Innocence Lost: The Tension of Contrary States in Blake and Milton

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Abstract

Though writing more than one-hundred years apart, the poetic works of John Milton and William Blake interacted with one another to such an extent that they have become increasingly entwined within the critical imagination of scholars over the past two centuries. Despite the recognition of the influence of Milton upon Blake, and subsequent examinations of Blake’s opinions of Milton as an artist, a thorough examination of Blake’s opinion of Milton as the narrator of *Paradise Lost* has heretofore remained unattempted. This essay examines Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as a lens through which to interpret the narrator of *Paradise Lost*. Reading Milton in this light reveals a fallen and troubled narrator attempting to represent innocence, yet encountering difficulties due to his fallen condition. Through his poetry Blake examines the nature of Milton’s narrator, ultimately demonstrating that the problems of innocence within *Paradise Lost*, namely the transience of innocence and the vulnerability of those in a state of innocence, stem originally from the fallen narrator’s impossible task of representing a condition which has been lost to him.
Acknowledgements

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Innocence Lost: The Tension of Contrary States in Blake and Milton

In writing *Paradise Lost* John Milton was expressly attempting to “justify the ways of God to men” (*PL* 1:26). In so doing he took upon himself the challenge of accurately depicting the innocent state of mankind’s great forbears Adam and Eve, and their subsequent fall from grace. The work which he produced has been heralded as a masterpiece of religious and literary significance ever since, though it has not been without its critics. William Blake looked at Milton as both his greatest inspiration and his greatest rival—Harold Bloom even went so far as to say Blake “read little with any care besides the Bible and Milton” (qtd. in Wittridge xvii). In writing *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* Blake sought to reveal the fatal problem with Milton’s attempted theodicy: that of representing a state of innocence from an already fallen perspective. Blake famously stated that “The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it” (Blake, *Marriage* 389). This claim has led many to examine in depth the nature of Satan within *Paradise Lost*, looking at him as a hero figure rather than a villain. Blake was making a more subtle point, however. The potentially heroic nature of Satan within *Paradise Lost* is a result of a deeper issue: the fallen nature of the poem’s narrator, and by extension Milton himself. In writing *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* Blake was attempting to explore in more depth the relationship between innocence, experience, and literary narrative. The subtitle of Blake’s collection of poems makes clear his purpose: “Shewing the two contrary states of the human soul.” It is the contrariness of innocence and experience about which Blake was making a point, chiefly that innocence can never be accurately reproduced or represented. Those who are truly in a state of innocence are ignorant of that state, being unaware
of any other form of existence. Those who are aware of innocence cannot accurately represent it either, however, since they already bear the stain of experience, which will of necessity color their versions of innocence as well. Blake therefore created a purposely flawed innocence, followed by a more explicit representation of experience, to reveal the impossibility of Milton’s task and the problems of Milton’s representation of innocence which necessarily followed.

Criticism surrounding the relationship between Blake and Milton has traditionally focused either on the flow of ideas from Milton down to Blake, or on Blake’s suggestion that Satan was the hero of *Paradise Lost*. Rarely has Blake’s work been viewed as the starting point for a critical approach to Milton’s narrator, particularly since such an approach questions the veracity of Milton’s entire work. Joseph Wittreich exemplifies the unidirectional flow of ideas within studies of Blake and Milton, stating that “In his poetry and in his art, Blake displays an extraordinary knowledge of traditions, both biblical and Miltonic; yet before any study of Blake and tradition can be undertaken, the relationship of Blake and Milton must be explored” (Wittreich xvii). Fredson Bowers’ article “Adam, Eve, and the Fall in *Paradise Lost*” joins with many scholars in charging headfirst into an examination of Milton’s meaning without taking any thought about the actual impossibility of the task at hand: “What cause led Adam and Eve to the Fall? To this question an answer must come, and Milton accepts the responsibility to provide it. His full explanation turns out to be broader than the question, as any satisfactory answer must if it is not to provoke a fresh question in turn” (264). Although these arguments suggest valid fields of Miltonic study, they fail to address the true nature of Milton himself as a fallen man, a point about which Blake was highly concerned.

Some critics have acknowledged the relationship between Milton and Blake. As Bette Werner noted, “*Paradise Lost* is…the point of Blake’s most intense involvement with the
thought of his predecessor, in terms of both artistic interpretations and poetic commentary. Blake could find in the poem a significant basis for agreement as well as the impetus for urgent correction” (50). John Tanner even commented directly upon Blake’s famous indictment of Milton: “Though not, as William Blake charged, ‘of the Devil’s party without knowing it,’ Milton was surely wrestling demons within himself in his great portrait of Satan” (Tanner 146). These critics, though engaging with the interplay between Milton and Blake, never go so far as to suggest that Blake’s poetry was a direct analysis and revision of Milton’s narrator, and therefore of Milton himself. Despite Tanner’s defense of Milton’s motives Milton was, indeed, of the Devil’s party, in the same way that every man or woman born on earth is—he was a fallen individual. Writing from a fallen perspective, Milton had no choice but to write freely of the Devil, as that was all he truly knew about. Indeed, in undertaking a project which involved understanding, explaining, and representing a state of innocence, Milton was putting himself in an impossible situation. The act alone of being aware of the state of innocence necessitates understanding its opposite: sin, or experience as Blake calls it. A sinful man is incapable of fully understanding innocence, as it has been lost to him. Therefore, *Paradise Lost* was flawed from the start. The question is not, therefore, why Milton portrays Satan with such depth and feeling, but rather what problems exist within the text as a result of Milton’s fallen perspective.

