

William Blake's "London": A Bleak Picture of Late 18th Century London

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Abstract: Known for his rebellious artistic disposition, William Blake starts the poem "London" with a dark and depressing atmosphere to depict a very frightening and abysmal picture of the late eighteenth century London and its inhabitants. "London" is primarily a protest against all constrictions of his time-religious, socioeconomic, political, institutional, sexual and so on. The aristocracy of the time dominates and demeans the majority of the lower and middle classes. Common people are constantly afflicted with pain and plight. More to the point, they have no freedom here at all. The types of work mentioned in the poem like 'chimney sweeper', the 'soldier', and the 'harlot' are also telling the negative social features intimated with the bleak physical environment of London. The poet directly accuses and condemns authoritative institutions of failing to serve people and of creating tyranny. "London" is really a devastating portrait of a 'charter'd' society where all souls and bodies are trapped, exploited and infected. It is as if the very heart of the English Empire is corrupted and diseased. Here we only see an ominous scene of decadence-physical, moral and spiritual. The objective of this article is to explore the bleak and sneaky picture of London with the egregious consequences of diseasing the creative capabilities of a society.

Key words: bleak, charter'd, corruption, harlotry, and mind-forg'd

Introduction

William Blake (1757- 1827) is not only a leading figure of the Romantic Movement, but a leading poet in the whole of literature and art as well. His poem "London" is an incredibly powerful poem of the "Songs of Experience" section of his larger work, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*(1794).¹ In the poem, Blake expresses his thoughts and observations on London through a symbolic character he creates to narrate social and political tribulations afflicting the city. The world the speaker observes is a fallen world where pessimism, anger, frustration, and desolation are prevalent. Common people are the hapless victims of exploitation. Their collective misery is given voice in the poem- which in turn, suggests Blake's distressed view of London. The speaker expresses his experiences while walking around London at midnight, the time which associates the negative aspects of wandering with confusion and sin. The city life has taken away the freedom and vitality of the common people. Even, the poor children are not free to enjoy childhood; instead they are forced into excruciating labour and harlotry, their innocence has been tainted. Charters restrict freedom, ultimately resulting in the restriction of thinking. By choosing potentially deadly disease "Syphilis as the symbol for all that is wrong with England",² Blake paints the real picture of London. In fact, "London" is an indictment of English society, the monarchy, the church, and the law- all of which affect and repress people's daily life. The negative words- 'weakness', 'woe', 'cry', 'ear', 'appalls', 'blood', 'blights', 'plagues' and 'hearse' etc also show the despairing situation of London of the time. To indicate its severity, "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."³ However, Blake does not solely blame the authoritative institutions, but the people of his country also for their self-imprisonment.

Obviously, Blake shows his repugnance and resentment towards the oppressive hierarchal social system through the rhetorical components of imagery, symbolism, allusion, alliteration, repetition, imagery, an ironic twist of words, the connotation and multiple meanings of words, capitalization, and his specific change in meter. He puts emphasis on sound imagery which is suggestive of a noisy industrialized city Blake laments. "Similarly, end rhymes contribute significantly to the development of the poem's dark atmosphere. For example, 'flow' and 'woe', 'man' and 'ban', 'fear' and 'hear', 'cry' and 'sigh' and 'curse' and 'hearse' create an

¹ <http://www.enotes.com/topics/london-william-blake/in-depth>

² <http://www.enotes.com/topics/london-william-blake>

³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_\(William_Blake_poem\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_(William_Blake_poem))

atmosphere of animated grief.”⁴ Really, the poem represents a gloomy picture of London as a symbol of fallen humanity.

