

Original Paper

William Blake's Treatment of Innocent Children in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*: Social Problems Context

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Abstract

This article aims to demonstrate how William Blake's Songs of Innocence (1789) can be connected to Songs of Experience (1794) regarding innocent children. It aims to illustrate how, from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century, Blake has written poetry to present some important aspects, such as class, child labor, slavery, and education during the French Industrial Revolutions. It can be said here that children are exposed to the social and economic shifts of the eighteenth century. A child's inherent qualities are described in Songs of Innocence as a symbol of divinity and innocence. Children gradually absorb biases, and their innocence turns to their mothers and other adults for comfort and security. Blake's poems uphold a majority of children whose childhoods are presented by forced labor, slavery, and poverty in order to satisfy the needs of the eighteenth-century and the nineteenth-century capitalist economy; on the other hand, the poems in Songs of Experience foster how children encounter resulting of formal education and religious doctrine. Social customs and norms of the than time was against deprived, acquitted and defenseless children. The holy child, once a representation of divinity and purity, no longer embodies noble qualities. Children's difficult upbringing shapes them into a feeble and occasionally disobedient adult. Blake lets his readers behold the transformation of a little child who, because of life experiences, develops universal themes that are not understood at an early stage of life. An examination of Blake's poetry with an emphasis on experience and innocence is prompted by the lyrical portrayal of the disparity.

Keywords

William Blake, children, innocence, experience

Introduction

William Blake is considered as a religious poet of the Romantic period in English literature. The Romantic age (1798 to 1832), after the Neoclassical period, marked a transition from the constraints of Neoclassical literature to freedom in creative expression. The neoclassical period (1660 to 1798) prioritized reason and intelligence, precise diction and syntax, while suppressing the uninhibited expression of human emotion and suffering. Highly structured language and pompous diction of Alexander Pope, John Dryden and other poets deprived readers of all class of people of the society. The French Revolution, the Enlightenment ideas, the rapid industrialization triggered an influential response that gave rise to a new era which is for the commoner of the society where mass people and nature are the subject matter of literature, like poor children, nurse, animal etc. The Romantic Movement, conversely, repudiated traditional poetic conventions and pursued unrestricted modes of expression. Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* depict main aspects, including poverty, slavery, education, brutality of capitalists, spiritual crisis, racial conflicts, etc. in romantic poems. The poet addresses liberal issues, including poverty, child labor, and abuse, as well as the oppressive characteristics of politics and religion, to advocate for the recognition of children's rights with their own hope and inspiration.

The interplay between these two collections reflects Blake's belief in the duality of the human experience. Innocence is not just a stage to be lost; it is essential for understanding and navigating the complexities of life. The transition from innocence to experience can be painful but is necessary for growth and awareness. Blake's portrayal of children serves as a powerful commentary on the nature of humanity, the importance of nurturing innocence, and the need for societal change to protect and uplift the most vulnerable.

This article would like to examine Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, focusing on the effects of societal conventions on children and their journey into adulthood. Blake elucidates the factors that impact children's growth and psychology. His poetic views of children during the period of industrialization significantly influence his poetry. The book, *Songs of Innocence*, signifies the delightful and untainted realm of childhood, articulating through the unblemished viewpoint of children in contrast to the malevolence and afflictions of civilization. *Songs of Experience*, conversely, delineates the evolution of the innocent children into a realm of untold suffering and anguish, represented by political and economic transformations. In *Songs of Innocence*, Blake creates a realm of freedom and innocence embodied by the children, whereas in *Songs of Experience*, the poet presents the processes that precipitate the erosion of children's innocence and freedom (Nath, 2018, pp. 1-3).

Literature Review

This research is qualitative research; therefore, the primary materials and the secondary materials are the medium of this research. The literature review portion of the article has been conducted to present the secondary materials. reviewed by different scholars and critics of different times as follows:

According to Liang Chy Chien (2004), human labor was considered a basic commodity during the initial phases of industrialization. Consequently, women, men, and children were compelled to work in appalling conditions for meager compensation. The industrial society's demands compelled parents to enlist their children in labor duties. The children were employed in textile mills, agriculture, and food-producing factories. Consequently, child labor became widely accepted, and children at the age of four were found to get themselves involved in physical labor.

