



London

William Blake (1794)

I wander thro' 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.

walking around slowly / mapped
river flowing through London

sadness

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

law
created by the mind

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

cause someone to be shocked
unlucky and usually unhappy

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

prostitute

damaging effect / vehicle carrying a coffin

General

The speaker wanders through the streets of London and is shocked by what he sees. The city is a horrible place and he recounts several scenes he encounters.

Stanza-by-stanza

First stanza

In the first two lines we have the speaker wandering through the streets of London.

*I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.*



Rook Reading

This is a paradox as 'wander' suggests walking freely and 'charter'd' being mapped. You can wander in nature, but there is not a lot of wandering when your route is already straightforward. It is like a man from nature has entered the city of London and is shocked by what he sees. In the second line we even see nature mapped out, outlined, as the river Thames is also 'charter'd'.

In the next two lines Blake plays with the verb 'mark' (to notice) and the noun 'mark' (a trace on something). Also notice the alliteration in "mark-meet" and "weakness-woe":

*And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.*

When the speaker wanders through the streets of London, he looks at the faces of Londoners and sees disheartened people. They are weak and sad. The purpose of this first stanza is to set the tone of the poem and the atmosphere of the capital city.

Second stanza

In this poem there is a lot of repetition. As if the city drums its mantra on the speaker (and the reader!). In the first lines we had 'charter' and 'mark', in the following few lines we have "In every". This repetition can also be seen as an opposite to the arbitrary world of nature.

*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*

The final line of this stanza is really important, because these people in the city of London are to blame themselves. It is not the government, nor the church, nor any other institution that forces them to live this way. Every cry the speaker hears and every law (ban) he sees, he recognizes that this wickedness is done by people themselves. It is their mind that keeps them in their pitiful state of living, their thoughts, chains, cuffs (manacles) created by their own thoughts. They could free themselves from this misery if they only unlock their thoughts.



Third stanza

The third stanza has some references. We have the chimney sweepers (a recurring theme in Blake's poetry, being an image of the innocent child being abused).

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

The Church does not care and is even an accomplice in the exploitation of children (the speaker is appalled by this). Some say a 'blackning Church' can also be seen as chimneys of factories, the new bell towers of the city.

The unfortunate soldiers die (the sigh being their last breath) in a war or conflict and their blood is figuratively smeared on the walls of the government (Palace). The authorities have innocent blood on their hands. Also notice that no persons are mentioned with the Church and Palace, creating a distance from the institutions, because remember it is people themselves (mind-forg'd manacles) who are responsible.

Fourth stanza

But most thro' midnight streets I hear

The word 'but' shows the worst is yet to come. The speaker (and Blake) is appalled by the marital state of people in the city. During midnight this becomes most clear. Midnight alludes to sinister dealings and death. It is when the harlots do their work.

*How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear*

The word curse has multiple meanings in this poem. The prostitute (harlot) can be cursing as in swearing at her situation, or because she is in labour. 'Curse' can also be used as 'being cursed'. The youthful prostitute is cursed in this gloomy city.

The curse also implies syphilis or other sexual transmitted diseases as it affects marriage in the final line. Babies from mothers with syphilis had painful watery eyes. So, the curse (syphilis) is given to the new generation.

And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse

'Blight' is a disease that damages and kills plants. In a more general meaning it corrupts something, having a damaging effect on, in this case, the institution of marriage. A 'marriage hearse' is an oxymoron. A 'hearse' is a vehicle that carries a dead body to a funeral. So the prostitute infects marriages because adulterous men are not faithful to their true love. Marriages are also affected by the sexual transmitted diseases from the harlots.

Blake saw marriage imposed on men by the Church, taking him from nature. However, this is of course better than sex without affection. So prostitutes do more damage to marriages which in themselves are already bad enough.

Romanticism

The Romantic movement was characterized by its emphasis on individualism, nature, emotion and the medieval past (as opposed to the classical past like the Renaissance). Blake was one of the founding fathers of the Romantic movement (although the term was coined later).

In "London" the juxtaposition of the city and nature is clear. The Thames (a river, so nature) is caught in the mapping of London. Blake also criticizes the city as being a cesspit for humanity with innocent children being exploited, and death and diseases being omnipresent.

We also don't see individuals. The speaker (the only individual) is opposed to the institutions and the multitudes. The speaker seems to be able to wander freely in this place of oppression while the nameless citizens are putting mental chains on their thoughts and thereby their behaviour.

Publication

"London" was published in a work called "Songs of Innocence and Experience" in which Blake shows the 'two contrary states of the human soul'. "London" is in the 'experience' part, published in 1794.