

Children and Childhood in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Tutkielmani aiheena ovat lapset ja lapsuus William Blaken runoteoksissa ”Songs of Innocence” (1789) ja ”Songs of Experience” (1794). ”Songs of Innocence” ja ”Songs of Experience” ovat kokoelma lyyrisiä runoja, jotka on ryhmitelty Innocence- ja Experience-osiin siten, että useista runoista on toisilleen vastakkaiset versiot molemmissa osissa. Runojen muoto muistuttaa lastenloruja ja tuohon aikaan suositaan lisänneitä lapsille suunnattuja uskonnollisia opetusteoksia, joita runoissa esiintyvät pastoraaliteemat osaltaan heijastavat.

Keskeisenä kysymyksenä tutkimuksessa on se, voidaanko kyseisten runojen lapsi- ja lapsuusteemat nähdä osana aikansa yhteiskunnallista keskustelua, tai toimivatko kyseiset teemat näissä runoissa ensisijaisesti symbolisessa merkityksessä uskonnollisessa viitekehyksessä.

Tutkielmassa olen tarkastellut runoissa esiintyviä teemoja sen valossa, mitä tuon ajan yhteiskunnallisesta liikehdinnästä ja diskurssista sekä Blaken ajatuksista näihin liittyen tiedetään. Lisäksi olen ottanut huomioon Blaken maailmankatsomukseen liittyviä filosofisia käsitteitä, jotka näiden runojen julkaisuvaiheessa olivat vielä muotoutumassa.

Ajan yhteiskunnallisista teemoista ne, jotka olen katsonut keskeisiksi näiden runoteosten synnyn kannalta, ovat valistuksen ajan tuomat aatteet ja tiede, esimerkiksi Voltairen, Rousseauin, Newtonin ja Locken teoriat, joihin Blake suhtautui kriittisesti, ellei raivokkaasti, sekä teollisen vallankumouksen mukanaantuoma köyhän työväestön (eritoten lasten) elinolojen heikkeneminen ja orjakauppa olivat yhteiskunnallisia kiistakapuloita, joista Blakella oli tiettävästi voimakkaita näkemyksiä.

Blaken omaan ajatteluun tiedetään tulleen vaikutteita mm. mystiikan suuntauksista kuten uusplatonilaisuudesta ja dualismista. Blake suhtautui jyrkästi valistuksen ajan myötä jalansijaa saaneeseen deismiin, nähden sen ateismia vaarallisempaan suuntaukseen. Tutkiessani runoja uskonnollisessa viitekehyksessä olen pyrkinyt muodostamaan käsityksen Blaken uskonnollisesta ajattelusta perustuen hänen omiin kirjoituksiinsa, sekä siihen mitä hänen uskonelämästään tiedetään (mm. lyhyt Swedenborgilainen vaihe). Blaken tiedetään omanneen radikaaleja näkemyksiä uskonnosta. Eritoten kirkkojen yhteiskunnallinen valta jonka alla köyhiä lapsia nujerrettiin ja hyväksikäytettiin, nousee Blaken runoissa esiin jopa eräänlaisena institutionalisoituneena pahuutena.

Tarkastelun perusteella voidaan nähdä, että Blaken ajattelussa yhteiskunnallinen ja uskonnollinen ovat nivoutuneet kiinteästi toisiinsa, siten että runoissa voidaan nähdä paljon yhteiskunnallista kritiikkiä, mutta ongelmat näiden ilmiöiden taustalla ovat hengellisiä.

Asiasanat: William Blake, lapset, lapsuus, 1700-luku, valistuksen aika.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss children and childhood in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and the political, ideological and religious context of the poems. In the poems the theme of childhood is closely knit with themes of repression and exploitation, in social, educational and religious contexts. Thus, the main topics of interest in the scope of this thesis include whether *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* can be seen as participating in debates on social and political issues, including exploitation of especially children of the poor within institutions such as charity schools, child labour and slavery. Or, whether *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* should be seen in a religious context, and whether the concerns that are voiced in the poems are really about the state of religion. Also, in one way these points can be seen as overlapping, as in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* religious indoctrination does have a role in keeping certain exploitative social practices alive.

Blake published *Songs of Innocence* in 1789, and the combined *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in 1794. In order to provide a context for the themes in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, I will discuss the general social and economic conditions of children of the poor in the late eighteenth century Britain, as well as specific political issues, such as child labour (especially the use of small children as chimney sweepers), the charity school system, and the abolition debate. The focus of the thesis is mostly on those poems in the *Songs of Innocence and of*

Experience where children feature as central characters. Some of the other poems (as well as poems outside the work that is seen as the definitive *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*) have also been studied and are referred to when their interpretation sheds light on certain concepts in Blake's poetry, such as Blake's idea of the Contraries (as described in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell")¹.

Around the time when Blake wrote the Songs, children of the poor were subjected to many forms of exploitation. This included, for example, child labour (the conditions in which such labouring took place considerably worsened, and, not insignificantly, became more visible to the general public, along with the onset of the industrial revolution). Likewise it was commonplace for these children to be condemned to, for example, charity schools (which were basically thinly veiled workhouses), and a future carrying out the most gruelling, menial labour in society in order to stay alive.² These kinds of cruel practices were not merely accepted by the more fortunate in society, but they were actually in their interests; as discussed later in this thesis, for example the passing of the law to abolish using small children as chimney sweeps was delayed by the House of Lords for as many as a hundred years because it would have meant that property holders would have been forced to make some investments. This is reflected in poems such as "The Chimney Sweeper", "London", and "Holy Thursday".

1 William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Sir Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 148. All further references to the poems will be to this edition.

2 Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1995), 187-188.

This thesis also discusses the relationship of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to religious literature for children, and the catechistic method of teaching literacy, as these are reflected in the form of the *Songs*.

Songs of Innocence and of Experience bears certain similarities to the works that belong to the genre of religious educational writings for children that were published in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as "Cradle Hymn" and *Divine Songs for the Use of Children* by Isaac Watts, Anna Laetitia Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781) and *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes* (1646) by John Cotton. This fact has prompted interpretations about the relationship of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to representatives of this genre, and Blake's intentions behind the style of some of the *Songs* being similar to that of improving "morality hymns". For example, Larrissy takes "The Chimney Sweeper" (of *Songs of Innocence*) as an example and argues that although being close to e.g. Isaac Watts' *Moral Songs* (1740), the way that the poem draws on the tradition of "hymns and improving songs for children and workers" only serves to make the irony of the poem better understood ³. What is significant here is how the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, by mimicking the style and tone of some of the works mentioned above, actually draws attention to, as Larrissy describes (quoting Paul Fauvet), the kind of indoctrination designed for "the ideological assimilation of the new working class".⁴ The catechistic style of religious writings for children is especially clearly repeated in

3 Edward Larrissy, *William Blake* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1985), 16.

4 Larrissy, 17.

"The Lamb", of which Richardson argues: "The Lamb offers the adult reader a satirical portrayal of the catechistic method".⁵

According to Richardson, the spread of formal schooling and literacy to classes outside the elite during the modern era in Europe saw education and childhood itself also "politicised as never before".⁶ Richardson draws attention to the close relationship between political and educational theories, stating that the interrelation between "the constitution of the state and the construction of its citizens" can be seen not only in Rousseau and Locke, but as far back as Plato.⁷ Richardson also states that it was during the late eighteenth century that education became what Raymond Williams has deemed "the most central issue in the history of our culture"⁸.

According to Cunningham, the eighteenth century saw a change to the secular in the ideas about childhood, and more well-to-do parents were considerably influenced by Locke and Rousseau in matters concerning education⁹. Cunningham also states that the industrial revolution brought the middle and upper classes a new awareness of the children of the poor, as they were in a more visible position than before (working, for example, in factories and workhouses instead of on farms), which made it clear that "their upbringing was in stark contrast with the precepts of nature".¹⁰ Blake was familiar with the works of Rousseau, and accused him of being a hypocrite in "Jerusalem".¹¹ According to Northrop Frye, Blake was against Rousseau's idea of

5 Alan Richardson, "The Politics of Childhood: Wordsworth, Blake and Catechistic Method", *ELH* Volume 56 Number 4 Winter (1989), 864.

6 Richardson, 853.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 Cunningham, 187-188.

10 *Ibid.*, 188.

11 James H. Warner, "Émile in Eighteenth-Century England", *PMLA*, Vol. 59, No. 3. Sep. (1944), 785-786.

the “natural man”. Frye says that Blake saw civilization as being supernatural, and by this Frye means superior to nature, as well as separate from it. Civilization has evolved by man's superiority over nature, and cities symbolise imagination throughout Blake's work.¹²

Blake himself had no children, and whether he had any interest in the then newly introduced theories on childhood of Locke and Rousseau does not seem relevant to Blake scholars. However, Cunningham identifies Blake as the first one to articulate the “central message of romanticism”, this being that childhood is “the spring which should nourish the whole life”.¹³

Because of Blake's interests in mysticism (for example alchemy, neo-platonism and hermeticism) his works must not be reduced to social commentary alone; for example Larrissy emphasises the importance of taking into account Blake's philosophical background and warns against doing, for example, Marxist readings of Blake that dismiss this so as to portray him first and foremost as a social critic.¹⁴

In order to provide an ideological context for the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, I will discuss Blake's ideas of Innocence and Experience, “the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul”, as they are presented on the title page of the *Songs*. Wherever the words “innocence” and “experience” are capitalised in this thesis, they refer to Blake's ideas of “the contrary states”.

12 Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry A Study of William Blake* (Princeton University Press, 1990), 36.

13 Cunningham, 73.

14 Larrissy, 31.

The illuminations of the poems are not in the scope of this thesis as such, although some visual features are discussed in conjunction with Blake's concepts of Innocence and Experience.

2. The ideological and social context of Blake's Songs

2.1. Blake's concepts of Innocence and Experience

2.1.1. The two contrary states of the human soul

In order to interpret the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, it is necessary to consider Blake's concept of what he called the "states" of Innocence and Experience, and how the poems relate to the idea of these states. The states of Innocence and Experience are called "the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul" in the subtitle on the title page of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*,¹⁵ and the idea of contraries is therefore a logical starting point. According to David W. Lindsay, Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* was the result of a long evolution during which the book now seen as the definitive work took shape.¹⁶

Lindsay connects the creation of *Songs of Experience* to changes in Blake's world-view that took place in the early 1790s (albeit not specifying what these changes were).¹⁷ According to Gardner, Blake's brother Robert died in February 1787, and this is thought to have profoundly affected his writing of both *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*.¹⁸ Erdman says the following about Blake: "Blake's progression from Wilkite patriotism¹⁹ in the 1770's to humanitarian

15 Larrissy, 6.

16 Lindsay, 14-15.

17 *Ibid.*, 14.

18 Gardner, 97.

19 With "Wilkite patriotism" Erdman means the movement of followers of John Wilkes in London in the late 1760s and 1770s. John Wilkes was an "outspoken 18th-century journalist and popular London politician who came to be regarded as a victim of persecution and as a champion of liberty because he was repeatedly expelled from Parliament. His widespread popular support may have been the beginning of English Radicalism." (Britannica Online).

Christianity in the 1780's to political radicalism in the 1790's is dramatic but hardly unique".²⁰ It is possible that Blake's changing world-view prompted him to write *Songs of Experience*, and his increasingly radical opinions are perhaps reflected in it, with its disillusioned tone.

Lindsay argues that *Songs of Innocence*, which he sees as describing a prelapsarian, harmonious state, does imply that there is another, fallen state, but not that there would be a collection of poems describing that fallen state.²¹ Lindsay says this suggests that originally there may not have been any intentions to produce a book for each of these "contraries".²² Lindsay's view is problematic, however. *Songs of Innocence* cannot be described as "a prelapsarian state of total harmony", as Lindsay does, because there are several examples in *Songs of Innocence* that make Innocence out to be a state more complex than that. For example, the poem "A Little Boy Lost" in *Songs of Innocence*:

Father, father, where are you going
O do not walk so fast.
Speak father. speak to your little boy
Or else I shall be lost,
The night was dark no father was there
The child was wet with dew.
The mire was deep, & the child did weep
And away the vapour flew.²³

This poem clearly shows the unreliable, unloving guardian - the father who leaves his son behind, and it could just as well be one of the *Songs of Experience*. Another example is "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence*. The lines "When my

20 David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 175.

21 *Ibid.*, 14.

