The Little Black Boy

POEM TEXT

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
White as an angel is the English child:
But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

My mother taught me underneath a tree
And sitting down before the heat of day,
She took me on her lap and kissed me,
And pointing to the east began to say.

Look on the rising sun: there God does live
And gives his light, and gives his heat away.
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort in morning joy in the noonday.

And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love,
And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear
The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.
Saying: come out from the grove my love & care,
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.

Thus did my mother say and kissed me,
And thus I say to little English boy.
When I from black and he from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:

I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear,
To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him and he will then love me.

SUMMARY

My mother gave birth to me in Africa. I am Black, but I feel passionately that I have a white soul. The English boy is white like an angel, but, being Black, I look like I lack divine light.

I remember a lesson my mother taught me. One morning, before the day got too hot, she sat me down on her lap underneath a tree and kissed me. She pointed towards the sun and began to speak.

She told me to look at the sun as it rose, and said that's where God lives. God offers us light and warmth. All the living beings of the world receive comfort and joy from his energy.

My mother continued: God put us here on earth—in a small space—so that we could learn to accept and appreciate the rays of his love. Our Black bodies and faces are just a cloud, or the shade from trees.

Once our souls have learned to take the heat, God will announce that there is no longer any need for our earthly bodies. He will beckon us out from the shade and invite us to frolic around his tent like joyful lambs.

That's what my loving mother told me, and I'm passing on this lesson to the English boy. When he and I are freed from our earthly identities—me from blackness and him from whiteness—we'll gather around God's tent and play in joy and freedom (like lambs).

I'll offer him shade from the rays of God's love until he can tolerate the heat, and we'll lean upon God's knee. Then I'll stand up and stroke his white hair, and, being like the English boy, he'll love me.

THEMES

RACIAL EQUALITY AND DIVINE LOVE

"The Little Black Boy" is an 18th-century poem in which a Black child attempts to figure out his place in this world and the next (that is, in the spiritual afterlife). The poem says that race will cease to matter when the speaker is united with God in the afterlife. The poem thus argues that divine love transcends race, and that all races are equal in the eyes of God.

The speaker starts by talking about his upbringing "in the southern wild," an allusion to Africa. The boy himself states that though he "bereav'd of light" his "soul is white." Blake here is playing into the idea of white and black as symbolic concepts, with whiteness/light (that is, an absence of darkness) being associated with goodness, purity, and love. The speaker here is stating a claim to these positive attributes, and the poem is insisting that he, too, is worthy of God's love.

The speaker then recounts how his mother taught him to associate God with the sun, and that the purpose of earthly life is to "learn to bear the beams of love." In other words, the sun's rays are the rays of God's love, and the speaker "bear[s]" more of these beams than the white "little English boy." The speaker's

"sun-burnt" skin thus becomes a mark of his closeness to God rather than a source of shame. (In reality, of course, having dark skin has nothing to do with being "sun-burnt"; Blake is trying to make a point with his imagery here, rather than a scientific argument about skin color.)

The mother's story concludes with the idea that identity is only temporary—blackness or whiteness are just "cloud[s]" that people wear during earthly life. Racial differences disappear in heaven, where the two boys will finally become free and equal, and "like lambs rejoice." The speaker restates this idea and suggests that in heaven he will provide shade to the "little English boy."

Blake intends this as a vision of equality and joyful communion, but note that this is at odds with the way in which the speaker, even in heaven, "shade[s]" the white boy. In a sense, the poem argues that the speaker—through his experience of God's "beams of love"—is *better* prepared (perhaps due to his experience of suffering in life) for a spiritual relationship with God, and thus must help the white boy when they both meet in the full brightness of God's love. At the same time, this image makes the speaker deferential to the white boy even in death.

And, of course, readers never learn of the English boy's response. In the end, the speaker might be taken as presenting an innocent but ultimately naive perspective. As a child, the boy perhaps hasn't yet fully encountered the brutality of society's racist evils, and so can still buy into hopeful but unrealistic visions of the future.

Finally, it's important for the reader to understand that, even as the poem ostensibly seeks compassion and equality, the poem itself embodies many of the racist attitudes common in the 18th century (and, of course, afterwards)—with treating Africa as a "wild" or, uncivilized, place being just one example. The speaker also seeks the approval of the English boy and remains subservient to him even in the afterlife—meaning that race in fact does not float away after death, and that the speaker remains subject to the prejudices he faced on earth even in heaven.

It's possible Blake was aware of this, and, again, was purposefully seeking to make an ironic commentary on the young speaker's naivety. Elsewhere in Blake's work, he does indeed condemn the promise of an idyllic afterlife as a means to excuse earthly mistreatment. Then again, the poem might simply be unaware of its own racism.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-12
- Lines 13-28

LIFE, LOVE, AND THE AFTERLIFE

The poem presents a vision of the Christian afterlife, and argues that people's identities on Earth are only temporary. Here, as in other Blake poems, an idealized vision of the afterlife explains and informs the meaning of earthly existence—that to be alive is, in effect, to be passing through the earthly world, and that before too long people will be reunited with a fundamentally loving and kind God.

The young speaker puts forward the view, which he has learned from his mother, that life on earth is short and fleeting—and perhaps even not all that important within the overall context of people's "souls." Though the poem doesn't directly address earthly suffering, this perspective suggests that suffering is something temporary—and that sufferers can look forward to eternal joy in the afterlife.

Later, the speaker restates what his mother taught him about why human beings are given earthly lives: "we are put on earth a little space, / That we may learn to bear the beams of love." Earthly life, then, has a purpose that isn't necessarily immediately obvious: to *prepare* for the afterlife. Indeed, this preparation is about acquiring knowledge, suggested by the use of the word "learn." This learning and preparation may help give meaning to earthly suffering, but the form of the poem suggests another kind of lesson as well.

The second stanza, together with the last three, provide similar visions—one earthly and one heavenly. The young boy grows up with the love, care, and affection of his mother, who holds him close to her as she talks about the afterlife. Then, in the subsequent image of the afterlife presented in the last three stanzas, the boy has a similar relationship with God, a relationship that is loving, nurturing, and akin to the love between a mother and child.

With this in mind, then, the "learn[ing]" of earthly experience could also be a question of learning how to love and be loved. In turn, the speaker wishes to show the same kind of care and affection for the "little English boy," picturing the two of them as God's "lambs" set free from the limitations of earthly identity.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 15-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
White as an angel is the English child:
But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

The poem begins with the speaker talking about his upbringing

and his relationship with his mother. He explains that he was born in "the southern wild," an allusion to Africa (which lies far to the south of England). Consonance and assonance in "mother" and "southern" link these words together, lending the poem a kind of sing-song, bouncy rhythm from the start.

