

# William blake's songs of innocence

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Blake's use of the pastoral in Songs of Innocence and Experience Put simply, Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience juxtapose the innocent pastoral world of childhood against an adult world of corruption and repression. The collection as a whole, by means of paired poems in Innocence and Experience (The Lamb, The Tiger; The Echoing Green, The Garden of Love/London; The Nurse's Song (I and E); Introduction (I and E); The Chimney sweeper (I and E), etc) explores the value and limitations of two different perspectives of the world. The same situation or problem is seen through the eyes or perspective of Innocence first, then Experience.

Blake stands outside Innocence and Experience, in a distanced position from which he recognizes and attempts to correct the fallacies of both perspectives. He uses the pastoral, in many songs, to attack oppressive and destructive authority (Church, King, parent's, adult figures), restrictive morality, sexual repression, established religion - the Established Church, social inequality, militarism. The pastoral is a literary style that presents an idealism and artificial picture of rural life, the naturalness and innocence of which is seen in contrast with the corruption and artificiality of city and court.

The pastoral is often seen as a nostalgic looking back at a lost paradise, a lost Eden, a lost Golden Age. However, Blake does something different with the pastoral. Firstly, he rejects the nostalgia of the ideal in order to show the real human condition. He does this by opposing pastoral ideal and urban reality both within the single states of Innocence and Experience and between the two states. (For example - 'Introduction' of Innocence, 'The Shepherd'). Secondly, he radically redefines the relation of the pastoral to

the city because the Songs as a volume could be said to take place in the city.

Blake frames the obviously pastoral scenes within an urban setting in a way that breaks down the conventional city/ country dichotomy - and his criticism is aimed at not merely social problems, but the source of these problems - a limited way of seeing. Within Innocence, Blake takes us into the frame, or confinement of the pastoral space and explores inner tensions, exposing and attacking social problems. For example, in 'The Little Girl Lost' of Innocence, the pastoral setting is that of 'a desert wild' that becomes 'a garden mild'.

The reference is the biblical image in Isaiah 35 of an ideal time in which the 'desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose'. Lacy, the innocent child, lives 'In the southern clime'/Where the summer's prime/Never fades away (distinctly pastoral! ). She 'had wandered like a wild bird' song. Blake brings in a contrast between Lacy's trust and her parents' fear (that she is lost and will come to harm). For Lacy, there is no cause for distress, except consideration of her mother's feelings (if my mother sleeplessly shall not weep').

The other side of the conflict is the parents' fear and concern: As far as they are concerned, there is nowhere safe; (Where can Lacy sleep? . Their concern becomes more and more self-centered, until it becomes emotional blackmail (oh can Lacy sleep, if her mother weep? ). A moral prescription is then introduced - Lacy ought to be worried - and we notice that this is justified only by the mother's distress, not by any real danger. By means of the command, 'Then let Lacy wake', Blake shows how fear turns into tyranny.

The parent's' fear of nature has made them unreasonable - They command their daughter to be unhappy, simply because they are.

Stanza 8 resolves the conflict as Local's surroundings become transformed - the desert is 'bright'. Local's positive perception dominates the rest of the poem - The imperative, 'Let' in the line, 'Let thy moon arise', underlines her opposition to her parent's. The pivotal word, 'bright' stands between Local's and her parent's' attitudes to nature (for the parent's, it is a dark, unknown world of fear; for Lacy, it is safe and bright. ) The lion licks Local's bosom and the lioness 'Loosed her slender dress'. The dress is a symbol of her parent's' upbringing, which Local's perception can cast off.

She is naked, so shame is removed (a reference to Adam and Eve's nakedness in the Garden of Eden). In the ext poem, 'The Little Girl Found', the lion's masculinity, his mane, was what frightened the parent's (soon his heavy man/Bore them to the ground'). So, the poem conveys the need for sexual freedom, natural energy, sexual energy, feared by Local's parent's. (In 'The Little Girl Found', the parent's' perception of the lion as fearful is transformed -then they followed/Where the vision led'- by meaner of transforming their vision, their perspective, the parent's' fear disappears (nor fear the wolfish howl,/Nor the lion's growl').

Within the pastoral frame of the Garden of Eden, Blake explores inner tensions, exposing and attacking social problems. (In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, which Blake wrote between the two parts of the Songs, he stresses that man's instincts are not fallen (sinful from the moment of birth) and therefore to follow the instinctive desire for love and pleasure cannot be

wrong: The soul of sweet delight can never be defiled. On the contrary, it is the thwarting of desire that leads to corruption and a warping of the personality: Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse enacted desires.

