

## **Blake's London** by Ayana Summers

William Blake resided in London, a metropolis of England, all his life, except for three years in Felpham, a village on the south coast of West Sussex. Blake loved London, but at the same time was outraged by the suffering its society inflicted on the oppressed. To Blake, London was a dark place with depressing pillars of smoke from the mills and degradation of its people. His poem "London" chronicles those feelings.

"London" is one of Blake's greatest of prophetic lyrics. Based on Ezekiel, it associates London under British Prime Minister William Pitt's counter-revolutionary repression with Jerusalem waiting for its destruction. Whereas the third stanza focuses on societal repression, the other three manifest Blake's sense of loss of freedom, pleasure, and liberty.

In the first stanza, Blake begins the cycle of corruption and degradation, from which there is possibly no escape: The word "charter'd" has multiple meanings. It refers to the "charter'd rights of Englishmen" which have been curtailed by Pitt, but it also refers to commercial chartering of the River Thames. The spirit of members of society has been restricted, bound, "charter'd" by commercialism which has abused regulations to stifle freedom. This abuse marks every face Blake sees, but the people are too weak and too fearful to rebuke the system. Blake also echoes Ezekiel (9:4), where God says: "Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof."

Fear is prevalent in the second stanza, for it is what makes "every" person a prisoner, a victim of the system. The repetition of "every" three times wields incredible power. It shows that human misery is widespread. The frightening fact is that human mind – ideally an instrument of freedom – has become the source of imprisonment in that the manacles worn by Blake's Londoners are "mind-forg'd." In this vision of endemic desolation, freedom, pleasure, and liberty have no place.

Stanza three is Blake's most focused indictment of society: The blackening of the churches is literal, for London was becoming a dark place with soot from countless chimneys showering its questionable blessings on the city. The real dark spot was the Church's complacent attitude toward its children – the chimney sweepers. These children were condemned to a miserable life under the very eye of the Church of England. The "hapless Soldier's sigh" that "Runs in blood down Palace walls" is a strong symbol. It is an indictment of the royal palaces that send these young men to wars of questionable validity to be slaughtered. It points an accusing finger at the court's guilt surrounding the bloodshed of its soldiers. Blake viewed the chimney-sweeping children and soldiers as victims of an abusive system.

The most pathetic victim (in Blake's vision) was the young harlot, who is described in the poem's final stanza. Blake comments on the condition of the harlot, who has killed married life and infected mothers and children with disease. Her plight seems to be forced on her by economic injustice. Her presence destroys the ideals of marriage that have been transformed from a celebration into a funeral. The marriage coach becomes a "Marriage hearse" when disease-stricken

harlots, themselves victims of economic injustice, roam the streets of London to spread their disease to others.

Though triggered by depressing events, Blake's "London" is highly lyrical. Yet the oppressive tone of the poem cannot be overshadowed by lyrical style. "London" is Blake's criticism of society. Outraged, he chose of the most oppressed to record his vision of loss: the child chimney sweep, the soldier and the harlot. Exposing the truth yet providing no resolution, Blake's microcosm of London is an unhappy one.