

## London in the Visions of Literature

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To write about art and literature depicting London is often to write about Romantic poetry and novels, and to draw attention to the green and pleasant parts of the lands as hills, vales, woods, and all their rural relatives. Urban areas are often cast as dark mills, restaurants with oyster-shells, hospitals, and underground stations, for example, whilst rural places are celebrated, but their inspiration and beauty is to be found in the more civic depictions. Such poems and novels can enable us to envisage the city in a new life and even uncover the histories of a place. This paper will shed light on London in the eyes of literature, both as a civic and a cultural city, in order to draw more attention to the city as both an urban and rural place. This paper will also shed light on the great poets as *William Wordsworth*, John Keats, D. H. Laurence, and novelists such as Charles Dickens, Sam Selvon Salvo, and Virginia Woolf.

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The old City of London was built by the Romans in the year 54 BC. It was once the capital of the empire, during which “the sun never set”, a phrase used to describe the global empire at that time, which was so widespread that at least one part of their domain was in daylight. This city witnesses various historical periods, including Victorian, industrial, the World Wars One and Two. Through all these changes, London was in the heart of English literature and has motivated the imagination of many writers and poets, with influence from its streets, green parks, bridges, and the River Thames, for example. We can feel and see old London, with its chimneys, hills, smoky skies, its cobbled streets, where both poor and noble English characters have been portrayed in many novels and poems (World History, 1993).

Thus, many writers and poets were inspired by London, by its nature, people, beauty, even its civil war or colonies. This paper will shed light on six famous English writers who were influenced by the city, whose writings focus on various places in and around London.

During the early 19th Century, the English romantic poet, William Wordsworth, contributed to the launch of the age of romantic English poetry. The poet expresses how nature is wonderful, creating unique images that portrayed everything in life as being beautiful and simple. Thus, the hub of all his work is nature, especially London nature, atmosphere and beauty (Andrew, 2015). In his famous poem “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” in 1802, which he wrote while feeling worried about leaving the city, he penned “*This city now doth like agreement wear, the beauty of the morning never saw, I never felt a calm/so deep*” (Kelly, 2007).

In his poem, “London”, Wordsworth spoke about London as being a lady, where he writes

She is a fen  
 Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,  
 Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,  
 Have forfeited their ancient English dower of inward happiness. (Wordsworth, 1802, pp. 2-5)

Wordsworth preferred writing about nature rather than cities and man-made structures in his poetry. However, in this poem, he expresses his admiration for the City of London in the early morning. In the first line, he notes that nothing, presumably in nature, is as “fair” as the city in this still, quiet state:

Earth has not anything to show fairer:  
 Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
 A sight so... (Wordsworth, 1802)

Wordsworth sees the natural world as the secret of life. He tries to take his readers away from the factories, mines, and other fields of the Industrial Revolution, emphasizing that it caused social and economic problems. These ideas were expressed in his poem “The Tables Turned”:

Let Nature be your Teacher...  
 Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;  
 Our meddling intellect  
 Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:-  
 We murder to dissect (Wordsworth, 1789, pp. 16-20)

Here, he tries to make his readers see life without all the factories, smoke, and people’s shouting voices of confusion.

This City now doth, like a garment, wear  
 The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
 Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
 Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
 All bright and glittering in the smokeless air  
 Never did sun more beautifully steep  
 In his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill;  
 Ne’er saw I, never felt, calm so deep! (Wordsworth, 1802, pp. 4-11)

He also attempted this in his poem, “Composed upon Westminster Bridge”, September 3, 1802. As mentioned above, this poem is a description of what he sees before an industrialized city comes to life. He attempts to make his audiences see the beautiful side of London.

Another English romantic poet who was inspired by William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge is John Keats (1795-1821). This poet, who died quite young, was born in 1795 in central London. He carries on the traditions of the great romantic poets after William Wordsworth. These traditions appear in many of his odes. The young romantic poet was very much inspired by love and nature in London, especially when he moved to Hampstead Heath, A place where Londoners seek to escape the urban sprawls, which had been a source of inspiration for many other artists and writers. Keats was one of many poets that saw Hampstead as a quiet and beautiful place, thus he wrote some of his greatest works, inspired by the natural beauty of Hampstead Heath.

