Lively Green and Desart Wild:
Nature and the Human Imagination
in William Blake’s
*Songs of Innocence and of Experience*

by

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And I know that This World Is a World of IMAGINATION & Vision. I see Every thing I paint In This World, but Every body does not see alike...
The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way.... But to the Eyes of the Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself...

WILLIAM BLAKE
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ iii

Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: The *Songs of Innocence* .............................................................................. 8

Chapter 2: The *Songs of Experience* .......................................................................... 37

Chapter 3: The *Songs* and Present-Day Ecological Thought and Theory ............... 64

Figures ............................................................................................................................. 80

Bibliography .................................................................................................................... 83
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Introduction

In recent years, the Romantic poets have proven alluring subjects for ecocritical analysis: the detailed study of the interaction between the environment and humanity in poetry and fiction. However, ecocritics' analyses of William Blake have often been equivocal, muted, or scant—in no small part due to the popular, and somewhat justified, perception of Blake as primarily an urban poet. Blake never took the long, rambling walks in the Lake District that inspired Wordsworth, or toured the French Alps which inspired Shelley—in fact, he never left England, and spent most of his life in London. Nevertheless, the ecocritical dismissal of nature in Blake's poetry is a serious oversight; Blake's poems overflow with imagery drawn from his understanding of the natural world. A central concern of his work is the way that the human imagination derives both joy and redemption from its interactions with nature. The importance of nature to Blake—and Blake's critical, impassioned view of how profoundly human perception and imagination can be transformed by nature—is especially evident in his two-book poetry collection, the Songs of Innocence and of Experience. The Songs contains such popular poems as "The Tyger," "The Lamb," "The Chimney Sweeper," and "The Ecchoing Green," whose very titles evoke the nature that permeates Blake's poetry.

Despite the vital role of nature in Blake's works, literary critics have not only overlooked its part in Blake's mythos, but have often outright misread it, usually portraying it as either non-existent, or as irrelevant to Blake's characters. In the words of one prominent Blakean ecocritic, Kevin Hutchings, "it has become a widely accepted critical commonplace that Blake is in fact nature's poetic adversary" (37).
Hutchings blames Northrop Frye for much of the credence given to this view of Blake as "anti-nature": in his profoundly influential work, *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye claims that, in Blake, "we see nothing outside of man worthy of respect. Nature is miserably cruel, wasteful, chaotic and half-dead" (39). Frye, and the critics who followed him, tend to see Blake's work as deeply anthropocentric, arguing that Blakean nature offers little of value to humans, or could even be the embodiment of evil. Admittedly, these critics' views are not completely unsubstantiated; Blake's work is undeniably anthropocentric—in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, only three out of the forty-five poems ("The Clod & the Pebble," "The Tyger" and "The Lilly") contain no humans or references to humans in either their text or their illustrations. Even when nature does play a role in the poems, the *Songs* focus not on what humans see in nature, or on what they do to it, but on what the humans make of their observations of nature—how their imaginative elaborations upon nature may create joy for humans of all ages and from all walks of life. Nevertheless, the critics' nearly unanimous dismissal of Blake's seemingly inconsequential vision of nature has led, over the years, to a relative dearth of criticism on the depictions of nature in Blake's work—as opposed to, for instance, the role of nature in Wordsworth's poetry.

Recently, however, ecocritical readings of Blake's texts have become more prevalent, as have alternative readings of Blake's vision of nature. These new ecocritics have re-examined what past generations of scholars have dismissed, and have found that Blake's work is, perhaps, not as deeply anthropocentric as was

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1 As in Stanley Gardner's readings of "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found" (*Blake's Innocence and Experience Retraced*, 94). Kevin Hutchings cites these critics' reliance on Blake's marginalia as particularly misleading, and believes that Blake's comments on Wordsworth have been misread.
previously thought. For example, the traditional critical interpretation of Blake’s proverb, "nature is barren," from his work “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” is that Blake's nature has no innate meaning—humans must impart meaning to nature by experiencing and exploiting it. But as the ecocritical author Mark Lussier writes in “Blake’s Deep Ecology,” it is possible to invert this interpretation: “by necessity of the proverb’s own symmetries, man is barren in the absence of nature” (404). In other words, nature has inherent meaning and value, and mankind is utterly dependent upon nature for both mental and physical health—indeed, the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* support this latter view, and contain many instances in which nature is depicted as anything but barren. Ecocritics dwell upon these moments, teasing apart the relationships between Blake's human characters and nature—and, ultimately, determining the relevance of those relationships to today's ecological problems and controversies.

There are many variations on ecocriticism: deep ecology and ecofeminism, for example, have been frequently used to examine the works of the Romantics—and thus, there are many lenses through which to examine Blake's work. Moreover, the field is often subdivided by subject—for example, those who focus on the Romantic poets, Blake included, often style themselves as "Green Romanticists." My own analysis of Blake draws most heavily on several of these green Romanticists, especially Jonathan Bate and Karl Kroeber. Bate and Kroeber were among the first critics to apply ecocriticism to Romantic literature, and both posit (as I do) that the depictions of nature found in their preferred Romantic authors' literature

[are] neither apolitical nor a disguise for covert ideological polemics... What the successes of late twentieth-century critics have disastrously obscured is the
British romantic poets' emphasis on pleasure as the foundation of poetry, even political verse.... This is the foundation of what I [Karl Kroeber] shall call their proto-ecological views. (3-5)

Although neither Bate nor Kroeber focus on Blake to the extent that later Blakean ecocritics do, these early Romanticist ecocritics do recognize that the work of Blake's Romantic contemporaries laid the groundwork for much of how humans relate to the environment in the 20th and 21st centuries, and that the work of the Romantics is worth studying both for insight into how these poets thought about nature, and for the modern implications of that worldview. Subsequent influential ecocritics, including Lawrence Buell and William Cronon, have built upon this perspective of the Romantics, often citing their work as progressive. However, both Buell and Cronon have noted that, when these Romantic ideals were combined with later ecological thought, they served as a literary foundation for an attitude towards the environment that could be profoundly (and unhelpfully) anthropocentric.

However, a few ecocritics (Kevin Hutchings and Mark Lussier, specifically) have applied ecocritical methods of reading to William Blake—and, in doing so, have explored and illuminated Blake's deeply conflicted yet surprisingly modern attitude towards nature. Kevin Hutchings persuasively asserts that Blake's relationship with nature is not as anthropocentric as prior critics have believed it to be. Rather, he argues, if Blake's poetry is read with a healthy sense of skepticism and an awareness of the outcomes of Blake's relationship to nature (even outcomes that the poems themselves might not be aware of), Blake's depictions of nature reveal his attitudes towards human power structures. This might seem a surprisingly anthropocentric reading of Blake for an ecocritic determined to prove Blake's value as a source of
environmental wisdom, but for Hutchings, acknowledging Blake's anthropocentrism is key to establishing that although Blake's poems may have centered around humans, nature also plays a crucial role that must not be ignored. Like Hutchings, Mark Lussier approaches Blake intending to prove that Blake's views of nature are not to be discounted. Lussier argues that Blake's vision of nature is strikingly similar to a branch of ecological philosophy—specifically, deep ecology—that would not emerge until centuries after Blake's death. My work in this thesis builds upon the work of both these Blakean ecocritics: I follow Hutchings' skepticism of the "idealistic" admiration of the depictions of nature in Romantic poetry that is characteristic of the work of Bate and Kroeber, while like Lussier, I link Blake's vision in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to modern ecological thought.

Even the ecocritics who recognize the central importance of nature in Blake's poetry and its role as a source of joy have paid relatively little critical attention to the role of the natural world in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, one of Blake's most widely read works. Although Hutchings and Lussier both touch upon nature's appearance in the *Songs*, their efforts to give a comprehensive overview of nature in Blake's entire oeuvre preclude close study of more than a few of the poems in the *Songs*. While understandable, this is a missed opportunity: most of the *Songs* are clearly expressive of Blake's philosophy of the importance of the natural world in shaping and invigorating the human imagination. Because the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* offer a view of, as the book's subtitle states, "the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul," the *Songs* depict two views of the world that are both dialectic and complementary. The innocent and experienced narrators and characters offer
vastly different views of nature—views which offer unique insight into Blake's vision of the ideal human relationship with nature, and of the ways in which human interactions with nature can go awry. The *Songs of Innocence*, given its peaceful, prelapsarian setting, allows for an interaction between humans and nature in which humans are able to personally seek out interactions with nature in order to experience joy. Central to these poems are the lives of the young, both human and animal: in poems such as "The Ecchoing Green" and "Nurse's Song," children frolic and play in rolling green hills. By experiencing nature and allowing their imaginations to elaborate upon it, humans may, if they choose, experience joy. In fact, humans only begin to slip from innocence into the "fallen" world when nature becomes inaccessible, as it does in the city, as demonstrated in poems such as "The Chimney Sweeper" and "Holy Thursday."

The *Songs of Experience* delves into that fallen world, in which humans, for the most part, surround themselves not with nature, but with the trappings of human society. Rather than going to nature for joy, the fallen characters base their conceptions of nature on a flawed imagined version of nature created by other humans. Even so, *Experience*, like *Innocence*, professes hope for humanity in the real nature, beyond the bounds of the city: humans may still find redemption for their faulty imaginations through their interactions with nature.

Given the widespread misunderstanding of Blake's attitude towards nature on the part of critics, it is not surprising that little ecocritical work has been carried out on the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* specifically. Many of the Romantic poets (especially Wordsworth) are considered the founders of what is now modern
ecological philosophy—but Blake, so long misunderstood as "anti-nature," has been largely, and unfortunately, ignored. This thesis' analysis of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* reveals why Blake's *Songs* are both relevant and important to modern ecological thought, and why the *Songs*’ vision of humanity's interactions with the natural world deserves the same kind of careful ecocritical consideration that the work of the other Romantic poets has received for decades. A better understanding of Blake's work in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and an analysis of how Blake's vision of nature relates to both modern ecocritical thought and the reality of modern environmental issues, may determine whether or not the *Songs* are worthy (or not) of the same reverence for their prescient nature as the poetry of other prominent Romantic poets, as well as whether the *Songs* constitute interesting subjects for further ecocritical examination. Furthermore, this thesis' ecocritical analysis explores whether the ways of interacting with the natural world depicted in the *Songs* can still, in any way, serve as a positive or a negative model for how we might interact with, think about, and imagine our own versions of nature.
Chapter 1: The Songs of Innocence

William Blake's Songs of Innocence depicts a semi-mythological, Edenic vision of England's countryside, in which shepherds and children, nurses and old men, laugh, sing and play. The hardships and cruelty that enter, and indeed suffuse, much of the later companion collection, the Songs of Experience, are largely absent from the world of the Innocence poems, and people in Innocence are—with some important exceptions—at liberty to focus on strengthening and expanding their relationships with the natural world. In fact, the strength of humans' desire for a closer connection to nature, and the joy resulting from that connection, is apparent in the motivations and actions of almost all of Innocence's characters and narrators.

The Songs of Innocence poems craft a consistent vision of the ways in which humans in a pre-Fall, Edenic state of innocence may best derive joy from nature: by first observing it and then building on those observations, imagining their own semi-fictional versions of nature. Through creation and exploration of this imagined version of nature, humans may reliably and simultaneously experience joy and bring themselves into a healthier, more harmonious relationship with the natural world. Nature itself seems to nurture and promote this process, given that further interactions with it intensify humans' joy—and the fact that nature is unchanging in the Songs of Innocence allows that joy to be perpetual, shared by successive generations.

However, when humans stop basing their imaginings on actual nature, the imaginative process can be harmful to them. On an individual level, ungrounded imaginings can produce a distorted version of nature that is detrimental to the individual in that the type of joy experienced is qualitatively different from, and less
than, the joy experienced as a result of an imaginative vision more closely connected to real nature. On a societal level, ungrounded imaginings result in humans misleading others—or deceiving themselves—about how nature functions. When people rely too heavily on others' imagined versions of nature, rather than on their own observations of the real world as the basis for their own understanding of nature, they become vulnerable to the other humans who seek to force a false version of imagined nature on the less fortunate, a cruel act that (in Blake's world) deprives the misled individual of the possibility of innocent joy.

**Imaginative Elaboration: Finding Joy in Nature**

The foremost desire of most characters in the *Innocence* poems is joy—the words "joy" and "rejoice" appear a total of twenty times in the nineteen poems—and joy is most found in the presence of nature. In the very first poem in the *Songs of Innocence*, the "Introduction," the character of the Piper (who is commonly seen as an avatar of Blake himself), states that his purpose is to write "my happy songs./Every child may joy to hear" (19-20). However, simply being in nature is not enough to bring joy to most of Blake's characters. Instead, the most visibly joyful characters use what I term *imaginative elaboration*. Rather than approaching the natural world with preconceived expectations of what they might find there, the narrators that are most capable of joy are willing to observe and accept the wonders of nature, attaching cultural significance to sensations and objects only after they have been observed or experienced. Characters who participate in this imaginative elaboration make very basic, factual observations of their surroundings, which the characters then use as the basis for a more fanciful imagining of nature—and thinking about this imagined
nature brings them joy. In general, the natural elements which humans typically perceive as "joyful," such as singing birds or a bright spring sun, result in the most joy when imaginatively elaborated upon.

