

Imagination Versus Materiality – The Bond of Image and Text in Conflict

Sofia Vlazaki, University of West Attica, Greece

The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

A seminal figure in the history of the poetry and visual art of Romanticism, William Blake, considered imagination as an instrument of knowledge superior to reason. In his works he sympathized with the victims of society degraded by industrialization and praised imagination against materiality. The paper focuses in two groups of works of the artist, bound together in a single volume, “Songs of Innocence and of Experience”. Blake asserted on the general title-page an addition to the title: “Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul”. In the introduction of “William Blake: Songs of Innocence and of Experience” (Oxford, 1970) Keynes G. mentions, “The character of the designs for Experience is noticeably more severe than it is in those of Innocence [...]”. This paper investigates the way Blake expresses his ideology – imagination in contradiction to materiality – in the form of songs of innocence in contradiction to experience songs and focuses where text and image are bound in one, “[...] due to his cast of mind, whereby the life of the imagination was more real to him than the material world [...] word and symbol each reinforcing the other” (ibid).

Keywords: William Blake, Text & Image, Contradiction, Illustration

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

This paper presents a sub-chapter, part of my PhD thesis which is called “Imagination versus materiality: the bond of image and text in conflict”. Main aim of my studies is to investigate the way we read stories and the way illustrators create their parallel worlds of images for various texts. In this sub-chapter of my dissertation I am presenting the parameter of contrast which, I believe constitutes one of the crucial aspects in the illustrated works of excellence and I focus specifically in works that the author is also the illustrator.

A perfect example of an author illustrating his own text is the romantic artist, William Blake and his book “Songs of Innocence and of Experience”.



Image 1: William Blake

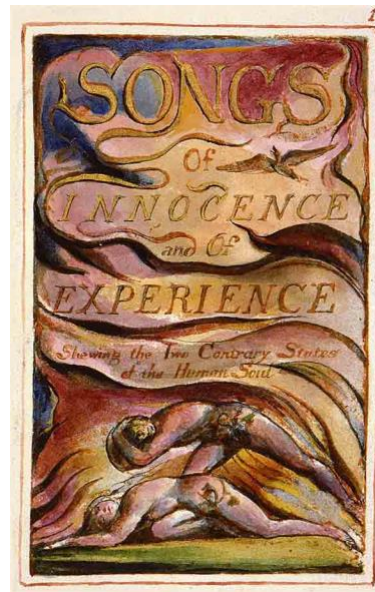


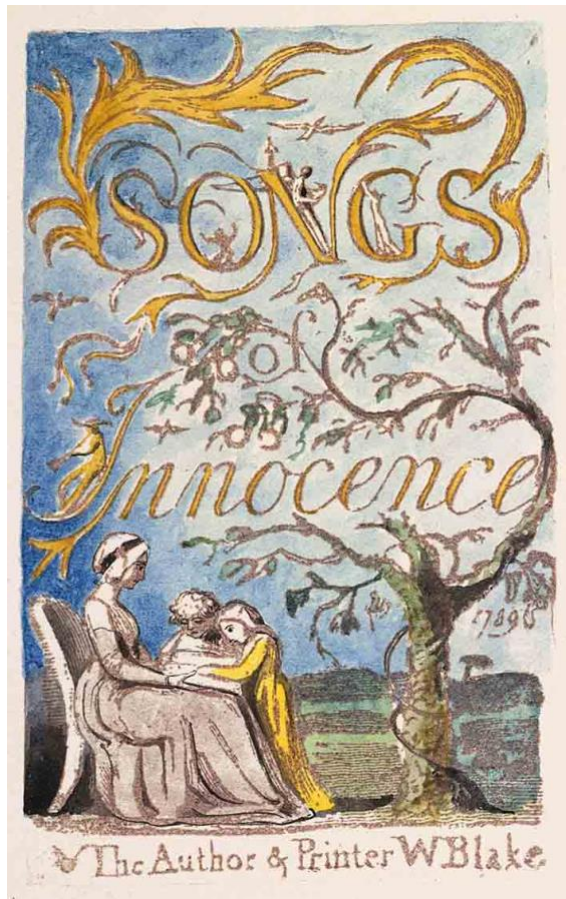
Image 2: “Songs of Innocence and of Experience”, William Blake, book cover

