Teaching Blake's Psychology Of Redemption In "Songs"

Harold E. Pagliaro  
Swarthmore College, hpaglia1@swarthmore.edu

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In teaching *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* I use a variety of points of view, but I subordinate them to this consideration: What do the songs, taken as a whole, imply about how the mind works psychologically? To answer, I consider the characters, including the speakers. Who are they? What is their predicament? What are their responses to natural, social, and psychological forces? I also pay attention to the social justice Blake calls for; to his uses of pastoral tradition; to the irony implicit in many songs, especially *Songs of Innocence*; to recurring religious metaphors; to relations between text and illustration; to the consistency of ideas from *Songs* through major prophecies. My chief aim, however, is to get “inside” individual characters in the songs, to expose their psychologies, and to see how those psychologies help us learn about the two contrary states of the human soul and the relation of those states to redemption—what in Blake’s view humans must do to be saved.

Most characters in *Songs* seem utterly exposed to experience, vulnerable to the people and things around them, but few seem aware of what they endure. Blake helps us see that the unembroiled regard of this exposure to pain is possible, even necessary, first by encouraging us to so regard it, and then by showing us some characters who share this view—chiefly speakers like those of “The Clod and the Pebble” and “The Human Abstract” in *Songs of Experience*.

Death is the subject on which Blake draws to identify the basis of human vulnerability. In his world, it is death that limits us to mortal vision, makes us accommodate to the natural world or perish, defines the natural world and the natural human being in all of us. In *Songs* death appears in many forms: the garden of love is filled with graves; chimney sweepers are locked in coffins of black; the Raven of death nests in the human-made tree of holy Mystery; the cycle of life in London begins in the Marriage hearse: man and fly are married in death; the little black boy thinks he will be free of prejudice only after he leaves his unalterable black body; some nameless power has dared to grasp the Tyger’s deadly terrors.

Factors outside *Songs* reinforce this first powerful impression. At Thel’s grave plot, the vision of life as hostile and deadly, like much of Blake’s poetry, seems to combine human vulnerability and the steady regard of threatening forces. Though the two functions are often divided (the young harlot of “London” is vulnerable, but the poem’s speaker, also vulnerable in a way, looks steadily at her vulnerability), Thel experiences both. True, she
is able to flee the world of death, but until she does, she sees death everywhere defining life. Neither blaming her for running nor congratulating her for avoiding a bad scene seems reasonable; there is no simple solution for the problem she faces. Death is all around Thel, and to see it as starkly as she does is to run away, Blake seems to say. On the other hand, the combination of vulnerability and the capacity to see clearly is necessary for Self-examination and Self-annihilation.

The view that much in the poetry turns on death is not new to Blake studies, but it is more important than the time spent on it in the criticism implies. In his preface to the Blake Concordance Erdman remarks on the unexpectedness of the poet’s frequent use of death: “Each new concordance brings its . . . surprises, those most immediately accessible being some of the words that come out at the top of the frequency count. . . . We may have expected to find MAN, LOVE, ETERNAL, and EARTH among Blake’s most used words, but not DEATH so near the top . . . ” (1: vii). In fact, the only words of substance more frequent than death in the poetry are all, Albion, and man. But how Blake uses the word (and related words) is most important—they almost never refer to physical death. Without morbidity, Blake associates death, dead, and their proxies with the fallen world we move through as we live our lives, stumbling “. . . all night over bones of the dead” (“The Voice of the Ancient Bard”). He uses the word to characterize our natural and our social context or to suggest a sense of ourselves or a point of view we have unconsciously adopted as a result of being imposed upon— (“They clothed me in the clothes of death” as the chimney sweeper in Experience says). Aware that we are intimidated by death, Blake treats it dynamically, as a conditioning force we incorporate into our beings as we unconsciously accommodate to its threat. And he makes clear we do so in order to survive.