Line 2 then begins to develop its antithesis between blackness and whiteness. The boy is aware of his skin color, but professes that his "soul"—that is, who he is on the inside—is "white." The poem is trying to relate the well-established religious symbolism of light and dark (good and evil) with the skin color. By stating that his "soul is white" the speaker argues that his soul is faithful and pure, regardless of what he looks like. The exclamation mark after "O!" creates a pause, or caesura, in the line that marks the strength of the speaker's feeling.

In lines 3 and 4, the boy compares himself with an "English child." The other boy is "white as an angel," making it *seem*—given the way that Christianity links whiteness/light to goodness—that he is somehow more Godly than the speaker himself. The white boy looks angelic, because angels are so frequently depicted as being white and shrouded in a bright aura of shining light. The common rhyme of "white" with "light" in this stanza reinforces this connection.

If skin color really is an indicator of godliness, worries the speaker, then his own dark skin makes him look as if he is "bereav'd of light" (lacking in the light of God). Line 4 uses heavy /b/ alliteration through "but," "black," and "bereav'd," defining the line with one particular attribute in a way that echoes how the boy is defined by his skin. "Bereav'd" is an important word choice because it suggests a sense of loss and sorrow. Though the reader learns little of the speaker's circumstances, his perception of inferiority—or of the potential to be judged as inferior—could be based on his experiences of the world thus far (the Atlantic slave trade, for example, was in full swing).

The form established in this stanza will continue throughout the poem. Each stanza is a quatrain, meaning it has four lines, that fall in an ABAB rhyme scheme. The meter is iambic pentameter, meaning each line has five poetic feet in a da-DUM rhythm. All of these attributes make the poem seem rather simple and familiar, which is fitting given that its speaker is a child.

Ironically, and likely unintentionally, even in the first stanza the poem starts to show some of the racist attitudes that it attempts to argue against. For example, Blake associates Africa with uncivilized wildness and a lack of moral and social refinement. These types of arguments were often used to justify the conquering of nonwhite peoples and the enslavement of Black men, women, and children. It's important to keep such context in mind while reading the poem, which reflects many of the racist ideas of its time even as it pushes for equality.

LINES 5-8

My mother taught me underneath a tree
And sitting down before the heat of day,
She took me on her lap and kissed me,
And pointing to the east began to say.

The first line of the second stanza echoes the first line of the previous stanza, creating a sense of continuity in the poem. There is clear parallelism here, as both lines begin with "My mother" followed by "[verb] + me" followed by a location:

My mother *bore* me *in the southern wild*,

And:

My mother *taught* me *underneath a tree*

The repeated references to the speaker's mother also emphasize just how important she has been in her son's life, and how her love and teachings have shaped his view of the world.

This stanza specifically sounds like a kind of parable. Mother and son take shelter before the "heat of day"—meaning it's before noon, when the sun is at its height—underneath a tree. The mother sits the boy on her lap and kisses him, displaying a tender, nurturing love that is very similar to what the speaker ultimately expects from God in the afterlife. Indeed, it is the mother who provides this vision of a better afterlife to the young boy, presumably as a way of helping him cope with the suffering that, in the poem, comes with being Black in this earthly life. The mother then points "to the east," implicitly gesturing towards the sun (which rises in the East).

This stanza retains the steady ABAB rhyme scheme and iambic pentameter of the first. Assonance and consonance add further musicality to the lines. Note the long /ee/ and /m/ sounds of lines 5-6, for example:

My mother taught me underneath a tree
And sitting down before the heat of day,

The poem continues to sound steady and pleasant, reflecting the purity and innocence of its speaker.

LINES 9-12

Look on the rising sun: there God does live
And gives his light, and gives his heat away.
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort in morning joy in the noonday.

The mother draws the boy's attention to the "rising sun," which is also where, according to the speaker's mother, God lives. She associates God himself with light and warmth; the rising of the sun, and the way that the sun enables life to grow, is presented

as a kind of daily gift of love by God. Alliteration between "God" in line 9 and "gives" in line 10 links God with the act of loving generosity, as though each day God creates the world anew. Furthermore, light and heat are drawn directly "away" from God—he is their source, like some kind of holy battery—which is an idea that has an important place in the subsequent discussion of skin color.

Polysyndeton is important in this stanza too:

> And gives his light, and gives his heat away.
> And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
> Comfort in morning joy in the noonday.

These "ands" suggest abundance, as though God's generosity and creation is practically limitless. They also gently echo the sound of the Bible itself, which, in the King James Version, is brimming with polysyndeton. Compare the mother's retelling of the Creation myth with how it appears in Genesis in the KJV:

> In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

These lines of the Bible also demonstrate that the division between light and dark is deeply embedded in the Christianity itself. It's from this fundamental symbolism—that light is good, and dark is bad—that the poem attempts to make sense of race.

All in all, then, this section works by building an image of a joyous world in which all creatures "receive / Comfort." The boy carries this image with him through life, expecting it to become a reality after his time on Earth is finished. Of course, what is notably absent from the poem is any real acknowledgment that the lived experience for people, particularly at the time Blake was writing, was entirely different depending on their skin color.

LINES 13-16

And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love,
And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

The speaker continues recounting what his mother told him about the world. Here, she comments specifically on the issue of race—why it is, in particular, that she and the boy have black skin. Though Blake is in one sense ahead of his time in trying to argue for equality between races, to do so he also reinforces racial stereotypes and implies that darker skin is inferior to lighter skin.

The mother explains that people are "put on earth" in order to "learn to bear the beams of love" (that is, to receive the light of God). The alliterating /b/ sound harks back to line 4, when /b/ was associated with blackness, an association which continues here. The word choice of "bear" is important because it suggests suffering and difficulty—to "bear" something is to put up with it. Think how different this line would read if "bear" was replaced with "enjoy" or "bask in." The use of "bear" hints at the perils of being Black in the 18th century, when slavery was still legal in England. Blake is also implying that the speaker's life is inherently filled with more suffering than the life of "the English child" (an idea that rests on racist assumptions about the "wildness" of Africa introduced in the first line of the poem).

The boy's mother preempts this suffering by portraying earthly life as a kind of lesson that helps prepare the soul for reunion with God in the afterlife. Presenting life this way gives meaning to what otherwise seems intolerable pain.