Keats wrote the draft of his poem, “Ode to a Nightingale”, which was influenced by the birdsong of a nightingale nesting somewhere on the Heath (Everest, 2002). The poem envisaged a wonderful view of the

landscape, moving left towards the east from the Heath, a place which Keats shared his first lodgings with his brothers (Roe, 2013). Keats is influenced by the beauty of the scenic views and London's towering skyline view above the Heath. By standing there, one could connect with Keats' poems, especially the verse, "*I stood tip-toe upon a little hill, which is most fitting*" (Keats, 1991, p, 1)

The clouds were pure and white as flocks new shorn,  
 And fresh from the clear brook; sweetly they slept  
 On the blue fields of heaven, and then there crept  
 A little noiseless noise among the leaves:  
 For not the faintest motion could be seen  
 Of all the shades that slanted o'er the green.  
 There was a wide wand'ring for the greediest eye,  
 To peer about upon variety;  
 Far round the horizon's crystal air to skim,  
 And trace the dwindled edges of its brim. (Keats, 1891, pp. 8-17)

During the late 19th Century, Charles Dickens portrayed the new London very well. His descriptions of London are contrary to the happy descriptions written by Wordsworth and Keats about half a century previously, that portray silence, ships, towns, domes, theatres and temples, lying open unto the fields to the sky (Schwarzbach, 1979). Charles Dickens' novels and phenomenon were landmarks of literature in English and of English culture in the 19th Century (Pykett, 2002), where Dickens's writings varied between talking about nature and industry, and the smoke from homes and trains which was a new event at that time to many of his contemporaries. Dickens was "emphatically the novelist of his age", and his novels were suitable even for the generations that came after (Smith, 2008).

As an English social novelist, Dickens depicts 19th Century modernity in general, and London life in particular. Dickens is a novelist whose "genius is especially suited to the delineation of City life", and who "describes London as a special correspondent for posterity" (Pykett, 2002).

London is considered as the main character in Charles Dickens' novels, such as *Oliver Twist*, 1837 and *Great Expectations* 1861, which evoke images of early Victorian London. His 1859 novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, set in London and Paris, is his best-known work of historical fiction, *David Copperfield*, 1848. To Dickens, London was a breathing entity for which he had a magic. He liked its diversity but hated its inequalities, and his descriptions of the sights, sounds, and smells of the city are among the most evocative phrases in English literature (Saunders, 2004).

Here we should mention an important expression, "Dickensian London", which appears among critics because of Dickens' strong interest in and connection to London, which is the main place in his writings. Life in Dickensian London centered on the old City that covers a mere square mile and is dominated by St. Paul's Cathedral. In his famous novel "Great Expectations", *Pip described the adjacent street market of Cheapside as "all smeared with filth and fat and blood ... the great black dome of St Paul's bulging at me"* (Saunders, 2004, p. 44).

The River Thames has also been portrayed in Dickens' writings, including in his novel, *Little Dorrit*, 1855, where the river is a much more visible part of the environment in which the characters live, whether gazed upon by Amy at Southward Bridge or by Arthur at Twickenham.

Dickens as the narrator emphasizes the inseparable unity of the River's reflection of reality, as he expressed:

Between the real landscape and its shadow in the water, there was no division; both were so untroubled and clear, and, while so fraught with a solemn mystery of life and death, so hopefully re-assuring to the gazer's soothed heart, because so tenderly and mercifully beautiful. (Dickens, 1855, p. 326)

However, Dickens himself struggled with London, hence the incident in *David Copperfield* that Dickens wrote was in some way real. Dickens could be considered as a witness of the Victorian age, such as in *Oliver Twist*, where you can read about the new experience railway travel for the first time (Smith, 2008). In his novel *Little Dorrit*, Sunday is chosen for the introduction to London because it evokes the atmosphere of legalistic inactivity or paralysis that prevails in the house. The city is described in terms that will later be applied to the house: "It was a Sunday evening in London, gloomy, close and stale", "the inhabitants gasped for air" (*Little Dorrit*, 1855, p. 26).

