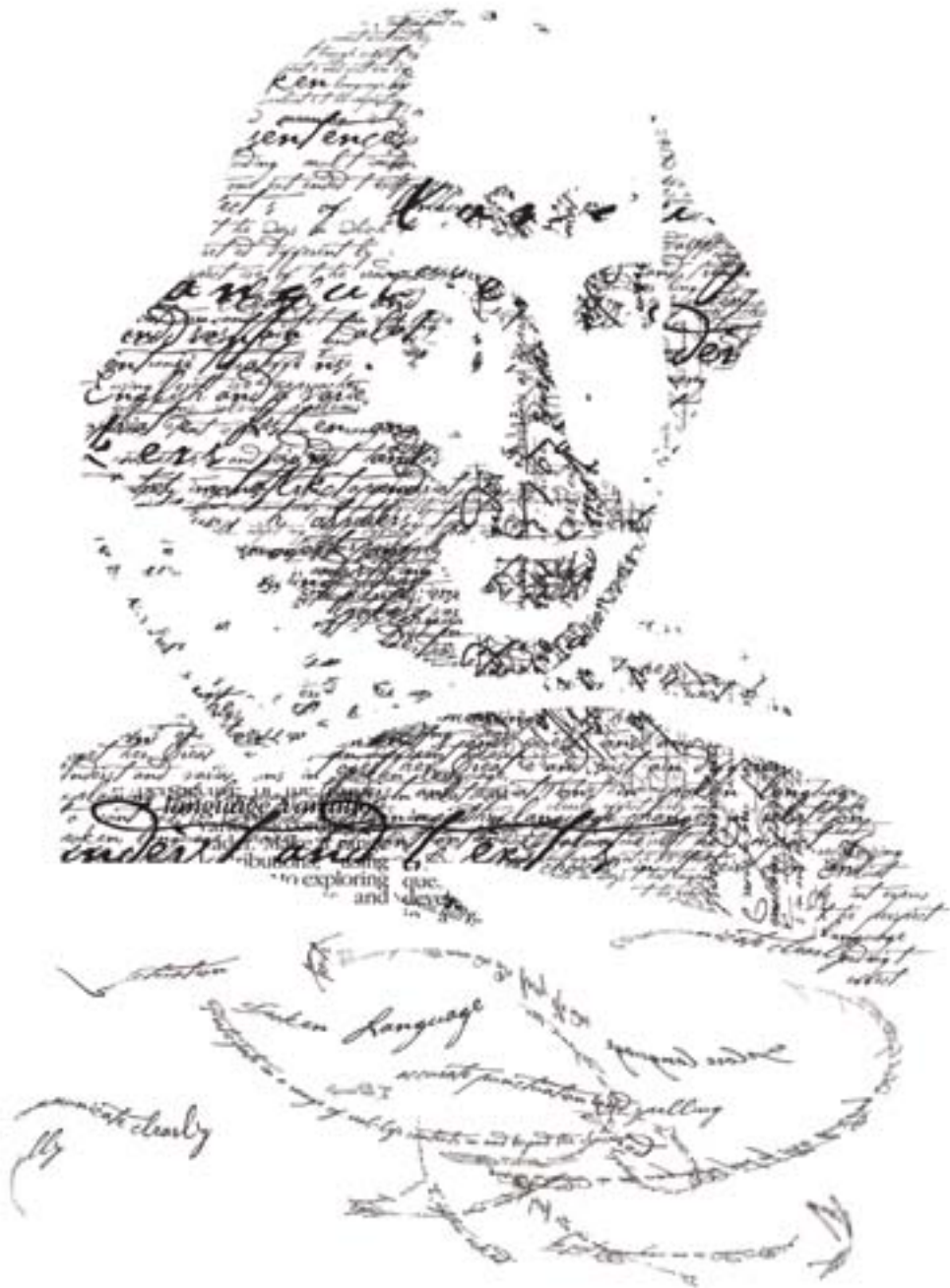


A LEVEL
ENGLISH LITERATURE H071 H471
INTRODUCTION AND GUIDED READING
SONGS OF INNOCENCE & EXPERIENCE
WILLIAM BLAKE



From September 2012, OCR will be introducing new set texts for unit F663. To support you and your learners through this change, OCR has commissioned senior members of the examining team to write an introduction and guided reading list for each text in Section B. You can choose to use these materials with your learners as you see fit.

