



The Meeting of Childhood and Colonialism in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*

Mötet mellan Barndom och Kolonialism i *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* av William Blake

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Abstract

In *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* William Blake contrasts childhood and adulthood. This essay relates this to another prominent social issue in the collection, colonialism. This essay aims at answering the question of what happens when the child is black rather than white. By providing an analysis of how children in general are portrayed, followed up with a brief discussion of how Blake deals with colonial issues this essay sets the stage for a final concluding discussion about what happens when the two themes of childhood and colonialism meet. The discussion reveals that Blake is using irony to ridicule the contemporary polarized meanings of the words "black" and "white". By doing this Blake makes the little black boy in "The Little Black Boy" the perfect symbol for criticising the contemporary issues of child abuse and colonialism in one single piece of poetry.

Keywords: William Blake, Black, Childhood, Colonialism, Poetry, Social criticism, White

Sammanfattning

I *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* visar William Blake på motsättningarna mellan barndom och de vuxnas värld. Denna uppsats kopplar detta tema till kolonialism, en annan framstående social fråga som behandlas i diktsamlingen. Syftet med denna uppsats är att besvara frågan om vad skillnaden blir när det är ett svart barn istället för ett vitt som framställs i dikterna. Genom att först analysera hur barn i allmänhet framställs, följt av en kort diskussion om hur Blake hanterar problemet med kolonialismen leder denna uppsats fram till en avslutande diskussion kring vad som händer när två stora teman som barndom och kolonialism möts. Den avslutande diskussionen framhäver att genom Blakes användande av ironi så gör han den samtida polariseringen av orden "svart" och "vit" till åtlöje. Den svarta pojken i "The Little Black Boy" blir Blakes perfekta symbol för att kritisera de samtida frågorna kring barns utsatthet och kolonialism i en och samma dikt.

Nyckelord: William Blake, Barndom, Kolonialism, Poesi, Social kritik, Svart, Vit

Born in London, the capital of the colonial power of Great Britain, William Blake was a great social critic of his time and an advocate for children in particular, as well as a critic of Britain's colonial policies. This is evident in his illustrated collection of poems *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1793), with the subheading "Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul". In this illustrated poetry collection, the ordinary and marginalised in society, including infants, children and sub-Saharan African slaves, are allowed to have their story told (Quinney 92). As Michael Ferber points out, Blake was a great social critic and advocated liberty for all groups of society:

Blake is one of the great poets of liberty in all its forms. All his rulers are tyrants, all his subjects slaves. The chimney sweeper, the African, Orc in America, all are chained by both real and mind-forged manacles. Much of Blake's eloquent and moving poetry either protests oppression or celebrates liberation. (125)

As the title *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* suggests, the collection contrasts childhood and adulthood, and I will relate this theme to another prominent social issue in the poem, colonialism. In short, what happens when the child is black rather than white? To answer this question, I will provide an analysis of how children in general are portrayed, followed by a brief discussion of how Blake deals with colonial issues. These complementary analyses set the stage for a concluding discussion about what happens when the two themes of childhood and colonialism meet. Examining how the poem is exposing the poor conditions and social injustice of children in general, as well as the distinctions made between black and white children, this essay argues that by combining the themes of childhood and colonialism Blake is shown to make a stronger critical statement not only against contemporary maltreatment of children, but against the maltreatment of sub-Saharan African children subject to colonialism and slavery in particular.

The theme of childhood versus adulthood is everywhere in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, but there are a handful of poems which deal specifically with the maltreatment of children. First off in my analysis will be “The Chimney Sweeper” 1 and 2 (one each in the innocence and experience sections), which, as the name suggests, deal with the subject of child labor. Since they were small enough to get into the small spaces of chimneys in order to clean them, young children from poor families were sold to become apprentices to do the dirty and hazardous work of chimney sweeping. Another poem which is key to this essay is “London”, which is without a corresponding poem in the *Innocence*-part of the collection. What “London” offers is Blake’s understanding of the city, the centrum of power and the physical locations of many of the poems in the collection. The next key poems are “Holy Thursday” 1 and 2, in which Blake showcases the social concern of society and also illustrates the growing social awareness of the times. More specifically these poems deal with the charity schools of 18th-century London and the poor and homeless children sent there. The final poem under consideration is also the most important since it combines the two themes of childhood and colonialism. “The Little Black Boy” deals with the subject of slavery by describing the conditions of black children in the 18th century colonial power Britain. During the late 18th century, slavery was still legal and sub-Saharan Africans were often subject to slavery during the period of colonialism. The poem addresses many different aspects of a young sub-Saharan’s childhood, including slavery, skin colour and religion. Like “London” it does not have a corresponding poem in the other part of the collection. Even though I have chosen to focus on a select number of key poems that are essential to this essay, the themes they touch on are connected to *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as a whole, and I will have occasion to discuss and analyse other poems in passing, as well as the illustrations of the collection.

