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Songs of Innocence versus Songs of Experience: A Study of William Blake

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S O N G S O F I N N O C E N C E

versus

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A Study of William Blake

by

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The purpose of this project is to compare and/or contrast the poems in the Songs of Innocence with those of like title or subject matter in Songs of Experience, using Blake's life and philosophies as a background to provide details which will give more meaning to the poems themselves.

When the average person reads William Blake's poems, he either feels that they are delightful but simple lyrics, or he comes to the conclusion that they are so obscure and so filled with symbolism that he can never understand them. Even at his worst, one always feels that Blake is saying something very plain and emphatic, although the reader may not have the wildest notion of what it is. It is possible to read his poems and to be so enchanted with them that one does not stop to ask what they mean. A. E. Housman says of Blake's poetry that "the meaning is a poor, foolish, disappointing thing in comparison with the verses themselves."[1] At the same time, it is almost impossible to read and enjoy poetry without knowing what it means because the meaning makes an important contribution to the delight which the poems give.

Blake's life and philosophies serve as interesting and essential background in trying to understand his poetry, particularly the Songs of Innocence and the Songs of Experience, which represent two entirely different points

of view and periods in Blake's life, which began in London November 28, 1757. He was the third son of five children of James and Catherine Blake and spent most of his life in the city of his birth, where his father earned a moderately prosperous living as a hosier. His parents soon learned to respect his sincerity and also to fear his fierce anger after physical punishment. For the latter reason, he was not sent to school; as a result, his formal education was limited. Most of his knowledge came from reading Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, and the Bible.

With his talents and capacities, the career of a painter would have been the natural one for Blake, but his father's means were not sufficient to put this profession within his reach. For this reason, at the age of fourteen he became an apprentice to an engraver, whose trade he learned quite well and which he later used in illustrating his own poetry. Today his works are valued more for their illustrations than for their content,[2] and he ranks high in the world as one of England's greatest artists.[3]

In his boyhood he was fond of trips into the country, where he gave his imagination free reign. Once he came back from the fields and told his mother that he had seen the prophet Ezekiel sitting under a tree. He often spoke of having met Isaiah, Moses, Homer, Dante, or Milton as if these were such simple everyday occurrences that no one would think of disputing them. Kings and prophets came from Heaven or

Hell to sit with him, and he complained of them as if they were rather troublesome objects.

Many other instances of his visions and his vivid imagination are recorded. His mother told that when he was four years old, God put His head to the window of the room in which the young genius was playing and caused him to begin screaming. On another occasion he saw angelic figures walking among the haymakers, and when he was ten years old, he saw a tree filled with angels. Once he saw a fairy funeral and described it in the following manner: "It was a procession of creatures about the size and color of green and gray grasshoppers, bearing a body laid out on a rose-leaf. They buried it with songs and then disappeared."[4] Once he said that Milton appeared to him and asked a favor of him. Milton said that in Paradise Lost he had committed an error, which he wanted Blake to correct in a poem or a picture. Blake said that he declined because he had his own duties to perform. When his favorite brother died, Blake saw Robert's soul ascend through the ceiling, "clapping its hands for joy."[5] Later, when he had no money to pay for printing his poetry, the spirit of Robert told him how he and his wife could make plates of his poems, illustrated with engravings, and publish them themselves.

In addition to these mystical visions, he went through many of the ordinary fights and flirtations of childhood. The story is told that one day he was complaining of the

unreasonable ways of some girl to another young woman named Catherine Boucher. She listened with apparent sympathy and told him that she thought the situation was indeed difficult for him. Blake replied, "Do you? Then I love you." Whether or not this story is true, it does indicate Blake's impulsive nature.

At the age of twenty-five, Blake married Catherine, and, although they had no children, most sources report that theirs was a happy marriage until his death forty-five years later on August 12, 1827. Because fame came posthumously, they spent the last two years of their marriage in a two-room apartment which served them as both a dwelling and a workshop. G. K. Chesterton reports that Blake had more joy on his death-bed than any other man.[6] The room shook as he sang songs in praise of God. Indeed, he seemed to wait for death as a child waits for the opening of gifts on his birthday. His body lies in Bunhill Fields Burying Ground in England, but no headstone refers to its final resting place.

Blake's personality would surely have provided ample material for modern psychologists to study. He was spiritual, dignified, gentle in manner, and lovable in his personal character; but he also had a bitter, intolerant temper which caused him to be violent when sufficiently aroused. He was a visionary, a mystic, a daring speculator in religion and morals, an enemy of kings and wars, assertive, dogmatic as to his own beliefs, and an utter non-conformist in his works

of art and poetry. He never took a holiday from his work, only turning from one task to another for relief.