At the very beginning of the poem, we see, Blake castigates the aristocrats of London who capitalize on the hardship and suffering of the poor. So, the poem begins with a criticism of laws relating to control and ownership as conspicuously expressed in the lines below:

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.⁵

The poet sees London city as a marked, divided place, where everything is mapped and owned. The use of words 'wander', 'charter'd' and 'mark' all contribute to the sombre atmosphere to the poem. The repetitive use of the word 'charter'd' reinforces the sense of stricture among the people and at the same time stresses Blake's fury and hatred towards the ruling classes for their exploitative practices. "'charter'd' is a reference to the charters that allocate ownership and rights to specific people. Blake saw this as robbing ordinary people of their rights and freedoms."⁶ Even, the river which should normally be free for all and which is usually a symbol of life, freedom and the power of nature is under the ownership of the rich; it has been mapped to flow according to man's direction- all these suggest corruption and misappropriation in every sphere of society. Here the 'charter'd Thames' is a bitter reference to the way in which every aspect of life in London is owned, constricted, and measured by the political system. "The word 'charter'd' can also have connotations of hiring and leasing which emphasizes how the city is claiming to own its people and suggests the unjust nature of capitalism in its infancy with money being taken from the majority, the working classes, and transferred to the minority of aristocracy through taxation. This lack of freedom and essential funds is essentially highlighted through the use of the word 'wander' which illuminates the idea of isolation, vulnerability and predominantly slavery."⁷ It seems everything is a possession of the ruling class. It is as if here life has been structured by the need to conform to the rule of those in power. This lack of freedom is also reflected in the repetition of the word 'marks'. The restrictions are internalized in the people of the 'chartered' city. While wandering through the charter'd street of London, Blake sarcastically describes the sights he sees. Wherever he turns, he sees misery, sorrows and sufferings, weakness and woe as the marks on their faces reveal. The weakness may be physical, mental, or intellectual because at that time the poor people suffered from starvation or hunger, they had to do excessive work, they did not have any hope or happiness and many poor people may not have gone to school. They looked helpless as they were unable to change their destiny. Really, the city of London is crawling with class distinction, exploitation, ownership, alienation, despondency and so on. To emphasize the feeling of severity and the widespread effect on these people, the poet uses alliteration in line four, 'marks', 'weakness' and 'woe'. Succinctly speaking, "this condition shows the underbelly of London and the negative effects the Industrial Revolution has brought about."⁸

The sense of distress, grief and entrapment is further emphasized in the second stanza. Through the silence of the poor, the mystical poet can still hear all that they want to say but fail, for fear of being imprisoned. Sadly enough, the helpless people are always living inside the dark of the society dominated by materialism. The poet repeatedly uses words 'every' and 'cry' to symbolize the depression and incarceration the entire society constantly faces. The poet hears the misdirected cries of people who do not know how to express themselves:

In every cry of every man,
In every Infant's cry of fear
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.⁹

It is with the use of the words 'fear', 'cry', 'ban', and 'mind-forg'd manacles', Blake conveys the idea of the city of London teeming with physical, psychological and spiritual imprisonment. Here, people are frightened and their feelings are confined to their own minds. The word 'ban', quite clear in its meaning, reveals common people's inability to criticize the unfair rule of the country. Possibly, the most potent image of internment 'mind forg'd manacles' is really what this stanza, and even the whole poem is about. The speaker makes it clear by saying that 'every' sound he hears is evidence of the 'mind-forg'd manacle'. By attacking the 'mind-forg'd manacles', the poet expresses his perception of self-limitation and the denigration of the human imagination.

⁴ <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/~woodyar1/sampleessay3.htm>

⁵ William Blake, "London", William Blake: Selected Poetry, 48

⁶ <http://mrcritch.blogspot.com/2016/02/london-revision-guide.html>

⁷ [www.tutorhunt.com/resource/1325/Mar 3, 2012](http://www.tutorhunt.com/resource/1325/Mar%203,%202012)

⁸ <https://uk.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20100613030447AAwKUCm>

