

# **A Comparative Analysis of the Motif of Flânerie in William Blake’s *London* and Mary Robinson’s *January, 1795***

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## **Abstract**

This research presents a comparative analysis of the motif of flânerie in William Blake’s “London” and Mary Robinson’s “January 1795”. Both of these romantic poets assume the persona of a wanderer in their poetic exploration of the city of London in the late eighteenth-century England. Moreover, they express their empathy with the marginalized individuals. However, there are shades of a Juvenalian satire in Blake’s diatribe against the shortcomings of his society. The poet expresses his righteous anger against the miserable condition of various individuals, including chimney-sweepers, hapless soldiers, and harlots. Similarly, Robinson records a period of significant social, cultural, and political upheaval in “January, 1795”. In particular, the writer highlights the social, cultural, and economic divide between the privileged and the unprivileged social classes. However, she adopts a more light-hearted attitude in referring to various forms of social injustice in the city. In this respect, she pairs an amusing tone with her critique of the city’s shortcomings; therefore, her voice has close affinities with that of a Horatian satirist. Blake’s vision of London is more penetrative while that of Robinson is more panoramic.

**Keywords:** Blake, Flânerie, London, Robinson

## **1. Introduction**

A comparative study of literary works sheds light on the common features of literary works. It also takes into account the distinctive and unique manner in which various writers have expressed their opinion about the social and cultural problems of their age. From this vantage point, this study compares the cityscape of William Blake and Mary Robinson’s poems “London” and “January 1795”, respectively. In both poems, the poet assumes the role of a wanderer through the city London.

London, a city rich in history and cultural significance, has long been the subject of critical exploration by many poets. Identified as “the cultural heart of England” (Hiller, Groves, & Dilnot, 2019, p. vii), London has become not only a global city but also a mental geography, capturing the imagination of eminent English writers. This accounts for various writers’ “tendency to personify and mythologize London” in parallel with “the great mythopoeic cities of Western culture—Rome, Jerusalem, Athens, Babylon, Troy” (Hiller et al. 2019, p. xvii). Throughout various literary periods, especially in the Romantic period, the

city of London has been under the spotlight by many poets.

The Romantic era in England (1789-1832) was a time of significant changes in society, culture and literature. During this period London was a prominent city and served as a key source of inspiration and reflection for many writers. Various English Romantic poets expressed their sentiments and feelings about the city. Boasting of the city, William Wordsworth (1793), for instance, in the sonnet "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3, 1802", maintained that: "Earth has not anything to show more fair: / Dull would he be of soul who could pass by / A sight so touching in its majesty" (lines 1-3). As a spectator, Wordsworth observed how various features of the city such as "Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie / Open unto the fields, and to the sky; / All bright and glittering in the smokeless" (lines 6-8). Of course, not all English Romantic writers expressed a sublime view of the city. The portrayal of the city by William Blake (1757-1827) and Mary Robinson (1756-1800) are cases in point. Blake in "London" offered a social critique of the condition of the city in the context of Industrial Revolution. Similarly, Robinson in "January 1795" highlighted the shortcomings of the city.

This study offers a comparative analysis of the portrayal of the city of London by the English Romantic poets William Blake and Mary Robinson. It investigates the extent to which the two poets are similar to or different from each other in their depiction of the city. In particular, it focuses on the motif of flânerie to explore the two poets' critical outlook on London in the late eighteenth-century England. A comparative study of Blake's "London" and Robinson's "January 1795" broadens readers understanding of the way in which the two poets were influenced by the social, political, and cultural issues of their age. This study is also significant in that it registers a male and a female poet's outlook on the city of London. Although the two poets had a somewhat similar critical attitude about the city, their manner of expression as revealed in their satirical view is different.