Although he was, on the whole, happy, he was subject to moods of depression and likely to conceive dislikes, which he expressed bluntly. He had a difficult and repulsive aspect in his character which was so full of self-assertion and resistance that all were driven away except the small circle of friends who overlooked his pecularities and had the wit to interpret his mind and moods. He despised money and fame and could do without the applause of his contemporaries, but he felt irritated and indignant when his works were received with coldness by the public.

There is much disagreement as to whether or not Blake was mad, and the answer to this inexplicable mystery would certainly influence one's interpretation of his poetry. G. K. Chesterton[7] says that in the legal sense he was not mad, that he was business-like and perfectly capable of managing his property and his personal affairs. He was vain, but it was the gay and boisterous vanity of a child, not a maniac. In his later writings, especially in the prophetic books, he began to talk rather wildly, and in some parts he seems to advocate the idea that sin is sometimes a good thing because it leads to forgiveness. Though this does no credit to his logic nor is hardly rational, it cannot be considered proof that he was insane, according to Chesterton.

Rossetti[8] says that in the prophetic books there are many passages which show that the author was obsessed by ideas which he could not control. He poured forth conceptions and images which were remote, intangible, and for which he avowed himself not responsible. Wordsworth, after reading Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, spoke of them as the productions of "great but undoubtedly insane genius."[9]

Some people have called him mad because he saw angels and ghosts and prophets. The fact that the poems which he wrote while he was under the influence of divine guidance are not his best poems gives credence to the possibility that the subjective reality of his spiritual communications did cause parts of his powerful brain to deteriorate. As a spiritualist, he threw open the doors of his mind to "the canaille of the other world."[10] Some of the pictures that he drew under the influence of what he considered direct spiritual dictation give one a feeling that he was under evil influences. His mind was indeed a magnificient one, but he suffered the loneliness of a spiritualist who knew his gods, but did not love them.

Except for Mr. Wordsworth, most of the critics seem to feel that even though his mind may have deteriorated in later life, he was sane when he wrote the two works under consideration in this paper. This is the point of view which the writer also takes.

It is necessary to have a knowledge of Blake's attitudes and philosophies to understand his poetry. Perhaps the fact that he had less formal education than any of the other great Romantics accounts in part for the originality of his genius as well as its eccentricity. If he had received a conventional education, he might have rejected many of the ideas, attitudes, visions, and philosophies which are a part of his greatness. He believed that formal education was the great sin; it was eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.[11] He advocated no other education than that which lies in the cultivation of the fine arts and the imagination.

Blake felt that he had a mission to teach rather than to learn, and even as a boy he was bursting with information. He was dedicated to the purpose of opening the eyes of men to the truth as he saw it. He had a strong sense of his personal responsibility, both to God and to society, to keep on producing the kind of imaginative art in which he believed.[12] He obeyed this sense of responsibility and his own genius in defiance of an indifferent and sometimes hostile society; as a result, he was neglected and frustrated by being unable to satisfy his intense desire to communicate.

Blake's attitude was that of an inspired seer. A thing was true because he saw it to be so by a spiritual and intuitive eye, and he believed in the truth of his visions. To him, spiritual things were reality, and physical items were merely fleeting and unsubstantial illusions.

To say that Blake's religion was unorthodox is an understatement. He succeeded in inventing in the course of about ten years as tangled and interdependent a system of theology as the Catholic church has accumulated in two thousand years.[13] He was a fervent Christian in a certain way, but it was a way of his own and was very different from that of any of the churches. For the last forty years of his life, he did not enter a place of worship, but he kept up a practice of private prayer--at least in emergencies. He believed in God and in Jesus Christ, but he also believed that men are gods, or rather that collective Man is God. He said, "Jesus Christ is the only God; and so am I, and so are you. I know of no other Christianity and no other gospel than the liberty both of mind and body to exercise the divine arts of imagination."[14]

Blake believed that man's body and soul were one and that man was essentially a spirit invested with a body and communicating with the Divine through the medium of his five senses. Man, the divine spirit, was a law unto himself, and he was at liberty to do whatsoever his spiritual essence dictated. Blake recognized no evil in the elements of the human soul, and he felt that religion had no right to state that certain things were sins or to run up bills of indictment against people who were fulfilling their own destinies by putting their free will into action. "Every religion that preaches vengenance for sin is the religion of the enemy and avenger and not of the forgiver of sin;

and their God is Satan named by the divine name," according to Blake.[15] It is doubtful that he believed in future rewards and punishments on the basis of the lives which men lived on earth. He once declared that moral virtues do not exist because everything that lives is holy and good in God's eyes, but he also stated that the Roman Catholic Church was the only one which taught the forgiveness of sins. Although these two ideas seem paradoxical, they are typical of Blake.

