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The Complementarity of Contraries in William Blake's
Songs of Innocence and Experience: A Contrastive
Analysis of a Selection of Poems from Both
Collections.

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INTRODUCTION

William Blake was an English poet, artist, engraver and visionary born in London on the 28th of November 1757. Despite the fact that his work was underestimated during his lifetime, he is now considered to be one of the best representatives of English Romanticism and English poetry as a whole. Romanticism was a literary movement which lasted from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, and which essentially appeared as a reaction to the previous era, commonly known as The Enlightenment or The Age of Reason. In general terms, while the Enlightenment was based on reason, logic, skepticism, objectivity and science, Romanticism mainly advocated the importance of the imagination, spontaneous feelings, subjective experience, creativity and the natural world.

William Blake did not receive any formal schooling, but spent much of his childhood observing the nature of the outskirts of London, a city which kept on expanding. These wanderings were to influence his poetry deeply in the following years. He was taught how to read and write by his mother, and from an early age showed a profound interest in the arts and creative works. He would soon enrol in a drawing school to become an apprentice to a master engraver years later. At the age of twenty-one, he enrolled in the Royal Academy of Arts. He started to work as an engraver of illustrations for novels, magazines and the like, a specific skill that he would end up using in combination with the writing of his poems. As a matter of fact, his visual artwork is highly estimated all around the world. His technique consisted in producing his text and design on a copper plate with an impervious liquid. The plate was then dipped in acid so that the text and design remained in relief. That plate could be used to print on paper, and the final copy would be then hand coloured. He decided to design plates for his poems, and called them 'Illuminated Writings.' Blake allegedly affirmed to have been revealed this technique by his dead brother in a vision; in fact, his visions are

said to have played an important role in his writings. Blake differentiated himself from the rest of his contemporary poets in that he never published his poetry in the conventional way. On a regular basis, he never published more than twelve copies and, as a result, many of them did not survive the passing of time, some were unique copies, and some others have simply disappeared. In these 'Illuminated Writings' the poet bridges the gap between the textual and the visual, between words and images, in order to create a completely different experience for the reader. This does not necessarily mean that the image represents the poem, nor that the poem represents the image, as they are two different parts which complement each other; each part has its function and meaning but both are necessary to achieve this different effect and experience. As will be soon seen, this idea of dualism is constant in his poetry.

Within these 'Illuminated writings' we can find the collections of poems *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of experience*, which are commonly known as Blake's Illuminated Songs. The former, *Songs of Innocence*, was published in 1789, but in 1794 Blake decided to combine this collection of poems with another one, *Songs of Experience*, and later on he published both collections together under the title *Songs of Innocence and of Experience. Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, William Blake affirmed that "without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (2004:181). It is clear that contraries play an important role in Blake's *oeuvre*. That is why the main purpose of this essay will be to explore and show how contraries complement each other in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. In spite of the fact that these collections seem to have fairly simple diction and style, they have prompted a wide range of interpretations on the part of critics. The title *Songs of Innocence and Experience Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul* clearly invites us to think that Blake saw these two sets of poems and songs as an artistic whole, and therefore

wanted them to be read together so that readers could contrast and compare them. As each collection aims to represent one specific state of the human soul, they cannot be fully understood in isolation, that is, without taking into account their respective counterpart (Gillham, 1973: ix). As Joseph Wicksteed (1970: 99) affirms, the word “Shewing” in the title somehow warns us about the didactic aim of the songs; Blake wanted to teach his readers about the nature of the human soul. In order to achieve this, he felt the need to offer a living realisation of its ‘Two Contrary States.’ Therefore, to reach this understanding, bearing in mind the idea of duality is of the utmost importance. As regards the nature of these two contrary states of the human soul, C. M. Bowra (1970: 139) explains that, while the first set of songs shows “an imaginative vision of the state of innocence,” in the second set Blake “shows how life challenges and corrupts and destroys that innocence.”

On the one hand, *Songs of Innocence* represents the state of the human soul which is characterised by feelings such as joy, pleasure, vulnerability, wonderment and naivety. According to Gillham (1973: 14), “innocence” is a noun which we usually attribute to animals or children, as these creatures are thought to have an uncomplicated existence: “Creatures who are limited in any way by their capacities or range of possible activities find it easier to come to terms with their world and with themselves.” In this state of the human soul, a feeling of spontaneity prevails, actions do not have consequences and imagination flies; there are no limits in the world and no boundaries whatsoever between the real and the imagined. Children are great representatives of these feelings and of this state of the human soul. Therefore, the child motif is recurrent in Blake’s songs. However, for Blake, the idea of childhood did not correspond at all to the idea we may have of it nowadays. For him, childhood was not something completely definite; it was quite complex, both a symbol and a state of the soul which can also be present in maturity. Here lies the complementarity between the two states of the human soul: the former (innocence) is undoubtedly present in

