

*A Study Guide for*

# **William Blake's "London"**

# *Poetry for Students*





# Poetry for Students, Volume 40

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# London



**William Blake**

**1794**

## Introduction

“London” is a poem by William Blake, who was one of the greatest of the English romantic poets. It was first published in 1794 in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, a collection of poems written and illustrated by Blake and also published by him using a method of printing he invented himself. “London” is one of the *Songs of Experience*, which show the suffering that people endure when they lose or forget their former innocent state.

It is one of Blake's best-known and most powerful short poems, offering a keen sense of the indignation Blake felt at the social injustices of his day. Blake lived in London, and the speaker of the poem, who can safely be identified as the poet himself, walks the streets and records impressions of what he sees and hears in the city. It is not a flattering or uplifting picture of England's capital city. Blake thought that people did not have a clear understanding of the way life should be lived, in joy and freedom. He blamed the institutions of church and state for enslaving people's minds with limiting beliefs that led only to emotional and physical suffering.

Widely anthologized, “London” can also be found in *Blake: Poetry and Designs*,

edited by Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant and published by W. W. Norton in 1979.

## Author Biography

Blake was born on November 18, 1757, in London, to James Blake and his wife, Catherine. Blake's father was a hosier. Blake was tutored at home until he was eleven and was then sent to a drawing school, which he attended until 1772. He was then apprenticed to an engraver, Joseph Basire, for seven years. In 1779, he began to study at the Royal Academy of Art and did commercial engravings for Joseph Johnson, a bookseller. Three years later he married Catherine Boucher, the illiterate daughter of a market gardener. They had no children, but by all accounts it was a happy marriage.

Blake had started writing poetry when he was twelve, and in 1783, his *Poetical Sketches* was printed, although no copies were sold. In 1784, he wrote a satire, *An Island in the Moon*, which was never published. In the late 1780s, Blake developed his own method of printing and began to produce his illuminated books, which combine text and design. He also came under the influence of the Swedish mystical philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg. In 1789, Blake wrote and published *Songs of Innocence and The Book of Thel*, and the following year his satire *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* was published.

During the 1790s Blake produced a series of books in which he developed his own mythology. These included *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), *The First Book of Urizen* (1794), and *The Book of Los* (1795). He also published *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in 1794, the collection that includes “London.” This was also the period in which he produced a series of twelve color prints, including “Nebuchadnezzar” and “Newton” (1795). During this time, Blake worked as a commercial engraver; he was barely known as a poet and little known as a painter. The only exhibition of his work during his lifetime was one he arranged himself, at his brother's shop, in 1809–1810. Very few people went to see it.

In 1800, Blake and his wife moved from London to Felpham, a village on the South Coast, where Blake received commissions from the minor poet William Hayley. In 1803, a drunken soldier accused Blake of making threats against the king. Blake was tried and acquitted in 1804. The previous year he had returned to live in London, where in 1805, he completed his commissioned series of eighty Biblical watercolors.

Blake's major late poems include *Milton: A Poem* (completed in 1804) and

# Themes

## ***Social Protest***

The poem is a protest against the social conditions that the speaker observes as he walks the streets of London. Although London is the reference point, the poet might have made similar protest about another city or about English society generally. As he patrols the streets he becomes like a biblical prophet, pointing out injustice with a kind of controlled fury and indignation. He knows that what is happening is wrong and feels compelled to speak out about it. He believes that everyone in the city, not just certain groups of people, are afflicted by the prevailing malaise.

For the miseries the poet observes, he blames the institutions of church and state, which combine to create a society in which oppression flourishes and is justified by those in authority. The church is to blame because it does not speak out against the evils of child labor, as seen in the plight of the city's boy chimney sweepers. The church, says the speaker, should be ashamed of its silence and inaction by which it allows, even condones, such abuses.

The government is also to blame because it passes repressive laws that restrict the activities of anyone who questions the rightness of the established order or who protests at political corruption. Charters originally marked out people's freedom from tyranny. The Magna Carta signed in 1215, for example, asserted the rights of citizens that the monarch could not take away. But the way poet uses the word "charter'd" suggests that such liberties may not be exactly what they appear. The granting of charters to large commercial interests, for example, as was common at the time, meant that many other people or groups were excluded from such rights. The granting of special liberties to one group denied those same liberties to others. This was the argument mounted by Tom Paine in his *Rights of Man* (1790), which Blake certainly knew.



## Topics for Further Study

- Walk the streets of your own town and take note of the people you see and the sounds you hear. Then write a free verse poem based on your impressions. Blake's poem conveys a sense of indignation and anger at the situation he sees. What dominant mood or emotion will your poem convey? Try to reflect those feelings with the words you choose for the poem.
- Consult *Poetry for Young People: William Blake (2007)*, edited by John Maynard. Read the introduction to Blake's life, poetry, and ideas, and then pick out two poems, one from the *Songs of Innocence* and the other from the *Songs of Experience*. Give a class presentation in which you read each of these poems aloud and use them to illustrate Blake's idea of the two different states of mind and soul: innocence and experience. Alternately, create a digital presentation in which you use slides to illustrate a comparison of the poems side-by-side.
- Make an audiovisual recording of yourself reading "London" and select some appropriate copyright-free images to illustrate each stanza. Then upload your reading to YouTube or your Web page and invite students to comment on it.
- Bearing in mind what you have learned about Blake's categories of innocence and experience, write an autobiographical essay in which you chart your own course from innocence to experience. In what ways have you been able to maintain an open, receptive mode of being, similar to innocence, and to what extent have you become disillusioned or hardened by what you have experienced as you have grown from childhood into your teenage years? Make references to Blake's poetry in your essay.



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## **Wars**

The British government's penchant for waging war is another target of the indignant speaker. The poem was written at a time when Britain had become a formidable European power and was establishing its global empire. From the 1780s to the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Britain, in spite of losing the American colonies, solidified and extended its power in Canada and India, began the colonization of Australia, and took possession of other territories around the world by military conquest. Blake had lived through the period of the American War of Independence and had sympathized with the colonists, regarding America as a land where freedom flourished. He disliked the expansionist policies of George III and his government, which he saw as motivated by greed and materialism and which he thought resulted in oppression. In the poem, he blames the monarchy and its allies for the unnecessary suffering of the soldiers, who do the bidding of their masters but after discharge are left on the street to fend for themselves—their sad fate pointing an accusing finger at the entire political system and the injustices it perpetrates.

## **Religion**

The poem emphasizes that the institutions of church and state combine to enslave people not so much by physical force as a kind of mind force. The chains that bind them—invisible yet formidable—are in part self-created by people who allow the church and the state to convince them that they, the authorities, know best. The religious and secular authorities claim that the ideas and beliefs they promote and the laws they pass are wise and prudent, based on God's law and the dictates of human reason. The poet, on the other hand, sees those same beliefs as limited, harmful, and simply wrong. Adherence to them makes people live stunted, restricted lives that are less than fully human.

In this highly compressed poem, Blake conveys this point by making the word “ban” in stanza 2 serve triple duty. Although not a common meaning in today's usage, a ban is, first, a curse, and in this poem, it refers to the curses uttered by any of the unhappy people the poet observes on the streets of London. Second, a ban is a prohibition, something that people are not allowed to do because it is illegal. The poet