Blake believed that the way to the truth of God lay in man's imagination and that only by complete freedom can man reach his highest powers of imagination. He did not mean something shadowy or fantastic when he referred to imagination, but rather he meant definite and clear-cut images. He objected to any laws or restrictions which kept man from obtaining his highest powers. In fact he detested restraint of every kind and spoke scathingly of orthodoxy in law and religion. To him the world of imagination was synonymous with the world of eternity. In fact, to Blake, God and the imagination were one; that is, God is the creative and spiritual power in man, and apart from man the idea of God had no meaning.[16] In the light of his belief that God did not exist apart from man, his songs which tell of God's love and care are actually describing qualities which men themselves display. Only by utilizing these Godly qualities of love can men fully realize and develop their divine nature.

Blake believed that man's highest development required perfect love. He thought that free love was the highest ideal, but he was often misunderstood on this point because "free love" did not have the same connotation for him that it has today. Chesterton[17] says that he once proposed to his wife that they should live together naked in their back yard as Adam and Eve did. If he really suggested this, she succeeded in diverting him from his plan. A quality of indecency did appear in his later works, but it was an idealistic indecency. He did not aim at sin, but at an impossible sinlessness.

With this information as background, let us turn now to the two works in question. Blake's title page describes the Songs of Innocence and the Songs of Experience as "showing the two contrary states of the human soul."[18] The poems of the Songs of Innocence can be taken at their face value as the outpourings of a naive and child-like spontaneity. In like manner the Songs of Experience can be interpreted as the bitter disillusionment resulting from maturity; however, closer study reveals a much deeper meaning than this.

The Songs of Innocence depicts an imaginative vision of the state of innocence. Rather than being a collection of children's poems, it depicts the soul's perfect condition of existence when it is at one with itself--the condition which Blake mirrors as the state of childhood. To Blake childhood was both itself and a symbol of a state of soul

which may exist in eternity. The children in the state of innocence act simply, with spontaneous joy and complete harmony and union in their actions. Other characteristics of innocence are: perfect happiness in ignorance of evil and the self; freedom and energy without restrictive law; unhindered communion between the child and the universe; and the clear vision, which is love, of the divine world. In these poems Blake seems deliberately to have set his tone in a quiet key so that there would not be even a hint that innocence was not complete and secure. He was careful to exclude any disturbing note or any suggestion that innocence could be anything but happy.

Songs of Experience shows how life challenges, corrupts, and destroys the state of innocence. There is no unity of the child with the universe and no glance of God in the infant's eyes. The soul has already been exposed to evil and the knowledge of cruelty and death; it is at war with itself in a conflict between good and evil. Frustration, solitude, old age, and decay are everywhere, even in the cradle. Youth is suspicious, and parents see false motives and false desires in their child and seek to repress them. The child grows to manhood and a resentful old age not under the universal sky on the hills of innocence, but among gardens, behind walls, or in a landscape divided and measured, as life is.

There are several general contrasts in these two works. One of these lies in the symbolism. In the Songs of Innocence

the symbols are largely drawn from the Bible, and there is not much difficulty in understanding their meaning because Blake makes use of such familiar figures as the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God. These symbols convey a special kind of existence in which humans have the same kind of assurance and security that belongs to lambs under a wise shepherd or to children with loving parents. In Songs of Experience Blake often uses symbols of his own making, and his meaning is more elusive. To the meekness of the lamb is opposed the fearfulness of the tiger, though each is depicted as beautiful in its own province. Just as the Songs of Innocence were sung in a happy Paradise, the Songs of Experience are sung in a disillusioned Hell. In the first work, Blake was able to find complete expression for what he had to say, and there is none of the confusion of his later works. The poems in Songs of Experience reveal something of the obscure side of Blake's poetry. His use of abstract symbols and the uncertain way he had of hurrying his conceptions into shape give the reader a sense of something hastily presented and as hastily withdrawn. He feels that he must snatch a meaning or miss it entirely, for before he has time to think about it, another image has replaced the former one.

Although every poem in the Songs of Innocence is contrasted with one or more poems in the Songs of Experience, which either have the same title or deal with similar subject matter, nine of these poems will be sufficient to illustrate Blake's genius and great technical skill. In

this project, the order of presentation is the same as that in which the poems in the Songs of Innocence appear. For the reader's convenience, each poem will be presented in its entirety, with the appropriate comments following.