Dickensian London with its winding alleys and shrouded streets gave way to the London of modernity, immortalized by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941). Many of Dickens' novels are set in the same geographical area as Woolf's, but whereas central London in Dickens's novels is a chaotic, dangerous and dilapidated area with all kinds of unpleasant and untrustworthy characters, in Woolf's novels it is more of a creative and innovative place. The city of London is the main location for Woolf's novels. Her novels are filled with streets names, parks and monuments, where the characters walk about in London. By following their routes, turns, shortcuts, dead ends, resting points and stops on the map of London, one realizes that to Woolf, the characters in her stories, in a very politically conscious way, are a breath of the bright writer. Virginia Woolf was born in London (Hyde Park) and therefore, London was always very close to her heart throughout her life (Larsson, 2017).

Virginia described Hyde Park as a grand Victorian area [...] near mid-Victorian educational buildings, museums, and beautiful gardens (Conrad, 1992). She talked about her family home in the Old Bloomsbury essay:

The house was also completely quiet [...] Here, then seventeen or eighteen people lived in small bedrooms with one bathroom and three water closets between them. (Q in Conrad, 1992, pp. 182-183)

Woolf incorporated the tea table as the indoor centre setting of Victorian family life in her novels, by setting it in various key scenes in *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* 1927, *The Waves* 1931, and *Between the Acts* 1941 (Conrad, 1992). For example, in *A Sketch of the Past* 1940, Woolf indicated the importance of the family tea table in the dining room at 22 Hyde Park Gate, just as in other mid-Victorian homes:

The tea table the very heart and centre of family life... (Q in Conrad, 1992, p. 184)

When Virginia moved to the Bloomsbury area of London in 1904, she was inspired by the new and unusual home arrangements that she encountered. Her writings then appeared to be influenced by her childhood at Hyde Park Gate and Talland House, which was reflected in her novels. Talland House represented a happy and significant period in Virginia's life, the best beginning to life conceivable (Sketch, 1904, p. 128). Woolf's childhood experiences at St. Ives, both indoor and outdoor, served as the foundations for writing *Jacob's Room* 1922, *To the Lighthouse* 1927, and *The Waves* 1931. The yellow blind from her Talland House nursery is similar to the white blind in the opening scene of *The Waves*, which describes the sun rising while the blind stirred slightly, but all within was dim and unsubstantial (*Waves*, 1907, p. 252).

Another place that Woolf lived in London was Brunswick Square, which became the domestic area central to the early formation of the Bloomsbury Group, an informal gathering, composed largely of Cambridge graduates and Vanessa and Virginia Stephen, who were interested in art, philosophy, literature, and friendships. This loosely formed group played a role in London's cultural shift in the early 20th Century, affecting art, home décor, literature, and politics (Woolf, 1964).

During the mid-19th Century the industrial revolution altered the way men and women thought. Virginia was very impressed by the World War, she writes the mark on the wall.

Gordon Square in London also influenced Virginia Woolf's writing. She describes in the same essay her initial impression of Gordon Square when she visited it briefly in October during her rest cure:

But I can assure you that in October 1904 it was the most beautiful, the most exciting, the most romantic place in the world. To begin with, it was astonishing to stand at the drawing-room window and look into all those trees; the tree which shoots its branches up into the air [...]. The light and the air after the rich red gloom of Hyde Park Gate were a revelation. Things one had never seen in the darkness there—Watts pictures, Dutch cabinets, blue china—shone out for the first time in the drawing room at Gordon Square.

When writing Fry's biography, Woolf realized, looking back, that December 1910 was the point when she, as well as the painters, began to think about new forms. Indeed, Lee suggests Fry had an important influence upon Woolf's imagery in *To the Lighthouse*, in which she drew upon painting, not writing, to describe the transition from Victorian to post-war England (Lee, 1999).