WILLIAM BLAKE SONGS OF INNOCENCE & EXPERIENCE

Biography

Blake was the son of a modestly prosperous retail hosier (Napoleon was soon to call England 'a nation of shopkeepers'), brought up in the Soho district of London, a home for artists, spiritual non-conformists and political activists (Blake was all three). Showing an aptitude for drawing, the boy was sent first to drawing school, and then apprenticed to an engraver, James Basire. He enrolled in the Royal Academy, but, as usual with him in later life, found large institutions uncongenial and was soon executing freelance commissions for book illustrations. He is also likely to have quarrelled with the President of the Royal Academy, Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose general statements about art did not please him: 'To Generalise is to be an idiot' was a typical comment. While Blake's work as illustrator and engraver paid the bills, the self-published designs, and more ambitious personal projects, had to be subsidised. As a freelance, Blake was totally dependent on the whim and character of his patrons. Fortunately most of these seem to have been well-disposed towards him, and tolerant of his eccentricities, though the artist's unworldliness did leave him open to exploitation by the more unscrupulous.

Up to the age of about 50, Blake and his wife lived fairly comfortably, with a servant and in several rooms, though in later years their lifestyle contracted and poverty showed through. Blake was never a solitary genius; on the contrary he recruited adherents and admirers throughout his life, including, right at the end, a group of young painters clustering about Samuel Palmer. Coleridge and Charles Lamb got to know Blake's poems before the poet's death, and Ruskin became a devotee of his paintings, especially their rendering of light. The real emergence of Blake's reputation, however, came with Alexander Gilchrist's *Life* in 1863 and with the Victorian cult of all things 'Romantic' soon afterwards. The most attractive of the many biographies for A2 students is Peter Ackroyd's *Blake* (1995), an object lesson in how to return a major artist to the contexts that produced him.

AO4 Biographical
contexts

Writer, Illustrator, Self-Publisher

Blake's illuminated books were modelled on manuscripts from the Middle Ages, where the pictures informed the words and the words the pictures, and the links between them were supplied by the reader, not managed by the artist. If Blake did everything himself, there was no chance of 'interpretation' ('priestcraft', Blake often called it) obtruding, for 'Truth can never be told so as to be understood.' No one censored Blake's designs, no editor toned them down, and no printing-house misrepresented or misunderstood them.

He worked on copper-plates, drawing out his design in stopping-out liquid. To get a positive etching, he needed first to create a negative, so he worked in mirror image, leaving as bare metal the most important sections of the design and stopping-out the rest of the plate, so that when the acid was applied to the copper it ate away at the unstopped material to release the desired form.

This method, known as relief etching, is opposite to the conventional way of etching a copper plate at the time, where the surface of most of the copper plate is preserved and the design itself is attacked with acid. There is something satisfyingly paradoxical about Blake's inversion of the process, well-suited to his delight in the creative power of opposites. As he put it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which includes the proverb 'opposition is true friendship', this was 'printing by the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.'

Once Blake had completed his etched plate (and he could work much more quickly in the relief method than the conventional system) he could ink it and print it again and again. The design would necessarily be the same each time it was printed, but he could vary the effect by changing the inking process. He could print in monochrome, or ink the plate with a different solid colour on every page.

He could load the design on the plate itself with different pigments, producing an effect of strong shadow and autumnal tints. Or he could wait for the lightly inked design to dry, and watercolour it by hand, producing glowing effects of springtime energy.

No two impressions need, or indeed could, be identical. The ordering of the designs changes from copy to copy, and the artist further varied his effects by choosing to ink *Innocence* in vibrant watercolour washes, preferring more sombre opaque effects for *Experience*. Blake's art had become truly democratic.

Blake was never tempted to mass-produce his designs, or to arrange their sale for profit, though well-wishers, knowing Blake was touchy about charity, sometimes gave ten times the original asking price for his more sought-after special editions. Twenty-four copies of *Innocence* survive, the same number of the composite volume, and just four copies of *Experience* alone. It is possible there were never many more.

Gilchrist confirms that Blake's early text, *Songs of Innocence*, was, with the help of his devoted wife Catherine, the work of a 'total artist':

The poet and his wife did everything in making the book – writing, designing, printing, engraving – everything except manufacturing the paper: the very ink, or colour rather, they did make. Never before surely was a man so literally the author of his own book.

A2 essays will benefit greatly if you respond to the visual aspect of Blake's self-publication. However, they need to refer to the effect of particular designs, and not to refer to too many. The prescribed material remains Blake's poetry, not his designs.

Go to www.blakearchive.org for a comprehensive collection of Blake's designs. This includes a facility for comparing variant inkings of the same plate held in different libraries.

Songs of Innocence

Though long known as part of a composite volume (1794), where it stands as a companion of the later Songs of Experience and enters into debate with it, Songs of Innocence made its appearance independently in 1789, and must to some extent be considered a freestanding work. It is most confidently classified as a children's book, with its title a reminder that throughout his life Blake was fond of singing his own lyrics, to tunes of his own devising.

In the design for the Experience poem 'London', a shaft of light illuminates a child as he leads an old man: 'I see,' Blake wrote in the long poem Jerusalem, apparently a later re-working of this design, 'London blind and age-bent begging through the streets / Of Babylon, led by a child. His tears run down his beard' In Innocence, too, Blake is fond of showing how the child may educate, sometimes even shame, adult possessors of worldly wisdom.

