

# Children in Blake's poems and illustrations from Songs of Innocence and Experience

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**Majić, Anđela**

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Filozofski fakultet sveučilišta u Zagrebu

Odsjek za anglistiku

Children in Blake's poems and illustrations from *Songs of Innocence and  
Experience*

Diplomski rad

Mentor: dr.sc. Martina Domines Veliki, doc.

Student: Anđela Majić

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## 1. Introduction

The main subject of this graduate thesis will be the portrayal of children and the childlike spirit, with all the depths of meaning that it contains, within Blake's visually artistic and poetic expression. William Blake published *Songs of Innocence* in 1789, as the first volume in his new manner of illuminated printing. Five years later, he reissued it with the addition of *Songs of Experience*, making it the only volume of poems which he published on his own. This shows not only the importance that he attributed to this work but also the earnestness and power of the message that he advocated through it. The two segments of the book present two contrasting expressions within a single scheme. The first one explores the idea of innocence, what it means and how it manifests. The second one explores its corruption and destruction. However, the notion of childhood and the undoing of creative forces that constitute the essence of innocence go much deeper than what childhood relates to, something wider and more elusive as a concept. In the words of Maurice Bowra:

For him childhood is both itself and a symbol of a state of soul which may exist in maturity. His subject is the child-like vision of existence. For him all human beings are in some sense and at some times the children of a divine father, but experience destroys their innocence and makes them follow spectres and illusions. (1966: 30)

At the same time, experience is a necessary part of human growth and development; "To reach a higher state, man must be tested by experience and suffering" (Bowra 1966: 36). In this process of spiritual development, Blake sets the tone of the stages – *Songs of Innocence* are set in a quiet tone, contain simple motifs, sweet and pure imagery, whereas *Songs of Experience* display a transition into indignation and passion, harsh and depressing imagery and complex allegories. What follows this transition are Blake's illuminations which accompany the poems and are also subject to detailed analysis. In this work, the main focus will be put on the element of innocence or experience through the motif of childhood in the analysed poems, how it is defined and how it changes and manifests itself within subjects that Blake addresses. In all of the chosen examples, the text of the poem along with its underlying social, religious or moral issues will be connected to its visual aspect in the form of the illuminated page of that poem and broken down as such. After defining what constitutes the idea of innocence and the childlike spirit in the Romantic Period and Blake's poetry, each of the poems (as well as the elements that are transferred into the matching illumination) will deal with the question of what Blake criticizes and expresses through the motif of children.

## 2. *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*

Blake issued his *Songs of Innocence* in 1789 as the first volume produced in the manner of illuminated printing.<sup>1</sup> Five years later, in 1794, he reissued it using the same technique with the addition of *Songs of Experience*, which he then merged into a single book. The importance that Blake appointed to this book is evident in the fact that this is the only volume of poems which he published himself. He must have seen them as such a wholesome expression of himself as both an artist and a human being that he felt it had to be shared. He issued the *Songs* in its complete form when he was 37, and his final choice of songs went through rigorous revisions given the fact that he omitted some of the best poems that he wrote from the book because he found them unsuitable for reasons only known to him. (Bowra 1974: 136) Something that was formed with such care and attention to detail automatically awakens one's curiosity.

There is a conscious distinction present between Blake's prophecies<sup>2</sup> and his *Songs*. The most obvious one is the form. In the prophecies, he uses free verse, whereas the *Songs* are written in the traditional metres of English songs and hymns, and he explained his reasoning for this in the foreword to *Jerusalem*:

When this Verse was first dictated to me, I consider'd a Monotonous Cadence, like that used by Milton and Shakespeare and all writers of English Blank Verse, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming, to be a necessary and indispensable part of Verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward, but as much bondage as rhyme itself. (Blake as qtd. in Erdman (ed.) 1988: 145)

For this reason, he uses free verse when he needs the freedom of an Orator, but the *Songs* require a different approach, confined within the regular measure of a song. Another distinction is the purpose he aims to fulfil. In the prophecies, there is an urgent, revolutionary call, but the *Songs* begin with a poem simply called 'Introduction'. Blake's ability to create his intricate systems of myths, symbols, and allegories, which makes his prophetic books so outstanding, is completely

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<sup>1</sup> Illuminated printing is a method of relief etching devised by Blake "achieved simply by painting his text and designs on the copperplate with a fine brush or pen in acid-resist, and then 'biting' the plate in acid to reveal his outlines, printing, and hand-coloring." (Ward 2003: 24)

<sup>2</sup> "*Prophecies*" refers to Blake's series of poetic works consisting of 12 books written through an intricate system of myths and symbols, and modelled after the *Bible* and *Ossian* (Bowra 1974: 137-138): *Tiriël* (c. 1789); *The Book of Thel* (c. 1789); *America a Prophecy* (1793); *Europe a Prophecy* (1794); *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793); *The Book of Urizen* (1794); *The Book of Ahania* (1795); *The Book of Los* (1795); *The Song of Los* (1795); *Vala, or The; Four Zoas* (begun 1797, unfinished; abandoned c. 1804); *Milton: A Poem in Two Books* (1804–1810); *Jerusalem; The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804–1820) (Erdman 1988, 8-9).

repressed in the *Songs* and there is almost no trace of his previously elaborated mythical figures or characters (Bowra 1974: 137-138). This is interesting not only because they were both written within a timeframe of a few years, but also because it points to his need to write in a purified, simple form, free of any context other than his own deeply personal point of view to express something primordial. The title itself – *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, puts in front of the reader two contrasting visions, making them continuously aware of this contrast, keeping a mental space for an opposition of what he has read. The first impression while cutting into his *Songs of Innocence* is the fluid simplicity - the words and images he uses are so simple, but the mental images and the feeling they imprint resonate much more profoundly. As noted by Leo Damrosch, "the most accessible of Blake's poems are the *Songs of Innocence*, intended to be read aloud by adults to small children, and embedded in images that enrich the texts. Some of these are simple illustrations, but others differ suggestively from the words, hinting at perspectives that adult readers may ponder while the children receive a simpler message." (2015: 50). On the other hand, Morris Eaves argues that the surprising complexity of Blake's poems is further deepened by the illuminations: "Texts and pictures, despite their presence on the same pretty page, coexist as semi-autonomous strata: rifts and faults in one stratum disrupt the features of the adjacent stratum, making conditions ideal for mental earthquakes." (2003: 5). Both of these perspectives meet in the following: one of the reasons for the poem's artistic worth lies in the reader's open possibility to take from them what they desire, whether it be savouring the simple motifs and their purity, which will mainly be this case with children, or delving into complex issues and states of mind that hide behind them, reserved for the adult readers. Eaves explained this well: "The *Songs* have that wondrous characteristic that even great poems can only occasionally claim: they are enjoyable at any level of scrutiny. Their concentrated music makes them sound good when read aloud the first time and the fiftieth; most of them make some kind of sense right away, while repeated readings yield new insights." (2003: 2). And with few exceptions", as Damrosch adds later on when referring to *Songs of Experience*, "the poems in the second set are the ones that nobody would want to read to small children" (2015: 66).

In *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*<sup>3</sup>, Blake states: "Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to Human

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<sup>3</sup> *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is another illustrated piece of writing by Blake, containing 27 plates. This illuminated book published in 1790 is an apocalyptic satire that Blake made in response to "the theology of Emanuel Swedenborg, the cosmology and ethics of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and biblical history and morality as constructed by the "Angels" of the established church and state." (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, The William Blake Archive)

existence." (Blake as qtd. in Erdman (ed.) 1988: 34). He kept this in mind when writing the poems and elaborated this thought extensively. The two sections of the *Songs* are two separate elements that are both contrasted and complementary. The first part puts forth his imaginative vision of the state of innocence, depicted through symbols of pastoral life. The second part shows how life destroys this state of innocence by slowly corrupting it with experience as an inevitable part of being human.

### **3. Childhood as a motif in the Romantic Period**

The notion of childhood only began to get recognition in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century within the period which we now define as *The Romantic Movement*. This period marks an important transition in Britain's as well as Europe's history, mainly associated with the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the middle class, signifying the end of the Classical period. With the new social structure that came with these changes, the construction of childhood changed as well. Adrienne E. Gavin, in discussing the literary constructions of childhood and its development from medieval to contemporary times, claims that Romantic writers in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were the first to produce a sustained construct of childhood through their poetry. Childhood in the Romantic sense is distinct from adulthood, a desirable state to which adults wish they could return: "a lost, idealized, clear-visioned, divinely pure, intuitive, in-tune-with-nature, imaginative stage of life, of whose spirit adults felt the loss and sought to capture in literature" (2012: 8).

To understand the role of children and innocence in Blake's poetry, he must first be considered in relation to the features of Romanticism, even though his work marks the beginning stages of the period which defines him as a Pre-Romantic poet. Calling a writer Romantic, as David Simpson explains it, "has thus traditionally been to signal an interest in such categories as genius, nature, childhood, and imagination, perhaps along with some assumed response to the French Revolution." (2003: 170), all of which are touched upon by Blake in his work. However, the way Blake fits into the constructions of the period has been widely debated by literary critics, and some of those debates, as summarized and compared in Simpson's essay *Blake and Romanticism* do not narrow the defining parameters that make Blake a Romantic poet, nor do they give a precise answer to what those parameters are:

(...) he is unusual for having been, for much of the twentieth century, the outside insider, the writer who is mentioned, quoted, and taught (while others have been ignored completely) but mostly not placed at the center of the spirit of the age. It is as if he cannot be ignored but cannot be quite integrated: the traditions which we need to know to make some sense of him are not the traditions that have gone into the favored models of Romanticism. (2003: 178)

One of the reasons for this inability to constrict Blake's work within any defining parameters is its originality, which eludes this or any other epoch. Additionally, this intricacy is further transferred into the field of art history, which has its own parameters, categories and stylistic and thematic definitions, and to which Blake contributes through painting, engraving and book illustration (Simpson 2003: 178). However, when it comes to the subject of the child and childhood, Blake's work, along with William Wordsworth's (1770-1850), is indispensable. Their vision of childhood is based on the idea of purity and idyll, and the overlap of their visions is well presented through Wordsworth's words: "The Child is Father of the man" (*My heart leaps up when I behold*, 1807: 7), depicting the child as the teacher of the adult. Blake, as "one of the English Romantic-period poets who is most routinely associated with new configurations of infancy", constructed a specific "new, 'Romantic' understanding of infancy as a privileged state which is both free from but also vulnerable to corruption, or, to use Blake's own terms, as an 'innocence' always liable to transition to 'experience'." (Domines Veliki, Duffy 2020: 15-16). As Adrienne E. Gavin suggests, Romantic poetry from authors like Blake and Wordsworth constructs the "Romantic child" as a correlation between an idyllic state desired by adults and the opposing notion of experience feared by adults. In this context, she cites Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* (1807) as the paragon for this construct of childhood, and marks it as "one of the period's most influential poems about childhood" (2012: 8), which portrays childhood as a state of emotional spontaneity, unlimited possibilities and endless potential, "but a state from which all mature minds feel estranged" (Austin 2003: 83). Gavin immediately follows her previous statement by adding: "William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) also famously expresses the Romantic sense of adulthood, or experience, as a falling away from childhood's innocence" (2012: 8). For Blake specifically, this Romantic sense of adulthood defined as experience is not the finish line to one's spiritual development, but this idea will be explored more elaborately in the context of Blake's poems.