"The Ecchoing Green" is one of several poems in *Innocence* which explores the crucial importance of the relationship between humans and nature, providing a model of imaginative elaboration and describing how characters engage in it to derive joy. In the first stanza of "The Ecchoing Green," the collective narrator uses imaginative elaboration to delineate an emotional connection between humans and nature.

The Sun does arise,  
And make happy the skies.  
The merry bells ring,  
To welcome the Spring.  
The sky-lark and thrush,  
The birds of the bush,  
Sing louder around,  
To the bells chearful sound,  
While our sports shall be seen  
On the Ecchoing Green. (1-10)

The process of observation in "The Ecchoing Green," which is paralleled in many of the other poems, lays the groundwork for properly performed imaginative elaboration. The poem's opening lines offer a pure, factual observation of nature: "The Sun does arise." Rapidly, however, the collective human imagination of several participants (the "our" only mentioned later, in line 9) subtly alters the image by anthropomorphizing both the sun (which is given the agency to make things happy) and the skies (which are made happy by the sun). The physical presence of humans in the landscape is immediately confirmed (in line 3) by the chiming of the bells—this is not a fully imagined landscape, but a real one (with some mild imaginative
elaboration) in which human actions have visible effect. Moreover, this is a landscape in which humans and nature are in communication, with minimal dissonance: the "merry" bells are products of human manufacture, but, by imbuing them with the same kind of emotion as the "happy" skies (a part of nature), the narrator depicts the emotional harmony between human and natural elements of the scene. Similarly, in lines 5-6, the narrator's focus swings back towards nature with observations about the birds, whose joyful songs change so that they harmonize with the noise of the bells (7). The alternating observations of the human and natural world establish the emotional connection and interaction between the two in the narrators' collective imagination—elements which humans perceive as joyful (the birds' song) bring joy to humans, and humans perceive that their own joy amplifies the extant joy in nature.

The second stanza of the "Echoing Green" establishes that, although observations of the natural world and its interactions with the human world are a part of imaginative elaboration that produces much joy (as in the first stanza), the most profound and persistent joy is nourished by more extensive and complex imaginative elaboration on the natural world. This complex elaboration permits humans across generations to bond and experience different, albeit linked, joys in the same landscape. The second stanza moves from a description of the human-influenced natural world and children's sports to a parallel description of the "old folk" in that setting, and their reminiscences of their own sport:
Old John with white hair
Does laugh away care,
Sitting under the oak,
Among the old folk.
They laugh at our play,
And soon they all say,
Such such were the joys,
When we all girls & boys,
In our youth time were seen
On the Echoing Green. (11-20)

In this stanza, persistence of joy through sequential human generations is realized by all humans present in a double refraction, or echoing, of perspective: the old people observe the young people enjoying their surroundings—and, in turn, the young people hear the comments of the elderly. The inclusion of these remarks in the poem suggests that the youths—the narrators—are taking their elders' happy comments to heart. The elders' comment, "Such such were the joys" constitutes their realization of the possibility of joy's persistence over the course of generations (17). The elders further note that the setting—created by the interaction of the human and natural—has persisted largely unchanged from when the old folk were young: "Such such were the joys, When we all girls & boys, In our youth time were seen..." (17-19).

When the entire landscape is seen through the eyes of the "old folk," it becomes a conduit not only for experiencing joy in the present, but for realizing that as long as the landscape exists, so does joy. This realization is, itself, an elaboration by the imaginations of the old folk—a fanciful yet logical conclusion based on rational observation. Aside from the temporary amplification in the birds' eternal song, as they sing louder in response to the youths' joy (which ceases as soon as the sun sets and the birds, like humans, become "ready for rest"), the landscape remains
largely unchanged from when the old people were both physically and symbolically young.

The unchanging Green, which gives the same "joys" to generation after generation, allows the older people to see, in contrast with the present, what has changed: their own physical decline as well as their degree of engagement with the natural world. However, thanks to the persistence of joy (the children are still experiencing the same joy that their elders once did), this slow fading of life is still perceived favorably by all human observers: everyone on the green has been happy, and the people are able to relive that happiness by observing it in their children, even when they themselves are too old interact with the natural world itself. The old people's second-hand observations of the younger children's interactions with nature still allow them to remain joyful. In fact, the elders recognize the remarkable nature of joy's persistence—as do the youthful narrators of the poem, who internalize and elaborate on their elders' realization of joy's persistence, when they state, "They laugh at our play...On the Echoing Green." (17-20)

This process of deriving joy from observation and imaginative elaboration promotes a relationship with the natural world through which its participants recognize their profound reliance on nature itself for joy—not only in the present, but

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2 This association between aging and difficulty experiencing deep joy from interactions with the natural world is not uncommon in Blake—in the "Nurse's Song" of Innocence, the nurse is distantly detached from nature—and in the linked "Nurse's Song" in Songs of Experience, the nurse who actively avoids engaging with nature notes that "The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind," suggesting her aged state (3).

3 Note also that old John "[d]oes laugh away care"—his perception of the children's joy is actively staving off his movement out of the world of Innocence. The role of interactions with nature in keeping people out of the world of Experience is discussed in depth later in this chapter.
also in the past and future. For example, the elderly folk in "The Ecchoing Green" still find joy on the Green, years after the most immediate joyous experiences have passed. The eternal nature of this joy is reliant on the Songs’ assumption that landscapes do not change over time, despite human interactions with those landscapes—a point which is crucial to understanding the third chapter of this thesis. The idea that humans might not change a landscape through their interactions with it, but may only derive joy from it in perpetuity, might sound alien to modern ecologically conscious readers, sensitized as they are to the idea that humans inadvertently harm nature upon coming into contact with it, but it is nonetheless key to the Songs of Innocence's idea that nature is an unchanging constant, of which humans are naturally a part, if only they can look at it and understand how it works.

**Problematic Imaginative Elaboration: Misunderstandings and Distortions of Nature**

Imaginative elaboration, the preferred method of interacting with nature generally upheld by the Innocence poems, can also generate a profound misunderstanding of nature: as such darkly ironic poems as "The Chimney Sweeper" and "Holy Thursday," make clear, the human impulse towards imaginative elaboration on the natural world opens the door to a situation in which nature is incorrectly imagined, and the imagined nature is too different from, or is a distortion of, reality in problematic ways. In these instances, humans are still driven to act upon their imagined versions of nature, even if their imagined nature looks nothing like reality. Characters will reliably act upon presumptions that they believe will give
them joy in real life—but if their actions are based on an incorrectly imagined nature, their actions will sometimes actually cause misery or harm.

Before a discussion of ways in which characters engage in distorted imaginative elaboration, it is important to distinguish between the critiques that Blake is making of his characters' inaccurate perceptions of the natural world from Blake's own inaccuracies. This distinction is sometimes difficult to make; in both the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience*, anthropomorphization of animals and elements of the landscape is rampant. Angels wander the fields of "Night," and the sky itself may be happy (as in the "Ecchoing Green"). Yet there is substantial evidence that often an omission or incorrect imagining of nature by the characters was intended in the poems, demonstrating ways in which the characters have "gone wrong" within the world of the poems. These indicators include irony (as in "The Chimney Sweeper" and "Holy Thursday"), as well as obviously and jarringly unrealistic elements appearing in the natural world (lions and tigers in the British countryside in "Night"). These difficulties signal a dissonance between either the narrator and the other people in the poem, or between the poem itself and the narrator—clear signs that some consciousness within the poem is aware that nature is being imagined incorrectly.

In several *Innocence* poems, the characters' imagined versions of nature are cautionary exemplars of imaginative elaboration gone wrong. The narrators and other characters base their imagined constructs of nature not on direct observation, but on cultural concepts of the natural world which—because those conceptions have been filtered in unsettling ways through the imaginations of other humans—bear little
resemblance to reality. In poems such as "The Chimney Sweeper" and "Holy Thursday," imagined nature is profoundly different from the natural reality of the Blakean world of *Innocence* as seen in poems such as "The Lamb": different in ways that, disturbingly, allow the imagination's vision to become a tool of abuse and oppression, productive not of joy, but of extreme misery and suffering among the oppressed.

The false pastoral heaven that ensnares the children of "The Chimney Sweeper" exemplifies the terrible harm that the process of imaginative elaboration can do when it is not based on first-hand natural experiences, and is thus susceptible to manipulation by the corrupt and fallen. In this poem, a new chimney sweep, named Tom Dacre, is being initiated into the group. As in ideal imaginative elaboration, the first hint of natural imagery (the hair on Tom's head, which "curl'd like a lambs back") enters the poem through the kind of close factual observation that Blake's narrators perform elsewhere. Tom, however, as a human in an urban environment, can scarcely be said to be a part of the natural world—the hair like a "lambs back" is an important simile, but it is cut off almost immediately, severing any connection the boy may have had to the natural world. That simile, incidentally, is a sign of the narrator's immediate impulse towards imaginative elaboration: his mind is going to work on what it sees. However, the simile is also the first indication that the process of imaginative elaboration in this poem is fundamentally flawed. The narrator's imagination connects an observed human thing to the natural world, rather than the other way around, as is customary in the *Songs of Innocence* (see "The Lamb"). The urge to form some link between nature and humanity is still there—but because no
real nature is accessible, the chimney sweep must make do with whatever "observations" his masters give him, however fictional they may be.

The perversion of the normal order of interacting with the natural world continues, as Tom falls asleep and dreams of a tragically distorted natural paradise, with an unreasonably high barrier to entry:

That thousands of sweepers Dick, Joe, Ned & Jack Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black,

And by came an Angel who had a bright key, And he open'd the coffins & set them all free. Then down a green plain leaping laughing they run And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind, They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind. And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy, He'd have God for his father & never want joy. (11-20)

In crafting the dream, Tom's imagination begins with familiar images (his fellow sweeps, and "coffins of black") and then begins introducing the fantastic with the angel—an imaginative process not unlike that which more fortunate narrators engage in elsewhere in the Songs. However, the nature depicted in "The Chimney Sweep" is, unlike that in many of the other Innocence poems, only the result of a baseless imaginative elaboration on Tom's part. The scene might appear to be an example of a reasonably realistic idyllic vista, but within the context of Tom's life, it must be considered fantastic, created by Tom's imagination as it acts upon what he knows or has been told. A real version of the "green plain" would have been inaccessible to the impoverished chimney sweep boys—either they would never have seen such a
landscape, or, if they had, it would have been many years before. If the coffins are a metaphor for the boys' soot-stained, miserable lives, the dream makes clear that these boys shall not see such a landscape again until they die and enter heaven. Given the sweeps' lack of actual contact with the natural world, coupled with indoctrination by their cruel adult masters, the chimney sweeps' imaginations work in bizarre ways, assigning cruel prerequisites to what should be, in Blake's view, a landscape available to all humans—a sign of how sad the sweeps' lives are, and of the joys that they must live without.

The fourth and fifth stanzas of "The Chimney Sweeper" underscore, unequivocally, the devastating results of imaginative elaboration gone wrong—when imaginings like Tom's are not grounded in actuality, but on the purposefully distorted "observations" of others. The truly disturbing portion of this poem begins when the angel tells Tom that "if he'd be a good boy,/He'd have God for his father & never want joy." By reinforcing a message of innocent obedience and docility (both of which, incidentally, are associated with lambs and children in other Innocence poems), the angel takes on aspects of the authority figures in Tom's life. As Galia Benziman notes in her essay on the mechanics of child neglect in Blake's work, "these are the words of adults, put into the child's mouth [and mind] as part of his ongoing exploitation, in order to render him obedient and submissive" (175). By holding the joy that Tom might gain from even his imagined nature for ransom, the angel (and therefore Tom's supervisor, who is presumably doing likewise) keeps Tom feeling

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4 In "The Chimney Sweeper" of the Songs of Experience, the little sweep does describe his early youth, in which he "was happy upon the heath"—a sign of his country birth (5).
"happy and warm" despite his wretched living conditions, as he eagerly awaits a reward that he must die to claim.

The skeptical reader (especially in Blake's day) might, of course, ask why Tom's reading of nature is necessarily incorrect—why should the chimney sweep's vision of heaven be considered flawed? An answer can be found in a comparative analysis of imagery from "The Lamb," another of the *Innocence* poems, which informs a reading of the "Chimney Sweeper" in significant ways. The contrast between the world of "The Lamb" and that of "The Chimney Sweeper" reveals the extent to which Tom has been removed from the world of *Innocence*, and is no longer one of the reliable child narrators seen elsewhere in the book of poems. Throughout the *Songs of Innocence*, and particularly in "The Lamb," Blake crafts a persistent image cluster in which lambs, children, and the Christ child are woven together into a trinity of innocence—the lamb is of the natural world, the Christ child represents the divine, and the child is of the human. In "The Lamb," these connections are made explicit with the line, "[w]e are called by his [Christ's] name" (18).

Children in the *Innocence* poems instinctively understand the relationship between the divine, themselves, and the natural world. For instance, in "The Lamb," an innocent child teaches theology to a young sheep, asking,

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
...

