

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict

London - *William Blake*



LONDON

William Blake

Brief Summary

The poem centres from a **first-person perspective** on an anonymous speaker (who could be assumed to be Blake) walking through London, and commenting on the filth and corruption he sees, including the child labour, monarchical abuse, and prostitution he witnesses. It's short and obvious in its **criticisms of the authorities** which have allowed the city to get into such a dangerous and unpleasant state.

Synopsis

- Walking through the streets of London observing its corruption and dirt
- Sees signs of sadness and suffering in every person he passes
- Signs of child labour, church's corruption, the army and the monarchy
- Sees prostitutes and newborn children
- Views the carriages of newlyweds as hearses – cycle of misery

Summary

Context - French Revolution // wanted revolution in England // published during "reign of terror" // from "Songs of Experience" but no counterpart in "Songs of Innocence" // industrial revolution

Form – dramatic monologue and simple language (conversational)

Structure – uniform stanza length (order/control) // iambic tetrameter throughout (8 syllables) // broken by some lines > emphasise them- "marks of weakness" // 3rd stanza "HEAR" // cyclical structure (back to focus on people) - never-ending

Language – juxtaposition (marriage hearse / blackening church) // moral corruption // anaphora (extent of suffering) // literary crescendo // symbolism of manacles - physical symbols of the sources of oppression / institutes of power

Key idea – suffering (due to abuse of power) is never-ending and has a great impact on everyone, but it will remain until people are willing to take action to remove it. Their suffering and oppression is now internalised, and they cannot escape because they will not act. Call for revolution.

Context

William Blake (1757 - 1827)

William Blake was an English poet and artist, who was writing during the **Romantic literary era**. He lived in London for most of his life, and saw it as corrupted by greed and inequality. He thought his city was dirty and corrupt, both literally and metaphorically, and as he thought this was largely due to the political situation lots of his poetry was about political subjects. Poetry was his passion and he would use it to try and instigate change. To help him with this, he would write using simple language so his message was accessible to all. He also stood against oppressing women and supported equality. This is demonstrated by how he educated his wife, teaching her to read and write, and eventually she became his business partner.

However, believing in equality for both genders was unusual, and Blake was **considered to have radical political views**. He was also anti-monarchy and



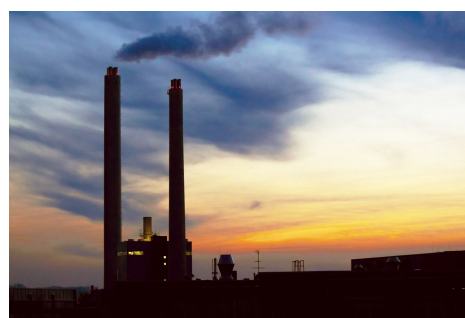
wanted a revolution to remove it, thinking that revolution was inevitable and necessary. He also identified as Christian, but rejected organised religion and established church because he saw it as corrupt and hypocritical. He strongly disagreed with the fact that they put money into new buildings whilst the poor starved.

French Revolution

London was published during the “reign of terror”. The French Revolution became an inspiration for many radicals as it was a symbol of how the disenfranchised and oppressed could seize power from the privileged. It resulted in the end of the French monarchy, which is what Blake was hoping for in England, which ended when Louis XVI was executed in 1793. However, it was followed by “reign of terror”, with thousands executed via guillotine.

Industrial Revolution

England transformed into an industrial power, and oversaw a mass movement to cities from the countryside. However, this urbanisation led to most of London being covered in smog from factories and industrialisation



The term “Chartered” means government gave the wealthy exclusive rights to land and resources that had been previously owned in common, which meant the wealthy started owning monopolies of land.

From the collection ‘Songs of Experience’ (1794)

This was a poetry collection that acted as a **companion piece to “Songs of Innocence”** (1789), which was focused around the innocence and naivety of children and the beauty and peace of nature, providing simple moral messages. On the other hand, “Songs of Experience” **exposed the corruption and suffering / the harsh reality of the new, changed world and the social issues** (such as poverty, child labour and prostitution) that were attached to it.

The poems in the “Innocence” collection have a darker pair in the “Experience” collection such as “The Lamb” and “The Tyger”, or “The Chimney Sweep”. These feature in both collections but in the first provide an innocent child’s view of the world then the darker pair explores the church and society’s role in child labour. These pairings serve to show how innocence is lost with experience of the harshness of reality. However, London has no companion in “innocence”. The gist of the poem is that London is unambiguously and indubitably corrupt.



