London

POEM TEXT

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

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

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

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

SUMMARY

The speaker takes a walk through the designated streets of London. This walk brings the speaker near the River Thames, which seems to have its course dictated for it as it flows throughout the city. The speaker sees signs of resignation and sadness in the faces of every person the speaker passes by.

The speaker hears this pain too, in the cries men as well as those of fearful newborn babies. In fact, in every voice in the city, in every law or restriction London places on its population, the speaker can sense people's feelings of being oppressed by city life.

The speaker hears the cry of young chimney-sweeps, whose misery brings shame on the Church authorities. Thinking of unfortunate British soldiers dying in vain, the speaker imagines their blood running down the walls of a palace.

Most of all, the speaker hears the midnight cries of young prostitutes, who swear and curse at their situation. In turn, this miserable sound brings misery to their tearful new-born children. The speaker also imagines this sound plaguing what the speaker calls "the Marriage hearse"—a surreal imagined vehicle that carries love and death together.

THEMES

THE OPPRESSION OF URBAN LIFE

In "London," the speaker takes a walk through the titular city and finds only misery. The dirty and dangerous city is an intense expression of human life—not at its fullest, but at its most depraved and impoverished. Blake was notably writing at a time when the Industrial Revolution was at full pace, restructuring society in a way that he believed made people lose sight of what it means to be human. Blake uses "London" to argue that this urban environment is inherently oppressive and denies people the freedom to live happy, joyful lives.

The poem opens with the speaker's experience of walking through the city. Through the speaker's eyes and ears, the reader gets a strong sense of the dismal lives of the Londoners. The people are "marked" by "weakness" and "woe"; the streets and even the river Thames are "charter'd"—that is, their courses have been decided for them. (Rivers are often a symbol of freedom, but not in this poem.)

The speaker also hears pain everywhere—it's "in every voice," even that of newborn babies—and it's caused by "mind-forg'd manacles." Manacles are a type of physical restraint, like handcuffs, but these particular manacles are "mind-forg'd"—that is, they come from thought rather than the physical world. The root cause of London's misery, it seems, is the way that humanity *thinks* about itself, the way that society has been conceived and developed. The speaker suggests that society *could* be joyful, free, and full of love, but that people's fear, greed, and thirst for power have made the urban environment unbearably oppressive.

Though the poem doesn't delve too deeply into the way it thinks society *should* be, it's very clear about the strong links between misery and its urban setting. At the time of Blake's writing London was (and still is) one of the busiest, most developed urban environments in the world. The poem argues that this way of life—with its focus on economic activity and individualism—is fundamentally flawed.

To emphasize the point that the city environment itself oppresses its inhabitants, the speaker gestures towards some of the desperate measures people take in order to survive. The chimney-sweepers, who are only children, put their health at great risk to earn a living; both the soldiers and the harlots (female prostitutes), in different ways, must sell their bodies in order to survive. In other words, everyone is trapped by their situation, forced to exchange the only things they have—their bodies—in order to, paradoxically, keep those bodies alive.

What's more, the poem offers no real hope that society may find a way to cast off its "mind-forg'd manacles." Note that the poem emphasizes the next generation in closing on the "youthful Harlots" and the "new-born infants." This image turns what should be a joyous celebration of new life into an initiation into poverty, pain, and hopelessness; it implies the cyclical nature of London's poverty, and suggests people don't have the freedom to escape their urban woes.

The poem, then, views modern city life as hopelessly oppressive. With the Industrial Revolution at full pace, London was undergoing significant and speedy changes. The poem argues these changes aren't for the better, and its criticism of London may be just as relevant to today's cities.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

THE CORRUPTION OF CHILDHOOD

"London" also touches on an important theme throughout Blake's work, one that is especially prominent in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*: the corruption of childhood. Blake believed that people are born with everything they need for a joyful, loving, and happy life—but that the adult world corrupts this innocent state. In this poem, the speaker describes how children are essentially crushed by the adult world, thus building a vivid argument supporting Blake's broader belief.

The speaker of "London" presents urban children as being in distress from the moment they are born. For example, line 15 describes how newborn babies are "blasted" by the curses of their impoverished prostitute mothers. With this image, the speaker gestures towards an ongoing cycle of misery—miserable mothers lead to miserable children, who may themselves create more miserable children later on—that is integral to the urban environment. Similarly, in line 6, infants are characterized as consistently crying, and these cries are specifically related to the fear they feel. It is as though they can sense the misery around them, before they've even developed their ability to meaningfully perceive and make sense of the world.

Perhaps the most poignant reference to childhood corruption is in line 9, when the speaker discusses the chimney-sweepers. Chimney-sweeping was a brutal but very common profession in London in Blake's day, and it was work that children were frequently sold or forced into. (Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" poems discuss this theme in greater detail.) Like the prostitutes and the soldiers mentioned elsewhere in the poem, the impoverished children of London are forced to exchange their one possession—their bodies—for money, food, and/or lodging. In other words, they give up their childhood—when they should be playing and learning about the world—in order to merely survive. And doing so, of course, actually diminishes their chances of survival, because chimney sweeping places them in toxic and physically dangerous environments.

Through the images of childhood suffering that the speaker observes and recreates for readers, Blake seems to suggest that the oppression of children is one of the worst examples of how the "mind-forg'd manacles" of urban life and industrialization corrupt society.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 6
- Lines 9-10
- Line 15

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.

