

The Poetic Vision of William Blake's "Songs of Innocence" and "Of Experience"

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA

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The Poetic Vision of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*

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Literature and German Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to bring forth and explore the poetic vision of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *of Experience*. More specifically, the primary focus of this paper will be on portraying William Blake as an artist whose works are poetically complex and need to be read in accordance with his illustrations, because they function as a whole. The paper will also give an introduction into the Romantic period, exploring its most important representatives, as well as their beliefs, along with the key elements, such as the common man, imagination and nature, that shaped this literary and artistic movement. Furthermore, the paper will shed light on Blake's ideas on imagination being superior to reason and how it is a fundamental aspect of the human nature. William Blake is today considered one of the greatest poets and artist of all time, his visions and vivid imagination enabled him to become the creator of his own world of poetry and visual arts, which was heavily influenced by his religious and spiritual beliefs.

Key words: William Blake, *Songs of Innocence*, *Songs of Experience*, poetic vision, Romanticism, poetry

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Introduction

*“To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.” - William Blake*

The aim of this paper is to portray William Blake as an artist that inspired many people to broaden their limited way of understanding, which could be seen as a life without the use of imagination, where people only believe what they see and what they are told, to an unlimited way. Such way of thinking enables people to visualize and create things that are by many thought as impossible, as well as to create their own world, just as Blake did. Furthermore, to show the true duality of human nature that begins once we enter into the world of experience. In the world of innocence, people are considered to be naïve, however, it is experience that guides and shapes us later in life.

This paper will first deal with the introduction to the age of Romanticism, more specifically, when the period started, how it got its name, and what years were most relevant. As well as mentioning the most important occurrences that influenced the representatives into rejecting the views and beliefs of the Age of Enlightenment, while creating a new period. A biographical introduction to the life and work of William Blake will be given, to portray him as not only a poet but also an engraver, painter, and illustrator. The paper will also talk about his childhood and the events in his life that formed his views and beliefs. Furthermore, the paper will give an introduction to Blake's most famous collection of poems, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, after dividing it into two sections, the timelines will be set and the most important aspects will be mentioned. An important aspect, which is Blake's concept of the “Real Man Imagination” will be brought forward, as to illuminate what kind of views and beliefs he had, and altogether how these views had influence on his artistic work.

A group of selected poems from the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience: The Lamb, The Tyger, The Divine Image*, and *The Human Abstract*, which deal with the notion of creation will be

analyzed. Additionally, the idea of human nature in connection to Blake's spirituality will be brought forward and examined.

1. The Age of the Romanticism Aesthetic

Romanticism was considered to be a significant artistic and intellectual movement that emphasized the common man, the power of imagination, free expression of emotion and the beauty, and love of nature. In the year 1798 the word “romantic” came down to the Schlegel circle in Jena and its meaning was defined as literature that is distinguished from “classic”, in this case, Greek and Latin. Over the years, it became practically synonymous with the words “modern” and “Christian” in the Schlegel circle. However, the etymology, and all together, the use of the term as a description of a literature period has some interesting facts. According to Feber in his book *A Companion To European Romanticism*, the word *romantic* derives from the city of Rome, “*Roma*”. An interesting fact thus is, that the ruins of Rome were a frequent theme of the writers and artists we today call romanticists, such as Wilhelm Schlegel’s “*Rom: Elegie*” (1805), Stae’l’s *Corinne* (1807), Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Canto 4* (1812), Lamartine’s “*La Liberte´ ou une nuit a` Rome*” (Feber, 1).

In the later years, there has been a great deal of discussions as if to keep the name *Romanticism*, because the name itself has constantly been redefined and criticized, or to find another term that would suit the period and the creators better. It came to the point that A.O. Lovejoy in his work *On the Discrimination of Romanticism* stated how the term, in fact, has no reference at all and how it had so many meanings that it eventually lost the function of a verbal sign (Feber, 3).

After examining the etymology of the word, it is vital to further introduce the period and its most important creators. According to Abrams, the Romantic period roughly began in the year 1785, which is also marked by the death of the English writer Samuel Johnson and the year when poets such as Blake and Smith published one of their first poems. The period was rather short, however, it was extremely fruitful in several different aspects, and it only lasted until the 1830es. The period could also be understood as some sort of rejection of *Classicism* and *Neoclassicism*, or in other words, its characteristics such as harmony, idealization, and rationality. It was a period that Abrams describes as “turbulent” because England changed from an agricultural society to a modern industrial nation. The population of England was polarized into two distinct classes, the rich and the poor. Abrams picturesquely describes the lower class, particularly children having to drag heavy coal sledges, and compares it to scenes from Dante's *Inferno*. The writers of that time

found this period to be extremely inspiring, which led to some of them calling it “the spirit of the age”. They saw this period as some sort of revolution that enabled humans to start history all over again. Some of the writers even reconsidered apocalyptic transformation, shifting it from the external to the internal, and seeing it as a part of the consciousness of an individual. “An apocalypse of the imagination could liberate the individual from time, from what Blake called the ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ of imprisoning orthodoxies and from what Percy Bysshe Shelley called ‘the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions’” (Abrams, 7).

