Nurse's Song (Songs of Innocence)

POEM TEXT

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still

"Then come home my children the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise
Come, come, leave off play, and let us away
Till the morning appears in the skies."

"No, no, let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep;
Besides, in the sky the little birds fly
And the hills are all covered with sheep."

"Well, well, go and play till the light fades away
And then go home to bed."
The little ones leaped & shouted and laugh'd
And all the hills echoed.

SUMMARY

When I hear children playing on the grassy field and their laughter echoing out from the hill, my heart feels calm in my chest and the world is at peace.

I call out to my children, "Let's go home, the sun has gone down and the dampness of night has begun to set in. Come on, stop playing, let's go; we can come back in the morning."

The children say in response, "Please, let us keep playing; it's still light out and we can't go to bed yet. And look, small birds are flying through the sky, and there are sheep all over the hills."

So I say, "Ok, ok, go off and play until there's no more light in the sky, and then it's time to return home and go to bed."

The children jump and shout and laugh, their voices echoing through the hills.

THEMES

THE INNOCENCE AND JOY OF CHILDHOOD

"Nurse's Song," from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, presents an idealized vision of childhood. Under the care of their nurse (something like a modern-day nanny), the children in the poem are allowed to stay out late, play freely, and engage in their natural curiosity about the world. Their nurse looks on from a distance, happily supervising their play without restricting it. In this way, the poem celebrates the contagious wonder and delight of childhood, qualities the poem implies are worth encouraging and protecting.

The children's laughter echoes through hills, spreading the sound of unabashed happiness throughout their surroundings. Their joy gives the nurse a sense of inner peace, her own (quieter) contentment. When she hears the children laughing, her "heart is at rest within my breast / And everything else is still." In other words, she feels as though everything is as it should be.

The poem implies that this idyllic vision of childhood depends upon the nurse's trust, love, and understanding. This isn't a world totally lacking in authority; the children are free to play as they wish, but the nurse keeps her tender, attentive gaze on them from afar. She tries to call the children in before the "dews of night arise," promising they can come back the next day. She looks out for them but doesn't frighten them into obedience.

The children, of course, desperately want to keep playing and exploring the hills, where they're captivated by the flight of the birds and the vast numbers of sheep. The nurse lets them stay out, entrusting them to "go home to bed" once the light is gone. She *values* their spirited attitude towards the world, implicitly prioritizing it over getting them to bed at certain time: joy takes precedence over arbitrary rules.

The hills thus ring out even more loudly with the shouts and laughs of the children, who are allowed to discover the world on their own terms. These children flourish, the poem implies, because they live in a safe world that understands, values, and prioritizes the precious innocence of childhood.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast

And everything else is still

The *Songs of Innocence* version of "Nurse's Song" presents a utopian vision of what childhood *should* be like. The poem's speaker is the nurse of the title (a woman in charge of a group of children). Picture the scene: it's getting late, but the nurse's children are having a wonderful time playing in the great outdoors. The nurse, in turn, is happy that they're happy.

The poem's first two lines focus on the sound of the children's shouts and laughter as they echo around the green (that is, the grassy hill they're playing on). The fact that the nurse describes *hearing* the children rather than *seeing* them suggests that the kids have wandered off a bit. This, in turn, suggests that the nurse is monitoring the children, but she's not domineering. Under her care, they're free to frolic and enjoy themselves, so long as they're within earshot.

There's no sense of any danger or risk. As such, the nurse says that her heart is "at rest"—that is, calm and serene. She knows the children are happy, safe, and doing what they do best (playing!). The internal rhyme between "rest" and "breast" lends the line a satisfying sound that evokes the nurse's contentment; everything is in its right place.

The rest of the poem will follow the form introduced here: each stanza is a quatrain with an ABCB rhyme scheme. In other words, the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with each other, as with "hill" and "still" here.

The poem's meter, meanwhile, consists mainly of anapests (trisyllabic feet with a stress pattern of da-da-DUM). More specifically, it alternates between lines of anapestic tetrameter (lines of four anapests) and anapestic trimeter (three anapests):

When the voi- | ces of child- | ren are heard | on the green
And laugh- | ing is heard | on the hill,

This is a riff on something called ballad meter. There are occasional variations (as with the iamb, da-DUM, of "And laugh-"), but otherwise the poem's form is pretty predictable. These anapests and steady rhymes lend the poem a carefree, skipping sound that evokes the children's joy.