It's worth considering that similar perspectives occur in other poems in the *Songs of Innocence*. In "The Chimney Sweeper," a naive young (white) boy accepts the horrors of the chimney sweep profession precisely because of his belief in God's love (and Blake singles out organized religion for particular responsibility). This poem doesn't present the speaker's perspective as inherently naive, but it's worth considering the way his youthfulness and lack of worldly experience—like the chimney sweep's—inform his hopeful point of view.

In lines 15 and 16, the poem argues that earthly identity is ephemeral. The mother suggests to the boy that his race is just "a cloud," a temporary state that will pass by. While this metaphor—skin as a kind of cloud—is extended to whiteness in line 23, here the poem again reveals its essential racism by presents being Black as some kind of inferior or damaged state.

Black faces are "sun-burnt," the notion of being burned suggesting there is something wrong with them (even at the same time as Blake tries to argue that skin color is irrelevant in the eyes of God). In scientific fact, of course, darker skin tones are *better* able to "bear the beams" of the sun and are less prone to burning. The poem is trying to imply that the boy's dark skin means he's had more exposure to God's light. Through simile, his skin is then compared to "a shady grove"—an idea which the boy picks up on the last stanza.

LINES 17-20

For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear
The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.
Saying: come out from the grove my love & care,
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.

The fifth stanza continues the mother's explanation of the relationship between earthly life and the afterlife. It's worth noting that the poem doesn't specify that the mother is talking about Christianity *exclusively*, but there are enough allusions to Christianity make this leap. To name a few:

- The association between heaven and clouds is common in Christian depictions of the afterlife.
- The idyllic "grove" evokes the Garden of Eden.
- The "golden tent" evokes the tabernacle, also known as the Tent of the Congregation or the Tent of Meeting, God's dwelling place in the Old Testament.
- A lamb is usually used to symbolize Christ, and the Lamb of God appears in many Christian prayers.
- The silver-haired, paternal God is in keeping with traditional Christian depictions of God.

The boy's mother tells him that God will recall humanity to heaven once human "souls have learn'd the heat to bear"—that is, when humans have learned to receive the "beams of love" they will be welcomed back into heaven. It's a little confusing, because God's love is something which the poem talks of as both "joy[ful]" (as in the closing image) *and* difficult to "bear" (like the relentless heat of the Sun along the equator). This reinforces the logical difficulty of discussing skin and race within a symbolic system that so clearly relates light/whiteness to God, goodness, and purity.

Using asyndeton, the boy recalls his mother's words about what will happen when the great day comes:

> The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.

The lack of an "and" suggests the way that this event will immediate and dramatic—as if there will be no time for a word like "and." The delicate /sh/ consonance, highlighted above, helps conjure the image of clouds disappearing. Of course, these clouds are metaphorical—for Blake, they represent the temporary particulars of human identity. God will tell humanity to:

> [...] come out from the grove my love & care,
> And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.

Lambs are a common symbol in Blake's poetry, and represent innocence, purity, love, and godliness (and sometimes Christ himself). The simile here paints a joyful image of humanity reunited with God, living in a world in which skin color is irrelevant.

LINES 21-24

Thus did my mother say and kissed me,
And thus I say to little English boy.
When I from black and he from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:

The penultimate stanza marks the conclusion of the mother's words. The memory of the mother's advice ends as it began, with an image of tenderness and affection:

> Thus did my mother say and kissed me,

The alliterative /m/ and consonant /s/ sounds have a gentle, almost playful effect that conveys the intimacy of the mother-son relationship—and this relationship remains crucial to how the boy sees his earthly existence and the afterlife. The /s/ consonance, evoking that tenderness, is present in the next line too:

> And thus I say to little English boy.

With additional /l/ consonance, which is also soft, the boy explains how he wishes to pass on his mother's advice to the "little English boy." Essentially, he calls on the latter boy not to worry about earthly identity (including skin color) because, as his mother taught him, soon the "cloud[s]" of identity will evaporate and both boys will exist in joy, harmony, and equality under the watchful eye of God. Blackness and whiteness are merely temporary states before the entry into paradise, the poem argues.

Of course, this may prove little consolation to the boy as he encounters suffering and punishment throughout his life on the basis of his skin color while the white "little English boy" does not. Indeed, in its attempt to present an ideal vision of the afterlife, the poem is very quick to erase any of the stark and real differences in lived experience between being Black and white in the 18th century. Though Blake is, in one sense, unusual in the era for trying to depict Black and white people as equals, this equality can only take place once earthly life is a distant memory.

Line 24 offers a vision of this utopian afterlife, restating what the boy's mother said in line 20:

> And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:

Through simile, the poem again compares the boys to "lambs." This is a common image in Blake's poems (see: "The Lamb") that portrays innocence, instinctive joy, spiritual purity, and closeness to God (Christ himself is sometimes referred to as the *agnes dei*, meaning "lamb of God"). The alliterative "like lambs" is intentionally playful, supporting the vision of the boys frolicking in their newfound freedom. Of course, part of the poem's problem is that the English boy most likely already *has* this freedom, whereas the speaker almost certainly won't.

LINES 25-28

I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear,
To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him and he will then love me.

The poem ends with a vision of the afterlife in which the speaker offers "shade" to the white English boy. Though this is an idealized image, the poem still seems to present God's love as something that is difficult to "bear," like "heat" (which is why

the speaker thinks the white boy will need shading from its beams).

At the same time, both boys are supposed to be closer to the love and divine grace of God, who appears to be presented in the typical silver-haired father image so common in Western depictions of Christianity. There is a degree of tension, then, between the idea that the white boy needs to be shaded and the fact that this is supposed to be a vision of heavenly paradise. Essentially, the speaker seems to be saying that it's here, in the afterlife, that his ability to deal with the rays of God's love will come in most useful, because he will be able to shade the white boy until he (the white boy) will also be able to tolerate the heat and glare of God's love.

That both boys are already frolicking "like lambs," however, seems to contradict the idea that the white boy needs this kind of help. Furthermore, the poem has thus far argued that earthly identities—metaphorically described as "clouds"—will be cast off in the afterlife, yet it appears that race still plays a role even here.

Perhaps Blake is arguing that the speaker is instinctively closer to God because he will have more experience of suffering in his earthly life, but elsewhere in Blake's poetry it is hard to find a similar argument in support or explanation of earthly hardship. Indeed, Blake's other poems in the same collection often express outrage that anyone—particularly children—should have to endure such pain in the name of religion (particularly in the way that religion is administered by institutions like the church).

In the poem's last two lines, the speaker states that, once he has offered his shade to the English boy, he will:

> [...] stand and stroke his silver hair,
> And be like him and he will then love me.

