

**The country is always regarded as a better place than the city in literature of this period. Do you agree?
Answer with reference to two or more relevant texts**

In an age of increasing urbanisation that saw the number of people living in towns increase from 15% of the population in 1750 to 80% in 1880 (Evans, 1993:101) the focus on the city as the source of prosperity for the individual was inevitable. Historically, the industrialisation of Britain was responsible for this, but it is industrialisation that has led to the conflict between image and reality in both cities and the countryside.

Works such as Dickens's *Hard Times* (first published in 1854) set in the fictional 'Coketown' describe the urban setting as dirty and general fairly hellish, while the country is portrayed as idyllic by comparison. While this rural portrayal is possibly a reaction to the unquestionable urban horrors there is a danger of viewing rural life with misty-eyed sentimentality as in reality work was seasonal, and accommodation was primitive. However, it is this sentimentality that is a key theme in Romantic literature in an age that was turning its back on the "ordered rationality of the Enlightenment" (Baldick, 1991).

Wordsworth takes this Romantic sentimentality to its extreme in *The Prelude* with the juxtaposition of his experiences in the country with those in London. In Book I he associates his personal freedom with the country, and it is in the country that he has an overwhelming choice of where he wants to be:

In what vale
Shall be my harbour? Underneath what grove
Shall I take up my home, and what sweet stream
Shall with its murmurs lull me to my rest? (Book I, line 11ff)

It is in the country that he feels he has the promise to display "prowess in an honourable field" (line 52), in other words write *The Recluse*, and the very environment will bring about

Pure passions, virtue, knowledge, and delight,
The holy life of music and verse. (line 53ff)

These natural moments of solitary reflection are very important to Wordsworth as an individual, and they are only afforded him when he is in the country. In the early books he is continually seeking solitude seemingly to reinforce his bonds with nature and emphasise the Romantic element of his youthful self.

Wordsworth also demonstrates the power of Nature as an unknown force when he takes a bird that has been caught in someone else's trap:

I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me (Book I, line 329ff)

This embodiment of nature's power is also what he feels makes him take the shepherd's boat, as he was "surely [...] led by her" (line 372).

From the countryside Wordsworth's perception of London is as an exotic place; he recalls a crippled boy who had to visit London, but when he returned home to the country Wordsworth was disappointed to see no change in the boy, and no "beams of glory brought away / From that new region" (Book VII, line 103ff). Quite what change he was expecting to see is not clear, whether something nebulous as a result of his overall metropolitan experience or a dramatic change such as the boy being able to walk again, Wordsworth's preconceptions of the city as a magical place have been shattered.

Wordsworth's urban experience is not a positive one. He sees himself as an outsider, a "vagrant" or "casual dweller" (Book VII, line 60ff), and in an impersonal setting he seems to lose his own identity becoming part of the throng of city dwellers. Wild points out that "the all powerful *I* is virtually lost or abandoned" for approximately 130 lines, and is replaced by "'we' [as] transient tourists rather than legitimate inhabitants" (Wild, 1997:4).

Throughout Book VII there is a list of all of the individual experiences offered by London, such as the rare animals, and theatre but none of these provide a suitable stimulus, and Wordsworth feels "the imaginative power / Languish within me" (Book VII, line 498ff). From the high Romantic perspective the country has to be seen to be preferable to the city where solitude is impossible, individuality is lost and

the natural world does not exist. For someone born and brought up in the Lake District this dislike of the city could readily be seen as a biased view in an age where the natural population movement is away from the country.

Dickens was brought up in London and lived there for the majority of his life. Although in *Hard Times* his fictional city is a depressing prospect, London in *Great Expectations* must be a more realistic contemporary view of the metropolis. The overall view of the country city divide is traditional, Dickens draws on “pastoral convention” with Pip’s home village representing “innocence and unworldly values”, while the city is “identified with temptation and corruption” (Schellinger, 1998:2).