In novel after novel, Woolf anchors her characters in London's web of streets. This is the space in which she has them come into existence, gives them life and lets them move about. In Woolf's novels, it is always important to know where in London the various parts of the story take place, and in this scene from the beginning of *The Voyage Out* 1915, she draws an indelible line running north to south that divides the London map of her fiction into two parts: the affluent West, which she herself came from and which is the point of departure for most of the main characters in her fictional world; and the poverty stricken East End, which is depicted as a dark hole that the characters in her fiction only penetrate out of necessity or compassion (Larsson, 2017).

Briefly, in between lays the centre of London with its grand shopping street, the Strand, Fleet Street, the home of journalism, and the newly constructed Victoria Embankment. This is where people of various types meet, lose their composure, abandon their old habits, taste freedom and think new thoughts. Woolf's use of London locations and their historical dimension always plays a significant role. The construction of Kingsway, which is also a central street in Woolf's second novel, *Night and Day* 1919, was an important element in the slum clearance project to modernize London around the turn of the century (Woolf, 1967).

Regarding the modernism trend, which began at the start of the 20th Century, we must mention the great writer, poet, and journalist David Herbert Lawrence, the man considered as the icon of the Period of Modernism in British, as well as world literature (Vera, 2014). He is the writer who drew the directions to cope with the modern era and its difficulties. His characters seemed to be clear, modern and full of life. He talked for the first time in English literature about the truth of life.

In 1915, the old world ended, wrote Lawrence in recollection. "The spirit of the old London collapsed [into] a vortex of broken passions, lusts, hopes, fears, and horrors" (Lawrence, 1915, p. 123). This makes the reader

aware of how London changed with the dawn of the 1920s. Lawrence, in contrast to Dickens or Virginia, wrote about the London of the Bohemian gang, which appeared in his well-known novel “*Women in Love*” 1920.

His descriptions were about the traditional components of English pastoralist-trees, frosts, flowers, grass and water, country houses, and at the same time he described mines, steelworks and factories. These contrasts are indicated in three key novels. *Women in Love* 1920, *The Rainbow* 1915, and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* 1928 (Cheung, 1979). Though, an opportunity to free himself from a spirations to the narrowly defined world of literary circles: for, despite Lawrence’s dislike of London’s middle-class literary cliques, his first two novels, *The White Peacock* (1911) and *The Trespasser* (1912), Lawrence was only all the more conscious of his distaste for urban England when he wrote to a friend in New York: “Here I am back in London. It seems very dark, and one seems to creep under a paving-stone of a sky, like some insect in the damp” (Lawrence, 1923, p. 546)

His reaction to the Metropolis may provide a fitting description of life in polluted, wintry London, but it is also a piece with the abhorrence that commentators over the past century had expressed, “at increasing urbanization and in perceiving a more fundamental process of SOC” (Lawrence, 1923, p. 547). And in Lawrence’s attitude at this time, the decline had reached the point of pitching English culture in its entirety into the abyss. While staying in Hampstead, he wrote:

London-gloom-yellow air-bad cold-bed-old house-Morris wallpaper-visitors-English voices-tea in old cups-poor D.H.L. Perfectly miserable, as if he was in his tomb. (Lawrence, 1923, p. 548)

Lawrence suffered during this period in London, which was obvious in his writings, especially in the letters as mentioned above. He shared this with Virginia Woolf, and it is astonishing that although Virginia had some reservations about Lawrence’s writings, they did have the same perspectives referring the dislocations caused by the First World War. They saw the war as a threat to the mode of individualized and subjective experiences, which they were trying to represent—if not construct—in their writings. This is indicated in Woolf’s novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), and Lawrence’s short story *England, My England* (1922), at the same time. Both fictions address the injurious consequences of the war on a personal level. They use the same narrative trope, as both works focus on the ordeal of young men who are sent to the front during war. Lawrence and Woolf both choose to capture the pain and devastation after the war through the relations between their hero and his wife (José, 2001).

