

Contrasting visions of the world: the echoing green and london



In 'Songs of Innocence and of Experience', Blake evokes contrasting visions of the world. The two poems, 'The Echoing Green' and 'London', are especially characteristic of these contrary visions; evoking polar opposite images of innocence, corruption and freedom. Blake uses both contrasting (for example, the different use of tone) and similar ways (the use of sound as a poetic device) to evoke contrary visions in the two poems: one of freedom, joy, and one of corruption.

The most immediate contrast between the two poems is the overwhelming vision of misery in 'London', compared to the embodiment of joy in 'the Echoing Green'. Blake, it should be noted, utilizes similar poetic techniques to evoke these different visions. For example, Blake's prevalent sensory imagery in both poems heightens the contrary visions of each one. In 'London', Blake references the sounds of misery, "cry" (which is repeated thrice), "soldier's sigh", "curse", "tear". Sensory imagery is crucial to 'the Echoing Green' too, which describes the "laughing" (repeated twice), "the bells' cheerful sound", "the merry bells ring", and the "birds of the bush [which] sing louder". Blake's focus, particularly, on auditory imagery, in both poems, aids the presentation of overwhelming misery and joy in 'London' and 'the Echoing Green' respectively. In 'London', the overwhelming vision of misery is emphasized by the actual sound of Blake's language, for example the repeated plosives, "ban", "blackening", "blood", "blasts", "blights", and the dejected alliterative sibilance of the "soldier's sigh". Additionally, Blake dramatically morphs human misery into physical form, "soldier's sigh runs in blood down palace-walls" and "blackening church"; horrific images which further the presence of misery. Indeed, these

metaphors are symptomatic of Blake's far darker, far more dramatic, tone in 'London', "mind-forged manacles", "plagues", "hearse", which contrasts the significantly more light-hearted tone of 'the Echoing Green'. In the latter, the monosyllabic language and deliberately simplistic tone, "the sun does arise", "the birds of the bush", evoke an image of innocent joy.

Therefore, through auditory imagery, as well as the tone, Blake establishes contrasting visions of joy and misery in these two poems.

The structure of each poem aids the presentation of Blake's contrary visions of joy and misery, freedom and entrapment. It should first be evinced that 'the Echoing Green', in its comparison of the characters to "birds in their nests", suggests a vision of freedom, which is highlighted further by that "old John, with white hair, does laugh away care". In contrast, 'London', quite obviously, asserts imprisonment through the description of the "mind-forged manacles" and inexorability of "every" individual's suffering. In 'the Echoing Green', this evoked sense of simple freedom is emphasized further by the consistent rhyming couplets, which chime with happy implications and are, in themselves, simplistic – usually only one syllable masculine rhymes. Blake's five syllable lines in 'the Echoing Green', additionally, trip each line of the poem into the next, instilling in its rhythm excitement and energy. In contrast, Blake's use of rhythm in 'London' evokes an entirely contrary vision. For example, the repetition of "every", "every cry of every man", establishes a heavy and arduous rhythm, which reflects the general vision of misery in the poem. Thus, in both poems, Blake skillfully uses the rhythm and structure of the poems to construct and echo their contrasting meanings.

Furthermore, Blake's contrary visions in 'the Echoing Green' and 'London' are evoked, in part, through the contrasting senses of community and isolation in each one respectively, which Blake achieves through his subtle language choices. For example, in 'the Echoing Green', Blake's repeated first person plural, "our sports", "our youth-time", "our play", as well as his unifying language, "among the old folk", "when we all - girls and boys", evoke a sense of community. Further, Blake's language signifies a harmoniously interacting world, "the merry bells ring to welcome the spring", "the birds sing louder to the bells' cheerful sound". In both, "to" signals the different elements, "the merry bells", "the spring", "the birds", all reacting to one another harmoniously. Similarly, the harmony between the old and young is suggested by the fond nostalgia felt by the former towards the latter, "soon they all say 'such, such were the joys'". Finally, Blake's multiple voices in 'the Echoing Green' (the use of the young narrator and older speaker, Old John) create a further sense of warm community, even equality, which juxtaposes the anonymity implied in 'London'. Indeed, whilst voices are named in 'the Echoing Green', (Old John), in 'London', individuals are referred to only by their occupation, "the chimney-sweeper", "the hapless soldier", "the youthful harlot". This anonymous portrayal of individuals, who are defined only by their professions, is further evidence of Blake's vision of an overtly, excessively, commercialized society, which is concerned only with a person's economic identity (their occupation). Additionally, in 'London', in contrast to 'the Echoing Green', Blake uses a first person singular, "I wander", denoting a sense of isolation. However, it should be noted, Blake still uses inclusive language in 'London', most notably the repetition of "every", as is done similarly in 'the Echoing Green'.