Read as a lens through which to understand problems of narration in *Paradise Lost, Songs of Innocence and of Experience* takes on a dynamic and illuminating role as it interacts with and comments upon the narrative style of *Paradise Lost*.

Returning to *Paradise Lost* after having examined the deeply troubled “innocence” of Blake’s work reveals that Milton’s innocence, though seemingly pure, bears many of the same problems as does Blake’s. Milton’s troubled representations of innocence originally stem from
the fallen nature of the narrator of the poem, a man ostensibly aligned with Milton himself. The theme of fallen and inaccurate narrators is strong within both *Paradise Lost* and *Songs*, and contributes to the initial problems with innocence within both works. After gaining an understanding of why representations of innocence are impossible, one can then begin to carefully examine the specific problems which find their way into even the most honest attempts at innocent representations. Specifically I will be looking at the transitory nature of innocence and the vulnerability of innocence. These problems find representation in Milton and Blake, and are bound together by the fallen and experienced nature of the authors, narrators, and characters of the poems, often resulting from the unconscious attempt to comprehend and represent innocence from a fallen perspective. By writing an obviously flawed version of innocence, and comparing it with a bleak representation of experience Blake points out the more subtle, but no less substantial, inaccuracies of innocence in *Paradise Lost*.

Blake’s poetry explicitly highlights the issue of Milton’s fallen state in attempting to produce a work about God and innocence. Before attempting an analysis of Blake’s poetry, however, it is necessary to establish the identity of Milton’s narrator. Milton makes it clear that the narrator of *Paradise Lost* is Milton himself by explicitly emphasizing the act of writing *Paradise Lost* within the body of the poem itself. Addressing the heavenly muse, he pleas “I thence / invoke thy aid to my advent’rous song / That with no middle flight intends to soar / Above th’Aonian mount while it pursues / Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” (*PL* 1:11-15). The identity of the narrator as Milton is further reinforced through allusions to the narrator’s “eyes that roll in vain” (*PL* 3:24) and the fact that the poem’s subject was “long choosing, and beginning late” (*PL* 9:26), traits which echo Milton’s own blindness and advanced age during the composition of *Paradise Lost*. By aligning himself as the narrator of the work,
which self-consciously is attempting the superhuman task of explaining the nature and mind of God, Milton is setting himself up as an all-seeing narrator with the power of perceiving aspects of God which are unclear to common men. It is this self-elevation to a level of wisdom and insight unattainable to mere mortals that Blake takes issue with, and which he specifically addresses in his own poetry. Ultimately Blake demonstrates that the fundamental problem of Milton’s work is that by becoming aware of the difference between states of innocence and experience, Milton can no longer write about innocence accurately.

The introduction to *Songs of Innocence* portrays the gradual process of the loss of innocence on the part of its narrator, the piper:

Piping down the valleys wild,

Piping songs of pleasant glee,

On a cloud I saw a child,

And he laughing said to me:

"Pipe a song about a Lamb!"

So I piped with merry cheer.

"Piper, pipe that song again;"

So I piped: he wept to hear.

"Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe;

Sing thy songs of happy cheer!"

So I sung the same again,

While he wept with joy to hear.
"Piper, sit thee down and write
In a book, that all may read."
So he vanished from my sight,
And I plucked a hollow reed,

And I made a rural pen,
And I stained the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear.

 Appropriately, the culmination of a loss of innocence is the act of writing, a detail which emphasizes the necessarily fallen position of Milton as the narrator of *Paradise Lost*. Initially the piper represents a symbol of joyful innocence, as demonstrated by the use of terms such as “pleasant glee” and “merry cheer.” The piper’s discourses with the child on the cloud, however, suggest that the piper’s joy is blind and uninformed. The child’s repeated weeping at the piper’s songs suggests sorrow over the naiveté of the piper, rather than tears of joy as the piper supposes. As the poem continues the Child’s commands require more and more understanding on the part of the piper, first having him pipe a song, then sing, and ultimately write the song. The transition from a wordless song, to a song with words, to words alone also suggests an element of loss involved in the process of gaining experience. Although by the conclusion of the poem the piper has become more serious-minded and capable of expressing himself through the written word, he has lost the symbol of joy and innocence that was his music. As Matthew Schneider points out “Something of innocence’s opposite—even if it cannot yet be conceptualized as belonging to
experience—shadows this progression. Each step along the way from joyful noise to scriptural permanence necessitates a loss of something putatively more prior and original” (354). The last words of the piper, “And I wrote my happy songs, / Every child may joy to hear” on their surface seem to indicate a set of cheerful poems that a child can read and delight in. However, when viewed in the context of words of the Child, this statement seems deeply ironic. The use of the word “stain” further reinforces the incursion of sin into the innocence of the narrative. Much as the Child initially suggested that the piper’s songs were happy, only to allow the piper to discover that they were in fact very serious, Blake invites his readers to discover for themselves the serious undertones which are bound into his “happy songs.” In this way the readers of the work also become involved in the process of gaining experience, through which process naïve joy is sacrificed in order to gain a more profound level of understanding.

