

# Nurse's Song (Songs of Experience)



## POEM TEXT

- 1 When voices of children are heard on the green,
- 2 And whisperings are in the dale,
- 3 The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
- 4 My face turns green and pale.
  
- 5 Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,
- 6 And the dews of night arise;
- 7 Your spring and your day are wasted in play,
- 8 And your winter and night in disguise.



## SUMMARY

When I hear children's voices echoing throughout the grassy field and whispers in the valley, I remember my own youth clearly, and my face looks sickly.

I tell the children in my care, "It's time to go home now. The sun has gone and the mists of night have begun to arrive. You waste your spring days by playing, and you spend your winter nights deceiving yourselves."



## THEMES



### ADULT CYNICISM VS. CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE

In the version of "Nurse's Song" found in William Blake's *Songs of Experience*, a nurse (something like a modern-day nanny) watches the children in her care playing outside. While [her counterpart in Blake's \*Songs of Innocence\*](#) finds a similar scene charming, it makes *this* nurse's face turn green—with envy, revulsion, or a bit of both. To this cynical speaker, it seems that childhood is not innocent, joyful, and exciting but rather a "waste[]" of time that soon enough gives way to the dismal reality of adulthood.

On the one hand, the children in this poem are probably having a good time. They are playing, after all. But the *descriptions* of this play suggest something isn't quite right. Whereas the children in the *Innocence* version of "Nurse's Song" shout and scream exuberantly, here there are only "whisperings [...] in the dale" (that is, the valley). Their whispering might suggest that there's something furtive or deceitful about their play, that threatening voices surround them, and/or that the nurse's

presence has put a damper on their spirits. In any case, childhood no longer quite seems like the totally carefree, happy-go-lucky state presented in Blake's earlier poem.

The sound of the children's play also triggers a memory of the nurse's own "youth," making her face "turn[] green and pale." Perhaps she is jealous of the children's innocence, or maybe this is a kind of nausea that anticipates all the corrupting forces that await the children in her care as they grow up. Either way, the nurse can't simply let the children be children. Whereas the speaker in the *Innocence* poem lets the kids stay out late because they are having such a good time, this nurse does no such thing. She calls their play a waste of time, acting as though childhood has no inherent value; it's just something that gets in the way of being an adult.

The nurse also says that the children spend their "winter and night in disguise." Winter and night might represent the end of innocence and the darkness of adult life that the poem implies soon awaits the children. The word "disguise" builds on the mention of "whisperings" from the previous stanza to suggest that there's something sinister and deceptive on the horizon; perhaps the children already on the cusp of adulthood in the nurse's eyes, and their daytime antics belie darker impulses. What's clear is that their play will soon come to an end.

Other *Experience* poems deal more directly with life as a child in 18th-century England, often specifically illustrating the cruel realities of the industrial revolution and child labor. Such concerns perhaps lurk in the background here, with the nurse suggesting that future suffering negates any happiness the children might feel when they're young. Though it's hard to pin down the nurse's perspective, she clearly believes that childhood—and the notion of free, unhindered joy—is nothing but a fantasy.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-2

*When voices of children are heard on the green,  
And whisperings are in the dale,*

The poem's speaker is the nurse of the title (a woman in charge of a group of children). When the poem begins, it's getting late, and the sun is setting. The children in the nurse's care are still playing outside.

Line 1 actually begins with the same phrase that begins the

version of "[Nurse's Song](#)" from the *Innocence* section of Blake's collection, placing these two poems in conversation. In the other "Nurse's Song," the nurse can hear children's voices "on the green" and their laughter from the hill. Here, however, that laughter gets replaced with "whisperings [...] in the dale," or the valley.

The sounds of joy thus give way to something stranger and more disquieting. Perhaps the whispers speak to the fact that the nurse is now excluded from the joys of youth (because she is an adult); it's as though the children have their own club that she's not allowed to join. The whispers might also suggest suspicion, secrecy, or even illicit behavior.

It's not even clear if these whispers belong to the children themselves or to some other, perhaps sinister, presence. That is, maybe those whispers represent *threats* surrounding the children as night falls.