However, Dickens’s idyllic country and corrupt city are not clear-cut places. It is in the village where the convict threatens Pip, where he suffers his sister’s brutality, is nearly murdered by Orlick, and where his sister is assaulted and paralysed. It is when visiting Miss Havisham and Estella that Pip’s mind is corrupted into acknowledging his commonness thereby providing the impetus for his gentlemanly aspirations. The key element of goodness in the country village is Joe’s character; throughout the book his honesty, loyalties, and devotion to duties (exemplified by actions such as returning to work the day after his wife’s funeral) are unswerving even during his mutually uncomfortable visit to see Pip in London.

Pip’s first impressions of London are not positive: on arrival the first four adjectives he employs to describe the city are “ugly, crooked, narrow and dirty” (Dickens, 2003:163). His guardian, Mr Jaggers’s, office is “dismal” (a word used more than once in chapter 20) and Pip gives a very Gothic description of the room conveying a very dark emotional response from the reader. Pip’s visit to Newgate, while waiting for Jaggers, gave him a “sickening idea of London” (Dickens, 166), and Wemmick’s response to Pip’s casual question of whether London is a wicked place is a very balanced, but doubtless accurate, answer: ““You may get cheated, robbed and murdered in London. But there are plenty of people anywhere, who’ll

do that for you.” (Dickens, 172). Not only does this cast a shadow over the country’s view of London as a dazzling location; it also again debunks the view of the country as being a preferable place to the city.

Regardless of Pip’s impression of London he enjoys the opportunity to become and live a gentleman’s life, ultimately living beyond his means, developing an increasingly materialistic bent. Interestingly, one of Pip’s most striking actions while in London is to arrange the position for Herbert and safeguard it through Miss Havisham when he had returned his money to Provis. Although brought about by guilt, this behaviour is reminiscent of Joe, and seems above and beyond the call of friendship and out of place in the cut and thrust of Pip’s urban existence.

Wemmick’s house in Walworth is a strange find in the city; referred to as the ‘Castle’ he is able to hoist up a bridge to “cut off the communication” (Dickens, 206). Having access to this sort of physical solitude in the city environs is unusual and is opposed to Wordsworth’s experience of the lack of individuality in London. Although when the bridge is up Wemmick is separated from the outside world – he is, in some ways, living in his own world with his fortifications, livestock, and home-grown food – he has the Aged Parent also resident so his escape to solitude can never be complete. Regardless of this, the detachment from the city is emphasised in his walk from Walworth to Little Britain with Pip during which his character becomes “drier and harder” and his “mouth tightened” (Dickens, 210) thereby fitting in with the impersonal city atmosphere loathed by Wordsworth.

Wilde comments on the wholesomeness of the country through Lord Henry in *A Picture of Dorian Gray*, although it does not suggest that there is any merit to this:

[A]nybody can be good in the country. There are no temptations there. This is the reason why people who live out of town are so absolutely uncivilised. Civilisation is not by any means an easy thing to attain to. There are only two ways by which man can reach it. One is by being cultured, the other by being corrupt. Country people have no opportunity of being either, so they stagnate. (Wilde, 1997:145)

In the same way as Pip aspires to shake off his uncommonness by moving to London, the importance of moving away from the uncorrupt, but uncultured, country is clear when looking for civilised society.

Despite suggesting that country people are at no risk of corruption, it is to the country that Dorian Gray goes to enjoy unspecified activities that call his gentlemanliness into question by the London society:

‘What about your country house and the life that is led there? Dorian, you don’t know what is said about you.’ (Wilde, 105)

The country cannot be said to be an inherently better place than the city, in the same way as the city is not necessarily any worse than the country; viewing the countryside as a preferable place in which to live is questionable both factually and in Romantic literature. This misconception that is still perpetrated today must be attributed to people viewing the past ‘Romantically’ through rose tinted spectacles and reinforcing the stereotypes of the bucolic country and soot coated city.

(1572 words)

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