Introduction (Songs of Innocence)

POEM TEXT

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 chear,
Piper pipe that song again—
So I piped, he wept to hear.

Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe
Sing thy songs of happy chear,
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 vanish'd from my sight.
And I pluck'd a hollow reed.

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

SUMMARY

As I went through the wild valleys playing joyous songs on my pipe, I saw a child sitting on a cloud. Laughing, he asked me to play a song about a lamb. So I did, happily. *Play that song again!* said the child—so I did, and he cried to hear me play.

Put down your pipe and sing *your songs instead*, said the child. So I sung the same songs I had piped—and he cried with joy as he listened.

Piper, sit down and write those songs in a book, so everyone can read them, said the child. Then he disappeared, and I sat down and picked a reed.

I made the reed into a rustic pen, and I dyed water to make ink. Then I wrote down my joyful songs so that every child can take delight in them.

THEMES

CREATIVE INSPIRATION

The "Introduction" to Blake's great collection *Songs of Innocence* claims to tell the story of how the book came to be: through a strange encounter between a wandering musician and a holy child. Making art, this mystical tale suggests, requires artists to open themselves to inspiration, *following* the whims of mysterious forces rather than *directing* or *designing* their work.

The poem's speaker is Blake's alter ego, a piper who wanders through the "valleys wild" playing a cheery song to himself—until a strange, joyous child appears on a cloud above him. In the first stanza, the poem's ambiguous phrasing makes it unclear whether it's the *speaker* or the *child* who plays those "songs of pleasant glee." The poem thus begins with a sense that the speaker and the child might equally be part of the song-making.

Even after it becomes clearer that the speaker is the one piping, the sense of collaboration and connection between speaker and child only gets stronger. For the child starts molding the speaker's music. First, he demands that the speaker "pipe a song about a Lamb"—then that he play it again—then that he make up words for it—and finally that he write his songs down "in a book that all may read." The speaker cheerfully obeys, his art evolving to meet the spirit's demands (and producing both this poem itself and the book it comes from!).

The speaker's art is thus born from a creative interplay between himself and a spirit whose nature determines what he makes. Since the spirit who visits him is an innocent child, of *course* he ends up writing *Songs of Innocence*—poems about the very kind of creative, exuberant joy that *this* poem depicts.

Such inspiration, the poem suggests, isn't in the artist's control. Artists who seek inspiration can only wander, play their pipes—and be ready to follow when a spirit appears to lead them.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

THE NATURE OF INNOCENCE

This "Introduction" opens Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, a collection of poems in which he explored his concept of (what else but) innocence. This was a quality that he called one of the "two contrary states of the human soul," as

contrasted with hard-earned experience. (His later omnibus collection, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, would juxtapose these two contrary states.) Innocence, in Blake's terms, is an intuitively joyous, childlike view of the world, a kind of natural wisdom.

In this poem, fittingly, innocence appears in the symbolic form of a heavenly child on a cloud who urges the speaker on to make music and poetry. This happy child embodies the beauty of an innocent perspective: to be innocent is to be filled with joy and to delight in free-flowing creativity.

But joy, this poem knows, is not all there is to life—*or* to innocence. When the child asks the pipe-playing speaker to "pipe a song about a Lamb," he's not just asking for a tale of a sweet baby sheep, but for a song about Christ—a figure symbolically known as the Lamb of God for both his gentleness and his bloody, redemptive sacrifice. (For that matter, the vision of the cloud-child himself can't help but evoke the baby Jesus.) The child's happy tears over the piper's song are thus a response to great joy and great pain. These *Songs of Innocence* will be about a world where all is ultimately redeemed, beautiful, and good—but not a world without suffering.

This outwardly simple poem, then, suggests that simplicity and innocence are paradoxically complex and perilous states. Even to *write* about innocence in this fallen world, as the speaker notes, one must "stain[]" clear waters to make ink and break reeds to make pens. An innocent eye, as the whole collection will go on to show, perceives the ultimate goodness of the world. But it isn't blind (or immune!) to that world's failings.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee
On a cloud I saw a child.
And he laughing said to me.

The "Introduction" to William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* tells the story of how the book came to be: a visionary tale that will explore both Blake's rich, complex idea of innocence and the mysteries of creative inspiration.