The opening of the poem sets up its premise: the reader will accompany the speaker on a walk through London, seeing and hearing what the speaker perceives. The verb "wander" makes the walk seem almost casual or aimless. This helps make the misery that follows seem like an *everyday* kind of misery—this world of poverty and pain is just what people will find in London whenever they walk through it.

Of course, we don't know yet that the city is such a dismal place; instead, these first two lines merely hint at its oppressiveness. To "wander" also suggests a kind of freedom, an idea which is put under strain by the word "charter'd." A charter is a legal document, granting or denying powers or access (to a particular plot of land, for example). In this one word, the speaker suggests what he or she hates most about modern society: the way it restricts and devalues human life. The "charter'd streets" specifically hint at the way London is a kind of cage, keeping its inhabitants within the confines of their pain. The diacope created by the word's repetition in line 2 reflects the way that this cage is inescapable. The streets, then, represent physical city limits that, in turn, hint at the *mental* limitations of the "mind-forg'd manacles" introduced in line 8.

Line 2 carries on with "charter'd" by now applying it to the Thames. The Thames is the river that flows through London, and it is a key part of the social fabric of the city. It's still pretty dirty now, but back when Blake was writing it would have been even worse—full of filth, waste, and even dead bodies. Here, the Thames acts as a kind of symbol in reverse: rivers are often symbols of natural beauty freedom, but in the poem the Thames only adds to the sense of misery, limitation, and restriction. This symbolic subversion is clear in the grammar of

the line itself: The open assonance of "does flow" almost creates a sense of a river running freely, but it is immediately cut short by the harsh end-stop. The punctuation imposes its limits on any short-lived suggestion of freedom.

It's quite possible that the use of "charter'd" is an allusion to Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. Paine's book was a strong expression of support for the principles of the French Revolution (1789), and in this book he makes a remark that quite possibly informs this poem: "Every chartered town is an aristocratical monopoly of itself." In other words, the layout and organization of a city reflect its imbalance of power, power which is concentrated in the hands of a small ruling class.

Of London specifically, Paine makes another remark whose echo can be found in Blake's poem: "It is a market where every man has his price, and where corruption is common traffic." Worth noting here is that in the poem's first draft, both instances of "charter'd" read "dirty" instead. "Charter'd" must have seemed to better reflect the specific points about London's oppression that Blake wanted the poem to make.

LINES 3-4

And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

Lines 3 and 4 start to introduce the speaker's perceptions as he or she walks through London. In essence, the speaker finds a city overflowing with misery and pain—"weakness" and "woe." The speaker doesn't just find this in *some* faces, but in "every face." There is something about London itself, then, that must impose these conditions on its people—and London is too strong and powerful a beast for any one individual to resist (apart from those in positions of wealth and power, perhaps).

The use of "mark" is important in these lines. In line 3, it functions as a verb that means "notice." But in line 4, the word becomes a noun, as the speaker describes the way the faces of the people of London visually display their pain and impoverishment. This use of antanaclasis helps develop the sense that *everyone* is marked by London's oppression—all the regular folk that live there have to suffer under the city's conditions. The repetition of "mark" also subtly separates the speaker from those he or she is passing by. The speaker stands apart in order to notice their misery—or, if we understand that first "mark" in the sense of "mark" as "to label" or "leave a mark" on something, the speaker is in part responsible for these city dwellers' misery. This all suggests the speaker is not actually one of the impoverished people whom he or she pities.

The metrical shift of line 4 makes this "marking" more dramatic. Up until now, the meter has been a regular iambic tetrameter, creating the sense of somebody walking with a regular pace. This rhythm is broken in line 4, which begins with a trochee to make the "marks" sudden and imposing and is also missing a syllable (it has seven as opposed to eight). This reflects the way that the pained faces of the Londoners have impeded upon the speaker's steady pace, causing the speaker to stumble:

And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

The use of alliteration also emphasizes the marks of weakness and woe in the people's faces, the /m/ and /w/ functioning as visual marks across both lines. Overall, these lines help to create a sense of abundant misery and pain in London.

LINES 5-8

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

Stanza two is the thematic heart of the poem, showing that the speaker perceives in London a battle between freedom and oppression. It also shifts the poem from its initial focus on sight to its overall emphasis on sound.

Just as *every* face showed marks of "weakness" and "woe" in the first stanza, the speaker hears pain and misery in *every* voice. The anaphora of the repeated "in every" shows just how wide-spread the problems are, and also helps widen the poem to be about the condition of humankind more generally.

It's clear that the speaker feels something is fundamentally wrong about every aspect of life in this city, from the cradle to the grave. The capitalization of "Man" and "Infants" again emphasizes the way in which *everyone* is oppressed by London—these are stand-ins for every man, every infant—and each sound they make is evidence of this oppression. Every individual lives in misery, and they are born into this misery. The conditions of London (which the following stanza expands upon) make misery a cyclical, self-fulfilling prophecy. The first stanza evoked the sense of London as a cage, and this stanza begins to reveal the consequences: a cycle of pain that traps people from infancy to manhood.

Having established the way in which pain is so widespread in London (and modern society by extension), the caesura in line 7 shows that these "cries" are linked to "every ban." That is, there is a direct link between the way society oppresses people (implied by the word "ban") by limiting their potential and the widespread misery that they feel. Line 8, meanwhile, shows that these restrictions on human potential are "forged"—made—in the mind. These "manacles" (metal bands used to chain people's hands or ankles) are not literal, but rather the product of a collective failure of the imagination about how society could and should be.

