Infant Sorrow

POEM TEXT

My mother groan'd! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I leapt:
Helpless, naked, piping loud;
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my father's hands:
Striving against my swaddling bands:
Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.

SUMMARY

My mother moaned in pain, my father sobbed, and I jumped energetically into my life in this dangerous world. I was powerless, naked, screaming at the top of my lungs. I was like a little devil wrapped in a cloud.

I fought against my father's grip, and tried to break free of the blankets that restricted my movements. Trapped and exhausted, I resigned myself to moping in my mother's embrace.

THEMES

LIFE AND SUFFERING

Spoken in the voice of a newborn baby, "Infant Sorrow" suggests that life is full of hardship and pain. While the baby in "Infant Joy" (this poem's companion piece) glories in entering the world, *this* speaker knows that, from a painful birth onward, life is going to be a tough ride (and one, incidentally, that the speaker never asked for!). In this poem, existence is inseparable from suffering: being born means being tied to a world of pain by a helpless body.

Entering this world, the poem suggests, means trouble right from the start. The speaker's mother "groan[s]" in the pain of labor as the speaker is born—and more than that, the speaker's father "we[eps]," perhaps not just tears of joy: he might be upset that this baby is here at all, or he might be worried about how he's going to support it. (It's worth remembering that Blake's 18th-century London was a difficult place to be a kid: poverty and grueling child labor were both widespread.) This baby is entering a "dangerous world" in which people face suffering from the instant they arrive, and can't necessarily rely on their parents for protection.

Coming into this "dangerous world" is even tougher because of just how powerless babies are. The infant speaker, "helpless" and "naked," can't exert any control over their situation. They didn't *ask* to be born, but here they are, a soul trapped in a dependent infant body "like a fiend hid in a cloud." All that they can do is accept their fate, resolving to "sulk" on their "mother's breast" rather than struggle any more. (That "sulking" might also punnily suggest "sucking": the baby, giving up and eating, resigns itself to being alive.)

This baby's predicament, the poem suggests, is *everyone's* predicament. The "swaddling bands" (a kind of tight wrapping used to keep babies still) in which the speaker is "bound" might be read symbolically as an image of the basic difficulty of life: everyone alive is "bound" to a body that's trapped in a world of sufferings.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

INDEPENDENCE VS. CONFORMITY

Through its portrait of an enraged baby who enters the world "like a fiend hid in a cloud," "Infant Sorrow" suggests that society restricts, represses and demonizes people's instinctive energy—the wild souls they're born with. Try though the speaker might to resist this oppression, they're ultimately forced to "sulk[ily]" resign themselves to their fate.

The speaker comes into the world full of vitality and life; in fact, they "leap[]" into the "dangerous world" (an image that suggests their soul existed before birth), and "pip[e] loud," screaming with seemingly untameable vigor. Coming to the world makes them feel "like a fiend hid in a cloud"—in other words, like a demon concealed in the "cloud" of a fleshly body. (To Blake, this demonic energy wouldn't have been a bad thing: he often used images of devils and fiends to suggest exuberant life force, especially the kind that organized religion and civil society liked to quash.) This image suggests that a human soul's natural state is powerful, energetic, independent, and rebellious.

But society can and does tame the speaker's energies—and quickly! Not only is the baby restricted by its helpless little body, its parents do their best to repress it, too. Though the baby "struggle[es]" against its "father's hands," it can't escape being wrapped in "swaddling bands" (tight blankets meant to keep babies still); it's no match for an adult. For that matter, the wide and "dangerous" world will soon oppress the speaker even more. The baby's physical restrictions also suggest societal ones: civilized conventionality, the poem suggests, stamps out

people's individuality and independence—the "fiend[ish]" energy they're born with.

The poem thus suggests that society prevents human beings to be what they're meant to be. Right from birth, the speaker is oppressed both by well-meaning parents and a cruel, "dangerous" wider world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

My mother groan'd! my father wept.

"Infant Sorrow"—and its speaker's life—begins with groans and tears. The poem's first line describes the speaker's first encounter with the world, the day of their birth. Things don't seem to be going especially well:

My mother groan'd! my father wept.

In the most optimistic possible reading, the mother's moans might just be the ordinary pains of childbirth; the father *could* be weeping tears of joy at the miracle of new life. But the "Sorrow" of the poem's title hints otherwise.

