

Context

Look up the meaning of "Romanticism (literature)". Make sure you are clear about the following contextual issues:

- The influence of Rousseau's philosophical ideas.
- The importance of libertarianism as a Romantic theme.
- The importance of Nature as a Romantic theme.

Summary

The poem's persona wanders through the streets of London, observing the downtrodden faces of its inhabitants. S/he hears in their voices the damaging consequences of restrictive ideologies and beliefs. The church, the law, the political establishment and industrial capitalism destroy individuals and all notions of civil society.

Explanations

Make notes from a substantial dictionary of the appropriate meanings of the following words.

Line	Word/phrase	Explanation
1	charter	
4	woe	
7	ban	
8	forg'd	
8	manacles	
10	appals	
11	hapless	
14	harlot	
16	blights	
16	hearse	

Themes and issues, attitudes and values

1. How does William Blake present London? What themes and issues does he explore in relation to the city? What do his attitudes to these seem to be? What philosophical values underpin his thinking?

Language

1. What patterns of imagery do you notice? What significance do these have?
2. One can't help but notice the repetition in this poem. What is it doing?
3. Which words do you find the most striking? Why? Explore their connotations and connections.
4. What is significant about the nature of the words? Are they complex or simple, abstract or concrete? What about their syllabic length? Their degree of formality?
5. What aspects of 18th century society might be symbolised by the chimney sweeper, the harlot, and the soldier? Think about the age, gender, class and role of these individuals.
6. What significance might there be in the choice of title and the repeated reference to the river Thames? Consider what role in the world the city had in the 18th century.
7. Consider the aural impact of the poem. How are alliteration, assonance, and the sounds of words utilised by Blake? What impact do they have on mood or meaning?

Structure

1. Line 8 is the centre of a 16 line poem. How significant is this to an appreciation of Blake's poem?
2. What relationship do the first seven lines have to the eighth? How do the following eight develop its ideas? How does this structure influence the impact or meaning of the poem?

Form

1. Consider the persona and the situation. Some critics have suggested that the detachment, objectivity and omniscience of the persona are so extreme that the poem's voice must be that of a ghost. To what extent do you agree? Does this perspective make any difference to your understanding of the poem's meaning?
2. Consider the poetic form. What patterns of rhyme and rhythm does Blake use? How do these relate to the poem's mood(s) and/or ideas?
3. Consider the genre: this is a lyric from "*Songs of Experience*". How does the idea of a lyric compare or contrast with the nature of Blake's themes/mood in this poem? What effect is created?