

## Elements of political and social protest writing: Text overview – *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*

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This resource is an explanation of some of the ways *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* can be considered in relation to the genre of political and social protest writing. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning in that it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of the genre. We haven't covered every element of this genre. It is hoped this will provide a useful starting point and a springboard for thinking about the text in more detail.

### Overview

Blake was a rebel and an outsider, sympathetic to both the American and French Revolutions.

His poetry addresses two key elements of political and social protest writing: he champions the freedom of the individual and he condemns those who wield power. He was a political writer, with a hatred of oppression; he had entrenched and decidedly radical notions about freedom. Blake, politically and ideologically, was a libertarian, whose cherished beliefs about free will and individuality were expressed in his poetry and art. Poems such as *London* and *The Garden of Love* in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* showcase his libertarian politics, with recurring images of constraint and binding reflecting his antipathy towards hierarchies and power structures that seek to impose their will and ideology on the common man or more specifically on children.

Blake had a deep-rooted anti-establishment ethos and he constantly questioned and attacked the actions, motivations and legitimacy of the authorities of his day. *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* foreground this element of Blake's politics too. Poems in the collection contain radical, rebellious attacks on the political systems and institutions (the Church, monarchy and government) of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* can be seen as containing Blake's political manifesto.

However, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* are complex and full of ambiguity and not all the poems offer a straightforward expression of sympathy for the oppressed or a direct attack on political structures or institutions. Blake uses symbols and metaphors to articulate his complex ideas and views of the world and they work on a number of different levels. He often brings together

opposing meanings in single images and competing voices can be heard in his poems. A metaphor, at the same time, can show peace and security but also fear and disquiet. So, reading the poems as examples of political and social protest writing requires careful investigation and an open mind. In whatever way Blake makes his protest, above all he argues for freedom – both physically and mentally. He celebrates both the free and creative imagination and also the life force that exists throughout the natural world.

Indeed Blake's portrayal of the green world is a key aspect of his political writing. Just as he argues that all people should be free from constraints and true to their natures so too does he argue that nature needs to be respected, that human beings should not impose their wills on it since nature is a manifestation of God. Nature, he suggests, should be cherished in whatever form it appears. In *Night* the angels seem to bless both the hungry wolves and tigers howling for prey and the tender lamb which needs protection.

Where Blake is more typical as a political and social protest writer is the way he challenges the establishment through the act of writing, in particular in a way that is outside of the conventional modes of the day. (Blake rebelled against the style and sentiments of Augustan writers). Several of the poems are reflexive drawing attention to their own composition and foregrounding the writer as a prophet of sorts: In *Introduction* the piper must write 'In a book that all may read' and in doing so he gives voices to the oppressed and underprivileged. In terms of the structure of the collection, Blake largely uses *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to establish a world of freedom and innocence, so he can then contrast this with the forces that bring about the loss of this innocence and create suffering as in poems such as *A Little Boy Lost* and *The Schoolboy*.

## The world of innocence, safety and security

The world Blake creates in many of the Innocent poems, is a world which is idealised, and it is very much part of his political vision and political message, though his protest is indirect rather than direct. Like More's *Utopia* the innocent world is set up as an example to the present world; it invites readers to ask questions about the world in which they live and the value and nature of experience. It is a world where children are happy and people are free, where all feel protected and secure; a world which leaders should aspire to create. In *The Echoing Green* human beings are in harmony both with each other and with nature. The young and old amicably share the same space and at the centre of this space is the oak tree which affords the human characters freedom. It is an emblem of strength and security, a symbol of what good government ought to be. *Laughing Song* shows the same degree of accord, where meadows, grasshoppers and children are free to laugh and to "live and be merry" and *On Another's Sorrow*, Blake goes a little further by saying that if human beings live in a harmonious state then they will share and therefore dissipate the sorrows of others, including those of children and small birds.

## Protesting against government power

The benevolent pastoral world established in many of the Innocent poems is contrasted with other poems where Blake directly attacks the repressive arm of government. Contextually, it is important to note that the songs were written in 1794, at a time when the British Government was deeply conservative and reactionary. The Tory Government was terrified that a Revolution, similar to the one that had recently occurred in France, would arise in Britain and this fear of subversion and political unrest led to some draconian policy making. At this time Britain was also in the throes of the Industrial Revolution in which industrial magnates were making money on the backs of the proletariat and the slave trade was still thriving, despite growing dissenting voices arguing that slavery should be outlawed (Blake himself attacks slavery in *The Little Black Boy* claiming that little black boys and little white boys are essentially the same). The country, at the time Blake was writing, was very much in the hands of a few powerful men who ensured that control remained where it was. In his poems Blake is very much a supporter of the vulnerable and powerless and those being controlled. In *London* the repetition of the word 'chartered' and its links with the oppressed on whose faces are etched 'marks of woe', indicates clearly where Blake places the blame for the miseries that he sees in those who walk London's streets. In "every ban", the speaker says, he hears "mind-forged manacles". In *The Clod and the Pebble*, Blake suggests that the political world is motivated by selfishness and self-love; those who have power want to bind others to their own delights, thereby building "a Hell in Heaven's despite".