22 *Ibid.*

23 Blake, "A Little Boy Lost", 120.

mother died I was very young, / And my Father sold me while yet my tongue ...”²⁴ again describe a guardian (the father) betraying the child he should be protecting. These examples alone make it impossible to argue that the state described in *Songs of Innocence* is solely harmonious. Using the term “prelapsarian” also associates Blake's idea of Experience with the fall of man, which seems too simplistic. However, Rodney and Mary Baine discuss Innocence and Experience in this context as follows: “When Albion the Ancient Man fell, the state of visionary, prelapsarian Innocence changed to one of visionless, postlapsarian Experience.”²⁵ Also Frye sees Innocence as a prelapsarian state, and furthermore understands Experience as something that people consider fallen, because it lacks the vision and imagination of Innocence. Frye says: “[The world we see] is a cheap print or reproduction of what was once the vision of the unbounded creative power of God.”²⁶ In fact, Frye states that for Blake, the conclusion to the impossibility of “deriving a bad world from a good God” is that “the fall of man and the creation of the physical world are the same event”.²⁷ Considering Frye's interpretation, the context of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* could be seen as the struggle of man to reach a state as close to the garden of Eden as possible (Innocence), but, as Experience cannot be erased, the only way is to reach another state of being that unifies the two.

Donald E. Dike says the following on the subject: “What is perhaps less clear [...] is that the *Songs of Innocence* do not themselves describe an absolute state of being

24 Blake, “The Chimney Sweeper,” 117.

25 Rodney M. Baine and Mary R. Baine, “Blake's Other Tigers, and “The Tyger”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 15, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1975), Rice University. 571.

26 Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 40.

27 *Ibid.*, 41.

or fashion [...] the sequestered illumination of some immaculate Eden. They take resistances continuously into account; they are consciously against something and trying to see their way through something..”²⁸ that something being the “gross moral and perceptual reality [...] that the reader brings with him to the poems.”²⁹ Dike's view is interesting, for the idea of there being an awareness of a different reality in the *Songs of Innocence*, and also for the idea of the reader of these poems providing the “contrary” point of view. This idea of the reader not being able to read the *Songs of Innocence* without knowledge of Experience, makes Lindsay's view of *Songs of Innocence* as possibly intended as a single work acceptable.

According to Lindsay, the criticism of the Innocence-Experience antithesis has often included a dispute between systematic and anti-systematic interpretations, so that the systematic interpretation relates every poem to the book's scheme. By Lindsay this scheme is a progression from Innocence through Experience to a higher Innocence - which is thought to be described in the poem “To Tirzah”.³⁰ According to Lindsay, scholars with a more anti-systematic approach “attain a perilous freedom of interpretation”, which Lindsay sees as dangerous if the original context of each poem is not taken into account carefully enough.³¹ However, while it is important to be aware of the context behind the scheme of the books, relating all interpretation to it can be too rigid. As discussed above, it is possible that *Songs of Innocence* were

28 Donald A. Dike, “The Difficult Innocence: Blake's Songs and Pastoral”, *ELH*, Vol. 28, No. 4, (Dec., 1961), The Johns Hopkins University Press, 358.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Lindsay, 43.

31 *Ibid.*

originally intended to stand alone, and there are certainly things in the poems of *Songs of Innocence* that provide a good view of Experience.

When attempting to understand the idea of the contraries Innocence and Experience we can look at “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”, the poem that defines Blake's idea of the “Contraries”. Larrissy draws attention to the fact that the subtitle “The Two Contrary States of the Human Soul” implies that the states of the soul are only two (thus implying that the soul would be confined to either state and also apparently dismissing the idea of a Higher Innocence), but uses the idea of the “Contraries” from “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” to suggest that the contrary states of the human soul can also mean contraries that allow progression. The soul needs to go through both these states in order to gain a comprehensive idea of the world. Thus, Larrissy's interpretation seems to suggest that Blake's idea of the contrary states would include that the soul is not confined to either state, but that it is possible for the soul to experience both states and end up with a complete, objective view of them.³² As discussed above, the poems of *Songs of Innocence*, certainly do not describe a state of pure carefree bliss. Rather, they can be seen describing longing for such a state. For example, in “The Ecchoing Green”:

Sitting under the oak,
Among the old folk.
They laugh at our play,
And soon they all say:
“Such, such were the joys.
“When we all, girls & boys,
“In our youth-time were seen
“On the Ecchoing Green.”
Till the little ones, weary,
No more can be merry:

32 Larrissy, 7.

The sun does descend,
And our sports have an end:³³

Here, darkness descends on the green signalling an end to the children's happy play. The poem ends with the lines "And sport no more seen / On the darkening Green."³⁴ There is a sense of finality in the last lines, as if the sun were not going to rise ever again. Therefore, while being cheerful, the poem ends on a dark note. This clearly hints at the harsh realities of Experience. There is a sense of loss and longing that the "old folk", reminded of their youth, further emphasise. The children's happy play symbolises a state which is essentially lost, eventually even to the children themselves.

Frye says in *Fearful Symmetry* that Blake's idea of a contrary is distinct from his idea of negation; for example the contrary of virtue is a corresponding vice which should exist and is necessary. However, the negation of virtue is an act to restrain it.³⁵ As Frye identifies some of the contraries of Blake, such as 'Devils' and 'Angels', and 'the Reprobate' and 'the Redeemed', he says: "the clash of contraries is [...] an essential part of the 'redemption' of mankind" because, for example, 'the Redeemed' need 'the Reprobate' to bring out the goodness in 'the Redeemed', by challenging them.³⁶ Frye seems to identify Christianity, Atheism and Deism as two contraries and a negation as well, stating that "Blake saw in Deism, not atheism, the really pernicious foe of Christianity".³⁷ Therefore, it seems that according to Frye's interpretation, the contraries are not equal or neutral as such, but one of them does

33 Blake, "The Ecchoing Green", 116.

34 *Ibid.*

35 Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 188.

36 *Ibid.*, 188-189.

37 *Ibid.*, 188.

have an inherent goodness that needs to be brought out by the necessary badness of the other contrary. The truly evil thing is the negation which prevents the goodness from materialising. Hence, if the contraries are Innocence and Experience, is the negation of Innocence an action that restrains it? Similarly, if Experience brings out the the inherent goodness, the essence of Innocence, is the end result Higher Innocence? According to Pagliaro, the concept of Higher Innocence is used by e.g. Damon, Wicksteed, Frye, Gleckner, Erdman, and Bloom to define a stage of spiritual development following Innocence and Experience.³⁸ Gleckner, for example, provides the following interpretation:

The journey through the states involves the fall from unity to division and the rise to reunity, from innocence to experience to a higher innocence; these realms are Blake's main states. To present, or to represent, them in all their peculiarities required something more than mere perception, whether that perception were of sense alone or imaginative. The diverse particulars of *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* mean little in terms of the system without some unifying element to give them a meaning. That element is symbol. In the *Songs of Innocence* the symbol is a child (and mother); in the *Songs of Experience* the symbol is the father-priest-king.³⁹

However, Frye's interpretation of Blake's contraries can be applied so as to understand the interaction between Innocence and Experience as a process that “refines” Innocence. In this case the idea of the soul transitioning from Innocence to Experience becomes problematic, and the idea of two separate states, the one following the other, does not seem logical. The relationship between Innocence and

³⁸ Pagliaro, ix.

³⁹ Robert F. Gleckner, “Blake's Religion of Imagination”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 14, No. 3, (Mar., 1956), 367.

Experience seems to be more of a dialectical one, which would support the view of Blake partly coming from the neo-platonic tradition.⁴⁰

Larrissy argues that Innocence can as a state be seen as limited, and quotes Anne Mellor, who sees the Innocence poems as marking enclosure both in prosody (for example, the repetition in the poems) and with regard to the illustrations.⁴¹ Larrissy argues, referring to Roman Jakobson's study, that the symmetry of the verbal art in the Experience poems reinforces the "stark rigidity" of the illuminations, whereas in the Innocence poems the repetitions and parallelisms could be seen as constricting when they are considered with the frames of the illuminations, which are, though "benignly leafy and springlike", nevertheless frames.⁴²

When attempting to define the concepts of Innocence and Experience as states of the human soul, the poems of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* themselves shed light on the relationship the poems have to these states. Essentially the voices of the narrators, the piper and the bard, express knowledge of the complete vision related to the different states of the soul. Lindsay argues that the *Songs of Experience* "map the postlapsarian realm which the *Songs of Innocence* obliquely criticised", saying that while the *Songs of Experience* are more knowledgeable about reality than the *Songs of Innocence*, the *Songs of Innocence* also possess enough knowledge to criticise it, if indirectly.⁴³ Lindsay also says that the *Songs of*

40 For example, according to Frye, "the lower half of the mystical system of Plotinus is very similar to Blake's" (Frye, *Fearful* 154). Also Kathleen Raine has written about the influence of Plotinus and Thomas Taylor on Blake (Larrissy, 30), and Edward Larrissy suggests "... if [Blake did belong to arcane traditions], we may be missing much in [him] unless we read him in the light of the Hermetic tradition , and of neo-Platonism, Kabbalism and other occult doctrines" (Larrissy, 31).

41 Larrissy, 10.

42 *Ibid.*, 13.

43 *Ibid.*, 43.

Experience stigmatise the idealism and gullibility of the *Songs of Innocence* (although there is some criticism in the *Songs of Innocence*), and that the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience*, when regarded as separate works, do each imply a knowledge of the other state, referring to it.⁴⁴ Robert F. Gleckner, on the other hand, draws attention to the awareness that the states have of each other through the narrators, the piper and the bard, and their different points of view in time, referring to the line in the "Introduction" to the *Songs of Experience*: "Hear the voice of the Bard! / Who Present, Past, and Future, sees;". According to Gleckner, for the piper the past signifies primal unity, the present signifies Innocence and the immediate future signifies Experience, and for the bard the past is Innocence, the present is Experience and the future a Higher Innocence⁴⁵. On the other hand, in Frye's opinion this line "establishes at once that the imagination unifies time by making the present moment real."⁴⁶ In *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye describes Blake's idea of time as definite, beginning at the creation or fall and ending at the apocalypse, so that the fallen world is temporal and the unfallen world is eternal – however not as an extension of time, but as a "spatial [world] from which time has been eliminated".⁴⁷ Therefore, the bard unifying time can only mean that he sees the relationship between the past, the present and the future as non-linear. This makes the idea of the soul's progression through Innocence and Experience seem more like a dialectical process than a linear one.

44 Lindsay, 43.

45 Gleckner, Robert F. "Point of View and Context in Blake's Songs," in *Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Northrop Frye (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Inc., 1966), 11.

46 Frye, *Blake*, 24.

47 Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 46-47.

The narrators' point of view is not restricted in the same way as the point of view of the poems' characters. Gleckner says that “the note of sorrow is never completely absent from the piper's pipe” and “in experience ... the high-pitched joy of innocence is now only a memory” but “within this gloom lies the ember which can leap into flame ... to light the way to the higher innocence”.⁴⁸ On the other hand, for example the voices of the child characters do not all represent a similar point of view, but some are more knowledgeable and cynical than others. For example, the infant voice of “Infant Joy” in *Songs of Innocence*, and the voice in “Infant Sorrow” in *Songs of Experience* are very different in their knowledge of the outside world: the child voice in “Infant Joy” is wrapped up in itself, blissfully unaware of the outside world: “I have no name: / I am but two days old. ... I happy am / Joy is my name”.⁴⁹ The poem describes the simple, all-consuming bliss of the love between a mother and child, and the child is simply “happy”. In stark contrast to this, the poem “Infant Sorrow” is a poem where the voice of the infant expresses a painful awareness of the outside world, describing the shock of being born (“Into the *dangerous* world I leapt”)⁵⁰, struggling against being swaddled, and, finally, giving up the hopeless attempts to break free, gives in and wearily *sulks* on her mother's breast.⁵¹ It is clear that this character has a knowledge of the world that essentially brings her pain.

