

The Images of Evil in Blake's *Songs of Innocence*

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Abstract *Blake is a poet who is aware of the contraries manifested in life. These contraries are highlighted in his Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience. It is not individually that the former relates to innocence alone and the latter to experience alone. There is a strain of both innocence and experience in each of the works. The two co-exist as well as complement one another. This paper shows the instances of experience in Songs of Innocence. The meaning of innocence is not realized without the presence of experience and vice versa. Blake's illustrations of his poems also throw light on the lurking world of experience. The world of experience is here almost synonymous with evil or the forces of evil.*

“Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.”

(The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, 1790, plate 3. copy g, ca.1815)

The *Songs of Innocence* are usually treated as if they are “happy songs”, “songs of joy”, of simplicity, love, goodness, innocence, sweetness, which “every child may joy to hear”(“Introduction”, L-20). But the *Songs of Innocence* are not just associated with everything innocent, there is an image of the over lurking evil waiting to prey on the goodness of the innocent ones and I have tried to show these images within the text. Critics like J.R. Watson, Heather Glen, Robert F. Gleckner, Andrew Sanders have also pointed out the fact that there is a grimly oppressive reality in the *Songs of Innocence*. According to J. R. Watson, in the *Songs*, “the eyes of the children look out upon a society which is corrupt, vicious, and unjust, and their very trust is itself a denunciation” (Watson 84). Robert F. Gleckner presents a similar view when he says, “But into that joyous context the elements of experience constantly insinuate themselves so that the note of sorrow is never completely absent from the piper's pipe” (Gleckner 192). On the surface the *Songs* seem to be simple but there is a deeper meaning under the surface. There are hints of brutality, injustice, oppression, exploitation, ugliness and peril in it. There are adumbrations of the world of experience, of darkness. In the *Songs of Innocence* itself

there are contraries, which coexist, that is, the good and the evil, and because there are contraries, there is a progress and the progress is towards experience.

Innocence is the state of being free from evil, but the *Songs of Innocence* do not in my view suggest that freedom. But, what is evil? Evil means harm to living beings. "...the explanation of evil has never been at the centre of Christian belief....Satan is its vivid personification...and sin and evil continue to flourish...and unbelievers and evil doers are condemned to the tortures of Hell" (McManners 578-580). "Hell for Blake was a deliberately perverse symbol of liberty and the spontaneous activity of genius" (Daiches 869). In *Songs of Innocence* there are varied images of evil in the form of cruelty, oppression, child labour, slavery, racial discrimination, inequality among individuals, darkness, corruption, and the loss of innocence, goodness and spirituality. Blake is a visionary and he is able to see through innocence. Blake handles his speakers very clearly and plays with various perspectives and gives opportunities to ask various questions. He gives us different ways of seeing things through different perspectives, which is true but not the whole truth. Although the poems in the *Songs of Innocence* are regarded as "happy songs", there are satirical undertones in it. It is the vulnerability of the innocent beings like lamb, sheep, children, flower which brings out the foreboding images of evil in the *Songs of Innocence*. To Blake God is the creator of both good and evil, love and hate. In fact God himself is both caring and wrathful, both good and evil. It seems as if God himself is the oppressor who tolerates the exploitation of the helpless and the weak.

Innocence can never be complete. It is disturbed by a sense of vulnerability because the force of evil is always at work. Blake deeply felt for the children and he shows how evil in the form of manipulation by the adults kept creeping in the world of their innocence in *Songs of Innocence*. In other words, Blake shows the evil practices in the society against children. For Blake repression is evil. Also good and evil cannot exist on their own. To understand evil, good must exist and to understand good, evil must exist. Blake was against institutionalized religion and he also pointed at Christianity's capacity for promoting injustice and cruelty when it is actually meant for justice and kindness. So, in a sense, evil in the religious institution in the form of corruption and oppression is shown in the *Songs of Innocence*. Blake was against such institutions because they remained silent in the face of such oppression, corruption, exploitation and abuse. Religion here becomes a form of covert aggression. Blake played a very active role in exposing such evils of his society. He criticized the society of his time and stood against the suffering caused by the social evils. Blake's England was progressive and successful on the one hand and poverty-stricken and neglected on the other. He was compassionate to the poor and his sensitivity is found everywhere in his works.

David Daiches writes that Blake "was also a man of his time who responded characteristically and sometimes violently to the main political and social events of his age, notably the French Revolution and the repressive policy which the British Government adopted in its fear of revolutionary activity at home, and the far reaching changes in British social life which steadily developing industrialization was bringing in its wake. There runs a strain of protest against tyranny and repression of all kinds and of plea for freedom both social, political, ecclesiastical, and intellectual" (Daiches 874-875).

