


London By William Blake Analysis

GCSE ENGLISH LITERATURE
PAST AND PRESENT: POETRY ANTHOLOGY

 William Blake
(1757-1827)

London

1 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.

5 In every cry of every man,
In every infante's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear.

10 How the chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackning church appalls,
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down palace walls.

15 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.

Handwritten Analysis:

- ABAB rhyme scheme - structured - people are stuck in their ways and trapped in the system**
- rich > poor**
- even nature is owned by someone**
- drivers normally represent Slavery and freedom but it's still owned by someone**
- metaphorical scars left by controlling and oppressive system**
- depression**
- physical scars left by diseases spread by overcrowding, STIs and physical labour**
- economically, socially, etc.**
- 'mind-forged' shows how it is useless and not real**
- poor stays poor and rich gets richer - they are chained to this ideal**
- Contrasts sweepers - innocent + dirty**
- Church: clean + guilty**
- Poor women forced into prostitution although they are young and innocent the 'curse' is the neglect by elders and authorities such as the church which allows them to suffer**
- Children are born into extreme poverty**
- prostitutes contracted syphilis which made their babies syphilitic meaning they had painful eyes**
- Oxymoronic and shows Blake's views on marriage that women are expected to marry young until the end while men don't**
- blood + lives of poor needed so rich to be so rich and powerful**
- walls separate social classes**
- Wants authorities to pay attention and not ignore them**
- Reference to French revolution which Blake was a strong believer in wants England to do the same**

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London by William Blake Analysis is a profound exploration of the city and its social conditions in the early 19th century. Written in 1794 as part of Blake's collection titled "Songs of Experience," the poem encapsulates the despair and corruption prevalent in London during this time. Through vivid imagery and poignant language, Blake critiques the societal structures that contribute to the suffering of its inhabitants. This article aims to dissect the themes, imagery, and significance of "London," providing a comprehensive analysis of Blake's work.

Historical Context

To fully appreciate Blake's "London," it is essential to understand the historical backdrop

against which it was written:

- Industrial Revolution: The late 18th century marked the onset of the Industrial Revolution, leading to urbanization and a shift from agrarian societies to industrialized cities.
- Social Inequality: Rapid industrialization resulted in stark contrasts between wealth and poverty, with many people living in squalor while a select few accumulated immense wealth.
- Political Climate: The poem was crafted amidst political unrest, including rising discontent with the monarchy and the Church, which were seen as oppressive institutions.

Overview of the Poem

"London" consists of four quatrains, employing a simple yet effective ABAB rhyme scheme. The poem's structure contributes to its rhythmic quality, enhancing the emotional impact of the words. The speaker, who wanders through the streets of London, observes the suffering and injustice that permeates the city.

Thematic Analysis

The poem explores several prominent themes:

1. Urban Alienation

Blake vividly portrays the sense of alienation felt by individuals in the bustling city:

- Isolation: Despite being surrounded by crowds, the speaker feels a profound sense of loneliness. The repetitive imagery of "chartered streets" highlights the oppressive nature of urban life.
- Dehumanization: The poem suggests that the rigid social structures dehumanize individuals, reducing them to mere cogs in an indifferent machine.

2. Social Injustice

Blake's critique of social injustice is evident throughout the poem:

- Child Labor: The mention of "chimney-sweeps" symbolizes the exploitation of children, forced into labor at a young age.
- Institutional Corruption: Blake points to the complicity of institutions like the Church and the Monarchy in perpetuating societal suffering. The "black'ning Church" signifies moral decay and hypocrisy.

3. Loss of Innocence

A recurring theme in Blake's works is the contrast between innocence and experience:

- Innocence vs. Experience: The poem reflects a loss of innocence, as the harsh realities of urban life overshadow the purity of youth. The "youthful harlot" represents the corruption of innocence due to societal pressures.
- Cycle of Despair: The imagery of "cries of the Lamb" evokes a sense of despair, illustrating how the innocence of children is sacrificed on the altar of societal greed.

Imagery and Symbolism

Blake's use of imagery and symbolism enriches the poem's meaning:

1. The Cityscape

- Chartered Streets: The term "chartered" implies that the natural landscape has been commodified and controlled, stripping it of its vitality.
- The Thames: The river, often a symbol of life and flow, here becomes a stagnant entity, reflecting the moral decline of society.

2. Contrasting Figures

- The Soldier and the Harlot: These figures embody contrasting aspects of urban life. The soldier represents oppression and violence, while the harlot symbolizes moral decay and the loss of innocence.
- The Chimney-Sweep: This character encapsulates the plight of the working class, highlighting the exploitation that occurs in the pursuit of profit.

Literary Devices

Blake employs a variety of literary devices that enhance the poem's emotional resonance:

1. Repetition

Repetition is a key device in "London," emphasizing the speaker's despair:

- "In every": The repeated phrase underscores the pervasive nature of suffering throughout the city, suggesting that no one is immune to its effects.

2. Alliteration and Assonance

These sound devices contribute to the poem's musicality:

- Example: The "sighs" and "cries" create a haunting rhythm that echoes the sorrow of the city's inhabitants.

3. Irony

Blake's use of irony heightens the critique of societal norms:

- "Marriage Hearse": This oxymoronic phrase juxtaposes love and death, implying that institutions meant to promote love and unity instead contribute to despair and suffering.

Conclusion

In conclusion, London by William Blake analysis reveals a poignant critique of the societal and moral decay of early 19th-century London. Through rich imagery, powerful themes, and masterful use of literary devices, Blake encapsulates the struggles of individuals caught in the throes of urban life. The poem remains a relevant reflection on the consequences of industrialization, social injustice, and the loss of innocence.

Blake's "London" serves as a timeless reminder of the need for compassion and reform in society. As readers delve into the poem, they are confronted with the stark realities of life in a city that, despite its grandeur, harbors deep-seated pains and injustices. The poem's exploration of these themes continues to resonate, urging us to reflect on the human condition and the societal structures that shape our lives.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes explored in William Blake's poem 'London'?

The main themes in 'London' include social injustice, the loss of innocence, the constraints of urban life, and the critique of institutional power.

How does Blake use imagery to convey the atmosphere of London in his poem?

Blake employs vivid and often dark imagery, such as 'chartered streets' and 'black'ning church', to illustrate the oppressive and bleak environment of the city.

What is the significance of the repetition of the word 'mind' in 'London'?

The repetition of 'mind' emphasizes the psychological impact of the city's oppressive conditions on its inhabitants, suggesting a collective suffering and loss of hope.

How does Blake's use of structure enhance the meaning of 'London'?

The poem's consistent quatrain structure and ABAB rhyme scheme create a rhythmic, almost song-like quality, which contrasts with the grim subject matter, highlighting the irony of beauty amidst despair.

In what ways does 'London' reflect Blake's views on industrialization?

'London' critiques industrialization by depicting the dehumanizing effects of urbanization, such as poverty and child labor, which Blake saw as corrupting the human spirit and society.

What role does the character of the chimney sweeper play in 'London'?

The chimney sweeper represents the exploitation of children and the innocence lost due to economic and social hardships, symbolizing the broader theme of suffering in the industrial age.

How does Blake's use of personification contribute to the poem's message?

Blake personifies institutions like the church and the monarchy to illustrate their complicity in the suffering of the people, suggesting that they are not merely passive entities but active oppressors.

What impact did 'London' have on the Romantic movement and literature?

'London' had a significant impact on the Romantic movement by emphasizing individual experience and social critique, inspiring later writers to explore themes of urban alienation and social justice.

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