Earth's Answer

POEM TEXT

Earth rais'd up her head,
From the darkness dread & drear.
Her light fled,
Stony dread!
And her locks cover'd with grey despair.

Prison'd on watry shore
Starry Jealousy does keep my den
Cold and hoar
Weeping o'er
I hear the Father of the ancient men

Selfish father of men
Cruel, jealous, selfish fear
Can delight
Chain'd in night
The virgins of youth and morning bear.

Does spring hide its joy
When buds and blossoms grow?
Does the sower?
Sow by night?
Or the plowman in darkness plow?

Break this heavy chain,
That does freeze my bones around
Selfish! vain!
Eternal bane!
That free Love with bondage bound.

SUMMARY

The Earth lifted her head from the horrible, gloomy darkness. She'd grown dull and dim, and she had a look of petrified terror. Her hair was a miserable grey.

The Earth said, "I'm being held prisoner on this watery coast. Starlit Jealousy is my prison guard, keeping my cell cold and frosty. Above me, I hear the cries of the God of men who lived a very long time ago.

"I ask that selfish, patriarchal God—who is cruel, jealous, and self-serving: if pleasure and joy are chained up in the darkness of night (i.e., heavily restricted), can they really bring forth youthful innocence and the dawn?

"Does the spring go all shy when its flowers are blooming? Does the planter of seeds only do so under the cover of darkness? Can the plowman (who prepares the soil) also only work at night?

"Set me free from the weighty chains that make my body cold. Self-serving, futile, endless misery that holds Love captive when it should be free!

THEMES

ORGANIZED RELIGION, DESIRE, AND OPPRESSION

"Earth's Answer" responds to William Blake's poem "Introduction," which calls on the "Earth" to "return" to the way it was before the biblical Fall of Man and "renew" the world's "fallen light." Here, the Earth (personified as a female figure) says she can't do this because she's been imprisoned in darkness by a tyrannical God. "Earth's Answer" is a highly symbolic poem open to a range of interpretations, but it broadly implies that the jealousy, selfishness, and sexual repression engendered by organized religion have crushed everything glorious about life and "Love." The Earth then calls on humanity to break the chain that binds "Love" in order to return to a freer, more joyful state.

The poem's depiction of a decrepit, dying Earth reveals that something has gone terribly wrong in the world. Earth has become pale and haggard, "her light fled" (that is, her natural glow has been extinguished). Her hair, meanwhile, is "covered with grey despair." She looks ancient, sad, and sickly because she's been chained up in a frosty, watery prison.

"Earth" points the finger for this imprisonment at the restrictive morality that has infected humanity through organized religion. "Earth" cannot be herself—and, it follows, neither can humanity—because the "Father of ancient men," with his "Cruel jealous selfish fear," holds her back. (Though Blake was deeply religious, he didn't accept the authority of the oppressive, vengeful God envisioned by much mainstream organized religious thinking.) Meanwhile, "Starry Jealousy, which might refer to both this jealous God and/or to cold-hearted reason, acts as Earth's prison guard, making sure she can't escape and set humanity free.

Keeping her in this state is unnatural, the Earth insists, is like "spring hid[ing] its joy / When buds and blossoms grow" or someone planting a garden at night. These comparisons are notably erotic, in turn implying that sexuality is something

natural and joyful—not something that should be "with bondage bound."

The "Earth" thus demands that someone "Break this heavy chain" that holds her back. Humanity should be free to express itself with unrestricted "delight. Humanity could thus revel in "free Love," which doesn't necessarily *just* mean sexuality. It's more like human beings could be their instinctive, joyful, child-like selves, free from the stuffy restrictions brought to bear on them by the institutions of organized religion.

In this sense, the poem embodies an idea best summed up by one of Blake's major influences, the French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "man is born free but everywhere is in chains." In short, "Earth" wishes to be set free in order to restore human beings to their natural *innocence*, to give them back the keys to paradise. But the "Earth" also insists that this emancipation must come directly from human beings themselves.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Earth rais'd up her head,
From the darkness dread & drear.
Her light fled,
Stony dread!
And her locks cover'd with grey despair.

"Earth's Answer" is a direct response to William Blake's "Introduction," the poem that opens the *Experience* section of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. In "Introduction," a "Bard" (a kind of cosmic, time-traveling poet who appears throughout the collection) calls on the Earth to "Arise" and "renew" the world's "fallen light." Humankind has "lapsed," the Bard says, from its instinctive, joyful state.

