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**Conceptions of Innocence and Experience in Blake's
"The Book of Thel" and Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode"**

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Abstract

Both William Blake's "The Book of Thel" and William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" explore the effects of leaving a perfect, enlightened world and entering the flawed domain of man while suggesting the pre-existence of the human soul. Wordsworth's ode envisions the world as an imperfect, but worthwhile environment while Blake's poem focuses on the dangers and pains that accompany it. The authors paint differing pictures of this world of experience by personifying nature, employing vivid imagery of the soul before and after its descent, and by using significant symbols in their respective epigraphs to reflect their overall views. These devices work together to provide the reader with a choice of how to handle this knowledge of the once divine, but now unkind, universe.

Essay

It is the "obstinate questionings / of sense and outward things" that constitute the bulk of human life in both William Blake's "The Book of Thel" and William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (Wordsworth 9.141-42). Questioning the world in which they live, both authors explore the effects of leaving a perfect, enlightened world and entering the flawed domain of man while suggesting the pre-existence of the human soul. Wordsworth's ode envisions the world as an imperfect, but worthwhile environment while Blake's poem focuses on the dangers and pains that accompany it. The authors paint differing pictures of this world of experience by personifying nature, employing vivid imagery of the soul before and after its descent, and by using significant symbols in their respective epigraphs to reflect their overall views. These devices work together to provide the reader with a choice of how to handle this knowledge of the once divine, but now unkind, universe.

A Romantic idea of nature as something not only alive, but also completely sentient is explored quite literally in Blake's "The Book of Thel". He uses personification to form a dialogue between the innocent yet unsatisfied Thel and the other inhabitants of the Vales of Har. Described as "small" and "lowly," the Lilly answers Thel's cries of dissatisfaction concerning her lack of purpose in life (Blake 1.1.17). The Lilly wants to help Thel, as do all of Blake's personified natural elements, crawl out of her melancholia. The Lilly's speech

originally emphasizes her weaknesses in life, stating “the gilded butterfly scarce perches on [her] head,” but shifts to a description of her strong relationship with God (Blake 1.1.18). She maintains a personal relationship with the Divine who “visited from heaven” and “spreads his hand” over the flower each morning (Blake 1.1.19). He heals and encourages the Lilly to move forward in life despite her supposed weaknesses. Blake’s creation of the Vales of Har serves as a metaphor for life before life: it represents what happens to a soul who has yet to be born. In this pre-existent world, the creatures can share a personal relationship with God unlike the one man can experience on Earth. God reassures the Lilly that she will be “clothed in light” and “fed with morning manna” (Blake 1.1.23). Blake uses the Lilly as an example of how the fair maiden, Thel, should be. The Lilly knows and accepts that her purpose in life is to “nourish the innocent lamb” and to “scatter” perfume across the land (Blake 2.1.5, 9). She “loves to dwell in lowly vales,” is happy with her life, and knows that God will take care of her (Blake 1.1.17). The Lilly does not understand Thel’s complaints about lacking substance in her life, and Thel struggles to comprehend how the Lilly can serve so many purposes. Thel feels “like a parting cloud” who is nothing more than a fleeting footnote to the world, but the Lilly is willing to sacrifice herself for others because it is her purpose (Blake 1.1.8). No part of the Lilly’s sacrifice will be in vain because she is all about giving back to the world.

Blake paints the Lilly as the ideal: a person who completes her function in life and wants for nothing more. Thel’s conversation with the Lilly only serves to further her disconnect from the Vales of Har. She feels that she has no purpose, and so she questions what her life will mean in the end. Thel longs for the certainty that this simple flower possesses and yet cannot subjugate herself to a life without questions. Marjorie Levinson believes the conversation between Thel and the Lilly might take place in the girl’s head and that Thel “projects her answers into them” (Levinson 293). By having Thel answer her own questions, Levinson states that Thel is “hearing what it is that she knows,” and “glimpsing” what she does not (Levinson 293). This view of the dialogue could explain why it is that the Lilly’s speech so thoroughly depresses Thel; it is simply another example of her thinking too much. Blake’s crafty personification of this tiny flower presents the reader with a foil to Thel. The Lilly exemplifies blind devotion while Thel seeks impossible answers to life’s questions; thus, Thel’s discontent grows with every piece of knowledge she gains.

Blake continues his personification of nature through his depictions of the “tender” Cloud and the matronly “Clod of Clay” (2.1.13). Blake creates an atmosphere of unity and togetherness throughout the Vales of Har and repeatedly highlights each individual creature’s unique relationship to God. The Cloud with his “golden head” and “bright form” attempts to answer Thel’s questions by describing his own place in the water cycle (Blake 3.2.5). The Cloud shows such optimism and faith because he knows that his disappearance leads not to death but “to tenfold life, to love, to peace, to raptures holy” (Blake 3.2.10-11). Thel worries that she will “fade away” and become nothing more than fodder for insects, but the Cloud tells her that she is not alone (Blake 3.2.21). Blake uses the Cloud to reaffirm a theme first purported by the Lilly: “Every thing that lives /Lives not alone, nor for itself” (3.2.26-7). In this fantastical realm of the Vales of Har, no creature is alone. A benevolent force connects them all, and that force is God.

