

English & Cultural Studies 1G03: Study Notes

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William Blake, "London," from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794)

After creating and printing *Songs of Innocence*, Blake created the *Songs of Experience*—but he never printed the *Songs of Experience* separate from the *Songs of Innocence*.



As I said in class, “London” is another example of Blake’s illuminated works, i.e., he engraved the poem and the images together on a single copper plate, and then, using his own printing press, he printed a copy of that plate on paper using inks. After the paper sheet had been printed, he and his wife, Catherine, painted the page with vivid water colours, giving us the memorable physical object that we have now. Each version—and there were only ever a few—is unique. In the Powerpoint presentation posted on Avenue you can see how two different versions look, how the stark differences in colouration invite us to read the poem and consider the work in different ways. How so, exactly? By hand-making a limited number of copies of his work, Blake pitches his artistic powers *against* print culture, i.e., against a culture that mass-produced cheaper printed texts. Why would an artist choose such a dissenting path?

We looked at the poem in lecture and I want to return to the poem here in the Study Notes. But let’s begin by considering the image that runs along the top the poem. Notice how the poem itself ends with the grim image of a “marriage hearse.” Where we might expect to see the phrase “marriage bed,” a phrase associated with happiness, loving bonds, fertility, new life, and mutuality we instead see something shockingly different: marriage, Blake suggests, is too often the site of a kind of death. To the extent that heterosexual marriages had become merely transactional, a woman trading her body for financial security, it had been interred, buried. By all accounts, Blake himself enjoyed a long and joyful marriage, but in the poem marriage is the scene of a kind of fatality. It trundles along, like a hearse, and so possesses the semblance of life, but at its heart there is something dead, inert. But along the top of the poem, we see something else again, a scene of a child leading an elderly man through a doorway in a high stone wall. Yet another wall in this course! Another image on the plate shows us a child warming herself or himself by a large fire. A great cloud of billowing smoke rises above: is this a “pall” of the sort that the poem mentions? Given what you now know about what children and childhood meant to Blake, what do these scenes mean? Do the poem’s images—a child alone but warmed by a fire, a child alone but offering assistance to another person—offer hope, a way forward, when the poem itself, which is a dire warning, does not? To borrow a phrase that the great literary critic, Tiltottama Rajan, taught me: are we “still-born or still to be born?” Are we ushered into a dead and deadening world . . . or on the threshold of something new, advancing on the gate, as the inhabitants of Eden do in Justice’s Petrarchan sonnet? What is evident is that Blake is not simply illustrating his poem, i.e., providing images that depict scenes in the poem itself. The images tell their own story, while also communicating with what the poem says. What do you make of that push and pull between what Blake is saying and what he is depicting in pictures? Blake often provided illustrations that did not illustrate a scene *in* the text, as illustrations most often do, but instead *accompany* the text, as if in a critical dialogue with it.

Lots of editors of Blake put a period or end-stop at the end of the last line:

And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse ●

But if you look carefully at the image of the engraved poem you will see that Blake doesn’t include an end-stop or period at all. Punctuation is always important in literature. Think about the way in which a period or end-stop abruptly halts the verse in Donald Justice’s “The Wall:” “The angels, often.” In the case of Justice’s sonnet, the end-stop abruptly brings the poem to a momentary halt, midway through a verse. How strange. That arrest, that way in which the poem stops itself mid-verse, invites you, the reader, to pause, take a breath, and think about what the speaker of the sonnet has just said: no wall

was visible back then, yet, as I think of it at this very moment, angels were everywhere, “often.” Why is that, I wonder? As the speaker tells the story he comes into a realization, stopping in their own tracks: Mmmmm, as I recall now, the speaker realizes, there were many angels hanging about, mixed in with the human population. What was it about us humans that “required” that kind of management, and watching-over? What did we do or what was it that the angels already knew we would do that prompted that kind of preemptory supervision? The fact that there were so many of those angels, is that another “omen”? An omen of what? No wall is needed, not yet at least, if the populace of Eden is full of ICE agents that look like us, that is, until they unfurl their wings, i.e., put on combat fatigues, masks, brandish automatic weapons, and begin shouting obscene commands.

Now, without any final punctuation, Blake’s “London” trails uncertainly off into a kind of silence. Without that little but important piece of punctuation, the last line is made to feel more open-ended and inconclusive than it might otherwise feel. In poetry, the devil is in the details. And in Blake, “devilishness,” energetic resistance and complexity, trumps “angelic” demands for control and conformity. Note how the letters making up the phrase “Marriage hearse” threaten to run right off the edge of the page, as if containing a resistant and troubling energy that the page can hardly contain.