Without considering all the implications of the illuminations, it could be argued that although it seems logical to equate Innocence with childhood, naïveté, and ignorance, thus seeing it as being less and lacking in knowledge, and to equate

48 Gleckner, *Point of View*, 11.

49 Blake, “Infant Joy”, 118.

50 Blake, “Infant Sorrow”, 217, italics mine.

51 *Ibid.*, italics mine.

Experience with adulthood and wisdom, and somehow more complete than Innocence, both states are in fact incomplete, and thus, restricted. Innocence as a state is incomplete because of the view that reality is restricted by the illusions that the mind (and soul) hangs on to in order to protect itself – the mind is aware of the reality, but is in denial. Experience is restricted by the pain that knowledge brings. In other words, in the state of Experience, one sees things more truthfully, but this state is almost as if incapacitated by the pain of reality. If the state of Innocence can be seen as a state where truth is shrouded by self-fabricated illusions, there is still a promise of a future state: in the last poem of the *Songs of Innocence*, “The Voice of the Ancient Bard”, the Bard (the narrator that we meet in the *Songs of Experience*) from the future, asks the “youth of delight” to “come hither”.⁵² In this poem, the Bard is making a promise about the future (“the opening morn / Image of truth reborn”) that presents the idea of the future as a state where there is no hiding of the truth, no “endless maze” of folly, no “tangled roots” that “perplex her ways”.⁵³

The state of Experience can be likened to a state of passive contempt; the harsh reality is seen clearly, stripped of all the illusions of the state of Innocence, but the state of Experience at times seems static, hopeless. However, the progression towards the state of higher Innocence can be seen in some poems, one example being “The Little Girl Lost”, which begins as follows: “Children of the Future Age / Reading this indignant page / Know that in a former time / Love! Sweet Love! Was thought a crime”.⁵⁴ Here it is clear that the narrator is referring to a brighter future,

⁵² Blake, “The Voice of the Ancient Bard”, 126.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

where Love is free. Likewise Innocence may be a state that enables the person to have some joy and comfort in not acknowledging the whole truth, but it is also a state that not only can make people accept being exploited, but also enable those who exploit them to quiet their conscience. Experience, on the other hand, is the state that enables people to see the reality – however, this state is hindered by bitterness that cripples the subjects of the Experience poems - the bitterness and anger is truthful, but not productive in the way that the state of higher innocence aspires to be – see chapters 3.1.1. *Child labour in the Songs* and 3.1.3. *The charity school system and “Holy Thursday”* on how the states of Innocence and Experience can be interpreted in “The Chimney Sweeper” and “Holy Thursday” poems, both of which have corresponding “Innocence” and “Experience” versions.

In the “Introduction” to *Songs of Innocence*, the piper tells us how he sees a child on a cloud. This child, who could be seen as a divine creature or even Christ, asks the piper, laughing, to play a song about a Lamb for him. Then, upon hearing the piper play, he cries. Lastly, after asking the piper to sing the song once more, the child cries with joy. This could be seen as outlining the theme for the entire book, or just the *Songs of Innocence* book. If the child is seen as Christ (which is not entirely without problems because of the way that the child seems to progress from one emotion to another prompted by the piper's songs), the “Introduction” can naturally be seen as describing a kind of divine inspiration which has prompted the “Piper” to sit himself down and pick up a pen, or the author of the book having been inspired by Christ himself to write these songs “In a book that all may read”,⁵⁵ in order to educate

55 Blake, 111.

“all”, about matters of the human condition. However, as mentioned before, it is difficult to argue that the child here represents Christ, because, after all, the child is as if in an innocent, ignorant state, obliviously happy on a cloud, until he meets the piper. Therefore the child could be more easily seen as to be symbolising the state of Innocence, a state which is more a state of denial than a state of ignorance, and the “Introduction” to be describing how these *Songs* will affect that state.

If we assume that Blake's “Introduction” introduces the *Songs of Innocence* only, therefore relating to the state of Innocence (which seems very likely considering the way the books were published), we can see this progression from laughing to crying to crying with joy as describing the way that the *Songs of Innocence* at first glance could be seen as a collection of “happy songs”, which is how they are described in the “Introduction” (“And I wrote my happy songs / Every child may joy to hear”),⁵⁶ but, naturally, these songs are mostly anything but happy. This could be interpreted as a kind of satirical reference to how “happy songs for children” were seen in religious literature for children, the kind that had been around since the Reformation,⁵⁷ which typically included songs that were all about educating the child to fear God and know its place in the society rather than being at all concerned with any actual happiness. Alternately, this can simply be seen as a kind of a way to inform the reader of the purpose, and, not insignificantly, the importance of this work, as the description of the divine inspiration in the form of the Christ-like child does seem to make the author seem to be likening himself to a prophet-like visionary with a divine purpose. Considering that although in the “Introduction” these *Songs* are described as “... my

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Cunningham, 69.

happy songs / Every child may joy to hear”,⁵⁸ it becomes clear to the reader that the actual content is aimed at an adult reader, and, therefore, this "Introduction" puts the *Songs of Innocence* more in the context of a satirical pastiche than a genuine children's' book.

There are allusions in Blake's "Introduction" to the fact that the potential reader of the *Songs of Innocence* expecting religious songs for children is likely to be in for a surprise, these “happy songs” challenging the reader with partly hidden criticism and satire. For example, it is described in the "Introduction" how the child, in a very child-like way, repeatedly asks the piper to first pipe a “song about a Lamb”⁵⁹ twice, then asks the piper to sing for him. Upon hearing the song piped for the second time, he cries. But although the song makes him cry, he wants to hear it again. It is as if the child is overcome by an emotion, that, although upsetting, leaves him wanting to hear more. This change in the tone of the "Introduction" seems to allude directly to the significance of the *Songs of Innocence* – that they are not for entertainment, but for education about matters of fundamental importance. The reader may not find these songs pleasant, but they might challenge his mind. On the other hand, according to Gleckner, the Songs were not written for either our entertainment or education as much as they were written “for our salvation”.⁶⁰ Therefore, knowledge (Experience) is necessary, although not pleasant. Also, in the last stanza of the poem, it says: “And I made a rural pen / And I stain'd the water clear”,⁶¹ this idea of the author (the piper who becomes a writer) “staining the clear water” with his ink is a symbol of a writer

58 Blake, 111.

59 *Ibid.*

60 Gleckner, 10.

61 Blake, 111.

disturbing the status quo with his writings, turning the “hollow reed” into an implement with which he exposes the hypocrisy ingrained in society. Or, in the state of Innocence the water is clear, meaning that the soul's perception of things seems clear to itself, because it is incapable of seeing beyond appearances, unlike in Experience, where “perception transcends appearance”.⁶² In Experience, the clear water is tinted with knowledge, and the soul is now aware of what lies beyond.

2.1.2. Childhood vs. the states of Innocence and Experience

It seems logical to equate Innocence with childhood. However, in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Experience does not equal adulthood, and the relationship between Innocence and childhood is not straightforward. Children can be robbed of their Innocence prematurely, but this does not mean that they should not become familiar with Experience at all. As Cook says, In *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* Blake developed a framework which *reveals* that sentimental, aesthetic pleasure, derived from scenes of sweeps in heaven or charity children in church, may be based on illusions about the social relations which produce charity children or child labour⁶³. There is clearly a sense of seeing things for what they really are in *Songs of Experience*. Those in positions of authority, or even simply those who are fortunate enough never to have known hard physical labour, hunger, and harsh living conditions, might take pleasure in taking pity on, for example, charity school children.

⁶² Larrissy, 43.

⁶³ Jonathan Cook, “Romantic Literature and Childhood,” in *Romanticism and Ideology. Studies in English Writing 1765-1830*, ed. David Aers, Jonathan Cook, David Punter (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 49.

Pity is more about feeling pleased with oneself than it is about genuine concern. The children, instead of being valued as they are, only exist as objects, exploited, controlled, repressed, but never left alone to be children.

Pitying unfortunate members of society while accepting the social conditions that contribute to their misfortune is one of the underlying themes in the “Holy Thursday” poems. In the “Holy Thursday” poem of *Songs of Innocence*, the reader is presented with a sentimental image of poor children singing hymns like lambs, and the poem ends with the following line. “Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door”⁶⁴ the relationship between the less fortunate and those who pity them, is one of power. Pity, compassion, even charity, are seen as commendable things, things that will get one a place in heaven. But ultimately the motivation for this kind of charity is thoroughly selfish.

Apart from the need to feel pious, this sort of charity or compassion also stems from a need to control. In *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, the relationship between adults and children is equal to the relationship of the priest to his congregation, of the King to his subjects. For example, in “The Chimney Sweeper” of *Songs of Experience*:

A little black thing among the snow:
 Crying “weep! ‘weep!’ in notes of woe!
 “Where are thy father & mother? say?”
 “They are both gone up to the church to pray.
 “Because I was happy upon the heath.
 “And smil'd among the winters snow:
 “They clothed me in the clothes of death.
 “And taught me to sing the notes of woe.
 “And because I am happy. & dance & sing.

64 Blake, “Holy Thursday”, 121-122.

“They think they have done me no injury;
 “And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King
 “Who make up a heaven of our misery.”⁶⁵

In this poem, the chimney sweeper character says “They think they have done me no injury, / And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King / Who make up a heaven of our misery.”⁶⁶ Here it is clear that the power that the parents have over the child is essentially damaging. Something that turns the happy, smiling child into “a little black thing” who is dressed in “the clothes of death”. In other words, it is a destructive power that basically robs its object of life and joy. But why? In the poem the parents who have destroyed their child praise God, the priest and the King, “who make up a heaven of our misery”. One interpretation is that the parents more than likely benefit from the child’s suffering, possibly having sold him to a master sweep – but as long as they go to church and praise God, they feel pious. Of course the parents agree with a priest who makes them believe that what they have done is necessary.

In light of the way that power-relationships are described in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, it seems that while childhood is described as a state of vulnerability comparable to that of the lower classes, childhood is also set apart from these. There is an untainted quality to childhood that the harlot and soldier of “London” do not possess. The harlot and the soldier are repression and exploitation incarnate, and have passed the point of no return. But the children of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* have a longing for the kind of life that a child should

65 Blake, “The Chimney Sweeper”, 212.

66 *Ibid.*

lead. They are wistful about running in fields, playing in the sun and singing happily. They feel wronged, but they are also aware of what they should have, and often describe what their ideal state is like. For example, in "The School Boy" it is very clearly described what the child of the poem loves, and how it is taken away from him:

I love to rise in a summer morn,
 When the birds sing on every tree;
 The distant huntsman winds his horn,
 And the sky-lark sings with me.
 O! what sweet company.
 But to go to school in a summer morn,
 O! it drives all joy away;
 Under a cruel eye outworn,
 The little ones spend the day,
 In sighing and dismay.⁶⁷

Donald A. Dike argues that the states of Innocence and Experience are not separate states, but "inhere in one another, and neither can be denied."⁶⁸ Dike seems to see the states as perhaps "two sides of the same coin", as if they are two ways of looking at the same thing. When it comes to childhood, Dike seems to look at the idea of guardianship in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, whether provided by a father, a symbolic shepherd, or a priest, as potentially either necessary or dangerous. Interestingly, Dike underlines the fact that in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* the mother is often presented as a protecting guardian, and the father as a potentially repressive one. Dike says: "Between father and child, the mother is a kind of protective baffle that soothes or explains anxieties away."⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Blake, "The School Boy", 124.