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee
On a cloud I saw a child.
And he laughing said to me.

Pipe a song about a Lamb;
So I piped with merry chear,
Piper pipe that song again--
So I piped, he wept to hear.

Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe
Sing thy songs of happy chear,
So I sung the same again
While he wept with joy to hear

Piper sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read--
So he vanish'd from my sight.
And I pluck'd a hollow reed.

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain'd the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear.

The piper's point of view in the "Introduction" to the Songs of Innocence is joyful and happy. He is conscious of the essential divinity of the child and assured of its protection. The setting in the first stanza is an atmosphere of carefree abandon, a kind of aimless delight which is unburdened by restrictions. The cloud is not menacing, but merely shows that here is a child's dream world where everything is alive and full of "pleasant glee" and where the child knows and wants nothing else. This is the world of innocence.

In stanza two the aimless wandering has stopped for a moment, and the piping of one song "about a Lamb" is made "with merry chear." The song is without words, but it is about a lamb, an animal known for its mildness, softness, and, above all, its innocence. This is Blake's threefold vision of innocence: the child, the lamb, and Christ. The child on a cloud is laughing as he commands the song to be played, but he weeps after it is played the second time. The thought of the Lamb of God is essentially a vision of loveliness, but it is also tinged with sorrow as it reminds the reader of Christ on the Cross.

The last two stanzas form the introduction proper to the Songs of Innocence. The visionary child has vanished from sight, and Blake begins to write.

Hear the voice of the Bard!
Who Present, Past, and Future sees
Whose ears have heard,
The Holy Word,
That walk'd among the ancient trees.

Calling the lapsed Soul
And weeping in the evening dew;
That might control!
The starry pole;
And fallen fallen light renew!

O Earth O Earth return!
Arise from out the dewy grass;
Night is worn,
And the morn
Rises from the slumberous mass.

Turn away no more:
Why wilt thou turn away
The starry floor
The watry shore
Is giv'n thee till the break of day.

The Bard's voice in the "Introduction" to Songs of Experience is solemn and more serious, for the high-pitched joy of innocence exists now only in memory. The voice of the bard, "whose ears have heard the Holy Word," calls to the universal soul of all mankind. His weeping is divine sympathy, the product of experience, symbolized here by the "evening dew."

Stanzas three and four teach that even though the soul was hurled from its state of innocence into experience, where it is subject to laws and punishment, the punishment is not eternal. Just as morning always follows night, so a better day is yet to come if one will only endure "till the break of day."

The Sun does arise,
And make happy the skies.
The merry bells ring
To welcome the Spring.
The sky-lark and thrush,
The birds of the bush,
Sing louder around,
To the bells chearful sound.
While our sports shall be seen
On the Ecchoing Green.

Old John with white hair
Does laugh away care,
Sitting under the oak,
Among the old folk,
They laugh at our play,
And soon they all say.
Such such were the joys.
When we all girls and boys,
In our youth time were seen,
On the Ecchoing Green.

Till the little ones weary
No more can be merry
The sun does descend,
And our sports have an end:

Round the laps of their mothers,
Many sisters and brothers,
Like birds in their nest.
Are ready for rest;
And sport no more seen,
On the darkening Green.

"The Ecchoing Green" is not only the history of a day, but of all human life. The sun that rises in the first stanza is the spiritual sun of the state of innocence. The "merry bells" reflect the happiness of the birds of the heaven, "sky-lark and thrush," and the birds of the earth, "birds of the bush." This is not just any spring day, but the day of innocence.

The simplicity and the innocence of stanza one make the change in the second stanza seem more abrupt. Here we have the adults of experience in direct contrast with the "little ones" of innocence. The stanza begins with the picture of Old John sitting with other old folk in the shade of an oak tree. Old John, with his white hair, symbolizes the winter of man's life. For him the green echoes only memories, which in themselves imply lack of vision. At first they are laughing away cares, but in the last part of the stanza, John and the other old folk have become burdened down by the cares of the natural world. They have failed to find a mature substitute for innocent sport (play).

The final couplet echoes the futility of Old John's attempt to recapture the carefree merriment of youth. The green no longer echoes because it is dark and deserted, and

echoes cannot penetrate the forests of experience. To ignore that experience by turning one's eyes toward childhood is eternal death, but to recognize it and grapple with it is eternal life.

This last couplet also is suggestive of the sense of despair that one feels as he reads "The Garden of Love" in Songs of Experience.

I went to the Garden of Love.
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst.
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not, writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore,

And I saw it was filled with graves.
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys and desires.

