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Jeannie Campe

Minnesota State University, Mankato

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WILLIAM BLAKE: THE MISUNDERSTOOD ARTIST OF THE 19TH CENTURY

Jeannie Campe (English/French)

Mary Susan Johnston, Faculty Mentor (English)

Abstract

The purpose of this project is to examine the artistic vision of William Blake as well as his impact on literature. William Blake was one of the most misunderstood artists of his time, which led to a life of isolation and poverty. Determined to follow his “Divine Image,” Blake remained unappreciated until his twilight years, although he was still virtually unknown except for a small group of followers. William Blake is important today because of his innovative work stemming from his frustration with standard poetic tradition and techniques. This project explores Blake’s collection of poems entitled *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. The two groups of lyrics depict, as Blake stated, “the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.” Although written a few years apart, Blake intended the two volumes to be read together. Each poem from *Songs of Innocence* stands as an independent poem, but also has a matched counterpart or contrary in *Songs of Experience*. In addition, Blake expressed many of his conceptions visually and each poem is accompanied by a design and illustration that make up an integral part of the text.

William Blake: The Misunderstood Artist of the 18th Century

Jeannie Campe

William Blake is best known as a poet and an engraver, but perhaps the most appropriate title for him is that of “visionary artist” (Perkins 73). He is more than a poet; he is a pictorial artist as well. The vast majority of his works are accompanied by illustrative designs, which are an integral part of the text and contribute to the overall meaning of the work. Today, Blake’s works are recognized as that of a genius and are some of the most anthologized works in English. His poems are enjoyable at all levels of scrutiny. They are filled with social commentary, yet still satisfy the venturesome newcomer. In his own lifetime however, Blake was unsuccessful in exhibiting and selling his works. He was considered eccentric, even mad. From the outset of his career he was radically at odds with the public he sought to reach. Contemporary criticism was disparaging. Lee Hunt, a literary critic, called him a quack; another called him an unfortunate lunatic. He had few supporters and lived and died in almost total obscurity.

The main focus of my research concentrates on Blake’s two-part collection of poems: *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Because Blake originally published the text combined with images in a medium called illuminated printing, I have also studied

Blake's theories concerning illustrative design and how it affects the reading of the poems.

It is useful to begin by briefly examining Blake's time and personal history in order to develop an understanding of the influences on his work. Little is known of his family or early childhood. He was born on November 28, 1757, the son of a relatively well to do shopkeeper (Wilson 1). He was not immediately sent to school, although he had shown a passion for drawing from a very young age. His family later recognized this artistic talent, and his first formal education came at the age of ten when he was sent to drawing school. At the age of fourteen, he was apprenticed to the engraver James Basier. With Basier, Blake learned the tools of the trade. Engraving was an important and illustrious business because it was the only way to mass-produce paintings and illustrations in print and books at the time. Even so, it was still considered a craft and not an art.

As for Blake's religious background, he lived at a time when Christianity and belief in God were very important, but Blake came from a family of Dissenters, probably Baptists. The exact type or amount of religious instruction he received remains unknown, but we do know that it left him with a passion for the Bible. His religious views were developed in an atmosphere of vigor and inspiration, which contrasted with the beliefs of the established Church of England. As an adult, Blake moved on to develop a religious mythology. In a sense, he created his own religion and a special language to go with it. Part of this religion included his beliefs in the contraries in life and the "prophetic significance" of art (Lincoln 11). A partial explanation of why Blake was a critical failure in his time may have to do with his expressed religious views. He

held beliefs that were significantly far removed from the common and popular beliefs of the time.

At the age of twenty-two, Blake married his wife Catherine on August 18, 1782 at Battersea Church (Wilson 15). She was to become a powerful influence on Blake's life. Catherine was a great companion and wife through the years of poverty and struggle, despite speculations that he was sometimes a challenging domestic partner. Although Catherine was illiterate at the time they married, Blake taught Catherine to read and write. She was then able to assist him in his own work. Wilson adds that she "accepted his visions with the wonder and faith of a child" (16). The Blakes had no children.