The alliteration of "mind-forg'd manacles" also subtly chimes with "Man" in line 5, suggesting that human beings are to blame for their own misery. Humankind has lost sight of how beautiful, joyful and free life can be, and this shortsightedness

is expressed by the oppressive character of London—a city that people themselves built.

LINES 9-10

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackning Church appalls,

The third stanza is a kind of catalogue of misery and pain, providing the concrete evidence to back up the claim made in the second stanza: that London is shackled by "mind-forged manacles." In a touch of poetic mastery, the last word of the previous stanza, "hear," provides the form for this stanza. The third stanza is an acrostic, with the first letters of each line spelling out that very same word: "HEAR." This imperative verb, concealed in the poem's form, is a kind of imprisoned plea for help that asks the reader to acknowledge the level of suffering in London and to respond accordingly.

Lines 9 and 10 talk about the specifics of the oppression that happens in London, both in the way it plays out in people's daily lives and which authorities might be responsible for it being there in the first place. "Chimney-sweepers" were people employed to clean the soot from chimneys, and because those chimneys were small and narrow it was often children that were forced into cleaning them. This is an economic oppression that robs children of their childhood, forcing them into the adult world of work *and* the terrible health problems that came with this particular job. Blake believed that people are born with everything they need to live a happy, joyful, and spiritually-fulfilled life, but that the adult world as it is corrupts them from an early age. That idea is definitely at play in these lines.

Line 10, syntactically speaking, is part of the same phrase as line 9. These lines are connected via enjambment and, in essence, they're saying that the misery of chimney sweepers brings shame upon the morally dubious—"blackning"—church governance.

The official Church (Church of England) played a big role in society at the time Blake was writing, supposedly tasked with administering care and accommodation to those forgotten by society (such as orphans). But the clear implication here is that the Church has failed its society—it imposes economic, legal, and social restrictions on people and fails to empower them to live full, free, and healthy lives. Furthermore, economic hardship often forced families to sell children into the chimneysweep profession.

The poem, then, is taking aim at the collective failure to cherish life, showing that this failure is part of the reason why children are put in such a perilous condition. The church is supposed to act as a moral and spiritual guide, but all the evidence here points to its inadequacy and ignorance.

LINES 11-12

And the hapless Soldiers sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls

Lines 11 and 12 continue to consider the conditions and sources of oppression put forth in lines 9 and 10. Like the chimney-sweeper, the soldier is an oppressed figure. His oppression, however, stems from the "Palace," which metonymically represents the authority of the State (that is, the British monarchy). Facing the difficult economic circumstances of London, the soldier is forced to exchange the value of his life for a wage. In essence, he has to sell his body in order to survive—just as the chimney-sweep, and, in a more explicitly obvious way, the prostitutes of London have to.

And just as the chimney-sweepers of London make a crying sound, the soldiers have their own vocalization of misery: they "sigh." The sibilance in "hapless Soldiers sigh" actually sounds like someone exhaling, bringing these lines to sonic life. But it's not immediately obvious what the source of this sigh actually is. It could be sheer exasperation, the soldier tired of the conditions that London life imposes on him. Or it might the sound of his last breath when he dies in some remote battle, sent there by the distant kingly authorities.

Line 12 seems to back up the second of these interpretations. The soldier's sigh—in a weird twist of poetic imagination—"runs" down the walls of the palace "in blood." This line is also sibilant in "runs," "palace" and "walls," continuing the sonic link with the "soldiers sigh." This pins down the "Palace" as the site of responsibility for the soldier's misery, and clearly marks the State as the oppressive authority.

Furthermore, the metaphorical presence of soldiers' blood on the palace walls suggests that the palace owes its existence to the soldiers' bodily sacrifice—the building is literally constructed by their deaths. This critique of warfare strongly suggests that human conflict is nothing more than a waste of human life. The soldier is, of course, a violent figure himself, but the strong suggestion here is that this violence is a kind of cycle brought about by the way society organizes and conceives of itself—the result of those "mind-forg'd manacles."

LINES 13-16

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

The final stanza takes the poem towards its bleak conclusion. Now the speaker relates what he or she hears at midnight on the streets of London. "Midnight" carries with it the suggestion of the witching hour—the most supernatural time of night—which implies that London's oppression is a kind of spell. This ties in with the "mind-forg'd manacles" being a form of psychological control.

The speaker now hears the "curse" (another supernatural reference) of "youthful Harlots." These are young women forced into prostitution by the difficult circumstances of the urban environment. In order to survive, they have to sell their

bodies. In doing so, they are like the chimney-sweepers and "soldiers," who must also exchange their bodies for a chance of survival. The emphasis on the youthfulness of the prostitutes doubles down on the idea that the oppression of London is a cyclical trap, one that it is impossible to escape from the cradle to the grave.

This cycle of misery is then foregrounded by the second mention of infants. These are the children of the "youthful Harlots," who by no fault of their own are born into the heart of London's pain and impoverishment. Before they even develop faculties for understanding and perceiving the world, they are deeply affected by the pained cries of their mothers. The assonance of /a/ sounds between "harlots," "blasts," and "infants," which links the three together conceptually, has a violent loudness to it that calls to mind shrieks of psychological and physical pain. There is no hope for these infants, who are entrapped from the first moment of life.

