

# William Blake's songs of innocence and of experience: paired poems and symbols

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Innocence is often related to purity, being naive, and youthfulness while experience is associated with attributes like wisdom, knowledge, and adulthood. These two terms are also linked with certain images. For example, innocence is connected to lambs, angels, and children. On the other hand experience is correlated to images such as an old man's white beard, scars, and reading glasses. These two terms are frequently interconnected and can be used with each other. An often seen cliché with innocence and experience is a when character starts out being innocent, but then over time the character becomes experienced from certain situations over time. In William Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience, he uses paired poems and symbols of innocence and experience within the poems to show innocence and how it can either rival or transform into experience.

William Blake was a first generation English Romantic. Early in Blake's life he claimed to have seen spirits such as angels. Blake continued to see spirits throughout his life until his death in 1827. The Romantic period lasted from the late 18th century to the early 19th century. During this period writers stressed the content of their works instead of the style. The romantic authors also wanted to involve emotion, imagination, and individualism more than previous period. In 1789 Blake wrote Songs of Innocence. This book was based on a shepherd writing poems after he sees an angel child during a walk in the countryside. Blake specifically writes the poems that all people, no matter their social status, age, or sex, could read them. "Happy Songs" are how the poems are described and are often related to children's nursery rhymes. Five years later in 1794, Blake added poems to the book and changed the name to Songs of Innocence and of Experience. Blake tried to

convey a main theme of “ Two Contrary States of the Human Soul” in the new and expanded book. Illustrations were also made for each individual poem in the book, some were more detailed than others, but all their own individual styles. Blake even pairs poems from Songs of Innocence to the latter Songs of Innocence and of Experience.

One example of these so called paired poems is “ The Chimney Sweeper”. There are two versions of this poem, the first is in Songs of Innocence and then a sequel in Songs of Experience. In the first version a boy, Tom Dacre, is very sad because of his harsh, tough job of chimney sweeping. He then sees an Angel in his dreams and starts to be satisfied with his job because he sees that God will take care of everything as long as he does his job right. This belief is evident when the narrator says: “ Tho’ the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm” (Blake 23-24). The quote is saying that if Tom and the rest of the boys continue to work hard and work with the right mindset and attitude then God will take care of the rest. Blake also includes images of lambs, angels, and children playing in pastures within the poem. These symbols, especially children, are seen as innocent and even Biblical. In the sequel of “ The Chimney Sweeper” an unidentified boy, who could be Tom Dacre, is wandering around in the snow looking for his parents. This boy is less naïve and knows that his parents have given him up to become a chimney sweeper. Chimney sweeping has given him very bad experiences for such a young boy. He is referred to as “ a little black thing” who is described as wearing clothes of death. The color black is almost always linked with death

which often comes with some sort of experience. The chimney sweeper says that God, Priests, and Kings make up a heaven of misery. This makes the boy sound less like an optimistic and innocent child, but instead more like a boy who has endured a series of terrible experiences. Even though the focus of both poems is a child, the second poem deals with a maturing and less innocent child who has to deal with adults and their experience. Overall, Blake uses this poem pairing to show the transformation from innocence to experience while using the young chimney sweeper as an example.

Not only was the pairing of both "Chimney Sweeper" poems used to show the transformation and differences of innocence and experience, but Blake also paired two other poems. The first part of the pair is called "The Lamb". This is a poem about not just one lamb, but all lambs and their creator. Blake writes of the lamb's great attributes while giving hints that God created this creature. The poem also talks about God being a lamb in his own way. There are many references to innocence in "The Lamb" such as: a lamb being meek, children, and creation of life. The significance of the lamb's meekness is shown in a critical essay when the author says, "These lines give reference to Christ's message that 'the meek shall inherit the world' and the concept that gentleness and love is the ideal way of behaving in the world. Blake's narrator also links the behavior of the Divine to the behavior of a little lamb" (Smith and Tomason). This excerpt shows the innocence of God and how God made the lamb meek and innocent. The second part of the pairing is called "The Tyger". This poem has a serious tone compared to the soft and tender tone of "The Lamb". "The Tyger" has many questions within the poem,

having one in almost every other line. Blake mentions fire multiple times in the poem as well as using personification about heaven and the stars. These are complete opposite as one refers to the fires of hell and on the other hand, heaven and its light and innocence is referenced. The tyger is a mean and vicious animal that prowls through the forest looking for prey. An author of a critical essay said, " Although the " Tyger" initially is constructed by Milton's Satan, this fiery beast of Experience, ultimately, is handed over to Blake's Christ" (Miner). This quote shows the terribleness and experience of the tyger. Blake creates a dilemma with God and the tyger. He makes the reader question how God, such an innocent being, could create such a nasty beast of experience. William Blake once again uses two linked poems, " The Lamb" and " The Tyger", to show the transformation from innocence to experience.

Blake often uses pairings of poems to show innocence and experience, and he does it again with " The Little Girl Lost" and " The Little Girl Found". Although, these two poems are both in Songs of Experience instead of being split in between Songs of Innocence and of Experience. The first poem is the story of a little girl named Lyca. She gets lost in the forest and her parent's adventurous journey to find her. There are many symbols of innocence and experience throughout the poem. For example, Blake writes that the girl is just seven years old and still has not experienced much of life. But then on the other hand the mother, a woman who has probably experienced a decent amounts of tragedies in her life, just lost her own daughter which is going to be the worst experience of her life. In the latter poem, Lyca's

parents look for seven days until a lion approaches them and instead of attacking them, the lion leads them to Lyca. The use of the lion is similar to “The Tyger”, but this time the lion is seen as innocent not an experienced beast like the tyger from the different poem. Blake’s use of the innocence and experience contention is evident in this excerpt from a critical essay: “In “The Little Girl Lost” and “The Little Girl Found” we come to the borderland between Innocence and Experience. Blake moved these poems from one group to the other, and this convertibility helps us understand the relationship of “contrary states.” In the two border poems, the seeming forces of evil prove to be as gentle and fostering as parents” (Price). Not only does he show the rivalry of innocence and experience but also how they can be disguised within one another. As well as in the last quote this quote shows how Blake intertwined and rivaled innocence and experience. From the same critical essay the author says, “If we stress the faith that is strong enough to transcend the power of the world, these poems clearly fall into the pattern of Innocence. If, on the other hand, we stress the adversity to be overcome and the courage with which it is faced, they move toward Experience, although they remain the most triumphant of the Song of Experience.” (Price). Also, at the end of “Little Girl Found” Lyca’s parents find her sleeping “among tygers wild” (Blake 48) which is ironic because the tygers are supposed to be beasts of experience, but then they accept Lyca as one of their own as she begins to live with them. Once again, Blake uses paired poems, but this time from the same group of poems to show the rivalry of innocence and experience.

Throughout Songs of Innocence and Experience William Blake routinely uses paired poems and the symbols within the poems to show the rivalry between innocence and experience as well as the possible transformation from to innocence to experience. Innocence and experience were connected to Blake's two contrary states of the human soul. Along with this comes many images and symbols that represent innocence and experience.