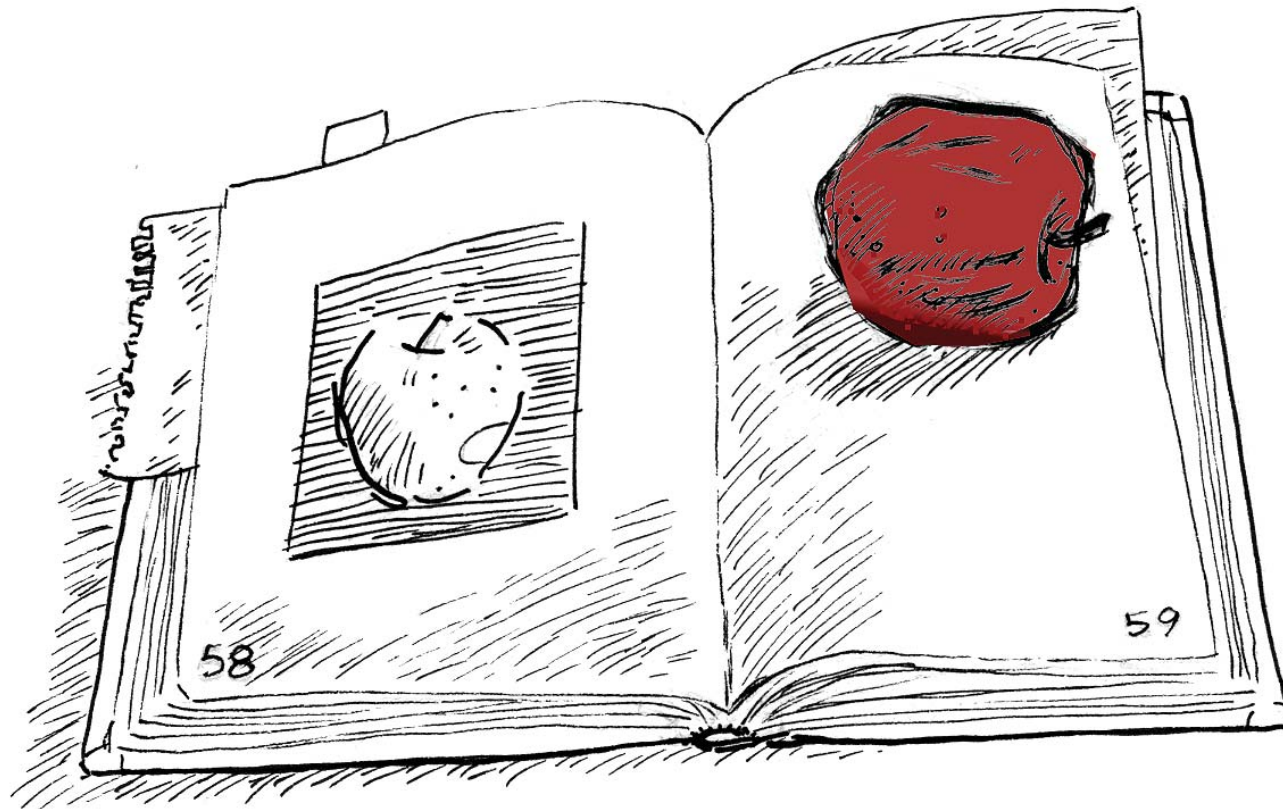


# William Blake

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# *Innocence or Experience*

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**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 the Bible, *whereas* Dickinson seems to want to find true meaning in God

# *Innocence or Experience*

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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 too close to Church of Rome
- he experienced religious visions which he turned into poems or prints
- left behind self published, self illustrated prints and volumes of work.

# *Innocence or Experience*

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**Left behind many reactionary verses which take on multiple causes.**

His commentary is not limited to political or religious change.

Sometimes his concerns lie in improving the morality of the average citizen.

- Read “The Sick Rose” —supplemental.

*What are your first reactions to the poem?*

# *Innocence or Experience*

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“The Sick Rose” tackles the subject of a sexual union utilizing both phallic and yonic symbols.

# *Innocence or Experience*

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## ***Items to consider:***

- Does he portray an expressionistic scene or realistic?
- Is the union portrayed as a scene of compassion?
- Why is the worm 'invisible'?
- Why is the rose 'sick'?

# *Innocence or Experience*

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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.

# *Innocence or Experience*

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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.

- Compare the concept illustrated in Richard Wright's protagonist Dave in "A Man Who Was Almost a Man" — you are shown a character stuck without experience and thus cannot mature to adulthood experience. He is lost in a naive stage of innocence.
- Or like the Grimm Brothers collected story of "The Goose Girl" where the main character symbolically represses her maturity in a state of innocence, remaining as a lowly working class goose girl, due to lack of experience with dealings of the world.

# *Innocence or Experience*

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**In Blake's particular case**, his verses which are 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.

# *Innocence or Experience*

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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 Dickens would attempt to increase a sense of humanitarianism in his stories *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol*.

# *Innocence or Experience*

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**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 Revolutionary 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.

# *Innocence or Experience*

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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 rise up against the ruling class.
- Economic times were severe due to England's 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*

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## **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 choke the city with 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*

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- 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*

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## **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 system 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*

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“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*

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- 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 persona 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*

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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*

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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 French 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*

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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.

# *Innocence or Experience*

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- He composed many political-protest poems which act as **poems of witness**—for example “London,” in the text page 1020, follows the proper format for these types of protest works:
  - > takes the reader on a short journey through London alongside the persona who walks metaphorically through London and discusses various issues
  - > the persona is shown existing in the environment which he rebels against
  - > he likewise acknowledges various types of people
  - > in turn, the reader translates London’s problems to encompass the world’s
  - > the narrator is shown as an isolated figure, in the background, as a non-participatory character; he *witnesses*— but does not *act* directly
  - > the reader is therefore expected to be an agent of change and reform
  - > acts as a critique of the mainstream culture