Blake's portrayal of children in general will provide the first part of my analysis. There are of course many different children described in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, but those who are subject to abuse, neglect and child labor will provide the main focus of this essay. At first glance the children, and especially those in the *Songs of Innocence*, might seem quite blissful and often unaware of their poor conditions. Blake, however, by showcasing their poor circumstances criticises the lower-class parents of these London children. Donald Dike elaborates,

“The Chimney Sweeper” opens on a continuing darkness, an uninterrupted night: “So your chimneys I sweep, & in soot I sleep.” Orphaned of his mother, that recurrently saving presence, and so defenseless [sic] against the callous selfishness of the predictably untrustworthy father, the sweeper has been apprenticed (“sold”) into the commercial bondage of child labor. (371)

Dike puts his finger on one of the main antagonists: the fathers of the young children in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* are often either absent or cruel, leaving them alone in the forest in “A Little Boy Lost” or selling them off to child labor as in “The Chimney Sweeper” 1.

One significant example of this is found right at the beginning of “The Chimney Sweeper” 1:

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

Through a first-person perspective Blake provides an insight to the conditions for many young children being sold off as chimney sweepers. This particular chimney sweeper has a remarkably tragic story, his mother dying at a very young age and his father selling him as a

chimney sweeper at a very young age. Besides the fact that the young chimney sweeper apprentices were forced to perform dirty child labor that was hazardous to their health, they were often not paid properly for the work (van Manen 61-62). However, despite all this, this particular young chimney sweeper seems to be quite happy. He even comforts his even younger compadre, Tom Dacre:

Theres little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curl'd like a lambs 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. (ll. 5-8)

Showing his humanity, the narrator acts almost like a guardian angel to young Tom when he has his soot-stained hair shaved off. Painting a picture of an innocent young child who is still mature enough to take care of his younger compadre, Blake effectively makes the antagonising father, who sold him off, seem even more cruel in contrast.

In “The Chimney Sweeper” 2 Blake paints a different picture compared to the one found in *Songs of Innocence*:

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. (ll. 1-4)

In contrast to the “The Chimney Sweeper” 1, “The Chimney Sweeper” 2 initially provides a third person perspective from someone observing the young chimney sweeper from above in a patronizing manner, likely a silent bystander from the upper class. This person does not see the young chimney sweeper for who he is, a child in need, but instead sees only a little black thing in the snow. The observer looking at the young chimney sweeper does not seem to view the hazardous child labor and abuse as the actual problem, but rather sees the dirty chimney

sweeper in the snow as someone who disturbs the pleasant scenery of the snowy streets. Later into the poem Blake switches back to the first-person perspective of the young chimney sweeper:

And because I am happy, & dance & sing,
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. (ll. 9-12)

Blake now uses another approach to his criticism of child labor and abuse by showing us this more cynical and bitter young child, one who is more experienced and aware of the people who profit from his labor even as they appear pious by praising “God & his Priest & King”. The powerful contrast between Blake’s different approaches in “The Chimney Sweeper” 1 and “The Chimney Sweeper” 2 is what makes these two poems so effective in their criticism against child labor, neglect and abuse.

The background to these poems is a late 18th century Britain that was slowly beginning to be transformed into a modern urban society. With the industrial revolution in full swing, cities were expanding and the population was growing rapidly. Many of the poems in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* are explicitly taking place in London, which as a physical place is best described in the poem with the same name found in the Experience-part of the collection. Blake describes London as a place of misery and suffering among the inhabitants. Taking the part of a first-person observer, the narrator of the poem describes the settings and people he sees when wandering through the city:

I wander thro’ each charter’d street,
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe. (ll. 1-4)

Wandering the poorer streets close to the river Thames, the narrator describes the weak and sad faces he sees in the people he encounters. In most poems of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* Blake is either assuming someone's first-person perspective or letting someone describe something from a third person perspective. These lines stand out since they seemingly describe the poet himself wandering freely around the city of London, which had always been his home (Sayers and Monin 4), thereby giving us an account of his own experiences.

