Holy Thursday (Songs of Innocence)

POEM TEXT

'Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
The children walking two & two, in red & blue & green
Grey headed beadles walkd before with wands as white as snow,
Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames' waters flow.

O what a multitude they seemd, these flowers of London town!
Seated in companies they sit with radiance all their own.
The hum of multitudes was there, but multitudes of lambs,
Thousands of little boys & girls raising their innocent hands.

Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of song,
Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of heaven among.
Beneath them sit the agèd men, wise guardians of the poor;
Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door.

SUMMARY

It was the Thursday before Easter when, with their blameless young faces newly washed, the children of the charity schools walked two by two, dressed in red and blue and green. Grey-haired old officials marched in front of this parade carrying pure white walking sticks. At last, the whole crowd streamed into St. Paul's Cathedral, flowing like the river Thames.

Oh, what a vast crowd they made, these blossom-like children of London! Sitting in church in groups, they seemed to shine with their own light. The church was full of the sound of a great crowd—but only a crowd of lambs. There were thousands of children there, lifting their innocent hands in prayer.

Now, they begin to sing, making a sound as great as a powerful wind—as great as the sound of angels singing in the choirs of heaven. Below them sit the wise old men charged with taking care of impoverished kids like these. So, reader, nourish sympathy, pity, and charity in your own heart—or you might find yourself turning angels away without recognizing them.

THEMES

CHARITY, POVERTY, AND SYMPATHY

"Holy Thursday" tells the story of a once-traditional London event: on Holy Thursday, one of the Christian holidays leading up to Easter, thousands of orphaned and impoverished children from the city's charity schools paraded through the streets to attend a service at St. Paul's Cathedral. This poem's speaker, deeply moved by the sight of all these "innocent" souls singing together, cautions readers that there's a lesson here: people must learn to "cherish pity" (that is, to develop their own empathy) or they'll risk turning away "an angel" in need. By presenting this vision of impoverished children as angelic innocents, the poem implies that a world that treats poverty as a moral failing rather than an affliction risks hurting the most vulnerable—and missing out on great blessings.

The charity school children on their way to the Holy Thursday service strike the speaker as the very picture of "innocen[ce]." The poem describes these "multitudes" of orphans as "lambs" and "flowers," brand-new lives "radian[t]" with goodness. And when they sing, they make a "harmonious thundering" like a veritable choir of angels. It's not these kids' fault, the poem implies, that they've fallen on hard times; they're both blameless and beautiful. They deserve all the "pity" and sympathy that society can muster.

This, the poem suggests, is why "pity" for those who fall upon hard times is so important: in turning one's back on suffering and impoverished people, one might very well be turning an "angel" away. In this reading, the poem aligns with a number of traditional Christian ideas: that the most important virtue is love, that there's something especially sacred about children, that "angels" often appear in unlikely disguises, and that the "poor," in the words of one of the Beatitudes, are particularly "blessed" and beloved by God. More fortunate people, the poem cautions, should keep all those ideas in mind and behave accordingly.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

SOCIETY'S COMPLACENCY, CRUELTY, AND HYPOCRISY

On the one hand, "Holy Thursday" presents a

touching picture of orphaned children going to church and a reminder that people who have been lucky in life should take care of those in need. On a closer look, though, the poem is also an ironic condemnation of society's complacency and hypocrisy when it comes to so-called "charity." While the speaker seems moved by the sight of a "multitude" of orphans making their way to church for a religious holiday, this speaker also doesn't ask too many questions about what these orphans' lives are like on *other* days—or how London ended up with so many abandoned and impoverished children on its hands in the first place. A dewy-eyed, band-aid "pity" for the world's suffering children isn't enough, this poem subtly suggests: people who really want to make a difference should attack the inequities that create poverty in the first place and reject the hypocrisy that treats impoverished people as second-class citizens even as it purports to care for them.

The speaker's sentimental portrait of children streaming into St. Paul's for a religious holiday contains more than a few hints that not all is well. For starters, the kids are from London's charity schools, institutions that took in orphaned or abandoned children. That's all well and good—but when a city has "thousands" of such orphans, a full-on "multitude" of parentless kids, something has clearly gone wrong!