The title page depicts an adult woman holding open a book for two children to read, who examine the pages with mature, discerning faces. Authority in literature seems thus to belong to the child's response, not adult interpretation. This is in accord with Rousseau's views in his *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and *Émile, ou l'Éducation* (1762). These books initiated a cult of the child as visionary that became widespread in first generation Romanticism. Wordsworth's insistence that all adults carry a formative child within them ('The child is father of the man') is a famous instance.

The earliest poems in Songs of Innocence appear among passages of gusty satire in an eccentric 1784 manuscript not intended for publication called *An Island in the Moon*. All three Ur-poems focus on the patina of innocence that seems to insulate children from danger or sorrow: from an unearthly light in 'The Little Boy Lost' (very bright in Blake's design, and just a yard from the child), from poverty in 'Holy Thursday'; even from their nurse's demand they come into dinner from their playing in 'Nurse's Song'. These three poems set the tone for Blake's thinking about children in Songs of Innocence. His children are both blessedly uncomplicated, and immune from, or above, human wisdom.

Sometimes, as in 'Infant Joy', where the child-speaker is but two days old, its wisdom is so fresh from the hand of God it seems creepily pre-human (trailing the 'clouds of glory', perhaps, that Wordsworth writes about in his 'Immortality Ode'). When Blake saw a group of children at play, he didn't think of competitiveness, envy or deceit, but was prepared to admire without qualification. 'That,' he told someone, pointing to a children's game, 'is heaven.' But worldly readers are apt to find 'heaven' challenging, like the 'naked new-born babe' in Macbeth's visualisation of Pity (1795), which, drawn by Blake, would strike the fear of God into any would-be murderer.

Even the chimney-sweepers of Innocence seem insulated from their appalling working conditions by a shared religious vision, as iridescent as Charles Kingsley's re-working of it in *The Water Babies* (1863):

*Then down a green plain leaping, laughing they run,
And wash in a river, and shine in the sun.*

They seem to run refreshed from this river, and back to their appalling labours, comforted by the eerie half-rhymes of the final stanza.

Thus the children of Innocence function as religious initiates, on intimate terms with the Lamb of God, showing how far the adults of Experience often are from understanding Christian integrity; or else they live among, and even lead wild beasts, like the Messianic child in Isaiah 11:6 ('The Little Girl Lost'). Their playground is an 'echoing green', whose cries ring on throughout life, increasingly distressing adult hearers with thoughts of frustration and mortality, of Peter Pan, of A.E. Housman's 'land of lost content'. They are not productive or disciplined members of the community. They will not, do not, cannot go to bed to fit in with nurse's or any other adult timetable.

Like most children the children of Songs of Innocence satirise adult practice. Recent attempts to prove that these beautiful but spooky poems are about language acquisition or educational method fail to come to terms with the occult quality inseparable from the Romantic cult of the child, or with Blake's contempt for all forms of education, even those that take a left hand path: 'There is no use in education. I hold it wrong – It is the great Sin.'

Continued

The most significant 'sources' for Blake's Songs are the popular poems of the late eighteenth century, particularly hymns and ballads. Ballads were collected by editors such as Joseph Ritson and Bishop Percy; hymns had become a regular part of Anglican worship. But the big difference between Blake's Songs and these analogues was that Blake's children are never interested in establishing a moral for his piece. 'A Cradle Song' in Innocence seems to have been closely modelled on Isaac Watts's well-known 'Cradle Hymn', but where Watts, rather absurdly, bids the cosseted infant remember how much better off it is in its nursery than its heavenly maker was in His Ox's stall, Blake's baby happily shares Jesus's 'image' and emotions, without once reflecting on its supine privileges or expressing puritanical guilt. Blake's babe breathes 'dovelike moans' beguiling 'earth to peace.' That is enough. There is no sermon. 'The Little Vagabond' in Experience is based on the ballads rather than a hymn, but it too is inscrutable. The main point seems to be to contrast the tight-fistedness of churchgoers with more generous tavern-drinkers. But the poor child who speaks the poem, with his desire for beer-kegs at church, might just as easily be expressing the freedom of his lifestyle, or campaigning for self-serving liberty hall. Like all the children in Songs, this one is keen only to affirm, as simply as possible, his joy in being.

AO3 Power of Innocence
to transform our world
AO4 Literary context:
Romantic cult of the child

Revolutionary Times

Songs of Innocence was published in 1789, the year of the Fall of the Bastille in France, opening event of the French Revolution, and symbol of the overthrow of feudal tyranny. Songs of Experience was published in 1794, during the height of the French Reign of Terror. Other first generation Romantics, such as Wordsworth and Mary Wollstonecraft, witnessed these events at first hand. Blake, as always, remained in London, but the political transformations unfolding in France inspired and excited him. At the beginning of the Revolution Blake wore the red bonnet of liberty in the open street as a mark of commitment; but as news of atrocities escalated, and it became clear the revolutionaries meant to do away with the Catholic Church (which, somewhat oddly, Blake respected) he qualified his support. If the revolutionaries were to behave as heretics, argued the profoundly Christian Blake, it was his duty to be a saint.

