

## **To Be as Innocent as the Tiger and as Experienced as the Lamb: The Paradoxical Nature of Innocence and Experience**

Stephanie Montalti  
English  
Brooklyn College  
2900 Bedford Avenue  
Brooklyn, New York 11210 USA

Faculty Advisors: Dr. Justin Steinberg and Dr. Roni Natov

### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes pastoral motifs in the illustrations of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, compared to the text, to show how the states are complementary and contradictory. This paper applies a biographical-historical approach to describe how revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Blake's process of Illuminated Printing, and his understanding of innocence and experience, distinguish his voice within the poems and his revolutionary ideas. Analyzing the rose animal motifs in the illustrations of four poems shows how the motifs and the states of innocence and experience are fluid.

**Keywords:** William Blake, Illustrations, Innocence

### **1. Introduction**

It's 2018 and India's Supreme Court just ruled that sex with a child bride under 18 is considered rape. It's 2018 and Syrian children have just experienced a chemical attack, many have died. It's 2018 and students in United States schools have been killed in mass shootings; they can no longer expect safety. Although William Blake was writing about 18<sup>th</sup> century England, his subject matter is all too relevant. He was concerned with large scale and public issues such as child labor and racism as well as small scale and more private matters such as the effect of losing virginity on family dynamics and coping with loss and loneliness. His poems and illustrations in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* help us understand, even today, the implications of childhood and the way it can be violated.

This paper is motivated by the desire to understand how music, illustrations, alliteration, and color all add to the duality of Blake's poetry. By looking at motifs that are doubled throughout the collection, this paper supports the analysis of illustrations as distinct works of art and partners to the written supplement. The rose, tree, and animal motifs, which are pastoral motifs, motifs that represent the idealized countryside, represent both innocence and experience as complementary and contradictory states and how the illustrations help distinguish Blake's voice from his culture. This paper also explores the way innocence is retained in poems in the Experience section, as seen in "The Tyger," as well as how poems in the Innocence section foreshadow a coming of experience.

### **2. Methodology**

This paper applies a biographical-historical approach under the theory that an author's life influences his or her work; more specifically, we can see an author's experiences represented in the literature. I also support the analysis of authorial intent, although I will not exclusively interpret the poems the way they were "intended" to be; rather, I will

consider different scholarly interpretations of the poems as well as Blake's religious and cultural upbringing in order to ground my own interpretations. Reading the poems with political context can also enrich our understanding of London in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, Morton D. Paley, Professor of English at UC Berkeley, provides sound reasoning for this interpretation as he does not consider the *Songs* a "direct record of Blake's spiritual autobiography; for we would then have a poet who was Innocent at the age of thirty-two, when *Innocence* was published, but somehow became Experienced two years later when he began to write the second group of *Songs* in his Notebook"<sup>1</sup>. In order to develop the fullest analysis of the poem, this paper analyzes historical and biographical details of Blake's life as well as formal elements of the poems like language, style, and structure to show that the duality of innocence and experience, as expressed through motifs in the illustrations, represents Blake's reaction to hypocrisies and contradictions of his revolutionary time.

The first chapter describes Blake's early life and his experience with printmaking, his reactions to war, and school. This chapter helps develop the idea of Blake as a revolutionary thinker, as reflected in his art and theories, and explains why he opposed the practices of social institutions, which I discuss in Chapters 4-5. In my second chapter, I explore Blake as a painter and his method of illustration, which was entirely unique, arguing that Blake's inventive approach to painting influenced the way he understood children, as I argue mirror writing was a regressive experience. Chapter 3 provides definitions for innocence and experience, which are grounded in Judeo-Christian origin, and describe the ways they are paradoxical, in order to lay foundation for Chapter 4. In Chapters 4-5 I analyze two motifs, the rose and animals, in a total of four poems, as evidence for the complementary and contradictory nature of innocence and experience, the final example of the ways the states are paradoxical. Chapters 4-5 relate back to the previous chapters to discuss not only where the illustrations diverge from the text, but also where Blake's distinctive notions of the states diverge from society's.

### 3. Chapter One: Blake as Poet

This chapter argues that William Blake's motivations and inspirations for his collection of poems, titled *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, derive from England's political climate, his childhood, and his experiences with printmaking. While the artist or writer's personal life is oftentimes evaluated separately from his work, with Blake, the meaning and recurring motifs in his works are embedded in his personal philosophy about innocence and experience, which I will explore in the next chapter. Here, I describe Blake's early life as inklings of the future writer and I analyze his poem "Milton" which contextualizes his sentiments toward the French revolution and England's future. I then discuss his discontent with contemporaries like Sir Joshua Reynolds and with institutions like the Protestant church, before turning to other influences like radically changing approaches to children's literature and Blake's own visions, which helped shape the *Songs* and his prophetic books. Across his timeline of works is a thread of classical and biblical allegorical motifs as well as abstract portrayals of human emotion. This chapter shows that Blake's life led him to imagine a more unified and idyllic world in which states of innocence and experience could also be united. I argue that his notions of innocence and experience can be understood from studying his biography and history as he sought to create more fluid definitions for these terms in the wake of a constricting and oppressive environment for children. This contributes to my larger thesis that analyzing various meanings of the same pastoral motifs in Blake's illustrations contributes to the understanding of these motifs in the text as representative of dual and fluid states of being, innocence and experience.

