

# REPRESENTATION OF THE THEN ENGLAND IN SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE BY WILLIAM BLAKE

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## ABSTRACT

In 1789, Blake published the Songs of Innocence. Later in 1794, he produced the collective version of Songs of Innocence and Experience. These days, the songs are frequently studied for their literary worth alone. However, they were produced as informative books hand-printed, colored, and engraved by Blake himself. The textual aspect of the poem and the illustration was created as an integrated whole, each adding meaning to the other. Used the highlights from the book Songs of Innocence and Experience in their original illustrated form and learn further through summaries and in-depth analyses of each poem. In this research paper, The researcher will explore how the narrator thinks that it is a scandal that a country as rich and prosperous as England neglected so many children living under extreme poverty. It is true that the first verse is rectified to a great extent with the help of the first one. It is a matter of fact that England cannot be termed as a rich country when there are such a huge number of poor children is living in this country. These children are sunless and never out of winter. Moreover, the second verse goes a few steps further saying that there cannot be other seasons as long as these children are hungry. Rain or sunshine are the cause of happiness but nobody has the right to enjoy such happiness when thousands of suffering from such happiness. The poem "Holy Thursday, Chimney Sweeper, The little black boy Lost and London" deals with the social problem. They actually symbolize the then society than in England. In this Article, the researcher studied the then England in Songs of Innocence and Experience by William Blake in detail.

Keywords: William Blake, Holy Thursday, suffering, misery

## INTRODUCTION

There is no better way of introducing the poetry of William Blake than the Songs of Innocence and Experience. Though the Songs of Innocence and Experience represents just a little part of his entire work or provide an adequate impression of his complete ability, they at least work as a good representation of his creativity and creative energy. In this context, Max Powmun rightly says that The Songs of Innocence has spontaneity in expressing different expression of childhood happiness and that is also the first time in this class of literature. The happiness of a child is the highest category of emotion in the whole world. Max Powmun further says that it vanishes with the first rays of the sun and its core quality is a thing "never to be recalled". This is the purity of a song that William Blake has communicated to the world in a vivid form. This is the "Divine Vision" that is central to all his beautiful works. Through a great creation, The Songs of Innocence and Experience, Blake sketched two clearly understandable states of mind. On the contrary, the unhappy world of Songs of Experience is a different state that is pushed in the mind of English antagonism to the French Revolution. According to Heulhen Glen, the Songs of Innocence and Experience assumes that Songs of Innocence and Experience is not a tentative collection. They depict transparency in the depth of thought that constitutes real simplicity. They foretaste all the holiest aspects of life and experience that are attributable to childhood only. They flourish with the most beautiful touches of the rustic life through which the golden age of life can be still visible [1].

"Holy Thursday I" is one of the remarkable poems that Blake wrote in this book called "Songs of Innocence" in the year 1789. In this poem, a ceremony called "Ascension Day" is mentioned. This is a traditional ceremony in England. Children come to a cathedral to celebrate the occasion. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyze with style this beautiful

creation of Blake “Holy Thursday” in terms of phonetic, grammatical, lexical, phonological, and graph local, and figures of speech. In the consequent poem, “Songs of Innocence”, Blake narrates finely how the poor children are treated in the English Society [2]. In this context, his view is more direct. He questions the holiness of the day that is meant to celebrate the existence of poverty. According to Blake, England is a rich and beautiful land but in this rich and beautiful land, thousands of children are living in misery. Though the poor children offer at the Holy Thursday spectacle, their country is a land of poverty. Blake says England is fated to be “bleak & bare” where the winter is eternal so long as the poverty prevails within her border. In contrast, points out that there is a land where “the sun does shine” because the children can never live with hunger forever nor poverty can persist forever [3].

Here, the version of “The Chimney Sweeper” is also not an exception. The “Innocence” version mentions an angel and the sweepers of chimney get to frisk in pasture and fly on clouds. Doesn’t it sound nice? Well, the lone chimney sweeper is destitute who is left alone in this vast world. His parents have left him long ago. They were praying in a church when his parent left him alone crying and feeling insecure. It was snowing outside. It is really pity and shameful event. One could see that through this description, Blake has finally criticized the society as a whole. Blake wants to say that not only kid’s parents abandoned the kid but also the entire society or the larger institutions like the church are also too reluctant to these kinds of the social scar. Apart from narrating these unnerving incidents that have been taking place in our very society, Blake’s poem works as a voice of the downtrodden, suffering, and poor children who in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century were not allowed to say much but who had been suffering for various reasons. This poem of Blake matches its namesake in “Songs of Innocence” [4].