What's more, the children are escorted by "[g]rey headed beadles"—elderly officials from the orphanages or the church—carrying "wands as white as snow." Those decorative-sounding "wands" (or sticks) might well be used to give the children a whack if they put a toe out of line on this special occasion.

These moments of unease suggest that both society and religion in 19th-century England might have something rotten in their cores. If London has produced vast crowds of abandoned children, then it must also have either killed all those children's parents (perhaps through poverty or accident) or forced those parents to make the awful choice to give their children up. The "beadles" here, meanwhile, in doing what they see as their Christian duty, might also be behaving as if they're *better* than the impoverished kids they claim to care for: as "wise guardians of the poor," they may well treat impoverished folks as second-class citizens who need "wise[r]" heads to guide them. For that matter, the speaker's fixation on the children's "angelic" innocence might also hint that the wider world is often only willing to offer compassion to impoverished people if they "earn" that compassion by behaving like paragons of virtue!

When the speaker admonishes readers to show "pity" to suffering souls, then, the poem hints that "pity" simply isn't good enough. Caught up in sentimental compassion for innocent children, the speaker doesn't seem too interested in addressing the society that brought them to this state or the religious hypocrisy that disguises condescension as piety.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

'Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
The children walking two & two, in red & blue & green
Grey headed beadles walkd before with wands as white as snow,
Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames' waters flow.

"Holy Thursday" begins exactly when its title suggests: on Holy Thursday, the day in Easter Week when Christians commemorate the Last Supper. This particular Holy Thursday takes place in 19th-century London, William Blake's own time and place.

On this holiday, the children of London's charity schools—kids who had been orphaned or abandoned—would parade to St. Paul's Cathedral, one of the most important churches in the city, for a service. The poem's speaker has arrived in time to catch this procession and looks on in wonder.

Take a look at the imagery the speaker uses here:

> 'Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
> The children walking two & two, in red & blue & green
> Grey headed beadles walkd before with wands as white as snow,

These images might come from a storybook:

- The speaker first observes a long, long parade of newly-scrubbed kids in their Sunday best; the polysyndeton of "two & two, in red & blue & green" suggests a procession that seems to go on and on, so many brightly-dressed children that the speaker keeps having to add another "and."
- And these kids are led by what appear to be wise old men, like biblical patriarchs: "grey headed beadles" (or officials, perhaps from the orphanage or the church) walk at the head of the procession like shepherds, carrying "wands as white as snow"—pure white walking sticks.

This passage paints a vivid picture of a particular historical custom, but it also feels timeless: the bright, innocent young being guarded by the grey-bearded older generation. Perhaps the simile the speaker uses even suggests something sacred. As the children make their way into the cathedral, they strike the

speaker as like a *river*—the Thames, specifically, the very river that flows beside St. Paul's. This image of a river of children making their way into a holy place might hint at a kind of Judgement Day parade of souls into heaven.

But there are also hints that something's not quite right here. All these children, remember, are orphans or foundlings, kids whose parents have died or abandoned them. And the allusions to St. Paul's and the Thames remind readers that these are the lost children of just one city—and a rich, prosperous city at that. Something has to have gone very wrong for one city to have this many parentless children. Even those snow-white "wands" might suggest, not just spotless ethical purity, but violence: a stick can be used to hit as well as to guide.

This poem will depict a sincerely touching scene. But it will also undercut its own speaker's enthusiastic perspective on that scene, asking: *is* it such a lovely thing, this parade of foundlings? What kind of city creates this many impoverished orphans in the first place, then leaves them in the care of the men with the sticks?

Like many poems in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, this one will use a deceptively simple structure to tell a complicated tale:

- The poem's four-line stanzas (or quatrains) each use a singsongy rhyme scheme of couplets: for example, *clean / green / snow / flow* in the first stanza.
- And the lines are written in bouncy iambic heptameter—that is, lines of seven iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm ("The child- | ren walk- | ing two | & two | in red | & blue | & green").

Both of these choices make the poem feel like a children's song. But if it is, it's an ironic one, a veiled critique of a corrupt society as much as a celebration of childlike innocence.