⁶⁸ Donald A. Dike, "The Difficult Innocence: Blake's Songs and Pastoral." *ELH*, Vol. 28, No. 4, (Dec. 1961), 374.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 367.

Dike analyses the idea of a guardian in relation to the pastoral themes of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as follows:

“Once invited into the pastoral landscape, the guardian, however well-disposed (for his motives are usually good), is a possible cause of repression. There is a risky double-edge to the idea of guarding, and even when this function is discreetly performed, it is likely to meet some resistance.”⁷⁰

Dike also refers to the “Little Boy Lost” poems, and says that “A fear precisely of getting lost, of being too free, inheres in the state of innocence, a threat to its serenity and survival.”⁷¹ It is an interesting idea that guardianship is seen both as necessary protection as well as potential repression and exploitation.

Cook, on the other hand, argues that repression is a central theme in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* poems. Cook says “... the key term in the dialectic of the 'Nurse's Songs' is repression”⁷² and that “[t]aken together, the ['Nurse's Song'] poems are like the terms of an equation as yet unsolved”.⁷³ This could be seen as supporting Dike’s argument, and as Cook discusses “The Little Girl Lost” and “The Little Girl Found” poems, the idea of the guardian as a repressive force is there. According to Cook, the poems are about the sexual awakening of a young girl, repressed by the fear of her parents. He says: “Lyca's sexuality depends on her conception of her parents. The inhibition caused by the image of her parents' anxiety is surpassed by the child imagining them anew in a way that brings them into a less fearful relation with the forces of desire.”⁷⁴ It seems that Cook is arguing that the

70 *Ibid.*, 364.

71 *Ibid.*, 361.

72 Cook, 51.

73 *Ibid.*

74 *Ibid.*

repressive guardianship is lessened by the child's own imagination. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the repression imposed by guardians in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is another way of describing the "mind-forg'd manacles" of "London". Apart from physically forcing children or other vulnerable characters to submission, there are much more efficient ways of controlling them. Authority figures protect their subjects, and thus repress them.

2.2. Ideas of childhood in late eighteenth-century Britain – ideological and economic background

In the eighteenth century, the idea of childhood became a subject for political and intellectual debate in western society more than before. Where before the concern for children had been more about attempting to weed out the evil from the child, by the late eighteenth century, when Blake published the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Enlightenment ideas and the fact that the views on childhood were gradually becoming more secularised, caused more abstract ideas on education and childhood to become the subject of public and political debate. According to Cook, the emergence of different secular models of the self and the competition between these new models and the still persisting idea of childhood that was based on religion is reflected in the eighteenth -century discussions of children and childhood and in the way that these discussions have a particularly intense focus: the exploitation of child labour.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Cook, 46.

Hugh Cunningham outlines the historical background of the political and religious ideas of childhood in Europe since 1500 to the present, stating that between 1500 and 1900 a heightened sense of the importance of childhood gradually developed in western society. According to Cunningham, this manifested itself in three ways: the belief in the importance of early education, the concern to save a child's soul, and the growing interest in learning.⁷⁶

Cunningham states that each of these ideas can be linked to major movements such as the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the Enlightenment, and romanticism. Thus they can be associated with the influence of Erasmus, Locke, Rousseau and Wordsworth.⁷⁷ Erasmus' humanist ideas stressed the importance of early education as the means to implant the "seeds of piety in the tender heart".⁷⁸ Erasmus did not believe in original sin, which in the midst of Reformation set him ideologically somewhat apart from the Catholicism which he otherwise held with.⁷⁹

According to Cunningham, along with Protestantism came the idea of the family as a miniature church, with the father, being the head of the family, also being responsible for the religious and moral education of his family.⁸⁰ Cunningham says that for Puritans, baptism (unlike for Catholics) was not enough to ensure salvation, but faith was necessary, and as children could die at a very young age, it was of utmost importance that they received religious education as early as possible.⁸¹

76 Cunningham, 41.

77 *Ibid.*, 46.

78 *Ibid.*

79 *Ibid.*

80 *Ibid.*, 50.

81 *Ibid.*, 49.

Linda A. Pollock states that although parental care appears to not have changed much between 1500 and to date, in her study, which is mostly based on private diaries as the primary source for the findings, she found that abstract ideas of childhood and parental care were increasingly emphasised from the seventeenth century onwards. According to Pollock, this abstract thinking first appeared among the seventeenth century Puritans, and then increased in the eighteenth century.⁸²

Jonathan Cook argues that interest in the subject of childhood in late eighteenth-century England indicates the long-term trends within intellectual culture; the fact that secularisation was taking place along with the arrival of new secular models of the self, and converging and conflicting with “the still persisting version of childhood derived from theology”, meaning and idea of childhood based on seeing children as being damaged by Original Sin.⁸³

According to Jonathan Cook, there were social and economical contradictions in eighteenth-century England that also related to children; as children of the poor were being exploited more and more in hard and menial labour, and yet the more socially privileged were enjoying more opportunities for happiness than before. Therefore Cook sees childhood as a particularly sensitive register for class interests behind attitudes towards children.⁸⁴

According to Clark Nardinelli, “many of the social changes accompanying industrialisation [in Britain] aroused the indignation of contemporary critics and later

82 Linda A, Pollock, *Forgotten Children : Parent-child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983 (1985)), 269.

83 Cook, 46.

84 *Ibid.*

historians.”⁸⁵ Nardinelli argues that while the Factory Acts have traditionally been praised for ending child labour, it was in actual fact already declining by then, due to rising income and technological change. There were stern contemporary critics, of which Nardinelli cites Richard Oastler, who compares child labourers to Negro slaves:

Poor infants!, ye are indeed sacrificed at the shrine of avarice, without even the solace of the Negro *slave*; ye are no more than he is, *free agents*; ye are compelled to work as long as the necessity of your needy parents may require, or the cold blooded avarice of your worse than barbarian masters *may demand!*⁸⁶

According to Hugh Cunningham, the key to the changes in the conceptions of childhood that happened during the eighteenth century was a long-term secularisation of attitudes towards childhood and children.⁸⁷ He goes on to add, however, that there were many exceptions to this generalisation, but that there was a long-term, if interrupted, decline in belief in original sin, and that along with that decline, children went from being thought of as “corrupt and innately evil to being angels”.⁸⁸

Cunningham summarises this fundamental change as being basically a “shift from a prime focus on the spiritual health of the child to a concern for the development of the individual child”.⁸⁹

John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are seen as central influences in the process in which the eighteenth-century attitudes towards childhood changed. Locke

85 Clark Nardinelli, *Child Labor and the Factory Acts*. *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (Dec., 1980), Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Economic History Association. 739-755.

86 Nardinelli, 739

87 Cunningham, 61.

88 *Ibid.*, 63

89 *Ibid.*, p. 62

was active early in the eighteenth century and Rousseau around the middle of it. But how much did the writings of these two theorists actually influence parents? Cunningham thinks that although Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (published in 1693) is commonly seen as a classic, the ideas it presented were in fact not new. According to Cunningham, the book (which is a collection of letters rather than a continuous or consistent book) is actually a fairly typical representative of the Renaissance genre of the book of the courtier, and is focused on producing the model English gentleman.⁹⁰ Cunningham argues that the educational ideas Locke presents in this book were every bit as conservative as they were innovative.⁹¹ However, he does say that although Locke's book was all about the obsession with the importance of bringing up an individual who conforms to the role of a perfect representative of his or her rank, Locke did have an original idea that was actually revolutionary: the recognition of, if not exactly emphasis on, the individuality of each child.⁹²

It is clear that Blake was well familiar with the philosophy of Locke, as he refers to Locke several times in the poems "The Song of Los", "Milton", and "Jerusalem". The tone of these references suggests that Locke was an influence on Blake. Blake was also familiar with Rousseau, as he criticised Rousseau in "The Song of Los", "Milton", and "Jerusalem", attacking the Natural Religion of Rousseau and other Deists.

According to Cunningham, there is plenty of evidence that people aspired to bring up their children on Rousseau's principles.⁹³ There were at least two hundred

90 Cunningham, 62

91 *Ibid.*

92 *Ibid.*

93 *Ibid.*, 68.

treatises on childhood published in Britain by the end of the eighteenth century, all influenced by Rousseau's *Émile*.⁹⁴ Cunningham also lists several examples of disastrous pedagogical experiments conducted by parents who were influenced by Rousseau's theories, which made it easier for Rousseau's critics to dismiss his theories.⁹⁵

According to Cunningham, although Locke condemned severe corporal punishment, he allowed its legitimacy for children who displayed “obstinacy” or “rebellion”.⁹⁶

Cunningham argues that Locke thought that a child has to “submit his Will to the Reason of others”. However, according to him this was less the puritan idea of breaking the Will and more the idea of the child as a grown-up having a will that would succumb to his own reason (once he has it).⁹⁷ According to Cunningham, this seems to lay a blueprint for a man to repress his desires.⁹⁸ Cunningham goes on to add that Locke believed that a child is a *tabula rasa*, or a blank slate, but only when it comes to ideas.⁹⁹

Linda A. Pollock describes how in the eighteenth century children were referred to as innocent for the first time.¹⁰⁰ She suggests that it may be possible that this was either as a reaction to the concept of children being depraved, or due to the influence of Locke and Rousseau, as Locke criticised the doctrine of Original Sin and

94 *Ibid.*, 68.

95 Cunningham, 68.

96 Cunningham, 63.

97 *Ibid.*

98 *Ibid.*

99 *Ibid.*

100 Pollock, 107.

Rousseau explicitly described children as innocent,¹⁰¹ Pollock also describes how Locke emphasised a parent's responsibility and significance for the development of a child, whereas Rousseau suggested an approach that kept a child's development free from adult intervention.¹⁰²

Whether Blake was familiar with Rousseau's and Locke's educational theories is not clear from his works. However, their theories were popular at the time and Blake certainly read some of Locke's and Rousseau's works. For example Frye states that "Blake had carefully read and annotated Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* in his youth"¹⁰³, and "Newton & Locke" and "Voltaire & Rousseau" are objects of Blake's derision in the poems "Song of Los", "Milton" and "Jerusalem". Frances Ferguson sees Blake as a critic of Rousseau's educational theories: "The controversial aspect of Rousseau's scheme, as William Blake was quick to see, was that it went well past the traditional bounds of the empiricist project of expecting children to come to agreement with adults about how objects existed in the world".¹⁰⁴ James H. Warner sees Blake as a critic of Rousseau's Deism but seems to assume that Blake was familiar with *Émile* and criticised the discussion of religion in it.¹⁰⁵

101 *Ibid.*

102 *Ibid.*, 120.

103 Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 14.

104 Frances Ferguson, "The Afterlife of the Romantic Child: Rousseau and Kant Meet Deleuze and Guattari". *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102:1, (Winter 2003), 216.

105 James H. Warner, "Émile in Eighteenth-Century England". *PMLA*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Sep., 1944), 785-786.

