

A STUDENT GUIDE

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NOTES FOR A LEVEL STUDENTS

PREFACE

Being the two contrary states of the human soul

This little note is the key to the reading of the text because Blake is not praising innocence and damning experience, but is stating that both have to lead somewhere – eventually to wisdom.

‘Unorganizd Innocence, An Impossibility’ Blake wrote in one of the margins of his later poems. ‘Innocence dwells with Wisdom but never with Ignorance.’

Without contraries there is no progression

This suggests clearly that innocence without experience (or vice versa) would lead to stagnation and to fixity – a state that Blake deplored as being the ‘status quo’ sought by the state and the church, those twin satanic mills of oppression and materialism.

It is also significant that Blake wrote the *Songs of Innocence* before the French Revolution, but he wrote *The Songs of Experience* after the disillusion that followed the carnage and the collapse of justice a few years after the calls for *Liberté, Egalité and Fraternité* were enthusiastically answered.

It is in this spirit that you should read and seek to interpret the poems.

AQA sets this text as a specifically contextual question in their examination. This means that they expect you to know about Blake’s own beliefs and ideas and also the historical, social and religious background against which he was writing. That is why you will find a fair amount of information about these things while you study the text. The list of past questions and the assessment objectives in the exam information section will show how you are expected to use this knowledge in the exam.

You will not find the wonderful Blake illustrations here, but there is a list of useful websites where you will be able to see them online and read interpretations of them. They are essential for a full understanding of the written texts, for Blake put his poems and engravings deliberately together. He also engraved the plates for experience on the back of those for innocence, thus producing a visual expression of the way in which the two states are part of a whole.

INTRODUCTION

This poem presents Blake as the piper with the child as his guide and his audience. Blake was an instinctive musician, who often sang tunes to his poems which were set down by musicians who heard them, but have since been lost. The poem moves from the piper [poet] making music 'about a lamb' to singing the same song with the words and finally, at the child's request, to writing down the 'happy songs' so that 'every child' may be able to hear them.

The poem is written in ballad form, with alternate rhyming lines – suggestive of childhood rhymes and songs. This is reinforced by the use of repetition and by imperatives from the child that tell the piper what to do. This suggests that the child represents the spirit of poetic inspiration which is here associated both with innocence and with the idea of the sheep and the shepherd.

The piper is also shown in the frontispiece to *Songs of Innocence* as a shepherd with his sheep. He is shown naked, a symbol of his innocence, and there are connotations of Jesus as the lamb, the good shepherd and the child who was god-made-man. The poem's semantic field contains many words that show the nature of the songs – 'pleasant glee', 'laughing', 'merry cheer', 'happy pipe', 'wept with joy'. Both the frontispiece and the engraved plate of the poem show the entwined trees of earthly love.

All of these are presented in the songs that follow. This is hinted at with the image of 'a hollow reed', with its echoes of Chapter 11 of the 'Book of Revelation' where the hollow reed is the perfect man who is a channel for divine inspiration.

But there is a hint of darker future when the piper/poet begins to write. He 'stains the water clear'. The water in *Songs of Innocence* can usually be seen as the symbol of life and purity – at least it is able to wash away the stain and disperse it.

THE SHEPHERD

This short poem complements the previous one, showing the 'good shepherd' now with his crook – the symbol of his job. He is shown as guardian and protector, following his sheep. The lambs are depicted as 'innocent' like children, while the ewes, the mothers, are shown to be 'tender'. All of them can rest peacefully because they 'know when their Shepherd is nigh'. The parallels with Jesus as the lamb of God and also as the Good Shepherd are clear, although it is the shepherd himself who is seen by the poet to have a 'sweet lot' or a fulfilling profession as he wanders through the natural scene all day with 'his tongue... filled with praise'.

Again, Blake uses a simple rhythm and rhyme scheme to remind the reader of nursery songs and children's hymns and his engraving shows a pastoral scene, with no unpleasant interruptions.

THE ECCHOING GREEN

The images in this poem are both pastoral and idyllic. The poet makes intensive use of sounds in the first stanza to present the happy innocence of childhood. The sunrise is symbolic of youth and immaturity and the 'merry bells' set the tone for the birds, which are the sky-lark and thrush, both noted for the beauty and cheerfulness of their songs. The semantic field of stanza 1 is shown in phrases such as 'make happy', 'merry bells', 'welcome', 'cheerful sound', 'our sports', all of which suggest the carefree days of youth when there was nothing to do but play. The phrase 'the echoing green' implies that Nature itself is implicated in the joyful scene and reflects the happiness of the people in it.

The second stanza depicts the 'old folk' sitting under the protective shade of the oak tree. They too are shown as innocent because they remember the guiltless days of their own childhood when they would play on the green. Their laughter shows that they are involved with the happy children and are pleased for them. One person, 'Old John' is singled out as he 'laughs away care', showing that he has attained wisdom and has been able to put aside the cares and worries of experience.

In the final stanza, the children are shown to be 'weary' [a word reminiscent of experience] and are unable to be merry any more, implying that the games of childhood are coming to an end – along with its innocence, perhaps? With the sunset, the coming of darkness is prophetic of the onset of adolescence. The 'sports have an end' and the children are compared to 'birds in their nest', safe for the moment but soon to fly into the world of experience. The image of 'the darkening green' with which the poem ends is symbolic of the necessary move into the world of adulthood and experience which Wordsworth memorably described in *Intimations of Immortality* as

'shades of the prison house begin to close
around the growing boy'.

The children, here beginning the dangerous journey into a world of oppression and false ideas, need guidance from someone like Old John, who has come through experience to wisdom and knows the pitfalls of the path.

The rhythm of the poem is a spritely movement which is very like a hobby horse and suggests nursery rhymes such as 'Ride a cock horse' or 'The North Wind doth blow'. It thus reflects very well the games and sports of the children as they play out of doors. It also carries them forward perhaps all too quickly towards the 'darkening green' at the end of the poem – childhood is a short time compared with adulthood. This impetus is maintained by the rhyming couplets and the simple words, most of which have one or two syllables, except for 'echoing' and 'darkening' – the words that describe the green where they play.

In the pictures, Blake shows the oak as the tree of life, protecting adults and children alike; he also shows 'Old John' as the wise guide leading the children, although some have opted for the vine which has the entwined trunks of earthly love. A boy is handing a bunch of grapes down to a girl – perhaps symbolising how adolescence leads to the end of innocence. Those who have experience but not wisdom cannot lead others safely.

Like the Introduction, Blake is showing that the state of innocence, depicted as a kind of earthly paradise, cannot last – and nor should it, since it is dangerously naïve when it is set in a country where repressive laws and exploitation are the norm for poorer people.

THE LAMB

In this deceptively simple poem Blake uses a child as the narrator who asks the questions and then answers them. The questions, which are interconnected and repetitive, are both simple and profound – ‘who made thee?’ This addresses the most important ideas that people have about where we came from and who we are. By putting this question into the mouth of an innocent child, addressing that most innocent of creatures, a lamb, Blake shows that children often go to the heart of existence because they have not yet learned to complicate things. You have only to watch an adult’s reaction to the question, ‘Where did I come from?’ to realise this. The answer given by the child in the poem equally reveals innocence – the lamb was made by he who ‘calls himself a lamb’ just as the child was made by he who ‘became a little child’. This association of child and lamb with Jesus follows the ideas proposed in the Introduction and in ‘The Shepherd’. The depiction of Jesus as the child of the nativity and as the lamb is reinforced by the description, ‘He is meek and he is mild’, reminiscent of Christmas carols – almost, one might say, the Jesus of Innocence, but also the Jesus who protected children in the New Testament by saying that for those who abused them, ‘it were better for them that a millstone were put around their neck and they were cast into the river’. This is also the Jesus who told people, ‘unless you become as little children, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.’

It is this idea that permeates the *Songs of Innocence*. Blake himself retained this wonderful ability to see things from a childlike viewpoint, as he shows in this poem; he argues the need for the imagination and simplicity of the child to remain as a guiding light through the darkening world of experience. The world of experience is notably absent from ‘The Lamb’. The engraving depicts the naked child feeding the lambs under a protective arch of trees, outside a simple country cottage. The first stanza is full of images of Nature – ‘by the stream’, ‘o’er the mead’, ‘all the vales’, and of happiness, ‘clothing of delight’, ‘softest clothing woolly bright’, ‘tender voice’, ‘vales rejoice’. The physical environment of the lamb is characterised by life, food, ‘clothing’ and gentle noises. The stream here is the water of life and the meadows and valleys are made for the lambs and children to enjoy freely.

In the second stanza where the child answers the question, ‘who made thee?’ there is a movement from the physical to the spiritual as the child talks about Jesus as the creator of both lamb and child. The poem finishes on a short, childlike prayer, ‘Little Lamb, God bless thee.’ The repetitive nature of the poem gives it the quality of a child’s prayer or hymn and the simple rhythm, reinforced by the use of assonance, supports this impression (it could be sung to the tune of ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’!) as does the rhyme scheme, which is in rhyming couplets – although ‘name’ and ‘lamb’ are only half-rhymes. Although it is less obvious to modern readers, the repetition of the pronoun ‘thee’ gives a feeling of familiarity and closeness between the child and the lamb.

Blake’s own religious views centred very much on Jesus as the mediator between humanity and the one true God – since he was both human and divine, just as Blake felt people to be. When he was asked if he believed in the divinity of Christ, Blake replied, ‘Yes, Christ was divine ... but then so are you and so am I’. He saw Jesus as the figure that put forgiveness at the centre of the Christian religion and Love as its most important duty. As such he was the antithesis of the tyrannical, demanding God that used fear to enforce oppressive laws, all beginning ‘Thou shalt not ...’ The emphasis on the lamb in the *Songs of Innocence* is a reminder that Jesus was a saviour who sacrificed his life for the redemption of all people. This is an echo of the Jewish Passover feast, which is celebrated by the slaughter and eating of a lamb and the time in Egypt when the blood of the lamb placed over the doorway was a signal to the angel of death not to enter the house.

THE LITTLE BLACK BOY

This poem has to be seen in the context of Blake's attitude to slavery, which was firmly on the side of William Wilberforce and the Abolitionists. Blake had done engravings for a book by Stedman, which depicted the dreadful tortures and inhumanity shown to black slaves – especially those who dared to revolt and demand their freedom. Blake's view of all people as partaking in the divinity of Christ and therefore having equality in the sight of God is shown in this poem through the narrative of the black child and the engraving that shows both children, black and white, being welcomed by Christ, the good shepherd.

The poem works in contrasts between black and white, light and dark, earth and heaven, soul and body. Thus in the first stanza, the child narrator comments, 'I am black, but O! my soul is white.' It is confusing if you have a black skin, to understand the religious equations between black/evil and white/good. The white English child has no such difficulty and is compared to 'an angel'. The simile for the narrator is, 'as if bereaved of light', with its connotations of ignorance, fear and darkness. The protest that he has light in his soul appeals to the reader to look beyond the outward physical difference to the real person beneath. The contrasts are resolved at the end of the poem, where differences are no longer apparent as both children bask equally in the love of God, in an earthly paradise.