### 1.1. Literature Review

As will be briefly mentioned, both William Blake and May Robinson's poetry have been the subject of much critical discussion. Characterized by individualism, the Romantic poetry has counter-establishment quality. As Behrendt (2009) states, it is characterized by "a determined resistance to the state's impingement on individual prerogative, an interference that is routinely characterized as both unwarranted and 'unnatural'" (p. 42). One of the notable sources on William Blake's poetry is Bloom's *Major Poets: William Blake*. As Bloom (2003) notes, Blake is "the first, and among the greatest, of the English Romantics" (p. 15). Highlighting the influence of the Industrial Revolution, Bloom (2003) argues that any study of Blake's "London" should necessarily take into account this event. In Blake's view, the Industrial Revolution had changed London for worse:

The manufacturing work being done in factories created filth and pollution. London was dirty. Thick, black smoke from factories left behind a nasty residue where it landed. The river Thames was polluted with the byproducts of industry. The new type of work changed the city socially, economically, and topographically. (Bloom, 2003, p. 41)

In their analysis of Blake's poem some critics have addressed the moral issues raised by the poet. For instance, Wolfson (2003) has focused on mind-forged manacles imposed on individuals by social and institutional forces such as the church. He concludes that from Blake's vantage point, the death of chimney-sweeper boys should frighten the tyrannical church. As he states, the "institution, Blake's syntax insists, is the agent of contamination: it blackens (Wolfson, 2003, p. 81). Scholars have also focused extensively upon the social problems raised in the poem. Drawing upon Blake's critique of the church, Freeman (2017) argues that "as the Church blackens the children literally with the soot from the chimneys it blackens its own potential for a connection to the divine" (p. 67). As for the condition of prostitutes, "Blake links the preponderance of prostitution in London to the decay of society, the harlot both being cursed and perpetuating the curse" (Freeman, 2017, p. 153). In a more recent study, Kozlova, Klymenko and Shyrokovska (2023) have analyzed the verbal-visual synthesis in Blake's poetry. As they point out, Blake's illustrations of his poems have an intension beyond their design. They believe that he combined the engravings and poems to depict a new world and to create picturesque poetic texts, representing his individual thoughts.

In the late twentieth century, Anglo-American criticism has greatly re-evaluated the position of female authors within the canon of Romantic poetry. The works of authors such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825), Hannah More (1745-1833), Anna Seward (1742-1809), Charlotte Smith (1749-1806), Dorothy Wordsworth (1771-1855), and Mary Robinson (1758-1800) to name a few have been identified as fundamental to a better understanding of British Romanticism. As mentioned in the contemporary press in 1793, "no living poet could hold a candle to Lady Catherine Rebecca Manners, and Mrs. Mary Robinson was probably the greatest poet of all time" (Werkmeister, 1967, p. 311). In view of Behrendt (2009), Robinson in "January 1795" similar to Elizabeth Moody's "Thoughts on War and Peace" (1798) or "Lines Written by a Female Citizen!" (1795) ascribed to the unidentified "F. A. C." expresses her radicalism explicitly and reveals her opposition to contemporary state of affairs. In another study, the scholar Hogle (2019) has commented on the gothic-hybridity hybridity in Robinson's *Lyrical Tales*. As he opines, this work is a direct response, often poem-to-poem, to William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798. For many critics, he notes, Robinson's book is the "founding volume in the development of English Romanticism" (p. 3).

A notable scholar of Robinson's poetry Pascoe (1992) has analyzed the motif of female stroller in Robinson's "January 1795". In discussing Robinson's portrayal of London, Pascoe (1992) argues that "Robinson's London was the London of more affluent women of the late eighteenth century, a whirl of social liaisons and fashionable engagements ... Its view of the London, a representation that would appeal to female readers, was a London of people and not of buildings" (p. 167).

Although the poems of Blake and Robinson in their own have received much critical attention, a comparative study of these poets' view of London sheds more light on the social fabric of the city as represented from the perspective of a male and female Romantic poet.

