

DOES BLAKE'S ILLUSTRATED DESIGNS VISUALISE HIS POEMS IN THE SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE?

Introduction:

William Blake was born in London in 1757. His Father soon recognized his son's artistic talents and sent him to study at a drawing school when he was ten years old. At fourteen, William asked to be apprenticed to the engraver James Basire, under whose direction he further developed his innate skills. As a young man Blake worked as an engraver, illustrator and drawing teacher, and met such artists as Henry Fuseli and John Flaxman, as well as Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose classicizing style he would later come to reject. Blake wrote poems during this time as well, and his first printed collection, an immature and rather derivative volume called *Poetical Sketches*, appeared in 1783. *Songs of Innocence* was published in 1789, followed by *Songs of Experience* in 1793 and a combined edition the next year bearing the title of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* which shows the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.

In 1809, Blake sank into depression and withdrew into obscurity; he remained alienated for the rest of his life. His contemporaries saw him as something of an eccentric- as indeed he was. Suspended between the neoclassicism of the 18th century and the early phases of Romanticism, Blake belongs to no single poetic school or age. Only in the 20th century did wide audiences begin to acknowledge his profound originality and genius. (1985, 492)

Blake's political radicalism intensified during the years leading up to the French Revolution. He began a seven-book poem about the revolution, but it was either destroyed or never completed, and only the first book survives. He disapproved of Enlightened rationalism of institutionalized religion. In the 1790's and after, he shifted his poetic voice from the lyric to the prophetic mode, and he wrote a series of long prophetic books, including *Milton* and *Jerusalem*.

Blake published almost all of his works himself, by an original process in which the poems were etched by hand, along with illustrations and decorative images, onto copper plates. These plates were inked to make prints, and the prints were then

colored in with paint. This expensive and labor-intensive production method resulted in a quite limited circulation of Blake's poetry during his life. It also posed a special set of challenges to scholars of Blake's work, which has interested both literary critics and art historians. Studies on his work shows that we should consider his graphic art and his writing together; certainly he himself thought of them as inseparable. (1985, 493)

William Blake was one of the most influential English romantic artists of the 19th-century. His poems, paintings, and engravings, revealed a remarkable talent. He was an artist who mixed his poetry with painting which was really interesting. In his age he was influenced by various social, ideological, and political movement along with Romantic Movement which made him practice his own method and to develop a new style.

Why does he decorate his pages with lines and stain them with color? He engraved illustrations for printed books and he was familiar with emblems, devices, borders, and other decorations that beautify and interpret the printed page.

One critic admiring Blake's poems writes:

The Short poems of Blake are like pebbles thrown into a pool, creating ripples which move outwards indefinitely, affecting everything they touch. At their gentlest they are like tendrils caressing the world, at their most violent like bombs smashing to smithereens the false structures of existing belief and opinions.

In his critic of Innocence and Experience, C.M. Bowra claims that the address to Earth is an authentic appeal reflecting Blake's desire of creating an "ultimate synthesis in which innocence might be wedded to experience and goodness to knowledge".

The poems of Blake's Songs of Innocence and Song of Experience are portrayals of the continual conflict between innocence and experience. Each poem tells different links of interweaved stories.

Also, the "break of day " stands as a symbol of the new life in which innocence and experience will be transformed, and man's soul will attain a fuller, more active life in the creative imagination.

Regarding the connections between Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience and some similarities Bowra adds that:

...The Bard in the "Introduction to Songs of Experience" appears again in "The Sick Rose" and is again calling to an individual; perhaps this individual is the same character as the narrator at the end of "The Echoing Green ". By weaving through these stories and characters, Blake portrays views of innocence and experience as they appear in several characters. While these characters may not be the actual characters in previous poems, there is enough evidence to support the theory that the characters that are introduced are meant to represent the characters that have similar experiences to those that have been introduced earlier. Blake defines a few different "type" of characters, whose types are defined by the amount, of experience, wisdom and maturity."

Blake's most well known work is that contained within his Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience collections of poems. The former of these collections, printed 1789, depicts a naive world of nature with Christ-like overtones. It does, however, acknowledge an opposite or contrary world. The Songs of Experience, a later collection printed 1794, depicts a cold, sad despairing place.

In this essay, I attempt to compare Blake's illustrated designs and poems in his Songs of Innocence and Experience and to examine to what extent his paintings visualize his poems.

As my first step, I would elaborate on some of the poems of Songs of Innocence and their corresponding images. This section will be followed by a similar study on his Song of Experience. Finally, I will round up the presented arguments voiced by a number of his famous critics and then provide a conclusion.

