



# LONDON

## KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

**Context** – *London* was written by William Blake in 1792, and was published in *Songs of Experience* in 1794.

**William Blake** – William Blake (1757-1827) was an English poet and painter. He is known as being one of the leading figures of the Romantic Movement, as well as for his personal eccentricities. Blake rejected established religious and political orders for their failures, particularly in how children were made to work – this was one of many things that he viewed as being a part of the ‘fallen human nature.’ He lived in London for his whole life, barring three years in which he resided in Felpham.



**London in 1792** – London was already a large city with nearly a million people. The Industrial Revolution had brought new machinery that saved time, making some very rich, however it put many out of jobs. Machinery was often hazardous to operate, and those working with it were paid poorly. There was no government support for these people, so many lived in total poverty. For every 1,000 children born, almost 500 died before they were 2. Most children couldn't go to school, and had to work.



***Songs of Innocence and Experience*** – Published in 1794, these two sets of poems were created by Blake with the aim of showing the ‘Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.’ The Songs of Innocence collection contains poems that are uplifting, celebrating childhood, nature, and love in a positive tone. The Songs of Experience section (of which *London* was one of the poems) offered a contrasting tone towards these ideas. Some of the topics covered in these poems were the dangerous working conditions, child labour, and poverty.



**Romanticism** – Romanticism was an artistic, literary, musical, cultural and intellectual movement that originated in Europe in the latter half of the 18th Century, peaking in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century. Romanticism is characterised by its emphasis on emotions – glorifying nature and past events – memories and settings are often imaginatively described using vivid imagery. Although Blake struggled to make a living during his lifetime, his ideas and influence were later considered amongst the most important of all the Romantic Poets.



### Language/Structural Devices

**Sight Imagery** – Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering Blake's artistic talents, the poem is awash with visual imagery, with a clear picture of London vividly painted in the mind of the reader. For example, the speaker details the ‘mark’ in every face that he meets, which provides a visual connotation of the people's skin being physically imprinted by their hardships – the reader can picture their cuts, bruises and ailments. Similarly, the use of the word ‘blackning’ in stanza 3, creating a dirty image of pollution and corruption in the city.

**Sound Imagery** – The pained and anguished sounds of London also accompany the reader as they are guided through the city by the speaker. Particularly from stanza 2 onwards, the reader is shown how helpless and destitute the citizens feel through the sounds that they make, from the ‘cry’ of men and infants, to the ‘sigh’ of the soldiers, and the ‘curse’ and ‘blast’ of the harlots at night. The sound imagery aids the reader in hearing the grim pain of each of the people that the speaker encounters.

**Quote:** “And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.”

**Quote:** “In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infants cry of fear,”

**Metaphors** – Figurative language is highly prevalent throughout the poem, particularly in lines 3 and 4 of each stanza. For example, the soldiers' blood does not literally run down the walls of the palace; this is a means of showing that those in power have caused the soldiers to experience pain and suffering. In the same way, the ‘manacles’ that the citizens wear are in fact shackles of the mind.

**Repetition/ Anaphora** – Blake repeats words and phrases to emphasise their importance. For example, the word ‘charter'd’ is repeated throughout the opening stanza to show how rigid and unchanging London is. The anaphora used in stanza 2 of ‘In every’ emphasises the frequency and consistency of the pain and suffering – it is happening all over and is clear to see and hear.

**Quote:** “And the hapless Soldiers sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls”

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

**Form/Structure** – The poem is written in four equal stanzas of four lines, each in iambic tetrameter. Alternating rhyme is used throughout in the scheme of ABAB. The rhyme creates deliberate emphasis on words that underline the tone of the poem, e.g. ‘cry’ and ‘sigh.’ The poem is told from the viewpoint of a first person narrator who is walking the streets.

**Varied Verbs** – Blake uses a range of interesting verbs to demonstrate the wearisome and pained manner in which actions are carried out in London. Often these are figurative. For example, the harlots ‘blight’ the marriage hearse, and ‘blasts’ the new-born infants tear. Such verbs are carefully selected to attain the maximum impact on the reader.

**Quote:** “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.”

**Quote:** “Blasts the new-born Infants tear  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse”

**Themes** – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

**Death/Mortality** – The poem is full of dark imagery that creates a constant sense of darkness and death across the poem. The mortality of all manner of people in London, from the child chimney sweepers, to the ‘hapless soldiers’, even the institution of marriage, is depressingly detailed by Blake - it is as though London is slowly strangling itself.