In "Earth's Answer," the personified Earth responds to the Bard's call to "arise." All she can do, however, is wearily "rais[e] up her head," a phrase suggesting immense physical effort and a weakened state.

The Earth is shrouded by "darkness dread & drear," the pounding /d/ alliteration and growling /r/ consonance conveying just how beaten down she feels. Her "light" has "fled," leaving only a "Stony dread" in its wake (as opposed to, say, soil brimming with life). And her "locks," her hair, are "cover'd with grey despair." In other words, hair is "grey" with fright and worry.

The Earth *should* be a magnificent, beautiful, flourishing figure. Instead, the poem depicts her as dull and dried up, as though all the life and joy have been suck outed of her. In the next stanza, readers will found out who, exactly, has driven the Earth to this dismal state.

LINES 6-10

Prison'd on watry shore
Starry Jealousy does keep my den
Cold and hoar
Weeping o'er
I hear the Father of the ancient men

The personified Earth begins to speak in the second stanza, and the rest of the poem will be in her voice.

In these lines, the Earth says that she's been imprisoned by "the Father of the ancient men." This likely refers to the God of the Old Testament and, importantly, to much of organized religion's *conception* of God as a vengeful, tyrannical figure. Some context is helpful here:

- William Blake was a deeply religious man, but he didn't *exactly* believe in the Old Testament God. To Blake, the organized religion of his day was an attack on the natural instinct, freedom, imagination, and creativity that dwell within humankind.
- This "Father of the ancient men" is, in a sense, a human creation that helps restrict humankind in the name of being "good."

The Earth specifically says that she's "Prison'd on watry shore," trapped in a chilly den like an animal. This "watry shore" conveys a *boundary* and a *restriction* (as it does in "Introduction"):

- In the biblical book of Jeremiah (to which Blake's "Introduction" explicitly alludes), God tells humanity that it should fear him because "I made the sand a boundary for the sea, an everlasting barrier it cannot cross. The waves may roll, but they cannot prevail; they may roar, but they cannot cross it."
- It's this cruel and vain version of the Old Testament God—and all the institutions that support this idea of God—that "Earth's Answer" pits itself against.

At first glance, "Starry Jealousy" seems like another personified figure who acts as a kind of prison warden, making sure the Earth can't escape. It's likely, however, that "Starry Jealousy" is another name for the "Father of the ancient men." As God himself says in the Book of Exodus: "you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God."

Lines 8 and 9 might be read in a few ways. "Cold and hoar" could mean "cold and frosty" or "cold and grey-haired." It's also not clear who, exactly, this phrase is meant to describe:

1. It could describe the Earth's place of imprisonment.

"Starry Jealousy" stands over her, making sure her "den" is freezing cold.
2. This could be a self-descriptive phrase, the Earth acknowledging her own frosty, gray-haired appearance.
3. Finally, it might refer to the "Father of the ancient men." This God is often depicted as an old man, so "hoar" as grey-haired would make sense in that context.

The "Weeping" in line 9 is also somewhat ambiguous. Most likely, however, these tears are either shed by the Earth, distraught at her imprisonment.

LINES 11-15

Selfish father of men
Cruel, jealous, selfish fear
Can delight
Chain'd in night
The virgins of youth and morning bear.

The Earth addresses the "Father of the ancient men" mentioned in line 11. Now, she calls him the "Selfish father of men," hammering home her dislike.

She sums up his worldview as "Cruel, jealous, selfish fear," the asyndeton of this list making her words sound particularly stinging and full of rage. This "Father" is so selfish that she calls him it twice in two lines!

Blake's use of punctuation was unconventional and publishers have often tweaked it (which is why readers might encounter various versions of Blake's poems, including "Earth's Answer"). Line 13 actually begins a new sentence that, together with lines 14 and 15, forms a rhetorical question. This question is being addressed to the "father of men" and to anyone who might be listening/reading:

> Can delight
> Chain'd in night
> The virgins of youth and morning bear [?]

