

Comparative Analysis: My Parents vs Little Boy Crying

Matthew Williams • English Literature • May 11, 2026

Introduction

Stephen Spender's *My Parents* and Mervyn Morris's *Little Boy Crying* both examine childhood pain shaped by adult power. Spender presents a speaker whose parents try to protect him from rough children, yet their protection leaves him socially isolated and emotionally wounded. Morris presents a father disciplining his young son, showing how punishment can feel like cruelty to a child even when it is motivated by love. Both poems explore childhood vulnerability, fear, and misunderstanding, but they differ in the source of harm: Spender focuses on social conflict outside the family, while Morris focuses on emotional conflict within the family.

Central shared theme: childhood vulnerability within parent-child relationships, especially how adult decisions can create pain even when they are meant to protect or teach.

Sources of childhood pain

In *My Parents*, pain comes from the outside world. The speaker remembers the "children who were rough" as physically and emotionally threatening. Their abuse is captured in the **simile** "threw words like stones," which turns language into a weapon. The boys' violence is repeated and unresolved, suggesting that childhood can be shaped by ongoing social hostility rather than one isolated incident.

In *Little Boy Crying*, pain begins inside the home after "the quick slap struck." The child's "laughter metamorphosed into howls," showing how quickly innocence and play can become distress. Morris presents pain as immediate and intimate, rooted in a moment of discipline between father and son rather than in a wider group conflict.

Parental role and responsibility

Both poems present parents as powerful figures, but their power works differently.

In Spender's poem, the parents act through restriction. The line "My parents kept me from children who were rough" suggests protection, but the verb "kept" also implies control and separation. Their attempt to shield the child does not remove danger; it leaves him isolated and unprepared to face it.

In Morris's poem, the father acts through direct discipline. To the child, he seems "empty of feeling," yet the narrator reveals that "this fierce man longs to lift you." The father is not emotionally empty at all. He is suppressing tenderness because he believes the child must learn a lesson. Morris therefore makes parental responsibility morally complex: love may require restraint, but that restraint still hurts.

Fear, power, and physical imagery

Both poems show that children experience power through the body before they understand it emotionally.

Spender's speaker describes the boys through threatening physical imagery. He fears "more than tigers their muscles like iron," and he imagines them "like dogs to bark at my world." These **similes** make the boys seem predatory, animalistic, and impossible to reason with. The child feels physically overpowered by a social world he cannot enter.

Morris uses fairy-tale imagery to show how the father appears in the child's imagination. The father becomes "the ogre" and "that grim giant," not because he is truly monstrous, but because the child interprets adult authority as terrifying. The poem therefore separates perception from reality: the father is loving, but the child experiences him as a threat.

Perspective and emotional misunderstanding

Both poems depend on misunderstanding, but they handle perspective differently.

My Parents remains close to the speaker's memory. Even though the speaker is looking back, the poem still carries the fear and humiliation of childhood. The line "I longed to forgive them but they never smiled" shows that the speaker wanted reconciliation but never received it. The emotional distance between him and the rough boys remains unresolved.

Little Boy Crying moves between the child's limited view and the father's hidden feelings. The narrator tells the child, "You cannot understand, not yet," making the reader aware of what the child cannot see. This shift creates dramatic irony: the child's pain is real, but the father's love is also real. Morris asks the reader to hold both truths at once.

Tone and ending

The endings reveal the long-term effect of each childhood experience.

Spender ends with emotional stalemate. The speaker longs to forgive the boys, but their refusal to smile leaves the wound open. The tone is reflective, bitter, and unresolved, suggesting that childhood humiliation can persist into adulthood.

Morris ends with moral instruction: "You must not make a plaything of the rain." The tone becomes controlled and didactic, reinforcing the father's belief that discipline teaches consequence. Unlike Spender's poem, Morris's ending suggests that the painful moment may eventually be understood, even if the child cannot understand it now.

Conclusion

Both poems present childhood as a vulnerable state shaped by forces children cannot control. In *My Parents*, parental protection fails because it cannot overcome class hostility and social exclusion. In *Little Boy Crying*, parental discipline wounds the child because he cannot yet understand the father's love or purpose. Together, the poems show that adult actions, even when well meant, can leave deep emotional marks on children.