Songs of Innocence

Blake published his Songs of Innocence in 1789. The poems of Innocence are full of life and simplicity. The texts centers on the lively period of childhood and is full of energy. Both the design and the text are simple and contain subjects which are related to nature and children. Every item in the text and especially in the design may have emblems and should be considered meaningful.

In Picture Theory, Mitchell argues in a different way about the quality of the Songs of Innocence that the hollow reed and the stained water indicate that a kind of absence and lack of innocence accompanies the very attempt to express the message of innocence. What makes the poems songs of innocence is the narrator's unawareness of these evil connotations.(1994,122)

Blake himself suggested some two years before that a man might be insulted with "the innocence of a child..., because it reproaches him with the errors of acquired folly."

Jean H. Hagstrum says in this regard that Songs of Innocence deals with three integrally related elements - humble life, natural sexuality, and the Poet-Christ.

Humble life is the particular province of the border which is richer and more beautiful in it than on any other of Blake's pages. In Blake's borders, with trees, vines, creepers, leaves, birds, and insects, life was abundant- and allusive even the letters of the title page vegetate into organic forms.

As the second major theme of Songs of Innocence, natural sexuality appears alike in word, border, and design. Some of the recurrent sexual symbols are lamb, ewe, leaves, stems, grapes, and the embrace of man and woman. For instance the boy on the second page of "The Ecchoing Green" who gives a bunch of grapes from a vine to a girl is a symbol of sexual awareness.

The Poet-Christ of Innocence is represented predominantly in poetic and prophetic characters of divine, love, and human imagination. All those who salvage the lost are

manifestations of Christ, or the divine shepherd who seeks and finds the straying sheep.

In this part I would like to explain about some of the famous poems of The Songs of Innocence such as: "The Ecchoing Green," "The Lamb," "The Little Black Boy" and "Infant Joy." I will also mention other critics' points of view, regarding these poems.

The Ecchoing Green

Blake uses a curved line that stretches from side to side and top to side to connect different parts of form and vision. Like the designs, the poems are full of life and action; the sun, the singing birds, children playing, merry-bells, and laughter. However, the visual images lack some details that are included in the texts such as the sun and the birds. Also, the poem ends with a symbolic reference to mortality which gives the final lines a sad mood:

"Like birds in their nest,
Are ready for rest: And sport
No more seen,
On the darkening Green."

As already stated, the second element of Innocence is uninhibited sexuality, which quite visibly is seen in "The Ecchoing Green", in the first design of which we find a boy with a hoop and a boy with a bat which describe a summer day.

According to Hagstrum, the second page of the poem illustrates all the emblematic qualities that Blake manipulated such as: the direct appeal to children and to listening adults, the presence of proverbial wisdom as a substratum, and the conversion of people and natural details into a universal symbol. The poem is about a day of childish sport which symbolizes the beginning and end of life and is supported by its designs. On the second page, children from the right-hand side border hand grapes to members of a group who now returns home from play. It symbolizes the passage from innocence to experience through the gate of sex. (1964,56)

The Lamb

In "The Lamb", lamb has a religious meaning and refers to Christ. The illustration in the picture shows a tree that twists all the way around the border and separates the stanzas. Also in the picture, we see a cottage which is not mentioned in the text; nor is the willow tree (a symbol of heaven) at the back of the picture. As we can see in the picture, Blake uses natural scenery to convey his thoughts. According to S. Gardner, in the visual image of the poem, the lamb is not alone; it is accompanied by a human. This shows a compound of Christian spirit and 'pastoral reality' that becomes a symbol of caring and is associated with the clear daylight. (1986, 79)

Moreover, the word "stream" does not appear in the picture. It seems that in the first stanza the child talks to an animal (a sheep), but in the second stanza he talks to Christ. In the last four lines of the poem God, Christ, and the child melt into each other and they all become one:

"He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name. "

The poem has a simple style and a fluent nursery rhyme, which is comparable to the easy design of the picture. They both have a pastoral setting and tranquil scenery. In the design, there are two female angels; one of them is dancing on a wheat stem and the other is sitting on another stem under the first one and is looking at the child. Also, there are two sheep and a lamb which are surrounded by wheat stems. There is, however, no textual counterpart for the sheep and stems.