Blake was a late 18<sup>th</sup> century Romantic poet, painter, and philosopher who created a body of work that reflected his subversive political and religious beliefs, which ultimately made him a pariah of England. His spirituality and connection to the arts, which are manifested in his *Songs*, are apparent in Blake's childhood. He was born on November 28, 1757 in the Soho district of London, England to Catharine Harmitage and James Blake and died on August 12, 1827. Blake was perceptive to the world of the lower middle class since his father was a tradesman and produced hosiery; Blake's poetry would eventually represent his interest in social class. As Blake's personality developed, so did his idiosyncrasies. Fred Stern's "William Blake, Visionary Rebel" details the moments in his childhood that foreshadowed his rebellious nature into adulthood. Stern states, "Although unsophisticated, his parents recognized and tried to fulfill their precocious son's needs...(and) they felt his temperament and nervous disposition would hinder his progress in a more structured environment"<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, they home-schooled him. This, however, did not discourage his visual interests, as he started drawing and rhyming and at age 10, he attended a drawing school. Since the culturally accepted way to practice art was by earning enough to make a living, whether through apprenticeships or working at academic institutions, Blake was discouraged from freelancing. Blake's work with a London engraver and at the Royal Academy did shape his aspirations. At 14 years old, Blake became an apprentice

for London engraver, James Basire. Here, he was able to “draw replicas of 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Century tombs” at Westminster Abbey and learn printmaking, publishing and printing<sup>2</sup>. Stern describes that it “was quite an achievement” for Blake to make his own engravings at a young age, as was the number of recognized artists he encountered<sup>2</sup>.

18<sup>th</sup> Century England experienced multiple revolutions through the French Revolution, the American Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. Political revolutions were directed against the British Parliament as well as the Anglo-Saxon Church, which preached a life of charity and piety but turned a blind eye to citizens in need. The storming of the Bastille radicalized Enlightenment thinkers, expressed the ideas of the radical Enlightenment, and led Blake to latch onto radicals in London who participated in riots that included the burning of Catholic homes and of buildings of authority, such as prisons and banks. This event is believed to have influenced his poems *Europe* and *America* as the protest was also sparked by a dislike for war with America<sup>3</sup>. Although much of the fervor in England was due to revolutionary sentiments afar, England directly engaged in war with France and temporarily ended it with the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Blake’s reactions to political instability are evident in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, which is described in later chapters, but also in a poem titled “The French Revolution” that he started but never finished. While scholars like William Richey and István D. Rácz agree that this poem has little stylistic resemblance to his later works, its political weight and symbolism help explain Blake’s philosophies. Its “anapestic rhythm, a metric pattern very rarely used by Blake,” is often used to represent the French Revolution, as seen in Petöfi and Byron’s works, to convey energy and motion; whereas in his *Songs*, Blake incorporates the rhythms of ballads, hymns, and nursery rhymes<sup>4</sup>. Rácz distinguishes Blake’s interest in the revolution not as a desire for upheaval, but for peace. He states, “even the king fits into the peaceful vision of the closure. Instead of decapitating him, Blake finds a place for him in a new world order”<sup>4</sup>. Richey writes, “most critics have considered the poem’s political content as little more than a backdrop for his evolving philosophical system”<sup>5</sup>. Like Rácz, Richey asserts that it is liberty Blake supports, not violence<sup>5</sup>. Richey describes that Blake believed the revolution would restore peace and would allow “for a return to tradition,” to an “original uncorrupted state *before* the distinctions of class and birth had divided human society”<sup>5</sup>. Even in *Songs of Innocence*, Blake confronts the Church’s principles without anger or vengeance and instead, he portrays quaint landscapes and angelic figures in a satirical and sarcastic way. His *Songs of Experience* do paint a harsher and perhaps, more realistic vision of England’s dirty streets but still, he does not propose taking drastic or revolutionary measures to resolve injustices. So, while Blake’s dissatisfaction with the poem may be deduced by his failure to finish it, it represents his engagement with politics.

Another impactful change in England was industrialization, which introduced new machinery and new jobs in cities. With the rise of exportation and manufacturing also came pollution and dense cities, especially in London. Although the city economically flourished, the oppressed and poor were prevented from rising, forced to work in inhumane conditions. Concern for capital rather than humanity overwhelmed Blake’s poetry. One of the injustices Blake responds to in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is child labor and the way children, especially orphans, became chimney-sweepers, often kept malnourished to fit into chimneys, eventually developing cancers. Blake expresses his views on “London” in his “Preface” to the poem “Milton.” Blake questions God and the Church’s presence in London, as the city was once beautiful with “pastures green” but is now, a place of “dark satanic mills,” an attack on the rise of industries. As Price describes, “To Blake, London was Babylon and also Jerusalem—a place of confusion and conflict, but also of spiritual potential”<sup>6</sup>. Although Blake distrusted the Church and the construction of institutions, which he only saw as machines of oppression, he believed in spirituality and was hopeful, even expressing vigor to make London a place of peace again. Although raised as a Protestant, Blake was less interested in the formality of religion and more so in the belief of a higher being. Blake’s classical allusions, including the “chariot” and “ancient times,” also become prevalent in his images, as he turns to classical myths of perfection in a time of injustice. The motifs in this poem that specifically carry over into *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* include the “lamb” and “green” “pastures” which symbolize a lost innocence. They are regarded as symbols of innocence, meaning youth, vitality, and happiness; however, in this poem and in the *Songs* they are oftentimes reminisced as the characters move on into experience and no longer possess these qualities. They become motifs of a lost innocence because they are somehow unattainable but were once present “in ancient time.”

By exploring Blake’s early life, including his experience printmaking, as well as his reactions to revolutions, his motivation to not only write, but also comment on the state of children and of world peace is established. This chapter shows that the instability of 18<sup>th</sup> century London led Blake to create a fluid theory of life stages, in which one’s life could be viewed in peaceful progressions even when the reality of the world is harsh.