This idea is further explained by Mother Nature, or as Blake calls her, the “Clod of Clay” (4.3.7). Responding to the pitiful cries of a lowly worm, the Clod of Clay scolds Thel for assuming that she is alone and declares “we live not for ourselves” (Blake 4.3.10). In the Vales of Har, there should be no individual. Every person, place, or thing serves a greater purpose and helps one another in very specific ways. Their innocence and ignorance feed off of more innocence and ignorance. Blake personifies nature as God’s wife who has “nuptial bands” around her chest (5.3.2). Nature is entwined with divinity and all living creatures are their children. The Clod of Clay tells Thel that she “cannot know” all of God’s truths but that she continues to “live and love” despite this fact (Blake 5.3.5-6). Mother Nature tries to get Thel to accept that living in ignorance is better than facing the incomprehensible. However, despite her views on the matter, the Clod of Clay cannot ignore the pained cries of her daughter Thel. She wants to teach, guide, and expose Thel to the world of experience. Blake uses the Clod of Clay to present an opportunity for Thel to glimpse the world of experience and yet remain connected to the world of innocence. The Clod of Clay shows motherly compassion and allows Thel to make up her own mind about the Earth by entering its gates and witnessing it firsthand. Blake’s paradise is one made up of pure innocence, selflessness, and joy, but it is one lacking insight or depth. By personifying nature in the pre-existent state, he paints a happier world that enjoys the privilege of direct interaction with God so unlike the one with which man is familiar.

Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” also utilizes the personification of nature, but instead of alienating the world of experience it serves to bring out its inherent beauty. Wordsworth describes nature as something that once was “Apparelled in celestial light” (1.4). He goes on to describe nature using celebratory terms not to create a vision of paradise, as Blake’s poem does, but to prove how far the Earth is from perfection. He personifies the Rainbow and the Moon who delight in looking upon the heavens (Wordsworth 2.12-13). He lists multiple reasons why nature is so grand, so beautiful, and yet he feels that it is lacking something. While “The sunshine is a glorious birth,” these lovely descriptions do not even begin to describe the beautifulness of the land before life (Wordsworth 2.16). The birds sing “a joyous song” and the innocent lambs dance to “the tabor’s sound,” but the speaker, Wordsworth himself, has lost something incredibly valuable (3.19-21). Wordsworth wonders why he cannot view nature the way he did as a child. Reminiscent of Blake’s Lilly, Wordsworth says “The Pansy at my feet / Doth the same tale repeat” (Wordsworth 4.54-55). Wordsworth believes that children retain enough of their pre-worldly knowledge to influence how they perceive nature. Children see nature as God intended because they can almost remember God. Wordsworth personifies nature as joyous, celebratory, and wonderful in order to emphasize how far his adult perception has fallen from the days of his youth.

Wordsworth, like Blake, personifies the earth as a mother who has “pleasures” and “yearnings,” who serves as a teacher or a “nurse” to mankind (Wordsworth 6.78,79,81). Wordsworth’s Mother Nature differs substantially from Blake’s in that instead of desiring to teach and expose her children, she wants them to forget their own pre-existence. She does “all she can / To make her Foster-child.../ Forget the glories he hath known” (Wordsworth 6.82-

84). She does not seek to preserve paradise but rather to heal man of it. Nature can and does remember the joy and immortality of the soul but man simply cannot. Though Kenneth R. Lincoln believes that nature is “neither conscious nor unconscious of mutability,” there is textual evidence to suggest that Wordsworth’s Mother Nature does know (Lincoln 216). According to Wordsworth, sometimes man can catch glimpses of the past through what he calls “obstinate questionings,” and he describes nature as trembling “like a guilty Thing surprised” (Wordsworth 9.141,147). Mother Nature does her best to help man forget the secrets of the soul, but cannot prevent all recollections. Wordsworth’s personification of nature as a mother who purposefully hides the puzzle pieces pointing to pre-existence presents the idea that there is something worthwhile to the world of experience, even if it is only trying to find the truth.

Blake uses the personification of nature to glorify the benefits of the pre-existent world, which includes a direct relationship with God, all the while indubitably linking innocence with ignorance. Wordsworth, however, uses his personification not only to elevate pre-worldly virtues, but also to imply that there is something important in our fleeting remembrances of it. These authors use imagery to illustrate the worlds of innocence and experience as they perceive them in order to make their personifications come to life.