In many ways, “London” adopts the conventions of nursery rhymes, just like “The Chimney Sweeper.” What are those conventions, and where do you see them at work here? Conventional nursery rhymes, which were increasingly popular in Blake’s day, are characterized by simple language, repetition, pleasant scenes, a kind of sing-song sound. And often a lesson, either implied or obvious: be good, be prompt, obey your elders, etc. But there is also a big difference. “The Chimney Sweeper” provides us with a look at the world from the eyes of children—sometimes damaged children, but still children. The poem we looked at is part of a small volume of poems that Blake called *The Songs of Innocence*. But in the years immediately following the publication of *The Songs of Innocence* (what year was it published?) a great deal had happened to cause Blake to focus on different question . . . or perhaps to focus on the same questions from a different perspective. With “London,” we are now in the volume of poems he called *The Songs of Experience*. In these poems the world looks much darker. From that point forward, as I’ve said, he never published *The Songs of Experience* separate from *The Songs of Innocence*—he realized that a complete picture of the world required both points of view. Or perhaps he realized that the world of innocence, the happy world of children, brimming with imagination, was also extraordinarily vulnerable, exposed to terrible dangers and exploitation. The “Chimney Sweeper” poem we read, after all, is plucked from *Songs of Innocence*—Blake celebrates innocence, but by including this very dark poem, he also reminds us that that innocence can be mercilessly exploited, and that the world of experience is always there to haunt and contaminate the world of innocence.

In the Powerpoint presentation I showed you the title page of that volume: what is the central image of the page? What are we looking at when we look at the title page? The speaker of “London” is not a child speaking to another, younger child, but a kind of prophet or what the British liked to call a *Bard*, one who has the power of vision, a person who is immersed in the culture about which he has an enormously discerning eye . . . and ear. The Bard or prophet is the one who sees things as they actually are, no matter how horrifying. The prophet is the one who calls bullshit on the official story about the state of the world. And so the poem is considerably denser than “The Chimney Sweeper.” Indeed, observe how, as the poem unfolds through its four stanzas, four blocks of rhyming verse, it gets more and more difficult. (A **stanza** is group of verses set off from other groups. Stanzas mark movements in poems, transitions in their meaning, focus, and worries. Trace the movement that takes place between

stanzas in this poem and other poems that we take up in this course.) The rhyme pattern remains the same but the language gets more and more compressed, more and more challenging—as if we were being taken down into a deep well of thought and feeling. Blake is asking us to look around, and listen intently, but he is asking us to look and listen most intently to the sex-workers, for the crux of the matter lies there. The poem becomes more and more difficult at that point because *this* is where the hardest things to think and see and hear lie.

It is midnight, always an auspicious time of day, brimming with *omens* or what Blake calls “marks of weakness, marks of woe.” A terrible darkness has fallen over the city. At the witching hour, the streets of London are haunted by many thousands of sex-workers. Their cries, “curses,” fill those streets and fill Blake’s ear. It is the sound he hears “most” he tells us, meaning that there is something about their condition that speaks “most” strongly, movingly to him about the terrible condition of humanity in England. (Notice that the first letter of each verse in the third stanza spells out the word **H E A R**. Blake is mobilizing all the resources of the language in this poem, right down to arranging single letters into patterns. The arrangement of letters across verses to form words is called an **acrostic**. *Listen*, the prophet-speaker says, **tune your ears to the sounds on the streets, tune out the lies and tune in to the truth!**) By some estimates, 1 in 5 women young women living in London at the end of the 18th century were sex-workers, perhaps as many as 100,000 individuals. The Church, as well as “polite society,” condemns them as lewd parasites, as “fallen women” (why on earth are women the ones who are said to be compromised, somehow not upright?), violating the body of Britain, but Blake is remarkable for refusing to judge them this way. He has a powerful examples in the New Testament as a precedent for treating women who are outcasts with dignity and understanding. Look up that passage in the Gospel of John (8: 1-11) and Luke (7: 36-50)

