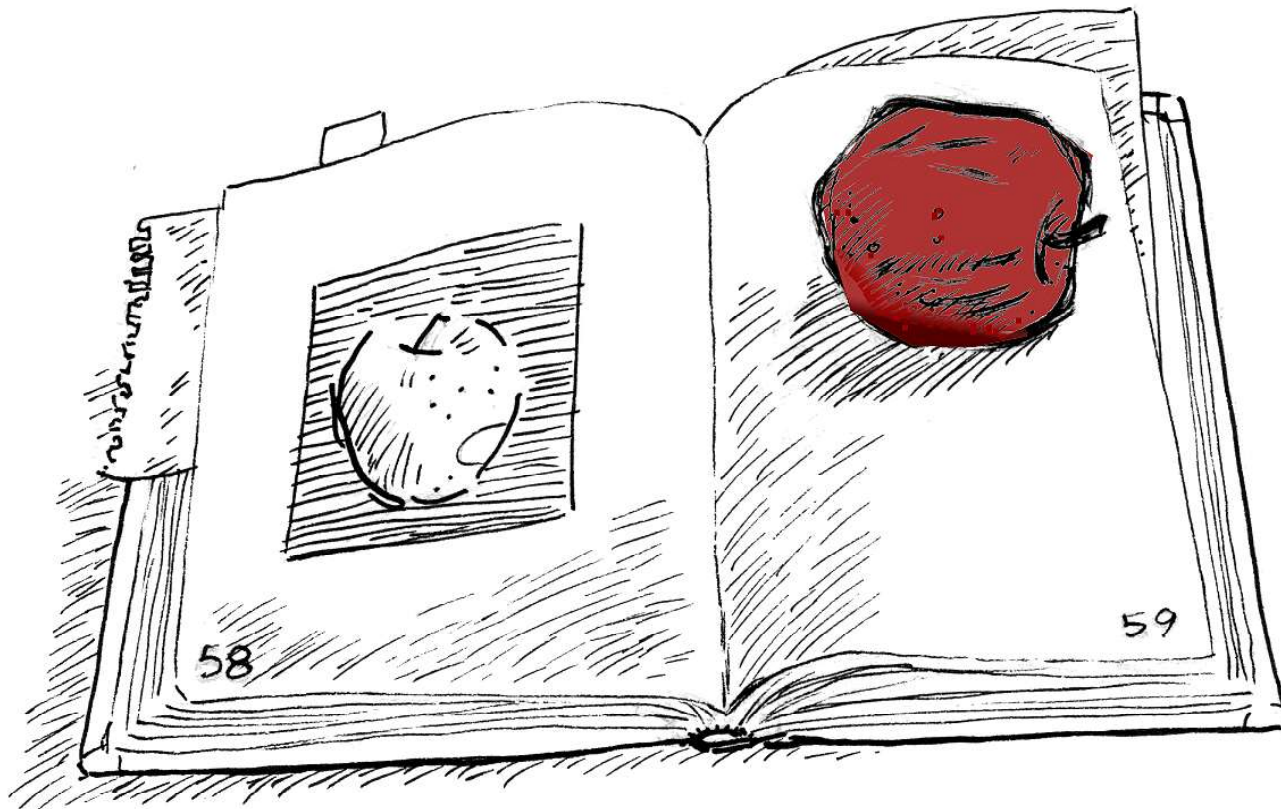


William Blake



Innocence or Experience

William Blake — (28 November 1757 – 12 August 1827)

His poetry and lifestyle are similar to Emily Dickinson due to:

- most known for his shorter verses which are composed of similar meter and regularized rhyme schemes; he prefers near-perfect rhymes, *whereas* Dickinson would opt to use slant rhymes
- largely unknown during his lifetime
- very eclectic and very eccentric ideas; possible mercury poisoning increased his eccentric behavior; unknown causes for possible mental trauma
- obsessed with finding true meaning in God,

