

One of the strongest features in Blake's philosophy was his belief in imagination as an active creative force. He attacked rationalism, authoritarianism, industrialization, and organized religion as destructive of creative and spiritual energies.

Songs of Innocence and Experience (1794) is a relatively early work: ***Innocence*** was first published in 1789; ***Experience***, in 1794. The years between these two dates saw the most bloody acts of the French Revolution.

Songs of Innocence These poems are mostly joyful and sweet lyrics creating images of childhood in a happy natural setting. The titles "Laughing Song" and "Infant Joy" illustrate the tone; the children are angelic and are compared with lambs. In a few of these Songs, however, Blake suggests that the innocent child is caught in an exploitative and harsh world that is beyond his or her understanding. One example is "The Chimney Sweeper".

Songs of Experience In *Songs of Experience*, Blake takes a darker, sadder tone. These lyrics depict a world of sickness and tyranny. Many of the *Songs of Experience* correspond to specific *Songs of Innocence*; some even share the same title.

Two of Blake's most famous lyrics, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" are from these two groups of Songs. In the first poem, "The Lamb" the innocent child speaks to the lamb, his counterpart, and says that they are both the creations of God. In the second poem, the speaker raises questions about the nature of the creator; in fact, the poem consists entirely of a series of questions. The tiger's beauty or "symmetry" is fearful. It suggests a creator who is powerful and daring; the image is of a blacksmith working upon metal with fire and hammer. The crucial question "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" links the two poems and suggests the range or contrary powers of the creator.

Social Evils Blake also addresses the evils of society in *Songs of Experience*. In the poem "London" the speaker, walking through the city streets, sees people full of grief and fear, restrained by "mind-forged manacles," the bonds of modern society. In the third stanza, the child as chimney sweeper and the man as soldier are both abused by the powers of church and state. The final stanza presents the young girl as a prostitute, corrupted by a society that she, in turn, corrupts with disease.

Innocence/Experience Blake does not identify himself wholly with either view; most of the poems are dramatic--that is, in the voice of a speaker other than the poet himself. Blake stands outside innocence and experience, in a distanced position. Experience adds a layer to innocence that darkens its hopeful vision while compensating for some of its blindness.

The style of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is simple and direct, but the language and the rhythms are carefully crafted, and the ideas they explore are often deceptively complex. Many of the poems are narrative in style; others, like "The Sick Rose" make their arguments through symbolism or by means of abstract concepts. Some of Blake's favorite techniques are personification and the reworking of Biblical symbolism and language. Blake frequently uses the familiar meters of ballads, nursery rhymes, and hymns, applying them to his own, often unorthodox conceptions. This combination of the traditional with the unfamiliar fits Blake's interest in reconsidering and reframing the assumptions of human thought and social behavior.