



# WILLIAM BLAKE

1757 - 1827

- ✿ He's the oldest of the romantic poets. His life is but as long as the Romantic period.
- ✿ To him the world was mad with its anxiety, bloodshed, cruelty, repressive morality, and selfish lovelessness.
- ✿ He believed human sacrifice to be the basis of social organization.
- ✿ He believes that a communion w/ the heavenly world which is portrayed in *Songs of Innocence (1789)*.
- ✿ The effect of the French Revolution on him is apparent in *Songs of Experience (1794)* as a protest against contemporary society.

- ❁ He believes that the world is twisted and unhappy because of:
  - ❁ failure of imagination
  - ❁ an inability to conceive nature and society other than they appear
  - ❁ A passivity toward the world.
- ❁ His poetry tries to explain how this passivity comes about and how it can be changed

# IMAGINATION

- ✿ “a man is imaginative he is independent of the outer world, not only because he radically transforms what he encounters but because the excitement of life for him does not depend on external crises and shocks.
- ✿ works of art are simply heightened, more organized instances of the imaginative processes taking place in us all the time.
- ✿ the imagination has the means to bring individual happiness.
- ✿ the imagination has a potential power of transforming society
- ✿ the imagination confers the possibility of sympathy. It is the process by which we identify ourselves with other people, & hence bring about the salvation of society.
- ✿ the world is a labyrinth in which we are trapped unless we are freed by our imagination

# THE WORLD OF INNOCENCE & EXPERIENCE

- ❖ The pov is limited whether innocence and experience because our knowledge is sensory not imaginative and created by the fallen soul.
- ❖ One consequence of one state or the other is that being unable to see the whole, we can only see, or deliberately choose portions of existence, & invest all our faith & energy in them.
- ❖ The position of innocence is sentimental, opposed to glaring evidence, blind to the universal hardship, fanciful in allowing itself to resolve all problems by recreating the world as it ought to be or perhaps as it once was, or by direct intervention from the spiritual world

- ❖ The position of experience is full of cynicism, sterility, spiritless materialism, repression.
- ❖ Sleep, darkness, and prison are the images that describe the soul in its fallen state in the world of experience.
- ❖ some poems invoke the idea that a person in a state of innocence might see certain entities quite differently than would a person who has reached maturity
- ❖ Blake tries to identify the fallacies and flaws of each state

- ✿ There is a double irony in play between innocence and experience as states of existence. One progresses both organically & imaginatively, & in moving from innocence to experience one falls back creatively
- ✿ Innocence is bliss & experience is anguish but organized innocence creates a balance between the two states.
- ✿ In the frontispiece of the *Songs of Innocence* children are receiving education from nature. This emphasizes that innocence is not ignorance, but responsiveness & optimism as children possess instinctive spirituality

- ✿ During the innocent stage of life the child is untouched by evil, he or she is joyous, peaceful, & filled w/ wonder.
- ✿ There is a communion w/ heavenly world in *Songs of Innocence*.
- ✿ The speakers in *Songs of Innocence* are children or childlike, & the songs express their emotions & their vision. To them the world is one of “mercy, pity, peace, & love” received & bestowed by all creatures and their creator.
- ✿ In the fallen world *Songs of Experience* children have lost their innocence & it is far less certain that adults are interested in the plight of the weak, selfishness, & cynicism have replaced concern & belief



- ❁ *Songs of Innocence* dramatize the naive hopes & fears that inform the lives of children & trace their transformation as the child grows into adulthood.
- ❁ Many of the poems draw attention to the positive aspects of natural human understanding prior to the corruption & distortion of experience.
- ❁ *Songs of Experience* work via parallels & contrasts to lament the ways in which the harsh experience of adult life destroy what is good in innocence while also articulating the weaknesses of the innocent perspective
- ❁ Experience thus adds a layer to innocence that darkens its hopeful vision while compensating for some of its blindness

- ✿ With regard to religion, they are less concerned w/ the character of individual faith than w/ the institution of the church, its role in politics, & its effect on society & the individual mind.
- ✿ for the most part *Songs of Innocence* succeed in preserving unity by the strict exclusion of all images of fear & doubt. In the world which Blake has created by a restriction of the christian & pastoral traditions, there are no beasts of prey or lust, disease is unknown, & old age only means an access of dignity, not the approach of death