#### 4. Childhood as Blake's motif

Even though Blake himself did not have any children with his wife, he was certainly involved in the subject of children and childhood. Both are significant subjects in Blake's work, and in the *Songs*, he delves into the issues of exploitation and repression of children *in* and *by* the English society, as well as the Church. Robert Rix argues that "It is against this repressive ideology that Blake most clearly articulates a theory of 'infancy' as pivotal for an understanding of man's rights to be treated respectfully as an individual." (2020: 49). One of the objects of Blake's criticism was later documented in the form of the *Report of Children's Employment Commission*, which contains thousands of pages of testimonies revealing abusive practices in particular industries like factories, mines, mills, trades and manufacturers, bleach and dye works, lace manufactures and, notably, chimney sweeping (White 2005: 212-213). Testimonies sometimes came from children as young as five years old, who were used for tasks which benefitted from their small size and forced obedience. The source of this labour force were poorhouses, which was convenient not only because these children were statistically insignificant and seemingly dispensable, but also because such practices were distasteful to the common eye, so it was in the best interest of everybody for it to be hidden. In some of these cases, 'hidden' meant working for up to 16 hours in total darkness and solitude, ankle-deep in water, pumping water, pulling coal carriages and carrying the coal baskets on their backs up the ladders. The chimney sweepers, which became a symbol in Blake's work, were under constant risk of injuries, fractures, suffocations and asphyxiations.

However, this instance that Blake expressed through his *Songs* as a means of social protest was not all that rare. Not in their form, nor in their content. According to R. S. White, "Late eighteenth-century children's books contain poems and stories on such subjects as the distress of poverty, the evils of the slave trade and the need for kindness to animals: most seek to inculcate a mildly progressive humanitarianism." (2005: 220). So, what exactly is the revolutionary component with which Blake contributed to this notion? Maurice Bowra warns of the deceitfulness of the *Songs* since their form is so purified and fluent, one can easily forget that they have a whole world of meaning behind the words: "It is possible to read the *Songs* and to be so enchanted by them that we do not stop to ask what in fact they mean. (...) The mere meaning, extracted from the poems and paraphrased in lifeless prose, is indeed a poor thing in comparison with what Blake wrote " (1974: 138). This is of key significance when it comes to Blake's ability to get his point across. The aforementioned 'revolutionary component' lays in the

unobtrusiveness of his ideas expressed through their simplicity. Polite adult rationalism, as R.S. White calls it (2005: 220), binds itself to the unavoidable controlling mode of conveying ideas as the only available and acceptable source of rightfulness. This way of introducing ideas in any kind of discourse is reduced to argumentation which we can either accept as the recipient of the information (which will happen only if we were already predisposed to this way of thinking, or if this notion is already in the category of the moral values that we advocate), or it will automatically launch us in the state of resistance. It should be noted that this impulse that we as humans have, to distance ourselves from unpleasant ideas, is exactly what society does on a macro level. It hides away its unpleasant or problematic practices and keeps them separate from the common view. Blake, on the other hand, has a specific talent to express himself in a way that does not raise one's moral barrier once they come into contact with the hidden unpleasantness that is his object of focus. In *Songs of Innocence*, he uses his subtlety to bring an issue to consciousness through slight provocation, without creating a barrier with the reader. In *Songs of Experience*, however, his *modus operandi* is not subtle anymore - his criticism is harsh and expressive, but portrayed through pity. The simplicity of his form combined with the underlying seriousness of his actual motifs, and conveyed through the use of pity shows how difficult ideas can be presented in a way that addresses them as an issue in an unobtrusive way. In other words - a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.

As mentioned before, the state of innocence for Blake is both childhood in itself and a symbolic state which may persist in adulthood. His vision of what childhood is, coupled with his religious beliefs that all human beings are children of a divine father, shows how their pure childlike state of mind and soul is gradually dissolved by deeper contact with the world and more experience of it. When Blake expresses the distinction between the state of innocence and the state of experience, he does it by comparing similar or identical themes from opposite viewpoints. Given the fact that he first wrote *Songs of Innocence*, and added the *Songs of Experience* afterward, his motivation to upgrade and complement his first statement tickles one's curiosity. "When he composed the *Songs of Experience*, Blake seems to have passed through a spiritual crisis. He, who was in many ways the healthiest of men, wrote in 1793: 'I say I shan't live for five years, and if I live one it will be a wonder.' What this was we can only guess, and such clues as are available point to a combination of different causes." (Bowra 1974: 141) Whatever the emotional turmoil that he was experiencing was, his inspiration seemed to be in full bloom, and given the importance that he put on active imagination as the proof of God within him, this period seemed particularly fruitful for him.

The following pages will aim to break down the subthemes which Blake expresses through his idea of innocence, whether through criticism or the construct of a divine state. These subthemes will serve as a means to incorporate structure and gain some insight and clarity into the complex and elusive concept that is the motif of a child. Even though this system of categorizing Blake's idea of childhood might prove limiting to a certain extent, given the subject's inability to be fully contained within any kind of classification, it aims to incorporate as much meaning as it can within the bounds of poems selected for this purpose. Specifically, the themes used for this categorization are:

1. Divine inspiration and spirituality (as shown by 'Introduction' [*SoI* & *SoE*<sup>4</sup>], 'The Lamb' [*SoI*], and 'Infant Joy' [*SoI*])
2. Exploitation by the State and society (as shown by 'The Chimney Sweeper' [*SoI* & *SoE*] and 'London' [*SoE*])
3. Exploitation by the Church (as shown by 'Holy Thursday' [*SoI* & *SoE*] and 'Infant Sorrow' [*SoE*])
4. Condemnation of slavery (as shown by 'Little Black Boy' [*SoI*])

#### **4.1. Divine inspiration and spirituality**

##### 4.1.1. Introduction

The first song in both *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* is called 'Introduction'. In *Songs of Innocence*, the narrator envisions himself walking "down the valleys wild" (1) and playing songs, encountering a child on a cloud who asks him to pipe a song for him, then singing it without the pipe, and finally writing it down so that everyone can admire the happy song. The narrator was piping around cheerfully until a child he encountered asked him to create a song based on a specific subject – a lamb. As will be mentioned in the following poems and their analysis, Blake uses the symbol of a lamb to express a specific form of innocence, that in the shape of Jesus Christ (Damon 1973: 232), which embeds a Christian element to the poem – an important part of Blake's expression. This means that the child that requested a song about a lamb is encouraging the narrator to connect with the divine realm for inspiration. The child is, therefore, a metaphor for inspiration from God, pointing to the conclusion that if we follow the God-like impulses of the child that we have within us, inspiration and creation are inevitable.

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<sup>4</sup> Abbreviations for *Songs of Innocence* & *Songs of Experience*, used only in this instance for convenience.

Aside from characterising a child as the embodiment of inspiration and imagination, as well as the connectedness with the divine realm, this poem is also an explanation of Blake's writing process for the whole volume of poems – at first, there is a sensation, a feeling that has no specific shape or form, "Piping down the valleys wild/ Piping songs of pleasant glee" (1-2). Then, it turns into an idea and the inspiration encourages it to shape itself into something more concrete. Through revision, it shifts from melody into words: "Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe/ Sing thy songs of happy cheer" (9-10) until finally, this same stroke of inspiration disappears and leaves the author to himself to use what nature offers him so that he can translate his thoughts into a written form:

Piper sit thee down and write  
In a book that all may read"  
So he vanish'd from my sight.  
And I pluck'd a hollow reed,  
And I made a rural pen,  
And I stain'd the water clear,  
And I wrote my happy songs  
Every child may joy to hear.

(13-20)

Upon reading, the imagery and the atmosphere are so pleasant and sweet, that it automatically evokes emotions of delight. The child that encourages the author to express himself, and further upgrade this expression so that it may be shared with others shows how Blake sees children not only as a source of pure energy of acceptance and joyfulness but also as inspiration. This is confirmed by the child's reaction to the song, the fact that it is crying means the author's expression has struck a chord with which it resonates: "Why do children weep 'with joy to hear' these songs? Because the message transcends the realities of their condition without changing them." (Erdman 1977: 144). Leo Damrosch notes that the weeping here expresses joy as defined by Blake himself "as in one of the *Proverbs of Hell* in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: 'Excess of sorrow laughs, excess of joy weeps.'" (2015: 54). In other words: metaphorically, the poems (in *Songs of Innocence*, naturally) resonate with the very notion of innocence. The last line "Every child may joy to hear" (20) confirms that this song is the embodiment of the childlike spirit, and creates joy in all those who share it – whether they are children themselves or adults who are childlike at heart. The poem consists of five

quatrains, and the rhyme within each of the quatrains differs. In stanzas 1, 2 and 4 the rhyme is ABAB, whereas in stanzas 3 and 5, it has an ABCB pattern. This contributes to the atmosphere of simplicity and childlike playfulness portrayed in the poem. Another important element is Blake's choice of pastoral, introduced at the beginning of the poem with the speaker running around valleys and playing the shepherd's pipe, displaying his unity with the natural world. As Harold Bloom put it, "The 'Introduction' establishes the *Songs* as relating themselves to pastoral convention." (1961: 30). In fact, after 'Introduction', the poems that follow are 'The Shepherd', 'The Ecchoing Green' and 'The Lamb', all containing pastoral motifs starting with the title. This leads to the conclusion that Blake builds surroundings which he finds most suitable for his vision of innocence to thrive in, it being an environment unsullied by societal restrictions and systems, allowing one full liberty. On the other hand, the poems that contain urban motifs, as will be shown later on, are often those that advocate his criticism toward the society, State, Church, etc., but pastoral motifs can be found throughout those as well. Blake's choice of symbols was well described by C. M. Bowra: "In the *Songs of Innocence*, Blake's symbols are largely drawn from the Bible, and since he makes such familiar figures as the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God, there is not much difficulty in seeing what he means." (1974: 143).

The last stanza contains an ambiguity to this pristine state, in the line "I stain'd the water clear" (18). As stated by Bloom, "a slight shadow falls in the double meaning of "stain'd" (1961: 30). To understand this, he directs the attention to the title page for *Songs of Innocence* (e.g. see fig. 1) depicting Mother Nature reading a book to her children, confronted by a diseased apple tree with fruit hanging above the children<sup>5</sup> (Bloom 1961: 143). Simply put, innocence is never freestanding but bears traces of experience within it. Both the motif of stained water and diseased fruit-bearing tree stand for the defilement of innocence, and in using these motifs Blake notifies the reader of the presence of experience, a setting present throughout the poems.

The previously mentioned title page of *Songs of Innocence* is, in fact, not the first plate. Before it comes an interesting frontispiece (e.g. see fig. 3) illustrating a man holding a pipe, looking up at a child floating on a cloud. In the background there are trees and sheep grazing, visualising the words of the poem in a pastoral setting. Therefore, upon opening the book, this mysterious depiction leaves the reader in rumination until the words of 'Introduction' describe its meaning. It should also be noted that the child is depicted naked while the piper is wearing

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<sup>5</sup> It can also be argued that the motif of apples above the children's head is a reference to the fruit from the *Tree of Knowledge*, again leading to the conclusion that experience is present within innocence, and its 'consummation' will replace naivety with cognition.

light, tight-fitting clothing. The explanation for this is offered by Leo Damrosch, who notes that "The mother and children on the title page were clothed, but Blake's more overtly symbolic figures are usually naked or wear diaphanous garments, in accordance with his conviction that in a good painting 'the drapery is formed alone by the shape of the naked body'" (2015: 53). Therefore, the nakedness is not only a signifier of unity with nature and oneself but also underlines the construct of the child, in connection to God, as a source and symbol of divine inspiration. The illumination for 'Introduction' (e.g. see fig. 2) features vines climbing from the ground on both sides of the text "derived from a mediaeval manuscript illustrating the Tree of Jesse" (Keynes 1972: 132-3), showing Jesus Christ's genealogical descent from David, the son of Jesse. Given the fact that the poem represents divine inspiration on the subject of a lamb that symbolizes Christ, this backdrop seems fitting. Additionally, the ground from which the vines stem has a stream in front of it, alluding both to the "water clear" (18) and the reed that the piper uses to write his poems.

