Context: the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment was a period of European history spanning the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was a huge period of social, economic and conceptual change.

The Industrial Revolution

- Enclosure laws – land that had formerly been open for common use by communities was closed into large, private farms. This resulted in a massive increase in food production and also drove peasants into the cities in search of work.
- Capitalism developed, and the new ‘merchant’ or ‘bourgeois’ class grew.
- Inventions such as the steam engine created mechanical methods to increase production and transport goods and workers.
- Europe moved from a primarily agricultural and rural economy to a capitalist and urban economy, from a household, family-based economy to an industry-based economy.

Political revolutions and unrest

- American Revolution (1763–1783).
- Gordon Riots (1780) Protestants angered by the ‘Roman Catholic Relief Act’. Blake was caught up in a swell of 40,000–60,000 people who stormed and destroyed Newgate Prison.
- Irish Rebellion (1798) (Orange Order was founded in 1795). Act of Union created ‘the UK’ in 1800.
- French Revolution (1789–1799).
- Napoleonic Wars (1799–1815).

Scientific progress

- Isaac Newton’s (1642–1727) mechanistic view of the world began to hold sway.
- The earliest scientists to use the microscope, Robert Hooke in England, and Jan Swammerdam and Antony van Leeuwenhoek (1632–1723), discovered cells.
- The first electrical storage device was invented in 1745. In 1749, Benjamin Franklin demonstrated that lightning was electricity.
- Medicine developed knowledge of anatomy, microscopic anatomy, blood circulation, inoculation, pathology.
**Concepts and beliefs**

- Importance of ‘reason’ above superstition.
- Growing religious tolerance.
- Increasing concern with social justice.
- Movement away from monarchy or aristocracy.
- Abolitionism (of the slave trade).
- Women: the position of women was degraded during the Enlightenment. Their rights to own property and run businesses were restricted. Blake was friends with women who were working towards equality, such as early ‘feminist’ Mary Wollstonecraft, who published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.
- Importance of education.

**English government**

- George III (1738–1820) ruled from 1760. Later in his reign he suffered from recurrent mental illness. His eldest son (also George) ruled as regent from 1811 until his death.
- At the beginning of the century, power was divided between the monarch and the parliament. The government was highly corrupt, with members of parliament often paying for votes.
- The balance of power shifted when George became ill towards the end of the eighteenth century, with parliament becoming more independent.

**Links to the Songs**

Find examples of poems that demonstrate these themes:

- protest against social injustice
- personal rather than institutional religious experiences
- rural versus urban environments
- concern with the human condition
- revolt against authority.

Remember that while Blake was surrounded by these developments, he would not necessarily have embraced all of them. The Enlightenment trend towards reason above spirituality, for example, did not appeal.