## 2. The Motif of Flânerie in Literature

Flânerie or the activity of strolling and observing by is a recurring motif in the art and literature of urban life. The flâneur, which means wanderer or streetwalker, was originally a figure “tied to a specific time and place: Paris, the capital of the nineteenth century as it was conjured by Walter Benjamin in his analysis of Charles Baudelaire” (Tester, 2015, p. 1). The term which entered the English language in the nineteenth century, has been defined in *Oxford English Dictionary* (2024) as “a lounge or saunterer, an ‘idle man about town’”.

The flâneur of nineteenth-century Paris finds his vivid expression in the prose and poetry of Charles Baudelaire. As Baudelaire in the essay “The Painter of Modern Life” stated, “The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird’s, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd” (Baudelaire, 1972, p. 399). To Baudelaire the flâneur was an urban male walker. In this respect, Janet Wolff points to the inadequacy of the concept to describe women’s experience of the city. As she writes, “There is no question of inventing the flâneuse: the essential point is that such a character was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century” (cited in Levy, 2001, p. 178). Likewise, Tester (2015) states that for Baudelaire the poet is a man, one who reaps aesthetic meaning from the observation of the teeming crowds. Therefore, “Baudelaire’s poet is a man who is driven out of the private and into the public by his own search for meaning” (Tester, 2015, p. 2). It is through the participation in the public domain that the poet finds a sense of fulfilment. In this sense, the poet becomes an idler enjoying his presence in the public life of the city. As Baudelaire (1972) maintains, “For the perfect idler, for the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite” (p. 399). Of course, the motif of flânerie is not limited to the streets of the nineteenth-century Paris. In Mary Robinson’s poem “January 1795”, the poet assumes the identity of the flâneuse, a female observer of the crowd. On the other hand, in William Blake’s poem “London”, the poet-flâneur records his impressions regarding horrible changes brought about by the industrialization and urbanization of the society.

## 3. The Poet as the flâneur: Blake’s Bleak Vision of London

The comparative study of the motif of flânerie in William Blake and Mary Robinson’s poems about the city of London is suggestive of their distinctive and unique critical outlook. The city, which has been the subject of much artistic and critical exploration, is the title of a poem in Blake’s *Songs of Experience*.

Adopting the persona of a wanderer, William Blake in “London” (1794) depicts a bleak picture of the city. The analysis of the poem is meaningful by taking into account the major social and cultural changes in England during the poet’s life.

English Poet and engraver William Blake (1757-1827) was born in London. A voracious reader, Blake read the Bible, classical Greek literature, and Shakespeare and Milton’s works. Politically, his parents Catherine and John Blake had radical ideas, and the effect of this radicalism manifested itself throughout the poet’s works (Bloom, 2003). Blake’s first book of poetry *Poetical Sketches* was printed in 1783 with the help of his friends John Flaxman and the Reverend Anthony Stephen. Around 1789, the beginning of French Revolution, Blake wrote such major works as *Songs of Innocence*, *The Book of Thel*, *Tiriel*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (early 1790s). Now, he is regarded as “the first, and among the greatest, of the English Romantics” (Bloom, 2003, p. 15). Blake’s “bitter song” (Wolfson, 2003, p. 78) “London” appeared in *Songs of Experience* (1794).

When Blake wrote the poem “London” the Industrial Revolution had dramatically transformed the living condition of people in England. This resulted largely from a shift in manufacturing processes because of the invention of power-driven machinery, replacing hand labor. The Industrial Revolution that began in the mid-eighteenth century with developments in machines producing textile, was given impetus by the advent of the steam engine in 1765. In the following decades, steam gradually replaced wind and water as primary sources of energy for the manufacturing processes. This began a phase of economic expansion and technological development in England. Industrialism engendered its own problems as the nation was experiencing a shift from a mode of life primarily based upon agriculture to one of more modern life style.

With the development of factories casting palls of smoke over cities, the rural landscape of England took on a more modern appearance. Due to the destruction of their home industry, many agricultural communities either migrated to industrialized cities such as Manchester and London or remained as farm laborers surviving on low wages. The terrible living conditions of laborers had a negative impression on the mind of many of the writers of the age.