the latter (experience). For Blake, innocence is something inherent, it cannot be caused, induced or taught. As a result, children are innocent because they have not been corrupted by social reform yet. Gillham (1973: 14) goes as far as to assert that “any deliberate attempt to foster innocence is destructive of the state, which is, by nature, unpremeditated and self-forgetful.” This means that innocence is inherent in children because they do not even know that they are being innocent; little by little, awareness and reason begin to set aside spontaneity and naivety. In addition to the motif of the child, other innocence symbols that Blake recurrently uses are sheep, wild birds, wild flowers, green fields, dawn, dew, shepherds and hills (Bateson 1970: 176). All these symbols evoke a pure, happy and childlike world.

On the other hand, *Songs of Experience* embody the other state of the human soul, which is characterised by suffering, corruption, awe and the destruction that experience entails. Unlike in *Songs of Innocence*, “more developed creatures have more difficult tasks and their failures are frequent” (Gillham, 1973: 14). As creatures grow up and gain experience and knowledge, spontaneity is left aside, which dovetails into a more artificial and systematic behaviour. The world becomes more complicated and so do problems and preoccupations. In spite of all sorts of attempts to ignore this complex world and go back to the former state of innocence, Gillham asserts, “the inclined adult encounters greater difficulty in achieving Innocence, and attains the state less frequently” (14). This is mainly due to the amount of experience so far acquired and the development and wider complexity of his/her mind. According to C. M. Bowra (1970: 149), “the first and most fearful thing about experience is that it breaks the free life of imagination and substitutes a dark, cold, imprisoning fear.” Therefore, experience corrupts innocence, happiness and spontaneity, in turn paving the path for the emergence of hypocrisy. Bowra also asserts that Blake saw hypocrisy as a sin, because it refuses to follow “the creative spirit of the imagination” that prevails in the other state of the human soul. Some symbols which Blake uses to represent

this corruption and hypocrisy are looms, houses, snakes, silence, clouds, night, stars and stones (Bateson 1970: 176). These symbols conjure up feelings quite different, mainly sadness, insecurity, dread and loneliness.

The two states of the human soul are contraries but also necessary for the full development of human existence. One state cannot be fully understood without its contrary; in a word, they are complementary. In both sets of songs, Blake displays two completely different visions of human existence. In fact, as Gillham affirms (1973: x), the key to understand the poems is to bear in mind that, in each state of the human soul, the same experiences are recognised and portrayed differently.

ANALYSIS OF A SELECTION OF POEMS

Although it is true that each poem can be read and understood in isolation, the fact that many of them are explicitly paired is by no means a mere coincidence. To give but one example, in both sets of songs a poem titled “Holy Thursday” can be found. Furthermore, some poems in *Songs of Innocence* have their counterpart in *Songs of Experience*. For instance, “The Blossom” should be read in combination with “The Sick Rose” (Gillham 1973: 1). As a result, the poems will not be fully understood unless they are read together; they need each other, just as the two states of the human soul do.

In this final degree dissertation I intend to bring to the fore these contrasts and the complementarity of the two collections by analysing and comparing the poems “Infant Joy”/ “Infant Sorrow,” “The Lamb”/ “The Tyger,” and the two “Chimney Sweepers” in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, respectively.

“Infant Joy” versus “Infant Sorrow”

Infant Joy

I have no name
I am but two days old.—
What shall I call thee?
I happy am
Joy is my name,—
Sweet joy befall thee!

Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old,
Sweet joy I call thee;
Thou dost smile.
I sing the while
Sweet joy befall thee.

“Infant Joy,” which belongs to *Songs of Innocence*, is a poem which represents an intimate moment between a mother and her newborn baby, whom she sweetly addresses.

This is a moment full of happiness and delight, and testifies to the strong connection they both have. The poem is divided into two stanzas of six lines each, characterised by their shortness. It shows a very simple diction, and rhyme and rhythm are achieved through the repetition of words such as “sweet joy” or “pretty joy.” Repetition is the outcome of the spontaneity of the moment, in which feeling and speaking are rather more important than thinking. In addition, this repetition contributes to giving sonority to the poem by conveying the effect of a lullaby. It is also important to note that this is some kind of conversation because, in the first stanza, the baby is given voice. As this is physically impossible, it could be interpreted as describing the mother who, overwhelmed with happiness, imagines this conversation.

