

*Songs of Innocence and Experience -*  
**A Trans-historical Humanitarian Discourse**

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) **ISSN 1930-2940** Vol. 13:7 July 2013

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William Blake

Courtesy: [www.blakearchive.org](http://www.blakearchive.org)

“To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour”

(William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, 1-4)

**Part of English Romanticism**

William Blake (1757-1827), the foremost controversial figure of English Romanticism, has attracted the attention of the Easterners recurrently because of his recourse to mysticism, which is generally considered to be the legacy of the East. It would not be an exaggeration to say that if he would have been born in the East, he would have been considered and venerated as an illuminated genius, for the Easterners hold and share the same cosmic view as he held.

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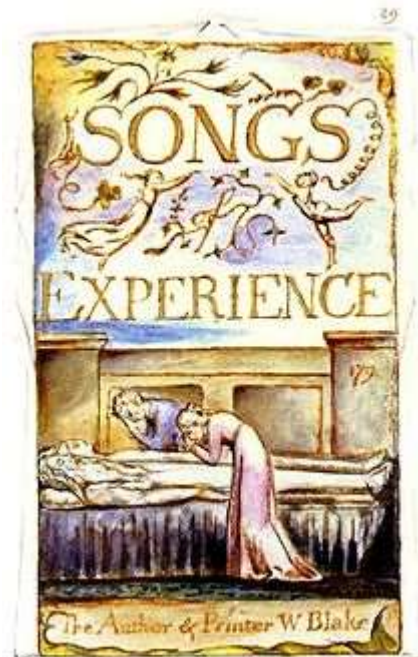
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## Comprehending the Mysteries of the Mysterious Creator

William Blake was not a namesake visionary but vision for him is the key to comprehend the mysteries of the mysterious creator. He had the belief that he could easily and coherently see what he imagined. His entire creative aura is an attempt to develop this faculty of vision. He longed for the harmonious unity between good and evil, but this shouldn't be viewed as something devilish, rather he wished that what is generally believed to be evil by the social, political and religious bodies as evil is just a hypothetical construct and not something really destructive that needs to be suppressed and controlled. He believed that good and evil are both aspects of the real truth. He considered 'experience/knowledge' responsible for the primal fall and the current crisis in the religio-political sphere too the result of this over emphasis of rationality. Natural instincts, emotions and innocence like essential ingredients that constitute the true identity marks of human beings, Black aspires that these be given a free hand. These should neither be suppressed due to the fear of Church, nor should be surrendered in the lawn of nation state. Rather he holds the view that both religion and state ought to acknowledge the dignity and integrity of human being. These should allow the human beings to liberate their creative potential and divine energy.

### A Romantic Intellect



Courtesy: [www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org)

Blake was a hyper-sensitive soul and a romantic intellect. He was dissatisfied with the contemporary structures which had lost their real essence, owing to the negative impact of Enlightenment rationality of Voltaire, Rousseau and others. He even made them a butt of ridicule when he says:

Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau:  
Mock on, Mock on, 'tis all in vain!

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You throw the sand against the wind,  
And the wind blows it back again.  
(William Blake, Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau)

### **Prophetic and Humanitarian – Fine Thin Line**

Blake's poetic aura is undoubtedly prophetic and humanitarian, for there is too much emotional content and a mysterious perception that sounds idyllic. Instead of being a victim of traditional pessimism and the contemporary illusory optimism, Blake's poetry is reflectively creative, that echoes an intellectual code of response to the age of transition. While rejecting to bow down wholly before the unholy belief that holds a firm conviction in the infinite potentialities of man, to enlighten the people of his milieu, he offers enormous tones to acknowledge the drawbacks, in advance, of man-centred society that was replacing a God-centred society. What is however astonishing of his poetic carrier, is the underlying essence of his thought provoking ideas. Neither he favours the staunch and frigid teachings of the Church, nor does he appear to be too much enthusiastic champion of the age of rationality. This gets amply clear when he says, "Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion". (William Blake, Wickiquotes)

Blake sounds extremely humanitarian, as he acknowledges the pitfalls of prioritising and respects the possible potentialities and responsibilities of human beings. Apart from paying respects to the vital values of *being human*, consciously as a poet, he displays contradictory views but with an implicit touch of morality. He wished vociferously that man must play creatively in the different walks of life, without being absurdly subject to the norms of traditional theology, priestly doctrines, violent ideologies like bogus nationalist perceptions, spurious materialism and age of apparatuses.

### **A Demystified Version of Blake's World – Not a Lunatic View**

Blake was both poet and artist, and it is a fallacy to consider his ideas as lunatic ranting, for he strives for union of matter and spirit. Blake's *Songs* explores both the contours of the demystified version of Blake's world. He equally recognizes and valorises both the realms. In other words, he tried to harmonise the contraries of the world, which for him is the prime function of a poet. Though this paradoxical vision achieved him a lunatic label by the contemporaries, yet it on the intellectual scrutiny reveals a world that is torn between the materialistic assumptions and spiritual goals and a sound poetic mind that conceives a harmonious idea of a blissful world. The contrasting nature of the collections reveals an interior as well as an exterior tension that existed because of the rift of receiving the ideas of modernity and morality differently.