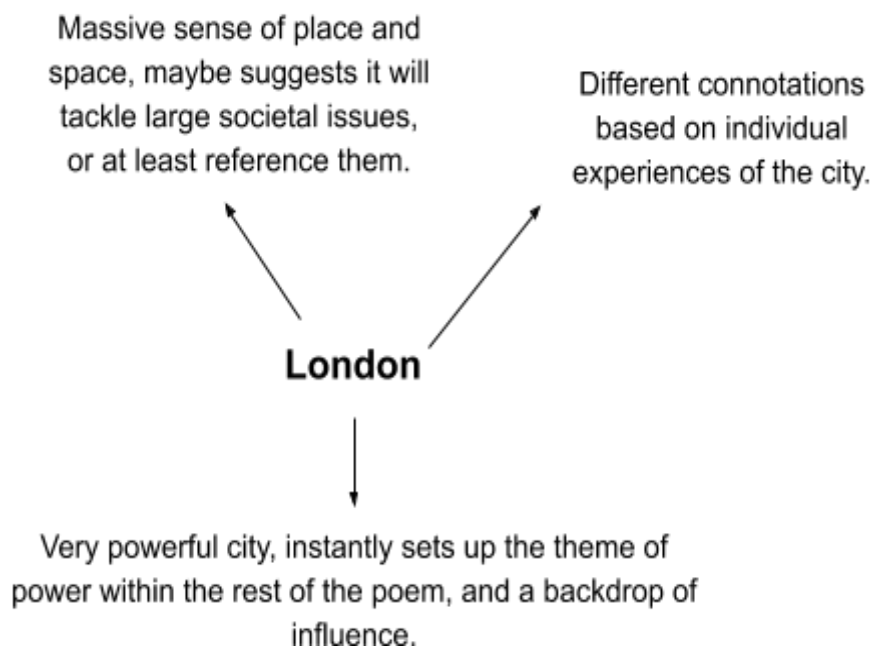
London

Blake explores the theme of **authoritarian abuses of power** in his poem which is set in the capital of (arguably) the most important country in the world at the time: London. Blake was a hopeful poet who tried to use his talent at writing to motivate change. Maybe he hoped that readers of “London” would consider their own impact on the run down state of the city, and potentially how they could help improve it.

He suggests there is a huge issue with the divide between those in power and those completely void of it, relating to the huge wealth disparity affecting Victorian England. The simplistic structure of **four regular stanzas** following an **alternate rhyme scheme** contrasts the complex, seemingly unending issues which Blake sets forth in his work.

The poet **emphasises with those who have been hurt most by the capitalist structures which cause inequality within society**, focusing on their misery. The poem would probably have been considered revolutionary within his society, as he is attacking the ‘establishment’. Overall, he employs an **immensely negative tone**, which replicates his own disillusionment with both the government and the monarchy, as well as the Church.

The title “London”



London

The repetition of "marks" demonstrates that this is a permanent impact of place's power with wide-reaching and exception-free extent. Also suggests cannot remove the impact of the suffering they have experienced (weakness), and like the branding of cattle, the citizens are branded too by their experiences

Adjective blackening is at surface level an acknowledgement of the soot and smoke that (produced by industrial factories) polluted every part of London during the 1700s. Figurative interpretation can be found through the negative connotations of immorality and evil derived from "black'ning" It is the moral blackening of the church he is referring to. This can be perceived as a criticism of organised religion, and its failure to provide for the disadvantaged members of society.

Juxtaposed connotations of new beginnings, joy and happiness of wedding with the end of life and grief of a hearse.

I wander through each **chartered** street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
And **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 **black'ning church appalls,**
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.**

They all been "chartered" so they are effectively owned and controlled by the wealthy

Breaks from the iambic tetrameter used for most of the remainder of the poem, which could reflect how if people rise up against institutions of power, they can free themselves from societal restraint.

This is significant because children are supposedly born innocent and shouldn't have to suffer. The phrase incites sympathy in the reader and also shows pessimistically how every life is destined for misery.

Internal oppression and weakness, also a culmination of the suffering experienced in the preceding lines.

Connotes dismay/horror, and reflects the lack of action of the church, which should offer support and help to the poor, but instead is focused more on its own wealth. A lack of morality appals those who (like Blake) believe in the true meaning of the bible Importance of loving and caring for others taught by Jesus. It juxtaposes the purity and love expected of the religious institution. Juxtaposition of innocence of youth with immorality of harlot.



Perspective

Dramatic Monologue

London is written with a **first-person speaker** speaking passionately about what he sees and experiences, combined with simple language in an almost **conversational tone**.

Blake wanted his poetry to feel **accessible** to all members of society because it contains messages and views everyone should consider and take on, and this works with a monologue as it sets up a conversation

The poem is also written in first person to make it seem personal: this is the speaker's own experience of London, and his home and his views.