3. Two readings on the childhood theme in Blake's Songs

3.1. Socio-political reading

3.1.1. Child labour in the *Songs*

The "Chimney Sweeper" poems are the poems in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* that can quite easily be seen as taking part in the discourse of the development in the ideas of childhood that was taking place in the late eighteenth century, and especially with the political debate on the increasing use of child labour brought by the industrial revolution. According to M. Dorothy George, the practice of using very young children (usually boys) as chimney sweepers, or so-called climbing boys, had been around "probably since the use of chimneys became general".¹⁰⁶ However, it was not until 1760 that there began to exist any kind of compassion or political outrage for the cause of these children. According to George, along with link-boys (boys who carried torches for pedestrians and horse carriages for a fee) and shoe-blacks, they had been considered as "villains ripening for the gallows".¹⁰⁷ According to Martin K. Nurmi, even Charles Lamb, who was sympathetic towards the plight of these children, could not help regarding them as "not quite the same as other people".¹⁰⁸ What is particularly significant is the attitude of the church towards the sweeps; the sweeps were not welcome in church. Nurmi quotes Hanway's account of sweeps being driven out of church by a beadle shouting "What have

106 M. Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1966) 242.

107 *Ibid.*

108 Martin K. Nurmi, *Fact and Symbol in 'The Chimney Sweeper' of Blake's Songs of Innocence* in *Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Northrop Frye (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 18.

chimney sweepers to do in a Church?.”¹⁰⁹ According to Cunningham, the industrial revolution brought along new kinds of work for children (earlier children had worked more on farms whereas with the industrial revolution children started to work more in factories and mines) and also working conditions that were bad enough to cause such problems for the working children that people gradually started to pay attention to the issue.¹¹⁰ Eventually the new enlightenment ideas of childhood also came into play in policy-making. From about 1780 onwards some people actually started questioning the widely accepted assumption that children of the poor should start working at a very early age.¹¹¹ Already in 1766 Jonas Hanway published *An Earnest Appeal for Mercy to the Children of the Poor*, where he urged that when young children were apprenticed they should not be forced to do unpleasant work, and that the work should not be too hard on their bodies and minds.¹¹² Hanway also took up the cause of the climbing boys, or chimney sweeps, and published *A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweepers* in 1785. This not only brought into attention the cruelties inflicted on these children, but also created an entire genre of literature around the subject matter. An example of this, *The Chimney Sweeper's Friend and the Climbing Boy's Album* was published by James Montgomery in 1785 (The “Chimney Sweeper” poem from Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* was included in that book).

The actual realities of the practice of children of the poor (often also orphaned or abandoned) being apprenticed at a very young age to work as chimney sweeps has

109 Nurmi, 18.

110 Cunningham, 138.

111 *Ibid.*

112 *Ibid.*

been described by Martin K. Nurmi, who says that the Chimney Sweeper poems were written by Blake around the time when there was much public discussion of the plight of the climbing boys, and reformers such as the above-mentioned Jonas Hanway were already publicising their atrocious working conditions and treatment.¹¹³

According to Nurmi, when the chimney sweeper in “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Innocence* describes how he was “sold” by his father before his “tongue / Could scarcely cry “ ‘weep! ‘weep! ‘weep! ‘weep!’”,¹¹⁴ it is indeed a realistic image: children were apprenticed as sweeps in return for a small cash payment to the guardian, as early as at the age of four.¹¹⁵ The punctuation of the lines quoted above varies, but in this version the apostrophes before and exclamation marks after each “weep” emphasise the reference to the chimney sweepers’ street cry “Sweep! Sweep!” advertising their trade, so that the ambiguous [weep/sweep] cry implies the chimney sweeper to have been too young to pronounce the word “sweep” properly when he was apprenticed. Lindsay refers to the ambiguity of the line, and quotes Wicksteed, who agrees that Blake must have heard this sound frequently in the streets of his youth.¹¹⁶ The fact that the word is repeated, implies, according to Pagliaro, the chimney sweeper’s psychological concentration on the painful things that his life has so far consisted of (mother dies, father betrays him by selling him) (Pagliaro, 20).¹¹⁷ It does seem that the repetition of the ambiguous sweep/weep emphasises the relentless grind of this boy’s life from which there is no escape.

113 Nurmi, 15.

114 Blake, 117.

115 Nurmi, 16

116 Lindsay, 35.

117 Harold Pagliaro, *Selfhood and Redemption in Blake's Songs* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1987), 20.

Nelson Hilton refers to the chimney sweeps as “the chimneys' weepers”, and analyses the word “weep” further, comparing it to Jesus' words on the Road to Calvary, when he said: “weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children”.¹¹⁸

Pagliario also interprets the last line of the first stanza: “ So your chimneys I sweep, & in soot I sleep.” as being accusatory in tone: your chimneys.¹¹⁹ The compact biography of the chimney sweeper contained in the first four lines of the poem is a journey of loss (“When my mother died I was very young”), betrayal (“my Father sold me”) and exploitation (“weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!”), ending on the reader's doorstep (“your chimneys I sweep”).¹²⁰ It underlines one of the themes of the poem: how exploitation, resulting from lack of love, is condoned by society, and why the reader should start paying attention to this.

The loss of the mother, the protective guardian, and the betrayal of the father bring us back to the theme of guardianship, as discussed in chapter 2.1.2. *Childhood vs. the states of Innocence and Experience*. As mentioned, Dike ties the protection of the mother with Innocence, and the rather unreliable and possibly repressive guardianship of the father with Experience.¹²¹ Dike describes the chimney sweeper's situation as follows “orphaned of his mother, that recurrently saving presence, and so defenseless against the callous selfishness of the predictably untrustworthy father”.¹²²

118 Nelson Hilton, *Literal Imagination: Blake's Vision of Words* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 256.

119 Pagliaro, 20.

120 Blake, “The Chimney Sweeper”, 117.

121 Dike, 367.

122 *Ibid.*, 371.

As mentioned above, Hilton interprets the usage of the word “weep” as an allusion to Jesus's words in the Bible. Another comparison to Jesus can also be found in the second stanza of the Innocence poem where it is described how little Tom Dacre cries when his white hair, “That curl'd like a lamb's back” is shaved.¹²³ The white, curly, lamb-like hair that is shaved off could be seen as an allusion to Christ and one of the symbols of the transition that the boys are forced to go through, from a pure white lamb to a shorn creature covered in black, the colour of the devil. This process of subhumanisation of these children is a powerful image of a society that prefers to explain the atrocities it condones to itself by turning the children it exploits into such wretched beings they are no longer recognisable as human. According to Nurmi, Tom's haircut is a ritual haircut, symbolising the transition “like in prison or army”.¹²⁴ Nurmi also points out that contrary to an ordinary child's tears that come from fearing the unknown, Tom fears what he knows is coming.¹²⁵ In this scene the narrator, a sweep senior to Tom, comforts him by saying that when his head is shaved, his hair will not be spoilt by the soot. This seems to be suggesting that when the hair is taken away, and ceases to be in this new world of blackness that the child is entering, it is somehow saved and stays intact.

This brings us to the next scene of Tom Dacre's dream, where first he sees thousands of sweepers “lock'd up in coffins of black”,¹²⁶ which quite clearly symbolise the children's' current miserable existence imprisoned in blackness in every way imaginable, from being forced to climb into black, confined spaces to literally being

123 *Ibid.*

124 Nurmi, 17.

125 *Ibid.*, 15.

126 Blake, 117.

imprisoned in their own blackened bodies, the layer of soot that is never washed off not only posing the threat of dying from cancer but also marking them as filthy, subhuman creatures. Thus, the blackness of the chimney, of the body, and of the bags of soot they sleep on forms their prison, and quite literally the coffin they might lie in after death, in more ways than one. However, the chimney sweeper's conditions are so miserable that death might seem to be almost a release to these boys. Therefore, it could be argued that while Tom cries because he knows that in addition to the horrors of his new life, he is very likely to die an early death, it does seem that after the older sweep's comforting words about his hair, he has a wonderful dream that could be seen as a representation of heaven. As the white hair is not spoilt when it is cut off, but rather exists in its clean state in a pure, unspoilt place, removed from the wretched reality of the chimney sweeps, similarly death can be seen as the release from the prison that is life as a chimney sweep. This brings us to the conclusion that the coffins of the third stanza are not only symbols of chimneys or soot-covered bodies, but also actual coffins. When the coffins are opened with the bright key in the fourth stanza, the sweeps run to the river to wash themselves and "shine in the Sun."¹²⁷ In the fifth stanza, their bodies are described as being "naked & white", as if the layer of soot were a cocoon, which, once washed off, would reveal their bodies to be as white and new as a newborn baby's. With their "bags left behind", they leave the unbearable burden of their lives as sweeps behind them and rise upon clouds as if in heaven. This interpretation seems even more natural when in the last two lines of the stanza, the Angel tells Tom that "if he is a good boy, / He'd

¹²⁷ Blake, "The Chimney Sweeper", 118.

have God for his father, & never want joy.”. Having God for a father also seems like a clear allusion to heaven. But the love of God is conditional: to receive it the chimney sweep must be a good boy.

The most intriguing part of the poem is the last two lines, where the narrator's voice concludes: “Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm / So if all do their duty they need not fear harm”.¹²⁸ This has been interpreted in many different ways. According to Nurmi, doing one's duty means “primarily going up chimneys without having to be forced”, and he associated the “harm” with the punishment reserved for those sweeps who refused to climb. He also makes a conclusion that the line could be taken to mean that if one endures the “present inhuman condition, sustained by ... glimpses of Innocence”, one may be able to keep one's humanity.¹²⁹ However, while it seems natural that this would be the kind of reasoning a little child, facing such atrocious conditions and cruelty, would use to explain the newly cruel and cold world to himself, when interpreting the poem in the “prophetic” context of the *Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*, this seems too simple an interpretation; as if one interprets Blake's vision as being one of transition from Innocence to Experience toward a “higher Innocence”, the last lines become more a description of the state of mind of the chimney sweep, while parodying the indoctrination that has conditioned him to be an obedient slave. As mentioned, as a child's reasoning it would seem logical. However, the sweep is very much sustained by the “glimpses of Innocence”, as Nurmi says, in the form of the dream. Cook, on the other hand, argues that the chimney-sweeper of the *Innocence* poem is “revealed as a smug ideologue who

128 *Ibid.*

129 Nurmi, 21.

inducts his fellows into an official morality which denies their real interests".¹³⁰ However, rather than seeing the chimney sweeper as a "smug ideologue", it could be argued that the chimney-sweeper is sooner a victim of the kind of conditioning that glorifies suffering and the idea of "duty" or being a good boy, submitting to oppression by those more powerful (in other words, better) than oneself (even if one is killed prematurely in the process) because he believes that he will have his release in heaven. Of course, the chimney sweep has no choice; he does not willingly condone being exploited, but has been conditioned to do so. But when it comes to duty, it becomes clear that "all" are not doing their share. In fact the chimney sweeps are the ones who, betrayed by adults, are left having to bear the burden of duty while adults exploit them. This interpretation makes the chimney sweeps seem almost Christ-like in their martyrdom.

Considering the last lines of the poem with regard to guardianship, the chimney sweeper, whose father sold him (the guardian who betrays and exploits) is given a promise of a "surrogate" father, which Dike describes elsewhere as follows:

"The sense [...] that the guardianship of the earthly father is at best transient has to be transcended by the vision of a permanent surrogate, God, whose sole function is protective."¹³¹

However, the promise given to the chimney sweeper is conditional; in order to have God for his father, he must be a good boy. The promise of the guardianship of God has a sense of potential repression and abandonment. Of the last line of "The Chimney Sweeper" (So if all do their duty they need not fear harm) Dike says: "It equates the expectations of the provisionally promised God-father with the interests

130Cook, 47.
131 Dike, 361.

of the sweeps' masters.¹³² One possible reading could be that those in a vulnerable position in society can also be vulnerable to the kind of religious indoctrination that promotes inequality.

The last line of the poem does not include a promise of no harm, only that there is no need to fear it – after all, harm will unavoidably come the chimney-sweeps' way. The promise of celestial life can on a more symbolic level be seen as a glimpse of Higher Innocence, which cannot be obtained without interaction with Experience, which is clearly present in the poem. On the other hand, restricting the Innocence of children is evil, and the positive aspects of the poem could be seen as the Innocence of the sweepers prevailing despite their being restricted, locked up and tied down in every possible way, and their souls are progressing towards a Higher Innocence.