This question might be read in a few different ways, so let's break its pieces down:

- "Delight," here, refers to all the glorious things that the Earth and humanity should be able to enjoy: creativity, imagination, sex, joy, love, and so on. The Earth imagines this delight as a figure who's been chained up "in night," or imprisoned in darkness.
- If delight is held back, the Earth asks, how could it possibly "bear" the "virgins of youth and morning"? The word "bear" can mean to carry or give birth to/create. The "virgins" here might represent youthful innocence, while "morning" represents new life, hope, beginnings, and so on.
- Basically, then, the Earth is saying that there can't be any revelry, joyousness, etc. so long as the "Selfish father of men" holds delight back. Nothing can exist as fruitfully and gloriously as it should be able to while it has to live under the oppressive rule of the "Selfish father" (and in the company of all those people who, merely through the way they think about and conceive of the world, do his bidding).

The question could also be flipped around:

- How could the virgins of youth and morning bear (as in *endure*) delight when they're chained in night? That is, how could they find any joy when trapped in darkness? Youth, purity, promise—it all would just wither away.

However readers interpret the specific elements of these lines, the broader takeaway is clear: human beings exist in a restrictive prison where they aren't able to live according to their true nature.

LINES 16-20

Does spring hide its joy
When buds and blossoms grow?
Does the sower?
Sow by night?
Or the plowman in darkness plow?

The Earth asks more rhetorical questions. These questions form part of an argument against her imprisonment by the selfish, jealous, and controlling of the "father of men."

The first question is:

> Does spring hide its joy
> When buds and blossoms grow?

The poem subtly personifies spring here, depicting it as capable of feeling emotion. It would be absurd for spring to "hide its joy" when flowers bloom; such blossoming is natural and delightful, a cause for happiness and celebration. The bubbly alliteration of "buds and blossoms" helps to convey the beauty and abundance of those flowers. There's also an erotic dimension to this question (and those that follow), those "buds and blossoms" suggesting blossoming sexuality and procreation—things the poem also implies are also natural and worth celebrating.

Lines 18-20 make the same point, but they give it a more human framework (don't be fooled by Blake's eccentric use of question marks; there are just two questions here):

> Does the sower?
> Sow by night?

Or the plowman in darkness plow?

A sower is someone who plants seeds, which will one day grow into fully fledged plants/flowers. To sow is a creative and, in a way, a *procreative* act, one stage in the process of bringing new life into the world. It's reprehensible, to the Earth, to imagine that a sower would be ashamed of this work. Should people be ashamed of their own desire and "delight," if it's these that bring new life into the world too?

The "plowman" reiterates the same idea, driving the poem's argument home. A "plowman" churns up the soil, preparing it to be planted. Again, the Earth is asking why such vital activity should be kept secret ("in darkness").

Notice how the polyptoton repetition of "sower"/"sow" and "plowman"/"plow" emphasizes the relationship between each character and their labor; their identity is tied to their work. That is, sowers have to sow, and plowmen have to plow. Repressing sex—and, more generally, desire/instinctive joy (which need not be of a sexual nature necessarily)—is as absurd as telling a farmer they can only work on their fields in pitch black.

LINES 21-25

Break this heavy chain,
That does freeze my bones around
Selfish! vain!
Eternal bane!
That free Love with bondage bound.

In the last stanza, the Earth begs to be set free from the "heavy chain" that holds her in a cold, dark den. Her words seem to be addressed not just to the "father of men" who keeps her prisoner, but also to humankind itself. The poem suggests that the chains holding the world back are really those created within the mind: oppressive, restrictive ideas about sin, sexuality, a vengeful God, and so on.

The emphatic assonance of "b**r**e**a**k" and "ch**ai**n" makes it seem as though the Earth struggles against her bonds as she speaks. This chain holds the Earth back from her full glory. It "freezes [her] bones around," a phrase that suggests painful barrenness. This image contrasts with the blossoming spring from the previous stanza, hammering home the idea that the Earth is withering away.

In lines 23-24, the Earth admonishes "the father of men," describing him as "selfish" for the third time in the poem. She complains that he is an "Eternal bane." The latter word can mean either "a cause of great distress" or a deadly poison, and both ideas are relevant here. "The father of men"—with his selfish, endless misery—prevents life from flourishing. He keeps "free Love" in "bondage," tied up.

The alliteration of "**b**ondage **b**ound" sounds heavy and violent, further dramatizing the Earth's terrible situation. The poem thus implores humanity to set itself free from its own chains and regain its natural energies, calling for a kind of revolution of both the body and the spirit.

