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Themes: Themes and Meanings

Blake's purpose in creating the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* was to level criticism at late eighteenth century English society. In these poems, Blake contrasts the unfallen innocence of children with the sordid, repressed attitudes of the adult world—a world ruled by the church, the monarchy, and English common law. Blake viewed himself as a prophet whose task it was to shake people out of their complacent acceptance of their fallen circumstances. In "London," he turns his attack on the capital city, thus pointing out that the very heart of the English Empire is diseased and corrupt. By choosing syphilis as the symbol for all that is wrong with England, Blake is able to condemn institutions and emotions that are sacred to most people: love and marriage. He seems more antagonistic toward the civil and religious laws that sexually repress people than he does toward the husband who cheats on his wife by visiting a prostitute. Nor does he condemn the prostitute for her behavior.

He sees the prostitutes as physically, emotionally, and morally imprisoned by a system that makes them depend on their wealthy customers for their income. He also makes it clear that such victimization works both ways: The venereal disease that the men pass on to and contract from these young women also poisons innocent wives at home and the unborn children of both wives and prostitutes.

The poem concludes with the "youthful Harlot's curse": disease for the straying husband and his unsuspecting wife, syphilitic blindness for children of both women, and a condemnation of marriage as the institution that drives people to form loveless unions, that enslaves people instead of teaching them to love—emotionally and physically. There is angry irony in Blake's choice of words in the concluding line of the poem when he refers to the carriage carrying the young bride and groom from the church as the "Marriage hearse."

It is not only the church that draws Blake's anger in "London": The monarchy is also blamed for the people's woes. In part, the English government and the church are inseparable because the Church of England is the official state church. Of equal importance is the fact that, as the most powerful force in England, the government should protect rather than victimize its citizens. "London" shows that this is not the case. Soldiers who willingly lay down their lives to defend their ruler stand as testimony to their leaders' greed. This was especially pertinent in light of the recent bloody American Revolution, which Blake saw as a reaction against the greedy tyranny of the British monarchy. In poems such as "London," Blake hoped to shock his readers into demanding reform by pointing out the corruption and suffering that existed all around them.

Analysis: The Poem

"London" is a sixteen-line poem composed of four stanzas of alternatively rhyming short lines. "London" is included in the "Songs of Experience" section of William Blake's larger work, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794) and contributes to Blake's portrait of fallen human nature.

Blake focuses his attention on the condition of London, England, the capital not only of the country but also of “culture,” yet, as the four stanzas make abundantly clear, Blake does not share the opinion that this city sets a positive example. Each stanza of “London” points out ways in which the British monarchy and English laws cause human suffering.

The poem is written in the first person and reports the narrator’s observations as he walks through the streets of London. Stanza 1 opens near the River Thames, the heartline of the British Empire; it connects the capital city with the rest of the world. Here Blake observes that everything he sees is “charter’d”—owned by and bound to someone—including the river, which ironically should flow freely to the ocean. The narrator comments that everywhere he looks he sees unhappiness and people suffering.

The second stanza reports what the narrator hears as he walks these imprisoning avenues: human cries of anguish and fear. Not only does he find this suffering in individual misery, but Blake also says that the legal dictates he hears carry with them threats to human freedom. He concludes the second stanza by equating laws with “mind-forg’d manacles”—strictures that limit the human imagination, the human heart, and the human soul.

The third stanza maintains the focus on the sounds that Blake hears as he walks the London streets. He gives examples of persons who are enslaved by the British system of law, by economic boundaries, by the church, and by the monarchy. He says that each chimney sweep’s cry is an affront to the Church of England, the state religion. The irony is that the Christianity Blake criticizes is founded on the principle of doing good to others, in particular the less fortunate; Blake says that the sweep’s pitiful cry is a reminder to and a black smudge on the very institution that should be helping the child. Blake then lists a second victim of the British government and church: the “hapless Soldier” who fights to preserve the monarchy and whose death sigh bloodies the royal palace walls.

The final stanza of the poem is set in darkness—Blake is listening in the midnight streets to the cries of young prostitutes as they curse the men who victimize them, the wives who are equally victims, and the religion that forces people to think that they must marry and stay married no matter what. “London” ends on a pessimistic note in which Blake reviles the one sacrament that should offer hope to present and future generations: marriage. Instead of being predicated on love and mutual respect, Blake sees it as something that enslaves the body and soul in much the same way that stanzas 2 and 3 point out that English laws victimize the less fortunate.

Analysis: Forms and Devices

“London” is a deceptively “simple” poem, in part because the language is plain, the lines are short, and the imagery is seemingly everyday. Yet the impact of this poem depends on the multiple layers of meaning that Blake expects readers to see in his choice of words and in the associations that readers will make. Furthermore, “London” is included as a part of a larger work: *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, a collection of poems that examine and criticize the fallen world.

Because “London” is a “Song of Experience,” it is set in contrast to the images that Blake presented in the first half of the work: “Songs of Innocence,” poems that showed children frolicking, nature in bloom, people happy and loving, a world before Adam and Eve fell—an event that, according to Blake, brought law, government, monarchy, religion, and other “evils” into the world. “London” represents the antithesis to the world Blake showed readers in “Songs of Innocence”; “London” shows readers an urban landscape consisting of buildings. Nowhere in the poem does Blake include a reference to the natural world except to the River Thames, which he characterizes as “charter’d”—owned and bound by British law. In this fallen world nothing is free, not even the minds and souls of the people. Throughout the poem, Blake makes use of layered

meanings and references, as he does in the word “charter’d,” which not only means “given liberty,” but also refers to ownership and landholding.

Thus “London” depends for its impact on ironic contrasts. In the second stanza, Blake repeats this device by using the word “ban,” which not only refers to an announcement of marriage—what should be an occasion for joy—but also implies bonds and enslavement rather than liberty. So when Blake, in this stanza, describes the pitiful cries of people enslaved by law and custom, he implicitly heightens the impact of his criticism by contrasting the antithetical meanings of the word “ban”: political and legal prohibition and proclamation of a forthcoming marriage. Blake demands that readers make this type of connection; to miss these layers of meaning is to miss the harsh criticisms that Blake directs at the English monarchy, church, and legal system.

Finally, Blake uses appeals to the senses to heighten the poem’s impact. By having the narrator walk through this sordid scene and report what is heard and seen, Blake forces the reader into an immediate confrontation with the human suffering the poet sees all around him. The speaker hears children crying in the person of the chimney sweep and in the diseased prostitute’s blinded newborn; he hears despair in the dying sigh of the soldier; he sees death and suffering on every street.