

## Coram Boy, Overview

Contexts and concepts	
<p><b>Slavery</b> – From the 17C through to its abolition in the 19C, British merchants were among the largest participants in the Atlantic slave trade. Otis's wealth, in his guise as 'Mr Gaddarn', reflects the large profits available from this trade, and from the enslavement and sale of children in workhouses and orphanages. In 2006, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, apologised for the country's involvement in this trade, and the debate has resurfaced in the 21C with the conflict over statues of men who profited from slavery.</p>	<p><b>Race</b> – The British involvement in the slave trade led to the development of black communities in the cities of the UK, but most were servants or lived in poverty. In the 17th and 18th centuries black domestic servants in great houses were often seen as status symbols and Toby reflects this as he is 'bedecked in his full princely regalia' and treated like an exotic pet by Gaddarn's guests. The precarious fate of many poor black people at the time is shown by Gaddarn's declaration that at any time he can ship Toby 'off to Virginia'.</p>
<p><b>The Coram Hospital and charity orphanages</b> – The Coram Hospital was in fact a children's home established for the "education and maintenance of exposed and deserted young children", founded in 1739 by Thomas Coram. Lady Ashbrook reflects the 18C fashion for philanthropy which led to the setting up of similar institutions across the country, most run and administered by parish councils. However, the subsequent scandal over the orphanage reflects the cruelty and neglect found in many such institutions.</p>	<p><b>18<sup>th</sup> century childhood and education</b> – Children in 18C society were routinely brutalised and this is reflected through the experiences of the orphanage children, but also through Thomas' bullying at the Cathedral school. Whilst Isobel has a governess, education for girls from wealthy families was intended only to provide them with the skills to run a home of their own. As there was no national system of education, poor children were unlikely to receive any formal schooling unless they were lucky enough to be recipient of a charity bursary.</p>
<p><b>18<sup>th</sup> century society</b> – The 18C was a time of sharp social divides and rigid hierarchies. Society was patriarchal, with men as the bread-winners and women running the home. In more affluent families, such as the Ashbrooks, the woman's role would extend to taking charge of the household accounts and servants. For those in poverty life was harsh with the only assistance being charity. As there was a belief that poverty was caused by bad habits, some argued that poor relief should be hard to obtain. Workhouses were often the only option, with many being no better than prisons.</p>	<p><b>The Gothic Genre</b> - Gothic fiction is a literary genre that combines elements of the supernatural, horror, death and at times romance. It originated in England in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, at the time the novel is set. Gothic novels often feature explorations of morality, philosophy and religion, with evil villains acting as metaphors for societal issues or human failings. 'Coram Boy' has elements of the gothic such as Meshak's obsession with angels, the bleak and rain lashed settings at the start, the mysterious Mother Catbrain, and the tragic deaths of the babies taken by Otis.</p>

