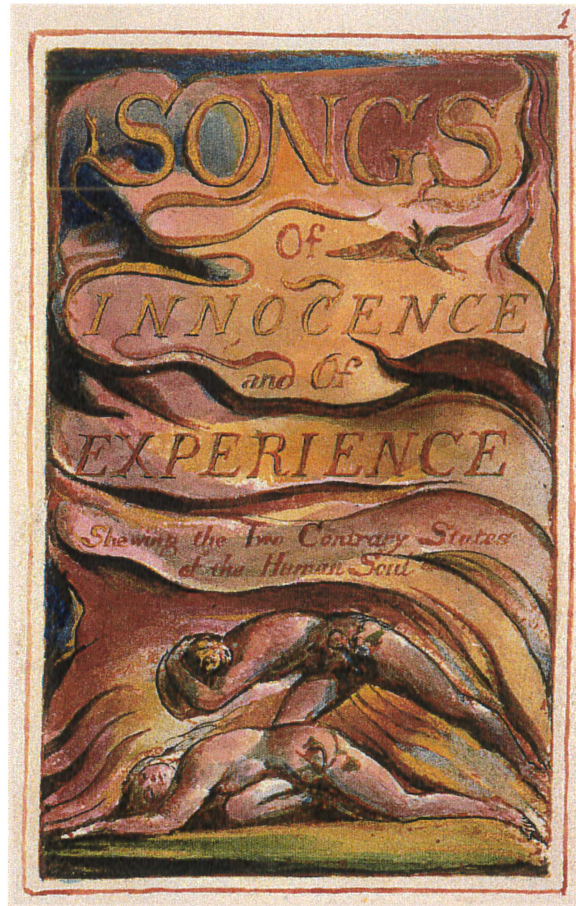


William Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and of Experience'



The 'Songs of Innocence' were published in 1789. Five years later Blake added the 'Songs of Experience' and since their publication in 1794 the two parts have been published as one collection. The latter part of the 18th century was a very interesting period of history and we would like you to begin by completing some simple research on the following topics:

1. The Age of Enlightenment, specifically the ideas of David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire.
2. The Industrial Revolution in Great Britain, specifically with regard to wealth generation, the expansion of British cities and the condition of the poor.
3. The French and American Revolutions, specifically focusing on the regimes in control of France and the American states prior to the revolutions, the motivations / objectives of the revolutionaries and how fear of revolutionary ideas spreading to England prompted a series of measures from the British government.
4. The pastoral tradition in literature, specifically focusing on use of the term prior to 1610 to describe literature that presented lives of shepherds and the more modern use of the term to describe literature which presents the countryside. You might even wish to investigate Jonathan Bate's ideas about 'The Great Pastoral Con Trick'

WRITE UP YOUR FINDINGS IN BULLET POINT NOTES – NO MORE THAN A PAGE PER TOPIC

This poem is from the 'Experience' part of the collection. It's one you will likely be familiar with because you will probably have studied it at GCSE. Your research on the effects of The Industrial Revolution, the French and American Revolutions and the philosophy of Rousseau and Voltaire will be useful here.

Read the poem, look at the annotations and the question. Look at the model answer.

London

I wander through each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

5 In every cry of every man,
In every infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear:

10 How the chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning church appalls,
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down palace walls.

15 But most through midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.

physical signs of effects of poverty

Licensed to trade - commerce dominates city

repetition signifies ubiquity of suffering

symbolically shackled - constrained by mental control

contrast - powerless (chimney sweeper / soldier) - church, monarchy

*a) sexually transmitted disease?
b) diseased society?*

everything commodified - even human beings

In 'London' how does Blake convey the horrific plight of the poor to his readers and imply that Britain would benefit from a revolution similar to that in France?

The poem takes as its form a random "wander" through the streets of the capital, Blake's speaking noticing and recording ("mark in every face I meet") the plight of the city's poor. It is governed by a balance between visual and auditory imagery, the speaker seeing the "marks of weakness, marks of woe" in the city's population (presumably their ragged appearance, signs of malnourishment and disease and so on) and hearing their woeful cries of desperation. Blake links this directly to the fact that London is a centre of commerce, a place where trade dominates every "chartered street" and even the mighty Thames river, which would have been full of merchant ships bringing in imported raw materials from 'the new world', being packed with goods for export and, shamefully, journeying to the west coast of Africa to coerce slaves into making the journey across the infamous middle passage.