...
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child. (1-2, 13-16)

An initial reading of "The Lamb" might seem to support the argument that the narrator of "The Chimney Sweeper" is imagining a version of nature that accurately reflects reality: the monologue of the innocent child in "The Lamb" bears striking similarities to Tom's evangelistic speech to the other sweeps in "The Chimney Sweeper." The similarity, however, is only superficial: in "The Lamb," the child is entirely happy and living in a rural paradise, as is the lamb; by contrast, in "The Chimney Sweeper," the first stanza is indicative of the injustice of the sweeps' miserable living conditions, and the symbolism of the shaving of Tom's hair, which "curl'd like a lambs back," seals the message. The shaving of Tom's hair marks his movement away from innocence—lambs are not usually shorn when they are very young. The shaving is thus a sign of Tom's forced move into adulthood and the world of the Experience poems, his simultaneous loss of any chance at true childish innocence, and his new status as a commodity, rather than a person—the shearing of a sheep is, essentially, the harvesting of a part of that sheep, just as the children are harvested for their labor.

Once Tom enters the postlapsarian world of Experience, a combination of factors make it impossible for him to correctly envision either nature or the divine in the same way as the innocent child of "The Lamb." Tom now lacks both the innocence and the chance for factual observations of real nature that are necessary in order to form the same "correct" connection between nature and an overarching morality (like the children of "The Ecchoing Green" or "The Lamb"), and thus winds
up reinforcing the bars of his own metaphorical prison by, with the best of intentions, applying the principles of his flawed imagined nature to create a rubric for his own behavior that builds upon and incorporates the oppressive ideals of his master. Thus, Tom's vision of an imagined nature can no longer be considered either "innocent" or "correct" in the same way as the vision of the child in "The Lamb," which innocently connects Christ to both the child and the lamb. "The Lamb's" child is able to impose his own allegory on nature not only because he bases his assumptions on factual observations about the lamb (the texture of its wool, its behavior, and other factors) but also as a result of his own purity, innocence, and ability to connect the word of God directly to nature, without much interference from corrupt modern society. When Tom attempts to perform this same kind of extrapolation, he comes to the tragic conclusion that he must be docile and compliant, rather than striking out on his own to seek the real nature that could give him joy and an escape from misery.\(^5\)

In the other London-based poem of *Songs of Innocence*, "Holy Thursday," the distortions of the imaginative elaboration process seen in "The Chimney Sweep" occur on a larger, almost societal, scale. The poem is a description of charity-school children being taken to sing in St. Paul's Cathedral:

\[
\text{Twas on a Holy Thursday their innocent faces clean}  
\text{The children walking two & two in red & blue & green,}  
\text{Grey headed beadles walkd before with wands as white as snow}  
\text{Till into the high dome of Pauls they like Thames waters flow}  
\]

\(^5\) In the *Songs of Experience*, a return to nature is consistently depicted as the best way to reliably connect, once again, with the world of *Innocence*—see Chapter 2.
O what a multitude they seemd these flowers of London town
Seated in companies they sit with radiance all their own
The hum of multitudes was there but multitudes of lambs,
Thousands of little boys & girls raising their innocent hands

Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of song
Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of heaven among
Beneath them sit the aged men wise guardians of the poor
Then cherish pity; lest you drive an angel from your door

Initially, the characters of "Holy Thursday" bear some resemblance to the narrator of "The Lamb"; they are children, who, in the Blakean world of *Innocence*, should be the paragons of innate innocence (they are so identified in both lines 1 and 8), and should be able to make connections with the natural world. Despite the urban surroundings, the narrator imaginatively elaborates upon what he sees, envisioning the children as embodiments of nature (they are both "lambs" and "flowers") summoning the power of nature to create a joyous song "like a mighty wind" (9). However, the final lines of "Holy Thursday" ring with a sardonic, moralizing tone that undermines a reading of the poem as describing innocents, and demands a revised understanding of the lines that came before.

In order to understand both the manner of and the degree to which the process of imaginative elaboration is flawed in "Holy Thursday," one must examine the complex, crucial role of the narrator. Unlike "The Lamb," "Holy Thursday" is not narrated by a child; the children are described in the third person. The narrator is also unlikely to be one of the children's "guardians": as Robert Gleckner, a Blake historian, notes in "The Irony in Blake's 'Holy Thursday,'" the term "guardians of the poor" was commonly used in the poor laws of the day to denote "charity administrators;" furthermore, Blake himself took a dim view of such institutionalized
charity (414). Blake's ironic use of this term seems to place the narrator somewhere among the observers of the ceremony, rather than among the participants in the spectacle—although the ambiguity of the narrator's exact location, coupled with his moralizing tone, also opens up the possibility of a third-person omniscient narrator.

The narrator of "Holy Thursday" is thus ideally positioned to convey both the common conceit, based on incorrect observations of an entirely fabricated nature (oppressed children are seen as flowers and lambs), that the children are innocent—and that this conceit of innocence may be misplaced. Thus, the distancing between the narrator and the children allows for the reassuring (but untrue) possibility that the association between imagery of the natural world (the flowers, the river, and the mighty wind) and innocence itself might still hold true, and that the children might still be capable of uncorrupted imaginative elaboration. And yet the distance between the narrator and the children is also great enough that the narrator is able to see—and subtly comment on—the primary problem with the common perception of the children's performance: the children themselves. As Gleckner notes, these were hardly the innocent, truly joyous children that Blake depicts in, say, "The Lamb" or "The Ecchoing Green." Rather, these children were "regularly flogged, poorly fed, and annually forced to march through the streets to St. Paul's to give thanks for the 'kindnesses' they had received during the year" (Gleckner 412). As in the "The Chimney Sweeper," the final lines of "Holy Thursday" undermine the initial reading of what came before—the cause of this is a shift in the narrative voice, feeding an internal inconsistency in the poem, as Harriet Linkin points out in her essay on the language of speakers in the Songs. Linkin also concludes that the narrator's voice is
simultaneously associated with a simplistic mode, reminiscent of a fairy tale, in which problems may be easily overlooked and a moralizing, "Biblical or prophetic intonation" which encourages a disquieting "passive acceptance of the image before [the reader]" (6-7). But anyone who looks beyond the botanical and meteorological language can easily see how wrongly this language is being applied, thanks to the deep disparity between the reality of the situation and the hazy vision of innocence that viewers of the children's performance are being asked to accept.

The Cause of Cruelty

In the Songs, when the process of imaginative elaboration is completely divorced from its connection to nature—purposefully or out of indifference—the result is the oppression of innocence, the removal of the possibility of joy, and the perpetuation of cruelty. However, there are other poems, such as "Night," in which the imaginative vision becomes completely disconnected from nature, without any easily apparent cruelty or misery. What, specifically, constitutes the difference, in the world of the Songs, between a failed and overreaching (but still seemingly innocuous) imagination and one with the capacity to actually cause harm to other people? Is the difference attributable to some innate moral failing on the part of the characters, or are there environmental factors at play?

Even a casual glance at the poems of the Songs of Innocence indicates that there is a definite link between a lack of nature and immoral behavior, including cruelty to other people: both of the Innocence poems in which children suffer at the hands of adults ("The Chimney Sweeper" and "Holy Thursday") are poems in which misconstrued understandings of nature are widespread. Further consideration of the
Innocence poems reveals the two conditions which contribute to a harmful imaginative relationship with the natural world: an overabundance of people, and, more importantly, the absence of nature. Relative solitude is a small but still significant factor in the difference between a harmful and a harmless overactive imaginative elaboration—thus, when narrators are alone in nature, as in "Night," they literally can do no harm to anybody but themselves. Nature itself is impervious to harm in both the Songs of Innocence and the Songs of Experience, and thus, when a narrator or characters find themselves alone, they are utterly incapable of harming anyone, intentionally or accidentally.

However, while an individual human's solitary state may preclude harm to others, the size or density of a given human population is not the defining factor in whether that population's collective imaginative elaboration results in widespread misery: some large groups of people in the world of Innocence engage in imaginative elaboration with only positive results, while others cause severe suffering from similar actions. For example, the groups in the "Laughing Song," "The Ecchoing Green," and even the "Nurse's Song" are able, either collectively or individually, to imaginatively elaborate upon the scenes around them in ways that not only bring no harm to humans or nature, but leads to joy for themselves and others. By contrast, in "Holy Thursday," an entire population of people imposes their collectively imagined version of nature upon a small group of children, blocking out an acknowledgement of the reality of the lives these children will lead in order to take some small pleasure from their "innocent" singing.
In fact, the distinguishing factor in whether imaginative elaboration may harm its subjects is whether the setting is urban or rural: many poems (including "Laughing Song," "The Ecchoing Green," and the "Nurse's Song") which involve large groups of people take place in a rural setting, while both "The Chimney Sweeper" and "Holy Thursday," which embody the link between cruelty and mistaken imaginings, are set in London. In the "The Chimney Sweeper," the little boys, imprisoned in jobs far from the fields that they have been promised if they are "good," come to their erroneous conclusions about the world, step by step, learning from the cruel teachings of their elders; in "Holy Thursday," the poem's adult characters are blind to the fact that the "flowers of London" are not symbols of nature so much as they are children who are growing up in oppressed misery. This is a blindness that allows the adult characters to absolve themselves of a sense of either responsibility or "pity" for the children.

What is it about urban environments that causes cruelty to enter the equation? In the *Songs of Innocence*, it is not the concentration of humanity, but the *absence of nature* that is the necessary condition for cruelty. These poems show that the human imagination will elaborate upon whatever it is given as setting, context, or background; the lack of a healthy relationship with, and access to, nature, will prevent people from perceiving the problems caused by their imaginative elaboration. In Blake's version of London, nature is non-existent—the closest thing to it is the "flowers of London town," which are actually the oppressed children (5). Furthermore, in the context of the *Innocence* poems, the primary factor that maintains humans in a state of innocence is nature itself. The crucial relationship between
nature and innocence is clearly visible in "The Ecchoing Green," in which many humans of all ages are able to interact with nature as a whole, without any apparent dissent—their points of view are different, but all base their imaginings on the same landscape, and are in unanimous, if implicit, agreement about how joy is best derived from that landscape.

The most direct connection between a cruel action and a corrupt imagining of nature, then, is the imposition of a life without access to nature upon another person. By forcing the little chimney sweep into a natureless environment, the people of London force him and his fellows into the world of the Songs of Experience, in which it will be impossible for him ever to find joy in the same way that he once did. As Lawrence Buell might say, the sweep's masters are forcing him to think of nature as increasingly "other," as a distant commodity intended only for a privileged class—the "good boy[s]" of the poem. Thus, sadly, the return to joy that is central to the Songs of Experience is available only to those who are able to enter in nature once again (a position which, of course, excludes chimney sweeps)—and, moreover, the chimney sweep comes to believe that there is no hope of rebellion to change his sad position.

**Problematic Imaginative Elaboration: Real Nature, Overreaching Imagination**

While imaginative elaboration that occurs in the absence of nature is clearly linked to both intentional and unintentional cruelty by humans to other humans, as well as to the actual misery that stems from that cruelty, nature in the Blakean world does not prevent imaginative elaboration from going awry. In fact, imaginative behaviors which result in misery—or a failure to recognize another's misery—in an urban environment may appear to be without consequence in a rural environment. In
the green hills of such poems as "Night," the narrators are isolated, rather than
immersed in human society—they are literally unable to cause direct harm to others.
Nevertheless, imaginative elaboration that occurs without adequate grounding in
observations of actual nature—as can clearly be seen in "Night"—results in an
entirely fabricated imaginary vision of nature. This imaginary nature may involve less
serious consequences than the imaginative elaboration of such poems as "Holy
Thursday" or "The Chimney Sweep"—but an imaginative vision that becomes
entirely disconnected from nature, even if initially grounded in it, is nonetheless
problematic.

In "Night," the process of imaginative elaboration is, in contrast to "The
Chimney Sweeper," initially rooted in the narrator's personal observations of reality,
but gradually becomes increasingly distant from the narrator's original experiences.
Instead of coming to a satisfactory, reasonable equilibrium between actual nature and
imagined elements, the narrator's imagination departs so completely from his initial
observations that his imagined vision of nature become unlike anything in reality.
Eventually, the narrator slips into the kind of blindness to the real world that, in "Holy
Thursday" and "The Chimney Sweeper," is associated with misery and cruelty. In his
blissful blindness, the narrator of "Night" notices neither what is missing from his
version of the imagined landscape, nor the disturbing paradoxes and parallels to the
problematic structures of human dominance that result in the cruelty of his final,
futile vision.

In the first lines of "Night," the narrator initially appears to be engaging in an
ideal imaginative elaboration: he observes nature directly and begins to gently
elaborate upon it in his own mind. Here, as in most of the other Songs of Innocence, the landscape of the poem and of the accompanying illustration (see Fig. 1, p. 80) is a domesticated environment, largely free of predators and other things which might injure humans or their livestock:6

The sun descending in the west,
The evening star does shine,
The birds are silent in their nest,
And I must seek for mine,
The moon like a flower,
In heavens high bower;
With silent delight,
Sits and smiles on the night. (1-8)

For a time, the narrator is able to observe simply, with the bare minimum of imaginative elaboration on the landscape, as do so many other successful narrators who achieve joy through imaginative elaboration. Even in lines 5-8, when the narrator does employ both metaphor and personification to describe "the moon like a flower,/In heavens high bower," the embellishments are still based entirely on what the narrator has seen with his own eyes. In fact, the comparison of the moon to a "flower" actually serves to link the moon (a celestial rather than earthly object) back to the earthly natural world.

