**English Romantic Verse** One-Page Guides

**Poet: William Blake**

Poem: Songs of Experience: Holy Thursday

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| Context (biographical, Romantic attitudes, social/historical etc) | The poem refers to the traditional Charity School service at St Paul’s Cathedral on Ascension day which celebrates the fortieth day after the resurrection of Christ. Charity schools were publicly funded institutions established to care for and establish orphaned and abandoned children in London. This poem moves on from the companion poem in *Songs of Innocence* the children are viewed at the service but the poem then moves on to focus on their poverty.  Blake, like Wordsworth later, rejected the idea that children were born evil, seeing them as innocent until affected by the world (experience). He was a friend of Elizabeth Wolstencraft (Mary Shelley’s mother, who Mary never net except in her writings) and a radical thinker. He rejected the established Church of England and was critical of the way the establishment treated the poor.  The natural imagery in the poem has echoes throughout Blake’s *Songs* and in much of Romantic poetry where a return to a kind of pastoral Eden is longed for  *Holy Thursday (Innocence)* |
| A poem about… (Interpretations, key Romantic themes, nature, mortality) | Childhood, poverty, corruption of society, critique of the establishment. Society is corrupt. In the poem ‘Holy Thursday’from *Songs of Innocence,* Blake could be praising the charitable act (although he could also be critiquing the hollow nature of this display of apparent altruism). Here the criticism of society and its institutions is more marked. The speaker, looking at the singing children, sees nothing but poverty (in a ‘rich and fruitful land’) and therefore the scene is not ‘a holy thing to see’. Ends by painting a picture of a more utopian society which, with sun and rain (and therefore growth of all kinds) children can flourish. |
| Speaker (who? talking to whom? attitude to subject- ironic, reverent etc) | Speaker is a fairly typical Blake persona who asks a series of questions which are essentially rhetorical (the implied answer to them all is ‘no’). At the end of stanza two there is a cry of anguish from the speaker ‘It is a land of poverty!’ |
| Form (sonnet, ballad, verse form, rhyme and rhythm) | Four quatrains, each have four beats and rhyme ABAB. Variation on the ballad stanza. All lines end with a masculine ending, a stress on the final syllable, except the crucial ‘It is a land of poverty!’ and, earlier, ‘Babes reduc’d to misery’. These are both dactylic feet (stress, unstress, unstress) – perhaps to emphasise the key message of the poem. These dactyls have a kind of echoing quality and the two of them are strongly linked in meaning. |
| Overall structure (shifts, changes, climax of narrative etc) | Stanzas one and two are governed by questions about the scene of poverty that the speaker sees, which have the underlying answer ‘no’ and come a conclusion at the end of stanza two with the exclamation ‘It is a land of poverty!’ He is describing unnecessary poverty given the wealth of the nation.  For example, the quotation “Babes reduc’d to misery, Fed with cold and usurous hand?” suggests the orphans have been ruined because of neglect – the adjective ‘usurous’ suggests that any charity that is given to them is only lent, not freely given.  The third stanza, with the anaphora ‘And the…’ lists, in a metaphorical or allegorical way, how their world is ‘bleak & bare’ (compare with the use of the ampersand - & - in *Holy Thursday (Innocence)* ). In the final stanza, Blake explores a better world for them – a utopian society? Or just a better society? - where the land is genuinely fruitful (returning to the opening line, perhaps?) and how this kind of hunger would not exist. |
| Language (vocabulary - heightened or demotic; rhetorical features etc) | “rich and fruitful land” suggests literal and figurative fruit and fertility, as well as wealth, contrasting with the reality of England at the time: ‘Babes reduc’d to misery’.  “cold and usurous hand” refers to the corruption within this society - lending money (called, pejoratively, ‘usury’) and gaining from the process (perhaps in praise from others?). As with much of Blake the language is otherwise quite simple and the poem relies instead on allegory/metaphor/symbolism, using the allegory and language of nature. Blake contrasts the ‘land of poverty’ (‘bleak… bare… thorns… winter’ with a utopian alternative in the last stanza (‘sun… shine… rain… babe…) |
| Imagery (metaphor, simile, images etc) | Last two stanzas are metaphorical/allegorical, where the weather describes their state and experience. Natural imagery: “rich and fruitful land”, “sun does never shine”, “fields are bleak & bare”, “ways are fill’d with thorns” - odd as it is done in the city of London – thus must all be metaphorical. Nature is unfulfilled and barren, contrasts with “flowers” (*Songs of Innocence)* as these children are unable to grow.  “sun does shine”, “rain does fall” - creates an equal balance. Edenic, more of the pastoral ideal. Pathetic fallacy. |
| Punctuation and grammar (sentence length, end-stopping, caesura, verb mood - imperative, declarative, interrogative, exclamatory) | “their ways are fill’d with thorns: It is eternal winter there” - colon perhaps highlights their paths being blocked, they will never get where they want.  Anaphora ‘and their... and their...’ gives a sense of urgency, of building the grim picture of their world |
| Links to other poems | *Songs of Innocence: Holy Thursday, Tintern Abbey, Intimations of Immortality* - explore the theme of childhood (innocence, prelapsarian state, an immortal state, we are not born evil)*.* The forms of literal and metaphorical entrapment in Bronte’s ‘To a Wreath of Snow’ and ‘Julian M and A G Rochelle’ (sometimes called ‘The Prisoner’ as much of it was in an earlier draft with that name). Religious expression is in *Songs of Experience: Holy Thursday, Tintern Abbey, Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner, Intimations of Immortality* and many more poems |