Though the grammar is somewhat ambiguous, here the speaker seems to refer to God rather than the English boy. He pictures himself in a similar image of love and affection as presented in the earlier discussion of his mother—though the parent-figure now is God. The /s/ alliteration suggests tenderness and intimacy between the boy and his God, who will "then love me [the speaker]." Another question arises for the reader whether this means that God *didn't* fully love the speaker already, but this remains unanswered.

The last two lines could also be interpreted as referring to the "English boy." In one of Blake's illustrations for this poem, the speaker has his hand on the other boy's shoulder and could be stroking his hair. The speaker imagines becoming like the white boy, who then loves the speaker—an idea which again reinforces the idea that blackness represents inferiority.

Indeed, the poem—perhaps intentionally, perhaps unintentionally—ends on an ironic note, as even in heaven, the speaker still serves the white child and seeks his approval. The speaker thought all racial differences had floated away like clouds, but it's clear that something still divides him from God and the English child. This closing image, even as it attempts to demonstrate the equality between all peoples and races, seems to *reinforce* racial divide by portraying the speaker as subservient to the English boy. That is, it is the speaker who has to assist the white, in what is an uncomfortable and perhaps accidental echo of the lived experience of many Black people in the 18th century.

Blake may have been aware of this, and was implying that the speaker is naive to the point of delusion in thinking that "the little English boy"—and by extension white society—would ever treat him as truly equal. Taken thus, the poem becomes a rather cynical and bitter rejection of promises of heavenly salvation. Alternatively, and perhaps more likely, the poem is unaware of the way that it perpetuates the racism of its time.

SYMBOLS

LIGHT

Light, and sunlight in particular, plays an important role in the poem. Its symbolism can get a bit tricky/murky, however, since Blake plays into ideas of lightness as representative of purity and innocence while also insisting that the Black speaker's skin color actually brings him closer to God.

Most broadly, the sun in the poem represents God himself, as well as his warmth and love. The sun is essential to life on the planet, a fact that the speaker's mother talks about in the third stanza. She says that the sun's rays are the "beams of [God's] love"; the physical effects of the sun, then, come to represent the way that God nurtures all life. As is stated in lines 11-12, "flowers and trees and beasts and men" received "comfort" and "joy" from the sun and, therefore, from God. The sun itself is a creation of God, too, and so also represents the awesomeness of his divine power.

When the speaker says in the first stanza that he is "bereav'd of light," he is saying that he looks on the outside as though he has received none of this nourishment, warmth, and love from God—an assumption that the speaker's mother is quick to dismantle as the poem moves forward.

While the English book looks "white as an angel"—with whiteness/light again being linked to purity and innocence—blackness in the poem represents a different relationship to God. Black people are described as having "sun-burnt face[s]," a frankly racist way of describing their skin color. Blake is trying to make the point, though, that dark skin too can be a sign of God's love, as it represents the absorption those aforementioned "beams." The poem thus suggests that Black people might be *better* prepared to "bear" the "heat" of God.

That's why the Black boy pictures himself shading the white English boy.

As noted throughout this guide, take care to remember that the thinking here is predicated on racism. Blackness has nothing to do with being "burnt," a descriptor that implies Black people are damaged in some way. Having the speaker find love only when being more "like" the English boy (or God) and also shading the English boy in heaven reinforce stereotypes of Black people as subservient to white people. Even in heaven, it seems, the speaker is marked out as separate from the "little English boy." Perhaps Blake was aware of this and is making an ironic commentary on the speaker's naivety. Even so, the poem's argument for racial equality exhibits the racism it seeks to condemn.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "But I am black as if bereav'd of light."
- **Lines 9-12:** "Look on the rising sun: there God does live / And gives his light, and gives his heat away. / And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive / Comfort in morning joy in the noonday."
- **Lines 14-16:** "That we may learn to bear the beams of love, / And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face / Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove."
- **Lines 17-18:** "For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear / The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice."
- **Lines 25-26:** "I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear, / To lean in joy upon our fathers knee."

LAMBS

The speaker compares himself and the English boy to lambs two times in the poem. This isn't because lambs seem like fun, happy animals; it's because lambs are symbolic of innocence and purity in the Christian tradition. Lams are also representative of Christ himself, who is sometimes portrayed as depicted as the *Agnus dei*, or lamb of God. The speaker is saying that, once race is erased in heaven, both the speaker and the English boy will be pure and innocent, and thus able to rejoice.

Lambs pop up in a lot of Blake's work. Blake essentially thought that people were naturally filled with purity, love, and joy, but that children eventually lost such innocence. In becoming "like lambs" in heaven, the speaker and English boy regain that innocence and, in doing so, become closer to God.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** "And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice."
- **Line 24:** "And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration throughout. The first alliteration occurs in the first opening words of the poem:

> My mother bore me in the southern wild,

The repeated use of the phrase throughout the poem shows the importance of the speaker's mother in shaping how the speaker sees the world. The alliteration has a gentle playfulness, convening the intimacy and affection between mother and son.

The rest of the stanza uses prominent /b/ alliteration:

> And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
> White as an angel is the English child:
> But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

The alliteration associates dark skin with the state of being "bereav'd of light," building a sense that it is somehow inferior (or seen as inferior). Likewise with the link to the word "but," which is often a word that signals the introduction of a problem or obstacle (e.g., "I was going to go the shops, *but* they were closed"). Though the poem tries to suggest that race is irrelevant—at least in the afterlife—it is also subconsciously reinforces the idea that being Black represents a kind of flaw or fault.

This is picked up in line 15, where "black bodies" are portrayed as having "sun-burnt" faces, with the image of burning suggesting that something is wrong with black skin. The poem implies that this is because Black people are more adept at "bear[ing]" the "beams" of God's love, alluding to the heat and sun of the African continent. It's a somewhat confusing image because being "burnt" suggests that Black people do *not* really "bear" these rays effectively.

In line 18, the poem uses alliteration (and consonance) to suggest the presence of God's voice:

> The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.

Notice how this cluster of alliteration seems to turn up the poetic volume of the poem (especially if read out loud), thus helping to create a sense of drama around the moment when God finally speaks to humankind.