The poem then ends on a stunningly bleak image that reiterates the cyclical nature of London's misery. Blake uses an oxymoronic image, "the Marriage hearse," which ties together two very different things. Marriage is supposed to be an expression of love—which is so notable for its absence in the poem—but here is intimately linked with death, represented by the hearse. In the oppressive environment of London, then, the usual places where love would appear—between two people getting married, or between a mother and child—are corrupted by death.

As if that wasn't dark enough, this conceptual "marriage hearse" is also "blighted" with "plagues" caused by the "youthful Harlots curse." This is partly suggestive of venereal disease, the kind that young women in the sex profession were helplessly exposed to. "Blight" alliterates with "blasts," reinforcing the suggestion of violence and pain. "Plagues" is also an evocative word in terms of London's history, as London is a city that has been ravaged by plague on numerous occasions. The effect here is to pile misery upon misery, conjuring a suffocating and oppressed atmosphere from which there can be no escape (unless society fundamentally changes the way it operates and casts off the "mind-forg'd manacles").

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration occurs in all four stanzas of "London." In lines 3 and 4, the numerous /m/ and /w/ sounds create a sense of abundant misery. Every person the speaker walks past shows "marks" of "weakness" and "woe." The /m/ is associated with these marks, and accordingly the four appearances of /m/ in these lines mirror the way the speaker encounters people on his walk.

In line 8, the /m/ sound appears again. Here, it helps give the phrase "mind-forged manacles" its terrible power. The phrase refers to the oppressive restrictions that humanity places upon itself which, in the speaker's view, are the result of a collective failure to imagine a better society based on love and freedom. The /m/ sound here picks up on the association with misery established in the first stanza, and also helps create a feeling of entrapment. The first word of the phrase starts with /m/ and so does the last, meaning that the phrase itself is in a way surrounded by /m/. It also echoes the /m/ of "Man" in line 5, strengthening the link between the manacles and human beings; the sonic similarity suggests that people are inherently prone to entrapping themselves—that that these shackles aren't simply "mind-forg'd" but also "Man-forg'd," because the oppression of city life is something humanity has created for itself.

In the third stanza, lines 10 and 12 alliterate through the words "blackning" and "blood." Both have negative associations, and both are associated with two of the sources of London's oppression: the official Church and the State/monarchy. The alliteration helps underline the way that society's authorities are directly responsible for people's pain and impoverishment. This is further reflected in the /ch/ consonance of "Chimney" and "Church."

And just as the first two stanzas were linked by the /m/ alliteration, the fourth stanza shares the /bl/ sound with the third stanza. This time it's used for two verbs, both of which describe destruction: "blasts" and "blights." This helps create a sense that this destruction—like the city's oppression—is inescapable. Altogether, the repetition of sounds in the poem thus contributes to the sense that the misery of city-life is cyclical and feeds upon itself.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “m,” “m”
- **Line 4:** “M,” “w,” “m,” “w”
- **Line 5:** “M”
- **Line 8:** “m,” “m”
- **Line 9:** “Ch”
- **Line 10:** “bl,” “Ch”
- **Line 11:** “S,” “s”
- **Line 12:** “bl”
- **Line 13:** “m,” “m”
- **Line 14:** “H,” “H”
- **Line 15:** “Bl”
- **Line 16:** “bl”

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is used in the second stanza. Lines 5, 6, and 7 all begin with "in every," and line 7 even repeats the phrase yet again after the caesura. The anaphora of the second stanza also echoes the use of "in every" in line 3 which, while perhaps not technically anaphora because it doesn't come at the beginning of a clause, still contributes to this increasingly dense

repetition. Part of the poem's overall intention is to show the way that misery and pain are abundant in London. Indeed, they are everywhere that the speaker goes. The anaphora helps to emphasize this abundance, the repeated phrase creating a sense of accumulation and inescapability.

It also links the various subjects together: "Man," "Infants," "every voice" (which presumably includes women), and "every ban" (that is, every rule or regulation of city life). All of these are joined together by the poem's use of anaphora, which reveals that they are all a part of the same problem. Though the cry of a man and the cry of an infant might seem to have very different causes, the speaker's point is that they ultimately have the *same* root cause: those "mind-forg'd manacles." It is these that manacles—the symbols of psychological oppression—that the speaker hears echoing "in every" corner of London.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "in every"
- **Line 5:** "In every"
- **Line 6:** "In every"
- **Line 7:** "In every," "in every"

ANTANACLASIS

Antanaclasis is used once in "London." It is found in lines 3 and 4, when the first use of "mark" is a verb and the subsequent uses are nouns instead. The first mark means "notice." The speaker notices "weakness" and "woe" in every face that he or she comes across. The word also relates to mathematics and numbers, as though the speaker is counting the faces that he or she sees. Brilliantly, Blake shifts the meaning of the word at the start of line 4 (also emphasized by the metrical change through the cutting of the first unstressed syllable). Not only is the speaker actively marking the faces, but the faces themselves are actually marked by the "weakness" and "woe" of those that wear them. This might relate to their facial expressions, or the way that their faces have changed over time through a life of pain and impoverishment.

To mark something can also mean to *leave* a mark on it. In this sense, the antanaclasis can also be understood as the speaker inscribing weakness and woe onto the people the speaker sees, not simply noticing but actively labeling their misery. This sets the speaker apart from these city inhabitants, suggesting that the speaker is not from the city or is of a different, presumably higher, class.