The likelihood, then, is that the mother and father are suffering. Perhaps they didn't want this baby; perhaps they feel they won't have the means to support it as it grows. (Blake's poetry often lamented the plight of impoverished children.) Perhaps they know from experience that to be born is to enter a world of great misery—and their "sorrow" anticipates what the child will have to bear. The parallelism of this first line—"My mother groan'd! my father wept"—links the mother and father together, as though *everyone* in the room were suffering the same pain.

All this ominous weeping and moaning strikes a dramatic contrast with this poem's companion piece, "Infant Joy." That poem, which appeared in Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, depicted a baby's delight at entering the world. This baby, however, is entering the world of the *Songs of Experience*, where life is often crueler and darker. This poem will look at all that's painful about coming into this world.

LINE 2

Into the dangerous world I leapt:

Line 2 depicts the moment of the speaker's birth, which, as the reader already knows, isn't a happy one.

As the speaker enters the world, they seem instinctively to know that it's a terrible and "dangerous" place. While the baby in "Infant Joy" literally names itself "Joy" to reflect its "happ[iness]" at being alive, this speaker senses the threat of suffering and hardship right from the get-go.

At first, though, this baby seems to have the energy to meet the world's sorrows head-on. It isn't just passively born; it "leap[s]" into the world, as if crossing some great void into physical existence. In other words, the speaker already seems to exist *before* birth; their soul or spirit (which in Blake is often portrayed as eternal, pure, and vital) lives *elsewhere* before taking up residence in its new body. The verb "Leapt" suggests that this eternal human soul is naturally wild, full of vigorous energy.

The meter of the line reflects this soulful power. The poem is written in accentual tetrameter: in other words, it uses four strong stresses per line, but doesn't stick to any one type of metrical foot. Listen to how the stresses fall here:

Into the dangerous world I leapt:

That first stressed syllable makes this line feel urgent as a drumbeat.

LINES 3-4

Helpless, naked, piping loud;
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

In lines 3 and 4, the speaker describes their first few moments out of the womb.

The third line is pretty true to life: most babies arrive "helpless, naked, [and] piping loud"! But within the context of infant *sorrow*, these words take on deeper meaning:

- The speaker is helpless because they have no choice about being born, nor about the life of suffering that awaits them.
- Their nakedness also suggests their vulnerability—and the idea that they're in a natural state, an unclothed creature that will soon be dressed up (perhaps against its will).
- And their loud "piping" suggests that they're protesting against the indignity of the whole situation!

The asyndeton of the line "Helpless, naked, piping loud" shows that this is all happening quickly and chaotically: there's no time even for an "and" as the baby comes to terms with its humiliating predicament.

The simile in the fourth line introduces a new note of ambiguity to the situation. Describing their newborn self as "Like a fiend hid in a cloud," the speaker paints a picture of demonic fury wrapped up in a soft, formless substance: an energetic and angry soul trapped in a soft body.

When Blake uses the word "fiend," he tends to mean a devilish figure of some sort. But Blake's devils are rarely

straightforwardly evil. On the contrary, many of them represent the kind of wild, vibrant creative energy that society, in Blake's view, *demonized*. "Fiend" could suggest the infant speaker is, like those devils, one of the world's "energetic creators"—which is something that society simply won't allow the child to be.

Perhaps, then, the speaker feels "hid[den] in a cloud" because they know that they won't be permitted to be their true self: their wild, vigorous soul might get clouded out, obscured from view.

LINES 5-6

Struggling in my father's hands:
Striving against my swaddling bands:

In lines 5 and 6, the speaker puts up a fight. Though they've only just been born, they're already feeling restricted by life on earth. Here, the poem subverts two images of comfort and security, portraying them as forms of oppression: both the baby's "swaddling bands" (tight wrappings meant to hold babies still) and its "father's hands" are to be "struggl[ed]" against, in the baby's view.

The father's role in this scene is already ambiguous because of his weeping in line 1; it's difficult to know what he thinks or feels about the baby. He might be trying to comfort his newborn, but maybe he's also trying to hold it back, to make it behave; this could be the first step in a long life of oppression and restriction.

The "swaddling bands," meanwhile, theoretically help babies sleep better and feel safe and snug. Here, though, they're another constraint that the speaker wants to break free from. Of course, the speaker is just a "helpless" baby, so the odds they can successfully fight back aren't great! The speaker's natural energy is thus curtailed: they're literally stuck in a shape imposed on them by the adults in the room.