Blake’s “London” is representative of the horrors of industrialism’s adverse side effects on the life of people in the late eighteenth century. As Bloom (2003) observes, in Blake’s view, the Industrial Revolution had transformed London for worse. The manufacturing activity of factories with their black smoke produced dirt and pollution. The river Thames was dirty with by-products of factories. As a result, the social, economical, and topographical structure of London was transformed. Although the new industry provided more job opportunities, the wages were not high. The poor suffered in dangerous and unhealthy conditions. These conditions affected Blake profoundly. “While he could not change society, he could observe, and express his opinion of the changes in his art” (p. 41).

The speaker-flâneur of Blake’s poem “London” is a shrewd observer of the city. The poem’s illustration shows the images of a small child leading an aged man and a small wayfarer warming his hands at a fire. Both images are evocative of the figure of flâneur. “On first viewing,” Kenneth (1970) comments, “the aged cripple and the child who seems to be leading him appear as two victims of the evils of contemporary London” (p. 48). She furthermore maintains that “If we generalize the child as Innocence and the aged cripple as Experience, we can interpret the design in the larger context of the *Songs Of Innocence and*

*Of Experience, Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*" (p. 48). In parallel with these figures, the poem's speaker represented as a wanderer through the city.

The poem begins with the motif of *flânerie*: "I wander thro' each charter'd street / Near where the charter'd Thames does flow" (lines 1-2). An early draft of the poem reads: "I wander thro each dirty street / Near where the dirty Thames does flow". The change to "charter'd" is suggestive of Blake's criticism of the restrictions imposed on people and streets. As Bloom (2003) notes, the term "chartered" has the connotations of commerce and cheating. A charter is a document that grants rights to certain individuals, simultaneously limiting the rights of others (p. 42).

As the poet-spectator wanders through the streets of London, his sight is troubled by the harsh realities of the city. In every face he meets, he sees "Marks of weakness, marks of woe" (line 4). Here, Blake draws an analogy between himself and the biblical prophet Ezekiel who was ordered by the Lord to "Walk through the streets of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of all who weep and sigh because of detestable sins being committed in their city" (Ezekiel 9: 4, New Living Translation). Signs of weakness and sadness are evocative of the nation's malady, resulting from poverty, social injustice, and the stranglehold of hypocritical religious institutions and emerging capitalism.

In the next quatrains, the speaker offers a vivid account of objects of his observation. Getting nearer, he hears everyman's cry of pain and suffering. The poet uses anaphora to express the depth of "every cry of every man" and "every infant's cry of fear" (5-6). He lashes out at "bans" restricting people's freedom, saying that "manacles" have been forged even upon their mind. These "mind forg'd manacles" (line 8) or chains have not only limited individuals but also have prevented them from achieving their potential. In an age dominated by Enlightenment principles, the visionary poet spotlights the limitations of an overtly rationalistic philosophy which is blind to individuals vital faculties and needs.

In Blake's view, the chimney sweepers, recruited soldiers, and female prostitutes are "undeniably victims" (Kenneth, 1970, p. 47). The chimney sweepers are also the subject matter of two of his poems entitled "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. In these poems, he addresses the issue of child labour and the exploitation of children in the late eighteenth century. As the poet describes, the church is responsible for the deplorable condition of innocent children; their cry, he observes, appalls "Every blackening church" (line 10). In wandering the city, Blake also ruminates upon the sad fate of "hapless soldier" whose sigh "Runs in blood down Palace walls" (lines 11-12). In this way, he critiques those in power, knowing them responsible for the lives of unlucky soldiers. In the midnight, the poet also hears a prostitute's curse as he walks the streets of the city. Once more, the poet criticizes the corruption of the church, the very institution of marriage. Blighted with plague, the marriage coach has become a hearse.