## 4. Chapter Two: Blake as Painter

Creating illustrations to accompany his poems, specifically in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, involved an original method, which produced unique images. Each painting, like the ones in his *Songs*, was individually designed; this prevented any reproduction, including color and design from being exactly the same. Blake claimed that his brother, Robert, guided the process of Illuminated Painting as he “always felt the spirit of Robert lived with him”<sup>3</sup>. Michael Phillips’ *The Creation of the Songs From Manuscript to Illuminated Printing* describes some of Blake’s unpublished or pre-published works by analyzing his *Manuscript Notebook* as well as Blake’s designs, which reveal some of his inspirations and his philosophical beliefs. The process of Illuminated Printing was created in 1788 and consisted of “writing and drawing on a copper plate using an acid-resistant varnish, etching the unprotected surfaces away leaving both the text and design standing in relief, and then inking and printing the relief surfaces on a printmaker’s rolling press”<sup>7</sup>. Blake originally used opaque paint and later switched to watercolors for the *Songs*’ images. Although a similar process had already been created known as ‘aqua fortis,’ which avoids the need for an engraving tool by coating the plate in a protectant and allows the unprotected, desired parts, to get corroded, Blake reverses this system. He would engrave directly with the “acid resisting varnish” onto the plate, allowing the non-engraved parts to be eaten away<sup>7</sup>. In this way, he treats the plate like a paper; however, “in order to copy his text onto the copper plate Blake had to become skilled in reverse or mirror writing”<sup>7</sup>. Many of Blake’s sketches reveal how he practiced with writing backwards in cursive. Blake managed to create a completely unique system through his engravings and paintings that complement his focus on “contraries” within his poems. By working with “contraries” or reversals, Blake was able to think in a different perspective, both literally and figuratively. He was forced to reimagine and, perhaps, return to a childlike state, by writing backwards, a language familiar yet unfamiliar. In a similar way that many modernist poets choose to make their content feel uncanny, by taking familiar content and defamiliarizing it through figurative language or form, Blake’s illustrative process produces a similar effect. By writing backwards, Blake takes a once familiar task and makes it unfamiliar, perhaps influencing his content and illustrations as well. He re-experiences a state of innocence, being unaware and unfamiliar with the process of writing and drawing, a rather simple and intuitive process for the adult. Further, in the way that Blake’s writing challenges our conventions of writing, from left to right, this process mirrors the way he also challenges the arbitrariness of norms themselves by recalling a time when these norms were first developed. While to the lay viewer, this process is undetectable, by studying Blake’s methods his thought process seems to be urging for a change in the way we view the most ordinary perceptions. By creating a variation of ‘aqua fortis,’ he also challenged established art forms and in his works, he also challenges the powers in England. This theory is supported by Phillips’ argument that “By creating a formula possessing these contrary aspects, and putting it to use in just this manner, Blake unified the relationship of the poet and painter with that of the book producer” to show how his illustrative process parallels his interest in idiosyncrasy and individuality<sup>7</sup>. Being both poet and painter for Blake meant embracing autonomy meaning self-rule, independence, identity, and craftsmanship, regardless of pre-existing norms or conventions. Instead of embracing the industrial revolution, Blake rejected standardization by becoming all parts of the “machine,” the poet, publisher, and illustrator, and by creating each piece by hand, thereby emphasizing the artist as autonomous.

In order to explain the way variations in text and illustrations effect my interpretation, I must first acknowledge how these variations were created. Blake originally created *Songs of Innocence* as a separate body of work from *Songs of Experience* and made only 27 original copies of the combined *Songs*. While the colors are largely impacted by the difference in copies, other variations include “the size and shape of figures, the expressions on their faces, the contours of trees, bushes, bodies, and buildings”<sup>8</sup>. Since I will be studying nuances in figures, trees, and buildings in the illustrations, this is especially important to note. Differences in Blake’s Illuminated Printing became more complex with practice and he even crafted copies with gold or silver colors to customers of high prestige. While the images I will be using are from Geoffrey Keynes’ commentary on the *Songs*, I will attempt to discuss multiple interpretations, due to the different editions and these variations. My consideration of variations within the illustrations especially reinforces the idiosyncrasy of Blake’s method of illustration and his beliefs as well as the deliberateness of his choices, which challenge the standardization of the industrial revolution.

## 5. Chapter Three: Defining Innocence and Experience

The title to Blake’s collection identifies innocence and experience as “contrary”; however, they are parts of a whole and are, oftentimes, portrayed similarly. The separation of the poems in two sections also suggests their contradictory

nature; however, by providing multiple definitions of the states, I hope to show that innocence and experience as states are not as oppositional as they may seem. It is through his imaginative sense, which I explore in the previous chapter, that I show how Blake envisions a world without conflict and with a balance of innocence and experience. This chapter will also define innocence and experience in order to clarify their use in Chapter 5, as a preface to an analysis of their complementary motifs, and in order to show where Blake diverges from society's notions. This chapter contributes to my thesis that innocence and experience are complementary and contradictory states by offering three inherent ways to understand the states as paradoxical. Morton D. Paley states that innocence and experience are "inner state(s) externalized in a world of images...which correspond to felt qualities in life"<sup>1</sup>. It is through Blake's illustrations, his "world of images," that we can discover the multiple meanings of innocence and experience. I believe that Blake's states are best understood through the illustrations, which oftentimes seem more true to Blake's beliefs than the text. For example, the poem "Holy Thursday" appears to be a pleasant description of religious children; however, it is in the illustration that the reader sees the way order and structure encroach on innocence. The children in the illustration are unlike those in "The Ecchoing Green" illustration, for example, who frolic freely. I believe the illustration for "Holy Thursday" truly shows Blake's outlook on organized religion- that it is hypocritical and detrimental to a child's state of innocence.