The poem can also be interpreted as describing a coping strategy that the child's mind creates in order for the child to be able to survive without going out of his mind. This brings us back to the ideas of Innocence and Experience. The fact that knowledge of the painful reality does exist also in the state of Innocence is implied in the way that the sweep's life is described in the opening stanza, and in how this knowledge is causing Tom Dacre to cry out in fear of what awaits him when his hair is cut off, this making the state of Innocence, with its illusory comforts, seem more like a coping strategy of the mind of the unloved child rather than mere ignorance or inexperience. While the dream sequence of the Innocence poem clearly describes how things should be, and could be, if love did exist in society, the promise is just an illusion: the lack of love in society results in oppression and exploitation, and

132 Dike, 372-373.

damages people, creating the “mind-forged manacles” of “London” that imprison their bodies and souls (which Blake believed to be one according to the Marriage of Heaven and Hell, where he says: “Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of the Soul discern'd by the five Senses,...”).¹³³ Those who exploit and oppress are restricted by those mind-forged manacles as much as those who are being exploited. The role that the church and state play in this is significant. The line “if all do their duty they need not fear harm” could be interpreted as bitter parody from Blake, echoing religious indoctrination, recited as an automatic response, emphasising the denial that the child's psyche protects itself with. Porter Williams sees this the line as something Blake wrote to emphasise the atrocity of the practice: “The naïve sincerity of the child is surely meant to intensify the disturbing pathos of the situation”.¹³⁴ However, more than the child, the true fools in this poem are those who exploit these children or condone it (“your chimneys I sweep”) and then protect themselves with their hypocrisy that they base on religious beliefs, but which ultimately springs from a more pragmatic and sinister point of view: that as long as the status quo is convenient for those who have power, it is acceptable to sacrifice the health and lives of children and to consider them sub-human and to be destined for a life of vagrancy and crime, best put to work so as not to become vagrants and delinquents.

When being turned into slaves, the children are given attributes that ease justification of their exploitation. The climbing boys were in rags, filthy and covered in

133 Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” 147.

134 Porter Williams Jr. “Duty’ in Blake’s ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ of Songs of Innocence”, *English Language Notes* 12. (1974), 92-96.

soot and were often forced to beg for their food and encouraged to steal by their master, which is why they were considered a nuisance and much in the same class as other social outcasts like beggars and thieves.¹³⁵

The “Chimney Sweeper” poem that can be found in the *Songs of Experience* is presented by a narrator's voice as well as the voice of a chimney sweeper character who is quite different from the chimney sweeper of the Innocence poem. This poem very clearly criticises the kind of hypocrisy and oppression practiced by religious institutions and the government, essentially seen as one and the same, the “Priest and King”.¹³⁶

An “Act for the better regulation of chimney sweepers, and their Apprentices”, which stipulated a number of things to be improved in the apprenticeship of chimney sweepers (for example, for the apprentices to be washed every week and not to be forced to go up a lit chimney) was passed in 1788, but it was a weak act and difficult to enforce, which meant that little actually changed.¹³⁷ The law for the complete abolishment of the practice of apprenticing children to chimney sweeps was held up in the House of Lords for over a hundred years from when the campaigning for it started (when a letter, probably written by Jonas Hanway was published in the *Public Advertiser* in 1760¹³⁸), until it was finally passed in both Houses (1875). The bills that were passed before that in the House of Commons (in 1804, 1818, and 1819) had all been defeated by the Lords, for reasons such as them not wanting to infringe upon property rights (which would have been caused by the fact that

135 George, 239.

136 Blake, “The Chimney Sweeper”, 212.

137 Nurmi, 22.

138 George, 239.

chimneys would need to be changed to enable mechanical sweeping).¹³⁹ According to Gardner, “Blake wrote the sweeper verses for *Innocence* against the background of the culminating Act of a long campaign to bring some protection to the climbing boys ... He wrote the poem for *Experience* as the master sweeps contrived to circumvent the same Act in the years after 1788”¹⁴⁰. Therefore, it can be said that the redemption in the *Innocence* poem possibly also reflects anticipation of the Act, whereas the *Experience* poem is disillusioned because the Act has not been passed in the form that was hoped for.

On the other hand, Larrissy points out that Emanuel Swedenborg has also written about beings he called “Sweepers of Chimnies”, who were inhabitants of Jupiter (¹⁴¹). Larrissy quotes a passage from Swedenborg's *Concerning the Earths in our Solar System*:

There are also Spirits amongst those from the Earth Jupiter, whom they call Sweepers of Chimnies, because they appear in like Garments, and likewise with sooty faces . . . One of these spirits came to me, and anxiously requested that I would intercede for him to be admitted into heaven . . . at that Instant the Angel called to him to cast off his Raiment . . . I was informed that such, when they are prepared for heaven, are stripped of their own garments, and are cloathed with new shining Raiment, and become Angels.¹⁴²

The above passage bears so many similarities to the “Chimney Sweeper” of *Innocence*, that it seems clear that Blake borrowed the ideas for the poem from Swedenborg, which is what Larrissy argues.¹⁴³ It is well known and documented that Blake was at one point very interested in Swedenborg's writings, and for example

139 Nurmi, 22.

140 Gardner, 115

141 Larrissy, 30.

142 *Ibid.*, 30.

143 *Ibid.*

Mona Wilson writes: "Swedenborg's accounts of his own visions, his belief of the spiritual symbolism of the material world and interpretation of the bible according to this belief, and his doctrine that Christ is the only God, had a lasting effect upon Blake's thought."¹⁴⁴

3.1.2. Negro slavery and "The Little Black Boy"

Another form of repression that Blake criticised was slavery, not only in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, but for example in "Visions of the Daughters of Albion".¹⁴⁵ Blake was disillusioned by the French and American revolutions, saying that after the colonial and monarchic restraints were destroyed, what was established was merely "the irresponsible 'right' to buy and sell".¹⁴⁶ Erdman says Blake thought that "everything that lives" is "holy" and valuable in itself, not to be measured by monetary value.¹⁴⁷ According to Erdman, Blake is critical of "counting gold" The buying and selling of people is a recurring theme in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, for example in "London", whose prostitute, soldier and chimney sweep are the exploited peers of "The Little Black Boy". In "The Little Black Boy", the following lines in the poem imply the idea of equality of all mankind:

"And these black bodies and this sunburnt face
 "Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.
 ...
 "For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear,
 "The cloud will vanish; we shall hear [God's] voice,
 ...

144 Mona Wilson, *The Life of William Blake* (St Albans: Paladin Books, 1978), 56.

145 Erdman, 88.

146 *Ibid.*

147 *Ibid.*

And thus I say to little English boy,
 When I from black and he from white cloud free,
 ...
 And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
 And be like him, and he will then love me.¹⁴⁸

Here, the colour of the skin is referred to as a “cloud” that shades the souls from the “beams of love”, a cloud they must bear until they are ready to tolerate the “heat” of love. However, the little black boy is better equipped to bear this heat; he is able to protect his white peer until he is, too. Plato’s idea of the body as a “sepulchre of the soul”, and Thomas Taylor’s view on this was that the function of the body is to enable the soul to endure punishment. Larrissy cites Kathleen Raine’s discussion of this in connection with “The Chimney Sweeper”.¹⁴⁹ Emphasising the neo-Platonic influence on Blake, Raine has also interpreted the soot on the chimney sweeps' skin to be “the earthly mire and clay that cannot defile the spirit”, quoting a passage from Plotinus to support this claim.¹⁵⁰

The colour, or rather, “blackness” of the skin of the little black boy is given a central symbolic role in the poem. This bears a resemblance to “The Chimney Sweeper”, although there the blackness, the black layer of soot, quite literally becomes a death trap. In “The Little Black Boy” the black skin is a “shady grove”. However, Larrissy points out that Blake in fact “inverted” the ideas of the occult tradition, as he believed “body and Soul” to be one (Larrissy, 33).¹⁵¹ This idea makes the symbolism of the physical body more complex. It seems that in “The Little Black

148 Blake, “London”, 216.

149 Larrissy, 29.

150 *Ibid.*, p. 29-30.

151 *Ibid.*, 33.

Boy", as well as "The Chimney Sweeper", the body is presented as something that the soul can transcend, but on the other hand we assume that Blake thought they cannot be separated.

Guardianship is a complex theme in "The Little Black Boy", where the guardian of the little black boy to begin with is his loving mother. The protection she provides is further emphasised as she teaches her son underneath a tree, which shades them from the heat. The child's real father is not mentioned, but God is addressed as the father towards the end of the poem where the little black boy says: "I'll shade him from the heat, till he can bear / To lean in joy upon our father's knee;"¹⁵² Dike has discussed guardianship in "The Little Black Boy" as follows:

"the [mother's] reassurance extended turns on a frank acknowledgement of the dangers of the paternal love. About this love there is nothing easy of comfortable; one must learn how to endure it, in the meantime protecting oneself from it, as from too much exposure to the sun."¹⁵³

In fact, while learning to bear the God-father's harsh love, the little black boy sees himself as a guardian-figure for the little white boy. The little black boy seems more knowledgeable and capable than the white boy, capable of supporting the white boy like a loving parent, or at least seeing this as his role: "Thus did my mother say, and kissed me; / And thus I say to little English boy."(Blake, 125)¹⁵⁴. According to Erdman's interpretation, the black boy can better bear the "beams of love" because he already loves the English boy".¹⁵⁵ The idea that the black boy seems superior to

152 Blake, "The Little Black Boy", 125.

153 Dike, 367.

154 Blake, 125.

155 Erdman, 99

the English boy has possibly also been influenced by Swedenborg's writings. In "Last Judgment", passage n. 118, Swedenborg writes: "The African people are more capable of enlightenment than all other peoples on this earth, because they are of such a character as to think interiorly and thus to accept truths and acknowledge them."¹⁵⁶

Lindsay points out that the poem has two significant contexts; around the time of writing the poem, Blake's interest in Swedenborgian thought as well as the support Blake had for the anti-slavery movement.¹⁵⁷

Erdman has discussed Blake's relationship to the anti-slavery movement in detail, and according to him, Blake's "The Little Black Boy" coincided with the parliamentary debate about the abolition of slave trade in Britain, which took place from 1789 to 1793. The bill was defeated in Parliament, leaving the by now strong abolitionist movement "baffled".¹⁵⁸ Erdman points out that the movement was so strong partly because people who had a direct stake in the slave trade were relatively few.¹⁵⁹

Erdman says that Blake received information about the cruelties of slavery through many sources, but in 1791 he was also commissioned by a bookseller to engrave a series of illustrations depicting slavery conditions, including scenes of atrocious torture and execution of negro rebels.¹⁶⁰

156 Swedenborg, Emanuel. [1762] 1999. The Last Judgment (Posthumous). n. 118. Translated by N. Bruce Rogers. The Heavenly Doctrines. <<http://www.heavenlydoctrines.org/static/d9082/118.htm>>

157 Lindsay, 34.

158 Erdman, 229.

159 Erdman, 91.

160 Erdman, 96.

Gardner presents another point of view of Blake's possible personal familiarity with negro children, as according to him, the number of destitute negro ex-slaves and former recruits from the American war increased greatly in London during the time Blake was writing *Songs of Innocence*.¹⁶¹ Gardner says Blake knew children of these black people round the streets and was familiar with the concern for "the plight of the negroes".¹⁶²

As an argument against slavery in the abolitionist debate, "The Little Black Boy" presents the idea of "the brotherhood of man", but it seems there could be a twist to this; as it is possible to interpret "The Little Black Boy" as a representation of how an "innocent" little black boy might see the world, before he becomes aware of the betrayal that the little white boy has in store for him. If the poem is read in the context of an adult reader who is aware of the practises of the slave trade, it can become a chilling account of the noble and innocent savage who does not expect the white man to hurt him. In any case, in this context the black boy is morally superior to the white boy, which perhaps reflects the fact that those who are oppressed must be superior in order to be equal, and presenting them as ordinarily human would not achieve the desired effect – outrage over them being exploited. On the other hand, another reading could detect some patronising tones in the poem; the noble savage accepts his lot because even he knows that he is really inferior to the little white boy, whose love he so much desires. This echoes the last line of "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Songs of Innocence*: "So if all do their duty they need not fear harm."¹⁶³ It is the

161 Gardner, 109.

162 *Ibid.*, 110.

163 Blake, "The Chimney Sweeper", 118.

black boy's duty to know his place and bear the little white boy's burden in addition to his own.

