

Literary text • *Infant Joy*

from *Songs of Innocence*, by William Blake

BEFORE YOU READ

- 1 In what way do you think infancy and joy may be related?

'I have no name,
I am but¹ two days old.'
What shall I call thee?
'I happy am,
Joy is my name.'
Sweet joy befall thee!²
Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old,
Sweet joy I call thee;
Thou dost³ smile,
I sing the while,⁴
Sweet joy befall thee!

- 1 **I am but:** I am only.
- 2 **befall thee:** be given to you, however the use of the word 'befall' also suggests Blake's paradoxical belief that existence itself was a fallen state.
- 3 **dost:** do (arch.).
- 4 **the while:** in the meantime.

COMPREHENSION

- 1 Look at the first stanza.
 - a Who or what is speaking to the poet?
 - b How old is it?
 - c What does the poet wish?
- 2 Who is speaking in the second stanza?

ANALYSIS

- 3 Listen to the poem. What is its rhyme scheme?
- 4 What elements contribute to the poem's musicality? Look for examples of rhyme, repetition and consonance.
- 5 What are the qualities that the poet associates with the baby?
- 6 How would you describe Blake's language? Choose from the following:

complex • simple • straightforward • musical • philosophical • rhetorical • formal • informal • childish

- 7 Find the line in the poem which is repeated. What is the significance of this line? Fill in the following text with the appropriate words from the list.

given • joy • fall • repeated • born

The poem appears to express the simple **1** of a baby being **2** into the world and equates this joy with existence itself, by naming the child 'joy'. But this feeling is complicated and questioned by the **3** line which concludes each verse, 'sweet joy befall thee'. Here the word 'befall' refers to the idea that the experience of joy is **4** to us by the fact that we come into existence, it is part of the 'gift' of time that constitutes every individual life. But the verb 'befall' contains the word **5** '.....', thus suggesting that this gift of time is also a kind of fall, connected to the idea of original sin. Exactly what this fall consists of we shall see in the complementary poem, *Infant Sorrow*.

Literary text • *Infant Sorrow*

from *Songs of Innocence*, by William Blake

My mother groaned,¹ my father wept!²
 Into the dangerous world I leapt:³
 Helpless, naked, piping⁴ loud
 Like a fiend⁵ hid in a cloud.
 Struggling in my father's hands,
 Striving against⁶ my swaddling bands,⁷
 Bound⁸ and weary⁹ I thought best
 To sulk¹⁰ upon my mother's breast.

1 groaned: made a sound expressing pain or suffering.

2 wept: cried.

3 leapt: jumped.

4 piping: shouting, screaming.

5 fiend [find]: devil.

6 striving against: trying to escape.

7 swaddling bands: the cloth in which a baby is wrapped when it is born.

8 Bound: tied, but also restricted.

9 weary [wiəri]: tired.

10 sulk: to be sullen and morose, to hide from or reject contact with the world.

COMPREHENSION

- 1 What event does the first stanza describe? What are the mother's and father's reactions to the event?
- 2 How does the baby describe itself and its entry to the world? Does it appear happy to exist? Why or why not?
- 3 What is its immediate view of the world it has been born into?
- 4 Now look at the second stanza. How does the child react to being born?
- 5 Look at the last lines. What does the baby eventually decide to do? Why, do you think?

ANALYSIS

- 6 Listen to the poem again and note down its metre and rhyme scheme.
- 7 Identify the simile in which Blake alludes to the figure of Lucifer in *Paradise Lost*. Why do you think he connects this image with that of a newborn child?
- 8 Now look at the second stanza. In what sense is the baby 'bound'? Look up this word in your dictionary and see what meanings it can have here.
- 9 Identify the enjambment in the second stanza. What might this convey? Choose from the following or add your own interpretation:
 - a the baby's need to be fed
 - b the baby turning away from the world it has just entered
 - c the baby's desire to sleep
 - d the baby's happiness at being born
 - e

- 10 Now consider the two poems in relation to one another. How is the meaning of 'Infant Joy' modified after reading 'Infant Sorrow'? Complete the following text with the words from the list.

sorrowful • exchange • breast •
 pain • baby • Lost • limitation

The notion alluded to in the first poem that the joy of existence constitutes a type of fall, is confirmed by 'Infant Sorrow', where the new-born **1** compares its being born into the world with the fall of the angel Lucifer ('fiend') from Heaven as recounted in Milton's *Paradise* **2** Here the baby sees itself thrown into a dangerous and **3** world. It senses the **4** of its mother's labour and its father's sadness and then struggles against the limitations of its helpless human form. The meaning of the word 'bound' is extended to life itself as a **5** of possibility, and also to the baby's being 'bound' – destined – to die. At the end of the poem, the baby, in seeking the mother's **6** shows its desire to return to its former paradisiacal state of non-separation and non-being, when it existed only in the realm of pure possibility.

Thus, taken together, the two poems show how the gift of life is also a gift of death, the **7** of the infinity of not yet existing for the finite joy and sorrow of life.

DISCUSSION

- 11 Do you consider joy and sorrow as independent or interdependent? Discuss with other students.