The Little Black Boy

There are two songs and two pictures for "The Little Black Boy." In the first picture, a black child is talking to his black mother. A twisted branch separates the picture from the stanzas. There two trees facing each other that can be taken as the mother and her child in the poem. The sun in the picture is interpreted as God. The black child is sitting on her mother's lap and points at the sun. Yet, the two trees are not mentioned in the poem. Also, in the poem the mother raises her arm and points at the east, whereas in the picture, it is the boy who shows the sky with his hand.

In his Blake's Composite Art, Mitchell explains that in the poem, Blake uses a pictorial allusion to the theme of a guardian angel presenting a human soul to God. This allusion completes an evolution in the consciousness which is clear in the text: the black boy realizes that in spite of his color he is equal or even superior to the white boy ("I am black, but Oh! My soul is white") because he had to undergo lots of suffering (ironically referred to as "bearing the beams of love". The poem starts with the white boy ("white as an angel") and the black boy in miserable condition ("bereaved of light"); however, the design shows a reversal of roles. (1978, 12)

In the other song with the same title, the design shows a white boy leaning on the knee of the shepherd-Christ. The black boy stands behind him to "stroke his silver hair." The picture portrays a grazing herd of sheep and a willow tree which is the emblem of paradise. None of these details are included in the text. These features indicate a heavenly state before the black boy's eyes. While it is the text of the first poem that bears a pictorial allusion, in the second title, the allusion goes to the visual image itself. In the picture of the first song, the boy and his mother appear at the top of the design next to a river, whereas in the second picture, the black and white boys appear with Christ at the bottom of the picture. In both combinations, pictures seem to be only literal translations of the texts because they can be regarded as independent works of art on their own.

Infant Joy

Blake wrote his "Infant Joy" mostly in monosyllabic words and a melodious, smooth language. Although he is not old enough to speak (he is only two days old), he expresses his natural and deep happiness by a sweet smile which can be paralleled with the bleating of a lamb.

Robert N. Essick writes that the child's smile signifies his joy and what it says is a translation into language of what he says through its expressive signs. The child's smile is a visual companion to the host of auditory natural signs that echo in Blake's Songs of Innocence: crying, laughing, sighing, shouting, bleating, birds' songs, shriek, howl,... (1989, 110-11)

The poem is about a deep affection between mother and child, which at a deeper level indicates Christ's love and compassion. The elements of love, birth, uninhibited sexuality, and natural joy are discernible in the visual image of the poem, too.

Explaining the visual image of the poem, Hagstrum writes:

"The words alone introduce only two speakers, the child and the mother. The presence in the design ... of an unsuspected third figure whose hands are raised in awe, adds dramatic ambiguity - but also makes the scene both an Annunciation and a Holy Birth. The text alone has no suggestion of stem, leaf, or flower - important details for the flame-flower and the pendant bud suggest sexual experience and birth, and the spiny stem and angular leaves anticipate the world of Experience."
(1964, 6)

The design and border of "Infant Joy" enlarges its meaning, yet the poem says nothing about the third person (a winged angel) who appears in the design, nor is there any plant or flower (that signifies womb) in the poem. The infant's face shows no smile of joy, but it evidently expresses security and tranquility.

Songs of Experience

Songs of Experience were published after Songs of Innocence. Although, there are some similarities between the two collections of poems, Experience is almost different.

Hagstrum describes the quality of these songs beautifully:

The tree of Innocence is large and healthy, its branches entwined in a natural embrace; but it anticipates the Fall in the serpentine creeper that often winds its trunk. The tree of Experience is dry and dying, its withering branches form round arches over the page as its spiky twigs invade the text; but its shape and the few sprays that still shoot recall its primal vigor. Experience is related to Innocence as a fossil is to a living creature.

He also adds:

Experience is not primarily a state of nature; it is a psychological, political, social- a condition of man and his institutions.... Experience is the work of church, state and man in society. (1964, 78)

In this section, I will discuss about some major poems of Songs of Experience, which include: The Tyger, the School Boy, and Chimney Sweeper.

The Tyger

The Tyger is, perhaps, apart from the words to the hymn Jerusalem, the best known of all Blake's works. As the contrary poem to The Lamb, The Tyger is straight from the heart of the Songs of Experience. While there are many interpretations of The Tyger, and some critics such as Marsh, have read into it very deeply, coming to the conclusion that it is a poem that addresses our "constant struggle to decode, interpret and master the world around us" as well as Satire on the ways we attempt to carry this task out, I think that The Tyger is poem that addresses the creation of evil in the world. More specifically, in the context of Blake's other work and personal opinion, as a subtle message that the creation of the Establishment was a creation of a great evil. The Tyger is a poem full of rich, powerful imagery, and sound.