This paper defines innocence and experience as both emotional and physical states. Innocence is youth, old age, unknowing, freedom, joy, nakedness, and virginity. Innocence is being a young, careless child who is at one with nature. "Innocence for Blake was an inclusive state where all forms of life- man, beast, angel; all stages of life- infancy, childhood, adulthood, old age- were on a continuum and part of a whole"<sup>10</sup>. In many ways, experience is the opposite of innocence as it includes, adulthood, knowing, consciousness, insight, restraint, clothing, protection, and sex. Experience usually exists in the mature, the adult who does not have the same carefree pleasures as the child, but who gains an awareness of one's connection to nature. This carelessness or spontaneity is what allows the child to form a "communion with nature, readily perceiving the divine in all things"<sup>1</sup>. The word nature is used in two ways: 1. It refers to the animal and environmental world and 2. It refers to the human condition and human tendencies.

The disjunction between society's view of the states and Blake's view is partially due to the fact that Blake conceived of innocence and experience differently from his culture. While some contemporaries, like Wordsworth, believed childhood to be a distinct stage of life, Blake's poems reveal how the culture at large often treats children like adults. For example, to Blake, innocence and experience are not inherently positive and/or negative states, but rather they each have pros and cons. While one loses a sense of carelessness and freedom upon entering experience, due to economical or social burdens, an individual gains insight in experience. Also, while innocence may seem preferable to experience given a "partial reading," the state also has its dangers<sup>12</sup>. On the contrary, Blake shows how it is in experience that the individual can truly appreciate and recognize a union with their natural environment. Matt Simpson's "Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and Experience,'" explains how a surface level reading of the poems may also lead a reader to believe that poems in Experience are "greater" or "profounder" than those in Innocence<sup>12</sup>. The simplicity of Innocence's themes, given prior studying, should not be confused with being simplistic.

Some of the ways that Blake's understanding of innocence and experience diverges from that of his culture include his notion of what is natural and unnatural. According to Blake, experience as a state is just as natural as innocence and therefore, the experiences one undergoes in experience, such as a loss of virginity, the development of passion and lust, are also natural. Blake also supports the idea of having inherent insight in innocence, which opposes society's view of children as ignorant. Society's lack of awareness of childhood as a state is what allowed children to be treated as adults and deprived of freedom and joy Blake believed children should experience. I discuss social institutions' treatment of children and other underrepresented people in Chapter 1 and the way this led to neglect and constraint. Another important difference between Blake and society's views on experience is that Blake believes experience brings a sense of life just as innocence does, whereas society believes experience only entails an ending and death. While innocence literally brings new life, experience entails an ending and a beginning of new experiences. In Chapter 4, I describe the way the poem "Infant Joy" represents these contradictions between Blake and society's views. Lastly, Blake's *Songs* reveal how Blake imagines a world with a balance of innocence and experience.

Paley describes how the final poem in the *Songs*, "The Voice of the Ancient Bard," reflects Blake's own belief in a unified individual. He states that the end of the poem suggests the "possibility of reorganizing man's divided self and, if not of regaining the lost world of Innocence, then of forging a new unity"<sup>1</sup>. Blake believed that in the most harmonious world, one could regain innocence and have a balance of the two states. His poems are cautionary tales against being forced into a premature or bleak experience. His poems serve to show that there is a bit of innocence in experience, but only if one can find value in the natural world and the natural order of things. This is why he opposed social institutions, as they command their own orders, which oftentimes juxtapose a natural aging or way of being. While innocence and experience follow the generally accepted notion of aging, which is that one begins in innocence and moves into experience, as one gets older, Blake also believed in a non-linear system.

According to Blake, although innocence is highly associated with childhood, an individual could move back into innocence, especially when in old age. This example is evident in the poem, “The Ecchoing Green.” In this poem, the narrator states that “Old John with white hair/Does laugh away care,/Sitting under the oak,/Among the old folk”<sup>9</sup>. This poem is located in the Innocence section and although it is primarily about young children, it is also about the elderly remarking on their youth and being able to carelessly play. The word “care” is what connects Old John to the young children as both embody the state of innocence, as both are careless. Here, Blake shows how one can return to innocence. In old age, after one attains a level of wisdom, it may seem that that carelessness would not be wise. However, carelessness entails not worrying about insignificant matters and giving way to one’s most natural desires. Wisdom, whether it is innate as in innocence, or learned in experience, allows for joy and spiritual freedom, which Blake believes to be a positive state.

Where there appear to be overlap between these two states is in age and insight. While innocent individuals are usually children, “The Ecchoing Green” is an example of the elderly also as innocent. So, while age can be used to distinguish innocence and experience, it is not exclusive. What seems to be a better commonality between the two states is insight, meaning an innate knowledge or a gained knowledge. In innocence, characters in Blake’s poems are often connected to the natural world, although sometimes unaware of it; in experience, characters develop an awareness of the natural world, which they lose or break away from, under the constraints of social norms.