The women who cry out in the streets are not parasites but victims, victims of a culture that gives unmarried (and, indeed, married) women far too few possibilities for work. Impoverished and abandoned, they sell their bodies to keep body and soul together, just as fathers are forced to sell their children into the slavery of the “climbing boy” in “The Chimney Sweeper.” For Blake, a culture that is willing to dispose of so many women means that a terrible sickness or “curse” lies at its heart. Sex workers are regularly denounced as morally corrupt and as the agents of disease; and yet, and this is the important point, London’s men appear to have an insatiable need for prostitutes. A fatal kind of split troubles 18th-century marriage; men seek to gratify their sexual desires among prostitutes in order to shore up a fantasy of the “home” as a place of purity, unsullied by such desires. The disposable women on the streets are the “collateral damage” of this brutal fantasy about a life divided between proclaiming the purity of the soul, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, denouncing the impurity of the body, seeking its “needs” in out-of-the-way places, far from home. As Blake’s vivid and dense image of the “marriage hearse” suggests, this fantasy is a deadly because it is a fundamentally *unimaginative* way to construct and control and imagine a marriage, which could instead be a passionate, loving, complicated and evolving meeting of bodies, minds, and spirits. As Blake says elsewhere in his work, it is the culture’s anxious insistence on chastity, flawlessness and purity, especially in women, that paradoxically results in men electing to live these strangely divided lives, separating “sex” from “love,” and seeking “sex” in one part of the city, and solely as an economic transaction, and seeking “love” in another part of the city, namely home. In the 1800s, British women were being described as “the angel in the house,” i.e., pure of mind and disembodied, and thus, in a sense, no trouble at all. The body of the city of London, divided between a) a “red-light” district inhabited by the homeless and b) the homes and

beds to which men returned to their angels each day, seemed to Blake to be a symptom of a the deeply divided life of Britons. What is clear is that everyone suffers: married couples and sex-workers, alike. All cry in the darkness. Blake longs for a time in which we might live our lives more imaginatively, a time when we might more fully inhabit our dreams and desires, rather than parceling them out in this way and with such deadly results. The fundamental hypocrisy of a society that creates the conditions for sex-workers--and then blames them for their condition--deeply troubled Blake, filling him with sorrow. In their piercing cries he sees the young women, like the children and the young soldiers, ground up in a heartless machine that trades in human flesh. As Blake insisted throughout his work, sexual life is a central part of the work of the imagination—but in the noisy, cramped, and dark streets of London, an inhuman economic system, a system created by human beings yet larger than any individual, has reduced that life to a brutalizing economic transaction. And this transaction may not only be between a man and a sex-worker. Like other radical thinkers of his day, including the founder of modern feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft, Blake saw that too many marriages were *themselves* forms of legalized prostitution. As Wollstonecraft famously suggested in her political treatise, *Vindications of the Rights of Woman* (1792), published and widely read during the same time that Blake is crafting “London,” married women are treated as chattel (or property), forced to exchange their bodies for economic security: for Wollstonecraft, marriage can thus be structurally indistinguishable from sex-work and sex-slavery. When Blake speaks of the “marriage hearse,” he is describing the hypocrisy of a culture that loudly proclaims the sanctity of marriage as a way to cover up the fact that it is, in the end, a form of prostitution forced upon women in a society that offers far too few opportunities to flourish on their own. Whatever marriage was once or could be, in the 1790s it is the sign of a certain social death, a “hearse.”

Marriage hearse. At this concluding moment in the poem, Blake’s language condenses into something strange and compelling. We move here from a **metaphor**, which relies upon the work of a comparison or analogy (think of how the lion sharpening its claw in Justice’s sonnet stands as a metaphor for something dangerous and even blood-thirsty inside the supposed perfection of Eden), to a **symbol**, a single vivid image that stands for and vividly concentrates an idea, question, or problem. The two devices or techniques in literature are obviously closely related, with no definitive line separating the two. A symbol can be a metaphor that has, in effect, undergone a high degree of compression. --Like a star that has folded in on itself, throwing off lots of radiation and characterized by powerful forces of attraction.

Young women, young soldiers, and children: all disposable populations whose cries go mostly unheard in this poem. The poem is strange because it is full of the sounds of sorrow but we hear no actual words. Blake hears those sounds and transforms them into words...and images. He “marks” the denizens and outcasts of London, meaning he “remarks” or “recognizes” them as the precious creatures that they really are when no one else will in the anonymous streets of this ferocious city. He also “marks” them, meaning he leaves a trace of himself on them, in effect tagging them. He marks their individual faces, tracing the lineaments of sorrow in each. Marks is one of those words that has multiple meanings in English, an ambiguity Blake fully exploits. Marking faces would mean a great deal to an artist who literally *made* marks in the copy plates--scratching words into the metal surface using a tool called a *burin*—that he used to create his illuminated works. This repeated emphasis on marking cannot help but recall all those moments in the bible in which marks and markings are significant: the mark of Cain, the mark of the Beast, to name only two.

