

Blake's vision of innocence as a form of protest



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Despite Blake's asserted protest in his dual collection, 'Songs of Innocence and Experience', the role of protest in his vision of innocence, itself, is more debatable. Arguably, Blake's protest is constructed only through the contrasts that arise between 'Songs of Innocence' and 'Songs of Experience'; therefore, the vision of innocence does not itself act as a protest. However, Blake's emphasis on the naturalness of physical pleasure subverts conventional doctrines and establishes an implicit protest against his society. Thus, although Blake's attack may be more effective and multifaceted when placed alongside 'Songs of Experience', his vision of innocence is arguably still itself a protest.

Blake foregrounds the contrasting perceptions of innocence and experience and, arguably, through this, forms his protests against both a single vision and the repressive teachings of the Church. Possibly, without the contrary vision of experience, Blake's vision of innocence cannot be considered, itself, to be a protest. Indeed, for example, it is the contrast between the vision of innocence in 'the Echoing Green' and that of experience, in 'the Garden of Love', that reveals Blake's attack on the Church. In 'the Echoing Green', the reader is introduced to a thriving natural setting, "the skylark and thrush" and "Old John sitting under the oak", and the return to innocence is signaled through Blake's joyful language, "cheerful", "laugh", "our play". However, in 'the Garden of Love', which is portrayed as an experienced reflection of 'the Echoing Green' (the recurring, but ultimately distorted, image of "the green"), the dominating usurpation of religion is now emphasized, "a Chapel was built where I used to play on the green". Contrasting with 'the Echoing Green', the speaker describes a suppressed natural world, "tombstones

where flowers should be”, and an absence of joy, as indicated by the draining of color, “ black gowns”. Arguably, only through the blatant change that transpires between these two visions of innocence and experience is Blake able to demonstrate the Church’s culpability in man’s misery and form his protest. This is similarly applicable in the contrary poems, ‘ Infant Joy’ and ‘ Infant Sorrow’, in which the change from freedom and joy, “ I happy am”, to imprisonment, “ swaddling bands”, is subtly paralleled with the transition from the child’s freedom from religion, “ I am but two days old” (children were baptized on the third day) to the child’s awareness of its doctrines, “ like a fiend hid in a cloud”. Therefore, it could be argued that Blake’s vision of innocence is not itself a protest, as Blake requires the dual presence of innocent and experienced visions to formulate his attack on, and protest against, religious doctrine.

Additionally, as mentioned, crucial to Blake’s protest is his attack on a ‘ single vision’. By highlighting both the limitations and advantages of either an innocent or experienced vision, Blake suggests that, for man to progress, a dual perception from innocence and experience is necessary. Thus, Blake’s vision of innocence is not, in itself, a protest, as the latter is arguably formed only by the presence of both innocent and experienced visions. Indeed, in the poems ‘ the Chimney Sweeper’, one a vision of innocence and one of experience, Blake implies the need for a dual perception, protesting against a single one. Blake suggests that the speaker’s innocent outlook enables blindness towards his own oppression; “ if all do their duty, they need not fear harm”, in which the half rhyme, “ warm”, “ harm”, chillingly implies that this conclusion is erroneous. In contrast, in ‘ the Chimney Sweeper’ of ‘

Songs of Experience', the speaker is strikingly aware of his oppression, "they are gone to praise God and His priest and king who made up a heaven of our misery". The experienced speaker is unaware, however, as to how he should combat his oppression, contrasting the active responsiveness to circumstances in Blake's vision of innocence, demonstrated by the Chimney Sweeper's resilient positivity, "never mind it, for, when your head's bare, you know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair". It is the amalgamation of innocence, which enables action, and experience, which enable realization, which would lead to progression. Therefore, through the visions of innocence and experience, Blake reveals the value of a dual perception, forming his protest against a single one. Arguably, Blake's vision of innocence can only be considered a protest alongside Blake's contrasting vision of experience, rather than as a form of protest in itself.

However, although much of Blake's protest has been demonstrated to arise from, and be more effectively presented by, the contrast between the visions of experience and innocence, the latter is itself, nonetheless, arguably still a form of protest. Arguably, Blake's characterization of children as naturally innocent repudiates and attacks the Christian doctrine of 'original sin' (which asserts that children are born evil). In Blake's vision of innocence, children are explicitly referred to as having "innocent faces" ('Holy Thursday'). Similarly, the interconnection made between children and the 'lamb', a symbol of innocence and Christ, "like lambs we joy" ('the Little Black Boy') and "multitude of lambs" ('Holy Thursday'), signals Blake's belief that children are naturally innocent. Further, Blake subverts the conventional, oppressive attitudes towards children by giving them dialogue

and narrative voices (as in ' Infant Joy', ' the Little Black Boy' and ' the Chimney Sweeper') – a protest in itself. Crucially, Blake additionally presents children as possessing authority; for example, in the ' Introduction' to ' Songs of Innocence', the adult speaker is directly receptive to the child, as signaled by the repetition of " so". Therefore, in subverting the oppressive attitudes of ' original sin' towards children, Blake's vision of innocence acts as a protest in itself.