Here is an ugly antithesis of the happy contented children at play on the green. The green is still there, but on it is a chapel with "Thou shalt not" written over the door. In stanza three, the garden itself has changed. The graves, tombstones, and priests in black gowns indicate that jealousy, cruelty, and hypocrisy in experience turn joy into misery.

"The Lamb" and "The Tyger" are two of Blake's best-known poems.

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life and bid thee feed.
By the stream and o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice:
Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee;
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek and he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child and thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee.

The lamb, of course, with its meekness, its tender voice, and its mildness, is the symbol of innocence. Blake believed that behind the universe is an eternal image called the Lamb, of which all living lambs, with their eternal innocence, are merely copies.[19]

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare sieze the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? and what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

The tiger is Blake's symbol for the fierce forces in the soul which are needed to break the bonds of experience. He is made by some powerful force which uses the hammer, chain, furnace, and anvil; thus, he will endure in experience even though the lamb is destroyed. The "forests of the night" in which the tiger lurks are ignorance, repression, and superstition. One receives an overwhelming impression of an awful power lurking in the darkness of being and forcing on him questions which pierce to the heart of life. Did the same God make good and evil? Blake merely poses this question; he does not attempt to answer it.

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue,
Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep.
So your chimneys I sweep and in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curl'd like a lamb's back, was shav'd, so I said.
Hush Tom never mind it, for when your head's bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.

And so he was quiet, and that very night.
As Tom was a sleeping he had such a sight,
That thousands of sweepers Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack
Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black.

And by came an Angel who had a bright key
And he open'd the coffins and set them all free.
Then down a green plain leaping laughing they run
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked and white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father and never want joy.

And so Tom awoke and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags and our brushes to work.
Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm,
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

A freedom of imagination is the theme in "The Chimney Sweeper" of Songs of Innocence. The first stanza portrays the speaker as a child whose feeble cry tells the world that his mother has died and that he has been cast into a bosom of soot. In stanzas two through five Tom Dacre's dream is recorded. The little chimney sweepers are released from their black coffins, which are their soot-covered bodies, by an angel with a bright key. They are released into the land of innocence which Blake would have called the land of imagination. Their physical poverty and harsh life cannot discourage them because they have the ability to escape into their dream-world through imagination.

A little black thing among the snow:
Crying weep, weep, in notes of woe!
Where are thy father and mother? say?
They are both gone up to the church to pray.

Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smil'd among the winters snow;
They clothed me in the clothes of death.
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

And because I am happy and dance and sing,
They think they have done me no injury:
And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King
Who make up a heaven of our misery.

The shift to "The Chimney Sweeper" of Songs of Experience from the one in innocence is mainly one of character. In the earlier poem, the mother was dead, and the father was not present. Now both parents are living and have gone "up to the church to pray." Even though he has both parents, the sweeper of experience has no vision. The first sweeper could escape from reality into the realm of innocence, but this one succumbs to its darkness and to the tyrants of experience.

The first two lines of the second stanza refer to the chimney sweeper of innocence who, despite his plight, can smile and be happy in the knowledge of his own innocence. In experience, however, the sweeper's parents bind him with "clothes of death," which contrast sharply with Tom Dacre's naked whiteness. For the sweeper in experience, there is no vision, no angel with a bright key, no rivers to cleanse, and no sun to warm; the clothes of death are the ultimate reality. Thus, in the last stanza he confesses his misery and winces from his injury. His misery is important to him, and his parents are evil for allowing it to happen. In the last stanza he indirectly curses God and Priest and King for profiting from his misery. He could have gone naked, but he accepted the clothes of death. He could have sung a song of joy, but the notes of woe came easier. He could have made a heaven of his misery, but he did not see that heaven and all diety resided in his own breast.[20]

Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean
The children walking two and two in red and blue and green
Grey headed beadles walk'd before with wands as white as snow
Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames waters flow.

O what a multitude they seem'd these flowers of London town
Seated in companies they sit with radiance all their own.
The hum of multitudes was there but multitudes of lambs,
Thousands of little boys and girls raising their innocent hands.

Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of song,
Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of heaven among,
Beneath them sit the aged men, wise guardians of the poor.
Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door.

In "Holy Thursday" of Songs of Innocence the charity children are "walking two and two" into the high dome of St. Paul's. Their innocent faces have been scrubbed clean, and they are dressed in the colors of life, "in red and blue and green." From a conventional point of view, it is thoughtful and kind of the "wise guardians of the poor" to run charity schools and to take the children occasionally to St. Paul's to give thanks for their so-called blessings. From Blake's point of view, however, the children clearly are disciplined, regimented, and marched in formation to the church mainly to advertise the goodness of their supposed benefactors. Blake's point is that in the state of innocence there ought to be no discipline, no regimentation, no marching, no uniforms, and no guardians. Instead, there should be free, uninhibited, thoughtless play on the echoing green.