As I said in class, when Blake was drafting out the poem, and thus before he committed the poem to a copper engraving (after which there can be no more revisions!), he wrote “The German-forg’d manacles” rather than the phrase we eventually got, “The mind-forg’d manacles.” What do you make of that revision? “German” refers to the Hanoverians, the royal family in England at the time, who were German. But Blake is trying to put his finger on something about what it means to live an incarcerated life, an imprisoned life. The King was indeed ordering the arrest of more and more of his subjects, who he feared were seditious, i.e., not loyal to the crown. He and his agents were responsible for enchaining thousands of prisoners. The courts and the government issued more and more “bans” against citizens who were said to have revolutionary or dissenting thoughts. This was a deeply paranoid time in England . . . and it got much worse as the disastrous and costly wars with the French dragged on. And of course, these repressive “bans,” whose impact Blake feels and hears everywhere in the streets, most directly and disproportionately affect the powerless, including children and street women and soldiers drafting into conflicts that burned them like fuel. But it is not that kind of brutal and direct force that finally concerns Blake here, as powerful and troubling as it is. Instead, Blake sees another kind of imprisonment, namely the ways in which you or I, under certain conditions, become our *own* jailors. When our imaginations wither, when we are no longer willing or able to put our imaginations to use, we end up administering and controlling *ourselves*. You know the expression, “You are your own worst enemy,” meaning, there is something in you that is preventing you from being the person you most deserve to be. You have enemies, real enemies, but the worst enemy of all is not necessarily out there but *in here*. There’s a sobering thought to consider here: under what conditions do we come to embrace our own subjection? Under what conditions do you *internalize* your chains?

In his notes, Blake also thought about writing his poem this way:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the dirty Thames does flow.

What do you make of his decision to use *charter'd* in place of *dirty*? What difference does that revision make? What happens to the poem when you replace one word with the other? Think about how “charter'd” introduces many more meanings into the poem than “dirty.” The city and even nature—the Thames river—has been mapped, administered, chartered or charted. Chartered companies, i.e., large corporations granted monopolies over goods, services, and territories, dominate the economy (think the Hudson’s Bay Company, or the East India Company, which became the de facto government of the Indian sub-continent under British rule). Britons loved to proclaim themselves as living in the best of all possible political worlds because their legal-constitutional framework rested on the 1215 *Magna Carta*, “The Great Charter,” which decreed that no one was above the law. This Charter supposedly guarantees freedom for everyone. Yet in this great chartered land, Blake observes, so many lack anything resembling freedom.

Carefully consider how Blake treats the cries of the chimney sweepers, whose voices you’ve already heard in the poem from *Songs of Innocence*. Note how the cry that is heard is instantly translated into something tangible and visible: the cry “Every black’ning Church appalls.” This translation between senses (a sound becomes a picture, in this case) is called *synesthesia*. These strange shifts in how the senses work give the poem a dreamy, even nightmarish feel, which makes sense since the whole thing takes place in the dead of night. (The soldier’s cry undergoes an analogous translation: the cries suddenly look like blood running down the walls of the royal palace, as if shaming the monarchy for

prosecuting useless and murderous wars, wars which are, after all, then, as today, mostly fought by youth. In Blake's day, citizens who, like Blake, strongly opposed the repressive status quo, scrawled the phrase, **No King**, on walls in London—a crime punishable by death.) Tarry with that strange phrase, sensitizing yourself to how Blake, as a poet's poet, is contorting language, molding and remolding it. Somehow the children's' cries *blacken* the church, perhaps staining it, marking it, reminding parishioners that child slaves live and die just outside the church doors. The blackening is the mark of the Church's indifference to the children, the very creatures that Christianity makes a point of welcoming. Do these cries then *appall* the Church, shaming it? Or is the church *appalled*, its officials saying, "that's a damn shame about those gangs living and dying out there," and then doing nothing at all to help. Perhaps *appall* means to shroud the church in a pall, the ceremonial cloth with which the dead are buried. The cries of the climbing boys sound the demise of the Church. Perhaps that is what Blake means. This phrase in the poem is there to slow you down, capture your attention . . . and wake you up.

One more thing: I pointed out in class the importance of discerning who is **speaking** in a poem and to whom those words are addressed. Going forward, don't forget to consider the speakers and addressees of the texts that we study. In "The Chimney Sweeper," we listen to the voice of a child who is not only caught up in a cruelly indifferent machine but who seems unaware that he is trapped: he cannot see the walls that hem him in, not unlike those who lived in Donald Justice's Eden—that is, until the "woman" woke them up. In "London" we are addressed by an impatient, angry, but discerning prophet figure, someone who mingles with the populace and yet sees them for what they actually are.

