**London, 1802, by William Wordsworth**

**In A Nutshell**

"London, 1802" works on so many levels. First of all, it's an obvious call for help; the poet, William Wordsworth, laments the state of England, and expresses his fears about the health of the national character. Second, it's an elegy for John Milton, a great English poet of the 17th century (famous for the super-long and spectacular epic, *Paradise Lost*). Finally, it's just a gosh darned good old-fashioned sonnet. In just fourteen lines, Wordsworth manages to invoke his poetic forefather, sketch out his view of England's character and inhabitants, and demonstrate to us just how skilled he is with rhyme and meter by crafting a gorgeous Petrarchan sonnet. Wow. What more could you ask for?

Not only is the sonnet an accomplished and polished example of its form, it's also a bold condemnation of the poet's nation and fellow countrymen. This, you might think, must have taken some real guts. Well, guts and confidence. "London, 1802" wasn't actually published until 1807, despite its misleading title. By that time, Wordsworth was an established poet; along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (of *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* fame), he had basically created what would come to be known as Romantic poetry, which burst onto the scene in 1798 with a collaboration between the two poets, simply titled *Lyrical Ballads*. These poets and their contemporaries (who included Keats, Shelley, Byron, and Blake) attempted to use poetry as a mediator between humanity and nature; they saw verse as a way to directly express the emotional experience of human life, ideally in spontaneous, clear language.
Wordsworth's poetry was well received. *Poems in Two Volumes*, which contained "London, 1802," was actually his third book. After this productive period, Wordsworth's fame continued to grow – he actually became Poet Laureate of England in 1843, and remained in that position until his death in 1850.

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**Big Picture Study Questions**

1. How does this appeal to Milton, a famous poet, reflect upon Wordsworth's view of the power of poetry?

2. Do you think Wordsworth sets himself up as Milton's poetic heir here?

3. Why would Wordsworth look to a poet for reform, rather than a politician or a religious figure?

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