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## CRITICAL APPROACHES

## THEMES

## INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

What are the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* about? Well, the most obvious answer is that they are about what they say they are about, the two ‘contrary states’ of ‘Innocence’ and ‘Experience’, and that the individual poems in the two books are exemplars of these states. Innocence, then, would be, as we have seen, the condition essentially allied to childhood: a condition in which we can view the natural and human world without fear, and can feel confident that we have a home in that world. Behind this, of course, lies a whole realm of biblical myth, in particular the Garden of Eden, although there are significant differences between the biblical Garden and Blakean innocence.

Perhaps the most obvious difference concerns sexuality. Adam and Eve, after all, were ejected from the Garden because of their accession to carnal knowledge, and throughout Christianity there is a connection between sex and the fall of man. To Blake things were quite otherwise: the world of innocence is one of natural, unforced pleasure in sexuality, as in all other things of the body, and it is interesting that this significant alteration of emphasis constitutes one of Blake’s many prefigurations of the much later discoveries of Freud, who first demonstrated systematically the sexual interests of the infant.

Innocence, however, cannot last forever unchallenged, although it is always possible to prolong or regain it temporarily: through love, through poetry, through beauty. It is, however, inevitably under threat of being superseded as we move into adulthood and encounter cares, duties, responsibilities. But – and this is a very important point to Blake – although this ‘progression’ – which is also a fall from grace – is inevitable, it is *also* true that we make it much worse than it needs to be. We make it worse through all kinds of tyranny and harshness at the political level; through the rule of the moral law and an ethic of punishment rather than



## CHECK THE BOOK

Some of the best essays on Blake can be found in the *New Casebook*, edited by David Punter (see [Further reading](#)).

## Critical approaches

forgiveness at the religious level; and through selfishness, possessiveness and jealousy at the personal and psychological level.

In Blake, though – and this is what makes some of the *Songs*, as well as most of his other work, so complex – these levels cannot be separated out. We hear in the famous phrase from ‘London’ of ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ (line 8); but the brilliance of this phrase lies in its double meaning. On the one hand, we could say that the ‘minds’ that forge these manacles are the minds of other people; when we observe the inhumanity of urban life we are seeing the imposition of some people’s will upon others, or, to put it another way, we are witnessing the suppression of healthy individual life by an ideology comprised of work, power and repression. But it is *at the same time* true that the mind that places these shackles upon us is, in an important sense, our own. Again to use a more modern terminology, we could say that what Blake shows us is not only the forces of violence at work in society and the economy; he also shows us the processes of *internalisation* by means of which we absorb these forces inside ourselves and accept them without question, an acceptance which kills off the all-important development of the imagination inside us.

In some of these respects, it is appropriate to see Blake as a **Romantic** poet. Most of the other major Romantics – Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats – share Blake’s distrust of the forces abroad in contemporary society: they too detect an increasing mechanisation in the world around them, and they too recommend a reconsideration of a more ‘innocent’ state as part of the solution to the problem. Yet in none of these other writers, with the possible exception of Wordsworth, do we find quite the level of *detail* in the description of everyday city life. This is, of course, partly because Blake knew everyday life and its pressures better than they. He came from a lower social class than any of them, and he was under considerably greater pressure to earn his living than any of them. The ‘escape to the country’ was not for him remotely financially viable. It could also be argued that he was the most politically radical of them, with the possible exception of Shelley. Certainly in comparison with Wordsworth and Coleridge, his two most near contemporaries, he kept his faith more consistently with the revolutionary principle of those early years when all three of them

## CONTEXT

For all his life, Blake earned his living as an engraver, but this was a trade that was disappearing as a result of technological developments.

World events	Blake's life	Literary events
1760 Accession of George III	1757 Birth of Blake in London	
1764 Invention of Spinning Jenny	1767 At drawing school in The Strand	
1768 Royal Academy founded: first president Joshua Reynolds	1769-78 <i>Poetical Sketches</i>	
1770 Cook discovers Australia	1770s (early) Becomes student at Royal Academy school	
1775 Outbreak of War of American Independence	1774 (c.) Apprenticed to engraver James Basire	1774 Goethe, <i>The Sorrows of Young Werther</i>
1778 France allies with American colonies		1779 William Cowper and John Newton, <i>The Olney Hymns</i>
1780 The Gordon Riots, London: 'No Popery'	1782 Marries Catherine Boucher	
1783 American Independence is recognised	1788 (c.) 'All Religions Are One' and 'There Is No Natural Religion'	1788 Wesley brothers, <i>A Collection of Hymns and Psalms for the Lord's Day</i>
1788 George III's first attack of madness	1789 <i>Songs of Innocence; The Book of Thel</i>	1789 Gilbert White, <i>The Natural History of Selbourne</i>
1789 Outbreak of French Revolution	1789 (c.) <i>Tiriel</i>	
	1790-3 (c.) <i>The Marriage of Heaven and Hell</i>	1791 Thomas Paine, <i>The Rights of Man</i>
1791 <i>The French Revolution (vol. 1)</i>	1791 <i>The French Revolution (vol. 1)</i>	
1792 France is declared a republic	1792 <i>Song of Liberty</i>	
1793 Reign of Terror in France	1793 <i>Visions of the Daughters of Albion; America</i>	
	1794 <i>Songs of Experience; Europe; The Book of Urizen</i>	

World events	Blake's life	Literary events
	1795 <i>The Song of Los; The Book of Ahania; The Book of Los</i>	
	1795-1804 <i>Vala, or, The Four Zoas</i>	1796 Coleridge edits <i>The Watchman</i>
1798 Invention of lithography	1800 Moves to Felpham and lives under patronage of poet William Hayley	1798 Wordsworth and Coleridge, <i>Lyrical Ballads</i>
1803 First railway steam engine	1803 Returns to London	
1804 Napoleon crowned emperor	1804-8 <i>Milton</i>	1811 Jane Austen, <i>Sense and Sensibility</i>
1805 Battle of Trafalgar	1804-20 <i>Jerusalem</i> , including 100 engravings	1812 Lord Byron, <i>Childe Harold</i>
1812 Luddite riots	1809 <i>Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures, Poetical and Historical Inventions</i>	1813 Jane Austen, <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
	1810 <i>The Canterbury Pilgrims</i> (engravings)	1814 Shelley, <i>The Refutation of Deism</i>
1814 Napoleon abdicates		1816 Coleridge, <i>Christabel</i>
1816 Riots in Britain		1817 Keats, <i>Poems</i>
1819 Peterloo massacre. Children under 9 forbidden to work in cotton mills		1818 Mary Shelley, <i>Frankenstein</i>
1820 George III dies	1820-21 Large watercolours for <i>Book of Job</i>	1820 Clare, <i>Poems</i> ; Shelley, <i>Prometheus Unbound</i>
1824 Workers allowed to form unions. Foundation of RSPCA	1824 First meets young visionary painter, Samuel Palmer	
	1826 <i>Book of Job</i> engravings	
	1827 Publishes 102 engravings to Dante. Dies	