



[...] A momentary sense of what human nature may become may here and there flash in upon one as he gazes out upon the dark waters, but it is only when the human monster actually rises for a moment to the surface and disappears again, leaving a victim dead and disembowelled, that one quite realizes that that momentary scene is a dread reality. Just for a few days the mass of the people of Spitalfields and Whitechapel themselves seemed to be realizing the awful possibilities of the nature that belonged to them. Thousands of them were really shocked and sobered, by the last tragedy especially. One could see in the people's faces, and could detect in their tones and answers, an indefinable something which told plainly that they had been horrified by a revelation. Mr. George Holland, whose remarkable work has been going on for so very many years in premises occupying an obscure position in George Yard, Whitechapel - where it will be remembered one of these unfortunate women was found with thirty or forty stabs - says that the sensation has affected his institution very greatly. He has some hundreds of young women connected with his place, and many of them have been afraid to stir out after dark. He is under some anxiety, too, lest ladies who have been wont to come down there on winter evenings to teach and entertain his young people, should be deterred by this latest addition to the evil reputation of Whitechapel, and he is earnestly pushing on alterations in his premises which will give him a frontage out in the main road. On the other hand, Mr. Charrington, whose great place stands out boldly on the Mile End highway a blaze of light and cheerfulness, thinks that people have more than ever thronged out of the dark and silent byways and back lanes into the broad pavement and into the glare of light thrown upon it by shops and public-houses and entertainments, and the innumerable hawkers and salesmen of one sort and another who line the "waste" along the Mile End Road. Since these outrages the dark places of Whitechapel and Spitalfields have undoubtedly been a little darker and stiller, and more depressing. Some streets have presented, even to those familiar with them, quite a desolate and deserted appearance after nightfall. But the nine-days' wonder has passed, the effect of the shock has visibly subsided, and people are beginning to move freely again.

Turn down this side street out of the main Whitechapel Road. It may be well to tuck out of view any bit of jewellery that may be glittering about; the sight of means to do ill-deeds makes ill-deeds done. The street is oppressively dark, though at present the gloom is relieved somewhat by feebly lighted shopfronts. Men are lounging at the doors of the shops, smoking evil-smelling pipes. Women with bare heads and with arms under their aprons are sauntering about in twos and threes, or are seated gossiping on steps leading into passages dark as Erebus. Now round the corner into another still gloomier passage, for there are no shops here to speak of. This is the notorious Wentworth Street. The police used to make a point of going through this only in couples, and possibly may do so still when they go there at all. Just now there are none met with. It is getting on into the night, but gutters, and doorways, and passages, and staircases appear to be teeming with children. See there in that doorway of a house without a glimmer of light about it. It looks to be a baby in long clothes laid on the floor of the passage, and seemingly exhausted with crying. Listen for a moment at this next house. There is a scuffle going on upon the staircase - all in the densest darkness - and before you have passed a dozen yards there is a rush down-stairs and an outsurging into the street with fighting and screaming, and an outpouring of such horrible blackguardism that it makes you shudder as you look at those curly-headed preternaturally sharp-witted children who leave their play to gather around the *mêlée*. God help the little mortals! How can they become anything but savages, "pests of society," the "dangerous classes," and so on? How black and unutterably gloomy all the houses look! How infinitely all the moral and physical wretchedness of such localities as these is intensified by the darkness of the streets and the houses. It is wise and astute of Mr. Barnett to give emphatic expression to the cry that has so often been raised for "more light" for lower London. If in this one matter of light alone, the streets and houses of the West End were reduced to the condition of the East, what would life become there? Oh, for a great installation of the electric light, with which, as the sun goes down, to deluge the streets and lanes, the dark alleys and passages, the staircases and rooms of this nether world. Homes would become cleaner, and more cheerful and attractive; life would become healthier, whole masses of crime would die out like toadstools under sunlight, and what remained would be more easily dealt with. The Cimmerian darkness of lower London indoors and out constitutes no small part of its wretchedness, and the brilliant lighting of the public-house gives it much of its attraction. Even the repute of many of these shady localities is due in great measure to their impenetrable gloom after nightfall. There are many of these doorways and staircases into which a stranger might venture with perfect impunity, and many of the people are harmless, well-meaning sort of folk, but they are all enshrouded in that murky obscurity which in the apprehension of adventurers from more favored regions converts them all into possible assassins and thieves. It is a relief to get out of this vile little slum and to work one's way back into the life and light of the great highway, with its flaunting shops, its piles of glowing fruit, its glittering jewellery, its steaming cook-shops, its flaring gin-palaces and noisy shows, and clubs and assembly rooms, and churches and mission halls, its cheap jacks and shooting galleries, its streaming naphtha lights and roar and rattle, and hurrying throngs and noisy groups, and little assemblies gathered together under the stars and the street-lamps to listen to some expounder of the mysteries of the universe or of the peculiar merits of a new patent pill. Here are the newspaper contents-bill spread out at large with some of the news vendor's own additions and amplifications, telling of new murders or further details of the old ones. [...]

