Infant Joy

POEM TEXT

I have no name
I am but two days old.—
What shall I call thee?
I happy am
Joy is my name,—
Sweet joy befall thee!

Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old,
Sweet joy I call thee;
Thou dost smile.
I sing the while
Sweet joy befall thee.

SUMMARY

"I don't have a name yet—I'm only two days old," says the first speaker, a baby. A second, grown-up speaker replies: "What should I name you?" "I am happy," the baby says. "I should be called Joy." "Bless you," says the grown-up: "May joy fill your life!"

The grown-up continues, "Oh, beautiful joy! Darling joy, only two days old; you *are* sweet joy, and that's what I'll call you. While you smile, I'll keep on singing the same words: may joy fill your life!"

THEMES

THE JOY AND INNOCENCE OF NEW LIFE

"Infant Joy" is a short dialogue between a baby (just "two days old") and an adult (who could be the baby's parent or a kind of poet-narrator, as appears elsewhere in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*). When the grown-up asks what they should call the baby, the baby simply responds: "Joy is my name." Babyhood, this poem suggests, is a miraculous time of pure joy—a feeling that the adult speaker hopes the baby can hold onto as they grow.

The poem's newborn baby is instinctively happy to simply exist, so carefree and innocent that it's basically the living embodiment of delight: choosing to name itself "Joy," this baby declares that joy is its very essence. When babies are born, the poem suggests, the big bad adult world is nowhere to be seen. The new arrival can just bask in the bliss of being alive.

The grown speaker agrees that "Joy" is the only fitting name for this little one: just looking at the baby makes them "sing" with joy themselves. The baby's delight seems to remind them that life is miraculous and overwhelmingly beautiful. Overcome with feeling, the adult says to the baby, "Sweet joy befall thee," wishing them a whole life full of this happiness.

"Infant Joy" thus presents an idyllic picture of new life, in which babies are born joyful and spread joy all around them. Life, in this poem, begins in a state of bliss.

Of course, this is just day *two* of the baby's existence—and this is a poem from the *Innocence* section of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Its companion poem in the *Experience* section presents a much bleaker picture of infancy. For now, though, there's no hint of the harsh reality check that might await this child. For a moment, both the baby and the adult caring for it just get to experience the wonder of new life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

I have no name
I am but two days old.—
What shall I call thee?

"Infant Joy" is an uplifting dialogue between a newborn speaker and an adult figure—perhaps the baby's parent, perhaps the poet-narrator voice that appears throughout *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. The "infant" of the title, unexpectedly enough, gets the first words, telling the grown-up its life story to date: it has "no name" yet, and it's only "two days old."

This baby speaks in simple, monosyllabic words, and often in dimeter (that is, lines of two stresses apiece) or trimeter (lines of three stresses), like so:

I have no name
I am but two days old.—

These short, simple lines feel fitting for a speaker who's only lived for two days so far!

Both of the baby's first two lines start with the word "I." This anaphora reminds readers that this new little self is just getting

to grips with having a separate life and identity: with "no name" and only "two days" on earth, it still seems to be enjoying the novelty of being an "I" at all.

The poem, too, honors this baby's independence. Blake's poetry deeply values childhood, often depicting it as a pure, free, instinctive, and ecstatic state. It's telling, then, that the first words in this poem belong to the infant, rather than the adult—and that the adult replies to the baby's declaration that it has "no name" with a respectful question: "What shall I call thee?"

Newborn babies, of course, are usually named by their parents, so there's a role reversal here. The adult speaker gives this decision *back* to the child, giving the infant's perspective priority. Children, these first lines suggest, deserve respect as independent people from the moment they're born.

LINES 4-6

I happy am
Joy is my name,—
Sweet joy befall thee!

The infant's reply to the adult's question—"What shall I call thee?"—has a beautiful, simple, unashamed logic to it. The child is instinctively happy, intuitively aware of the miracle of its own existence. It wants to be named after this happiness, to be defined by its all-encompassing delight. And so it declares:

> I happy am
> Joy is my name,—

Notice how *sure* the infant is that "Joy" should be its name—and already *is* its name, in fact. This child knows joy and joy only; it is the living embodiment of joy. The words "I happy am" sound like an affirmation of existence as well as a description of the infant's mood: in other words, simply existing, being able to say "I am," *is* happiness to this baby. (How many adults can say that?)