The wand in the first stanza symbolizes authority; since a beadle wields the symbol, it is also religious

authority, institutionalized religion, the organized church. In addition it represents an act of restraint which forces the children to act according to rule rather than impulse. The whiteness of the wand suggests the coldness of man-made moral purity as opposed to the warmth of young, energetic, unrestrained innocence. It also suggests the worldly concept of the duty of worship, which is the antithesis of all of Blake's ideas of freedom and spontaneity.

In stanzas two and three, the children temporarily escape from this restraint as "they sit with radiance all their own" and "raise to heaven the voice of song." This simple act raises them to a level far above their supposed benefactors, who sit beneath them without vision, without innocence, and without love.

> Is this a holy thing to see,
> In a rich and fruitful land,
> Babes reduced to misery,
> Fed with cold and usurous hand?
>
> Is that trembling cry a song?
> Can it be a song of joy?
> And so many children poor?
> It is a land of poverty!
>
> And their sun does never shine.
> And their fields are bleak and bare.
> And their ways are fill'd with thorns.
> It is eternal winter there.
>
> For where-e'er the sun does shine.
> And where-e'er the rain does fall:
> Babe can never hunger there,
> Nor poverty the mind appall.

In the first stanza of "Holy Thursday" of Songs of Experience, Blake raises the question of how, in such a

rich and fruitful land, can babes be reduced to misery. In the second stanza he asks two questions, which imply that even though this song is the cry of miserable children, it is also a song of joy. Although they are impoverished, the children still know the way to God.

There is a sharp contrast between the third and the fourth stanzas. The third is a picture of the children's lives as they are; the fourth is the state to which they aspire. There poverty cannot appall the mind because the real poverty exists in the tyrants of the "rich and fruitful land" where love is bought and sold. In the usurous heart the sun can never shine; but in this last verse, the spiritual state where no such poverty exists is achieved.

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 noon day.

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 and 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 father's knee.
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him and he will then love me.

"The Little Black Boy" in Songs of Innocence at first glance seems to be concerned with the age-old problem of the differences between the Negro and the Caucasian races. It is true that the abolition of slavery had been advocated in England for several decades before the date of this poem,[21] but Mark Van Doren interprets the poem in a way that has far more meaning and beauty.[22]

In the first stanza the little black boy begins by saying that he was born under the southern sun and, therefore, is black; but his soul is as white as the body of the English child, who, because of his exterior appearance, is not misunderstood as black children are. He goes on to say that his mother explained it to him once and made him understand that there was a certain advantage in being outwardly black. She told him one day, as they sat in the shade of a tree, that the souls of men endure with difficulty the beams of their Father's love and that they cannot enjoy His love if they are not protected from its full strength by a dark skin as the black boy is. God's love is like the beams of the sun in that in addition to nourishing life, it can also burn and destroy when it beats

fiercely on a soul which is unprepared to sustain it. The bodies of men search out shadowy places and benefit from clouds because the heat of the sun is hard to bear; in like manner, men's souls learn to bear the heat of love, which would be a fearful thing if they were exposed to it all at once.

Although this parallel is not perfectly drawn, Blake's real interest is in his desire to persuade the reader that all men are equal under the skin. The skin of both black men and white men is a cloud which protects the wearer until the day when no protection will be needed; then all will cast off their clouds, their skins, and will be able to go where God is.

The little English boy does not realize that he, too, wears this protective cloud. He identifies his whiteness with the soul's whiteness and doubts that the little black boy has a soul. The ultimate in forgiveness and love is expressed by the little black boy in the last stanza when he says that when their two souls are freed from their clouds and when they stand around the tent of God, he will shade the little English boy until he has made up for his lack of discipline and learned to bear the heat of God's love. Then the English boy will love him as he now loves the white boy.

A different kind of love is expressed in "A Little Boy Lost" in Songs of Experience.

Nought loves another as itself
Nor venerates another so,
Nor is it possible to Thought
A greater than itself to know:

And Father, how can I love you,
Or any of my brothers more?
I love you like the little bird
That picks up crumbs around the door.

The Priest sat by and heard the child.
In trembling zeal he siez'd his hair:
He led him by his little coat;
And all admir'd the Priestly care.

And standing on the altar high.
Lo what a fiend is here! said he:
One who sets reason up for judge
Of our most holy Mystery.