3.1.3. The charity school system and "Holy Thursday"

According to M. Dorothy George, the charity school movement in London belongs to the eighteenth century. The charity schools started getting replaced by the Lancasterian¹⁶⁴ schools by the end of the century, and around that time it was estimated that as many as 6000 children in London went to charity schools.¹⁶⁵ George explains that the motives of the charity schools were mainly to keep children of the poor from vagrancy and crime and to put them to work, and that the attitude towards teaching them reading, writing and ciphering was apologetic (apparently George means that teaching those skills to poor children at all needed to be defended and justified).¹⁶⁶ She illustrates this by quoting the following passage from *Weekly Miscellany*, 19 May 1733 (Quoted by J.P. Malcolm in *Anecdotes of the Manners and Customs of London during the Eighteenth Century*, 1808): "the utmost care [was taken] not only to instruct the children in the knowledge of the Christian religion, but also to breed them up in such a manner that they are descended from the laborious part of mankind, they may be bred up and inured to the meanest of

164 Joseph Lancaster (1778-1839) developed his method in the late 1790s for use in his Royal Free School in Borough Road, Southwark, London. The Borough Road school was a charity school, and the poor were Lancasterian education's intended subjects everywhere. The distinguishing feature of a Lancasterian school was monitorial instruction. Dell Upton, *Lancasterian Schools, Republican Citizenship, and the Spatial Imagination in Early Nineteenth-Century America*, *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Sep., 1996), 238.

165 George, 218

166 *Ibid.* 219.

services”.¹⁶⁷ George also quotes Isaac Watts, who says that “if these children of the poor ... be trained up in reading writing, and arithmetick ... they become competitors for such place with others of equal talents who have yet far better pretensions to them”.¹⁶⁸ According to David Fairer, from the beginning the charity schools were seen as an experiment in social engineering, and one that was seen as working, to some extent, “against the natural grain”.¹⁶⁹ In conclusion, education for the children of the poor was seen at best to be limited to work. There was much criticism even towards such practices as teaching the children to read the Bible and teaching them as much writing and ciphery as was useful for a servant or labourer (but no more than that, so that the children did not become a competitors for positions that traditionally employed members of the middle classes).

George also mentions that much emphasis was put on the way that the children appeared in public; dress (school dress and badges), conduct, and the “orderly and marshalled appearance” of the children at church twice every Sunday, as well as at the annual service at St. Paul's (in which the charity children praised their benefactors by singing hymns), this service being the subject of Blake's Holy Thursday poems - the annual service seems to have been an important part of the public display of how the children became “as much distinguished from what they were before as is a tamed from a wild beast”.¹⁷⁰

167 *Ibid.*, 219.

168 *Ibid.*, 247.

169 David Fairer, *Experience Reading Innocence: Contextualizing Blake's Holy Thursday*. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2002) 539.

170 A Rector of one of the London Charity Schools in 1728, quoted in George, 219.

The “Holy Thursday” poems in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* are one of the pairs of poems that, having the same title, seem to be presented as counterparts to each other. The “Holy Thursday” of *Innocence* presents us with the emotionally moving image and sound of thousands of poor charity children, with their “innocent faces clean” “these flowers of London town ... sit with a radiance of their own” and “raise to heaven the voice of song”. In the last stanza of the poem the presence of “the aged men, the wise guardians of the poor” is also acknowledged, the poem ending with “Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door”.¹⁷¹ But in the *Experience* poem, there are “babes reduced to misery”, instead of the shrill voices raised to heaven, there is a “trembling cry, and the guardians are now accused of feeding the children “with a cold and usurous hand”.¹⁷²

Fairer draws attention to how Stanley Gardner illustrates in his study how the annual service at St. Paul's was an extremely emotional event, and it is clear that one would have been quite likely to experience it in a similar way to the narrator of the “Holy Thursday” poem from *Songs of Innocence*. Especially the childrens' shrill little voices are described as bringing tears to the observers' eyes. Fairer quotes the composer Joseph Haydn having recounted how he “wept like a child” upon hearing the voices, that, according to Haydn, “sounded like angels' voices”.¹⁷³

The relationship of the *Innocence* and *Experience* poems in the case of “Holy Thursday” can be interpreted in the context of the contrary states of *Innocence* and

171 Blake, “Holy Thursday”. 121-122.

172 *Ibid.*

173 Fairer, 537.

Experience, in as the Innocence poem can clearly be seen to present a satire of the illusory view of reality that the Experience poem so clearly mocks.

Fairer says Gardner suggests that the Innocence poem "Holy Thursday" should be taken at face value, "withouth benefit of our own brand of retrospective enlightenment".¹⁷⁴ However, Fairer sees Gardner's offering the poem as a document celebrating an actual event as problematic, as we may then risk forgetting its role in the whole book of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.¹⁷⁵ Fairer treats the "Holy Thursday" poems as an example of a recurring theme in Blake's works of "how an impulse hardens into a system", the poems showing how the charity children were "contextualised by an anxious society and in the process had their innocence compromised".¹⁷⁶

According to Fairer, five years after Blake wrote his first version of "Holy Thursday", the charity children were in fact being exploited for political ends in the National Thanksgiving for King George III's recovery from madness, to reinforce the positive aspect of the celebration. The civic authorities feared violent demonstration, and Fairer suggests that the charity children were used for this celebration in order to prevent it.¹⁷⁷

Cook argues that if the reader resolves the contradiction between the *Songs of Innocence* poem and the *Songs of Experience* poem in favour of the validity of Experience, seeing the Experience poem as describing the reality of the matter seen

174 Fairer, 538.

175 *Ibid.*

176 *Ibid.*, 538-539.

177 *Ibid.*, 540.

truthfully , then “the poem of 'Innocence' necessarily becomes a satire on the kind of person who could see the operations of charity on such terms.”¹⁷⁸ In the context of the whole book of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* this kind of satirical approach could also be seen in the reference to pity in the Innocence poem, where the narrator tells the reader to “cherish pity”, as pity is described later in Human Abstract in *Songs of Experience* this way: “Pity would be no more / If we did not make somebody Poor;”.¹⁷⁹ The Human Abstract poem seems to be suggesting that people are made poor, the exploitation of the poor not being limited only to exploiting them for actual slavery and cheap labour, but also for the righteous spiritual gratification of the rich revelling in their own pity and charity.

Fairer describes how the public discussion and debate on charity schools in the eighteenth century exhibited a great concern, even fear, of overeducation, and the possible threats to the status quo it could bring.¹⁸⁰ With this in mind, it could be argued that the Holy Thursday poems can be seen as criticism of the exploitation of the children of the poor for the often hypocritical political and religious ends of the powerful in society. Again, as in "The Chimney Sweeper" of Innocence which declares that “...if all do their duty they need not fear harm”,¹⁸¹ the discourse of religious indoctrination is again what keeps the victims vulnerable by defining them and confining them into their place in society. As the chimney sweeper clings to a sentence he has been taught in order to survive, turning the last line of the poem into

178 Cook, 49.

179 Blake, 217.

180 Fairer, 543.

181 Blake, "The Chimney Sweeper", 118.

a bitter parody, the sweet imagery of “Holy Thursday” becomes little more than a hypocritical charade.

3.2. Religious reading

3.2.1. Biblical characters and symbols in the Songs

In *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, there are many passages that remind of biblical scenes and characters. There are several instances where the child characters have qualities that make them Christ-like, or like angels. The recurring theme of lambs is clearly Christian symbolism as well.

In “The Little Black Boy”, the black boy has a role as the mediator between the little white boy and God. The little black boy protects the white boy until he can “bear the beams of love” from God. Considering the contemporary issue of slavery, the little black boy’s role in the poem seems Christ-like in the way that Christ speaks on behalf of his enemies in Luke 23:34: “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”¹⁸²

There is a theme in “The Little Black Boy” of being shaded from the heat of the sun, which could be understood as being saved, because it is also used in the Bible, it seems, to describe and symbolise the blissful state of being watched over by God. For example, Psalm 121 includes the following passage, where God is compared to a protective shade: “The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.”¹⁸³ There are also some similarities to this theme in the following passage from Revelation 7:16, where

182 The Bible, King James version, Luke 23:34. All further references to The Bible will be to this version.

183 Psalm 121:5-6.

people who have come out of the great tribulation are described as follows: “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.”¹⁸⁴ In “The Little Black Boy”, the shade of a tree and the shady grove, a cloud, as well as the black skin all protect the Little Black Boy from the heat of the sun. However, the little black boy is better equipped to bear the “beams of love”, and he in turn shades the little white boy: “I’ll shade him from the heat, till he can bear / To lean in joy upon our father’s knee”.¹⁸⁵ These examples suggest that these elements in “The Little Black Boy” partly reflect their biblical counterparts. The elements of protection in the poem are highly symbolic and support as well as guardianship in this poem, which have been discussed in chapter 3.1.2. *Negro Slavery and “The Little Black Boy”*.

The “Chimney Sweeper” poems are rife with Christian imagery and symbolism. The chimney sweeper character Tom Dacre has lovely white hair, which “curl’d like a lamb’s back”, the ritual shearing of which powerfully symbolises preparation to slaughter. The following passage is found in Isaiah 53:7:

He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.¹⁸⁶

“The Chimney Sweeper” of *Songs of Innocence*, in turn, includes the following passage, which has some similarities to Isaiah 53:7:

184 Revelation 7:16.

185 Blake, “The Little Black Boy”, 125.

186 Isaiah 53:7.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,
 That curl'd like a lamb's back, was shav'd: 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!¹⁸⁷

Isaiah 53 tells the story of the Suffering Servant, and which in a typological reading can be seen as describing Jesus as the Messiah, 700 years before his birth. Also, the latter part of "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Innocence* has some elements which are similar to Revelation 7, of which the following is an example:

And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.
 Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them.
 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.
 For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.¹⁸⁸

In the above passage there are references to washing robes and being led to flowing waters, and similar elements can be found in "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Songs of Innocence*, which the following passage illustrates:

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
 And he open'd the coffins and set them all free;
 ...
 Then down the green plain leaping, laughing, they run,
 And wash in the river, and shine in the Sun.¹⁸⁹

187 Blake, "The Chimney Sweeper", 117.

188 Revelation 7: 14-17.

189 Blake, "The Chimney Sweeper", 117.

3.2.2. The Songs' relationship to religious literature for children

According to Colin Heywood, before the middle of the eighteenth century most books intended for children sought to teach children or improve their minds.¹⁹⁰ According to Lindsay, in addition to being thematically indebted to the pastoral tradition, the form of the *Songs of Innocence* is like the religious lyrics for children, giving as examples John Bunyan's *A Book for Boys and Girls* (1686), Isaac Watts's *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (1715), Charles Wesley's *Hymns for Children* (1763), and Christopher Smart's *Hymns for the Amusement of Children* (1763)(Lindsay, 24)¹⁹¹. Blake was also familiar with Anna Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781), because he engraved the illustrations for it.¹⁹² V. De S. Pinto argues that "Some of Blake's *Songs of Experience* seem like direct answers to Watts's *Divine Songs*."¹⁹³ Pinto describes how in number XXIII of Watts's *Divine Songs*, children who fail to obey and respect their parents are threatened with terrible things. For example, these children will be cursed and ravens and eagles will pick at and eat their eyes. In Blake's "A Little Boy Lost" the child who questions a priest's demands, is chained and burned "in a holy place". "A Little Boy Lost" is a chilling poem that well conveys the madness of religious zeal:

"Nought loves another as itself
 "Nor venerates another so.
 "Nor is it possible to thought
 "A greater than itself to know:
 "And Father, how can I love you,

190 Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* (Cambridge: Polity, cop. 2001), 94.

191 Lindsay, 24.

192 *Ibid.*

193 V. de S. Pinto, "Isaac Watts and William Blake", *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 79 (Jul., Oxford University Press, 1944), 220.

