In his meditative essay “On Work,” Thomas Carlyle uses elevated language to establish a contrast between a meaningful working life and a solitary, empty, reflective one that leads us nowhere. Of the two, Carlyle clearly favors the first, but, to sway the reader in his direction, he uses loaded diction and vivid metaphors the divide the issue clearly into two clearly defined camps.

Thomas Carlyle sees the problem of modern life; the student, the philosopher, and the preacher meditating themselves into doubt that, Carlyle claims, can be cured by action alone. He immediately establishes the paradox between Work, which “will itself lead one more and more to truth,” and Idleness where “there is alone perpetual despair.” Capitalizing their names, Carlyle personifies the two ideas, talking about Work in a mighty, heroic tone (noble, sacred, benighted), while for the enemy (Idleness) he uses putrid language of “sour mud-swamp of one’s own existence” (35). He uses his second paragraph largely as a concession, but quickly exposes his assumptions that “tormenting oneself toward self reflection” leads only to emptiness, and that “working like Hercules” provides a much better plan because it leads to “endless significance.” For his rebuttal, he shifts to progressive imagery of jungles cleared, seeds rising, and cities built that create a Straw Man argument: making Idleness pale in comparison to Work’s progress, which he now lifts to Heavenly proportions: “Blessed is he who has found his work: let him ask no other blessedness.” Carlyle doesn’t give his reader a choice: they can choose Idleness’ hell-dogs of “Doubt, Desire, Remorse, Indignation, Despair itself,” (23-24) or Labor’s “blessed glow”, “purifying fire”, or “the bright blessed flame” (29-31). By the end of the essay, Carlyle has subtly moved the argument from earth to heaven, in order to make the reader guilty for even considering the other side of knowledge which “thou has no other knowledge but what thou has got by working.” Using contrast, Carlyle establishes a metaphorical battle of quiet, personal introspection (which has “long enough . . . tormented thee”) being defeated by Labour, which makes man’s soul a “sacred-celestial Life breathed into my by the Almighty.” As much as this could be a bedtime story to inspire a child, it could also be a warning to an age which Carlyle fears: one filled with study groups, philosophy classes and prayer sessions, while, just outside the door, is a world a natural world just dying to teach hard, life-giving, eternal lessons.