

# Poetry is seizing life by the throat: analysis of "london"

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“ Poetry,” said Robert Frost “ is a way of seizing life by the throat.” Not having been equipped with the media and technology of today, poets of the post-1770s era often approached their poetry in this fashion. They took advantage of the freedom of words and used poetry to express their views and opinions on social and personal issues, which was most effectively done through the usage of vibrant language. “ London” by William Blake is one such example of a poet using aggressive language to express his dissatisfaction with the oppression and alienation evident in his days. Blake responds to these societal inequities by representing what many have called a form of “ social protest” against the political and economic gloom Blake believed had gripped London at that time. Blake wishes to use the poem to show his contempt for the “ charter’d” city of London, and he does this effectively through the use of subtle word choices, which leave an impact on the reader. He uses repetition and words with double meaning to explain the appalling conditions of the city of London. One example would be the repetitive use of “ charter’d” in the poem, which emphasizes how Blake felt that the city had been forced to submit to an organized structure. Even the Thames and the streets had not been exempt from this oppression, having been swayed from their natural course to conform to the oppressive administration. According to William Blake, the city of London had been, as one critic put it, “ mapped, licenced, controlled and choked with commerce.” As he describes the plight of the common man, evident in the “ marks of weakness, marks of woe” that scar their faces, Blake again employs repetition for the words “ mark” and “ every,” effectively representing the atmosphere of despair and misery. The repetition of “ every” may also

suggest that Londoners are not the only sufferers, that the struggle against submission to oppression is universal. Similarly, Blake's use of the condemning word "black'ning" to describe the Church can also be said to have a double meaning. Written during the time of the Industrial Revolution, when London was transforming from an agrarian society to an urbanized one, it can be assumed that the Church was physically covered in soot from the spread of industry. However, it is difficult to miss the figurative meaning as well: Blake claims that the Church had blackened itself from its responsibility for the deaths of the young chimney sweepers who comfortably got into the chimneys but seldom got out. Blake's disgust at the economically exploited life of a young chimney sweeper is further highlighted in his poem "The Chimney Sweeper." In addition to demonstrating Blake's condemnation of the exploited lives of the poor and young for the sake of a prosperous economy, his choice of "black'ning" is also used to express the corruption he perceived in the institutionalized Church. What is interesting to note in this stanza is how Blake has turned the oppressors (religion and the monarchy) into cold and dark inanimate buildings (the church and the palace), while the oppressed are real people, taking their last breaths in the form of a "hapless sigh" and a "cry." Blake sympathizes with the cruel fate of the soldiers, and the mention of the "blood down Palace walls" implies that the Palace has blood on its hands, the result of being responsible for too many soldiers' deaths. One of the things that stands out most to the reader is Blake's employment of imagery to emphasize the level of imprisonment and submission. His "mind-forg'd manacles" enforces a dramatic image of mental restrictions and internal

struggles, “manacled” on by higher authoritative bodies through their exertions on moral sanctions. He attacks them as people who impose shackles on the common man’s spiritual freedom and happiness. He also accepts that many of the limitations people have in their lives are through their own creations, and as a Romantic poet who believed in the importance of understanding imagination in order to understand human personality, he clearly loathed this form of “mental constriction.” “London” ends on a pessimistic note, as the baby born from the young poverty-stricken prostitute mother is greeted with a curse. London seems to have no hope of a rebirth or regeneration, as even this young, pure infant will in no time be beleaguered under oppression and poverty. Even a joyous occasion such as a marriage is a death sentence, plagued by venereal disease. Apart from the language used, what makes “London” unique among other poems is Blake’s use of observations made as he “wanders through each chartered street,” which implies that these are personal experiences rather than general commentaries. By choosing to show in his poetry the plight of his fellow Londoners, Blake has started his own method of social reform. Perhaps this is how poets fulfill Robert Frost’s charge to “[seize] life by the throat”: they use their poetry to voice not only their own concerns, but also the dissatisfaction of others with society and with life in general. After all, as Jean Cocteau once said, “The poet doesn’t invent. He listens.”