In the second stanza of "Night," the narrator introduces supernatural elements—the angels—to the landscape, using imaginative elaboration. However, the imaginings are still fairly tame, and the new elements are physically linked to the landscape: the feet of the angels move on the grass where the "lambs have nibbled" (11-12). Although the angels are completely fictional, their actions do not

6 With the exception, of course, of the lion crouched in the lower right-hand corner of the illustration—but he, as the poem later proves, is entirely imaginary, like the angel.
significantly alter the setting, since they merely accelerate processes which were already occurring in the actual version of nature: the gentle angels "[u]nseen...pour blessing,/And joy without ceasing,/On each bud and blossom,/And each sleeping bosom," bringing on the comfortable sleep that the animals were already seeking before the angels' entrance into the landscape (13-16).

So long as the imagined landscape remains firmly linked to the real, rural setting, all is well. However, as "Night" proceeds, an increasing number of supernatural and otherwise incongruous elements appear, and as a direct result, the logic of the piece becomes internally inconsistent. This is the genesis of the narrator's problems: the landscape that he perceives becomes increasingly imaginary, without further reference to real nature—and, simultaneously, the narrator's grasp on what is real and what is imaginary begins to slip. The narrator notices neither what is missing from his version of the imagined landscape, nor what elements of that landscape are utterly improbable. For example, when the narrator's imaginings begin to fundamentally reconstruct the imagined setting, turning the countryside into wilderness, a serious paradox results. Beginning with line 25, the narrator begins "rewilding" the pastoral landscape in his imagination, adding fictional predators and transforming the scene of a peaceful flock of sheep roaming freely and safely into a scene of destruction and carnage. Straying far from his initial observations of evening fields, the narrator describes "wolves and tygers [that] howl for prey" (25). Both

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7 Rewilding is a concept originally defined and popularized by the conservationist Dave Foreman, in 1990.
8 The imaginary nature of the lions, wolves, and tigers is certain. First and foremost, the tigers and wolves that the narrator imagines preying upon the sheep are completely out of place in the English countryside that the poem initially appears to
wolves and tigers are deeply out of place in the landscape that the narrator describes—not only would they never actually appear in the hills of England, but their savage destruction of the gentle sheep brings a disturbing turn to this otherwise peaceable landscape.

Having imagined this paradoxical landscape—a prelapsarian meadow that has been invaded by vicious, postlapsarian predators—the narrator faces a problem that requires greater, more convoluted imaginings to resolve. The real world that the narrator initially wanders through—the fields and groves of line 9—does not suggest even the possibility of danger; its animals fall asleep peacefully and without fear. However, the predators that the narrator imagines are definitively postlapsarian—these lions would far rather eat lambs than lie down with them. If the narrator is to maintain his ideal imagined vision of an innocent world in which angels keep their charges from harm, and in which cruelty and violence are distant threats, then the violence committed by the predators cannot exist, except as an allegorical device that represents the cruelty of the fallen world that humanity now lives in.

The imaginative power of Blake's narrators, however, is not unlimited—and for the narrator of "Night," the vision of the paradoxical predators becomes untenable. Instead of making more observations of the real natural world to supplement and enrich his imagined nature, the narrator of "Night" resolves his difficulty by moving the narrative's location to the pastoral heaven that he envisions as awaiting both his

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be taking place in—at no point have wild tigers lived in England, and by the 1700s, wolves had been almost completely exterminated from the island. In the land that he, his narrators, and (presumably) his readers could observe, such predators simply did not exist.
imagined predators and their prey—the actual sheep of the landscape in the opening lines—after their deaths.

In this imagined heaven, the relationship of predator to profoundly changes—a signal of the final severing of the already tenuous connection between the poem’s imaginative world and the actual natural landscape in which the poem begins. While the narrator’s complex imaginative elaboration does resolve the paradox of predators in the world of *Innocence*, the resolution is obtained at the cost of departing entirely from reality. In this pastoral heaven, the rules for how natural elements operate change: the predators, represented by the lion, are no longer bound by their carnivorous urges. They repent of their actions: free of the need to kill to eat, the lion is given the ability to see, in a very human-like way, the damage he has done by killing the sheep. In a moment of deep emotion (reminiscent of the tenderness that the old folk feel towards the laughing children in "The Ecchoing Green,") the lion guards the little lambs as they bleat in their sheepfold.

And yet, despite this sharp break from reality, all is not well in the narrator’s heaven: if all danger has been removed, and if the lambs are truly safe, why is a sheepfold (and, for that matter, a lion to guard it) still necessary—especially when there is clearly nothing keeping the (imaginary) predators from the sheep in reality? One might argue the sheepfold is a holdover from the real world—an object inspired by something that the narrator has seen in person recently—and yet no fold is mentioned in the first half of the poem. Indeed, the flocks of sheep in the real world

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9 The "fold" is not mentioned until line 36, which is set in Heaven—and while it would have been customary for sheep to have been gathered in a fold at night, its presence in reality is never explicitly mentioned—an odd omission for a supposedly observant narrator.
"took delight" in "green fields and happy groves," and there is no sign that they are not wandering freely (9-10). Furthermore, one might expect that in this heaven, where the lion is a benevolent, repentant ex-carnivore, the lambs might react positively to his presence. However, when then the lion walks near, the lambs still make "tender cries"—as if, perhaps, they are still frightened of his presence (35). A further indication that something is not quite right is that, unlike the lion, who speaks with a very human voice, the only sounds the sheep make is "bleating" (41). These central characters—the innocents of the poem, who might be awarded special rewards in heaven—are as dumb as they are on Earth, lacking the human consciousness and voice that the lion displays so clearly.

The astute reader is left with nagging doubts: given that more egregious examples of imaginative failure (in "The Chimney Sweeper" and "Holy Thursday") actually cause physical harm, could the disturbing flaws in "Night's" narrator's imagined pastoral heaven be a sign that his imaginings are not really harmless, at least to himself?

Unfortunately, because "Night" is written from a firmly first-person perspective, it is difficult to say whether, if the narrator were somehow causing harm to himself or to other humans, this harm would even appear in the poem. Yet, regardless of whether the narrator is harming anyone in the moment of the poem, blindness to one's own mistakes is a consistent and troubling problem in the *Songs of Innocence*. A misguided, oblivious narrator is also manifest in (and central to) the darker *Innocence* poems. For example, in "Holy Thursday," the spectators of the children's performance perpetuate society's baseless assumptions about how nature
works without, apparently, being cognizant of the cruel situation that the children are in—a situation which those very spectators are perpetuating by enjoying the children's performance.

In fact, the similarities between the narrator of "Night" and the spectators of "Holy Thursday" are even more striking when the characters in the two respective poems—and the voices they are given—are considered. Although Blake draws explicit connections between lambs and children in other poems, there is a less visible (but still important) connection here as well: in "Holy Thursday," the children are very much like the lambs of "Night:" they make pleasing sounds, but have no language of their own—and in both cases the reader is not privy to the perspectives of the innocent as he or she is to that of other, more powerful characters, such as the lion and the narrator of "Night" and the "wise guardians of the poor" of "Holy Thursday."

The parallels between the (perhaps distressed) cries of the lambs in "Night" and the songs of the orphans in "Holy Thursday" are reinforced by the corresponding strong parallels between adults' imaginative behaviors—in the latter poem, any sense of distress on the part of the children is ignored or glossed over by adults—and those of the lion of "Night." Although the lion weeps, he also makes the assumption that all is well now that he is repentant. He observes, but does not respond to or attempt to interpret, the troubled sounds made by the lambs. As the being with the most power (both in heaven and on the imaginatively-enhanced earth), the lion steals the reader's attention away from the less fortunate—even in the illustration for "Night," the lion can be found crouching at the lower right-hand corner of the first plate (see Fig. 1, p. 80) but not a single lamb is present.
While the narrator's imaginings in "Night" may seem harmless when the poem is considered in isolation, in the context of the *Songs of Innocence* as a whole, the danger of his situation becomes clear: while he may not be blind to the suffering of any real person or creature on his nighttime rambles, the thematic similarities to other, very similar forms of imaginings that do cause cruelty are too significant to ignore. In fact, in his vision, the narrator has mirrored or reproduced, among the animals of his pastoral heaven, the same troubling societal relationships that result not only in an absence of joy, but in actual cruelty and misery among the children of "Holy Thursday" and "The Chimney Sweeper."

Even if no direct harm is done to other humans or creatures when a character's imagination runs wild (as is likely in "Night," which takes place in an isolated location) the question of joy—and the lack thereof—remains. Other poems in *Innocence*, such as "The Ecchoing Green," and the "Laughing Song," depict humans receiving exuberant joy from their surroundings—and yet the "Night" narrator, despite being out in a countryside very similar to that in "The Ecchoing Green," receives more reassurance and contentment than actual joy. The poem's end does hold glory, but the glory is experienced by the imaginary lion, not by the narrator himself, and that glory is heavily tempered with redemptive melancholy—the lion writes that he will "[g]rase after [the lamb] and weep" (44). One could argue that the lion is a mental extension of the narrator—a representation, perhaps, of some urge or thought that the narrator regrets—but even if this is the case, the narrator's end goal is less exultingly joyful than it is contentedly bittersweet. It is difficult to imagine that this
conclusion, however certain it feels to the narrator of "Night," is as desirable as the laughter-filled joyous life of "The Echoing Green."

Clearly, a central message of the Songs Of Innocence and of Experience is that it is better not to allow one's imagined version of nature to diverge greatly from reality. The cruelty that may result from blind or disconnected imagination is, in both "Holy Thursday" and "The Chimney Sweeper," dangerous, whether that cruelty stems from purposeful manipulation or inadvertent indoctrination by an entire society. Furthermore, the very act of fleeing into an overly-imagined world may also be problematic if conducted carelessly, leading to an absence of otherwise-accessible joy, and possibly even to blindness to societal structures of oppression.
Chapter 2: The Songs of Experience

William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* was originally published in 1789, followed by the *Songs of Experience* in 1794. As in the *Songs of Innocence*, nature is a central concern of the *Songs of Experience* poems, which, although much darker and more cynical than the joyous, nursery-rhyme-like poems of *Innocence*, extend and expound upon Blake's critique of society and his rubric for finding joy through imaginative interaction with the natural world. The *Songs of Innocence* assert that, as humans grow physically and mentally, their innocent relationship with nature can be maintained. 10 In stark contrast, the poems in the *Songs of Experience* explore the degree to which humankind's fall from innocence has caused a disconnect from nature: humanity has become engrossed in itself, is corrupted by sin, and is incapable of seeing nature for what it really is. As a result, humans can no longer derive joy from nature as they did in the *Songs of Innocence*. Yet hope remains: just as the *Innocence* poems offer a vision of imaginative elaboration as a way to obtain joy, the *Experience* poems describe another possibility by which humans can leave their corrupted surroundings and pursue the joy that still can be found in the wilderness. Only there, where unpredictability and danger reign, can those humans successfully look at nature and see it for what it truly is, correcting their own imagined versions of that nature and coming into harmony, even unity, with the natural world even greater than that attainable in the *Innocence* poems.

10 See my analysis of *Innocence*'s "Holy Thursday" and "The Chimney Sweeper" in Chapter 1 for two exceptions.
The term I use for the process of obtaining joy in the world of *Experience* is a phrase coined by Harold Bloom in an essay collected in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Songs of Innocence and of Experience*: "imaginative redemption." Bloom uses this phrase to describe the process in Blake's poems by which characters are able to correct their process of imagination in order to be redeemed for their sins. The cultivation of a healthy imagination is a crucial element of Blake's poetry, in which a vibrant, healthy imagination is one of the most important signs of being a good person (as Bloom explains it, of being closer to the angels). Conversely, dullness leads to a lack of empathy and, therefore, cruelty to others. In my view, Bloom's concept of imaginative redemption describes a process akin to that on display in the *Songs of Experience*; however, an ecocritical reading of the *Songs* reveals that, in *Experience*, imaginative redemption occurs almost exclusively in situations in which humans are seeking help from nature. As a result, my understanding of imaginative redemption differs from and is less expansive than Bloom's. Furthermore, as I argue later in this chapter, a return to nature (and a subsequent harmony with nature) is a crucial part of the redemptive process—a fact that Bloom fails to note in his emphasis on fitting imaginative redemption into his vision of the Blakean mythos.

There is a strong sense of disconnection between the characters of *Experience* and the natural world that surrounds them: there is little joy for them in the green fields surrounding their squalid cities, and the forests beyond are filled with savage, dangerous beasts. Yet for all these poems' darkness, the inhabitants of Blake's world of experience are not beyond salvation—a salvation enabled by the imaginative
redemption that is possible in nature. The natural world has not been wholly destroyed in parallel with the fall of humans; in fact, the natural world still exists in an untouched, wild state outside of the sphere of human influence, ready to receive and redeem those who seek it out (or who stumble upon it by accident).

While the *Songs of Experience*’s untouched natural world offers the possibility of imaginative redemption, humanity’s tendency to corrupt the nature it touches complicates those same humans' attempts to return to nature for guidance. The world of *Experience* is a fallen world, far different from that of the *Innocence* poems, and even the occasional human habitation of (and interaction with) the rural and pastoral landscapes so common in *Innocence* is sufficient to prevent humans from feeling joy in them. In order to find the redemption that leads to bliss (and, simultaneously, a healthy, harmonious relationship with the natural world), characters encounter the most untouched, wild places that they can find. The wildest of forests and deserts, unsullied by corrupting human influence, still hold wellsprings of joy. This is not the joy of a truly innocent child—rather, it is closer to the typical Romantic concept of the sublime, full of awe and terror as well as bliss.