It was a period that greatly differed from the neoclassical period, where royalty was considered to be supreme and their ideas and deeds were not supposed to be questioned. Because of that, there is also a major shift in themes from the neoclassical period. The quiet village life became the dream, poets are now leaving behind the so-called idealization of the city, they now have a preference for the rural, simple life.

It is important to mention that two significant events occurred in this period, the first one being the American War of Independence in the year 1773. It was a war for the freedom and rights of the common people which in other words, could be considered as the first war for democracy. The second event was the French Revolution in 1789 which could be also considered as the war of the common man. Along with Wordsworth, Coleridge and a number of other radical English theologians, Blake was "an ardent supporter of the French Revolution". They saw the Revolution as “the purifying violence that, according to biblical prophecy, portended the imminent redemption of humanity and the world” (Abrams, 78).

The poets of that time, as in any other artistic and intellectual movement, had different ideas and interests, however, because they lived during the same period, there still was something that they had in common such as the conditions and experiences of life, which led them to forming groups of individuals or in other words schools. The most important work that marked the beginning of this period is Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* from 1798. The writers of the Romantic period did not think of themselves as Romantic. Some of the writers were classified into a number of distinct schools, such as “the “*Lake School*” of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Robert Southey; the *Cockney School*, a derogatory term for the Londoners Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt,

and associated writers, including Keats; and the *Satanic School* of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Byron, and their followers” (Abrams, 6).

2. William Blake the Artist

William Blake, the greatest English visionary of Romanticism, was not only a poet and an artist but he was also predominantly an engraver. He was born on November 28 1757 to James Blake and Catherine Hermitage. His father James was a hosier and he married his mother Catherine in the Church of England Chapel of St. George located in Hanover Square in the year 1752. This was the second marriage to his mother Catherine, because her prior husband, who had also been a hosier, died. William Blake was the third child in the family, all together he had six siblings, but two of them died in infancy. His parents raised him and his siblings in the Dissenting tradition. "Like most Dissenters, they believed that all truth lies in the Bible and that the proper interpreter of that truth is the individual conscience, not the priest or the church" (Bentley,7). The term that was used in the 18th century for extreme Dissent was Enthusiasm and it is known that Blake identified himself as an "Enthusiastic hope-fostered visionary". (Bentley, 8). He was always reading the Bible and thought of it as the book of liberty. Blake read and understood the Bible in a different way, a way that the Church would probably declare as heresy. "He asserted that "he did not believe in the omnipotence of God", "and he believed that Christ is the only God... "And so am I and so are you" (Bentley, 9).

Blake did not go to school, the only schooling he had was his mother's knee, which he thought of as rather a positive thing because he disliked school: "Thank God I never was sent to school/ To be Flog'd into following the Stile of a Fool" ("William Blake | Biography, Poems, Art, Characteristics, and Facts").

He started experiencing visions from an early age, such as seeing God's face in a window and seeing the Prophet Ezekiel under a tree, as well as a tree filled with angels. His parents did not believe him and they tried to discourage him from lying and they thought of him as much more different than his peers. It is the visions that shaped him as the most astonishing poet of early Romanticism (Bentley, 19). He also showed great passion and interest for art creating art. Although his father wanted him to become a hosier like him and to keep the family business, Blake had other plans. His father thus allowed him to enroll in Henry Pars' drawing school (Bentley, 22). Two years later, Blake expanded his artistic abilities and started writing poetry.

In 1772 Blake was trained to become an engraver by an engraver himself, James Basire. After the end of his apprenticeship with Basire, Blake enrolled at the Royal Academy in London. He made a living for the majority of his life by engraving illustrations for the illustrations of other writers (Gibson, 11).

In the year 1782, at the age of twenty-four, he got married to Catherine Boucher who was illiterate. Blake taught her how to read and write and she also helped him with his painting and engraving. Although the couple were together for a long time, they did not have any children (Christ et al., 76). During that period, Blake started to connect with "a circle of London intellectuals" (Bloom, *Bloom's Major Poets*, 13) which included "Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, sculptor and draftsman John Flaxman, William Godwin, Rev. Anthony S., and Harriet Mathew (through Flaxman), and painters Thomas Stothard and Henri Fuseli" (Bloom, *Bloom's Major Poets*, 13). Blake and his wife had a low income all their life, and subsequently died in poverty, which disabled Blake to publish his own books at his own expense. That is why Bentley, in his book *Stranger from Paradise*, describes Blake as "a poet without a publisher, an artist without a patron" (Bentley, 100). However, Harriet Mathew and John Flaxman supported William Blake financially by helping him fund the publication of 50 copies of *Poetical Sketches*, which was printed in the year 1783. However, the collection was never published for the public, instead, Blake gave the copies to his acquaintances and other people that were interested in his work.