## Protesting against the abuse of children

In some poems, Blake directly criticises the way adults abuse children. In *Holy Thursday* (Experience), he asks if it is holy to see "babes reduced to misery/ Fed with cold and usurous hand" and in *The Chimney Sweeper* (Experience), male tyranny is attacked in the figures of "God and his Priest and King", who together make up a heaven of the misery of the "little black thing" weeping in the snow. The child chimney sweep is a recurring image in Blake's poems and foregrounds society's evils. Chimney sweeps were apprenticed at the age of seven (In *The Chimney Sweep* from Innocence, Tom Dacre's father sold him while his tongue "could scarcely cry, weep, weep, weep, weep!") and their treatment by their male employers was often brutal. Children lived in constant fear of suffocation and burning and not surprisingly their lives were cut short by their cruel employment. In *London* Blake suggests that "the chimney-sweeper's cry" is covered up by the Church.

## Blake's anticlericalism

Blake frequently attacks established religion exposing what he sees as its destructive dogmas and ideologies. He also draws attention to the miseries caused through the Church's demand for obedience and obeisance. Parents go to church to pray while their children are alone suffering. It offers no respite to

children for their hunger and misery as evidenced in *The Little Vagabond* where Blake appeals for compassion and responsibility. Unlike the ale house, it does not offer warmth and sustenance. The Christian Church is an institution that today one would hope is concerned with acts of charity, mercy and empathy, particularly concerning those who are most vulnerable, such as children. Indeed, in the *Gospels* Christ frequently makes reference to the sacred nature of childhood innocence; in his words, “the Kingdom of God belongs” to children. In Blake’s poetry the Church fails in these tasks. The Church is seen as a powerful organisation which does nothing to help the powerless and disenfranchised; in fact, the institution is portrayed as being complicit in the oppression of the people. In *The Garden of Love*, the priests bind with briars the joys and desires of the speaker. Established religion is presented as tyrannical both spiritually, as in *A Little Boy Lost* and *Holy Thursday*, and sexually and emotionally in *The Garden of Love*. In *The Garden of Love* Blake espouses a liberal outlook on sexuality and sexual desire, attacking the repressive and damaging influences of traditional religious teachings and morality on these most natural of human instincts. The poem’s narrator visits the eponymous ‘Garden of Love’ (a celebratory metaphor representative of unfettered sexual freedom) only to find that “A chapel was built in the midst”. The image of the Chapel signifies the dreadful changes that have occurred since the narrator’s last visit to the Garden and as the poem develops religious symbols are shown to occupy the once joyous space. The poem ends with the Garden transformed into a graveyard where, the narrator laments, “Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,/And binding with briars my joys and desires”. The priests, as shown through Blake’s employment of the verb “binding”, are presented as the agents of repression. In *A Little Boy Lost* (Experience) the child who questions the perceived conventional wisdom of the church is seized by his hair by the priest who thinks the child has no right to ask questions. The priest believes he is a custodian of the truth and the law and should not be challenged. His reaction to the child is terrifying. It is called a fiend, stripped to its shirt, bound in an iron chain and then burned.

## Blake against the education system

Blake argues implicitly throughout *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* that the best education comes when children are given freedom to grow. Like Wordsworth, he believed that nature was the best educator because it is instinctive and sympathetic. In *The Schoolboy* Blake directly condemns the formal education system which limits the creativity and natural curiosity of children. He says that children who are sent to school on a summer morning “spend the day” sighing and in dismay. He uses imagery of repression to clinch his point. School is referred to as a “cage” and children as buds which are “nipped” by formal learning. Blake suggests that when children are taken away from the natural rhythms of life, they will be cast into a world of winter barrenness.

## Blake as champion of freedom, one who is against laws, conventions and oppression

Images of imprisonment and binding recur throughout the songs; they are indicators of the lamentable state of the world as Blake saw it, one in which people are controlled and subjugated. In *London* even the great river Thames has been restricted by the hand of man; just like the streets, it too is chartered. In *The Chimney Sweeper*, the children are, “locked up in coffins of black”, the physically restrictive space of the chimney becoming a metaphorical representation of control and oppression. In *Infant Sorrow* Blake presents a vignette of a child’s birth. The newborn is “struggling” and “striving” against his father, and at the end of the poem “bound and weary” it gives up hope.

Blake also protested against the human laws which sought to restrict sexual freedom. He believed love was natural and should not be subject to conventional controls. In *A Little Girl Lost* the father who stands in judgment over his daughter for pursuing her desires, causes her to shake with terror. Interestingly in this poem, Blake prophesies that children of the future will be surprised that in a former time ‘Love! sweet Love! was thought a crime’. How life ought to be lived is exemplified in *Nurse’s Song (Innocence)* where the kindly nurse does not curtail the children’s fun and play. She listens to their honest requests to continue with their games and gives them the responsibility about when they should go home.

## The green world and eco politics

In *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* Blake shows that human life is at its best when it has a healthy relationship with nature, when it is part of it and not superior to it. In many ways the poems seek to remove the anthropocentric view that humans have. Blake seems to suggest that nature should be afforded the same rights as human beings. He argues that humanity must recognise that life in all its forms is precious, – the fly and the tiger having as much right to live according to their own natures as children and adults. His respect for nature is at its height in *The Tiger*. The creature with its “fearful symmetry” burns bright and defies definition, and the poet is in awe of its terrible and magnificent power but does not want to crush it. In *The Fly*, the narrator identifies with the fly, and sees both himself and the fly as being at the mercy of some greater power which can brush them both aside. In *The Blossom* nature is given a voice perhaps showing the importance it has in Blake’s philosophy. The blossom tree is admirable since it offers protection and understanding, passing no judgment on either the merry sparrow or the sobbing robin but instead drawing both to its bosom. Blake ultimately suggests that a healthy interaction between human beings and nature and a sympathetic understanding of nature’s powers and laws can increase human joy and well-being. If only human beings would listen to the earth – as suggested in *Earth’s Answer* then the imagination would be freed from all repressive forces.