After God speaks and invites humankind back into paradise (and/or heaven), the boys will live out joyful, carefree existences free from the limitations of earthly identity. Here the poem uses the alliterative simile "like lambs" to describe this eternal happiness and child-like innocence. The speaker imagines himself stroking his (divine) father's hair: "I'll send and

stroke his silver hair[.]" This alliteration suggests intimacy and affection, and gently echos the use of alliteration to describe the other nurturing relationship in the poem—mother and son.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My mother," "me"
- **Line 2:** "black, but," "white"
- **Line 3:** "White"
- **Line 4:** "But," "black," "bereav'd"
- **Line 5:** "My mother," "taught," "me," "tree"
- **Line 6:** "down," "day"
- **Line 9:** "God"
- **Line 10:** "gives," "gives"
- **Line 13:** "little"
- **Line 14:** "learn," "bear," "beams," "love"
- **Line 15:** "black bodies," "burnt"
- **Line 16:** "but"
- **Line 18:** "will," "vanish," "we," "hear his," "voice"
- **Line 20:** "like lambs"
- **Line 21:** "my mother"
- **Line 24:** "like lambs"
- **Line 25:** "him," "heat," "he"
- **Line 27:** "stand," "stroke," "his," "silver," "hair"
- **Line 28:** "him," "he"

ALLUSION

There are many allusions in "The Little Black Boy." The "southern wild" mentioned in the poem's opening line is an allusion to Africa, which lies to the south of England. This draws on the racist association between Africa and "wild[ness]"/savagery. The term establishes a division between the supposedly civilized world of England and the allegedly uncivilized African continent—a notion that seems to contrast with the poem's attempt at a message of racial equality.

This is poem is widely debated and has many contradicting critical interpretations, and one of the key issues in this debate is the mother's advice to the speaker. For some, her vision of the afterlife and the way she explains the value of earthly life are based on religious ideas that come from beyond the Christian framework (from somewhere in the vague "southern wild"). However, it's also valid to view her lesson as fundamentally Christian, particularly in the way that the third stanza appears to allude to the Book of Genesis (the first book of the Bible).

In this stanza—as in Genesis—God is depicted as the source of all warmth and light, and the creator of a world of abundance and joy. The use of polysyndeton supports the idea that this relates to the Bible (the King James Version is full of "ands"). Furthermore, the boy's vision of his divine "father"—God—is strikingly similar to the common depiction of God as an old man. Indeed, the rest of the poem is firmly rooted in Christian theology, so to consider this stanza as an exception seems a little far-fetched.

The reference to "lambs" in lines 20 and 24 is another allusion to Christianity. In the Biblical book of John, Jesus is called the "Lamb of God." This helps build a picture of freedom, joy, happiness, and closeness to God—the future afterlife which the speaker anticipates so keenly.

Finally, the reference to the "tent of God" in lines 20 and 24 might be a subtle allusion to the tabernacle, God's dwelling place in the Old Testament.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the southern wild"
- **Lines 9-12:** "Look on the rising sun: there God does live / And gives his light, and gives his heat away. / And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive / Comfort in morning joy in the noonday."
- **Line 20:** "my golden tent," "like lambs"
- **Line 24:** "the tent of God," "like lambs"

JUXTAPOSITION

"Little Black Boy" depends heavily on antithesis, positioning black and white as opposites—even as it attempts to argue that blackness and whiteness are ultimately not all that important. The first example of antithesis is in line 2:

> And I am black, but O! my soul is white;

Here, the boy feels his skin color to be some kind of disadvantage or proof of inferiority. But he also feels instinctively that he is faithful, pure, and innocent, all attributes associated with the symbolism of whiteness. Indeed, Christianity is pretty much constructed out of the same antithesis: light/whiteness is good, and dark/blackness is bad. Look at this passage taken from the book of John, one of the New Testament's Gospels:

> This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.
> If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth:
> But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

The speaker of the poem has instinctively absorbed the lesson outlined above—that darkness is bad, and that light is a symbol of godliness. Understandably, he wishes to disown the association between dark skin and spiritual darkness and assert his own inner light, his "white" soul. Yet in line 4 he restates that his skin color makes it look like he is "bereav'd of [spiritual]

light." Of course, these are Blake's words, and they very problematically reinforce the idea that to be Black is to be burdened with some kind of inferiority (whether it ultimately proves untrue in the afterlife or not).

The second moment of antithesis contrasts the speaker and the white "English child." The speaker looks on his counterpart and sees him as angelic (because of his whiteness). Contrast this with the speaker's own description—through the advice of his mother—of his own "sun-burnt face," and it's clear to see which skin is presented as the more normal. While the English boy appears to be a picture of purity, the notion of being "burnt" suggests a kind of imperfection. The poem suggests that, reunited with God in the afterlife, the boys will cast off their earthly identities. But here the antithesis between white and black is still present, with the speaker imagining that he will "shade" the white boy from the "heat" of God's love. Even in this heavenly vision, then, they are still fundamentally different.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "And I am black, but O! my soul is white; / White as an angel is the English child: / But I am black as if bereav'd of light."

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton is used once in "The Little Black Boy," in line 18. In this section of the poem, the speaker recounts what his mother taught to him about the meaning of earthly life and, importantly, what to expect from the afterlife. The mother explains that earthly bodies are nothing but metaphorical "cloud[s]," identities that people wear during their time on earth that they then quickly shed in heaven. This, of course, is an attempt to suggest that skin color is not important—or, at least, that it's not an important factor for very long.

When people, continues the mother, learn to "bear" the heat that emanates from the "beams of [God's] love," God will announce the return of humankind into paradise and/or heaven (the poem mixes up the individual afterlife with a kind of communal reunion between humanity and God). The mother explains that:

> The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.

In normal grammatical construction, there should be a conjunction word—most likely "and"—between "vanish" and "we." Two distinct sentences—"The cloud will vanish" and "we shall hear his voice"—are forced into one. The main effect of the asyndeton is that it creates a sense of immediacy and drama, reflecting the way that life as humankind knows it will suddenly change upon "hear[ing] his voice." Note that, in some versions of the poem there is a punctuation mark between "vanish" and "we"; this is still an example of antithesis.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 18:** "The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice."

CAESURA

Caesura is not a major feature of "The Little Black Boy," but it is used here and there. In the first example, in line 2, caesura is used to signal an intensity of feeling and emotion:

> And I am black, but O! my soul is white;

The exclamation mark after "O" creates a brief pause before the speaker's strong insistence that he feels his "soul is white." This is meant to demonstrate the depth to which the speaker feels that his skin color, in some way, isn't representative of his inner state. He feels himself to be loyal to God, pure in spirit and intention, and is aware of how these traits—which can be summed up as *goodness*—are more usually associated with light/whiteness than darkness (which is frequently linked to evil).