Poetical Sketches is Blake's first collection of poems, which comprises of poems he wrote from the years 1769 to 1778. The title *Poetical Sketches* connects both verbal and visual art, which is soon to become Blake's way of expressing himself as an artist (Eaves, 68). Blake's first collection of poems shows us that he attempted pastoral and satire at the very beginning of his writing career, these literary forms are also being seen in some other of his poems and collections, such as for example, *Songs of Innocence*, which is "Blake's closest approach to pure pastoral, but an even subtler form of satire seems to be inherent in these famous visions of a childhood world" (Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse*, 36). *Poetical Sketches* consists of 19 lyric poems, a dramatic fragment, two prologues, a ballad, and three prose poems. It starts with four landscape lyric poems addressed to the four seasons of the year. Although the poems are arranged in stanzas, they are unrhymed, which indicates that Blake might have been inspired by James Thomson's *The Seasons*, which is a descriptive poem written in blank verse. The four poems are being followed by two brief

invocations, *To the Evening Star* and *To Morning*, both of the poems show how Blake as a young artist was influenced by Spenser, in particular his *Epithalamion* (Bloom, *Bloom's Apocalypse*, 17).

Around the year 1789 Blake experienced a prolific literary period, in which he produced one of his most significant works which are: *Songs of Innocence* (1789), *The Book of Thel* (1789), *Tiriel* (1789), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (early 1790s), and *Songs of Experience* (1794).

Blake was a determined seeker of spiritual truth, he knew that it could be found almost anywhere including in hymns, great literature, philosophy, and volumes of theological speculation (Bentley, 126). Blake attempted to create his own mythology in the works of his later, or in other words mature poetry, which is far more complex than his earlier poetry, and with that Blake wanted to challenge his readers.

His first mythological narrative *Tiriel*, which was published around the year 1789, came "to be known as Prophecies, after the titles of *America A Prophecy* (1793) and *Europe A Prophecy* (1974)" (Bentley, 130). He did not intend "prophecy" to mean a prediction of future, furthermore, as Bentley states "Blake's Prophecies are the poems or visions of seers" (Bentley, 130). William Blake primarily uses the prophetic methods of "contradiction, vision, and imagination to express his prophecy" (Shen, et al. 2).

Blake's most significant prophetic works would probably be *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The book opens and closes with poetry, while "proverbs, short descriptive narratives, observations, arguments, and parodies" make up the majority of the text, which also includes some of Blake's vibrantly colored illustrations (Ackroyd, 150). In this work, Blake criticizes and challenges Christian beliefs while citing Roman and Greek Mythology, as well as the work of Milton, in order to support his arguments (Bloom, *Bloom's Poets*, 103). Abrams in his book *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, describes *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as "a vigorous, deliberately outrageous, and at times comic onslaught against timidly conventional and self-righteous members of society as well as against stock opinions of orthodox Christian piety and morality (110). In other words, it is a complex and provocative work that is challenging concepts of conventional religion as well as moral concepts.

Another one of his important mystical poems is his epic poem, *Milton*. The poem tells the story of how the spirit of a well-celebrated English author and poet, John Milton, who was also the author

of the famous epic poem *Paradise Lost*, “returns to the world to teach men the true gospel about art and gospel that does not wholly agree with what the world had that he had taught in his writing” (Pierce, 1). In other words, *Milton* is concerned with Blake's effort to "correct the ideas of *Paradise Lost*" at Milton's request.

Jerusalem, an epic poem, is another one of Blake's most famous works, even Blake himself considered it his greatest work. The poem was thought to be finished in the year 1804 and it is “highly repetitious in its imagery and actions” (Morris, 251). It is important to mention that both *Milton* and *Jerusalem* are similar, in fact, “the same symbolism runs through both poems, and the same method” (Frye, 356). The poem consists of four stanzas, which correspond to the following four acts: “a fall, the struggle of men in a fallen world which is what we usually think of as history, the world's redemption by divine man in which eternal life and death achieve a simultaneous triumph and an apocalypse” (Frye, 357).

Blake and his wife lived in London until his death on 12 August 1827. Even though Blake's health was deteriorating in his final years, his unceasing artistic productivity and dedication to his artistic endeavors were also evident. Blake never lost his passion or creativity. He passed away on August 12, 1827, when he was 69 years old, unfortunately, he was unrecognized as an artist during his lifetime. But after his death, his legacy grew, and successive generations began to largely appreciate and admire what Blake had created.