William Blake (1757-1827) was a renowned artist, poet, and printmaker of the Romantic Age who used his creative power in order to produce a very important interplay between images and words. (Saree Makdisi, 2015)

The Songs of Innocence and of Experience occupy a vital place in the corpus of Blake's poetical writings. This is so because these Songs are as much the product of Blake's earlier writings as the pointer to his future writings. The kind of philosophical tone that we encounter in The Songs of Innocence and of Experience is indeed astounding. (Suprita Jha, 2020)

The Bond of Image and Text in Conflict

In terms of social commentary, Blake's illustrations in Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1789) provide insights into the social changes occurring in England during the late 18th century. Blake's poems capture the experiences of English society during the transition between the 18th and 19th centuries, marked by industrialization, political upheaval, and the displacement of reason. Through his work, Blake offers a unique interpretation of the formation of modern industrial society, intertwining politics, religion, and art (Duarte, 2014).



Images 3 & 4: Title pages from “Songs of Innocence and of Experience”

Blake’s works in Songs of Innocence depict a universal view of the world and the purity of human souls, while the ones in Songs of Experience present a darker and more cynical view, criticizing societal and religious oppression.

Main focus here is the above, strong contradiction which stands for these two groups of works and Blake’s religious outlook and his revolt against institutionalized Christianity which is also visible overall.

He consistently stresses the importance of freedom, as opposed to the tyranny that he feels to be characteristic of the government of his day, and attacks negative moralizing, which he associates with the church, as opposed to a true sense of religion. (Suprita Jha, 2020)

While investigating Blake’s work ‘Songs of Innocence and of Experience’ and the parameter of contrast a suggestion occurs: when illustrations are high in contrast, either in their content or form, they assist viewer’s understanding and pleasure. And this is also why contrast constitutes one of the crucial aspects when someone is looking for the perfect example of an author illustrating his own work, or equivalently of an illustrator creating text for his images.

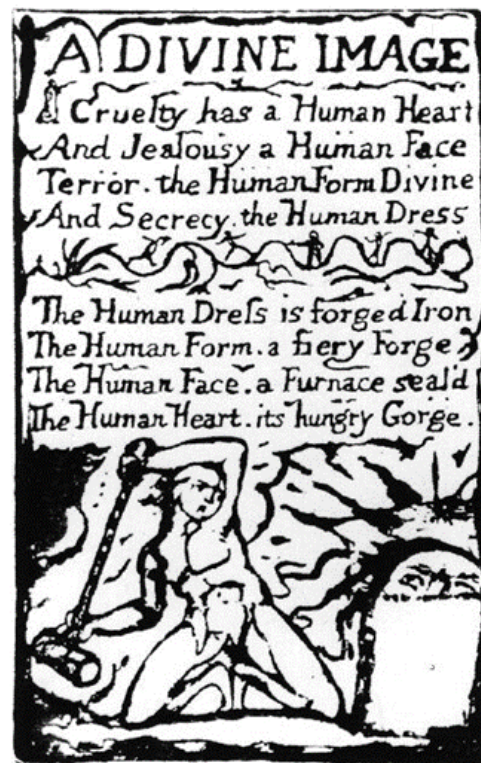
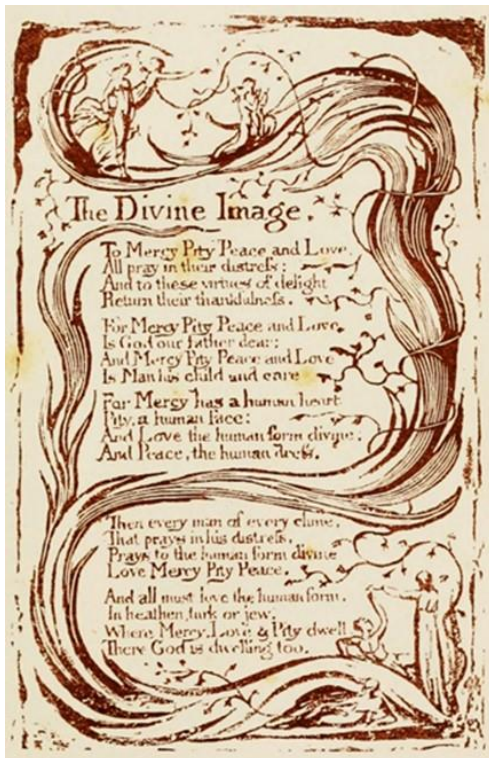
William Blake’s work in general is a unique marriage of text and image and this bind combination is more than obvious in “Songs of Innocence and of Experience”. Blake used his artistic skills to create intricate and symbolic illustrations that enhanced the reader’s understanding of the poems. The illustrations were not mere decorations but were integral to