AO4 Political and
religious contexts

Blake the Radical

Literary criticism has trouble with the attitude of Romantic artists to politics. Typically Romanticism concerns itself with the individual and with the limits which time, place, circumstance and human rules impose on the imagination. This means that the typical trajectory of Romantic writing and thinking is to forsake political issues and historical context and become preoccupied with the inner life. This can lead progressive critics to maximise the political residue in these writers, neglecting the true complexity of the work in favour of something polemical or reductive; it can encourage conservative critics to argue that the art of the Romantic has no business with the 'real' world at all, or, worse, to recruit the artist somewhat antiseptically for the heritage industry.

Blake has been subject to both misappropriations. The artist's early commissions for the engraver Joseph Johnson brought him into radical circles. He did the illustrations for Mary Wollstonecraft's first two books, both didactic texts for children, and also illustrated a travel-book, John Gabriel Steedman's *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796), which deals quite graphically with the brutality of slavery. Nevertheless, steeped as he was in the thinking of revolutionary writers, Blake was not a political animal. He found the anti-Christian outlook of many radicals incompatible with his religious faith: 'he rebuked the profanity of Paine [an Atheist], and was no disciple of Priestley' [a Unitarian], wrote Samuel Palmer. Blake was not very effective in political debate, being aggressive and not always able to argue rationally, and his ill-considered outbursts often dismayed his 'minders', who were aware of the dangers awaiting conspicuous radicals, particularly after the notorious 'Treason Trials' of 1794. This was not, in Blake's case, an unfounded fear. In summer 1803, with the South Coast kindled with fear of a Napoleonic invasion, Blake unwisely quarrelled with a soldier named Scofield doing some work in his garden. After raised voices and some jostling, the soldier alleged that Blake had insulted the King and his troops, and Blake was forced to take his trial for sedition at the local Assizes.

The artist was acquitted, but seems to have been much distressed by what he saw as a Government plot against him because he was of the 'Paine party', and enlisted the malicious soldier with angels of Satan in his epic *Jerusalem*.

The political vision of Blake's poems is thus infuriatingly difficult to match up with deliverable political programmes. There is a tendency for real people to get mixed up with visionary forces, as happens to Private Scofield, or to politicians like Necker or George Washington. There is also a tendency for the hard edges of Blake's art, and its complex vision, to highlight contradictions, even on basic issues, such as whether his poems advocate interventionism or quiescence. For example, Blake concludes 'Holy Thursday' I (Innocence) with 'cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door'; yet at the beginning of 'The Human Abstract' (Experience) he argues that charity is bound to have a selfish component, for this is a fallen world:

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody poor
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we

'London', which George Orwell believed contained 'more understanding of the nature of capitalist society' than 'three quarters of socialist literature', is also ambiguous. The sigh of the 'hapless Soldier' runs as 'blood down Palace walls'. But is this the soldier's blood, shed during a revolutionary self-sacrifice? Or is he a soldier in the pay of establishment tyranny, whose 'sigh', projected as a musket-bullet, claims 'innocent' revolutionary lives? The poem's effects of synaesthesia also get in the way of its political arguments, introducing a note of hallucinatory horror.

We 'hear' the clank of 'mind-forg'd manacles, churches become draped in something like funeral palls, and 'sighs' turn to blood-stains.

Continued

The apparently simple anti-slavery poem 'The Little Black Boy' in Innocence proves a mine-field for proponents of political correctness. Within the context of his innocent other-worldliness the little black boy's desire to 'be like' the Christian God is profound and touching; but to realise his dream his soul must be 'white' and all kinds of arguably racist implications occur to more 'experienced' readers of the poem. When read alongside 'The Chimney-Sweeper' perspectives on the meaning of 'whiteness' and 'blackness' shift again, making disinterested 'experienced' readings – as opposed to 'innocent' ones – well-nigh impossible. Blake may have got wind of this himself: troublingly – or refreshingly – he sometimes inks in the image of the 'little black boy' black or brown, sometimes white or pink.

