

Isaac Watts

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Independent minister, writer, and known as the “Father of English Hymnody,” Isaac Watts left a legacy of hundreds of hymns and psalms he translated and reinterpreted from the bible. Watts (1674-1748) helped popularize hymns in English churches after publishing his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* in 1707. His works proved foundational in English-language Christian worship and are still sung today; most famous is his “Joy to the World.” Watts also wrote books on geography, astronomy, grammar, and philosophy widely used throughout the eighteenth century for educational purposes.

Watts was born in Southampton, England, into a Nonconformist family. His father, Isaac Watts Sr., was twice imprisoned for dissenting from the Church of England. Watts Jr. studied at King Edward VI School, Southampton, a Nonconformist academy at which he learned Latin, Greek, French, and Hebrew (1680-1690). He furthered his education at the dissenting academy run by Thomas Rowe in London (1690-1694). Under his direction, Watts studied classical and modern philosophy, and divinity. Rowe played a major part in influencing Watts’s intellectual and religious development, and Watts later thanked him for his teachings and guidance in an ode called “Free Philosophy” dedicated “To the Much Honored Mr. Thomas Rowe, the Director of my Youthful Studies.”

The poem was first published in 1706 in his first poetic collection *Horæ Lyricæ: Poems, Chiefly of the Lyric Kind*. The poem is written as a Pindaric ode, with irregular stanzas in iambic meters. In the poem, Watts critiques the rigid rules of the education system and advocates for breaking free of these constraints. This breaking of boundaries is evident in the irregular rhyme scheme and use of metrical feet. Most of the poem is in iambic tetrameter and trimeter, while the second to last line in the third stanza makes use of iambic pentameter, reflecting the wildness and passion of the content. The poem celebrates the teachings of Rowe, who inspired Watts’s passions about philosophy. Though not an especially public poem (as Pindaric odes often are), it is loud and passionate in its use of objective correlatives.

Though respected for his literary and religious accomplishments, Watts was on bad terms with many of his friends and family. He never married, led a sheltered life, and had increasingly bad health. This latter limited his duties in public ministry and forced him to spend his later years living in a friend’s home.

Watts died in 1748 and was buried in Bunhill Fields, a Nonconformist burial ground in London, England.

Further Reading

Maclear, J. F. "Isaac Watts and the Idea of Public Religion." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 53, no. 1, 1992, pp. 25–45.

Stokes, W. Britt. "Natural Religion, Isaac Watts, and Early Eighteenth Century Evangelical Devotion." *Evangelical Quarterly*, vol. 94, no. 4, Oct. 2023, pp. 312–29.

Free Philosophy: To the Much Honoured Mr. *Thomas Rowe*, the Director of my Youthful Studies⁹¹

CUSTOM, that Tyranness of Fools,⁹²

That leads the Learned⁹³ round the Schools

In Magick Chains of Forms and Rules,

My Genius storms her Throne.⁹⁴

No more ye Slaves with Awe profound 5

Beat the dull Track, nor dance the Round,⁹⁵

Loose Hands,⁹⁶ and quit th' Inchant'd Ground,⁹⁷

Knowledge invites us each alone.

I hate these Shackles of the Mind

Forg'd by the haughty Wise; 10

Souls were not born to be confin'd,

And led like *Sampson*⁹⁸ Bound and Blind:

I love thy gentle Influence, ROWE,⁹⁹

Who only dost¹⁰⁰ Advise:

Thy gentle Influence like the Sun 15

Only dissolves the Frozen Snow,

⁹¹ Watts, Isaac. *Horæ Lyricæ: Poems, Chiefly of the Lyric Kind*. Edited by John Lawrence, printed by S. and D. Bridge, 1706, pp. 153–154; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

⁹² *CUSTOM, that Tyranness of Fools* the speaker personifies Custom (habit) as ruling over fools

⁹³ *Learned* students and other scholars

⁹⁴ *My Genius storms her Throne* the speaker's spirit rebels against Custom's tyranny

⁹⁵ *dance the Round* dance in a circular fashion, a round dance (*OED*)

⁹⁶ *Loose hands* let go the hands of those dancing beside you

⁹⁷ *th' Inchant'd Ground* a round dance on enchanted ground was believed to summon dangerous spiritual beings such as faeries

⁹⁸ *Sampson* in the Bible, Samson was a man blinded and enslaved by the Philistines; God granted Samson strength and with it he destroyed the temple of the god Dagon, killing his captors along with himself (Judges 16:4–30)

⁹⁹ ROWE Watts's instructor, Thomas Rowe, at the dissenting academy

¹⁰⁰ *dost* does

Then bids our Thoughts like Rivers flow,
And chuse the Channels where they run.

Thoughts should be free as Fire or Wind;
The Pinions¹⁰¹ of a Single Mind 20
 Will thro' all Nature fly:
But who can drag up to the Poles¹⁰²
Long fetter'd¹⁰³ Ranks of Leaden Souls?
My Genius which no Chain controuls¹⁰⁴
Roves¹⁰⁵ with Delight, or deep or high: 25
Swift I survey the Globe around,
Dive to the Centre thro' the Solid Ground,
 Or travel o're¹⁰⁶ the Sky.



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¹⁰¹ *Pinions* a bird's wings, playing on the word "opinions"

¹⁰² *Poles* literally, the North and South Poles; metaphorically, the heights of enlightenment

¹⁰³ *fetter'd* shackled or chained

¹⁰⁴ *My Genius which no Chain controuls* the speaker has a free spirit

¹⁰⁵ *Roves* to roam without destination

¹⁰⁶ *o're* over