the overall meaning and interpretation of the poems. They provided visual cues and imagery that deepened the emotional impact of the text.

Moreover, in the text of Jha (2020) "Representation of two Contrary States of Human Soul: Songs of Innocence and Experience by William Blake" there is the claim that Blake's illustrations in "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" contribute to the overall thematic coherence of the work. It becomes obvious that the visual motifs and recurring symbols throughout the illustrations create a sense of unity and interconnectedness between the poems. They establish a cohesive narrative and reinforce the overarching themes of innocence, experience, and the human condition (Jha, 2020).

Taking into account Jha's suggestions about Blake's illustrations it becomes possible that he is one of the first great examples of the combo-model: author-illustrator within the realms of art history.

Although we experience a certain unity between these two groups of poems their existence in contradiction is even more intense. Dr. Norah Hadi Qassim Alsaeed in "The Divine Image and A Divine Image: William Blake's Religious Gnostic Perspective" (Alsaeed, 2023) claims that the stark contrast between the images of innocence and the images of experience is a well-known aspect of the artist. His poems in Songs of Innocence present a universal view of the world, depicting the purity and goodness of human souls. In contrast, the poems in Songs of Experience present a darker and more cynical view of the world. They highlight the negative aspects of human nature and society, such as oppression, corruption, and hypocrisy. The Songs of Innocence often have titles that are similar to those of Experience, but they convey contrary images. Alsaeed presents an example here:



Images 5 & 6: "The Divine Image" and "A Divine Image" from "Songs of Innocence and of Experience"

"The Divine Image" in Songs of Innocence and "A Divine Image" in Songs of Experience both explore the existence of God in humans and condemn the tyranny of religion and the Church. The use of identical or similar titles in these poems suggests Blake's intention to provide a direct shift from innocence to experience, from a universal perspective to a limited, self-centered one.