Where Antanaclasis appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "mark "
- **Line 4:** "Marks," "marks"

ASSONANCE

Assonance occurs primarily in the final stanza of "London." There is also a hint of assonance in the /o/ sounds of "does flow," but these are cut off in by an end-stop a way that helps introduce the idea of restriction and limitation that will come to characterize the poem.

Across lines 14 and 15, "Harlots," "Blasts," and "Infants" are linked together by the /a/ sound. They are literally linked together by sound within the poem, too—the harlots' screaming "curse" heralds a life of misery for the newborn infant. The "curse" "Blasts" any chance the new-born would have had at living a free and joyful life. The assonance, then, helps conjure an oppressed and violent atmosphere, underscoring the cyclical nature of misery in London and the impossibility of escaping. The /a/ is also a relatively loud sound compared to the stanza's other sounds, symbolically representing the way in which the sounds of misery are carried on the air throughout the city, overwhelming everything else.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ea," "ee"
- **Line 2:** "ea," "o," "o"
- **Line 12:** "u," "oo," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 13:** "o," "o," "ee," "ea"
- **Line 14:** "a"
- **Line 15:** "a," "a"
- **Line 16:** "a," "a"

ALLUSION

It's possible that the use of "charter'd" is an allusion to Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. This book argued in favor of the principles of the French Revolution (1789). In it, Paine makes a remark that quite possibly informs Blake's use of "charter'd" here: "Every chartered town is an aristocratical monopoly of itself." In other words, Paine is saying that the layout and organization of a city reflect its imbalance of power, power which is concentrated in the hands of a small ruling class. Of London specifically, Paine makes another remark echoed in this poem: "It is a market where every man has his price, and where corruption is common traffic." This line seems to echo the poem's suggestion that everyone in London, from the chimney-sweeps to the prostitutes, has no choice but to sell themselves to survive.

Interestingly, in the poem's first draft, both instances of "charter'd" read "dirty" instead. "Charter'd" must have seemed to better reflect the specific points about London's oppression that Blake wanted the poem to make, and it may be that the word choice was inspired by Paine's similar points.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “charter'd”
- **Line 2:** “charter'd”

CONSONANCE

Consonance occurs throughout the poem, but most heavily in the final two stanzas. As with alliteration and assonance, the consonance helps connect various concepts through similar sounds. In line 8, for example, the shared /m/ of "mind-forg'd manacles" emphasizes that these manacles are not physical, but rather constitute a sort of mental oppression. Here, the speaker is literally turning up the volume. Stanzas 2, 3 ,and 4 are all specifically about what the speaker can hear on a walk through London. The final stanza, however, is about what the speaker hears "most"—this isn't necessarily the most *commonly* heard sound, but more likely the one that seems to *say* the most about the pained and impoverished life of the London inhabitants.

Consonance is used in this stanza to make it sound even more violent and anguished than the previous stanzas. The lines use a /t/ sound throughout, and this is a sound that requires the mouth to stop the airflow, mimicking the violent and threatening London atmosphere and suggesting a sense of impending suffocation. The /t/ sound occurs in "but most," "midnight streets," "Harlots," "Blasts," "Infants tear," and "blights." This literally makes the lines feel noisier, embodying this stanza's literal emphasis on the specific noises of the "youthful Harlots" and the "Infants."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “ch,” “ch”
- **Line 2:** “r,” “r,” “r,” “r,” “f”
- **Line 3:** “m,” “f,” “m”
- **Line 4:** “M,” “w,” “m,” “w”
- **Line 6:** “f,” “f”
- **Line 8:** “m,” “nd,” “d,” “m,” “n”
- **Line 9:** “Ch,” “c”
- **Line 10:** “b,” “l,” “ck,” “Ch,” “pp,” “lls”
- **Line 11:** “pl,” “ss,” “S,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 12:** “bl,” “d,” “d,” “c,” “s”
- **Line 13:** “t,” “m,” “t,” “m,” “t,” “t,” “t”
- **Line 14:** “th,” “th,” “l,” “t,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 15:** “Bl,” “t,” “s,” “t,” “t”
- **Line 16:** “bl,” “t,” “s,” “l,” “s,” “s”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs between lines 3 and 4, 8 and 9, 9 and 10, 11 and 12, 12 and 13, and the entirety of the final stanza.

The enjambment between lines 3 and 4 makes the use of "Marks" at the start of line 4 a more dramatic moment. The reader is expecting an unstressed syllable, and the enjambment contributes to that expectation—but suddenly the "marks of weakness" impose themselves on the poem, mimicking the way they impose themselves on the speaker during this walk through London.

Between lines 8 and 9, the poem actually enjambs across two stanzas. The key here is to look at the first letters of each line in the third stanza: they spell HEAR. And in parallel, the last word of stanza 2 is "hear"—so the poem issues its instruction to the reader and then literally spells out what can be heard in the London environment. The enjambment sets up this link.

The two enjambments within the third stanza—between lines 9 and 10, and lines 11 and 12—create a sense of balance between the stanza's two halves. Line 9 sets out an aspect of London's misery (the cries of the chimney-sweepers), and then the enjambment allows line 10 to reveal one of the key causes of the chimney-sweepers' pain: the Church. Likewise, line 12 reveals that the "Soldiers" pain is caused by the "Palace," which is a metonymic reference to the nation and the monarchy.