After the Second World War ended, London became a mixed society, with the streets full of immigrants. Among the crowd of immigrants, a brilliant man appeared, a writer who created a name for himself in English literature, Samuel Dickson, Salvo (better known as Sam Selvon). Sam was a Caribbean novelist and short story writer. In 1950, he left his home to travel to London, escaping the parochialism of the West Indian middle-class, and looking for an international audience for his work after his arrival. In 1952, he published his first full-length novel, *A Brighter Sun*, which received much international interest and acclaim, and launched the “great period of Trinidadian novels”. Sam Salvo was one of the early migrants of the mass movement from the West Indies to Britain, which began in 1948 (Bill, 2014).

Samuel Selvon’s fiction is important as one of the very first dramatizations and articulations of the anxieties and daily challenges faced by the marginalized black immigrant population in 1950s and ‘60s Britain. Selvon remained in London until 1978 where he tried to present immigrants’ points of view and challenge deeply-rooted

stereotypes about black newcomers. He led a hand-to-mouth existence, writing when money allowed. In 1956, six years after his arrival, his novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, appeared. The novel opens:

One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unruliness  
 About London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and  
 The lights showing in the blur as if not London is at all but some  
 Strange place on another planet, Moses Loretta hop on a  
 Number 46 bus at the corner of Chepstow Road and  
 Westbourne Grove to go to Waterloo to meet a fellar who was  
 Coming from Trinidad on the boat-train. (Selvon, 1950, p. 23)

Selvon, in his novel *Moses*, describes the arrival of the main character of his novel, Moses, to Waterloo station, also known as London Waterloo, which is a central London terminus on the National Rail network in the United Kingdom. Samuel gave us the chance to imagine, as he said, “On a foggy, winter evening Moses is travelling to Waterloo Station, the point of arrival or departure for any immigrant, a place that evokes nostalgic feelings to anyone, Moses included” (Laurea, 2016, p. 45).

In his work of fiction, Selvon reports and describes the movements of West Indians in the 1950s, as well as the conditions that they have to endure after their arrival in London. The era which Selvon was talking about is the post-war era, as London became the new contact zone, where immigrants could influence society from the bottom up (Nasta, 1988).

Once again, he portrayed the newcomers to London through Waterloo station, describing this station becomes the symbol of this new contact, and of the ambivalent feelings of the immigrants. Indeed, it becomes the gateway to the city, a rite of passage, the place where the borders of Great Britain are “violated” and disrupted, as well as the place where a mixture of feelings (happiness, fear, nostalgia, disillusionment) all mix together (Bill, 2014).

In his famous novel *Lonely Londoners* (1956), he portrays Britain’s post-war condition, and evokes in his opening paragraphs, recalling T.S. Eliot’s “Unreal City”, a London “[u]nder the brown fog of a winter dawn” it was like a fairy tale—“One grim winter evening”. London, from Selvon’s eyes, seems to extend back into history, more than the doldrums of a modernist London, with disastrous fog “sleeping restlessly over the city” which gives the sensation of a London under force. The city’s lights no longer flash against the night sky in celebration of its centrality but only “show in a foggy state as, if it, not London at all but some strange place on another planet (Nast, 1988).

Selvon also had a good eye on people after the Second World War, especially women, as he expressed:

A lot of the men get killed in the war and leave widow behind, and it has bags of these old geezers who does be pottering about the Harrow Road like if they lost, a look in their eye as if the war happen unexpected and they still can’t realize what happened to the old Brit’n. All over London, you would see them, going shopping with a basket, or taking a dog for a walk in the park, where they will sit down on the bench in winter and summer. (Laurea, 2016, p. 51)

But he could never hide his love for the beautiful nature in London, as he wrote:

All these things happen in the blazing summer, under the trees, in the park, on the grass with daffodils and tulips in full bloom, and a sky of blue. Oh it does really be beautiful then to hear the birds whistling and see the green leaves come back on the trees, and in the night the world turn upside down and everyone hustling, that is life, that is London.... (Q in Laura, 2016, p. 66)

In the end, after reviewing English literature, whether it be poems, novels, or fiction, we realize to what extent London was in their hearts, and can touch the variety in the sense of writers' feelings towards the city of London. Some saw it as a beautiful human, some described its streets, gardens, palaces, trees, birds, etc., but others suffered from the industrial side of London, revolutions, the World Wars, etc., but over the ages, London has been at the heart of English literature.

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