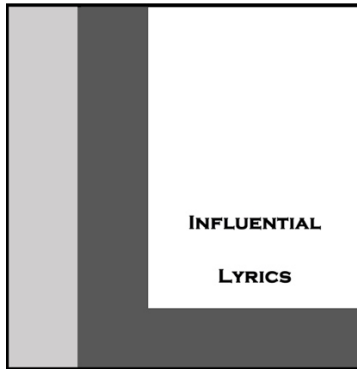




Series 1, Number 12

# WILLIAM BLAKE

## 1757-1827

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### THE LAMB

Little Lamb, who made thee  
Dost thou know who made thee  
Gave thee life & bid thee feed  
By the stream & o'er the mead;  
Gave thee clothing of delight,  
Softest clothing wooly bright;  
Gave thee such a tender voice,  
Making all the vales rejoice;  
Little Lamb who made thee  
Dost thou know who made thee

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,  
Little Lamb I'll tell thee:  
He is called by thy name,  
For he calls himself a Lamb;  
He is meek & he is mild,  
He became a little child:  
I a child & thou a lamb,  
We are called by his name:  
Little Lamb God blefs thee,  
Little Lamb God blefs thee.

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## PODCAST

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### *Lines to remember...*

I a child & thou a lamb,  
We are called by his name:  
Little Lamb God blefs thee,  
Little Lamb God blefs thee.

### *Podcast Script*

#### **William Blake, “The Lamb”**

William Blake, 1757-1827, is unlike any other poet working in English. He was as much an artist/artisan as a poet. His works were not published through the usual process of printing and publishing and bookselling; instead, he engraved, printed, and painted each individual page of each book by hand, using his own press and a printing method that he had himself invented. As a result, no two copies of his poems are exactly alike. As a writer, he was a deeply religious—even Visionary—thinker who once claimed that the Bible was “the great code of all art.” But he was also deeply critical of any human organization—the established church, for example—that claimed to have the “true” meaning of the Bible. In fact, one of his most famous quotations—this from an artist character named Los in his great epic called *Jerusalem*—is “I must create my own system or be enslaved by another man’s.” Clearly, Blake is a completely idiosyncratic, one-of-a-kind genius.

As you might imagine then, Blake was largely unknown in his own day, but eventually two collections of his shorter lyric poems came to be admired during the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when they began to find their way into the mainstream press. These were the *Songs of Innocence* which appeared first in 1789 and the *Songs of Experience* in 1794. For the present podcast I’ll focus on a very famous short poem from *Innocence* called “The Lamb.” In the next episodes, we’ll consider a poem called “The Garden of Love” from *Experience* as well as a poem called “The Tyger” which is the specific “contrary” of “The Lamb.” The aim is to introduce what Blake called “The two contrary states of the human soul.” As you’ll see, the psychological, philosophical, and religious implications of Blake’s “contraries” are utterly mind-bending, but we can begin, as always, with a close careful reading of the poems and then develop the contexts that make these poems so powerful.

So here is today's offering, a short poem called "The Lamb" from the *Innocence* collection. One more note before we hear the poem—because Blake's poems were all hand made and hand illustrated, we are only getting part of the whole work by focusing only on the words. In "The Lamb," for example, the text of the poem is illustrated by an image of a young shepherd boy who is tending his flock of sheep. The speaker of the poem is presumably this boy-shepherd talking to one of his lambs. So here is "The Lamb," by William Blake.

[poem]

So, that's "The Lamb," one of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. Even if you're not deeply read in English poetry, this one may seem familiar...and there's a good reason for that! "The Lamb" is among the most anthologized of all English poems. It's taught in English classes, it's read in Sunday schools, and (as here) it's a relatively easy introduction to the work of a notoriously difficult poet. Don't worry...we'll be touching on some of those difficulties in a few minutes. For now, let's just make sure we understand what the poem says and how it says it.

