Exploring the Theme of Grief in William Blake’s Poem London

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Keywords: William Blake, London, Industrial revolution.

Abstract. William Blake is one of the most famous poets in the history of English poetry. His short poem “London” vividly depicts the various suffering scenes in London society against the background of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century, and expresses the poet’s strong dissatisfaction with the reality of England and his deep sympathy for the oppressed people. This paper will analyze the poem from the details in the aspects of the form and meaning.

1. Introduction

William Blake lived at a time when the American War of Independence and the French Revolution shook the world, and the British authorities were on a rampage to persecute and arrest progressives at home. Blake had been personally involved in the struggle for democracy in England and had been trained in the struggle. The revolutionary years and the experience of fighting laid some of the foundations for his poetry, especially Songs of Experience. London is one of the famous short poems in the collection, which was created in 1793. Britain quickly became the world's first industrial nation through the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century, and London became the cradle of the Industrial Revolution. The development of the industrial revolution contributed to the intensification of the contradictions inherent in capitalist society and the phenomenon of the exploitation and oppression of the grassroots. The general mood of English society was deteriorating, and the capitalists were morally bankrupt. Life for the toiling masses was unbearable. In the face of the devastation caused by capitalism and the ugliness it brought to society, Blake gave vent to his anger by writing poems that attack the reality of society.

2. Analysis on the Form of the Poem

2.1. The Rhyme of the Poem

There are four stanzas in this poem, which applies a meter of iambic tetrameter. The rhyming words of every line compose a rhyme of “abab cdc d cd cd efef ghgh”. After reading the poem for many times, it
can be found that there are many long vowels and diphthongs in it. These two characters make the poem appeared in a slow cadence. We can image a picture of the poet pacing on the streets of London. Perhaps in the social circles of the bourgeoisie, they lived an extravagant life and were accustomed to spendthrifts. It’s a strong contrast that the people at the bottom were all sad and numb because they were being exploited by capitalism. William Blake slackened his pace, because he felt compassion for what he had seen.

In the first stanza, both the long vowels and the diphthongs are applied. The long vowel /a:/ in the words “chartered” and “marks” and the /i:/ in the words “each, street, meet” sounds like helpless cry of the weakness. The use of the long vowels makes the poem sound like a bleak song, and the listener’s heart will overflow with sadness. There are also two diphthongs /əʊ/ in the closing words “flow” and “woe” of the second and fourth line of the stanza. It sounds like the modal particle “Oh”, which can express helplessness and sorrow. Luo Lianggong notes that the length of the sound often has a rich stylistic function in English poetry intentionally or unintentionally, if the poems discharge together long vowels (including diphthongs) and short vowels, etc. cleverly, they can often express specific thoughts and feelings.[1] The use of the long vowels and the diphthongs creates an atmosphere of sadness. The Thames flowed silently, but was full of the curses and despair of the toiling masses along its banks. And the first and the third line are ended up with a consonant /t/, which is brief but powerful and can remind the readers of the snappish voice. We can learn the anger from the bottom of William’s mind.

In the second stanza, we can see five “every” in the three parallel sentences for the first sight. It shows the pervasive oppression of the people by the bourgeoisie. Whether it was a soldier who had served his country well, a young girl who had become a prostitute, or even a baby who had just been born, it was hard for them to escape its clutches. And the word “cry” repeated twice, from which the reader can get that the capitalism is so devastating that no matter you are a grown-up or an unarmed infant, it put you into a desperate situation. The long vowel /iə:/ appeared in the last words “fear” and “hear” of the second and fourth line drags the rhyme of poem. On one hand, William meant to correspond with the first stanza by doing so. On the other hand, it increases the length of speech when reading aloud. It makes you feel breathless, because there are few pauses in the reading. It is exactly what the ordinary people feeling at that time. The rhythms used by the poet recreate the scene for us, giving us a sense of being there. And the long vowel /ɔː/ in the word “forged”, /ə:/ in the word “manacles” and the diphthong /ai:/ of the word “mind”, /iə/: of the word “hear” slow down the pace of the poem. It seems like the poet, having experienced what he saw and heard, felt very sorry for them, but could not save them from the dilemma.