The mother in this poem is shown as wise and loving. She teaches the child that God is responsible for the hot sun where they live, and that, just as their black skin acts as a protection, or cloud, to shield them from burns, so, in the same way, when their souls have learned to bear the heat of God's love, the clouds that are their bodies will melt away and they will join God in Heaven. God is compared to the sun, with his 'beams of love' and the body is seen as a protection, just as clouds protect the earth from fierce sunlight. However, clouds also obscure the light and prevent people from seeing clearly and this can apply both to seeing God's love and seeing each other in a true light. This teaching the black child passes on to the white boy, offering to help protect him.

'I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear
To lean in joy upon our father's knee.'

When their bodies are gone, they will both be the same and, in that paradise, 'he will then love me.' Their bodies are referred to as 'clouds' suggesting that they are hiding the light beneath (in the soul) and also that they are insubstantial. The line 'When I from black and he from white cloud free' can also refer to perceptions – the way people cannot see beyond the physical senses. It is sure that Blake's idea of Paradise on earth includes the vision of black and white people coming together in love and equality, as the innocent vision of the child foretells. It is this kind of imagination that Blake says people must strive towards, in order to build a better world. As the narrator, the black child can be seen as more experienced than the English boy, just as the chimney sweeps are more experienced than those who play in gardens. He is also seen as wiser, passing on his mother's teaching to the white child.

The poem is written in ballad form, to preserve the simplicity and directness of the narrative, and the use of iambic pentameter gives it a conversational tone, as though the child is addressing the reader. It is also appropriate as much of the poem is an account of what his mother said, which also includes within it the words of God, as she imagines them. It has a satisfying structure, as it sets up contrasts, especially between black and white, which are resolved at the end in a vision of a golden tent and silver hair and love.

THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER

This poem is written in the same rhythm and ballad form as the 'Little Black Boy' and for the same reason. The simple and direct narrative comes from a child – in this instance a little chimney sweep. Perhaps even more than children who were set to work in factories or mines or the many other forms of labour that children had to endure, the chimney sweeps had a particularly miserable existence. There were a lot of them, for one thing, since every house had a chimney. They were generally very young, since many of the chimneys had awkward bends that required tiny bodies. It was a horrible job meaning that they had skin engrained with soot, permanently inflamed eyes, burns from the hot bricks and often unhealed sores where their skin had rubbed off against the chimney sides. The daily distortion of still-growing bones meant that many of them were crippled and their lungs were filled with the choking soot. If they were reluctant to engage in the terrible task, they were beaten, or fires were lit underneath them to force them up the chimney. They were kept by a master and they slept in dormitories on the floor, with few facilities for washing, and given little other than a space to sleep and some food. Blake deplored the society that could treat small children in such a way and exploit them for money; even more the parents who would sell their children to a master in such a trade, although poverty often dictated this course.

In this poem we see Blake using satire to express his anger. The poem appears to be a simple story told by the child and it is his viewpoint that the reader sees. The child reports how his mother died while he was still little (perhaps in childbirth or as a result of complications, which was a major cause of death among women) and his father sold him before he could even speak properly. Blake deliberately shows his first words as 'weep weep weep weep' as he has little cause to do anything else. Literally, the words suggest the lisping child plying his trade, 'sweep, sweep', but, with the repetition, also sound like a small bird, thus emphasising the vulnerability of the child as well as his unhappiness. The following line points an accusing finger at the reader with the use of the pronoun, 'Your chimneys I sweep' which shows the complicity of all adults in this cruel exploitation. The continuation of the line, 'in soot I sleep' shows the impossibility of any escape from the filthy conditions imposed upon the children.

The tale of 'little Tom Dacre', personalises the narrative, giving an identity to this child sweep which ensures that the audience are aware of the boys as individuals. Tom cries when his head is shaved, a normal practice for the infant sweeps. His hair is described as 'curl'd like a lambs back' which refers to his innocence and to the idea of Tom as a victim, being sacrificed. The narrator, in a heartbreaking imitation of an adult, advises him that it is all for the best, so 'the soot cannot spoil your white hair', which also contrasts the angelic nature of the child with the darkness of the soot and, by implication, with the evil of those who exploit him. Tom's dream symbolises the position the little chimney sweeps are in, 'lock'd up in coffins of black', which represents the enslavement of the children, the claustrophobic dark chimneys and the living death they endure daily. In the dream an angel, a heavenly messenger, with 'a bright key' opens the coffins and 'set them all free'. They find themselves in an earthly paradise where they run over 'a green plain' and wash in the river of life. This symbolises the change in their condition, from exploited slaves to free, playing children, which is the condition that Blake wants for all children. It also shows the children as 'naked and white', and therefore in a state of innocence, having washed off all traces of their enslavement and misery. They also 'rise upon clouds' which, like the child in Introduction, suggests that they are associated with the spirit of imagination and it is this that sets them free – perhaps this is also symbolised by the 'bright key' of the angel which releases them from physical bondage into the paradise of imagination.

The conclusion of the poem appears to be clichéd, but it is put in childlike terms. Thus Blake is showing the way in which children trust and believe what adults tell them. It is ironic in the sense that when the angel tells Tom, ‘if he’d be a good boy / He’d have God for his father & never want joy’ the interpretation of being ‘a good boy’ would mean different things to Blake and to some of his readers. For those who exploited children, or supported the status quo, it would mean that he should obey his master and not complain about his miserable life and then he would get his reward in heaven; for Blake, however, it would mean that he would be true to his imagination which Blake saw as the divine part of human beings. In the same way, the final line, ‘So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm’ is ambiguous: it could mean the duty to be a good and cheerful worker, or it could mean the duty owed by the individual to preserve his innocence through dreams and the use of poetic imagination.

THE LITTLE BOY LOST

The first stanza is narrated by the child, begging his father not to walk so fast and to speak to him, ‘Or else I shall be lost’. This could be seen in conventional religious terms as the soul begging God the Father for guidance through the sinful world. It could also be read as the uncaring father leading his child into the forest of experience and there abandoning him.

The second stanza brings no response from the father-figure and the child is left, lost and alone in the dark and the wet. This is a very deep and primitive fear for children and the reader may empathise with the little boy left in the deep mire (or marsh), so the fear of sinking might be added to his misery. We are not surprised ‘the child did weep’, but the final line suggests some hope as his weeping seems to make ‘the vapour’ fly away. If the vapour is a mist, which seems likely, it will represent concealment or obscurity, so for this to depart means that clear sight or revelation must be at hand. The reader will have seen what the next poem is called and will know that there is a happy outcome to the child’s panic. This idea is reinforced by the jogging rhythm of the lines, but Blake’s use of wild nature – forest and marsh – suggests the dangerous world of experience, even while, in the engraving, it shows angels surrounding the text and the small boy following a light – perhaps the vapour flying away, perhaps the light of poetic imagination.

THE LITTLE BOY FOUND

In the companion poem, the child is said to be ‘led by the wandering light’ which could be the ‘vapour’ of the previous poem or could represent a guardian or angelic spirit. He begins to cry but God appears, in white, the symbol of goodness and purity. We may see this as Jesus, the divine man, or as the representation of the divinity in Man. He is described as ‘ever nigh’ (ever near) and as ‘like his father’ and is thus associated and contrasted with the father who lost him in the previous poem, suggesting that the true father responds to his child and stays close to him in the dangerous world of experience. That the child is not yet ready for this journey is shown by God restoring the little boy to his mother, who has been searching for him. However, she has been searching in the ‘lonely dale’, the world of innocence and she, too, is contrasted with the father in the previous poem, both because she has been looking for the child, instead of losing him, and because she believes him to be in the world of innocence and not that of experience. The fact that she is ‘weeping’ and ‘pale’ shows the grief and worry of the caring and protective parent. The importance of the childhood world of innocence and the need for wise guidance into the world of experience is a Blake theme that is shown in these two simple yet profound poems, with their nursery-rhyme metres and their emotional symbols.

THE DIVINE IMAGE

Blake's conviction of the divinity of Man that he shares with God in the person of Jesus is very much the focus of this poem. The title reflects the Christian belief that mankind was made in the image of God. He selects the virtues of 'Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love' as those which human beings value most and which are attributes of God, but also of people. These are the virtues to which humans appeal in their distress or need, much as a television documentary about starving or needy children hopes to appeal to the same feelings in their viewers. Blake's hatred of injustice and suffering leads him to remind the reader that these are attributes both of 'God our father dear' and of 'Man his child and care'. Those who profess to believe in God must also believe in their fellow beings. He says:

'For Mercy has a human heart
Pity a human face:
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.'

Blake then points out that these virtues are universal because 'every man of every clime' (that is, climatic region) who offers up prayers in their misery, offers them to the human form in its divine shape, i.e. God, who is personified in these attributes. It therefore follows that, if all humans share this divinity, then 'all must love the human form / in heathen, turk or jew'. You cannot discriminate between different races and religions, because, if they are human, then they share the same divinity and if they have the virtues of 'Mercy, Love and Pity', then in them 'God is dwelling too.' It is a moving plea for the brotherhood of Man and for each person to find within themselves the divine attributes that will bring this about.

It is a song of innocence because it presents a vision of the possibility of paradise on earth, if all people realised the humanity and the divinity within themselves and each other. It is revolutionary because the view of Christians at the time would certainly not see 'heathens', 'turks' (i.e. Muslims) or 'jews' as being in the image of God, which was only acquired through Christian baptism. This was why so many missionaries ventured across the globe, either in the wake of colonialism or in its vanguard. They wanted to bring God (as they saw him) to the native peoples through baptising them and teaching them Christian doctrine and practice and there was no question of seeing them as having divinity through virtue of their humanity.

The poem's metre has four stresses in the first line, followed by three stresses in the second and the rhyme scheme is ABCB. The repetition of the qualities 'Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love' is reinforced by a rhythmic beat that is, once again, reminiscent of nursery songs and rhymes and therefore reminds the reader that this is a vision of innocence that makes a perfect world seem possible.

HOLY THURSDAY

Once more, Blake uses a simple nursery style rhythm to create a picture which at first seems to be one of innocent happiness and natural gratitude. Thousands of children, 'their innocent faces clean' are walking into Saint Paul's cathedral in London for a special service on 'Holy Thursday'. The children's numbers are described by Blake as 'multitudes' and their procession into the cathedral is compared to 'like Thames waters flow'. The children are likened to 'flowers', 'lambs' and angels in their innocence. They sit in 'companies' (or schools) and they have 'radiance all their own' as if their natural goodness was visible. Their singing of the hymns is likened to 'a mighty wind' or 'harmonious thunderings' which reaches the 'seats of heaven' because God will hear the voices of the pure in heart.

Songs of Innocence by William Blake

However, there are hints of a very different picture underneath this pleasing sight. The children are 'walking two & two in red & blue & green'. This suggestion of regimenting (increased by the repetition of the ampersand) brings with it the idea of coercion, which is reinforced by the 'Grey headed beadles' who carry 'wands as white as snow'. These are symbols of their office, but may also serve as a reminder that beatings were fairly frequent within the charity schools. The uniforms the children wear are smart but also a constant reminder that they must obey the rules of their institution or risk being turned out onto the streets to starve. Surely it is no coincidence that the final two lines put together the 'wise guardians of the poor' with the admonition 'Then cherish pity; lest you drive an angel from your door.'