Blake's brother Robert, nearly five years younger, was another important influence in Blake's life. He played an important role in Blake's development as a poetic visionary. It is said that Robert was the "only one of the family spiritually akin" to Blake (Wilson 2). Blake took care of Robert when he became ill with consumption in 1787 at the age of twenty-five. The accounts tell that Blake lingered awake without any rest for a fortnight and slept for three days and nights after Robert passed away. Afterwards, Blake claimed that he saw Robert's spirit rise from his deathbed. He felt that he could communicate with Robert from the grave and his death allowed Blake to find the door into the visionary world; a world that assisted him in his writings. His otherworldly communications with Robert inspired many of his works. In 1800 he reported that "Thirteen years ago I lost a brother, and with his spirit I converse daily and hourly in the spirit, and see him in my remembrance, in the regions of my imagination. I hear his advice, and even now write from his dictate" (Wilson 22).

Among Blake's finest work is the combined collection of poems, *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*, which he first began publishing at the age of thirty-two. The *Songs* challenge traditional assumptions, sometimes indirectly, sometimes with daring directness by confronting social and religious issues. These poems have been approached, explained and commented on in terms of "mysticism, occultism, neo-Platonism, psychology, sociology, and autobiography" (Gleckner 34). The best way to approach the poems is to consider what Blake referred to as the "two contrary states of the human soul" (Blake 84).

Together, the *Songs* depict these opposing states. In many instances, the poems develop opposite points of view toward the same subject matter. Blake juxtaposes the innocent, pastoral world against an adult world of corruption and repression. He presents these comparable contrasts not as elements of a unified system of belief, but as aspects of two contrary modes of vision that illuminate subjects to which they are applied.

Songs of Innocence was first published in 1789. *Songs of Experience* was published shortly thereafter in 1794. Though they were conceived independently, Blake meant for them to be read in conjunction with each other. In fact, they were always printed and sold together after 1794. Today, they share the combined title of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and are almost always read together. It is possible to read the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience* as separate, individual poems and collections, but full meaning largely depends upon seeing them as "integral parts of a complete book" (Gleckner 34).

To emphasize the state of contraries, Blake constructs the poems based upon counterparts. The poems in the *Innocence* collection have counterparts in *Experience*,

which are linked by identical or contrasting titles. For example, a poem entitled “The Chimney Sweeper” appears in *Songs of Innocence*, as well as in *Songs of Experience*. The poems share the same title, but offer different view points. There are also poems such as “The Lamb” in *Innocence*, contrasted with “The Tyger” in *Experience*. Many of the poems fall into pairs to allow for the same situation or problem to be seen through the lens of *Innocence* and then through *Experience*.

With *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Blake intended to satirize both the states of innocence and of experience. No satire seems implicit in the *Songs of Innocence* until it is read in conjunction with *Songs of Experience*, which makes it clear that the two contrary states of the human soul are parodies of each other. Whomever prefers the natural sweetness and happiness of childhood is reminded by the *Songs of Experience* that childhood is by no means always sweet, and that happiness is “against Nature” (Ostriker 47). The *Songs of Experience* satirize the state of innocence. They show us the “butcher’s knife which is waiting for the unconscious lamb” (Frye 47). The *Songs of Innocence* satirize the state of experience as well. The hypocrisies evident in the poems in *Innocence* become more obviously shameful when contrasted with the harsh realities presented in the poems from *Experience* collection.

The *Songs of Innocence* can be “approached as its own integral work” because it was conceived and produced before the *Songs of Experience* (Hilton 198). The introductory poem, entitled “Introduction,” announces the work as a book for children. Blake states “And I wrote my happy songs / Every child may joy to hear” (ln 19-20). Ostriker explains that “As [the collection’s] symbol is the child, so their style resembles

that of children's song" (9). The child is a symbol of "primal unity" and is an unconscious self (Gleckner 45).