Yet it would be a mistake to think that Blake's art always puts him above, or at least apart from, practical politics. Things are pretty clear and pretty polemical in the poems critiquing organised religion. Blake was dismayed when a chapel was built on Lambeth village green. In 'The Garden of Love' 'Thou shalt not...' is written over the Chapel door and in the garden where he used to play freely as a child:

*Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys and desires.*

'A Little Boy Lost' - in which a child appeals to reason and to nature for inspiration, is denounced by a priest and is promptly incinerated by his parents - expresses the extreme dissenter's contempt for those who seek to defend the 'mystery' of 'priestcraft' by repressive means, a contagion that spreads to the heart of family life. The victims of Blake's 'Chimney-Sweeper' poems, his most effective radical texts, do not have family. Sweeps were usually parish boys, ideal, because of stunted growth, for negotiating the twisting flues and narrow apertures of chimney-flues, cleaning with brushes or metal scrapers as they went.

The 'apprenticing' of children as young as seven was often equated with official forms of slavery:

*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.
(from 'The Chimney-Sweeper' - Innocence)*

The boy is so young that his lisping attempt at advertising his trade as 'sweep' comes out poignantly as "weep", both advertising and bemoaning the capitalist enterprise. In Innocence, as we have seen, the chimney-climbing 'lilly-whites' are insulated from 'harm' by their faith; in Experience the 'little black thing among the snow' is dressed as if for his own funeral, disowned not only by his parents, but by the God and King priest and parents praise in church. Despite brutally bad publicity, not least from Blake's poems, climbing-boys continued to be maimed, trapped and suffocated in the London flues until sharp-toothed legislation in the 1860s.

Thus through exposure to riots, revolution, capitalism and the Sunday-school, the little wunderkind of Innocence, striding the blast and dreaming dreams of heaven, becomes the sulky baby of 'Infant Sorrow' in Experience, a cantankerous rebel, giving his sullen parents (presumably the point-of-view of this poem) rest by neither night nor day.

For a detailed study of Blake's Radicalism see Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (1992).

AO2 Blake's complexity
AO3 Ambiguity of Blake's outlook
and writings;
AO4 Political contexts

'Without Contraries is No Progression'

On the title-page of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) Blake suggests that the poems are meant to illustrate the 'Two Contrary States of the Human Soul'. Images of Adam and Eve crouch amid the fiery wrath of God, their genitals crudely covered with leaves. It is the moment of judgement after the Fall (Genesis 3:11; Milton, *Paradise Lost* Book 10, 121), when the bliss of Innocence gives way to knowledge of Good and Evil, and awareness of Death. To go by the poems which follow Blake didn't just mean to 'illustrate' these contrary states, but to set up trenchant debates between them.

'The Songs of Experience are satires,' wrote Northrop Frye, 'but one of the things that they satirise is the state of innocence . . . conversely the Songs of Innocence satirise the state of experience.' This effect is best explored using the counterpart poems in *Innocence and Experience*. Gilchrist calls them 'antitypes'. These are: the two 'Chimney-Sweeper' poems, the two 'Nurse's Songs', the two 'Holy Thursdays', 'The Lamb' and 'The Tiger', 'The Little Boy Lost' and 'The Little Boy Found', 'The Little Girl Lost' and 'The Little Girl Found', 'Infant Joy' and 'Infant Sorrow'. Blake is never systematic, however, so it would be unreasonable to treat every poem in *Songs* as if it ought to have a companion, or to expect Blake to set up balanced discussion in all poetic pairings. The deliberate instability of Blake's text is also a factor. In certain copies as many as six verses are transferred from *Innocence* to *Experience*.

Indeed, the most striking effects of all are probably in the 'singleton' poems of *Experience*. In 'The Clod and the Pebble' the dialectic is not found in dialogue with another poem but at the heart of the poem itself: we are all either exploiters and exploited, the poem argues, simply, coolly, cruelly, and we need one another, as bully needs victim, sadist needs masochist, master needs slave. Lucky and Pozzo in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* might well have read this poem. In the brief, possibly autobiographical poem, 'My Pretty Rose-Tree' the speaker refuses to cheat on his lover, only to generate an impenetrable thorn-thicket of jealousy and reproof. At its deepest this fierce, riddling poem even seems to suggest ('her thorns were my only delight') the speaker gets a kick out of his girl's jealousy. Another cruelly dialectical poem is 'The Poison Tree'.

Here we are not confronting creative opposites, but the enormity of the differential between apparent and actual motives in supposedly civilised society. The poem, simple as it is, comprises a multiple betrayal by deceit that ultimately spreads to and poisons every aspect of a relationship. The participants in the poem should have aired and shared their differences, and let them co-exist. Instead, the poem culminates in the gladness of one character when he finds his enemy stretched out beneath a tree that is certainly not the Tree of Life (the design of the fallen foe is graphic). Blake, who liked all disputes out in the open, bitterly subtitled this poem 'Christian Forbearance'.

Thus the poems of *Experience* are typically more sombre and less magical than those of *Innocence*. Rather than affording glimpses of half-forgotten childhood, they show the damage when the dust of years clogs the retina and dams the imagination. As Gilchrist puts it:

The Songs of Experience consist rather of earnest, impassioned arguments; in this differing from the simple affirmations of the earlier Songs of Innocence – arguments on the loftiest themes of existence.

