

Oliver Goldsmith's poem "The Deserted Village" critiques the social and economic effects of the Enclosure Acts in 18th century England, particularly the depopulation of rural villages and the loss of a way of life. The poem mourns the decline of rural communities and the shift towards industrialization and wealth accumulation, viewing this progress with a sense of loss and nostalgia. (The poem is dedicated to the artist Sir Joshua Reynolds, with whom Goldsmith was a close friend, which means that both the poet and the artist were leading the 18th-century resistance to the industrialization of the English landscape. See the webpage section, "The Industrial Revolution & Romantic Landscape Painting.")

The Enclosure Acts

These laws, passed in the 18th century, allowed large landowners to enclose common land, essentially privatizing it and displacing small farmers and villagers who had previously relied on these lands for sustenance. "The Deserted Village" is a critical response to these Parliamentary Acts.

Goldsmith's Poem

The poem is a lament for the loss of rural communities due to the Enclosure Acts. It paints a picture of a thriving, idyllic village ("Sweet Auburn") that is then destroyed and depopulated. It describes the decline of a village and the

emigration of many of its residents to America. In the poem, Goldsmith condemns rural depopulation and the indulgence of the rich. It also criticizes rural depopulation; the moral corruption found in towns, consumerism, enclosure, landscape gardening, avarice, and the pursuit of wealth from international trade. The poem employs, in the words of one critic, “deliberately precise obscurity,” and does not reveal the reason why the village has been deserted. The poem was very popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also provoked critical responses. References to the poem, and particularly its ominous “Ill fares the land” warning, have appeared in a number of other contexts.

Themes of Loss and Nostalgia

The poem also explores themes of loss, nostalgia, and the idealized view of rural life before the Enclosure Acts. Goldsmith mourns the disappearance of communal spaces like the pub and the decline of traditional village customs.

Criticism of Wealth and Progress

The poem also critiques the pursuit of wealth and industrial progress, suggesting that these are not necessarily synonymous with happiness or prosperity. Goldsmith expresses a preference for the simpler, more virtuous life of the rural past.

The Poem's Legacy

The poem remains a significant piece of literature that reflects on the social and economic changes of the 18th century and continues to be studied for its exploration of themes of rural life, loss, and progress.