Blake’s brilliant uses of vivid imagery to describe the Vales of Har paint a heavenly picture of this world of innocence. Before the soul departs for life, it begins in a place filled with lovely creatures and innocent daughters tending their “sunny flocks” (Blake 1.1.1). Thel is first described as the “youngest” who “sought the secret air, /To fade away like the morning beauty from her mortal day” (Blake 1.1.2-3). Blake then presents the readers with a series of strong images that perfectly illustrate her unease. She worries that she is fleeting “like a watery bow” and “like the transient day” (Blake 1.1.8, 11). Thel believes that she is nothing more than a “reflection in a glass,” and that she asserts no more control or purpose than that of a “parting cloud” (Blake 1.1.9,8). Blake sets Thel’s dilemma with these brief and yet powerful portraits of her own intuited meaninglessness. He juxtaposes these images of weakness and brevity with the auditory image of the voice of God who walks “in the garden in evening time” (Blake 1.1.14). This alludes to God’s perfect dominion of Eden where man and God once mingled. The Vales of Har is modeled after, or perhaps representative of, true paradise. God interacts with nature in this world of innocence; he blesses the weak Lilly, extends the life of an ephemeral cloud, and even unites with Mother Nature to create all living things. This is a far cry from the world of experience where God is never directly seen or heard. Each creature exemplifies virtue. For example, the Lilly is pure, modest, and unquestioningly dedicated to a purpose. Every living thing is surrounded by love and attention, like the cloud that joins with the “fair eyed dew” in a “golden band” (Blake 3.2.13-15). Light imagery abounds in the Vales of Har from “shining tents” to “silver shrines” (Blake 2.1.2, 3.2.13). Blake presents readers with repeated descriptions of the ethereal in order to create the innocent atmosphere of the world.

Perhaps the saddest image found in this world of innocence is of the infantile weeping worm. A baby who lies “wrapped in the Lilly’s leaf” but “helpless and naked” evokes pity not only from Thel but from the readers as well (Blake 4.3.3,5). When Thel looks at this pitiful

creature, she sees her worst fear: that she will die alone while weeping for a greater purpose. However, even this sad image is rectified when the motherly Clod of Clay swoops in to care for the infant. Utter helplessness is the worst fate suffered in paradise, but it is not one suffered solitarily. Blake creates a perfect world where all creatures are interconnected, and all live and die in harmony, except for Thel. In spite of this presupposed unity, Thel is not contented to live a life without meaning or purpose; she wants to experience something before she dies.

Blake's vision of the world of experience is the complete opposite of his loving paradise. Death imagery pervades the inside of Earth's gates where Thel finds herself at the end of the poem. As soon as the maid enters, she is taken aback by the "secrets of the land unknown" (Blake 6.4.2). The idea of the unknown is unsettling to humans because of the fear associated with uncertainty. Reader apprehension increases when Thel encounters "couches of the dead" (Blake 6.4.3). The world of experience is serious and presents death as an inescapable fate. The grotesque picture of a couch laden with corpses pays no attention to the life they once held. It severs these bodies from the lives they once lived and perfectly illustrates the price of living. There are no allusions to what purposes they served or if they died in vain; they are nothing but a dead and empty husks. Death is rooted in and connected to "every heart" (Blake 6.4.4). Blake describes the world of experience as a "land of sorrows, & of tears where never smile was seen" (6.4.5). This is a stark contrast to the world of innocence where even the saddest, lowliest creature was cherished by a "mother's smiles" (Blake 4.3.6).

Thel wanders and eventually stumbles onto what has to be one of the most terrifying images conceivable by humans: her own grave (Blake 6.4.9). Thel faces the physical evidence of her own death, the grave plot where her body will rest and rot for all of eternity. Blake creates a wonderful symmetry by having the "voice of sorrow" raise questions that mirror Thel's initial inquiries (6.4.10). These questions ask for a world of innocence. "Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction?" (Blake 6.4.11). Why cannot man live without fearing death? Why must man experience pain? How can such worldly pleasures bring so much destruction? Blake's world of experience longs for the days of innocence but is instead infused with death and devoid of hope. Thel, quite obviously, chooses to flee from this terrifying realm and return to the familiar world of innocence. Blake's vivid death imagery leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that the world of experience is a dark and negative place.