LINES 5-8

> *O what a multitude they seemd, these flowers of London town!*
> *Seated in companies they sit with radiance all their own.*
> *The hum of multitudes was there, but multitudes of lambs,*
> *Thousands of little boys & girls raising their innocent hands.*

As the second stanza begins, the speaker follows the parade of orphans into the church and marvels at just how many of these children there are. They're an outright "multitude," the speaker cries; in fact, they're "multitudes" upon "multitudes," a parade of diacope that stresses just how overwhelmingly huge this crowd of children is.

Not only are these children many, the speaker feels, they're heartbreakingly sweet. These "flowers of London town" also make the low "hum" of "multitudes of lambs"—both metaphors that suggest springy, beautiful new life. They also suggest *innocence*, an idea the speaker leans on; the poem repeats the word "innocent," which first turned up in line 1, here in line 8. These children, the speaker insists, are blameless.

And that's a pointed idea in a poem about abandoned kids. These children aren't wards of the state because of anything *they* did wrong, the speaker stresses. They're the very picture of harmless goodness.

But then, being harmless and good has never saved anyone from suffering. The metaphor of the "lamb," especially in the context of a Holy Thursday service, can't help but suggest an important piece of Christian symbolism: Christ himself is traditionally called *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God. And that's not just because he was gentle and kind, but because he was sacrificed, a lamb to the slaughter.

In other words, this stanza doesn't just emphasize that these children are sweet, but that they're somehow sacrificial, the collateral damage of a society that has, in one way or another, taken their parents from them. And there are "thousands" of such children, a "multitude" of abandoned kids. The "radiance" (or glowing light) of their beautiful, innocent faces might be moving, but perhaps there's also something awful about it; their sweetness is an indictment on a society that has only charity schools to offer them in exchange for their losses.

Again, alert readers might sniff out some irony here: the *poem's* perspective on this situation seems a little bit different than the *speaker's*. While the speaker marvels at the kids' flower-like sweetness and radiant beauty, the poem doesn't let readers forget that all that sweetness comes from a society-wide calamity. If these kids are the "flowers of London town," then London breeds orphans like a country garden breeds snapdragons.

LINES 9-11

> *Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of song,*
> *Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of heaven among.*
> *Beneath them sit the agèd men, wise guardians of the poor;*

As the speaker listens, moved, the countless children in the cathedral begin to sing—and their voices sound like a message from heaven itself.

First, the speaker hears their singing as "a mighty wind" that reaches all the way to "heaven," a simile that might allude to all kinds of biblical windstorms, from the wind that touches the Apostles at Pentecost to the whirlwind from which God speaks to Job. A powerful wind, in Christian readings of these stories, is often a stand-in for the Holy Spirit, a visitation from God.

That sense that the children are in touch with the divine gets even stronger in the next line. Their singing, the speaker goes on, sounds:

> [...] like harmonious thunderings the seats of heaven among.

In other words, they sound like a choir of angels singing in heaven itself. And notice how the soft /h/ alliteration of "harmonious" and "heaven" creates an appropriately breezy, breathy harmony here. Listening to these children, then, the speaker feels in touch with divinity. Something sacred is happening here.

The children's song also seems to put them *above* the "agèd men" who serve as their "wise guardians"; these figures are seated "beneath" the children somehow, in a position that suggests that, for all that they present themselves as "wise guardians of the poor," they're also *lesser* than the people they claim to serve. While the speaker might mean that line about "wise guardians" sincerely and respectfully, there's still a sniff of irony here—one that will come to a head in the poem's closing line.

LINE 12

Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door.

The poem concludes with the lesson the speaker has drawn from the sight and sound of these angelic children, a lesson the speaker wants to impart to the reader:

> Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door.

In other words, learning from the sight of these blameless but suffering children, people should learn to feel pity and sympathy for the poor, who might, after all, be "angel[s]" in disguise. That idea again alludes to biblical wisdom—for instance, this famous line from the book of Hebrews: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

Consider the assumptions that underlie the speaker's conclusion here:

- In stressing the children's innocence and goodness, the speaker implies that better-off people tend to believe that impoverished people somehow *earn* their suffering. The speaker seems to be saying, "No, no, many who suffer are innocent!"
- And if that's so, the reason to "cherish pity" in one's own heart would be to keep oneself from making a mistake, being unjust to an innocent person.
- Better-off people, in other words, would do well to see themselves as "wise guardians of the poor," just like the "beadles" who watch over these children.