Blake's version of imaginative redemption bears many similarities to the concept of the sublime found in the works of other Romantic poets (most prominently Wordsworth). This drive to rejoin the natural world in order to find something greater than one's self is another common Romantic theme. As Jonathan Bate notes in his book on *Romantic Ecology*, "if the French Revolution was one great root of Romanticism, then what used to be called 'the return to nature'... was surely the other." (6) Many of the Romantic poets left their urban homes, however temporarily,
to seek out the peace of more secluded, natural environments. There, many of them felt, they could experience the emotions that eluded them elsewhere. Nevertheless, significant differences also exist between Blake's experiences and those of most Romantic poets. Most significantly, Blake does not view nature as an untouchable connection to the distant divine. Rather, in *Experience*, humans are able, through imaginative redemption, to not only connect with, but also become a part of nature. Thus, Blake's understanding of nature, as revealed in *Experience*, is, in some ways, closer to modern conceptions of ecology and conservation biology than to that of his Romantic contemporaries; he does not see nature as necessarily "other," but rather as a greater whole that humans should seek to be embraced by, and to be a part of.

That said, the necessity for Blake's characters to seek out wild places in order to find redemption and joy is problematic in its implications for human relationships with (and impact on) nature: Blake's work never acknowledges the harm that humans may cause to nature. Instead, his poetry dwells only on the merging of humans and nature that results from a successful imaginative redemption and assumes that, once humans completely understand the natural world, they can become one with it. Despite the capacity for harm to other humans that Blake's characters consistently demonstrate, this act of merging with the natural world allows them to understand what is harmful and what is helpful, both to themselves and to other elements of nature, including lions and tigers. Thus, in *Experience*, the act of approaching nature can never lead to harm to it.
The Fall of Humans and the Continued Purity of Nature

In order to correct the false imaginings of nature that make redemption impossible, the men and women of *Experience* must turn to the wilderness and observe it. These observations, when conducted with an open mind, lead to redemption because, despite humanity's fallen state in the *Songs of Experience*, nature itself has remained uncorrupted by humankind's sins. Because the humans of *Experience* exist in a fallen state, their cities, where humanity is concentrated, are depicted as centers of human misery and misconstrued versions of nature. Escape from those human-filled surroundings is the only way to get a clear view of how the natural world really operates. However, nature itself has remained unaffected by humanity's downfall: since the blindness of humans whose imaginative elaboration has run wild (as depicted in the *Innocence* poems) is the primary source of the corruption of the city, in places where there are no humans, there can be no false ideas of how nature works. Interestingly, this idea is contrary to Robert M. Baine's conclusion in *The Scattered Portions: Blake's Biological Symbolism*, a work which covers Blake's entire oeuvre. Baine asserts that, in order for a harmonious reunion between humans and nature to occur, it is nature that must return to the humans. Kevin Hutchings, the renowned Blakean ecocritic, arguing much the same theory, cites Blake's cosmology as "unabashedly anthropocentric," drawing on Blake's concept of the giant Albion, the "human form divine," in which all elements of the cosmos are united (67). While this argument undoubtedly holds some validity when Blake's works are considered as a whole, it is a poor fit for the relationship of humans and nature depicted in the *Songs of Experience*. In fact, quite the opposite relationship is on display in *Experience*: the poems do not show nature returning to humans as
Baine and Hutchings suggest. Rather, it is humans that leave human society and approach nature in a state of sadness or fearful penitence. Those who approach nature in this way eventually become a part of a larger whole—one might almost call it a larger ecosystem—once again, for nature has not been destroyed in mankind's fall from innocence, but has merely become inaccessible to all but the repentant. This is not the same concept as the aforementioned Albion; although the idea of universal union and harmony in one force is the same, this force is explicitly the antithesis of the fallen human. Instead, the divine is present in nature—everything that is not of human make, and to which humans must reach out in their hour of need. Out beyond the edges of the cities and the green pastoral hills, the wilderness remains unchanged, primal in its untouched state—humanity only perceives it as "chained" or "locked away" because our way of looking at it has been soured.

The first two of the poems in the *Experience* collection—the "Introduction" and "Earth's Answer"—establish the crucial importance of the relationship between humans and nature, how mankind has misconstrued this relationship, and what must be done to remedy the disconnect between the two. In the "Introduction," which Blake consistently placed as the first poem in the *Songs of Experience*, the character of the Bard, who serves as a kind of mythical avatar of Blake himself, explains how mankind believes nature to have vanished with the fall. The Bard laments the loss of "Earth" and compares the life of joy and innocence that he knows existed before the Fall with the world now:
Calling the lapsed Soul
And weeping in the evening dew:
That might controll
The starry pole:
And fallen fallen light renew!

O Earth O Earth return!
Arise from out the dewy grass;
Night is worn,
And the morn
Rises from the slumberous mass. (6-15)

In this passage, Earth's absence is explicitly linked with Blake's concept of the lapsed human soul. It should be noted that "Earth" represents more than a simple personification of nature—after all, despite her disappearance, natural elements still exist for the Bard (note the "evening dew and the "dewy grass"). Thus, this Earth is more of an abstract concept—she is the connection between humans and the natural world, rather than physical elements of nature itself. The Bard laments humanity's lot—they have fallen into sin, and, simultaneously, Earth has fled. Furthermore, the Bard also laments Earth's absence, linking it with the human condition when he cries out emphatically (note the exclamation point) that the world of humans is weary (or "worn") of existing in a fallen state (the "night"), and wishes to return to a time of innocence and light (the "morn"). As explored later in this chapter, in such poems as "Holy Thursday and "The Little Girl Found," a lack of interaction with nature is one of the central hallmarks of mankind's fall from innocence in the Experience poems—and, therefore, Earth's absence in the "Introduction" serves to immediately establish the importance of human-nature interactions.

The idea that the Earth has fled from humans, however, is only the Bard's perspective—and, as the next poem, "Earth's Reply" (which is in dialogue with the
"Introduction") shows, this perspective is inaccurate. Instead, humans have excluded *themselves* from nature through Adam and Eve's original sin, followed by the inability of the rest of humanity to redeem themselves. In "Earth's Answer," Earth herself attempts to clarify the situation:

Prison'd on watry shore  
Starry Jealousy does keep my den  
Cold and hoar  
Weeping o'er  
I hear the Father of the ancient men

Selfish father of men  
Cruel jealous selfish fear  
Can delight  
Chain'd in night  
The virgins of youth and morning bear. (6-15)

In this passage, the cause of Earth's apparent absence is explicitly explained. The sin of Adam (the "Father of the ancient men") and all of the sin that stems from that original sin (including "Jealousy," cruelty, and "fear") have caused the imprisonment of Earth (and therefore of all light and joy) and kept her in chains, bound and inaccessible to mankind. Yet the poem also offers a clear solution to the problem of inaccessibility in its final stanza, when Earth cries out:

Break this heavy chain,  
That does freeze my bones around  
Selfish! vain!  
Eternal bane!  
That free Love with bondage bound. (16-20)

This last stanza offers the possibility of redemption through the abolishment of human selfishness, vanity, and other sins of the ego. This redemption requires true repentance and a change of behavior on the part of humankind as a whole (or possibly on the part of individuals; the poem is ambiguous), a penitence that will undo the sins of Adam. Moreover, until that penitence is achieved, nature will remain inaccessible.
Yet Earth urges the Bard (and perhaps, by extension, the reader) to "[b]reak this heavy chain," thus allowing Earth to come forth and bring the return of joy once again.

**Disconnection from Nature: Urban and Rural landscapes**

In the *Songs of Experience*, cities are persistently presented as centers of human corruption and iniquity—places where it is extremely difficult to gain and maintain an accurate imagined version of how the natural world works. While the *Innocence* poems depict the city as a place where imagination can easily go astray, or where visions of nature can be based on anything but factual information (see my analysis of "Holy Thursday" and "The Chimney Sweeper"), the city as portrayed in *Experience* is a far fouler place, full of pestilence and selfish cruelty, where "Every blackning Church appalls,/And the hapless Soldiers sigh/Runs in blood down Palace walls" (*London* 10-12). Clearly, the need to leave the city in order to get back in touch with the reality of nature is even greater in *Experience* than in *Innocence*.

Moreover, the rural landscape which provided such joys in *Innocence* no longer suffices to provide the spiritual fulfillment that pilgrims to nature might seek. The cities' corruption also has a significant spillover effect to the countryside, dampening its beauty beneath a pall of human cruelty and manipulation—a phenomenon most visible in "Holy Thursday." This corruption prevents the countryside from giving human visitors the same kind of joy as in the *Innocence* poems. In *Innocence*, groups of people could enjoy the pastoral landscape together (as in "The Ecchoing Green," the "Nurse's Song," the "Laughing Song," and others) as a
group—but in those landscapes, there was never a concern that they were not acting in each others' best interests. Even when there were distinct differences between group members (between the children and the nurse in the "Nurse's Song," for example), these differences were rarely the cause of contention—discussions were had, compromises were found, and everybody went home content.

The world of Experience, by contrast, is clearly one in which humans often act against each other—and this contention bleeds over into interactions which humans have in rural settings, even those which are apparently bountiful and beautiful. For example, in the poem "Holy Thursday," the countryside is described as "rich and fruitful," and yet, in an apparent contradiction, it is also a place where children suffer:

...their sun does never shine.  
And their fields are bleak & bare.  
And their ways are fill'd with thorns  
It is eternal winter there. (9-12)

The illustration accompanying "Holy Thursday" depicts children laid out, naked and dead or dying, in a landscape that is still verdant (see Fig. 2, p. 81). The hills are covered in grass, the sun is shining, and a river flows in the background. The leafless tree stretching over the dead child is the only sign that it might be winter, or that any aspect of nature might not be producing to its fullest. This is an exemplary illustration of the Experience poems' consistent portrayal of the intact nature of the natural world, coupled with humanity's downfall: the land itself remains fully able to produce food, but children still suffer in it, both because of physical harm that others are inflicting upon them (the "cold and usurious hand") and because people perceive or imagine the landscape to be much less fruitful than it actually is. Because humanity, as a
collective, believes the land to be "filled with thorns," even though no such plants appear in the illustration, the humans are unable to make use of the land's potential bounty. The final stanza's assertion (that "[b]abe can never hunger" where the sun shines and the rain falls) reinforces the depth of humanity's misperception of nature. Obviously, sunshine and rain regularly occur all over England, yet in the poem's world, there is also widespread misery. It is important to recognize that this poem is strongly reminiscent of a nursery rhyme—note the addressing of the poem to children and the repetition of line structures ("And their sun does never shine/And their fields are bleak & bare./And their ways are fill'd with thorns" [9-11]).

These lines recall certain poems of the Songs of Innocence, such as "The Chimney Sweeper," in which children are encouraged to remain in lives of blind poverty, unaware of the full extent or import of their own misery, thanks to the manipulation of their perceptions of nature by their elders. Thus, the final stanza of this "Holy Thursday" holds a double meaning: either the final stanza is merely a hollow repetition of a false promise of prosperity, similar to the conclusion of Innocence's "The Chimney Sweeper," or the poem's narrator is legitimately lamenting the human sin that keeps innocent children from living joyfully and healthily amongst England's green fields. Both are equally valid—and equally tragic—readings of the final lines, for both come to the conclusion that in the world of experience, there are few chances for starving children to escape into the world of innocence that they deserve.
Reconnection with Nature: The Wilderness and Imaginative Redemption

Since the rural has become a place of strife and contention in the *Songs of Experience* (despite the fact that the landscape itself is essentially unchanged), if humans wish to experience similar simple joys to those of the *Innocence* poems, they must flee still farther from centers of human habitation, into the wilderness itself, in order to experience imaginative redemption. It is absolutely clear that redemption is necessary in Blake's world, if his characters ever want to experience joy again—but how is that redemption to come about, and what is the end result of the process?

"Imaginative redemption," as I call it (building on Harold Bloom's original concept), is not unlike the "imaginative elaboration" seen in the *Songs of Innocence*; however, it requires an escape from the corrupting influence of humankind and a correction of existing thoughts about nature (rather than the generation of entirely new thought), and ultimately leads to a relationship with nature that is even more profound and fulfilling than the simple joyful harmony of the *Innocence* poems—a relationship in which humans may even become one with nature, eliminating all distinctions between themselves and the wilderness and living alongside lions and tigers without fear.

The wilderness, as a concept, is nearly absent from the *Songs of Innocence*; every single poem in the book contains at least some human presence, whether in the form of a narrator or a person wandering through an illustrated landscape. In fact, most commonly, these poems and their illustrations contain multiple people. In marked contrast to the *Innocence* poems, three of the *Experience* poems contain no humans at all, either in their illustrations or the text ("The Tyger," "The Clod & the Pebble" and "The Lilly"). Furthermore, there are several poems in which humans appear only by inference. "The Sick Rose," for example, contains a great deal of
personification, an implied human narrator, as well as several humanoid sprites frolicking around the rose blossom in the poem's illustration. This is a significant difference: since the lands in which humans are supposed to live in harmony with nature are perceived to have been corrupted by that humanity, the wilderness *needs* to exist if the few penitent humans are ever to escape from their fellow men, since the wilderness is the only place where humans may still perceive the redemptive qualities of nature.