## Personal notes on the 3 documents: **the poem**

- **Poet as witness and “seer”** (prophet): “I wander,” “mark,” “I hear”
- **Poetic devices**: **alliterations** (wander / weakness / woe; mark / meet; blasts / blights), **repetitions with or without variations** (each, every, chartered, mark [verb then noun]), **regular rhyming pattern** or scheme (ABAB), **iambic tetrameter mostly (1 unstressed syllable followed by 1 STRESSED syllable → uSuSuSuS)** with a few exceptions, especially at key moments in the poet’s demonstration/indictment (Cf. line 4 = 1 STRESSED syllable at the head of the line instead → SuSuSuS), **anaphora** (lines 5-7).
- **The weakness the poet sees**: signs of oppression / poverty / disease, etc. (hence, **a feeling of empathy** with humanity) BUT ALSO signs of human weaknesses and limitations in the sense that all the “bans” (interdictions) and institutions (the various Churches, governments, etc.) are **man-made** → mankind’s responsibility in its own suffering is underlined Cf. “mind-forged manacles” with interesting pun on **man / manacles**.
- **Man and monuments**: interesting interaction between **sufferers (men) and the seats of authority (any church, a “palace”)** = the rich in general or more particularly Buckingham Palace (royalty) or Westminster Palace (= the Houses of Parliament) or what was formerly called (until the 17<sup>th</sup> c.) the Palace of Whitehall (the centre of Government). Note that Blake uses many capital letters in the original (illuminated) version of the poem, so that all those meanings are acceptable. Churches are corrupt (“blackening”) and “appalled” by the sweeper’s cry (= *not* sympathetic or willing to help). The “palace” is smeared with soldiers’ blood → makes one think of the biblical episode of **the writing on the wall = a prophecy**: the downfall of King Belshazzar is announced – see Bible, Daniel 5: 1-31.
- **A curse / plague on future generations**: youth is corrupted by society as it is (*youthful* prostitute transmitting venereal diseases through intercourse) → marriage as a soiled institution, bringing death to the couple & disease or unhappiness to the new-born babe.

London, print from Copy AA of Songs of Innocence and Experience. 1826. In the Collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum



### Other Notes on William Blake’s “London” by Joshua Feldman

Source: <http://www.suite101.com/content/william-blakes-london-a159186>

Note: Noteworthy ideas, wordings or phrases have been highlighted.

Blake's 'London' is one of the most famous poems in his 'Songs of Experience'. He was extremely intimate with the city, living there for the majority of his life. He therefore witnessed first-hand the suffering and unhappiness that is related in the poem, lamenting its fall from the "green and pleasant land" [[Jerusalem](#)] that is celebrated in the accompanying 'Songs of Innocence'.

#### Controlled Repetition

The poem is organised into four quatrains, each with the unfaltering rhyming scheme of ABAB. This structural repetition is mirrored in the language, a dominant feature that creates a sense of urgency. In the first stanza, both the streets and the Thames are described as "charter'd", implying that they are controlled by the state. The fact that the river, which is of course free-flowing, is described as thus is a hyperbolic technique that reflects the poet's strong disdain for institutional dominance. The word "mark" is then used as both a verb and a noun, carrying a sense of permanence that alternatives such as 'speck' do not. Furthermore, an alliterative 'w' is used twice in "weakness" and "woe", creating a sound that deflates the sentence and mixes pathos into the poetic rage.