The piper in the introduction to Songs of Innocence, in addition to being a model for the reader of Blake’s poems to follow on the path from innocence to experience, is also an analogue of Milton as he narrates Paradise Lost. Both Milton and the piper are in need of heavenly inspiration before they are able to undertake the writing of their respective works, but the differences between the two serve to enlighten the reader about the problems which Blake sought to emphasize within Milton’s work. Unlike Milton, who is specifically imploring the muse in order to write a work which he had long been considering, the piper is visited by the Child without any invitation on his part. The motives of the piper in writing his songs are therefore not in question. Milton, on the other hand, leaves open the question of his motives. His self-stated objective of justifying God’s ways to men bears within it an element of self-aggrandizement which is not present in Blake’s narrator. Milton therefore, though he may believe that he is writing a work of heavenly inspiration for the benefit of all mankind, cannot escape the fact that
pride is a prominent factor of his narration. The element of pride emphasizes the fallen nature of Milton’s narrator, which becomes a serious issue when he begins to expound on subjects of God, angels, and innocence.

Blake’s illustrations provide further insight into the differences between the humble narrator of Songs of Innocence and Milton’s blind pride as he narrates Paradise Lost. The frontispiece to Songs of Innocence depicts the piper walking down the valley, pipe in hand, looking up at the Child on the cloud. By positioning the Child above the piper, Blake draws attention to the subservient role of the piper. Furthermore, the piper is seen to be turning away from his pipe in order to look directly at the Child, an act which suggests the piper’s willingness to leave behind childish and innocent pursuits, such as his piping, in order to gain instruction and eventually share with others what he learns. Behind the piper are sheep, symbols of innocence,
which he is leaving behind him. Blake’s illustrations to *Paradise Lost* also contain an image of instruction, when Raphael warns Adam and Eve of the danger they are in as a result of Lucifer’s presence in the Garden. Raphael and Adam sit opposite each other, with Eve standing between the two. In the background of the image is the Tree of Knowledge, the ever-present reminder of the danger which lies so near. Raphael is gesturing towards the Tree as if in admonition, while Adam’s hands are raised and his brow furrowed. Adam’s expression is curious, as it appears to be one of objection rather than submission. Appropriately enough, Milton can be aligned both with Adam and with Raphael. Milton, in emphasizing his need for heavenly assistance, is much like Adam. Yet Blake’s illustration suggests that the heavenly wisdom is not being accepted as freely as one would hope. However, by elevating himself beyond the level of mere mortals Milton also takes on the role of the instructive messenger, sent to emphasize the presence of danger in order to benefit mankind. Blake’s illustration emphasizes the problems with both possible interpretations, pointing out the lack of humility on the part of Adam and the lack of effectiveness of the part of Raphael. In either case Blake’s message is clear: Milton’s objective is impossible. By elevating himself to a level impossible for mortal men to achieve, Milton is guilty not only of self-deception, but also of pride, thus rendering his portrayal of innocence within *Paradise Lost* inaccurate at best.

*Songs of Experience* is also a valuable vehicle through which Blake emphasized the problems of Milton’s theodicy. The introduction to *Songs of Experience* recalls the language used by Milton when he invokes the heavenly muse:

> Hear the voice of the Bard,
> Who present, past, and future, sees;
> Whose ears have heard

Spratt 9
The Holy Word
That walked among the ancient tree;

Calling the lapsed soul,
And weeping in the evening dew;
That might control
The starry pole,
And fallen, fallen light renew!

"O Earth, O Earth, return!
Arise from out the dewy grass!
Night is worn,
And the morn
Rises from the slumbrous mass.

"Turn away no more;
Why wilt thou turn away?
The starry floor,
The watery shore,
Are given thee till the break of day.

Blake positions his narrator as a “Bard” who has the ability to discern not only past and present, but future also. The emphasis on the fact that the Bard has “heard, / The Holy Word, / That walk’d among the ancient trees” suggests almost eerie levels of similarity with Milton. Both
narrators are seeking wisdom in order to teach others of events past, present, and future. In the case of Milton these events include the prior events of the creation and fall, current events including the fallen state of mankind, and future events such as the ultimate redemption of mankind through the grace of Christ. Blake’s reference to trees similarly suggests the Garden of Eden, about which Milton is also seeking to gain wisdom from heavenly sources. Blake’s narrator and Milton also share a common intent, that of “calling the lapsed soul.”

The similarities between these two narrators go deeper than mere purpose, however, and even encompass physical characteristics. As has already been addressed, Milton made a point of emphasizing his physical blindness within Paradise Lost. Blake’s narrator also suggests that he is suffering from a physical blindness which he is seeking to compensate with heavenly inspiration. The narrator’s desire for the earth to renew its “fallen light,” his demands that “Earth return,” and his question of “Why wilt thou turn away” all suggest blindness and a loss of earthly perception. By presenting us with a narrator who desires to gain heavenly knowledge both in order to compensate for physical blindness and to teach others about heavenly things, Blake presents readers with a clear symbol of Milton.

