Holy Thursday (Songs of Experience)

POEM TEXT

Is this a holy thing to see
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduced to misery
Fed with cold and usurous hand?

Is that trembling cry a song?
Can it be a song of joy?
And so many children poor?
It is a land of poverty!

And their sun does never shine.
And their fields are bleak & bare.
And their ways are fill'd with thorns
It is eternal winter there.

For where-e'er the sun does shine,
And where-e'er the rain does fall:
Babe can never hunger there,
Nor poverty the mind appall.

SUMMARY

Is it a holy thing, in a wealthy, fertile country, to see miserable and penniless children offered heartless, miserly, self-interested charity?

Are the children's wavering cries meant to be music? How could that sound possibly be considered a joyful song? How are there so many poor kids here? This is a poor country indeed!

The sun never shines on these children, and the fields never grow food for them. They must walk thorny paths; they live in an endless winter.

For wherever the sun shines and the rain falls, children can never go hungry, and horrifying poverty can't exist.

THEMES

CHILD POVERTY AND SOCIETY'S FAILURES

"Holy Thursday" is a tirade against an England that starves and impoverishes its children, then pats itself on the back for handing out dribs and drabs of charity. The poem, published in William Blake's *Songs of Experience*, describes impoverished orphans singing in St. Paul's Cathedral on Holy Thursday, a religious holiday when the students of London's charity schools traditionally paraded to church. This display, the poem's speaker declares, is no kindly show of human warmth, but rather a travesty: London should never have allowed its children to end up in such dire straits in the first place. These impoverished children are an indictment of a disordered and monstrously selfish society.

The speaker is horrified by the sight of the countless orphaned children singing in St. Paul's Cathedral. There's nothing "holy" about this event, they declare: "in a rich and fruitful land," it's a crime that so many kids need to live in charity schools at all. The "cold and usurous hand" (that is, the unfeeling, miserly charity) of the schools—and of the state itself—is no substitute for a social order that would keep children (and their parents, for that matter) safe, nourished, and loved from the start. If these orphans are here at all, in other words, it doesn't mean that England is a particularly charitable country, but a broken one.

What's more, the speaker suggests, the schools' charity is self-serving, not truly generous or kindhearted. In demanding that the children in their care put on a public performance of "joy" and gratitude, the people who run and fund the schools are *using* them. Supporting the charity schools merely allows better-off people to feel good about themselves, without addressing the fundamental problem of desperate poverty in England around the turn of the 19th century. Such "generosity" only slaps a coat of paint over a social order that makes more and more poor, orphaned, and helpless children.

This isn't Blake's only poem titled "Holy Thursday." There's a companion piece in his *Songs of Innocence*, the counterpart to *Songs of Experience*, in which a speaker reflects on the sweetness and beauty of all the little children making their way to church. In that poem, a subtle undercurrent of irony suggested that something wasn't quite right about this sight; in this poem, the outrage comes blazing to the front. In both cases, the speaker takes a special interest in the fate of children. What happens to helpless kids, these poems suggest, shows you all you need to know about the society they live in.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

SOCIETY VS. NATURE

In a world that ran rightly, this poem's outraged speaker cries, the orphaned children of London's

charity schools would never have ended up impoverished and reliant on meager handouts. The natural world can and should supply everything humanity needs, and natural human kindness should ensure that everyone can live a good life. English society, this poem thus suggests, has become outright *unnatural*: the inequalities and sufferings in England at the turn of the 19th century go against the very order of the world.

In a "rich and fruitful land" like England, the speaker points out, there's absolutely no reason that the countless children of London's charity schools (homes for abandoned or orphaned kids) should be living in poverty. The country has more than enough natural resources to support them and their families comfortably. "Where'er the sun does shine" and the "rain does fall," the speaker says, children should "never hunger": the natural world, in other words, provides for everyone. By metaphorical extension, natural human *feeling*—the sunshine of kindness, the rainfall of sympathy—should work in tune with the world, making sure that everyone gets their share of nature's bounty.