Note, too, how the poem locates this whispering down *below* in a valley ("dale"), whereas the children from the *Innocence* version of this poem are up on a hill. This might represent a kind of fall (in the biblical sense), in which the children descend from the heavenly heights of joy to the murkier depths of immorality and/or suffering.

This poem has a similar metrical sound to its predecessor, mainly written using [anapests](#) (trisyllabic feet with a da-da-DUM stress pattern) and [iamb](#)s (da-DUM):

When voi- | ces of child- | ren are heard | on the  
green,  
And whis- | perings | are in | the dale,

### LINES 3-4

*The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,  
My face turns green and pale.*

The nurse describes how she feels in the presence of the playing children, who provoke the nurse's memories of her own youth. Her face "turns green and pale," as if their enjoyment makes her sick (in contrast to the serene contentment of the nurse in the *Innocence* version of the [poem](#)).

There are a few reasons why this might be the case. Consider the fact that the nurse speaks from an *Experience* perspective—that is, she has lived a life and seen first-hand what happens when children grow up (she was, of course, one herself!). Maybe she fears for the children's future because she knows what the world has in store (poverty and child labor were common in late-18th century England).

Alternatively, perhaps the nurse resents the children precisely because they still enjoy their youthful days. The nurse can never go back to being young again, and she's "green" with envy.

Take note, too, of the nurse's choice of words here: "rise"

anticipates the way that "the dews of night arise" in line 6, associating the loss of youth with the ending of the day. And the use of "fresh" is somewhat [ironic](#). That is, memories perhaps *feel* fresh and immediate to the nurse, but they're actually the opposite: expired and gone.

### LINES 5-8

*Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,  
And the dews of night arise;  
Your spring and your day are wasted in play,  
And your winter and night in disguise.*

Lines 5 and 6 quote directly from the *Songs of Innocence* version of "[Nurse's Song](#)." The nurse tells the children that it's time to go home as it will soon be night.

Given that she just described herself turning "green and pale," however, the lines ring out differently in this version of the poem. It seems as though the nurse can't stand the children being happy for another moment, or, maybe, that she's deeply worried about the dangers that will "arise" along with the night.

In the previous poem, the children convince their loving nurse to let them stay out a bit longer, until the very last ray of light has faded. But the children in *this* "Nurse's Song" don't have a voice. There's no sign of protest, which might imply that this nurse is stricter than her *Innocence* counterpart, a cruel ambassador from the adult world.

Unlike the *Innocence* nurse, this speaker has no time for childish games. According to her, playing is a waste of the children's "spring" and "day." These could be meant literally—that is, the children waste the days of spring and the daytime itself. But "spring" and "day" also [symbolize](#) youth itself. The speaker doesn't specify why "play" is such a waste of time: perhaps she herself has lost the ability to have fun and lark about, or maybe she thinks that the children's time would be better spent preparing for the tough, cruel adult world.

The last line expresses a similar sentiment: the children waste their "winter and night in disguise." "Winter and night" might represent impending adulthood.

Disguise, of course, is one of the main devices through which children go about playing. It facilitates the imagination and helps them learn about the world. But here, the nurse seems to *resent* the children for the way they behave. Perhaps the nurse thinks the children are deceitful (as those earlier "whisperings" suggested). Maybe she thinks that childhood innocence is itself an illusion.



## SYMBOLS



### THE RHYTHMS OF NATURE

In this version of "Nurse's Song," the rhythms of the

natural world [symbolize](#) the transition from youth to adulthood and from innocence to experience.

The poem links sunlight and spring to childhood innocence. The children are in the freshness of their youth, playing "on the green." They seem safe and happy.

Night, meanwhile, seems to represent the difficult realities of life (and perhaps even outright threats) that lie in wait for the children. The world isn't the protective, nurturing place it appears to be, the poem implies, and the children are frittering away the final moments of their youth by playing rather than preparing for what's to come. The arrival of winter and night, in turn, represents the idea that, one day soon, the warmth and light of their childhood will give way to the cold, harsh world of experience.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "the sun is gone down, / And the dews of night arise; / Your spring and your day are wasted in play, / And your winter and night in disguise."

#### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "my," "rise," "my mind"
- **Line 6:** "night arise"
- **Line 7:** "day," "wasted," "play"
- **Line 8:** "night," "disguise"

## JUXTAPOSITION

[Juxtaposition](#) plays an important role in "Nurse's Song." In fact, the collection in which "Nurse's Song" appears sought to show the "two contrary states of the human soul"—and there are clearly two opposing forces at work in this poem.

For one thing, the poem contrasts the speaker's age and experience with the innocence of the children in her care. It also juxtaposes the brightness of day/spring/youth with the darkness of night/winter/maturity.

The children play, presumably happily, in the distance. Their youth is a source of joy and excitement. The nurse, meanwhile, feels ill at the thought of youth. Memories of her own younger years "rise fresh in [her] mind," making her turn "green and pale"—with envy and/or repulsion. This image creates a clear dichotomy between the carefree children and their fretting nurse. In turn, the poem sets up a juxtaposition between the joy of youth and the worry, resentment, fear, etc. of adulthood.

This juxtaposition plays out on a [symbolic](#) level. The disappearance of the sun, and its eventual replacement by the night, represents the shift from childhood to adulthood. The nurse even tells the children that their "spring" and "day" are "wasted" and that their "winter" and "night" are spent in "disguise." Placing day/night and spring/winter side-by-side evokes the shift from innocence to experience and suggests that the adult world will inevitably crush youthful joy.

#### Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

## REPETITION

"Nurse's Song" uses [repetition](#) in a few different forms. For example, in lines 3 and 4, the nurse says "my" three times:

The days of **my** youth rise fresh in **my** mind,  
**My** face turns green and pale.

This subtle [diacope](#) focuses readers' attention on the nurse and her inner state of mind. It also suggests that she's preoccupied with her own memories, rather than thinking about what's best for the children.

Note how "your" in lines 7-8 then mirrors the speaker's use of "my":



## POETIC DEVICES

### ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) adds to the poem's sing-song feel. This device also calls readers' attention to important moments in the poem. Listen to the string of long /i/ sounds in line 3, for example:

The days of **my** youth rise fresh in **my** mind,

These long vowels seem to impose themselves on the line with a suddenness that evokes the sudden onset of the nurse's memories of youth.

In the final three lines, assonance ramps up the intensity of the poem's language and also creates some [internal rhyme](#):

And the dews of night arise;  
 Your spring and your **day** are wasted in play,  
 And your winter and **night** in disguise.

Just listen to how those /ay/ sounds in "day," "wasted," and "play" seem to drag the line out, capturing the nurse's contempt for the children's desire to play.

Assonance is also one of the ways that the poem interacts with the other version of "Nurse's Song" that appears in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The assonance and internal rhymes in the *Innocence* poem feel very playful, light, and child-like, not dissimilar to a nursery rhyme. *This* "Nurse's Song" seems to subvert that sound and even mock it.

Your spring and your day are wasted in play,  
And your winter and night in disguise.

This hammers home the [juxtaposition](#) and sense of separation between the nurse and her charges.

Finally, note how the speaker repeats the word "green" in lines 1 and 4:

When voices of children are heard on the green,  
[...]  
My face turns green and pale.

This repetition connects the children's play to the speaker's disgust. The speaker is either repulsed by thoughts of her own youth, repelled by the children's behavior, sick with worry, or all of these things at once.

#### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "green"
- **Line 2:** "And"
- **Line 3:** "my," "my"
- **Line 4:** "My," "green"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 7:** "Your," "your"
- **Line 8:** "And," "your"



## VOCABULARY

**Green** (Line 1) - A grassy field.

**Dale** (Line 2) - A valley.

**Dews** (Line 6) - Moisture on the grass formed by condensation.

**Arise** (Line 6) - Come to life or appear (here, perhaps in the sense of climbing up the blades of grass).



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Nurse's Song" has a simple form consisting of two quatrains (a.k.a. four-line stanzas). These stanzas follow an ABCB [rhyme scheme](#) and alternate between lines of tetrameter and trimeter (more on that in the Meter section of this guide). As such, the poem is a riff on the [ballad](#)—a form traditionally set to music, and which here creates a familiar, sing-song rhythm.