The symbolic representation of Milton within Songs of Experience becomes increasingly important when one looks at the next poem in the series, “Earth’s Answer.” In response to the Bard’s question of why the earth turns away and places him in darkness, the reader is presented with a somewhat troubling response. The poem contains a dialogue, presumably between the Bard and the Earth, wherein the Bard repeats his questions. In response the earth replies:

Prison'd on wat'ry shore,

Starry Jealousy does keep my den:

Cold and hoar,
Weeping o'er,
I hear the father of the ancient men.
Selfish father of men
Cruel, jealous, selfish fear
Can delight,
Chain'd in night,
The virgins of youth and morning bear.

Blake presents the reader with a vision of the fallen world in which Milton is attempting to write about heavenly things. The emphasis on words such as “selfish” and “jealousy” emphasize the sinful nature of the world and everything in it, including Milton. Milton’s own writings about himself are undeniably laced with references which can be interpreted as selfish, vain, and prideful. Blake points out, however, that even works which are full of cruelty, jealously, selfishness, and fear, can delight those who are “Chain’d in night,” or in other words those who are within the fallen world. In crafting this response to a figurative plea from a Miltonic narrator, Blake not only explains the immense popularity of *Paradise Lost*, but further reinforces his belief that Milton’s work is flawed, as any such work must be, by having been crafted within a fallen world.

It is worth examining the two illustrations to these poems, which show visually what Blake so masterfully expressed with the written word. The illustration for the Introduction shows a figure reclining among the clouds and the stars, with his head surrounded by a dark circle. The figure is presumably the Bard, who is figuratively surrounded by the vastness of eternity which he wishes to comprehend and express. However, the dark circle surrounding his head suggests both his physical blindness, and his spiritual blindness which results from his...
As a result of the deep issues with Milton as a narrator on the subject of innocence, tensions regarding the nature of innocence creep into *Paradise Lost*. These issues include animosity towards innocence on the part of experienced characters, a sense of inevitable loss of innocence, and the vulnerability of those in a state of innocence. Certain critics have asserted that “Milton equated innocence with sinlessness—nothing more and nothing less” (Schneider 352), however, innocence within Milton is a much more complex and contradictory topic, as Stephen Behrendt emphasizes: “Gradations of guilt and accountability, degrees of good and evil,
of right and wrong, are complicated matters, and invoking the old absolutes—Satan equals evil, the Father equals good—grossly oversimplifies a most complex situation” (85). The difficulties and complexities of the state of innocence which are present in both Blake and Milton serve as evidence of the fundamental impossibility of Milton’s task. Due to the fallen conditions under which *Paradise Lost* was written, a simple and straightforward representation of innocence was impossible, as Blake makes explicit in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

The inevitability of a loss of innocence hangs like a shadow over both Blake’s poetry and the world of *Paradise Lost*. Long before the reader is introduced to Adam and Eve, Milton’s God informs us of their ultimate fate:

So without least impulse or shadow of fate
Or aught by me immutably foreseen
They trespass, authors to themselves in all
Both what they judge and what they choose, for so
I formed them free and free they must remain
Till they enthrall themselves. (3:120-125)

Adam and Eve’s innocence which we are subsequently introduced to is, as a result of God’s pronouncement, already tainted with the anxiety of impending loss. This anxiety forces the reader to acknowledge a problem with innocence: it exists only to be lost. Indeed, innocence can never be known from within a state of innocence, as there is no basis of comparison. Innocence therefore exists only to those who have already lost it, making it by its very nature temporary. The inevitability of loss extends to the characters within the poem itself. Appropriately it is Satan who most explicitly suggests both the evanescent nature of innocence, as well as the sorrow which will follow: “Ah, gentle pair, ye little think how nigh / Your change approaches
when all these delights / Will vanish and deliver ye to woe, / More woe the more your taste is now of joy!” (4:366-370). Satan’s speech here suggests not only innocence's temporary nature, but introduces the idea that innocence may not even be a particularly beneficial thing, as it only serves to make one more miserable after having known and lost such joys as innocence provides.

The transience of innocence within *Paradise Lost* becomes even more instrumental as Adam and Eve begin to experience anxiety for themselves—anxiety which eventually influences their actions in profound ways. Eve’s dream, delivered to her by Satan, gives the pair one of their first tastes of the potential for sin: “For I this night / (Such night till this I never passed) have dreamed /…of offense and trouble which my mind / Knew never till this irksome night” (4:30-35). Eve’s repeated insistence that she had never known such a night reinforces the conclusion that until her dream Eve had never witnessed the shadow of sin. Further on, however, the reader is given additional information which suggests that the innocence of Eden, even prior to Eve’s dream, was not without its problems. Following her creation Eve sees her reflection in a pool of water, and finding the image pleasing remarks “There I had fixed / Mine eyes till now and pined with vain desire” (4:365-66). Eve’s vanity and self-worship, coupled with her use of the word “desire,” suggests a deeper and more troubling condition: pride. As the greatest of the seven deadly sins, the appearance of pride in Eden reveals not only the possibility that innocence is not a state of perfection, but also suggests that, whether known or not, Eve was already having thoughts which would ultimately lead to the fall. As John Tanner states in *Anxiety in Eden*, “The fall must have occurred as desire prior to disobedience; that is to say, Adam and Eve must have fallen inwardly before they fell outwardly” (18). Eve’s vanity, which expresses itself only moments after she becomes conscious of her own existence, is the first
glimpse of the seeds of inward fall which preceded the eventual fall itself and which lend anxiety to both Eden and the reader.

