

Keeping the Pursuit of Innocence in Experience: The Analysis of the Image of Children in William Blake's Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience

Yuntian Xiao^{1,a,*}

¹School of Law and Social Work (School of Intellectual Property), Dong Guan University of Technology, Dongguan, China

a. 1811061140@mail.sit.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The works of William Blake, an iconic figure in English Romanticism, are epitomized by "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience," wherein 'children' hold significant symbolic value. Blake delves into the essence of childhood, adopting their perspective and employing their voices to convey nuanced narratives. This approach serves as a vehicle for his profound exploration of humanity, social critique, and quest for innocence. Through an analysis of select poems featuring children in these two collections, this study juxtaposes the contrasting portrayals of children in these distinct realms while unearthing their shared characteristics. It investigates the dichotomy and harmony between innocence and experience in Blake's poetry. Remarkably, Blake's writing evolves from an emphasis on "innocence" to a recognition of "experience." However, even amidst this transformation, he steadfastly clings to the aspiration for innocence, albeit within the context of a more sober and rational world of experience. This evolution underscores Blake's intricate exploration of the human condition, wherein the pursuit of innocence endures as a central theme throughout his work.

Keywords: William Blake, children, Songs of Innocence, Songs of Experience

1. Introduction

In the realm of 19th-century poetry, William Blake stands as an extraordinary figure who not only pioneered English Liberalism through his poetic prowess but also exhibited a remarkable proficiency in the art of printmaking. Blake's greatness transcends the boundaries of individual achievement, residing instead in the profound realm of art he constructed by seamlessly melding poetry, imagery, and decorative arts. During his lifetime, he was often labeled as an anti-rationalist, a dreamer, a madman, or a paranoid figure, seemingly detached from the realities of the world. However, since the 19th century, his poetry has garnered high praise for its depth and piety. Michael Rossetti, a prominent literary critic of that era, aptly commented on the genius that was William Blake, asserting, "A man of Genius, who, if he were living in any age or country, would be understood and admired by all men of sense and feeling, and would not be suppressed, nor passed over, nor superseded, by any known or possible man" [1].

In the early stages of his literary career, William Blake displayed a penchant for a concise and lively writing style, while his later works took on an enigmatic and mysterious quality, steeped in profound mysticism. His poems ranged from the simplicity of a child's innocence to the complexity of metaphysical conundrums, conveyed through mystical language and even poetic fantasies that Blake himself may not have comprehended [2]. Within his body of work, "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience" emerge as two pivotal symbolic masterpieces. Scholars and researchers have diligently analyzed select poems such as "The Tyger," "The Lamb," "London," and "The Sick Rose" from various angles, including stylistic analysis, postmodern perspectives, archetypal criticism, psychoanalysis, and considerations of schizophrenia. Regrettably, the profound symbolism carried by the child images in Blake's poetry has received scant attention, despite their multifaceted significance in conveying his thoughts on human nature, society, and religion.

Throughout Blake's two most renowned collections of poetry, numerous depictions of children abound, each imbued with layers of meaning. In "Songs of Innocence," these children typically symbolize qualities of purity and innocence, embodying hearts untainted by the world's complexities and eyes unclouded by experience. Conversely, in "Songs of Experience," the children manifest a different facet of innocence within the shadowy realm of experience, characterized by an energy distinct from that of adults amidst the darkness and tribulations [3]. Although some scholars have recognized Blake's fascination with children, their analyses have predominantly centered on individual poems, such as the widely studied "The Chimney Sweeper," or have delved into abstract theories too broad to effectively explore and dissect. Therefore, there arises a pressing need to adopt a multifaceted and dynamic approach to unravel the evolving imagery of children in Blake's poems and to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the significance he ascribed to these childlike representations.