It is with this background in view that I approach Songs. Usually I begin with one of the few poems in Songs of Innocence that present characters unaffected by physical or emotional danger—the “Introduction” or “The Lamb”—and I try to show that the children in these poems are in a state such that people and forces outside them seem “continuous” with, not inimical to, themselves, as Gleckner (Piper 45), Holloway (62), Erdman (Illuminated Blake 48), and others have shown. The child speaker of “The Lamb” is made “identical” with the Lamb and with Christ: “I a child & thou a lamb / We are called by [Christ’s] name. . . .”

Having established the psychology of this child as an obvious model of Innocence, I turn to songs that do not conform to the model—the great majority of Songs of Innocence. In what sense is the chimney sweeper—who, far from being “continuous” with his environment, has been “cut off” from his
dead mother and "cut off" by the father who sold him—in a state of Innocence? And what about the little black boy, who is "cut off" from the white? Do not their songs, and many others of Innocence, register a world of sorrow and disillusion? The answer depends on whose point of view one takes. The reader may see in such poems a world of sorrow. Obviously both children are driven hard by a cruel society. Or Blake the man may be understood to be using irony to express his anger at their treatment. The last line of each poem certainly undercuts the palliating vision earlier presented by each child. "So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm" may be read as Blake's ironic way of rendering the comfort of Tom Dacre's dream illusory. "And be like him and he will then love me" may similarly render the comfort of the black mother's lesson futile; if the black boy wants more to be loved by the white than to accept as valuable his mother's view of him (and all blacks) as especially benefitted by experience, what good is her lesson after all?

Despite the logic of Bloom's view that *Songs* includes many ironies (Blake's *Apocalypse*, e.g., 50–51), it is also reasonable to consider these poems from the point of view of the children who experience their action. It is the children, finally, who dwell in Innocence or leave it. It is their point of view, in and out of Innocence, that helps us to understand their psychology. Let us assume that both chimney sweeper and black boy speak for themselves consistently (as well as for the poet's irony). Then we would have to conclude that the sweep's "So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm" was literally intended, and it would follow that he had been taken in by Tom Dacre's dream. That is, we would understand that the speaker accepts the rationalization the dream represents, masking and transforming his deadly social present with a promise of a transcendent heaven.

Read with the same expectations for consistency, the black boy's "And be like him and he will then love me" underscores a similar presentation of social evil and the speaker's evasion of it. The black boy's last line permits the reader to see the child's mind working at two levels, quite self-deceivingly. At one level he recalls the occasion of his mother's lesson with unconscious pleasure—"She took me on her lap and kissed me"—and then he repeats the lesson verbatim, surely an act of faith in its truth and efficacy. But at another level, he makes of the lesson something very different from what the mother claims it to be: the promise of a future state in which his spiritual superiority—which, she tries to make him realize, he enjoys in the present life—will enable him to help the English boy. Instead, he finds in it a reason for believing he can become enough like the white boy for the white boy to love him. In effect, the black boy believes he has accepted his mother's lesson, but in fact he unconsciously repudiates it, using it to cope with a problem it was intended to transcend. The problem still controls him, and he is unaware of the fact.
In contrast with these children of Innocence, characters in *Songs of Experience* are typically self-conscious of the dangers they face, or they are somehow urged or otherwise moved to become conscious of it; they confront their troubles or they feel pain without the relief of illusion. Psychologically the “obverse” of his counterpart in Innocence, the chimney sweeper of Experience knows he has been imposed upon, and he resents the fact: “... because I am happy, & dance & sing, / They think they have done me no injury.” Not only does he have an unvarnished view of his own predicament, he has also begun to appraise the mental operations of his mother and father, who, as he sees it, believe they have done him no injury, when of course they have “clothed [him] in the clothes of death.” He shows a further psychological sophistication by associating his parents with other creators of a false heaven—“God & his Priest & King / Who make up a heaven of our misery.”