A number of Blake’s poems make explicit the temporary nature of innocence which is subtly present in Milton’s writing. “The Echoing Green” and both versions of “Nurse’s Song” are prime examples of Blake’s use of this theme. The two poems from Songs of Innocence seem to represent light-hearted and carefree children, and the joy of adults in seeing these innocent youth laugh and play. However, by looking at what isn’t said in the poems it becomes clear that the adults in the poems are truthfully aware of the impending and inevitable loss of innocence which will befall the children, and are also aware of the difficulties and challenges which life will force upon them. We will first look at “The Echoing Green”:

The sun does arise,
And make happy the skies.
The merry bells ring
To welcome the spring.
The skylark and thrush,
The birds of the bush,
Sing louder around,
To the bells’ cheerful sound,
While our sports shall be seen
On the echoing green.

Old John with white hair
Does laugh away care,

Spratt 16
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 and boys,
In our youth-time were seen
On the echoing green.”

Till the little ones weary
No more can be merry;
The sun does descend,
And our sports have an end.
Round the laps of their mother
Many sisters and brothers,
Like birds in their nest,
Are ready for rest;
And sport no more seen
On the darkening green.

The old people in “The Echoing Green” are laughing away care, yet the fact that they have care that needs to be laughed away suggests that they have led hard lives—lives which the children will be facing shortly. The reminiscence about when the old people were young suggests the
transience of both youth and happiness. Furthermore, the repeated use of the word “echoing” suggests not only the noise of play, but also the existence of mere echoes of happier times which are now gone. The term “echo” also implies a sense of emptiness and void, in which the only thing which exists are the echoes of happiness and not happiness itself. Finally the conclusion of the poem suggests the arrival of the loss of happiness, as the children are so weary that they will play no more. The use of such a superlative term as “no more” suggests a degree of finality which casts a dark specter over the lightness of the poem. Interestingly, the poem concludes by referring to the darkening green rather than the echoing green, a suggestion that the bright memories of the innocence of youth have been supplanted by the dark reality of experience.

Blake’s illustrations to the poem further suggest the impending loss of innocence for the children, as well as the sad experience of the adults. The first illustration represents a number of adult women sitting under a large tree surrounded by children, some playing and some seeming to collapse upon their mothers’ laps. The background depicts children playing. The tree itself is both representative of innocence and experience, as the tree of knowledge was a symbol of Adam and Eve’s innocence prior to their partaking of the fruit, and afterwards became a symbol of their fall. The presence of the innocent and the experienced around the tree emphasize this dual symbol. Furthermore, the faces of the women appear weary and care-worn, emphasizing the loss of childlike joys on the part of the adult speakers in the poem. The second illustration represents the conclusion of the children’s play, as they are directed homeward by the stern gesture of an older man. Also pictured are children within a tree lounging and reaching for fruit. The act of partaking of fruit is a clear allusion to the fall, and implies the impending loss of innocence which pervades Blake’s work. The adult directing the children home implies a desire
to limit the innocent joys of the children on the part of the experienced, as they realize that those joys are temporary by their very nature.

“Nurse’s Song” has a similar light style which hides more doubtful themes underneath:

When the voices of children are heard on the green,
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast,
And everything else is still.

Spratt 19
"Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,
And the dews of night arise;
Come, come, leave off play, and let us away,
Till the morning appears in the skies."

"No, no, let us play, for it is yet day,
And we cannot go to sleep;
Besides, in the sky the little birds fly,
And the hills are all covered with sheep."

"Well, well, go and play till the light fades away,
And then go home to bed."
The little ones leaped, and shouted, and laughed,
And all the hills echoed.

The nurse claims that she is happy when listening to the children laugh and play, but the fact that her happiness relies on witnessing youth play suggests that she is unhappy and careworn much of the time. The happiness of the children doesn’t serve as a cure to the problems which the nurse faces, rather the problems are only temporarily forgotten, surely to return with the cessation of the children’s play. Furthermore, the nurse seeks to call the children in from their play, as if to force both the children and herself to face reality. The children resist, however, and the nurse gives in to their desires. The opposition between the desires of the nurse and the children is reminiscent of the opposing desires of Adam and Eve, and God, as well as the opposition between Satan and God. Interestingly the nurse’s actions would be self-destructive, since her happiness relies on the happiness of the children which she sought to end. This suggests an
interesting parallel with Satan, who was willing to give up his happiness if it meant having control: “To reign is worth ambition, though in hell: / Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven” (1:262-63). Despite the nurse’s desires to curtail the play of the children, she eventually yields to their entreaties, showing that the nurse, though a fallen and experienced individual, is still able to appreciate innocence despite her animosity towards the children caused by their possession of that which the nurse has forever lost.

