

I MA ENGLISH LIT
SUB CODE : 18PEL2
BRITISH LITERATURE-II

William Blake - Songs of Innocence and Experience

Blake is a unique poet with an original poetic vision. He was pained by the ills plaguing the less privileged sections of humanity. He appreciated the innocent aspect of Nature and acknowledged the terrible beauty of Nature too. Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) juxtapose the innocent, pastoral world of childhood against an adult world of corruption and repression; while such poems as "The Lamb" represent a meek virtue, poems like "The Tyger" exhibit opposing, darker forces. Thus the collection as a whole explores the value and limitations of two different perspectives on the world. Many of the poems fall into pairs, so that the same situation or problem is seen through the lens of innocence first and then experience. Blake does not identify himself wholly with either view; most of the poems are dramatic—that is, in the voice of a speaker other than the poet himself. Blake stands outside innocence and experience, in a distanced position from which he hopes to be able to recognize and correct the fallacies of both. In particular, he pits himself against despotic authority, restrictive morality, sexual repression, and institutionalized religion; his great insight is into the way these separate modes of control work together to squelch what is most holy in human beings.

The *Songs of Innocence* dramatize the naive hopes and fears that inform the lives of children and trace their transformation as the child grows into adulthood. Some of the poems are written from the perspective of children, while others are about children as seen from an adult perspective. Many of the poems draw attention to the positive aspects of natural human

understanding prior to the corruption and distortion of experience. Others take a more critical stance toward innocent purity: for example, while Blake draws touching portraits of the emotional power of rudimentary Christian values, he also exposes—over the heads, as it were, of the innocent—Christianity’s capacity for promoting injustice and cruelty.

The *Songs of Experience* work via parallels and contrasts to lament the ways in which the harsh experiences of adult life destroy what is good in innocence, while also articulating the weaknesses of the innocent perspective (“The Tyger,” for example, attempts to account for real, negative forces in the universe, which innocence fails to confront). These latter poems treat sexual morality in terms of the repressive effects of jealousy, shame, and secrecy, all of which corrupt the ingenuousness of innocent love. With regard to religion, they are less concerned with the character of individual faith than with the institution of the Church, its role in politics, and its effects on society and the individual mind. Experience thus adds a layer to innocence that darkens its hopeful vision while compensating for some of its blindness.

The style of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is simple and direct, but the language and the rhythms are painstakingly crafted, and the ideas they explore are often deceptively complex. Many of the poems are narrative in style; others, like “The Sick Rose” and “The Divine Image,” make their arguments through symbolism or by means of abstract concepts. Some of Blake’s favorite rhetorical techniques are personification and the reworking of Biblical symbolism and language. Blake frequently employs the familiar meters of ballads, nursery rhymes, and hymns, applying them to his own, often unorthodox conceptions. This combination of the traditional with the unfamiliar is consonant with Blake’s perpetual interest in reconsidering and reframing the assumptions of human thought and social behavior.

LONDON - WILLIAM BLAKE

London is a poem by William Blake, published in *Songs of Experience* in 1794. It is one of the few poems in *Songs of Experience* that does not have a corresponding poem in *Songs of Innocence*. Blake lived in London so writes of it as a resident rather than a visitor. The poems reference the “Two Contrary States of the Human Soul”. The “Songs of Innocence” section contains poems which reference love, childhood and nature. Critics have suggested that the poems illustrate the effects of modernity on people and nature, through the discussion of dangerous industrial conditions, child labour, prostitution and poverty.

This poem is taken from “songs of experience”. It reveals the poet’s feelings towards the society in which he lived. England in the 1800s became very oppressive, influenced by the French Revolution. It started to impose laws which restrict the freedom of individuals. “At first, Blake loved London, he wrote that “golden London and her silver Thames, throng’d with shining spires and corded ships”(Poetical Sketches), but after French Revolution, the British government began to oppress the civil democratic activities. Then London was quite different from before: everything was covered with darkness, terrors and miseries.”. Thus he shows a negative picture of London and he offers a social criticism of 18th-century England.

TYGER - BLAKE

The poem begins with the speaker asking a fearsome tiger what kind of divine being could have created it: “What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame they fearful symmetry?” Each subsequent stanza contains further questions, all of which refine this

first one. From what part of the cosmos could the tiger's fiery eyes have come, and who would have dared to handle that fire? What sort of physical presence, and what kind of dark craftsmanship, would have been required to "twist the sinews" of the tiger's heart? The speaker wonders how, once that horrible heart "began to beat," its creator would have had the courage to continue the job. Comparing the creator to a blacksmith, he ponders about the anvil and the furnace that the project would have required and the smith who could have wielded them. And when the job was done, the speaker wonders, how would the creator have felt? "Did he smile his work to see?" Could this possibly be the same being who made the lamb?

LAMB - BLAKE

The poem begins with the question, "Little Lamb, who made thee?" The speaker, a child, asks the lamb about its origins: how it came into being, how it acquired its particular manner of feeding, its "clothing" of wool, its "tender voice." In the next stanza, the speaker attempts a riddling answer to his own question: the lamb was made by one who "calls himself a Lamb," one who resembles in his gentleness both the child and the lamb. The poem ends with the child bestowing a blessing on the lamb.

The poem is a child's song, in the form of a question and answer. The first stanza is rural and descriptive, while the second focuses on abstract spiritual matters and contains explanation and analogy. The child's question is both naive and profound. The question ("who made thee?") is a simple one, and yet the child is also tapping into the deep and timeless questions that all human beings have, about their own origins and the nature of creation. The poem's apostrophic form contributes to the effect of naiveté,

since the situation of a child talking to an animal is a believable one, and not simply a literary contrivance. Yet by answering his own question, the child converts it into a rhetorical one, thus counteracting the initial spontaneous sense of the poem. The answer is presented as a puzzle or riddle, and even though it is an easy one—child's play—this also contributes to an underlying sense of ironic knowingness or artifice in the poem. The child's answer, however, reveals his confidence in his simple Christian faith and his innocent acceptance of its teachings.

A POISON TREE - BLAKE

"A Poison Tree" is a poem by English poet William Blake, first published in his *Songs of Experience* in 1794. In deceptively simple language with an almost nursery-rhyme quality, the speaker of the poem details two different approaches to anger. In the first, openly talking about anger is presented as a way of moving past it. In the second, the speaker outlines the danger of keeping anger within. The poem uses an extended metaphor to describe the speaker's anger as growing into a tree that bears poisonous apples. The speaker's enemy then eats an apple from the tree and dies. The poem is generally interpreted as an allegory for the danger of bottling up emotions, and how doing so leads to a cycle of negativity and even violence.

Thus, in "A Poison Tree" the speaker presents a powerful argument against the suppression of anger. By clearly laying out the benefits of talking about anger, and the consequences of keeping negative emotions within, the poem implies to the reader that the suppression of anger is morally dangerous, leading only to more anger or even violence.