The first stanza is introduced by the baby’s voice, saying that he has no name and is only two days old. It might be said that the poem warns readers from the very beginning that the conversation which follows is not a real one, since a two-day-old baby cannot be possibly aware of his own existence. The baby is then asked by another voice what his name is, and seems to be sufficiently aware of the situation and his feelings to state that, as he is happy, his name is Joy. Then the other poetic speaker again blesses the child: “Sweet joy befall thee!” This blessing is also present at the end of each stanza, which clearly increases the sense of harmony. This being said, despite the simplicity of the lines, the idea and meaning behind them are not that simple. How can a baby really know what s/he is feeling? The analysis of the second stanza leads to the conclusion that it is the mother who gives voice to her baby, while disclosing her feelings towards him.

In the second stanza there is only one poetic voice. These lines are again full of repetitions; it seems that the poetic speaker is constantly repeating the baby’s words in the previous stanza, thus emphasising the idea of joy, happiness and sweetness: “Pretty Joy! Sweet joy but two days old, sweet joy I call thee.” This stanza brings to the reader’s mind the

intimate moments of a mother talking to her baby on her lap, smiling at him and repeating the same words once and again, singing to him so as to make him smile back: “Thou dost smile, I sing the while.” This stanza ends with the same blessing of the previous one. As was argued before, in addition to stressing the sense of musicality, this scene helps to create a child-loving environment with the mother singing some kind of lullaby. The spontaneity and delight resulting from such a moment between mother and son are constantly evoked. According to D. G. Gillham (1973: 3), “she projects her own contentment in interpreting the conduct of the babe, causes him to name himself ‘Joy,’ describes him as happy in his own being and as a source of joy to herself.” Therefore, it could be assumed that it is the mother’s gratefulness and happiness that makes her end up inventing an imaginary conversation with her newborn baby, in which she projects her own feelings onto him.

In short, this poem encapsulates the happiness and delight characteristic of babyhood. Actually, it could be concluded that it is the mother’s own vision of infancy that is described in the poem. Although she is no longer a child, looking at her baby takes her back to a previous state in which there was only joy and happiness, as any kind of previous suffering is simply left behind. In this imaginary conversation, spontaneity is enhanced through the repetition of words and phrases, let alone feelings of tenderness. “Infant Joy” consequently belongs to William Blake’s first set of songs.

Infant Sorrow

My mother groand! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I leapt:
Helpless, naked, piping loud;
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my fathers hands:
Striving against my swaddling bands:
Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk upon my mothers breast.

As has been previously explained, most of the poems in *Songs of Innocence* have their counterpart in *Songs of Experience*. This is the case of the poem that has just been analysed, which can be contrasted with the one titled “Infant Sorrow.” As the contrast in their titles clearly suggests (joy/sorrow), the latter shows a completely different perspective of the birth of a child and babyhood. “Infant Sorrow” belongs to *Songs of Experience*, and is divided into two stanzas with four lines each. Unlike the previous poem, “Infant sorrow” shows a regular rhyme scheme in both stanzas, AABB, which may point to the fact that there will be no spontaneity here.

In this poem, a baby talks about his own birth in the first person. He explains how unhappy his experience of entering the world was. In the first stanza, the baby relates how his mother and father felt at the moment of his birth: his mother may have groaned due to the pain of labour, while his father may have wept because he was aware of the amount of suffering and pain which living in this world necessarily entails. As a matter of fact, the baby himself regards the world as dangerous. It could be said that he feels naked and helpless because he is not old and experienced enough to know how to face problems in the future; he does not feel protected from pain. The last line of this stanza contains an odd simile: “Like a fiend hid in a cloud.” This is a most unexpected and shocking comparison, because it is angels who allegedly live in the clouds, not demons. Therefore, this may represent how out of place the baby feels.

This feeling of uncertainty and insecurity is further strengthened in the second stanza. The baby relates how he struggled in his father’s hands and tried to get rid of the clothes which covered him. The use of the verbs “struggle” and “strive” creates a feeling of entrapment which is highlighted through the alliteration of the “s” sound, which somehow reproduces the baby grappling with adversity forces. In the end, the baby is so worn out that the only solution seems to be nursing her mother’s breast milk. Actually, there is little more

a baby can do. A feeling of defeat therefore prevails; the baby is aware of the problems and pain he will come up against but, as he is only a baby, he cannot change or avoid this reality, which makes him feel powerless and frustrated.

To sum up, this poem represents the pain which bringing a child into an uncertain world may cause. Parents are well aware of the fact that experience implies suffering and sorrow, which prevents them from fully enjoying the birth of their child. The baby arrives in a hostile environment, and is thus unconsciously ready to fight against a dangerous world. D. G. Gillham (1973: 3) asserts that, since the baby realizes that he is completely powerless, he decides to adopt a passive role sulking upon his mother's breast. On the other hand, this could also be interpreted as the baby gaining strength to fight and survive in the near hostile future.

