

Homework P1-5

EN 206 Unit 1: Romantic and Victorian Poetry

Week 2 Introduction and Assignments

Week 2: Blake's Contrary States: Childhood Innocence versus Wordly Experience

What to Do This Week:

- 1) Read through my initial preliminary introduction to Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* just below here in this document. (10 minutes)
- 2) View the five videos then listed next in this document. (60 minutes)
- 3) Read then the assigned poems listed next in this document. (45 minutes)
- 4) Compose a journal entry in response to the journal prompt found next in this document and submit it to the Blackboard slot by 11:59 on Tuesday August 25. (45 minutes)
- 5) Make three posts to our Week 2 Discussion Post on Blackboard by noon on Thursday August 27th; see directions at the end of this document about what to post. (20 minutes)

1) Introduction: Blake's Contrary States--Childhood Innocence versus Wordly Experience

- a) If you did view the Introduction to Romanticism powerpoint assigned last week, you may recall that William Blake was one of the first generation English Romantic poets, writing much of his poetry between 1790 and 1820.
- b) As with the other romantic poets, he valued the imagination as way of understanding how all the things in the world might fit together in a meaningful organic way, something especially crucial at a time when the Industrial Revolution was beginning to mechanize the world and the French Revolution had revealed how unfair traditional European societies could be in terms of human equality.
- c) As with the other romantics, he was especially keen on looking to nature for the harmony, peace, and spirituality it could provide. Hand in hand with this turn to nature for the romantics was a special emphasis on the importance of childhood as an intuitive time of innocence that could powerfully connect one to nature and the spiritual powers it invoked.
- d) In terms of this context, Blake's early dual collection of poems *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) explores both the purity of childhood (innocence) and the subsequent loss of it as we grow older (experience).
- e) Blake held a firm belief that much of understanding of life revolves around thinking through essential dualities such as good and evil or spirit and body. He uses the term 'contraries' to characterize such opposing dualities and stated: 'without contraries there is no progress.'

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- f) Consider the following characterization of his dualistic vision of innocence and experience from a commentator:

While ostensibly about the naivety and simplicity of innocent youth, *Songs of Innocence* is not merely a collection of verses for children. Several of the poems include an ironic tone, and some, such as "The Chimney Sweeper," imply sharp criticism of the society of Blake's time. Although clearly intended as a celebration of children and of their unadulterated enjoyment of the world around them, *Songs of Innocence* is also a warning to adult readers. *Innocence* has been lost not simply through aging, but because the forces of culture have allowed a hope-crushing society to flourish, sometimes at the direct expense of children's souls.

Songs of Experience allows Blake to be more direct in his criticism of society. He attacks church leaders, wealthy socialites, and cruel parents with equal vehemence. Blake also uses *Songs of Experience* to further develop his own personal theological system, which was portrayed as mostly very traditional in *Songs of Innocence*. In *Songs of Experience*, Blake questions how we know that God exists, whether a God who allows poor children to suffer and be exploited is in fact, good, and whether love can exist as an abstract concept apart from human interaction.

- g) Thus, while Blake celebrates the innocence and joy of childhood, especially when connected to nature, he is also a sharp critic of society--in terms of how children can unfairly have their innocence corrupted; in addition, as we all grow older we do understandably lose some element of our childhood innocence as well--it is necessary as we grow into rational human beings who become a part of the world of experience.
- h) For this week's reading and responses, then, at the outset here think about the following questions:

- Blake describes innocence and experience as “the two contrary states of the human soul.” What do you think he means by this?
- Do your own experiences growing up confirm Blake's view of this duality between innocence and experience?
- For Blake, how is it that society (including government, the church, and other authorities and realities) proves to be a corrupting influence on individuals, especially children?
- Does Blake's use of parallel poems, one from 'Innocence' and one from 'Experience' (often but not always evident in titles), help you to see the shift he explores?

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>KEEP GOING>>>>>>>>>>>>

2) **View the Videos:** Before reading the assigned poem (listed below), view the five videos I have provided with the hyperlinks here. While I am happy to frame our weekly units myself, which I will do to some degree (as I have done here), there are some really thoughtful, engaging, and varied presentations about Blake and his poetry out there, particularly those created by educational institutions such as universities, museums, and libraries. Anyway, it makes sense to experience these varied and useful perspectives at the outset of our weekly activities.