The “Nurse’s Song” from Songs of Innocence makes even more pronounced these oppositions between happiness and experience:

When voices of children are heard on the green,
And whisperings are in the dale,
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
My face turns green and pale.

Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,
And the dews of night arise;
Your spring and your day are wasted in play,
And your winter and night in disguise.

Rather than laughing at the play of the children, she thinks of her own youth and becomes sick at the thought. This could be either because the happiness of her youth stands in such stark contrast to the horrors of her adult life, or because she realizes only in retrospect that her youth was in actual fact a terrible time of life. Either way, she views the play of the children as something wasteful. By calling home the children, and not allowing them to continue to play as she did in Innocence, the Nurse forces reality upon the children. The Nurse, along with the old

Spratt 21
people in “The Echoing Green”, seems to predict the future unhappiness of the children. The impression of the evanescence of innocence, and the prediction of its loss, along with the concept that sorrow is more full when contrasted with joy, suggest a strong thematic link between *Paradise Lost* and Blake’s poetry.

Much like the Nurse in Blake’s poetry, Milton was participating in an act of self-deception when he attempted to produce a perfect world for Adam and Eve, even though he was already writing from a fallen, and therefore jaded, perspective. The impossibility of Milton’s task led to a degree of animosity, if not ostensibly then at least subconsciously, on Milton’s part towards the happy couple which it was Milton’s task to represent. “Nurse’s Song” shows that within states of innocence there are always those who are seeking to disrupt the happiness of the innocent party. Satan is the obvious culprit in *Paradise Lost*, as he desires for Adam and Eve to experience the same misery that he himself has become subject to on account of his rebellion. Satan stands as the most complex character within *Paradise Lost*, and demonstrates both the need for fallen creatures to appear to be satisfied with their state, as well as the subtle desire to heap their unhappiness upon others, seeking company for their misery. When Satan first arrives within the bounds of Eden, he sorrows within himself regarding his decision to war against God and his subsequent expulsion from Heaven, until he becomes resolute and declares, “So farewell hope and with hope farewell fear! / Farewell remorse! All good to me is lost. / Evil, be thou my good” (4:108-110). Upon abandoning his own hopes of ever regaining a place in God’s paradise, Satan set himself to disrupt the happiness of Adam and Eve. Satan, though always outwardly confident, did not gain inner confidence and resolution until he recognized his fallen condition and developed a deep and driving sense of animosity towards Adam and Eve on account of the happiness of their innocence.

Spratt 22
A visual comparison of Blake’s illustrations of both “Nurses Song” from *Experience* and the fall of Eve reveals striking similarities between the two. Both suggest a moment of instructive intimacy between an innocent being and an experienced being: the nurse and the boy, and Satan and Eve. Furthermore, the other member of the couple in each image is seen to be idly distracted in the background of the illustration, suggesting a naïve detachment from the events taking place. By so illustrating both Milton’s and his own work in such a manner, Blake was drawing a parallel between the two works. The seeming innocence of the two non-participants is shown to be, particularly in the case of Adam, no more than willful self-deception, much as the author who attempts to enter such a state of innocence is deceiving himself. Furthermore, both drawings contain obvious illustrations of fruit signifying knowledge and a subsequent loss of
innocence, suggesting that even those in a state of innocence are eventually destined to fall, being constantly surrounded by the devices of their ultimate destruction.

*Paradise Lost* contains strong elements which suggest that innocence, rather than being a virtue, is in fact a weakness which makes its subjects vulnerable to manipulation and abuse. This theme is carried into Blake’s poetry and illustrations, where innocence is shown to be a tool which is exploited by those seeking power in order to take advantage of those who are in a state of innocence. Milton presents Satan as the chief abuser of the innocent, and Blake, by extending Milton’s argument, aligns any person who abuses another’s ignorance with Satan himself.

The fall of Adam and Eve within *Paradise Lost* is, in many ways, as much a result of Adam and Eve’s ignorance as it was a result of their craving for further knowledge and experience. Thus Milton presents the reader with an impossible paradox: innocence which can only be maintained through proper experience is nullified by the very thing which preserves it. In his work *Areopagitica* Milton makes clear his feeling on the vulnerable state of untried innocence:

> I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather; that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. That virtue therefore which is but youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure; her whiteness is but an excremental whiteness. (349-350)

These words, written over twenty years prior to the publication of *Paradise Lost*, reveal an important perspective on innocence which repeatedly presents itself in *Paradise Lost*. Eve’s
speech to Adam in which she tries to persuade him to separate with her so they can work alone suggests the vulnerability of untried innocence:

If this be our condition thus to dwell
In narrow circuit straitened by a foe
Subtle or violent, we not endued
Single with like defence wherever met,
How are we happy, still in fear of harm?
But harm precedes not sin: only our foe
Tempting affronts us with his foul esteem
Of our integrity. His foul esteem
Stick no dishonor on our front but turns
Foul on Himself! Then wherefore shunned or feared
By us who rather double honor gain
From his surmise proved false, find peace within,
Favor from Heav’n, our witness, from th’event? (9:322-234)