As can be seen, "Infant Joy" and "Infant Sorrow" depict the experience of babyhood, but from two completely contrary perspectives. The babies in both poems are given an important role by their parents; in "Infant Joy," the mother feels so fortunate and grateful for the birth of her baby that she openly communicates them to her son, leading him to name himself "Joy." On the contrary, in "Infant Sorrow" the parents cannot feel such happiness because they are aware of the fact that they are bringing a child into a dangerous and grievous world. As a result, the baby is born into such an unhappy environment that he cannot feel anything but sorrow. Although these two poems make perfect sense on their own, their contrastive reading allows readers to better appreciate the differences between both; the experience of babyhood is described from rather different perspectives. One interpretation does not override the other; they are complementary, like the two states of the human soul.

“The Lamb” versus “The Tyger”

“The Lamb,” from *Songs of Innocence*, and “The Tyger,” from *Songs of Experience*, are two poems that offer two rather different interpretations of the idea of God. As D. G. Gillham (1973: 5) asserts, “Blake knew that God can come to men only as they are capable of receiving him.” It could accordingly be assumed that the conception of the divine image is subjective, as it may vary depending on one’s life stage. Hence, these two poems are told by two different speakers, a child and an adult respectively, who show their own interpretations of the nature of creation.

The Lamb

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o’er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing woolly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!
Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee

Little Lamb I’ll tell thee,
Little Lamb I’ll tell thee!
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee.

“The Lamb” is divided into two stanzas with five rhymed couplets each. The poetic speaker, a little child, addresses a lamb and enquires about its creation and origin. The questions made by the child seem to be rhetorical: he may not expect the lamb to respond because the child

already knows the answers. As a result, what he basically wants is to express his awe about God's might and the creation of the world.

The first stanza begins and ends with the same couplet: "Little Lamb who made thee, Dost thou know who made thee," which clearly brings to mind the rhythm of some well-known popular sayings. Moreover, since the poetic speaker is a child, this also contributes to creating an innocent and childlike environment. The child asks the lamb who has given it life and its characteristics as an animal. The repetition of the verb "gave" might point to the extreme generosity of the creator. This idea is also highlighted with the extremely detailed description of the features of the lamb: "Gave thee clothing of delight, softest clothing woolly bright." In this couplet, for example, the simple fur of the lamb is described as a marvelous gift. As J. J. Garth Wilkinson (1970: 51) asserts, poems like this one are exceptional "for the transparent depth of thought which constitutes true simplicity." The poem emphasises the naivety of the child, who sees life as harmless and is capable of finding beauty and happiness in the smallest and simplest things. In fact, although this stanza is full of questions, the child seems to have no doubts. Posing these questions could thus be a way to describe and reaffirm what he has been taught about God.

In the second stanza the child responds to the questions previously made by himself. He seems to be very enthusiastic about the fact that he is able to respond; he knows who the creator is. This can be seen in the repetition of the sentence: "Little Lamb I'll tell thee, Little Lamb I'll tell thee!" In the next lines, the innocence and naivety of the child are further enhanced: he has unquestioningly accepted what he has been told about the beauty of God and the creation of the world. The gentleness and kindness which characterise his conception of God are in turn projected onto the lamb, to the effect that the child sees the animal as a reflection of God's work. In fact, the child affirms that God calls himself "lamb," a clear reference to the Bible, which states that Jesus Christ, the son of God, is called the "Lamb of

God,” who embraced the human condition to take away the sins of the world. Therefore, the lamb could be interpreted as the ultimate embodiment of beauty and goodness as created by God. In addition, the lamb could also be considered to be a fragile, delicate and small animal, and the child in turn sees himself as similar and closely linked to the lamb. He ends up assuming that both the lamb and the child are clear evidence of the magnificence of God’s creation. In fact, according to D. G. Gillham (1973: 9), “the mystery of the creation is not considered and God’s present love is implicitly accepted.” This could mean that the child does not even try to go into the nature of the creation in depth because his experience is limited and, for the time being, he has more than enough with simple explanations about God.

In brief, this poem represents the notion of the divine from a child’s point of view. As children are characterised by their innocence and lack of experience, the child’s notions of God and the creation of the world are simple, happy and good. Therefore, he ends up projecting his naive conceptions onto a lamb; for him, the lamb represents all he knows about God, and this is evidence of the simple way in which he understands the world. As S. F Bolt (1970: 122) asserts, the lines “I child & thou a lamb” “sum up the burden of *Songs of Innocence*, and also their poetic method, which compels the reader to reduce verbal complex associations to essential images, and consider them moment by moment.” In other words, the child makes these associations in order to make sense of the world he lives in; he simplifies reality so that it becomes more understandable. This consequently proves that the notion of the divine is a subjective concept, influenced by the experience and knowledge one may have in a certain stage of his/her life.