As the poem begins, the speaker, a piper, is wandering through the "valleys wild" at his leisure, "piping songs of pleasant glee"—enjoying making music all by himself in a green wilderness.

But he isn't alone for long. He's brought up short by a strange encounter:

On a cloud I saw a child.

It's as if his piping has summoned a spirit. The sudden appearance of this hovering, laughing cloud-child doesn't seem to surprise the speaker one bit. He presents this apparition in language pure, plain, and matter-of-fact as a nursery rhyme's—as Blake will present many of the wild visions in *Songs of Innocence*.

Notice the unfussy structure here: the quatrains (or four-line stanzas) written in bouncy trochaic tetrameter (that is, lines of four trochees, metrical feet with a DUM-da rhythm, as in "Pip**ing** | **down** the | **val**leys | **wild**"). Notice the catalexis—the final cut-off unstressed syllable—that makes the lines seem to hang in the air for just a moment when they end, like a kid in mid-skip. Notice, in short, the way the poem's energetic form and simple language feel like they could have come from a picture book. (And indeed they do: Blake beautifully hand-engraved and illuminated almost all of his major works, and no reading of a Blake poem is complete without some time spent pondering the images that converse with the words.)

But already, that simplicity is deceptive. Look carefully at the structure of the first three lines:

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee
On a cloud I saw a child.

Grammatically, the person "piping down the valleys wild" could be either the *speaker* or the *child* here. And while the poem will soon resolve that ambiguity—the piper is indeed the speaker—the blurring of boundaries at the beginning is meaningful. In ways that will only become richer and more complicated, the speaker and the child have *something to do* with each other.

Already, readers can guess that the appearance of a *child* on a cloud might be a fitting introduction to a collection called *Songs of Innocence*: children and innocence are pretty much synonymous, symbolically speaking.

Again, though, this is no ordinary child, and the innocence he represents will be a far more complex notion than some sentimental idea of wide-eyed childish wonder. He's here to ask something of the wandering piper—and, "laughing," he speaks.

LINES 5-8

Pipe a song about a Lamb;
So I piped with merry chear,
Piper pipe that song again—
So I piped, he wept to hear.

The laughing child on the cloud has a request for the wandering piper: "Pipe a song about a Lamb." The piper is only too happy to oblige: he "pipe[s] with merry chear," apparently composing

such a song on the spot. The child is overjoyed at this, and demands, "Piper pipe that song again"—words that, more than any he's spoken so far, make him sound like a real child, with a real child's bottomless appetite for repetition. *Again, again!* The piper obliges. The child, mysteriously moved, weeps.

Joy and creativity flow back and forth between the child and the speaker here. Listen to the way that the repetitions in this stanza mirror the collaboration:

> Pipe a song about a Lamb;
> So I piped with merry chear,
> Piper pipe that song again—
> So I piped, he wept to hear.

The child is the ideas man here: he knows what kind of song he wants to hear, and he asks for it, once and again, with insistent parallel phrasings. Both times, the speaker readily responds, the simple anaphora on "so I piped" suggesting how easily and happily he answers the child's desires.

The child's weeping suggest that this artistic collaboration touches him deeply. But it might also reveal something about the "song about a Lamb" and its allusive depths:

- Lambs aren't just cute baby sheep, woolly images of sweet innocence (though they're certainly that). They're symbols for Christ himself.
- Jesus was known as *Agnus Dei*—the Lamb of God—both because of his gentleness and because he sacrificed himself, going like a lamb to the slaughter.
- The Christian undertone here gets even stronger when you reflect that this "song about a Lamb" is being requested by a child hovering on a cloud. Hard to juxtapose lambs and heavenly babies without thinking of the baby Jesus!

So the child's tears might not be pure tears of artistic joy. Perhaps they suggest mourning and suffering; perhaps they even suggest his *own* mourning and suffering. In this moment, the poem bends dizzyingly back on itself. In requesting a "song about a Lamb," the child might be asking for the *very song we're reading now*—a song about a lamb-like holy baby who visits the piping speaker with divine inspiration. (Weaving the web even more ornately, he could also be asking for *another* of the poems in *Songs of Innocence*: "The Lamb," which also symbolically links lambs to God.)