The overall form of the poem is rather like a religious catechism—that is, a set Question followed by a set Answer. In this case, the question is about creation: "Little Lamb, who made thee / Dost thou know who made thee." Then the shepherd boy speaker elaborates by listing off the wonderful attributes of the lamb—life in a beautiful pasture, a comfy fur coat ("Softest clothing woolly bright"), and a beautiful tender voice that makes "all the vales rejoice." It's an idealized image of course, but if you've ever encountered an actual lamb—perhaps in a petting zoo or something—you'll recognize that it's realistic as well. The shepherd boy then closes this opening section of the poem by repeating the fundamental question: "Little Lamb who made thee / Dost thou know who made thee."

The question doesn't remain open for long. The second half of the poem begins immediately with the repeated line "Little Lamb, I'll tell thee." And this takes us to the religious heart of the poem: the Creator calls himself a lamb, he is meek and mild, and he became a little child. The reference, of course, is to Jesus. Jesus is referred to in the Bible as the "lamb of God," and in the nativity scene, he is incarnated as a little child, the "baby Jesus" of the Christian story. But then something especially interesting happens as the speaker draws a set of parallels between himself, the actual lamb he is talking to, and the Lamb as the creator. As the shepherd boy puts it: "I a child and thou a lamb, / We are called by his name." Note the shift to the plural "We" in that final line. It is as though the Creator is Jesus who is both a lamb and a child, the shepherd speaker is a child, the addressee is a lamb...WE are all of us participants in—perhaps even incarnations of—the benevolence and generosity of the Creator. The speaker then caps off this insight with a final blessing: "Little lamb God bless thee, / Little lamb God bless thee."

So there you have it—a simple poem spoken by a child who has utter faith and complete confidence in the benevolence of the Creator. Very sweet, very charming...and very much a heresy! Notice in particular the parallels drawn between the Creator, Jesus, the boy shepherd, and the lamb: “We are called by his name.” There is no sense here that we are sinful creatures who have fallen away from the divine and are now in need of salvation. Quite the contrary. We are all of us incarnations of the same benevolent energy that created us and that still lives on in our very souls. In this light, consider these two possible readings of the final lines of the poem: “Little lamb god bless thee.” In Blake’s engraved versions of the poem, there is no punctuation in the line, no comma after the word “lamb.” So, we might interpret the line as the speaker saying to the lamb: Little lamb, God bless thee—in other words an appeal to God to bless the lamb to whom the shepherd boy is speaking. But it is also possible to read the line as though the lamb is actually an embodiment of the Creator: it’s a little lamb-god. Read in this way, it is the speaker of the poem who is blessing the lamb who is—like the shepherd boy himself—also an incarnation of god.

I realize that this double reading of the closing lines may seem like a stretch, but it does offer an entry to the larger context in which Blake places his poem—the collection called the *Songs of Innocence*. These poems demonstrate how the world appears from the vantage point of Innocence, one of the two contrary states of the human soul, as Blake puts it. So what exactly is Innocence? Well, this gets to some of the more mind-bending aspects of Blake’s art, but I may be able to at least offer one way to grasp this concept using some insights from current research in perception and consciousness. This will seem like a detour from Blake, but we’ll get back to the poem in a moment...

So, here’s a question to ponder: What exactly happens when you perceive something? At first, the answer seems simple—you open your eyes, look out the window, and see a tree. You *perceive* the tree. Okay, but now consider that your brain doesn’t really perceive the tree at all—your brain is a physical organ that sits in total darkness inside your skull. This organ can’t “see” anything; all it takes in are millions of faint electrical signals produced by the eyes and transmitted to the brain via the optic nerve. Then, based solely on this electrical input, your brain somehow produces a mental picture of the tree. The presence of this *mental* tree is the act of perception—what your brain “sees” (and what we take to be the “real world” outside of our heads) is to some degree a construct of our own minds. (One consciousness researcher, Anil Seth, even suggests that reality is actually an hallucination!) The implications of this understanding of perception are profound, but for the present purposes it’s enough to recognize, first, that what we take to be an empirical “real world” outside of our heads is actually a re-creation within our consciousness, and second, that the reality we perceive and understand is inevitably shaped by and perhaps dependent upon the state of mind of the perceiver. This last point is key—seen in this light, Blake’s poem illustrates how the speaker perceives the world while in a condition of Innocence (as Blake terms it).