But no, this speaker says: the artificial structures of 18th- and 19th-century English society, with its rigid class system and its dreadful poverty, jar against the world's inherent evenhanded generosity. To the children of the charity schools, the "fields are bleak and bare" and the "sun does never shine." In other words, a society that doesn't provide for everyone (and especially for its most innocent and helpless members) is a society that's working against the natural order, destroying an abundance that should be freely and evenly shared.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Is this a holy thing to see
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduced to misery
Fed with cold and usurous hand?

William Blake wrote two poems called "Holy Thursday": one in his *Songs of Innocence* and one in his *Songs of Experience*, two collections he would eventually publish together as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. This was a book intended, in Blake's words, to show the "two contrary states of the human soul": fresh-eyed and childlike versus world-weary and adult. Readers who picked up this gloriously illustrated collection would have first encountered the *Innocence* "Holy Thursday," in which a tenderhearted speaker watches as an old London tradition takes place:

- From the 16th century onward, the city of London supported a number of "charity schools": combined schools and homes for orphaned, abandoned, and impoverished children.
- On Holy Thursday—a Christian holiday in Easter Week commemorating the Last Supper—the children who lived in these schools would parade to St. Paul's Cathedral for a service.

In the *Innocence* "Holy Thursday," a speaker from Blake's own time (the turn of the 19th century) is charmed by the sight of all these kids marching to church and singing hymns. The children's sweetness, this speaker says, should teach the more fortunate a lesson: "cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door."

The poem covered in this guide, however, is the *Experience* version of "Holy Thursday"—and this poem's speaker takes quite a different perspective on the matter:

> Is this a holy thing to see
> In a rich and fruitful land,
> Babes reduced to misery
> Fed with cold and usurous hand?

This incredulous rhetorical question feels like an outburst of rage against the earlier speaker's sentimentality. Forgoing the first poem's loving descriptions of the little children dressed up "in red and blue and green," this speaker gets right down to brass tacks: it is an abomination, they cry, that a rich, fertile country like England should have created all these orphans in the first place. Charity is all well and good, but what's better is for children not to be orphaned, abandoned, and starving at all. Abandoned children are also a sign of desperate or abused *parents*, too poor (or too dead) to care for their kids. England, this speaker insists, is more than prosperous enough to keep its people from suffering in such appalling numbers.

For that matter, the speaker rages, the institutions that care for these children are charitable in one sense only. Sure, they offer food, shelter, and rudimentary education. But they dole these things out with a "cold and usurous hand": without human warmth, and with the full intention of getting something in exchange for what they give. (Usury is the practice of lending out money at a ruinous interest rate.) One of the repayments the schools demand, this poem will go on to suggest, is a public show of groveling gratitude. The service at St. Paul's isn't just a festive, pious occasion: it's a self-congratulatory display, a way for those who offer the children charity to feel good about themselves.

The poem will make its point in quatrains of forceful accentual meter. That means that while the poem doesn't use regular metrical feet (like iambs or trochees), it does stick to a regular number of beats—in this case, four beats per line, like this:

Is this a holy thing to see
In a rich and fruitful land,

Each of those beats hits like a fist pounding the table. This strong and simple form captures the speaker's strong and simple conviction: England's management of its helpless children reveals its appalling societal failings.

LINES 5-8

Is that trembling cry a song?
Can it be a song of joy?
And so many children poor?
It is a land of poverty!

As the second stanza begins, the speaker continues his tirade with a series of incredulous rhetorical questions. In the earlier poem, the speaker delighted in the angelic voices of the charity school children singing hymns. This speaker has their doubts:

Is that trembling cry a song?
Can it be a song of joy?

The speaker's tone here suggests that their answer to these questions is: *certainly not*. These children aren't freely singing a joyful hymn. They're singing for their supper, knowing that their guardians demand a show of gratitude and good behavior. This speaker, unlike the first, hears pain and fear in their little voices.

Again, too, the speaker makes the point that, if "so many children" are "poor," then this isn't a "rich and fruitful land" at all: "It is a land of poverty!" The repetition of the word "land" makes it clear that England in general (and London in particular) are rich *and* impoverished at exactly the same time. The country overflows with wealth; somehow, it also overflows with impoverished children. *Now how*, the speaker asks in a tone of deep irony, *can that be?*

If England is at once rich and poor, it's not just literally a land of poverty: it's metaphorically impoverished, too. Only a country poor in intangible virtues—in genuine human kindness, in generosity, in wisdom—could organize its affairs in such a way that its abandoned and orphaned children fill a great cathedral to overflowing.

