

A Procession of Pretense: Innocence in William Blake's "'Twas on a Holy Thursday"

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I pledge this essay

In “Holy Thursday” from *Songs of Innocence*, William Blake presents the artificiality of good works. The poem, in simple rhyming couplets, appears to merely state the events of a church service for the charity school, with the speaker meditating on its beauty and righteousness. But the emphasis on innocence, with its juxtaposition to implied hardships, invites the reader into the superficial involvement of societal structures in public welfare. At the time of the poem’s publishing in 1789, London supported a hierarchy of power with budding industrialization and child labor. The descriptive lines construct an image where the beauty of this holy scene of orphans unravels into a social commentary. In “Holy Thursday,” the facade of harmonious imagery parallels the Church’s self-serving front of parental responsibility.

The poem opens with a scene of procession. The occasion should seem joyous as the children walk “two & two” in the bright, childlike colors of “red & blue & green” (line 2). With the introduction of “grey-headed beadles” the children appear in good hands with religious teaching and care. But Blake continues the description of the beadles, slipping “wands white as snow” in their actions, altering any reader’s immediate conclusion of merriment (line 3). The wands blatantly imply violence as a means to this orderliness. With evident underlying control of these kids, the reader can reassess the face-value of the poem’s lines. Looking at the description of “their innocent faces clean,” (line 1) and returning to the line “two & two” the order and initial image transforms to the artificial. This cleanliness is something of note to the viewer, suggesting a dirty and ill taken care of alternative. The “two and two” then highlights the nature of a procession and its biblical allusion. In the story of Noah’s Ark, the animals file two in two into the blessed vessel of the ark, just as how these children file into the holy structure of the church. But while these animals are saved, the rest of the world floods and fills with turmoil. By focusing on the saving of those selected animals, one can forget the overwhelming destruction on the

outside. Churchgoers may then focus on the supposed contentment of the children processing into St. Pauls, while their orphaned reality is full of destruction. St. Pauls becomes a structural exterior of the difference between the facade of these children's care. As the abandoned youth flow into the Church like the "Thames" (line 4), the nature reference might initially appear docile, but the grime of the river requires a willful ignorance to make the simile work—just as how one needs to only focus on the front of piety to believe in the children's wellbeing. A procession is a performance, afterall, introducing the reader to the mode of reading this poem.

The sinister exploitation of these children pronounces itself with an understanding of the facade of the poem and thus the facade of the Church's care. The speaker glorifies the children in their numbers: "O what a multitude they seemd these flowers of London town" (line 5). The Church is cultivating these "flowers of London town," and cultivating "thousands" (line 8) of them. Without parents to raise them, these children have the care of charity schools, run by the Church, as a substitute. But the speaker emphasizes "multitude" in the observation "the hum of multitudes was there but multitudes of lamb" (line 7). The metaphor of "lambs" refers back to the opening line on "innocent," but with the situation of the children, "lambs" evoke a flock taken advantage of in a warped veil of religion. Lambs need to be guided, just as children do, but the guide holds all of the influence. Whereas children are meant to be raised by individualized parental figures, a collective party of Church and State raises this collective group of school-children. These children have no guardian looking after their best interests, instead they have a guardian of exploitation, raising these kids into the workforce. Parental figures also teach obedience, but the obedience for these children does not benefit the unit of the family but rather the unit of the workforce. In the absence of parents, the children hold no opportunities, but the Church holds the ultimate one for exploitation.

In the final two lines of the poem, the tone of the speaker transitions to a tone of warning. After the detail of “aged men wise guardians of the poor” (line 11) the speaker motions outward to the reader, “Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door” (line 12). The “aged men” act as the “guardians” of these orphaned children through charity– but following the image preceding these lines, the reader understands that this charity is broken. Philanthropic endeavors of the churchgoers and well-off society prove more a personal benefit than a benefit to the actual children. The good works act to uplift the donors while the children process in a show reflecting supposed generosity, but the last line encourages an active role in societal-welfare, rather than just a facade of care. The lines of the poem can be flipped to uncover the true nature of these children’s lives, or simply taken at first glance, just as how willful parts of society chooses to view the children’s situation. The Church exploits these orphans, but the willfully ignorant donors act as the enablers. The children provide a tangible and spiritual profit to their guardians at the expense of their own wellbeing.

Works Cited

Blake, William. "Holy Thursday." *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, by David Damrosch and Kevin J. H Dettmar, 5th ed., vol. 2A, Boston, Pearson, 2012, p. 184.