In line 9, the caesura allows for the development of the mother's advice to the speaker. That is, the colon provides a pause in which the young boy looks to the east at the rising sun (inviting the reader to imaginatively do the same). Line 19 achieves a similar effect, announcing the arrival of God's "voice."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "O! my"
- **Line 9:** "sun: there"
- **Line 10:** "light, and"
- **Line 16:** "cloud, and"
- **Line 19:** "Saying: come"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout the poem. Much of this is also alliteration, and covered in that section of the guide. Generally speaking, consonance is used to bring images to life and/or to reinforce the speaker's point of view. In the first line, for example, /r/ and /th/ sounds in "mother," "bore," and "southern" link these words together, conveying the way they all relate to the same place.

Lines 3 and 4 show an interesting difference in the way the speaker describes himself versus his description of the white "English child:"

> White as an angel is the English child:
> But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

Notice how line 3 uses internal consonance though /n/ and /l/ sounds to support the image of the white boy as angelic, as

though the beauty of his skin is delicate and, in a sense, ornate or precious. The heavy /b/ alliteration in line 4 is intentionally unsubtle in contrast, which supports the idea that the speaker sees his skin as a kind of problem—and a pressing one, given how strongly it features in his view of himself and the world in which he lives.

The second stanza makes effective use of subtle /s/ consonance in lines 7 and 8:

> She took me on her lap and kissed me,
> And pointing to the east began to say.

This /s/ sound (which is also known as sibilance) has a gentle, whisper-like quality. This helps convey the intimacy between mother and son, building a sense of intimacy and tenderness.

Later, the /m/ sounds in line 12 have a comfortable, pleasant sound, subtly evoking God's skillful and deliberate design for the world:

> Comfort in morning joy in the noonday.

The tender /s/ sound mentioned above recurs in the penultimate stanza, in which the speaker offers that same affection to the "little English boy":

> Thus did my mother say and kissed me,
> And thus I say to little English boy.

The /l/ sound here echoes as well, adding further lilting gentleness to the line. This consonance, then, shows how the boy wishes to pass on the lesson his mother taught him to his white counterpart.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My mother," "bore," "me," "southern"
- **Line 2:** "black, but," "white"
- **Line 3:** "White," "an angel," "English child"
- **Line 4:** "But," "black," "bereav'd," "light"
- **Line 5:** "My mother," "taught," "me"
- **Line 7:** "kissed"
- **Line 8:** "east," "say"
- **Line 9:** "God does," "live"
- **Line 10:** "gives," "light," "gives," "his heat"
- **Line 12:** "Comfort in morning," "joy," "in," "noonday"
- **Line 13:** "little"
- **Line 14:** "learn," "bear," "beams," "love"
- **Line 15:** "black bodies," "burnt"
- **Line 16:** "but," "cloud," "and," "like," "shady"
- **Line 18:** "cloud," "will," "vanish," "we," "shall," "hear his voice"
- **Line 19:** "come," "from," "grove my love"
- **Line 20:** "golden," "like lambs"
- **Line 21:** "Thus," "my mother," "say," "kissed," "me"
- **Line 22:** "thus," "say," "to little English"
- **Line 24:** "like lambs"
- **Line 26:** "lean in," "upon," "knee"
- **Line 27:** "And then," "stand," "and," "stroke his silver hair"
- **Line 28:** "like," "him," "he," "will," "love"

METAPHOR

There is one main metaphor in "The Little Black Boy," which is introduced in lines 15-16:

> And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face
> Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

Essentially, this metaphor states that earthly racial identity is nothing but a "cloud." Clouds, of course, are always changing and have no fixed shape, which is why the mother uses this metaphor, insisting that life on earth is just a small—and in some ways insignificant—stage in the journey of "our souls."

Furthermore, to be "cloud[ed]" is to be hidden—so part of what the mother's lesson means is that earthly identity (in which people take on physical characteristics like skin color) is a covering for people's *true* selves. The "cloud," then, applies as much to the white boy as it does to the speaker, in that his whiteness also a temporary state. In heaven and/or paradise, suggests the speaker's mother, these clouds will evaporate and human beings can rejoice with God, free from the problems of race.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face / Is but a cloud"
- **Line 18:** "The cloud will vanish"
- **Line 23:** "When I from black and he from white cloud free,"

POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton features prominently in the poem's third stanza:

> And gives his light, and gives his heat away.
> And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive

This section is a kind of brief hymn of praise to God, listing numerous aspects of his divine creation in a way that is similar to the Biblical Book of Genesis. God creates light *and* flowers *and* trees *and* so on, suggesting an abundance and almost endless list of evidence that proves God's skill and mastery in designing the universe. The polysyndeton makes it read as if this list could keep going and going, and evokes the variety of life on earth even as it reduces this life to general categories

like "flowers."

The other effect of the polysyndeton here also relates to the Bible, but more specifically to its sound. The King James Version of the Christian religious text, widely read in Blake's era, is full of polysyndeton. Repeated use of "and," then, actually *sounds* biblical. Take this section from the Book of Genesis, for example:

> In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

The "ands" here make God seem purposeful and methodical, while also highlighting the majesty and awesomeness of his creative act.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "And," "and"
- **Line 11:** "And," "and," "and," "and"

SIMILE

There are three similes in "The Little Black Boy." The first of these is wrapped in the poem's one metaphor and appears in the fifth stanza, in which the speaker recalls his mother's explanation for their place in the world:

> And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face
> Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

Earthly identity—including skin color—is metaphorically described as a "cloud," a temporary state which people will cast off when they are called back to heaven by God. This cloud works "like a shady grove," offering people shelter from the intense brightness and heat of God's "beams of love" (here linked to the sun). It's a somewhat confusing simile because the poem on the one hand characterizes Black people as better able to bear these "beams," while also suggesting that they are "burnt" by the sun (implying some kind of inferiority or damage). This simile also allows the speaker to imagine himself shading the white English boy in heaven (and/or paradise)—precisely because he has learned to endure and appreciate these rays.

The other simile is an important image in Blake's poetry more generally. For Blake, humankind had lost its innocence—indeed, he believed people were taught as children to lose their natural purity, love, and joyfulness. The poem compares the speaker's earthly life to his expectations of the afterlife, in which he expects to "rejoice" with his white English counterpart "like lambs." Lambs embody innocence, instinctive love, and closeness to God—indeed, Christ is sometimes depicted as the *Agnus dei*, or lamb of God—and it is through casting off their earthly identities that human beings will be restored to this ideal state. The lamb image has similar connotations in Blake's poem "The Lamb," which also appears in the *Songs of Innocence*.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "like a shady grove"
- **Line 20:** "like lambs rejoice"
- **Line 24:** "like lambs we joy"

ASSONANCE

Much of the poem's assonance is tied to its rhyme scheme, which is discussed separately in this guide. There are a few very clear moments of assonance that are separate from the rhyme scheme, however, all of which fall in the first half of the poem and help establish it's gentle, childish tone.