The poem's attention to what happens at St. Paul's in particular is meaningful, too. Blake saw that church's orderly, elegant neoclassical design as an emblem of a worldview he hated: one in which cold reason dominated, leaving no room for feeling and imagination. (He might have been amused by the 2019 event in which his painting "The Ancient of Days" was projected on the church's dome: this famous image, often misinterpreted as a picture of God creating the world, is in fact a picture of Urizen, the blinkered god of conventional reason in Blake's personal mythology.) The "cold and usurous" charity of the schools, Blake's wider works might suggest, is an outgrowth of a chilly, mechanical, heartless view of the world.

LINES 9-12

And their sun does never shine.
And their fields are bleak & bare.
And their ways are fill'd with thorns
It is eternal winter there.

In the third stanza, the speaker's tone turns from outraged to downright prophetic—in the biblical sense. (The role of a biblical prophet wasn't to see the future: it was to warn sinners to mend their ways before they brought God's wrath down on their heads.) As if in a trance, the speaker relays a vision of the orphans' lives as an endless, joyless trudge through a wilderness. Listen to the ringing polysyndeton/anaphora here:

And their sun does never shine.
And their fields are bleak & bare.
And their ways are fill'd with thorns

Each new "and" drops fresh misery on the children's backs. Essentially abandoned by society, they're living in a terrible "land of poverty" all by themselves: it's "their sun" that doesn't shine and "their fields" that are barren. For other, better-off people, the speaker implies, this land might look very different. But so long as these children live starved, loveless lives, the whole country remains metaphorically poor.

In the speaker's grim vision, nature itself has gone wrong. The children live in an "eternal winter" with no relief; even the sun has stopped following its seasonal course. England's blinkered cruelty to its children and its impoverished people, the poem implies, is outright *unnatural*.

LINES 13-16

For where-e'er the sun does shine,
And where-e'er the rain does fall:
Babe can never hunger there,
Nor poverty the mind appall.

The speaker concludes their prophetic vision with some thunderous parallelism:

For where-e'er the sun does shine,
And where-e'er the rain does fall:
Babe can never hunger there,
Nor poverty the mind appall.

In other words, anywhere the sun shines and the rain falls, there's *enough for everyone*. In a world running rightly, nature can and does provide for all humanity. In its unbalanced, inhumane distribution of wealth, then, English society is cutting against nature itself, upsetting the world's balance. The "poverty" this disordered system creates "appall[s]" the "mind," in particular: it's an affront not just to nature, but to what Blake would have called a God-given capacity for *thought*.

Take another look at those last two lines:

> Babe can never hunger there,
> Nor poverty the mind appall.

The speaker here echoes the language and phrasing of the first stanza. There, they spoke of "babes reduced to misery"; here, they declare that "babe can never hunger there." Through repetition, the poem concludes by putting right what was wrong—or, at least, showing how English society *could* right its wrongs.

While this poem began as a rejoinder to the sentimental speaker of the first stanza, this speaker and that one have something in common: they see the children singing before them in St. Paul's as precious creatures, sacred and dignified. The day's ritual might not be "holy," but the children themselves are. Perhaps the two speakers might even be read as two feelings struggling for dominance in the same mind: tender sympathy for the children vying with outrage against the world that has hurt them.

POETIC DEVICES

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Holy Thursday" kicks off with a series of furious rhetorical questions:

> Is this a holy thing to see
> In a rich and fruitful land,
> Babes reduced to misery
> Fed with cold and usurous hand?
> Is that trembling cry a song?
> Can it be a song of joy?

The implied answer to each of these questions is: *absolutely not*. The sight of countless orphans making their way to church is anything *but* holy, the speaker feels. It's downright unholy and unnatural, an indictment of a society that creates so many abandoned and impoverished kids in the first place.

The next questions put readers in the scene alongside the speaker, listening to the children singing a hymn in church. Their "trembling cry," the speaker implies, is no "song of joy"; it might as well be a wail of despair.