3. The Poetic Code of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*

Songs of Innocence and of Experience is a collection of poems and illustrations that is today perceived as a masterpiece of both written and drawn art, which is intertwined and does not function in the same way without the other. It is hard to clearly pinpoint the year in which this collection of poems was created, because: "It is a work which underwent many large mutations over a long period of time, and whose successive forms are related to different stages in Blake's personal, ideological and artistic development" (Lindsay, 14). Nevertheless, it is known that the collection was made complete in the year 1794, when Blake published *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. According to Gillham, the idea behind the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* was to create a cohesive whole that would explore "possible states of being and feeling in which spiritual energy expresses itself" (Bottrall, 22).

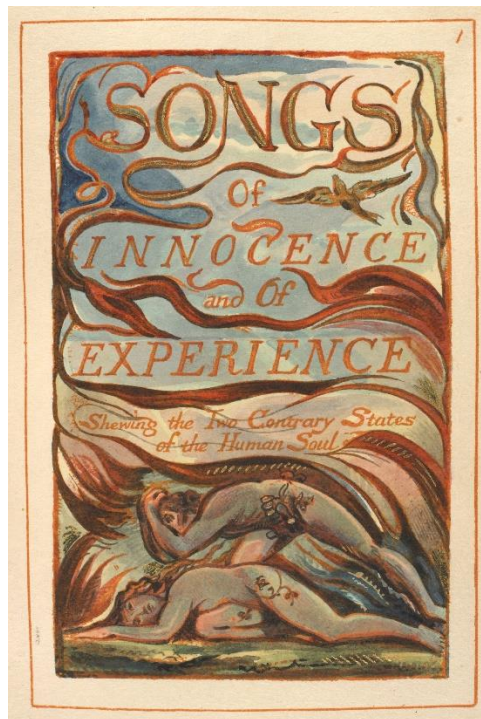


Photo 1. Title page of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*¹

¹ <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience>

The poems from both *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* function so well together, because they are in contrast with each other, in other words, the poems show a polarized state of a human being. *Songs of Innocence* shows the perspective of a child which is joyful and innocent, while the other section shows the more experienced and reserved perspective. For example, “The Lamb” of Innocence is confronted by “The Tyger” of Experience, this offers the reader two different perspectives, for seeing the same situation. The *Songs of Innocence* are sung and introduced by the Piper, while the *Songs of Experience* by the Bard, this could possibly show us two different, again polarized, states of the author himself. "The contraries of innocence and experience are not absolute but provisional, a creative opposition out of whose tension new insights can be generated" (Tomlinson, 27).

According to Simpson, there are a few people who read *Songs of Innocence* and *of Experience* how the poet actually intended it to be read. The illustrations are crucial for correctly understanding the poems. Simpson describes it as: “What Blake demands is that we experience *Songs of Innocence* and *of Experience* in, as it were, a three-dimensional way and know them - in the ways they energise and activate one another - as something rich and strange, vigorously alive - in a word, as visionary” (Simpson, 22).

3.1 Songs of Innocence

Blake collected the poems and created the *Songs of Innocence* in 1789, as well as a title page, for a better understanding of the poems. According to Bentley Jr, William Blake is not the speaker in either of the pomes, instead: “The speakers of the poems in *Songs of Innocence* are babies, children, and adults, black and white, birds, insects, and animals; none is William Blake” (Bentley Jr, 132). The *Songs of Innocence* are thus seen as descriptions of a harmonious and in some way naïve perspective of perceiving life, which every individual goes through at some point in their life. However, “Innocence is no idyllic state. Innocence is born and has to exist in the world of Experience which is constantly at pains to corrupt and exploit it” (Simpson, 23). This quote shows us how innocence, or in other words, children, need someone who is going to protect and guide them, and such figures of protectors can be seen in the poems: angels, fairies, mothers, fathers,

shepherds, which in simpler terms are Christ-like figures. *Songs of Innocence* are considered Blake's "closest approach to pure pastoral", however it also seems to contain a subtle form of satire.

It is important to mention that the *Songs of Innocence* are not songs about Innocence, but about the innocent state. The poems are, as said, introduced by the Piper, who refers to them as “songs of pleasant glee”. While looking at the conversation in the poems, it could be described as spontaneous and dynamic, which makes the tempo of the poems fast and it gives the notion of joy being broadcasted (Simpson, 25).