Another poem of Blake “A Little Boy Lost” represents a child reflecting the inquisitive mind of the human. The boy in the poem searches for love and tries to understand the true shape of it. He makes out that love is primarily “selfish” and that no one can think anything beyond “himself”. The boy asks his father sincerely, “Father, how can I love you, /or any of my brothers more?” This clear and humble question or thirst for knowing the truth is taken as blasphemy by a priest. The older man catches the boy and every onlooker was delighted to see the incident. The priest standing upon the altar and holding the little boy up as a wrongdoer wants to show everyone how the people with “crooked” thought could be punished. The priest opines that the boy “sets reasons up for judge/of our most holy mystery” [5].

Blake sees London a miserable place full of crying and hungry infants, aggressive soldiers, poor chimney sweepers, and barefaced prostitutes. In the context, the prophetic voice of the poet returns to criticize the condition of the place like London that the rest of the world knows differently. The Bard sees the marks of weakness and the marks of woe everywhere. Blake, like Jonah or Amos, asks London to introspect and repent for all forms of wickedness; otherwise, Blake sees the severe damage to the culture and very existence of the city.

### Holy Thursday

There are four quatrains in the “Holy Thursday”. The first one is a heroic quatrain [ABAB] but the other three vary. There is a discord in the second stanza. It misses the rhyme [ABCD, though there may have an intended slant rhyme for “poverty” and “joy” in their spelling. The last two stanzas follow ABCB model. It seems that the poet has made this irregularity willingly. The decay of the city, the oppression of some sections of the society, and the way the poor children are treated become clear to the readers. There were two contrasting readings related to the “Holy Thursday” of Innocence. This version is blunt. It can only be read as one of the toughest forms of criticism of the religious pretense that was quite rampant across the religious institutions at the time of Blake. The bard has used the term “eternal winter” to mention the anguish of the poor children. These poor children lack the sun and rain, both of which are sources of life and happiness. Thus, the poor children are doomed to this unnatural condition by the machinations of a system that remembers the children just to rationalize their own rectitude.

In “Songs of Innocence”, this is different conduct of the thanksgiving service by the charity school children. The bard uses the first two stanzas to ask questions with implied answers. The joyful flow of children marching into the cathedral has been

swapped with the question, 'Is this a holy thing to see, in a rich and fruitful land, Babes reduced to misery? /Fed with the cold and usurous hand?'

It has a clear implication. A country with loads of wealth wants to ignore the real needs of its children. Though the term "charity" exists it lacks love and care. "Usury" is the source of the word "usurious". This word means the practice of lending money at unfair rates of interest. The indication in this context is that there are people who give this charity expecting more and more obedience and gratitude from the children. The use of the term "hand" is metonymy here signifying not just the guardians but the whole city and even the whole nation that shows generosity. That this is not "holy" does not signify that it goes against the command of Christ "to love one another as I have loved you" and the dictum that says "whatever you do to these, the least of my brothers, you do it to me". The church had forbidden the practice of usury very strictly. The avid readers of the bard may be aware of all these connotations and are capable of drawing the anticipated conclusion [6].

The children are not raising their voices with joy and elation. Instead, the reader is asked whether that "trembling cry" is a "song"? The stanza goes like these –

Can it be a song of joy?

And so many children poor

Here again, the answer is known to the readers. Is it really possible to sing songs of praise when there is so much poverty? Is it really possible to be joyful for the children when they are hungry? The stark conclusion is that this is the land of poverty. However, stanza 1 contradicts this assumption. This stanza says, ".....a rich and fruitful land". The poverty that the poet narrates here is spiritual poverty that is introduced by the lack of thoughts. When thousands of citizens were enjoying an affluent lifestyle, the poor were in a desperate situation. Blake describes this from their perspectives in the following way:

'And their sun does never shine.

And their fields are bleak and

bare. And their ways are filled with

thorns. It is eternal winter there.

It clearly describes a condition where the same people who should have taken care of this helpless and hungry children have been thrown to that dark world. The extremity of their misery is depicted by throbbing repetition at the start of each line. The term "thorns" that these children are sacrificial victims of the situation just like Jesus at the crucifixion. Accordingly, it depicts the short-sightedness of those with sufficient wealth and power who fail to arrange anything for the future citizens of the country. This has been made clear in the final stanza where the imagination of the poet goes in another direction:

'For where-ever the sun does

shine and where-ever the rain does fall

Babe can never hunger there,

Nor poverty the mind appall."