Deliberately mixing up the senses of hearing and seeing, Blake goes on to accuse those in power (represented by the "blackening Church" and the blood-covered "Palace") for the plight of the lowly soldier or chimney sweeper, the latter by alluding to the line "Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep" in "The Chimney Sweeper" 1:

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls. ("London", ll. 9-12)

The child's weeping cry transforms into the darkness of the church, black from all the soot in the industrialised town of London that the chimney sweeper has to clean, but also a sign of the moral corruption of the Church as a social institution. By doing this, Blake shows that the Church is not above the moral guilt of society at large but is rather an integrated part of a system which oppresses the marginalized.

The late 18th century was a time in Great Britain when people, and society as a whole, were starting to view children and childhood as something distinguishably separate from adults and adulthood (O'Malley 1), where there earlier was no great difference in society's view of children and adults. During this period, there was an increasing concern for the plight of children in society which manifested itself in different ways. An evident example of the

increasing social concern was the increasing number of charity schools for poor children, a topic Blake deals with in his two “Holy Thursday” poems. David Fairer explains:

The children are repeatedly the object of concern about the spiritual health of society at large; and the need felt in each locality to do something with its poor [...]. Charity education was the point at which infant hopes met adult fears, and the wider perspective of experience challenged an innocence that was only with difficulty and circumspection being separated out from ignorance. (539)

Throughout the two key poems Blake provides us with several different perspectives on the situations of British 18th century children. Again, going from a first-person to a third person narrative of observers and even bystanders, he makes the criticism both effective and immediate. In “Holy Thursday” 1, Blake brings to the fore the poor children of London going on parade to St Paul’s Cathedral on Holy Thursday (nowadays known as Maundy Thursday), a yearly event which brought together thousands of children from London’s charity schools (Fairer 536). In the first stanza of the poem Blake describes the procession of children, as well as their older custodians:

Twas on a Holy Thursday their innocent faces clean
The children walking two & two in red & blue & green
Grey headed beadles walkd before with wands as white as snow
Till into the high dome of Pauls like Thames water flow. (ll. 1-4)

Describing the poor children put on parade two by two with their innocent faces washed for the special occasion, Blake shows how the children were treated like dolls for the viewing pleasure of the general public. In front of the children walked the grey headed beadles, i.e., the church officials, keeping them in order. In “Holy Thursday” 1 we get to see Blake’s own concern for children as well as him reflecting upon how society as a whole is proud to showcase how it takes care of its poor, but his emphasis is more on the purity of the children

than on the muted criticism of the behaviour of their elders.

However, in “Holy Thursday” 2 Blake is more blunt when he questions the sincerity of the charity shown during this event:

Is this a holy thing to see,
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduced to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand? (ll. 1-4)

In this first stanza of the poem Blake is questioning the whole parade by stating that the children are fed with cold and usurous hand, asking the pointed question why there had to be charity schools in the first place in a rich and fruitful land such as England. By including the word “holy”, Blake is once again addressing the hypocrisy of the church by asking if it is a holy thing to see these children put up on parade. Saree Makdisi argues that the different charities (charity schools, shelters for girls, orphanages etcetera.) was in fact just a way to keep the poor in place rather than reflecting a genuine care (102). Keeping in mind that the parade referred to in “Holy Thursday” 1 and 2 as a yearly event obviously happens only once a year, one can ask the question of what these children’s situations were like during the rest of the year. In his online article *Blake’s Radical Politics* Andrew Lincoln draws the conclusion that Blake was ambivalent to the philanthropic actions taken by society to deal with its poor: “Blake’s view of philanthropic responses to poverty was probably always ambivalent. The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 gave a new political urgency to his views. In London a range of new radical groups emerged, demanding major changes to the political system.” This further supports the view that Blake was critical towards the actions taken by society to deal with its poor. While charity schools were becoming more and more common, abuse, neglect and child labor were as present as ever in British society (O’Malley 1).

