



# LONDON

## 2023

William Blake

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## FULL POEM

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I wandered through each chartered street,  
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,  
A mark in every face I meet,  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every man,  
In every infant's cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forged manacles I hear:

How the chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every blackening church appals,  
And the hapless soldier's sigh  
Runs in blood down palace-walls.

But most, through midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful harlot's curse  
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,  
And blights with plagues the marriage-hearse.





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## WILLIAM BLAKE

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- William Blake was born in 1757 in London, where he lived most of his life.
    - This gives the strong impression that the 'I' in the poem is Blake himself, writing from experience.
  - Blake was a poet, painter and printmaker.
  - Blake respected the Bible,
    - but disliked organised religion such as the Church of England.
  - In 1800, Blake moved from London to the village of Felpham but returned in 1804.
  - Blake often wrote about rebelling against the misuse of power and class.
  - Blake died in 1827.
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## PUBLISHING CONTEXT

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*London* comes from Blake's collection *Songs of Experience* (1794).

- This collection was a companion piece to the earlier *Songs of Innocence* (1789):
    - after 1794, *Songs of Experience* was always published in the same volume as *Songs of Innocence* –
      - the two are to be seen as one whole work together.
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## MORAL LESSONS AND CORRUPTION

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- *Songs of Innocence* focuses on simple moral lessons for children to learn, with poems often focusing on nature.
    - *Songs of Experience*, however, focuses on a much harsher view of a world corrupted by humans.
      - In terms of the power and conflict cluster, *London*, coming from *Songs of Experience*, can be seen as a critique of human power,
        - exposing the distance between those in power and those suffering.
          - The suffering is inescapable, because of the misuse of power by those in control.
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## INDUSTRIALISATION: CONTEXT

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When Blake was born, the population of London was approximately 760,000.

- 100 years later, the population had risen to over 3 million people.
    - One of the major influences for this population boom, and one that Blake was against, was the Industrial Revolution.
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- The Industrial Revolution began in around 1760.
  - Put simply, it marked a shift from country life to city life.
    - Machines were invented, which could complete work quicker than humans had done in the past.
      - This brought about big changes in...
        - agriculture,
        - manufacturing
        - and transport.

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## INDUSTRIALISATION: THE HUMAN EFFECT

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- Industrial factories were created, and conditions in these were often terrible.
  - children were often used as workers,
    - because they were small enough to fit in and around the machinery,
      - so it wasn't uncommon for six-year-olds to be working nineteen-hour days in these factories.
        - London became a smoke-ridden city:
          - nature was being ruined,
            - and this is one of the important contextual factors explored in Blake's poem.

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## STRUCTURE: STANZA LENGTH AND RHYME SCHEME

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The poem is most rich in its use of language and imagery,

- but there are still a number of valid structural points to make.
  - the poem has a repetitive structure:
    - it is written entirely in quatrains (each stanza contains four lines),
      - with the rhyme scheme ABAB.
        - Repetition is a key point in this poem.
          - Here we can see that the repetitive stanza structure and rhyme scheme reflects the...
            - relentless,
            - repetitive
            - and overwhelming suffering in the city.

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## STRUCTURE: REPETITION OF WORDS

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Repetition of words is another structural device employed by Blake,

- not just in this poem,
  - but in many of the poet's works. In *London* we see repetition of:
    - chartered
    - chartered
    - mark
    - mark
    - mark
    - every
    - every
    - every
  - the repetition of words, like the repetition of stanza structure and rhyme scheme, reflects how the life of suffering repetitive and inescapable:
    - there is no relief from it,
    - no let up,
      - because it is a result of the choices of those in positions of power.

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## STRUCTURE: WHOLE TEXT

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The whole text structure is also significant:

- stanzas one and two focus on the people who are suffering,
- whereas stanza three explores the causes of the suffering:
  - the Church,
  - Industrialisation,
  - land owners
  - and the monarchy.
- The final stanza returns to the focus of those who are suffering.
  - By ending with the same topic as the poem began with, the poet is implementing a...
    - cyclical,
    - repetitive structure
      - which once again highlights the inescapable fate of those in the city:
        - it goes round in circles.
          - Just when you think you've got to the end, you're back at the beginning again.

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## METER

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Not everything follows a strict structural pattern, however.

- For example, Blake's use of meter:
  - I wander through each chartered street,  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow
    - Most of the poem is written in iambic tetrameter.
      - lines of eight syllables,
        - with alternating unstressed and stressed syllables.
          - The repetition of this meter is yet another example of repetition to reflect the inescapable life the poor of London have.

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## VARIATIONS IN METER

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not everything is written in iambic tetrameter.

- Some lines contain seven syllables, like line four.
  - marks of weakness, marks of woe.
    - In a line pointing out the weakness of those who are suffering, the line itself becomes weak in its syllable use:
      - it contains less than the previous lines.
        - Blake weakens the line here to reflect the weakness of those who are suffering.
        - The weakness in the lines could also represent the weakness of industrialisation itself
          - Blake may be pointing out how industrialisation will suffer if the people suffer because it relied on people for it to work
            - Industrialization could not survive without proper treatment of people
        - The weakness of the lines could also indicate rebellion
          - If people were to realise that industrialisation could not function without them, they could rebel or resist in order to attain fairer treatment

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## RESISTANCE: THE LUDDITES

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In Nottinghamshire in 1811, a series of machine breaking riots took place.

- These riots marked the beginning of Luddism.
  - The Luddites were angry at the increasing use of mechanisation in factories
    - and highlighted the urgent need for better working conditions.
      - They took their name from 'Ned Ludd', who, according to legend, lived in Sherwood Forest and advocated anti-industrialization.
        - In 1849, Charlotte Brontë's novel Shirley portrayed the Luddite uprisings in the Yorkshire textile industry.





- Here, mill operator Robert Moore finds that the shipment of machinery he had been awaiting arrives smashed to pieces by angry workers protesting the loss of their jobs.

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## TRADE UNIONS

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The mid-nineteenth century saw the birth of the trade union and the strike. Unhappy with their lack of rights, many workers protested by organising strikes. However, with no organised strike pay, many found it hard to sustain such protests and employers often refused to hire known strikers.

Highlighting the living and working conditions in the industrial cities, Elizabeth Gaskell's 1848 novel *Mary Barton* discusses the terrible repercussions of a worker's strike.

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## PROTEST POEMS

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Following on from William Blake's mention of 'chartered streets' in the poem *London*, and 'dark, satanic mills' in *Jerusalem*, protest poems such as Caroline Norton's *A Voice from the Factories* (1836) and Thomas Hood's *Song of the Shirt* (1843) were written to highlight the sufferings of the oppressed working classes in industrial cities. Alongside these, Elizabeth Barrett Browning composed *The Cry of the Children* to express her anger at the reports of the Children's Employment Commission of 1842, whilst Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* addressed the wrongs of industrialisation and the rise of the Chartist movement.