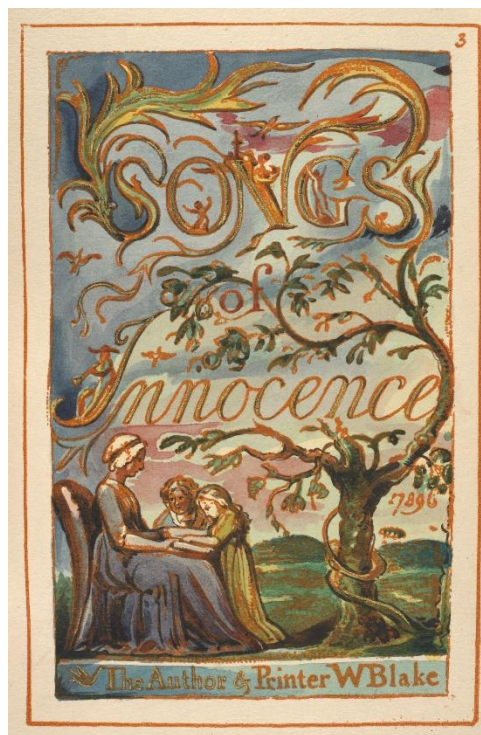


Photo 2. Title page of *Songs of Innocence*²

In this illustration, we can see a woman who is sitting on a chair with an open book and two children which are looking at the book and reading. Just looking at the illustration, it gives the notion of a care-free life and happiness.

² <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience>

3.2 *Songs of Experience*

Blake started wrote *Songs of Experience* around the year 1789 and 1794, when the collection of poems has been finished. The themes of this section are bringing forth “the exact parallels with those of the *Songs of Innocence*, but in a different and more sombre mood and the same is true of the illustrations” (Blunt, 53). When it comes to reading *Songs of Experience*, it is important to note how it must be read as a whole, including *Songs of Innocence*, because the two collections complete each other, and only partially reading it may possibly lead to misunderstandings. Some might even say how *Songs of Experience* are “greater and profounder” and how the poet had to go through negative experiences in life which made him create such a work. On the other hand, *Songs of Innocence* are described as naive (Simpson, 22). *Songs of Experience* were initially intended to be direct satires of *Songs of Innocence*, poem for poem, but as Blake wrote them, he discovered more versatile ways to express himself (Ackroyd, 141).

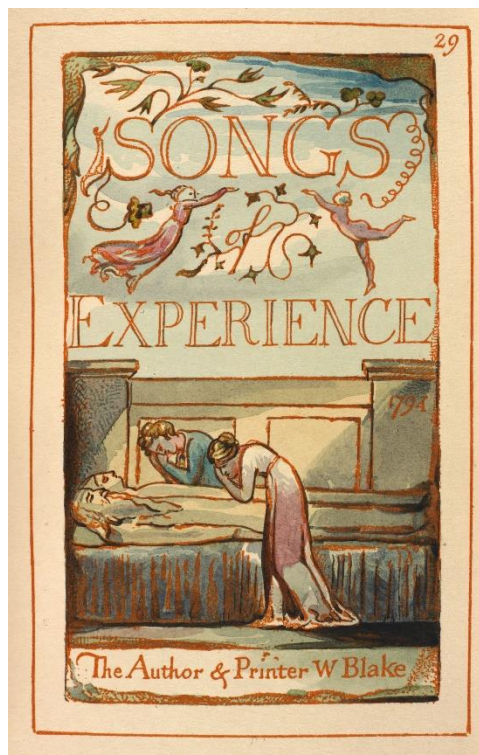


Photo 3. Title page of *Songs of Experience*³

³ <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience>

In this illustration, we may see a dying man lying on some sort of bed accompanied by a grieving companion. Not only does the illustration change the tone but so does the title, where Blake used “unadorned Roman capitals, as opposed to the fantastic vegetable-curls of the earlier letters” (Blunt, 54).

This gives a different, much more dark, harsh, and saddening setting to the poems one is about to read. When looking at the other illustrations in this section in contrast to the *Songs of Innocence*, the characters are drawn as “clinging to the earth in attitudes of sorrow - huddling, kneeling, stooping, or lying flat on the ground”. (Simpson, 24). This shows us the exact opposite of the joyful and carefree life as we have previously seen in *Songs of Innocence*, where the Piper is now replaced by a Bardic voice.

On the contrary, *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* often contain monologues, and the absence of dynamic communication is replaced by well-thought-out statements. This shows us how once when we enter the world of experience, we start to become more careful of the words we were saying, mostly hiding the true meaning and just façadeing our words to please others.

4. Blake's concept of the Real Man Imagination

Many philosophers, writers, and even inventors confronted themselves with the problem of the question of imagination and perception. The question still remains unanswered, however, while examining Blake's work we are able to look into his way of understanding, while subsequently forming ideas of our own.

As already mentioned, the representatives of the Romantic period rejected the Enlightenment because, according to them, it limited the true potential of human beings. More specifically, when talking about imagination and perception, they also rejected Locke's view, because it restricted the mind's capacity for imagination perception, and creation. As Ghosh wrote, the Romantics believed that "imagination is the most vital activity of the human mind which makes creation possible" (Ghosh, 2).

An important thing to mention is that Blake "looked at the world through and not with the eye" (Gleckner, 362). There is no denying that William Blake had a great imagination and was an incredible creator of both written and graphic art. In fact, his great sense of imagination was present from his early years, ever since he experienced his first visions, such as a tree full of angles, God putting his head to the window, or even in his adolescence, seeing his brother Robert's spirit "ascending heavenwards through the matter-of-fact ceiling, clapping its hands of joy" (Raine, 14).