Charity schools were established by wealthy benefactors with the aim of educating the children of the poor to become useful and God-fearing citizens. They were totally reliant on gifts and donations from charitably minded people and therefore had to prove their usefulness and high moral standards. While there is no doubt that they saved many children from a life of starvation, begging, thievery and prostitution, they did not encourage any 'unsuitable' ideas in their pupils about freedom, individuality or rising above their station. The basis for their education was the Bible and religious instruction was the most important lesson, which also helped to instil in them a proper sense of gratitude to their benefactors and teachers. They might be taught basic reading, writing and mathematics and also vocational studies – a trade such as joinery for the boys while the girls would learn how to sew and do domestic duties to fit them to become good servants. Some of the schools were very bad – examples can be found in Dickens' portrayal of Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* and Charlotte Brontë's depiction of Lowood School in *Jane Eyre* – but in some cases the schools provided a haven from worse things, as in *Coram Boy* by Jamila Gavin.

This poem should be read alongside the poem of the same title in *Songs of Experience* to appreciate the satire used by Blake here.

INFANT JOY

This poem shows the infant who is wanted and loved; by implication the parents here are wise and tender, shown in their reaction to the baby. The repetition of the word 'joy' suggests the romantic view of childhood and infancy, where children are seen as innocents to be protected and played with. The poem begins with a dialogue apparently between the newborn infant and its parent about the choice of a name:

'I have no name
I am but two days old.'

Babies were not generally given names until they were baptised – and then it was often the name of a godparent, hence the term 'Christian name'. The given name perhaps signified the power of the established churches to 'own' an individual through the rites of baptism or christening and may explain why Blake uses the dialogue between the parent and child to 'call' the infant and to use a name that signifies the feelings between its parents on conception and the feelings of the mother for her baby. The baby in stanza 1 appears to be giving its name to the parent. Naming the child enables it to become a separate being with its own identity.

'I happy am
Joy is my name, –
Sweet joy befall thee!'

The infant's voice is not heard in stanza 2, as the parent has agreed to the name – 'Sweet joy I call thee' – and is rewarded by the baby's smile. The bond between parent and child is expressed in the song that wishes 'Sweet joy befall thee', with its hint that there are different possibilities. The song is reminiscent of a lullaby, but also, critics have suggested, of the hymns taught by rote to children to sing in church. The two stanzas mirror each other in form and pattern and the poem is highly repetitive, as songs for young children often are.

Songs of Innocence by William Blake

In contrast to 'Infant Sorrow' in the *Songs of Experience*, the baby is, of course, the consequence of a physical union, which Blake saw as the rightful expression of love, and is therefore an expression of joyful love as well as a new life in its own right. This poem has been connected to 'The Blossom', with its delicately expressed symbolism of sexual love.

THE BLOSSOM

This poem has given rise to different interpretations from critics, some of whom see it as a specifically sexual poem and others who disagree strongly, arguing that its inclusion in *Songs of Innocence* rules out such an overt theme. The former see the references to 'arrow' as the penis and to 'cradle narrow' as the vagina with the obvious implication of the speaker's 'bosom' implying a free embrace of sexual relations. They also argue that the sparrow is 'merry' at the prospect of love, while the robin's 'sobbing' implies orgasm. The image in the engraving is said to depict the penis both erect and flaccid, while the small winged creatures are representative of the semen which generates new life. A blossom traditionally symbolises youth opening into maturity and the poem is said to celebrate the joy of free and mutual sexual love. The sparrow here is seen in its role as a symbol of the goddess Venus, in classical mythology, while Blake would appear to be giving a similar role to the notoriously territorial robin.

Other critics, however, see the poem either as a celebration of the family with the birds and the blossom being reminiscent of paintings of the Holy Family, or else as a plea for the compassion and understanding that the speaker brings to the birds, both in joy and sorrow. The sparrow is seen as a humble and ordinary bird, while the robin symbolises household harmony and contentment. The sparrow is carefree ('merry') while the robin is sad ('sobbing') and the blossom creates a harmony between the two sides of life.

As with 'Infant Joy', the two stanzas mirror each other and the use of repetition reminds the reader of childhood songs – perhaps the one where cock-robin is killed by the sparrow, with his bow and arrow.

It is perfectly possible to reconcile these two views since Blake believed in free love and not in what he saw as the 'tyranny' of monogamous marriage. Love, both physical and emotional, should be freely given and enjoyed in his ideal world and should not cause pain to anyone. In an age where marriage was an arranged contract and girls often had little say in who they married, it can be seen why Blake thought of some marriages as little more than legalised prostitution, with girls being wed to the highest bidder. Blake himself was very happily married and did not indulge in his ideas of free love, since they would have caused great distress to his wife, Catherine. His views on the ideal world of innocence can encompass sexual feelings, as long as these are free and happy. They are somewhat similar ideas to those of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, who were innocent and happy in their nakedness until they acquired 'knowledge of good and evil' when they became ashamed. This knowledge belongs to the world of experience into which children 'blossom' and then society and the teachings of the church make them ashamed of their natural feelings, as Blake would see it.

LAUGHING SONG

This is a more interesting poem than it might appear on first reading. It seems to celebrate nature and children in harmony, with its repetitions of 'laugh' and 'merry'. The personification of the different facets of nature – the woods, stream, air, hill, meadows and grasshopper are equated with 'Mary and Susan and Emily' and are all engaged in happy laughter. The narrator who depicts this joyful scene invites the reader:

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‘Come live and be merry and join with me,
To sing the sweet chorus of ‘Ha, Ha, He.’

The ‘green’ aspect of the scene is stressed, which suggests youth and immaturity, as well as the spring /summer season, and most critics have taken it as a straightforward celebration of happy childhood. The form of the poem is a simple folk song, written in rhyming couplets, for which it would be easy to compose a tune.

The poem gives a picture of the ideal Romantic childhood, growing up in natural surroundings and with the freedom to roam and be at one with Nature. This view echoed Rousseau’s vision of ‘the noble savage’ which insisted on the purity of the primitive and held that it was society that corrupted people and made them un-natural and therefore unhappy.

‘Nature wants children to be children before being men. If we want to pervert this order we shall produce precocious fruits which will be immature and insipid and will not be long in rotting.’ (Rousseau, 1979, p.90)

However, most lines begin with the word ‘When’, which is used here to establish a lack of permanence. It is only when all these things are happening together, that the reader can be invited to join the ‘sweet chorus’. This word, which affects the structure of the whole poem, seems to be an implied warning that this scene cannot last. It is supported by the engraving which shows a group, not of carefree children, but of young adults, apparently led by a young man with a glass of wine in his hand. All are fully clothed and there is none of the nudity that Blake often uses to establish innocence. It is almost as though Blake is suggesting that this carefree happiness is to be taken while it is still possible, before the world of experience overtakes it.

The poem has been moved from Innocence to Experience and back again to Innocence, which suggests that Blake himself had some doubts about where to include it. It has been suggested that the ‘painted birds’ point to an underlying theme about art and nature and the compromise to be made between the making of art and the world of experience.

A CRADLE SONG

This appealing lullaby would seem to show the relationship between a loving and wise mother and her innocent baby, as she sings him to sleep. It is written in a suitably simple form of four line stanzas with rhyming couplets. The structure of the poem is interesting; the first four stanzas each begin with the word ‘sweet’ which is repeated in the third line, but it moves from ‘Sweet dreams’ to ‘Sweet sleep’ to ‘Sweet smiles’ to ‘Sweet moans’, perhaps suggesting a progression from the world of innocence to experience, although the mother is wishing the world of experience away from her infant;

‘Sweet moans, dovelike sighs,
Chase not slumber from thy eyes’.

The following stanza would appear to support this idea:

‘Sleep sleep, happy sleep,
While o’er thee thy mother weep’

The mother weeps over the baby because she knows that sooner or later he must leave the world of innocence and enter that of experience. The mother then refers to the ‘holy image’ of the Christ child that she can see in her baby’s face,

‘Sweet babe once like thee
Thy maker lay and wept for me’.

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The poem continues with overtly religious references, such as ‘Infant smiles are his own smiles’, showing Blake’s equation of innocence with Jesus, the lamb.

From the world of experience expressed in ‘sweet moans’, the poem moves back to the world of innocence, but now raised to a spiritual level. In this way the poem could be read as the ideal journey of the infant’s soul expressed in the lullaby sung by the wise and loving mother. The second illustration, which shows the child’s pillow like a halo, would seem to support this idea.

NIGHT

The first three stanzas of this poem seem to show a child’s story book view of the world at night, with the ‘moon like a flower’ smiling down and the birds ‘silent in their nest’. In this world where ‘green fields and happy groves’ wait to be enjoyed by daylight, the ‘flocks have took delight’, giving yet another image of the innocent lamb gently nibbling the grass. In the silent night world, angels are depicted as pouring blessings and joy:

‘On each bud and blossom
And each sleeping bosom’.

The angels’ function is to act as guardians, protecting people and animals alike, and to bring comfort

‘If they see any weeping
That should have been sleeping’ ...

In a child’s world, the natural and the supernatural can exist easily together (look at modern myths about Father Christmas and the tooth fairy) and the world of innocence represented by the lambs is one in which angels have a natural role. Even when the world of experience and the passions intrudes, ‘When wolves and tigers howl for prey’, if the angels cannot keep them from killing the sheep, they

‘Receive each mild spirit
New worlds to inherit.’

The old world and the new one seem to co-exist in a similar fashion, but with the lion, now seen in terms of red and gold, become a protector (as in *The Little Girl Lost*). This vision comes from the Old Testament, where Isaiah prophesied,

The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; The calf, the young lion, and the fattened calf together; and a little child will lead them.

It is essentially a song of innocence which is made apparent by the rhythms Blake used, each stanza having eight lines, the first four of which are in iambic tetrameter and alternate rhyme, while the following four lines are in rhyming couplets and have a quicker rhythm, using anapaestic dimeter to create a headlong rushing feel to the lines; this suggests the swift onset of night, the swooping motion of the angels, the charge of the wild beasts and finally the driving away of all terrors and the newly ‘baptised’ mane of the lion shining like gold as he turns from predator to protector.

The narrator of the poem seems not to be a child, but has a child’s viewpoint, as he can see both natural and supernatural things and has a clear understanding of the innocence of the natural order of things, while also envisioning the superiority of the spiritual. It is a poem in which caring and true empathy are shown by the angels in their quest to bring joy and comfort; their weeping is an attempt to prevent the sheep being eaten and indicates the care with which they receive the souls of the dead. It is also shown by the lion in the final two stanzas, where the King of beasts has ‘ruddy eyes’ that ‘flow with tears of gold’ and it is this true empathy that is shown to have the spiritual qualities possessed by the angels.

A DREAM

This poem has themes of being lost and found and also of empathy and guardianship. The narrator dreams that he is lying on grass at night, and watching an emmet [an ant] wandering about lost. The narrator describes her as

‘Troubled wildered and forlorn
Dark benighted travel-worn,’

which personifies the insect as a weary traveller, thus gaining sympathy from the reader for her plight. The narrator within his dream then hears the ant talking. The picture drawn by the poet is one of the lost mother’s family sighing and alternately running to look out for her (‘Now they look abroad to see’) and going back to weep because she isn’t there (‘Now return and weep for me.’). Although this is an ant, the condition is made real for the reader – even more so when the narrator himself feels such sympathy that, ‘Pitying I drop’d a tear:’

To the narrator’s relief, a glow-worm hears the ant and asks,

‘What wailing wight [person]
Calls the watchman of the night?’