These *Songs of Innocence*, then, won't be songs of ignorance. Innocence, in Blake's terms, can't mean denying or avoiding the world's pain any more than Christ himself did. Rather, the joyous collaboration between piper and child suggests that innocence might have something to do with a way of *seeing* and *understanding* a world of pains and sufferings. Blake was a passionate (and idiosyncratic, and dissenting) Christian, and from the Christian standpoint, the story of Jesus doesn't end with death, but continues into a miraculous resurrection. A "song about a Lamb," in this sense, must be a song about joy and life ultimately triumphing over even the darkest horrors.

LINES 9-12

> *Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe*
> *Sing thy songs of happy chear,*
> *So I sung the same again*
> *While he wept with joy to hear*

In the third stanza, the speaker's creative relationship with the child evolves further. Now that the speaker has twice piped his "song about a Lamb," the child asks him to do something new:

> Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe
> Sing thy songs of happy chear,

In other words, he asks the piper to stop piping and sing his songs instead, finding words for the tune. The diacope on the word "happy" here suggests that the child wants the speaker to move from one joy to another; the piped song was good, and the sung song will be good, too.

Once again, the speaker responds easily and fluently: "So I sung the same again," he says, as if adding a few new steps to the circle dance the pair have already spun through. The very language of this stanza reflects that blossoming same-but-different creativity: "happy chear" in line 10 echoes "merry chear" in line 6, and where the child "wept to hear" in line 8, he now "we[eps] with joy to hear" in line 12.

Through a balance of repetition and change, then, the piper's songs have evolved from sweet tunes to full-fledged songs. This growth comes through *collaboration*. Had the laughing, floating child not turned up, the piper might still just be ambling through the "valleys wild" playing to himself. Creativity, here, involves an exchange between the artist and some mysterious outside force.

The speaker's introduction to these songs of innocence, then, suggests that he wrote them because he was open to a *spirit* of innocence. This divine, lamb-like child visited him, and—right away, with ease, without question—he did what it told him to. Poems *about* innocence are thus *born* of a kind of innocence: an open, playful, loving, joyful creativity. This isn't just lighthearted fun, it's profoundly moving, an experience that might bring anyone to tears.

LINES 13-16

> *Piper sit thee down and write*
> *In a book that all may read—*
> *So he vanish'd from my sight.*
> *And I pluck'd a hollow reed.*

The child on the cloud, having summoned poetry from the

piping speaker, has one last instruction for him:

> Piper sit thee down and write
> In a book that all may read—

This, then, is the origin story of the very book the reader holds in their hands now. The spirit of innocence first playfully inspired the composition of the poems, then insisted that those poems be shared. The book is needed so that "all may read" the songs, joining the speaker and the child in their joy.

At this moment, though, the child vanishes as suddenly as he appeared. After all the singing and laughing and crying, the speaker must move on to a new kind of creativity; to share his joy in this art again, he'll have to labor alone for a while.

So he turns to the landscape around him and gathers his tools. He begins by "pluck[ing] a hollow reed"—an image that might ring a bell for readers familiar with Greek mythology (or with English poetry, for that matter). Reeds were the sacred plants of Pan, the goat-god of shepherds and woods. Famously, he used them to make his trademark instrument: the Pan pipes.

But this piper will do something different with his "hollow reed"; he's about to turn what could be a musical instrument into a literary one. The pen he makes from his reed is a kind of cousin to his pipe.

LINES 17-20

> *And I made a rural pen,*
> *And I stain'd the water clear,*
> *And I wrote my happy songs*
> *Every child may joy to hear*

The speaker uses his freshly plucked "hollow reed" to make a "rural pen"—a rustic writing instrument that springs right out of the "valleys wild." For ink and paint, he "stain[s] the water clear." And with that, he concludes, he does just what the child inspired him to do: he writes down his "happy songs" so that "every child may joy to hear" them, just as the cloud-child did.

On the one hand, this is an image of creative culmination and a warm welcome to the book: *come in and sing with us*, the speaker seems to say. On the other, there are hints of unease here. In order to transform his songs from airy ditties to solid tome, the speaker has to break things and stain things, to kill a reed and besmirch the clear waters. His tools grow organically out of the world around him, yes—but his art-making also does a little violence to that world.

Perhaps there's a touch of an artist's frustration there. The hard labor of composition, this moment hints, never quite captures the airy joy of first inspiration; the final product always comes out a little "hollow," a little "stain'd," a little *fallen* from its initial loveliness.