The first two lines are clearly assonant. The shared assonance and consonance of "m**o**th**e**r" and "s**ou**th**e**rn" produce almost an internal rhyme, while in the next line the speaker's excited "**O**!" chimes with "s**ou**l." Altogether, this assonance starts the poem off on a lilting, bouncy note. The poem feels a bit like a nursery rhyme, which makes sense when considering that the speaker is a little boy.

The second stanza then contains assonance of the long /ee/ sound, which repeats so closely and insistently in line 5 that it sounds almost like a tongue-twister:

> My mother taught m**e** underne**a**th a tr**ee**

The final strong moments of assonance then pop up in the third stanza, with the repetition of short /i/ sounds and yet more long /ee/ sounds throughout. All in all, the assonance makes the poem feel bouncy and lighthearted, and perhaps a little simple, reflecting the innocence of its young speaker.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "mother," "southern"
- **Line 2:** "O," "soul"
- **Line 5:** "me underneath," "tree"
- **Line 6:** "heat"
- **Line 8:** "east"
- **Line 9:** "live"
- **Line 10:** "gives," "his," "gives," "his," "heat"
- **Line 11:** "trees," "beasts," "receive"

VOCABULARY

Bore (Line 1) - Gave birth to.

Southern wild (Line 1) - Most likely an allusion to the African continent.

Bereav'd (Line 4) - Lacking, with an implied sense of loss.

Noonday (Line 12) - Around midday.

Bear (Line 14) - Tolerate and endure.

Grove (Line 19) - A small group of trees that provide shade.

Rejoice (Line 20) - Celebrate happily.

Joy (Line 24) - Here used as a verb, suggesting to play with freedom and innocence.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Little Black Boy" has seven stanzas, totaling 28 lines. Each is a quatrain (a four-line stanza), which is typical of Blake's poems in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The poem has a nursery rhyme-like simplicity, which ties in with the speaker being a child.

The boy starts by talking about his birth, before devoting the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth stanzas to an anecdote about his mother—the lesson she taught him about how the world was made, what it means to exist in that world, and the promises of a paradise-like afterlife. The boy then concludes with a vision of this afterlife, when he and his counterpart, the white English boy, will cast off their earthly identities ("cloud") and play together joyfully in the presence of God. The poem thus attempts to bring together in harmony the two opposites that it has presented throughout.

The poem can also be considered a dramatic monologue of sorts, in which Blake, a white man, throws his voice into an experience that he can't actually relate to very well, if at all (more on the issues here and the poem's racism in the Speaker section of this guide).

METER

Most of the lines in "The Little Black Boy" are written in iambic pentameter. This means each line has five iambs, metrical feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-DUM). Blake's poems often feature a lot of metrical variation, but this poem is fairly steady and regular. The first two lines show the iambic pentameter in full motion:

> My moth- | er bore | me in | the south- | ern wild,
> And I | am black, | but O! || my soul | is white;

The overall regularity gives the poem a simple, child-like sound fitting with the young speaker.

There are some important moments in which the meter changes. Take lines 7 and 21, which both depict a moment of tenderness between the speaker and his mother:

> She took | me on | her lap | and kissed | me,
> [...]
> Thus did | my moth- | er say | and kissed | me,

Both lines omit the fifth and final stress. Lines which end on an unstressed syllable are known as *feminine* endings. This lack of stress gives these lines a gentle quality that conveys the intimacy between mother and son. This technique, in which a line is intentionally incomplete, is known as *catalexis*.

Line 9 also presents an interesting variation:

> Look on | the ris- | ing sun: | there God | does live

Here, the first iambic foot can be read as swapped around to make a trochee (stressed-unstressed, DUM-da). This places weight on the word "Look," which is an instruction issued by the mother to her son. This stress makes the word feel important, and highlights the value of the lesson taught by the mother to the young speaker (a lesson which forms the way he sees the world).

The same trochaic substitution appears earlier in the poem, too. In line 3, the first-foot trochee places extra emphasis on the word "White":

> White as | an an- | gel is | the Eng- | lish child:

This helps demonstrate how important whiteness and blackness are to the boy's perception of his place in the world.

RHYME SCHEME

As with many Blake poems, "The Little Black Boy" has a strict rhyme scheme throughout. In this case, each quatrain stanza runs:

ABAB

Four-line stanzas with this scheme are sometimes known as heroic quatrains, or elegiac quatrains. For the most part, this rhyme scheme serves to give the poem a child-like simplicity to match with the young speaker (other poems in the *Songs of Innocence* do this too).

There are a couple of instances in which the rhymed end-words say something specific about the poem's subject. Lines 2 and 4 make a pair out of "white" and "light," for instance, which is an important association throughout the poem. Indeed, the conflation of whiteness with light—which has symbolic connotations of divinity and purity—forms part of the speaker's anxiety about his own skin color. Rhyming them here shows

how fundamentally literal whiteness (skin color) is linked to symbolic whiteness, even as the speaker refers specifically to the "white[ness]" of his "soul."

In lines 18 and 20, the poem presents another significant pairing: "voice" and "rejoice." In this section, the speaker talks about a moment in the future when God will announce that humankind can return to paradise and/or heaven (the poem doesn't specify). God's "voice," then, will make humankind "rejoice." This demonstrates the way in which the anticipation of this future moment holds such an important place in the speaker's mind—and will perhaps work as a coping mechanism for the inevitable racism he will encounter as he gets older.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is the little Black boy of the title. The poem is taken from the *Songs of Innocence*, meaning it is meant to represent an innocent perspective (sometimes to the point of naivety).

The speaker talks about his birth in "the southern wild" (a problematic reference to Africa) and displays anxiety about his skin color. He is particularly troubled by the symbolic associations of whiteness/darkness and how these fit with his own skin color. He views his counterpart—the white "little English boy"—as more angelic, in appearance at least. His own "blackness," to him, makes him look as if he is "bereav'd of [divine] light." He then explains the lesson that his mother taught him—that earthly identity, including skin color, is nothing but a "cloud." These temporary identities, he believes, will be cast off in the Christian afterlife, in which he and the English boy will play together "like lambs" in the presence of God.