SYMBOLS

TENDING THE LAND

In the fourth stanza, the Earth asks a series of pointed rhetorical questions: whether spring "hide[s] its joy" when the flowers bloom, whether the "sower" can only plant seeds "by night," and whether the "plowman" can turn the fields in "in darkness."

Again, these questions are all rhetorical: the answer to each is no. These questions are also symbolic: they represent the idea that sexuality is entirely natural, and thus that it shouldn't have to be shrouded in darkness and shame.

The poem implies that it's just as absurd for people to hide their desire as it is for spring to be embarrassed about "buds and blossoms" blooming (an image with intentionally erotic undertones). Likewise, a sower (someone who plants seeds) and a plowman (someone who prepares the soil for planting) would never be expected to do their work secretly—so why should sexuality, which is just as natural, be oppressed?

Sex, love, and desire, in other words, are part of the instinctive rhythms of life. And, like the work of the sower and the plowman, these feelings play a vital role in bringing *new* life into the world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-20:** "Does spring hide its joy / When buds and blossoms grow? / Does the sower? / Sow by night? / Or the plowman in darkness plow?"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds intensity and emphasis to the poem, making the Earth's plea for freedom sound all the more compelling.

The first stanza is packed with /d/ alliteration: "**d**arkness **d**read & **d**rear," "**d**read" (again), and "**d**espair." These thudding sounds are like hammers pounding throughout the poem, conveying the immense weight holding the Earth down. Broader consonance, highlighted below, adds to the effect:

Earth rais'**d** up her hea**d**,
From the **d**arkness **d**read & **d**rear.
Her light fle**d**,
Stony **d**read!

And her locks cover'd with grey despair.

These /d/ sounds have a dull, punishing insistence. The many guttural /r/ sounds in these lines (as in "dread & drear") add a low growl to the lines as well.

Alliteration adds yet more rhetorical power to the Earth's speech in the second-to-last stanza. In line 17, for example, the bold /b/ alliteration of "buds and blossoms" help to capture the sudden, vibrant beauty of spring. In the next lines, the alliteration of "Sower"/"sow" and "plowman"/"plow" elevates the poem's language—and, thus, add power to the Earth's argument. Note that these are also examples of the device known as polyptoton, which links both *characters* (the "Sower" and the "plowman") with the *action* they perform (sowing and plowing). This emphasizes that such work (and the sexuality, freedom, creativity, etc. it represents) is entirely *natural*.

In the final stanza, the alliteration of booming /b/ sounds intensify the Earth's call to be freed:

Break this heavy chain,
That does freeze my bones around
Selfish! vain!
Eternal bane!
That free Love with bondage bound.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "darkness dread," "drear"
- **Line 4:** "dread"
- **Line 5:** "despair"
- **Line 7:** "does," "den"
- **Line 17:** "buds," "blossoms"
- **Line 18:** "sower"
- **Line 19:** "Sow"
- **Line 20:** "plowman," "plow"
- **Line 21:** "Break"
- **Line 22:** "bones"
- **Line 24:** "bane"
- **Line 25:** "bondage bound"

ASYNDETON

The poem's use of asyndeton grants the Earth's speech an urgent, desperate tone that fits with the hopelessness of her situation (something she herself calls an "eternal bane").

The device first appears in line 12, in which Earth describes the "Selfish father of men":

Cruel, jealous, selfish fear

The asyndeton turns this list into a quick-fire burst of adjectives. It's as though the Earth is so angry with this "Father" for imprisoning her—and for ruining humanity's instinctive joys and desires—that she doesn't have time for conjunction words like "and."

Lines 23 and 24 create a similar effect, evoking the Earth's simultaneous rage and helplessness:

Selfish! vain!
Eternal bane!

This could also be interpreted as an example of the device parataxis; Blake's unorthodox use of punctuation makes it ambiguous. Whatever readers call it, the Earth speaks in short, sharp clauses seemingly directed at that same "Father" who holds her captive. Packing these cries so tightly together makes them seem all the more urgent and forceful.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "Cruel, jealous, selfish fear"
- **Lines 23-24:** "Selfish! vain! / Eternal bane!"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses personification throughout, treating the Earth as a female figure who has been imprisoned in a cold, dark den as though she were an animal.