In *Songs of Experience*, 'Introduction' sets off on a more serious tone, and the reader is urged to hear the words of the Bard, who can see the Past, Present, and Future. Unlike the Piper who runs around valleys and pipes happy melodies, the Bard introduces a more serious setting to the poem. The notion of divinity is repeated here as well. In this case, though, the divine vision does not manifest as childlike imagination, but as a singular harsh revelation in the form of God's Word, calling on the "lapsed soul" (5) to redirect its attention from the "starry pole" (9) and renew the fallen light. According to Blake's Dictionary, "The STARS symbolize Reason. (...) They are a member of a quaternary: Sun (imagination), Moon (love), Stars (reason), and Earth (the senses). They are assigned to Urizen."<sup>6</sup> (Damon 1973: 386). These elements interact in a way that conveys a message: mankind is stuck in reason, "The starry pole" (9), and the senses, "O Earth O Earth return!" (11), are called to be brought back so that the imagination (Sun) might rise again: "Night is worn, / And the morn / Rises from the slumberous mass." (13-15). In other words, mankind/Earth has shifted its focus from inner imagination (God) onto the material world around it. In the previous poem, the staining of water was proof of existence of experience within innocence. In this case, Bloom claims, the poem "summons the reader to progress with the aid of the contraries, to carry Innocence over into Experience and Experience into a more organized Innocence" (1961: 38). This would explain the process of maturation as

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<sup>6</sup> *Urizen* is a character from Blake's mythology, a god-like figure who symbolizes Reason; a law-maker, the avenging conscience and the limiter of Energy. His story is told in *The Four Zoas* (one of the *Prophetic Books*), while his name first appears in *A Song of Liberty* (from *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) (Damon 1973: 419-422).

envisioned by Blake – naive innocence as a pure, pristine state in which a child is happy, free and unburdened by the realities of the world, followed by the seeds of experience that grow and corrupt this state as a necessary part of growing up and coming into deeper contact with the world, and the final stage that completes this development is reaching organized innocence within experience and coming out the other end. Organized innocence in this sense would be the result of transcending both naive innocence and experience ("the aid of the contraries") and establishing a position that combines the liberties of innocence with realities and wisdom of experience.

The divine vision in the form of a child in *Songs of Innocence* encourages the author to perform an action that is immediately followed by the action itself, whereas the bard's incentives fall on deaf ears since the intended audience is irretrievably spiritually disconnected from their source of inspiration. Divine intervention that is present in both states blooms into creativity and joyful expression in the state of innocence, whereas in the state of experience the opportunity for imaginative fulfilment and redemption is wasted and brings to consciousness how unattonable the human race is, which is what disables it from following the Divine intervention. To put it simply, in *Songs of Innocence*, the essence of innocence is a child that symbolizes the Divine inspiration and is proof of man's connectedness with God. The essence of experience in *Songs of Experience* is the unattainability of connection with the Divine sphere. Growing up, man has become so removed from his imagination, his childlike spirit, that he cannot pull himself up from the "starry pole" (9), which is only human nature. On the other hand,

we begin to apprehend Blake when we realize that for him "human nature" is a wholly unacceptable phrase, an absolute contradiction, or, as he said, 'an impossible absurdity'. What was human about us, Blake insisted, was the imagination; what was natural about us had to be redeemed by the imagination, or else it would destroy us. The imagination, to Blake, was not a faculty, however glorious, but was the Real Man, the unfallen unity we had been and must become again. (Bloom 2003: 12-13)

*Songs of Experience* also has a frontispiece which is clearly in reference to the one in *Songs of Innocence* (e.g. see fig. 5). Here, however, there is no cosy frame made of tree branches but a lone tree in the background and one large trunk in the foreground. A large flock of sheep is replaced by two or three sheep "grazing in a single shadowy mass" (Damrosch 2015: 70). The most interesting part is the man with a winged child on his head, both looking at the reader with an abstruse look. Even though the child's wings are outspread, it cannot soar because the man

is holding its hands. As previously defined, the child symbolizes inspiration from God, meaning that experience implies the containment of creative forces and cuts the connection with the divine sphere. The illumination for 'Introduction' in *Songs of Experience* (e.g. see fig. 4) depicts a starry background, referring to "the starry pole" (9) but also signifying the darkness of the human state. In the bottom lies a naked figure, a representation of Earth with her back from the reader – "O Earth return (...) / Turn away no more" (11; 16). The play of elements that were present in the poem is also present in the illumination – Earth is turned away from us and disconnected, enveloped in the stars, but has an aura around its head that shines like the Sun, which was previously explained as a metaphor for imagination. This leads to the conclusion that the potential for enlightenment and salvation lies within our imagination, meaning that, if humanity is to be saved, it must pass through the process of maturation and reach organized innocence.

#### 4.1.2. The Lamb

The poem begins with a child asking a lamb a series of questions about its existence, asking who gave it such delightful qualities like the softness of its fur or the pleasantness of its voice, and then answering the questions themselves. The child tells the lamb that God, who also calls himself a Lamb, made it. Even though the poem seems simple and easy to understand, there is more depth to its simplicity than detected by the first impression. The rhyme in the song is in a simple AABB scheme, portraying a child-like manner of expression and making it sound like a nursery rhyme. As was previously mentioned, the image of a lamb is usually a metaphor for Jesus in his physical form. As is defined in *Blake's Dictionary*, "it is a symbol of the Christ. (...) Blake used the Lamb as a symbol of Innocence (SoI, 'The Lamb'), and of God's love, as contrasted with his wrath (SoE, 'The Tyger')" (Damon 1973: 232). In this poem, this is expressed in the literal sense:

He is meek, & he is mild;

He became a little child.

I, a child, & thou a lamb,

We are called by his name.

(15-18)



In this case, God, the child and the animal are all equalized and stand as proof of a loving Creator, while also portraying a Christian ideal of compassion, gentleness, innocence, and purity. This poem very clearly conveys Blake's belief that Jesus embodies all his creations within him - he is us, and we are him. The fact that the poem is in the form of question and answer validates the metaphoric sense of childhood since it is a natural thing for a child to have an imaginary conversation with an animal as a form of play, while also showing the transcendental interconnectedness of all that comes from God, still untouched by unpleasant experiences of life. In other words, experience hardens us and gradually disables the communication of (our inner) child with God himself, and with it our creative imagination. Anne Kostelanetz Mellor introduces an interesting argument on this subject:

The closed form of the poem, a catechistic question and answer, implies that the universe in which such a dialogue could take place is also closed; in other words, the world of Innocence includes all that one needs to know of man's relation to God. Blake's design emphasizes this sense of completeness: two trees with spreading branches intertwine around and between the stanzas to frame the entire pastoral scene of lamb and child into a single unit. (1974: 4)

The state of innocence, as the quote suggests, requires isolation in order to be preserved. The use of the word "catechistic" is interesting and contributes to this claim since catechism is defined as a summary of the principles of the Christian religion in the form of questions and answers, used for the instruction of Christians (Hobson 2004: 63). The answers that are provided are restricted to a certain set of information that leaves no space for further inquiries - what is stated in the answer is what one needs to know of the subject. This can be connected to the use of rhetorical questions in the poem. The first half of the poem is a rhetorical question in itself, where the answer is contained in the second half. (Mellor 1974: 4) Forming the poem by posing a question and then answering it makes the reader feel like he was given a complete, finished idea. As was mentioned at the beginning of this section, the poem may seem simple, but it is actually a well-crafted whole, controlled by simple sentences and wholesome rhyme and rhythm which create a restricted "unit of perception" (Mellor 1974: 8) of Blake's world of innocence.

This appears even more true when we compare it to Blake's illumination (e.g. see fig. 6) for the poem. The child is naked, in its most natural state ("as is"), which seems appropriate not only because nakedness in itself refers to the state of innocence in the Bible before Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis 2, but because it conveys a sense of security, comfort, and unambiguity. The colours are warm and bright, painting the scene in a cosy

summery landscape. There is a sprightly vine that curls playfully, enveloping the scene of child and lamb (and the herd in the background) and shielding them from the outside world. Once again Blake's choice of a pastoral scene conveys his desire to find a utopia for innocence, but unlike 'Introduction', where the pastoral scene allows full freedom of being, in 'The Lamb' it is more focused on displaying a sense of cosiness, protection and isolation.

For this archaic, idealistic vision of innocence and childhood to stay sustained, it must be contained and protected from outside sources, which signifies its fragility. Bloom goes a step further in addressing this issue: "'The Lamb', usually considered a fine example of namby-pamby, is a poem of profound and perilous ambiguity, and raises for us the crucial problem of the *Songs of Innocence* and of *Experience*, the pairing of matched poems, here 'The Lamb' and 'The Tyger'" (1961: 31). What he means by this is that the poem which corresponds directly to this one in *Songs of Experience*, 'The Tyger', introduces another perspective of this protected world in which the lamb lives – it is the same world in which the tiger lives and preys on the lamb. Bloom then elaborates his argument: "The lamb is emblematic of both reality and deception in the ambiguities of merely natural innocence. In the world of experience within 'The Tyger' he would be an object of pity" (1961: 31). The conclusion this leads to is similar to the one made in 'Introduction' - a seed of experience is always present within innocence, and although there is beauty in its fragility and naivety, it is also the source of its defencelessness and endangerment. To sum up, a lamb in the Blakean sense has a layered meaning that carries a spiritual component (being a symbol of Christ, innocence, and God's love), a pastoral one (as it is a usual motif in that sense), and an ambiguous one (its tenderness being both its virtue and flaw).

#### 4.1.3. Infant Joy

Although not a major poem in the collection, it deals with important motifs in the context of this thesis. As is typical for Blake, this poem is deceitfully simple in its form yet troublesome to interpret for several reasons. The narrators are both the baby and its mother, and their interaction portrays the joy and excitement a new-born brings into the world. The poem begins with the baby saying: "I have no name / I am but two days old" (1-2). The significance of the child's age, given that it is a specific number, has prompted numerous interpretations by critics. Whereas some connect the "two days" with the creation of heaven in Genesis, others suggest that it might denote the number of days since the pregnancy has been established. However, the

explanation offered by Walter Minot seems to connect with Blake's ideas to the highest degree. He proposes that the fact the child has no name can be explained by the custom of baptising children on the third day after birth, and the poem is referencing the time before its christening: "For example, the birthdate of William Shakespeare has been accepted (not without some doubts) as April 23rd because he was baptised on April 26th and, according to Sidney Lee, 'it was a common practice to baptise a child three days after birth' " (Minot 1991: 78). At the same time, this perspective raises a question – how long can a child stay truly innocent after its arrival on Earth until the labels and restrictions of society force it into a certain type of mould?