The "swaddling bands" can thus be read as a symbol of societal oppression more generally—all the social and economic factors that will dictate the terms of the speaker's life. Note how the speaker describes the wrappings as "my swaddling bands": these bindings seem to become part of the unwilling speaker's identity.

Notice how the sound of the lines dramatizes this struggle between the child's natural energy and the external forces that wish to contain it. Both of these parallel lines start with verbs describing the baby's resistance: "Struggling" and "Striving." Then come the things that won't let the speaker move freely, the father's hands and the swaddling bands. This back-and-forth pattern might evoke the speaker's futile thrashing against the inevitable victory of restrictive forces.

LINES 7-8

Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.

The newborn speaker makes a significant decision in lines 7 and 8. Faced with a "dangerous" and oppressive world, finding all their "struggling" is to no avail, they decide to stop trying to break free. "Bound and weary," they resign themselves to "sulk[ing] upon [their] mother's breast."

These lines introduce a note of humor. After all that talk of fiends and screaming, the image of a baby giving up its pitched resistance to "sulk" in its mother's comfortable embrace feels comically anticlimactic. For that matter, the idea that this is a measured choice on the baby's part, the thing it "thought best" to do, gives a lot of agency to this tiny, "helpless, naked" person: it's as if the baby is a little military tactician, making a calculated retreat.

What's more, there's a subtle pun here. "Sulk[ing]" on its mother's breast, the baby is also "sucking" on its mother's breast, accepting the facts of its new body: when you're in this world, like it or not, you've got to eat.

The poem thus ends with an image of comical resignation. But it's also tragic how quickly the world crushes the speaker's instinctive vitality. The world, this poem suggests, doesn't encourage energy and independence; instead, it wants most people to conform, to do what they are told. (For that matter, simply being born into a mortal body that needs to be clothed and fed means facing suffering—perhaps, as the speaker suggests, from the very first moments of life.)

It's the loss and repression of natural energy, the poem suggests, that suffuses life with sorrow; readers are left with a sense of an opportunity lost, both on an individual and a societal level.

SYMBOLS

THE SWADDLING BANDS

The baby's "swaddling bands"—the tight blankets that restrain it—might be read as a wider symbol of restriction: the restrictions of society and of the body.

While the baby's swaddling bands might be meant to make it feel safe and snug, in reality they suppress the baby's natural energy. In doing so, the bands stand in for *all* the ways that society might limit the instinctive wildness of the human spirit (e.g. through poverty or organized religion, two common enemies in Blake's poetry). The baby's parents might have good intentions, but they do society's bidding here, forcing the baby to conform against its will.

For that matter, the bands might suggest the limitations and restrictions of the human body itself! Babies are born in helpless bodies, and even adult bodies are limited by illness and death. Having a body, this symbolism suggests, can feel like a

hindrance as much as a delight.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Striving against my swaddling bands: "

POETIC DEVICES

CAESURA

The poem uses caesura to create an atmosphere of misery, confusion, and oppression. Line 1 barely gets off the ground before it is interrupted by a dramatic exclamation mark:

> My mother groan'd! || my father wept.

This divides the line in half (creating two parallel phrases), and means readers might linger on the word "groan'd" a beat longer, imagining a long moan of pain. By disturbing the poem's flow before it's even gotten started, this caesura also subtly reinforces the idea that the world will likewise restrict the flow of the speaker's energy.

Soon after, line 3 also uses a double whammy of comma caesura. Here, the speaker describes themselves as:

> Helpless, || naked, || piping loud;

These commas compress the line, packing it with three distinct descriptions that capture the speaker's confused, powerless state. Even though caesurae often slow a line down, here they quicken the pace, putting the reader right there in the room with the screaming newborn baby.

It's worth noting, too, how these commas work hand in hand with asyndeton (the lack of a conjunction word like "and"). It's as though the speaker is gathering their first impressions of life, perceiving their own helplessness, nakedness, and *noisiness* in dizzying real time.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "groan'd! my"
- **Line 3:** "Helpless, naked, piping"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism helps to give the poem its drama.

In the first line, the speaker uses parallelism (and anaphora) to describe the speaker's parents:

> My mother groan'd! my father wept.