Ironically, although Blake was not in favor of organized religion, many of his ideas are grounded in Judeo-Christian belief. As I discuss in Chapter 3, although Blake is considered a radical thinker, the origins for his theories on art and spirituality are highly bound to traditional thought. Paley explains how Blake was not only influenced by literary texts depicting the pastoral, but was also influenced by the Psalms. For example, Blake’s images of the child with the sheep in “The Lamb” or Lyca who is licked by the lion in “The Little Girl Lost” can be related to the book of Revelations, “The wolf will live with the lamb; the leopard will lie down with the young goat. The calf and the lion will graze together, and a little child will lead them”<sup>13</sup>. Blake indeed depicts a lion or a tiger, a lamb, and a child all sitting together peacefully as he hopes to convey that man can try harder to relate to “the wild” as we are not so far apart. Another example of Blake’s biblical allusions is with the fall of Adam and Eve. The states of innocence and experience can be described in relation to “the fall.” “Externally and generically...(innocence) applies to the condition of man before the Fall; internally and psychologically to the child who has not yet experienced the inner divisions of human life”<sup>1</sup>. Both of these definitions hold true, as the first clause seems to be the source of this state and the second, the conditions of it. The clearest allusion to Adam and Eve is located on the Title-Page which depicts two figures, possibly Adam and Eve due to their lack of clothing and embrace after what appears to be flames around them, signifying their fall from grace. Paley explains that medieval theologians called the fall the “Fortune Fall- the idea that the fall of Adam and Eve was in a paradoxical sense a “happy sin,” in that otherwise Christ would not have been born to save mankind. For Blake, the fall into Experience was if not happy at least necessary”<sup>1</sup>. Without experience, one would be unable to learn, unable to become an adult. Another way that the states are paradoxical is that “Innocence *demands* Experience: both are phases in the spiritual development of man and, at the same time, perennial ways of looking at the world”<sup>1</sup>. Although the states are opposites, they also need and explain one another. While age helps explain when we acquire these states, these states are also everlasting and can co-exist. The following chapters show the final way the states are paradoxical in order to prove that although innocence and experience are contradictory, when they are represented through the same motifs, they appear to be complementary.

## 6. Chapter Four: The Rose Motif

In this chapter, I argue that the rose, the tree, and animal motifs are symbols of innocence and experience, thereby proving them to be paradoxical, and although they change form to reflect their state, this allows the motifs to express the truth of a reality Blake imagined and his revolutionary attitudes. While this collection of poems is separated into two sections, and the poems in “Experience” are often heavier in tone and theme than those in “Innocence,” I will show how the sections and these states are actually alike, through my analysis of key motifs that appear in both sections. I also explain where Blake’s views on virginity, race, poverty, and childhood diverge from that of his culture and how this creates ambiguities and contradictions between the illustration and text.

The rose in “Infant Joy,” located in the Innocence section, and “The Sick Rose,” in the Experience section complicates the definitiveness of their states. While these poems’ illustrations converse with one another, I would not consider them to be traditionally paired poems, which are those that share similar titles, but are located in opposing sections.



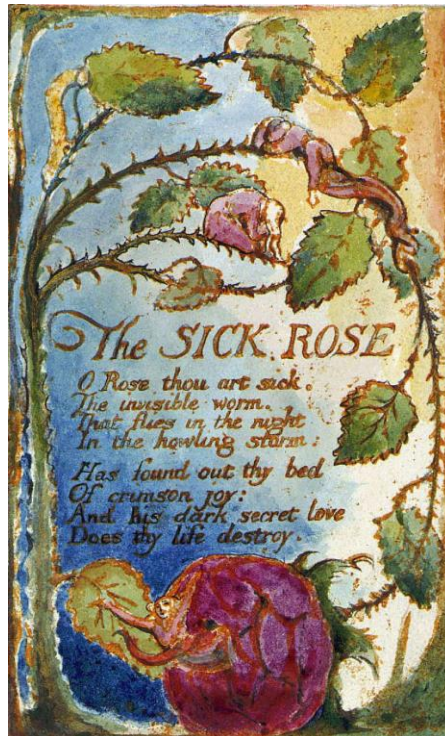


Figure 1. Illustration of “The Sick Rose” in William Blake’s *Songs of Experience*  
<https://didoisux.wordpress.com/2013/02/04/the-sick-rose/>



Figure 2. Illustration of “Infant Joy” in William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*  
<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/388717011559546921/?lp=true>

Plainly summarizing, “Infant Joy” is about absolute joy that befalls a newborn baby who has yet to be given a name; I will explore the implications of naming, which will affect the innocence of the child. “The Sick Rose” is about a rose that has been sickened by an “invisible worm,” which has destroyed its life<sup>9</sup>. Beginning with “Infant Joy,” there are two roses; one of them wilts and is closed, while the other holds what appears to be a mother, a baby, and an angel. Using the large rose for comparison, the shape of this rose’s petals, which curl around these figures, suggests the flower is protecting the new life within. Therefore, the rose acts as a womb or mother figure, which protects the baby and nurtures it; it is life giving. Abiding by this interpretation, the smaller rose, has yet to produce life. While there is no reference to the flower motif in the poem itself, the words describe the baby’s new life from both the mother and the baby’s perspective. While I believe that the narrator of the first stanza is the baby, since the narrator states, “I am but two days old,” and the narrator of the second stanza is the mother who grants the name “Sweet Joy” to the baby, Matt Simpson has another interpretation. In “Blake’s ‘Songs of Innocence and Experience,’” he explains that the fairy creature in the illustration is actually the narrator of the second stanza. Both a mother and baby figure are represented in the illustration, as well as an angel, which are frequent motifs that serve as a protecting figures. Simpson supports analyzing the illustrations with the text, as he would never assume the second speaker to be anyone but a mother without the image. Perhaps Simpson believes the second narrator to be the angel since it grants “blessings” onto the baby whose experience of innocence will suggestively be brief as emphasized by the words “sing the while”<sup>12</sup>. In terms of color, the illustration’s use of yellows, greens, and blues supports the theme of infancy. The only “negativity” in the poem, if it can even be found, seems to come from not knowing the baby’s name. While this is not a problem, per se, the unknown can be eerie and frightening. Also, while “joy” is the overall tone of the poem, the word “name” has multiple connotations. Once a name is placed on a child, that name not only provides an identity, but also imposes expectations. The arrival of a name will ultimately inhibit the innocence of the child. However, the rose bears no name and therefore, represents a pure innocence. Through the rose, innocence represents new life, joy, and freedom, as expressed by having no name. Carrying the meaning of the rose as innocence, when the reader gets to “The Sick Rose” the rose and its meaning changes.