Sunrays and rain are symbols of life and happiness. These are also connected with the spiritual life of people and connection with the Almighty. Children should never be kept hungry or live in poverty.

The “Holy Tuesday” poems [two parts] depict that Blake was a social reformer. Through our creations, he is showing the world the agony of the poor whom the world sees with sympathy only and people who do the charities expect gratitude and praise. The poet also depicts the wide gap between the poor and the rich in his society [7].

### The Chimney Sweeper

When a structural comparison is made with the companion piece taken from the Songs of Innocence, it seems that just half of its counterpart. In many places, the lines are smaller by one or two syllables. The voice of the chimney sweeper resembles the voice of Innocence. However, he hardly has any time to answer the questions; hence, the lines are shorter. This poem takes the form of AABB rhyme which is the feature of childhood and innocence. As it delves deeper and brings forth different aspects of the life of the chimney sweeper, it takes CDCD and EFEF forms in the last two stanzas. Just to sketch the increasing agony in the life of the chimney sweeper, the final stanza has only a near rhyme between “injury” and “misery” in line 10 and line 12 respectively.

The entire social system and even God conspires to develop its own vision of paradise upon the labors of poor children pushing them to extreme agony. In his two “Holy Thursday” poems, the poet chastises the king or the government and the religious leaders or the representatives of God [priests]. The poet decries the use of innocent poor children to bolster the conscience of adults. The application of the phrase “make up a heaven” bears a double meaning – one way it talks about creating heaven, on the other hand, it casts a disparagement in the direction of the king and the priest. Another somber poem, in fact much more somber with the same title in the Songs of Innocence, where the little chimney sweeper could break out through the power of imagination. The poem shows the parents of the little sweeper are jealous of his freedom and cheerfulness. The poem starts in the following way:

“A little black thing among the snow:

Crying weep, weep, in notes of woe”

The disparity between the black sooty figure of the child and the white snow creates both conventional dead metaphors about good and evil. It is clear that the poet does not want to show the child as a reflection of evil but what he has experienced or happened to his life as the real evil. The poet sees the conspiracy of the adult world behind this dreadful situation of the child. This is clearly depicted through the poet’s expression in the stanza “weep, weep” that describes the professional anguish of the child who needs money, so he wants to be hired. It also shows the misery of the condition as these are the “notes of woe”. When the watchers ask, “Where are the father and mother say?” The little sweep becomes a narrator. Through the description of the little sweep, the poet reveals his own anger. The poor child tells that both of his parents went to the church to pray. Through this depiction, the poet shows the pretense of the adults in this religious observance when their children tolerate extreme agony [8].

On the other hand, the second stanza shows the in-built jealousy in the adults who cannot see the innocent, imaginary world of children. The second stanza goes as follows:

‘Because I was happy upon the

Heath, and smiled among the

Winters snow:

They clothed me in the clothes of death,

And taught me to sing the notes of woe.”

It is the innocence of the child and his happiness in his own imaginary world that makes the parents jealous. Thus, the parents cut short his childhood and throw him in the world full of challenge and agony. The poet has used the phrase “clothes of death” to narrate the harshness of the occupation and the world where the child needs to stay for a time unknown. Unlike in the poem bearing the same name in the Songs of Innocence, the “angel with bright key” is not present here. However, the poet hints that there a part of this world remains with the child:

“And because I am happy, &

Dance & sing, they think they

have done me no injury”

It is not possible that the parents don't know the type of life their son has been leading. The idea is that the adults are colluding with the state and the church:

‘And are gone to praise God &

his Priest & King Who make up

a heaven of our misery’

The final line is the recollection of “Clod and Pebble” where the envious love “builds a hell in heaven despite”. The poet accuses the parents, the king, and the priest making the world a hell to the children instead of making their life beautiful and happy. Blake narrates the sorry state of the society in a simple and subtle way.

#### The Little Boy Lost

There are six gallant quatrains in the poem “A Little Boy Lost”. The first stanza is like a prologue that depicts the nature of love. It is more like a meditation that consists of “Self” and “Thoughts”. The second stanza continues this meditation but includes “Father” that gives the stanza a form of prayer. The speaker is a child who is eventually overheard by a priest. The priest disapproves the boy's prayer and tells the harrowing story of the boy's punishment in the hands of an unkind, narrow-minded clergyman [9].