In the final stanza, the consistent enjambment builds a sense of propulsion as the poem heads towards its climax. But the lack of punctuation also helps the poem insist that London's misery is ongoing, with no end in sight. The refusal to punctuate means that the poem has no sense of closure—just as the Londoners have no escape from their hardship.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “meet”
- **Line 4:** “Marks”
- **Line 8:** “hear”
- **Line 9:** “How,” “cry”
- **Line 10:** “Every”
- **Line 11:** “And,” “sigh”
- **Line 12:** “Runs,” “walls”
- **Line 13:** “But,” “ hear”
- **Line 14:** “How,” “curse”
- **Line 15:** “Blasts,” “tear”
- **Line 16:** “And,” “hearse”

DIACOPE

Diacope occurs in the first stanza of "London." Both lines 1 and 2 are dominated by the same single word: "charter'd." The word itself suggests a kind of administrative restriction placed on the city, its people, and even nature itself (as suggested by the river Thames). The repetition is entirely deliberate, and it helps to create an atmosphere of enclosure and limitation. The speaker is trying to "wander," but the way the streets are "charter'd" seems to dictate the speaker's course. Applying this same word to the river inverts the river as a symbol: whereas rivers often represent freedom, here the river only helps to emphasize the sense of oppression that runs throughout the poem. That is, *no one* is free in London—the restrictions that society has

developed constrain even flowing bodies of water.

"Marks" in line 4 can also be thought of as diacope, though we discuss what Blake is doing here more specifically in our entry on antanaclasis. In any case, its repetition seems to underscore just how incredibly common these various "marks" of misery are.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "charter'd"
- **Line 2:** "charter'd"
- **Line 4:** "Marks," "marks"

SIBILANCE

Sibilance is used most heavily in lines 11 and 12:

> And the hapless Soldiers sigh
> Runs in blood down the Palace walls

Out of a total of ten words in these two lines, six of them contain sibilants. The main effect that this achieves is to create the sound of sighing, which in itself is sibilant. The way in which the sibilance makes the lines themselves seem to sigh helps create an air of hopelessness and resignation; the poem feels as resigned as the "Soldiers" seem to. There is also a slow quality to the sound, which mirrors the image of blood dripping down the palace walls. The link between the words created by the sibilance also helps make it clear that the soldiers' sigh—which could be interpreted as the exhalation of their dying breath—is caused by the decision-making in the palace, which is a metonymic term for the state—that is, the British monarchy that sends soldiers into war.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "ss," "S," "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "c," "s"

METAPHOR

Metaphor occurs twice in "London." The first instance is arguably the thematic heart of the poem: the "mind-forg'd manacles" of line 8. In reality, manacles are metal chains that bind people's ankles or hands, the kind that might be used on a group of prisoners. Of course, the speaker does not mean that the inhabitants of London are literally chained up. Instead, the manacles are a metaphor for the way in which the people described in the poem are oppressed both socially and psychologically by the city that they live in.

But it's more complicated than that—these manacles aren't just the external difficulties presented by a city like London. They are "forged" in the "mind;" that is, they are made in the human imagination rather than the physical world. The poem doesn't suggest that they are created by the very people whom they oppress, but rather seems to indicate a more collective failure to imagine a better way that society could be organized and allowed to flourish. Essentially, this line is calling out a basic tendency in mankind: to impose restrictions and limitations on itself that then cause pain and impoverishment to many of its people. The administrators of these manacles—the people that make sure they are tightly fitted on the lives of the London inhabitants—are those in positions of authority, e.g. the official Church of line 10 and the monarchy ("Palace") of line 12.

The second metaphor is in the final two words of the poem: "Marriage hearse." Of course, no such thing exists; this seems to be an imaginary vehicle that the speaker imagines existing in the streets of London. But the metaphor serves to highlight the way that even love (as suggested by "Marriage") is closely linked to death in dismal places like London.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "mind-forg'd manacles"
- **Line 16:** " Marriage hearse"

METONYMY

Metonymy occurs once in "London" and is found in line 12. Here, "the Palace" is not just talking about the specific building where the King lives. It's also a stand-in for the entirety of the state—that is, the British monarchy. The reference helps pin a location and a cause to the soldiers' misery: the monarchy, which gets to decide the fate of soldiers' lives, is responsible for the desperation they experience here.

The metonymy also helps create an air of removed distance around the monarchy. It is only indirectly mentioned, and this mirrors its inability to take responsibility for—its distance from—the everyday misery of the Londoners. That is, ordinary people might be able to see the literal building of the palace, but they have little hope of bringing their complaints to the actual monarchs who control society.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** " Palace"

CAESURA

Caesurae occurs only in line 4 and line 7. The comma in line 4 creates a brief pause after the word "weakness." This pause has an air of resignation, as if the poem itself is already growing weary. Indeed, the fact that the caesura is immediately followed by "marks of woe" shows how deeply embedded misery is in the lives of the Londoners—the brief respite of the caesura soon gives way to more evidence of pain. It also seems to take the place of the word "and," making this caesura an instance of asyndeton as well, and suggesting that the speaker is too

exhausted by London to even bother speaking the extra word.