The lines "I happy am / Joy is my name" (4-5) tell the reader that the only thing this child knows about itself is that it feels happy and that, although it does not have a name yet, joy is a state that covers its existence. Therefore, Joy stands for what the child is and feels, but also references the only time in its life when it will be free to define itself as it wishes: "the infant at 'two days old' (2) is completely innocent, free, and joyful for probably the last time in its life, for after that (according to Blake's view of the world) the infant will be christened, or named, thus limited by repressive human institutions such as the church." (Minot 1991: 78) The rest of the poem is narrated by the mother, where she shares the joy she feels for her baby and blesses it as Joy, hoping that its future will indeed be full of it – "Sweet joy befall thee" (12).

Reading this poem through the eyes of our modern time assurance of the infant's safe and certain future is what keeps the subject simple and charming, and wrongly so. Namely, in Blake's time infants commonly died, which casts another light on the matter (Gardner 2013: 52). Infant mortality is not expected in today's time, which is why the instant connection of mother and child is permitted with confidence that this connection will not be jeopardized. What makes this moment of connection in Blake's poem remarkable is the fact that, after two days, this baby is at its most fragile state, and yet the mother still decided to immerse herself in this tiny expression of joy and recognise it as such; "The lines establish a powerful and unprecedented bond of sympathy between the parent and the new-born child, which it was usual to resist in emotional self-defence until the child had survived his precarious entry into the world and could be accepted as a unique personality.", Gardner explains, connecting the beauty of this moment to the illumination as well: "One blossom drops in repose while the other encloses the child, the nurse and the angel in a cradle of natural splendour. This angel is invoked not by maternal feelings, even when these were held (as they had to be in Blake's century) against the odds of death, but by love, epitomized in the nurture of childhood" (2012: 53-54). According to Blake's Dictionary, "Angels also mercifully bring death, particularly to children."

(Damon 1973: 22), which makes them both the protectors of innocence and the guardians of souls in the unfortunate case of the children's death. This potential for death may be what the droopy blossom symbolizes.

Blake was criticised by some for the line "Thou dost smile" (5) since an infant that young is not at the stage of its development where smiling is possible. Robert Rix responds to this criticism by arguing that Blake used a figure of speech to establish the natural 'joy' embodied by infants, "To which all men of more advanced years must seek to return" (Rix 2020: 52), once again bringing us back to the construct of maturation as a process in which innocence incorporated by experience results in spiritual homeostasis that is organized innocence. Rix concludes later on that for Blake, infancy is not only the beginning of childhood, but also a metaphor for one's spiritual reawakening and rebirth, and the liberty of expression given to children in Blake's poems as carriers of innocence seem even more special when compared to the contemporary models of his time: "the unusualness of the children in Blake's poems often only becomes fully apparent when they are compared with models otherwise available in the eighteenth century. Many of Blake's poems are remarkably free of restrictive didacticism, and indeed openly critical of it" (Rix 2020: 63). Therefore, an infant for Blake, specifically the one in 'Infant Joy' is a spiritual construct embodying pure joy and innocence; their recent arrival on this world still carries strong closeness to the divine, and their "value of Innocence" (Rix 2020: 52) serves as inspiration and incentive for one to recognise and return to innocence within.

## **4.2. Exploitation by the State/society**

### **4.2.1. The Chimney Sweeper**

The poem begins with the narrator, a young boy, explaining why he became a sweep - he was sold by his father after his mother's death, and now works as a chimney sweeper and sleeps in soot. He recalls the story of a boy called Tom Dacre whom he comforted when his hair was cut off until he had fallen asleep and dreamt of sweeper-heaven. From third to the fifth stanza, he follows an imagined narrative that Tom sees in a dream, where thousands of sweeps locked in coffins taste freedom, run in nature and bathe, laugh and shine in the Sun after an angel releases them from their confined misery. The next morning, the boy wakes up and goes to do his work, basking in the warm glow of knowing he will one day be happy and free if he does his duty.

Even though the narrator is an unknown sweep, the fact that he tells a story of a boy to whom he refers by his name is significant because it introduces a personal note to the poem. Blake's treatment of pity to invoke sympathy in the reader creates harsh awareness for all the neglected children living in dreadful conditions, which was a normal sight in industrial England of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this context, Michaela Irimia points out that Blake "Had seen London improving in terms of welfare, cleanliness and economic expansion, but could not help deploring the cost at which this was being done" (2013: 176). Blake made a clear contrast between the brutal conditions that these children found themselves in, through no fault of their own, and the positive and hopeful perspective they have on the world which is almost painfully naive. They are hopeful that one day they will be happy, clean and free, but given how dangerous their work is, and the fact that they are children, and as such - helpless, we as readers are aware that their hopes will not be fulfilled and will eventually die with them. To put this in realistic circumstances, David Erdman informs us that "In 1788 philanthropists secured a piece of protective legislation for the "climbing boys" which provided that a boy should not be apprenticed before he was eight, should be thoroughly washed once a week, and should not be compelled to go up an ignited chimney", (1977: 132) which gives more than enough insight to just how horrifying the treatment of chimney sweepers was up until that point. Sadly, he adds: "Even that modest attempt at reform was never enforced, and employing small children as chimney sweeps did not become illegal until 1875." (1977: 132) Blake's poem deals with the first two points of the legislation, the first one being age. The usual age for starting apprenticeships was 13, the same age that Blake started his engraving apprenticeship, but at that age, boys would become too large to fit into the narrow chimneys, which is why this practice would require younger (and therefore smaller) children: "the regular small climbing boys were hardly paid anything and could be kept almost unfed for fear of growing out of their business" (Irimia 2013: 176). The second point is hygiene; since there were no facilities where sweepers could wash off the soot, cancer of the scrotum was common (Damrosch 2013: 64), which is why the poem contains the motif of children being naked and white after they "wash in a river and shine in the Sun" (16). This invokes a sense of injustice in the reader, making them aware that only the ones who stand up to the normalization of child oppression and exploitation will correct that injustice. The reader is further challenged by the fact that the sweep is speaking directly to them, saying: "So your chimneys I sweep"(4). At the same time, it points to the uselessness of Christian platitudes used to give moral justification to the exploitation of children as a social phenomenon. Instead of causing disbelief and urgent action-taking to prevent it, such a horrific practice is morally purified and almost romanticized as God's way to

bring his children closer to His grace. Again, Blake does not provoke compassion and resistance to societal and religious norms of his time through direct, crude criticism, but uses the naivety and helplessness of the speaker, who has no choice but to accept his fate caused by unavoidable circumstances, to express hard-hitting facts, and leaving a space for the readers to estimate for themselves the greatness of such an injustice. In other words, in *Songs of Innocence* Blake bypasses any explicit form of protest, but still provokes the reader by addressing them directly while hinting on the implausibility of hopeful childlike rationalization.

The symbol of a lamb, which appears regularly throughout the *Songs*, represents an obvious biblical connection to God in his physical form, but also the state of innocence itself, so the image of child and lamb can be used interchangeably in Blake's work. The context here is Tom Dacre's hair "that curl'd like a lamb's back, was shav'd " (6), so that it would prevent the child from spoiling his white hair from soot, but more realistically, to prevent dirt build-up and infections. Symbolically, however, cutting his white lamb-like hair can be interpreted as cutting away his innocence, much like with the image of a child sleeping in black soot. Essentially, it exchanges his whiteness for blackness. That brings the attention to the symbolism of colours: white for innocence, as well as regained freedom and carelessness; black for soot, tainting the sweep's childhood, and the coffins for helplessness and restricting their freedom. The final line in the poem, "if all do their duty, they need not fear harm." (24), points to a Christian belief that if one works hard, he will be saved and reach Heaven. At the same time, it carries a much darker implication, referring to the "harm" that follows if they fail to fulfil their duty, and further than that – even when fulfilling their duties, they are still harmed and suffering. Here, Blake calls out the dangers of misinterpreting the Bible that results in the justification of child exploitation.

In *Songs of Experience*, Blake takes further steps to explore how society allowed such a thing to happen. The second poem is noticeably shorter and begins with a crying chimney sweeper who is asked where his parents are, to which he replies that they have gone up to the church to pray. He then explains that his happiness has led his parents, who had sold him into the business of chimney sweeping, to believe that they had done him no harm. However, "They clothed me in the clothes of death, / And taught me to sing the notes of woe" (7-8). The personal note created by giving a name to a child labour victim in *Songs of Innocence* is now replaced by a feeling of dissociation from an untitled entity, achieved "by describing the boy as 'A little black thing', dehumanizing him completely." (Afrin 2012: 27)

The light, hopeful tone of the sweep in *Songs of Innocence* is now replaced with a dejected, sorrowful one, and this shows exactly how Blake 'corrupts' the innocence in the second part of

the poems by using the same elements, but twisting the result of their interaction. What preserved the first song from sounding depressing was the naively positive outlook of a child dealing with a difficult situation, and in *Songs of Experience* this element of a child's innate nature of innocence and joyfulness was the very cause of his fate. *Because* of his happiness, his parents see no wrong in their actions which seals the child's fate. Michaela Irimia argues that "Blake raises the indictment of perverted parenthood, whether in the natural, religious or political sense, on the crude realization that grown-ups rejoice in their children's wretchedness and sorrow" (2013: 182). The narrator's question inquiring the whereabouts of the child's parents could be reformulated to – 'where are those whose purpose is to protect and care for you?' and the effect that Blake has achieved here is the realization that the ones who are accountable for rectifying this situation – the parents, members of society, and the Church itself – are nowhere to be found. Whereas it would be logical to assume that churches would oppose this horrifying practice, they did quite the opposite by teaching that child labour in all forms was a moral obligation (Damrosch 2015: 85), and the very presence of chimney sweepers in churches was forbidden. What its contribution was, however, was a promise of a better place after a short lifetime of misery: "The Church's disciplinary promise to its exploited charges" (Irimia 2013: 182). This disillusionment of the ones responsible is an appeal for a reformation of humanity in which every human being is obligated to prevent injustices such as this one.

The symbolism of black and white can be found here as well, contrasting the whiteness of the snow with the blackness of the child dressed in clothes of death – forced impurity tainting the natural purity of a child. Another element that repeats itself with a twist is that of heaven, and the previously imagined vision of heaven where children laugh and shine in the Sun is now replaced with an eternally hopeless "heaven of our misery " (12).

The overall atmosphere in the poems is enhanced with their visual appearance, beginning with the title. In *Songs of Innocence* (e.g. see fig. 8), the title is made using leafy swirls that seem to be thriving, green and exuberant. The ornament twirls around the words, creating a playful frame and leads the eye to the scene at the bottom, depicting images described in the poem – a group of thrilled children, excitedly running and dancing towards a river raising their arms, with the angel that delivered them from their coffin on the other side. The colours Blake uses are cheerful but with a hint of gloominess: notes of blue, green, and yellow flowing into one another, as if referencing the children's ill-directed enthusiasm. However, an interesting interpretation is offered by Zachary Leader, who claims that the scene as Blake made it lacks the very things denied to the sweeps – clear, bright colours, Sun, warmth and open spaces, as

can be seen from the heavy block of text crushing the scene in the bottom, "much as Innocence itself is ground down by a life of poverty and oppression (1981: 47).