Blake's two seminal works bear witness to the evolution of his writing style, transitioning from the optimism of innocence to the sobriety of reason. In tandem with this stylistic transformation, the images of children within his poetry also undergo metamorphosis, mirroring Blake's growing realization of the intricate relationship between innocence and experience. This paper aims to meticulously examine the evolving portrayals of children in these two iconic collections, along with an exploration of his illustrative works, shedding light on William Blake's profound concern for children amid this transformation and his relentless pursuit of the innocence inherent to his original convictions.

2. Children in the World of Innocence

In *Songs of Innocence*, the portrayal of children is one of pure and unspoiled innocence. This poetry's most prominent feature lies in its simplicity and ease of comprehension. Children can easily resonate with these poems, while adults can also glimpse traces of their own childhood within them [4]. In the Introduction to *Songs of Innocence*, the concept of innocence takes on a symbolic form – that of a heavenly child seated on a cloud, urging the speaker to create music and poetry. This joyful child embodies the essence of innocence, where purity is synonymous with happiness and unrestrained creativity. The speaker, a piper, plays merrily, and a child on a cloud, representing an angelic presence, implores the speaker to "Pipe a song about a Lamb" twice. The piper plays and sings the song with great enthusiasm, moving the child to tears of joy as it listens to the sweet, cheerful melody. This child then inspires the speaker to write a book before vanishing, and the piper does just that, crafting joyful songs with a reed pen for the delight of children. Consequently, a vivid and tranquil scene, brimming with childlike innocence, unfolds. The cheerful "Little Lamb Song" establishes the overarching theme of innocence, pure beauty, joy, and pleasure throughout *Songs of Innocence* [5].

William Blake's celebration of the innocence of children becomes even more pronounced in "The Lamb," which is narrated from a child's perspective, conveying an instinctual appreciation for the joy

of nature and, indeed, the joy of innocence. Blake juxtaposes the images of a "lamb" and a "child," both symbols of innocence, and describes the lamb in terms of a child's self-answers, thus directly praising the inherent innocence of humanity [5]. In the first stanza, the child adores the lamb and repeats the question of who created this delightful creature. The use of archaic language ("dost thou") imbues the verse with a nostalgic tone that underscores the child's innocence. The child then proceeds to ask and answer the question independently, revealing the innate goodness and innocence of the young protagonist. Symbolically, the child represents Jesus, often referred to as the "Lamb of God" in the Bible, who enters the world with innocence and curiosity. This emphasizes the sacredness of childhood and underscores Blake's admiration for God's creation, uniting the child and the lamb as a whole. Thus, in the child's world, beauty and kindness reign supreme, devoid of jealousy or violence, and God, the creator, is characterized as compassionate, gentle, and pure. This reflects Blake's original conception of innocence and his celebration of both the innocent child and the benevolent God.

Blake's own illustrations are integral to his poetry collections and those of his friends. His distinctive painting style, particularly the smooth lines and the use of water and sky colors, is remarkable. Rather than merely adding his poems to the illustrations after the fact, he integrates the two, allowing them to influence and complement each other. In his illustrations for "The Lamb," a naked boy gently strokes a lamb as it grazes, surrounded by a flock of sheep peacefully enjoying the gifts of nature. The woolly sheep and the boy in the foreground are depicted using bright, soft colors and accompanied by gentle lines. This visual representation further accentuates the docile nature and innocence of both the lamb and the child. Thus, the lamb and the child function as symbolic metaphors for the world of light in this poem, illustrating the harmonious relationship between the painting and the verse [6].

Within Blake's constructed world of innocence, the concept of "equality" also plays a significant role. In "The Little Black Boy," Blake refers to the black child as a "lamb." At this point, the symbolic and metaphorical meaning of the "lamb" image becomes more complex, revealing his advocacy for racial equality and the equality of all human beings to some extent. It signifies his deep concern and contemplation of the essence of every human soul [7]. In Blake's eyes, all children are joyous lambs, all deserving of equal love and radiating the light of purity and beauty without radical distinctions. The realm of innocence is characterized by purity, joy, and equality, where all children are innocent.