The colon caesura in line 7 is a key moment in the poem. The preceding lines in the stanza have emphasized the all-encompassing social and psychological misery of London; the speaker hears the people's pain everywhere. The colon takes all of that accumulated misery and points towards a way of understanding it, and locating where it comes from. Through the caesura, the cries of man, woman and child are all tied together with "every ban." That is, London's misery is a direct result of restrictions and limitations imposed by humans themselves, particularly those in positions of authority. A collective failure of the imagination—the "mind-forg'd manacles"—is the thing that has resulted in this pained and impoverished society, and the caesura helps make that connection clear.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** ","
- **Line 7:** ":"

OXYMORON

Oxymoron occurs once in "London," in its final two words. Here the speaker clashes two very different worlds together: love, represented by "marriage," and death, represented by the suggestion of a funeral "hearse." It's a deeply unsettling image, and it is in essence arguing that there is no space for love to grow in oppressed urban environments like London—any promise of love is already dead on arrival. Not only is marriage transported by a hearse, but that hearse itself is blighted with plagues. This makes the image even more surreal, and gestures towards the sexually-transmitted diseases (very literal links between love and death) that were commonplace in London at the time.

Where Oxymoron appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "Marriage hearse"

VOCABULARY

Thro' (Line 1, Line 13) - A shortened version of "through."

Charter'd (Line 1, Line 2) - This has a double meaning. "Charter'd" in this context can mean predetermined, as though the layout of the city is set in stone. But it also relates to legal administration, hinting at the authorities who have power over London.

Thames (Line 2) - The Thames is one of England's main rivers and runs directly through London, dividing the city into North and South.

Mark (Line 3, Line 4) - Mark is used in two senses here. In line 3 it means "notice," but in line 4 it refers to the visual signs of weakness and woe.

Ban (Line 7) - These are restrictions and limitations imposed on society by its authorities. But the word also has an archaic meaning of "curse," so that might have been part of the original intention too.

Mind-forg'd manacles (Line 8) - This is a metaphor for the psychological and spiritual restrictions and limitations imposed on the London inhabitants. Literally, "manacles" are physical restraints of the kind placed on prisoners, while "mind-forg'd" means "created by the mind" or perhaps "imagined."

Blackning (Line 10) - A shortened version of "blackening" (becoming blacker or darker in color).

Appalls (Line 10) - It's not entirely clear what the intention is here, but this word most likely means "brings shame upon."

Hapless (Line 11) - Unlucky and helpless.

Harlots (Line 14) - Female prostitutes.

Lights (Line 16) - A verb that means to spoil or damage, with a particular link to the way disease affects people's physical and mental health.

Hearse (Line 16) - A carriage used in funerals for transporting the dead. In the 18th century they were horse-drawn.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As with many of Blake's poems, "London" has a simple form that furthers a discussion of complicated ideas. There are four quatrain stanzas. Taking a zoomed-out look at these stanzas, the first can be said to deal with the *sights* of London, while the following three focus instead on the *sounds* of the city.

Of these, the only one with a particularly inventive form is stanza three. Here, Blake takes the final word of stanza two and uses it to create an acrostic. The first letter of each line in stanza three spells out HEAR, which helps the poem emphasize the sense of sound that the speaker experiences in London. But this formal feature is not immediately noticeable, which reflects the poem's idea that to truly understand the pain and impoverishment of London (and cities like it) takes a deliberate effort.

METER

On first glance, "London" is written in iambic tetrameter. Indeed, the first three lines conform to this scheme perfectly:

> I wan- | -der thro' | each chart- |-er'd street,
> Near where | the chart- | -er'd Thames | does flow.
> And mark | in eve- |-ry face | I meet

The poem here is setting up its basic premise—a walk through London—and the regularity of the meter calls to mind the speaker's solid and rhythmic walking pace. But suddenly, this regularity is thrown off by line 4, when the "marks" in people's faces appear in front of the speaker. Their "weakness" and "woe" disrupt the speaker's walking rhythm, and this change is reflected metrically the shortened first foot of the line (technically something called headless catalexis; we could also scan this is being a line made up of trochees and the sound would be the same):

> Marks | of weak- | ness, marks | of woe.

This makes the appearance of the people's faces more dramatic, as though they have literally just jumped unexpectedly in front of the speaker's eyes.

What's more, line 4 isn't the only line to cut out the final syllable. Every line in stanza three breaks with iambic tetrameter in the same way, which makes the "chimney-sweepers' cry" and the "hapless soldiers' sigh" more prominent and audible—stressed from the first syllable, the lines *feel* louder. Lines 14 and 15 employ a form of catalexis too, with an effect similar to that of stanza three. All of these lines scan the same way that line 4 (quoted above) does.

RHYME SCHEME

"London" follows a simple rhyme scheme throughout:

> ABAB

All of the rhymes are full, perfect rhymes as well. Generally speaking, the steady, unchanging rhyme scheme helps the poem *feel* like a walk. Just like a pair of feet, one rhyme is laid down after another. It's also notable how many of these end words have negative connotations. Out of sixteen ending words, perhaps only five sound neutral when taken out of context: street, flow, meet, Man, and hear. All of the rest deal with pain, the sounds of pain, or images of restriction—and in the final word of the poem ("hearse"), death itself. This helps the poem create an overall atmosphere of misery, and brings those other five words into this world of negative connotations. In context, "street" becomes the site of London's misery, and every person that the speaker "meets" is evidence of oppression and pain. The poem thus uses a relatively straightforward rhyme scheme to keep the focus on its thematic concerns—namely, the oppression and misery of urban life.