Any student of *Songs* is likely to be surprised and possibly daunted by the wide range of readings these poems have attracted. My own make no pretence to be definitive. One of the most vital connections to note in reading Blake is that between his simplicity and his obscurity. The two most influential studies of Blake's poetry are Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947) and David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (1954), though both will need to be filleted for A2 students.

Good simple guides are the *Penguin Critical Studies* by David W. Lindsay, *Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1989) and *Poetry of William Blake* (1991). Morris Eaves, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake* (2003) is very useful.

AO2 Blake's complexity
AO3 Ambiguity of Blake's outlook
and writings;

Blake and the Enlightenment

Throughout his life Blake questioned established orthodoxies and systems, required received opinions to justify themselves, and believed that man must find his own personal, individual pathway through the world. "May God us keep / From Single vision & Newtons sleep!" was Blake's prayer. In Blake's Newton design the great scientist is oblivious to the beauty of his own naked form and of the coral-encrusted rocks on which he sits. All that matters is measuring geometrical figures on a scroll that seems to project from his own head, a monstrous parody of Blake's God in the act of creation. For Blake 'Bacon, Locke, and Newton' are not the fathers of modern science, but 'the three great teachers of Atheism, or Satan's Doctrine'.

If Blake and those who thought like him looked increasingly unlikely to realise paradise on earth through revolutionary action, they could still keep up a 'mental fight' for 'Jerusalem', the term Blake borrowed from the Old Testament for the City of God, and hoped to build with the help of words and prayers in 'England's green and pleasant land'.

Blake's hymn, now fast becoming the unofficial National Anthem of England and the English, is taken from his Epic poem Milton, where the great Republican patriot returns to earth early in the nineteenth century to share his 'Inspired Man' speech with Blake's struggling compatriots.

Blake believed the highly political and theologically unorthodox Milton was England's unsung National Poet, and he illustrated Milton's great poem, Paradise Lost, on many occasions, taking care to bring out the vigour of its Satan and the frustrating timidity of its God. In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790-3) he goes even further, arguing that Paradise Lost is a dualistic rather than monotheistic poem, showing God and Satan locked in creative struggle, and arguing that the author 'was of the Devil's Party without knowing it.' Indeed Milton is most straightforwardly seen as Blake's attempt to educate the cosmic genius of Milton out of the errors of religion, politics and even sexuality into which his giant strength had wandered, self-involved.

AO4 Blake's intellectual and religious contexts

Blake and Religion

Deeply religious, Blake came profoundly to distrust organised religion. By birth he was a dissenter, refusing to subscribe to the Thirty Nine Articles that defined the Established Church of England. Blake was baptised in St James' Church, Piccadilly in 1757 though it is not clear he was a Baptist. He was one of the many religious men who walked the streets of late eighteenth century London, dreaming of the transformative power of religion, but not really identifying himself with one or other of the myriad little Protestant sects that even to Church Historians are now largely indistinguishable one from another. In the 1780s, Blake was a frequent attender at the New Church, the chapel in Great East Cheap where almost all extreme dissenters went at this time, but from 1790 Blake rarely if ever went to Church, and when he did he often gave offence, for he delighted in speaking his mind, often without listening to the opinions of others. He did not believe, especially on religious matters, that humility was any more than 'a form of hypocrisy'. And Blake's London – the London of prophets like Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott – was awash with religious vision and argument, with 'mysticism and millenarian yearnings' (Ackroyd's phrase).

Blake has become one of Britain's great religious poets, constellated with Donne, Milton, Herbert, Vaughan, Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Though his thinking is rooted in the Bible he appeals to readers of any faith or none, for his concern is the only conduit of religious vision, the human imagination, and the only image of religious truth, the human form. As he expresses it in 'The Divine Image' from Innocence:

For mercy has a human heart;
Pity, a human face;
And love, the human form divine;
And peace, the human dress.

The phrase 'human form divine' slips in from Paradise Lost (3, 44), claiming Milton, as Blake often does, as a harbinger of Blake's human-centred faith.

Blake's religious conclusions are unorthodox and varied, but consistent in insisting that 'all deities reside in the human breast' (Marriage of Heaven and Hell) and in their distaste for a hierarchical priesthood (now often referred to as 'clericalism').

The introductory poem to Songs of Experience portrays the rhapsodic bard deliberately misconstruing the 'Holy Word', as priests do, until roundly reprovved for chaining 'delight' in 'night' by the speaker of the next poem, reproachful 'Earth'. 'The Human Abstract' posits a tree of 'mystery', as pernicious to humankind as that which grew in Eden, only this one is rooted in the human brain. This distrust of all 'mystery', the exegesis and then the doctrine that flows from it, is the basis of Blake's appeal to modern anti-clericalists like Philip Pullman, author of the His Dark Materials trilogy. Blake's message, his modern disciples note, is essentially that of Monty Python's Life of Brian: 'You've got to think for your selves . . . You don't NEED to follow ANYBODY!' Except Blake himself, of course . . .