3. Children in the World of Experience

In *Songs of Experience*, William Blake undergoes a profound transformation in his portrayal of children, shifting from the idyllic innocence of his earlier work to a stark depiction of social issues. No longer the cheerful pipe-playing poet, Blake now emerges as a wise observer who implores society to break its chains. His gaze is penetrating, his attitude generous yet cynical, and he exposes the darkness and misery within the world of experience [8]. This shift in Blake's writing style was directly influenced by the outbreak of the French Revolution, which made him keenly aware of the suffering of children and the societal darkness.

One such poignant example is found in "Holy Thursday." The poem commences with a barrage of rhetorical questions, each yielding a negative response. On this sacred day, the city's destitute charity children sing church hymns, which the speaker interprets as cries of suffering rather than joyful songs. These unfortunate children are nourished by a "cold and usurious hand," symbolizing both the caretakers of orphans and the indifferent hand of society, which neglects its duty to help these impoverished youngsters. The children go to church to pray for the very philanthropists who should be serving their welfare [9]. For these children, their lives are shrouded in perpetual darkness due to society's heartless exploitation. They are condemned to endure an everlasting winter of poverty and cruelty. In stark contrast to the same-titled poem in *Songs of Innocence*, Blake directly exposes the hypocrisy of the church and the darkness of charitable institutions. His dissatisfaction with the cruel

society as a whole is palpable, as is his profound sympathy for these children who beg for the church's charity while dispelling his own idealized notions of God and the church.

Among Blake's works in *Songs of Experience*, none scrutinizes the image of children more intensely than "The Chimney Sweeper." This poem encapsulates the evolution of Blake's writing style from optimistic innocence to somber maturity. Within its verses, Blake unveils the facade of innocence and lays bare the societal ills of his time. His cynicism towards the cold, harsh world, his scathing critique of capitalist exploitation, his harsh condemnation of the church's manipulation and abuse of children, his disillusionment with God, his profound empathy for the tormented children, and his deep sorrow at their gradual loss of innocence in this tragic world are all vividly expressed [10].

The poem commences with a young chimney sweeper toiling in the bitter cold amid a howling north wind and heavy snow, while his parents attend church to praise God, seemingly oblivious to his plight. Blake plays with the word "sweep," rendering it as "weep" to convey not only the boy's labor but also his underlying sorrow. The pervasive theme of weeping underscores the child's experience, illustrating how an initially innocent chimney sweeper is transformed into a worldly child burdened with immense suffering. In the poem's final stanza, Blake notably capitalizes the words "God," "Priest," and "King," a striking choice that powerfully exposes the cruel world's exploitation of children. As the child endures persecution, his parents pray in church, praising a God and a priest who have inflicted misery upon their child. The once divine savior is now a heartless deity, and the priest is akin to a spiritual oppressor. Furthermore, the "King" and the ignorant parents, representing the callous British upper class, join forces with the hypocritical church to ruthlessly exploit the young, miserable boy. Ultimately, the child realizes his inevitable miserable fate within this hostile environment and grows disillusioned with the dark society, condemning God, the church, and his own parents [4].

Throughout the poem, William Blake utterly loses faith in God as a savior of the world and directs his criticism towards deceitful religion and a heartless capitalist system. His discontent with reality is evident, and he expresses a fervent desire to alter this reality from the perspective of the suffering chimney sweeper [11]. This transition from innocence to experience in Blake's writing is unmistakable, yet it is a painful process, akin to the chimney sweeper's own transformation. Blake is most deeply saddened by the fate of the children depicted in *Songs of Experience*.

4. Children in Lost and Found

In William Blake's "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience," he presents contrasting worlds that explore the themes of purity and corruption, innocence and experience. In the "Songs of Innocence," Blake paints a picture of a tranquil, compassionate, and pure world, where innocent beings are cared for and protected by a benevolent God and angels. However, in the "Songs of Experience," he unveils the dark side of this world, revealing aspects of darkness, torment, pain, selfishness, and a hypocritical and cruel portrayal of God and the church [12]. In this realm, children are subjected to suffering, forced to mature prematurely.

