

Learner Resource 2 Exploration of “Innocence” and “Experience”

Blake wrote *Songs of Innocence* in 1789. He wrote *Songs of Experience* in 1793, and subtitled the combined version *Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. The dictionary defines the adjective “contrary” as “opposed in nature or tendency or direction... the opposite of...”. Your task is to decide whether “innocence” **is** opposite to (the antonym of) “experience”.

In *Roget’s Twenty-first Century Thesaurus* (2013) the antonyms of “experience” are listed as:

Ignorance, heedlessness, neglect, peace, unfamiliarity, immaturity, inexperience.

Choose the one that you think comes closest to Blake’s “innocence” and match it to the one of the following definitions of “innocence” taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

1. Free from sin or guilt, morally pure, untouched by evil
2. Free from specific guilt, the fact of not being guilty of a charge, guiltlessness
3. Freedom from cunning or artifice, guilelessness, restlessness, simplicity, lack of suspicion
4. Lack of knowledge or sense, naïvity, state of being unaware or uninformed, lacking in worldly wisdom or informed judgement.

Now look at the following quote from *The Bible* (Genesis 2.16 – 3):

“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, of every tree in the garden thou mayst freely eat but of the tree of knowledge of good or evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die... And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her. And he did eat and the eyes of them both were open.”

Discuss how reading this extract from *The Bible* affects your understanding of Blake’s “innocence” and “experience”.

Study the statements below. You may choose your top three, or rank them as a class, negotiating the position of each statement in terms of which is most true of Blake’s use of these terms.

1. The innocence in Blake’s poems is associated with children and we should read them with a childish perspective.
2. The experience is the reality of the world, rather than a perfection that is prelapsarian (the biblical time before Adam and Eve lost their innocence in the Garden of Eden).
3. “The Innocence poems were the products of a mind unspoiled by stains of worldliness. Public events and private emotions soon converted innocence into experience.” (Keynes, OUP, Oxford, 1970, p. 12)
4. “The Experience poems satirise the state of the innocence.” Northrop Frye
5. Blake’s experience only exists after innocence as it shows what happens when we reach adulthood.
6. Blake’s experience exists alongside the innocence; it is a different perspective on the world.
7. Blake’s experience is the loss of childhood joy, replaced by fear and inhibition and corruption of the state and the church.
8. Blake’s innocence is only temporarily unaffected by the corrupt and restrictive world.