William John Long (2004) thinks that the French revolution (1789-1799) was a period of political and social upheavals that resulted in the overthrow of the French monarchy of King Louis XVI. Under the monarchy, the nobles and clergy were favored by unjust laws, while the working class was victimized. In addition, the literature that was generated prior to the revolution projected the glittering lives of the notables, which reflected the tyranny. In particular, the oppressive socio- economic systems were beyond the reach of the common people, who were unable to express their concerns or struggle for livelihood.

X Chen (2004) points out that the revolution not only brought about a complete transformation of society but also revolutionized literature by focusing on the child as a debatable concern. Critics and scholars on children's rights were permitted to articulate their opinions on matters that affected humanity, regardless of their age, status, or class. In *Songs of Experience*, Blake railed against the prejudices and afflictions of children in the industrializing society, eliciting sympathy for the children and a revolt against the oppressive social custom.

According to Ronald Eyeran (1981), modernism is defined as the shift from a conventional to a subjective and individualistic view of one's own identity. But I find in Karl Marx's philosophy that economic motivations in human relationships always lead to power struggles. While a carefree child gives up his innocence to fit in with an ever-changing society as presented Blake's *Songs of Experience*, individuality inevitably fades.

According to Kathleen Raine (1979), in *Songs of Experience*, Blake portrays "The Schoolboy" as a dissatisfied child whose independence was abruptly taken away the day he enrolled at school.

From reviewed literature, it can be said here that this article aims to show Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* represent the innocent aspects of children in his age.

Manifestations of Innocent Children in *Songs of Innocence*

In *Songs of Innocence*, Blake presents a fundamental view of infancy. Blake's idea of the children is complex. The mystical components and metaphorical themes make his poetry more challenging to comprehend.

In "Infant Joy", a woman poses questions and receives answers for her two-day-old infant, illustrating Blake's portrayal of purity untainted by the foolishness of the experienced world. The genuine essence of joy and purity is beautifully presented in the following stanza:

I have no name;
I am but two days old.
What shall I call thee?
I happy am I Joy is my name,
Sweet joy befall thee!

From this quotation, it is clear that the mother commemorates the arrival of her child and adopts the voice of the infant, representing purity and elation. The use of the term "joy" emphasizes innocence as an inherent quality of the infant and fosters its susceptibility. The poet indicates that children require protection and affection for an optimistic future.

In "A Cradle Song", the mother perceives God (Jesus) within her child. The juxtaposition of youthful innocence with God emphasizes the untainted purity inherent in children. The mother, through the enchanting verses of a lullaby, envisions the infant as a representation of Jesus, whose beaming countenance alleviates grief and pathos. The following stanza from the poem justifies the mother's vision of purity and divinity among children:

Sweet babe in thy face,
Holy image I can trace.
Sweet babe once like thee.
Thy maker lay and wept for me.

Blake's making use of adjectives denotes the natural attributes of the child, poetic diction, such as "sweet", "lovely", "soft", "pleasant", "smiles", "happy" and "heavenly", signify the pure image of a child, which intends to come in contact with its God. The poet aims to depict the image of a holy baby through signifying the dictum of Christianity. The poet, in fact, tries to come in contact with God through his poetic diction, which makes us awaken of God's grace.

Ecocritical and mystical elements are blend in Blake's poetry, especially for presenting children. Animals are a natural affinity for children; as a result, they would converse with them as if they were human. The juvenile narrator of "The Lamb" portrays the lamb as the most innocent, mystic and compassionate of God's creation, which creates an impression of naivety. Blake not only created human child as his subject matter but also created animal child, lamb, as his protagonist. Blake hints that children have not yet

acquired the ability to confound life by posing queries to the lamb in the poem. But they seek simplicity and justify their assumptions, as presented in the following lines of the first stanza:

Little lamb who made thee

Dost thou know who made thee?

From the two lines, I can argue that Blake pessimistically presents his thoughts of childhood by immersing readers in the child's interaction with the lamb. The multitude of inquiries and uncertainties that obscure the naive intellect seeks expression through questions. Blake thinks that the infant represents the essence of innocence. The aspects of worldliness and regulations do not diminish their innocence as they convey simplicity, cheerfulness, and purity. Childhood innocence, consequently, embraces religion uncritically and apparently.