The Tyger

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;

What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

“The Tyger,” on the contrary, encapsulates the other side of the coin. In this poem it is demonstrated that “the beast is also part of the creation” (Gillham, 1973: 6). The poetic speaker asks questions to a tiger, wondering how such a threatening creature has been created. As is the case of “The Lamb,” the poetic speaker does not expect the tiger to respond; he is posing so many questions because he does not seem to accept and understand reality.

The poem is divided into six quatrains with an AABB rhyme pattern and regular meter. From the very beginning, the tiger is described as an astonishing and dangerous creature who is “burning bright.” The poetic speaker is so overwhelmed that he instantly assumes that only an “immortal hand or eye” could have created such “fearful symmetry.” This clearly means that only God can achieve such perfection. This description of the tiger

in “the forests of the night” creates a sense of discomfort and mystery. The tiger shining in the gloomy night could represent the secrets of nature all of a sudden becoming apparent. Therefore, the tiger represents the threatening part of God’s creation, the existence of evil in the world. Furthermore, according to S. Foster Damon (1969: 277), the forest is the symbol of the World of Experience “where the sterile errors conceal the path and dim the light.” Accordingly, the poetic speaker of this poem can only be an adult who is entering the forest, thus gaining experience, and who is finally able to realise that evil has also been created by God.

The abundant use of synecdoque elements highlights the poetic speaker’s bewilderment. As can be seen in the first quatrain, he knows that the creation of such a ferocious and perfect beast can have only been carried out by an immortal soul. However, he attributes the creation of the tiger to different parts of the human body: “What immortal hand or eye” “What shoulder?”, “What dread feet?”. Furthermore, he also wonders which kind of tools the creator used: “What the hammer, what the chain.” This might suggest that the poetic speaker does not want to, or simply cannot, accept reality. On the one hand, he knows that only a divine being can create the tiger, which embodies evil but, on the other, he refuses to accept that God is responsible for this, so the poetic speaker ends up blaming parts of the human body whose owner remains totally unknown.

According to S. Foster Damon (1969: 278), we are shown in detail the process of creation of the tiger: “First, the fire of his eyes is gathered from the cosmos, then the heart is created, the feet forged, and ultimately the brain.” Thus, the poetic speaker is little by little aware of the complexity and perfection of the beast. This may be the reason why, towards the end of the poem, a feeling of growing anger can be appreciated. Now, questions occur in the middle of the sentence, as if the poetic speaker were getting more and more anxious, running out of breath. In addition, he wonders if the creator, after having given shape to evil,

looked at the tiger and smiled, proud of what he had just accomplished. The poetic speaker regards this idea as infeasible, and makes a direct reference to the poem "The Lamb": "Did he who made the lamb make thee?" In other words, the poetic speaker cannot understand how goodness, represented by the lamb, and evil, represented by the tiger, can have been created by the same God. Finally, the poem ends with the same quatrain found at the beginning, but with a slight difference: the verb "could" in the last line is replaced by "dare," which strengthens the feeling of negation, but also of anger and awe: "What immortal hand or eye dare frame thy fearful symmetry?"

To sum up, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" show the two contrary notions of God. The child in "The Lamb" is innocent and inexperienced, he only knows about God's creation of beauty and goodness, which he immediately sees embodied in a lamb, a fragile and joyful creature, just like him. The child feels satisfied enough with his simple knowledge about the world and does not attempt to analyse anything in depth because his lack of experience does not allow him to do so yet. On the contrary, "The Tyger" illustrates how experience goes hand in hand with the complexities and problems of the world. The seasoned poetic speaker in this poem is forced to accept the existence of evil in the world, and evil is embodied by a tiger. However, the adult cannot avoid wondering how such a vigorous and terrifying beast might have been created by the same God who created the gentle and defenceless lamb. In other words, he is amazed at the fact that God created both good and evil. As C. M. Bowra (1970: 158) affirms, "The lamb and the tiger are symbols for two different states of the human soul. When the lamb is destroyed by experience, the tiger is needed to restore the world." The tiger can also play a positive role after all. Blake knew that the perceptions acquired in the state of innocence are not enough, experience is also required to allow individuals to have doubts and make themselves questions. However, critics such as Wolf Mankowitz (1970: 134), on the other hand, state that these poems are "a comment on the limited capacity of

man to conceive God at all.” As a result, it could be concluded that, despite all the efforts that the experienced individual makes in order to understand, it is impossible to apprehend the concept of the divine in a complete way.