Eve’s argument reveals that she has an understanding of Satan and his desire to overthrow Adam and Eve, but her insistence on still separating from Adam stems from her belief that their innocence cannot be perfect if it can only be maintained when they are together. Furthermore, she suggests that by trying their innocence through separating themselves from one another, they will be able to prove themselves to God, and thus gain even greater honor in heaven, having passed through and overcome a trial of their obedience and faith. Eve’s argument bears some credibility, particularly since it is reinforced by God Himself: “Freely they stood who stood and fell who fell. / Not free, what proof could they have giv’n sincere / Of true allegiance, constant
faith or love / Where only what they needs must do appeared, / Not what they would?” (3:102-106).

Adam recognizes the other half of the paradox of innocence however, and thus advises Eve: “Seek not temptation, then, which to avoid / Were better and most likely if from me / thou sever not: trial will come unsought. / Wouldst thou approve they constancy? Approve / First thy obedience” (9: 364-367). Adam understood that innocence was a state of vulnerability, but unlike Eve he felt that the best course of action was avoiding temptation rather than learning to withstand it. It is plausible that Adam also understood the need to try one’s faith, but he was much more cautious than Eve in his approach, believing that trials would come to the pair whether they sought them or not, and that it would be wiser to face them united. Eve, however, displaying the headstrong and prideful nature of a creature who, as Tanner suggests, has already fallen internally, persists until Adam gives in to her will. Although initially Eve’s argument alone seems to support Milton’s point of view, a more careful examination shows that both Adam and Eve understood the need for trials to harden their virtue and innocence, but it was Eve’s excess of pride which ultimately led to the fall. Eve, being still innocent, lacked an understanding of the nature of sin; she therefore overestimated her ability to resist sin, and her overconfidence gave Satan an opportunity to take advantage of her innocence and ignorance in order to bring about the fall of Man.

The concept of the vulnerability of innocence both in terms of personal ignorance and the possibility for exploitation by others is a central theme of many of William Blake’s poems. He focuses particularly upon the innocence of children, and how that innocence is taken advantage of, along with their too-easily-given faith, to satisfy the greed of the men who employed the children of the poems. The two versions of “The Chimney Sweeper” are particularly rich
examples of the vulnerable state which innocence places its subjects within, and these poems work together with the arguments put forth by Milton to show how innocence which is untried by experience is not merely unproven, but is itself dangerous.

“The Chimney Sweeper” from Songs of Innocence presents us with a childlike narrator who, due to his innocence and faith, is not fully aware of the abuses which he is subject to:

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

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

And so he was quiet; and that very night,  
As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight, -  
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack,  
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black.

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

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

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

The chimney sweepers lead difficult lives to say the least: orphans who sleep in soot and sweep chimneys day after day. However their innocent naiveté keeps them from realizing just how desperate their situation is. Indeed, religion in this poem seems to function as a tool to keep the children dutiful, as seen by the statement, “if all do their duty, they need not fear harm”. It could be argued that their innocence is beneficial in that it shields them from the difficulties of their lives, and the perspective adopted in *Songs of Experience* may in fact agree with this, as we shall see a certain disdainful envy for innocence emerging. However, one cannot avoid the fact that innocence within this poem leads the children to bear abuses which they should not have to endure in the first place.

Blake includes within the poem elements which make clear the fallen nature of the world of the poem. The reference to death in the opening line removes all doubt as to the true nature of the poem. The dream of the black coffin is also troublesome, as the children perceive, at least
subconsciously, that they will only find release from misery in death. The bags referenced are more than simply tools of the children’s trade. They symbolize the burdens which the children are forced to bear throughout their lives, burdens imposed upon them because of their innocence. Despite the optimism and faith of the children, the references to death, weeping, and imprisonment imply not only the abuse of the innocent by those who are experienced, but also a darker side to innocence which, once innocence is lost, will only lead to further abuse. The religious imagery of the poem, rather than being comforting, is troubling when associated with the harsh reality of the lives’ of the chimney sweepers. Visions of angels, baptismal cleansing in clear rivers, and a reversion back to a clean and naked innocence are insufficient to insulate the children from the horrors and abuses which a fallen world imposes on the innocent and naïve.

The danger of innocent optimism and faith which is implicit in “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Innocence* is addressed explicitly in the version from *Songs of Experience*:

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

“Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smiled among the winter's snow,
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

“And because I am happy and dance and sing,
They think they have done me no injury,
And are gone to praise God and His priest and king,
Who made up a heaven of our misery.”

