UNIT 1: WILLIAM BLAKE: "HOLY THURSDAY"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- gain an insight into the life and works of the visionary poet William Blake
- explain both the content and context of the poem
- explore the relevant themes pertaining to the poem
- grasp the style and language employed in the poem
- appreciate the symbolism and significance of the poem

1.2 INTRODUCTION

William Blake is considered a **'visionary'** and a **'prophetic'** poet who through the combination of his literary genius and creative artistry as a skilled painter and engraver added a dash of life to his literary works. He had serious philosophical inclinations early in life and cultivated a wide knowledge of **theology** which significantly found reflection in both his literary and artistic works. The present unit will introduce the learner to the life and



Visionary: thinking about the future with imagination or wisdom

Prophetic: the power of predicting or foreseeing the future

Theology: the study of God and religious belief

works of the creative genius William Blake and one of his selected poems titled "Holy Thursday" taken from his poetry collections, *The Songs of Innocence* (1789). The learner may note that there is a corresponding poem with the same title in *The Songs of Experience* (1794) as well.

The Songs of Innocence first published in the year 1789 was a complete collection, comprising poems such as "The Lamb", "The Little Black Boy" and "The Chimney Sweeper" among the other nineteen poems. It was followed by the collection titled *Songs of Experience* comprising poems such as "The Tyger", "The Little Vagabond" and "London" to name a few from the other twenty six poems. Both these collections were published together in the year 1794 under the complete title of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. Both these works contain an interesting lay out with suitable illustrations and it is centered on representing the two contrary states of the human mind i.e., 'innocence' and 'experience'. Let us then explore both the poems to study, compare and contrast between the two poems.

1.3 WILLIAM BLAKE: THE POET

Let us explore the life and works of William Blake in the following subsections before we go on to enjoy a reading of his poem "Holy Thursday'.



Pious: deeply religious
Virtuous: having or cultivating high moral ideals
Draughtsman: an artist skilled at drawing and designing
Apprenticeship: a person learning a skilled practical trade from an employer
Engraver: a trained professional who is engaged in engraving
Engraving: A print made from an engraved plate or block, the process or art of carving a design on a hard surface.

1.3.1 His Life

The following subsection will provide you with a glimpse on the life and works of the poet. William Blake (28 November 1757 – 12 August 1827) was born to Catherine Hermitage Blake and James Blake who were native to London. Blake was brought up in a devout and religious household and mostly tutored at home by his mother. As a young boy, he attended a drawing school called the Henry Pars's Drawing School to be trained as a skilled **draughtsman**. He attended the Royal Academy for a long time before he made up his mind to take up **engraving** as his chosen profession. Thus, at a very tender age, Blake had received training and **apprenticeship** with the **engraver** James Basire. You may take note of the fact that the 'Bible'

was a major influence throughout his life, which also found a creative expression through his literary works.



Illustrations: artworks

His poems were accompanied by illustrations and hand-made etchings which were indeed a labour of love. His **illustrations** for works like the *Book of Job* were indeed masterpieces that had earned him wide acclaim as a painter and engraver. Blake was married to Catherine Boucher and had settled down to a family life in the year 1782. As a husband, he made all efforts to educate his wife, training her to read, write and paint with ease. Further, they produced some of the best illustrated works together. William Blake is considered as a 'visionary' or a 'prophetic' poet owing to the visions that he was often subject to, for an instance, at the tender age of four he had a frightful vision of God peering through a window.

1.3.2 His Works

Among his major literary works are his volumes of poetry comprising epic or narrative poems like *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789), his first collection of poetry *Poetical Sketches* (1783), *Tiriel* (1789), *The Book of Thel* (1789), *The Song of Los* (1795), *Jerusalem* (1804-1820), *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), *Milton: A Poem* (1804-1810) and *Song of Liberty* (1906). His prophetic books include: *America: A Prophecy* (1793), *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794), *The Book of Urizen* (1794), *The Book of Ahania* (1795), the unfinished *Vala* or *The Four Zoas* (1797) and in parts *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* composed between 1790 and 1793.

Blake poured elements of mythology, religious and personal symbolism into his literary works and brought them alive with his remarkable illustrations. He was inspired by the art works of the classical masters such as Michelangelo, Raphael and Albert Durer. The etchings and engravings created by him are an enriching visual delight and contain mystical, religious and mythological figures that leaves one all the more curious to know about them. Having spent a fulfilling life, Blake had breathed his last on 12 August 1827, followed by his wife in the year 1831. A memorial was built at Westminster Abbey in the year 1957 in their memory.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What does the *Songs of Innocence* and of Experience deal with?

Q2. Why is William Blake considered a 'visionary' or 'prophetic' poet?

Q3. Name the first published poetry collection of William Blake.

1.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM

"Holy Thursday"

'Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
The children walking two and two, in red and blue and green,
Grey-headed **beadles** walked before with wands as whites as snow,
Till into the high **dome** of Paul's they like Thames waters flow,
Oh what a **multitude** they seemed, these flowers of London town!
Seated in companies they sit with **radiance** all their own.
The hum of multitude was there, but multitudes of lambs,
Thousands of little boys and girls raising their innocent hands,
Now like a mighty wind they raise to Heaven the voice of song,
Or like **harmonious** thundering the seats of Heaven among,
Beneath them sit the aged men, wise **guardians** of the poor;
Then cherish pity, **lest** you drive an angel from your door.