SPEAKER

The poem is written from a first-person perspective, but this "I" is non-specific. Of course, the speaker has a lot in common with William Blake himself. In particular, they share a dislike and distrust of modern industrial London, observing the way that London oppresses and depresses its inhabitants.

The speaker is, like Blake, a kind of visionary. He or she deliberately delves into the heart of London, seeking to understand the city and its people. The speaker is a visionary not just in a visual sense, but in an auditory one too. It is as though the speaker can see and hear all of London's pain and impoverishment at once. The speaker also has a theory as to the source of London's misery: "the mind-forg'd manacles." To the speaker, London represents a collective failure of the human mind—a better society based on love, freedom and joy is, or perhaps only *was*, possible, but has been replaced by the miserable beast that is modern-day London.

SETTING

As the title of the poem suggests, the setting here is "London." Specifically, it's the London of Blake's time—so the late 18th century.

As the poem makes clear, this was a time of economic and social hardship. Rapid industrialization had completely changed the character of the city, and it was a hard place to survive. The poem emphasizes this effort for survival: the young (represented by the chimney-sweepers), men (soldiers), and women (youthful prostitutes) all have to put their bodies on their line just in order to exist from day to day. This creates the sense that London is an unforgiving and foreboding place, where threat and danger lurk at every corner.

But the poem is also set in the speaker's own particular perceptions of London. The reader is seeing, hearing, and understanding the city through the speaker's own eyes, ears, and mind. The "mind-forg'd manacles" and the "marriage hearse," for example, are the speaker's own ideas. Indeed, the links between poverty and authority represent the speaker's own theory that, in the speaker's mind, explains London's misery.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Blake (1757-1827) is a poet unlike any other. Often considered one of the first of the English Romantics, he also stands apart from any movement as a unique philosopher, prophet, and artist.

Blake first printed "London" in *Songs of Experience* (1794), the second volume of his important collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. This two-part book examines what Blake called "the two contrary states of the human soul." Many of the poems in *Songs of Innocence* have a counterpart in *Songs of Experience*, a twin poem that reads the same subjects from a

new perspective.

Blake conceived most of these poems not just as text, but as illuminated manuscripts in which images deepen (and sometimes complicate or contradict) the meanings of the words. Blake designed, engraved, printed, painted, and published these works himself, using a technique he called the "infernal method." In this process, he painted his poems and pictures on copper plates with a resilient ink, then burned away the excess copper in a bath of acid—the opposite of the process most engravers used. But then, Blake often did the opposite of what other people did, believing that it was his role to "reveal the infinite that was hid" by custom and falsehood.

While Blake was never widely known during his lifetime, he has become one of the most famous and beloved of poets since his death, and writers from Allen Ginsberg to Olga Tokarczuk to Philip Pullman claim him as a major influence.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

William Blake spent much of his life railing against the cruelties of 19th-century British society. And he had plenty to rail against!

The England of Blake's time was just getting caught up in the Industrial Revolution, a period during which the economy shifted from farming to manufacturing. The countryside began to empty out, and the cities began to swell. And English class divisions, always intense, began to seem even more pronounced as impoverished workers lived cheek-by-jowl with the fashionable and wealthy in newly crowded towns.

Workers during the early Industrial Revolution got a pretty raw deal. Even young children were forced to work in factories, dig in mines, and sweep chimneys (an absurdly dangerous job, contrary to the cheery Mary Poppins image many are familiar with: chimney-sweeps as young as three or four years old regularly suffocated in narrow flues). Adults didn't have it much easier. With few regulations to keep factory owners in check, bosses could impose impossible working hours, or withhold pay for any number of trifling offenses.

Blake saw these societal changes as threats to humankind. In "London," he describes industrial society as a form of physical and mental enslavement—as "mind-forg'd manacles."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Illustration and Other Poems — A resource from the Tate organization, which holds a large collection of Blake originals. Here the poem can be seen in its original illustrated form. (https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/william-blake-39/blakes-songs-innocence-experience)
- Blake's Radicalism — An excerpt from a documentary in which writer Iain Sinclair discusses Blake's radicalism. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl0yBrI24XM&t=1s)
- Blake's Visions — An excerpt from a documentary in which writer Iain Sinclair discusses Blake's religious visions. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8hcQ_jPIZA)
- A Reading by Idis Elba — Actor Idris Elba reads "London." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAIbkA4NRGQ)
- The Chimney Sweepers Article — An article from the British Library that looks at Blake's "Chimney Sweepers" poems, which relate to lines 9 and 10 of "London." The article offers insight into what the life of a "sweep" was like. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/william-blakes-chimney-sweeper-poems-a-close-reading#)
- Full Text of Songs of Innocence and Experience — Various formats for the full collection in which "L" appears. (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1934/1934-h/1934-h.htm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- A Dream
- Ah! Sun-flower
- A Poison Tree
- Earth's Answer
- Holy Thursday (Songs of Innocence)
- Infant Joy
- Infant Sorrow
- Nurse's Song (Songs of Experience)
- Nurse's Song (Songs of Innocence)
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Innocence)
- The Clod and the Pebble
- The Divine Image
- The Ecchoing Green
- The Fly
- The Garden of Love
- The Lamb
- The Little Black Boy
- The Sick Rose
- The Tyger
- To Autumn
- To the Evening Star

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