His literary, and altogether, artistic work is immensely inspired by his interpretation and understanding of the Christian Bible. "For Blake, then, the Bible, despite being the Moral Law, is 'a Poem of probable impossibilities, fabricated ... by Inspiration'" (Locker, 87). Blake's writing can most of the time be challenging to understand and his mythology's figurative representations have ambiguous meanings (Singer, 1). Because of his writings and opinions that greatly differentiated themselves from the opinions of his contemporaries, he was considered mad. Even today some of his opinions, especially about God, would be considered blasphemy, but that is again a limited way of using one's imagination. Blake wrote: "Man can have no idea of anything greater than Man, as a cup cannot contain more than its capaciousness. But God is a man, not because he is so perceived by men but because he is the creator of man" (Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*).

According to Chrimel Paul Jose in his work “The Divine Image and A Divine Image” argued that for Blake man and God are the same and vice versa (Jose, 5). That is why imagination is always connected to the divine, or in other words God. This shows us that according to Blake, any creation that we imagine is divine, because “Imagination is no less than God” (Ghosh, 2). He rejected the theory of *tabula rasa*, which was popularized by Locke, and says that “Tabula rasa thus implies that individual human beings are born "blank" (with no built-in mental content) and that their identity is defined entirely by their experiences and sensory perceptions of the outside world” (“Tabula Rasa - *New World Encyclopedia*”).

Instead, Blake held the view that everything is dependent on imagination, especially how one creates and experiences reality: “As a man is, so he sees” (“A Quote by William Blake”). We can argue that in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* Blake wanted to present how the “limitlessness of imaginative abilities during childhood gradually gets suppressed as one experiences the sufferings and miseries of adulthood” (Ghosh, 3).

However, the problem when it comes to understanding Blake's idea of imagination is that nowhere in his writings does he provide a systematic explanation of what he meant by “imagination”. According to Gleckner in his work “Blake’s Religion of Imagination”, what he instead does is, he uses the term broadly in order to refer to “the highest faculty available to man for his salvation” (359).

William Blake considered imagination to be “the divine presence in man”, which is unfortunately mostly only a neglected part of the intellect. In *Principle 1* of his work *All Religions are One*, Blake also argues that: “The poetic Genius is the true Man, and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius" (Erdman and Bloom, 6).

One can argue that human beings have an unlimited imagination, but sadly, it is often not used to its highest potential. Since our senses and intellect are limited and unable to give us access to the infinite, reality is not exactly as it seems. “What is now prov’d was only once imagin’d” (Erdman and Bloom, 141). This famous quote by William Blake, from his work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, shows how each and every thing that exists in this world had first to be imagined. We can only discover proof of “an invisible Source” underlying everything we see through “dreams and meditation, intuition and fantasy” (Singer, 13)

“I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create” (Erdman and Bloom, 141). In this quote from Blake’s work *Jerusalem*, to compare and reason could be the equivalent of employing constrained ways of thinking, which only depends on the experience of another. To create means, to use the limitless imagination that brings into life one’s aspirations and desires from the infinite. Blake’s way of thinking thus greatly differs from most of the people. He believed that there is no limit to imagination and he created his own reality which in the long run enabled him to become one of the greatest artists of all time.

5. The theme of creation in *The Lamb*; *The Tyger*, *The Divine Image*; *The Human Abstract*;

William Blake created *Songs of Innocence* and *of Experience* so that the poems from both of the sections would be in contrast with each other. *The Lamb* and *The Tyger* are probably Blake's "most famous pair of contrary poems" (Tomlinson, 30). Because they are contrary poems, they deal with the same theme of creation, but each poem views it differently, one gaining the perspective of innocence, and the other that of experience.

It is evident that Blake used a great deal of Christian symbols in his writing, the lamb which is a symbol of innocence being one of them. The lamb is also, especially mentioned in the New Testament, "where Christ is the Lamb of God, offered as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of mankind" (Tomlinson, 30). The speaker of the poem is a child who speaks to the lamb and wonders who was the creator of such a gentle creature. Both the lamb and the child were created by God with divine love and care, and they can furthermore, also be seen "as the creation of God who became both child and lamb" (Jose, 88). The speaker accepts the creation that is both deadly and loving because he understands this unique unity of the Creator's design. He also realizes that he himself includes both the Tyger and the Lamb. (Bloom, 26).