It is important to note that Blake's wilderness is defined not only by the absence of humanity, but also by its unpredictable beauty and power. Both forces are distinctly absent from *Innocence*'s rural landscape, which much more closely approaches the classical pastoral. For instance, "The Tyger" famously depicts the wilderness—the "forests of the night"—as a place of chaotic power, where the divine becomes truly incomprehensible (2). Fear, potentially lethal danger, and unpredictability exists here (in the form of the tiger itself), yet this is the same chaotic power that created the gentle lamb—and therefore, by extension, the redeeming power of Christ.

The experiences which people may have in the fearsome wilderness of "The Tyger" and other poems—experiences which may induce awe, fear, and recognition of splendid beauty all at once—are remarkably similar to the Romantic concept of the sublime. The wilderness requires great travail to reach, but once there, humans may connect with nature by correcting their own misconceptions of how nature works by really looking at the wild landscape and allowing it to make an impression on them. Because the wilderness both lacks humans (and, therefore, human corruption) and
also constitutes a perfect place to view the work of the divine on display, the wilderness is able to offer what the defiled countryside cannot: a window into a world of "more-than-Innocence," to which humans may retreat in order to correctly revise their ideas of nature and how it truly works.

"The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found" are a pair of poems which together show the entire sequence of events in imaginative redemption from start to finish—intriguingly, they also offer a solution to the problem of how humans may go to the wilderness for redemption without being harmed by its many dangers. Many critics interpret these poems as the tale of a young girl's sexual awakening as she transitions from the world of youthful innocence to mature experience. There is a great deal of evidence for variations on this reading: in the course of the poem, the protagonist (a little girl named Lyca) falls asleep and is stripped of her clothes and carried off by a kingly male lion, whom the critic Gavel Lindop describes as a "male spirit and a guardian," with whom Lyca is destined for "sexual union" (39). In the poem's accompanying illustration, people sprawl, naked, amongst lions, while virile trees twist together up the right-hand side of the final print (see Fig. 3, p. 82). This transformation is generally seen as positive—although the Blakean world of experience is often filled with suffering and misery, it is possible to enter into the world of Experience without these side effects.

Despite the predominance of the "sexual awakening" interpretation, there is an alternative, almost opposite reading of "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl

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11 Such critics include Gavel Lindop ("Blake: 'The Little Girl Lost' and 'The Little Girl Found') Thomas Connolly ("Little Girl Lost,' 'Little Girl Found': Blake's reversal of the Innocence-Experience Pattern") and Zachary Leader (Reading Blake's Songs).
“The Little Girl Lost,” when considered alone, is a poor example of the redemption that the Songs of Experience upholds—in keeping with its innocent subject, it shows no great, difficult transformative process. Lyca gracefully moves from her human life to a life amongst wild beasts, experiencing no emotional trauma—despite the presence of wild beasts, Lyca's greatest concern is for the emotions of her parents. However, "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found" were written as a pair, and should be considered as a single unit of art. Together, the two poems excellently illustrate the kind of imaginative redemption which the Songs

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12 The poems were moved when the Songs of Experience was first printed; all prior printings of the Songs of Innocence had "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found" included therein.

13 Lindup, in particular, takes this approach.
of Experience declares to be possible. "The Little Girl Lost" demonstrates what happens when an innocent girl (albeit one who lives in the world of experience) who needs no redemption, wanders out into the natural world. The process of becoming one with nature is obviously going to be different for Lyca than for her more experienced parents—and her easy return to nature sets the stage for showing the much more arduous process that her parents must go through.

Although "The Little Girl Lost" is primarily about Lyca's journey, it begins with several lines that foreshadow the imaginative redemption that her parents receive in "The Little Girl Found" The first two stanzas contain a prophetic reassurance that human redemption from corruption and the corresponding disconnection from nature—that is, imaginative redemption—is not only possible, but inevitable on a grand scale:

In futurity
I prophetic see,
That the earth from sleep,
(Grave the sentence deep)

Shall arise and seek
For her maker meek:
And the desart wild
Become a garden mild. (1-8)

These opening stanzas strongly echo the "Introduction" and "Earth's Reply": the "earth" here can be read as a personification of the planet itself, but it can also convincingly be read as encompassing all people. The latter interpretation is further validated by the next line, "Grave the sentence deep," which has another double meaning: it can either be read as "the profoundly important sentence, given to earth, is long and hard," or, with the right punctuation, it could be read as "Grave: the
sentence deep" (humankind is doomed to die as punishment for original sin). Given
that the text supports this dual reading, earth's rising from sleep acts as a metaphor for
mankind's quest to mend its sinful ways. Lines 7-8 indicate that the earth seems to
simultaneously revive with the human world—an intriguing and compelling shift that
demonstrates the narrator's conviction that total redemption is possible in the poem.
Nature, in Blake's poems, does not change as a rule—rather, humanity's perceptions
are what changes, and it is thus reasonable to conclude that the change in nature is
coming from a shift in how mankind perceives it, not from any actual physical
changes in the landscape. If (as discussed later in this chapter) humanity is able to
become one with nature through imaginative redemption, such a mass redemption
would simultaneously cause a mass shift in perspective that allowed humanity to see
the wilderness in a more friendly light—thus, one might read the line as "become as a
garden mild," an interpretation with Edenic implications of safety, peace, and
harmony among all men and creatures.

The poem then progresses to the story of a human individual, the little girl
named Lyca, who, like the earth, also rises to seek for something—the "wild birds'
song." She is presented as not only a lover of nature, but as one who actively seeks it
out—something which, in the *Innocence* poems, was generally presented as an
admirable pastime which usually leads to joy. However, as a resident of the world of
*Experience*, Lyca instinctively seeks out more than the pastoral—the birds' song is
"wild," and she must travel to the desert to find them. Lyca, as a paragon of
innocence (akin to the little boy in "The Lamb" of *Innocence*), is completely at home
in the wilderness. She does not fear for her own safety, even in the "desart wild,"
where the night is described as "frowning, frowning," and where ferocious cats roam free—the ground she sleeps on is "hallowed," possibly sanctified by her innocent presence. Lyca's only worries stem not from her own situation, but from the sorrow that her parents must be undergoing. If they did not sorrow for her, then Lyca herself would sleep well:

    Do father, mother weep,—
    "Where can Lyca sleep".

    Lost in desart wild
    Is your little child.
    How can Lyca sleep,
    If her mother weep.

    If her heart does ake,
    Then let Lyca wake;
    If my mother sleep,
    Lyca shall not weep. (18-28)

Lyca, as a representation of innocence in a world of experience, needs no imaginative redemption to rejoin nature—but this is not the case for her parents, who vividly demonstrate the series of events involved in imaginative redemption through the course of their search for their daughter. Unlike Lyca, her parents hold perspectives of the natural world that have grown skewed through long years living among other humans. They weep for their daughter's imagined predicament, without any solid proof that she is alive or dead:

    Tired and woe-begone,
    Hoarse with making moan:
    Arm in arm seven days,
    They trac'd the desart ways.
Seven nights they sleep,
Among shadows deep:
And dream they see their child
Starv'd in desart wild.

Pale thro' pathless ways
The fancied image strays,
Famish'd, weeping, weak
With hollow piteous shriek (5-16)

Lyca's parents have committed the Blakean sin of allowing their imaginations to run
wild, without basis in reality—just as the narrator of "Night" did. Lyca's parents
"dream they see their child/Starv'd in desart wild," and then proceed to take an image
that they themselves have generated and turn it into a full-blown "fancied image,"
which wanders through the real-life desert, leading the parents on with false fears.
The fear that this image is real is what causes them to be miserable, "[t]ired and woe-
begone," instead of merely sad or wistful as Lyca herself is.

The similarities and differences between the descriptions of the landscapes in
the Lyca-centered ("The Little Girl Lost") and the parent-centered ("The Little Girl
Found") poems further illuminate the wide gap between Lyca's perception of the
wilderness and that of her parents. Admittedly, the depictions of the landscape are
almost identical in the two poems: the landscape is a "desart wild" in both. Beyond
that, however, things change: the night is only described as "frowning" in "The Little
Girl Lost." Note that Lyca herself is not the one describing the night this way—the
narrator is somebody else, who looks at the desert from a non-innocent perspective.
Lyca herself does not appear to feel threatened by the landscape; perhaps because she
perceives it for the non-hostile environment that it actually is. One could argue that
this serves to emphasize the contrast between Lyca's innocence and the actual
hostility of her environment, and the degree to which she is comfortable in a place that, by all rights, she should be fearing. However, her parents sleep in "shadows deep"; their fear of the wild night does not permit them to relax, or to ask the wild night for protection. They believe they know the dangers that surround them.

Interestingly, this image of the sleeping parents strongly recalls the previously discussed "Earth's Answer," in which the Earth is described as "[c]hain'd in night" and feebly looking up from "the darkness dread & drear." Clearly, the shadows in "The Little Girl Found" further reinforce the parents' position as members of a society that has, collectively, gone astray in its relation to nature.

"The Little Girl Found" begins by depicting the parents' deep fear and distorted view of the wilderness, but the latter half of the poem emphasizes and enacts their actual imaginative redemption. By leaving human society and striking out on their own into the wild, and then allowing nature to correct their imagined versions of itself, the parents re-learn the ways of the wild, and lose their fear and dread. They come upon the same lion that carried Lyca off:

Turning back was vain,
Soon his heavy mane,
Bore them to the ground;
Then he stalk'd around.

Smelling to his prey,
But their fears allay,
When he licks their hands:
And silent by them stands.

They look upon his eyes
Fill'd with deep surprise:
And wondering behold,
A spirit arm'd in gold. (25-36)
It is notable that the parents—unlike the sleeping, oblivious Lyca—are fearful of the lion. Their fear is evident in their implied desire to flee ("turning back was vain"). And the lion, who "[b]ow'd" his head to Lyca—a reverential gesture—is perceived by the parents to "stalk" them as "prey." By submitting to the lion, and allowing themselves to see his true nature, the parents find that "]g]one was all their care."

Even before the lion himself reveals Lyca's whereabouts, her parents' fear is assuaged by this interaction, and they are willing to accept—or at least consider—the new version of reality that nature offers through the lion.

A possible argument against this assertion (that humans are able to live in harmony with nature once they reject the imaginative fabrications of their societies) is that the poem's end represents the parents' final, complete loss of contact with reality. In this alternative reading, the parents have made their vision of Lyca too real, and undergo some kind of psychotic break in order to live in a completely imagined world, where lions actually speak and their lost child is safe. The parents in this reading of the poem would fall into one of the categories of imaginative failure that Blake is concerned with in *Innocence*: a failure which normally results in the imaginer departing from the realms of reality, crafting an entirely fabricated nature in his or her head. There is superficial support for this alternative reading in the apparent parallels between Lyca's parents and the overly imaginative narrator of *Innocence's "Night."* In his kingly glory, the "Little Girl's" lion strongly resembles the clearly imagined lion of "Night" from *Innocence*. Further, the lion of "The Little Girl Lost" itself is described as a "vision," something not quite real—and a talking lion is surely far outside the realm of normalcy. Blake actually uses the same language to describe
both beasts (the lions both have "golden" hair and profoundly compelling eyes—
"ruddy eyes" in "Night" [33] and "eyes of flame" from which "ruby tears" fall in "The
Little Girl Lost" [47-48]).

However, the majority of evidence is against a reading of Lyca's parents as
having become completely disconnected from all reality at the poem's end. The way
in which Lyca's parents come to that blissful state is radically different from that of
the narrator of "Night." In "Night," the narrator's vision of nature becomes
increasingly fanciful as it progresses, following from one image to the next until
eventually he no longer needs the real world as a basis for his imaginings. Lyca's
parents, though they pursue a vision of their starved daughter into the desert, do so
only with the goal of ultimately finding the real Lyca. They are not deliberately
fleeing, like the "Night" narrator, deeper into fantasy. Furthermore, when the lion
speaks to the parents, they initially are surprised to hear it—a reaction exactly
opposite to that of the "Night" narrator, who never sees anything but what he expects
to see. Lyca's parents, whose imaginings of Lyca had become increasingly based in
imagined (rather than actual) reality, are distracted from their slide into compete
immersion in their own imagined nature by their encounter with the lion—and, in a
broader sense, with nature as a whole—and accept a reality that does not reflect their
misconceptions. In accepting the reality of the lion's kingly nature, and by going to
live fully in nature, rather than continuing to pursue the ghostly image of their
daughter, Lyca's parents have avoided the narrator from "Night's" imaginative failure.
Further, unlike the narrator of "Night," who must (presumably) eventually return
from his imagined world and participate in real life once again, Lyca's parents are
gifted bliss in reality. They are permitted to stay in the wild beasts' den forever, and become one with the natural world, living without fear amongst the beasts they once thought dangerous.

Imaginative Redemption and the Romantic Sublime

As this analysis has shown, the ideal situation in Blake's world of *Experience* is one in which humans repent of their cruel ways. Several of the poems in *Experience* (including "The Little Girl Lost/Found" and "The Fly") show that humans have the opportunity to engage in a process of imaginative redemption that involves a return to nature—and afterward, there is no longer a distinction between these humans and nature. These ideal humans, having gone through the process of imaginative redemption to correct their false ideas about the natural world, have a completely accurate idea of how nature works—in Blake's fabricated world, if not in the reader's world. These humans are able to sleep and dwell with dangerous carnivorous beasts, as if in complete harmony. Animals and humans may even speak to and understand one another, considering each other as equal beings. As such, redeemed humans may as well be considered a part of nature.