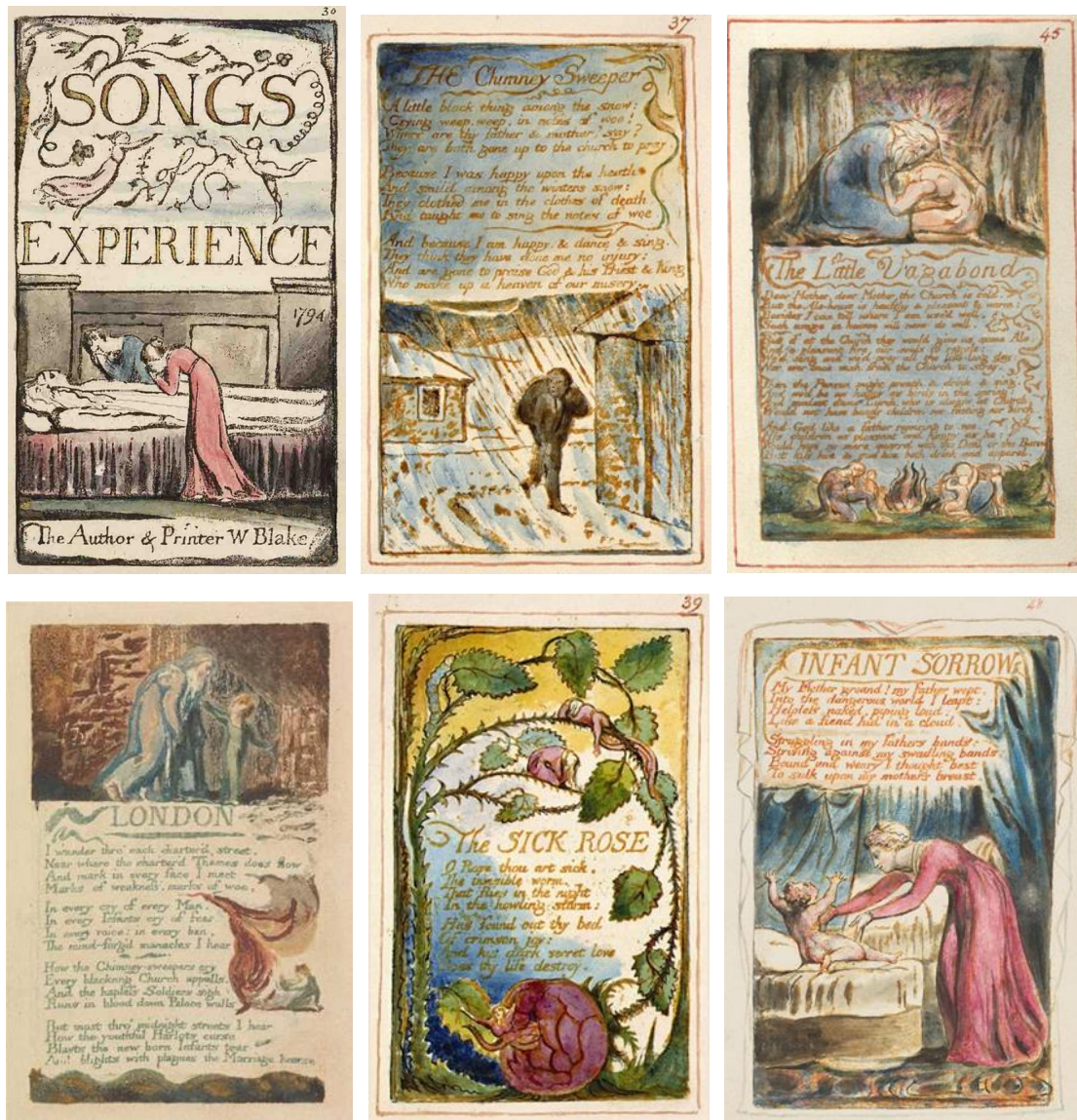
Furthermore, Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience carry another type of contrast as George Ewane Ngide states in his paper "Romantic Individuation and Individualism: Re-reading William Blake's Vision of Romantic Thingliness" (Ngide 2019) - the images of innocence and experience in Blake's poetry can be seen as a journey of life from individuation to individualism and back to individuation. The Songs of Innocence define who we are and the process of fulfilling our potential (individuation), while the Songs of Experience define what we have become and the process of returning to our original state (thingliness). This progression reflects a movement from harmony to disharmony and ultimately a journey back to harmony.

Comparing these two types of songs based on Jose Chiramel Paul's paper "Blake's Songs, Their Introductions and the Bible" (Chiramel, 2017):



Images 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 & 12: from "Songs of Innocence"

The illustrations of Songs of Innocence depict idyllic scenes of nature, children, and animals, symbolizing purity, joy, and harmony and are characterized by vibrant colors, delicate lines, and a sense of innocence and simplicity. And Nujhat Afrin in “Discourse of Children in William Blake’s Chimney Sweeper” claims that they convey a sense of childlike wonder and a belief in the inherent goodness of humanity (Afrin, 2012). The images of innocence in these illustrations reflect Blake's belief in the divinity of the human soul and the potential for spiritual growth and enlightenment as Alsaeed mentions (Alsaeed, 2023).



