What happens?

A walk through the city reveals suffering and restrictive institutions.

The main idea

Oppression is a system shaping bodies, voices and even the ways people imagine freedom.

1. “each chartered street,”

Method: Repetition

The description of legally controlled space applies to both the street and the river, suggesting pervasive restriction.

2. “The mind-forged manacles I hear:”

Method: Metaphor

Imprisonment becomes psychological as well as material.

3. “Runs in blood down palace walls.”

Method: Violent imagery

The soldier’s distress becomes an accusation against royal power.

4. “the marriage hearse.”

Method: Oxymoron

A union associated with new life is fused with death.

Form and structure

Four quatrains with alternating rhyme; the recurring patterns can suggest an enclosing social order.

Development, voice and tone

Stanza 1 — Observant and troubled. A first-person walker encounters restrictions in streets, river and faces.

Stanzas 2–3 — Accusatory. Repeated cries connect private pain to mental constraint, Church and monarchy.

Stanza 4 — Bitter and despairing. The focus on young people and marriage implies that suffering reproduces itself.

Context

Published in Songs of Experience (1794), the poem attacks suffering within supposedly civilised institutions.

Comparison links

Checking Out Me History: institutional control. The Emigrée: contrasting visions of a city.

Recall question

How does the speaker connect individual distress to systems?