Blake seems to have created for himself the most Protestant of Protestant sects. It consisted merely of the poet and his wife, revolved around concepts of (often sexual) energy, the 'source of eternal delight'. His creed might be summarised in his famous couplet, combining experimental reading of the scriptures with complete disregard for what anyone else had ever thought or written about them:

Both read the Bible day & night
But thou readst black where I read white.

In the words of Los from Blake's Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion: I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man's.

And the 'System' Blake evolved was highly personal and individualistic. In the 1820s a young journalist asked for the artist's opinions on the divinity of Christ, and received a disconcerting answer: 'Christ – he said – is the only God – But then he added - And so am I and so are you.'

Continued

It has always been a moot point whether Blake's largely self-willed exile from Christian tradition was good or bad for his art. T.S. Eliot thought his ideas too obviously put together 'out of the odds and ends about the house':

What his genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own.

Those who value Blake as religious writer delight in this contempt for institutions and the sidestepping of tradition, finding in his poems the stern naivety of Christian thought when separated from clerical pollution.

T.S. Eliot's essay on 'Blake' is in his *The Sacred Wood* (1920).

AO4 Blake's religious contexts

Old Nobodaddy

In his water-colour etching of God entitled *The Ancient of Days* (1794) Blake shows a muscular but rather preoccupied deity focused on a pair of compasses with which he plans the creation of the world:

*The Lord... set a compass on the face of the depths:
when He established the clouds above: when He
strengthened the fountains of the deep.
(Proverbs 8: 27)*

Blake's picture shows God much as he had painted Isaac Newton: with the delicate insistence of a calculating machine, a draughtsman, not an artist. This design is apparently based on a vision Blake saw at the top of his stairs in Lambeth. 'He enjoyed greater pleasure when colouring the print,' a friend recalled, 'than anything he ever produced.' He was inking it just before he died: it seems to have represented for him the arbitrary, controlling figure of the father 'that haunted Blake all his life' in Peter Ackroyd's words.

Blake also called his architect God 'Urizen', often construed by critics as the 'God of Limits or "Horizons"', of laws and penalties. As the poet argues in 'The Song of Loss' Urizen conspires with the great minds of the Enlightenment to mark quite arbitrary limits to human perception:

*Till a Philosophy of Five Senses was complete.
Urizen wept and gave it into the hands of Newton
and Locke.*

Throughout his life Blake was appalled by the human propensity to create and submit to oppressive images of the deity. When Blake is particularly aggrieved with his Urizen figure he calls him 'Nobodaddy' which may mean 'No worse or no more than your Daddy'. He is usually circumvented by the heroic figures in Blake's prophetic poems, Los and Orc, for they are representatives of human potential or wisdom, which Urizen tries to stifle. In orthodox Christianity God created everything, and evil is merely a degeneration of good, which God permits by allowing Satan (or whoever) to exercise free will. But in dualist systems like Blake's good and evil, God and Satan, are equal and opposed: perpetually warring factions. Thus for him 'Truth' lies in the debate between the purism of Innocence and the cynicism of Experience, and can only be established by synthesising the wisdom of one with the other.

AO4 Blake's religious contexts

'I behold London; a Human awful wonder of God!'

Blake is surely London's great poet. 'He left the city only once,' Peter Ackroyd tells us, 'and most of his life was spent in the same small area bounded by the Strand, and Holborn, and Oxford Street. He did not need to travel any further because he saw, literally saw, eternity there.' London was, for Blake, both the Jerusalem and the Babylon described in the Bible, and the events described or promised in scripture unfolded on its streets: images of fire and ruin were collected aplenty during the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780 (when Blake was 23, and became mixed up with a group of rioters); the stars that threw down their spears in 'The Tyger' might have owed something to the 'Great Fiery Meteor' of 1783; even the Tyger, eighteenth century symbol of bloodthirstiness (however badly Blake drew it), made frequent appearances at a London Menagerie.

The young Blake, if he had been morbidly minded, might have seen heads rotting on Temple Bar, corpses badly concealed in the over-stuffed City churchyards. He might have gorged himself on fashionable Gothic novels at any lending library.

But among all the exotic nastiness, Blake's Babylon afforded glimpses of the heavenly city of Jerusalem beyond, where the Thames shone beyond his lodgings 'like a bar of gold.' London enabled Blake to see the world in microcosm, and far beyond it.