The Earth represents love, desire, "delight," youthfulness, creativity, expressivity, and more. The "Father" (again, the Old Testament God and/or organized religion's *conception* of that God as a cruel, tyrannical figure) connotes envy, cruelty, selfishness, cold rationality, etc. Personification dramatizes the tension between all these abstract concepts, turning it into a battle between two larger-than-life figures.

When the poem begins, the Earth looks old and haggard. She has lost her "light," her gaze marked now by "Stony dread." Her hair is covered "with grey despair" and icy chains crush her "bones." This personification helps readers envision the Earth—and everything the Earth represents—as having been utterly beaten down by "the Father of ancient men" who keeps her captive. She's a devastated prisoner, her vibrancy and vitality sucked dry.

The poem also personifies the "spring," presenting it as a figure who feels "joy / When the buds and blossoms grow." In other words, spring delights at the fresh, colorful flowers sprouting all around. This personification hints to readers that the speaker isn't just talking about a literal season; the "spring" also represents human joy "When buds and blossoms grow"—when creativity, love, and new life are allowed to flourish.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "Earth rais'd up her head, / From the darkness dread & drear. / Her light fled, / Stony dread! / And her locks cover'd with grey despair."

- **Line 7:** "Starry Jealousy does keep my den"
- **Lines 16-17:** "Does spring hide its joy / When buds and blossoms grow?"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Break this heavy chain, / That does freeze my bones around"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem contains four rhetorical questions. The personified Earth asks these questions not because she's seeking an actual answer, but because she's trying to prove a point: creativity, spontaneity, curiosity, and sexuality have been unjustly, and unnaturally, forced into hiding.

First, she asks:

> Can delight
> Chain'd in night
> The virgins of youth and morning bear.

The wording here makes the question a bit hard to parse, so let's break it down step by step:

- The poem is subtly personifying "delight" and all that it might encompass (things like love, creativity, freedom, imagination, and so on). Were "delight" free to roam about as it pleases, it would "bear" (as in "bring into being") "The virgins of youth and morning." In other words, it would fill the world with youthful innocence and the promising, hopeful dawn light.
- But delight, here, is not free; it's "Chain'd in night"—imprisoned in darkness. The answer to the Earth's question is an emphatic no: delight can't work its glorious miracles while kept in chains.
- In an alternative reading, the Earth might also be asking if "the virgins of youth and morning" can "bear"—as in "endure"—the way in which "delight" is held captive. Again, the answer is no.
- In either reading, the poem is depicting a battle between freedom and restriction, the latter of which suppresses joy.

The questions in the following stanza repackage this first question. They ask:

- Does spring shy away out of shame when its flowers bloom?
- Does someone who plants seeds in the ground only do so under the cover of darkness?
- Does the person who prepares the soil for the seeds do the same?

Each question portrays a figure in the process of an action that is, by definition, theirs to perform (the sower sows, the plowman plows). It's patently absurd, Earth implies, to expect a "sower" to do their work in secret. Human desire, the poem implies, shouldn't be kept hidden either—it's as natural as the rhythm of the seasons. Human beings are *made* to love freely.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-20:** "Can delight / Chain'd in night / The virgins of youth and morning bear. / Does spring hide its joy / When buds and blossoms grow? / Does the sower? / Sow by night? / Or the plowman in darkness plow?"

REPETITION

Repetition adds urgency and emphasis to "Earth's Answer," appearing in many forms throughout the poem. For example, the Earth calls out to the "Father" of "men" twice in as many lines, using very similar language each time:

> I hear the Father of the ancient men
> Selfish father of men
> Cruel, jealous, selfish fear

This repetitive language keeps the focus of the Earth's rage squarely on this father figure, whom readers might interpret as the God of the Old Testament (as well as organized religion's idea of that God). Repeating the word "selfish," meanwhile (an example of diacope) hammers home this God's cruel nature. This God doesn't care about the Earth's happiness.

The poem also uses frequent parallelism to add force to its arguments. The rhetorical questions in the fourth stanza begin with the word "Does," and this anaphora reflects the fact that the Earth is really asking the *same question* over and over again (with different specific slotted in). She's repeating the same point to help it stick.

The anaphora of "That" in the final stanza helps readers parse the poem's windy syntax: the "heavy chain" from line 21 is what freezes the Earth's "bones" and keeps "free Love" in "bondage."

