

Learner Resource 6 “Nurse’s Song” – Context and comparison

Half the class has the “Nurse’s Song” from *Songs of Innocence* and this extract from Rousseau:

“Hold childhood in reverence, and do not be in any hurry to judge it for good or ill. Leave exceptional cases to show themselves, let their qualities be tested and confirmed, before special methods are adopted. Give nature time to work before you take over her business, lest you interfere with her dealings. You assert that you know the value of time and are afraid to waste it. You fail to perceive that it is a greater waste of time to use it ill than to do nothing, and that a child ill taught is further from virtue than a child who has learnt nothing at all. You are afraid to see him spending his early years doing nothing. What! is it nothing to be happy, nothing to run and jump all day? He will never be so busy again all his life long.”

[Extract taken from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education* (first published in English in 1763).]

The other half of the class has the “Nurse’s Song” from *Songs of Experience* and this extract from the introduction to Janeway’s *Token for Children*:

“O pray, pray, pray, and live holily before them, and take some time daily to speak a little to your children one by one, about their miserable condition by nature. I knew a child that was converted by this sentence from a godly school mistress in the country, *every mother’s child of you are by nature children of wrath*. Put your children upon learning their catechism, and the scriptures, and getting to pray and weep by themselves after Christ [...] Take heed of pardoning a lie. Take heed of letting them misspend the Sabbath.”

[Extract taken from James Janeway (a puritan minister), *Token for Children*. This book was first published in 1671, but remained incredibly popular for decades afterwards, and was designed to educate, being addressed to “all parents, schoolmasters and schoolmistresses, or any who have any hand in the Education of youth.”]

Each group should choose a sentence from their extract that most neatly summarises what it is about.

They should also provide at least one link between the extract and the poem.

Each group should provide feedback to the class, and discuss how the tone has changed between these two companion poems.

Each group should provide antonyms for the following words, thinking about the connotations of each as they do so:

- | | | |
|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| 1. laughing | 4. rest | 7. let us away |
| 2. hill | 5. everything | 8. morning |
| 3. breast | 6. still | 9. appears |

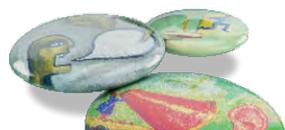
They should then look at this list:

- | | | |
|---------------|------------|---------------------|
| 1. whispering | 4. rise | 7. wasted on play |
| 2. dale | 5. my face | 8. winter and night |
| 3. mind | 6. pale | 9. disguise |

These are the contrasting words taken from each of the “Nurse’s Song” poems (for example, “laughing” from *Songs of Innocence* and “whispering” from *Songs of Experience* etc.). Discuss the relationship between the two lists of words: *are* they opposites?

Explore how the balance of power between the nurse and the children is depicted in each poem, by examining the lexical and semantic choices made by Blake.

- Individually, or in pairs, re-write the first two lines in the active voice. What difference does it make?
- Then replace the first person narrator with a third person narrator in line three. What difference does it make?
- Then replace the imperative “come home” with an interrogative. What difference does it make?



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If it helps, read both your new version and the original to the class and ask for feedback.

You might choose to use some of the following ideas to prompt a class discussion about the balance of power within these two poems:

Dialogue and use of direct speech

The present and the future

"play" repeated three times

Repetition of syntax: "come come.", "No no" etc.

Move to the past tense in the final two lines

Image: Nurse seated, reading in the foreground, away from the children who are dancing in an incomplete circle against a background of green hills

Title: predominantly written in lower case

Monologue

The present and the past

"play" used once

Present tense used throughout

Image: Nurse standing combing the boy's hair (hands either side of his head) framed by a doorway. A girl sits passively behind them

Title: Capitalised NURSES