Not only do these rhetorical questions conjure up the speaker's outraged tone, but they also put this poem in conversation with its predecessor. In Blake's earlier take on "Holy Thursday," which appears in *Songs of Innocence*, the speaker is perfectly charmed by the sight of all those sweet children singing in church. This speaker is clearly responding to that one. They don't even bother to describe the children; the first speaker has already done that. They simply burst out in a tirade against all that the original speaker found so touching, undermining the foundations of that innocent first impression.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Is this a holy thing to see / In a rich and fruitful land, / Babes reduced to misery / Fed with cold and usurous hand?"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Is that trembling cry a song? / Can it be a song of joy?"

ALLUSION

"Holy Thursday" alludes to a Christian holiday, an old London tradition, and an earlier Blake poem, all at once.

The holiday, Holy Thursday, takes place on the Thursday before Easter, and commemorates the Last Supper. On this day in the 18th and 19th centuries, the children of London's charity schools—homes for orphaned and abandoned kids—would put on their best clothes and parade to St. Paul's Cathedral for a service.

Blake describes such a parade in another poem titled "Holy Thursday," this one from his *Songs of Innocence*. As one would expect, the *Innocence* version takes a softer perspective on the occasion: the speaker delights in the children's sweetness and the power of their singing, and advises those who listen to "cherish pity"—that is, those who do their best to be kind to the unfortunate—"lest you drive an angel from your door."

There's an undercurrent of irony in that poem, though—for, surely, there's something unsettling about the sight of a vast river of orphans flowing through the streets, no matter how sweet their faces are. That undercurrent comes to the fore in this poem. The speaker here responds directly to the speaker in the previous poem, incredulously questioning their sense that this is a "holy sight."

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-8:** "Is this a holy thing to see / In a rich and fruitful land, / Babes reduced to misery / Fed with cold and usurous hand? / Is that trembling cry a song? / Can it be a song of joy? / And so many children poor? / It is a land of poverty!"

METAPHOR

Imagining the orphaned children's lives, the speaker paints a picture of a long trek through a bleak, barren, sunless wilderness:

> And their sun does never shine.
> And their fields are bleak & bare.
> And their ways are fill'd with thorns
> It is eternal winter there.

There's not a speck of comfort in this vision. The heavens and the earth alike have turned against these children; it's as if there's a curse on the whole world around them. By presenting the children's misery as a blighted metaphorical wilderness, the speaker suggests that there's something *unnatural* about the way these kids are treated (and about the fact that there are so many orphans and foundlings in London at all). Their predicament is like a devastated landscape where nothing—not the weather, not the vegetation, not the seasons—does what it should.

The bare fields and cold sky the speaker describes here might be read, not only as images of a broken society that goes against nature itself, but as metaphors for a life deprived of real love and compassion. The "cold and usurous hand" of the charity schools might provide the children with basic food and shelter, but it certainly doesn't offer them the sunlight of kindness or the rainfall of true sympathy.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Fed with cold and usurous hand?"
- **Lines 9-14:** "And their sun does never shine. / And their fields are bleak & bare. / And their ways are fill'd with thorns / It is eternal winter there. / For where-e'er the sun does shine, / And where-e'er the rain does fall:"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism helps to create the speaker's stark, thunderous tone.

Listen, for instance, to the ringing anaphora in the third stanza:

> And their sun does never shine.
> And their fields are bleak & bare.
> And their ways are fill'd with thorns

Those relentless "and"s (also an example of polysyndeton) make the children's predicament feel overwhelming. The sky *and* the earth *and* the thorny path offer them no comfort: the whole world around them is bleak and cruel.

The speaker sounds more like a biblical prophet than a mere social commentator here. This vision of the children's lives casts their hardships as a grim, Exodus-like trudge through an almost surreally unforgiving landscape. The speaker's rumbling parallelism underscores the poem's point: such suffering is deeply wrong, and English society should be "appall[ed]" at itself for letting it happen.

There's a similar prophetic tone in the speaker's final pronouncement:

> For where-e'er the sun does shine,
> And where-e'er the rain does fall:
> Babe can never hunger there,
> Nor poverty the mind appall.