In *Songs of Experience* (e.g. see fig. 9), similar swirls are used to make the title, but these seem less enthusiastic and droopy. He also used tones of blue, yellow and green but here they are bleak and dull, almost rotten looking. There is a depiction of a child walking alone in a winter night leaving black marks in the snow, throwing a glance over his shoulder. Creating a snowy scene carries significance: "The snow is also symbolic of bleakness and death surrounding the child and possibly also the cold, uncaring world in which he lives." (Afrin 2012: 27) The depiction underlines the vision of an abandoned child, cold and unprotected, left at the mercy of a harsh world. He is walking down a street in between houses reflecting his situation of having no home of his own, or a place where he is welcome. With his black clothes and face, he is *truly* "A little black thing among the snow" (1).

#### 4.2.2. London

When it comes to recognizing social injustice in Blake's poems, 'London' is essential. In the poem, the speaker is wandering through the city of London, and everywhere around him he notices marks of human suffering, both in sound and in sight. Men and children cry, sweepers, soldiers and harlots portray everyday people enveloped in their personal misery. Blake lived in London his whole life, and the motifs that he chose to present his vision were coming from a familiar place, things he saw on a regular basis. Heather Glen warns that "beneath the polite surface", referring to the written observations remarked by the observer of London<sup>7</sup>, "there is another set of meanings, which are the reverse of those such descriptions could customarily bear" (1996: 149). What she means by this is that there is a concrete deeper background to each of the motifs that he chose, an example of which can be seen in the first line "I wander through each charter'd street" (1). The streets are chartered because of a political debate raging at the time, in 1793, and Blake's use of the word is a political protest criticising the legal system's restricting of liberty and equality. The fact that the Thames is "charter'd" as well serves not only as a mockery of the chartered rights, but alludes to the restriction of nature imposed by human rights (Bloom 1961: 42), which, as a principle, applies to the whole poem, and to *Songs of*

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<sup>7</sup> This can pertain to both the speaker in the poem and Blake himself, but the use of the two can be interchangeable according to Damrosch, since "there is nothing to suggest that the poem's speaker is different from himself" (2015: 88).



*Experience* in general. In a wider sense, the rise of the industrial age brought forth a societal rearrangement the result of which is the oppression of London's citizens. The speaker's walk through the city focuses on the misery of the people.

The first two stanzas compress London into a monotonous vision, not celebrating its diversity and livelihood, but condemning its sameness: "the different faces which pass all bear the same message, 'Marks of weakness, marks of woe'. And the tight quatrain with its indicative tense conveys not flexible responsiveness to constantly challenging possibilities, but entrapment." (Glen 1996: 148). The last two stanzas, on the other hand, shift from a generalized picture of unnamed misery to specific depictions addressing actual people in the English society and recognizing the social relationships that connect them. Therefore, the first part of the poem sets the mood and setting of his London, whereas the second part accommodates actual people in that framework, giving it life, sound and feeling.

Within this critique of urban life, the subject of injured innocence and corrupted childhood presents itself in images of infants in distress, chimney sweepers crying out for a job, and young cursing harlots, as if creating stages of child development in which every stage dictates a tragic role to which the child resorted because of the society that it is in. The line "In every Infants cry of fear" (6) shows that the misery of children in Blake's London begins from birth, and then becomes part of a cycle. Even before it developed the ability to process its surroundings, the infant cries from fear that has set in as a response to its environment. The following image is that of the crying chimney sweeper, whose brutal existence "Every Black'ning Church appalls" (10), i.e. puts the Church to shame by giving a visual mark to its perpetuation of injustices (and whose role in destruction of innocence was discussed above). This "visual mark" is referring to an actual phenomenon of the effect of smog on buildings as a by-product of industrialization, while simultaneously alluding to the blackness of chimney sweepers. Therefore, woe and weakness create marks on the faces of people, while the soot that stains the innocence of children marks the face of the Church – "a world at war in a grain of London soot", as Erdman says (1977: 292). In the final stanza, the cursing harlot is a culmination of this social criticism. It is important to note that the harlots themselves were usually (but not exclusively) in their teens or early 20s, and whereas they cannot technically be considered children, it does point to the nature of poverty that progresses from corrupted childhood into miserable youth, starting with fearful infants, followed by destitute sweepers and culminating with young harlots, who then have children of their own. The line "How the youthful harlot's curse / Blasts the newborn

infant's tear" (14-15) (which is in direct opposition to the mother in 'Infant Joy' who blesses her child as Joy) is focused on the repetition of this cycle of corrupted innocence.

There is another level to these corrupted cycles stemming from sordid social relationships. Damrosch argues that the subculture of prostitution thrived on faulty settings of marriage of the time, as they were arranged between families for financial benefits, and the wives were expected to suppress any traces of sexuality, therefore directing dissatisfied men towards other sources of fulfilment. The result of this is the last line in the poem, [the harlot's curse] "blights with plagues the marriage hearse" (16). The husband, having contracted a venereal disease from the harlot, carries this disease into his marriage bed and to his wife, who then transmits it to their child – "symptoms of gonorrhoea, potentially fatal, could show up in a newborn's tears" (Damrosch 2015: 91-92). In that sense, the hearse stands for both the potential death brought by the "plagues" and the death of marriage as an institution. But these plagues relate to the whole society, described in a redeemable light in the first two stanzas. Society as a mechanism of repression is constructed on "mind forg'd manacles" (8) because people cannot release themselves from the internalized restrictions imposed by themselves, which is why this claim is both condemning and hopeful. This condition of self-imposed bonds is not unchangeable, and the hopefulness it carries is a seed of innocence in an experience-riddled world. However, the hopefulness of this implication is extinguished by the end of the poem because, even though it can be reversed, it is chosen by people guided by fear for their own existence and survival which is why its consequences have a disastrous effect. Children serve as collateral damage caused by people's selfish drive for self-preservation. What makes this drive unattonable is that their choice to continue living and contributing to the world of experience, instead of seeking new ways of relating to one another, implies the destruction of the purity and carelessness of those who are denied the option of staying in their world of innocence.

The illustration (e.g. see fig. 10) complements and extends the message of the poem. In it, a child is guiding an old man leaning on a crutch as they pass next to closed doors. Below this, there is a depiction of a little boy warming his hands at a large fire. Damrosch connects the illustration to the lines from *Jerusalem*, another poem of Blake's<sup>8</sup>: "I see London blind and age-bent begging through the streets / Of Babylon, led by a child. His tears run down his beard..."

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<sup>8</sup> *Jerusalem* is Blake's longest illuminated book at over 4500 lines, on which he worked from 1804 to 1820, during which Britain was mostly at war with France. Consequently, in it, Blake explores the idea of a perfect society, as Jerusalem itself stands for Liberty; the Holy City of Peace (Damon 1973: 206). It is an Emanation of Albion which represents England, suffering from the consequences of the Napoleonic wars, where greed and war obstructed the true meaning of religion. (Tate: *William Blake's Jerusalem*).

(*Jerusalem* 11-12). If the old man is the representation of London, then the child guiding it means it is showing him the path to regained innocence, once again returning to the concept of organized innocence. The London that Blake envisions in his two final stanzas leaves no space for the redemption of society but, as Glen says, "what has been humanly chosen can be humanly reversed" (1996: 157), once again bringing a glimmer of hope in the reestablishment of innocence in London. In a similar sense, the persistence of innocence is signified by the fire warming the little boy. The chimney sweeper in the illustration for Blake's poem in *Songs of Innocence* walks alone through a snowy street. Here, the child is given warmth as a reminder that even in the darkest and coldest of times, some fires cannot be extinguished.

### **4.3. Exploitation by the Church**

#### 4.3.1. Holy Thursday

Holy Thursday or Ascension Day was a specific occasion in which London's charity-school children would march through the streets toward St. Paul's Cathedral, giving their thanks for the charity that they received throughout the year in a celebration of the school's anniversary. Even though it is unknown whether Blake actually attended one of these processions, he was aware of their popularity and public approval (Gleckner 1970: 79). Its approval comes as no shock, naturally, it being an occasion dedicated to the 'true meaning' of Christian pity in this expression of gratitude while simultaneously allowing people to enjoy an amusing sight of well-behaved and harmoniously arranged children in a parade. In *Songs of Innocence*, Blake's vision of the children is depicted with such loveliness – "multitudes of lambs" (7), radiant and clean-faced, walking two by two wearing colourful clothes. The children walk in a neatly arranged parade, and when seated in the cathedral, their voices burst in a powerful song. Blake forms longer-than-typical lines, creating a flowing idea alluding to the procession of children. The same concept of hidden injustice, covered up by the children's nature, appears once again, much in the same way as it did in 'The Chimney Sweeper' in *Songs of Experience*.

And because I am happy & dance & sing,  
They think they have done me no injury,  
And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King,  
Who make up a heaven of our misery.

(7-10)

This procession was created as a spectacle for adults, good Christians revelling in their contribution to the children's apparent cleanliness and happiness. However, it is known that these children were often flogged, beaten, malnourished and generally treated poorly (Gleckner 1970: 79). Blake goes deeper into the dark side of this in the *Songs of Experience* counterpart, but he does leave obvious hints in the first poem as traces of experience. The children's clean faces point to them usually being dirty and only tidied up for the spectacle. The wands that the beadles carry with them serve as a reminder of their violent authority and their actual purpose. As Bernard Mandeville put it, in his widely read *An Essay on Charity, and Charity Schools*:

There is something Analogous to this in the Sight of Charity Children: there is a natural Beauty in Uniformity which most People delight in. It is diverting to the Eye to see children well match'd, either Boys or Girls, march two and two in good order; and to have them all whole and tight in the same Clothes and Trimming must add to the comeliness of the sight; and what makes it still more generally entertaining is the imaginary share which even Servants and the meanest in the Parish have in it, to whom it costs nothing; Our Parish Church, Our Charity Children. In all this there is a Shadow of Property that tickles everybody that had a Right to make use of the Words, but more especially those who actually contribute and had a great Hand in advancing the pious Work. (2017: 91)

What is meant by "a Shadow of Property" is a criticism of charity, pointing to the fact that this parade was not based on kindness, selflessness, and compassion for the downtrodden, but quite the opposite – the sense of complacency of their sponsors. This social hypocrisy is expressed passively in *Songs of Innocence*. Blake put his focus mainly on portraying the image of the children themselves. In written word, he does so by using an array of different descriptions, each portraying a certain aspect of his notion of innocence. In image, this is achieved through colour, composition, and decoration.