Even the poem's repetitions feel more labored here:

> And I pluck'd a hollow reed.
> And I made a rural pen,
> And I stain'd the water clear,
> And I wrote my happy songs

That relentless anaphora—drawing readers' eyes back again and again to that lonesome "I"—suggests that the making of the book was harder and more solitary work than the back-and-forth dance of initial inspiration. As Blake himself put it in another of his visionary works: "Joys impregnate. Sorrows bring forth."

But then, images of things blotched and broken and difficult and lonely are strangely *right* for the vision of innocence that this "song about a Lamb" has introduced. Innocence, in this poem, is the capacity to perceive ultimate hope and joy in a fallen world, to trust in it, and to share it.

SYMBOLS

THE CHILD

The child on his cloud symbolizes innocence itself: a childlike joy and trust in life. To be innocent, this child's "glee" suggests, is to see the world as an ultimately good and redemptive place.

But innocence doesn't mean ignorance. This child delights in the world even though he knows it contains suffering. In fact, he might know so on quite a personal level. When he asks the speaker to "pipe a song about a Lamb," he's drawing on the Christian symbolism that presents the crucified Christ as a mild, gentle lamb to the slaughter. And there's no way to juxtapose a heavenly floating baby with the Lamb of God without calling up thoughts of the baby Jesus.

The child on the cloud, then, evokes some of the richness of Blake's idea of innocence (and his idiosyncratic take on Christianity). This child's delight in the song of the lamb suggests that he feels and knows, deep down, that all will somehow be well, no matter how bad things might look.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-15

THE LAMB

The lamb is a traditional symbol of Christ. In Christian belief, Christ is often known as the "lamb of God" both for his gentleness and because he was offered up like a lamb to the slaughter in the bloody sacrifice of the Crucifixion.

When the poem's visionary child cries over the speaker's "song

about a Lamb," then, he might be moved by more than just the lovely music. A "song about a Lamb" could both mourn over Christ's suffering and rejoice over Christ's resurrection—an ultimate victory over death and pain.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Pipe a song about a Lamb;"

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The many repetitions in the "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* mirror the poem's action and capture its gleeful spirit. Just as the child on the cloud demands to hear the same song over and over (taking a delight in repetition that anyone who has hung out with a small child will recognize), the poem's simple language spins giddily around the same few words.

From the very first lines, when the speaker comes "Piping down the valleys wild / Piping songs of pleasant glee," the poem returns and returns to the delights of having a pipe and being a piper. Listen to all the pipe-y polyptoton in the second stanza:

> Pipe a song about a Lamb;
> So I piped with merry chear,
> Piper pipe that song again—
> So I piped, he wept to hear.

The swift repetition of these words, with their clean alliterative /p/ sounds, summons up the *sound* of piping: a lively procession of little notes. It also suggests that piper and child alike are immersed in the joy of the music: the repetition of piping words matches the repetition of the piper's song.

Meanwhile, subtler, wider-spaced repetitions weave the whole poem together. In the second stanza, for instance, the speaker says that he "piped with merry chear"; in the third, the child seems of one mind with him when he requests that the piper sing his "songs of happy chear," as if he's hearing the words and catching the spirit of *this very poem* before it's even been written. That repetition underscores how closely linked speaker and child are, and how much their joy comes from creative interplay.

Another poem-wide repetition sprouts in the second stanza, when the child cries at the sound of the piper's "song about a Lamb." He "wept to hear," the speaker tells us—and then, when the speaker *sang* the same song, putting words to the melody, the child "wept with joy to hear." In the final stage of creation, when the speaker has written his songs down, he declares he's done so to share that experience with "every child," who may now "joy to hear" what the visionary child did.

Again, repetition suggests an experience transmitted and shared. First, the speaker and the child move each other; then, through a different kind of art, the speaker reaches out to "every child"—the reader very much included, whatever their age.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Piping"
- **Line 2:** "Piping"
- **Line 5:** "Pipe"
- **Line 6:** "piped," "merry chear"
- **Line 7:** "Piper pipe"
- **Line 8:** "piped," "wept to hear"
- **Line 9:** "pipe," "happy," "pipe"
- **Line 10:** "happy chear"
- **Line 12:** "wept with joy to hear"
- **Line 13:** "Piper"
- **Line 19:** "happy"
- **Line 20:** "joy to hear"

PARALLELISM

Often interweaving with other forms of repetition, parallelism focuses the poem on inspired action and joyous collaboration.