In line 6, the adult speaker revels in the beauty and simplicity of the infant's answer, responding: "Sweet joy befall thee!" (In other words, "May sweet joy come to you!") This child already *is* joy, and knows it; the adult, taking joy in the baby's joy, can only wish that there will be even more delight to come later in the baby's life.

There's a meaningful pun here, too. The baby introduces the word "joy" as a name; the adult speaker responds by using the word as a concept, something that can "befall" the baby. This double meaning suggests that the baby *is* joy, *creates* joy, and *feels* joy, all at once: "Infant Joy" is all-encompassing.

As he often did in his poetry about babies (like the "Nurse's Song" in *Songs of Innocence*), Blake treats this innocent happiness as something sacred and profound. Life is joy, this first stanza suggests—and in this moment, the baby and adult can both feel that truth. The playful elegance of the rhyme between "call thee" and "befall thee" underlines the feeling that, for this moment, all's right in the world.

LINES 7-9

Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old,
Sweet joy I call thee;

The second stanza, spoken entirely by the grown-up, is no less joyous than the first. (In fact, the word "joy" will appear no fewer than four times over the course of these six short lines!) Reveling in the newborn child's happiness, the adult speaker can barely contain their own delight. Listen to their wonderstruck repetitions in the first three lines of the stanza:

> Pretty **joy**!
> **Sweet joy** but two days old,
> **Sweet joy** I call thee;

The abundant diacope on the word "joy" makes the atmosphere seem all the more jubilant; the parallelism of "**Pretty** joy!" and "**Sweet** joy" suggests the speaker just can't stop finding new ways to admire the miraculous baby they see before them. These lines feel caring as well as celebratory. Even as the adult speaker sings the baby's praises, they coo over it with the gentle words "pretty" and "sweet," too—perhaps, readers might imagine, bending tenderly over a cradle.

The adult speaker also mimics the infant's speech patterns: short, simple lines with only two or three stresses apiece. The language feels simple, light, and unfettered—which is exactly how the infant feels, *and* how the adult feels as they gaze at this little bundle of "joy."

LINES 10-12

Thou dost smile.
I sing the while
Sweet joy befall thee.

In the last three lines, the infant and the adult express their shared joy. The infant smiles instinctively, feeling safe, secure, respected, and loved; the adult sings in celebration. The simple rhyme between "smile" and "while" shows that these actions are linked, each inspiring the other.

Adults often sing to entertain or soothe young children. This singing, though, feels like something more than that: the grown-up here might be singing a hymn of praise as much as a lullaby. It's worth noting that Blake himself often sang when he felt especially exalted. This moment conveys awe and perhaps even divine inspiration (or the joy that comes with being in the presence of something divine).

This might be an ecstatic song, but it's a gentle one, too. Check out the way that these musical lines use soft sibilance:

Thou dost smile.
I sing the while
Sweet joy befall thee.

This /s/ sound weaves its way through the last three lines like a gentle whisper.

The poem's closing line repeats the adult speaker's cry at the end of the first stanza: "Sweet joy befall thee." In this moment of shared and overwhelming delight, the grown-up prays that the baby's whole life will go on just as it began, in "sweet joy."

As this poem's companion piece "Infant Sorrow" warns, that prayer might not be answered. It's a cruel world out there, and infant joy may not last forever. But no matter what, this poem suggests, the transcendent bliss of new life is sacred and meaningful.

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

"Infant Joy" uses intense repetitions to create an atmosphere of harmony and delight. Returning and returning to the same phrasings, the poem reflects the two speakers' endless wonder at the "joy" of new life.

Some of the most pronounced repetitions in the poem come in the form of parallelism and anaphora. For instance, almost every line the baby speaks begins with an "I":

I have no name
I am but two days old.—
[...]
I happy am

This anaphora reminds readers that, at only "two days old," this baby is still getting used to being an "I." The baby is an independent spirit, sensing the miracle of its own being.

The adult speaker, meanwhile, can hardly contain their delight at the baby's joy. Parallelism, anaphora, and full-on repeated lines make them sound as if they can't stop marveling over just how wonderful the baby is:

Sweet joy befall thee!
Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old,
Sweet joy I call thee;
[...]
Sweet joy befall thee.