Numerous scholars have extensively studied the thematic opposition between "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience," identifying many instances where poems from the former reappear in the latter [12]. Examples include "The Lamb" and "The Tyger," as well as "The Joy of the Baby" and "The Baby," emphasizing the stark contrast and contradictions between these two worlds.

In reality, the child images in "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience" are not entirely polar opposites; rather, they represent a duality of innocence and experience that coexists. Through the depiction of children's journeys between these two realms, Blake demonstrates not only how the

world of experience leads them from innocence to maturity but also how the yearning for innocence persists even after maturity is attained.

In "The Little Boy's Lost" from "Songs of Innocence," Blake narrates the story of a frightened little boy who cannot find his Father and calls out in fear. In this poem, God is chosen as the savior who comes to the child's rescue, appearing in a form resembling the boy's father. God consistently protects the child, highlighting the divine love and guardianship that envelop all the children in "Songs of Innocence." However, these two poems are not solely about God's compassionate care for innocent children. The little boy's fear of losing his father reflects the cold and cruel world that begins to erode the innocence of children. Nevertheless, the prevailing tone in these poems maintains Blake's enduring innocence. It is a belief in the loving protection of God, akin to that of a father, rooted in deep familial attachment and devotion to the divine [13]. Simultaneously, elements of experience subtly emerge within innocence, demonstrating a fusion of the two realms.

In "Songs of Experience," Lyca, the protagonist of "The Little Girl's Lost" and "The Little Girl's Found," finds herself lost in a desert, unable to sleep. She contemplates whether her mother weeps for her loss. In this world of experience, Lyca differs from the crying little boy in "Songs of Innocence" by maturely hoping that her mother is not grieving for her but rather sad due to her own misfortune. After falling into a deep slumber in the desolate desert's dark night, the poem paints a vivid picture of her eerie dream with descriptions like "frowning night," "moon," and "desert," creating a lifeless ambiance [3]. Here, Blake exposes the little girl's fear of death, where the dark night symbolizes the harsh realities of the world, devoid of rescue or mention of parents. Even God seems absent, leaving her feeling abandoned by the world.

Lyca eventually finds peaceful sleep in the Lion's palace, where God no longer plays the role of savior. Blake's disillusionment with God during his journey from innocence to experience becomes evident. Instead of God, a powerful lion rescues the little girl, while her parents tirelessly search for her in the desert. On their arduous journey, Lyca's mother, trembling and exhausted, leans on her husband for support. When they finally discover their daughter sleeping among the lions, their unconditional love for her shines through. This love, stemming from the depths of their hearts, represents another facet of innocence. Despite the darkness and desolation surrounding them, the parents' unwavering support showcases the innate love that can flourish even in the bleakest circumstances. It becomes the guiding light for a lost little girl in the world of experience, embodying the innocence that Blake clings to even as he matures within this realm.

In summary, the images of these children, lost and found in two distinct worlds, symbolize the juxtaposition and harmony of innocence and experience. In "Songs of Innocence," Blake's idealized portrayal includes a divine God as the protector of lost children. Conversely, in "Songs of Experience," the lost little girl is rescued by a wild beast in the dark desert, reflecting the cruelty of the experience world. The lost little boy, on the other hand, mirrors the real-world challenges faced by children as they are gradually exposed to the dark facets of society. Their innocence begins to crumble, replaced by the harsh realities of a hypocritical and merciless world. In "The Little Girl's Lost and Found," set in the dark world of experience, Blake emphasizes the genuine love that flows from a parent's heart. This love, inherent in human nature, represents the innocence that Blake yearns for deep within. Even as he gains clarity in the world of experience, his pursuit remains rooted in innocence, not in the hypocritical and unattainable God, but in the pursuit of truth. While residing in "experience," Blake continues to seek the innocence that lingers in his heart.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, William Blake's portrayal of children in two distinct worlds highlights his profound care, love, and sympathy for them. These depictions also serve as a window into his personal journey from innocence to experience. Throughout this process, Blake's worldview evolves, delving deeper into

the complexities of the human condition, transitioning from imaginative, fantastical realms to grounded realities shaped by personal experiences.