Take a look, for instance, at the interplay between the divine child's instructions and the piper's responses in the second stanza:

> Pipe a song about a Lamb;
> So I piped with merry chear,
> Piper pipe that song again—
> So I piped, he wept to hear.

The child instructs, and the piper unfailingly obeys, the simple anaphora of "so I piped" making his responses feel perfectly instinctive and natural, exactly what you *would* do without question if a visionary child appeared and asked you to play for him. The music of these repetitions makes the easy back-and-forth between the pair feel like a rhythmic dance in itself.

At the climax of this delightful collaboration, the child issues one final command: "Piper sit thee down and write / In a book that all may read." With that, he vanishes, leaving the speaker to another sequence of parallel actions:

> So he vanish'd from my sight.
> And I pluck'd a hollow reed.
> And I made a rural pen,
> And I stain'd the water clear,
> And I wrote my happy songs

Here, the anaphora conjures up a more complex and thoughtful process than the giddy music of earlier stanzas. The repeated

"and"s (which also make this a moment of polysyndeton) suggest that writing down those happy songs is a work involving many steps. The speaker has to pluck a reed and fashion a pen and brew inks and (last but far from least) sit himself down and write to preserve this moment of joyous inspiration. The more driving, focused parallelism here suggests a more laborious kind of art-making, in contrast with the earlier whirling dance of inspiration.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Piping"
- **Line 2:** "Piping"
- **Line 5:** "Pipe a song"
- **Line 6:** "So I piped"
- **Line 7:** "Piper pipe that song"
- **Line 8:** "So I piped"
- **Line 9:** "Drop thy pipe"
- **Line 10:** "Sing thy songs"
- **Line 11:** "So"
- **Line 13:** "Piper sit thee down"
- **Line 15:** "So"
- **Line 16:** "And I pluck'd"
- **Line 17:** "And I made"
- **Line 18:** "And I stain'd"
- **Line 19:** "And I wrote"

IMAGERY

Toward the end of this deceptively simple poem, a flash of imagery complicates the speaker's picture of creative joy. The heavenly child who has been egging the speaker on tells him to sit down and write these songs up so that "all may read" them. The speaker obediently gets down to business:

> So he vanish'd from my sight.
> And I pluck'd a hollow reed.
> And I made a rural pen,
> And I stain'd the water clear,

There's a twist of unease here. In order to write his "happy songs" and share them with the world, the speaker must first *do damage* to the landscape from which he draws his materials. To get his "rural pen," he has to "pluck[] a hollow reed"; to get his inks and paints, he must "stain[] the water clear." His artwork, in other words, mars the "valleys wild," breaking and blotting their beauties.

Even songs of innocence, the imagery of breaking and staining suggests, involve loss, injury, and sacrifice—the unavoidable perils of an imperfect world.

These images also hint at some of the frustrations of art-making. Though the speaker takes great joy in his playful exchange with the visionary child, the child has "vanished from [his] sight" by the time he sits down to write; when he breaks a reed and stains the water, he's no longer playing with a friend, but laboring alone. Perhaps, this moment suggests, the written record of an inspired creative experience often feels a little, well, "hollow"—or like a stain to free-flowing clear water, the messy, imperfect footprints left behind by something living.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "And I pluck'd a hollow reed."
- **Line 18:** "And I stain'd the water clear,"

ALLUSION

When the child on the cloud tells the speaker to "pipe a song about a Lamb," he's not just asking for a tale of a nice little baby sheep. The lamb, here as elsewhere, is an old symbol for Christ. In Christian tradition, Christ is known as "Agnus Dei" (Lamb of God)—because he's meek and gentle, and because he gets sacrificed.

This allusion introduces an idea that will become a major theme in the *Songs of Innocence*. While the book will be full of gleeful elation, it will also tell stories of terrible poverty and suffering (much of it afflicting children). To be innocent, this poem's allusion to Christ suggests, isn't to avoid suffering. Rather, it's to see beyond suffering to redemption—to take a wisely childlike view of the world as ultimately, thrillingly joyful, in spite of all of life's pains.