Images 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18: from “Songs of Experience”

On the other hand, Blake's illustrations of Songs of Experience present a darker and more complex vision of the world. The colors are often darker and more muted, and the lines are more jagged and chaotic, reflecting the disillusionment and cynicism associated with the experience (Chiramel, 2017). The images often depict scenes of oppression, suffering, and moral corruption (Afrin, 2012). These illustrations challenge traditional notions of morality and religion, criticizing the negative effects of societal and institutional structures (Alsaeed, 2023). They convey a sense of the harsh realities of life and the loss of innocence (Afrin, 2012).

Blake visualized a blend of lamblike meekness and mildness with the ferocity of tigers of wrath for having the human form divine perfect....” (Chiramel, 2017).



Image 19: “The Lab” and “The Tyger” from “Songs of Innocence and of Experience”

In addition to their artistic value, Blake's illustrations also serve a didactic purpose. They provide visual cues and symbols that help to convey the deeper meanings and messages of the poems. For example, the image of the lamb in "The Lamb" from "Songs of Innocence" represents innocence and purity, while the image of the tiger in "The Tyger" from "Songs of Experience" symbolizes the darker aspects of human nature. These visual symbols enhance the reader's engagement with the text and aid in their interpretation of the poems (Chiramel, 2017).

Blake's illustrations in "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" also contribute to the overall aesthetic and artistic value of the work. His intricate and detailed designs showcase his skill as an engraver and artist. The combination of poetry and visual art creates a unique and immersive reading experience for the audience (Chiramel, 2017).

Conclusion

One aspect of Blake's role as an illustrator in his work “Songs of Innocence and of Experience” is his ability to visually depict the contrasting states of innocence and experience. The visual representations help to reinforce the dichotomy between these two states and enhance the reader's understanding of the poems (Jha, 2020).

Yokota & Tale in “Picture books and the digital world: Educators making informed choices” mention that in the field of art literature, it is not uncommon for illustrators to also serve as authors. This dual role allows them to have complete creative control over their work and

ensures that the illustrations and text are seamlessly integrated (Yokota & Teale, 2014). This practice is particularly prevalent in children's books, where the visual narrative plays a crucial role in engaging young readers (Sazonenko, 2019). However, it is worth noting that this phenomenon is not limited to books for children. Illustrators who are also authors can be found in various genres of art literature.

In illustrated books for adults, where the illustrations are not merely decorative but serve as an integral part of the storytelling, illustrations can provide additional layers of meaning, symbolism, and visual cues that enrich the reader's understanding and engagement with the text. The illustrator's creative choices in composition, style, and visual elements contribute to the overall interpretation and impact of the work. And this is more or less how a parallel world to the text is born.

References

- Afrin, N. (2012). Discourse of Children in William Blake's "Chimney Sweeper". *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2(4), 27-30, doi:10.9790/0837-0242730
- Alsaeed, N., H., Q. (2023). The Divine Image and A Divine Image: William Blake's Religious Gnostic Perspectives. *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 33(2), 280-292, doi:10.59670/jns.v33i.723
- Chiramel, J., P. (2017). Blake's Songs, Their Introductions and the Bible. *English Language and Literature Studies*, 7(2), 43-64, doi:10.5539/ells.v7n2p43
- Duarte, M., G. (2014). The city of London on the songs of experience from William Blake: an interpretation of social changes occurred in English industrial society in the last decades of the eighteenth century. *Antíteses*, 7(14), 469-491, doi:10.5433/1984-3356.2014v7n14p469
- Jha, S. (2020). Representation of two Contrary States of Human Soul: Songs of Innocence and Experience by William Blake. *International Journal of Humanities and Education Development (IJHED)*, 2(6), 576-578, doi:10.22161/jhed.2.6.23
- Ngide, G., E. (2019). Romantic Individuation and Individualism: Re-reading William Blake's Vision of Romantic "Thingliness". *International Journal of Language and Literature*, 7(2), 16-27, doi: 10.15640/ijll.v7n2a2
- Yokota, J., & Teale, W., H. (2014). Picture books and the digital world: Educators making informed choices. *The Reading Teacher*, 67(8), 577-585, doi:10.1002/trtr.1262

Contact emails: svlazaki@uniwa.gr
svlazaki@gmail.com