Interestingly, Blake shows a contrast between the marginalised poor and the powerful establishments that govern the country. So, the monarchy (represented by the "palace") send desperate men to risk their lives fighting in wars and the religious establishment (represented by the church) ignore the plight of young chimney sweepers who worked in terrible conditions and had their life expectancy cut short by their dangerous trade. A further example of exploitation is presented in the final stanza. A young girl, no more than a child herself, is forced to sell herself for sex with strangers, risking disease and death so that

she can try and cobble together enough money to provide for herself and her new born child. It seems that this is a society where everything is for sale, including human beings. So why don't the people who are suffering follow the lead of the French and the Americans who fought back against their oppressors in favour of freer, more socially just societies?

The central metaphor of the poem is the "mind-forg'd manacles." The poor and vulnerable are metaphorically shackled, trapped in their circumstances. The establishment control and shape their thinking, like ideological blacksmiths moulding molten metal into a shape which suits them – it is in the interest of the monarchy, the church and all those who represent the powerful elite in society to keep the poor in their servile position, exploitable and unlikely to offer any resistance. However, there's a double meaning to forged, it also carries connotations of something counterfeit. The constraints on the poor are illusory and if / when the disenfranchised underclass realise their condition they will be able to rise up and overthrow the tyrannical forces in society which keep them in their subservient state.

TASK: read and annotate all five poems below. Then choose one question to answer, using the response to 'London' as a guide to the length and style of your response.

1. ***This poem is from the 'Innocence' part of the collection. Your research on pastoral literature and the French and American Revolutions will be useful here.***

The Shepherd

How sweet is the shepherd's sweet lot!
From the morn to the evening he strays;
He shall follow his sheep all the day,
And his tongue shall be filled with praise.

- 5 For he hears the lamb's innocent call,
And he hears the ewe's tender reply.
He is watchful, while they are in peace,
For they know when their shepherd is nigh.

In 'The Shepherd' how does Blake use his pastoral scene as an allegory for an ideal society?

2. *This poem is from the 'Innocence' part of the collection. Your research on the philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment and the French and American Revolutions will be useful here.*

Nurse's Song

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still.

- 5 'Then come home my children: the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise.
Come, come leave off play and let us away,
Till the morning appears in the skies.'

- 'No, no, let us play, for it is yet day
10 And we cannot go to sleep.
Besides, in the sky the little birds fly,
And the hills are all covered with sheep.'

- 'Well, well go and play till the light fades away,
And then go home to bed.'
15 The little ones leaped and shouted and laughed
And all the hills echoed.

In 'Nurse's Song' how does Blake convey ideas about the importance of freedom in society and allegorise ideas about resisting those in positions of power?

3. This poem is from the 'Innocence' part of the collection. Your research on the effects of the Industrial Revolution (you might need to top this up by further research into the role of chimney sweepers in society) will be useful here.

The Chimney-Sweeper

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry, 'weep weep weep weep'.
So your chimneys I sweep and in soot I sleep.

- 5 There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved, so I said:
'Hush Tom, never mind it, for when your head's
bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.'

- 10 And so he was quiet, and that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight:
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack,
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black,

- And by came an angel who had a bright key,
15 And he opened the coffins and set them all free.
Then down a green plain leaping, laughing they run,
And wash in a river and shine in the sun.

- Then naked and white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
20 And the angel told Tom if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father, and never want joy.

- And so Tom awoke, and we rose in the dark,
And got with our bags and our brushes to work.
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and
25 warm.
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

In 'The Chimney Sweeper' how does Blake convey his disgust at the appalling treatment of chimney sweepers during the latter part of the 18th century?

4. This poem is from the 'Experience' part of the collection. Your research on the effects of the Industrial Revolution will be useful here.

Holy Thursday

Is this a holy thing to see,
In a rich and fruitful land:
Babes reduced to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand?

- 5 Is that trembling cry a song?
Can it be a song of joy?
And so many children poor?
It is a land of poverty!

- And their sun does never shine,
10 And their fields are bleak and bare,
And their ways are filled with thorns;
It is eternal winter there.

- For where'er the sun does shine,
And where'er the rain does fall –
15 Babe can never hunger there,
Nor poverty the mind appal.

In 'Holy Thursday' how does Blake present his anger at the injustices of late 18th century society, which he saw as being polarised between extreme wealth and extreme poverty?