This "Nurse's Song," which appears in Blake's *Songs of Experience*, is in conversation with the "[Nurse's Song](#)" in the earlier *Songs of Innocence*. Reading one informs the other, creating an intertextual contrast between two different ways of treating—and respecting—children. In fact, lines 1, 5, and 6 are carbon copies of the earlier previous poem!

### METER

"Nurse's Song" mainly uses [anapests](#) (trissyllabic feet that go da-da-DUM) and [iamb](#)s (da-DUM). The first and third lines of each stanza have four feet (tetrameter) while the second and fourth lines of each stanza have just three (trimeter). Here's the first stanza as an example of this meter in action:

When voi- | ces of chil- | dren are heard | on the  
green,  
And whis- | perings are in | the dale,  
The days | of my youth | rise fresh | in my mind,  
My face | turns green | and pale.

This light, bouncy meter is deceptive. The poem sounds musical and lighthearted, but it's actually talking about the end of childhood innocence.

### RHYME SCHEME

"Nurse's Song" has a simple [rhyme scheme](#). In each stanza, the second and fourth lines rhyme:

ABCB DEFE

This is the typical rhyme scheme of [ballad](#) stanzas. Again, the poem's music is simple and predictable—perhaps deceptively so, given the nurse's dark take on childhood innocence.



## SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is the nurse of a title, a woman tasked with looking after a group of children (rather than a medical professional in the modern sense of the title). Unlike her counterpart in the *Songs of Innocence* "[Nurse's Song](#)," this nurse doesn't seem to care for her children all that much. They remind her of her younger self, which makes her feel sick to her stomach. This might be because she's jealous of the children's innocence, has regrets about the way her own life turned out, or has concern's about the vulnerable children's safety.

In any case, the nurse disapproves of the children's play, calling it a waste of time. The fact that she mentions winter and night in the poem's final moments might also suggest that she believes the children's carefree youth will soon come to an end.



## SETTING

"Nurse's Song" takes place somewhere outside as the day draws to a close. The children in the nurse's care are off playing "on the green" and "in the dale" (a valley).

In the version of "[Nurse's Song](#)" presented in *Songs of Innocence*, the children are playing on a hill. The fact that they're physically lower in this poem perhaps represents the speaker's low opinion of them and their behavior. It might also

[symbolically](#) represent a fall from the innocence of childhood into the corruption of adulthood. Of course, it's also possible that those "whisperings" don't belong to the children at all but rather come from some other threatening force, lurking in the background of their play. What's clear is that the world of this poem feels more sinister than that of its *Innocence* counterpart.

Blake was particularly appalled by the [child labor](#) that marked this era, seeing it as a consequence of the way that mechanization and conformism cut people off from their naturally independent imaginations.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [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](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8hcQ_jPIZA))
- [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 Experience](#) — Check out the full book as Blake originally published it, including his beautiful artwork. (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1934/1934-h/1934-h.htm#song18>)
- [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 \(Songs of Innocence\)](#)
- [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](#)



## 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 the movement as a unique philosopher and artist.

Blake wrote two poems titled "Nurse's Songs" and included them in his best-known work, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. 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* have a counterpart in *Songs of Experience*—a twin poem that reads the same subjects from a new perspective.

In the version of "[Nurse's Song](#)" found in the *Innocence* section of the collection, the titular nurse clearly cares for her children and finds joy in their play. The nurse in this *Experience* version of the poem, meanwhile, seems to resent her charges. While the children's voices fill the *Innocence* poem with laughter, they don't get the chance to speak in the *Experience* poem. And while that poem presents an idyllic vision of childhood, this suggests that childhood innocence is fleeting, deceptive, and doomed.

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—unlike those in this poem—were forced to work in factories, dig in mines, and sweep chimneys.

This increasingly mechanized and factory-driven society made thinkers like Blake worry that people were losing touch with their place in the natural order—and thus with their humanity.



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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