The subject, likely a boy very similar to the one in the poem from *Innocence*, shows that his cheerful demeanor even under hardship caused his parents to turn a blind eye to his suffering, feeling justified in so doing because he appeared to be happy. However, it is clear from the repeated use of words such as death and woe that the boy is truly miserable, and it is because of his innocence that he has been led to suffer such abuses. The poem also furthers the point of *Songs of Innocence* in that it suggests that Christianity has been corrupted and is now a vehicle for abusing and deceiving the innocent and faithful followers of the church. Unlike the version from *Innocence*, however, the child in *Experience* is suffering not at the hand of an unknown oppressor, but as a direct result of the negligence and self-deception of his parents. By shifting the source of oppression to individuals who should be a source of protection, Blake demonstrates that the abuse of innocence is not only dangerous for children, but for society as a whole. Exploiting innocence, for Blake, means a degradation of the ability of society to perceive and address social issues, leading them to willfully participate in acts of self-deception in order to justify their actions. In this sense the adults of the poem are like Milton’s Satan, who is constantly seeking to justify his fall from grace and subsequent malice towards Adam and Eve. The children of the poem are forced to accept their lot with all the cheer and humor they can muster, despite the fact that it is this cheer which leads to their abuses in the first place. Much like Eve in *Paradise Lost*, the innocence of the characters in these poems enables them to be manipulated into a self-destructive course of action for the benefit of those in power over them,
as when Satan emphasizes Eve’s lack of knowledge in order to persuade her to partake of the fruit.

Visually these two poems contain a transparent contrast between innocence and experience. The illustration from *Innocence* portrays the dream of the young chimney sweep, showing children dancing and playing on a green hill, and one being raised from a coffin by an angel. The illustration from *Experience*, however, shows the reality of the situation, depicting a soot-covered chimney sweep trudging through rain-drenched streets, gazing longingly towards the grey skies with longing and despair on his face. Whereas the illustration from *Innocence* depicts only a fantasy, a dream of what the chimney sweepers hope will someday come, the harsh reality of the illustration from *Experience* shows the faith and hope of eventual
joy and redemption are insufficient to solve the problems which exist for those in a state of innocence, as long as the experienced continue to justify inaction and complacence.

Blake’s two “Chimney Sweeper” poems work together to show the illusion and the reality behind the abuse of the innocent, and when viewed alongside their respective illustrations create a strong distinction between the perceived happiness of the innocents, and the actual misery to which they are subjected. These themes are mirrored in Paradise Lost, with Satan being the most obvious example of an individual who was once innocent, but has since gained experience, and with it the ability to abuse the innocent for his personal gain. Adam and Eve are the two characters who are taken advantage of by Satan, who presents them with a false vision of experience in order to blind them to the abuses to which they are being subjected as pawns in Satan’s mission to frustrate God’s purposes. It is only in retrospect, after gaining experience for themselves, that Adam and Eve are able to perceive the true nature of Satan’s deception, much as the lens of experience is necessary to reveal the full scope of the abuses of the chimney sweepers within Blake’s poems.

Milton’s Paradise Lost is rightfully regarded as a masterpiece of the English language, but it is not without its problems. In undertaking a task which could only be properly performed by God Himself, Milton was both elevating himself beyond the bounds of mortality, and setting himself up for inevitable failure, at least in his attempts to accurately portray a state of innocence. As a result of Milton’s inherent error in the premise of Paradise Lost, the work is riddled with tensions and anxieties regarding the subject of innocence, manifesting themselves in vulnerability for those in a state of innocence, and a sense of inevitable loss of innocence. At their core these issues stem from the narrator himself and his simultaneous desire for and animosity towards innocence. William Blake, in writing Songs of Innocence and of Experience,
sought to do intentionally what he felt Milton had done by accident: write a work about flawed innocence. In so doing Blake not only restated and expanded on the concepts of problems of innocence, but he also critically examined the role of Milton as narrator of *Paradise Lost*, and pointed out the problems of fallen beings explaining the will and mysteries of God. The interplay between these two authors and their poetry provides a cutting insight into the nature of innocence, as well as the nature of poetry itself, particularly when a poet attempts to explain subjects incomprehensible to the minds of mere mortals. The resultant works, as Blake makes clear, will never achieve total fidelity in representing innocence. Milton’s work, though it contains unavoidable inaccuracies, provides an ideal ground from which to examine issues of narration, theodicy, and innocence, even if it does not accurately depicting innocence itself.
Works Cited


About the Author

Andrew Spratt was born on an auspicious summer day in Salt Lake City, Utah. At the youthful age of one he moved with his family to the distant land of Bountiful, Utah, where Andrew attended Bountiful High School and developed a love for literature in Mrs. Drake’s AP Lit class. After graduating in 2005, Andrew moved to Logan where he attended Utah State University for one year before serving a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. During his first year at USU Andrew discovered his aptitude and love for writing when he accidentally enrolled in an upper division rhetorical theory class without any idea of what it actually was. Fortunately he loved it, and upon returning from his missionary service Andrew resumed his studies, majoring in English Literature. He joined the Honors Program during his Junior year after foolishly deciding that his major wasn’t challenging enough. During his senior year, Andrew once again decided that he wasn’t being sufficiently taxed, so he began pursuing a History minor as well. During this time Andrew also participated in Sigma Tau Delta, and was elected Vice President in April 2010. Following his graduation in May 2011, Andrew intends to return to his ancestral home of Bountiful before spending a year pursuing whatever exciting opportunities life presents, after which time he plans on attending law school.