London

BY [WILLIAM BLAKE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-blake)

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.

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

How the Chimney-sweepers cry

Every blackning Church appalls,

And the hapless Soldiers sigh

Runs in blood down Palace walls

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

# The Poet

William Blake was a poet and artist who specialised in illuminated texts, often of a religious nature. He rejected established religion for various reasons. One of the main ones was the failure of the established Church to help children in London who were forced to work. Blake lived and worked in the capital, so was arguably well placed to write clearly about the conditions people who lived there faced.

#### Summary

The speaker wanders through the streets of London and comments on his observations. He sees despair in the faces of the people he meets and hears fear and repression in their voices. The woeful cry of the chimney-sweeper stands as a chastisement to the Church, and the blood of a soldier stains the outer walls of the monarch’s residence. The nighttime holds nothing more promising: the cursing of prostitutes corrupts the newborn infant and sullies the “Marriage hearse.”

#### Form

The poem has four quatrains, with alternate lines rhyming. Repetition is the most striking formal feature of the poem, and it serves to emphasize the prevalence of the horrors the speaker describes.

#### Commentary

The opening image of wandering, the focus on sound, and the images of stains in this poem’s first lines recall the Introduction to*Songs of Innocence,* but with a twist; we are now quite far from the piping, pastoral bard of the earlier poem: we are in the city. The poem’s title denotes a specific geographic space, not the archetypal locales in which many of the other *Songs* are set. Everything in this urban space—even the natural River Thames—submits to being “charter’d,” a term which combines mapping and legalism. Blake’s repetition of this word (which he then tops with two repetitions of “mark” in the next two lines) reinforces the sense of stricture the speaker feels upon entering the city. It is as if language itself, the poet’s medium, experiences a hemming-in, a restriction of resources. Blake’s repetition, thudding and oppressive, reflects the suffocating atmosphere of the city. But words also undergo transformation within this repetition: thus “mark,” between the third and fourth lines, changes from a verb to a pair of nouns—from an act of observation which leaves some room for imaginative elaboration, to an indelible imprint, branding the people’s bodies regardless of the speaker’s actions.

Ironically, the speaker’s “meeting” with these marks represents the experience closest to a human encounter that the poem will offer the speaker. All the speaker’s subjects—men, infants, chimney-sweeper, soldier, harlot—are known only through the traces they leave behind: the ubiquitous cries, the blood on the palace walls. Signs of human suffering abound, but a complete human form—the human form that Blake has used repeatedly in the *Songs* to personify and render natural phenomena—is lacking. In the third stanza the cry of the chimney-sweep and the sigh of the soldier metamorphose (almost mystically) into soot on church walls and blood on palace walls—but we never see the chimney-sweep or the soldier themselves. Likewise, institutions of power—the clergy, the government—are rendered by synecdoche, by mention of the places in which they reside. Indeed, it is crucial to Blake’s commentary that neither the city’s victims nor their oppressors ever appear in body: Blake does not simply blame a set of institutions or a system of enslavement for the city’s woes; rather, the victims help to make their own “mind-forg’d manacles,” more powerful than material chains could ever be.

The poem climaxes at the moment when the cycle of misery recommences, in the form of a new human being starting life: a baby is born into poverty, to a cursing, prostitute mother. Sexual and marital union—the place of possible regeneration and rebirth—are tainted by the blight of venereal disease. Thus Blake’s final image is the “Marriage hearse,” a vehicle in which love and desire combine with death and destruction.