

## “Do Now” Work

### How does Blake present his ideas in 'London'?

*Be able to identify techniques and explore the effect on the reader.*

#### **Task:**

The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau said: "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains". What do you think this means?



In Silence Please

**BOURNVILLE**  
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William Blake was a poet and artist who specialised in illuminated texts, often of a religious nature. He was a Christian, but he rejected established religion (e.g. The Church of England) for various reasons. One of the main ones was the failure of the established Church to help children in London who were forced to work. Blake lived and worked in the capital, so was arguably well placed to write clearly about the conditions people who lived there faced.

The poem describes a journey around London, offering a glimpse of what the speaker sees as the terrible conditions faced by the inhabitants of the city. Child labour, restrictive laws of property and prostitution are all explored in the poem.

Can you see a similarity to Dickens's ideas here?

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**William Blake 'London'**

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

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

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

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

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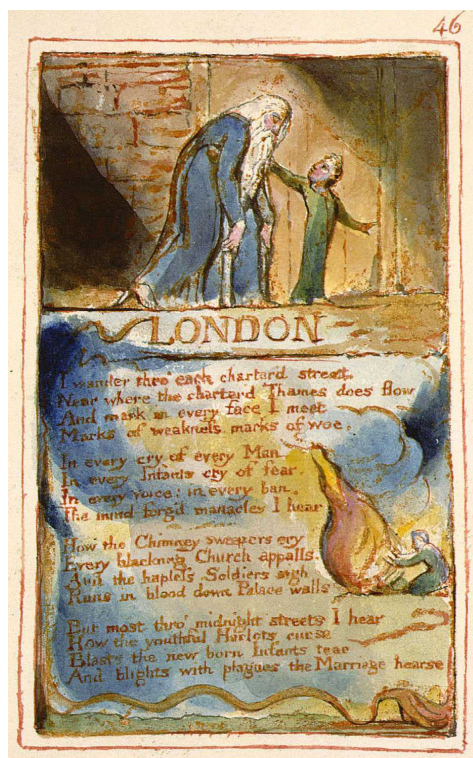
The poem starts with a criticism of laws relating to ownership. The "chartered Thames" is a bitter reference to the way in which every aspect of life in London is owned, even the river, so often in other poems a symbol of life, freedom and the power of nature.

Blake's poem also criticises religion and its failures. The speaker draws attention to the cry of the chimney sweeper and the blackening of church walls, implying that the church as an institution is inactive, unwilling to help those in need.

It ends with a vision of the terrible consequences to be faced as a result of sexually transmitted disease.

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## Songs of Innocence and of Experience

Published in 1794, this collection of poems, fully illustrated and originally hand-printed by Blake, aimed to show the "Two Contrary States of the Human Soul". The *Songs of Innocence* section contains poems which are positive in tone and celebrate love, childhood and nature. The *Songs of Experience* poems are obviously intended to provide a contrast, and illustrate the effects of modern life on people and nature. Dangerous industrial conditions, child labour, prostitution and poverty are just some of the topics Blake explores. 'London' is from *Songs of Experience*.

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**The French Revolution**

In 1789, the French people revolted against the monarchy and aristocracy, using violence and murder to overthrow those in power. Many saw the French Revolution as inspirational - a model for how ordinary, disadvantaged people could seize power. Blake alludes to the revolution in *London*, arguably suggesting that the experience of living there could encourage a revolution on the streets of the capital.



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**How does *London* fit with Power & Conflict?**

*London* shows us Blake's tenderness towards the vulnerable: the plight of the chimney-sweeps; the disease-ridden child prostitutes; the soldiers whose blood was on the hands of the establishment. We see conflict between his anguish and his position of being a passive observer – after all, he views all of this on a 'wander'. We see conflict between his own belief in God and his anger and frustration at the church's reluctance to truly deliver the Christian messages they preach, despite the power they hold. We hear the conflict between the barbaric neglect by the state and the innocence of the young girls, the chimney-sweeps and the even the soldiers with his simple, rhythmic, child-like repetition, sharply juxtaposed with the gruesome content.

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**What is 'London' about?**

It is a critique of human power, exposing the distance between those in power and those who are suffering. The suffering is inescapable, because of the fact that it is caused by the misuse of power by those in control.

The regular 4-line stanzas (called quatrains) and regular abab rhyme scheme reinforces the idea that the suffering is relentless and inescapable.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a philosopher, said: "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains."

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repetition  
- restricted

man  
controlling  
nature.

- chartered - privately owned
- Thames - a large river that flows through the middle of London

- manacles - chains
- harlot - prostitute
- hapless - unfortunate

repetition  
↳ physical

widespread

iambic  
tetrameter

child labour

metaphor  
- Rousseau

'blackning'  
Soot

- morally, not  
doing enough  
to help.

sexually  
transmitted  
disease  
child  
prostitution

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**Comprehension Questions**

1. Where is the speaker wandering?
2. How is the river controlled?
3. List three characters that the speaker encounters.
4. Which natural feature of the city does the speaker mention?
5. Which words are repeated in the opening stanza, highlighting the way the city is controlled?
6. What building stands in contrast to the city streets?
7. How does the harlot speak?
8. Which contrast is set up in the final line?

**Deeper Thinking Questions**

1. Who holds the power in this poem?
2. How is this poem relevant today?
3. What does Blake suggest about the human experience?
4. How do you think Blake feels about organised religion?

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Compare the ways poets present negative emotions in 'London' and in one other poem from 'Power and Conflict'.

## 'London' Blake

### Context:

Blake wrote 'London' in 1794. Blake loved nature, and he disliked the Industrial Revolution. 'London' highlights issues like poverty, prostitution and child labour. Although Blake was religious, he was against Institutionalised Religion as he felt the Church wasn't helping children in need. Blake refers to the French Revolution in the poem - a symbol of people rising up against those with power (monarchy and aristocracy).

### Themes:

Power of humans  
Negative emotions

**S** 'chartered' is repeated to show how London is restricted and controlled. Even nature is controlled - 'chartered Thames'. Emphasised by regular rhyme scheme. Suffering is repetitive and inescapable.

**P** 'In every cry' is repeated to show that suffering impacts on everyone 'man' and 'infant'. The 'new born infant's tear' implies innocence is lost immediately - society has condemned people from birth.

**L** 'marriage hearse' oxymoron shows that happy events are blighted by disease. Reinforces the lack of hope in the poem.

**I** 'mind-forged manacles' - metaphor - people are even trapped by their thoughts. Links to Rousseau: "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains."

**T** 'black'ning church' - literally, the church is black from the smoke in the Industrial Revolution. Or it could refer to the fact the church are morally 'black' as they don't help people in need.