⁹ William Blake, "London", William Blake: Selected Poetry, 48

Unimaginative thought imposes limitations or chains on the human spirit. A man lacking imagination is doomed to carry out a predestined life cycle because he cannot perceive anything other than sensory knowledge of materialism. And so, they cannot question authority, they cannot raise their voice against indiscretion. Again, it can be said that “‘mind-forg’d manacles’ had also been created through the edicts of a repressive church and supported by Parliament”¹⁰ and also “prompted by the harsh capitalist authority to terrify them into committing to intensive, hard labour to make their industrial businesses boom.”¹¹ “Intrinsically, the quote could also be seen to represent the typical Marxist view that the working classes could not rise up against the bourgeoisie, in the corrupted capitalist world they were surrounded by, as they had them convinced that society could not be changed and that they were free, only imagining their own exploitation.”¹² “In particular, it is powerful to hear the words, ‘in every ban’ which could be referencing excommunication by the church, as it illuminates how the church, a person’s only sanctuary, is being removed from them, establishing even more this sense of isolation among society. However, it is more likely to be seen as a metaphor for corruption and a criticism of the institutionalized world or more simply capitalism. From a Marxist perspective, such an institution would be seen as a key feature of a capitalist society and equally supports the Marxist critic Althusser when he says, ‘the power of the state is also maintained more subtly, by seeming to secure the internal consent of the citizen using ideological structures such as churches’. Therefore, it can be said that the presence of this corrupt religious structure is the tool constraining the thoughts and actions of the people of London”.¹³

The tone of anger and condemnation once again intensifies with another example of the impotence of moral authority. The English society is lost to its greed and corruption. Even, the church has also lost its credibility as a place of spiritual exploration and devotion for human beings. Blake uses the images of the crying children to show the despair of London. It is appalling to see children exploited as we notice in the following lines:

“How the Chimney-sweeper’s cry
Every black’ning Church appalls;”¹⁴

The very lines prompt an even bleaker view of England in Blake’s day. The lines introduce us to the chimney-sweeper who are none but the destitute children and to the church which was a domineering and powerful institution devoid of light and goodness at the time. The strength of the poem lies in its contrasts. While preaching charity, “the church employs children as young as four as chimney-sweeps.”¹⁵ The innocent underprivileged children are treated very much like slaves. They cannot enjoy childhood; rather they are forced to climb up and down chimneys to clean them. The chimney-sweeper’s woeful cry is a disgrace to the Christianity that the church of England promulgates. This cry blames the Church for its blindness to social injustice. This image makes a mockery of the love and care that should characterize the Christian religion. During Blake’s time, much money was spent on church while children were dying each year from abject poverty or with injuries directly relating to the odd job they had to do just to live. Here we see, hypocrisy lies in the implied power of the church. Another religious imagery ‘black’ning church’ represents the loss of innocence, and the society’s abandonment of religion, as we notice, without caring about the objective, the authority ruthlessly use them to sweep the church- the dirties from which blackened the church noticeably. The colour black can simply refer to the pollution of an industrialized city. It can also be seen more metaphorically that the church’s reputation was being increasingly tarnished by their deliberate lack of reaction to the corruption of society with its subsequent interest in child labour. If we again consider the word ‘appalls’, it brings to the mind the word ‘pall’, a cover to lay over a coffin, thus emphasizing the black Church as coffin and it denotes that “the church is effectively dead, burying its traditional principles in order to satisfy the capitalist phenomenon.”¹⁶

The hypocrisy of the power structure in society is also expressed by the wretched condition of the soldiers. The following accusatory lines strongly reveal this hypocrisy associated with the bleak physical environment of London:

“And the hapless Soldier’s sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.”¹⁷

Here, the ‘hapless soldier’s sigh’ evokes the idea that in times of war, the majority of conscripted soldiers was made up of lower class males while the upper classes made up the majority of officers. Even, in times of crisis, the structure was in effect. It is the ruling power which starts the wars to which soldiers are enforced to give

