

How do “London” by William Blake and “The Prelude” by William Wordsworth portray contrasting ideas about the power of individual experiences?

- In “London” the narrator feels a sense of hopelessness towards the people he meets along his travels, stating that as he “wanders” through the city, he sees “marks of weakness, marks of woe” on “every face” he meets. The repetition of the word “marks” suggests a permanency to the despair that seems to affect everyone, almost like it is impossible to get rid of. The consonant “w” sounds are also repeated, giving the reader a sense of the narrator’s bleak and sad life.
- In contrast, the narrator in “The Prelude” starts his adventure full of confidence, as reflected in the personification of the boat as “she was an elfin pinnacle”. This metaphorical feminisation of nature makes it seem gentle and calm, whilst “elfin” gives the sense that this experience is like a fairytale for the narrator. This portrays his experience as magical, but the atmosphere soon changes....
- However, for the narrator of “London” there is no volta (turning point) in his life. The monotony of these everyday “woes” and troubles is reflected in the constant and unbroken ABAB rhyme scheme, which could also hint at the sound of his feet pacing along the “chartered street”. Life continues, whilst the “mind-forged manacles” faced by ordinary citizens appears to enforce the hopelessness, which is a running theme throughout the novel. People appear to be trapped in every way - not just by the things they do, but also by the thoughts in their heads. The phrase “mind-forged” however could suggest that these issues are actually made up, with Blake perhaps commenting on our ability to always feel sorry for ourselves.
- The narrator in “The Prelude” appears to have a much more powerful experience, as he becomes aware of “The horizon’s bound, a huge peak, black and huge”. This very stilted and jarring sentence contrasts the earlier language of beauty and lyrical structure (which reflects Wordsworth’s position as a Romantic poet). The repetition of “huge” implies that the narrator has lost the ability to verbalise his emotions as skillfully as before, suggesting a profound change and feeling of fear inside him. This also shows how his earlier confidence has been lost, and is instead replaced with the metaphor of a great beast before him. This presents this experience as having a massive effect on his whole personality.
- The narrator in “London” uses bleak metaphors to portray his anger at all forms of power, particularly in the line: “Every black’ning church” which could hint at widespread corruption throughout our society. The word “black’ning” connotes images of death, whilst the use of a “church” may hint at Blake’s own damning opinions on organised religion. Additionally, significant events like marriages and funerals often happen at churches, and the dirty or tarnished image of this whole institution suggests that their reputation has been ruined through corruption. In a more prosaic sense, the “black” church