In the third stanza, Blake still applied the long vowels and diphthongs to the sentences, such as the /ai:/ in the feet of the first line and the third line and the /ɔː/ in the word “church”. As Wang Baotong states in The Golden Tone, when the o is pronounced with a double vowel, as in cold, a melancholy, sad feeling can expressed; or sometimes it may cause a sensation of coldness, as in moan, groan, woe, toll.[2] It’s worth noting that in the third line there is a diphthong /ou/ in the word “soldiers”. In the example above, the pronounce of “soldiers” can make the readers conjure up the picture that mortally wounded soldiers dying on the battlefield precisely, which makes people tremble with fear. Another different point lies in this stanza is in the closing words of the second and the last line, which are ended up with the consonant /s/. When we read this two sentences aloud, it sounds like people are oppressed but powerless to fight back, what they can do is just sighing, which is insignificant to the capitalists and does not arouse their pity. The combination of the two
techniques makes the emotions expressed by the author in the poem extremely heavy and one cannot help but sigh with them.

In the last stanza, the attention should be paid on the sentence “How the youth harlots’s curse blasts the new born infant’s tear”. In this sentence, there is a diphthong /au/ in the word “how”, which sounds like the voice of scream “Aww” when people hurt. And a long vowel /a:/ in the word “harlots” and “blast”, which sounds like desperate outcry. This creepy sound was the same sound that floated through the neighborhoods where the lower class of Londoners lived at the time. The word “blast” begins with a plosive /b/, which simulates a baby’s loud cry mixed with a prostitute’s unpleasant curses vividly. It was like the sound of thunder, which disturbed the listener.

2.2. The Alliteration in the Poem

This poem uses the rhetoric method of alliteration, which is embodied in the third and the last stanza of the poem. For example, in the third line of the third stanza, the alliteration exists in the phrase “soldier’s sigh”. The word “soldier” and “sigh” all begin with the consonant /s/, which appears again in the word “helpless”. At the same time, the /z/ at the end of the word “soldier’s” is similar with the pronounce of /s/. These two consonants portray a image vividly that the soldier charging into battle and collapsing with a faint sigh on his lips after fighting to the last ounce of his strength. The heightened combination of sound and meaning is so clever that the readers can almost see the scene the poet has described. In the first line of the fourth stanza, there is another alliteration, which appears in the sentence “But most through midnight streets I hear”. Both the word “most” and “midnight” start with the nasal consonant /m/, which sounds like sorrow murmur. This style of writing allows the reader to feel as if they can feel the gloom that hangs over London and the depressing atmosphere that is hard to escape.

2.3. The Writing Style of the Poem

As a poet master of a generation, William Blake’s poems rarely used complex language or florid diction; on the contrary, his poems are amazingly simple. He utilized basic vocabulary in the poems, which could be sung as nursery rhymes or folk songs; his poems were very melodic, with a lot of repetition of phrases and diction, and were very catchy. He made particular use of imagery to create a particular artistic atmosphere, and every image he portrayed in this poem is dark, accurately portraying the bleak night scenes of London at the time and the somber mood of the night commuters along the Thames.

3. The Main Ideas of the Poem

According to Jinli and Zhangjian, poetic image can be defined as an voice that can be spoken out, an object that can be seen and a specific representation of the outcome characters of a person; or what is heard or what is felt: a sound, a touch, an odor, a taste, and any bodily sensation; In a broad sense, poetic image is a word or a group of words that can represents any sensory experience. The author used a variety of poetic image to show us a picture that when he walked on the streets of London at night he saw the underprivileged struggling under the reign of terror. The images of the poem vividly expounded the evil deeds of the ruling class in collusion with the bourgeoisie in their efforts to oppress the people, and expressed the resentment of the people and the poets against this oppression.
In the first stanza, the word “chartered” not only creates a somber, heavy atmosphere but also addresses the background of the poem while setting the basic undertone of the poem, that the city of London is pervaded by inequality, exploitation, and class divisions. According to Wang Zuoliang, the word chartered in the original text, with its complex meaning, can be interpreted in at least two ways: the first one is to have commercial rights, as in chartered bank; and the second is to have a formal instrument, as in English men's chartered rights or chartered liberty, that is, the right of the English people guaranteed by the king.[5] From the two “chartered” the readers can get the information that the capitalists, sheltered and supported by a constitutional monarchy, had a monopoly on everything that was going on in society. As long as they bribed the ruling class, they could definitely monopolize the public places, for example the streets, or even the Thames river which had fed England for generations, thus taking complete control of people's life. As a result of money and profit, and the collusion between business and government, London has been corrupted by the money of capitalism and is full of depravity and crime.[6] This is followed by the author's application of a visual image, the grief on people’s faces, which expressed the pain of people suffering from suppression and loss of freedom.