Finally, notice how both lines 2 and 4 start with "and." This anaphora will appear throughout the poem (in fact, almost every second and fourth line of each stanza starts with "and"). This subtly echoes the polysyndeton found in many translations of the Bible, making this scene sound like a version of Paradise/Eden/heaven. Consider, too, the grammatical function of "and" more generally: it connects and extends phrases/sentences. The repeated use of "and," then, also subtly mirrors the children's desire to *extend* their playtime outside (and, perhaps, to connect with the environment within which they play).

LINES 5-8

"Then come home my children the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise
Come, come, leave off play, and let us away
Till the morning appears in the skies."

The nurse gently warns her children that it's time for them to "come home." It's getting late, the sun has started to set, and it'll soon be night.

Though the nurse seems content to let the children run around freely, she's still responsible for their well-being and exercises her authority. She does so warmly, however. Blake's vision of childhood as it *should be*, then, isn't based on anarchy and abandonment, but on tenderness and leniency.

The nurse tells the children to "Come, come, leave off play." In another voice, these words could seem annoyed and harsh. But knowing that the nurse is *happy* about the children playing, the epizeuxis repetition of "Come" actually sounds playful itself. As in line 3, assonance/internal rhyme ("play" and "away") keep the poem sounding light, breezy, and almost like a nursery rhyme.

Note that lines 5 and 6 appear verbatim in the *Experience* version of this poem, but with more sinister connotations. There, they suggest lurking threats and the inevitable loss of innocence. Here, though, the nurse follows them up with reassurance that a new day—and with it, a new chance to play—will return soon enough.

Indeed, there's no sense that going home represents any real kind of limitation on the children. The nurse is only being sensible, and promises that they can all come back when the "morning appears in the skies"—that is, at the earliest opportunity. The children's happiness, then, seems to be the number one priority here.

LINES 9-12

"No, no, let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep;
Besides, in the sky the little birds fly
And the hills are all covered with sheep."

The nurse quotes the children's reply to her instruction that it's time to go home. As might be expected, they'd much rather stay out and play! It's telling, though, that they feel comfortable saying this to their nurse. They don't fear her, the poem implies, and can thus speak freely.

"Let us play," the children plead, "for it is yet day." That is, while the sun has begun to set, there's still light in the sky—meaning it isn't bedtime quite yet. The children want to squeeze every minute out of the day. The assonance/internal rhyme of "play" and "day" makes the children's words seem impassioned and joyful. Like their nurse, the children use epizeuxis, this time in the form of "No, no." Perhaps this suggests a close bond between them and their carer; they subtly mimic her speech patterns.

The children continue with their line of logic. It can't be time for them to sleep *just yet* because the other creatures on the green/hill are still awake too:

> Besides, in the sky the little birds fly
> And the hills are all covered with sheep."

These lines suggest that the children's play is as natural as the flight of the birds or the wandering of the sheep. Their appeal to these animals also suggests that one of their reasons for wanting to stay outside is their instinctive curiosity about the natural world. They feel an affinity toward nature and its creatures. They seem excited to be in the presence of birds and sheep, as though the whole scene, comprised of humans, animals, and other aspects of nature (e.g. the grass) is in perfect harmony.

There's some symbolism at work here too. Birds tend to connote freedom, while sheep are associated with heavenly innocence (as in the lamb of God, or Blake's poem, "The Lamb"). The entire landscape, then, seems to represent the idyllic, free, innocent world of childhood.

LINES 13-16

> *"Well, well, go and play till the light fades away*
> *And then go home to bed."*
> *The little ones leaped & shouted and laugh'd*
> *And all the hills echoed.*

In the final stanza, the nurse agrees that the children can keep playing till the very last ray of light has gone. They, of course, are overjoyed! In this utopian vision, the needs and desires of children are nurtured and encouraged.

Notice how the epizeuxis of "Well" in line 13, like the repeat of "Come" in line 7, creates a playful, affectionate tone. The children mirrored the nurse's speech when they said "No, no," (echoing "Come, come"), and now she in turn mimics them; it's almost like they're playing a language game, the children developing their rhetorical skills with the help of their nurse. And It's easy to imagine the speaker saying line 13 with a kind, warm smile on her face. The assonance/internal rhyme between "play" and " fades away" sounds light and happy, befitting the poem's sense of freedom and joy.

It's not clear if the speaker sends the children off on their own, giving them permission to make their way home by themselves later, or if she's going to stick around till the night comes on. Either way, there's a clear priority here: the children's instinctive desire for play and exploration. The nurse seems to trust her children, offering them respect and understanding.

