

William Blake's "London"

The brief poem "London" from the *Songs of Experience* demonstrates how Blake uses his poetic speakers to exemplify precisely defined states of being. A glance at the opening stanza of the poem offers some insights into Blake's technique:

**I wander thro' each charter'd street ,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.**

One contrast is immediately evident: the speaker says that he "**wander[s]**" through the streets but the streets and the river are both "**charter'd**," suggesting that they have been straightened and regularized in a grid-like pattern that conflicts with the freedom implied by the speaker's wandering. The speaker is, in other words, a misfit in an overly ordered urban world. But Blake's use of the word "**mark**" further complicates the issue. In the final line of the stanza, "**Marks of weakness, marks of woe**," the word clearly refers to distinguishing signs or physical indications of weakness and woe on the faces of persons that the speaker encounters on the streets. In the third line, however, the word "**mark**" is poised between two contradictory meanings: on the one hand, it could be a synonym of "notice," suggesting that the speaker merely perceives signs that are already present on the faces of the people he meets. On the other hand, the word could be more active, indicating that the speaker unconsciously projects his own ill spirits onto others' faces, much like one might "mark" on a chalkboard. This latter conception would suggest that the unpleasant urban environment is not merely an external "fact," but rather it is at least in part the projection of the speaker's own state of mind.

This second definition of the word "**mark**" helps to explain what Blake means by the poem's most famous expression, the speaker who hears nothing but his own "**mind-forg'd manacles**." As the poem continues, the speaker describes "**How the Chimney-sweeper's cry / Every blackning Church appalls**" and how the "**sigh**" of the "**hapless Soldier**" leaves its bloody mark on the "**Palace walls**." And in the final stanza he claims that "**thro' midnight streets [he hears] / How the youthful Harlot's curse / Blasts the new-born Infant's tear**." These are ghastly, sickening images—evidence of a hopelessly hypocritical church and a political power (the "**Palace**") that cannot feel the agonies of the downtrodden and the weak. Worse yet, the final stanza points to a disease-ridden life that destroys even the finest hopes of love and happiness, carting those hopes off not in a celebratory carriage but in a "**Marriage hearse**." What is less clear, however, is whether these horrid images are an accurate representation of London or whether they are only the "**mind-forg'd manacles**" of the speaker. After all, in one version of the word "**mark**," it is the speaker who projects his own spirits onto the "reality" that surrounds him. It could be, then, that the "**mind-forg'd manacles**" are the mental chains that lock the speaker into his own dismal condition of Blakean Experience.