The blissful, harmonious, and secure version of the natural world as depicted in *Experience* is surprisingly reminiscent of the ideal of ecological unity discussed by many modern ecocritics and scholars. For example, the ecocritic Lawrence Buell argues in his book on Thoreau, *The Environmental Imagination*, that the "othering" of nature, or the division between humans and nature, is not only the leading cause of our modern environmental problems, but a tragedy that springs from the Romantic movement and its conception of the relationship between humans and nature. Buell
further argues that the Romantic perception of nature as something fundamentally different from humanity—as something that humans cannot partake of or interact with without special effort,—has developed into an attitude towards the natural world that makes it all too easy to abuse our planet's natural resources. The fact that Blake's ultimate goal was not to put nature on a pedestal and worship its sublimity, but to instead encourage his readers to become as close to it as possible, marks him as different from other Romantic poets—and, one might argue, as remarkably progressive in his semi-ecological thought.

**Problematicizing Imaginative Redemption**

In addition to the numerous practical issues related to, for example, the idealized, extremely improbable nature of friendly predators, that arise when Blake's ideas of imaginative redemption are examined closely, there is one problematic element that arises even within Blake's logic and contemporary worldview: that of the potential destruction of the wilderness by human visitors. Blake is very clear that humans are bearers of physical and imaginative corruption—but those very same humans must go out into wild landscapes in order to be redeemed. The paradox is this: how can the humans do so without lessening the "wildness" of the landscape with their corruption? Since their very presence corrupts the land around them, is it even possible for them to experience a truly wild landscape? This problem is neither acknowledged nor addressed in the poems themselves; which is extremely odd,

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14 These are discussed in depth in Chapter 3, as many of them are relevant to modern ecological debates regarding the nature of wilderness and how we can best preserve and enjoy it.
considering that the well-being of the wilderness was one of the major concerns of nature-loving Romantic poets.

In much of Romantic poetry, the effect of humans on wilderness is at least acknowledged, if not made central to explorations of human interactions with that wilderness. Usually, when humans enter "wild" spaces, the nature of the landscape is somehow changed—made less wild by their physical presence. This change might initially seem positive for nature—Jonathan Bate, for instance, argues that "'Romantic ecology' reverences the green earth because it recognizes that neither physically nor psychologically can we live without green things.... it is in fact an attempt to enable mankind the better to live in the material world by entering into harmony with the environment" (40). The worldview described by Bate elevates the natural world above humanity so that nature attains a revered status, closer to the divine—a status which humans should certainly respect.

However, other critics convincingly argue a position opposite to Bate's: that giving nature this elevated status can ultimately lead to a much more unhealthy relationship with the environment—a position with which Blake's poetry generally seems to agree. Both Lawrence Buell and William Cronon point to this "othering" of nature as a major problem with how modern people think about nature—and Cronon specifically blames the Romantic sublime for the genesis of this trend:

Indeed, it is not too much to say that the modern environmental movement is itself a grandchild of romanticism and post-frontier ideology, which is why it is no accident that so much environmentalist discourse takes its bearings from the wilderness these intellectual movements helped create (72). Blake certainly seems to recognize this tragedy in relation to cities. Blake's cities reflect the reality that he knew: they contain little nature, and nature is something to
be found far from centers of human habitation. Ultimately, his solution to the problem only feeds into it: in seeking out the "other" of nature in order to find salvation, the *Experience* poems reinforce the notion that questing for nature outside of human circles, rather than bringing nature into them, is the proper course of action for humanity.

Given the perspective in the *Experience* poems that nature must be sought outside the city, combined with the idea that humanity is essentially a force of corruption, it is reasonable to extrapolate that, upon seeking salvation in the wilderness, humans could wind up harming that wilderness somehow, in actuality (as they have with the city landscapes) or imaginatively (as they have in the pastoral landscapes of *Innocence*). However, in the *Experience* poems, the wilderness proves to be essentially impervious to potential harms caused by its intruders. In fact, humans are erased from the landscape before they can do any damage: those who do not perform imaginative redemption are at risk of dying from forces they refuse to try to comprehend (note the starving children in "Holy Thursday"). However, even humans who do successfully redeem themselves, and who are able to live in the wilderness without fear of its dangers, never diminish the wilderness's "wildness." In the process of imaginative redemption, characters gain a perfect understanding of how to understand nature—and thus, when they choose to continue living in nature (as in "The Little Girl Found"), they are able to live in harmony with it—and as some critics (including Lawrence Buell) have suggested, the distinction between human and nature actually evaporates. Humans become one with the natural world—and, as a part of the natural world, are not intrusive.
Although this paradox may appear to have been solved within the logic of Blake's poems, the poems still contain many other practical concerns—not the least of which has to do with the destruction of the wilderness caused by humans who, while seeking redemption, may never become one with the wilderness in the way that Blake hoped. I will address these problems in the subsequent chapter, as they are increasingly relevant to modern thought about the environment and how we relate to it: as we physically pollute our cities and countrysides, is there still a wilderness to flee to? Does Blake's imaginative redemption have merit as a way for modern readers to reconnect with our shrinking wild spaces? Blake himself likely would have said yes—his conviction in these poems that a return to nature can be mankind's salvation is strong and clear.
Chapter 3: The Songs and Present-Day Ecological Thought and Theory

Given the relative prominence and widespread influence of William Blake's work in modern culture—his poems have been adapted by artists ranging from Bob Dylan to William Bolcom\(^{15}\)—it seems somewhat surprising that the ecological elements of Blake's oeuvre have been largely ignored by ecocritics. This neglect is even more surprising in view of the abundance of ecocritical scholarship focusing on other Romantic poets. The failure to integrate Blake's works into a larger ecocritical discussion of Romanticism—while understandable, as later discussion clarifies—is also unfortunate, since several aspects of the Songs are highly relevant to modern environmental thought, and may even serve as appropriate models for how modern society may repair the human relationship with the natural world. Blake's vision of nature is central to his understanding of how the world works: as Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis have previously established, a close examination of the Songs of Innocence and of Experience reveals that in the Blakean world, nature is vitally important, providing humans with opportunities for both joy and imaginative redemption. The Songs' vision of the relationship between the human and natural world bears a deep, almost prescient, similarity to that of much modern ecological thinking—particularly deep ecology and the philosophy of those who, like Lawrence Buell and William Cronon, advocate a reconsideration of the distance between nature and humans. Moreover, a discussion of the paradoxes in the Songs' understandings of nature—

\(^{15}\) A Pulitzer and Grammy award-winning composer, Bolcom created a musical adaptation of the Songs that excellently encapsulates and enhances the sheer variety of settings, characters, and tones of Blake's poetry.
paradoxes which become apparent when the Songs' concepts of imaginative elaboration and redemption are considered in the context of actual human-nature interactions—reveals that the problems inherent to Blake's visions of those interactions bear startling similarities to the difficulties that modern ecocritics face in confronting humanity's current ecological problems.

**Blake and Wordsworth**

A major factor contributing to the relative paucity of ecocritical attention to the Songs is, as previously stated, the common (but mistaken) perception of Blake as an "anti-nature" poet. But this misunderstanding alone cannot completely explain ecocritics' neglect of Blake. Unlike Wordsworth (and some of the other Romantics poets), Blake's vision of nature is relatively complex and opaque—his nature is more representative of his ideas than it is a "recollection in tranquility," as Wordsworth would have put it, of actual experiences. This opacity has made it somewhat difficult to approach Blake's nature, and makes it more difficult to incorporate his ideas into a conversation of how the Romantics (and their intellectual descendents) viewed and wrote about nature. An understanding of how the other Romantics' versions of nature are different from that depicted in the Songs, and what aspects of their wilderesses have historically been especially interesting to ecocritics, may clarify what of Blake's poetry has made his version of nature so difficult to parse—and, to an extent, what can be done to make it more palatable to ecocritics.

Wordsworth is, quite rightly, revered by many ecocritics as a prominent "nature poet"—his work has influenced the thinking of poets and naturalists alike, both in his own time and in subsequent centuries. Any comparison between the nature
depicted in Wordsworth and Blake, is, by necessity, going to look unbalanced—the sheer amount of Wordsworth's work that could be classified as "nature poetry" dwarfs Blake's. That said, there are more subtle reasons why Wordsworth has been analyzed and cited by dozens of ecocritics as evidence for the enormous Romantic movement's enormous influence on centuries of subsequent ecological thought and policy, while Blake often does not even merit a footnote.\(^\text{16}\)

A key reason that Wordsworth's relative popularity in regards to Blake is likely that Wordsworth's nature is reasonably accessible, in comparison with the nature depicted in the *Songs*. The field of Romanticist ecocriticism (or Green Romanticism, as it is sometimes known) has latched onto this fact, much of it building off of Jonathan Bate's influential book *Romantic Ecology*, in which he argues that Wordsworth's conception of nature, while certainly imbued with his politics and personality, was nonetheless a presence in its own right, rather than a mere vehicle for Wordsworth's "theory of imagination and symbol" (10). The emotions that viewers usually derive from nature are much more sharply defined in much of Wordsworth's poetry, in which most landscapes fall somewhere on a gradient from "beautiful" (typical pastoral; evokes feelings of contentment and simple joy) to "sublime" (much more powerful emotions—terror, awe, amazement, ecstasy and the like). Meanwhile, the narrators of Blake's *Songs* focus almost exclusively on the pursuit of only one emotion—joy—and while different landscapes may give

\(^{16}\) This is particularly egregious in the case in Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism*, a comprehensive look at the evolution of ecocriticism, in which an analysis of the volume of work on Wordsworth and John Clare is given an entire chapter, and in which Blake does not appear at all.
Blake's characters different nuances of joy, the variation among the experiences is less clearly explicated than in Wordsworth.

The relative opacity and complexity of Blake's version of nature, however, cannot completely account for his frequent absence from modern ecocriticism. In *Imagining Nature*, Kevin Hutchings correctly blames Blake's omission from the literature on the long-standing perception of Blake as an "anti-nature" poet by prominent literary critics, and then explains why this view is misguided. Hutchings, however, in his attempt to cover the entirety of Blake's work, devotes a bare minimum of analysis to the *Songs*—and, in so doing, overlooks one of the most important reasons that a reclassification of Blake's work as not just nature-oriented, but as deeply relevant to modern ecological discourse, is important: the very paradoxes and problems which arise when the lessons of the *Songs* are applied to the real world parallel, very closely, several important debates which modern ecocritics and environmental activists and philosophers still struggle with.

**Parallels between the *Songs' Views of Nature and Modern Environmental Perspectives***

Many aspects of the songs also appear in the work of modern environmentalists and ecocritics—specifically, Blake's philosophy, in some respects, aligns very closely with the principles of "Deep Ecology." Although Blake's poems

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17 Deep ecology is, in the words of Greg Garrard, [one of] the four radical forms of environmentalism, [and] is the most influential beyond academic circles... deep ecology demands recognition of intrinsic value in nature. It identifies the dualistic separation of humans from nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture as the origin of environmental crisis, and demands a return to a monistic, primal identification of humans and the ecosphere. (*Ecocriticism* 24)
are undeniably anthropocentric—a quality utterly rejected as selfish by Deep Ecology proponents—the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* also advocate a "return to nature" in which humans, in their ideal state, are equal to all elements of the natural world, and do not continue to think of themselves as superior to it. Proponents of Deep Ecology generally take the stance that in an ideal world, humans should consider themselves to be an integral part of nature, rather than disparate from it—a stance remarkably similar to that expressed in the *Songs*. Similarly, in *Innocence*, harmony with nature is considered to be a positive—and, in certain poems ("The Lamb" in particular) innocent human children and animals are depicted as equals before God. Furthermore, in *Experience*, the process of imaginative redemption actually involves a return to the wilderness in which humans become one with nature: though the lions' total acceptance of Lyca and her parents in "The Little Girl Found" might not be realistic, it is exemplary of the *Songs*' insistence that the ideal human/nature relationship is one in which humans consider themselves to be a part of nature—and act accordingly. This attitude was, as Mark Lussier notes in his essay on "Blake's Deep Ecology," ahead of its time:

Blake's attempt to unveil the insidious potential of the enlightenment episteme [in which mind and matter, man and nature, are alienated from one another] at its moment of inception and replace it with an episteme of wholeness [very similar to that of modern deep ecology] gained little attention in his own day, and what attention it did receive was usually hostile. It is only at this moment of contemporary acceptance that such an ethical stance has gained widespread acceptance, even in the hard sciences from which the enlightenment episteme emerged. (407).

Another particularly important aspect of the *Songs*—and, not coincidentally, of both Deep Ecology and other branches of modern environmentalism—is the degree to which Blake's narrators' "incorrect" views of nature, which are treated as
deeply problematic, are similar to modern concepts of the "othering" of nature—that is, understanding the depiction of nature as many "non-human" things, rather than thinking of humans as an integral part of nature. In the *Innocence* poems, children and other people who view the world through the correct imaginative lens perceive themselves to be a part of nature. When humans physically separate themselves from nature, and begin to believe in a distant, idealized version of nature, they are undergoing a process of "othering." Those who participate in "othering" no longer see themselves as part of nature, but instead place nature in an entirely separate category—a view which can be problematic, since it allows humans to consider their own needs apart from that of the environment, when in reality, of course, human economic, social and political needs often have profound effects on the environment. Blake, however, condemns the process of "othering" in the *Songs of Experience*, and pushes for movement towards an ecological consciousness in which humans must eventually, in the course of seeking redemption, eliminate the sense of "otherness" which they have associated with the natural world. This willingness on the *Songs*’ part to acknowledge that eliminating the otherness of nature is necessary is striking in its similarity to some strains of modern ecological thought—especially deep ecology. Blake, however, takes the process one step farther: nature should not be revered as something greater, but still other, than humans—rather, we should seek to join with it once again.