The poem "Laughing Song" radiates positivism and joyfulness, two essential inherent qualities of a child. The joyful picture in the pastoral area, with children's playing and yelling, signifies the purity of infancy:

When the meadows laugh with lively green

And the grasshopper laughs in the merry

When Mary and Susan and Emily

With their sweet round mouth sing 'Ha, ha he!

The above stated stanza indicates that Blake's treatment of rural lifestyle represents the feelings and lives of common people, is presented clearly when it depicts children growing up in their natural environment. The sounds and colours of nature bring its charm to life. Blake's idea of innocence is manifested in the poem's simplicity, relationship to nature, inclusion of the carefree girls, and melodic sentences.

Blake makes use of symbols and screams in "The Ecchoing Green" to convey the joyous purity of youth. The opening stanza's setting of the poem is a picture of bliss, with the light and spring serving as a metaphor for the happy and brilliant voices of chirping birds.

The sun does arise,

And make happy the skies.

The merry bells ring

To welcome the Spring.

The sky-lark and thrush,

The birds of the bush,

Sing louder around,

To the bells' cheerful sound.

While our sports shall be seen

On the Ecchoing Green.

The aforementioned stanza vividly describes the joyful atmosphere of flamboyance and jovial play. The innocence of children in seeking pleasure in life is exemplified by their image, frolicking in the green corns. Their vivacity is a result of their ignorance of the harsher realities of life, which in turn fosters a casual and cheerful atmosphere. Furthermore, the field in the first stanza, which includes phrases such as ‘make happy’, ‘merry bells’, ‘sing louder’, and ‘cheerful sound’, demonstrates the carefree demeanor of children. In fact, the poem articulates the recollection of childhood and the transition to maturity.

The development of the maternal relationship between children and mothers is expressed in “A Cradle Song”. Blake writes that children represent innocence in their early years. The mother’s unwavering devotion for her children is reflected in her affection for the defenseless. In this context, I agree with Billal Azar (2009) who argues that children’s psychological growth and development requires emotional and psychological bonding following birth. The poem depicts cuddles and tender conversations to deepen the relationship between children and mothers. The mother interprets the infant’s grin as a representation of God’s smile, which is focused on tranquility and harmony. The tender tone of the lullaby that a mother sings to her child proclaims the innocent and beautiful bond that exists between child and mother. The mother expresses her happiness at watching her baby sleep well. The misery of an orphaned child is expressed in *Songs of Innocence*’s “The Chimney Sweeper”. A mother’s presence in a child’s existence is crucial because she provides the necessary care, protection, and nourishment to ensure the child’s survival. She offers the child moral and emotional support in addition to protecting him from the cruelty of society. The story of the young man whose heartless, self-centered, and unreliable father forces him into juvenile work as a commercial bondage is expressed in the poem “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.

The above-mentioned quotation depicts how the depressing story of the little sweeper who loses his mother at a young age makes the father feel pity and resentment. The boy is sold to the master sweeper by his father, who does not provide anything for the infant. In the twenty-first century, the father would be imprisoned for such an act of neglect. As industrialization, which peaks at the exploitation of human resources, entangles England and other emerging nations in the nineteenth century, child and human rights are abandoned (Frye, 1910, p. 185).

Growing up without a mother would unveil several challenges for a child in her lifetime. Anger and resentment result from the child’s social and emotional development being hampered if the mother

neglects or abuses her infant. On the other hand, grief and emotional outbursts are probable if the mother passes away when the child is young. In this standpoint, I agree with Bowlby (1958), who states that a mother's role is crucial for a child to have a happy and healthy upbringing (Bowlby, 1958, p. 353). The *Songs of Innocence* dramatize the naive hopes and fears that inform the lives of children and trace their transformation as the child grows into adulthood. Some of Blake's poems are taken from the perspectives of children, while others are about children as expounded from an adult perspective.