The conventional goodness of Blake's time, therefore, is just a passive failure to act out desire and is not something to be admired, unlike evil which is evidence of positive energy. Good is the passive that obeys reason. Evil is the active springing from energy and Energy is eternal delight. So, in the volume of Songs of Innocence and Experience, the tensions, oppositions or conflicts are within the frames of a song, as well as between the two contrary worlds of Innocence and Experience.

The Songs not only juxtapose pastoral ideal with urban reality (echoing Greenwood's; 'Echoing Green/'The Garden of Love'), but within the single state of Innocence, pastoral images are juxtaposed with a flawed urban society. The oppositions also exist within the single states of Innocence and Experience. The Songs of Innocence begins with a clearly pastoral 'Introduction' followed by 'The Shepherd', 'The Echoing Green' and, of course, 'The Lamb'(in Blake's final order of the Songs). These songs show pastoral harmony between humans and nature.

However, we are led out of (or in and out of, depending on the order of Songs), pastoral and into a disturbing world of social difference and injustice through such lyrics as 'The Little Black Boy', 'The Chimney Sweeper'(I). Yet even these songs have a pastoral element. Tom Decree, in 'The Chimney Sweeper', is identified with the lamb of pastoral and of innocence through his

hair, That curled like a lamb's back. The black boy's mother describes his body as a 'shady grove' that enables the soul to bear the beams of love', identifying the time on earth as a 'little space', akin to a pastoral retreat, rather than a time of preparation labor.

The pastoral narratives in both poems seek to free the boys from the stigma of their blackness, but ironically that freedom, in the form of a pastoral paradise, is attainable only after death. In 'The Chimney Sweeper'(I), an angel 'opened 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'. In 'The Little Black Boy, God's voice will call: 'Come out from the grove my love and care,] And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice'.

Only in death will the white boy be taught to reject his ignorant racist views: 'And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair/And be like him, and he will then love me'. So, Blake uses the pastoral to attack social evils and injustice, but also exposes the limits and inadequacies of the pastoral ideal. He transcends the pastoral to show the limits of pastoral innocence; to criticize the human condition; and to show a new vision. He does this by rejecting the nostalgia of the ideal to show the real condition - by opposing the pastoral ideal with urban reality.

The dual presence of town and country, idealization and realism, celebration and regret provides the tension that is fundamental to the pastoral space.

The pastoral's critical function is based upon the writer's handling of internal tensions between oppositions. Blake's objective in Songs of Innocence and Experience is to show the two contrary states of the human soul'. He shows

that we create our worlds by means of our perception of it. (Milton: 'A mind is its own place, and in itself/Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven' Paradise Lost).

Our world is 'Innocent' - loving, meek and mild, delightful, protected, gentle - if we perceive its creator as loving, caring and protective. But there are limits to this vision; we are vulnerable because we are ignorant of the dangers and threats that exist. The world of Experience is one that is dark, authoritative, oppressive, uncaring and repressive of enjoyment. We see ourselves imprisoned in this despair if we perceive its creator as oppressive, cruel, punitive and Judgmental - and if we perceive ourselves as imprisoned in Original Sin.

The two worlds opposed are those of childhood innocence and adult experience. He uses iconic pastoral images (piper and muse, shepherds, rural idyll, innocence of childhood, the Garden of Eden, gardens and greens, lambs, pathetic fallacy) and pastoral states (harmony, Joy, protection, care, love) and opposes these to urban images and states of adult authority and cruelty, state and church repression and authority, dishonest and destructive emotions.

Blake sets up oppositions, in the frames of the poems (as artistic creations) between Innocence and Experience and within Innocence and Experience. Blake provides (in Songs of Innocence) pastoral images, but shows the limits of pastoral innocence. In Songs of Experience, he writes in anti-pastoral mode and uses pastoral images to show the destruction of innocence, as well as ways to regain innocence in a vision of a New World.

Discussion of 'putting the complex into the simple': Approaches - discussion of 'The Lamb' and 'The Tiger', pages 91 - 101 Songs of Innocence and Experience can be regarded as anti-pastoral: Blake exposes the limitations of a comfortable image of pastoral innocence by 1) redefining the relationship between city and country (Rural in the city - the country in the city); 2) he uses the pastoral as a frame to expose social injustice and human suffering; 3) he uses pastoral images to show true innocence, then subverts these, both in Innocence and Experience, to expose the dark world of adult authority and repression.

Blake uses pastoral, not to show the contrast between rural and urban, but to expose the injustices of the human condition. Blake was a poet of the city, of London, and his pastoral setting is in the greens, parks and gardens of London.