On the contrary, the speaker of *The Tyger* is wondering how the same God could create two such different creatures. The tiger is thus here a symbol of "God's anger" (Tomlinson, 30). Becoming aware of the side of God which is not accepted by social convention or traditional religious practice, was an essential theme in Blake's literary work. Jose argues how *The Tyger* "symbolizes the dreadful forces in the world just as *The Lamb* symbolized gentleness, vulnerability, and innocence in the circle of Innocence" (Jose, 90). The most important question in both of the poems is the one of the creator: "*Little Lamb who made thee/ Dost thou know who made thee*" (Blake, *The Lamb*) and "*What immortal hand or eye,/ Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*" (Blake, *The Tyger*). Blake understands that "meekness, pity, mercy, and love" are insufficient on their own, and how there must be innocence besides experience in order to create "a harmonious whole" (Jose, 94).

Many of Blake's writings are reflecting the most significant changes of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, such as the Industrial, American, and French Revolutions. The way people lived has

changed as a result of these changes in “economy, society and politics”. Therefore, Blake's tiger is described as “strong, intimidating - a solitary, peripheral creature, independent of its shifting surroundings” (Bloom, 18).

When comparing *The Lamb* and *The Tyger* it is evident that they are opposites and one might argue that *The Lamb* is good and *The Tyger* is evil, however, that is unlikely to be what Blake intended. Bloom describes the Tyger as “bright, energetic, and vital”. The tiger is independent because it has acquired knowledge through experience, it is a hunter who hunts primarily in search of satisfaction, while the Lamb simply follows the flock. The tiger’s power, on the other hand, comes from its knowledge, and the intensity of that power is visible in the beast's bright eyes.

In the poem, the first and final stanza are almost identical, however, there is only one different word, and when it comes to Blake, one word has the power to completely change the perspective. “*Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*” shifted into “*Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*” The word *could* indicates “the speaker’s willingness to search for the capacity to create the “Tyger”, while on the other hand, the word *dare* “implies the knowledge that a creator is available, the remaining question having to do with the “willingness” to create it and what such willingness represents” (Bloom, 27). This difference does not suggest a change in objective fact, but only a shift in the speaker’s perception. The mystery surrounding the creation of the Tyger has not been solved, but it has been examined, recognized, and incorporated by the speaker into a new understanding of himself. (Bloom, 27). Bloom also argues: “He who made the Lamb made the Tyger, and he made man as well, who is both Lamb and Tyger and more”. In other words, the speaker of *The Tyger* through his thinking realizes that he actually is in some ways the Tyger (Bloom, 28).

The Divine Image is a part of the *Songs of Innocence*, it also offers a similar question as the already mentioned poems, it “celebrates the traditional Christian virtues of Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love” (Jose, 3). In contrast to the poem *The Tyger*, in *The Divine Image* there is never any indication of God's wrath or retribution, “only the constant refrain that God is mercy, pity, peace and love” (Whittaker, 75). The poem ascribes the straightforward notion that God is nothing more than a “series of gentle virtues”, and it is indeed simple to understand how this poem “could be adapted by certain types of Muslim, Hindu, Pagan or various other creeds” (Whittaker, 78).

Blake held the belief that God exists in every man and woman because God is the potential divine essence (Bottrall, 145). Therefore, Jose even adds, that if a man realizes his immanent virtues, he

“can rise up to the level of God” (Jose, 1). “*For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love, / Is God, our father dear:/ And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love, /Is Man, his child and care*” (Blake, *The Divine Image*), this quote means that God created humanity in his own image, which means that there is God in every human and that there’s something human in God. If God is known as the “creator”, and God is in every human, then the human should also become the “creator”. If we connect this to Blake’s views from the prior chapter of this paper, we may conclude that the humans’ imagination is indeed the creator. The divine characteristics, of mercy pity, peace, and love, that Blake lists, exist in man and they also manifest their divine nature through him. “In mercy, pity, peace, and love, he found the creed of brotherhood which is the center of his gospel” (Bottrall, 146). Blake knew that love may become selfish and possessive and that it needs to be redeemed by other generous qualities. These “powers” are what is governing life in the state of innocence, while giving it its completeness and security.

On the contrary, *The Human Abstract* belongs to the *Songs of Experience*, and its contrary to the poem *The Divine Image*. Bloom in his work *Blake's Apocalypse* even considers it to be the heart of Experience (142). When examining the title of the poem we could connect the word “abstract” to the Latin word “abstractus” which means “separated” or “drawn apart”, however, Bloom argues that it should not be understood that way, because for the contrast between the two poems (*The Divine Image* and *The Human Abstract*) is not between the integral and the split human nature, but rather between the equal delusions of Innocence and Experience as to the relationship of the human to the natural (Bloom, 142).

The poem also focuses on the divine virtues of *Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love*, which were extremely praised in *The Divine Image*, however, they “have now become dependent for their very existence upon the vices against which they war” (Gleckner, *The Human Abstract*, 376). In other words, the antithesis to *The Divine Image* is provided in *The Human Abstract*. Furthermore, the poem asserts to illustrate how the language of innocence can grow into the foundation of sacrificial religion (Lindsay, 80).