It may be important to ask whether the voices of speakers, which I have understood to represent “characters,” are not after all disembodied, in which case I have invented an implausible critical fiction: I think the answer is that no completely characterized mind is to be found in any single voice in *Songs*, or in a simple compositing of all the voices to build the “one mind” of *Songs*. The voices vary enormously in emotional strength, intelligence, sensitivity, and temperament; but they all collect to suggest a continuing mental process which, if not complete, is certainly full. It seems reasonable, finally, to think of the voices as speaking for characters, because so understood they give us a full sense of Blake’s vision of the human predicament. And the representation of this vision, dynamic as it is, invites us as much to participate in the process it identifies as to consider it analytically.

In fact, as I argue in *Selfhood and Redemption in Blake’s “Songs,”* *Songs* represents a continuous psychological process, an inevitable movement from the state of Innocence, in which (from the child’s point of view) one enjoys an unself-conscious unity with one’s surroundings, to an encounter with strong evidence that one’s life is endangered; such evidence is for a time displaced by rationalization (chimney sweeper, little black boy) but later intrudes into consciousness. At this point the mind may be thought of as in Experience because of its inability to rationalize evidence of danger (the nurse of Experience) or, a very different matter, because of its willingness to accept this evidence (the chimney sweeper of Experience). Where the mind cannot rationalize the evidence and yet cannot cope with the problem it represents, it registers as fear, pain, guilt, or a sense of defeat (the sick rose). Where the mind receives the evidence with knowledge enough to give it “meaning,” it becomes a problem understood to need a solution (the speaker of “The Tyger”) or a problem for which a solution is sometimes sought and found (the speaker of “To Tirzah”). In sum, danger in the world of nominal
Innocence results in the mind’s formation of a self-protective mechanism or conditioned self that not only protects life (reducing it to what is safe) but leaves the protected unaware that a larger life is available. *Songs* indicates that this self, which Blake later names “Selfhood,” must first be formed (Thel in Har had no chance to do so) and then confronted and done away with. But the task is very difficult, not only because in the confrontation we give up our defenses, so that death comes at us, but also because we believe (irrationally) that Selfhood is the “true self,” and when it is threatened, we are afraid we will cease to be.

It is not usual to think of characters in *Songs of Experience* as caught in the process of transformation (Self-examination), so it is hard to illustrate the process briefly. Here are necessarily curtailed readings of “The Fly,” “A Poison Tree,” and “The Tyger.” The first is a poem about someone liberated from his conditioned self (the self that dies) who takes the experience seriously, though he finally treats it comically. An unself-conscious gesture usually viewed as inconsequential, the brushing away and death of a fly, has moved the man responsible to consider his own life and death. First, his dominant sense is that he and the fly are one; next, that he and the fly are mortal. The two views are not mutually exclusive. The fly’s death informs the speaker so immediately of his own vulnerability and death that the usual ways of distinguishing himself from the fly dissolve. In more Blakean terms, he becomes continuous with the fly, having moved through the boundaries of Selfhood.

The second stanza identifies the climax of this liberation. Its sentences, questions, register not doubt but reverent recognition of the heretofore unknown: “Am not I / A fly . . . ? / . . . art not thou / A man . . . ?” He knows, of course, that he is still a man—“thou [art] / A man like me”—but he feels for the moment at least a redefinition of his usual self. The speaker marks his sense of identity with the fly as if there were no difference not only between a fly’s being and a man’s but also between a dead being and a live one: “art not thou [dead] / A man like me [alive]?”. The two issues, being and mortality, are for him parts of the same whole. If thought is life, and its want death, he argues, then he is a happy fly if he lives—that is, he has known a sense of oneness with the happy (unself-conscious) fly as a function of his new-won consciousness. And he is a happy fly if he dies in that the same consciousness of identity with the unself-conscious fly makes it comically reasonable for him to claim that his death will be like the fly’s, unself-conscious. The illustration provides the clearest sign of this change from man to fly. The speaker is not there, it seems, only a boy, controlled by a woman who almost surrounds him, and a girl playing battledore. All are located inside arching barren limbs of adjacent trees, whose tops just miss touching. About to pass
between the not-quite-met branches of confinement is a butterfly—the miss-
ing speaker, I believe.