These echoing phrasings unite the mother and father in distress—and make it clear that the first things the speaker hears in the world are the sounds of their parents' pain. (The father's tears might also be tears of joy, of course, but the baby certainly doesn't seem to think so.) The parallelism here helps the poem to suggest that the speaker's life starts with a bang and a howl. It's not just the newborn who's "piping loud" in distress here: everyone who lives, the phrasing suggests, suffers.

Once born, the speaker puts up a brief but futile fight to preserve its independence. Lines 5 and 6 use parallelism to bring this struggle to life on the page:

> Struggling in my father's hands:
> Striving against my swaddling bands:

Notice how each line begins with resistance—the speaker struggling and striving—and ends with the forces that crush that resistance: the "father's hands" and the "swaddling bands." Struggle and strive though the speaker might, these lines suggest, the forces of oppression restrain them at every turn. (There might be something a little ruefully funny going on here too, though. This image of titanic struggle is also a portrait of a newborn's helpless wriggling!)

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My mother groan'd! my father wept."
- **Lines 5-6:** "Struggling in my father's hands: / Striving against my swaddling bands: "

PUN

A subtle pun offers a comic twist in the poem's closing line.

After all their "struggling" and "striving" for freedom proves fruitless, the speaker gives up and accepts that they'll just have to deal with life in this "dangerous world." As the speaker puts it:

> Bound and weary I thought best
> To sulk upon my mother's breast.

This image of a sulking baby at its "mother's breast" also punnily hints that this is a *sucking* baby, grumpily nursing away. It's worth noting, too, that "suck" is an onomatopoeic word, evoking the sound as well as the sight of a feeding baby.

There's something darkly funny about this scene of a nursing infant—usually imagined as the very picture of tender sweetness—"sulk[ing]" as it sucks, giving in to the necessity of eating with bad grace, forced to admit that it simply doesn't have the strength to escape its life in this repressive, dangerous world or this tiny, helpless body.

This touch of humor at the speaker's expense moderates the tone of the whole poem. The first lines presented a newborn baby's energetic struggle as full of "fiend[ish]" power and

danger, an image of the soul striving for freedom from limitations. This closing pun suggests that there's something more a little ridiculous about the human predicament, too.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "To sulk upon my mother's breast."

SIMILE

In line 4, the newborn speaker describes feeling "like a fiend" (or demon) "hid in a cloud." This striking, ambiguous simile opens up the poem's philosophical possibilities.

"Fiend," for example, doesn't necessarily mean something negative here. Blake often used images of devils to evoke forces he approved of: qualities he felt society unreasonably *demonized*. The devils in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for example, represent the untameable forces of creativity, desire, and independence—qualities that this poem's speaker seems to be born with. Maybe, then, the speaker is a fiend in the sense of being born with a wild, energetic spirit. The word might also suggest the way that society will perceive or treat the speaker if they try to maintain this sense of self as they grow up!

But that's just the first part of the simile. This "fiend" is "hid in a cloud." There are plenty of possibilities here. That "cloud" might suggest the baby's body itself, the flesh its fiendishly energetic soul is "hid" in. (The idea that the baby "leap[s]" into the dangerous world might suggest that its soul existed elsewhere beforehand.) It might evoke a general concealment: born into the confusions and restrictions of life on earth, this baby won't get the chance to be the vigorous, energetic being that it is.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Like a fiend hid in a cloud."

VOCABULARY

Groan'd (Line 1) - A contraction of "groaned"; the speaker's mother is moaning in pain.

Piping (Line 3) - "Piping" here suggests that the baby is crying out in protest.

Fiend (Line 4) - A devil or demon.

Hid (Line 4) - Hidden.

Striving (Line 6) - Fighting.

Swaddling bands (Line 6) - Tight cloth bindings used to hold a baby still.

Sulk (Line 8) - Mope, pout.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Infant Sorrow" uses a short, tight quatrain form. A lot happens within the poem's two four-line stanzas: the events here are as compressed as the baby in its "swaddling bands."

In the first stanza, the speaker is born, struggling and screaming with wild energy as they enter this "dangerous world." It doesn't take long, though, for that spirit to be contained. The second stanza shows the speaker "bound and weary," unable to break free from their father's arms, and resigned to their fate: life in a human body and a restrictive society.

Like many poems in *Songs of Experience*, "Infant Sorrow" has a companion piece in *Songs of Innocence*, "Infant Joy," whose baby speaker feels considerably happier about coming into the world than this poem's speaker does.