Notice that the adult speaker doesn't just echo their own earlier words, but the baby's, calling back to the idea that the baby is "but two days old." In fact, readers who put these stanzas side by side will notice that their many repetitions create a kind of symmetry. The adult speaker closely echoes the baby, suggesting the two share a loving, empathetic bond.

Last but far from least, the word "joy" appears six times in this short poem. This diacope is downright ecstatic: the poem is quite literally full of "joy."

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 12

END-STOPPED LINE

Every short line in this short poem is end-stopped. All those clear, firm lines help to create a mood of awe and blissful certainty.

For example, the new baby introduces itself like this:

I have no name
I am but two days old.—

These stand-alone lines capture both the baby's newfound self-awareness and its marvel at being alive. It's as if the baby takes a moment to reflect on each of these brand-new facts about itself.

Just a moment later, more end-stopped lines reflect the baby's self-assured bliss:

I happy am
Joy is my name,—

Again, each of these lines stands alone, full of force and certainty. Just being alive, the phrasing here suggests, is joyful: that's a fact so clear that one can say it briefly, firmly, and simply.

The adult speaker, meanwhile, is so caught up in the baby's joy that they mirror its language:

Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old,
Sweet joy I call thee;

Here, end-stopped lines leave plenty of room for awe. The two-word line "Pretty joy!" feels like a cry of delight so intense that it needs no further explanation.

All in all, then, the poem's end-stopped lines suggest that there's something inarguable and self-evident about the wonder and joy of new life.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "name"
- **Line 2:** "old.—"
- **Line 3:** "thee?"
- **Line 4:** "am"
- **Line 5:** "name,—"
- **Line 6:** "thee!"
- **Line 7:** "joy!"
- **Line 8:** "old,"
- **Line 9:** "thee;"
- **Line 10:** "smile."
- **Line 11:** "while"
- **Line 12:** "thee."

PUN

Though just "two days old," the poem's infant speaker confidently chooses their own name. They feel nothing but joy—they *embody* joy completely—and so they decide that they should be called "Joy," too. In fact, they simply say that "Joy is my name," as if there were never really any doubt in the matter. The poem portrays new life as ecstatic and miraculous, making the child's choice of name seem instinctive and beautifully obvious.

The adult speaker picks up on the baby's mood in a jubilant pun:

> I happy am
> Joy is my name,—
> Sweet joy befall thee!

Here, "Joy" becomes both a name and an experience—an idea that carries on through lines 7-9, in which the speaker could be using "joy" as either a name or a noun. "Sweet joy I call thee," for instance, suggests both that the speaker is delightedly agreeing to the baby's name choice and declaring that the baby is the very soul of "sweet joy." Of course, both of these readings are true at exactly the same time.

This pun suggests there's something all-encompassing about the "joy" this baby brings to the world. The baby embodies joy, creates joy, and celebrates joy all at once—and the adult speaker's pun allows one word to hold all of these soaring feelings.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Joy is my name,— / Sweet joy befall thee!"
- **Lines 7-9:** "Pretty joy! / Sweet joy but two days old, / Sweet joy I call thee;"
- **Line 12:** "Sweet joy befall thee."

VOCABULARY

Thee, Thou (Line 3, Line 6, Line 9, Line 10, Line 12) - Old-fashioned, affectionate ways of saying "you"—sort of like "tu" in contemporary French and Spanish:

- "Thee" is the object form of the word, the version you use when something is happening *to* the person (as in "What shall I call thee?")
- "Thou" is the subject form, the word you use when the person is doing something (as in "Thou dost smile")

Befall thee (Line 6, Line 12) - Be yours; come to you.

Dost (Line 10) - An old-fashioned form of the word "do"; "thou dost smile" just means "you're smiling."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Infant Joy" is built from two six-line stanzas (sestets) with a number of repeated elements: the endings of lines 8, 9, and 12 in the second stanza echo lines 2, 3, and 6 in the first. This pure, simple form suits the pure, simple joy of the infant speaker.

The symmetry between the two stanzas also mirrors the loving, mutual relationship between the newborn and the adult speaker. Everything here, the poem's shape suggests, is as it should be, harmonious and sacred.