In England of Blake's time, there was no incident of burning alive of a blasphemous boy took place but the poet witnessed the extreme pain of punishment that the innocent people experienced in the hands of powerful religious leaders. The bard questions the very basis of religious faiths that denounce human reasons as not sufficient to understand spiritual truth. In several of his poems, apart from the current one, like “The Little Vagabond”, “The Garden of Love”, and “The Human Abstract” the poet raises the same question. The little boy imagines through his beliefs but never asks his unending questions to the unknown heavenly father. The boy addresses God with various questions. He does not seek answers from the religious authorities. This shows that the poet wanted to relate to God outside the traditional confines of the psychologically exploitive religious institutions of his time.

In various aspects, this poem is different in tone from “The Little Boy Lost” and “The Little Boy Found”. The introduction of the poem seems to have got inspiration from the words of Jesus. When Jesus was asked, what was the greatest commandment? Jesus said, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your entire mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. [Gospel of Matthew]”

The child in the poem insists,

‘Nought loves another as itself

nor venerates another so,

Nor is it possible to Thought A

greater than itself to know'

This stanza shows that on one aspect self-love is the most fundamental feeling and on the other aspect, it depicts the impossibility of the human mind to recognize anything away from its own level of thought. However, a different level of interpretation comes out if it is read with the second stanza. The second stanza reads as follows:

'And Father, how can I love

you, Or any of my brothers more?

I love you like the little bird

That picks up crumbs around the door.'

This suggests that the child loves everything around him right from himself and the family to the birds roaming around. In this context, the word "father" and "brother" can be attributed to religious meanings as well. In the Church, priests are abbreviated as "father" and all people can be seen as "brothers". These meanings are linked with the mentions to commandments at the beginning of the poem. However, according to the priest, the child's words are wrong versions of faith. "In trembling zeal, he seized his hair: he led him by his little coat". It is not a depiction of "love". In fact, this is an extreme example of repression of thought by the religious institution. This word "zeal" which has the fervor is contrasted with the image of the child's hair. The poet continues with the description of violence in the next three stanzas also. In this context, it is noticeable that in the world of experience, the actions of the priest are widely accepted and the parents had no power to prevent the action of the priest. In the fourth stanza, it is found that the priest denouncing the child from the high altar of his church. Readers and admirers of Blake may not have any difficulty in understanding the contrasting nature of the indictments with the guiltless and sincere views of the child. Urizen rules with reason. He is the jealous and oppressive God of the old treatment. The ruling elites prefer to maintain mystery in order to keep power. They like to keep people in the dark. There is no plea and,

"The weeping child could not

be heard, the weeping parents

wept in vain"

The innocent but clear voice is silenced forever. He was chained and burned at the stake, as many have been before him [10].

Blake uses contrast in the poem in different ways. His intention is not just showing the hypocrisy of the religious leaders but also to show the gap in power and the helplessness of people at large. The poet does this by using the words like "weeping", "his little shirt", and "his little coat". Blake shows the obliteration of free and guiltless thoughts by the forces of understanding. The poet ends the poem that is detached in the meaning of asking the readers a question, "Are such things done on Albion's shore." The lack of question mark again makes the answer clear. Albion was the ancient name of England.

London

In the first three stanzas "London" follows ABAB rhyme schemes with little deviation from iambic tetrameter. Just "Mind-for'd" manacles, and the other terms "how" and "blasts" are stressed irregularly in 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> lines. The term "Mind-for'd" is further stressed to make it more contrasting with the preceding three lines. Each of these three lines begins with "In every" to generate

a litany of cries throughout London. The lines 14 and line 15 provide irregular stress to the two words in order to perturb the reader that continues up to line 16.

The poet articulates his disparagement for the urban slouch in the post-industrial era of London in harsh tones whereas his praise for nature and innocence are always very pleasurable. According to the poet, in the urban space, the people are tightly packed in the man-made structures that bring one evil after another ending with the “Harlot’s Curse” that harms all types of people. It is like a system that is created to obliterate all that is favorable for the progress of humankind. This is a theme that Blake used in several of his works later. The readers are warned of staying or visiting London. The poet advises taking shelter in rural settings instead. The assessment of Blake not only aims the society or the social system of the world but goes beyond that. The third stanza directly addresses the oppression of one group of people with more power over the weaker section of the society. In many parts of the poem, the bard talks about the self-oppression of common people. One opinion suggests that the Harlot as mentioned in the last stanza is nature herself. Here, Harlot is proclaimed as a patriarchal, narrow-minded, religious system. In this particular interpretation, marriage coach is turned into a hearse by nature that becomes applicable for all marriage. It is assumed that marriage delimits a human institution that ends love. One of the best poems in the collection of poems, the poet wandering the streets aimlessly and he sees nothing melancholic:

‘I wander through’ each charter’d  
Street,  
Near where the chartered  
The Thames does flow’

In this context, the word “Chartered” means granting of rights to land or giving temporary rights through rents. Here, the implication of “chartered” from the poet’s perspective is that most part of London is actually owned by a small number of affluent people or corporations. It has another connotation that means mapping out with its hints of clearly defining the limits. There is also another meaning associated with “charter” when the term “charter of rights” is used. It sets aside poor and destitute of the society. As the poet wanders, he experiences other aspects of life as also,

‘And mark in every face  
I meet Marks of weakness, marks of woe.’

Here, the application of the word “mark” means “noticing something”. The poet notices signs of sorrow [weakness and woe]. The weakness in this context can be physical or psychological or both. It is combined with “woe” that show a condition of sadness and encumbrance in citizens. The repetitions emphasize the seriousness of such “marks” that are visible. The poet then records his impressions in the following way:

“In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infant’s cry of fear, In  
every voice; in every ban,  
The mind-forged manacles I hear”.

This is the central theme of the complete poem and also the innermost idea of the songs of experience. The manacles are cuffs or handcuffs or chains with which the prisoners or prisoners are bound to prevent them from escaping. There is a comment of Rousseau that says, “Man was born free and everywhere he is in chains”. The condition of the poor people in London is just like chained slaves or prisoners. The portrayal of the manacles as ‘mind-forged’ refers just not the way in which the deprived people

are oppressed by the state but also by the way in which they are forced to think in the way the church wants them to. It is also pinpointing of the way in which the people comply with the state of affairs, instead of going against power. This nature of common people, especially the deprived section of our society is suggested by the repetition of the word “every” while the other two words “infant” and “man” make it clear that people of all age groups are facing oppression in different ways. The author has also used the phrase “in every ban” to give a clear image of the repressive nature of the society in which the poor people of all age group leads their daily life.

In the subsequent stanza, the terms like “Chimney-sweepers cry” and the “hapless soldiers sigh” the sense of hearing is continued. The sweepers here represents the enslaved and abused children of the society whose conditions are so bad that Blake used the adjective “blackening” to describe the appearance of the child. The soldiers are “hapless” as they cannot control what actually happens to them. The word is connected with “hopeless” whereby it can be interpreted that once they are enlisted there remains almost no hope of becoming free. Once the soldiers accepted the “King’s shilling” which marked the reward for joining in the battalion they become protectors of the citizens. However, the reality was different. The soldiers were used as “cannon fodders” in the wars with foreign countries or were used to hold back the common people at home.

The term “sigh” is suggestive in this context. It is a symbol of sadness. It is anticipated as the blood running down the walls of the palace that is the residence of the supreme power – the king who sent them to fight battles.

Even these dreadful sounds are not the worst ones. The poet continues,

“But most thro midnight streets I hear

How the youthful Hralots curse

Blasts the new-born Infants

Tear

And blights with plagues the

Marriage hearse”

In Blake’s period, prostitution was rife in London. It spread different diseases. Even Children were thrown into this profession taking advantage of their poverty and hunger. In the absence of any protection, young girls feel prey to different diseases and died or died due to unscientific abortions. In some cases, where the young girls gave birth to babies, the babies also inherited sexually transmitted diseases. The curse takes intensive physical shapes. The poet elaborates further saying the disease “blasts the new-born infant's tear”. The poet also used the term “blights with plagues the Marriage hearse”. The poet uses different words like “blast”, “blight”, and “plague” have links with “destruction” in some way or the other. The term “Marriage hearse” is an oxymoron but it has a different connotation for Blake who thinks marriage is legal prostitution where a woman has no say or nobody asks her permission. Later, the same woman becomes a slave in the hands of her husband. There also remains a chance of getting diseases transmitted to the woman if the husband is a regular visitor of brothels.

It is also indicative of the way in which the people acquiesce in this state of affairs, instead of rebelling against their oppressors.

## Conclusion

This paper takes into account some popular poems of Blake where the conditions of the poor and deprived children are sketched elaborately. These poems as discussed in this paper make it clear that Blake has thoroughly understood the world of oppression where the state and the church are twin satanic mills of coercion, cruelty, and materialism. The parents who gifted their children books containing the poems and stories on poverty and oppression get knowledge of the evils, slave trade, and poverty of ancient England.



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