

Toil, Glitter, Grime and Wealth on a Flowing Tide – William Lionel Wyllie (1883; Tate)

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wyllie-toil-glitter-grime-and-wealth-on-a-flowing-tide-n01580>



- Can you guess where this is? **The River Thames, in London.** If you look *very* carefully, you might be able to spot a famous London building on the horizon – can you find it? **You can just spot the distant dome of St Paul’s Cathedral, to the left of the ship with a flag at the top of its mast.**
- What are your first thoughts on seeing the painting? Do you think it looks interesting? Or dull? What’s happening? What are the colours like? **There’s no story going on here, just people working the boats. The colours are quite dull – browns and blacks and greys, a little flash of pinkish-red, touches of blue in the sky and the white light on the river; but the way the foreground boats and figures stand out against the light is quite dramatic...**
- Is it a quiet picture or a noisy picture, do you think? What sounds would you be able to hear? **People shouting instructions to one another; ships’ horns hooting; the chug of the steam tugs; the lap of the water...**
- Perhaps you would not expect someone to paint such a big painting of something quite everyday and ordinary; but that’s exactly why William Wyllie did it. He wanted to make people think about the importance of the Thames and the everyday work that went on there.
- In the painting, we are looking up the river, towards the west. If we were to travel the other way, eastwards and downstream, what would we eventually come to? **The sea.**
- Most of the world’s major cities are situated on a river; and the Thames is the reason why the Romans made London (Londinium) the capital of Britain. Why? **For trade. The Romans realised that seagoing ships could reach Londinium (by sailing up the Thames) and unload their cargo**

there much more easily than they could at Colchester, which had previously been Britain's largest and most important city. If you look on a map, you'll also see that the Thames estuary (where the river meets the sea) is opposite the mouths of three great Continental rivers – the Rhine, the Scheldt and the Elbe – along which goods could be transported across Europe. Perfect for international trade.

- Originally, the part of the Thames where ships would come to unload and re-load was the section between London Bridge and where Tower Bridge was later built – 'the Pool of London', which we see in the painting. This was London's great Port, where quays and warehouses were built. Merchants from other countries also paid to use these warehouses to store their goods safely before transporting them on. And London became a centre for the building of ships, too. How many different kinds of ships and boats can you find in the picture? **Tall sailing ships in the background ('brigs'); flat barges in the foreground ('lighters'); on the far left, a low-masted barge (a 'stumpie') and a two-masted barge (a 'ketch'); little steam boats that towed the barges ('tugs'); and on the far right a steam ship with two funnels (a passenger steamer – the only boat here that is for leisure rather than work).**
- This is a painting made in Victorian times, by a painter called William Lionel Wyllie. He spent some of his time living on a boat on the Thames and he loved to paint pictures of the working life of the river. But why did he make this painting look the way it does? Well, he's given us some clues in the title to help us understand it: *Toil, Glitter, Grime and Wealth on a Flowing Tide*. So let's have a look for each of those things.
- First of all, 'toil' – what does that mean? **It's another word for 'work' or 'labour'.** Who can you see 'toiling' in the picture? Who looks to be working the hardest? **There are workers swarming all over the ships and boats. The ones we can see most clearly are in the foreground. On the black and busy tug that is towing the central barge we can see a man at the wheel. The barges were manoeuvred into position with large oars, which also served as rudders, and the bargee pulling at the oar is the one portrayed as putting in the most effort.** How has the artist made this man stand out and made us feel his effort? **He's the one who's closest to us, and almost in the centre of the picture. The artist has painted him on a diagonal, in contrast to all the horizontals and verticals of the picture, leaning over to use the whole weight of his body to pull against the resistance of the water.** Can you stand up and pose like the bargee? Lean over and pull on the oar. What do you think he might be saying (maybe he's talking to the man steering the tug)?
- Now, what about 'glitter'? **The glitter comes from the sunlight shining on the water.** What colour paint has the artist used to tell us about the light? **White paint.** How has Wyllie put the white paint on? Smoothly, or...? **In the foreground he has painted it in dashes and dabs and short strokes to create the 'glittering' effect of sunlight sparkling off the moving water. In the background, he's painted the white so solidly that it dazzles us.**
- Next is 'grime' – what does that mean? Another word for dirt. Something that's 'dirty' can also be described as 'grimy'. What's grimy in the picture? **The ships and boats, which look especially black against the blinding white of the sunlight.** Can you see what the barges are carrying? **The one nearest us is loaded with black coal; the one behind it with timber. The bargees would be filthy dirty from handling the cargo. Some of them are sitting on the coal.** What else is producing grime? **The smoke and fumes belching out from ships' funnels – from the tugs and from the passenger steamer; and from the chimneys of the factories we can see in the distance. The air is full of steam and smoke. And the river water is probably filthy too.**
- Finally, 'wealth' – what does that mean? **Riches, money.** The people we can see in the painting, the workers, weren't rich. So where is the wealth? **It's in the coal and in the labour of the workers: the coal will be unloaded and transported to the factories where it will be burnt in great furnaces to heat water to produce steam to power the machines that manufacture goods to sell for money... The dirty black coal and the toil of the workers will be converted into glittering wealth. And that's why William Wyllie paints the people and the boats in dirty dark**



Registered charity no.1048092
www.magiclanternart.org.uk



Artsmark
Partner

Supporting cultural education, endorsed by Arts Council England

colours against the blinding glitter of the sunlit river – all that grime will eventually be transformed into silver and gold coins!

Follow on ideas

- Make a 'glittering' collage map of London. Use tin foil or glitter to make a winding River Thames, and shapes cut out of coloured paper or from magazines for streets and buildings.
- Choose another world city to explore and map – Hong Kong, Paris, Dubai, Zurich... Does it have a river? Are the streets winding or straight? Where and what are its tallest buildings? ?

Topic links

- Geography/London
- Journeys/Transport
- Water/Rivers
- History/Victorians