

Themes

Power

The people are forced to work until they are exhausted and ill. They are controlled by 'mind-forged manacles'. The ordinary people own nothing: the rich and powerful own even the public spaces and resources (for example, the streets and the river).

Compare with

'Ozymandias': rulers lose their power eventually despite their 'sneer of cold command'.

'My Last Duchess'

Suffering and misery

The people all have expressions of 'woe'. Men 'cry', babies are frightened, soldiers are unlucky and ignored despite their injuries, and the population is 'blighted' with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) that raise infant mortality.

Compare with

'Exposure': here there is more physical suffering: 'Our brains ache'; 'winds that knife us'.

Injustice

The word 'chartered' was a late choice. Blake had originally written 'dirty'. 'Chartered' shifts the poem's focus from urban misery to the inequality that causes it. Meanwhile those who have responsibility for their people – the government and the Church – seem to not care about their poverty and misery.

Compare with

'War Photographer': here people in general seem not to care ('they do not care').

DO IT!

Choose two of the three themes explored on this page.

For each theme, list one more poem that you could compare with 'London'.

Briefly explain each choice.



Language

Blake expresses complex ideas through the use of compressed and very powerful **metaphors**: for example, the **oxymoron** of the 'marriage hearse' image confronts the reader with conflicting ideas: 'marriage' (happiness) and 'hearse' (grief). The effect is immediate and shocking.

Blake affects the reader directly through other means. **Sibilance** emphasises the sighing of the soldiers, and the blunt alliteration of 'blasts' and 'blights' conveys the violence being done to the ordinary people of London by the urban chaos and poverty.

STRETCH IT!



Explain the phrase 'black'ning church' and how it contributes to the poem's meaning.