Blake's criticism evokes shades of Juvenalian satire, which "bitterly condemns human vice and folly" (Baldick, 2001, p. 132). In such a satire, "the speaker is a serious moralist who uses a dignified and public utterance to decry modes of vice and error which are no less dangerous because they are ridiculous, and who undertakes to evoke from readers contempt, moral indignation, or an unillusioned sadness at the aberrations of humanity" (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 354). Though in Blake's "London", the speaker's voice is not as public as a Juvenalian satirist, the poet expresses his indignation and sadness at the appalling condition of the city people in the late eighteenth-century England.

#### 4. The Poet as Flâneuse: The Cityscape of Mary Robinson's "January 1795"

Similar to William Blake, the English romantic poet Mary Robinson in her poem "January, 1795" draws upon the motif of *flânerie* to express her critical worldview of the city of London. A comparative analysis of the works of the two poets suggests their idiosyncratic approach to the social problems of their era.

Although male authors dominated the literary and cultural landscape of England during the Romantic period, many women writers attempted to articulate their sensibilities and feelings by writing poetry. By the end of the eighteenth century, women poets like Hannah More and Anna Letitia Barbauld, Anna Seward, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson and Amelia Opie, to mention but a few, were taking an active role in public discourse on social, political, and cultural issues. As Backscheider (2005) observes, activist women poets "had become a deliberative body, a group that perceived in their writing, and were perceived themselves, as having a right to intervene in national life and its debates" (p. 8).

The English romantic poet Mary Robinson (1756-1800) in her poetry reflects upon themes of love and longing while also exploring the complexities and diversity of urban life in London. Born Mary Darby in Bristol, Robinson was famous in her time as a poet, novelist, and dramatist. She married Thomas Robinson in Westminster in 1773, but the marriage was not a success and she was poor until she became mistress of the Prince of Wales, when she was briefly a leader in fashionable society. In the last 17 years of her life, she suffered illness and developed her poetic talents. As a poet, Robinson was much aware of the injustices and shortcomings of English society.

For Robinson and other female romantic poets such as Charlotte Smith and Felicia Hemans, the city functioned as more than just an urban landscape; it provided them an opportunity for self-expression and self-discovery. In their exploration of London, they had the chance to assert their identity in spaces from which they had been historically excluded. By finding their presence in such public spaces they managed to have their voice heard. Alongside her contemporaries, Robinson expressed a collective voice, aiming at recording the feminine experience within the male-dominated literary and cultural landscape of her society.

In her portrayal of the city, Mary Robinson in "January 1795" assumes the identity of the *flâneuse*. As Behrendt (2009) mentions, "the invalid Robinson could not stroll through the city, but she did ride through it in a series of elaborate carriages,

both spectacle and spectator, lacking the anonymity of the flâneur, but possessed of that figure's moving perspective of the city" (p. 165). From the very beginning, Robinson evokes a sense of emotional and physical coldness. It is a time when the pavements are slippery, and "People Sneezing" (line 1). Setting the atmosphere of the poem, she presents a panoramic view of the city. She uses antithesis extensively to highlight the contrasting social divides; for instance, she highlights the social and economic divide between the lives of lords and beggars, Nobles and the wretched (2-3). In her depiction of the city, she draws the readers attention to the way in which it is populated with citizens from different social strata such as gallant soldiers, courtiers, gluttons, genius, wives and their passive spouses, ladies gambling, fools, old lovers, and "Poets, painters, and musicians; / Lawyers, doctors, politicians: ... / Seeking fame by diff'rent roads" (33-36). She also mentions various parts of the city, including "Theatres, and Meeting-houses; / Balls, where simpering Misses languish / Hospitals, and groans of anguish" (10-12). As a flâneuse, she is not blind to the dark side of the city. She observes, for instance, that how "Arts and sciences bewailing; / Commerce drooping, credit failing" (13-14). There are authors who are poor, rogues who are winners, fugitives who seek shelter (16-18).

