



Blake's Songs of Innocence & of Experience

William; Holmes, Richard Blake

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The songs combine extreme simplicity of form with complex and mysterious meanings. To begin to understand them, it is helpful to know something of the enigmatic man who described himself as 'Author & Printer W Blake' on their title-page. Blake's father was a hosier, and all his life Blake supported himself as a small, independent craftsman-printer and illustrator. He was apprenticed to an engraver in Covent Garden, began exhibiting paintings at the Royal Academy when twenty-three, and two years later married Catherine Boucher, the beautiful young daughter of a market-gardener, whom he taught to read, mix paint, and prepare plates. Her small, undulating figure seems to haunt many of his drawings. The marriage was childless (a significant fact, since the Songs were addressed to children), but very happy, and despite periods of poverty and depression, the household attracted many friends and later 'disciples', including the painter Samuel Palmer. In literary terms, Blake conceived the Songs in a popular genre of illustrated children's books and hymnals, which had a highly conventional eighteenth-century tradition behind it. Part One, Songs of Innocence, largely conforms to this tradition, set in a sunlit, pastoral world of nursery, garden and village-green. Its central ideas are those of joy, comfort, tenderness and parental or divine security; though not exclusively so. Part Two, Songs of Experience, largely subverts the tradition, set in a darker, more dreamlike version of the same landscape, with nightmare intimations, glimpses of forests and shadowy city streets, a sense of twilight and nightfall, and menacing animal and insect shapes. Here the central ideas are those of anger, jealousy, anxiety, cruelty, injustice and an overwhelming protest against the unhappiness in the world. Both parts draw on a vivid, hard-edged repertory of biblical and nursery book images.

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