The more the speaker ponders *The Tyger*, the more outstanding its Creator's power seems. This power that the Creator is indicated to have is important to the development of the poem's message and it is here that the ambiguous areas of the poem must be interpreted; that the tiger is unable to be "framed" may be read as the inability of anything to control or "capture" it. Not even the immense power of the Creator, is able to constrain the evil that it has created. It is here that the main point of the poem is made, and this is done principally through irony- the Creator has created a beast burning so brightly of evil that it even "shines" from the forests of Experience, of such immense evil that its own Creator can not control or "frame" it. This evil, in the context of Blake's other works may be read as the Establishment and thus, *The Tyger* may be read as a subtle attack on its overwhelming evil and hypocrisy. *The Tyger* has long been recognized as one of Blake's finest poems.

In his 'Life of William Blake', biographer Alexander Gilchrist relates that the poem "happens to have been quoted often enough... to have made its strange old Hebrew-like grandeur, its Oriental latitude yet force of eloquence comparatively familiar".

The essayist and critic Charles Lamb also wrote of Blake: "*I have heard of his poems, but have never seen them. There is one to a tiger ...which is glorious!*"

Many critics have focused on the symbolism in *The Tyger* frequently contrasting it with the language, images, and questions of origin presented by its "innocent" counterpart, *The Lamb*.

E.D Hirsch, Jr. for instance, noted that *The Tyger* satirizes the lyrics found in *The Lamb* that is not the poem's primary function.

Jerome J McGann, however, asserts in his essay in 1973 about the poem "...*The Tyger tempts us to a cognitive apprehension, but in the end exhausts our efforts.*" As a result, he concludes, "*the extreme diversity of opinion among critics of Blake about the meaning of particular poems and passages of poems is perhaps the most eloquent testimony we have to the success of his work.*"

Published in 1794 as one of the Songs of Experience, Blake's *The Tyger* is a poem about the nature of creation, much as is his earlier poem from Songs of Innocence, *The Lamb*. However, this poem is concerned about the darker side of creation, when its benefits are less obvious than simple joys. Blake's simplicity in language and

construction contradicts the complexity of his ideas. This poem is meant to be interpreted in comparison and contrast to *The Lamb*, showing the "two contrary states of the human soul" with respect to creation.

It has been said many times that Blake believed that a person had to pass through an innocent state of being, like that of the lamb, and also absorb the contrasting conditions of experience, like those of the tiger, in order to reach a higher level of consciousness.

In any case, Blake's vision of a creative force in the universe making a balance of innocence and experience is at the heart of this poem. The poem's speaker is never identified and so may be more closely aligned with Blake himself than in his other poems.

One interpretation could be that it is the Bard from the Introduction to the Songs of Experience walking through the ancient forest and encountering the beast within himself or the material world. The poem reflects primarily the speaker's response to the tiger, rather than the tiger's response to the world. He wrote most of his work before the Romantic Movement in English literature, during the opening stages of the Industrial Revolution, and in the midst of revolutions all over Europe and America.

The School Boy

On first reading "The School Boy" is the voice of a young boy complaining of being shut inside at his schoolwork instead of playing outside in the sun. When we look at the poem closer we can see that the poem is returning to the theme of childhood subjugated and its natural joy destroyed that can be seen in other poems in the collection such as "The Chimney Sweeper" in Experience with its comparison of the child who was 'happy on the heath' to now "Crying weep in notes of woe"!

A close comparison of *The School Boy* can be made to *The Ecchoing Green* in Innocence. Both poems talk of children, but "The Ecchoing Green" gives us a picture of them at idyllic play in a natural setting.

"The Ecchoing Green" is full of images of children in the pastoral and nature typical of Innocence while "The School Boy" shows children taken from these images and subdued, making it more typical of the poems in Experience.

Chimney Sweeper

The "Chimney Sweeper" poem addresses the hardships that faced children destined to the life of a chimney sweep in the late 18th century in London. The poem also may refer to the sufferings of all child laborers and can be considered as an attack on the Establishment that maintained poverty. The voice of the poem is enthusiasm.

The "Chimney Sweeper" like "The Tyger" reflects Blake's political and social beliefs. He is actually attacking what he considers injustice, evil, and suffering in the world.

If we look at this poem carefully, we can feel that the child is hopeful. Also, the design does not visualize the text, and does not reveal the hope or happiness, which is indicated in the poem.