Everything appears to be pretty unbalanced and lopsided, implying chaos: "Ancient dames for girls mistaken, / Youthful damsels quite forsaken" (27-28); "Lovers old, and beaux decrepid" (31), she says. Moreover, everything seems radically out of place: "Gen'ral's only fit for nurses; / School-boys, smit with martial spirit, / Taking place of vet'ran merit" (37-40). Moreover, Robinson depicts a society in which there is no room for moral values; it is an age of decadence:

Taste and talents quite deserted;  
All the laws of truth perverted;  
Arrogance o'er merit soaring;  
Merit silently deploring. (20-24)

Robinson actually records a period of significant social, cultural, and political upheaval. Her work represents not only her personal experience but also the broader experiences of city life in London. Through various imagery and close observations, she depicts London as a complex and desolate urban landscape. She underscores themes of desolation, social inequality and chaos, and the relationship between people and urban existence. Although a flâneuse, she is not an idler. Her poem records her sympathy for the less privileged citizens. She refers, for example, to such marginalized people as "beggars freezing" (2), "Genius in a garret starving" (3), and "Fugitives for shelter seeking" (19), highlighting the injustices permeating urban life. It is a morally degenerate society, falling into ruin and marked by duplicity; one that in which "Ruin hasten'd, peace retarded; / Candor spurn'd, and art rewarded" (43-44).

Robinson's voice in "January 1795" is indeed evocative of a Horatian satire. In such a satire, the speaker is "an urbane, witty, and tolerant" character, one who is "moved more to wry amusement than to indignation at the spectacle of human folly, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy." Moreover, the Horatian satirist uses "a relaxed and informal language to evoke from readers a wry smile at human failings and absurdities—sometimes including his own" (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 354). Similarly, she tends to take a light-hearted but somewhat pessimistic look at the city, satirizing its shortcomings.

## 5. Conclusion

William Blake in "London" and Mary Robinson in "January, 1795" drew upon the motif of flânerie to express their view of the city of London in the 1790s. Wandering through the urban landscape, the speaker-observer of Blake and Robinson's poems assumes the identity of the flâneur and flâneuse, respectively. The speaker of both poems is a shrewd observer of the human condition during their age. From a critical perspective, both poets highlight the shortcomings of their society. Moreover, they show their empathy for the less fortunate, unprivileged, and marginalized individuals. In this respect, Blake's poem is more meaningful in the context of the Industrial Revolution. The poet has a keen eye for the deplorable condition of chimney sweepers, soldiers, and harlots in the process of urbanization and industrialization of the society. Blake's empathetic imagination allows him to feel their sad and miserable condition.

Blake's city has marks of sadness and woe; blood runs down its palace walls, and the prostitute's cry of pain shatters the silence of its midnights. With a critical eye, the poet not only hears their anguished cries but also attempts to give voice to it. Consequently, he is filled with sadness and anger. From this vantage point, the persona manifested in Blake's "London" has close affinities with that of a Juvenalian satirist in that he expresses his righteous anger against the social injustices that many people faced during the age. Blake's flâneur is indeed a visionary, aware of the sad and harsh realities of his society.

While Blake harshly criticizes the miserable condition of suffering individuals, Robinson adopts a more light-hearted attitude in expressing her critique of the social and cultural problems of her age. The speaker-flâneuse of her poem displays the social divide existing among London citizens and wittily questions its inadequacies. Therefore, the persona manifested in "January 1795" is closer to a Horatian satirist, that is, a more tolerant, amused, and witty character.

In the work of both poets the concept of flânerie deviates from its primary sense. The flâneur of Blake's "London" and the flâneuse of Robinson's "January 1795" are no longer the manifestation of an idler enjoying his or her presence in the public city life. Blake's flâneur is a serious thinker, one who expresses his dissatisfaction with the living condition of the less privileged individuals of London. Similarly, Robinson's flâneuse adopts a critical but less severe attitude, regarding the life of various individuals in London. She develops a deep sense of social injustice in comparing the living condition of the privileged and the unprivileged classes of the city. Blake's vision is more penetrative while that of Robinson is more panoramic.

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