The children are wearing colourful, bright clothes, evoking a sense of their joyous, playful personalities. Blake's illumination (e.g. see fig. 11) expresses this as well. They are walking in pairs, grouped according to the colour of their clothing - in the upper line, the boys, and on the bottom, the girls. However, despite the strict order in which they are walking, Blake still left room for expressing their childlike spirit, as every child can be seen doing some sort of individual movement or gesture, resulting in subtle but noticeable differences in each pair. Then, these "flowers of London town" (5), referring to their fragility and beauty, are seated in the cathedral as "multitudes of lambs" (7), reflecting their connection to Christ, but also their

power in numbers, which becomes even more apparent as they start to raise their voices. As they sing, they turn into "a mighty wind" (9), not fragile anymore, but a force rising above "the aged men" (11). It has been mentioned before how Blake's simplicity of words and motifs can offer an ambiguous interpretation depending on whether the reader is a child or an adult. To a child, the lines "Beneath them sit the aged men, wise guardians of the poor; / Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door" (11-12) will sound like a positive and sincere message. The adult eye, on the other hand, will notice the seed of experience forming the bitter irony of those words, based on the reality of the situation: these "wise guardians" are the same ones that control the appalling conditions of the children, and who will send them back into labour and hunger after this procession of falsity (Damrosch 2015: 62). The children's innocent spirit remains untouched by the hypocrisy of the aged men, which is why they are positioned above them – their moral ground is higher, as is their connection to God. In the words of Robert Gleckner: "In this stanza, the children demonstrate their essential innocence, despite the attempts to make them conform to a hypocritical regimen, by spontaneously, 'like a mighty wind', raising their voices to heaven in song. Instantly the wooden galleries in which they sit seem transformed into the 'seats of Heaven'" (1970: 80). This "hypocritical regimen" is the basis of Blake's critique of the Church: labour forced upon the children is justified under the promise of God's reward, but the sight of the children in the reality of their everyday appearances was camouflaged. The Church uses the children both as tools for hard work and for the concealment of neglect, so that it may benefit from their exploitation.

The connection of children with Heaven can be observed in the illumination as well. Blake purposefully framed the song with depictions of children constructed in two layers. On the bottom, the children are walking on the ground, and the vines that intertwine with the lyrics stem from the trees that flank the composition. In the upper depiction, the children are walking in a space-less environment, enveloped in a blue haze, which confirms the aforementioned connection with Heaven. On the other hand, the hints of austerity can be seen in their strict formation, controlled by the beakles "with wands as white as snow" (3), meaning the restriction that is forced on Blake's concept of innocence here is both in the potential cruelty symbolized by the wand, and the lack of affection and warmth symbolized by the snow. The reader can find those hints which might indicate a deeper social or moral issue throughout the poem. However, the atmosphere that is present in it is that of naivety, or as R. S. White calls it – the "'see no evil' attitude" (2005: 222). This naivety is of crucial importance for Blake to get his point across as he combines it with hints of experience; his treatment of pity as an emotion that evokes

compassion and the desire to give mercy or relief for those in an unprivileged position serves to establish identification with the poor and suffering. In the case of 'Holy Thursday', R.S. White argues that pity, while useful for imaginative identification with the less fortunate, remains passive and as such, serves as part of the problem in perpetuating injustices (2005: 222). Blake may have recognized that there is no change without both the element of pity (that evokes sympathy and the desire to assist someone in their misfortune) and action, which calls for resistance to the current state of affairs. By preserving the innocence of the children's minds when faced with the injustice of their conditions, pity and identification through sympathy are achieved in the reader. The poem is meant to provoke both compassion and awareness of social injustice. The 'action' part of that equation is reserved for its counterpart in *Songs of Experience*.

The second poem begins with a series of questions. Blake piles on questions without providing a direct answer and the effect he is trying to achieve is accusatory. It is a direct call-out to all those passive, self-identified virtuous Christians who applaud the sight of destitute children living in miserable conditions guarded by cruel caretakers. He finds it shameful not only because of the obviously excessive number of orphaned children but because of the parading which serves to disguise the issue into a display of Christian values. The conclusion he later offers to the previously posed questions is that England - one of the richest, most powerful and prosperous lands and the image it prides itself with is faced with an alternative vision, here referred to as "a land of poverty" (8). He goes further to show the controversy of the march by questioning the holiness of witnessing such misery and poverty in a land that is supposedly "rich and fruitful" (2). A country that does nothing to protect and encourage its youngest and most vulnerable members on which the future rests cannot be called prosperous. There can be no spring and summer if they are doomed to an "eternal winter" (12) and lack both the physical and emotional warmth, just like the chimney sweepers. Blake was a fierce critic of flawed religious thinking and believed that religion affected every aspect of human existence: political, economic, mental and cultural. Robert Ryan concludes that this far-reaching influence is the source of all social disorders afflicting England in his time, claiming that Blake "saw religious error so profoundly ingrained in the human psyche that disestablishment of one corrupt form of it would not be enough to affect the radical change that was needed." (Ryan, 153) This is also why Blake's criticism of society and Church overlaps in his poems since they are so closely connected. Blake's religious beliefs play a crucial role in his artistic endeavours - his family were *English Dissenters* or *English Separatists*, meaning they were Protestant Christians who separated from the Church of England in the 17th and 18th

centuries and opposed state interference in religious matters (Cross; Livingstone, 490). For them, the Bible is crucial, and the great majority of Blake's writings were infused with the language of the Bible. Blake's understanding of the true religion of Jesus goes against the deformed Christianity in the form of church collaborations and the setback it has caused in the exploitation of the poor, the subordination of women, the abridgement of political liberty, the repression of sexual energy, and the discouragement of originality in the fine arts – all subjects which can be found as part of this thesis. The distinguishing qualities of Blake's vision were a radical demand for social justice, the cultivation of mutual love and forgiveness, and the fostering of creative freedom in religion, morality, and arts. His task: "to take religion back from the priests who had subordinated it to the political, economic, and cultural agenda of the ruling classes, and to make it a truly revolutionary force in society." And this task, he undertook by using the media of poetic and pictorial art (Ryan, 154).

In the illumination (e.g. see fig. 312), Blake uses unsettling imagery to express the result of this neglect – "an infant corpse lies on a valley floor; in the distance an undeviating stream flows (if it flows at all) parallel to, but out of reach of, the child, skirting a huge mountain of snow." (Fairer 2002: 550) The scenery seems green and exuberant, a reference to England as a rich and abundant nation. At the same time, all the figures in the depiction are either desperate or dead. The conclusion that follows is that the children are unable to benefit from their homeland's prosperity and when left to their own, they die. The overhanging naked branch above the child expresses a similar symbolism, an unprotected being left to its resources of which it has none. Blake chose the tragic imagery to express his criticism so that the message would be very clear. Four children appear in the illumination: two of them are dead, one is desperately grasping an adult figure, and one is weeping. The two adult figures show no initiative to help and are either observing the sight of dead/desperate children or seem completely passive in response to it. Whereas in previous examples, the illuminations in *Songs of Experience* would seem darker, bleaker and more colourless than those from *Songs of Innocence*, in 'Holy Thursday' Blake enhanced the vibrancy of the colours and the blues and greens underline the theme of a "rich and fruitful land" (2). Then, as a striking irony, he placed the disturbing motifs to relate the conclusion that even though the environment may seem prosperous, it means nothing if children are dying in it, and the generic adult figures are referencing all members of society that observe such misery and poverty and remain passive to it.

#### 4.3.2. Infant Sorrow

The counterpart poem to 'Infant Joy' sets off in a different direction. A baby tells the story of its birth in which its mother groaned and father wept. The setting of the poem is in opposition to the previous one, joy is replaced with pain and sorrow, and the baby itself is no longer an embodiment of innocence and purity, but compares itself to a "fiend in a cloud" (4) born into a dangerous world. The baby also tells of its father struggling to hold it, as it resisted the bands wrapped around it. Tired from the struggle, it sulked upon its mother's breast. The rhyme is a simple AABB pattern, which is more usual for poems in *Songs of Innocence*, but since the narrator is a baby, it seems appropriate for the rhyme and form to have a connection to innocence.

The information stated in the poem leaves lots of space for interpretation because there are no implications as to why the parents are miserable or why the world is dangerous. What offers itself as the most logical solution is that the child is unwanted which is why the atmosphere of its arrival into the world appears malicious. This would also explain the label of "fiend", as children are usually connected to the divine sphere (which is also why Blake used the motif of a child on a cloud in 'Introduction' from *Songs of Innocence* as a symbol for divine inspiration and creative imagination) and in this case, its presence is unwanted which explains the feeling of antagonism toward his surroundings. If the motifs of a dangerous world, striving against bands, and weariness as a result of its futility are taken into account, what is questioned here is the true nature of a child and the input of Church and society (including the parents) in this matter. In 'Infant Joy' this is a matter-of-course, as the presence and identification of a child are equalled with joy. A subject that was already touched in the counterpart poem where Blake clearly states that children are born pure and untouched by the world's wickedness which also allows them the liberty of self-assessment. Shortly thereafter the child becomes part of a system of restrictions. One of these restrictions is the act of christening. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that baptism erases original sin and turns man toward God, but the inclination toward evil still persists and summons one to spiritual battle (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*: 405). In other words, children are *not* born pure but carry sin as part of the human race which must be purified, or the Kingdom of God will be unattainable. Even then, evil is still present and must be fought off. Therefore, an important aspect of this poem shows how innocence is corrupted by flawed religious thinking which is forced upon it from the very beginning.



In his essay *Blake's Treatment of the Archetype*, Northop Frye argues that the state of innocence a child possesses does not necessarily mean it is sinless or harmless, "but that he is able to assume a coherence, a simplicity and a kindliness in the world that adults have lost and wish they could regain." (1970: 525) This once again goes to show that experience operates by suppressing and distorting one's natural will and desires, and the poem serves to prove that this process begins very early: "The striving for self-assertion and the parental tempering of personality start even before the infant is 'but two days old' and is an affair of claustrophobic family concern, typical of Experience." (Gardner 2012: 125) In the second stanza, this argument proves even more true in the literal sense; "Struggling in my father's hands / Striving against my swaddling bands" (5-6), where the baby is physically restricted from moving its body. Even though the practice of swaddling babies was and still is customary in natal care<sup>9</sup> and serves to calm the baby and prevent it from hurting itself, Gardner argues that this was a contemporary practice that was criticized by doctors in Blake's time; the controversial part was rolling the children with bandages eight to ten feet in length tightly around their body as soon as they were born to mend the shape of the child (2012: 127). In much the same way he has done in his previous poems, and especially 'Holy Thursday' or 'The Chimney Sweeper', Blake finds or notices inequities within the social practices which are so common that they mostly stay under the radar. He then converts those everyday injustices into his topics for interpretation. A lot can be said about Blake's fruitful imagination, but the subjects that he chose for his poems are created or allegorized using sights that he saw in his everyday life. The restrictions imposed on the child symbolize repression by parents, society, and the Church. All three were connected in Robert Rix's essay *William Blake's Infant Joy*, who gives context to the notion of a "dangerous world" using James Stonehouse's *The Religious Instruction of Children Recommended* from 1770,

in which parents are told that it is imperative to ensure that children are moved 'safely through this dangerous World': to ensure their safety, parents should raise children to be 'diligent in attending Public Worship, watchful to observe the Sabbath, shunning Temptations to sin, avoiding evil Company, and fearing the Lord, from their Youth'. Blake, in 'Infant Sorrow', is reacting against just such stifling of the child's innate energy and divinity. (Rix 2020: 67-68)

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<sup>9</sup> Historically, swaddling infants was almost a universal practice. Today, it is still common in the Middle East and some ethnic groups, while its recent resurgence is reflected by the fact that approximately 90% of infants in North America are swaddled in the first few months of life. (Clarke NMP 2013: 5-6)

As can be inferred from this, religious practices and fear from God are necessary to keep one from indulging to the evil within; the world is dangerous because of the evils to which we are drawn by nature, just as we are born carrying it by nature. This interpretation calls for irony since Blake rejected the concept of original sin (Damrosch 2015: 70). Even though the swaddling of babies was an actual practice, Blake's use of it in the poem shows how restrictions turn the innate liveliness of the child into a sulking submission (Rix 2020: 67). Whereas the child in 'Infant Joy' was given the freedom of defining itself as joy, the only option for the child in 'Infant Sorrow' is to sulk on its mother's breast. In the illumination (e.g. see fig. 13), however, there is no trace of groaning, weeping, or struggling. What is shown is a cosy scene enveloped by drapery in which a female figure is about to take an overjoyed naked baby into her arms. The lines written in the poem seem to be the opposite representation of what is happening in the scene. What was a dangerous world is now a warm-looking houseroom, the swaddled child is now raising its arms in excitement, the father is absent from the scene while a female figure is approaching the child<sup>10</sup>. For the most part, however, given the child's reaction to bands, its joy apparently comes from being free of them, as it is shown naked. The words of the poem make the reader wonder about the true nature of humans from their birth, and how much of it remains untouched if limiting one's natural behaviour begins seconds after birth. The illustration shows joy again, and in nakedness. The child in the illumination is free from restrictions and is celebrating its naturalness. Its nature is joy and what made it unhappy are the "swaddling bands" imposed by those who embody experience.

