

NAME

English 2301

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March 10, 2010

### Fading Innocence

There is a sense of innocence that a person has when he is a child, an innocence that fades to the past all too quickly. This pure outlook on life has the ability to make terrible life situations seemingly better. Once that innocence is gone, one cannot help but see the truth in dismal situations. There is a pain that accompanies such a realization, especially when there is no way to bring about improvement. William Blake believed that children have a special wisdom that allows them to see the world in a marvelous light and recognized the tragedy that follows the loss of such wisdom and innocence. His works *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* show the contrasting views of the world through both perspectives. The differences are best seen while comparing his works, two entitled "The Chimney Sweeper", "The Little Black Boy", and "London." Both sets of contrasting pieces examine the terrible conditions the narrators are being faced with. Despite the similar circumstances, there are apparent differences in the perspectives of each, especially the presence of hope and complete honesty about the circumstances.

Children see the world through rose colored glasses. Blake was very aware of this fact and portrays it well in "The Chimney Sweeper" from his *Songs of Innocence*. The story of a child chimney sweeper is a tragic one, full of pain and unknown oppression, but the children at hand accept the life they have been given. J.P.R. Wallis

takes note that “the idea of suffering is almost lost in the clear sense of a sustaining presence of love...” (9). A child’s innocence is present throughout the work; they know they are unhappy, but they see nothing morally wrong with the lives they are being forced to lead. The narrator demonstrates such innocence when he comforts Tom Dacre, saying, “Hush, Tom! never mind it....” when he gets his head shaved (Blake 785). The narrator would only comfort Tom in this moment if he truly believed things were better this way, a pure mindset which only a child would have. To the reader, these sweepers should be completely miserable, but somehow they continue with their lives and keep a sustaining hope. James Harrison recognizes that “though [the narrator’s] few years’ seniority have given him a protective sense of responsibility, they have robbed him of little if any of his innocence” (2). No matter the awful circumstances, these young individuals instinctively find the silver lining, a quality that slowly vanishes with age.

Another instance in Blake’s writing where a child’s innocence is evident is “The Little Black Boy.” Similar to “The Chimney Sweeper,” the narrator has been placed in a life of oppression and despair, but he holds on to a strand of hope his mother shared with him when he was younger. He firmly believes in the teaching his mother has passed on to him. He learned that “men receive / Comfort in the morning, joy in the noon day,” despite the fact that everything in his life demonstrates otherwise (Blake 784). Once again, this mindset and pure acceptance of these thoughts can only accompany the innocence of a child. Wallace Jackson states that, “an innocent world is an extension of the child” (399). The boy believes that “we are put on earth a little space, / That we may learn to bear the beams of love” (Blake 784). Every aspect of this

boy's life is teaching him how to have a heart of stone, live for himself, and do everything he can to just survive. Despite the fact that his childhood has been stolen away from him, he has a sense of optimism and shares his positive outlook with his peers. In doing so, he hopes to share a little ray of hope. If such a situation were happening to someone twice his age, there is no way that he would be approaching with the same mindset.

Innocence begins to fade as one grows older. Matters are no longer black or white but are, instead, a puzzling shade of grey. Life experiences, especially those containing tribulation, cause one to become calloused and develop a cynical outlook on life. In "The Chimney Sweeper" from Blake's *Songs of Experience*, the reader understands that the life the child leads and accepts is ghastly and cruel, and the child is slowly beginning to understand this concept as well. Natural development causes humans to think in a new fashion. Dennis M. Welch suggests the child sweeper may be "...on the verge of some deeper understanding," now offering a chance to better comprehend the situation around him (246). Hearing the child relay his story of how he came to be a sweeper causes the reader pain on the child's behalf. This pain occurs when he says, "And because I am happy, & dance & sing, [my parents] think they have done me no injury," and later when he refers to his life as "a heaven of...misery" (Blake 788). He knows that something is not ideal about the life he has been placed in whereas the boy in the *Songs of Innocence* only knows that he is uncomfortable but has no reason to believe that he is being mistreated. In the *Songs of Experience*, he is completely honest about his life situation, and unfortunately, he shows little sign of hope for ever finding an end to his misery.

Over time, the negative disposition about life, which stems from experience, only worsens. In "The Chimney Sweeper," the boy is only just beginning to grasp the concept that there is something better out there which he will never be given the opportunity to see. In Blake's "London," the narrator is much older and has experienced more of life which has affected his perspective of the world. The reader can immediately detect the depressive tone when the narrator says, "And I mark in every face I meet, / Marks of weakness, marks of woe" (Blake 787). The narrator has no idea of the feeling these people who he is passing are actually experiencing at that instant, but he is able to detect the inner anguish each is undoubtedly trying to conceal. Experience causes one to lose idealistic beliefs and accept realistic ones, in turn giving one a tainted view of the world. It is much easier to see the sorrow and pain in life and dwell upon it. Such as the narrator demonstrates as he walks through the streets of London and only takes note of the sound of crying, from infants, children, and even grown men. Jackson Wallace defines innocence as, "...that state of complete containment and contentment within a joyfully animated nature in which human and divine, animal and vegetable, are correspondent parts of an undivided vision" (398). When one is faced with less than idealistic conditions and forced to accept the fact that there is no way to avoid them, it is next to impossible to be in a complete state of joy, thereby causing innocence to vanish.

A person's perspective on life changes drastically once innocence is stolen. The minute innocence is lost is when cynicism and pain begin to make an appearance in life. The narrators in "The Chimney Sweeper" and "The Little Black Boy" are obviously being forced into lives of misery but are not able to fully comprehend the pain. They have not

been exposed to the terrible conditions long enough; their innocence is still intact. The narrators of "The Chimney Sweeper" and "London," on the other hand, have seen the reality of the world's harsh living conditions which has driven away the hope they once clung to. They are now left with an ability to see the negative both in people and fate and accept the fact that an escape from misery is unlikely. Experience is the only factor that separates these narrators from one another even though the life of a chimney sweeper is represented in each poem; a few of them very well could be facing each day side by side. This idea that innocence and experience affect a person's outlook on life is still evident today. An all too common occurrence in today's society is divorce. If a set of parents are getting a divorce, each child will approach the event differently. The youngest will pray every night that his parents will be reunited and never quite accept the fact that his family will never be the same, because he does not know anything other than a happy, unharmed family. The eldest, on the other hand, is unable to find the hope in the situation and allows his parents' divorce to take place. This mindset can be attributed to watching his peers' families be faced with the same tragedy and a higher understanding that life moves on, even if not peacefully. Age and experience are the only factors that prevent these children from seeing this adversity in the same light.

Experience steals innocence which, in turn, steals hope and the ability to see the light at the end of the tunnel. The narrator in each of the poems is surrounded by appalling events. Although they share this common factor in their lives, no two individuals have the same mindset about what they are being faced with. Two of the boys still have their innocence about them and can see a glimmer of hope despite the adversity. The others have lost their innocence through age and experience and have

the ability to see their condition for what it truly is: miserable. Innocence and purity can make even the worst of situations seem slightly hopeful. This quality is only around for a short time and once it is gone it can never return. Whenever there is a trace of innocence left, it should not be tampered with, for it is rare and must be treasured.

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