“The Chimney Sweeper” (SI) versus “The Chimney Sweeper” (SE)

Finally, Blake decided to write two poems with the same title: “The Chimney Sweeper.” One of them can be found in *Songs of Innocence* and the other one in *Songs of Experience*. As D. G. Gillham (1973: 27) declares, “of all states of wretchedness to be encountered, that of the chimney sweeper was, perhaps, the most miserable and the most capable of moving the Londoner’s heart to pity.” At the end of the nineteenth century, in London, young children were the ones in charge of weeping chimneys due to their size, which allowed them to enter the hot flues and clean them more easily. They had terrible working conditions because they had to spend hours inside chimneys, thus running the risk of falling or suffocating. Even if they survived these brutal conditions, they had to suffer from malnutrition and maltreatment on the part of their masters, for whom these children were seldom objects of pity. As a result, the title of these poems does not suggest a positive feeling, as each of them illustrates the experience of a chimney sweeper from a different perspective.

The Chimney Sweeper (*Songs of Innocence*)

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry " 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved, so I said,
"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

And so he was quiet, & that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!

That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black;

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he opened the coffins & set them all free;
Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

“The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Innocence* comprises six quatrains of four lines each with a regular rhyme scheme: AABB. In this poem, a small chimney sweeper tells the story of Tom Dacre, a workmate who suffered a lot when he was introduced in the business. The poetic speaker, who has no name, tried to comfort Tom and help him to cope with the situation. One night, Tom had a dream in which an angel set the chimney sweepers free. This vision helped Tom to muster strength, and in a way made him think that all his efforts and suffering would be rewarded one day. Unlike the previous analysed poems from *Songs of Innocence*, the poetic speaker of this poem is not a naive child who can only see the beauty and happiness of life. This poetic speaker seems to be a child whose terrible experiences have made him mature far too soon. However, innocence is nonetheless present in the figure of Tom Dacre, a little boy who thinks that hope will allow him to be happy in the end.

When the poetic speaker introduces himself in the first stanza, the only thing that the reader may feel for him is pity. He explains how his mother died and how he was sold by his father when he could not even talk: “Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep.” Once again, repetition plays an important role: the word “weep” is repeated five times in order to stress the pain that the poetic speaker felt at that moment. Furthermore, he directly addresses the

reader: “so your chimneys I sweep and in soot I sleep,” which subtly contributes to making them feel responsible for his circumstances as well.

In the second stanza, the poetic speaker introduces Tom Dacre and explains how this little boy cried when his head was shaved. The simile “his head curled like a lamb’s back was shaved” could once again represent how innocence, as embodied by the lamb, is stolen from these children, who are thus forced to face brutal conditions since they are born. The poetic speaker, who has more experience than Tom, desperately tries to comfort him and make him see the positive side of being shaved, however difficult this may be: “The soot cannot spoil your white hair.” The contrast between black and white is a constant element in this poem.

As a result of the poetic speaker’s support, the little innocent child ends up having a vision that night. In his dream, however, all the chimney sweepers are “locked up in coffins of black.” The happy and innocent life every child should enjoy has been drastically taken away from chimney sweepers, who consequently feel as if they were dead. However, an Angel suddenly appears, carrying with him “a bright key” that breaks them free. Once they are liberated, they go to a river to wash away the black soot of their bodies so that they can “shine in the Sun.” Now they are all “naked and white” children with “all their bags left behind.” There is a sharp contrast between two states: the latter, surrounded by whiteness and light, and the former, ruled by blackness and darkness, which confines children within a black coffin and condemns them to sleep through the dark night. As D. G. Gillham (1973: 33) sees it, in this state of darkness children feel “imprisoned in chimneys and locked up in poverty and ill-usage.” Liberation comes with the light: it is only in the state of brightness that the black coffins are opened with a bright key and children are finally free. “Freedom is taking place in the open green plain, where the sweepers ‘run leaping laughing’ leading to the complete release as the boys, now naked, rise to a brilliant world” (Gillham, 1973: 33).

This contrast further contributes to highlighting the brutality of their suffering and the sadness of their lives. On the contrary, light and whiteness could represent the hope and innocence that helped them elude reality. They are naked and white because they have been born again, the traces of dirt and soot have disappeared from their bodies, together with their pain.

In the end, Tom wakes up again in the dark, in the real cruel world. However, “Tho’ the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm.” It could be said that, although reality has not changed, Tom sees life from another perspective now. The last line of the poem is very meaningful: “So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.” The poetic speaker does not include himself in this line, which might suggest that he is more experienced than the rest of children. In fact, as D. G Gillham (1973: 31) affirms, “this is the sort of thing that is said in order to keep people submissive, especially people to whom harm has come in good measure.” To put it differently, it could be argued that the poetic speaker was told precisely the same when he was introduced in the business, only to keep him quiet and obedient. The last line makes the reader realise that Tom’s dream was not that beautiful and encouraging after all; the Angel that saves them can also be said to encapsulate the cynicism of the Church, which controlled society and promised those little poor boys happiness in the hereafter only if they endured suffering in this life. Yet, it seems that the poetic speaker knows that, through innocence and hope, this reality, so full of sorrow and suffering, might be somehow easier to cope with. In a way, Tom is prompted to remain in that state of ignorance and innocence because it is only if he overlooks his sad reality that he will be able to endure and survive.