METER

"Infant Joy" uses an unpredictable flavor of accentual meter: it doesn't stick to any one type of metrical foot. However, there's still a pulsing rhythm here. Most of the lines are written in dimeter, with two strong stresses apiece—as in "I have no name," "Thou dost smile," or "Joy is my name." Those two-beat lines suit the poem's infant speaker, who—after all—is only "two days old."

Some lines, though, can be read as either dimeter or trimeter (a line with three stresses). For instance, one could scan the words "Sweet joy befall thee" with two stresses—"Sweet joy befall thee!"—or with three—"Sweet joy befall thee!" The possibility of that extra stress makes the adoring adult's voice sound even more fervent.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme in "Infant Joy" runs like this:

ABCAAC DBCEEC

This pattern might look complex written out like that, but it doesn't *sound* very complex. That's because many of the lines in

this intensely repetitive poem use identical rhyme (that is, they rhyme on exactly the same word). For example, every C rhyme in this poem lands on the word "thee," with a little musical variation added by the changing words that come before it: "call" or "befall."

These powerful repetitions feel both harmonious and overwhelming, suggesting that the joy of this newborn life is so great that all the speakers can do is marvel at it, "sing[ing]" joy's praises over and over again.

SPEAKER

"Infant Joy" has two speakers: the "infant" in the title (who speaks lines 1-2 and 4-5) and an adult.

Blake's illumination of this poem portrays a female figure holding the baby, watched over by an angel; perhaps the adult speaker is the mother, perhaps the angel, and perhaps the poet-narrator who pops up elsewhere in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (in the "Introduction," for instance). All that really matters is that, whoever the speaker is, they share in the infant speaker's pure, innocent, and uncomplicated joy at the miracle of being alive, singing with joy as the baby smiles.

Of course, babies can't talk (especially not "infants"—at its roots, the word means "unable to speak!"). Blake gives a voice to the voiceless here, as he often did. The child is a mere two days old and doesn't even have a name; perhaps part of its joy comes from the fact that it hasn't encountered the world's oppressions and dangers just yet.

SETTING

The poem doesn't offer any details about time or place, other than the fact that the infant speaker is only "two days old." The lack of a clear setting feels intimate. It's as if the poem were taking place in a room in which only the baby and the adult speaker are present; they're too wrapped up in their shared "joy" to look beyond each other's faces.

The lack of a location makes the poem feel more universal and idyllic, as if this is how newborn babies and their caretakers feel (or could feel) in every time and place. There is no suggestion of the dirt, danger, and disease of Blake's 18th-century London lurking outside!

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

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

Blake published "Infant Joy" in the *Innocence* section of his best-known work, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794). This two-part book examines what Blake called "the two contrary states of the human soul," and many of the poems in *Songs of Innocence* (which was first published separately in 1789) have a counterpart in *Songs of Experience*—a twin poem that reads the same subjects from a new perspective. This poem's counterpart is "Infant Sorrow," in which another newborn speaker feels oppressed and miserable from the moment they enter the world.

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 18th- and 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. 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.

It was particularly hard to be a child during this period. Infant mortality rates were high; two of Blake's six siblings died at birth. And even young children were often 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).

Blake believed that childhood was a wise, precious, and sacred time, and keenly felt the cruelties and injustices that his society inflicted on the young. This poem's pure "joy" is a vision of what Blake felt *should* be; poems like "Infant Sorrow," "Holy Thursday," and "The Chimney Sweeper" indictments of what *was*.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Blake's Biography — Learn more about Blake's life and work at the website of the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/william-blake)
- Songs of Innocence and of Experience — Visit the Blake Archive to see this poem as Blake originally published it in a beautiful illuminated manuscript. (http://www.blakearchive.org/work/songsie)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of both "Infant Sorrow" and "Infant Joy." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrurUhX8KG0)
- Blake's Visions — Watch an excerpt from a documentary in which writer Iain Sinclair discusses Blake's religious visions. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8hcQ_jPIZA)
- A Blake Documentary — Listen to Blake scholars discussing the poet's life and work. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07gh4pg)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- A Dream
- Ah! Sun-flower
- A Poison Tree
- Holy Thursday (Songs of Innocence)
- 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

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