At the same time as the numbers of charity schools for the poor children were

increasing and more children were sent off to work as chimney sweepers, it was not only British children who were suffering during this time. The next part of this essay will investigate Blake's criticism of colonialism. In the late 18th century Britain had turned into a great colonial power, the British Empire. As a consequence, it is estimated that there were more than 20,000 slaves or runaway slaves living in London (Gallant 123). Even though slavery was still common, and to an extent still accepted by the general public, the abolitionist movement grew rapidly in the 1780s, and the number of antislavery poems, songs and broadsheets was increasing rapidly as well (Sandhu 15). The increasing social awareness of the time was not limited to the care of children, but included the subject of slavery and colonialism. One key aspect to understanding Blake's criticism against Britain's colonial policies and slavery was his involvement in the abolitionist movement (Gallant 123). He contributed by making engravings showcasing the slavery and torture that many of the sub-Saharan slaves were subject to (Parker 5).

Black children were frequently brought to England as slaves from its sub-Saharan colonies by planters, government officials or military personnel returning home from the colonies (Sandhu 3). As Alan Richardson argues, "If the colonization of childhood in the late eighteenth century helps account for Blake's treatment of slavery in a children's literary form, the infantilization of the colonial subject helps elucidate the terms in which Blake poses his dual critique of children's and colonial discourse" (237). Richardson's remark shows that when the two subjects of childhood and colonialism meet they combine to create a distinct third theme that spell out a deeply poignant social critique.

Christine Gallant argues that Blake's radical criticism against slavery is found not only in his texts but as much in his illustrations, or illuminated printings as they are called, of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*: "Although the texts may not seem to relate to abolitionist concerns or slave experience, their designs incorporate public icons alluding to

colonial plantation slavery that were employed widely in the abolitionists' public campaign of the 1780s" (124). Looking at the illuminated printings of the poems one can see subtle images of sugar canes, for example in "The Little Black Boy", as well as black persons in various shapes and forms. This shows that Blake's criticism is multi-layered as he uses illustrations to further increase the message of criticism in the poems.¹ While not the primary focus of this essay, these illustrations make the reader aware of the pervasiveness of the colonial theme in the collection, and they do bring a greater understanding of Blake's criticism against colonialism and slavery.

Apart from the engravings discussed above, Blake's criticism of colonialism and slavery in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is found primarily in the poem "The Little Black Boy". As Alan Richardson explains, "Blake's 'The Little Black Boy' offers a particularly rich site for examining [...] such contemporary social and political issues as colonialism, the antislavery movement, [and] the question of religious educations in the colonies" (233). As far as this essay is concerned, "The Little Black Boy" is the poem where its themes of childhood and colonialism come together.

Nowhere in the collection is the meeting of Blake's criticism against maltreatment of children and his criticism against colonialism as evident as in the beginning of the poem:

My mother bore me in the southern wild,

And I am black, but O! My soul is white:

White as an angel is the English child:

But I am black as if bereav'd of light. (ll. 1-4)

Even though "The Little Black Boy" is one of the *Innocence* poems, it could just as easily have been found in the *Experience*-part of the collection since it showcases the black child's understanding of racial difference, thus making him seem quite experienced. Gallant makes

¹ These illustrations can be found on the website *The William Blake Archive*, which works to make Blake's illustrations accessible to the general public.

the reasonable assumption that “[s]ince this black boy recognises the nationality of the white boy, he may already be one of those slaves brought to London as a young house servant by West Indian absentee landowners then sold to slavers going back to the Islands when they grew older” (126). This particular black child seems not only to have an understanding of racial difference and the nationality of the white boy, but also a certain geographical awareness since he remarks that his mother bore him in the southern wild, a generic place in Africa geographically south of England. The most powerful part of the first stanza is the second line where the boy states that he is black but that his soul is white, which could be taken to mean that his soul is innocent despite his skin being black (the connotations of the colour of the skin will be thoroughly discussed further below).