That's what the *speaker* thinks, at any rate. But the *poem* has something more complex to say about the problem of poverty.

Through its hidden-in-plain-sight ironies, the poem suggests that it's simply not enough to say, "Try to be nice to impoverished people, because many of them are really very sweet!" Such an attitude is both condescending and half-baked. The real question and the real problem here is: how does a society as wealthy and powerful as England's end up creating so many homeless children? What's wrong with this picture? And how are people who are better-off complicit in this situation?

William Blake would go on to spell out these questions—and his outrage—in a companion poem to this one, also titled "Holy Thursday." Here, though, he sympathizes with the speaker to a point. This poem's portrait of a crowd of "radiant[]" children singing in church is enough to move speaker, poet, and reader alike; there *is* something sacred about these children, something to be protected, honored, and venerated.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem's allusions set the speaker's story in a particular time and place. But they also connect that story to timeless human struggles.

In its first line, for example, the poem sets the scene: it's "Holy Thursday," the day of Easter Week when Christians commemorate the Last Supper. A Holy Thursday service focuses on service and humility; congregants might, for instance, follow Christ's lead and wash each other's feet to reflect the Christian ideal of humble love for one's fellow person.

It makes sense, then, that it was once a London tradition for the orphaned or abandoned children from the city's charity schools to parade to St. Paul's Cathedral (London's most important church) for a service on this particular holiday. The sight of these "multitudes" of children all scrubbed up for the occasion might have been intended to serve as a lesson in charity—or, as the poem hints, a smug pat-yourself-on-the-back moment for those who ran the schools.

This, then, is a very London occasion: the stream of kids even puts the speaker in mind of the "Thames," the river that runs through London (and right past St. Paul's). But this is also a powerful enough sight that it puts the speaker in mind of moments from the Bible:

- The "mighty wind" of the children's singing might evoke the story of Pentecost, in which a wind representing the Holy Spirit was said to give the Apostles the power to speak in all the world's languages.
- It might also suggest other biblical winds; for instance, in the book of Job, God speaks through a windstorm.
- And the closing line, in which the speaker warns readers not to accidentally "drive an angel" away,

suggests a number of Bible stories about angels in disguise, from the story of Abraham and Sarah (in which the couple hosts three angels, believing them to be ordinary travelers) to the proverbial words in the book of Hebrews: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "'Twas on a Holy Thursday"
- **Line 2:** "The children walking two & two, in red & blue & green"
- **Line 4:** "into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames' waters flow."
- **Line 9:** "like a mighty wind"
- **Line 12:** "Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door."

REPETITION

The poem's repetitions stress the sheer size (and angelic sweetness) of the crowd of children at St. Paul's.

The first of these repetitions is the quietest: as the "children" make their way to the church, they go "two & two," in pairs. The diacope here hints that this parade of paired children might stretch on for quite some time—not just "two & two," but two and two and two and two and two and two.

Something similar happens in the line's polysyndeton:

> The children walking two & two, in red & blue & green

By using this series of ampersands (that is, the & symbol, meaning "and"), the speaker creates a sense of an overwhelming crowd: just when one thinks the sentence (and the parade of children) might be over, another "&" comes along, like a double-take.

That sense of scale gets even clearer in the second stanza, where the speaker first describes a "multitude" of children, then doubles down, repeating "multitudes" twice more before the stanza is over. This repetition evokes a crowd so big that the speaker is practically doing a double-take, almost unable to believe how many orphans the "beadles" have managed to cram into this church. In line 6, the polyptoton of "seated in companies they sit" similarly suggests a kind of boggling marvel at the sight.

Another moment of diacope makes it clear that the speaker is awed not just by the size of this crowd, but by its blameless sweetness:

> Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of song,
>
> Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of heaven among.

