

Reflections on the Thames by John Atkinson Grimshaw: painted in 1880

Welcome to this audio guide in which we'll be looking at this interesting painting.

Here we are, standing on the Thames Embankment in London. Even if we didn't know the title of this painting, the great face of Big Ben would tell us where we are. It's such a famous view that it could seem almost too familiar. But this is of course a very different London, given it's nearly 140 years ago. So let's go back in time and spend a few minutes in Victorian night time London.

You might find your eye drawn to the bright face of Big Ben, and realise that, unlike nowadays no floodlights play on the rest of the tower or on the Houses of Parliament. They're a dark bulk on the skyline, and in contrast the bright lights of the clock, and the streets, shine out at us.

You're probably wondering about the strange greenish light that suffuses this painting. Why do you think the painter has created this effect? Is it artistic licence do you think, or is it accurate? If so, is it the bright moonlight that's casting this glow, or is the strange colour something to do with the street lighting of the time, or perhaps to do with all the smoke pollution in the air. What do *you* think?

The painter, John Atkinson Grimshaw, was a great admirer of the Pre-Raphaelite movement of painters, and like them, he strove to represent scenes realistically and in minute detail. So it's likely that this colour cast *is* an accurate record of what he saw. It's intriguing isn't it, almost phosphorescent. Grimshaw was actually known and liked for his atmospheric night time urban scenes, but this colour of lighting isn't so familiar to us nowadays.

It looks like we're being shown the new electric arc street lighting - an absolute novelty in 1880. The Thames Embankment was one of only two places in London to have this lighting installed in 1878. We're told that the white arc lights cast a harsh and very bright light and we can see this in sketches of Paris too where the lights made their very first appearance, also in 1878. By the year of this painting, just two years later, several thousand arc lights would have been installed in the capital, but

still, most of London would have been lit by gaslight, which we're told had a very pale greenish glow. The mix of lighting, together with the full moon and perhaps the constant smoke in the air, is probably the source of the glow. What atmosphere does it give to the painting, for you?

Now let's look at the people passing us by. Close to us, a woman leans on the stout wall looking out over the river. What does she sense as she leans on the stone? A coolness seeping through her clothes perhaps? Do you think she's waiting for someone, or, just pausing to gaze out at the river? If the dog is hers, is she out for an evening walk with it? What about her mood? Do you think she's thoughtful, perhaps peaceful? What might have caught her eye as she looks out on the river, or do you think she's staring unseeingly across the water as she thinks about something else? The title of the picture, 'Reflections on the Thames', could be a word play. It could refer to the woman as much as the lights twinkling on the water.

Moving on, we can see that the street's pretty busy with passers-by. One woman, selling something from a basket, is talking to a policeman. If you look closely you can see that he's jerking his thumb backwards. Is he giving her directions or is he telling her to move on?

Further away from us are two women and a man, and further away yet is the hint of crowds more people, whilst over to the right, a smart carriage trots by. What time is it? Fortunately we have Big Ben to look at, but it's a bit hard to tell if its hands read a quarter to eleven or five to nine. Is it a little busy to be as late as a quarter to eleven, or, like today, is London always busy until the small hours? It's intriguing to notice the amount of women out alone in this night-time scene. This goes against our general assumptions about Victorian times, but perhaps in crowded areas such as this, it was considered perfectly safe to take a solo evening promenade. It's also very possible that the novelty of the street lighting is attracting people in great numbers, and this is part of what we're being shown.

Over on the river, we can see Westminster Bridge striding over the Thames, illuminated with lamps that reflect off the water. Barges and boats ply the river, even at night. Are they late night delivery men, or are some of them fishing? Have you noticed the one boat in the shadows of the curving Embankment wall, with the

single red light? It's one of only a very few splashes of red in this painting and it stands out from the greenish palette, reflecting off the water. Where are the other areas of red? There are some bold dashes of red on the women's clothing towards the front of the painting, and there's also a red rooftop. Would you say there's a hint of red in the shadowy buildings on the other side of the river too?

These far-off buildings look all turrets and towers, and they're a bit unclear in the misty or smoky air. They could be the old St Thomas's Hospital – but anyway, it's a mass of big buildings and it does give this picture an interesting skyline.

Imagine now the sounds of this scene. You might notice the slop of the river against its banks, a street seller calling out perhaps, the chatter of passers-by and even the gentle swish of a woman's long silk skirt and the tap of her leather boots on the paving stones. You'll hear the carriage wheels crunching on the ground and the ring of the horses' shoes. Or it could be that you can't hear any of these small sounds amidst the confusing and constant noise levels that Victorian Londoners were accustomed to. People complained to the newspapers and to each other about the terrible noise. "It is almost impossible to get any sleep before three or four o' clock. ...horses and wagons may wake you all through the night...and, for some hours after the public houses are closed, there is continuous uproar – singing, shouting, howling, yelling, cursing and fighting."

This scene looks calm and quiet enough, but perhaps the reality of life was very different.

Do you find this painting overall to be welcoming and pleasant to view, or do you feel its mood is rather eerie, lonely or sad? How realistic a scene do you think this is? It's said of Grimshaw that his is 'a lyrical and beautiful evocation of the industrial era without the dirty and depressing bits'! Do *you* agree with this?

We've come to the end of this audio guide now, although you're welcome to spend more time looking at the painting.

Next, you might like reflecting on what you most enjoyed about this brief activity so scroll down to **Wrap up your painting** to have a go at this