The glow-worm then tells the ant that he is the light by which the beetle ‘goes his round’ and if she follows the beetle’s hum and his light she will get home safely. Again this is almost a whimsical story, such as one might tell a young child, who would accept readily that ants can talk and glow-worms can guide them home, written in Blake’s usual simple nursery rhythm in four line stanzas and rhyming couplets.

The themes of being lost and found are similar to those in ‘The Little Boy Lost’ and ‘The Little Boy Found’, except that the roles are reversed. Where the boy’s mother goes searching until he is restored to her by God, ‘in white’, the ant-mother has to find her way back to her children with help from the glow-worm, ‘nature’s own lantern’.

NURSE’S SONG

The nurse is presented as a kind and loving carer who has true empathy with the children in her charge. She is the main narrator in the poem and tells us that when she can hear the children’s voices raised in happiness and laughter, ‘My heart is at rest within my breast’, showing that this causes her contentment. However, she is also aware of her role as protector, since she urges them to ‘come home’ because it is beginning to go dark, ‘And the dews of night arise’, when it is not safe to be outside. The children, however, who are the narrators in stanza three, beg to stay out longer, using the arguments of children in all ages;

‘No, no, let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep ...’

The nurse understands their feelings – she empathises with the children and she expresses the Romantic view of childhood, where it is seen as ideal for children to roam free among natural surroundings for as long as possible, thus prolonging the days of their innocence. This is expressed by the nurse’s agreement;

‘Well, well, go & play till the light fades away
And then go home to bed’

Although the night will be replaced by another daytime, there is a sense in which the coming darkness also represents the world of experience creeping up on the children, and the wise nurse wishes to keep it at bay as long as she can. This judgement is supported by the final lines, where the hills, Nature itself, echo the children’s laughter and emphasises their harmony with the natural world of hills, sheep and birds.

The theme of guardianship and protection is shown here in the person of the nurse and the emphasis is on the world of childhood innocence, beloved of Rousseau and the Romantics. The simple language and the 'jogging' style of the rhythm which is reminiscent of nursery rhymes like 'Ride a cock horse' combine with the limerick-style rhyme scheme to create an atmosphere of carefree joy in a world where danger seems far away, although hinted at in the coming on of night.

SPRING

This simple and happy little poem is carefully crafted, despite the appearance it gives of spontaneity. Its seeming naïveté helps to create the atmosphere of childhood innocence appropriate to the season. Spring is the time for new life and for the emergence of animals who hibernate over the winter and a signal for the coming of light and warmth. This is celebrated in the poem by the call to the piper (or the poet), 'Sound the Flute!', which is almost a signal for the birds to begin their song. The nightingale, so called because she sings late into the evening, is a bush-living bird that represents 'the dale', while the lark is traditionally associated with the dawn and who hovers aloft in the sky as it sings. If you know *Romeo and Juliet* you will recall their discussion about whether the bird they could hear was the nightingale (allowing them more time together) or the lark (the signal for Romeo to leave for Mantua). So the opposites are reconciled in harmony as both rejoice in the coming of spring.

The flute – or the pipe – is also the instrument of Pan, the Greek god of Nature whose rites celebrated the fertility of the new year. Sure enough, the poem moves from the birds to a little boy 'Full of joy' and a little girl 'Sweet and small'.

While the children are associated with the birds and with Nature in their greeting to Spring, there must surely be some sexual hints in the association of pipes, boy, girl and cock (a traditionally masculine symbol) all joining to celebrate the season of new life. Once again, two opposites (boy and girl) join together in happiness at the new year.

The final move is from the children to the lamb, again an obvious association with Spring, but also a symbol of innocence and a representation of Jesus. Here it seems to be the child who is narrating, asking the lamb to 'Come and lick My white neck.' White is the colour of purity and innocence and is seen both in the child's skin and the lamb's wool, thus associating the two of them and 'Christ the lamb' in a loving relationship; however, it is also a sensual image that suggests a physical awakening:

Let me pull
Your soft wool.
Let me kiss
Your soft face.

Each stanza ends with the refrain 'Merrily Merrily to welcome in the Year', although the final line changes to 'Merrily Merrily we welcome in the year', thus identifying the child/narrator clearly with Nature and the season and the celebrating creatures. The refrain serves to reinforce the universality of the rejoicing as well as to reproduce the structure of a song. The sound symbols of flute piping, birds singing and children crowing, give way to the very tactile image of 'soft wool' and 'soft face' in the final stanza, thus suggesting the awakening of all the senses. The presence of the symbolic lamb also emphasises the need for the soul to awaken as well as the mind and body, although in this Romantic world of childhood, innocence and freedom are protection from the dark world of experience suffered by the chimney sweeps and the charity children.

INTRODUCTION

The Introduction to *Songs of Experience* sees the poet/piper become the poet/bard, with the first line of the poem commanding the reader to 'Hear the voice of the Bard!' The bard here seems omniscient – he sees the past, present and future and thus acts more as a prophet rather than the piper of the *Songs of Innocence*. The reference to 'The Holy Word' may be to the Old Testament, and to Jehovah who forced Adam and Eve from Paradise or to Jesus, the 'word made flesh' and, Blake believed, the only true way to God. The connotation of the 'ancient trees' may be the tree of life (associated with the cross and thus with redemption) although inevitably there are echoes of the tree of knowledge, which created the need for redemption by causing Adam and Eve to lose Paradise. The bard has heard this word that calls 'the lapsed Soul' to repentance as represented in the 'fallen light' that needs renewing. 'Fallen Man' can refer to the biblical fall of Adam and Eve, but also to imprisoned Man in his 'mind-forged manacles' unable to break away from the confines of materialism and realise his true spiritual and imaginative potential. 'The starry pole' may act as a guiding light, a glimpse of eternity, but stars in Blake often have associations with jealousy, with Science and with Reason and this stanza may be read as the narrator wishing for the 'Holy Word' to control the pole star and to renew the fallen light of poetic creativity.

The next stanza may be interpreted as the words of the bard himself, the call to Earth which is at the centre of the poem is to 'arise from out the dewy grass' which is associated with the darkness of Night and ignorance and to greet the morning – the daylight of spiritual awakening. The image of daybreak rising from 'the slumberous mass' of those sleeping masses of people who do not realise their own creative capacity, is a call from the Bard – the poet – to awaken from the sleep of materialism.

The final stanza gives the voice – of the bard, the poet or the Holy Word – asking Earth, or humanity, to 'Turn away no more'; it shows how the 'starry floor' and the 'watry shore' is given for a brief time until 'the break of day'. This could suggest that the time of jealousy and reason (symbolised by the starry floor) and that of materialism (symbolised by the watry shore) are nearly finished and the time for Man to free his creativity and true spirituality is close, in the 'break of day'.

EARTH'S ANSWER

This follows the introduction and is, as the title suggests, a reply to it. Blake keeps the same form and rhyme scheme to emphasise this link between the two poems. Earth, personified as a woman, raises her head from the darkness of reason.

'Her light fled:
Stony dread!
And her locks covered with grey despair.'

The description is of someone imprisoned who has aged in experience without attaining wisdom, for the light of imagination and joy is absent. 'Stony' reminds us of the mineral world which represents materialism.

Earth says she is:

'Prison'd on watry shore
Starry jealousy does keep my den
Cold and hoar ...'

Imprisoned by reason and the waters of materialism, the coldness is a reminder that Winter is associated with age and the opposite to the Spring of childhood. The stars representing Earth's

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exile from heaven are depicted as jealous of human spiritual and creative capacity. The stanza finishes with the 'Father of the ancient men' – the jealous god of the church, depicted by Blake as Urizen.

Earth refers to this god as the tyrant who keeps her imprisoned by oppressing the forces of freedom, joy and creativity. He is the 'Cruel jealous selfish fear' that is opposed to 'the virgins of youth and morning'. This a clear reference to the church that governs by prohibitions, especially sexual ones, as is made clear in the next stanza, which is all in question form:

'Does Spring hide its joy
When buds and blossoms grow?
Does the sower
Sow by night?
Or the plowman in darkness plow?'

Nature rejoices in fertility and sexuality, rather than hiding it furtively away, and therefore this natural way is how 'Man-in-Nature' should realise his freedom.

The final stanza is a plea for revolution, to break the 'heavy chain' of 'thou shalt not' and break free from the tyranny that prevents Earth from realising her true creative and poetic imagination.

THE CLOD AND THE PEBBLE

This is a carefully balanced poem, in which two opposing ideas of love are sung by two inanimate objects, each of which is given precisely half of the poem, or one and a half stanzas. Some commentators have seen it as representative of the collection, in that it brings together a view of love which could be seen as innocent with a view that could be seen as experienced. A 'clod' traditionally has connotations of dullness and stupidity, while a pebble is associated with cold and hardness. This choice of personifications might suggest that Blake saw neither viewpoint as a whole or satisfactory one, although they are brought together because they are complementary.

At first reading it appears that the clod's viewpoint is the right one, that love takes no thought for itself but willingly gives up everything for the beloved and 'Builds a Heaven in Hell's despair.' However, that this wholly giving and totally humble opinion is that of a 'doormat' is reinforced by the description of the clod being 'Trodden with the cattle's feet', which implies that this completely unselfish form of love is not necessarily the best one. For one thing it means that the clod's beloved is the one that is taking and being made comfortable only through the unease and discomfort of the lover.

The song warbled by the pebble puts the opposite viewpoint; that love is selfish and covetous and wants only 'To bind another to its delight'. This is the jealous kind of love that has been ascribed by Blake to the 'father of men' and the fact that it is put into the voice of a pebble – a representative of the materialistic world – argues that it is the voice of experience without wisdom speaking here. The pebble's view of love would need to find a lover willing to be downtrodden and submit to this demanding form of love – as suggested by the clod. The selfish and jealous kind of love would indeed 'build a Hell in Heaven's despite' since a love that only takes has no care for the giver. If the relationship suggested by the poem were ever to come about, the clod would be crushed and degraded, while the pebble would be fixed and unchanging. Neither state is desirable, any more than continual innocence is desirable without experience, or experience is desirable without wisdom.

The poem works through the use of repetition and antithesis and the balance of the form and metre suggests the balance of the two contrary views put forward by innocence and experience.

HOLY THURSDAY

This is a very different treatment of the service of thanksgiving by the charity school children from that in *Songs of Innocence*. The first two stanzas ask questions, with implicit answers. The apparently cheerful streams of children marching into the cathedral have been replaced with the question,

‘Is this a holy thing to see,
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduced to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand?’

The clear implication is that a country which has wealth chooses to ignore the real needs of its children and, even when charity is provided, it is grudging and given without love or care. The word ‘usurous’ comes from ‘usury’ which is the practice of lending money at unreasonable rates of interest. The indication is that those who give this charity expect excessive returns from the children, probably in terms of gratitude and obedience. The use of metonymy with ‘hand’ representing not merely the guardians, but the whole city (maybe nation) shows a general social responsibility. That this is not ‘holy’ is not merely that it goes against Christ’s command to ‘love one another as I have loved you’ and his dictum that ‘whatever you do to these, the least of my brothers, you do it to me’, but also because usury was strictly forbidden by the church. Blake’s readers would have been aware of all these connotations and able to draw the intended conclusions.