The parallelism here allows the speaker to take in the whole world in two sweeps of an arm. "Where-e'er" you look in the world, the speaker insists, there's nowhere a child should be starving—that is, if the world were running rightly.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "And their sun does never shine. / And their fields are bleak & bare. / And their ways are fill'd with thorns"
- **Lines 13-14:** "For where-e'er the sun does shine, / And where-e'er the rain does fall:"

REPETITION

Repetitions hammer home the speaker's incredulous outrage at London's hypocrisy and complacency.

In the first half of the poem, diacope helps the speaker to make a series of icy rhetorical points. For instance, the speaker's return to the word "land" suggests that what is by all appearances a "rich and fruitful land" is in fact "a land of poverty": rich in resources, poor in kindness and sincere generosity.

Similarly, listen to lines 5-6:

> Is that trembling cry a song?
> Can it be a song of joy?

The speaker seems to ask, *Call that wail of pain a song? If it is a song, it's certainly not a joyful one*. The repetition here makes it sound as if the speaker is barely containing their anger within a thin shell of irony.

The children of these schools, the speaker observes, have to sing for their supper, behaving as if they're happy and grateful to the people who shelter them. But really, they're still living lives of loveless poverty. A passage of polysyndeton conjures up a vision of their misery:

> And their sun does never shine.
> And their fields are bleak & bare.
> And their ways are fill'd with thorns

As the speaker describes the children's lives, one dreadful affliction piles up on another: each new "and" lands like another burden dropped on their backs.

These poor orphans, the speaker reminds us in the first stanza, are just "babes," the youngest and most innocent of children, helplessly "reduced to misery." At the end of the poem, the speaker brings that word back:

> For where-e'er the sun does shine,

And where-e'er the rain does fall:
Babe can never hunger there,
Nor poverty the mind appall.

This repetition, circling back as it does to the beginning of the poem (the word even lands at the same place in the stanza) suggests an urgent need for correction. Now, babes are "reduced to misery"; if the world were as it should be, no poor babe should ever starve.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Babes"
- **Line 5:** "song"
- **Line 6:** "song"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 11:** "And"
- **Line 15:** "Babe"

VOCABULARY

Babes (Line 3, Line 15) - Little children.

Usurous (Line 4) - Usury is the practice of lending out money at a ridiculously high and unfair interest rate. If the charity that London offers the children is "usurous," then, it comes at a cost. The people who care for these children expect something in return: perhaps total obedience or servile gratitude, and perhaps even more sinister things.

Where-e'er (Line 13, Line 14) - A contraction of "wherever."

Appall (Line 16) - Shock and horrify.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like many of the poems in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, "Holy Thursday" uses a deceptively simple form. With its four short quatrains (four-line stanzas) in homespun accentual meter, the poem looks and sounds like a nursery rhyme.

But while some nursery rhymes are certainly bleak or eerie, few make such an unguarded and impassioned social critique as this poem does. Here, the forceful simplicity of Blake's form conveys his rage over what he feels to be a painfully, appallingly straightforward point: the way England runs right now simply *isn't right*, in ways the youngest child could understand (and in ways the youngest children are suffering for).

METER

"Holy Thursday" is written in powerful, driving accentual meter. That means that while the poem doesn't stick to any particular metrical foot (like the da-DUM of iambs or the DUM-da-da of dactyls), it does keep to a certain number of stressed beats per line—in this case, four. Here's how that works out in the first two lines:

Is this a holy thing to see
In a rich and fruitful land,

Those beats don't land on the same syllables of the line, but they do march on steadily, creating a rhythm that makes the poem sound like the angriest political nursery rhyme you ever did hear. The striding meter captures the speaker's forthright rage and sorrow at the plight of London's orphans, not to mention the plight of a blighted, blinkered London.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "Holy Thursday" varies:

- Sometimes, as in the first stanza, the poem uses a forceful alternating ABAB pattern.
- Sometimes, as in the second, it uses a softer ABCB pattern and perhaps even a slant rhyme (like *joy* / *poverty* in lines 6 and 8).

Both these patterns are pretty simple, the kind of rhymes one might hear in a folk song or a ballad. The unpredictable mixture of the patterns, however, makes this simple-looking poem feel subtly ragged around the edges. It's as if the speaker's voice is breaking a little as they rage against false charity and the sufferings of children.