The weeping child could not be heard.
The weeping parents wept in vain:
They strip'd him to his little shirt.
And bound him in an iron chain.

And burn'd him in a holy place
Where many had been burn'd before:
The weeping parents wept in vain.
Are such things done on Albion's shore.

In the first stanza the child recognizes his self as divine and has learned "his own humanity to adore."[23] Such love of self is admirable and right in Blake's eyes but abhorrent, of course, to the priest and the child's parents. In the second stanza he says that he can love his father and brothers only as much as he loves the divine in his own self.

The priest cannot understand the real meaning of the child's words, and he calls the child a fiend who uses reason to judge "our most holy Mystery." Reason, according to Blake's philosophy, is the faculty which is created by man

to analyze love and decide how much should be given to father, brothers, birds, and God. In complete agreement with the blind judgment of the priest, the parents strip, bind, and even burn the child as punishment for his sins, or perhaps as an offering to the god of this "holy Mystery." The repetition of the word "holy" in stanzas four and six is effective because Blake applies it both to the "Mystery" itself and to the place in which man-made holiness destroys the true holiness of the child.

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
All pray in their distress:
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace,and Love,
Is God our father dear:
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is Man his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart
Pity, a human face:
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, turk, or Jew.
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too.

In "The Divine Image" of the Songs of Innocence,Blake delineated his concept of holiness. He knew that love may become selfish and possessive when it stands alone and that it needs to be redeemed by other generous qualities. The

divine image, of course, is man, and the divine qualities which Blake enumerates exist in man and reveal his divine character. In the state of innocence, life is governed by these powers of Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love; they give innocence its completeness and security.

Blake provides the antithesis to "The Divine Image" in "The Human Abstract" of Songs of Experience.

> Pity would be no more,
> If we did not make somebody Poor:
> And Mercy no more could be
> If all were as happy as we;
>
> And mutual fear brings peace;
> Till the selfish loves increase.
> Then Cruelty knits a snare,
> And spreads his baits with care.
>
> He sits down with holy fears,
> And waters the ground with tears:
> Then Humility takes its root
> Underneath his foot.
>
> Soon spreads the dismal shade
> Of Mystery over his head;
> And the caterpiller and Fly
> Feed on the Mystery.
>
> And it bears the fruit of Deceit.
> Ruddy and sweet to eat;
> And the Raven his nest has made
> In its thickest shade.
>
> The Gods of the earth and sea,
> Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree
> But their search was all in vain:
> There grows one in the Human Brain.

In bitter irony the poet shows how pity and mercy can be distorted and used as a cover for base, cowardly motives. He goes straight to the heart of the matter by showing how

pity could not exist "if we did not make somebody Poor;" neither could mercy exist "if all were as happy as we."

Harold Bloom suggests that the titles of these two poems are misleading because "The Divine Image" is a collection of abstractions, while "The Human Abstract" develops an extended image, that of the tree of mystery.[24] Having created the poor and unhappy as objects for pity and mercy in the first stanza, the rest of "The Human Abstract" depicts the net of religion being woven as a snare and nature being watered by the holy tears of the cruel weaver. Humility grows from the moisture of self-righteousness and blossoms into the tree of Mystery, which "bears the fruit of Deceit." The poem ends by saying that the tree grows not in nature but in the human brain. Thus, in this last stanza, Blake reiterates his belief that the forces in experience which destroy innocence have their origin in self-righteousness, hypocrisy, and man-made institutionalized religion.

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still.

Then come home my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise.
Come come leave off play, and let us away
Till the morning appears in the skies.

No no let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep
Besides in the sky, the little birds fly
And the hills are all cover'd with sheep.

Well well go and play till the light fades away
And then go home to bed.
The little ones leaped and shouted and laugh'd
And all the hills echoed.

The "Nurse's Song" of innocence tells how children are permitted to go on enjoying joyous, unrestrained play until it is time to go to bed. In this poem Blake depicts the carefree play of the imagination when it is not spoiled by senseless restrictions. The unrestrained energy of the children is the very core of Blake's state of innocence. The nurse called the children home only when it was necessary to protect them from the terrors the night might hold for a child who is separated from its mother.

In the "Nurse's Song"of experience, the voice which calls the children home is not one of loving care, but one of sour age, envious of a happiness which it can no longer share and eager to point out the dangers of the dark.

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And whisprings are in the dale:
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
My face turns green and pale.

Then come home my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise.
Your spring and your day are wasted in play
And your winter and night in disguise.