No longer are the children joyfully raising their voices to heaven; instead the reader is asked,

‘Is that trembling cry a song?
Can it be a song of joy?
And so many children poor?’

Again, the answer is implied within the question. How can children be joyful and sing songs of praise, when they live in poverty. The stark conclusion is ‘It is a land of poverty!’ While this would seem to contradict Blake’s assertion in stanza 1 that it is ‘... a rich and fruitful land’, the poverty he refers to here is a spiritual poverty, brought about by the lack of imagination. While many people in England enjoyed an increasingly wealthy lifestyle, for those who were poor it was a desperate situation, and the children suffered most. Blake describes this in terms of their mental landscape:

‘And their sun does never shine.
And their fields are bleak and bare.
And their ways are fill’d with thorns
It is eternal winter there.

This figuratively describes the situation to which the helpless children have been reduced by those whose duty it should have been to care for them and ensure them a childhood of carefree innocence. The relentlessness of their misery is suggested by the drumming repetition at the start of each line, while the thorns suggest that they are sacrificial victims, like Jesus at the crucifixion. It also suggests the short-sightedness of those who fail to provide properly for the nation’s future citizens, who represent its wealth. This is made clear in the final stanza, where imagination shows the opposite:

‘For where-e’er the sun does shine
And where-e’er the rain does fall:
Babe can never hunger there,
Nor poverty the mind appall.’

Sun and rain produce the conditions necessary to life and they are also associated with spiritual life in the symbols of light / heat of God’s love and rain as the water of life. Children will never go hungry or live in poverty in a land which cares about them.

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The two 'Holy Thursday' poems together show Blake as a social reformer, demanding justice for those who cannot fight for themselves. He shows the self-righteous attitude of those who demand gratitude and conformity as the price for giving charity, which in practice is merely their duty to the next generation. By implication he is also showing the enormous gulf between the poor and the rich in his society.

THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER

A much more sombre poem than that with the same title in *Songs of Innocence*, where the little sweeps could escape through the power of imagination, this poem shows the parents of the little sweep as jealous of his innocent freedom and happiness.

The poem opens with an onlooker describing

'A little black thing among the snow:
Crying weep, weep, in notes of woe!'

The contrast between the black sooty figure of the child and the white snow brings to mind both conventional dead metaphors about good and evil and Blake's subversion of these in poems such as 'The Little Black Boy'. Clearly Blake does not intend the child himself to be seen as evil, but rather what has happened to him – the conspiracy in the adult world to force him into this dreadful occupation. This is shown in his cries of 'weep, weep' which recalls the professional cry of the sweep asking for hire, but also shows the misery of his situation as they are 'notes of woe!' When the onlooker asks, 'Where are thy father and mother? say?' the little sweep becomes the narrator for the rest of the poem, as he gives an answer that reveals Blake's anger at his treatment and compassion for his condition. He tells the reader that his parents have 'both gone up to the church to pray'. This shows the hypocrisy of the parents in this outward religious observance, while they sell their child into slavery as an apprentice sweep.

The second stanza clearly reveals one of Blake's themes in the songs of experience – that of the jealous adults who cannot bear to see the innocent world of imagination that they no longer inhabit, without trying to destroy it. This is made obvious by the first word of the second stanza:

'Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smil'd among the winters snow:
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.'

It is the child's innocent happiness as he plays and sings that have caused the jealous parents to cut short his childhood – and, in this occupation, his life, as the phrase 'clothes of death' emphasises. Unlike in the poem of the same name from *Songs of Innocence*, there is no 'angel with a bright key' to set him free into the world of imagination. There is a hint that some of this world remains with the child when he says:

'And because I am happy, & dance & sing,
They think they have done me no injury'

– but everyone knows that children can still play and seem happy even in the most dreadful situations; the parents cannot be unaware of the kind of life their son must be leading. The suggestion is that the parents are colluding with the Church and the State:

'And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King
Who make up a heaven of our misery.'

The final line is reminiscent of the 'Clod and the Pebble' where jealous love 'builds a hell in heaven's despite.' Blake accuses the people who should be protecting children – the parents, the King whose duty is to protect all his subjects, and the priests who owe a Christian duty of care towards all, especially children, of creating a hell on earth for them instead.

The simple, direct language that Blake uses reveals the hypocrisy of the adults through the words of a child.

THE LITTLE GIRL LOST

The poem begins with the voice of the prophet – the bard – who sees a future time when the earth

‘Shall arise and seek
For her maker meek:
And the desert wild
Become a garden mild.’

This introduction appears divorced from the rest of the poem, but it is an indication to the reader that Blake is writing about a symbolic future when the material world (the desert) will become a spiritual one (a garden) as the human race is reunited with God. Lyca is a symbol of the human soul who has wandered in the desert and is caught in the sleeping world of experience. She is found by wild animals who do not harm her (it was a medieval tradition that wild animals would not harm a virgin) but the lion, who may represent death, but could also symbolise wisdom, removes her clothing which is appropriate to the material world of experience, and takes her in the state of nakedness that is often portrayed by Blake as innocence, to his cave. The description of the lion as ‘kingly’ is slightly at odds with his movement, as he ‘gambold round’ but the place where Lyca lies is depicted as ‘hallow’d ground’ and she is guarded by the moon, Diana, goddess of virgins. The sexual imagery in the poem has been seen as Lyca awakening to sexual desire, but moving beyond this almost immediately to the new Eden, where her knowledge is not forbidden or shameful. She is said to be ‘Seven Summers old’ which is a number that connects the new Eden to the creation which was said, in Genesis, to have taken seven days. This view is reflected in the illustrations where a girl and a man point upwards towards a bird that represents freedom, while the serpent depicted below it, is facing away from them. The second engraving shows Lyca preparing for the sleep of experience, wearing a red dress – traditionally the sign of passion.

The ballad form in which the poem is written is suited to a story, of which this forms the first part, while the rhyming couplets help to move the action forward, but also form small enclosed ideas of their own within the poem.

THE LITTLE GIRL FOUND

These two poems form part of the same story, and in the second poem, we are shown the suffering of Lyca’s parents. Again the number seven is significant, as they are said to have wandered for seven days and ‘Seven nights they sleep Among shadows deep.’ The second line recalls the 42nd psalm; ‘Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no ill.’ Lyca’s parents, however, do fear for her and they follow her trail until they are stopped by the lion. Here he becomes ‘A spirit arm’d in gold’, the herald of the New Jerusalem, and he leads them to their daughter, who sleeps peacefully ‘Among tygers wild’. The parents from the world of experience have followed their child back to the world of innocence which was Eden before the fall, but which is different in that it contains knowledge and wisdom. Blake’s final picture shows naked children playing happily with lions and tigers, while the female personification of earth, also naked to represent innocence, lies in the foreground. Again the imagery has biblical connotations, recalling the words of Jesus, ‘Unless you become as little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.’

THE SICK ROSE

The poem makes use of a narrator who is addressing the rose – the symbol of love – with the words, ‘thou art sick.’ The image of a blighted rose, which has had its beauty spoiled by an invisible maggot is continued in the following lines. The worm, which has connotations of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, is associated with sex, both by its resemblance to the penis and because, in the Bible story, it was the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve to gain knowledge, including sexual knowledge, which led to their downfall. There are also references to the ‘caterpillar’ which is used by Blake to symbolise a destroyer. ‘The invisible worm’ is a secret agent and it flies ‘in the night’, under cover of darkness and in ‘the howling storm’, a symbol of confusion and of passions, but also of materialism. Nevertheless it has ‘found out thy bed / of crimson joy’. The bed can mean both the rose bed and the lover’s bed and the crimson joy represents both the colour of the rose (the colour of passion) and the female genitals. In this case the passion is deadly for, ‘his dark secret love / Does thy life destroy.’ This can have a physical meaning in the shape of sexually transmitted disease, but it can also mean that relationships that have to be furtive and shameful are destroyed by this need for secrecy. Some people have seen the sickness as psychological, a result of unacted desires. Blake wanted love to be free and open and people to enjoy each other without the church telling them it was forbidden and sinful. This can be associated with other poems, such as ‘The Garden of Love’, where the priests ‘bind with briars / my joys and desires’ and also with ‘London’ where ‘the youthful harlot’s curse / blights with plagues the marriage hearse.’

THE GARDEN OF LOVE

As the title implies, the garden represents the natural world of innocence, with associations of Paradise and the Garden of Eden. The narrator returns to the garden of his childhood, ‘where I used to play on the green’. This is an echo of several of the songs of innocence, but the narrator is now in the world of experience, ‘and saw what I never had seen’ In the middle of the green is a chapel, which represents the established church and its gradual taking over of the growing mind. Instead of being open, for people to worship in their own way,

‘The gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not, writ over the door’.

The emphasis on punishment and sin, rather than on joy, on forbidding, rather than permitting, is typical of Blake’s view of the institution. The poem continues as the narrator, who has made a deliberate journey back to the Garden of Love, turns towards the garden itself, ‘That so many sweet flowers bore’ – flowers traditionally being symbols of natural love – but this too has changed:

‘And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tombstones where flowers should be’

The death of innocent love and gravestones placed on top of these symbols signifies the church’s determination to suppress sexual love and freedom and to bury natural desires. This idea is reinforced by the final two lines:

‘And priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys and desires’.

The thorns of the briars are the prickings of conscience that the church instils through making people feel guilty about their natural feelings. They are also associated with roses, the symbols of passion. Blake saw the church as oppressive, both because it made innocent desires sinful, and because it colluded with the state and the wealthy members of society to keep the poor in poverty and ignorance – thus enabling it to keep power over them. The priests’ black gowns are also associated with death and the darkness of experience.

THE TYGER

This is probably Blake's most famous poem; easy to remember because of its rhythmic verse and use of rhyming couplets, the animal itself holds a fascination for people, partly because of its beauty and partly because of the danger it represents. For Blake it is a symbol of righteous anger – the emotion he saw as driving progress. In 'The Proverbs of Hell' he wrote 'The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction' – instruction being associated with schoolmasters and priests. The poem begins with an image of the creature,

'Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night'

The tiger's flame coloured stripes are associated with passion, while the light and dark of its coat shows both contrast and balance. Forests are associated with experience and therefore with danger. The narrator asks the first of a number of questions in the poem,

'What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?'

While its creator must be immortal, it is a puzzle to know what kind of creator could make such a fearful creature – symmetry refers presumably to its patterning. More questions follow – all of them rhetorical since there can be no answer, and all of them directed to the origins of the tiger.

'In what distant deeps or skies,
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?'

The ideas here of cosmic fire associated with the tiger adds to its grandeur with a suggestion of Prometheus (a character in Greek mythology) stealing fire from the Gods as a gift for man:

'On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?'

There is also an echo of the Greek Icarus, flying too close to the sun and being flung to earth, but the impression is of something universal and even courageous.

The next stanza takes the idea of the tiger as a physical being;

'And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?'

The identification of the parts of the tiger with the creator that made it gives it a supernatural power, while the connection of 'shoulder' with 'art' is suggesting the combination of physical strength and imagination required to produce such a creature. This is followed by the image of a blacksmith's forge (perhaps an association with Vulcan, smith to the Gods?) which is also implicated in the making of the tiger:

'What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?'