Themes and how they link to character and contexts	
<p><b>Family &amp; friendship</b> – Thomas' loving family life is not a main focus of the book but is a rare positive representation of the 18C working class. It contrasts with the more distant relationships of the Ashbrooks who are representative of wealthy 18C life. Alexander's troubled relationship with his father reflects the aristocratic expectation that he should follow his father's traditional path. Friendship is shown to be valuable in the novel, with Alexander's unlikely friendship with the lower-class Thomas mirrored by the equally unusual friendship between Aaron and the enslaved Toby.</p>	<p><b>Charity</b> – Charity is mainly presented as a force for good in the novel – it is a charitable scholarship that allows Thomas to attend the Cathedral school and ultimately enables him to rise up through the social classes. Lady Ashbrook's charity motives are genuine, she is appalled by the condition of orphanages and fights local resistance to improve things for the children. Whilst the dark side of a reliance on charity is presented through the orphanage scandal, in the second part of the novel the improvements made in 18C poor relief are shown through the more benevolent conditions of Aaron and Toby's home.</p>
<p><b>Courage &amp; loyalty</b> - All the sets of friends [Alexander and Thomas, Aaron and Toby, Isobel and Melissa] show extreme loyalty to each other. Courage is linked to the friendships, for instance in Aaron saving Toby, Thomas giving his life to save Alexander and Isobel supporting Melissa through her pregnancy. Meshak's courage starts and ends the novel, he secretly defies his father to save Aaron, and watches over his 'angels' in the form of Melissa, Aaron and Toby, dying only when he knows them to be safe.</p>	<p><b>Exploitation</b> – Exploitation is evident from the start of the novel when it is clear that Otis uses his son to take care of his dirty work. Mrs Lynch and Otis form a corrupt alliance that preys on the vulnerability of mothers and exploits charitable institutions such as the orphanage. The exploitation in the novel is closely tied to the structure of 18C society – it is Otis' links with the wealthy men who run the orphanage that allow him to exploit children, and ultimately to escape punishment when the scandal breaks.</p>
<p><b>The Arts</b> – The role of the arts in society is a key theme in Alexander's story. His father is strongly opposed to him attending the Cathedral school and talks scornfully of his musical aspirations. Art is presented as a positive force; many of the good characters in the novel have musical temperaments and it is music which brings about the positive reconciliations in the second half of the novel.</p>	

Plot summary
<p>The main plot is preceded by a prologue that is framed as a sad tale told by a nursemaid to her charges. The tale is of a couple drowning six of their children and keeping only one.</p>
<p><b>Part One – 1741</b> The novel itself starts with Meshak, a vulnerable and terrified child, and his father Otis, a brutish and immoral man collecting five children in their wagon. They are handed a baby by a mysterious woman and Meshak is pushed by his father into burying it alive, along with other bundles. They arrive in Gloucester at Mrs Peebles's inn where Meshak sees Mrs Lynch receive a basket from a carriage. Meshak visits the Cathedral. Otis sells the other children to a press gang at the docks. The narrative shifts to Thomas and Alexander at the Cathedral school, where Alexander has helped Thomas handle bullying. Thomas visits Ashbrook House for the first time and meets Isobel and Melissa. Lady Ashbrook has a meeting about the orphanage with Admiral Bailey and argues with him about how many children they are taking in. The children play in the cottage and Meshak spies on them, seeing Melissa as his angel. Lord Ashbrook returns and shows his displeasure at Alexander's desire to be a musician. Otis meets Mrs Lynch and they agree to work together. A ball is held at Ashbrook House. Melissa changes when the boys return to school. Otis and Meshak collect and dump more babies, and Otis starts to do business with Sarah Wood at the Coram Hospital. He takes a black baby, intending to sell it to a rich family as a servant. Alexander's father refuses to allow him to continue with music, he spends the night with Melissa and then leaves home. Melissa gives birth and is told the baby has died. Mrs Lynch gives the baby to Otis but Meshak hides it rather than kill 'his angel's' child.</p>
<p><b>Part Two – 1750</b> Aaron and Toby have grown up as orphans at Coram Hospital. Alexander and Thomas are reconciled. Aaron is apprenticed to Mr Burney and is tutored by Alexander. Toby is sent to work for Mr Gaddarn. Alexander goes to sing at Mr Gaddarn's and sees Toby treated like a pet by the women there. He is sure he has seen Gaddarn before. Toby overhears Gaddarn and some men talking about getting children from the Coram to sell in America as slaves. Toby finds a hidden room. Months later, Aaron goes to see Toby, who has been very ill. Toby tells him about the Coram children being sold as slaves and shows him the gate through which they leave. Aaron sings in the Coram chapel and his old friend Mish embarrasses him by clapping loudly. Alexander recognises Gaddarn as Otis Gardiner and Thomas reveals to Alexander the scandal that led to Otis' execution. Melissa hears from Alexander for the first time in eight years, telling her of his musical success but when she replies she still does not tell him she had his child. Meshak watches Thomas arrive at Ashbrook House with six boys to prepare for a concert on behalf of the Coram Hospital. The concert is a great success and Lord Ashbrook expresses his desire to reconcile with his son. Melissa's mother recognises Meshak as Otis' son, who is then revealed to be Aaron's friend Mish, and the shock causes her sudden death. Meshak takes Aaron on the run with him. After her mother's funeral and Lord Ashbrook's return, the truth about Melissa and Alexander's child and Mrs Lynch's part in its disposal is revealed to all. Alexander starts to think Aaron might be his son. Gaddarn catches Aaron and Meshak and locks them up. Toby, Alexander and Thomas come to save them but they are put on the boat and Gaddarn [now revealed as Otis] kills Thomas. They jump overboard and eventually come to Ashbrook House where Aaron reveals himself to be Alexander and Melissa's son. Meshak's peaceful death is described in the epilogue.</p>

