



***READING AND WRITING SKILLS FOR STUDENTS OF  
LITERATURE IN ENGLISH: ROMANTICISM***

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## 2.1. William Blake, “London” (1794)

### Reading Skills

I

#### Before reading the poem

What do you expect the poem to be about? Why do you think Blake is writing about his own city? What kind of view do you think he is going to put forward?

#### After reading the poem

Were your ideas right?

Would you agree with the fact that “London” is a political poem? Why/Why not? Support your answer with examples from the text.

Now let’s analyse the structure of the poem:

#### Stanza 1

1. Who is speaking in the poem?
2. What is the meaning of “wander”? Give synonyms.
3. What does “thro” mean? What is “thro” short for?
4. What is the meaning of “charter’d”? Give synonyms.
5. As we can see, the word “charter’d” can be used with “street” and with “Thames”. What are the implications of such a use?
6. Account for the use/contraposition of “wander” and “flow” in lines 1-2. What kind of effect does it have?
7. Why is the word “mark” used three times in lines 3-4? Why does Blake use it as a verb in line 3 and as a noun in line 4?
8. What is the meaning of “woe” in line 4? Give synonyms.
9. So far, what is the description Blake is effecting in this stanza like? Do you think the picture of London will get any better? Do you see any reference to politics anywhere? There is one, so where do you think it might be?

#### Stanza 2

1. Blake repeats the word “every” five times. In fact, he has already used it in stanza 1. Why do you think this is so and to what effect?
2. What is the general atmosphere we find in the opening lines of the stanza?
3. What is the meaning of the word “ban”? Look up the word in a dictionary for different meanings and report on what you find.
4. Discuss the meaning of line 8 (“The mind-forg’d manacles I hear.”) What are manacles? What does Blake mean by qualifying them as “mind-forg’d”?
5. How does stanza 2 tie in with what has been described so far in stanza 1?
6. Having read stanzas 1 and 2, why do you think Blake is so angry at his times?

7. This stanza provides us with a key to understanding the poem. Where do you think it may be found?
8. Do you see another reference to politics here?

### Stanza 3

1. Who were the chimney sweepers?
2. What does “blackning” mean? Give synonyms.
3. What does “appal” mean? Give synonyms.
4. Why do you think the church is appalled by the chimney-sweeper’s cry? Discuss the use of “appalls”.
5. Why is the church described as “blackning”?
6. What does “hapless” mean?
7. Why is the soldier hapless?
8. What, in your opinion, is happening to the soldier?
9. Why is the soldier related to the palace?
10. Discuss the symbolism of colour in this stanza.
11. What is the connection between the chimney sweeper and the soldier? Could they be contrasted with the church and the palace? Why do you think Blake establishes these separate groups?
12. Discuss the transition from stanza 2 to stanza 3.
13. Is there any reference to politics in this stanza? Yes, it is burdened with them! Can you name them?

### Stanza 4

1. What time of day is it? What is the effect of ending the poem at night/in the dark?
2. What does “harlot” mean?
3. What does “curse” mean? Give synonyms.
4. How old is the harlot?
5. Why do you think she is cursing?
6. What is the meaning of “blast”? Give synonyms.
7. Who is the new-born infant?
8. Why is s/he crying?
9. What is the meaning of “blight”? Give synonyms.
10. Discuss the use of the word “plague” in this context.
11. What is the meaning of “hearse”?
12. What is Blake’s view of marriage according to the poem?
13. Why in your opinion does Blake end the poem with a reference to marriage?
14. Discuss the (powerful) transition from stanza 3 to stanza 4.
15. Do you see any politics in this stanza?

## II

1. What is Blake’s opinion of his peers?
2. Even though several senses are at work, there is one which clearly prevails upon the others. Can you name it? Give examples from the text.

3. What is the general effect of the text? Does the poem make you feel comfortable?
4. Account for the reference to childhood in the poem.
5. Discuss the presence of strong social and political criticism in the poem. What are the social and political institutions Blake aims his wrath at?
6. Blake seems to be dealing with issues related to industry/commerce, religion, the state and the family. Where in the poem can we find references to each of them? Could a pattern be found in the poem?

### Writing Skills

1. Match the words on the left from stanza 1 with the appropriate word(s) on the right:

wander  
charter'd  
flow  
mark  
woe

pain  
sign  
walk  
mapped  
moving water

2. What do the chimney sweep, the soldier and the harlot have in common?
3. What do the infants in stanzas 2 and 4 have in common?
4. What do the Church, the Palace and Marriage have in common?
5. Find words related to death, disease and human relationships in stanza 4.
6. Make a list of the institutions attacked by Blake in "London".
7. Incorporate the list of institutions into a paragraph which begins with the sentence: "Blake was critical of many late eighteenth century institutions".