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The Roles of Parents and the Divinity in William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*: The Impact of Earthly and Heavenly Power

My first exposure to Blake was in my first year of university in Dr. McIntyre’s English 122 course. Since then, my fascination with Blake’s work – or more specifically, with *Songs of Innocence and Experience* – has only grown, influencing me in every course I have taken, every paper I have written, and every work I have read. Throughout the past three years of my degree, I have questioned: why is *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is such a fascinating work? My realization is that though this collected work of poems may seem simple, with nursery rhyme rhythms and a focus on child life, it is actually a complex and allusive work. Moreover, through these poems Blake makes provoking socio-political statements reflective of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is why I originally fell in love with *Songs of Innocence and Experience* – there is more there than meets the eye.

Though I am personally fascinated with Blake’s work, he was not as popular amongst literary critics until around the late 1940’s. After Northrop Frye’s publication of *Fearful Symmetry* in 1947, critics started to pay as much attention to Blake as to other great romantic writers like Wordsworth, Byron, or Coleridge. From this point on, critics have researched and studied Blake’s work through many different frameworks and in many different contexts. Many critics such as Thomas E. Connolly, Christine Gallant,
Susan Matthews, and Paul Minor have all focused on the unique aspects of image and design in Blake’s work. Some critics, such as J.G. Gallant, Christopher Rowland, and Donald M. Smith have studied theology throughout Blake’s work. Furthermore, critics like Erin M. Goss and June Sturrock have even focused on the roles of gender and the body in Blake. However, despite all of these different critical approaches to Blake, I have yet to find an article that focuses specifically on the authority and power in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. My thesis will contribute to Blake scholarship with a critical approach that focuses on the parental and divine power in Blake’s *Songs*.

Throughout *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, the primary focus is placed on the children in the poems. Blake depicts aspects of the children’s lives that place them in either a state of innocence or a state of experience. My interest, however, is how they get there and who is influencing them. I will examine the roles of parental, earthly power – mother and father – and the roles of heavenly power – the divinity – over the children in the poems. My focus will be how these different roles of authority affect the children’s transition from one state to another. My hypothesis is that the transition from innocence to experience can only occur when the child calls the power of both the parents and the divinity into question.

In my first chapter, I will examine the earthly role of the mother and father in both sets of poems. How are the mother and father portrayed and why does Blake choose to represent the parents the way that he does? To answer these questions I will examine, through close readings, four poems from *Songs of Innocence* and four poems from *Songs of Experience*. In looking at contrasting poems from each state I will analyze how the portrayal of parental power changes and how it contributes to the transition between the
states. For example, in “The Little Black Boy” the child says, “My mother taught me
underneath a tree/ . . . She took me on her lap and kissed me” (Blake 9.5-7). In this poem
the mother teaches and nurtures her child and provides her child with physical affection.
However, in “Infant Sorrow” the child says “My mother groand! my father wept/ . . .
Struggling in my fathers hands:/ Striving against my swaddling bands” (Blake 48.1/5-6).
In contrast to the first poem, these parents are restricting their child in “swaddling bands”
and creating discomfort for the child. Furthermore, the ambiguity of “my father wept” is
suggestive of the questionable parental authority that is at work throughout the Songs.

In my second chapter, I will be contrasting the role of the parents to the role of the
divinity. Does parental power affect the children in the poems differently than divine
power – and if so, how? In this chapter I will also do close readings of four poems from
Songs of Innocence and four poems from Songs of Experience. These poems will allow
me to look more closely at the role of God and what type of authority he has over the
children. For example, in “The Little Black Boy” the child says, “Look on the rising sun:
there God does live/ And gives his light . . . and men receive/ Comfort in morning joy”
(Blake 9.9-12). In this poem, the divine is depicted as comforting and protecting. In
Songs of Experience, however, “The Little Chimney Sweeper” showcases a conflict
between the parents and the divinity: “Where are thy father & mother? say?/ They are
both gone up to the church to pray . . . to praise God & his Priest & King/ Who make up a
heaven of our misery” (Blake 37.3-4/11-12). The ambiguity of the last line, again,
reflects on the way that the children in these poems respond to different types of

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1 In my in text citations I will be providing both the page numbers and the line numbers
when referencing from Songs of Innocence and Experience.
2 When referring to God in his work, Blake spells “he” with a lowercase “h.”
authority. The contrast made between these two poems is an example of the close readings that I will conduct to further my understanding of the parental and divine power over the children.

Blake has received renewed attention, as the scholarship on his work has increased profoundly over the past seventy-five years, and continues to do so. My goal is to contribute to this scholarship on *Songs of Innocence and Experience* through close readings of specific poems to explore the different types of parental authority that Blake asserts in this work. Throughout the past three years I have been fascinated with the overlap that Blake creates between the innocent and experienced states. Therefore, one of my primary interests in research is figuring out how the transition from one state to another occurs – and I believe that this transition cannot be made without the roles of both earthly and heavenly power being called into question by the child. Up to this point, Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* has impacted my entire degree; therefore, I plan to spend my last year exploring how Blake’s states intertwine and coexist by focusing on a specific aspect of his poems: the power of parents and the divinity.
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