Representations of Innocent Children in *Songs of Experience*

Blake indicates how the social, political, and religious norms ruin children's innocence. *Songs of Experience* signifies the tale of a harsh society that robs children of their faith in their parents, in religion, and in society as a whole. The poet shares his insights about how industrial revolutions have affected children. His poems lament the powerlessness of the impoverished and vulnerable children and foster his distaste for the several establishments in charge of the injustice. His persistent worry is an attempt to illustrate how neither religion nor politics can save the children.

Blake depicts the pessimistic views of innocent children in "The Chimney Sweeper", whose parents sell them to sweep of soot from chimneys. Blake criticizes the parents' callousness toward their children in this poem. Parents are revealed to be self-centered, abandoning their children to a world of death, exploitation, and persecution in exchange for financial prosperity. Following the loss of their mother, the gullible, impressionable, and defenseless children from *Songs of Innocence* become chimney sweepers:

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.

This stanza makes us remind that Blake points out that innocence may conceal a harsh reality, wherein little boys, unable to articulate 'sweep' correctly, are employed as chimney sweepers with parental assent, despite parents being cognizant of the detrimental health impacts of chimney soot. The dream imagery of a child chimney sweeper exemplifies hope, better life and resilience.

A Marxist approach of socio-economic condition of England for low-pay child labor and the brutality of a father for gaining money is depicted in this poem; in addition, the irony of a acquitted child life is presented here with a vivid imagery. The innocent and defenseless children long for a nurturing mother and a safeguarding father for physical care and stimulation essential for their psychological growth and development.

Blake's anticlerical views are beautifully expressed in the poem "The Earth's Answer" taken from *Songs of Experience*, where earth represents God as jealous and fearful figure:

Selfish father of men!
Cruel, jealous, selfish fear! Can delight,
Chained in night,
The virgins of youth and morning bear?

From the above stated lines, it can be said here that Blake condemns dogmatic faith in religion because he deems it to be a pernicious worldview. Religious standards dictate how men, women, and children should behave and fulfill their demands. The poet makes use of colorful poetic diction to show how the church's insistence on obedience has imprisoned innocent children.

Blake aims at organized religion in the poem "The Chimney Sweeper", by indicating the fact that the church benefits from the wretched existence of the helpless sweepers. This poem is the diasporic representation of *Songs of Innocence's* "The Chimney Sweeper". These two poems stand as imagination and reality.

In her treatise "Blake's Two Chimney Sweepers", Linda Freedman argues that spiritual crises that are exacerbated by the church are closely related to the socioeconomic status that are found in Blake's times. The poet regards the church as a type of jail in the poem "The Garden of Love". The poem presents a harsh opinion of the church which unveils rules and restrictions to stifle joys and wants. The poet is appalled to discover that the center of the area where he used to play has been transformed into a chapel. Blake's idea in the poem "The Schoolboy" indicates that the formal education system robs a child of their creativity and joyous innocence. The innocent of childhood undergoes a transformation upon the child's enrollment at school. The carefree, jovial innocence of the child is destroyed by formal education, which dictates and regulates the child's cognitive and emotional development. Blake seems to be self-educated after discontinuing his education due to his inability to tolerate the monotony of the classroom.

Children are inherently attracted to nature, and they enjoy spending hours engaging in play and communication with the sun, trees, flora, creatures, and birds. The infant, like Blake's adolescent, is attracted to the sea and the forests. They prefer to engage in outdoor activities and swim in rivers rather than attend school or remain indoors. The village playgrounds or their compounds are filled with the joyful conversation of children. Blake identifies child labour, exploitation, and neglect of children as the primary factors that influence childhood. The findings indicate that society progressively suppresses the emotions, desires, and behaviors of children who are unable to respond to the social pressure. It is found that Blake's *Songs of Experience* contain themes of poverty, misery, loss of innocence, corruption of childhood, death, and restrictions imposed by authorities.

Children in Social Problems

Piaget & Weil (1951) argue that poverty can mean children going without basics, and it can also mean missing out on everyday fun and activities that other children take for granted. Poverty harms children's health, social and emotional wellbeing, and education. It harms their childhoods and their futures. Particularly at its extremes, poverty can negatively affect how children's body and mind develop, and can actually alter the fundamental architecture of children's brain. Children experience poverty when they do not get the nutrition, water, shelter, education or health care they need to survive and thrive. Children who experience poverty have an increased likelihood, extending into adulthood, for numerous chronic illnesses, and for a shortened life expectancy. Children living in poverty are deprived of nutrition, water and sanitation facilities, access to basic health-care services, shelter, education, participation and protection, and that while a severe lack of goods and services hurts every human being (Weinstein, 1957).