Similarly, Blake's vision of innocence directly and unashamedly foregrounds those acts, such as the indulgement of physical desire, which religious teaching demonizes. Blake's sensuous imagery alludes to sexual desire without inhibition; the repeated use of " sweet", for example, (which is in ' Infant Joy', ' Laughing Song', ' Spring' and ' the Shepherd'), arguably hints at a sexual and physical dimension to Blake's vision of innocence and, even more radically, children. This is achieved further by the innocent sexual implications of youthful, playful language, such as " our sport" and " play" (' the Echoing Green'). Similarly, Blake's use of tactile imagery, such as " softest" (' the Lamb'), " soft face" (' Spring'), " stroke his silver hair" (' the Little Black Boy'), boldly demonstrates and admits to the pleasure of physical feeling in these visions of innocence. That physical pleasure brings innocent joy is demonstrated especially in ' Spring', in which the simplistic rhyming couplets and short 3 syllable lines act to provide immediate resolution and fulfillment for the reader and chime with innocently happy implications. Therefore, akin to Blake's subversion of oppressive attitudes towards children, the emphasis on the pleasures of sexual and physical fulfillment in

Blake's visions of innocence defy religious indoctrination and, indeed, are a protest in themselves.

However, though Blake's subversion of convention in his vision of innocence may, indeed, be indicative of its being a protest itself, it is Blake's use of natural imagery which arguably guarantees the elements of protest in 'Songs of Innocence'. Crucially, Blake places the visions of innocence, which contain dissent from religious convention, in a pastoral setting; for example, in 'Introduction', the speaker, who responds to the child's requests, is "piping down the valleys wild". Further, children, supposedly born evil from 'original sin', are linked to the natural world, "like birds in their nest" ('the Echoing Green') and "I a child, and thou a lamb" ('the Lamb'), in which the child and nature are linked by the symmetrical structure of the line.

Arguably, the personification of the natural world, for example the anthropomorphic images of "the dimpling stream runs laughing by" ('Laughing Song'), "the sun does arise and make happy the skies" ('the Echoing Green'), acts to close the dichotomy between man and nature, suggesting an inherent naturalness to man in this innocent state.

Additionally, in 'the Blossom', Blake creates a vision of innocent, uninhibited discovery of sexual experience, demonstrated by the fertile, sexual images of the "blossom" and "my bosom", the phallic one of the "arrow", and the sensuous aspirated sounds, "happy", "hears", and "sobbing, sobbing".

Importantly, this blatantly sexual content is intimately linked with nature, "under leaves so green" (which is repeated twice) and "robin near my bosom". Similarly, in the visions of innocence of 'Spring' and 'the Echoing Green', both of which allude to physical indulgence, "our sports" and "come

and lick my white neck”, the sexual implications are closely linked to nature, “cock does crow, so do you” and “our sports shall be seen on the echoing green”. Therefore, Blake's vision of innocence is, arguably, a form of protest; these visions contain defiant dissent from religious doctrines, as in the unashamed demonstration of physical pleasure, as well as the divergences from ‘original sin’. Moreover, by characterizing these rejections of Christian doctrine as natural, Blake implicitly condemns the repressive religious teaching as unnatural. From this vantage point, Blake's vision of innocence is, indeed, a protest in itself.

To conclude, there are clearly multiple aspects to Blake's protest in ‘Songs of Innocence and Experience’. Indeed, much of his protest establishes itself through the contrasts between visions of innocence and experience; which reveal both the failures of a single vision and the wrongdoings of the Church. However, whilst the vision of innocence, in itself, may not reveal the entirety of Blake's protest, it nonetheless acts as a form of protest; albeit, perhaps, a less effective or striking one. In the visions of innocence, Christian doctrines, which emphasize ‘original sin’ and sexual repression, “make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts” (Roman, 13: 14), are defied. Blake unashamedly insists upon, and asserts the naturalness of, sexual desire, sexual discovery, and children's innocence; thus Blake's vision of innocence is, indeed, itself a form of protest.