

LONDON by William Blake

BACKGROUND TO THE POET

- ✓ Blake was born in London in 1757, living there for most of his life.
- ✓ He respected the bible but did not like 'organised' religion, instead believing that people should have more freedom over their beliefs.
- ✓ A common theme to his poems was the use and abuse of power, which comes through strongly here too.

BACKGROUND TO THE POEM

- ✓ Blake was born in 1757, before the industrial revolution. He used to spend his time as a child wondering the streets of London which were fairly scarcely populated at that time. This left him with many happy memories of his childhood and London as a city.
- ✓ In 1760 the industrial revolution began and equipment was invented to replace farm workers etc. This drove people out of the country towards the cities in search of work.
- ✓ This significantly increased the population of London, turning it from the peaceful city of Blake's childhood, to an overcrowded, noisy place.

FORM & STRUCTURE

- ✓ The poem has a very repetitive structure. It is written entirely in quatrains (each stanza contains four lines).
- ✓ The rhyme scheme is also very repetitive with an ABAB pattern.
- ✓ Blake also repeats some key words throughout the poem: 'chartered', 'mark', 'every'.
- ✓ The cumulative effect of all this repetition is overwhelming and makes the suffering that he sees inescapable and relentless.
- ✓ Stanza's one and two focus on the people who are suffering. Stanza three then turns to the cause of the suffering (the church, monarchy and those in power). Stanza four then focusses again on those suffering, giving a cyclical feel. This emphasises the repetitive, relentless suffering.
- ✓ Most of the poem has an iambic rhythm (with every other syllable being stressed). This gives a marching pace to the poem which echoes his footsteps as he walks around London.
- ✓ Lines are typically made up of 8 syllables, however there are some lines which only contain seven. 'Marks of weakness, marks of woe'. These lines seem particularly short and in this case weak, which is exactly what Blake is trying to emphasise.

WHAT IS THE POEM ABOUT?

- ✓ The poem is a narrative account of a person walking around London. It describes the sights they see in the streets.
- ✓ Given Blake's childhood it is generally taken that the person walking the streets is Blake himself (supported by the use of 'I').
- ✓ The poem shows Blake's dislike for the changes that the Industrial Revolution brought.
- ✓ Blake blames these changes on those in power / the rich.

THEMES

- ✓ Power of humans: Blake blames the abuse of power by those that have it, for the changes that he sees.
- ✓ Anger: Blake is clearly angry at the changes the revolution brings.
- ✓ Individual Experience: the poem is spoken from the perspective of someone walking around London, this is thought to be Blake himself writing from personal experience.

COMPARISONS

Power of humans	Anger	Individual Experience
Ozymandias, My Last Duchess, Tissue, Checking out me History, Storm on the Island	War Photographer, Checking out me History	Prelude, War Photographer, Kamikaze, Poppies, Bayonet Charge, Remains, The Emigree

LANGUAGE / QUOTES

- ✓ The poem begins with the repetition of the word 'chartered' in the first two lines. This is deliberate by Blake who is referring to the rich land owners, making it clear who he blames for the suffering: those with money and power.
- ✓ Blake uses lots of negative emotive language to describe the suffering he sees: 'marks of weakness', 'cry of every man', 'cry of fear', 'mind-forged manacles', 'chimney-sweeper's cry', 'hapless soldier's sigh', 'youthful harlot's curse', 'new-born infant's tear', 'blights with plagues'. The cumulative effect of this is rather overwhelming and leaves the reader feeling the despair he describes.
- ✓ The repetition in stanza one of the word 'mark' also shows just how visible the suffering is. It is everywhere he looks, hence the repetition.
- ✓ Stanza three refers to 'black'ning church appals' and 'chimney-sweepers cry'. This can be read literally (that the revolution is blackening the buildings) or metaphorically (that the church and businesses are exploiting the poor, failing to help those that need it).
- ✓ Stanza four develops this theme referring to 'hapless soldier's sigh, Runs in blood down palace walls'. Here Blake is showing how unhappy British soldiers and is blaming the monarchy for it.
- ✓ The final stanza leaves the reader feeling rather bleak. The 'youthful harlot's curse' and 'new-born infants tear' show that mother's are becoming prostitutes, because they have no other choice. The babies they then give birth suffer as a result.
- ✓ The very final words hammer home the message to the reader. The 'marriage hearse' presents the reader with an oxymoron; something that should be so beautiful (marriage) has been ruined (hearse) by those in power. Their misuse has caused all the suffering and despair.