Just looking at the illustration of the rose in this poem, one full rose sits at the bottom of the image and is completely closed while something sticks out of it, perhaps the “invisible worm.” This rose shares similar purple and red hues to that of “Infant Joy.” Some notable differences between the images, include the presence of thorns, brown stems, and larger leaves. Since the poem is more abstract than “Infant Joy,” since it lacks a clear narrator and subject, this could be the reason there are no obvious figures within this rose compared to the characters in the “Infant Joy” illustration. Due to the thorns, the shape of the rose, and the colors, the interpretation of this motif changes. The poem suggests that a worm or presence has made its way into the rose, thereby sickening it. The words “destroy,” “howling storm,” and “dark secret love” give this poem an ominous tone unlike the cheerfulness of “Infant Joy”<sup>9</sup>. The joy in this poem is “crimson,” rather than a primary red color, and it has found out the rose’s bed suggesting a loss of virginity with the worm as a phallic symbol, which takes away the girl’s innocence. The rose also represents passion; a kind of longing that is grounded in experience and is often associated with lust. As the poem exists in the Experience section, experience here means sexuality, a loss of innocence, and darkness. Although the poem might seem to suggest that sex is inherently negative, due to sinister imagery, there is no evidence that this is Blake’s perspective. Rather, I argue that the ominous tone is a result of society’s voice and its view of sexuality as harmful, since it upholds notions of virginity. In other poems like “The Little Girl Lost” Blake shows how sex is natural and only becomes taboo when society deems it so.

J.F. Berwick’s “*The Sick Rose: A Second Opinion*,” proposes a way to understand the problematic and inconsistent tone of the poem, when compared to Blake’s personal views on sexuality and to the illustration. I support Berwick’s argument that aside from the presence of thorns and leaves, the larger rose actually appears to be healthy and full, not destroyed. Berwick notes that the worm is deemphasized as it blends into the curves of the petals. He recognizes the importance of studying the design with the text, as the rose in both parts is incongruous. He does not see the same destruction in this image and further agrees with David V. Erdman who sees the flower on the ground not as fallen, but as open to letting in the worm and removed from the “thorns on which her two sisters writhe”<sup>14</sup>. Berwick realizes the paradoxes within the poem not only in the rose, but also in the sky, which is not depicted as a “howling storm,” as detailed in the poem. I support his interpretation that “We may deduce that the “howling storm” is nowhere but in the heart and eye of the speaker herself; she is in the state of experience, commenting with a jaundiced eye upon the experience of sexual love”<sup>14</sup>.

Society’s influence is one key element in both of these poems, which is not obviously represented. In “Infant Joy,” there is much delight over the newborn baby, but, as I noted, this is because the baby has yet to be given a name. In “The Sick Rose,” while the rose in the illustration is healthy, the poem expresses destruction, possibly a representation of internal turmoil. I believe that Blake incorporates the ominous voice of society in order to capture the shift into adulthood a young woman experiences, as marked by sexual relationships. Blake comments on how traumatic a loss



of virginity can be on the psyche of a young adult, especially when out of wedlock as discussed in the poem “A Little Girl Lost.” Blake does not suggest that sex is inherently wrong, but does show how sex is viewed in his culture. “The Sick Rose” exposes the hands of society, which rush the movement from innocence to experience. Although the rose does become experienced, with a loss of virginity, experience itself only seems negative due to the culture surrounding it. Further, innocence is usually associated with lighter themes, not because it is a more positive state than experience, but because it allows for freedom, that gets inhibited with experience. The paradox of the rose shows how cultural norms shape a young adult’s movement into experience and how the rose symbolizes passion and new experiences in both states.

In terms of understanding the states, it seems that the transition between these two poems could be explained as “knowing,” and not knowing<sup>12</sup>. In “Infant Joy” and in innocence, there is often a sense of not knowing, due to a lack of experience, and an immature consciousness. Roni Natov outlines two types of innocents, in *The Poetics of Childhood*, through their consciousness. She quotes Pagliaro, who states that the speaker of “Infant Joy” is “unselfconsciously united with the world”<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, in “The Sick Rose,” there is a heavy sense of awareness of the girl’s actions and of custom. Since Blake depicts a healthy rose in both poems’ illustrations, I believe his ideal state would be a balance of the two, since a life without awareness and without experience in adulthood would be harmful. Through the use of the same motif, we can draw a connection between two otherwise opposing poems.

## 7. Chapter Five: The Lamb, the Tiger, and the Lion

My final motif analysis is of animals, including the lamb, the lion, and the tyger. While I will mainly be comparing the paired poems “The Lamb” and “The Tyger,” I will also make reference to “The Shepherd,” “Spring,” and “The Little Girl Found,” whether to illustration or text. The “The Lamb” and “The Tyger” are two of Blake’s most iconic poems for their nursery rhyme feel, in part due to their repetition and rhyme.

