

ANALYSING THE POEM

LONDON BY WILLIAM BLAKE

BACKGROUND TO THE POET: WILLIAM BLAKE

- William Blake was born in London in 1757. He lived there for most of his life. Unlike most writers of the time he did not come from a wealthy family.
- He had no formal schooling; his education came primarily from his mother, but he did enrol in drawing school when he was 10. He trained as an engraver: engraving images into books and magazines.
- He spent a lot of his time wandering the streets of London, even venturing into the nearby.
- He was a very spiritual man and respected the bible but did not like the power and control that the church exerted. This is reflected in the poem.

BACKGROUND TO THE POEM: LONDON

- The poem reflects how Blake felt about the changes in London brought about by the Industrial Revolution.
- The introduction of machinery brought about a fundamental change in life: manual work became harder to come by as machines were more efficient. This meant more people moved to the cities in search of work.
- This brought about major changes to the city Blake was born in; the city he had explored freely as a child.
- The poem is written in the first person 'I' - which gives the impression Blake is describing his view of industrial London; the most powerful city in the world at the time it was written, which he portrays as dirty and corrupt.

One of the hardest things about these poems, for me, is understanding them! I'm sure many English teachers and professors may consider me a philistine, but they can be very hard to read. How can anyone be expected to write an analysis about something they don't understand? So, below, I've included a basic outline of the poem, written in plain and simple English; as well as a 'plain and simple' definition of some of the key poetry terms you'll need to understand what it's all about!

The Poem—A Literal Translation

I (William Blake) am wondering around the streets of London, down by the river but they are not how they used to be. Everywhere I look, people are miserable.

Every man and every child is sad and scared and feels trapped.

The chimney-sweeps are sad, the church is not helping and the soldiers are fighting to protect people who do not deserve it.

At night I hear women (prostitutes) swearing and shouting at babies that are crying. What should be sweet and innocent has become dirty and corrupt.

Key Poetry Terms

Stanza: A verse within a poem. It can take many forms, some poems have just one stanza some have many.

Quatrain: A stanza within a poem that has four lines; typically with an alternating rhyme scheme (see below).

Alternative Rhyme Scheme: Final words in alternative lines in a stanza rhyme; eg, 1st and 3rd; 2nd and 4th.

Rhythm: Do the lines in the poem follow a particular pattern or rhythm or create a certain beat?

Iambic Tetrameter: A particular rhythm where there are 8 syllables in a line of poetry, and every other syllable is stressed. Creates a marching beat.

Oxymoron: Words with opposite meanings put together for effect.

Now for the poem itself....