So now we can go back to the initial question: What exactly does Blake mean by “Innocence”? It’s a tricky question, but one might think of it as a distinct mode of understanding and experiencing the world. It is a state of mind associated with, but not limited to, childhood. When in a condition of Innocence, one perceives the world as fully informed by the immediate presence of some divine benevolent force that unites all creation. God is not some distant king-like rule-giving figure who sits in judgment in some mysterious heaven; rather, the Creator is present within all creation—or, put another way, the created universe is an embodiment of the divine. Seen in this context, “The Lamb” poem is an aesthetic representation of the world as it appears—that is, as it *exists as a perceived reality*—when in the Innocence condition.

Two additional comments about this. First, note that, from the perspective of a typical adult reader, the Innocence of the shepherd-boy speaker seems sort of sweet, sort of cute, but not to be taken too seriously. This adult condescension overlooks a key point though: Blakean Innocence is *not* merely childish naïvete, a way of experiencing the world that one will eventually grow out of when one becomes an adult and sees the “real world” as it “really” is. The more skeptical adult’s “real world” is just as much a fabrication of the perceiver’s state of mind as the innocent child’s “real world.” In other words, the Innocence condition generates a reality that is every bit as real as your grown-up, skeptical consciousness. Second, the condition of Innocence produces a reality of complete and unquestioning faith in the benevolence of creation. There is no self-doubt, no skepticism, no suffering, no self-recriminations, no unanswered question. That’s why, for example, the shepherd-boy’s question about “who made thee” gets an immediate and unequivocal response: “Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee.” Every doubt, every uncertainty, every momentary slip into skepticism—or even unbelief—is immediately resolved with an absolute faith in the omnipresence of the benevolent Creator.

The mind-bending complexity of this simple poem will become clearer over the next couple of episodes when we’ll be looking at the condition of Experience, the Blakean “contrary” of Innocence. For the moment let me just close this episode with a brief note about the sheer artistry of Blake’s poem. For one thing, note that this poem is not really about some sort of self-expression (as is one common mode of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century poetry). This is a poem intended to represent what the world looks like from a distinct perspective quite different from our “normal” or “mature” expectations. It may seem childlike, but one needs to take it seriously as a valid understanding of the relationship between creatures and their creator. Second, leaving aside the complex associations of image and text in Blake’s pages and focusing simply on the prosody of the work, note that Blake uses short lines and an emphatic trochaic meter. Instead of the familiar iambic pattern – ta Dum ta Dum ta Dum....etc.—this meter emphasizes the first syllables—Dum pa Dum pa Dum pa.... LITtle LAMB who MADE thee / DOST thou KNOW who MADE thee. To me, this meter in this context gives the language an extra boost of joy and enthusiasm—which will contrast strikingly to the contrary poem called “The Tyger” which we’ll be getting to in a forthcoming episode.

For now, though, let me just thank you for listening and encourage you to explore more of Blake's work. I'll be back soon with a couple more episodes on Blake's short poems—poems that in many ways prefigure some very modern ideas about psychology, politics, and consciousness itself. He's an artist like no other!

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## FURTHER READING

- Ackroyd, Peter. *Blake: a Biography*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. [Very readable, enjoyable biography of the poet/artist in his times.]
- Bentley, E. G., Jr. *Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake*. Yale University Press, 2001. [An extraordinary scholarly work packed with details and archival documentation. Essential reading for a Blake scholar and useful as a reference work.]
- Bragg, Melvyn. "Songs of Innocence and of Experience." *In Our Time*, hosted by Melvyn Bragg, BBC Radio 4, June 2016. < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07gh4pg> >.
- Hilton, Nelson. "Blake's Early Works." *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, edited by Morris Eaves. Cambridge University Press, 2003, pages 191-209. [An excellent and accessible survey of Blake's writing from the 1780s and 1790s when the *Songs* were first produced.]
- The William Blake Archive*. Edited by Robert Essick, Joseph Viscomi, and others. < <https://blakearchive.org> >. [A game-changing website in Blake studies. The site offers images of multiple versions of Blake's poems and engravings along with commentary.]

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## ETC....

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