

A study of Blake's  
"introduction" to  
innocence and  
experience



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William Blake's collection of illuminated poems in Songs of Innocence and of Experience depict, as the title page explains, "the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul" (Blake 1). Although Songs of Innocence, written in 1789, was crafted five years prior to Songs of Experience both collections read as stand alone works of engraving art and poetry; however, the second work was created to accompany the first. The companion poems in Songs of Innocence and of Experience establish a distance between the dissimilar states of pure innocence and world-worn experience. Blake's illuminated poems, "Introduction" to both Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, feature a speaker whose inspirations, themes and tones highlight the dichotomy between the soul's states of both innocence and experience. Blake's use of trochaic tetrameter in his "Introduction" to Songs of Innocence produces a sing-song rhythm akin to children's songs lending the poem a tone of childlike innocence. The Piper, Blake's speaker, begins the poem "Piping down the valleys wild" (1), a pastoral scene revealing the speaker as one unified with the natural world. The "valleys wild" and "songs of pleasant glee" (1-2), are lawless and unbounded by social systems and structures, placing the piper within the state of innocence described by S. Foster Damon as "free, as it needs no laws. It is happy, since it is unsophisticated. It enjoys the most spontaneous communion with nature, readily perceiving the divine in all things" (31). From this standpoint of pastoral innocence the Piper receives inspiration. A laughing child on a cloud, an otherworldly symbol of innocent joy, asks the speaker to "Pipe a song about a Lamb" (5). The lamb represents innocence, but also the 'Lamb of God,' Jesus Christ. Blake's speaker pipes "with merry cheer" (6), and plays the song once again for the child who reacts to the speaker's efforts with <https://assignbuster.com/a-study-of-blakes-introduction-to-innocence-and-experience/>

tears of joy (8). The tears elicited from the ethereal child at the Piper's second recitation represent a reaction of untainted innocence to the song of Christ's mercy. Implicit in the Piper's song about the Lamb—the redemption of mankind through Christ—is the notion of original sin and the loss of innocence. The child's joyful tears, in one sense, oppose the weeping in "Introduction" in *Songs of Experience*, but also forecast the mourning for innocence lost and experience gained. Serving as muse, the child on the cloud urges the speaker to "write / In a book that all may read" (13-14), the happy songs song on behalf of and from the standpoint of unsullied innocence. The "hollow reed" and "rural pen" (16-17), referenced by the Piper serve as pastoral symbols for the Blake's engraving tool—the burin—used in crafting the plates from which *Songs of Innocence* and of *Experience* were first printed. Watercolors were used by Blake to paint his prints, thus the Piper "stain'd the water clear," while transcribing his "happy songs / Every child may joy to hear" (18-20). The innocence presented by Blake in his vision of the child in unspoiled nature translates through the artist's tools and onto the page, creating a group of poems that are written from the perspective of an innocent soul. "Introduction" in *Songs of Experience* establishes a much different tone. While "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* shows the Piper finding inspiration for his poems from an angelic child's meek requests for a song, the "Introduction" in *Songs of Experience* begins with the speaker demanding, "Hear the voice of the Bard! / Who Present, Past & Future sees" (1-2). Unlike the state of innocence in which present joys remains a singular concern, the Bard sees past events, present reactions and possible futures. The Bard's voice differs from the descriptive tones of the Piper and takes on an imperative quality signifying the desire to <https://assignbuster.com/a-study-of-blakes-introduction-to-innocence-and-experience/>