Pity would be no more/ If we did not make somebody Poor;/ And Mercy no more could be/ If all were as happy as we” (Blake, *The Human Abstract*). Here Blake illustrates with “bitter irony” how “love, pity and mercy can be distorted and used as a cover for base or cowardly motives (Bottrall, 149). When comparing these two contrary poems, Bloom argues how *The Divine Image* is not an

image, but “a deliberately confused tangle of abstractions, as befits the limitations of the Innocent vision”, on the other hand, he describes *The Human Abstract* as “the organic and terrible image of the Tree of Mystery, growing out of the human brain and darkening vision with thickest shades” (Bloom, *Blake’s Apocalypse*, 142).

6. The forces and flaws of Human Nature

The majority of Blake's poems have their counterpart or foil in the employment of the same theme. In order to express the immeasurability within human beings, Blake's idea is to reveal the duality of human nature (Dutta, 74). With Blake combining the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience*, and giving them the subtitle “*Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*”, he made it clear that we are indeed talking about an opposition. As Gleckner in his work “William Blake and the Human Abstract” says, the poems *Holy Thursday*, *The Chimney Sweeper*, *Nurse's Song*, and *A Cradle Song* have respectfully the same titles as their counterparts. When it comes to the other poems, for some of them, he only made brief changes, such as *The Little Boy Lost* becoming *A Little Boy Lost*, and *The Divine Image* becoming *A Divine Image*. This barely noticeable change does not seem that significant, however, when it comes to Blake even the smallest details can have an impact. Gleckner sees it as a move from “a world of unconscious selves to one of conscious selves whose sense of differentness is acute and militant” (Gleckner, 373).

However, there are poems whose counterparts have completely different titles, such as the most famous contrary poems: *The Lamb* and *The Tyger*. Because of that, we are shown a more explicit opposition to the nature of the two different states. What they are showing is a complete change of perspective, where the world of experience becomes the world of adults, with a loss of imagination, as well as the power of the subconscious. The world of experience becomes “a dark, confined, dirty urban world” and “a world of wandering a lostness”. (Gleckner, 373).

Furthermore, Gleckner explains how: “Blake clearly intended the song of experience to be a parody of its counterpart in *Innocence* (“*Nurse's Song*” and “*A Cradle Song*”) or to be a direct perversion (“*Holy Thursday*” and “*The Chimney Sweeper*”)” (Gleckner, 373). With that, not only did the perspective change (which we can notice in the change from the piper to the bard) but so did the speakers when they transitioned from innocence into experience and their “vision has shrunk from an imaginative 'whole' view of the world to a sense-bound, limited, partial view” (Gleckner, 373).

The poem that best describes the ideas Blake had behind the subtitle “*Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*”, or in other words, describing the forces and flaws of human nature

would probably be *The Human Abstract*. Gleckner mentions how Blake stumbled upon plenty of problems when he was creating the idea of this complex poem. The poem demonstrates how experience corrupts the values that innocence has, and how they cannot function in "symbiosis", because experience has to destroy innocence. The poem begins by explaining how even the positive virtues can in some way have negative sides: "*Pity would be no more/ If we did not make somebody Poor;/ And Mercy no more could be/ If all were as happy as we*" (Tomlinson, 40).

Conclusion

In his famous collection of poems *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, William Blake effectively shows the duality of human nature, in other words, how innocence does not function without experience and vice versa. We enter this world being guided by innocence, we are living a life in which we are being drawn towards naturalness and simplicity. However, once we become mature over the years we are again being guided, however this time by experience. Experience guides us to the adult world, which is a world where the atmosphere has now shifted to a repulsive and degenerate kind. Moreover, the use of imagination becomes restricted, and individuals are forced, by society, to become slaves of social norms and codes.

This change in perspective shows us the harsh reality and how different the world actually is from what one used to believe. Although experience seems as a negative and dark part of life, it is extremely vital, because it teaches one to know their worth, and if necessary, rebel for ones' freedom. Hence, it could be argued that Blake, as a poet, played a significant role in destroying the social norms that are restricting the life of individuals to their fullest potential. Blake showed that there is indeed hope for salvation with the help of nature and realization of an individual's full spiritual and imaginative potential.

Furthermore, Blake also had a different view on religion and spirituality, he rejected the views of the Enlightenment as well as, to some extent, the views of the Christian church. With that, his views greatly differed from the views of other people in his time. This could have easily been a result of the "angelic" and "demonic" visions that he experienced since his early childhood. Blake used these visions, that were coming from his inner self, as a "muse", or inspiration to create both his illustrations and literary work.

Blake had a strong belief that imagination holds great potential for getting in connection with nature as well as gaining freedom from the restrictive and unimaginative world. He also believed that people should be more in connection with their true selves. To this day, this serves as a reminder of the importance creativity has in the life of an individual. By combining poetry and visual art, Blake pushed the boundaries of the conventional norms of his time, therefore, we can argue that William Blake was an artist that was ahead of his time.

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