SPEAKER

This poem's outraged speaker sounds a lot like William Blake himself. Blake made no secret of his horror at his society's evils. *Songs of Experience* is only one of many works in which he takes a rumbling, prophetic stand against injustice, poverty, and cruelty, especially where they hurt children. Blake took a special interest in the failings of his native England (and London in particular, where he lived nearly all his life). England, to Blake, *could* be a place of deep, holy goodness and beauty—but not while the English were managing it this way.

Whether or not one reads the speaker as Blake, they're certainly Blakean: a passionate, loving, exuberant soul who simply cannot countenance the everyday misery plaguing their country. This speaker feels the fate of the charity school children as particularly appalling, an affront to human goodness and the order of nature itself.

SETTING

"Holy Thursday" is set, as its title suggests, on Holy Thursday—a Christian religious holiday just before Easter which commemorates the Last Supper. This was a day focused on humility and service. Churchgoers on Holy Thursday often performed a ritual foot-washing in imitation of Christ, who was said to have humbly washed the Apostles' feet before that final meal.

It makes sense, then, that the children of London's 18th- and 19th-century charity schools traditionally paraded to St. Paul's Cathedral for a church service on this day. Their procession was meant to show off both their gratitude to their caretakers and those caretakers' humble goodness.

Blake took a special interest in this orphan parade. He wrote two poems on the subject, one in *Songs of Innocence*, the other (the version we're focusing on here) in *Songs of Experience*. The version in *Innocence* takes the procession at face value, or at least appears to: how lovely, the poem's softhearted speaker says, to see all these innocent little children singing together in church under the watchful eyes of wise guardians. This version, by contrast, decries the fact that London produces so very many impoverished orphans that it needs special schools for them—and that those who run the schools feel the need to "humbly" display their charges this way, patting themselves on the back for being so very good.

The setting makes this a poem very much of its era. Blake's London at the turn of the 19th century was a place of deep economic inequality, intense religious strictures (and hypocrisy)—and a new, exciting surge of outrage against the institutions that kept these injustices in place.

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 this version of "Holy Thursday" in *Songs of Experience* (1794), one of his most famous and important works. This group of poems formed the second section of his collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, a book that examines what Blake called "the two contrary states of the human soul."

Many of the poems in *Songs of Experience* have a counterpart in *Songs of Innocence*, a twin poem that reads the same subjects from a different perspective. For instance, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" both explore creation, divinity, and nature, but in very different ways! This outraged tirade against child poverty has just such a cousin: the subtly ironic "Holy Thursday" of *Songs of Innocence*, in which a softhearted speaker is charmed by the sight of all those sweet orphans on their way to church.

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. 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 sometimes died of suffocation 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 made him a fiery critic of the cruelty 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 the actor Toby Jones performing the poem. (https://youtu.be/o5cwDyvnM7c)
- A Brief Biography — Visit the Poetry Foundation's website to find an overview of Blake's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-blake)
- Blake's Legacy — Read contemporary novelist Philip Pullman's reflections on what Blake means to him. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/28/philip-pullman-william-blake-and-me)
- Blake as a Visual Artist — See more images of Blake's wild art (and learn about his artistic philosophy) at the website of London's Tate Gallery. (https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/william-blake-39)
- The Poem Illuminated — See an image of the poem as Blake intended it to be read: in one of his engraved and hand-painted illustrated manuscripts. It's worth thinking about how the images Blake chooses interact with his language. (https://blakearchive.org/copy/songsie.b?descId=songsie.b.illbk.51)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- A Dream
- Ah! Sun-flower
- A Poison Tree
- Earth's Answer
- Holy Thursday (Songs of Innocence)
- Infant Joy
- Infant Sorrow
- London
- Nurse's Song (Songs of Experience)
- Nurse's Song (Songs of Innocence)
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Innocence)
- The Clod and the Pebble
- The Divine Image
- The Ecchoing Green
- The Fly
- The Garden of Love
- The Lamb
- The Little Black Boy
- The Sick Rose
- The Tyger
- To Autumn
- To the Evening Star

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*Holy Thursday (Songs of Experience)*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 Feb 2022. Web. 21 Mar 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*Holy Thursday (Songs of Experience)*." LitCharts LLC, February 18, 2022. Retrieved March 21, 2023. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-blake/holy-thursday-songs-of-experience.