

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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William Blake (1757-1827) *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (B, 1406-1441)

William Blake was born in 1757 to a London tradesman. Blake's only formal education was in art; he taught himself to read, write, and to write poetry. At twenty four, he married Catherine Boucher, who was, at the time, illiterate, but whom he taught to be his assistant. Blake earned a living producing engravings, setting type, and giving drawing/engraving lessons.

Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1794) are poems accompanied by engravings. They are meant to represent what Blake refers to as "two contrary states of the human soul." (1407).

Question: What does Blake mean by Innocence and Experience?

For Blake, who developed an elaborate poetic mythology to frame his poetic visions, the same single fallen world can be viewed either as a source of joy or of gloom and despair. To pick a simple example, Blake's Tyger and his Lamb represent the two opposed perspectives. Do you see such a joy/gloom opposition playing out through the two kinds of song we read here? Do you in fact hear these pieces of language as songs, in any usual sense? *Do you begin to grasp the opposition and intimate inter-relation between Innocence and Experience?*

Question: Is this poetry congenial to a modern ear?

A second question seems in order. It moves into waters not typical for literary history. We ask whether this Blakean material is readable with delight and fascination today? Is this material in our present grain? Is it too simplistic? Or too allegorical—almost in the vein of *Piers Plowman*? Or is it so universal and central that it was already there in us when we encountered it on the page?

Comparative Literature:

1. Scholarship is a fine form of our effort to understand cultural products, and among the literary byproducts of a great writer, like Blake, count the scholarly works he/she has brought into existence. You might want to look at Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1968), a now classic work of criticism, which contains copious and insightful references to Blake, while constructing a schema of literature which shares many traits with Blake's own distinctive mythology.

2. A few poets have created private mythologies, while many more have tapped into the mythological thinking of their own age. In English literature the two most original myth making poets have been Blake and the Irish poet, Yeats, whom we will read in our final Unit of this class. Both poets were concerned with contraries, the nature of history and its internal antinomies, the power of imagination to transform. You can pursue the rich mythological relation of these two poets—Yeats greatly admired Blake's thought—by reading the Selection of Blake's *The Book of Thel*, in your Norton Anthology (1425-1430), and then turning to Yeats' *A Vision* (1925), where he enshrines his poetic philosophy of history. Try to see the relation between Yeats' map of the world and that of Blake, with his mythical cosmology.