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His beliefs are somewhat unexpected:

- had a dislike for the noble classes; felt restricted by the State; supporter of the American Revolution and the beginning days of the French Revolution, until it turned into a violent, bloody anarchy
- discouraged by Church of England; it remained close to the Church of Rome
- he experienced religious visions which he turned into poems or prints
- left behind self-published/illustrated prints and volumes of work.
- composed many political-protest poems; for example “London,”
 - > acts as a poem of witness or experience
 - > the persona walking metaphorically through London and discussing the various issues he sees

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Self published numerous works, notably:

Songs of Innocence (1789)

Songs of Experience (1794) a follow-up to the previous publication

> He later printed them together as one piece.

The titles of Innocence and experience:

- refers to the transition from one state of development to the other
- describes the notion of maturity or personal growth

A popular concept of his era was a proposal, suggested by John Locke, called empiricism. Locke theorizes that children gain knowledge through their various experiences. In the beginning they are merely blank slates, or a blank sheet of paper. Formally this is referred to as a *tabula rasa* which dates back to Aristotle.

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What is essential for this process to work effectively, one must be in-tune with one's senses; the basic senses and awareness of environment increases notions of knowledge and moves an individual closer to becoming a functioning adult in society.

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In Blake's particular case, his verses composed for the stage of innocence tend to have optimistic tones, even when they hint at themes of oppression or suggest atmospheres and scenes of neglect or dilapidation.

Yet, even here, in these seemingly positive tones—Blake is criticizing the current “moral” thinkers of his day.

Society should remain in a state of innocence like Adam and Eve before the Fall.

Critic Heather Glen notes that both books (*Songs of Innocence*, —*Experience*) address issues of morality, and that the construction of the poems follow typical “moral poems” written for children of the 18th century.

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However, Blake is a complex character.

- many of these songs are “social protests” against what Blake considered sins against humanity and against his personal interpretation of God’s laws
- the poems can show a multi-faceted theme and can mislead the reader
- like the haiku tradition, these verses contain a moment of reflection, the reader needs to pause and seek out a lesson to gain from the phrasing

These were all constructed to reach the increasing, struggling middle-class.

In his audience were people who would react to the concerns of orphaned children and the lack of child labor laws. Much the same manner the novelist Charles Dickinson would attempt to increase a sense of humanitarianism in his stories *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol*.

Innocence or Experience

This was a period of revolution—in all definitions of the word.

- Blake wrote both volumes after the American Revolution
- the Revolution proved how a cluster of “average” citizens could shake off the regulations of a smaller island nation which was composed of an elite upper-class system of land ownership and land-titles

After the war, England itself was debating the necessity of a Royal Family.

- Europe was becoming a powder keg of possible revolt.
- The French Revolution was underway. It looked as if France was heading towards a positive direction of creating a model of an European utopia.
- Radical liberal theories were being tested: Freedom of speech and freedom of the press were issues of constant discussion in the legal *and* public arenas.

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- Restriction of free thought was an on-going debate due to the news arriving out of France
- The French Revolution caused the British government to set in place restrictive censorship laws in order to prevent the working classes to raise up against the ruling class.
- Economic times were severe due to their loss in the American Revolution.
- Children were often used as labor.

This itself was a national scandal: the plight of the young chimney sweepers were often used as symbol of the increasing population of the poor.

Innocence or Experience

Blake viewed himself as a new Hebrew Prophet

- Blake felt that both the State *and* the Church were to blame for the recent developments of economic hardships—this is one of Blake’s major complaints: the state driven church is controlled by the ruling class and the priests are brainwashing the citizens into following the system—at their own peril. Commercial means are choking the city with their charters and industries. The church refuses to help the poor and is just as money-driven as the state ruled government.
- He uses London as a symbol which represents the vile atrocities of England and Europe.
- Blake is suggesting as well that London is suffering from a backlash of the Industrial Revolution; ironically, this same movement would continue for two centuries and later spiral America into an economic boom.