This repetition moves from suggesting that the kids' singing rises directly up *to* heaven to suggesting that their song sounds like a choir of angels *in* heaven. These kids, then, don't just strike the speaker as "innocent" (a word the poem repeats twice over its 12 lines), but out-and-out holy.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "innocent"
- **Line 2:** "two & two"
- **Line 5:** "multitude"
- **Line 6:** "Seated," "sit"
- **Line 7:** "multitudes," "multitudes"
- **Line 8:** "innocent"
- **Line 9:** "heaven"
- **Line 10:** "heaven"

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery evokes the touching, overwhelming sight of a parade of "thousands" of children making their way to church.

In the first stanza, the speaker focuses on the way the kids and their guardians *look*:

- With their "innocent faces clean"—newly scrubbed for the occasion, readers might imagine—the children walk "two & two," in pairs, dressed up in their special-occasion clothes. The special attention the speaker pays to the "red & blue & green" of the kids' outfits suggests that they're not usually dressed up so brightly.
- The "grey headed beadles" carrying "wands as white as snow," meanwhile, sound like biblical patriarchs, wise-old-man figures shepherding the kids with snow-white, rather holy-sounding sticks. (There might be a sting in this image's tail, though—"wands" can be used to whack as well as to guide.)

The second stanza, meanwhile, focuses on the *sounds* of the day:

- The children make the "hum" you'd expect from "multitudes of lambs"—an image that suggests a sound both overwhelming and gentle. Ordinary little-kid muttering and giggling swells to a vast noise when "thousands of little boys & girls" are present!

All of these images suggest that there's something awe-inspiringly beautiful going on today. These "multitudes of

lambs" in their Sunday best strike the speaker as something like a choir of "angel[s]."

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "their innocent faces clean, / The children walking two & two, in red & blue & green / Grey headed beadles walkd before with wands as white as snow,"
- **Line 7:** "The hum of multitudes was there, but multitudes of lambs,"

SIMILE

The poem's similes create vivid—and often pointed—images of the crowd of children and the "beadles" who handle them.

In the first stanza, the poem stresses just how vast a crowd of orphans makes its way to St. Paul's Cathedral on Holy Thursday. These children "flow" to the church "like Thames' waters": in other words, like the waters of the great river that runs right past the cathedral. This simile makes it clear that the children are both multitudinous and very much a London phenomenon. These parentless kids, this moment understatedly suggests, are the city's creation and the city's responsibility.

For now, it's the "beadles"—minor officials who might work for either the children's schools or the church—who are taking that responsibility on. The speaker portrays these "grey headed" men marching along with "wands as white as snow" in their hands—holding pure white sticks, that is:

- At first, these wands all seem like part of the day's pageantry: their snowy whiteness evokes their bearers' purity and moral uprightness, fitting in with the speaker's more sentimental ideas about charity.
- But there might be a veiled threat here: snow-white those wands might be, but perhaps the beadles will use them to whack any kid who gets out of line.
- This simile hints at the hypocrisy of those who claim to care for impoverished folks while really treating them as inferiors.

But the speaker seems sincerely moved by the sweetness and beauty of the children in church—and by their sheer numbers. When the kids begin to sing, their voices strike the speaker first as "like a mighty wind" (also an allusion to the Bible) and then like the "harmonious thunderings" of a choir of angels among the "seats of heaven" themselves. Both of these similes present the children, not just as touching and sweet, but as sacred and even awe-inspiring. These big images also stress, yet again, just how many thousands of abandoned kids are there.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "wands as white as snow,"
- **Line 4:** "they like Thames' waters flow."
- **Line 9:** "like a mighty wind"
- **Line 10:** "like harmonious thunderings the seats of heaven among."

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors allow readers to see the crowd of orphans through the speaker's sentimental eyes.

The mass of impoverished children making their way into St. Paul's Cathedral strike the speaker as the "flowers of London town": the brightest, freshest, most beautiful young folks the city can offer. This metaphor presents the children as the very picture of hope and goodness, lovely young people in the springtime of their lives. And if they're the "flowers of London town," they're also an occasion for civic pride! (Note that there might be a touch of irony here, too, though: the soil of "London town" sure seems to sprout a lot of abandoned kids...)

