

London

By William Blake

Context

- William Blake was a poet and artist who specialised in illuminated texts, often of a religious nature. He rejected established religion for various reasons.
- One of the main ones was the failure of the established Church to help children in London who were forced to work.
- Blake lived and worked in the capital, so was well placed to write clearly about the conditions people who lived there faced.

- Published in 1794, this collection of poems, fully illustrated and originally hand-printed by Blake, aimed to show the "Two Contrary States of the Human Soul".
- The Songs of Innocence section contains poems which are positive in tone and celebrate love, childhood and nature. The Songs of Experience poems are obviously intended to provide a contrast, and illustrate the effects of modern life on people and nature.
- Dangerous industrial conditions, child labour, prostitution and poverty are just some of the topics Blake explores.

The French Revolution

- In 1789, the French people revolted against the monarchy and aristocracy, using violence and murder to overthrow those in power.
- Many saw the French Revolution as inspirational - a model for how ordinary, disadvantaged people could seize power.
- Blake alludes to the revolution in London, arguably suggesting that the experience of living there could encourage a revolution on the streets of the capital.

Structure

- As the title of the collection suggests, London is presented in a very regular way, much like a song. There is a strict abab rhyme scheme in each of the four stanzas.
- The four stanzas offer a glimpse of different aspects of the city, almost like snapshots seen by the speaker during his "wander thro'" the streets.

Repetition refers to the idea of ownership and rights to specific people (robbing ordinary people of their rights)

Repetition (dual meaning)- physical marks as a result of conditions and also suggest the speaker is recording evidence as he walks the streets

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

Regular strict rhyme scheme like a song. Ordinary (perhaps reflects the people he is representing)

Repetition suggests that in every sound he hears is evidence of people's minds being restricted and confined. The city has robbed them of the ability to think.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

Manacles are like handcuffs.

The poem is full of negative words (and cry is repeated). Suggests pain and distress.

Forced to clean chimneys, the soot from which blackens the church (symbolic)

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls

For Blake, buildings, especially church buildings symbolise confinement, restriction and failure. Money is spent on churches when children live in poverty. Blake thinks this makes a mockery of Christianity which should be based on love.

Contrast here suggests that to Blake marriage should be a celebration of love and new life but here it is combined with the idea of funerals implying that the future brings nothing but death and decay.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born **Infants** tear
And blights with plagues the **Marriage**
hearse

Blake refers to children throughout the poem and feels that children are no longer allowed to enjoy childhood but instead are being forced to work in dangerous conditions due to rapid urbanisation in Britain.

What is Blake's view of the city of London in this poem?

- Shock
- Anger
- Negative language
- Violence
- Conditions
- Attitude to children, religion
- Prostitution
- Sounds