Structure

Cyclical Structure

The first/second stanzas focus on impact on people, the third explores the source of suffering, and the fourth goes back to the impact again. The effect of this is for Blake to **suggest suffering is never ending**, and implies to the reader that they will keep suffering until they break the cycle and rebel against society, like the French did during the revolution.

Iambic Tetrameter

Blake is fairly **consistent in his use of iambic tetrameter**. This shows order and control, as the consistency of a rhythm provides a sense of the relentless oppression.

IAMBIC TETRAMETER | Technique where the poet uses eight syllables in each line, with pairs of sounds going da-DA with the emphasis on the second syllable.

Consistent rhyme scheme and stanza length

Blake employs an **ABAB rhyme scheme**, along with consistent stanza lengths. He uses **quatrains** (4 lines) and this **fixed structure** enhances the sense of **complete control and oppression** which could mimic the way he feels lower classes are trapped in London. This consistent structure also highlights how suffering is relentless and never-ending, to the point of being overwhelming.

The structure may also reflect how frustrated Blake is that the general public won't stand up to the institutions of power which are controlling them. It could be argued that he represents the possible opportunities members of Victorian society have to **break free through the small inconsistencies in the tight structure of the poem**. These breaks and lines are emphasised because they stand out from the rhythm, breaking the flow. For example, the line **"marks of**



weakness, marks of woe is only seven syllables, which **breaks the iambic tetrameter** employed for the rest of lines.

Alternatively, these breaks and structural weakening could arguably serve to reflect the weakness of London's inhabitants, as they have been permanently weakened by the suffering they've endured, and this is the reason why they cannot stand up for justice or rebel against oppression.

HEAR

It is interesting to note that the first letters of each line of the third stanza spell out HEAR (Hear Every And Runs): some critics believe that this could be a subliminal message to his readers, considering Blake has focused on **auditory signs** of suffering throughout. These include **"cry"**, **"sigh"**, **"curse"** and **"I hear"**. Maybe Blake wants the reader to start listening to the signs of suffering around them, as well as listening to his message, ultimately calling for recognition of society's ills.

Language

Juxtaposition

Blake utilises juxtaposing phrases such as **"marriage hearse"** which contrast connotations of new beginnings, joy and happiness of weddings with the end of life and grief of a hearse. This is Blake making a **societal criticism** of how, for women, marriage was like death. Their carriage was a hearse, and they're being sent to a marriage where they would have all their rights and property lost. The new bride is then subject to oppression by their husband. Blake was in favour of liberating women, and felt that marriage itself is an abuse of power, giving men the opportunity to abuse power over their wives.

Anaphora

ANAPHORA | A word which refers to a previously used word.

The poem uses the phrase **"in every"**, with **"every"** also repeated within the lines (seven times in total throughout poem). This may be Blake emphasising the **extreme extent of the suffering**, showing how it impacts everyone with no discrimination. The device gets very repetitive, maybe to show how repetitive the cycles of suffering are in London's Victorian society. This repetition builds up to the final line like a **literary crescendo**.

Semantic Fields

SEMANTIC FIELD | A writer uses words which are linked by a theme or topic throughout a text or passage.



Oppression

Blake presents **oppression as stemming from privatisation**, using the repetition of the word **“chartered”** in the phrases **“each chartered street”** and **“chartered Thames does flow”**. This refers to how in the 1700s, legislation was passed giving common land to the wealthy for exclusive use and ownership. Therefore, land in the city transitioned suddenly from common to private, with everything owned and controlled by the wealthy.

There is a juxtaposition between **“chartered”** and **“flow”**, because “flow” implies freedom, whereas **“chartered”** is describing it as owned by someone. Blake is also commenting on the **oppression of nature by humans**. Nature should be free for all to access and enjoy, but the greed of humanity is so great it tries to control nature.

Suffering

The **cause of suffering** in the poem is **shown to be the institutions of power** (monarchy, government, Church) people in London, and England in general, were subjected to.

Blake uses the physical features of London as symbols for the different forms of suffering and corruption present within the city.

- The **“chartered streets”** serve to demonstrate the lack of freedom and privatisation induced by the industrial revolution.
- Whereas the **“hapless soldiers sigh”** references the threat of military action that loomed in the aftermath of the French revolution. As a result of the French revolution, governments scared of being overthrown, so they used their armies as a way for a country to prevent rebellion and oppress citizens.



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leadenhall_Street_J._Hookins.jpg

Organised religion is also portrayed as a source of suffering for citizens of London in the poem, highlighted by the phrase **“every black’ning church”**.