The child's request for a "song about a Lamb" might also bend back around and form a self-reflexive allusion. *Songs of Innocence* indeed contains a "song about a Lamb," a famous poem in which the lamb is again linked to Christ. And the "Introduction" *itself* might be read as a "song about a Lamb": a heavenly child floating on a cloud can't help but suggest the baby Jesus.

This poem's joyful, lamblike child might thus be encouraging the speaker to write about divine inspiration—to write a song about *being inspired* to write a song by the spirit of innocence himself.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Pipe a song about a Lamb;"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Piper sit thee down and write / In a book that all may read—"

VOCABULARY

Glee (Line 2) - Delight, joy.

Chear (Line 6, Line 10) - An alternate spelling of "cheer," happiness.

Thy, Thee (Line 9, Line 10, Line 13) - Old-fashioned words for "your" (thy) and "you" (thee).

Rural (Line 17) - Rustic—having to do with nature or the countryside.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The "Introduction" to Blake's *Songs of Innocence* welcomes its readers into a world that at first feels clear and bright as dawn. Like most of the poems in this collection, the "Introduction" uses a short, simple form: in this case, five rhymed quatrains (or four-line stanzas) with a bouncy, uplifting meter. This nursery-rhyme shape suits a poem of childlike glee and creative inspiration.

But the poem's simple shape also belies its complex thought. As in many of the *Songs of Innocence*, what at first seems to be a sweet little ditty is in fact a complex meditation on a world whose joys are intermingled with pain. The speaker's "song about a Lamb" is not just about the bleating woolly kind of lamb, but about Christ—and thus about a kind of innocence that knows and faces suffering. Innocence, here, doesn't mean ignoring the world's pain, but trusting wholeheartedly that such pain is all part of a deep redemptive beauty.

METER

The "Introduction" is written in trochaic tetrameter. That means that each of its lines uses four trochees, metrical feet with a DUM-da rhythm. More precisely, this is catalectic trochaic tetrameter, meaning that the lines drop their final unstressed syllables.

Here's how that sounds in lines 3-4:

> On a | cloud I | saw a | child
> And he | laughing | said to | me

The lines all start and end with a strong stress, giving the poem a boisterous rhythm: that missing unstressed syllable at the end of each line feels like the moment mid-skip when both your feet leave the ground. This energetic meter animates the poem's childlike joy, exuberance, and creativity.

RHYME SCHEME

The "Introduction" switches between two rhyme schemes. Stanzas 1 and 4 use an ABAB pattern; the rest of the stanzas use an ABCB pattern.

That easy variation gives the impression that the poem is a simple, spontaneous overflow of joy—just like the piping songs the speaker describes. But as ever in Blake, a simple form is just the still surface of a deep, deep pond.

The poem's repetitions mean that some rhymes appear more than once, and some stanzas rhyme not just internally but with each other: stanzas 2, 3, and 5 all share the same B rhymes on an /ear/ sound, and mostly even use the same words: *chear* / *hear*. (Only stanza 5 makes a slight tweak, swapping a *chear* for a *clear*.) These echoing rhymes suggest eternal delight: the piper's song becomes a circle dance, and the child takes fresh joy in every repetition.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is Blake's alter ego: a wandering piper who playfully collaborates with a visionary child. At home in the natural world and full of gleeful creative ease, this piper is the right guy to compose *Songs of Innocence*. He's able to mirror the inspiring child-spirit's delight and enthusiasm in his art; his creative brilliance lies in his ability to follow that child's lead, and thus embody innocence—a trusting, joyous, childlike, instinctively wise state of being.

This piper is a more straightforward self-portrait than new readers of Blake might imagine. All his life, Blake saw visions: a tree full of angels, a chatty Archangel Gabriel, and the ghost of a flea are only a few notables among countless apparitions. On one level a symbolic image of creative inspiration, the speaker's exchange with the joyous child is also a surprisingly matter-of-fact description of how Blake made his art.

SETTING

The "Introduction" is set in an idealized landscape of green valleys through which the piping speaker wanders at his ease. Though the speaker calls these the "valleys wild," they seem more pastoral than perilous. In Blake's illumination of this poem, the piper even stands amid a flock of sheep, in a scene that suggests countryside more than wilderness.

Nonetheless, the speaker's journey through the valleys hints at a very Romantic idea of the relationship between art and untamed nature. Poetry, here, springs up from the landscape, coming "as naturally as the leaves to a tree" (to quote another Romantic poet). The speaker's art literally grows out of the valleys: his poetry-writing pen is made from a "hollow reed," and readers might well guess that his rustic pipe is, too. The speaker works in tandem with nature to produce his poems.