"A Poison Tree" may appear at first to be a poem about the destructive
consequences of repressed feelings. But the watering of suppressed wrath
and the sunning of it with deceitful wiles imply the speaker's consciousness
of the predicament. The result of momentary repression and clandestine
nourishment is an interior garden world, imagined as attractive to the speak-
er's foe. In a way, the clear and growing shape of energy, neither expressed
externally nor repressed, makes the speaker a minor Satan, comic but by no
means trivial. What such a character might have rationalized in Innocence
eventually flourishes in Experience. The speaker's tone suggests pleasure in
recounting an experience that began badly and ended well. Informing us
that he or she had been frightened into silence by a foe, who now is dead,
the speaker displays a confidence in facing up to external events. It is "in the
morning," the start of a new day, that the speaker concludes the action of
this initially interior adventure, which has led to the threshold of outward
things, to a sense of continuity between inside and outside the mind. One
might say the speaker has endured the death of that part which feared the
foe too much to permit the expression of anger.

Blake's illustration reinforces this reading. Erdman identifies "a hand [just
above the fourth stanza] that seems to grasp the trunk above it as by the leg
of an elongated human torso" (Illuminated Blake 91). A hand there seems
unlikely, and I suggest to my students that it is the head of a happy-looking
serpent, from whose mouth issues a giant forked tongue, part of which un-
derlines and brackets the poem's title and part of which extends the entire
length of the poem to become continuous with the "y" of "my" in the last
line. The garden is the serpent-speaker's, as are the Tree of the Knowledge
of Good and Evil, the deceitful (spiritually productive) behavior, the dead
foe, and the promise of a new day. But the speaker is, finally, neither propri-
etary nor murderous, only psychologically enlarged by the destruction of an
inhibition, like someone who has taken the advice of the devils in The Mar-
rriage of Heaven and Hell.

The first four stanzas of "The Tyger" register the depth of the speaker's
recognition of the Tyger's deadly terrors, chiefly by showing him or her to be
incredulous to the point of disorientation. The speaker has come to know but
can hardly believe that these terrors have been incorporated into a living
form of the creation. Making no effort to repudiate the Tyger's deadliness, or
to explain it in the handy terms of proverbial or domestic truth, like the first
chimney sweep or the black boy's mother, the speaker accepts the idea of
the beast as terrible. This painful accommodation seems not to be entirely
conscious, but it is nonetheless systematic and effective. Such dislocations
result from the recognition of things in unplumbed depths of the mind and their movement into consciousness. In perceiving the Tyger thus, the speaker is compelled to define Tyger, Creator, Lamb, and human being anew and somehow to integrate them into a new shape of understanding. Given the question "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" one must conclude that the speaker once believed unconsciously that its answer was no and is on the verge of changing that answer to yes and of acknowledging that Tyger, Lamb, and observer are parts of a single system, however discrete they seemed. The change implies a passage to a new self-knowledge.

Obviously, the Tyger first recognized by the speaker is very different from the Tyger of the illustration. The Tyger there is not fierce, but neither is it a cat essentially; it is a cat with human features. He who made the Lamb made the Tyger, and he made humanity as well, who is Tyger, Lamb, and more. In this perception of creation, it is appropriate that the Tyger should be humanized. Paradoxically increased and diminished by this exhausting experience, the speaker is for the moment in the condition of rest and hope as the poem ends. But we have read the sign of potential redemption in his or her changing definition of self and world.

*Songs of Innocence and of Experience* has yielded full and satisfying responses from my students—not exclusive, confined, or otherwise reductive—when they consider its poems from the point of view of the psychological model I have suggested. A closely related result has proved to be the students' understanding of the dynamic processes represented in *Songs*, primarily as a function of their becoming involved in those processes as they try to grasp the living predicament of each character they encounter.