'Twas: a short form of 'it was'
Beadles: ceremonial officers of the church
Dome: round vault as a roof
Multitude: a large gathering of people
Radiance: brightness
Harmonious: peaceful or free from disagreement
Guardians: protector or keeper
Lest: that, not, for fear that

1.4.1 The Explanation of the Poem

Holy Thursday is a special day in the Christian calendar which is also referred to as Maundy or Covenant Thursday. As it falls on the Thursday before Easter Sunday when the Catholic churches conduct worship services, it is known as Holy Thursday. Easter Sunday is celebrated to mark the **resurrection** of Jesus Christ who according to the New Testament, arose from death on the third day after his **crucifixion**. In England, the celebration of Holy Thursday is known as Royal Maundy. Perhaps, you have read or heard about how Jesus had sacrificed his life on the cross for all humanity.

The opening lines of the poem captures the innocent faces of little children of the charity schools in England who stand in disciplined rows, dressed in red, blue and green to celebrate Holy Thursday at St. Paul's Cathedral. You can only imagine the elderly beadle or ceremonial officers of the church walk past the ceremonial wands. They march ahead to attend the Children's service at St. Paul's. The poet compares the little children moving in disciplined rows to the flowing river Thames and to the blossoming flowers of the season. Both the images suggest the purity and fragility of these little children. The poet almost exalts them as he would exalt the Lord in worship. These children prayed together at the service but there was only a gentle hum that rose from their midst. The thousands of little boys and girls with their radiating presence had raised their hands in prayer in all their innocence, singing hymns dedicated to the Lord.

Gradually the intensity of their singing voices begins to soar, sounding like a heavenly or angelic **choir**. The poet compares the strength of their singing to the gush of a "mighty wind" that is bound towards heaven. It reaches a **crescendo** when their singing grows louder in their "harmonious thundering". They bring to the mind the very image of little angels with radiating souls who look up to their Heavenly Father. Such a sight would easily melt our hearts. As they continue singing in the galleries, the poet directs our attention to the aged patrons and philanthropists of the charity schools who 'pose' as the "wise guardians" of the poor children. The last line of the poem stands out as an appeal to the readers "to cherish pity" or in other words to be generous of heart and compassionate towards any child who stretches his or her hand in need. The core message of the poem is that when such little children call on for a little help or kindness, we must not turn them away from our doorsteps. The least we can do is to speak a kind word or be kind to little children who may be poor or orphaned and may look up to us for a little love and kindness, a little affection and attention in all their hope and innocence.



Resurrection: the instance of rising from dead
Crucifixion: referring to Christ crucified
Choir: a regular group of singers taking part in church services



Crescendo: a gradual increase in loudness



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. Where do the children visit in disciplined rows? Mention the reason of their visit.

Q5. What are the children compared to by the poet?

1.5 MAJOR THEMES

Some of the major themes that emerge from the poem are as discussed below.

Orphaned Children

The short poem "Holy Thursday" reflects the ideal world of children which is filled with fancy and imagination, innocence and joy of childhood years. In contrast it also reflects the sad reality of little children who are abandoned by their own parents and are left to the mercy of charity homes in England. William Blake bore a sense of love and empathy for little children as is reflected in his volumes of poetry. He was much inspired by the works of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft who were the leading revolutionaries of England in their own right.

In the corresponding poem with the same title "Holy Thursday" in the volume *The Songs of Experience,* Blake had presented the miserable conditions and stark realities of little children who spent their childhood in the charity homes of England. Although, England was a rich and prosperous nation, there were multitudes of orphaned or poor children who cried in their grief and sorrow. These children devoid of love and care seemed to have no future or hope. Therefore, Blake wrote thus,

"And their sun does never shine,
And their fields are bleak and bare,
And their ways are filled with thorns:
It is eternal winter there"

The poet felt that the ideal environment in which children must be brought up should be an ideal place where they are nurtured like little flowers, so that they can blossom to the fullest. They must feel loved and secure, accepted and inspired to dream of a good future and in fact, be the future of the nation. It is not enough to keep them from starving in the charity homes,

but their guardians had the moral obligation of nourishing their souls. This is why the poet wrote that there are plenty of poor children in England whose worlds were "eternal winter" without the promise of a secure future. These impoverished children deserved a secure future and they must be restored from a life of neglect and denial to a life that is free from the hunger of love and hope. The nation will only prosper and flourish when its children does so. Thus, the elderly guardians and philanthropists have a large role to play rather than attending mere charity functions. Thus, the celebration of Holy Thursday calls for a meaningful celebration in the true Christian spirit.