¹⁰ <https://eview.anu.edu.au/cross-sections/vol1/pdf/ch12.pdf>

¹¹ www.tutorhunt.com/resource/1325/ Mar 3, 2012

¹² www.tutorhunt.com

¹³ www.tutorhunt.com

¹⁴ William Blake, “London”, William Blake: Selected Poetry, 48

¹⁵ <https://eview.anu.edu.au/cross-sections/vol1/pdf/ch12.pdf>

¹⁶ www.tutorhunt.com/resource/1325/ Mar 3, 2012

¹⁷ William Blake, “London”, William Blake: Selected Poetry, 48

their lives for the state or the royal family. The poet deliberately uses sibilance in "the hapless soldier's sigh" just to emphasize soldier's on-going weakness for fighting for the state. The blood running down the palace walls is another metaphorical representation of the oppression and suppression of the lower class, as it signifies the bloodshed of the soldiers to protect the palace, to keep it free of enemies. Soldiers do not have their own choices but to serve this country being forced. They are used only to meet the state's needs. After that they are left out on the street with nothing. How helpless the less fortunate are at the mercy of government or aristocracy! Another point should arguably be mentioned here. In line 11, we see soldier's "sigh is a softer sound than the sounds that are heard elsewhere in the poem. The sigh is faint because the dying soldier is far away in foreign lands, sacrificing his youth for the monarchical state. This image ties London with the whole world."¹⁸ However, the reference to "the running of 'blood down palace walls' which is also linked to the 'black'ning' church walls is a clear allusion to the French Revolution. The speaker is perhaps arguing that unless conditions change, the people will be forced to revolt."¹⁹

We find in the last stanza a vision of the terrible consequences to be faced as the result of sexually transmitted disease. Through rampant harlotry and its subsequent effects as distinctly shown below, a sinister atmosphere of London at the time is manifested:

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.²⁰

The poet here states what he hears most at midnight is a youthful Harlot's curse and 'most' implies the common occurrences within the inner city of London. Traditionally, night is associated with silence and rest as people sleep to revitalize them. But, Blake's "London" defies these conventional human notions. Here, midnight intimates immoral deeds and 'midnight streets' refer to prostitution. As typical in London at that time, adolescent girls are forced into harlotry. They fall victim to sexual gratification of the early capitalist. They are physically, emotionally, and morally imprisoned by a system for which they turn to prostitution as the only way to support themselves. How bleak a life can be here! Again, a prostitute mother has cursed her child for she cannot love it, as it is result of business, not the result of genuine love. "Essentially this can be seen as a perversion of maternity and more generally a metaphor concerning the sexual exploitation of women by the ruling elite."²¹ The poem reaches the climax when we see the cycle of misery restarts: a child is born in its turn in abject poverty, despair to a prostitute mother and the cycle of corruption is going to start all over again. More to the point, "The youthful harlot's curse" refers to the venereal disease of *Syphilis*, very frequent in the 18th century, which is the main cause of death also. A new human is born blind resulting from a parent's *Syphilis* by earlier infection from a harlot. The poet thus shows the effects of youth's sinful deeds on the next generation. Again, the startling phrase 'marriage hearse' is possibly the most significant oxymoron to express the goings on of the rich and how their actions affect the lives of all the innocent people involved. In literal terms, 'marriage' should be a celebration of love and the beginning of new life and the signs of hope, but here it is plagued with the blight of venereal disease passed by a prostitute to a promiscuous husband who undoubtedly poisons innocent wives at home, eventually killing them, thus brings the hearse. It is as if marriage is the beginning of the end, a sentence of death. "Essentially this suggests that marriage prompts the death of love, in its most symbolic form, whereby the typical bourgeois relationship is surrounded by hypocrisy."²²

Conclusion

In short, despite the fact that London was a cosmopolitan city at the time and certainly one of the busiest commercial centres in the world, William Blake paints a very bleak picture of it. Poverty, helplessness, suffering, disease, vulnerability of innocence, prostitution, war, and social, institutional, and sexual repression are epitomized in the ghastly representation of London. The city has stagnated morally and spiritually and this degradation overtly expresses itself in the form of physically impaired children as revealed in the poem. However, the backdrop of London connotatively represents all the cities in the world and all of modern human civilization and especially the urban version of that civilization. Really, the ideas expressed in the poem are not specific to London or England-they are universal. No doubt, "London" is a poem dealing with the universal human condition.

¹⁸ http://www.eliteskills.com/analysis_poetry/London_by_William_Blake_analysis.php

¹⁹ <http://mrcritch.blogspot.com/2016/02/london-revision-guide.html>

²⁰ William Blake, "London", William Blake: Selected Poetry, 48

²¹ [www.tutorhunt.com/resource/1325/Mar 3, 2012](http://www.tutorhunt.com/resource/1325/Mar%203,%202012)

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