There is the possibility of evil in the form of corruption and oppression, within the state of innocence as seen in *Songs of Innocence*. The innocent beings are not completely immune from danger. The children are in the danger of punishment if they do not do their duties; over the idyllic pastoral setting is the overpowering forests, which is an image of evil; there is the fear of wild animals at night and children and the flock of sheep have to return home by evening; night time or darkness is over lurking the bright light of the day. In *Songs of Innocence* the state of innocence is subject to repression and distortion. But we find a hopeful Blake in *Songs of Innocence*. The question is what is Blake hopeful of? The answer is obvious that he is hopeful that the force of evil would cease to exercise over the lives of the innocents. This means that the image of evil is there in the *Songs of Innocence* itself.

Every other song in the *Songs of Innocence* show instance of sorrow and difficulty. In the "Introduction" to the *Songs of Innocence* itself, the note of sorrow insinuates the piper's pipe. There is a clue that the state of innocence would not last long. The child on the cloud vanishes from the piper's sight the moment he picks up a reed to write the song. The moment of writing is also the moment when the inspiration is lost. It suggests the corruption or materialization of art, that is, the original inspiration has been corrupted by writing it down. In other words the oral has been transcribed, therefore the originality is lost. Again the phrases "a hollow reed" (L-16) and "a rural pen" (L-17) suggest emptiness and a darkness looming large. It also suggests the materialization of the rural things. The phrase "stained the water clear" (L-18) clearly suggests that purity or innocence has been corrupted or made impure and this happens because evil has come into the picture. Evil trees bear evil fruits. Obviously the intention of the Piper must have been something evil and so the child vanishes. It suggests a fallen state.

Towards the end of "The Echoing Green", the echoing green becomes the darkening green, the sun descends, the sports end, "the little ones weary, no more can be merry" (L-11-12). There is a hint of happiness being overshadowed by suggestions of evil. Darkness of night overpowers the light of day towards the end of the poem. It may also suggest youth's descent towards old age, where everything is full of "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" (Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale", L-23).

In Songs like "The Lamb" and "The Shepherd" there are suggestions of the lurking danger of the brute beasts over the meek creatures like the sheep and the lamb. Again God who made the lamb, or the shepherd who tends the sheep will not always be there to protect them. The vulnerability of the mild creatures that are oblivious to the evil shadowing them is stressed upon here.

In "Infant Joy" the adult wishes the child "sweet joy befall thee" (L-6). The adult wishes the child a joyful life but from within he/she knows that it is unlikely to happen. The word "befall" suggests some kind of misfortune that the child is likely to confront. Again the line "Sweet Joy, but two days old" (L-8) suggests that joy remains an infant and does not accompany the infant for long, because that joy is threatened by the foreboding evil.

“Slavery and the welfare of slaves became issues of considerable public and parliamentary concern in Britain . . . Many writers produced anti-slavery poems, including Blake, Southey and Coleridge and Wordsworth criticized Napoleon’s reimposition of slavery in France’s colonies in his sonnets of 1802” (Roe 22). Blake’s concern regarding the sufferings of the little boys and girls is similar to that of Charles Dickens’s. Through their writings they stood up against the society’s hostility towards children. Torture to children is a kind of evil and such images are seen in the *Songs of Innocence*, particularly in “The Little Black Boy”, “The Holy Thursday” and “The Chimney Sweeper”.

Blake points at the racial injustices prevalent in the eighteenth century England in “The Little Black Boy”. The hatred and bitterness of racial prejudice is an image of evil. The line “But I am black, as if bereaved of light” (L-4) suggests that black people were deprived of the light of God. In other words, they were in the dark world of evil, “a shady grove” (L-16). The inferiority of the black boy in contrast to the superiority of the English boy, that is, the inequality among the children of the same God, is indeed pathetic. Only when they reach God, they will be free from the colour bias. But that is an imaginary world. The little black boy actually has to face the stark reality of evil in his own world.