The idea of the tiger's creation being a combination of nature and creative art is taken a step further here, as though only a cosmic forge could produce sufficient heat to create its brain. The idea is reinforced by the hammering rhythm that runs throughout the poem.

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The image of the stars as a heavenly army, throwing down their spears in surrender to the power of the tiger, or perhaps in horror at its creation, serves to extend the idea of its supernatural qualities. The question that follows, however, is at the heart of the poem and also at the heart of the songs;

‘Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?’

The belief in a single creator must extend to the belief that he who created good must also have created evil – the tiger and the lamb share the same world. They are the two contrary states of the human soul, representing the worlds of innocence and experience. If the lamb represents goodness, innocence and meekness, the tiger represents passion, wrath and energy.

The final stanza repeats that at the beginning, with the difference being that the question is no longer whether a creator would be able to ‘make’ the tiger, but how he could ‘dare’ to do so. The circular structure of the poem indicates the eternal nature of the questions and the themes within it. There is no real answer to the ‘problem of evil’ in the universe, or to whether the creator of the lamb would smile at his unleashing of the tiger. The words that are repeated throughout the poem, such as ‘dare’ and ‘dread’ suggest something at once brave and awful, while images of ‘burning’, ‘fire’ and ‘furnace’ suggest not only the tiger’s orange stripes but the two eyes in the darkness and the anger burning in its brain. Fire is associated with creation and destruction, with cleansing and with warmth. These contradictions are present in the world, just as good and evil are both present.

LONDON

One of the bleakest poems in the collection has Blake, the narrator, wandering the streets of his home city and noting the misery around him.

‘I wander thro’ each charter’d street,
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow’

The word ‘chartered’ refers to the granting of rights to land or rents, the implication being that most of London is owned by a small number of people or corporations. It also has connotations of ‘charting’ or mapping out, with its hints of confining and defining limits. There is also an ironic association with the idea of a charter of rights, which does not extend to the poor and dispossessed. As the wanderer continues, he encounters others,

‘And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.’

The use of the word ‘mark’ to mean ‘notice’ is balanced by its second use to mean ‘signs’ and what the observer notices is signs of weakness and woe. The weakness can mean physical or moral or both and is combined with ‘woe’ to show a condition of unhappiness and debility in the citizens. The repetition serves to point up the number of marks that are visible.

From using sight to observe, the narrator turns to hearing to record his impressions:

‘In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice; in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear’.

This is the central image of the poem and the central image of the songs of experience. The manacles are chains and handcuffs which prisoners would have to wear and which were also used to prevent slaves from escaping. The image of London’s poor being enslaved by the ‘establishment’ is also an echo of Rousseau’s comment, ‘Man was born free and everywhere he is in chains.’ The description of the manacles as ‘mind-forged’ refers not only to the way in which the poor are oppressed legally, but also to the way in which they are ‘brainwashed’ by the Church into believing that the poverty of their condition is ordained by God and they will enjoy their reward in heaven. It

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is also indicative of the way in which the people acquiesce in this state of affairs, instead of rebelling against their oppressors. The universal nature of this way of thinking is suggested by the repetition of 'every', while the use of 'Man' (meaning Mankind) and 'Infant' further shows that it includes all age groups. The writer also uses the phrase 'in every ban' to bring home the repressive nature of the society in which these people live.

The use of the sense of hearing is continued in the following stanza: we hear the 'Chimney-sweepers cry' and the 'hapless Soldiers sigh'. The chimney sweepers are representative of the abused and enslaved children whose conditions so enraged Blake and the adjective 'blackening' is associated with the child's appearance, but also with the moral state of the church that condones their employment. The soldiers are 'hapless' because they are not in control of what happens to them and the word is also aurally connected with 'hopeless' since, once they are enlisted, they have no hope of becoming free. Young men would have been recruited into the army by officers especially trained to make army life sound attractive and the pay good. Once they had accepted the 'King's shilling' (the reward for joining up) however, the reality was very different and they became 'cannon fodder' in foreign wars, or were used to suppress their fellow citizens at home. This is suggested in their 'sigh' – symbolic of sadness – that is imagined as blood running down the walls of the Palace – the residence of the King in whose name they fought.

Even these terrible sounds are not the worst, however, for the writer continues,

'But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse'

Prostitution was rife in Blake's London, as were the diseases that came with it. Children were sometimes forced into becoming prostitutes through hunger and desperation. Without means of protection, many young girls became pregnant and often died as a result either of dangerous abortion attempts or in childbirth. Even if they and their children survived, the baby could inherit a sexually transmitted disease. The curse of the Harlot is therefore against the men who use her, the State and the Church whose duty is to protect her and the society that allows these things to happen. Her curse takes more physical forms as well in the disease that 'blasts the new-born Infants tear' and also 'blights with plagues the Marriage hearse'. The words 'blight', 'blast' and 'plagues' carry connotations of destruction and death, as does the 'Marriage hearse' which should be an oxymoron but refers to Blake's view of marriage as legalised prostitution, where a woman would be contracted to the highest bidder, often having no say in whom she would marry and being a virtual slave to her husband thereafter. It also carries associations of the diseases that men who have been with prostitutes could take home to their wives.

THE HUMAN ABSTRACT

This is a counterpart to the poem 'The Divine Image' in the *Songs of Innocence*, which undermines the virtues that were seen as divine by recognising that those virtues can only continue to exist, if the conditions that require them also continue to exist. In the paradise on earth that Blake wants to create, there would be no need for them.

'Pity would be no more,
If we did not make somebody Poor'

Without poverty we would not require pity, so the ideal situation is one in which neither poverty nor pity exist: 'And Mercy no more could be, If all were as happy as we'. The same idea applies to mercy – if everyone is healthy and happy, there would be no need for it.

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If the only kind of peace we have is one based on ‘mutual fear’ of each other’s retribution, then true love cannot flourish – only the love of self will grow (‘Till the selfish loves increase’). It is the kind of love proposed by the pebble, ‘Love seeketh only self to please To bind another to its delight ...’ and is rooted in materialism and jealousy. The personification of Cruelty as a trapper lying in wait for his victims (‘knits a snare’) sees the way in which people can be deluded into believing that if they have ‘Mercy, pity, peace and love’ they are fulfilling God’s will, but this is a view from the world of innocence without knowledge of the world of experience and a society whose values are based on material gain and hypocrisy.

The description of the tree in the third stanza shows how intellectualized values like Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love become the breeding-ground for Cruelty. The speaker depicts Cruelty as a conniving and knowing person; in planting a tree, he also lays a trap. His tree flourishes on fear and weeping; Humility is its root, Mystery its foliage; but this growth is not natural; it does not reflect upon the natural state of man. For Blake, the kind of humility preached by the Church is a way of thinking that allows the priests to know best and to suppress the divine imagination of the individual. Mystery is a way of preventing people from finding the truth for themselves, just as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden were forbidden to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

The creatures described in stanza four that prey on living things and destroy them, ‘the Catterpillar and Fly’, are flourishing in the tree of mystery – they are the opposite of imaginative life and of poetic creation. Rather, in stanza five, the tree is associated with ‘Deceit’ and its branches harbour the ‘raven’, the symbol of death. The fruit is depicted as desirable but it associated with hypocrisy and with the ‘mind-forged manacles’ which people use to hide the truth from themselves.

By the end of the poem we realize that the above description has been a glimpse into the human mind, the mental experience. Thus the poem comments on the way abstract reasoning undermines a more natural system of values. The result is a grotesque semblance of the organic, a tree that grows nowhere in nature but lies sequestered secretly in the human brain. People can rationalise their behaviour by following the laws of the state and the rules of the church, but they are deceiving themselves and are opting for spiritual death by denying their natural divinity and their poetic imagination.

INFANT SORROW

In contrast with the joyful infant in *Songs of Innocence*, this infant has had to ‘leap’ into a ‘dangerous world’ amid the groaning and weeping of its parents. Rather than the constructive dialogue between parent and baby that leads to the ‘calling’ of the baby, there is struggle and conflict, ending in a ‘bound and weary’ infant sulking ‘upon my mother’s breast’. As in many of the poems, childhood is a very different experience which depends on the views and wisdom (or lack of it) of parents and other adults. We might guess, as readers, that the infant called Joy will have the kind of childhood depicted in ‘The Echoing Green’, while the un-named infant will be more like the chimney sweepers. There are also echoes of the jealousy that Blake saw in adults for the world of innocence and the view of their child as ‘a fiend hid in a cloud’. This poem has useful connections with ‘A Little Boy Lost’ and other poems where parents abuse or sell their children.

NURSES SONG

This poem acts as a counterpart to the Nurse’s Song in *Songs of Innocence*. Instead of the wise guardian who allows the children’s play to go as long as possible, this nurse tells them ‘Your spring & your day, are wasted in play’, suggesting that she is trying to lead them as quickly as possible into the sleep of experience. Instead of the laughing on the hill that was heard in *Innocence*, we read ‘And whisperings are in the dale’, implying secrecy and deception – ideas appropriate to experience. Rather than having a contented heart at the sound of the children’s play, for this nurse,

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‘The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
My face turns green and pale.’

The jealousy of the adult for the innocence of youth is clear, as is the sexual envy for the pleasures that the young have in store – symbolised in the picture by the vine with grapes around the doorway. The trusting and honest daylight world of childhood innocence is set against the ‘winter’ of experience and the ‘night’ of disguise and falsehood – darkness after all conceals many things and, in Blake’s Songs, is the time when parents and children become separated and lose each other. The poems are connected by the idea of the guardian calling the children home to protect them from ‘the dews of night’, but their attitudes towards the children and their play are very different.

This poem is only half the length of the poem in Innocence although the form and rhythm is the same. The only voice heard here is that of the nurse – the children themselves are silent, unlike the previous poem where they are given a voice and their request is heard. Blake also makes use of two different associations of ‘green’ – the grass where the children play and which also shows their youth and immaturity, and the ‘green and pale’ face of the nurse, where it symbolises jealousy which is focused on the children; thus Blake connects the two sets of connotations.

THE FLY

In this poem Blake considers how even something as small and insignificant as a fly has something in common with humans; it is alive and like the narrator, ‘For I dance And drink & sing’, all activities which the fly does also. But the speaker in the poem also reflects how easy it is to kill something so fragile,

‘Thy summers play
My thoughtless hand
Has brush’d away’.

This leads the poet to reflect on the transience of life whether for insects or for humans, since ‘Some blind hand Shall brush my wing.’ This could be seen as the hand of Fortune, traditionally depicted as a woman who is blindfolded, since she deals with everyone impartially. In Blake’s time, life expectancy was far shorter than it is now, and there were many more incurable diseases, so the hand of fate could fall just unexpectedly on a person as a person’s could on a fly. The narrator then meditates on what it means to be alive or to be dead and concludes

Then am I
A happy fly,
If I live,
Or if I die.’

This is an antithesis to the ‘thoughtless’ hand that killed the fly in stanza one. To be thoughtful ensures that life continues, while not to think may result in death; however, this could be taken further to imply that the ability to think is what makes life worthwhile, while the lack of this ability means that a person is already dead in an important metaphorical sense. Since the speaker is obviously also a thinker, then he can be happy, because to think and reflect makes him alive, and if he loses this faculty, then he may as well be dead.

