

Blakes songs of innocence and experience and voltaires candide: a comparison essa...

[Experience](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

At first glance, William Blake's selection of poetry in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* seems to be vastly different than the satirical masterpiece that is Voltaire's *Candide*. However, despite being very different works of literature, both of the pieces were created in the same time period, and in the same political and international climate (Blake and Lincoln). Both of the literary works are concerned with similar themes, and with the changing political and social climate in western Europe during the mid- to late-eighteenth century. The theme of innocence and the pain of acquiring knowledge is a common thread throughout both of the pieces, and reflect a an era of growing socio-political awareness that emphasized fact and reason over blind faith and mindless servitude.

During the Middle Ages, Western Europe went through a religious transformation that led to a type of society that emphasized leading a virtuous life in the way the Bible instructs. One of the fundamental tenets of Christianity is the idea of original sin: that is, the original sin that Eve committed when she ate from the Tree of Knowledge, and convinced Adam to do the same, leading to their exile from the Garden of Eden. Knowledge was long considered dangerous by the Catholic Church, and the type and amount of information that the average person could attain was very limited. However, that all began to change during the Renaissance, which was a re-awakening of arts and sciences in Western Europe; the Renaissance led to an intellectual awakening that culminated in the Age of Reason. It is during this age, the Age of Reason, that both Voltaire and Blake created their famous works of literature.

Voltaire's *Candide* is one of the greatest pieces of satirical literature of all

time. Voltaire uses the titular character of *Candide* to exemplify innocence-- however, instead of being charming and virtuous, as innocence is meant to be, *Candide* is a comical and inept character who has little ability to handle the realities of the world outside his Edenic garden. *Candide*'s character is laughably inept, continuously making decisions and being swept into situations where some cynicism and worldliness would be a boon; however, he remains painfully optimistic throughout most of the text, although he abandons his optimism and innocence at the end of the novella (Voltaire and Havens). *Candide*'s innocence is not the highly-lauded innocence of the Bible; *Candide* is seen and presented as a fool, not as a character to be emulated.

Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (hereafter *Songs*) seems, on its face, to carry an entirely different message regarding innocence and experience. However, while Blake lauds the wonders of innocence, he also notes that innocence cannot exist without the other, darker side: experience. Blake's *Songs of Innocence* are not stand-alone; they cannot exist wholly without the counterpart of experience. In "The Lamb," for instance, the speaker asks the lamb if the lamb knows "who made thee" (Blake and Lincoln). At the end of the poem, Blake tells the lamb that he was made by God. However, in the poem that contrasts "The Lamb," "The Tyger," the speaker notes that God also made the tyger with his symmetry and ferocity (Blake and Lincoln). Innocence, Blake contends, is not meant to last; the individual is meant to be changed and molded in the crucible of experience. *Candide*, as a character, is allowed to grow up in complete innocence and optimism, sheltered in a metaphorical Garden of Eden for all of his formative

years. Conversely, the characters in Blake's Songs exist in the real world, and are all subject to formative experiences in the natural order of things. Candide's innocence is used as a thematic pair to the philosophical idea of optimism-- that is, Voltaire uses Candide as an example of why the prevailing, popular philosophy of the day of optimism is an unwise way to go through life. In Blake's Songs, innocence and optimism are not necessarily paired together as thematic ideas. While Voltaire uses Candide as a way to demonstrate his distaste for the philosophical idea of optimism, Blake does not seem to have the same philosophical distastes. Blake's poems on experience are darker than his poems on innocence, but he treats experience and the loss of innocence as a painful but necessary part of life; without innocence, one can never experience the transformative power of truly living.

Blake does not shy away from the darker aspects of life during his time. Some of his poems on experience are extremely dark, and even some of his pieces on innocence hint at the darker side of living life. The Songs simultaneously give credence to what is good about innocence, while also noting that there are certainly perks to experience, if one utilizes experience properly. In this way, Blake's Songs are different from Voltaire's Candide, in that they recognize the duality in everything, including the positives and negatives in both innocence and experience. Both Blake and Voltaire do laud the experienced; they both note that experience is unavoidable in life, and that with experience often comes pain. Voltaire's Candide is a scathing piece of satire aimed at those who willfully put aside the lessons they have learned from experience to sequester themselves in the cocoon of ignorance. In

Candide, Voltaire writes: “ ‘ Optimism,’ said Cacambo, ‘ What is that?’ ‘ Alas!’ replied Candide, ‘ It is the obstinacy of maintaining that everything is best when it is worst’ ” (Voltaire and Havens).

The loss of innocence is a necessary part of life, a fact that both Voltaire and Blake recognized. Although they treated the thematic ideas of optimism and innocence differently within their texts, they were both concerned with the unavoidable pain that comes with growing up and losing one’s innocence.

Works cited

Blake, William and Andrew Lincoln. Songs of innocence and of experience. Princeton, N. J.: William Blake Trust/Princeton University Press, 1991. Online.

Voltaire and George R Havens. Candide. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969. Online.