The repetition carries through to the second stanza, as the poet employs anaphora in the first three lines with the phrase, "In every". The use of the word "every" again contributes to the poem's overall sense of urgency, giving the impression that the issues were more widespread than they perhaps were in reality. Blake also uses aural imagery to stretch the impact of the poem on the reader's senses, as he hears "every cry... In every voice". This serves to humanise the people who he is trying to generate sympathy for.

### "Mind-forg'd manacles"

Subsequently comes an important image that encapsulates one of Blake's key authorial messages, namely that practically all human suffering is created from within. Everything that is criticised elsewhere in his poetry, such as the Church and the government, are ultimately human conceptions, and he suggests that humanity is therefore personally responsible for the damaging effects that they have had, as well as for their alleviation. The "manacles" are therefore "mind-forg'd" because they have been formed in the human brain. This is not to say that Blake does not sympathise with the masses: indeed, one could see the aim of his poetry as edifying, as he attempts to enlighten his readership.

### The People of London

The final two stanzas concentrate on various different groups of citizens that populated London in Blake's life. First, he mentions the "Chimney-sweepers", a heavily oppressed group of children who were forced into manual labour at an overwhelming risk of ill health, and whose "cry" is evoked elsewhere in the 'Songs'. The Church is then described as "black'ning", an epithet that suggests both literal pollution and figurative degradation, an injustice that "appalls" Blake who encourages the reader to empathise through such emotive language. Moreover, he produces a surreal image of a soldier's sigh that "runs in blood down Palace walls", suggesting the government are directly responsible for his death. There is something horribly ironic about the fact that the monarchy sit within the palace while such atrocities are occurring outside.

Blake concludes this provocative poem by describing what "most thro' midnight streets I hear", namely "How the youthful Harlot's curse/ Blasts the new-born Infants tear/ And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse". This is a complicated image that uses the extended metaphor of a sexually transmitted disease to suggest how contemporary injustices are passed through the generations. Indeed, the corruption of children is arguably the most prominent theme in the 'Songs', as the qualifying first line of this stanza would suggest. The final line could be an attack on the institution of marriage (although Blake was married himself), suggesting that formal unions can perversely destroy love rather than preserving it.

### A Powerful Vilification

'London' is therefore an extremely angry poem that encloses many of Blake's grievances, blaming institutions, and ultimately humanity itself, for the suffering that England's capital city is riddled with.

## Two other famous poems by William Blake

### *In a nutshell:*

*How established religions ruin a child's natural liveliness.*

### **The Chimney Sweeper:**

#### **A little black thing among the snow**

A little black thing among the snow,  
Crying "weep! weep!" in notes of woe!  
"Where are thy father and mother? say?"  
"They are both gone up to the church to pray.

Because I was happy upon the heath,  
And smil'd among the winter's snow,  
They clothed me in the clothes of death,  
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

And because I am happy and dance and sing,  
They think they have done me no injury,  
And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King,  
Who make up a heaven of our misery."

### *In a nutshell:*

*What religious institutions should do instead.*

### **The Little Vagabond**

Dear mother, dear mother, the church is cold,  
But the ale-house is healthy and pleasant and warm;  
Besides I can tell where I am used well,  
Such usage in Heaven will never do well.

But if at the church they would give us some ale,  
And a pleasant fire our souls to regale,  
We'd sing and we'd pray all the live-long day,  
Nor ever once wish from the church to stray.

Then the parson might preach, and drink, and sing,  
And we'd be as happy as birds in the spring;  
And modest Dame Lurch, who is always at church,  
Would not have bandy children, nor fasting, nor birch.

And God, like a father rejoicing to see  
His children as pleasant and happy as he,  
Would have no more quarrel with the Devil or the barrel,  
But kiss him, and give him both drink and apparel.