Innocence and Experience

Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* bring out the two different human states of mind i.e., 'innocence' and 'experience.' These two human states of being or condition can be compared to two opposite sides of a coin. It is 'experience' that moulds and transforms the human mind from its 'innocent' and 'inexperienced' state to its 'matured' and 'well-experienced' state, making a great difference to the early perception of the world around. It is through the gradual stages of life that the child figures out the real world, in sharp contrast to his ideal and imagined world. And it takes the 'weight of experience' for the youthful mind to be seasoned into maturity and gather worldly wisdom.

The Songs of Innocence are given to ideal happiness of childhood, untouched by the realities of life, while *The Songs of Experience* reveals the real practicalities of life. The world of innocence is symbolic of the childhood years filled with happiness, freedom and playfulness'; a state where both innocence and ignorance are blissful, as reflected in the present poem. And the world of experience is symbolic of the adulthood years abound in sorrow, obstacles and realities of life as contained in the corresponding poem in volume *The Songs of Experience*.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6. Name the two leading figures that had inspired William Blake. Who were they?

Q7. What do Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* reveal to the reader?

1.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

In the economy of just a few words, the poet brings alive a vivid picture of little angels whose innocence and radiating presence almost immediately captures our hearts. The poem is filled with several images and similes that for an instance enables us to associate the radiance of little children to heavenly angels or the ambience of the celebration at the church to one filled with music at the gates of Heaven. The first image is that of 'clean innocent faces' of the children in rows, the second is their uniforms of "*red and green and blue*", the third is the *"multitudes"* of little children at the worship service, the fourth image is that of "*grey-headed beadles*" and the fifth is that of the "*aged men*" or the rich patrons of charity homes. Also, the use of similes in the poem adds to these visual images of the poem for example, phrases like "*wands as white as snow*", "*they like Thames water flow*", "*like a mighty wind*" or "*like harmonious thundering*" which also form comparative images as well.

There is a musical or a lyrical quality in the 'rhyme scheme' of the poem with rhyming words such as: clean-green, snow-flow, town-own, lambs-hands, song-among, poor-door. The poet also employs a few metaphors for an example, "*these flowers of London town*" or "*multitudes of lambs*" (refers to the little children), the phrase "*raising their innocent hands*" or the word "angel" in the closing line of the poem (refers to a little child). The learner will find that the poem highlights striking and contrasting colours, for example the red/blue/green uniforms of the children or the colorful flowers of London, grey heads of aged men or the white of the beadles' wand. The entire mood of the poem is lifted with hymns sung in the sweet voices of little children at the worship service in St. Paul's Cathedral. It brings forth

the message of hope and optimism in the Lord who is the fort of love and protection for all his children.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



Q8. What is the function of similes in the poem? Give examples.

Q9. What is the core message in the poem "Holy Thursday"?



1.7 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit, you have received an insight into the life and works of the poet William Blake. A thorough reading of the poem "Holy Thursday" along with the detailed explanation will enable you to discuss the content of the poem and the emerging themes as well. Also, a study of the style and language of the poem will provide you with a better idea of the poetical techniques employed by the poet. Further, the learner will appreciate the core message hidden in the poem which highlights the realities of orphaned children and the importance of reaching out to them in time.



1.8 FURTHER READING

Blake, William (1967) *Songs of Innocence and Experience. Oxford : Oxford University Press.*

1) http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/william-blake

2) http://britannica.com/biography/WilliamBlake



1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Both these works deal with the contrary human states of 'innocence' and 'experience'.

Ans to Q No 2: He is considered as a 'visionary' or a 'prophetic' poet due to the visions he was often subject to, for an instance, at the tender age of four he had a frightful vision of God peering through a window.

Ans to Q No 3: His first collection of poetry is *Poetical Sketches* (1783)

Ans to Q No 4: The children visit St. Paul's Cathedral to celebrate Holy Thursday.

Ans to Q No 5: The poet compares the little children moving in disciplined rows to the flowing river Thames and to the blossoming flowers of the season.

Ans to Q No 6: He was much inspired by the works of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft who were the leading revolutionaries of England in their own right

Ans to Q No 7: Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* bring out the two different human states of mind i.e., 'innocence' and 'experience.'

Ans to Q No 8: The use of similes in the poem adds to these visual images of the poem for example, phrases like "*wands as white as snow*", "*they like Thames water flow*", "*like a mighty wind*" or "*like harmonious thundering*" which also form comparative images as well.

Ans to Q No 9: It brings forth the message of hope and optimism in the Lord who is the fort of love and protection for all his children.



1.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1. Discuss the life and works of the poet William Blake.

Q.2. Give a detailed explanation of the poem "Holy Thursday".

Q.3. What are the major themes in the poem "Holy Thursday"?

Q.4. Discuss the style and language employed by William Blake in the poem "Holy Thursday".

Q.5. Explain with reference to context:

a) "Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
The children walking two and two, in red and blue and green,

Grey-headed beadles walked before with wands as whites as snow,
Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames waters flow,
Oh what a multitude they seemed, these flowers of London town!"

b) "Now like a mighty wind they raise to Heaven the voice of song,
Or like harmonious thundering the seats of Heaven among,
Beneath them sit the aged men, wise guardians of the poor;
Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door."

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