METER

Like many Blake poems (and like the folk rhymes that Blake's poetry draws upon), "Infant Sorrow" is written in accentual meter. That means that it uses a certain number of beats per line, but doesn't stick to any one metrical foot in particular.

This poem uses accentual tetrameter: lines with four strong stresses apiece. Here's how that sounds in lines 5-6:

Struggling in my father's hands:
Striving against my swaddling bands:

Both of these lines start with heavy stressed syllables that evoke the speaker's struggle to break free from their father and their "swaddling bands." Compare that to the rhythms of the closing line:

To sulk upon my mother's breast.

As the speaker gives up and accepts their fate, the stresses also fall back and become more regular; in fact, this line is in neat iambic tetrameter (that is, it's built from four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm).

Through accentual meter, then, Blake shapes each line to the poem's action, making this short-but-powerful tale move just like its frustrated speaker does.

RHYME SCHEME

"Infant Sorrow" uses rhyming couplets throughout, like this:

AABB

This simple pattern is typical of Blake, who uses couplets frequently throughout *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. In this particular poem, the neat rhymes might reflect the constrictions and limitations of living in this world—the

bindings the speaker fruitlessly "struggl[es]" against. The rhymes feel tight as the "swaddling bands" the speaker resists.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a newborn baby. Born with a naturally independent spirit, this baby doesn't want to be held back. Alas, it soon finds that, when one's born with a "helpless" infant body, one really doesn't have much choice but to resign oneself to one's fate: life in a "dangerous" and oppressive world.

There's something ironic going on in Blake's choice of speaker here. The word "infant" originally meant "incapable of speech"; newborns don't generally get the chance to speak for themselves. The poem thus gives voice to a voiceless figure, putting words to the baby's outraged screams. This baby thus becomes a spokesperson for everyone who's gone through the indignity of being born.

SETTING

The poem is set during the first few moments of its speaker's life. As the newborn speaker "leap[s]" into the "dangerous world," screaming and struggling, they fill the room with noise and chaos. But by the end of the poem, the speaker has stopped fighting, resolving to silently "sulk upon my mother's breast" instead.

Readers might thus get the sense that this poem is set on the border between two worlds: a world that exists before life on earth—the world from which the speaker "leap[s]" into physical being—and our own "dangerous" and restrictive world, in which the speaker's wild, instinctive energy will be constrained by the metaphorical "swaddling bands" of convention and oppression.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Blake (1757-1827) is a poet unlike any other. Often considered one of the first English Romantics, he also stands apart from any movement as a unique philosopher, prophet, and artist.

Blake published "Infant Sorrow" as part of the *Experience* section of his best-known work, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794). 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. This poem has "Infant Joy" as its mirror, a poem that presents an ecstatic vision of new life. "Infant Sorrow" also shares common ground with "A Little Boy Lost," in which a young child is deemed a "fiend" by a priest—the high representative of organized religion—for daring to think differently.

Blake didn't just *write* poetry: he also designed, engraved, printed, painted, and published illuminated manuscripts using a technique he called the "infernal method." Blake 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.

Even among the often countercultural Romantics, then, Blake was an outlier. Samuel Taylor Coleridge himself—no stranger to a wild vision—once remarked that he was "in the very mire of common-place common-sense compared with Mr. Blake."

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 saw top-down religious structures as getting in the way of a more direct relationship between humanity and God.

Blake also 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 were forced to work in factories, dig in mines, and sweep chimneys (an absurdly dangerous job, contrary to the cheery Mary Poppins image many are familiar with: chimney-sweeps as young as three or four years old regularly suffocated in narrow flues). Adults didn't have it much easier. With few regulations to keep factory owners in check, bosses could impose impossible working hours, or withhold pay for any number of trifling offenses. Perhaps the child in this poem anticipates a life of toil and economic hardship.

For Blake, the factories of the Industrial Revolution represented a form of physical and mental enslavement—the "mind-forg'd manacles" mentioned in his poem "London." His poetry proceeds from both a deep commitment to God and an

even deeper dissatisfaction with the ways in which society spoils this spiritual relationship.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- 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 of Experience — Visit the Blake Archive to see this poem as Blake originally published it in a beautiful illuminated manuscript. (http://www.blakearchive.org/work/songsie)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of both "Infant Sorrow" and "Infant Joy." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrurUhX8KG0)
- 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)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

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