The children are thus even happier at the end of the poem than at the start. Readers can probably remember what it felt like to be allowed to play a little longer, and the bouncy meter of the last two lines captures the children's unbridled sense of joy:

> The lit- | tle ones leap- | ed and shout- | ed and laugh'd
> And all | the hills | ech-o-ed

Note that the "-ed" in "leaped," "shouted," and "echoed" all count as their own syllables here, thereby retaining the poem's mostly anapestic meter, which is light and playful. (By contrast, an apostrophe shortens "laugh'd" to one syllable.) The alliteration ov "little," "leaped," and "laugh'd" adds more music, as though the poem has an extra spring in its step to mirror the children's happiness.

The poem ends just as it began, with the sounds of children's laughter filling their surroundings.

SYMBOLS

THE BIRDS AND SHEEP

The children argue that they should be allowed to keep playing not just because there's still daylight, but also because there are still birds flying in the sky and sheep on the hill. To the children, the fact that the "little birds" and sheep get to stay out means that they should get to stay out, too.

These creatures are also symbolic. Birds, with their ability to soar through the sky, typically represent freedom. The sheep, meanwhile, represent innocence (think of Blake's poem "The Lamb," or how the Bible sometimes refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God).

The presence of these animals, in turn, conveys that the children's world is marked by freedom and innocence. There are no threats here, and the children are in harmony with their natural surroundings.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "Besides, in the sky the little birds fly / And the hills are all covered with sheep.""

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Nurse's Song" is filled with sonic devices that lend its language with playful music. One of these devices is alliteration, which appears in every stanza and helps convey the children's excitement as they play on the green.

Listen to the /h/ sounds of line 2, for example:

> And laughing is heard on the hill,

There's also "heard" in line 1 (also an example of diacope, given that the same word appears in line 2) and "heart" in line 3. The /h/ sound requires an exhalation of air, and this alliteration thus lends the stanza a certain breathlessness. This makes sense, giving the children are running around outside.

The next stanza features alliteration via the shared /d/ sounds of "down" and "dews," the heaviness of which perhaps subtly evokes the coming of the night.

The most striking alliteration, however, is the triple-whammy of /l/ sounds in line 15, which captures the children's reaction when they find out they're allowed to play a little longer:

> The little ones leaped & shouted and laugh'd

These /l/ sounds are playful and sprightly, as though the poem, like the children, suddenly has an extra spring in its step. Notice, too, how this alliteration chimes pleasantly with the consonance of "all the hills," ending the poem on a smooth, musical note.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "heard," "hill"
- **Line 5:** "down"
- **Line 6:** "dews"
- **Line 7:** "leave," "let"
- **Line 10:** "sleep"
- **Line 11:** "sky"
- **Line 15:** "little," "leaped," "laugh'd"

ASSONANCE

The poem is bursting with assonance and internal rhymes. These repetitive sounds work much like alliteration, creating a breezy, musical tone that keeps the poem feeling light-hearted and evokes the children's infectious joy.

Listen to the long /ay/ and /i/ assonance of the third stanza, for example:

> "No, no, let us play, for it is yet day
> And we cannot go to sleep;
> Besides, in the sky the little birds fly
> And the hills are all covered with sheep."

All this assonance lends the lines a sense of sonic harmony, which, in turn, suggests the harmony between the children and the natural world. Everything seems to be in its right place, just as it should be.

This assonance sometimes also links words together conceptually. In line 3, for example, "rest" and "breast" locates the nurse's feeling of peaceful happiness with her *heart*: the metaphorical center of love and emotional warmth. This subtly backs up the idea that her decision to let the children play longer comes from her desire to nurture them as best she can.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "rest," "breast"
- **Line 6:** "night arise"
- **Line 7:** "play," "away"
- **Line 9:** "play," "day"
- **Line 11:** "Besides," "sky," "fly"
- **Line 13:** "play," "away"

REPETITION

Repetition is an important device in "Nurse's Song." Take the diacope of "heard" in lines 1 and 2, for example, which conveys the way the children's voices echo throughout the landscape. The repetition of the word "play" in all but the first stanza also keeps the children's desire to innocently enjoy themselves front and center.

Note, too, that nearly half of the poem's lines start with the word "and." In fact, "and" begins the second and fourth lines of each stanza (apart from stanza 2, where it only appears in the second line). Here's stanza 1:

> When the voices of children are heard on the green
> And laughing is heard on the hill,
> My heart is at rest within my breast
> And everything else is still

On the one hand, this anaphora is convenient for the poem's meter: the opening unstressed "and" keeps the poem's music feeling predictable and consistent. But the repetition of "and" has a subtly thematic effect, too. It echoes the polysyndeton found throughout many translations of the Bible, in turn making the scene in the poem come across as all the more Edenic or heavenly.