#### **4.4. Condemnation of slavery**

##### **4.4.1. Little Black Boy**

The poem begins with the narrator telling about himself, his background, and his vision of God as explained to him by his mother. He says he was born in "the southern wild" (1) of Africa and his skin is black, unlike that of the English child. Then, he tells the story of his mother holding him in her lap and teaching him about God who lives on the Sun, giving heat, light, and life to the world and whose "beams of love" (14) all must learn to bear to fulfil their role on Earth. Once his soul meets God, the colour of his and the English boy's skin which "is but a

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<sup>10</sup> The female figure is, as Gardner argues, hardly identifiable as the mother. It is much more likely she is a nanny, given her clothing and headgear, which would partially explain the change in the child's behaviour (2012: 126).

cloud" (16) will vanish. This newfound knowledge he then transfers to the English boy, vowing that when they are together with God, he will shade him from the heat until he, too, learns to bear the beams of love; they will be the same and the boy will love him.

Around the time when Blake wrote this poem, a powerful reform movement was gaining momentum. *The Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, formed in 1787 with the purpose of putting an end to buying and selling human beings. To achieve this purpose, the founding members began gathering evidence to inform the public of the horrendous and inhuman treatment of enslaved African people. Erdman notifies that informing the public included town meetings, enlisting the help of artists and writers as well as creating a medallion portraying a kneeling and pleading black man or woman<sup>11</sup>, which was used on pamphlets and books, and then further incorporated into brooches, bracelets, hairpins and snuff boxes, becoming the key image for the abolitionist and anti-slavery campaigns in Britain and America (1977: 246). Blake's poem was written in the early phase of the campaign, assisting and supporting the cause, but his contribution did not stop there as he engraved, "with more than his usual care", as Erdman writes, 16 plates illustrating slave conditions in 1791 for the liberal publisher Joseph Johnson<sup>12</sup>: "Blake's engravings, with a force of expression absent from the others, emphasize the dignity of Negro men and women stoical under cruel torture" (1977: 248). The campaign reached its height in 1792-93 during its Parliamentary phase, but the bill was defeated in Parliament and slavery remained legal until 1834.

In the first stanza, the boy describes himself saying: "And I am black, but O! my soul is white / White as an angel is the English child:/ But I am black as if bereav'd of light." (1-3). Right from the beginning, the contrast of black and white is introduced, "affirming a vicious dualism", using Bloom's words (1961: 35). However, in poems analysed so far, white was used as a symbol for innocence and purity, whereas here there is a trace of irony as the child compares whiteness of the English boy with angels and his own soul, while his skin is defined as deprived of light. He asserts that his soul is white, as if defending himself from the connotations of his skin's blackness, which expresses the internalized belief of the superiority of whiteness. In the following four stanzas, the speaker recalls the words of his mother who gives a different perspective to his impression. The vision of God here is equated with the rays of the Sun and

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<sup>11</sup> Josiah Wedgwood: *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?*, medallion, 1787.

<sup>12</sup> Erdman states that Blake recycled some of those plates as illustrations for *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, another work with slavery as the central theme (1988: 248), written in the Parliamentary phase of the campaign which began in 1789 (1977: 246).

his blackness which enables him to bear the heat better, allows him to bear the love and light of God as well. Therefore, the line "And these black bodies and this Sun-burnt face" (19) refers to the abundance of God's love imprinted on his body. God gives his light and warmth to all beings as all are equally worthy in His eyes. The poem is part of *Songs of Innocence*, and from a child's perspective, it is a sweet demonstration of how all men are equal before God and skin colour is only skin-deep. In a more experienced sense, there is an alternate interpretation drawn from the lines "My mother taught me underneath a tree/ And sitting down before the heat of day" (5-6), which clearly instructs that heat should be avoided. Bloom suggests that God's love is too strong for us, which is why we must learn to bear it as was stated in lines "And we are put on earth a little space/ That we may learn to bear the beams of love" (13-14). From this, he concludes: "Presumably, the more we bear it, the darker we become, and the darker we are, the more we can abide." (1988: 36), connecting the idea of blackness with the endurance of burning heat. This stands for the burden placed on black skin, referring to the use of slaves as cheap labour and their cruel treatment in general. Furthermore, it satirizes a Christian paradox in which the body is deprecated in relation to the soul while its resurrection is celebrated (Bloom 1988: 36). In this context, faulty Christian beliefs are invoked once again. As was the case in 'The Chimney Sweeper', the practice of exploitation is justified with God's impending reward for the hard work one suffered through in life. Therefore, Blake condemns slavery not only as a lack of humanity, equality, and brotherhood but as the justification of suffering supported by the misinterpretation of the Bible.

On one level, the poem suggests how the black boy's inferiority is non-existent (as it is a cloud) on a spiritual level and should be non-existent on a physical level, as well. On a deeper level, what is actually suggested is that the construct of skin colour is not bound only to a physical level, and the proof for this is contained in the last stanza:

I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear,  
To lean in joy upon our father's knee.  
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,  
And be like him and he will then love me.

(25-28)

When it comes to the contrast of skin versus soul, Erdman argues that "To avoid a chauvinistic interpretation Blake explained that any skin color is a cloud that cannot obscure the essential brotherhood of man in a fully enlightened society, such as Heaven.", meaning that society should reach a level in which all men see themselves as equal to others – "If the Negro

is to be free of his black cloud, the little English boy must be likewise free from his 'white cloud', which is equally opaque." (1977: 255). The problem is - when both the English boy and the black boy are rid of the cloud that represents their skin, and stand as equals before God, the black boy still takes an inferior role in shading the white boy, stroking his hair and hoping for his approval. The inconclusiveness of the mother's narrative, as pointed out by Bloom, lies in the inability to define blackness as a cloud, as it is a result of absorbing God's love: "God who gives both His light and His heat away intends them as equal gifts, and those who accept light and reject heat receive neither grace" (1988: 37). Therefore, the equality of whiteness and blackness in Heaven is improbable given the white boy's inability to bear the beams of God's love, meaning he never fulfilled his role on Earth. In other words, the black boy "has learnt to bear the beams of love whereas the white child apparently has not. The white boy, because he does not love, is 'walking in darkness and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded him' (I John 1:11)." (Jose 2017: 63). This burden was once again taken by the black boy, which denies their equality in Heaven in the same way it was denied on Earth.

The point made at the beginning of this analysis is that from an innocent perspective, this poem offers a heart-warming moral passed from a mother to a child, teaching that God casts his light on all His children as a lesson, and in the same way God does, we should all see beyond the clouds of perception as we are all equal. From the perspective of experience, it becomes apparent that skin is not the limit of the cloud's existence. What constructs blackness and whiteness is not constrained within colour but encompasses deep-rooted *collective* beliefs and perceptions, which affect behaviours and actions. This is why the black child has to bear more heat, and also why he craves the acceptance of the white child. To the innocent black child's mind which is full of acceptance, the construct and heaviness of blackness are presented through lovely metaphors and visions, but its reality will set in as he grows older and is forced to bear more heat. Blake makes the reader aware that the 'heat' is not coming from God, but is man-made, and can be undone by man, calling once again for social reformation.

The illumination is made on two plates. The first one (e.g. see fig. 14) depicts a scene of the boy in his mother's lap with the Sun casting its beams in the background. The mother and child are sitting in the shade of a tree contrasting the light from the Sun, making it difficult to discern their skin colour.<sup>13</sup> Blake did this purposefully to emphasize the universality of the image of mother and child, a relationship that transcends race, as well as all societal, religious and "mind

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<sup>13</sup> Chiramel Paul Jose points out that she *is* distinguishable as an African woman because of her "uncivilized" waist-clad dress (2017: 60).

forg'd" (8) restrictions - an incentive for recognition of equality. In the second illumination (e.g. see fig. 15), the last stanza was given a literal visualization: the two boys both stand by Jesus. They are both white-skinned and their closeness is apparent, making them look like brothers joyous to be with their father, a theme implied in the poem as a universal brotherhood. However, one detail seems off – Jesus focuses his attention completely on the white child, while the presence of the 'black' child goes unnoticed. An explanation offered by Zachary Leader claims that the Christ-figure is a personification of institutionalized religion which explains the lack of interest towards the black boy. He later comments that this is the plate of Experience, while the first plate is rooted in Innocence (1981: 114). Christ has a shepherd's crook, in accordance with the line "And round the tent of God like lambs we joy" (24), with lambs grazing in the background and a stream of water in the foreground, once again introducing pastoral motifs as the default environment of innocence. The previously mentioned idea of the black child that has learned to bear the beams of love, unlike the white boy who has not adopted that knowledge is translated in the illumination as the black boy guiding the white boy toward Christ. In a wider sense, the black boy embodies the meaning of true Christianity, not just because he loves the white boy, but because he recognizes his inner light, an intuitive distinction between his physical identity and his own soul: "the black boy knows he is already 'like' God. It is not merely 'will be like'. He knows that he and his brother, the white boy, are the sons of God. This, he can understand because he loves." (Jose 2017: 63) The black boy's internalized physical inferiority against the white boy is surpassed by the spiritual superiority of his intuitive recognition of God's love which he embodies. This recognition of his inward light, that same innate innocence that Blake so often portrays through his poetic children, is a reminder for all adult readers, and society as a whole to return to innocence from experience: "Only the black boy himself knows (imaginatively, without ratiocination) that his soul is white, that 'inward light' does put forth a visual beam - and that his 'appearance' of blackness..., 'the real darkness of the body' is but appearance, an 'as if'" (Gleckner 1982: 211). To conclude, the little black boy exemplifies what society, in which slavery exists, has forgotten. A society in which the people recognize their innate light and return to it is one in which slavery cannot exist. Social reformation urged by Blake is done on an individual level, passing through experience into organized innocence.

## 5. Conclusion

The study of the poems outlined here presents a contrast between the states of innocence and experience expressed through the motif of a child. In *Songs of Innocence*, Blake explored how the world is perceived through the eyes of innocence and how hopeful, joyful and at times naive this world is. In *Songs of Experience*, hope and joy are replaced with dread and despair. Every child that Blake created to authenticate the genuineness of innocence, as well as the damage of its undoing, served as a medium for surpassing negligence and ignorance of his time. 'Blake's children' represent these issues to raise awareness of injustice, social malpractices, moral or spiritual dichotomies. In this sense, Blake has greatly contributed to the construct of childhood in Romanticism, not only by attributing importance to its role in adulthood but also by urging its *reawakening* in adulthood, which allows one's reconnection to God and with it, reconstructing a different society. A lack of this connection on a personal level is what causes the issues that are his objects of criticism on a societal level. Each child is a representation of some aspect of innocence and each plays a certain role. The structure of this thesis is based on systemizing what Blake aims to express using the motif of children.