The "Chimney Sweeper" in Experience develops the same situation as the poem by the same title in the Innocence collection, but it is from a different perspective. In this poem, there are clearly three different views of the sweeps situation, his own, his parents, and an observer. From the first reading it is clear that the young sweep feels exploited that his parents are self justifying, seeking only to pacify their own consciences and that the observer feels both pity and outrage.

Overall, the poem is an attack by Blake on the hypocrisy of the Church and of the wider Establishment.

Conclusion:

Blake's works are famous because of their composite art, which made him different from his contemporary artists. He wanted to develop an especial and unique technology and style by mixing painting and poetry.

Blake was then a man fiercely angry at the Establishment as a whole. In Blake's London however, the strictly social and moral codes of society prevented his work ever becoming acceptable; rejected by the mainstream of society as the creations of a mad man, poems like the works of Wordsworth were those that sold.

The 21st century was, however, with a vastly different social and political climate than that in which Blake lived. People are now freer than ever to pursue their own beliefs and as such, Blake's work has come under increasing attention. As a result, his poetry has been extensively commented upon as has his use of traditional form and metrical artistry to attack the Church and the wider Establishment.

The poems discussed, "The Chimney Sweeper" and "The Tyger" are all poems that reflect Blake's political and social beliefs, urging us, to adopt them and join him in attacking what he saw as the primary cause of evil, injustice and suffering in a "world of plenty", the Church and the wider Establishment.

Regarding his Composite Art, again Mitchell adds that, the pictures or designs have many relations, and the reduplicate the verbal scene. More often they are visual translation of Blake's metaphors. And, Blake's purpose of using this illustration is to represent the personifications of the poem and to give visual form to his personifications. (1964, 18)

Also, using designs make meaning more precise, and something they widen the imaginative resonances, or not they serve as an important aesthetic or semantic aim. (1964, 8)

Sometimes the design repeats the words. More often the designs complement the words in such a way as to insure that on almost every plate. If we consider border and design as well as word, Blake's entire paradise is shown. (1964,

Blake's illuminated books indeed emphasize his theory that "without contraries is no progression". The independency of the component parts is, however, the reason for the unity of his composite art, and for this his illuminated books are the most integrated forms of the visual-verbal art.

Blake himself believed that making poetry visual and making pictures "speak" was imperfect, because it presumed the independent reality of space and time. In short, his poetry invalidates the idea of objective time and his painting invalidates the idea of objective space. In other words, his poetry proves the power of human imagination to create time in its own image, and his painting affirms the centrality of the human body as the structural principle of space. Indeed, the unity of his art can be found in the equal engagements of imagination and body. (1978, 34)

He endeavored to invade man soul by the avenues of more than one sense; his art and thoughts moved towards a unity. He modeled the sister arts as they have never been before or since, into a single body; his union of the arts created a new form - an art of arts. The independency of Blake's illustration can be understood when there are illustrations, which do not illustrate a text.

Blake's two different forms of his work should be considered separately. The text can be compared with other text and the design with the other one. The independence of Blake's text and designs let him introduce independent symbolic statements, state some ironic contrasts, and multiply metaphorical complexities.

Northrop Frye explains this independency in a different way:

... The independence of Blake's designs from his words is rather surprising in view of the prevailing conventions within which he worked. The tradition of historical painting ...tended to dictate a slavish fidelity to the text, and the naive allegories of the emblem books were generally an attempt to simplify the verbal meaning. (1978, 14)

Also, Mitchell suggests that there are three main consequences for the practice of poetry and painting together. It encouraged a belief in transferability of techniques from one medium to another. That meant the idea that the coupling of the two arts provides a fuller imitation of the total reality. (1978, 17)

As Mitchell explains, Blake's illustrated books has its own "inter-animating principles", that is a specific poetic form or structure of images and values, and a distinctive pictorial style that interacts with this poetic form. Blake's composite art achieves its "wholeness", at different levels of poetic pictorial forms. This unity is also active and dynamic, and is based on the interaction of text and design as contrary or independent element. (1978,16)

If we evaluate Blake's painting and poems, we may conclude that, although they are different, they are almost equal in value.

In short, illustrations in Blake's work may be used for understanding the meaning of the text, for the decoration of the text, or for visualizing the text. Painting can give life to the text. These roles can also be considered for a text. The text may be painted meaningfully and decorates the pages.

Although, there is not sometimes any relationship between the text and its illustration, we can say that the painting can decorate the poem and is pleasant to the eyes of the viewer. It was a new technique at that time and also very interesting.

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