

William Blake's Depiction of Reality

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In William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, poems are paired with another, for example, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger," the two "Holy Thursday" poems, and "Infant Joy" and "Infant Sorrow." The purpose of creating complementary poems in this way is to fully represent the world and its inhabitants. By placing the poems one after another, Blake juxtaposes good against evil and shows that there exists a balance in life between joy and hardship.

Blake's poem "Infant Joy" is obviously about the happiness that a newborn child brings to the world; however, "Infant Sorrow" demonstrates the pain and grief a newborn can entail. Without the other poem, each by itself would unjustly show either a pure and idyllic world or a world of pain and distress. "Infant Joy" is a conversation between a baby and its parent involving each one's point of view. The structure of the poem is reminiscent of a nursery rhyme, which gives the reader a sense of lightness and delight. The diction of the baby, "I happy am, / Joy is my name," and the repetition exemplify the enthusiasm and happiness of childhood. However, without the second poem, "Infant Sorrow," the first seems facile and unrepresentative. The next poem details the suffering and distress of a newborn's parents, but from the baby's perspective. The screaming baby is a prisoner and a fiend ("Struggling in my father's hands / Striving against my swaddling bands") who is already at odds with the world. Through both these poems Blake shows the dichotomy of childhood and thereby captures the true essence of infancy. Newborns are in reality neither all joy nor all sorrow.

The different "Holy Thursday" poems show opposite views of how English society treats its orphans, specifically in London. The first paints a picture that equates the children with little "angels" who are wonderfully taken care of by the Church. They are walking on Holy Thursday to St. Paul's Cathedral, "... they like Thames' waters flow." By

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comparing the children to lambs, flowers, and angels, Blake reinforces his point that all the orphans are innocent and joyous. Blake stresses that they are happy and blissfully singing—“[T]hey raise to heaven the voice of song” —because they are well looked after by the Church: “Beneath them sit the aged men, wise guardians of the poor.” But he then argues against this sanguine view of English society with the next “Holy Thursday” poem. He uses the technique of short rhetorical questions to show how ashamed people should be of the way society treats orphans and the horrible conditions they are made to endure. He expresses outrage and disappointment because even in such a “rich and fruitful land” babes can be reduced to misery. Each poem shows opposite ends of the spectrum. One tells the reader of a joyful scene of nurtured orphans and the other condemns a supposedly Christian society for its lack of benevolence. Blake needs both to correctly depict the reality of the time and the situation the children are in.

Lastly, Blake pairs “The Lamb” with “The Tyger.” These two poems represent opposing forces: good and evil. “The Lamb” is written from a child’s point of view and begins by asking about the lamb’s origin. The question, “Little Lamb, who made thee?” is answered in the second stanza: by he who “calls himself a Lamb.” The structure of the poem, the question and answer, and the fact that a child is the speaker exemplifies the naïveté and gentleness of the lamb itself and what the lamb represents, Jesus. The second stanza characterizes the creator, Jesus, as meek and mild. Both the lamb and Jesus symbolize all that is good and peaceful in the world and the idea that God must be compassionate to create such a wondrous thing. However, the next poem, “The Tyger,” exemplifies the opposite of the lamb. The tiger is representative of the violence and malice that exist in the world. The structure of this poem is similar to “The Lamb”; it poses the question, how could God create such a beautiful yet monstrous being as a tiger? Blake equates God to a blacksmith: “What the hammer? What the chain? / In what furnace was thy brain?” The entire poem consists of questions, all asking, “What immortal hand or eye / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?” or, in other words, what kind of God could allow such evil and violence in the world? Both “The Lamb” and “The Tyger” interrogate the creator of such creatures, and when the poems are put together, the question is

how God can create something so innocent and gentle and then something so cunning and fierce. The lamb and the tiger represent the good and evil in the world, and if either poem had to stand alone, it could not fairly convey reality.

William Blake was clever to write complementary poems; they show the dichotomy in two opposing views of reality. In these three particular pairings, Blake demonstrates that the world is not one-sided. Life is neither completely awful nor wonderful; people are both caring and selfish; and God created both good and evil. Blake's poems can seem simple and childlike on the surface, but each pairing exposes the world as it truly is. ●