Remarkably, despite the harshness of the world's realities, Blake maintains an unwavering belief in the inherent purity and kindness within children, mirroring his own enduring and uncorrupted heart. In the midst of a cruel and intricate world, Blake steadfastly clings to his pursuit of innocence. However, this pursuit no longer rests solely on imaginative beliefs in a divine creator but extends to genuine compassion and love for humanity—a genuine goodness that persists even in the shadows and a noble, unadulterated sentiment that transcends societal hypocrisy.

While William Blake's works, like the children in his poems, undergo transformation and growth, their collective understanding of the world and humanity deepens, transitioning from fanciful imaginings to grounded experiences. Yet, amidst this evolution, Blake's portrayal of children remains untarnished, embodying an eternal and unchanging innocence that echoes his own inner purity, undiminished by the world's cruelty.

This paper has analyzed the varying representations of children in Blake's two poems, revealing how the poet finds harmony within the contrasting realms of experience and innocence. He not only matures in his outlook on the world but also steadfastly pursues the ideals of innocence. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that this study has limitations, having only explored two exemplary works. Future research should explore the portrayal of children in more of Blake's classic works, particularly those completed in the latter stages of his life, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of his enduring love for innocence and his unwavering pursuit of this elusive ideal..

References

- [1] Blake, William, William Michael, & Rossetti. (1890). *The Poetical Works of William Blake: Lyrical and Miscellaneous*. Covent Garden.
- [2] Bentley, G. E. Jr. (2002). *William Blake: The Critical Heritage*. Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- [3] Geng, J. (2022). *Innocence or Experience: On the World of Children in William Blake's Little Girl Lost and Little Girl Found*. *Masterpieces Appreciation*, (08), 152-155.
- [4] Ji, X., & Li, J. (2012). *On William Blake's Poetry's Concern for Children*. *Grain in Ear*, (4), 52-53.
- [5] Jin, X. (2019). *The Symbolic Metaphor within the Contrasting World: William Blake's Lamb*. *Journal of Zaozhuang University*, 40(1), 70-75.
- [6] Ren, D., & Liu, L. (2020). *The Bringer of Light, the Embodiment of Pure Beauty: William Blake and His Poems and Paintings*. *World Cultures*, (01), 20-23.
- [7] Adler, J. H. (1957). *Symbol and Meaning in "The Little Black Boy"*. *Modern Language Notes*, 72(6).
- [8] Zheng, M. (2022). *A Leap from Innocence to Experience: An Interpretation of William Blake's Chimney Sweeper*. *Forum on Industry and Science and Technology*, 21(5), 2.
- [9] Wang, Z., & Fan, Q. (2017). *Comparison of Poems with the Same Title in Songs of Innocence and Experience*. *Journal of Hunan Institute of Science and Technology*, 38(11), 56 + 55-83.
- [10] Zhang, W. (2012). *A Derrida Reading of William Blake's Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience (MA thesis)*. Sichuan International Studies University.
- [11] Yan, X. (2017). *A Grain of Sand to See the World: The Evolution of the Poet's Creative Thought from Blake's Two Poems of the Same Name*. *Journal of Shayang Teachers College*, (01), 30-32+38.
- [12] Bentley, C. E., & Feng, G. (1984). *"Tiger" and "Lamb" -- The Question Is Simple, the Answer Is Difficult*. *Foreign Literature*, (3), 28.
- [13] Li, J. (2012). *Who Let the Children Get Lost - Talk About Black "Lost Child" Moral of the Story*. *Journal of Horizon of Science and Technology*, (31), 1.