Innocence or Experience

- In Europe however, the Industrial Revolution caused social transformations: villages and smaller communities were slowly erased for the good of the economic possibilities of warehouses and factory mills.
- Farming communities were failing.

Keep this in mind when reading the poem: “The Chimney Sweeper”
(from *Songs of Innocence*).

Innocence or Experience

Chimney sweepers:

- Usually orphans, small boys under 10, children small enough to climb into narrow areas of chimneys to clean out built up soot and debris. Mortality rate was high for these children, all were victims of a lower class structure.
- Likewise orphans and illegitimate “bastard” children could be sold into a factory situation for as much as 20 or 30 shillings for a service of seven years, if they survived that long.

To convert this into modern decimal based systems of finances:

one shilling (or bob) is 5 pennies / half a crown is 12.5 pennies

one quinea is a pound or dollar

30 shillings equals \$1.50 — or 150 pennies

Innocence or Experience

“The Chimney Sweeper” (from *Songs of Innocence*)

- This version does contain dualistic tendencies:
the child-speaker is innocent of knowing the true implications of his status as an outcast-chimney sweeper.
- The narrator presents a story of other boys like himself.
- They have a common working bond.
- The children must nurture each other without a caring-adult supervisor.
- Despite this, the personae has a strong “pollyana” view of the world.
Blake is intending this verse to serve as the same logic of fairy tales:
virtue will be rewarded if you wait long enough.
- At least at your death you have a heavenly reward waiting for you.
- See essay from *Break, Blow, Burn* by Camille Paglia.

Innocence or Experience

- Obvious dark symbolisms exist within the text: coffins=chimney.
- Uses off-rhymes: dark/work, warm/harm : put the reader slightly off-balance promote a mood of disharmony.
- Line 20 uses the phrase “never *want* joy” which in British/English means: Never *lack* joy. In other words, you never want it because you already have it. Joy exists in abundance around you.
- Notice the closure: the optimistic innocent children rush to work, heading back to the oppression and dangers of experience. They rise in the dark and cold morning, not into images of their dreams.
- The closing line: So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm”— Blake shows the reader a personae resigned to his station in life to make us react, so we should want to fix the situation.
- Notice in this case the rhymes are set in couplets: AA BB.

Innocence or Experience

Both *Innocence* and *Experience* poems have similar constructions and format of verse:

- terse lines
- strong recognizable rhyme schemes
- heavily influenced by lyrical formulas from nursery rhymes or common ballads
- a majority of the stanzas are set as quatrains in each section

Innocence or Experience

The second version of the poem appears in the *Song of Experience*.

- These were written in midst of the French Revolution when Blake changed his position in the war, withdrawing support from the uprising.
- The poems here are the reverse of *Innocence*—that is, they have a more pessimistic bent, more prone to show overt depression and despair; these tend to openly question if God is punishing us.
- The themes are somewhat similar to *Songs of Innocence*, but show a shadowy, darker view of the world. Sickness, death, and other images of mortality are shown here, whereas *Innocence* concentrates on ideas of immortality—*somewhat* based on a utopian concept or on the need for one to be created.
- *Experience* shows how a utopia cannot work. The characters here are no longer innocent, they speak from past dramatic events.

Innocence or Experience

A good example, Blake composed a second poem with the same title “The Chimney Sweeper.”

- Notice the heavier pessimistic tone.
- The parents are praying in a church of industry sanctioned by Priests and King.
- This character is experienced enough to fake happiness; whereas his parents are delusional, praying to the Anglican God, unaware of their child’s condition, nor aware of what the Church and State are doing to them.
- The images he drew up for both also are different in theme; the *Innocence* version shows a group of boys playing in a idyllic landscape, in a private garden of trees and grass, within a dream utopia.
- The *Experience* version shows a lone, small figure wandering barefoot in London streets with rain falling, gloomy conditions.