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Green'. Yet, whilst the inclusive language of ' the Echoing Green' asserts unity, in ' London', its function is only to present misery as inescapable, as an absolute in modern society, " in every face I meet, marks of weakness, marks of woe", " every cry", " every infant's cry of fear". In ' London', any unity arises only from misery, juxtaposing the unified joy in ' the Echoing Green', " they laugh at our play".

The portrayals of the natural world in both poems are crucial to each one's meaning. ' the Echoing Green' asserts a natural state and cycle of man in his innocence, contrasting Blake's use and presentation of nature in ' London'. Notably, in ' the Echoing Green', man's actions are closely linked to the natural world, " many sisters and brothers like birds in their nests", and the cycle of man's day (from the beginning to the end of " our sports") is structurally framed by a similar cycle of nature, " the sun does arise" (the opening of the poem) and " the sun does descend" (the end). Further, the significant presence of natural imagery in the poem, " the sun", " the spring", " the skylark and thrush", " the oak", in which the " oak" is an image of continuity, and even in the poem's title, "'the Echoing Green'", reveals Blake's intent to closely associate man's own cycle (from young to old etc.) and innocent state of mind to nature. Indeed, Blake blatantly links the innocent joy of man, " laugh away care", with the natural world, " old John, with white hair, does laugh away care sitting under the oak". Thus, Blake asserts, not only, the naturalness of man's cycles, but also suggests man's natural state as being in the " joys...seen on ' the Echoing Green'", i. e. in innocence and freedom.

In contrast, the impact of natural imagery in 'London' is to suggest a misery that has permeated all levels of life, as well as evoking an unnatural vision of commercialization and corruption, which seem to dominate Blake's world in the poem. Blake describes the "midnight streets", wherein 'midnight', a noun, is turned into an adjective, arguably as if the streets themselves are the darkness, rather than only in darkness. In contrast, Blake's use of natural imagery in 'the Echoing Green' suggests a world permeated by joy, "make happy the skies". Notably, in both poems, Blake projects anthropomorphic imagery onto the natural and physical world; for example the "happy" skies in 'the Echoing Green'. However, this is to contrasting effects. In 'the Echoing Green', Blake's personification of the natural world, placed alongside the natural imagery to describe man, "like birds in their nest", blurs the distinction between nature and man. Arguably, Blake's use of natural imagery suggests that man is, within this vision of innocence in 'the Echoing Green', so in his natural state that the chasm between nature and man ceases to exist. In ways arguably similar to this, Blake places language of the manmade world onto the natural world in 'London', "chartered Thames does flow"; however, this instead signals an immense permeation of man's corruption and greed in the world. Furthermore, this referenced commercialization of the natural world, "chartered Thames", echoes the appearance of a dominating capitalist system, which similarly commodifies human experience, in Blake's reference to the "harlot" and the "chartered streets". Therefore, through the use of imagery relating to humans and nature, Blake presents contrasting visions of mankind and society in 'the Echoing Green' and 'London'.

However, it is important to consider that, although the two poems appear, and indeed still are, contrary in their visions, 'the Echoing Green's' subtle negative undertones foreshadow the vision described in 'London'. Thus, the two poems may not be only contrary but, instead, a development and echo of one another. The conclusion of 'the Echoing Green' has an underlying hint of loss when the refrain shifts from "the Echoing Green" to "the darkening green"; implying, it could be argued, a fear that the values described just prior are fading (a fear which 'London' then confirms). Indeed, within the very title of the poem, "echoing", there is a seed of inevitable decline. The transition of Blake's repeated reference to "sports" in each stanza, which "shall be seen" then "were seen", then "no more [were] seen", and which, interestingly, evade ever being in the present tense, arguably imply an unreachability to Blake's own hope for innocent freedom - a fear which 'London' then brings to fruition. Therefore, although the poems undoubtedly evoke contrary visions, they may simultaneously echo and foreshadow one another (especially when it is considered that Blake released 'Songs of Experience' only ever with 'Songs of Innocence', possibly indicating that he intended a degree of continuity).

To conclude, therefore, Blake clearly presents two hauntingly contrary visions in 'the Echoing Green' and 'London'; but, it should be noted, achieves this through both similar and differing poetic devices. 'the Echoing Green' is an example of the joy that can be found in innocence, harmony and freedom; whilst 'London' reveals, possibly more realistically, a world absent of these qualities. Perhaps, though, 'the Echoing Green' and 'London' should be considered as more than only contrary visions and, instead, as

Blake's deliberate attempt to reveal the inevitable shift from innocence to experience.