Not content to leave it at one metaphor, the speaker goes on to imagine the kids as "multitudes of lambs." A common symbol of sweetness and innocence, lambs also have significant Christian connotations. Christ himself is often called the "Lamb of God." Yet again, there's something both tender and dangerous in this image: being a "Lamb of God" doesn't just mean being a loving and innocent figure, but a figure who gets offered up for sacrifice. Perhaps these orphaned children, the poem hints, are just lambs to the slaughter.

But this speaker seems mostly to be thinking of the happier side of all of these metaphors. When the poem concludes that people must "cherish pity" so that they don't "drive an angel from [their] door" by mistake, the speaker doubles down on the idea that these impoverished children are figures of the utmost loveliness and innocence: blessings in disguise.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "these flowers of London town!"
- **Line 7:** "multitudes of lambs,"
- **Line 12:** "lest you drive an angel from your door."

IRONY

Sincere on its surface, this poem can also be read as an ironic commentary on a complacent, self-satisfied society.

The poem's speaker is deeply moved by the sight of a crowd of little children making their way to St. Paul's Cathedral for a Holy Thursday service. This "multitude" of impoverished kids—orphans from the city's charity schools—strikes the speaker as both awe-inspiring and touching; the children's "innocen[ce]," the speaker suggests, should remind everyone of their responsibility to care for those who have been less fortunate than they.

But in focusing on what's good and humane in this scene, the speaker overlooks a glaring question: how did a city as prosperous as London produce this many parentless and impoverished children in the first place? Blake even wrote a counterpoint to this poem making that point even more explicitly: in a poem also titled "Holy Thursday" that appears in the Experience section of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, a speaker rails against self-aggrandizing displays of charity that only emphasize how broken 19th-century English society really is.

Ironically, then, the speaker's well-meaning exhortation that people should "pity" these unfortunate children might actually hint at a smug complacency. "Pity," the poem suggests, isn't enough: rather, it's a human duty to root out the *causes* of poverty and suffering, not just to apply a band-aid and pat oneself on the back.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives this poem some deceptively simple sing-song music.

For example, listen to the sounds in lines 3-4:

> Grey headed beadles walkd before with wands as white as snow,
> Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames' waters flow.

All those pronounced /w/ sounds make this passage sound like a nursery rhyme, a simple and easily-remembered chant. That fits right in with the poem's depiction of a parade of innocent children, but it also might lull readers into a false sense of security: this *isn't* a tale of uncomplicated sweetness!

The poem's alliterative moments can also call attention to its imagery. The breathy /h/ sounds of "harmonious" and "heaven," for example, might evoke the rush of that "mighty wind" described in the previous line. The heavy /d/ sounds of "drive" and "door" in the final line, meanwhile, end the poem on a firm, emphatic note.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "walkd," "wands," "white"
- **Line 4:** "waters"
- **Line 6:** "Seated," "sit"
- **Line 10:** "harmonious," "heaven"
- **Line 12:** "drive," "door"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, gives the poem meaningful music.

For instance, listen to the harmonious vowel sounds in these lines from the first stanza:

> The children walking two & two, in red & blue & green
> Grey headed beadles walkd before with wands as white as snow,
> Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames' waters flow.

The interplay of /oo/, /ee/, /i/, /aw/, and /oh/ sounds here makes this passage sound musical, heightening this touching (or disturbing) description of all these little orphan kids in their Sunday best making their way to church. All these interweaving sounds might even help readers to anticipate the next stanza, when the "multitudes" of children burst into song.

Assonance can subtly create meaning as well as music. Listen to what happens in line 5:

> O what a multitude they seemd, these flowers of London town!

Here, the long /ow/ sound that links "flowers" and "town" stresses the connection between these children and their native city. While the speaker seems to mean this with pride—"look at all the city's beautiful little children!"—the strong link here might also ask readers to reflect on why, exactly, London sprouts so very many orphans. Perhaps there's less to be proud of here than the speaker feels.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "two," "blue," "green"
- **Line 3:** "beadles," "walkd," "wands," "white," "snow"
- **Line 4:** "high," "dome," "flow"
- **Line 5:** "flowers," "town"
- **Line 6:** "Seated," "companies"
- **Line 7:** "hum," "multitudes," "multitudes"
- **Line 12:** "cherish pity," "your door"

VOCABULARY

'Twas (Line 1) - An old-fashioned contraction of "it was."

