

Topic - Compare and Contrast 'Holy Thursday' from Songs of Innocence and Experience by William Blake.

⇒ The 'Holy Thursday' poems in both sections (Songs of Innocence and Experience) deal with the issues of Charity. The 'Songs of Innocence' version can be read in two ways - either as a straightforward depiction of childhood of innocence, or as a deeply ironic critique of the social conditions that made the existence of charity schools a necessity.

- 'Holy Thursday' from Songs of Innocence:-

⇒ The poem's dramatic setting refers to a traditional charity school service at St. Paul's Cathedral on Ascension Day, celebrating the fortieth day after the resurrection of Christ. These charity schools were publicly funded institutions established to care for and educate the thousands of orphaned and abandoned children in London.

⇒ The first stanza captures the movement of the children from the schools to the church, likening the lines of children to the Thames river, which flows through the heart of London; The children are carried along by the current of their innocent faith.

⇒ In the second stanza, the metaphor for the children changes. First they become "flowers of London town". This comparison emphasizes their beauty and fragility; It undercuts the assumption that these destitute children are the city's refuse and burden, rendering them instead as London's fairest and finest. Next the children are described as resembling lambs in their innocence and meekness, as well as in the sound of their little voices.

⇒ As the children begin to sing in the third stanza, they are no longer just weep and wail; the strength of their combined voices raised toward God evokes something more powerful, and puts them in direct contact with heaven.

⇒ The final line advises Compassion for the poor. The voice of the poem is neither Blake's nor a child's, but rather that of a sentimental observer whose sympathy enhances an already emotionally affecting scene.

“Holy Thursday” from “Songs of Experience” :-

⇒ In the poem “Holy Thursday” from Songs of Experience, Blake criticizes rather than praises the charity of the institutions responsible for helpless children. The speaker entertains questions about the children as victims of cruelty and injustice, some of which the earlier poem implied.

⇒ In the first stanza, we learn that whatever care these children receive is minimal and grudgingly bestowed. The “Cold and Usurous hand” that feeds them is motivated more by self-interest than by love and pity. Moreover, this “hand” represents not just the daily guardians of the Orphans, but the city of London as a whole.

⇒ The public display of love and charity conceals the cruelty to which impoverished children were often subjected. With his “Holy Thursday” of Experience, Blake clarifies his view of the hypocrisy of formalized religion and its claimed acts of charity. He exposes the established Church's self-congratulatory hymns as a shame that the sound of the children is only a trembling lute.