However, this relationship between artist and nature is also not totally *innocent*. In order to make pen and ink, the speaker has to kill a reed and "stain[] the water clear": his art mars the natural world at the same time as it grows from its earth and water.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Blake (1757-1827) is a poet unlike any other. Often

considered one of the first of the English Romantics, he also stands apart from any movement as a unique philosopher, prophet, and artist.

This "Introduction" kicks off one of his best-known and most influential works: the 1789 collection *Songs of Innocence*. He would later expand this collection into *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794), a book that examines what Blake called "the two contrary states of the human soul." The deceptively simple poems in these books often sound almost like nursery rhymes. But examined closely, they offer a visionary perspective on matters earthly and divine, from poverty to religion to time.

Many of the poems in *Songs of Innocence* have a counterpart in *Songs of Experience*, a twin poem that reads the same subjects from a different perspective. (For instance, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" both explore creation, divinity, and nature, but in very different ways!) The *Experience* counterpart to this joyful (but quietly bittersweet) "Introduction" is a prophetic rumble in which the speaker commands: "Hear the voice of the Bard!" Where the presiding spirit of *Innocence* is a laughing child, the guardian at the gates of *Experience* is a sage, wizardly old man.

Blake didn't just *write* poetry: he also designed, engraved, printed, painted, and published illuminated manuscripts using a technique he called the "infernal method." Blake painted his poems and pictures on copper plates with a resilient ink, then burned away the excess copper in a bath of acid—the opposite of the process most engravers used. But then, Blake often did the opposite of what other people did, believing that it was his role to "reveal the infinite that was hid" by custom and falsehood.

Even among the often countercultural Romantics, then, Blake was an outlier. Samuel Taylor Coleridge himself—no stranger to a wild vision—once remarked that he was "in the very mire of common-place common-sense compared with Mr. Blake."

While Blake was never widely known during his lifetime, he has posthumously become one of the most famous and beloved of poets. Writers from Allen Ginsberg to Olga Tokarczuk to Philip Pullman claim him as a major influence.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, like much of Blake's work, reflect Blake's passionate, idiosyncratic relationship with Christianity. As the vision of a holy child weeping over a "song about a Lamb" suggests, Blake was a deeply religious man. But he was highly critical of *organized* religion. He was born to a family of Dissenters, a group of English Protestants who broke away from and rebelled against the Church of England (and instilled in Blake an early distrust of the religious status quo). Blake pushed back against what he saw as a cruel, hypocritical state Christianity, a religion which he felt could only oppress and stunt humankind and interfere with every person's direct relationship with God.

For that matter, he believed—and memorably said, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—that "everything that lives is holy." To Blake, the whole world was infused with divinity, which people could see if only they opened their eyes to the "infinite that was hid" behind the illusions of custom and daily life. In this, he (like many of his Romantic contemporaries) rebelled against the rationalistic worldviews of 18th-century Enlightenment philosophers.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Illuminated — Compare and contrast some of Blake's hand-painted editions of Songs of Innocence. Blake published many of his books as illuminated manuscripts, in which pictures interweave with poems; consider how word and image interact here (especially in the illustrations to this "Introduction"). (https://www.blakearchive.org/work/s-inn)
- Portraits of Blake — Take a look at some portraits of Blake that capture his character: equal parts visionary and pugnacious. While he sat for the painted portrait at the top of the page, he described his friendship with the Archangel Gabriel to the artist. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp00448/william-blake)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Blake's life and work via the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/william-blake)
- Songs of Innocence and of Experience — Learn more about the groundbreaking collections in which Blake printed this poem. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience)
- Blake's Legacy — Read a piece by the contemporary novelist Philip Pullman on what William Blake means to him. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/28/philip-pullman-william-blake-and-me)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- A Dream
- Ah! Sun-flower
- A Poison Tree
- Earth's Answer
- Holy Thursday (Songs of Experience)
- Holy Thursday (Songs of Innocence)
- Infant Joy
- Infant Sorrow
- London
- Nurse's Song (Songs of Experience)
- Nurse's Song (Songs of Innocence)
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)

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CHICAGO MANUAL

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