## Personal notes on the 3 documents: **the trailer**

- **Pursuit through the streets of London:** not exactly a *hot* pursuit, but a disquieting, predator/prey atmosphere all the same.
- **Closed doors** or doors that are half ajar: secrets, the unconscious, what people often see as Victorian hypocrisy
- “the Infamous Dr. Jekyll” → a **household name** & a well-known story – here, **with a twist!**
- **Progressive close-up** on man’s face (slowly zooming in on his face) → mystery, suspense, idea that if you **take a long, hard look at anyone’s face**, you might see the (unpleasant) truths lurking there.
- By day (lab) ≠ by night (“monster” with a top hat) → not the usual idea of **Victorian respectability**.
- Involuntary **pun (ironic effect)** of the friend’s advice: marry a good woman → you’ll be a changed man. Gender issues here: Cf. leitmotiv in Victorian literature according to which a “good” woman can turn a man’s life around, and bring him stability, respectability, sweet counsel, a feminine presence, a family, etc. Here, a changed / changing man indeed – but a man who transforms himself into a... (bad) woman. **Other puns** in the trailer: Sister Hyde: “He hasn’t been himself”
- Now Hammer (the producers) believe YOU (the viewers) are ready for a complete change: **the 70s = an era of change**, especially as far as women/men relationships. Hence this movie has to be **contextualized** (characteristic of the time period that produced it). “This is the NEW Dr. Jekyll” → perfect for our time (the 70s)
- Male (pronounced three times in a row) / female: **oppose sex (= biological) and gender (the roles, etc. that a given society associated with each)**. **Sexual lure / attraction** of Sister Hyde. **Lesbian** undertones (scene with the prostitute). **Sensuality** (Cf. dresses, licks her fingers, shows a bit of leg when hiding a knife in her boot). **The most evil man = a (totally evil) woman!** → play on word here (man = male OR human being). Are we both good & evil? (already in Stevenson’s story) ≠ are we both man & woman? (an addition to Stevenson’s themes). Also a **battle / war between the sexes**: Sister Hyde wants to rid of Dr. Jekyll (a fight to the death), and speaks of a “tug-of-war” between Hyde and herself. Main question: who will win? Good or evil? Male or female?
- **The archetypal innocent female:** must stay away from Sister Hyde. “But WHY?” (a doomed victim)
- **What only the cinema could bring to this old story:** (1) **Shortcuts** permitted by the cinema: sudden transformations from one state to the other, in the scene with the prostitute, the mirror & dagger scene → **visual effects that belong to the cinema only**; (2) the **music** → suspense, we’re supposed to hold our breath, our heart skips a beat → anticipation of much horror (and pleasure); power (but also somewhat comic effect!) of **the titles** (like “As the impossible happens before your eyes!”)
- “a strange passion to murder and beyond” + **insistence on mirrors / a distorted vision of the human face** (looks like a specter, or a face disfigured by a silent scream, as in Edvard Munch’s 1893 painting *The Scream* → the human psyche is tormented, problematic, and has much to “hyde.”)

A silent movie "title"



## Personal notes on the 3 documents: **the essay**

\* **Spot the main themes & ideas in the excerpt.** Cf. the color-coded highlighting of the excerpt on page 2 above.

**Key for this color-coding:** *shock*; *Dark side / dark instincts of human nature*; *light & dark oppositions*; *names of people and places mentioned in this excerpt*; *crimes/dangers*; *main ideas (in favor of social reform)*

\* **The excerpt summarized in a nutshell:**

- a) **The journalist stresses how horrible human nature can prove to be** → stress on the **shock** caused by the Jack the Ripper murders: the whole community is shaken by them. Not only because those crimes are heinous in themselves but more subtly because such violence lurks in the heart of *every* human being (line 5). In other words, stereotypes & clear-cut distinctions hide the truth about humans (“the human monster” line 2).

b) Example of London's East End (notorious part of London), as opposed to the West End (commercial thoroughfares, especially). Many "crimes" (in the broader English sense of the word) are committed + many dangers lurk there, in particular due to the thieving, idleness, lack of proper education, general rough living that one finds there. This violence threatens the missionary efforts: example of George Holland (a missionary) in the George Yard Mission, in Whitechapel.

c) There is a direct link between those "crimes" / dangers and the darkness & absence of electricity which mark this district. Cf. mythological references (Erebus, Cimmerian darkness) → humans engulfed in a darkness that totally overpowers them (determinism).

d) Yet it is possible to turn things around: simply bringing more light to this district would do the trick because it is the living conditions (not the nature) of people living in the East End which accounts for the criminality one finds there (determinism, once again). This newspaper article thus pushes for progressive reform. Other examples of this progressive thinking: (1) One finds innocence, intelligence, & honesty there (lines 36-7 + 50-1); (2) people in the West End would behave just the same if they were submitted to the same living conditions (lines 42-3); (3) one must beware of any form of prejudiced thinking, born of fear (lines 51-2).