The first line is taken from the "Nurse's Song" of innocence, but the second line becomes a parody of the earlier poem. Instead of "laughing...heard on the hill," "whisprings are (heard) in the dale." The whisperings are

not necessarily there, but in the nurse's mind they must be there because her experience tells her that complete freedom and lack of inhibition are inconceivable. She sees the children as secretive and close-lipped, rather than innocent beings.

Recalling her past, she says, "The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind; my face turns green and pale." Green indicates that for a moment she envies the children their play, as the days of her own innocence flash before her eyes; but the moment is fleeting, and only the paleness of fear is left in its place.

Although the first two lines of the second stanza are taken verbatim from the earlier poem, their meaning is different when interpreted as part of the state of experience rather than that of innocence. In the first poem, the nurse calls the children home to protect them; in the second one she is convinced that they are already in experience, and she reprimands them for the folly they mistake for happiness. She accuses the children of wasting the freedom, which she now lacks, in play. She sees play as a waste of time and cruelly tells the children that their life is a sham passed in darkness. She is so enslaved by worldly morality and rationality that she calls the children from the very freedom in which their salvation lies to the bondage in which she now merely exists.

I have no name
I am but two days old.---
What shall I call thee?
I happy am
Joy is my name,---
Sweet joy befall thee!

Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old.
Sweet joy I call thee;
Thou dost smile.
I sing the while
Sweet joy befall thee.

"Infant Joy" depicts the instinctive, thoughtless life and the joyousness of innocence. The child in this poem needs no name; he is happy in the mere fact of his existence; therefore, his name must be joy. This poem is the epitome of Blake's concept of innocence---exhuberant, spontaneous, unrestrained joy.

The violent contrast of "Infant Sorrow" with "Infant Joy" is seen at once.

My mother groan'd! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I leapt:
Helpless, naked, piping loud:
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my father's hands:
Striving against my swadling bands:
Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.

The mother groans because she no longer has any place in the child's life. Her role as protector is over, and the child, though helpless, is on its own. The father weeps tears of jealousy because experience is his realm, and the infant is a dangerous trespasser. Nakedness

indicates that the infant is helpless in the face of danger because his mother can no longer protect him and because his father's dominion is upon him as he struggles in his father's hands.

The last stanza reveals the spirit of unrest and revolt which is present even at the very beginning of childhood. In the last two lines is the picture of the child who, after his first efforts of resistance when he feels himself "bound" as a prisoner, angrily gives up the struggle and sulks upon his mother's breast.

The poems that have been recounted here represent two different points of view from which William Blake looked at life. In the earlier poems, Songs of Innocence, the soul's perfect condition of existence, when it is at one with itself and the universe, is presented. No discordant tones are allowed to creep in to mar the vision of complete freedom and spontaneous joy. Later in Songs of Experience, Blake illustrated the various ways by which the experiences of life challenge, corrupt, and destroy the ideal state of innocence. Rather than being in a condition of perfect existence, the soul is at war with itself in a conflict between good and evil.

Without a knowledge of his life and philosophies, it is difficult to understand how the same poet can write with such fervor about two ideas which are so diametrically opposed to each other. Relevant biographical material has been presented to aid the reader in understanding these

poems. Of course, the interpretations of Blake's poetry are inexhaustible, but it is hoped that those set forth in this project will stimulate the reader to make further ventures into this rewarding experience.

FOOTNOTES

1 See C. M. Bowra, The Romantic Imagination, p. 27.

2 See Adrian Van Sinderen, Blake, The Mystic Genius, p. 16.

3 See Bernard D. Grebanier, et. al., English Literature and Its Backgrounds, II, p. 84.

4 See W. M. Rossetti, The Poetical Works of William Blake, p. lx.

5 Ibid., p. xxvi.

6 See G. K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 69.

7 Ibid., p. 71.

8 See W. M. Rossetti, The Poetical Works of William Blake, p. lxxxviii.

9 Ibid., p. xci.

10 See G. K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 100.

11 See W. M. Rossetti, The Poetical Works of William Blake, p. lxxx.

12 See Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 4.

13 See G. K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 156.

14 See W. M. Rossetti, The Poetical Works of William Blake, p. lxxvii.

15 Ibid., p. lxxxvii

16 See C. M. Bowra, The Romantic Imagination, p. 34.

17 See G. K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 77.

18 See C. M. Bowra, The Romantic Imagination, p. 28.

19 See G. K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 141.

20 This is a favorite philosophy of Blake.

21 1789.

22 See Mark Van Doren, Introduction to Poetry, p. 112-114.

[23] See Robert F. Gleckner, The Piper and the Bard, p. 253.

[24] See Harold Bloom, The Visionary Company, p. 38.

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