- a) Start off with this introductory lecture from a professor at the University of Leeds in England

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVvC8Pfromhs>

- b) Next up work through this introduction to Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* from the Tate Museum in London. Note that you can see how Blake's beautifully illuminated manuscripts (paintings) look, you can hear how his poems sound when read out loud, and you can read short perceptive analyses of some of the key poems from his dual collection:

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/william-blake-39/blakes-songs-of-innocence-experience>

- c) Then listen to a brief reading of two poems that Blake pairs in his collection: "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Innocence* and "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Experience*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfS79xNNenM&list=PLvJBrtj1vubHwfkNlrIIOeln8quoMR6a4&index=20>

- d) As a follow-up to listening to the two Chimney Sweeper poems, now listen to this fairly short but perceptive analysis of these two poems, particularly in terms of they are related to one another and reveal the transition from innocence to experience:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDjrP5IltvE&list=PLvJBrtj1vubHwfkNlrIIOeln8quoMR6a4&index=22>

- e) Last but not least but watch this animated futuristic video interpretation of perhaps Blake's most famous poem from *Songs of Experience*, "London":

<https://vimeo.com/42973939>

- 3) **Read the Poems:** while by now you have already viewed, listen to, and heard analysis of some of the poems from this collection (*Songs of Innocence and Experience*), it is now time for you to dive into the poems on your own and read them. They are short; take your time. In our Norton Anthology of English Literature (Major Authors Vol 2, tenth edition), they can be found on pages 48-64. Other Norton editions will have the same grouping of poems (most but not all from the overall collection), though page numbers may differ. If you wish to read these separately online (not via our textbook) you can readily search and find the table of contents for our tenth edition textbook. Or given that the collection is not that long overall, just read through the entire collection (*Innocence and Experience*), as this is pretty much what our anthology has anyway.

As you read through these poems keep in mind the following questions below, as I will ask you later on to respond to one of them in your journal entry (don't worry about the journal entry just yet). In any event, just try also to read and enjoy these short lyrics. The *Songs of Innocence* are often but not always a fairly delightful romp through childhood innocence (frolicking in nature, observing animals and flora and fauna in nature, carefree play); the *Songs of Experience* sharpen Blake's critical view of society as we see a darker reality emerge.

- Blake describes innocence and experience as "the two contrary states of the human soul." What do you think he means by this?
- Do your own experiences growing up confirm Blake's view of this duality between innocence and experience?
- For Blake, how is it that society (including government, the church, and other authorities and realities) proves to be a corrupting influence on individuals, especially children?
- Does Blake's pairing of single poems from 'Innocence' and 'Experience' (often but not always evident in titles) help you to see the shift he explores?

- 4) **Journal Entry:** Every week, except on a couple of occasions when you will be writing an essay for the entire week, I will ask you to upload via Turnitin a journal entry of 250-300 words by the end of the day on Tuesday August 25 (11:59 pm). For these journal entries I will typically give you some choice. These journal entries—combined with related discussion thread posts (see item 5 below)--will be graded on a typical hundred point scale and will accumulate through the semester to comprise 25% of your final grade. More on grading policies is upcoming; I will post a document related to the journal entries and posts near the top of our class page in the next few days). For now, here are the options for your journal entries—choose just one:

- a) Blake describes innocence and experience as "the two contrary states of the human soul." What do you think he means by this? Refer to specifics from

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two poems in developing your point. In so doing incorporate one short quote (just a line or two, no more) from each of the two poems.

- b) Do your own experiences growing up confirm Blake's view of this duality between innocence and experience? Refer to specifics from two poems in developing your point. In so doing incorporate one short quote (just a line or two, no more) from each of the two poems.
- c) For Blake, how is it that society (including government, the church, and other authorities and realities) proves to be a corrupting influence on individuals, especially children? Refer to specifics from two poems in developing your point. In so doing incorporate one short quote (just a line or two, no more) from each of the two poems.
- d) Does Blake's pairing of single poems from 'Innocence' and 'Experience' (often but not always evident in titles) help you to see the shift he explores? Consider perhaps the famous pairing of "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" as poems about the nature of creation. Refer to specifics from two poems in developing your point. In so doing incorporate one short quote (just a line or two, no more) from each of the two poems.

[Note: because Blake's "Chimney Sweeper" poems figure so prominently in the videos above, please do not choose these two specific poems for your journal entry so it can be more readily a response from your own reading]

- 5) **Discussion Thread Posts:** we will have a weekly 'discussion' of the readings via a discussion thread I will create. To this discussion thread, you will be asked to contribute three posts: your initial post will be simple enough—just post your journal entry (250-300 words); then do two shorter posts (25 or more words—keep it lean) that respond directly to another student's post, either an original journal post or a reply to another student's post/reply (anywhere in the thread). These posts need to be completed by noon on Thursday of the week in question (8/27 for week two here).

