**English Romantic Verse** One-Page Guides

**Poet: William Blake**

Poem: Songs of Innocence: 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.  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 (of which St Paul’s is an icon).  Children are described in the poem as “flowers” - the Romantics believed children were attuned to nature (see Wordsworth’s ‘Intimations of Immortality’)  The final phrase may refer to the story of Lot in the bible. He lived in the city of Sodom and when angels arrived, disguised as travellers, he offers them hospitality. As a result his own family are saved from the city’s destruction. What message might Blake be presenting?  The poem is a companion poem to *Holy Thursday (Experience)* |
| A poem about… (The main premise, different interpretations related to context, key Romantic themes) | Childhood, religious expression, anti-establishment expression. One reading suggests that the ‘grey headed beadles’ and ‘wise guardians of the poor’ – who are the agents of Christian charity - are kind and that if, like them, you pity the poor, angels will keep by you. However, if we take this poem as part of Blake’s general attitudes towards the established church, another reading would suggest that the last line is ironic/sarcastic. The church is ‘cherishing pity’ but achieving little except a dramatic and noisy (‘harmonious thunderings’) show of how charitable they are. Either way, the children come out of the poem well, as ‘flowers of London town’ and as ‘lambs’ (a traditional symbol of innocence, often related to Christ). They also seem to have an awesome, sublime power (‘mighty wind’, ‘thunderings’) |
| Speaker (who? talking to whom? attitude to subject- ironic, reverent etc) | Speaker is a typical Blake persona. Whilst in awe of the children, the line ‘cherish pity’ and the phrase ‘wise guardians of the poor’ could be seen as having a somewhat ironic/sarcastic tone. Does cherishing pity sound like a good thing? |
| Form (sonnet, ballad, verse form, rhyme and rhythm) | Three stanzas, each contain two rhymed couplets (“clean”/“green”, “snow”/“flow” etc) Lines are longer than is considered typical for Blake’s *Songs*. In stanza 1 this is appropriate, fitting the images of the long lines of children travelling towards the cathedral. Arguably he uses it to reflect both the organized quality of the way the children are shepherded (with repetition of ‘two & two’ etc, but also to allow their natural ‘free’quality, with the last line of stanza 1 ending with the comparison between their natural movement and the flow of the river (London’s river, of course, The Thames) |
| Language (vocabulary - heightened or demotic; rhetorical features etc) | “wands” - staffs/sticks used to ‘herd’ them. “flowers” - links to nature, children allowed to flourish. “Till into the high dome of Paul’s they like Thames’ waters flow” - suggests they are free but St Paul’s dome constricts them and makes them feel small. “multitude” - unflattering as their individuality is not acknowledged. “multitudes of lambs” - vulnerability. “cherish pity” - ironic, look after it/value it/precious. Oxymoron - “harmonious thunderings” |
| Sound effects (harsh and soft, onomatopoeia etc) | Onomatopoeia - “hum”, “thunderings” – perhaps to suggest the enormously impressive and holy sound of their song, ultimately only a yearly gesture? |
| Imagery (metaphor, simile, images etc) | Similes - “they like Thames’ waters flow”, “like a mighty wind”, “like harmonious thunderings”, “wands as white as snow”  Metaphors - “these flowers of London town!”, “multitudes of lambs”  Religious imagery - “innocent faces clean”, “wands as white as snow” - the colour white connotes purity. “multitudes of lambs”, “raise to heaven”, “the seats of heaven among”, “lest you drive an angel from your door”. |
| Patterns of language (semantic fields, repetitions, oppositions) | Repetitions of “multitudes” - highlights the sheer number of children in this situation. |
| Punctuation and grammar (sentence length, end-stopping, caesura, verb mood - imperative, declarative, interrogative, exclamatory) | “wise guardians of the poor; Then cherish pity” - semi colon is used to create a division between the rich and the poor. The use of adjective ‘wise’ may be mildly sarcastic (although no doubt it was the way they were seen at the time by many). Use of caesuras - reflects the restriction of the child. No enjambment - further emphasises this and juxtaposes the description of the children “they like Thames’ waters flow.” Statements throughout, final line “Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door” - declarative. |
| Links to other poems | *Songs of Experience: Holy Thursday, Tintern Abbey,* *Intimations of Immortality* - both explore the theme of childhood (innocence, prelapsarian state, an immortal state, we are not born evil). Wordsworth’s is perfect with this poem – suggests how the weight of experience weighs down the innocent child as it emerges into adulthood.  *Songs of Experience: Holy Thursday, Tintern Abbey, Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner, Intimations of Immortality* and many more poems explore religious experience. |