Map source: <http://www.21stcenturyvillage.com/east/spitalfields-map.html>

**CAPES 2013 – Préparation à la 1<sup>ère</sup> partie de l'épreuve de «Leçon »**  
**Présentation, étude et mise en relation de trois documents**  
**Suggested plan & ideas**

**Intro:**

[1] Introduce each of the three docs: only the relevant details & using appropriate terms to describe them: (1) a short poem divided into 4 quatrains, mostly in iambic tetrameter, with an ABAB rhyming pattern or scheme, from *Songs of Experience* (as opposed to *Songs of Innocence* → so explain what the reader expects); (2) a trailer supposed to make the viewer want to go & see the movie → briefly state what devices are used to create suspense (and scandal); (3) a committed piece of journalism outlining the miserable living conditions of London's East End population.

[2] Indicate what the general theme of these documents is:] the hidden face of London's squalid district & the need to bring light to its population.

[3] Indicate what your angle of approach will be:] *Light & Darkness as metaphors for the human psyche.*

[4] Indicate the plan you'll follow – slowly, clearly, fully.]

**1) The dark side of London.**

An unflattering picture of the English capital.

- Prostitution in all 3 docs: "harlot," "unfortunate women," sensual underwear & outfits of Sister Hyde in the trailer.
- Diseases: the harlot's curse = venereal diseases which bring death to the couple & unhappiness to the child, also making a mockery of the institution of marriage
- "Crimes" of all sorts (in the English sense of the word). Cf. highlighting in the *Daily News* excerpt.
- Poverty: sympathy for the plight of the poor (their faces, their cries, their destiny, etc.) and their living conditions in the article & in Blake's poem.  
→ poet / journalist as observers and whistle-blowers ; awareness of social problems.
- Naturally, the most horrible of all = murder (Jack the Ripper) in both the movie (based on Stevenson's famous novella) & the newspaper article.

**Transition: These sordid elements unfortunately go hand in hand with a realistic (not idealistic) view of human nature.**

**2) The dark side of human nature.**

- Interestingly, the 3 docs never pit one kind of human beings against another → no clear-cut differences between humans here (as opposed to a good v. bad stereotypical presentation)
- For instance, the newspaper stresses the morbid psyche of all human beings: "the human monster" line 2 and "the awful possibilities of the nature that belonged to them" line 5. In other words, the power to be evil belongs to all... The trailer recounts the fight between two sides of any human psyche, as in the original novella.
- More surprisingly, given Blake's sympathy for the poor & downtrodden, even *his* picture of the poor evokes the limits of the human spirit. The "mind-forged manacles" is a reference to the evil that men do to themselves: who else complies with figures of authority & accepts the power imposed on them (the Palace).

**Transition: Yet those are not depressing accounts. Each document shows the fight between good & evil, light & shade, NOT the victory of evil over good.**

**3) More light needed for us all.**

- Writing in the Age of Enlightenment & at the (violent) height of the French Revolution in Blake's case. Pushing for reform in the newspaper article.
- Humans need the light of Reason, and more Knowledge of themselves. Hiding the truth (of our dark nature) is not the way to better ourselves. Cf. trailer & its many images of mirrors, surfaces + metaphor of "dark waters" (line 2) in the article.
- Light in the article is indeed at once material & metaphorical: the advent of electricity (= the end of naphtha) in the East End is seen as the way to salvation. Light = also commerce, as in the West End → illuminated "shopfronts" will take the East & its benighted population into civilization & the next century.
- Naturally, the 1970s movie brings the metaphor of darkness a step further. With its representation of the war between the sexes, it can be construed as calling for an end to stereotypes of all sorts. While the other two sing the praises of the littlest human fellow & put forward progressive views.

**Conclusion:** [1] Summarize your demonstration.]

[2] Branch out:] However stark the realities described here & however depressing the list of evils which attend us, the social awareness of the writers in the 2 written docs & the '70s outlook evident in the trailer leave room for hope, I believe. Wanting to see the truth is a redeeming force to be reckoned with. If salvation might be too strong a term, at least this set of docs proves man's perpetual wish to better himself.