The short lines and springing rhythm reflects the movements of the fly as it darts about, and also the arbitrary nature of its life and death.

THE ANGEL

The poem begins with the narrator relating a dream and asking about the meaning of it. This poetic device was often used by medieval poets when they wanted to tell a story which had moral or religious significance. The writer here dreams that he was 'a maiden Queen' guarded by an angel, as children in Blake's poems often are. The angel stays by her day and night, while she weeps, wiping away her tears. However, she refuses to share with him her 'heart's delight' – in other words, her love for him – so the angel 'took his wings and fled', leaving her to grieve over her loss.

However she grows hard in the world of experience and she 'arm'd her fears With ten thousand shields and spears', determined never to be made vulnerable by love.

When her angel returns it is too late, for she has grown old and bitter in the war she has waged on her own passions,

'I was arm'd, he came in vain:
For the time of youth was fled
And grey hairs were on my head.'

It is a warning to those who are selfish and refuse to give love and to give themselves freely in love.

This poem fits in well with Blake's ideas about free love and generosity, especially when opposed to selfishness and jealousy. Those who slavishly follow the church's rules about sex and the suppression of passionate feelings will deprive themselves of the warmth and pleasure of real love and will become frozen in the sleep of experience, imprisoned by their own envious fears.

A POISON TREE

This is a poem about the destructive nature of repressed anger and is therefore set in the world of experience, since innocence is essentially connected with honesty and openness, not with repression and deceit. The contrast is shown in the first stanza:

'I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.'

This difference between an open admission of anger, which can safely be done with friends, and the suppression of similar feelings with enemies, perhaps because we are afraid that they will capitalise on it in some way, is clearly stated. The poem then explores what happens if anger turns inwards and becomes obsessive.

In the second stanza, Blake uses a metaphor of the narrator's anger as a plant – in this case a tree – which is nurtured and cared for and so it grows and flourishes. The tree may be compared to that in 'The Human Abstract', but it is also, of course, the tree of forbidden knowledge in the Garden of Eden and the deceitful, smiling writer could be likened to the serpent. The serpent in Genesis was Satan and he used the human trait of curiosity to persuade Eve to take the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The narrator in the poem also uses human psychology to gain his revenge, since his tree of anger and bitterness grows a fruit that appears desirable and, because it belongs to him, he knows his enemy will find it irresistible.

In the fourth stanza, we see that the ruse works: his enemy steals into the garden in the dead of night, when even the pole star was invisible. The action of taking the fruit is assumed by the reader, Blake having used the idea of stealing as the action of entering another's property.

'In the morning glad I see,
My foe outstretchd beneath the tree.'

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The use of the modifier 'glad' to describe the feelings with which the narrator views the death of another human being is shocking and reveals the damage done to the spirit and conscience of someone who allows their repressed anger and hatred to poison themselves, just as its fruit causes the death of its object. The fact that the writer has correctly interpreted the character of his opponent is no excuse for his behaviour, and no consolation for the damage he has done to his own soul.

The narrator in the poem can be equated to the jealous 'father of men' who is associated with repression and prohibition, as Blake sees the God in Genesis who forbids knowledge to Adam and Eve and whose anger bars them from Paradise. By implication, the reader can infer that Jesus, who urged forgiveness of enemies and the overcoming of hate by love, is associated with the telling of anger that releases the spirit from poisonous brooding.

The simplicity of the form, rhythm and rhyme scheme hides a complexity of themes and ideas, just as the narrator's smiling countenance hides his jealous scheming for revenge. Blake once wrote a couplet addressed to his patron, William Hayley, after he had refused him an opportunity to speak his mind:

'Thy friendship oft has made my heart to ache,
Do be my Enemy for Friendship's sake.'

A LITTLE BOY LOST

This poem is rather different in tone from 'The Little Boy Lost' and 'The Little Boy Found' in *Songs of Innocence*. The opening lines appear to be a reference to the words of Jesus when he summarised the commandments. *When asked what was the greatest commandment, Jesus said, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Gospel of Matthew 22:37-41)*

The child insists,

'Nought loves another as itself
Nor venerates another so,
Nor is it possible to Thought
A greater than itself to know'

This would seem, on one level, to be a statement of self-love as the primal feeling alongside the impossibility of the human mind to understand anything beyond its own level of thought. However, if it is read in context with the second stanza, it is possible to see a different level of interpretation.

'And Father, how can I love you,
Or any of my brothers more?
I love you like the little bird
That picks up crumbs around the door.'

This seems to suggest that the child loves all of nature equally, from himself and his family to the birds pecking in the street. The words 'Father' and 'brothers' can also have a religious meaning, i.e. priests are referred to as 'Father' in a spiritual sense, while all people can be seen as 'brothers in Christ'. These meanings are associated with the references to the commandments at the beginning of the poem. However, the priest sees the child's words as heresy (an alternative, and wrong, version of the faith) and his reaction – 'In trembling zeal he siez'd his hair: He led him by his little coat' – is hardly an illustration of 'loving your neighbour'. This is an extreme version of the Church's repression of independent thought. The word 'zeal', which has connotations of fanaticism, is juxtaposed with the image of the child's hair being seized and the impression of violence is continued in the next three stanzas. It is notable that in the world of experience, the

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priest's actions are admired and his parents seem powerless to prevent them. The fourth stanza presents the priest denouncing the child from the high altar of his church: 'Lo what a fiend is here! said he ...' Readers who have encountered Blake's ideas concerning 'reason' and 'mystery' before will have little difficulty in recognising the contrasting nature of the accusations with the innocent and honest views of the child. Reason is the rule of Urizen, the jealous and repressive God of the Old Testament, while mystery is the way in which the ruling elite keeps power since it means no sharing of knowledge, but – on the contrary – keeping people 'in the dark'.

There is no appeal and,

'The weeping child could not be heard,
The weeping parents wept in vain'

The voice of innocence is silenced by martyrdom as the little boy is bound with chains (symbolic of oppression) and is burned at the stake, as many have been before him.

Blake uses contrast in the poem deliberately, not only to show the hypocrisy of an institution that preaches love but does not practise it, but to show the gap in power between the priest who has the establishment and most of the people behind him and the child and his parents who can only weep. He does this by the repetition of 'weeping' and of 'his little coat' and 'his little shirt' emphasising the child's size and helplessness. Blake is showing the destruction of free and innocent thought by the forces of experience. He finishes the poem with a line that is detached in meaning from what has gone before and asks the reader a direct question, 'Are such things done on Albion's shore.' The lack of a question mark might well imply the answer. (Albion was the most ancient name given to England from 'white' and 'mountain' referring to the white cliffs of the South coast.)

A LITTLE GIRL LOST

Blake opens this poem with an address to 'Children of the future Age,' who, presumably will be in a better situation to share his indignation 'that in a former time Love! sweet Love! was thought a crime.' Blake then goes back to an 'Age of Gold'. The Golden Age is a term used for an ancient era when the world was seen to be in a state of perfection – Utopia, Eden and other terms have been applied to it and it exists in nearly all belief systems throughout the world. It is always held to have been ended by some kind of 'fall' or catastrophe. Blake creates an image of this time,

'Free from winters cold:
Youth and maiden bright,
To the holy light,
Naked in the sunny beams delight.'

It is clearly a time of innocence, shown by sunlight, the word 'holy' and the delight in their nakedness (like Adam and Eve before the fall). In the second stanza a 'youthful pair' are shown meeting in a garden at dawn. They are described as being 'fill'd with softest care' while the garden is 'bright' and is bathed in 'holy light' which connects this scene clearly with the golden age of the first stanza. The happiness of their love is associated with its freedom from experience in the stanza that follows.

This innocent and free love is depicted by Blake as being without fear and without guilt and the two lovers agree to meet that evening,

'When the silent sleep
Waves o'er heavens deep;
And the weary tired wanderers weep.'

The final line introduces a jarring note to the poem and reminds the reader of Blake's other lost and weary wanderers. The image suggests a view of straying from the metaphorical path which is

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confirmed in the next stanza, when Ona encounters experience, in the shape of her father. Her father is compared to the white haired God of oppression, his 'loving look' as 'the holy book' that signifies the jealous 'father of men' who envies the freedom of innocence and love. The effect he has on his daughter is that 'All her tender limbs with terror shook.'

The final stanza depicts the previously happy and innocent Ona as 'pale and weak' and the use of phrases like 'trembling fear' and 'dismal care' which present a strong contrast with the light and carefree tone of the first few stanzas. It is the father, despite his professions of love, who produces feelings of guilt and fear in Ona about the feelings she has and the sexual love which before had seemed happy, natural and innocent. Blake thus depicts the destruction of innocent love by jealous experience, leaving Ona crushed and alone.

The form of the poem seems to produce a separate small event in each stanza, with the long last line providing a conclusion in each case.

THE SCHOOL BOY

The poem makes a contrast between the freedom of childhood play outside in the natural world and the repressive nature of the schoolroom. The first stanza relates the pleasure of the child in 'a summer morn' when he is free to play and sing and the image of the birds singing with him suggests that this is the right and natural state of affairs. The distant huntsman who 'winds his horn' is reminiscent of the piper in the Introduction to *Songs of Innocence*, and a figure of poetic inspiration; as the schoolboy narrator comments, 'O! what sweet company.' However, the image in the second stanza is of 'a summer morn' spent in a very different way, 'Under a cruel eye outworn,' the jealous and oppressive gaze of experience that creates 'sighing and dismay' in the children. The idea is reinforced by Blake's use of the line, 'O! it drives all joy away', an ironic echo of the final line of stanza one.

Blake is clear that this kind of 'education' is destructive of true learning, as the child who is shown happily reading in the branches of a tree tells the reader, 'Nor in my book can I take delight, Nor sit in learning's bower', which emphasises the Romantic view that learning should come from Nature and should be through playing and happiness. Blake appears to consider that children who are repressed and unhappy are unlikely to learn very much. He puts it in a succinct question to the reader,

'How can the bird that is born for joy,
Sit in a cage and sing.'

The child who is identified with the birds in stanza one is depicted as caged and imprisoned, as he will 'droop his tender wing' like a bird that is not allowed to fly. The image is that of a mental and spiritual prison, as well as a physical one. The 'droop' of the wing echoes the previous image, 'I drooping sit,' which is a pose of unhappiness and of vulnerability.

The final two stanzas are an appeal by the child to adults to realise that children, like plants, need to be nurtured and given care, if they are to ripen successfully and bear fruit later on. If children are not allowed to have a natural childhood, which is spent in playing freely among the natural things (hills, meadows, lambs, birds, etc.) then they will wither before they can blossom into mature adults. This is a moving plea on behalf of innocence and it reminds the reader of all the children destroyed by experience: the chimney sweeps, the charity children, the little boy martyred, Ona (*A Little Girl Lost*), the harlot and the new-born infant in London, the children around the Nurse in *Experience*, *Infant Sorrow* and so on. The poetic imagination needs freedom in which to flourish and children whose lives are spent in misery and oppression cannot develop their true spiritual and creative personalities.

MY PRETTY ROSE TREE

This poem has at least two possible readings. In one, the flower, 'Such a flower as May never bore' is seen as symbolic of adulterous love. The speaker refuses it, saying, 'I've a pretty rose tree' and he goes back to the rose tree, 'To tend her by day and by night'. However, his rose tree is jealous and turns away from him, giving him only the thorns of envy; thus he loses both the flower and the rose tree because of jealous and possessive love.