Despite living in a fallen world, Blake believes that we can and must still return, however great the danger, to nature. This is similar to the views of many modern environmental advocates, who often seem to take a "better late than never"
attitude. Despite the ever-lengthening list of species that have gone extinct during our current anthropogenic mass extinction, as well as other permanent changes to our world, conservationists and climate activists alike continue to push for major policy changes that would prevent the damage from being too extensive. Even though the question of how much environmental damage may be prevented or repaired is always in the background of modern environmental discourse, Blake's poems are confident in their assertion that harmony with nature will come again, eventually: the opening lines of "The Little Girl Lost" proclaim definitively that

In futurity
I prophetic see,
That the earth from sleep,
(Grave the sentence deep)

Shall arise and seek
For her maker meek:
And the desart wild
Become a garden mild. (1-8)

Modern ecological thinkers and Blake also hold similar views on the importance of a "return to nature." The concept of a return to nature, primarily for imaginative inspiration, was fairly common in Romantic poetry—and its influence can still clearly be seen today in the works of such critics as William Cronon and Lawrence Buell. Cronon, in his work on how we define wilderness, "The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," writes that Romanticism, coupled with later American attitudes towards the untouched "wild lands of the frontier... freer, truer, and more natural than other, modern places," was largely responsible for the vision of "wilderness" and "nature" that modern environmentalism, for better or for worse, is founded upon (77). While Cronon argues
that modern conceptions of wilderness speak to a lack of self-scrutiny on the part of environmentalists, and believes that the concept of "authenticity" of wilderness (common amongst the Romantics—Blake included) should be abolished, he does praise the Romantics for their recognition that the wilderness was not "barren," and had value in its own right. Interestingly enough, although the Songs do uphold many of the values that Cronon deplores, they do encourage the kind of self-scrutiny that Cronon advocates—when the characters of the Songs fail to base their relationships with nature on experience and fact, rather than on social constructs of how nature is supposed to operate, they usually become unhappy.

**Blake's Paradoxical Environmental Message**

The Songs' vision of humanity's ideal relationship with nature also exhibits substantial problematic characteristics. Some of these problems are extremely revealing of how the Songs are relevant to modern environmental discourse: the Songs' inconsistencies are closely related to the struggles that modern ecocritics and environmental activists face. Because the Songs are, ironically, based on Blake's personal beliefs regarding nature, rather than actual observations of nature, the nature depicted in the Songs only loosely—and rarely—bears any resemblance to the reality of nature in Blake's time. If the Songs' attitude towards interacting with nature is to be considered useful, in whole or in part, by modern environmentalists, a dose of what Kevin Hutchings terms "self-scrutiny" may be necessary in order to determine which elements of Blake's narrative are flawed. Although most of these flaws stem from practical concerns, other flaws are rooted in internal inconsistencies in the logic of the Songs.
Despite the Songs' insistence the vital importance of observations of real nature as a basis for humans' imagined versions of nature, the vision of nature that is depicted as "real" within the world of the Songs often, ironically, bears little resemblance to anything that Blake or his readers could ever have seen, let alone interacted with. Some differences between the world of the Songs and natural reality are obvious—real lions do not speak, and real lambs likely do not understand sermons—but others are more subtle and, therefore, insidious. The interactions that the characters of the Songs have with the natural worlds envisioned through imaginative elaboration (in the Songs of Innocence) and imaginative redemption (Songs of Experience) are obviously deeply transformative—but how do these experiences translate when transposed into the real world? The answer lies in an exploration of the poems' paradoxes—where their internal logic breaks down, there are also serious ramifications for how the poems' readers experience the real world.

The most notable of the differences between reality and the nature of the Songs is suffused through the Songs of Innocence: the peaceful paradise in which Blake's shepherds, children, and lambs spend their days is based primarily on classical ideals of the pastoral. The classical pastoral uses shepherds, musicians, and other characters to explore deep themes in a leisurely, safe country setting. In the real England of Blake's time, the life of a shepherd often involved great hardships—many shepherds lived in a "craggy, harsh northern landscape" (Bate, 24) and had (to paraphrase "The Shepherd" of Innocence) little time for filling their tongues with praise. The Songs' depiction of the shepherd is indicative of a persistent softening trend throughout the poems, since not all of Romantic poets depicted the pastoral in
such a confidently positive way. Wordsworth, for example, ensured that his version of the pastoral "was reacting against the neo-classical version of pastoral...which insisted that the genre should concern itself only with shepherd in a state of innocence" (Bate, 26). By contrast, Blake's pastoral is still firmly grounded in that older tradition: the older pastoral allows for a vision of innocent life, in contented harmony with nature, which fits with Blake's ideal of the prelapsarian human imaginative connection to nature. By crafting an artificial pastoral, the Songs are able to offer a relationship with nature that, had it existed in reality, might be somewhat problematic—hardships and experience go hand in hand in the Songs, and thus as much suffering as possible must be kept out of the world of Innocence.

The poems of the Songs of Innocence and of Experience also explore other settings which are markedly different from real landscapes. Most notable among these landscapes is the wilderness of Experience: the "desart" in which Lyca loses herself, and which she and her parents eventually become a part of, contains both lions (which rarely inhabit deserts) and tigers (which do not inhabit deserts at all). In fact, the only setting in the Songs that realistically reflects a real place is London, with its recognizable landmarks (St. Paul's and the Thames in Innocence's "Holy Thursday"). However, even London appears in exaggerated form ("[I] mark in every face I meet/Marks of weakness, marks of woe" [2-4]). Even this seemingly grounded city is still being filtered through the eyes of an unnamed narrator—the words on the page still depict an imagined place, albeit one with recognizable elements carried over from reality.
The problem with the persistent discrepancy between reality and the world of the *Songs* is twofold. The primary difficulty is a failing of internal logic: the landscapes in the *Songs* are partially imaginary, but when humans interact with them in the ways that the *Songs* advocate—that is, by observing them, and then forming their own imagined versions of nature based on what they see—humans may not have the same joyful or redemptive experiences as the characters in the *Songs*. This, incidentally, is exactly what happens to characters in "The Chimney Sweeper" and "Holy Thursday" of *Innocence*, and in many other poems in *Experience*: because their imagined versions of nature are not based on their own personal observations, but on another person's imaginings, their attempts at imaginative elaboration or redemption can sometimes go tragically wrong. In fact, by the logic of the *Songs* themselves, the *Songs*’ readers are doing the wrong thing by listening to what the *Songs* have to say.

The *Songs*’ advice is further undermined by a more practical problem that arises from the discrepancy between the *Songs*’ version of nature and reality: in reality, interactions with nature may not play out in the way that the *Songs* anticipate. Even if readers of the *Songs* could interact with some elements of the *Songs*’ pastoral or the wilderness during their quest for imaginative elaboration or redemption, there is no guarantee that they will receive joy—and, in certain cases, they may be deliberately putting themselves in harm's way. Frankly, a human who deliberately follows a lion into its territory is more likely to be mauled than accepted as an equal or a member of the lion's pride—notwithstanding the Edenic possibilities depicted in "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found."
This is not to say that joy cannot be found in real nature—far from it—but rather, that it is clearly difficult to reconcile the nature of Blake's time or our own with the vision of nature depicted in the Songs: the discerning consumer of nature would be wise to take some, but not all, of Blake's advice to heart. Perhaps the best way to apply the Songs' message of imaginative elaboration to nature is to embrace it even more fully than the poems themselves seem to suggest: ignore the idealized version of nature that the Songs presents, in favor of making individual observations of nature and forming our own imaginative conclusions about how being in nature can grant us joy.

A further problem with the Songs' model for human-nature interaction, however, arises when humans do enter into and experience nature directly for themselves: the problem of wilderness. Wilderness plays an intrinsic role in Blakean imaginative redemption (as depicted in the Experience poems), yet depending on how one defines wilderness, the very human interactions that the Songs of Experience show as so crucial to bringing about redemption are also likely to destroy that wilderness. In much Romantic poetry, the instant that humans enter "wild" spaces, the nature of the landscape is somehow changed—made less wild by their physical presence. This is certainly the case in Wordsworth, as can be clearly seen in several passages from his Prelude of 1850, in which Nature, personified, implores the mortal Wordsworth, as well as his fellow travelers, to leave the Alps, which offer the sublime, untouched:
—"Stay, stay your sacrilegious hands!"—The voice
Was Nature's, uttered from her Alpine throne;
I heard it then and seem to hear it now—
"Your impious work forbear, perish what may,
Let this one temple last, be this one spot
Of earth devoted to eternity!" (157-162)

Some critics (including, perhaps most prominently William Cronon, in his essay "The Trouble with Wilderness") have pointed out that the propensity to treat wild spaces as an "untouched wilderness," that is somehow more precious for never having felt the hand of man, has carried over to modern times, and that when humans interact with the wilderness, the essential nature of wilderness is called into question: because, for many people, the definition of wilderness is dependent upon the absence of people, when humans begin to interact with it, something indefinable in the wilderness is lost—it becomes less wild. Thus, human interactions with wilderness are forever caught in a paradoxical state: as Alison Byerly points out, what we think of as "wilderness" is merely our perception of wilderness, since in interacting with wild spaces, we destroy their essential wildness.

Given the extremely important status of this paradox in most Romantic poetry concerned with the natural world, coupled with the Songs of Experience's insistence that humanity is essentially a force of imaginative corruption, one might assume that in the Songs, when humans seek imaginative redemption in the wilderness, they could wind up harming that wilderness. However, strangely enough, the wilderness of Experience proves to be essentially impervious to potential harms caused by its intruders: one way or another, humans are erased from the landscape before they can do any damage. Those humans who do not perform imaginative redemption are at risk of dying from forces they refuse to try to comprehend (note the starving children
in "Holy Thursday")—but interestingly enough, even humans who do successfully redeem themselves, and who are able to live in the wilderness without fear of its dangers, never diminish the wilderness's "wildness." In the process of imaginative redemption, characters gain a perfect understanding of how to understand nature—and thus, when they choose to continue living in nature (as in "The Little Girl Found"), they are able to live in harmony with it—and as some critics (including Lawrence Buell) have suggested, the distinction between human and nature actually evaporates. Humans become one with the natural world—and, as a part of the natural world, cannot be said to be intrusive.

To the modern reader, this may not seem like a satisfactory conclusion—especially because there are a number of other frustrating barriers between us and the wilderness existence that Blake advocates. Not least among them being that when humans enter nature in reality, they tend to bring their destructive tendencies with then, and never reach the kind of ideal harmonious state that Blake advocates. The potential harm caused by thousands of tourists could easily be considered to be a destruction of wilderness—Wordsworth himself was extremely worried about the possibility. For all the seeming hypocrisy of Wordsworth's words, his concerns turned out to be completely correct, as they have been borne out by history. As Alison Byerly notes in her essay on America's national parks, "It is difficult to see how such [a wilderness as America's frontiers] could remain untrammeled while being used by even a small percentage of the American people, or how it could provide opportunities for solitude to numerous visitors" (57). And, as Byerly then points out,
those landscapes are no longer unsullied, but have been fundamentally changed by the thousands of humans who flock to see them.

Although the Songs’ conclusions regarding the proper interaction between the natural world and humans clearly have some problems when applied to modern environmental problems, this does not mean that Blake should be dismissed as a poet without relevance to the modern era. Indeed, when the two aforementioned paradoxes are considered together, a startlingly relevant conundrum, one which modern environmentalism is currently struggling with, is revealed. The message in the Songs is that we are to disregard everything that we are told (for even the authorities, including the Songs themselves, cannot hope to offer the truth of nature as observed and imagined by individuals) and seek nature out for ourselves. But nature itself, through our own attempts to access it, becomes less wild, until through sheer numbers, we obliterate its intrinsic value as untouched wilderness. Thus, we are left with the disheartening possibility that, even out in nature, we will be left standing before a man-made image of nature, carefully tended and presented to us as "wilderness," even when signs of human influence (everything from roads to dead trees killed by the emerald ash borer beetle) are inescapable.

The dilemma of the vanished "true wilderness" is not only relevant to modern environmental discourse—it is vital. Anthropogenic climate change now affects every part of our globe, and in coming years, the changes will only become more and more visible and tangible. However, the longer humans ignore the effects of their actions upon the environment, the greater (and more destructive) those effects will be. To ignore our effects on a given landscape is to buy into an untrue cultural concept of
"untouched wilderness," rather than to see the real dynamic ecology of the landscape—including the human effect upon that landscape. While the Songs’ model does not necessarily fit or provide support for every different form of ecocriticism—it is likely that no single piece of Romantic literature could, given the diversity of the field of ecocriticism—the fact that the Song's inconsistencies correspond so well with environmental problems that modern ecocritics, environmental policy-makers and activists struggle to explore and, if they can, correct, is a strong indication of exactly how prescient and accurate Blake's Songs were in their depictions of how humans interact with nature.
Figure 1, The Illustration For "Night" of the *Songs of Innocence*. William Blake. *Songs of Innocence*; Wikimedia Commons; 15 February 2009; Web; 9 April 2014.
Bibliography