Later into the same poem Blake’s analysis becomes even more focused:

Thus did my mother say and kissed me,
And thus I say to little English boy
When I from black and he from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God like lamb we joy:
Ill shade him from the heat till he can bear,
To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.
And then I’ll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him and he will then love me. (ll. 21-28)

In these eight lines Blake manages to create a distinct picture of the black boy and his reflections regarding being different from the white boy. Like “The Chimney Sweeper” 1, the poem is written from a first-person’s perspective and shows the black boy reflecting upon the racial differences caused by the colour of their skin: despite the two’s souls being equal before God, he still has to shade the white boy from the heat which connects strongly to the slavery issue where the black boy has to be of service to the white boy even when they both are in

heaven. In the final part of the poem Blake is also addressing the fact that the distinction between black and white is not only a phenomenon found in society but also in the Christian religion. The line “To lean in joy upon our fathers knee” (ll. 26) indicates that the black boy together with the white boy is sitting in the knee of God, but that they are not one hundred percent equal before God after all. The distinction between being black and white does not end while living on earth but seemingly follows on even in the afterlife. This leads to the final line “And be like him and he will then love me.” (ll. 28), which shows that the little black boy wants to become white like the white boy. The following part of this essay will investigate why.

To understand how the words “black” and “white” are used by Blake one has to look more closely at their respective meanings in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. An ironic strategy he uses is to echo the stereotypical moral values connected to the words found in contemporary society: “black” is widely used to describe something with negative connotations, while white or silver on the other hand is used to describe something with positive connotations. While it is true that reading “The Chimney Sweeper” and “The Little Black Boy” back to back, as Saree Makdisi argues, makes for a different experience than reading them separate from each other: “Skin color and identity is treated similarly in both, though in the former as a question of race and in the latter as a question of occupation and class” (165), the word “black” is used to great extent in both poems with negative connotations. The word is connected to racial issues in “The Little Black Boy”, while in “The Chimney Sweeper” 1 and 2 it has to do with the dirt that comes with the job. It is also associated with death since the dead sweepers were “lock’d up in coffins of black” (1: 12), or is used to describe the poor chimney sweeper found in the snow: “A little black thing among the snow” (2: 1). The pervasiveness of the negative connotations of the word black can be felt throughout the entire collection, but is especially prevalent in the poems analysed in this

essay, seen for example in the line in “London” about “Every Blackning Church appalls” (ll. 10) discussed above.

It is not only the prevalence of the negative connotations attached to the word “black” that makes the black boy wish he had a different colour, but also the way “white”, or related words such as bright and silver, are presented as desirable. Examples of the word white as used with positive connotations can be found in many poems of the collection, but it is again especially prevalent in the key poems to this essay, such as line 8 of “The Chimney Sweeper” 1, “You know that soot cannot spoil your white hair”, indicating that the white hair is something to be proud of and worth protecting. Another example is found in line 17 of the same poem, “Then naked & white, all their bags left behind”, indicating that they are free of their burdens after washing away the black dirt to become white again.

These notions attached to the colours black and white in the rest of the collection become significant when we approach “The Little Black Boy”. The line “But I am black as if bereav’d of light” (4) reinforces the connection of the word “black” to darkness i.e., the absence of light, which is radiant white. This becomes even more obvious when looking at another line in “The Little Black Boy”: “And I am black, but O! my soul is white” (2), which shows that the little black boy knows that being black is something negative even if his soul at least is white. Again, the same assumptions can be seen in the third line of the first stanza: “White as an angel is the English child”. As Julie A Chappel and Camille Stone argue, “Myriad colliding cultural assumptions in need of disentanglement include the implications that, if his ‘soul is white,’ it is more worthy of consideration, that white English children are closer to God, and that his racial complexion is a sign of his light deprivation, whether it be the light of knowledge or of God or of the sun” (xii). They even go as far as saying that the black boy’s reflections indicate that he thinks that white children are closer to God than black children, and that the black boy believes that “white is right and black is ‘bereav’d of light’”

(xii), which would not be farfetched since God and angels in general are portrayed as white. Examples of this can be found all over *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. In “Holy Thursday” 1 Blake describes the church officials, which one must assume are close to God, as “Grey headed beadles walkd before with wands white as snow”. Another both obvious and powerful example can be found in the last two lines of the first stanza of “The Little Boy Found”: “Began to cry, but God ever nigh, Appeard like his father in white.” The pervasiveness of the use of the word white to describe something beautiful, innocent, clean and close to God makes it the desirable state or colour for this black boy, making it almost the perfect emblem for the *Songs of Innocence*, which in turn would make the word black emblematic of the *Songs of Experience*.