The Chimney Sweeper (*Songs of Experience*)

A little black thing among the snow,
Crying “weep! weep!” in notes of woe!
“Where are thy father and mother? say?”
“They are both gone up to the church to pray.

Because I was happy upon the heath,

And smil'd among the winter's snow,
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

And because I am happy and dance and sing,
They think they have done me no injury,
And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King,
Who make up a heaven of our misery.”

“The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Experience* is a shorter poem, divided into three stanzas with the rhyme scheme AABB CDCD EFEF. Unlike its companion and counterpart, there is no glimmer of hope here. The poetic speaker, who is also a young chimney sweeper, criticises the hypocrisy of official powers, such as the Church and the State, which “flourish at the expense of the unfortunate, and they maintain their comfort by establishing themselves respectably in a system that is designed to favour the determined self-seeker” (Gillham, 1973: 28). The poetic speaker is experienced enough to be aware of all of these social injustices; unlike Tom Dacre, he does not believe that hope and faith will save him. Furthermore, he also blames his parents, who allowed their son to suffer so much.

In the first stanza, the child refers to himself as “a little black thing among the snow.” Once again, the contrast between the black child full of soot and the white snow may symbolise the innocence and happiness that have been snatched from the little chimney sweeper. The child is “crying weep weep in notes of woe!” thus highlighting the pain and sadness that loneliness causes him. When someone asks him where his parents are, the little chimney sweeper responds that “They are both gone up to the Church to pray.” This answer may seem a simple affirmation but, as we go on reading the poem, we realise that the child is also criticising his own parents, who do not mind leaving their child alone.

In the second stanza, the poetic speaker explains how his parents sold him into the chimney-sweeping business. “They clothed me in the clothes of death, and taught me to sing the notes of woe.” The use of metaphors in these lines intensifies the feeling of sorrow. “The

clothes of death” may clearly refer to the black soot which covers all his body. Chimney sweepers are forced to do this work, which ‘kills’ their childhood, together with their happiness; it could therefore be concluded that they suffer from a metaphorical premature death. Furthermore, “the notes of woe” symbolise and intensify the weeping of these desperate children.

In the last stanza, the poetic speaker accuses his parents, who do not seem to have any feeling of guilt for having sold their child. “Because I am happy & dance & sing, they think they have done me no injury.” In Gillham’s words (1973: 28-29), “the sweeper’s parents, observing the natural exuberance of their child when it breaks out dancing and singing, may feel that, after all, he is not so badly off.” Despite being chimney sweepers, suffering from terrible working conditions and having matured forcibly, they are still children and, although less frequently, still show a childish behaviour. As S. Foster Damon (1969: 283) asserts, “Because a child still carries some of his happiness with him wherever he goes is no justification for making him live by such terrible work.” However, the parents of the poetic speaker use this childlike behaviour as an excuse to soothe their feelings of guilt. For him, his parents prefer to go “to praise God & his Priest & King.” It is now that the reader realises that this affirmation is full of meaning: the child is sufficiently conscious of the fact that the Church and other official institutions allow injustices to happen, and the parents of the poetic speaker prefer to pay more attention to the creators of social injustice than to their own child’s pain and suffering. Finally, “God, his Priest and the King” are accused of “making up a heaven of our misery.” D. G. Gillham (1973: 28) explains that “the word heaven is well chosen, implying a sanctuary for the self-satisfaction and insensitivity of those who have established themselves comfortably.” In other words, it is the misery of unfortunate and poor people that makes those in power maintain and enforce an unfair social order that places themselves at the top of the pyramid of power at all costs. Therefore, there is no hope,

nor innocence, that could possibly relieve the suffering and sorrow that the chimney sweepers have to bear.

In sum, these two poems deal with the misery of the little chimney sweepers and both criticise the cynicism of the Church and the State. As C. M. Bowra (1970: 140) affirms, innocence does not only exist in childhood and, by the same token, experience is not the exclusive prerogative of adulthood either. “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Innocence* shows that having hope for a better future can bring about some happiness in tough times. Conversely, “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Experience* depicts the anger of a little child against the powers who allow and enforce child exploitation and the people who regard this as acceptable and normal. Deep down in his heart, he knows that faith will not be able to change reality.

