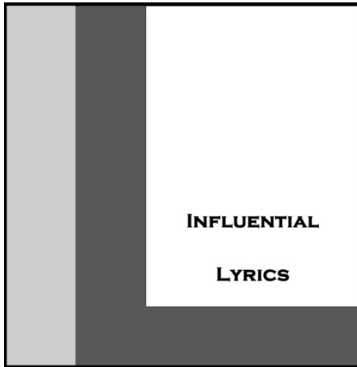




Series 1, Number 13

William Blake
1757-1827

The Garden of Love

I went to the Garden of Love.
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.

Podcast

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Lines to remember...

And priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.

Podcast Script

William Blake, “The Garden of Love”

[This is the second in a three-episode set focusing on poems from William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, published in 1789 and 1794 respectively. If you haven’t had a chance to listen to the previous episode on a poem called “The Lamb,” I would suggest that you give a listen to that podcast before you turn your focus to the present audio on “The Garden of Love.”]

Hello all, and thanks for tuning in to *Influential Lyrics*! Today we’ll be looking at another Blake poem, this one called “The Garden of Love.” If you’ve listened to the previous episode, you’ll recall that we considered a distinctive psychological, perhaps spiritual state of mind that Blake calls Innocence, which, as Blake puts it, is one of the two contrary states of the human soul. While “The Garden of Love” is included among the Experience poems, I find it useful as a kind of transition between Innocence and Experience. So, with a careful look at “The Garden,” we should have a clearer understanding of Innocence, Experience, and the relationship between them. What’s more, we’ll also come away with a grasp on Blake’s unconventional understanding of traditional, institutional religion. Obviously, we have a lot of ground to cover, so let’s get started with a quick reading of the poem.

[poem]

So, there you have it. It’s obviously a very short lyric—just twelve lines divided into three rhymed quatrains—but it’s remarkable for its profound critique of the church. Before we get into the details of the poem, let me offer two quick reminders: First, Blake’s poems were printed by hand, illustrated with Blake’s own engraving, and then hand painted, so the poem itself is only a fraction of the whole aesthetic project. Second, Blake’s *Songs* either of Innocence or of Experience shouldn’t be taken as statements of “what Blake really thinks.” Rather, they are “about” how the mind creates its own reality; thus, the poems are expressions of how the world appears to a consciousness in either the Innocence or Experience condition. So now, to the poem.

The opening lines describe the speaker’s return to a familiar space from his own past, the so-called Garden of Love. It seems that (to the speaker’s surprise) this space has changed quite radically: where he was once free to play on the green, now there is a church built in the middle and this edifice apparently inhibits the free play of the speaker’s recollection. The quatrain thus establishes a sort of before-after structure with the speaker commenting on how this Garden has changed with the appearance of the Chapel. It is not a happy change, as the second quatrain explains:

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;

So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore

This new Chapel is hardly an open, welcoming addition to the Garden. Its Gates are shut, and over the door is the opening phrase of many of the Ten Commandments (from Exodus 20, KJV), “Thou shalt not...” What’s more, this phrase is left without any specific elaboration. Instead of Thou shalt not steal or murder or covet your neighbor’s goods or whatever, the motto of this Chapel is purely and universally negative. Whatever you might be thinking or doing, Thou shalt not!

Naturally, the speaker is rather put off by this Chapel, so he turns back to the Garden which—at least in the past—was a green space of flowers and free play. No more. That image of childlike Innocence is now gone, for when the speaker turns back to the Garden he sees that it was “filled with graves / And tombstones where flowers should be.” Instead of a space of life, now the Garden is a space of death. (By the way, the illustration Blake designed for this poem shows a priest and two children kneeling before an open grave.) And this takes us to the final two lines of the poem:

And priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.

To me, this is an especially creepy image. The priests, dressed in black, are “walking their rounds” like police officers or military sentries, presumably enforcing that open commandment “Thou shalt not.” And the speaker himself finds his own “joys & desires” stifled by these enforcers of the Chapel’s rule. Where it was once possible to express one’s “joys & desires” in free and unconstrained play, now this freedom is bound up in these thorny briars. In other words, all the joy and confidence and security of the condition of Blakean Innocence has been extinguished by a church whose central purpose is to enforce a wholly negative discipline. Welcome to the condition of Experience.

Now that we have a good understanding of the basic form and content of the poem, I’d like to develop the meaning and significance by exploring a couple of wider contexts. First, we’ll place the poem within Blake’s notions of Innocence and Experience; and second, we’ll look at the poem’s implicit claims about religion, the Bible, and the established church.