Poverty does indeed impact growth from early childhood, starting with brain development and other body systems. Poverty itself can negatively affect how the body and mind develop, and economic hardship can actually alter the fundamental structure of the child's brain. Its manifestations include hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education and other basic services, social discrimination and exclusion as well as the lack of participation in decision-making. Various social groups bear disproportionate burden of poverty. However, inequalities of opportunity affect expectancy of children's lives and access to basic services, such as healthcare, education, water, and sanitation. They can curtail children's rights, through discrimination, abuse and lack of access to justice (Torney, 1971). Children in poverty today are at a greater risk. Broadly defined, risk is presumed to be a specific event that provokes a given reaction to children (Crivello & Boyden, 2014). Popular images of children that are considerably "at risk" illustrate a large number of circumstances such as: children exposed to physical trauma, severe poverty, and orphanhood, just to name a few. Risk consists of negative connotations and according to Crivello and Boyden, is thought to pose an inevitable threat to children with the undesirable outcomes such as immediate and later maladjustment.

The theme of childhood is treated in the *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* in a wonderful way. In the *Songs of Innocence*, Blake expresses the happiness and innocence of a child's life whereas the poems in the *Songs of Experience* record the wounds and cruelties of the civilized world. Blake believes that if children's freedom is taken away from them, they do not adopt fully to the adult world. Using the children as a source of both poetic inspiration and political critique, Blake openly denounces what the poet finds as institutional and familial oppression. He is also known to use a lot of religious symbolism in his poetry to highlight the aspects of both innocence and experience which can only be harnessed if both are understood. Blake's message regarding the children is a meditation on parenthood in times of hardship, with a particular focus on the impact of poverty and social injustice.

Comparative Discussion between *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*

A comparative study between *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* reveals a rich tapestry of themes that explore the complexities of human existence. Blake masterfully contrasts the joy of childhood with the stark realities of adult life, inviting readers to reflect on the importance of nurturing innocence while also addressing the moral responsibilities of society. Together, these collections form a profound commentary on the human condition, balancing hope with realism in a world fraught with challenges.

The disparity between *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* lies in their contrasting portrayals of the world, religion, childhood, and human existence. Blake uses this disparity to show that while innocence is a state of purity and harmony, it is often fragile and easily corrupted by the harsh realities of experience. Through these two contrasting collections, Blake offers a complex and nuanced critique of society, religion, and the human condition, emphasizing that neither innocence nor experience alone can fully capture the depth of human life. The tension between these two states highlights the constant conflict between hope and despair, idealism and reality.

Conclusion

Songs of Innocence and *Songs of Experience* are dedicated to infants and the factors that influence their psychological development. The analysis of Blake selected poems (mentioned above) demonstrates how challenges transform the carefree, innocent child into an egotistical, prejudiced, and perplexed adult. I have investigated the interpretations of Blake's perspectives on children's innocence and experience in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of his worldview, particularly in relation to the factors that influence children and childhood. They signify Blake's revulsion at the hypocrisy of the institutions, which are aimed at subjugating vulnerable children.

Blake is a social critic who endeavors to reform society by raising awareness of the factors that influence children. The poet recounts the challenges faced by neglectful and right-deprived children, who yearn for parental affection and encouragement. As a visionary poet, Blake recognizes the importance of addressing the issues that uphold the psychological development of children in the eighteenth century in order to children's rights and livelihood (Note 1). Overall, children with experience of poverty are just as happy with their friendships and families as are other children. I argue that the persistence of child poverty in rich countries undermines both equality of opportunity and commonality of values. It, therefore, confronts the industrialized world with a test both of its ideals and of its capacity to resolve many of its most intractable social problems.

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Note(s)

Note 1. Poverty reduction effectiveness is defined by the percent reduction in child poverty attributable to cash benefits. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/3296/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Report-Card-18-Child-Poverty-A-midst-Wealth-2023.pdf>