While the poem attempts to put forward a message of equality, it is problematic from start to finish. These problems in part stem from Blake's decision to inhabit the voice of a young Black boy, a life experience he would know little about. Most critics agree that Blake's poetry, generally speaking, *does* argue in favor of equality in a way that is ahead of its time. That doesn't place the poem beyond critique, however, and it's important to recognize that the poem displays some very same racial stereotyping that it argues against. For example, Blake repeatedly implies that being Black is somehow inferior—that having dark skin indicates sun damage, for instance, and that Africa is a "wild" place compared to England. Such thinking is simply racist.

SETTING

The poem is told entirely from the perspective of child mentioned in the title. In terms of time, the poem moves from the boy's past to a vision of the future.

The poem has a parable-like quality. The boy remembers a lesson his mother taught him about the creation of the world, his place in it, and what to expect after his earthly life. The presentation of this lesson as a memory suggests that the boy is no longer in "the southern wild" (an allusion to Africa), and the way in which he compares himself to an "English child" perhaps implies that he is now in England. The poem doesn't confirm this, however, and it's important to note that there is very little focus on actual lived experience as a Black person in a white-dominated world. Indeed, the Black speaker is almost entirely focused on the afterlife, as if it is only there that he can really start living in "comfort" and "joy." The memory of his mother suggests that the speaker has been separated from her, perhaps indicating that either he, she, or both have been sold into slavery (though, again, there is nothing specific in the poem to confirm this).

Stanzas 1 to 5, then, are set in both the speaker's memory and where that memory takes place: his childhood home in Africa. The poem presents this as a harsh environment of brutal sun, which carries God's "beams of love." The speaker then shifts focus from earthly life to a vision of heaven and/or paradise (either would make sense). He believes that God will welcome humankind—regardless of race—back into his divine kingdom, and that it is in that new environment that both he and the English boy will live innocent, carefree, and joyful lives. In one sense, then, the poem is set within the speaker's own imagination—and reference to his actual lived experience is notably absent.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Little Black Boy" was included in Blake's main collection *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The *Innocence* section of the book was first published in 1789, coinciding with the onset of the French Revolution.

As with many of Blake's poems, "The Little Black Boy" seeks to address a perceived injustice, and to place the life of someone who is impoverished and/or oppressed in a new religious context. Usually, this means presenting a vision of religion that runs counter to the institutions of the day. Indeed, Blake saw organized religion as a malign influence on people's lives, while also maintaining strongly held but fiercely independent Christian beliefs.

Here, the poem appears to argue that earthly identity—including skin color—is just a "cloud," a temporary identity. In the afterlife, children of all races will play together free under the watchful and loving eye of God, and free from their original identities.

It's important to note that there are two ways of interpreting this message. It could be taken at face value, but other poems in the *Songs of Innocence* are more clearly ironic, suggesting that

the "innocent" perspective is sometimes naive and sadly misguided. In "The Chimney Sweeper," for example, a young chimney sweep fails—though the failure can hardly be blamed on him—to realize the poverty and hardship that awaits him. Like the Black boy here, he holds onto an idealized vision of the afterlife as a way of explaining in advance the suffering that will almost certainly come his way.

Perhaps because of his lack of personal experience, Blake's poetry rarely touches specifically on race (through frequently deals with injustice). However, one of his longer works, *The Visions of Albion*s (1793), does focus on slavery. Another poem in the *Songs of Innocence*, "The Lamb," will inform readers on Blake's use of the lamb simile here. Readers should also look at the illustrations done by Blake for the narrative account of a colonial soldier, John Stedman (a link is provided in the Resources section of this guide).

Blake is often considered alongside the Romantic poets, though he undoubtedly sits apart as a writer of independent spirit and vision. Both William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge occasionally touched on the issue of race, which was intertwined with the issue of slavery. Wordsworth talks about the abolitionist cause in "To Thomas Clarkson. On the Final Passing of the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade," "To Toussaint L'Overture," and, at times, in his longer poem *The Prelude*. Some critics view Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as an expression and examination of white guilt regarding the slave trade. Readers should also investigate the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, who was a Black woman sold into slavery around the age eight (see: "On Being Brought from Africa to America").

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Little Black Boy" is notably lacking in specific historical context, though this is generally in keeping with Blake's poetic style. Blake saw himself as a kind of visionary and an outsider, and viewed his poetic subjects as those concerned with the most fundamental questions about existence that often went beyond the specific circumstances of the 18th century. That said, specific historical trends like the Industrial Revolution—the rapid growth of machine-based labor—do occupy and important place in his poetry. But in *this* poem, there is very little about the specifics of Black experience which, of course, Blake didn't and couldn't really know about. This is a white man attempting to speak on behalf of a Black child.

The true horrors of racism and the ways in which that racism structured society lurk in the background of the poem. Indeed, the speaker's instinctive sense that he is somehow inferior to the white English boy suggests he has at least some knowledge of the way in which his skin color will prevent him from living the same kind of life as his counterpart. In the late 1700s, the Transatlantic slave trade was in full flow. European ships sailed to Africa, where white slave traders enslaved Black men, women, and children and, for the most part, transported them across the Atlantic to new lives of unspeakable cruelty and oppression.

This trade, at the time, was officially endorsed by the British monarchy and it is on the profits of slavery that the British Empire, that came to rule over vast swathes of the world, was built. An estimated 12 million slaves were transported across the Atlantic, with approximately one and half million dying in transit.

The other important aspect of this poem is its relationship to Christianity. The speaker—and Blake himself—struggles to place skin color in the context of the religious symbolism of whiteness/light. Throughout the Bible—and, indeed, other major religious texts—whiteness and light are conflated with positive attributes like purity, love, knowledge, and divinity. Blackness/darkness are often linked to evil, the Devil, death, and destruction. The boy feels anxious about his skin color because of these associations, but it's always worth remembering that this anxiety is projected onto the little boy by Blake.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Blake's Illustrations — See the poem in its original format, with Blake's own visual depictions (plus other illustrations/engravings). (http://blakearchive.org/copy/s-inn.b?descId=s-inn.b.illbk.11)
- 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)
- Blake's Visions — An excerpt from a documentary in which writer Iain Sinclair discusses Blake's religious visions. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8hcQ_jPIZA)
- Blake and Stedman — Illustrations by Blake of a narrative written by John Stedman, a colonial soldier. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/john-stedmans-narrative-of-a-five-years-expedition-against-the-revolted-negroes-of-surinam-with-engravings-by-william-blake)
- The Transatlantic Slave Trade — A valuable resource about the history of slavery. (http://abolition.e2bn.org/slavery_45.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- A Poison Tree
- London
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Innocence)
- The Garden of Love

- The Lamb
- The Tyger

HOW TO CITE

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