Under the background that has been described above, the author employed parallel lines of five consecutive “every” to produce a very striking effect that can make the readers feel stifling and to enhance the momentum of the poem. The poet showed his inner contempt for London with brief words and four auditory images. The readers can almost hear the heart-breaking cries of the aching citizens, no matter they are infants or adults. All these cries have one thing in common: they are all resulted from “the mind-forged manacles”. It's not just the physical abuse of society, but also the imprisonment of the mind. The utilization of this imagery is simply gripping. The author used the statement in this section to express the darkness of London society at that time and the miserable life of the people. The use of these images brings the complete darkness of London to the readers. Through these lines, the readers are shown the corruption in the politics of London at the time, which makes them can’t help but to condemning those upper class aristocrats and capitalists. It is because of their insatiable greed and arrogance that young people’s future was stifled in the cradles, even the newborn babies suffered.

There are four important images in the third stanza, including “chimney-sweeper”, “church”, “hapless soldiers” and “palace walls”. Due to industrial development, chimneys were blackened, and children from poor families were mercilessly reduced to the cheapest labor as chimney sweepers. They crawled in and out of the chimney, huddled in their skinny bodies, sweep and sweep bearing the painful burns or even choked by the smoke. William Blake once wrote a poem called The Chimney Sweeper, which was written especially for such children. The poem is about children who are physically and mentally devastated by their work as chimney sweepers, who longed for relief while doing their work diligently, without abandoning their good nature. Children at such a playful age should be enjoying their childhood without any worries, playing with their peers and being pampered in their parents’ arms. But against the backdrop of extreme poverty caused by the corruption of the social system, they are forced to take up the most dangerous professions and to carry the burden of the family on their weak shoulders. From their cries, we can hear the tender voices pouring out heartbreaking words about the social injustices of the time. Children, as the most vulnerable in the social system and the future of London, should have been given the care and attention they deserve. In particular, the church, as a symbol of compassion, should be a place where children are loved and cared for. But what the poet saw, surprisingly, was
that children were standing on the church’s tall chimney sweeping. And instead of having mercy on them, the church joined into the evils of child abuse. The word “blacken” deploys a rhetorical device of pun, on the one hand it refers to the churches being stained black by rapid industrialization, while on the other it alludes to the decay of the churches by the erosion of the capitalism. Compared to the helpless child, the grown-up soldiers seemed to be able to cope with their destinies with more initiative and have more control over their lives. They were the assistants of the ruling class in suppressing the revolution at home and launching colonial expansion abroad, and deserved to be treated with courtesy and praise on their return from war. But the soldiers here, after making horrible sacrifices for their country, were ignored by the ruling class; they were merely regarded as tools of defense. They were incapable to resist, but to sigh heavily. As Blake put in the poem, the palace walls were the walls of the palace, and the palace was inhabited by cruel rulers who disregard the lives of the people and soldiers for their own benefit. They kept waging wars to open up territories, making soldiers bleed to death. The author did not describe the corruption of the rulers and the tragedy of the war through complicated phrases, but used the image “blood running down the palace walls” to describe the bloodshed of the soldiers, so that the readers have a rich imaginary space. The images in the third stanza are narrated in a vivid way, showing the readers the full brutality and indifference of the city of London.

As miserable as the fate of the powerful soldier was, the fate of women in the context of the society of the time was even more unfortunate. They had no freedom, and many young girls were forced to become “youthful harlots”. Their curses were indictments of the moral decay of society and the distortion of humanity. Their children were born in such conditions, without the slightest love, and were reviled at the mere sound of their cries. In addition, the author creates a strong visual impact through the strong contrast between the “marriage hearse” and “plagues”, pointing out the fact that at that time the lower class of London could not enjoy happiness but to accept the misery of their lives.

4. Conclusion
The poem “London” is a poignant poem, in which Blake’s powerful tone reveals the scars under the gorgeous surface of capitalism. The social contradictions brought about by the English Industrial Revolution let Blake see the essence of capitalist society. This poem is the catharsis of his inner anger. His deep knowledge of music and metre gives the readers a strong sense of rhythm.

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