Holy Thursday (Line 1) - A Christian holiday that commemorates the Last Supper. It takes place the Thursday before Easter Sunday.

Beadles (Line 3) - Official representatives of a church or school.

Wands (Line 3) - Ceremonial staffs or walking sticks.

Paul's (Line 4) - That is, St. Paul's Cathedral, London's most important church.

Thames (Line 4) - The river that runs through London.

Multitudes (Line 5, Line 7) - Great crowds.

Agèd (Line 11) - Elderly. The accent over the "e" here means this word is pronounced with two syllables: AY-jed.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like many of the poems in Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, this one is short and (deceptively) sweet. It's built from three quatrains (or four-line stanzas), each made from a pair of rhymed couplets. This simple shape indeed feels a lot like an innocent song or a nursery rhyme.

But there's a lot going on under that smooth surface. Even before one knows that this poem has a much harsher and angrier cousin in Blake's *Songs of Experience* (a poem, also called "Holy Thursday," that rages against 19th-century child poverty in England), something seems just a tiny bit *off* about this poem's portrayal of an angelic host of impoverished children. Just as one example, perhaps a parade of orphans so long that it looks like the river "Thames" itself is less a touching vision of charity and more an indictment of a society that produces so many abandoned kids.

In this poem as in many of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, then, an outwardly simple form invites readers to think hard about what the poem is actually depicting.

METER

"Holy Thursday" is written in iambic heptameter. That means it's built from lines of seven iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 2:

> The child- | ren walk- | ing two | & two, | in red | &
> blue | & green

Long heptameter lines aren't too common in English-language poetry; Blake is making an unusual and attention-grabbing choice here. These long, pulsing lines evoke what they describe: a seemingly endless parade of orphans.

But like a lot of poems written in iambs, this one breaks from that steady iambic pulse from time to time. For example, listen to what happens in line 8:

> Thousands | of lit- | tle boys | & girls | raising | their
> in- | nocent hands.

The poem introduces a couple of variations here:

- The words "Thousands" and "raising" are not iambs but trochees: feet with a DUM-da rhythm.
- And the line's final foot is an anapest, a foot with a da-da-DUM rhythm.

Those little changes give this line a rambling, higgledy-piggledy rhythm that helps to paint a picture of what the speaker sees: as all these children raise their hands in prayer, the tweaked meter stresses just how many of them there are by landing hard on the word "Thousands." Perhaps the rumbly rhythms here even suggest that there are children of all ages and sizes here: the irregular line might also suggest irregular rows of little kids, some taller, some shorter.

RHYME SCHEME

"Holy Thursday" is built from singsongy rhymed couplets. Each stanza's rhyme scheme runs like this:

AABB

These paired rhymes give this poem the feeling of a nursery rhyme—an appropriate choice for a poem that celebrates the angelic innocence of a crowd of orphaned children. The rhymes even walk "two & two," just as the children do as they make their way to church.

But, as in a lot of Blake's work, the simplicity here is deceptive. By presenting this speaker's vision of a host of abandoned kids as a nursery song about childlike goodness, the poem suggests that the speaker's society often tells simplistic, self-congratulatory just-so stories about charity and religion—and thus excuses itself from thinking too hard about the underlying causes of poverty and suffering.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a Londoner deeply moved by the sight of charity-school children streaming into St. Paul's Cathedral on Holy Thursday. This speaker sees in these children a reminder to be a good Christian: to take care of people who are young, helpless, and/or impoverished, and to remember that "angels" often appear in the guise of suffering folks.

But the speaker's warm feelings might conceal a certain hypocrisy or thoughtlessness. In getting sentimental over these kids, the speaker doesn't seem to worry too much about *how* London ended up with "thousands" of abandoned children on its hands. Through the limited perspective of this speaker, the poem suggests that "pity" isn't enough; true charity (in its oldest and strongest sense as "love for one's fellow person") demands that people rebel against a society that *creates* impoverished children in the first place.