Donald Justice, "The Wall:" The person who speaks the sonnet is looking back at a past event: a time when the woman and "they" lived among the angels and the beasts, even though there were "omens," and then the moment when all of that changed. That speaker is not identified. And yet in some way he or she must be a descendent of those who once lived in Eden and who then, under the aegis of "the woman," advanced into "the world." The speaker speaks from the point of view of "the world," looking back at what life was like before "the world."

William Blake, "The Chimney Sweeper:" The speaker is one child who addresses another. The addressee of the poem is us; it is "**your** chimneys I sweep," the child says, drawing us, you and I, tight into the circle of this climbing boy's world. You and I are the addressees of the poem and so complicit in the violence it describes. And yet something odd happens with that last, hollow, and moralizing verse, the verse that is so coarsely formulaic: "If you do x, then you will get y." Is it the senior child slave who says this? If you are listening very closely to the voice of the last verse you'll see that it doesn't quite sound like the boy who teaches the other boy earlier on in the poem. That boy used a homely little white lie to help the younger one face the day. He provides this kind of excuse for child slavery in the form of a kind of wry joke to lighten the mood and make a point. But the last verse sounds different; it sounds like it comes from somewhere else, from someone with much more authority, someone speaking at a greater distance from the life of slaves than the older boy has. So the poem's voice slips here, and transitions into another voice, authoritative and blithely confident. In the last verse, then, does an anonymous voice of authority in effect intercede in the poem, overwriting the boy's voice, commanding him to say and think in these more obviously brutally moralizing ways? In a way, the older boy sounds like a puppet in the last verse, mouthing the pious rationalizations of a culture that ignores his suffering too. In this last verse, it may not be the boy speaking at all but the disembodied voice of a morality that weaponizes goodness to extract labour from its impoverished children until they are dead. The key here: *listen* to

the voice in a poem, and to the subtle but important modulations of voice that track a shift in how the poem is working and where it is going. If we are the ones who employ child-slaves, are we not complicit in a crime against them. Remember that, as the United Nations has repeatedly reported, there are more enslaved individuals in the world today than at any other point in human history, most of them women and children. We don't force children to clean out our chimneys; what then are we compelling them to do? Study Tip: we will see a similarly strange last verse in Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

William Blake, "London:" The speaker is now not a child but a Bard or seer or prophet. The voice is declamatory, i.e., loud, insistent, urgent, and timely. Are we as readers not among those who are marked and remarked by the seer, compelled to listen to that seer's spell or incantation? Blake adopts the voice of the prophet, modelling his speaker on the prophets of the Old Testament—those remarkable figures who, often at great personal expense, and often reluctantly, warn others about the world's injustice with particular clarity and who long for the day when those who have been made to suffer at the hands of tyranny are made whole again. For Blake the bible was not only the founding text of his faith. It was also a vast storehouse from which he drew the resources for his own work. In the bible he found a richly suggestive language—brimming with metaphors, similes, symbols, characters, and settings--and a powerful set of stories from which he drew sustenance as a creator. The Old and New Testaments, he said, are "the Great Code of Art."

As we move through the course, remember to consider these questions: Who is speaking? From what place or condition? To whom is the speaker speaking? Who is the addressee?

Some terms that we have learned this week in class and in the Study Notes:

Symbol

Stanza

Synesthesia

Acrostic

Speaker

Addressee

Making videos of Blake's poems

Blake called the poems you have read for this course *songs*. They weren't in fact set to music although, given their attention to and work with the sounds of the English language, it's clear that they were meant not only to be read and looked at but also read aloud. Why does Blake invite us to think of them as *songs*? What is it in particular about music that appeals to Blake and that he would like us to associate with his engraved work?

Blake's illuminated text, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, has in fact often been set to music. Several of my previous students have done so, including Michael Griffin, who, a few years ago, produced the video linked below. Perhaps a video of "London" is the 21st-century version of an illuminated text.

Michael wrote, played, and recorded the music for the video, which features the paintings of the contemporary British painter George Morton-Clark. In the background of Michael's video you can hear the wonderful voice of his six year old daughter, Eden, who contributed her track to the video in one take. As I said to Michael at the time, to have a daughter named "Eden" helping you create a video of Blake's "London," well, you just can't make this stuff up. Years later Eden showed up as a student at McMaster!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAkEyFbGjTc>