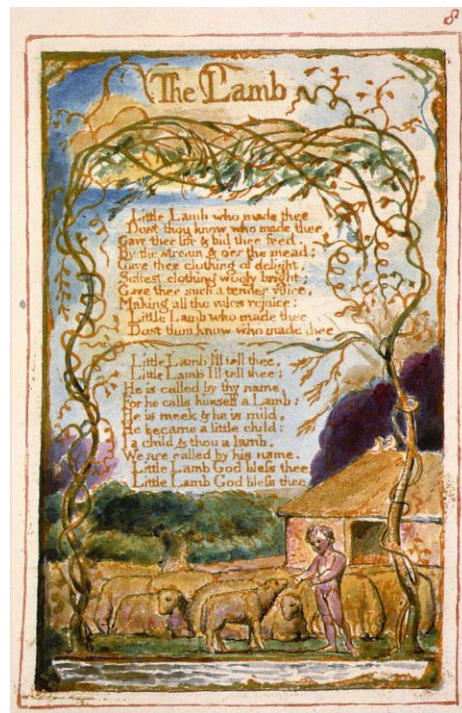


Figure 3. Illustration of “The Lamb” in William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*  
<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/456341374713523684/?lp=true>

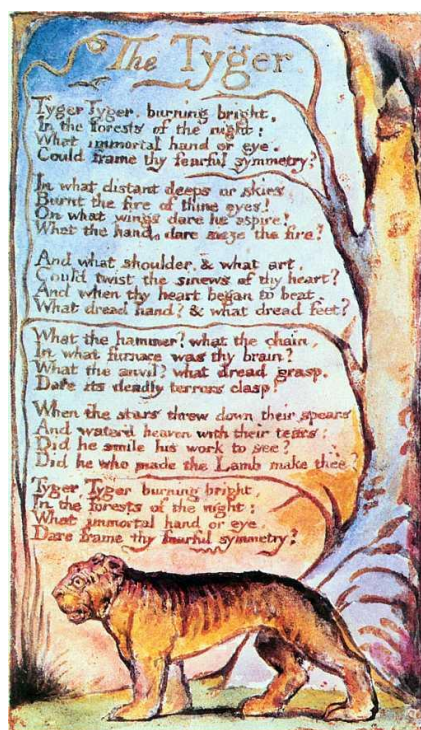


Figure 4. Illustration of "The Tyger" in William Blake's *Songs of Experience*  
<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/18225573471789257/?lp=true>

Both poems are about the maker of the animal, being God; however, for the lamb, God made a pleasant creature and the tiger, a fierce one. The "maker" in both of the poems is shown in different lights: in "The Lamb" God "calls himself a Lamb" and "a child" but in "The Tyger" God is "an immortal hand or eye" who "twists the sinews of thy heart." In "The Tyger" the same narrator of these paired poems asks, "Did he who made the lamb make thee?" It seems the answer to this question is yes, as God is shown in different lights, but in both poems he is powerful and he is the creator. I will now consider what the images tell the reader about the nature of these animals.

The image that accompanies "The Lamb" poem seems to pair well with its text. Some prominent figures in the illustration are the lambs and the child who feeds the animal. Lamb and child are one in this image, both creations of God, but also representations of God himself. The lamb appears to be gentle, calm, and a part of a flock. Blake is not straying from Christian influence, as Jesus is known as the Lamb of God. Baine states, that "Such a symbol has been universal within the Christian tradition for the time of *Revelation*. For Blake, the lamb symbolized all that is sacrificial or innocent in nature and it also embodied the quality of divinity which man can attain as well as emulate"<sup>11</sup>. This interpretation remains valid; as the illustration does not suggest otherwise, the lamb is just as innocent as the child. The tiger is unlike the lamb, which is the central figure of the image and stands alone. The tiger is not directly described as a symbol of God but rather a product of his power.

Another interpretation of the tiger is that it represents the artist's vision and the maker's hand. Unlike the descriptions of the lamb, the maker of the tiger is described through physical features, such as the "hand" and "the shoulder," which are integral parts for Blake himself as illustrator and writer. Blake was experiencing an age of creation, aside from his own personal work, with the rise of industrialism; so, it is possible that what Blake is expressing in this poem is the how powerful the artisan or artist is.

The lamb is one symbol that represents innocence, as a peaceful, natural, gentle, and harmonious state; while, the tiger as a symbol of experience, represents the state as manmade and dark. Blake uses words like "hammer," "chain," and "furnace" to describe how the tiger was made. Although the narrator describes the tiger through "fearful symmetry" I see neither fear nor symmetry in this animal that is illustrated from his side. He looks ignorant, unaware with a wide eye and open mouth. I agree with Rodney M. Baine and Mary R. Baine who support my interpretation of the illustration, which is that the tiger is "a foolish and ugly beast" with "vestigial nose and tiny ears...tightly joined