So, about Innocence and Experience, the “contrary states of the soul”: You’ll recall from the episode on “The Lamb” that when in the condition of Innocence one perceives the world as a semi-divine space, fully imbued with the generous benevolence of the Creator. There is no self-doubt, no suffering, no fear of death. Indeed, there is no need for any kind of struggle or discipline—just a complete and comforting faith in the beauty and holiness of all Creation. By contrast, Experience is the condition in which the world presents itself as a place of struggle, fear, and mortality. The very idea of unconstrained free play has no place in this reality. Instead, this is a world of discipline and duty—one needs to repress any desire for joyful free play. In Experience, “Thou shalt not” is the governing principle and the speaker’s “joys and desires” are thus stifled. The closing image of those “priests in black gowns” suggests to me a gloomy, soulless clockwork universe in which all freedom, all play, all joy is sacrificed to repression, dread, and an

overwhelming fear of death. It's not surprising then, that the bottom of Blake's engraved poem presents an image of a priest and two children praying before an open grave.

The speaker of "The Garden of Love" is thus stuck in a condition of Experience while recalling a very different but now inaccessible condition of Innocence. And what is the force that precipitates this collapse from Innocence into Experience? For the speaker of this poem, it's the church or, more broadly, organized, institutional religion.

To explain, let me introduce a bit of new vocabulary: the word "antinomianism." So, what is antinomianism? The term "antinomian," is borrowed from the Greek where "anti" means against and "nomos" means law. Hence, antinomianism literally means "against the law" and (as Blake's work elaborates the meaning) it refers to a theological position that sees laws as an affront to the creative freedom endowed to us by the Creator. Let's say, for example, that, like the speaker of the Lamb poem, we are in a condition of Innocence, and we see all of creation as the embodiment of a benevolent Creator. In such a world, there would be no need for discipline, rules, laws, or anything else that might constrain the free expression of a being's "joys and desires." To apply such constraints would, in effect, be trying to smother that spark of divinity within us all.

With this concept of antinomianism in mind, the central idea of Blake's poem becomes clearer. The speaker was once free to express his "joys and desires" without constraint, but the Chapel is an almost cartoonishly extreme image of Law with a capital L. Its motto is "Thou shalt not" and its commandments are enforced by a quasi-military force of "priests in black gowns." The church, in other words, does not promote a deeper sense of spirituality and a closer connection to the divine. Quite the opposite. The church is the wholly negative place that actively strives to sacrifice any sense of divinity within the created world to some set of laws or rules or commandments. "Thou Shalt Not!"

Such is the expression of antinomian thought as developed in Blake's poem, and it's clear that the message is (to put it mildly) not at all favorable to the church and by extension to organized, institutional religion as a whole. Given this theological position, one might quite understandably get the impression that Blake was anti-religion. But that wouldn't be right, so let me close with one more brief contextual commentary.

In the previous episode I mentioned that Blake once referred to the Bible as "The Great Code of All Art," and you may be wondering why a person who wrote a poem with such anti-church views would be so enamored of the Bible. Well, this poem shows one way in which Blake makes *use* of the Bible as an artist and a poet. Most people with even a passing acquaintance with Judeo-Christian scripture are familiar with the story of Creation. After creating the heavens and the earth and all the plants and animals, God creates a beautiful Garden of Eden, and this is the environment for the first human beings. It's a perfect place—beautiful, harmonious, etc.—and the first people, Adam and Eve, are in a state of innocence very much akin to Blake's condition of Innocence. But then, there is the original sin, the fall from the Garden, and the struggle and labor and mortality of a post-Innocence world. Such is the biblical narrative that is one important source for Blake's poem—it wouldn't be too great a stretch to see "The Garden of Love" as a

Blakean Eden. It is undoubtedly significant that, at least from the speaker's point of view, the church, rather than being a force of redemption, is actually the force that causes the fall from Innocence.

There are several other Biblical allusions in Blake's poem—for example, the "briars" that bind the speaker in the last line is an oblique reference to the iconic crown of thorns at the crucifixion of Jesus. Of course, it would take a dozen podcasts to explore the biblical undertones of Blake's work, and I've already gone on too long about this short poem. So let me just thank you for tuning in to *Influential Lyrics*, and I'll invite you to tune in to the next episode when we'll be looking at one more Blake poem—"The Tyger" from the *Songs of Experience*. In the meantime, I'd love to hear your comments and suggestions, and I'd love for you to subscribe to the podcast. Many thanks for listening, and I'll be back soon with another episode on Blake—an endlessly fascinating artist!

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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