- The adjective blackening is at surface level an acknowledgement of the soot and smoke that polluted every part of London due to the industry the 1700s.
- A figurative interpretation can be found through the negative connotations of immorality and evil derived from **“black’ning”**. This can be perceived as a **criticism of organised religion**, and its failure to provide for the disadvantaged members of society.
- Therefore, suffering is a symptom of the church’s failure to deliver on its duty. This is in line with Blake’s own support for the values and messages of the bible, but contempt towards organised religion which he saw as betraying the Christian faith.

Blake also presents the suffering of various people within society. Babies and children suffer; **“in every infant’s cry of fear”**. This is significant because children are supposedly born innocent and



shouldn't have to suffer, and therefore this phrase incites sympathy in the reader and also shows pessimistically how every life is destined for misery.

Children are also victimised, according to the poem: *"how the chimney-sweepers cry"*. This refers to how children were used for child labour in Victorian era, and often forced to work by parents who desperately need the money. It links to another poem in the collection - "The Chimney Sweep" - which also features in his other collection which acts as a companion, Songs of Innocence.

More victims of this societal oppression, according to the poem, are women: *"youthful harlot"* - many women were condemned to immorality and prostitution just to make a living, as there were few jobs available to women at the time. They were also systematically paid less than men and were only valued for appearance/sexual fulfilment.

The **motif** that suffering is never ending is further emphasised by the poem's **cyclical structure and narrative, which suggests suffering is internalized and inescapable because those who live in London won't act and rise up against their oppressors** and institutions of authority who restrain them.

This inevitable cycle of never ending suffering that is set for all is further mentioned through the **oxymoronic** phrase *"marriage hearse"*, as it suggests all happiness and all life is doomed.

Symbolism

One key symbol Blake employs is that of referencing: *"mind forged manacles"*, which suggests the suffering of the citizens of London has become internalised. Maybe their **oppression had resulted in them forging their own restrictions**. *"Manacles"* are associated with slavery and lack of freedom, which shows people are enslaved by authorities but also by their own mindset and fear, and also enslaved by accepting injustice. Here, Blake is suggesting it is their fears and aversions that prevent change, as they are physically free (the manacles are not literal) but enslaved by concepts instead.

These conflicts include the class system, ownership, charters, and institutions like the church and the monarchy, which Blake actively stood against. By presenting the manacles as having their origin in the mind, he is **sending the message that society can be reformed by people having the strength of will to break free from their aversion** to change and take action.

Another line which has symbolic significance in the poem is: *"and mark in every face I see"*, and here the word *"mark"* can be seen as a verb. The speaker notices the suffering present in London everywhere, but he also marks it, which is suggesting that he isn't ignoring it but make a note and recognising its importance, and the need for it to change.



Comparisons

London	Checking Out Me History
Oppression comes from the place itself and the people and institutions within it (interior forces)	Oppression comes from colonisation (exterior forces)
"Mind forged manacles" - internalised oppression	"Carving out me identity" - externalised oppression
Class oppression ["chartered streets"]	Racial oppression

London & Tissue

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poets show human power as a source of oppression and suffering; in the poem London, citizens are suffering ["mind forged manacles"], and in Tissue, oppression stems from power ["fall away on a sigh"], which shows relief of permanence fading. They also both work to criticise material wealth and inequality, for example in London the focus on the adjective "chartered" – the land and the "Thames" are chartered, which means they have been given to people to own what should be held in common. Likewise, in the poem Tissue, the speaker and poet is criticising how paper can control people – maps and "borderlines" as well as the ability of money to "fly our lives like paper kites" – control. Additionally, they use the noun "borderlines", which is a symbol of division and limitation.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> However, the two poets have different responses to the inequality, oppression and suffering they are faced with and see in society. On one hand, Blake is resigned to accept the cyclical nature of corruption – cyclical structure of poem, whereas Dharker is offering a solution to the problem of power.

London & The Emigrée

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poets work to explore the power of place through its ability to influence its citizens. In The Emigrée, there is the resounding positive impression clouds all other knowledge and contradicting information – power of memories of the place. Meanwhile, in London, there is the power of the place to oppress them, and causes them suffering and internalised oppression ["mind forged manacles"]. Both poets explore places which cause suffering. In The Emigrée, the speaker is suffering because she cannot return to her city and is trapped in a new place and tortured by the positive memories of the home she can't return to. This is compared to London, where the suffering is because the place is filled with institutions of power that control the citizens and the
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	speaker is unable to leave or escape.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the Emigrée the place is fantasy – “there was once a city” – the city is metaphorical and symbolic for the place she remembers, but which no longer exists. On the other hand, in London, the place is real but has symbolic values – buildings symbolic of institutions of power