to a thickset body...placed within a setting of rank or dead vegetation”<sup>11</sup>. In “The Tyger” the striping on the base of the tree mimics the stripes on the tiger’s back to show, as John Grant notes, “that it is the vegetable equivalent of the tiger”<sup>11</sup>. While the tiger is not as gentle as the lamb, I believe the trees along with the poem support how experience is a natural state, as the tiger is a natural creature. Where I find trouble is in the way Blake uses industrial and manmade objects to describe the parts of the tiger. As I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the industrial revolution had a great impact on Blake’s poetry and art. Here, Blake uses the industrial revolution as inspiration for his description of the tiger. Mirroring the way that Blake conceptualized the industrial revolution as necessary but destructive, he seems to be applying those similar notions in his illustration of the tiger. Perhaps, the aspects that the tiger represents are not ideal and this is why Blake chose that language, but ultimately I think that the tiger is supposed to represent the naturalness and sometimes ugliness that accompanies experience. In terms of what Blake believed, Baine states, “Blake saw the tiger as cruel and visionless, with a retracted nose indicating spiritual insensitivity”<sup>11</sup>. If the tiger is “cruel and visionless” then this justifies the machine diction, as Blake shows in poems like “London” the darkness that the machine age produces on the environment and on the human spirit. Another source of evidence for the interpretation of the tiger is its general symbolic meaning in Western literature. Just as the rose calls to mind beauty, romance, passion, sex, and love, Baine explains that the tiger in the “Western World...consistently symbolized bloodthirsty cruelty. Although occasionally poets like Shakespeare or Milton utilized the beast to suggest only untamable fierceness, they generally used the beast to suggest savage cruelty”<sup>11</sup>. The text does support his evaluation; however, the tiger in the image looks meek and unaware. Therefore, Blake may be insinuating that although humans in experience may possess a “savage cruelty” this is just as natural as our mildness in innocence. Baine slightly opposes this notion and explains that the tiger is “natural and inevitable: isolated passions, working reasonless, naturally become furious and cruel”<sup>11</sup>. I agree that the tiger is “natural” and that it represents “passion” in experience, but in poems like “The Little Girl Lost,” the tigers do not attack Lyca and Blake does not offer a cruel representation. While the lamb image appears in both the Innocence and Experience sections, the tiger only appears in Experience, as I argue it symbolizes human passion and lust that gets developed in experience.

The lion is another animal that represents experience, but is unlike the tiger. Baine cautions against comparing the tiger to the lion, which is a nobler creature. In “The Little Girl Found” for example, while the tiger is backed by rich red colors, to suggest it as a symbol of passion, Lyca and other naked children surround the lion. The lion possesses no harm and bears “a crown” atop “golden hair”<sup>9</sup>. It is the lion, which protects Lyca and leads her parents to their sleeping daughter. In “Night,” the lions are also compassionate creatures whose eyes “flow tears of gold” for the sheep’s “tender cries”<sup>9</sup>. What the analysis of the animal motifs reveals about innocence and experience is that both states are natural. Although innocence and experience contrast each other in terms of the desires one develops, the lust that one acquires in experience is just as natural as one’s mildness in innocence.

## 8. Conclusion

Some remaining questions I have that I could possibly address in a longer work include how my interpretations of the illustrations would change if I analyzed other editions of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. I would also like to see if my interpretation would change upon seeing the illustrations in person, such as at the Tate Museum or at the British Museum. Another possible direction for this paper includes seeing the way Blake’s poems are taught in schools. Although I was never introduced to the *Songs* while in school, the poems are often taught in elementary grades or in high school and it would be interesting to see whether they are taught with their illustrations.

While Blake may seem to be only relevant in academia, I believe his messages and his content are relevant to understanding real world experiences. As I state in the introduction and in my first chapter, Blake’s experiences with the devastating treatment of children allowed him to propose new ways of understanding childhood. By living amid revolutionary times, Blake developed modernist and revolutionary thoughts concerning art and literature. Studying the rose, the trees, and animals in Blake’s illustrations reveals the similarities and differences between innocence and experience and how the divisions between childhood and adulthood should be reconsidered. While there have been great advancements in children’s studies, including the protection of children, child labor laws, orphan hood and sex trafficking still inhibit innocence. Blake’s desire for more understanding between individuals and a peaceful world is still sought after. His ideas about the impact of society on the maturity of the child also offer a way to understand stages of life as well as complicated and universal emotions like vulnerability, hopelessness, and freedom.

## 9. Works Cited

1. Paley, Morton D. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969.
2. Stern, Fred. "William Blake, visionary rebel." *World and I*, Oct. 2009. *Academic OneFile*, go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=cuny\_broo39667&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA212037433&it=r&asid=2b9ce6cb9d97f0fa61acca6fb9a7c680.
3. "William Blake," *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-blake. Accessed 7 Febr. 2018.
4. Rácz, István, D. "History and Poetry: William Blake and *The French Revolution*," *Eger Journal of English Studies*, vol. 2, 2007, pp. 39-45.
5. Richey, William. "The French Revolution: Blake's Epic Dialogue with Edmund Burke." *English Literary History*, vol. 59, no. 4, 1992, pp. 817-837, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2873296.
6. Price, Danielle E. "Songs of Innocence and of Experience; Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul." *World Literature and Its Times: Profiles of Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events That Influenced Them*, by Joyce Moss and Lorraine Valestuk, vol. 3: British and Irish Literature and Its Times: Celtic Migrations to the Reform Bill (Beginnings-1830s), 2001, pp. 435-444. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*, go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=GVRL&sw=w&u=cuny\_broo39667&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CCX2875500054&it=r&asid=153dc35996a08f38340e633774988f3c.
7. Phillips, Michael. *William Blake The Creation of the Songs from Manuscript to Illuminated Printing*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.
8. Leader, Zachary. *Reading Blake's Songs*. London, Routledge, 1981.
9. Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Introduction and Commentary by Sir Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford, *Oxford University Press*, 1967.
10. Natov, Roni. *The Poetics of Childhood*. New York, Routledge, 2003, *Children's Literature and Culture*, vol. 24.
11. Baine, Rodney M. and Mary R. Baine. "Blake's Other Tigers, and 'The Tyger,'" *Studies in English Literature*, vol. 15, no. 4, Autumn 1975, pp. 563-578, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org.ez-proxy.brooklyn.cuny.edu:2048/stable/450011.
12. Simpson, Matt. "Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and Experience,'" *Critical Survey*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1992, pp. 22-27.
13. *The Holy Bible*. International Standard Version, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ISV Foundation, 2014.
14. Berwick, J. F. "The Sick Rose: A Second Opinion." *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 47, 1976, pp. 77-81.