**Loss and Suffering** – The people in London are described as being helpless – constrained by the authorities but also the ‘manacles’ generated by their own perceptions and ideas. The ‘sigh’ of the soldier and the marks of ‘woe’ and ‘weakness’ in the people suggests that the people feel that they are trapped in an inescapable cycle of suffering.



### Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
1	1	I wander thro' each charter'd street,	The opening stanza sets the <u>tone</u> and <u>setting</u> for the remainder of the poem. The <u>repetition</u> of the word ‘charter'd’ shows how legally defined, mapped out, or in this case, <u>confined</u> the place is – Everything, it seems, is already decided, and is subject to government control – there is little room for freedom or imagination. This particular spot is near the Thames River – which too has been ‘charter'd.’ In each of the faces that the speaker sees, he notes how society seems to be <u>wearing them down</u> and hurting them (‘weakness’ and ‘woe’). The word ‘mark’ has a dual meaning: to notice something, but also to physically imprint something. The impact of living in this place is having a noticeable impact on the people there. This creates a <u>melancholy tone</u> .
	2	Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.	
	3	And mark in every face I meet	
	4	Marks of weakness, marks of woe.	
2	5	In every cry of every Man,	The second stanza gives some further insight into the speaker's feelings regarding the people that he passes by. Blake uses <u>more repetition</u> , this time of the word ‘cry’, emphasising the desperate <u>sorrow</u> in this city. He also uses anaphora to emphasise the word ‘every’ – to make clear that all here feel the same, there are no real exceptions. ‘Manacles’ are some kind of chain or shackles that keep people <u>imprisoned</u> . The idea that these are ‘mind forg'd’ shows that these are <u>metaphorical</u> manacles that are created by society and the people's own ideas. This early use of the words charter'd, ban and manacles show that Blake feels that society imprisons people with pressures and ideals.
	6	In every Infants cry of fear,	
	7	In every voice: in every ban,	
	8	The mind-forg'd manacles I hear	
3	9	How the Chimney-sweepers cry	In the third stanza, the speaker delves further into his feelings against what he sees in London. He begins with the <u>chimney sweep</u> , a dirty and dangerous job which shortened life expectancy, often done by <u>child orphans</u> (orphans of the church), who were small enough to fit down chimneys. The ‘blackning’, therefore, can refer to the physical blackening of the children covered in soot, their <u>symbolic blackening</u> in being drawn closer to death, and the church's <u>metaphorical</u> blackening (becoming more evil) in being involved in such horrific child labour. Lines 11 and 12 use the <u>metaphor</u> of the soldier's blood running down the wall of the palace to show that those in power have blood on their hands for sending so many men into war. The soldier's ‘ <u>hapless sigh</u> ’ suggests that he feels powerless to change things.
	10	Every blackning Church appalls,	
	11	And the hapless Soldiers sigh	
	12	Runs in blood down Palace walls	
4	13	But most thro' midnight streets I hear	The speaker then turns his attention to the things that he encounters at night in London. The idea that the ‘Harlot’ is ‘youthful’ is troubling, for it shows that even those that are <u>young and innocent</u> are being drawn into prostitution. Even worse, the subject of her ‘curse’ is the tears of ‘new-born Infants’ – this shows the hardened heart of those <u>corrupted</u> by the city. Another metaphor is used to show how the harlot ‘blights with plagues the marriage hearse’ – in the sense that the existence of young prostitutes in the city is destroying the institution of marriage. This is also clear from the <u>semi-oxymoronic</u> idea of the ‘marriage hearse.’ It also references some of the damaging and disgusting diseases that are being spread across the city. In short, those that are innocent become quickly corrupted and <u>infected</u> in this city.
	14	How the youthful Harlots curse	
	15	Blasts the new-born Infants tear	
	16	And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse	

### Poems for Comparison

<b>Ozymandias</b>	<i>London</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>death/mortality</u>
<b>Exposure</b>	<i>London</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem in the approach to the theme of <u>loss and suffering</u> .

### The Poet's Influences

In Blake's *London*, the condition of the poor and their children were desperate...the rise in the population, poor harvests and war created serious hardships. Orphans and the illegitimate children of the poor could be sold into apprenticeships that offered meagre prospects; young boys were used to sweep chimneys (prostitution and dire housing conditions were continuing problems). Some philanthropic initiatives attempted to address these issues, but asylums and charity schools were often linked to the exploitative apprenticeship system. From the British Library – [www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk)