The nurse and her children also mirror each other through another type of repetition known as epizeuxis, highlighted below:

> Come, come, leave off play, and let us away
> [...]
> "No, no, let us play, for it is yet day
> [...]
> "Well, well, go and play till the light fades away

This epizeuxis creates a quick, playful rhythm that makes the nurse sounds warm and affectionate. The children then echo her with their "No, no," almost as though they're subconsciously borrowing the nurse's way of speaking in order to make their argument more relatable and endearing.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "heard"
- **Line 2:** "And," "heard"
- **Line 4:** "And"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 7:** "Come, come," "play"
- **Line 9:** "No, no," "play"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 12:** "And"
- **Line 13:** "Well, well," "play"
- **Line 14:** "And"
- **Line 16:** "And"

VOCABULARY

Green (Line 1) - A grassy field.

Dews (Line 6) - Condensation on the grass.

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" consists of four stanzas with four lines apiece. These quatrains more specifically ballad stanzas:

- They follow an ABCB rhyme scheme, meaning lines 2 and 4 in each stanza rhyme with each other.
- They alternate between lines of tetrameter (four poetic feet) and trimeter (three feet); more on this in the Meter section of this guide.

This is a very musical, familiar poetic form that echoes the rhythms of nursery rhymes and hymns. The poem's predictable rhythms work well to evoke the simplicity and happiness of the scene at hand.

METER

"Nurse's Song" uses a loose meter built from anapests and iambs. An anapest consists of three syllables arranged in an unstressed-unstressed-stressed pattern (da-da-DUM), while an iamb has two syllables in unstressed-stressed pattern (da-DUM). The poem also alternates lines of tetrameter (four feet) with lines of trimeter (three feet), a variation on typical ballad meter.

Here's the first stanza to illustrate all this in action:

> When the voi- | ces of child- | ren are heard | on the green
> And laugh- | ing is heard | on the hill,
> My heart | is at rest | within | my breast
> And ev- | erything else | is still

Line 1 consists of four iambs; line 2 begins with an iamb followed by two iambs; line three goes iamb, anapest, iamb, iamb; and line 4 goes iamb, anapest, iamb.

This rising meter fills the poem with a joyful, bouncy rhythm.

RHYME SCHEME

In "Nurse's Song," the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme. This creates a rhyme scheme of ABCB DEFE and so on.

This simple pattern is the typical rhyme scheme for ballad stanzas, and Blake uses it for many poems in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Here, the rhymes fill the poem with satisfying, pleasant music. The steady rhymes create a sense of harmony, reflecting the poem's idyllic world in which everything is in its rightful place.

SPEAKER

The poem's main speaker is the nurse of the title (it's her "song," after all!). The nurse isn't a medical professional in the modern sense, but something more like a nanny who looks after children. She comes across as kind, light-hearted, and sympathetic to the needs of her wards. The sound of their laughter warms her heart, and when they want to play a little bit longer in the dusk, she lets them.

Through the nurse, the poem depicts a society that cares for and prioritizes the needs and desires of the young. She facilitates their natural curiosity and instinctive energy—and their happiness makes her happy, too (Check out the *Experience* version of "Nurse's Song" for a different perspective.)

The poem also gives the children a voice as they respond to the nurse's instructions to come home. This dialogue is gentle and respectful, reflecting their affectionate relationship. The last two lines, though, are a little more mysterious. They *could* be spoken by the nurse, but they might also be the omniscient narrator of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* swooping in as the poem zooms out.

SETTING

The poem takes place outside as children play on "the green" (a grassy field) and a "hill." Both of these feature throughout *Songs of Innocence* as places of peace and joy (e.g., "The Echoing Green" or "The Laughing Song"). The children love playing there: they feel free, and enjoy the company of birds and sheep (lines 11 and 12).

Time plays an important role in the poem, too. It's dusk: the sun

has set for the day, though some light remains in the sky, and the night is waiting in the wings. The children probably *should* go home to bed, but they beg not to—and get permission to stay out longer from their nurse.

Overall, then, the poem offers up a kind of idyllic setting in which children can just be children. It's hard to imagine anything bad happening in this world.

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.

There are two "Nurse's Songs." Blake self-published this one as part of the *Innocence* section of his best-known work, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, in 1794 (though Blake had also released the *Innocence* poems on their own in 1789). 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.

While *this* nurse clearly cares for her children and finds joy in their play, the nurse in the *Experience* version of the poem seems to resent her charges. While the children's voices fill this poem with laughter, they don't get the chance to speak in the *Experience* poem. And while this poem presents an idyllic vision of childhood, the *Experience* 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. 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)
- A Blake Documentary — Listen to Blake scholars discussing the poet's life and work. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07gh4pg)
- 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 that accompanies the poems. (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1934/1934-h/1934-h.htm#song18)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

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

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