Finally, the poem uses polyptoton in lines 18-19:

> Does the sower?
> Sow by night?
> Or the plowman in darkness plow?

Repeating words with the same root emphasizes the connection between these workers and their work. Sowing and plowing seem to define the "sower" and the "plowman," making it all the more illogical that they ought to be ashamed of or hide their labor. Likewise, the poem implies, human beings shouldn't be ashamed of their joy and physical desires; people are made to love.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Father of the ancient men"
- **Line 11:** "Selfish father of men"
- **Line 12:** "selfish"
- **Line 16:** "Does"
- **Line 18:** "Does," "sower"
- **Line 19:** "Sow"
- **Line 20:** "plowman," "plow"
- **Line 22:** "That"
- **Line 25:** "That"

VOCABULARY

Drear (Line 2) - Dull and gloomy.

Den (Line 7) - A hidden dwelling-place, here meant as a kind of prison.

Hoar (Line 8) - Frosty and/or gray-haired.

O'er (Line 9) - Contraction of "over."

Father of the ancient men (Line 10, Line 11) - Most likely a reference to the vengeful Old Testament God as well as to organized religion's *conception* of God as tyrannical, vengeful, etc.

Bear (Line 15) - Can mean either "bring into being," "carry," or "endure."

Sower (Line 18) - Someone who plants seeds in the ground.

Plowman (Line 20) - Someone who uses a plough to dig up/prepare soil for planting seeds.

Vain (Line 23) - Self-centered and/or useless.

Bane (Line 24) - A cause of distress or misery (also an old word for deadly poison).

Free Love (Line 25) - Love unhindered by restraints.

Bondage bound (Line 25) - Kept in chains.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Earth's Answer" contains five quintains, or five-line stanzas. Each stanza has the same (or very similar) rhyme scheme and metrical pattern, which lends the poem some internal consistency.

The poem is mostly a speech made by the personified Earth, who laments the way in which she has been imprisoned by "the Father of the ancient men." Stanza 1 sets the scene, while the rest of the poem is in the Earth's voice.

This poem is also a response to the "Introduction" that appears just before it in Blake's *Songs of Experience*, in which a Bard (a poet) calls on the Earth to "return" and "renew" the world's "fallen light." Here, the Earth *answers* that call. As such, there is some formal symmetry between these two poems: both use quintains, a similar metrical shape and rhyme scheme, and recurring images (like the "watry shore" that keeps the Earth locked up).

METER

"Earth's Answer" has an unusual meter *within* its stanzas, though all of its stanzas generally follow the *same* pattern:

- The first line in each stanza has three stressed beats, the second line has four stresses, the third has two stresses, the fourth has two stresses, and the fifth has four stresses.
- Those stressed beats don't always appear in the same *places* in each line, though the lines themselves have around the same number of *syllables*.

Here's how that looks in the first stanza:

Earth rais'd up her head, [three stresses]
From the darkness dread & drear. [four stresses]
Her light fled, [two stresses]
Stony dread! [two stresses]
And her locks cover'd with grey despair. [four stresses]

The next stanza uses the same three, four, two, two, four pattern:

Prison'd on watry shore
Starry Jealousy does keep my den
Cold and hoar
Weeping o'er
I hear the Father of the ancient men

This lends the poem some internal structure and consistency. The stanzas get shorter in their middle two lines, perhaps evoking the constricting of the Earth in chains. This also slows the poem down, drawing out the Earth's suffering.

RHYME SCHEME

"Earth's Answer" has a semi-regular rhyme scheme. Stanzas 1, 2, and three all follow the same pattern (with new rhyme sounds introduced in each stanza):

ABAAB

Stanzas 3 and 4 break the pattern, however. Here's the rhyme scheme of stanza 3:

ABCCB

Note that the "A" rhyme here repeats the "B" rhyme sound from the previous stanza ("men" in stanza 3 rhymes with "den"

and "men" from stanza 2).

And here's stanza 4:

ABBCB

That "C" rhyme copies the sound of the "C" rhymes from stanza 3 (and in fact directly repeats the word "night").

The poem feels musical yet not entirely predictable. Those quick middle rhymes also might strike readers as claustrophobic and restrictive, subtly evoking the Earth's imprisonment.