In the spiritual aspect of childhood, the child stands for divine inspiration, conveying its connection to God which turns into a manifestation of creativity, as was shown in 'Introduction'. Aside from being pure and divine, innocence is also fragile and susceptible to the threats of experience, as 'The Lamb' suggests. Succumbing to experience is a normal part of the human existence and development, the danger lies in becoming too removed from one's imagination and his childlike spirit, which is why one should be reminded to recognize the divinity of innocence, just like the mother of the infant in 'Infant Joy', and return to it.

The motif of a child is also employed as a sobering call in recognizing societal and religious malpractices. Blake introduces 'The Chimney Sweeper' as the representative for the practice of child labour, raising awareness of the dangers of normalizing child oppression as was common in Blake's society, which also went through critical pursuance in 'London', but can be applied to any time in history including today. Blake portrays society as a ruthless machine, taking into account the Industrial Revolution, functioning on the oppression of the people, and this oppression starts since birth, a point made in 'Infant Sorrow'. There, the determinants of oppression are not only societal but religious. The exploitation caused by religious institutions was addressed by giving insight into the lives of children who were victimized by it. In 'Holy Thursday', Blake condemns the treatment of children that attended charity schools, which were powered by the self-identified virtues of their Christian sponsors. It calls out the concealment of the actual situation where the tidied-up children are made to look presentable to raise money.

Lastly, the last utilization of the motif of a child in this thesis was to condemn slavery. Once again, the justification of suffering is supported by faulty readings of the Bible, combined with an internalized collective belief of superiority, shown by 'The Little Black Boy'.

The seriousness of Blake's themes combined with the simplicity of his expression creates a work in which a voice is given to all those who do not have one. In the same way that "mind forg'd manacles" assemble an oppressive, corrupted society that allows poverty, suffering, oppression, discrimination, and misery, recognizing innocence within and outside of us allows for equality, joy, acceptance, forgiveness, and abundance. Through his illuminations, Blake deepens the meaning of his poems, and the combination of words and images create a psychological imprint in the reader's mind, making his work deeply impressionable.



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## 7. Image Sources

All reproductions originate from Copy AA, 1826, The Fitzwilliam Museum. The William Blake Archive. <http://www.blakearchive.org/copy/songsie.aa> Accessed December 10<sup>th</sup> 2019

8. Attachments



Fig. 1: Title page: Blake, William, Object 3, The William Blake Archive, 12.0 x 7.4 cm



Fig. 2: 'Introduction': Blake, William, Object 4, The William Blake Archive, 11.3 x 7.9 cm



Fig. 3: Frontispiece to Songs of Innocence: Blake, William, Object 2, The William Blake Archive, 11.0 x 7.0 cm



Fig. 4: 'Introduction': Blake, William, Object 30, The William Blake Archive, 12.4 x 7.2 cm



Fig. 5: Frontispiece to Songs of Experience: Blake, William, Object 28, The William Blake Archive, 11.0 x 7.0 cm





Fig. 6: 'The Lamb': Blake, William, Object 8, The William Blake Archive, 11.9 x 7.7 cm



Fig. 7: 'Infant Joy': Blake, William, Object 25, The William Blake Archive, 11.1 x 6.8 cm

# The Chimney Sweeper

When my mother died I was very young,  
 And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
 Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep,  
 So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre who cried when his head  
 That curld like a lambs back, was shav'd, so I said,  
 "Push Tom never mind it, for when your heads bare  
 You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

And so he was quiet & that very night,  
 As Tom was a sleeping he had such a sight,  
 That thousands of sweepers Dick, Joe Ned & Jack  
 Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black,  
 And by came an Angel who had a bright key,  
 And he open'd the coffins & set them all free:  
 Then down a green plain leaping laughing they run,  
 And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.  
 Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,  
 They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind,  
 And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,  
 But have God for his father & never want joy

And so Tom awoke, and we rose in the dark  
 And got with our bags & our brushes to work  
 Tho' the morn'g was cold, Tom was happy & warm,  
 So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.



Fig. 8: 'The Chimney Sweeper': Blake, William, Object 12, The William Blake Archive, 12.2

x 7.3 cm



Fig. 9: 'The Chimney Sweeper': Blake, William, Object 37, The William Blake Archive, 11.0

x 6.8 cm

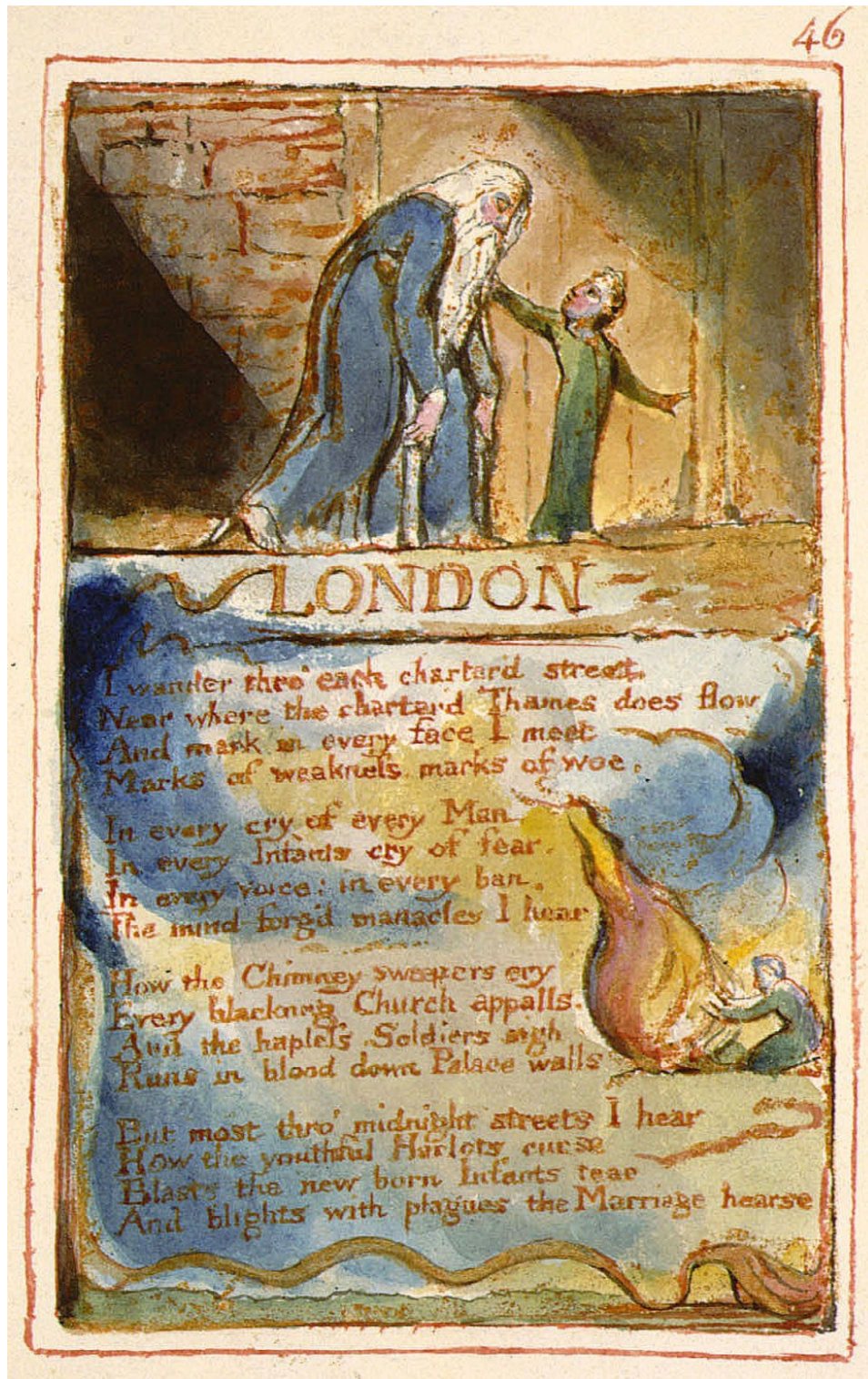


Fig. 10: 'London': Blake, William, Object 37, The William Blake Archive, 11.0 x 6.8 cm



Fig. 11: 'Holy Thursday': Blake, William, Object 19, The William Blake Archive, 11.4 x 7.7

cm



Fig. 12: 'Holy Thursday': Blake, William, Object 33, The William Blake Archive, 11.3 x 7.3

cm



Fig. 13: 'Infant Sorrow': Blake, William, Object 48, The William Blake Archive, 11.1 x 7.0

cm





Fig. 14: 'The Little Black Boy': Blake, William, Object 9, The William Blake Archive, 11.1 x 6.9 cm



Fig. 15: 'The Little Black Boy': Blake, William, Object 10, The William Blake Archive, 11.1

x 6.7 cm

## 9. Abstract

William Blake issued his *Songs of Innocence* in 1789 and five years later in 1794, he reissued it with the addition of *Songs of Experience*, which he then merged into a single book. Both were produced in the manner of illuminated printing. The poems deal with the portrayal of children and the childlike spirit, how it manifests through characteristics of innocence and how it is destroyed through experience. Innocence denotes a state in which one observes the world through joy, naivety, safety, and emotional warmth. Experience, on the other hand, is a state of hopelessness, cynicism, loneliness, and cruelty fuelled by the harsh realities of the world. At first sight, it might seem one of these states is undesired and should be avoided, but the lesson the *Songs* teach the reader is that both are part of existence, and being human means incorporating both of these states within ourselves. How this childlike spirit (and its destruction) is depicted, both in words and in the visual arts, and what it expresses using the motif of a child will be systemized in this thesis. The poems are categorized based on their primary themes. Firstly, divine inspiration and spirituality. In 'Introduction', Blake portrays innocence as a metaphor for divine inspiration in the form of a child on a cloud. Turning away from our childlike creative forces severs our connection to God and redirects our attention to false values. 'The Lamb' symbolizes Jesus and the divine but also portrays innocence as fragile and naive. 'Infant Joy' explores the beauty of pure innocence untouched by experience in a dialogue between a mother and her child. The second category inspects exploitation by the State and society, beginning with 'The Chimney Sweeper' where the issue of child labour is addressed through the subject of young chimney sweepers whose inessentiality and small size were used for cramming them in narrow spaces to scrape and clean soot, often causing injuries, fractures, suffocations, and asphyxiations. 'London' is a critique of the English society addressing everyday people and their misery. The third category deals with exploitation by the Church, exemplified by 'Holy Thursday' which brings up the subject of child mistreatment through the work of Charity Schools, and 'Infant Sorrow' which questions the restrictions imposed on human life since birth. The final category condemns slavery through the poem 'The Little Black Boy', in which a mother tells her child a lovely story to soften the reality of slave treatment.

Keywords: William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, innocence, experience, children, 'Introduction', divine, 'The Lamb', 'Infant Joy', 'The Chimney Sweeper', exploitation, 'London', 'Holy Thursday', 'Infant Sorrow', 'The Little Black Boy', slavery.