Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



London

by William Blake

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.5

"London" appeared in Blake's Songs of Experience (1794). London was growing fast and was full of poverty; young children worked as chimney sweeps, and the French Revolution had made the government fearful of protest. The poem has four four-line stanzas rhyming ABAB. Note: stanza 4 refers to prostitution ("harlot"); teachers may wish to preview it.

THE POEM

I wander through each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
A mark in every face I meet,
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every man,
In every infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear:

How the chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackening church appals,
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down palace-walls.

But most, through midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.

VOCABULARY

chartered — owned, mapped and controlled by law or business

ban — a curse; also an official ban or law

manacles — handcuffs, chains

appals — horrifies; also covers in a pall (a dark cloth)

hapless — unlucky

harlot — an old word for a prostitute

blasts — destroys

blights — spoils, infects with disease

hearse — a vehicle that carries a coffin

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the speaker see “in every face” he meets?

2. Blake repeats “chartered” and “every.” What is the effect of this repetition?

3. What are “mind-forged manacles”? Who might have made them?

4. In stanza 3, how are the church and the palace connected to the suffering of the chimney sweeper and the soldier?

5. Explain the phrase “the marriage hearse.” Why is it a shocking combination?

WRITING PROMPT

Walk (in person or in memory) through a place you know well. Write a poem of 3–4 stanzas about what you see and hear there that others might overlook.

London — Answer Key

1. “Marks of weakness, marks of woe”: signs of misery and exhaustion.
2. “chartered” shows that even the streets and the river are controlled and owned; “every” shows the suffering is everywhere and touches everyone.
3. Chains made by the mind: limiting beliefs, fear, and rules people accept without question, created by society, authority and people themselves.
4. The sweeper’s cry stains “Every blackening church,” which fails to help him; the soldier’s sigh “Runs in blood down palace-walls,” blaming the rulers who send him to war.
5. Marriage should mean a new beginning, a hearse means death; joining them shows how disease and misery poison love and family from the start.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/london-william-blake/