SPEAKER

There are two speakers in "Earth's Answer." The first is the omniscient narrator who pops up here and there throughout William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. The first stanza belongs to this speaker, while the rest of the poem is spoken by the Earth, personified as a female figure.

The Earth, in the poem, has seen better days. She's lost her "light," or vibrancy and vitality. "Despair" has turned her hair "grey," and her face bears a look of "Stony dread." She resents her imprisonment in a cold, dark "den" and demands to be set free from the "heavy chain" that's crushing her. The "Father of the ancient men"—that is, the jealous, angry God of the Old Testament/conceived of by organized religion—is her captor, unwilling to let her flourish in her natural glory.

In a sense, this conflict between the Earth and the "Father of the ancient men" is really an *internal* battle within people's own hearts and minds. (Around the same time this was written, Blake wrote that "all deities reside in the human breast.") The Earth represents the wild, instinctive, sensual, joyful, playful, loving, free parts of humanity. Traits like jealousy, hatred, and cruelty have crushed people's truer, better natures, as have the restrictive teachings of so much organized religion.

SETTING

"Earth's Answer" takes place after humanity has fallen from grace. People have lost their way, losing much of their instinctive, innocent joy. And this, the poem implies, is due to emotions like jealousy and hatred as well as the restrictions imposed on love and sex by organized religion.

The speaker dramatizes this by presenting the Earth as a personified female figure who has been locked away in a dark, cold den bordered by a "watry shore." This prison comes across as supremely desolate and lonely.

This isn't a literal prison, however, and the poem is using this imagined setting to make a point: that joy, hope, and humanity itself cannot flourish and grow so long as love, sexuality, creativity, and so forth are held in darkness and "chains."

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 any movement as a unique philosopher, prophet, and artist.

Blake first printed "Earth's Answer" in *Songs of Experience* (1794), the second volume of his important collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. This two-part book examines what Blake called "the two contrary states of the human soul." 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.

Blake conceived most of these poems not just as text, but as illuminated manuscripts in which images deepen (and sometimes complicate or contradict) the meanings of the words. Blake designed, engraved, printed, painted, and published these works himself, using a technique he called the "infernal method." In this process, he painted his poems and pictures on copper plates with a resilient ink, then burned away the excess copper in a bath of acid—the opposite of the process most engravers used. But then, Blake often did the opposite of what other people did, believing that it was his role to "reveal the infinite that was hid" by custom and falsehood.

"Earth's Answer" is a direct response to the first poem of *Songs of Experience*, appropriately called "Introduction." In that poem, the speaker calls on the Earth to restore herself to her former glory and "arise," filling the world with light. While this pair of poems has confounded critics and readers ever since their publication, most agree on their basic gist: the world has become too restrictive/oppressive and needs liberating.

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 was a deeply religious man, but he was highly critical of *organized* religion. He was born to a family of Dissenters, a group of English Protestants who broke away from and rebelled against the Church of England (and instilled in Blake an early distrust of the religious status quo). He generally saw top-down religious structures as getting in the way of a direct relationship between humanity and God.

To Blake, the whole world was infused with divinity, which people could see if only they opened their eyes to the "infinite that was hid" behind the illusions of custom and daily life. In this, he (like many of his Romantic contemporaries) rebelled against the rationalistic worldviews of 18th-century

Enlightenment philosophers. He also held the view that deities/mythological figures existed only in the human mind (but were nevertheless real).

Though a committed Christian, Blake's views were highly unorthodox for the time. He believed that organized religion was, for the most part, teaching humanity to deny its instinctive, natural, expressive, and beautiful state of being. This poem is thus a call to arms—to both individual people and society en masse—to think beyond the "mind-forg'd manacles" that keep humanity in chains.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Blake's Artwork for Earth's Answer — Check out the poem as originally set out by Blake. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earth%27s_Answer#/media/File:Songs_of_Innocence_and_of_Experience,_copy_Z,_1826_(Library_of_Congress)_object_31_Earth's_Answer.jpg)
- Songs of Innocence and of 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)
- Blake's Biography — Learn more about Blake's life and work via the website of the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/william-blake)
- Blake's Radicalism — An excerpt from a documentary in which writer Iain Sinclair discusses Blake's radicalism. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl0yBrI24XM&t=1s)
- 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 Joy
- Infant Sorrow
- London
- Nurse's Song (Songs of Experience)
- 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

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