SETTING

"Holy Thursday" is set in Blake's own 19th-century London on the day of an Easter Week tradition: a parade of charity-school children ending with a service at St. Paul's Cathedral.

The poem vividly captures the sights and sounds of this holiday, from the children's festive "red & blue & green" clothing to the "hum of multitudes" in the jam-packed church. The speaker also emphasizes what a very *London* event this is, comparing the stream of kids to "Thames' waters" (that is, the waters of the river that runs through the city).

In depicting a spectacular charity event, the poem also quietly indicts London—a prosperous and powerful city—for producing so many impoverished children in *need* of charity.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Blake (1757-1827) is a poet unlike any other. Often considered one of the first of the English Romantics, he also stands apart from any movement as a unique philosopher, prophet, and artist.

Blake first printed "Holy Thursday" in *Songs of Innocence* (1789), one of his most famous and important works. He would later expand this collection into *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794), a two-part book that examines what Blake called "the two contrary states of the human soul."

Many of the poems in *Songs of Innocence* have a counterpart in *Songs of Experience*, a twin poem that reads the same subjects from a new perspective. For instance, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" both explore creation, divinity, and nature, but in very different ways! This subtly ironic "Holy Thursday" has an obvious cousin in *Songs of Experience*: another "Holy Thursday," this one an undisguised tirade against child poverty.

Blake didn't just *write* poetry: he also designed, engraved, printed, painted, and published illuminated manuscripts using a technique he called the "infernal method." Blake painted his poems and pictures on copper plates with a resilient ink, then burned away the excess copper in a bath of acid—the opposite of the process most engravers used. But then, Blake often did the opposite of what other people did, believing that it was his role to "reveal the infinite that was hid" by custom and falsehood.

Even among the often countercultural Romantics, then, Blake was an outlier. Samuel Taylor Coleridge himself—no stranger to a wild vision—once remarked that he was "in the very mire of common-place common-sense compared with Mr. Blake."

While Blake was never widely known during his lifetime, he has become one of the most famous and beloved of poets since his death, and writers from Allen Ginsberg to Olga Tokarczuk to Philip Pullman claim him as a major influence.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

William Blake spent much of his life railing against the cruelties of 19th-century British society. And he had plenty to rail against!

The England of Blake's time was just getting caught up in the Industrial Revolution, a period during which the economy shifted from farming to manufacturing. The countryside began to empty out, and the cities began to swell. And English class divisions, always intense, began to seem even more pronounced as impoverished workers lived cheek-by-jowl with the fashionable and wealthy in newly crowded towns.

Workers during the early Industrial Revolution got a pretty raw deal. Even young children were forced to work in factories, dig in mines, and sweep chimneys (an absurdly dangerous job, contrary to the cheery Mary Poppins image many are familiar with: chimney-sweeps as young as three or four years old regularly suffocated in narrow flues). Adults didn't have it much easier. With few regulations to keep factory owners in check, bosses could impose impossible working hours, or withhold pay for any number of trifling offenses.

Blake's passionate, prophetic stance on humankind's innate divinity also made him a fiery critic of the societal inhumanity he saw all around him in the streets of his native London. And Blake was only one in a long series of writers who saw 19th-century working conditions—and the poverty that always threatened workers—as an affront to humanity. Charles Dickens would later make similar protests in novels like *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist*.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/dDi62ikcEdk)
- Songs of Innocence and of Experience — Visit the Blake Archive to see this poem as Blake originally published it: as a beautiful illuminated manuscript. (http://www.blakearchive.org/work/songsie)
- A Blake Biography — Learn more about Blake's life and work at the website of the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/william-blake)
- The Blake Society — Visit the website of the Blake Society to learn more about William Blake's continuing influence. (https://www.blakesociety.org/)
- Blake's Legacy — Read an interview with the novelist Philip Pullman in which he discusses Blake's influence on his

work. (https://www.npr.org/2017/10/19/557189779/philip-pullmans-realm-of-poetry-and-inspiration)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- A Dream
- A Poison Tree
- London
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Innocence)
- The Clod and the Pebble
- The Divine Image
- The Ecchoing Green
- The Garden of Love
- The Lamb
- The Little Black Boy
- The Sick Rose
- The Tyger
- To Autumn

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