The Charity Schools of the eighteenth century, which were established to care for and educate the orphaned children, were not actually what they seemed on the surface. In “The Holy Thursday” Blake criticized these charity schools which only made a show of charity but in reality were institutions which concealed the cruelty to which impoverished were often subjected to. The children were “walking two and two” (L-2) in uniforms and the “grey-headed beadles walked before with wands as white as snow” (L-3). The “wand” image suggests that the children were not free; they were under strict regimentation and violent authority. In the state of innocence children were ought to be free and uninhibited but here children are constant fear of punishment. The line “beneath them sit the aged men, wise guardians of the poor” (L-11) is also ironic and suggests that the charity schools which were meant to be based on kindness and charity, were actually based on fame, selfishness and self interest. The guardians wanted to boost their fame or to waive their taxes. The children only advertised their so-called charity. Such hypocrisy on the part of the “wise guardians”, the church and the charity schools can be viewed as evil. Again, that so many children came in “multitudes”, and that so many children were in charity schools suggests their abandonment by their parents and their families and that they were uncared for. This abandonment of the innocent souls is also a kind of evil.

In “The Chimney Sweeper”, one can witness the affects of industrialization and the resultant evils of child labour, poverty and inhuman atrocities. The young children are employed as chimney sweeps and it is the father himself who had sold them. Again, Tom’s head being shaved implies that he and thousands of other children were sacrificed, their innocence crushed by the very evil of slavery. The words and phrases like “weep”, “soot”, “coffins of black”, “rose in the dark”, “cold” also suggest a sinister foreboding. The vision that Tom Dacre has in a dream, of an angel rescuing all the chimney sweeps is

but only a dream. The reality is something else. The world is evil, danger lurks in the chimneys where they work, the soot sticks to their white bodies thus staining their purity. The world of innocence seems like only a dream because there is a kind of threat everywhere. The sweeps worked in unhealthy atmosphere and were poorly fed, this led to their early death and so the “coffins of black” suggests their death, the death of innocence. The children being forced to work as chimney sweeps implies that their childhood, their goodness and their innocence have already been exploited by the hazards of evil.

The forces of darkness lurk over the *Songs of Innocence*. In the song “Night”, “green fields and happy groves” (L-9) are bade farewell and “when wolves and tigers howl for prey” (L-25) the angels do nothing but “they pitying stand and weep” (L-26). In the darkness of the night, brute beasts “howl for prey”. So evil is at work in this world of innocence. The speaker hopes for a world where both lambs and lions would live in harmony together. But we as readers know that it is impossible and that pure joy is only a dream. Again in “The Little Boy Lost”,

The night was dark, no father was there:

The child was wet with dew;

The mire was deep, and the child did weep... (L- 5-7).

It shows how the adults leave the children to be doomed. The insensitivity on the part of adults towards the meek and the mild is a kind of evil. The “father” may also mean God and that God has abandoned his child means that evil has already crept in the world of innocence because God and goodness are no more there. Again in “The Nurse’s Song”, the nurse is aware that it is getting dark and that the children must go home because the forces of evil would be skulking around. “A Cradle Song” which is a lullaby is also not free from the grip of the image of evil. The mother senses that something unfortunate was to befall her child, may be some kind of oppression, and so she weeps. There is also the mention of “Thy Maker” weeping “for all”. Christ wept on seeing mankind suffer and sin. Sin and suffering is there in the world and amidst such conditions, the child is sure to fall prey to sin or evil.

“Blake used the metal plate for the production of a large proportion of his literary and artistic output” (Keynes 122). Some of the pictures illustrating *Songs of Innocence* suggest a kind of complexity and difficulty, the “flame plant”, the twining creepers, the complex borders and images suggests a disturbance. According to Jean H. Hagstrum, “the destruction Blake unmistakably adumbrates even in the borders. When his friend Cumberland noted that the vine grasps ‘the distorted trunk with snaky twine’ (George Cumberland) he provided the proper perspective on one of the most insistent visual motifs in the *Songs of Innocence*. For in border and design, tree twists around tree, creeper and vine embrace trunk, vine and stem rise in serpentine loops and often form round, Urizenic arches over the page. The entire tradition that Blake absorbed... suggests that the twisting serpentine forms of his Edenic garden prefigure a Fall” (Hagstrum 527).

“Blake’s *Innocence* has a quality that makes it poignant – its capacity for being blighted by society. There passes now and then over it the shadow of Experience, a cloud that suggests the coming of dark but that does not destroy the day” (Hagstrum 256).

There is much that is terrible and frightening in the gentle world of innocence, which is likely to be tarnished by evil. “The *Songs of Innocence* frequently suggest challenges to and corruptions of the innocent state; children are afraid of the dark, brute beasts threaten lambs, slavery imprisons the negro and a vile trade the little chimney sweep” (Sanders 359). In this way Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* becomes a powerful commentary upon the corrupt, vicious and unjust society.

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