Something that would have been very hard to find in Blake's London, at least in the time of Songs, was an industrial chimney, still less a 'Satanic' Lancashire cotton-mill, though there would have been plenty of smoke from coal fires, and light industry in the form of brewing, glass and brick-making. The famously misinterpreted phrase in the hymn 'Jerusalem' ('dark Satanic mills') is actually (as so often with Blake) drawn from his reading, not from life. The Satanic mill is that at Gaza in Milton's Samson Agonistes, line 41. Blind Samson is set to toil there, a prisoner among slaves.

AO4 Social and
biographical contexts

Blake and the Natural World

Natural imagery and description is characteristic of Songs, and this may reflect the rural character of Lambeth, with village green and poplar trees, immediately before the builders moved in in 1792. After that Blake would have had only fleeting glimpses of green-world in London, and he spent only three years in the country proper, at Felpham in Sussex. His preference, in any case, was for the heart of London: his two favourite lodgings were within spitting distance of the Strand; he thought the suburbs round Hampstead unhealthy 'Mountainous Places'; and his notion of an 'echoing green' were boyhood walks and 'trees filled with angels' on Peckham Rye.

In the Introduction to Songs of Innocence Blake provides a typical 'urban visionary's' countryside. Blake's 'strict, sharp-lined manner' of recording nature owes little to originals, which he disliked. Almost everything is seen through pastoral spectacles. A shepherd persona is:

Piping down the valleys wild,
Piping songs of pleasant glee . . .

Immediately a literary-minded child on a cloud asks him to 'write / In a book, that all may read'.

So he:

plucked a hollow reed,
And I made a rural pen,
And I stained the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear.

This country is as idealised and aesthetic as any in an eighteenth century bucolic: note how the pen makes the whole vision the paper of its text. 'For all the attention he paid to the outer world' argues one critic, 'Blake could have been almost blind.'

It is no surprise that Blake, who came to admire Wordsworth's writings late in life, did so with one strenuous reservation. 'The eloquent descriptions of Nature in Wordsworth's poems,' he told Crabb Robinson, 'were conclusive proofs of Atheism, for whoever believes in nature . . . disbelieves in God – For Nature is the work of the Devil.'

AO2 Literary genre (pastoral)
AO4 Social and
biographical contexts

Was Blake Mad?

Blake's contemporaries thought him at best a harmless crank, at worst a madman. Throughout his life he was given to curious or premature experiments: with nudism, spiritualism, sexual magic. To recite Adam and Eve's parts in Paradise Lost Blake and his wife stripped naked. Once he claimed to have talked with an angel who had posed for Michaelangelo. He stopped and bowed to the Apostle Paul when out on walks. At Felpham he saw a 'fairy's funeral' underneath a flower in his garden. In 1819 he worked indefatigably to draw 'Spiritual Heads' for an army of visitors from history who visited him in the company of a young water-colourist named John Varley. There were personal sittings from the devil, several female murderers, the 'man who build the pyramids', and a personification of the constellation Cancer. The most famous picture in this series is of a malign spirit confined to the body of a flea, who answered the painter's questions courteously.

Gilchrist, his first biographer, noted that some thought Blake's recollections of these remarkable encounters were inconsistent, and that he probably made them up. Almost everyone who knew him pointed out 'he could throw aside his visionary mood and his paradoxes when he liked.' The truth is probably that Blake believed the world 'in his head' (he would point to his craggy skull) was infinite in power and extent and that, beholding it, he possessed 'immortal longings' that could reach the edge of the universe and beyond. He could control it, too, and tap it for artistic purposes.

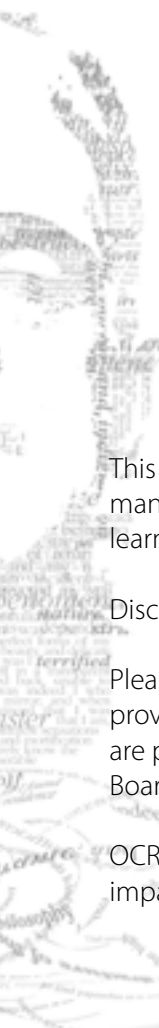
But so, he argued, could every other man and woman alive. What, after all, were the prophets of the Bible but gifted poets? As Blake asks the Prophet Isaiah in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: 'Doth a firm persuasion that a thing is so, make it so?' Isaiah answers: 'All poets believe that it does, and in ages of imagination the firm persuasion removed mountains.'

So Blake saw the sun-rise simultaneously with his bodily and his spiritual eye. He took the evidence of the first for granted, concentrating on the intensity of the second. He explains that in ideal conditions the two perceptions should harmonise:

'What it will be Questiond When the Sun rises do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea O no no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty. I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative eye any more than I would question a window concerning a sight. I look thro' it & not with it' (Vision of the Last Judgement).

One of the most attractive guides to Blake is the Catalogue of the 2001 Tate Gallery Blake Exhibition, eds. Robert Hamlyn, Michael Phillips, Peter Ackroyd and Marilyn Butler.

AO4 Social, religious and biographical contexts



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