The reader may suspect that the poems in *Innocence* work in a simple and uncomplicated manner, but Blake is certainly not uncomplicated. His goal with this collection was to dramatize the naïve hopes and fears that inform the lives of children and trace their transformation into adulthood. The characteristics of innocence are those of eternity: perfect happiness in ignorance of evil and the self; freedom and energy without restrictions; unhindered communion between the child's life and the lives of animals and the surrounding universe; and the clear vision of the world. Many of the poems draw on the positive aspects of natural human understanding prior to the interruption of experience.

Although the state of being in *Innocence* is seemingly idyllic, it is not without limitations. *Innocence's* ever ready comfort and security involve passivity, resignation and dependence. Lincoln further points out that the "divine virtues of *Innocence* are realized only as symptoms of dire repression: hypocritical mercy, "usurious" pity, fearful peace, selfish love" (213). "The Chimney Sweeper" and "The Little Blake Boy," for example, seem to offer simple religious solace to children in dire situations, but they are highly ironic poems. In addition, "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found" may or may not be about the family consequences of an adolescent's sexual development. Eaves confirms that the *Songs of Innocence* "seem to posit other narratives that are implied but not present" (5).

The poems in *Songs of Experience* differ considerably in mood and perspective. In contrast to the poems in *Innocence*, *Experience* is a state of disillusionment in which

“distress breeds anger and a new kind of hope” (Lincoln 10). In this set of poems, Blake laments the ways in which the harsh experiences of adulthood destroy what is good in innocence, while also showing the weaknesses of innocence. According to Wilson, “Blake had looked on the world through the eyes of a child [in *Innocence*]: [in *Experience*] he must now see it through the eyes of a man who perceives all the evil and misery, and rebels against the errors which cause them” (32). For Blake, this transformation is experienced by all of us when we pass during adolescence from the stage of innocence to the stage of experience. The imagination is inhibited and we come to perceive the world primarily with our senses. Still, man must pass through the state of experience in order to eventually arrive at a higher state of innocence. Man must experience things in order to truly understand them. In addition, it is a movement from clear consciousness in innocence into self-consciousness in experience.

The introductory poem of *Experience* is also different than that of the introductory poem in *Innocence*. The speaker begins by commanding his readers to “Hear the voice of the Bard!” (ln 1). It is evident that this set of poems is not nearly as soft and gentle as that of *Innocence*. Blake is declaring that it is a time for renewal. He is “Calling the lapsèd Soul” and therefore wants all of the fallen souls to listen (ln 6). There is also the image of the “watry shore,” which signifies chaos for Blake (ln 19). Although the *Songs of Experience* are less serene than the *Songs of Innocence*, they are more dramatic and powerful.

The language Blake uses further differentiates the two groups and their apparent contrary states of being. In *Innocence* the following words are repeated over ten times: “bird,” “child,” “infant,” “lamb,” “little,” “laugh,” “mother,” “father” and “sweet”.

Words such as “weep” and “joy” also occur over twenty times. The world of *Innocence* is a child’s world, which is suggested by the affected vocabulary. In *Experience* words such as father, hand, weep and fear each appear close to ten times. *Experience* is less tranquil than *Innocence* and the symbols are slightly more diverse.

The *Songs* rarely offer simple choices, “but tend to emphasize the relativity of particular images and points of view” (Lincoln 10). To accept one view and refuse the alternative would be to turn away from an unpleasant truth or to accept a reductive view of human nature and feelings. The poems form a complex comment on good and evil.

Songs of Innocence and Experience remain as challenging for readers today as they were for Blake’s original readers. Few works of poetry offer such challenges with this disarming appearance of simplicity. The form that these poems take consists of simple language, rhymes and rhythms, but they also have the ability to be much more complicated than they appear. They force the reader to think in unexpected ways.

Blake’s illustrative designs and theories contribute to this apparent complexity. They are integral to Blake’s artistic expression. Part of Blake’s originality stems from his ability to assimilate and transform art for his own purposes. Through his work, we are able to explore the transactions between the poetic and the pictorial, the linguistic and the visual. To open one of Blake’s original books is to be confronted with two equally compelling forms of art. For the reader, it is a remarkable experience to be able to look at what Blake imagined, as it is represented verbal and pictorial imagery.

