LONDON

Lines of evidence: 24

Context – London was written by William Blake in 1792, and was published in Songs of Experience in 1794.

Poems for Comparison

Ozymandias – London can be compared and contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of death/mortality.

Exposure – London can be compared and contrasted with this poem in the approach to the theme of loss and suffering.

The Poet’s Influences

In Blake’s London, the conditions of the poor and their children were desperate. The poem reflects his view of the dark and dangerous working conditions experienced by the people of London in the 18th century. Blake was influenced by the Romantic movement, which emphasized emotionalism and individualism. He used a range of literary devices in his poetry, including sound imagery, figurative language, and anaphora.

William Blake – William Blake (1757-1827) was an English poet and painter. He is known as being one of the leading figures of the Romantic Movement. His work is characterized by moral and religious content, and his art is often symbolic. Blake rejected established religious and political orders for those in power have caused the soldiers to experience pain and suffering.

Songs of Innocence and Experience – Published between 1789 and 1807, these poems were created by Blake with the aim of showing the ‘Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.’ The Songs of Innocence collection contains poems that are more uplifting, celebrating childhood, nature, and love in a positive tone. The Songs of Experience collection was released after his life, and contains poems that underline the tone of the Songs of Innocence.

Romanticism – Romanticism was an artistic, literary, musical, philosophical, and cultural movement that originated in Europe in the latter half of the 18th Century. It emphasized the power of emotion and the beauty of the natural world.

Language/Structural Devices

Sight Imagery – Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering Blake’s artistic talents, the poem is awash with visual imagery, with a clear picture of London and a pointed view of the reader. For example, the speaker describes the ‘mark’ in every face that he meets, which provides a visual construction of the people’s skin being physically imprinted by their hardships.

Sound Imagery – The coined and anguished sounds of London also accompany the reader as they are guided through the city by the speaker. Particularly from stanza 2 onwards, the reader is shown how helpless and destitute the citizens feel through the sounds that they make, from the cry of ‘manacles’ to the sigh, and the harsh ‘harlots’ at night. The sound imagery aids the reader in hearing the grim pain of each of the people that the speaker encounters.

Metaphors – Figurative language is highly prevalent throughout the poem, particularly in lines 3 and 4 of each stanza. For example, the soldiers’ blood does not literally run down the walls of the palace; this is a means of showing that those in power have caused the soldiers to experience pain and suffering.

Form/Structure – The poem is written in four quatrains of four lines, each in iambic tetrameter. Alternating rhyme is used throughout in the scheme of ABAB.

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Death/Mortality – The poem is full of dark imagery that creates a constant sense of darkness and death across the poem. The speaker comments on the dangers of the child chimney sweepers, to the ‘hopeless soldiers’ of the city. There is little room for freedom or imagination. Everything seems to notice the people there. This creates a melancholy tone.

Loss and Suffering – The people in London are described as being helpless, constrained by the authorities but also the ‘manacles’ generated by their own perceptions and ideas. The ‘sight’ of the soldier and the marks of ‘woe’ and ‘weakness’ in the people suggests that the people feel that they are trapped in an inescapable cycle of suffering.

STANZA 1

Line 1: I wander thro’ each charter’d street,

Line 2: And mark in every face I meet,

Line 3: Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

STANZA 2

Line 4: How the Chimney-sweepers cry

Line 5: Every blackening Church appalls,

Line 6: And the hapless Soldier sighs

Line 7: Runs in blood down Palace walls

STANZA 3

Line 8: But most thro’ midnight streets I hear

Line 9: How the youthful Harlots curse

Line 10: How they mark in every face they meet

Line 11: How the new-born Infants tear

Line 12: Blasts the new-born Infants tear

Line 13: And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse

ANALYSIS

The opening stanza sets the tone and setting for the remainder of the poem. The repetition of the word ‘charter’d’ shows how legally defined, mapped out, or in this case, confined the place is. Everything, it seems, is already defined. In the second stanza – there’s little room for freedom or imagination. This particular spot is near the Thames River – too which too has been chartered. Blake feels that the speaker sees, he notes how society seems to be wearing them down and hurting them (‘weakness and woe’). The word ‘manacles’ has a double meaning, it’s something that the people there. This creates a melancholy tone.

The second stanza gives some further insight into the speaker’s feelings regarding the people that he passes. Blake uses more repetition, this time of the word ‘cry’, emphasizing how the people who he passes by. He also uses anaphora to emphasize the word ‘every’ – to make clear that all here feel the same, there are no real exceptions. ‘Manacles’ are some kind of chain or shackles that keep people imprisoned. The idea that there are ‘manacles’ should this be metaphorical manacles that are created by society and the people’s own ideas. This early use of the words ‘manacles’ ban and manacles show that Blake feels that society imprisons people with pressures and ideas.

In the third stanza, the speaker delves further into his feelings against what he sees in London. He begins with the chimney sweep, a dirty and dangerous job that shortened life expectancy, often done by child apprentices (orphans of the church). He is saddened by the sight of children being forced to do such work.

The speaker then turns his attention to the things that he encounters at night in London. The idea that the Harlots is youthful is troubling, as the speaker is concerned with the kind of little girls. The speaker notes how the poor and the exploited are being brought to prostitution. Even worse, the subject of her ‘curse’ is the physical blackening of the children. The speaker is worried about the condition of the children.

In the final stanza, the speaker notes how the people there are some kind of chain or shackles that keep people imprisoned. The idea that there are ‘manacles’ should this be metaphorical manacles that are created by society and the people’s own ideas. This early use of the words ‘manacles’ ban and manacles show that Blake feels that society imprisons people with pressures and ideas.

The Poet’s Themes

The theme of death/mortality is prevalent throughout the poem, with references to London being ‘strangled’, and the city being described as ‘dying’. The speaker is concerned with the condition of the poor and their children, and the idea of the city being ‘dying’ is a reflection of this.