find meaning and create change within the chaos of experience. Instead of composing a song about a lamb, the Bard has actually “ heard / The Holy Word / That walk'd among the ancient trees” (3-5), a direct reference to God seeking Adam and Eve after they have committed the original sin. Northrop Frye indicates that “ the ‘ Bard’ thus finds himself in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, who derive their inspiration from Christ as Word of God” (60). Inspired by the word of God and “ weeping in the evening dew” (11), the Bard’s lamenting over mankind’s fall contrasts with the child’s innocent cries of joy at the song about Christ. “ Calling the lapsed Soul” (10), the Bard hopes to inspire all human souls to overcome their fallen state and wield the power of imagination allowing man to “ controll / The starry pole, / And fallen, fallen light renew” (12-14). Where Blake celebrates his vision of innocence in Songs of Innocence’s “ Introduction,” the Bard of experience mourns mankind’s first move away from innocence into the abyss of fragmentation that separates humanity from God and man from man. Inspired by the voice of God, the Bard calls to earth: Arise from out the dewy grass; Night is worn, And the morn Rises from the slumberous mass. (12-15) The “ slumberous mass” referred to by the Bard constitutes both earth and mankind wrapped in the endless chaos of fragmentation and separation from God. The “ Night” has lasted since the Old Testament God cursed mankind and made division of earth from God and will persist until the Bard’s orders for the souls of mankind rise from their material prisons with the dawning of a new post-apocalyptic millennial era—the “ morn” (13-14). Frye concludes that the “‘ fallen light,’ [ . . . ] is the alternating light and darkness of the world we know; the unfallen light would be the eternal light of the City of God”; thus, “ the prophet sees in every dawn the image of a resurrection that will <https://assignbuster.com/a-study-of-blakes-introduction-to-innocence-and-experience/>

lift the world into another state of being altogether" (63). The Bard begs both the earth and man to rise from their fallen fragmented forms and gain, through the awakening of imagination, a higher state of tested innocence. The "lapsed soul" (6), that remains ensconced in the state of experience binds itself within the earthly material realm circumscribed by "the starry floor" and "watry shore" (18-19). These boundaries inhibit man's ability to transcend the material realm of experience and reunite the fragmented segments of human experience with "the break of day" (20), ending the cycle of light and dark and beginning the new millennial era in which God and all men are once again joined together through love and understanding. Songs of Innocence and of Experience presents poems in the form of illuminated plates, adding an artistic depth to the texts themselves through contributions made by the decorations to the theme of the poems. "

Introduction" in Songs of Innocence features text decorated on either side by images "derived from a mediaeval manuscript illustrating the Tree of Jesse" (Keynes 132-3), showing the genealogical descent of Christ from David, the son of Jesse. Blake's song in the initial version of "Introduction" concerns Jesus, making the lineage of Christ a fitting backdrop for the poem. Songs of Experience presents the text of its "Introduction" above a reposing figure, most likely female, symbolizing both earth and the soul. Earth lies with her back to the reader and looks toward the right side of the text with an aura surrounding her head. The figure of earth operates as an inverse to Jesse who faces the audience and looks from right to left in The Tree of Jesse (Unknown). In the engraving as in the poem, earth appears as an opposite to the image of Jesse who represents the biological path to Christ and the salvation of mankind. Imagination, mankind's only hope of redemption from <https://assignbuster.com/a-study-of-blakes-introduction-to-innocence-and-experience/>

material bonds, remains present in the glow emanating from earth's head (Blake 24, 76). Blake's two versions of "Introduction" written from the perspectives of innocence and experience function on much the same level as Milton's companion poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. Mirth and melancholy both present themselves throughout the experience of human life as experience inevitably grows from innocence. Blake's two poems feature tones that reflect the condition of the speaker's soul, innocence exhibiting laughter and tears of joy and experience demanding attention to its complaints. Thematically the poems diverge in focus: the first "Introduction" celebrates the natural ability to imagine and live unbounded in the pastoral simplicity of innocence versus the second "Introduction" that offers reproach for the material world of experience. While the world of innocence relies on love and joy in the present those in the experienced realm must suffer the chaos and separation from the human form divine—God. Although interpretation of Blake's poetry remains a challenge, the portraits of innocence and experience given to readers of Blake's two versions of "Introduction" display divergent characteristics of two conditions of the soul, opening the path for Blake to fully explore the dichotomy throughout *Songs of Innocence* and of *Experience*. Works Cited Blake, William. "Introduction." *Songs of Innocence*. 1789. *Introd. and Comment.* Sir Geoffrey Keynes. New York: Oxford UP, 1967. 23-4.—. "Introduction." *Songs of Experience*. 1794. *Introd. and Comment.* Sir Geoffrey Keynes. New York: Oxford UP, 1967. 75-6. Damon, S. Foster. "The Initial Eden." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Ed. Morton D. Paley. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969. 30-5. Frye, Northrop. "Blake's Introduction to Experience." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Songs of* <https://assignbuster.com/a-study-of-blakes-introduction-to-innocence-and-experience/>

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