Almost every poem Blake composed is accompanied by, or is within an illustration. In his time, illustrations traditionally tended to illustrate the text, or attempt to simplify the verbal meaning. His technique is symbolic rather than representational.

His illustrative works add additional elements to the meaning of the written work. His illustrative technique is symbolic rather than representational. Many of the visual images move toward the realm of language and a reader must study the pictorial content to decipher meaning. A reader is forced to use “association, transformation and creative inferences” to examine gestures, expressive content and facial expressions (Mitchell 6). The illustrations tend to multiply the text and amplify its “significance rather than merely replicating it” (Makdisi 116-117). Since the illustrations are not constructed as narrative texts “the pictures have the maddening habit of multiplying the contested territory of meaning, often of destabilizing” (Eaves 5).

For his illustrations, Blake developed a special process called illuminated printing, a method of relief etching. This procedure involved working directly on a copper plate with special acid-resistant materials. Blake wrote the text in reverse and drew the illustration with pens and brushes. The plate was then etched in acid to destroy the untreated copper, which left the design in relief. The plates were finally printed in colored inks and usually tinted later with watercolors. Blake announced this process as “a method of Printing which combines the Painter and the Poet” (Viscomi 41). It allowed him to act as his own publisher, in addition to being able to integrate text and illustration on a single page.

The illustrated prints in *Innocence* and *Experience* are similar in design to the verbal texts that they accompany. They serve not only as companion pieces, but as contraries as well, “whose differences are as important as their similarities” (Mitchell 5). For instance, the frontispiece to the *Songs of Innocence* shows a tranquil scene designed with cool and pastel colors. Also represented are a pair of entwined trees, which are

symbols of love and harmony. The man and child in the cloud are composed and peaceful. From their positioning we know that the child and innocence are in control. Interestingly, this is one of the rare scenes that does have a verbal equivalent. It serves as an illustration to the first poem in *Innocence*, entitled “Introduction.”

The man and winged child have “obvious pictorial relative[s]” in the frontispiece counterpoint found in *Experience* (Mitchell 5). This scene displays a young man carrying a winged child. The illustration however, does not have a verbal equivalent. The reader must refer back to its complementing frontispiece in *Innocence*. Any words we find to describe the scene in *Experience* will have to involve transformations and reversals of the language discovered in the poem and illustration from *Innocence*. In addition, the reader will notice that the poems in *Experience* are commonly depicted in bolder, darker colors and with more menacing symbols. The young man in the *Experience* frontispiece is also advancing with the right foot, not the left as before on the title page of *Innocence*. This signifies the pending change of direction the poems take. The illustration prepares the reader for the urgency and anxiety of that specific set of poems.

In Blake’s time, engraving was an expensive and labor-intensive process that resulted in limited output and circulation of his work. Today, it is generally agreed upon that Blake’s poetry needs to be read in conjunction with the illuminated prints. Blake certainly thought so. The reason why they are still often depicted separately is because of space and printing costs. Indeed, neither the poetry nor the prints are unintelligible or uninteresting without the support of the other.

William Wordsworth, one of Blake’s English contemporaries and admirers, stated that “There is no doubt this poor man was mad, but there is something in the madness of

this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott” (Ostriker 204). This fascination remains today. Blake is still a mesmerizing poet for contemporary readers. Fortunately, what *has* changed is that his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* have been transformed. They have gone from “curiosities to literature” (Ostriker 205). They are recognized as works of great literature, rather than eccentric oddities. Fortunately, Blake’s frustration with traditional techniques and methods transformed his poems into treasured works of art.

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Author Biography:

Jeannie Campe is a graduate of Minnesota State University, Mankato, MN, with a BA in English Literature and French.

Faculty Mentor Biography:

Mary Susan Johnston is a Professor of English at Minnesota State University, Mankato, MN. She specializes in British Literature and Religion and Literature. Her graduate degrees are from the University of Minnesota.