Characters	
<p><b>Meshak</b> - Meshak is an almost mystical figure and his visions of angels are at the centre of the gothic elements of the novel. His story begins and ends the novel, presenting him as a form of guardian angel, a role he takes on for Aaron and Toby, both of whom are also outsiders. He is physically awkward and vulnerable looking, causing people to jeer at him or assume he is a 'simpleton'. The fear and disdain with which he is treated reflects the 18C fear of those with disabilities.</p>	<p><b>Otis/Gaddarn/Mrs Lynch</b> – Otis is presented as thoroughly evil and corrupt through the novel, both in his initial guise as the 'Coram Man' and as his later alias, Gaddarn. Together with the equally evil Mrs Lynch, he represents the corruption at the heart of 18C society as they are able to bribe, coerce and blackmail members of the aristocracy, and were aided in this by churchmen and parish officers. Otis' eventual fate is a mystery, he disappears on the boat to America.</p>
<p><b>Alexander</b> – Alexander turns his back on the stereotypical path for the son of a wealthy landowner, who would have been expected to follow his father into business or a government post. Alexander's first appearance in the novel presents him as heroic, he saves Thomas from bullies and befriends him despite the difference in their social class. He remains an honest, honourable character throughout, a marked contrast to his father.</p>	<p><b>Thomas</b> – Thomas is a poor child, admitted to the Cathedral school and able to meet Alexander only as a result of a charitable scholarship. His first visit to Ashbrook House serves to highlight the contrast between the boys' two very different worlds, as he is overawed by the grand surroundings and out of his depth. He repays Alexander's faith in him by giving up his life to save his friend from Otis's sword</p>
<p><b>Aaron</b> – Aaron is the illegitimate son of Alexander and Melissa, saved from being buried alive by Meshak, who sees him as a precious 'angel' and unwittingly prevents him from being saved by Alexander. Aaron is attractive and talented musically, like his father. He is brought up happily alongside Toby, reflecting the good work of the Coram Hospital, but their differing aspirations and fates reflect the racial divides of the 18C.</p>	<p><b>Toby</b> – Toby was initially cared for by a freed slave, and he tells Aaron his mother is in America. He is lucky to have been taken in by the Coram Hospital, where boys like him would have been well cared for. His apprenticeship to Gaddarn as a servant reflects the fate of many black Africans in Britain at the time, who were prized as exotic status symbols by wealthy families.</p>
<p><b>Lord and Lady Ashbrook</b> – The Ashbrooks are stereotypical wealthy 18C figures. Lord Ashbrook is austere and distant to his son, appearing callous in his refusal to let his son study music, although he does finally show remorse. Lady Ashbrook is a more benevolent figure, she expresses shock about the orphanage conditions and remorse that she has not been aware of such neglect, finally devoting herself to the care of orphaned children. As such she reflects the positive philanthropy of the time.</p>	<p><b>Melissa</b> – is the daughter of the Ashbrook children's governess, and as such she would have been allowed to learn and play alongside them but would still have been regarded as part of the servant class. A marriage between her and somebody of Alexander's wealth and status would have been unusual at the time, but in the novel, it serves as a symbol of the lessons learnt by the characters about redemption, secrets and the true importance of family.</p>