Annotated Version of Prompt 1’s Passage


At my family’s cabin on a Minnesota lake, I knew woods so dark that my hands disappeared before my eyes. I knew night skies in (1) which meteors left smoky trails across sugary spreads of stars. But now, when (2) 8 of 10 children born in the United States will never know a sky dark enough for the Milky Way, I worry we are rapidly losing night’s natural darkness before realizing its worth. This winter solstice, as we cheer the days’ gradual movement back toward light, let us also remember the irreplaceable value of darkness.

All life evolved to the steady rhythm of bright days and dark nights. Today, though, when we feel the closeness of nightfall, we reach quickly for a light switch. And too little darkness, meaning too much artificial light at night, spells trouble for all.

(3) Already the World Health Organization classifies working the night shift as a probable human carcinogen, and the American Medical Association has voiced its unanimous support for “light pollution reduction efforts and glare reduction efforts at both the national and state levels.” (4) Our bodies need darkness to produce the hormone melatonin, which keeps certain cancers from developing, and our bodies need darkness for sleep. Sleep disorders have been linked to diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease and depression, and recent research suggests one main cause of “short sleep” is “long light.” Whether we work at night or simply take our tablets, notebooks and smartphones to bed, there isn’t a place for this much artificial light in our lives.

The rest of the world depends on darkness as well, (5) including nocturnal and crepuscular species of birds, insects, mammals, fish and reptiles. Some examples are well known—the 400 species of birds that migrate at night in North America, the sea turtles that come ashore to lay their eggs—and some are not, such as the bats that save American farmers’ billions in pest control and the moths that pollinate 80% of the world’s flora. Ecological light pollution is like the (6) bulldozer of the night, wrecking habitat and disrupting ecosystems several billion years in the making. Simply put, without darkness, Earth’s ecology would collapse . . . . (7)
In today’s (8) crowded, louder, more fast-paced world, night’s darkness can provide solitude, quiet and stillness, qualities increasingly in short supply. Every religious tradition has considered darkness invaluable for a soulful life, and the chance to witness the universe has inspired artists, philosophers and everyday stargazers since time began. (9) In a world awash with electric light... how would Van Gogh have given the world his “Starry Night”? Who knows what this vision of the night sky might inspire in each of us, in our children or grandchildren?

Yet all over the world, our nights are growing brighter. (10) In the United States and Western Europe, the amount of light in the sky increases an average of about 6% every year. Computer images of the United States at night, based on NASA photographs, show that what was a very dark country as recently as the 1950s is now nearly covered with a blanket of light. Much of this light is wasted energy, which means wasted dollars. (11) Those of us over 35 are perhaps among the last generation to have known truly dark nights. Even the northern lake where I was lucky to spend my summers has seen its darkness diminish.

(12) It doesn’t have to be this way. Light pollution is readily within our ability to solve, using new lighting technologies and shielding existing lights. Already, many cities and towns across North America and Europe are changing to LED streetlights, (13) which offer dramatic possibilities for controlling wasted light. Other communities are finding success with simply turning off portions of their public lighting after midnight. (14) Even Paris, the famed “city of light,” which already turns off its monument lighting after 1 a.m., will this summer start to require its shops, offices and public buildings to turn off lights after 2 a.m. Though primarily designed to save energy, such reductions in light will also go far in addressing light pollution. (15) But we will never truly address the problem of light pollution until we become aware of the irreplaceable value and beauty of the darkness we are losing.

(8) The writer makes a stylistic choice here, contrasting a “crowded, louder, more fast-paced world” with darkness that “can provide solitude, quiet and stillness.” These words allow the writer to characterize a well-lit world as undesirable and to depict darkness as peaceful and pleasing.

(9) The use of rhetorical questions encourages the reader to consider a world without Van Gogh’s beloved painting and what Van Gogh’s vision inspires in us all. The suggestion of a world without such artistry and the notion that darkness is “invaluable to a soulful life” are also designed to evoke an emotional reaction in the reader.

(10) This statistic is used as evidence to support the claim that “our nights are growing brighter,” which leads into the writer’s point that this “blanket of light” is largely “wasted energy, which means wasted dollars.”

(11) By returning to the introduction’s description of a youth spent admiring dark nights, the writer creates another emotional appeal — this one to fear, especially in readers under thirty-five years old, who may now realize that their opportunities to witness true darkness are “diminishing.”

(12) The writer moves from evoking fear to reassuring readers that there is a solution to the problem of light pollution.
(13) The writer chooses his words carefully in this paragraph in order to shape readers' perceptions and bolster his claims. For example, he argues that we are using too much light when less is needed by referring to light being "wasted." He also suggests how easily the problem of light pollution might be addressed, using "simply" to describe what "other communities" are doing.

(14) The writer reasons that if even a city known for its light can enact sensible restrictions, it ought to be comparatively easy for cities not famous for their use of light to do so as well. Paris is also used as evidence to support the writer's previous claim that "communities are finding success."

(15) The argument concludes by recalling the "irreplaceable value and beauty" of darkness. That this darkness is being lost, as evidenced over the course of the writer's argument, serves as a final appeal to readers' emotions.