### **Furthering the Cause of Pity, Peace and Love**

Through the conduit of his poetry Blake championed an ideal form of human existence, cutting across all the superficial differences that had resulted in dehumanizing the society. He found his society devoid of pity, peace and love. The rationale spirit had removed the human carpet from beneath the human consciousness and encrusted it with a Faustian and Machiavellian

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spirit that had left God/Man binary in topsy-turvy. Machiavelli had gone to the extent of saying in his famous text *The Prince* that “the ruler can advance the interests of his state and maintain his power by any means without bothering about its morality. . . a prince can lie, cheat, steal, do cruelty, assassinate or wage war.”

### **Symbolism via Tropes**

The various tropes that Blake employed in his works, symbolize innocence and simultaneously the world of experience which is often shown as a dark forest. The multiple tropes that he employed in his poems are accredited with contrary qualities that it seems that they are having a dialogue with each other. If at one place, they symbolize positivity, at other they typify negativity.

### **Accurate Photographic Representation**

Moreover, it would be unsound on the part of the reader to read the two collections in isolation, for the better understanding seems to be possible following the Historicism school of thought where race, milieu and moment are taken into consideration. The collection can be considered an accurate photographic representation of the times when England was in a transition (feudal—industrial set-up), and Blake being a mystic tried to have a balanced view, as he knew that without contraries there is no progression possible.

Moreover, the way Blake arranged the *Songs* seem to imply that Hegel’s ‘dialectic model’ has influenced Blake too much. The arrangement of themes, support an interpretation which treat both *Songs* as contrasting elements of a single discourse, which is dialogic with the overall superstructures of those times as well. “Although the two “states” are “contrary” the former characterized by resilient purity, the latter by irreversible bitterness, they interact with one another to produce syntheses in turn beginning a new dialectic. Growth emerging from “strife” generates direction, negating any notion of stagnancy within either contrary (online). Most poems in *Innocence* have their dialectic opposites in *Experience*. Thus the meek lamb of ‘The Lamb’ is having its dialectical opposite, the ferocious tiger of ‘The Tyger’.

### **Satire in *Experience***

Blake in *Experience* satirises the material and spiritual institutions which have snatched the innocence of children on hypothetical pretexts. The third stanza of ‘London’ attacks the Church which, while preaching charity, employs children as young as four as chimney-sweepers. These whisky priests feed these babes only enough to keep them alive and then, on Holy Thursday, regiment them to Church. This shows an ambivalent spirit of the masses actually, whose vision was hypnotized by the glittering façade of the growing industrialism.

Blake is not deterrent to progress, but knows that fairest joys should not be cursed. It was all eventually in this wake he remarks “It is better to murder an infant in the cradle than to nurse an unacted desire” (William Blake, Wickiquotes). It is good omen, however, that on human issues, such as slavery and child labour, Blake found a good audience. Blake is praised for his

works, especially for displaying such humanely concerns. Few in literary arena have equalled his imaginative power.

### **Didactic in Function**

Blake's poetry and paintings are undoubtedly didactic. His views on politics, religion, literature and science were overtly revolutionary. His *Songs* created through a new process called illuminated printing are examples of originality and strong individualism. He believed that a perfect state of happiness is possible through imagination and intuition. He despised tyranny of every sort. Blake's writings were viewed as potentially dangerous in a time when the established order in England had witnessed the violent destruction across the channel. Blake himself was influenced by a 'wave of freedom' that had swept across France, America and England, but the disillusionment that it brought afterwards coaxed Blake to compose 'London' wherein he charges licentious Parliament with spreading the wretchedness of the human condition.

### **A Complete Artist**

It is essential to remind here that Blake was a complete artist and his writings need to be interpreted alongside his engravings. He became an engraver at a time when that art was losing its popularity and appeal. The misspelling of tiger as Tyger may symbolize the disorder in the social ethos of those times and an intentional act on part of the writer, besides the basic fact that 'Y' fitted the portrait of tiger that Blake prepared to complement the message of poem "The Tyger". In his anti-slavery poem 'The Little Black Boy', two naked children, one black, the other white, are pictured standing before Jesus to exemplify that both are same and innocent. This is an overt attack, to those forces who treat people on the basis of their skin colour, creed and sex, etc.

The tonal quality of the *Songs* is such that it creates an atmosphere, the humanistic smell of which transcends the historical epoch as well. It is equally having appeal for the postmodern denizens, who are living in an age that is witnessing a severe clash of ideologies. Blake seems to have envisaged the future and the role of poet across time constraint too. The *Songs* are an organic whole. It becomes evident that for proper understanding the reading of both pieces becomes mandatory, otherwise they will lose their real essence.

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