CONCLUSION

If, as Northon Frye (1970: 171-72) states, giving primary place to the imagination and individual feelings were the principal characteristics of Romanticism, William Blake can undoubtedly be regarded as one of the best representatives of this movement, as this poet became one of the most outstanding epitomes of artistic independence and creative autonomy. Nevertheless, Blake differed from the rest of romantic poets. As was explained before, *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* are two collections of poems which are accompanied with illustrative plates. Blake combined the visual and the textual in order to achieve a completely different effect on his poetry. These collections were known as Blake's 'Illuminated Songs.' In spite of having been already published in 1789, *Songs of Experience* was reprinted five years later together with its companion, *Songs of Experience*, under the title *Songs of Innocence and of Experience; Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. In this work, Blake "transcended Self, and escaped from the isolation which Self involves" (Garth Wilkinson 1970: 51). In other words, he represents the universal man in his two states. On the one hand, the state of innocence, characterised by a childish and pastoral environment; a state full of happiness, sweetness and joy. On the other hand, the darker state, where innocence is replaced by experience, suffering, misery and sadness. Hence, each collection of poems could be considered to be a description of each contrary state of the human soul. Furthermore, Blake regarded contraries as the source of progression. That is why he wanted both set of songs to be read together as a whole, a single unity. In Alexander Gilchrist's words, "these poems have a mutual relationship, the influence of which is much impaired if they be read otherwise than as whole" (1970: 58-59). Most of the poems in *Songs of Innocence* find their counterpart in *Songs of Experience*. In addition, each pair presents the same situation but from completely different perspectives. Thus, despite making perfect

sense when read in isolation, reading them together as a unity may help the reader to have a more definite perception of their meaning and implications.

The aim of this essay has been to make a contrastive analysis of the poems “Infant Joy” and “Infant Sorrow”; “The Lamb” and “The Tyger”; and the two “Chimney Sweeper” ones, to demonstrate the complementarity of contraries in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. “Infant Joy” and “Infant Sorrow” describe the stage of infancy and the experience of bringing a child into the world. “Infant Joy” contains the dialogue between a happy mother and her newborn baby. Her joyous feelings are communicated to her infant and, as happiness is the only feeling the baby knows, he assumes that his name is “Joy.” This poem ponders on how such a beautiful moment can make any human being elude, if only momentarily, everyday problems. On the other hand, “Infant Sorrow” offers the opposite perspective: the baby is the poetic speaker, who explains how painful his arrival into the world was. Whereas his parents felt unhappy and even guilty for having brought a child into a world full of suffering, the baby feels fear and insecurity because he knows that he must be prepared for a tough future. Nevertheless, for the time being, he thinks that his best option is to take shelter amid his mother’s breasts until that future arrives.

“The Lamb” and “The Tyger” tackle God’s creation of good and evil respectively. The poetic speaker of “The Lamb” is an innocent child whose knowledge about the world is limited and simple. Therefore, the beauty of the creation is the only notion of God he has got. His positive concept of the nature of the creation is projected onto a lamb, a small, lovable and innocent animal, so often regarded as the very embodiment of goodness on earth. On the contrary, “The Tyger” represents the creation of evil. The poetic speaker is an experienced adult who goes into a forest and is overwhelmed by the strength and energy of a sublime animal, a tiger. He wonders how such a fearful beast can have been created. He refuses to believe that God dared to create the tiger but, ultimately, the poetic speaker knows that the

perfection of the animal could only have been achieved by a deity. In short, the concept of God is quite complex, as it implies the integration of both states, innocence and experience. For innocent creatures like children, God reveals Himself as a simple, beautiful and ideal notion. However, as the individual gains experience, this notion becomes more and more complex, obscure and difficult to define and apprehend.

“The Chimney Sweeper” poems from both collections accomplish a harsh critique of London society at the end of the nineteenth century, when the State and the Church allowed the chimney sweeping business to risk the life of little children, forcing them to work under terrible conditions since they were far too young. The poem belonging to *Songs of Innocence* depicts how those little and naive boys trusted the Church and its promises of a joyful and pleasant life in Heaven, as long as they were willing to endure the suffering of their earthly life. On the other hand, “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Experience* shows how these children are forced to mature far too early. Their sorrow has made them gain enough experience to realise that the State and the Church do not care about their living and working conditions, nor about other injustices, as long as they make sure they remain in power. In addition, this poem criticises the parents of the little chimney sweepers, who prefer supporting the Church to preventing their children from suffering and death.

To conclude, *Songs of Innocence and Experience* depict human experience and behaviour from contrary perspectives so as to make readers identify and connect with them. Furthermore, as representations of the two contrary states of the human soul, they reach their ultimate meaning in the joint interpretation with their respective counterparts. When reading them as a single unity, the reader achieves a more complete understanding of both. As Blake declared in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough” (2004: 184). For him, it was necessary to look at things

from different perspectives, as it is only then that they become more and more complex, but ultimately meaningful.

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