Against this background, Blake’s choice of strategy raises some obvious questions. At first glance, it might seem strange that an abolitionist who criticises colonialism and slavery still seems to conform to an established racist and colonial interpretation of the words “black” and “white”. This has also been an issue which critics have debated. As Makdisi points out,

This relationship might lead us to question the conclusion drawn by certain critics that *The Little Black Boy* is an inescapably “racist” text, since *The Chimney Sweeper* reminds us that becoming “white” is not simply a matter of “race” in the narrow sense and, in any case, both need to be read with some measure of irony since both subvert parental wisdom. (165)

Makdisi’s view that the two poems “The Chimney Sweeper” and “The Little Black Boy” need to be read with irony in mind is supported by several other researchers. Alan Richardson argues convincingly that Blake is making heavy use of irony as one of his most effective tools for executing his criticism:

Blake’s lyric critically addresses the racist and colonialist attitudes informing most antislavery literature of the period, and that its complex ironies arise from

Blake's immanent critique of that movement's ideology, that questions of race and of religion in the lyric should not be treated separately. (234)

Richardson's view is that by using the established vocabulary Blake creates a complex irony which not only deals with the race issue but also the religious aspects. Janet Sayers and Nanette Monin also elaborate on Blake's heavy use of irony as one of his primary tools when criticising and dealing with issues in society:

Blake used irony and parody as inversion tactics, and how they were implicated in a full-blown artistic mythology that arched over his lifetime. Blake was committed to engaging all the human senses in the activity of reading; text (poetic imagery and parody); visual (ambiguous and complex figurative allegory); and the aural sound-scape evoked on the page (through song). (9-10)

Sayers and Monin agree that Blake's use of imagery, his illustrations, and his use of song, all poems in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* written almost like nursery rhymes, help create Blake's multifaceted criticism and irony. Makdisi also argues that the meanings of the words can shift when reading different plates, different copies as it were, of "The Little Black Boy" and "The Chimney Sweeper, 1 and 2, since the illustrations differ from plate to plate (167). This leads to the conclusion that one must read the poems in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* with irony in mind, looking at the illustrations connected to each poem, as well as keeping in mind the nursery rhyme style they are written in to be able to fully understand Blake's irony. Blake's heavy use of irony in the key poems to this essay changes both the meaning and our understanding of the poems found in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. What might seem like Blake conforming to contemporary racist and colonialist interpretations of the words "black" and "white" is rather a strategy to polarize the meanings of the words in as extreme a manner as he possibly can. By turning the words "black" and into extremes he

criticises the whole phenomenon by making it ridiculous. Irony is the powerful tool which makes Blake's criticism such a sharp weapon for expressing his criticism against maltreatment of children, slavery and Britain's colonial policies.

To conclude, by analysing William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in three stages this essay has aimed to show how Blake not only is exposing poor conditions for children in general, but also tried to answer the question of what happens when the child is black rather than white. By first investigating how children in general are portrayed in "The Chimney Sweeper" 1 and 2, "Holy Thursday" 1 and 2, and "London", I have found that Blake is putting his focus on the marginalised in society and especially the children who are subject to abuse, child labor and poverty. He makes his criticism extremely effective and multidimensional by switching between first and third person narrative perspectives, most often impersonating victims or perpetrators, but in "London" also speaking with what seems closer to the poet's own voice. The second stage of the analysis was to have a wider geographical perspective by discussing Blake's criticism of England's colonial policies and of slavery. In this section I have not only analysed the text of the poems but also their illuminated illustrations. By sometimes contrasting text and illustration, and sometimes by underlining the verbal message with his illustrations, Blake sharpens his criticism against colonialism and slavery. These two sections prepared the way for the third and most important stage of this essay: investigating what happens when the two themes of childhood and colonialism meet in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. The poem "The Little Black Boy" provided the focus for my analysis of the meeting of the two themes, maltreatment of children and colonialism. By effectively using the tools of irony in the poems' contrast between the associations attached to the words "black" and "white", Blake is showing how the black child is even more exposed and marginalised than the English child, or even the black man or woman in general, thereby creating the perfect symbol for his criticism against both

maltreatment of children as well as colonialism. The growing social awareness of the time and the distinction between adults and children makes a black child substantially more effective than if the subject was an adult black person. My discussion has found that when Blake wrote the poem “The Little Black Boy” he merged his criticism against maltreatment of children with his criticism against colonialism and slavery into a criticism which is even greater than the sum of its individual parts. The little black boy in “The Little Black Boy” becomes Blake’s ultimate symbol for criticising maltreatment of children and colonialism found in his contemporary society.

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