“Or any of my brothers more?
 “I love you like the little bird
 “That picks up crumbs around the door.”
 The Priest sat by and heard the child.
 In trembling zeal he siez'd his hair:
 He led him by his little coat;
 And all admir'd the Priestly care.
 And standing on the altar high,
 “Lo what a fiend is here!” said he;
 “One who sets reason up for judge
 “Of our most holy Mystery.”¹⁹⁴

It is clear that Blake is criticising the unforgiving threats of either Watts or religious education targeted for children. The ridiculously exaggerated reaction of the priest, which is in no proportion to the “crime” of the little boy, is well conveyed when Blake describes how “In trembling zeal he siez'd his hair.” and then from the altar shouts: “Lo what a fiend is here!”. The poem ridicules the fact that children’s innocent ponderings on religious matters are not tolerated - indeed they are being threatened with torture if they dare question anything – Blake is painting priests and religious authority figures as pompous and power-hungry, ready to judge and pick on the most vulnerable individuals, and more importantly, placing their rage on the wrong target. Blake is forever criticising the misplaced outrage of the clergy aimed at the weak and the exploited – the ones of which Christ said: “Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.”¹⁹⁵, and “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”¹⁹⁶

194 Blake, “A Little Boy Lost”, 218.

195 Marc 10:15.

196 Matthew 25:40.

V. de S. Pinto, who has studied the similarities and differences between Isaac Watts's and William Blake's work, says the following:

The flower poem, the animal or bird poem, and the insect poem are all traditional features of collections of children's poetry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and were derived, doubtless, from the old Emblem books. All these types are found both in Watts and Blake, as well as in earlier collections such as Bunyan's *Book for Boys and Girls*.¹⁹⁷

There are also very strong similarities between Watts's "Cradle Hymn" and Blake's "Cradle Song", which Pinto illustrates.¹⁹⁸ Pinto also points out the similarities between Watts's "Song IV" and Blake's "London", which are remarkably similar, although, as Pinto says, there is a smugness in Watts's poem,¹⁹⁹ which is especially repulsive when compared with "London"; Watts's poem ends with the following lines:

Are these thy favours, day by day
To me above the rest?
Then let me love thee more than they,
And try to serve thee best.²⁰⁰

In light of these examples, it seems that the similarities in Blake's poems to these representatives of children's literature mainly serve the purpose of highlighting the fundamental differences between them. Although Blake is playing with the form and themes of the genre, his *Songs* are more a parody than a representative of it.

3.2.3. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and their relationship to the Catechistic tradition

197 Pinto, 219.

198 Ibid., 222.

199 Ibid., 221.

200 Quoted by Pinto, 222.

Charity schools and Sunday schools, the only form of education available to the lower classes, relied on the catechetical method (Richardson, 854). According to Hugh Cunningham, the catechistic method of teaching literacy and religious knowledge to children was a practice which was already established in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries²⁰¹. According to Richardson there was a clear shift in education as it broadened to include more people from the lower classes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as catechism replaced dialectic as the means of “disciplining” the society.²⁰²

However, literacy was seen as empowering and therefore potentially dangerous. After all, the lower classes might get all kinds of ideas if they were able to read potentially dangerous material. Richardson refers to the example of Sarah Trimmer's *Sunday School Catechist* (1788), which, according to Richardson, makes clear Trimmer's goal “that literacy remain a means of maintaining class distinctions rather than facilitating social mobility”.²⁰³ Because the potential danger that literacy posed in the hands of the lower classes, it was crucial that the reading material for such people was restricted to catechism and other religious and improving texts. For example, Sarah Trimmer was in favour of policing the distribution of reading matter for “the lower orders of people, and for children”.²⁰⁴ Therefore, it could be said that the ruling classes actively aspired to restrict what the lower classes and children (both certainly groups of people on which strong control was felt to be necessary) could read. The ruling classes would seek to not only prevent them from getting

201 Cunningham, 49.

202 Richardson, 853.

203 *Ibid.*, 855.

204 *Ibid.*, 854.

dangerous ideas about their own capabilities, but, even more conveniently, to intensify their identity as belonging to a lower class and thus to encourage obedience in them. Children needed to feel the same about their relationship to their parents. Therefore it was of utmost importance that the very core of the religious teachings aimed for children were about obedience; to God, to the priest, to one's parents.

One poem where Sunday schooling and learning the catechism is possibly reflected is in "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence*. The famous last line of the poem, "So if all do their duty they need not fear harm", is interesting, because it seems as if the sweep is taking on the voice of a Sunday school teacher. "Duty" is referred to, for example, in Sarah Trimmer's *The Teacher's Assistant: Consisting of Lectures in the Catechetical Form*, an example of catechetical teaching material, from which Richardson quotes: "... Is not a day of rest very comfortable after six working days? [Ans. Yes.] What should you return to God for appointing the Sabbath day?" [Ans. Thanks.] How should you spend it? [Ans. In learning your duty.]"²⁰⁵ Richardson argues that in Trimmer's books the "duty" of the poor clearly begins in an acceptance of the class system as designed by God, as he quotes Trimmer's *Sunday-School Catechist*: "We should consider that it is the wish of GOD that there should be different ranks among mankind, high and low, rich and poor, and that all the good things in this world are dealt out by His providence as He sees best for His creatures"²⁰⁶ One interpretation of the last line of the poem could be that the child sweep recounts a familiar line from a catechetical book (learned by heart to be delivered automatically) in order to reassure and comfort himself. After all, vague

²⁰⁵ Richardson, 862.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

recollections of Sunday School might even represent to him the closest thing to nurturing he knows.

Blake's *Songs*, while mimicking the form of religious literature for children, criticises the force-feeding of ideas that rob children of their self-esteem and their ability to think for themselves. Learning the catechism is precisely the kind of learning that Blake criticises, with the aim of learning answers to questions by heart to be delivered automatically. This method of teaching relies on anything but the joy of learning. A good example of Blake's criticism of repressive education is "The School Boy", which laments how schoolchildren's creative vigour and their sheer joy for being alive are lost when they are forced to study "under a cruel eye": This much-quoted passage from "The School Boy" illustrates this well:

How can the bird that is born for joy,
 Sit in a cage and sing,
 How can a child when fears annoy,
 But droop his tender wing,
 And forget his youthful spring.²⁰⁷

The following passage from "The School Boy" tells us what happens when children are not left to experience life on their own, but are robbed of their innocence by repressive educational methods:

O! father & mother, if buds are nip'd,
 And blossoms blown away,
 And if the tender plants are strip'd
 Of their joy in the springing day,
 By sorrow and cares dismay.
 How shall the summer arise in joy,
 Or the summer fruits appear.

207 Blake, "The School Boy", 124.

Or how shall we gather what griefs destroy
 Or bless the mellowing year.
 When the blasts of winter appear.²⁰⁸

It is clear that children's potential is not realised, if “the tender plants are strip'd of their joy”, as we are informed later on, “How shall the summer arise in joy. / Or the summer fruits appear.” education that kills all joy in learning bears no fruit, and there is nothing to be gathered while everything that has been sown has been destroyed by grief: “...how shall we gather what griefs destroy”.

Songs of Innocence and of Experience is clearly indebted to the catechistic material for children, but if anything, Songs are a parody of these types of texts, criticising the repressive ideology behind them.

3.2.4. God the child vs. God the father in “The Lamb”

Another example of how the Songs can be seen as a response to religious literature for children is “The Lamb”, which mimics the form of the catechistic method by which children were taught to read using specifically formulated religious material. Richardson argues that “the child speaker of 'The Lamb' can be seen as an ordinarily passive victim of the catechistic method who here “attempts to reassert some measure of power through playfully, even parodically catechising a figure still more naïve and helpless than himself.”²⁰⁹ While the child can be seen as possibly imitating an authority figure posing questions, the child is still quite a gentle catechist. There is nothing stern about the way he poses question to the lamb: “Little Lamb, who made

208 *Ibid.*

209 Richardson, 863.

thee, ” the tone of the child is tender, and the questions are posed in a playful and sweet manner. The child praises the lamb’s soft wool and tender voice, and the overall tone of the poem is that of love. Therefore, while the child in this setting takes the role of an authority figure, he is not repressive – it could be seen as a representation of a relationship that is based on protection rather than repression.

Richardson argues that in naming his creator as God the Child rather than God the Father, the speaker of 'The Lamb' disrupts at its source the traditional associative chain of authority which leads, as in Trimmer's "Sunday School Catechist" from "the Duty of Loving God" to "Honouring the King" (to love him as the father of his country, and to submit peaceably to the laws of the land, not to suffer ourselves to be persuaded to join in any riots or cabals").²¹⁰ Finally, this chain is to lead to "Submitting to Teachers, Spiritual Pastors, and Masters" ("It is part of your duty to your neighbor to order yourselves to lowly and reverently to all your betters ... your parents, governors, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters ... All rich and great people are also to be considered your betters in this account").²¹¹ Dike sees in "The Lamb" an attempt to "reduce or get rid of disturbing differences [between God and his creatures] so that the relation can be close and entirely harmonious."²¹² It seems that the God who is referred to as "the selfish father of men" in "Earth's answer" in *Songs of Experience*, is in "The Lamb" of Innocence seen as a meek and loving, non-threatening guardian. As Dike says:

210 Richardson, 864.

211 *Ibid.*

212 Dike, 367.

“Behind the various ways of dealing with God, with the father of any type of pastor, is a distrust of power amounting to dread. [Power] brings with it constraint [...], and shows obligation to be different from desire.”²¹³

In “The Lamb” there is a longing for the kind of relationship with God that includes none of the harsh demands of the God-father of *Songs of Experience*, a relationship motivated by love instead of duty and fear.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the childhood theme in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in order to gain an idea about whether the intentions of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* are related to contemporary political issues regarding children, especially poor children, and whether these intentions stem from a religious or political viewpoint. In order to gain a better understanding of Blake’s thinking and some of the concepts that he had invented, I have discussed the different interpretations of Blake’s ideas of the contraries and the human soul. These concepts are closely coupled with the larger framework of Blake’s worldview, which has been discussed more generally. What can be concluded about the context that Blake’s ideology provides for the poems, is that it seems clear that although Blake voices strong outrage over real social and political issues, these problems are, more often than not, seen as symptomatic of an enormous misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the Christian faith. The seemingly pious church-goers in Blake’s poems, not to mention the priests, make a mockery of Blake’s idea of Christianity.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 369.

One central theme in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is repression, and in Blake's ideas of the contraries, repression of feelings, desires, and actions is the ultimate evil. Blake talks about what he calls "negation", the act of denying or repressing an action or an impulse. In *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, those acts of repression seem to be a central contributor to the unhappiness of the most unfortunate members of society, including children. From the perspective of experience, what seem to be antithetical episodes in a society's relation to its children turn out to be identical: charity and child labour are revealed as aspects of a common exploitation or neglect of children.²¹⁴

If the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* are seen as fundamentally an ideological and philosophical work that comments and criticises social institutions and conventions, there is a clear theme running through this: the repression of the most vulnerable members of society, the role religious indoctrination plays in this and the spiritual, rather than political, implications of this. However, the childhood theme in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* introduces guardian figures onto the scene. These heavily symbolic figure show two sides of themselves in the context of Innocence and Experience. On the other hand children, men, and women need safety and guidance to an extent, on the other hand guardianship often equals repression, which is debilitating and prevents individuals from realising their full potential, from becoming whole.

Within a religious context, several themes related to child characters and childhood can be found in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. The child

214 Cook, 4.

characters can be seen as Christ-like figures in, for example, “The Chimney Sweeper” poems, “The Little Black Boy” and “The Lamb”. The lamb is a symbol which is repeatedly used in the poems, and which, while symbolising Christ, also reflects the pastoral tradition, to which *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* owes some of its form and subject matter. When studying the poems from a religious point of view, it is also possible to see criticism towards religious indoctrination. In the poems there are several examples of religious authority figures being mocked, for example in “Holy Thursday” and “A Little Boy Lost” in *Songs of Experience*, and the form of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* can easily be seen as parody of the catechistic tradition as well as other religious books for children that were popular in the eighteenth century. Another central theme that was discussed in this thesis, and which provides the framework for interpreting poems in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, are the concepts of Innocence and Experience, and the human soul in relation to these.

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