In the second reading, the flower is seen as a symbol of the creative imagination, associated with free and genuine love. However the narrator rejects this opportunity, 'And I passed the sweet flower o'er', in favour of the world of experience and imprisonment which is symbolised by the thorns of the rose tree. The plant is now associated with The Sick Rose and with the 'briars' that 'bind my thoughts and desires' in the Garden of Love.

These two readings can be merged as a reading on two levels, especially as the rhythm and rhyme scheme in the poem echo that of The Garden of Love, while the theme of sickness and jealousy echoes the ideas in The Sick Rose.

AH! SUN-FLOWER

The sun-flower is associated with the golden age in this short poem,

'Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the travellers journey is done'.

In the world of the new Eden, to which the sunflower turns its face, youth is finally able to express the love which is natural to it.

'Where the Youth pined away with desire,
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow:
Arise from their graves and aspire,
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.'

The sunflower symbolises the human condition, with its roots firmly imprisoned in the earth while its face is always turned towards the sun.

THE LILLY

The lily is a symbol of pure love, here contrasted with the rose (which represents jealous love or passion) and even the sheep, which possesses 'a threatening horn' with which to keep off intruders. The lily merely grows beautifully. It may be associated with the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Why take ye thought for raiment [clothing]? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.'

The lily stands for those who delight in the poetic imagination and the beauty of creation and are not concerned with keeping others away or jealously defending their possessions. Unlike the other two poems, this is in two rhyming couplets, the first of which associates the rose (with its thorn) and the sheep (with its horn), and the second of which concerns the lily and rhymes its delight in love with its 'beauty bright.'

TO TIRZAH

In some ways this poem foreshadows Blake's great prophetic poems, with their emphasis on the struggle of humanity to break free from tyranny and oppression and to set their creative imagination free. The first stanza is concerned with the necessity for people to die in order for their spirits to be released from their bodies. Anything 'Born of Mortal Birth' has to be 'consumed with the earth' in order to achieve spiritual freedom. It also refers to the necessity for youth to cast off the authority of their parents in order to gain their own identities. This is implied in the quotation from Jesus to his mother, in the Gospel of St. John.

*And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there: And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage. And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine. Jesus saith unto her, **Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come.***

The second stanza seems to be the Christian history of the race – 'sprung from Shame and pride' is a reference to Adam and Eve, the biblical parents of humanity who created the necessity for death. The redemption of the race by Jesus is referred to as 'Mercy changed Death into Sleep', implying the resurrection of the spirit.

The 'Mother of my Mortal part' refers to the birth mother who brings the child into a world full of cruelty, hypocrisy and oppression. Through procreation of the body, she closed 'my Tongue in senseless clay' and betrayed the writer to 'Mortal Life', which can end only in death. However, since the writer's creative spirit is set free through the 'Death of Jesus', which redeemed humanity, he asks how this true self can be connected with her, 'Then what have I to do with thee?'

The name Tirzah is taken from the Song of Solomon, in which the King's beloved is compared to the beautiful city of that name. Tirzah thus symbolises earthly and sexual love, leading to procreation and birth into the sleep of mortality. There is a brief reference to a quotation from St. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians in which he says, 'It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.'

These ideas are expanded by Blake in a later work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, especially when he depicts the body as 'the cave of the senses', a prison in which the only chinks of light and creativity come through the five senses:

If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to Man as it is, infinite. For Man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

The form, rhyme scheme and metre of the poem are reminiscent of a hymn.

THE LITTLE VAGABOND

Blake's view of organised religion as cold and repressive is here put into the mouth of a little boy, who speaks from the viewpoint of innocence. The child sees only that the church is cold and unfeeling, while the ale-house is warm and welcoming. He relates places only to himself,

'Besides I can tell where I am used well.
Such usage in heaven will never do well.'

In his childish honesty he questions why the church doesn't become like the ale-house, since

'We'd sing and we'd pray all the live-long day:
Nor ever wish once from the church to stray.'

Songs of Experience by William Blake

The image of the parson who 'might preach & drink & sing' is an amusing and rather unlikely one, although obviously preferable to Dame Lurch and her school, where the children's limbs are bent from being cramped at their desks and where they are beaten and deprived of food in the name of religious fasting. The fact she is 'always at church' implies Blake's opinion of those people who thought regular church-going excused any cruel and thoughtless behaviour the rest of the time.

Unlike the jealous and prohibitive God promulgated by the churches, the child imagines him as a loving father, 'rejoicing to see, His children as pleasant and happy as he'. His naïve point of view sees the devil (in the form of alcohol) reconciled with God in a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Blake, of course, was well aware of the social evils caused by excessive drinking, but he allows the child's rather subversive narration to create the contrast between the warmth and humanity of the ale-house (generally regarded as an undesirable location by religious people) with the cold inhumanity of the church (normally regarded as a good location by society).

By setting up these oppositions, Blake is making the reader consider 'the contrary states of the human soul' and he reinforces his theme by using a rhythm and rhyme scheme appropriate to a drinking song.

THE VOICE OF THE ANCIENT BARD

In the final poem of the collection, Blake gives the reader a strange poem with an odd number of lines and a first line that does not rhyme with any others, although it is a call to youth: 'Youth of delight come hither,' which could be associated with Blake's own call, 'Rouze up Young men of the new age', a call to revolution. Here the youths are requested to observe the sunrise, the opening of a new day which he calls an 'image of truth new born.' This is a state of total innocence, for the newly born has had no time to acquire any experience. There may also be a reference to the idea of God's light coming from the East.

The next few lines refer to the world of experience through which all must travel, and it is seen as an uncomfortable and dangerous journey that portrays – amongst other images – Folly as 'an endless maze' with 'Tangled roots'. The doubts, the reasoning that obscures poetic imagination, the arguments and annoyances that hinder the children as they leave their innocence behind, all contribute to the hazards of the pathway to becoming truly creative and spiritual beings. There is a warning that many will not make it, but will remain trapped in the death-like sleep of experience.

'They stumble all night over bones of the dead:
And feel they know not what but care'.

The happiness of carefree innocence has given way to the cares and anxieties of experience. The stumbling is due to the loss of honesty which children possess, but adults gradually cover with lies and hypocrisy. Those who fall have accepted the mind-forged manacles that kill poetic imagination, and they become trapped by materialism. Those who need advice and guidance themselves are trying to lead those who are just entering the world of experience, 'And wish to lead others when they should be led.' What they lack is the leadership of wisdom, symbolised in the ancient bard, who has safely negotiated the treacherous path of experience and can show them its pitfalls. Blake wrote in his manuscript of *The Four Zoas* that 'Wisdom dwells with innocence, but never with ignorance.' The naïve honesty and openness of childhood is similar to the honesty and creative voice of wisdom, whereas the area between the two is uncertain and possibly destructive.

The form of the poem represents the content, starting with the call to youth to awaken to a new age, then a rhythmic four lines suggesting innocence, which is troubled by a half-rhyme on 'reason/teazing' and comes to a stop on those who have fallen. The rhyme scheme changes in the final four lines and the halting rhythm suggests those who are stumbling and searching for the path.

A LIST OF USEFUL WEB SITES

<http://www.multimedialibrary.com/Articles/kazin/alfredblake.asp>
<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=1949>
<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=2004>
<http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw13.html>
<http://www.english.uga.edu/~wblake/SONGS/begin/begin1.html>
<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/blake/>
<http://virtual.park.uga.edu/~wblake/SIE/42/42borowsky.bib.html>
<http://prometheus.cc.emory.edu/panels/1c/randonis.html>
<http://www.bartleby.com/221/0908.html>
<http://www.blakearchive.org/>
<http://english.ucsb.edu:591/rchrono/>
<http://www.wwnorton.com/nael/romantic/welcome.htm>
<http://thecriticalpoet.tripod.com/romantic.html>
<http://vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=2788>
<http://www.dreamhawk.com/bandw.htm>
<http://www.newi.ac.uk/rdoover/blake/notesinn.htm>
<http://homepages.strath.ac.uk/~chcs05/childrenlit/romanticism.html>
<http://www.keithsagar.co.uk/Blake/index.html>
<http://personal.centenary.edu/~lgame/Multimedia/Blake.html>
http://www.tate.org.uk/learning/learnonline/blakeinteractive/gothic/life_01.html
http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=1216495
<http://www.literatureclassics.com/essays/631/>
<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/dec2000/blak-d01.shtml>
<http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/blake/>
<http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/poetry/blake.htm>
<http://hometown.aol.co.uk/jjawando/Start.html>
<http://cobalt.golden.net/~fucw/sermons/Blake.html>

History pages

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/IRchild.htm>
<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/PRgeorgeIII.htm>
<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/PRpitt.htm>
<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/REVhistoryIR2.htm>
<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/REantislavery.htm>
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/swe/gos.htm>
<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/18th/>
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history>

PAST QUESTIONS ON BLAKE SONGS – AQA Specification A

Songs of Innocence and of Experience – William Blake

JAN 2002

17 How does Blake convey his thoughts and feelings about the treatment of the children of the poor in the England of his day? In your answer, **either** make detailed use of **one or two** of his poems **or** range widely across the *Songs*.

18 How successfully has Blake in his *Songs* satirised what he saw as the injustices of English society towards the end of the eighteenth century?

JUNE 2002

17 Blake wrote an introduction to his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* which he did not include in his published work:

*The Good are attracted by Man's perceptions,
And think not about themselves;
Till Experience teaches them to catch
And to cage the Fairies and the Elves.*

*And then the Knave begins to snarl
And the Hypocrite to howl;
And all his good Friends show their private ends,
And the Eagle is known from the Owl.*

How are these lines typical of Blake's view of life at the end of the eighteenth century? You may range where you wish throughout the *Songs* or concentrate on two or three of them in your answer.

OR

18 How does Blake seek to influence the feelings of his readers for the victims of a society which he believed was based on fear and repression rather than on the brotherhood of man?

JAN 2003

17 How do Blake's *Songs* reflect the period of political and social change through which he lived? How effectively does he use language and form to convey his views about these changes?

OR

18 What influence did Blake's interest in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible have on his *Songs*?

JUNE 2003

17 Rousseau, whose writings Blake studied, argued that one of the principles that motivated human beings was a revulsion at seeing fellow human beings suffer and die. How far do Blake's *Songs* reflect this view of Rousseau in their themes and language?

OR

Songs of Innocence and Experience by William Blake

18 A contemporary who knew Blake described him as eccentric and wild, but not mad. How far do Blake's *Songs* confirm this view?

JAN 2004

17 A French Romantic poet stated: "Romantic poetry springs from our agony and our despair." Referring to relevant *Songs*, show how far this is true of Blake's poetry.

OR

18 To what extent is it true that Blake's revolutionary vision dominates his *Songs*?

JUNE 2004

17 Illustrate from Blake's *Songs* the ways the poet shows that the people of his time were alienated from their natural selves and from society by political, economic and religious repression.

OR

18 Show how Blake in his *Songs* displays his indignation about the brain-washing and exploitation of children by people in power.

JAN 2005

21 How does Blake present his views in the *Songs* on relationships between parents and children?

OR

22 How does Blake in his *Songs* present his vision of paradise on earth?