Wordsworth also employs vivid imagery to describe the world of innocence versus experience, but he lacks Blake's apparent pessimism. While Blake's poem takes readers to a specific pre-existent state, Wordsworth only postulates what the pre-world would be like from what he can remember from his childhood. In this way, Wordsworth serves as his own example. He describes what he can remember and takes great joy in these recollections. He describes this former state as having "the glory and freshness of a dream" (Wordsworth 1.5). He witnesses a child who can still see the earth as bathed in a "celestial light" (Wordsworth 1.4). This child laughs with the "heavens" and clearly has a close relationship to the divine if they can laugh together as friends do (Wordsworth 4.38). Wordsworth envies and adores the purity of the child's relationship with nature and uses images of a "festival" and the pagan wildness of a crown of flowers (4.39-40). The child is truly Nature's Prince. Wordsworth can

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recognize the “visionary gleam” within the child but cannot feel it himself (4.56). He paints the unusual image of birth not as an awakening, but as a “sleep and a forgetting” (Wordsworth 5.68). The world of experience is not one where man is slowly corrupted by evil, but instead one where he slowly forgets what is pure. Man enters the world “trailing clouds of glory” leaving behind his former home with God (Wordsworth 5.64). The incredibly strong image of leaving Heaven behind only to be encased by the “prison-house” of life casts an unfamiliar light on the world of experience (Wordsworth 5.67). Instead of living in order to gain entrance to Heaven, Wordsworth believes that man has already left perfection behind. Wordsworth sees any recollection of this world as “the fountain light of all our day” (9.151). The world before life or the “immortal sea” from which we came is everlasting even if man cannot remember it (Wordsworth 9.163). Man’s former home has “radiance,” “splendor,” and “glory” (Wordsworth 10.175,178). In a truly amazing literary feat, Wordsworth succeeds in painting a very clear picture of a pre-existent world he cannot truly describe objectively.

Wordsworth’s “Intimations Ode” presents a very positive outlook on the world of experience. It is a wondrous world filled with beautiful natural scenes and one where man can always search for something greater. The poem begins with celebratory images from nature despite this, he states “there hath past away a glory from the earth” (Wordsworth 2.18). The world of experience is filled with inklings of the world that existed before. He knows that something is lost, but he cannot hope to regain it fully. Wordsworth says he is haunted by a “thought of grief,” but instead of bringing pain the thought brings relief (3.22). He is plagued by constant questions, very much like Thel in Blake’s work, about the nature of innocence and about where that “visionary gleam” went (Wordsworth 4.56). However, instead of causing unrest as they do for Thel, these questions revitalize Wordsworth. He not only finds meaning in them but they also make him a stronger, better person. Though he describes life as a “forgetting,” Wordsworth is adamant that life still holds the potential for joy (Wordsworth 5.58). He presents the readers with an account of a child, a young boy, who exemplifies the median between the two worlds of existence. He believes that a young child who still remembers something of the world of innocence is the closest a mortal being can be to divinity. The child “beholds the light” of God and “sees it in his joy,” but eventually this celestial light fades away into that of the “common day” (Wordsworth 5.69-70,76). Wordsworth watches the child mimic adults and wonders why someone so holy would want to fit into a world of such common creatures and ceremonies. Wordsworth imagines the child as “Nature’s Priest,” the closest man can get to God, and yet the child is striving to be another bland adult (5.72). The child serves as the one eye in a world of blindness because he is aware of man’s “heritage” and holds all the answers to man’s “obstinate” questions about God (Wordsworth 8.111,9.141). Despite the child’s inevitable separation from his divine legacy, Wordsworth ultimately paints the world of experience as one of celebration, where the birds “sing a joyous song” and lambs “bound ...to the tabor’s sound” (10.168-69). Wordsworth finds a sort of meaning in his inability to remember paradise, and feels connected to nature whenever he tries to conceive it. Wordsworth looks forward to these recollections of the past because they enrich the present. He will not grieve the loss of knowledge but rejoice in the fact he once shared it at all.

Blake's views of the pre-existent state contrasted with the world of experience are apparent not only throughout the entirety of "The Book of Thel," but also before the narrative even starts. The epigraph, aptly called "Thel's Motto," explores the banality of humankind juxtaposed with the purity of the immortal soul through its ambiguous, though astute, uses of symbolism. The Motto takes the form of four questions, a fact that not only foreshadows the importance of questions in Thel's story but also reflects their bearing on the life of every thinking person. The questions begin with the image of an eagle, a well-known symbol for freedom and power, which flies over the Earth but does not interact with it. The Eagle symbolizes the majestic and beautiful and could even be seen as a symbol for the divine. More likely, it symbolizes Thel who, like the eagle, is free of worldly concerns and of despair. However beautiful and wonderful her life may appear, Thel is ultimately unhappy with her uninvolved life and desires more. Thel herself acts as a symbol for desire, as her name derives from "Greek for 'I will,' or 'I wish'" (Swearingen 127). Thel is also described as needing "some particular satisfaction" because she is not happy with her existence (Swearingen 127). She desires to know what goes on in the "pit" of life (Blake "The Book of Thel"). The pit represents the darkest recess of existence, and conjures up images of hell and pain, concepts found on the mortal earth, but not in the world of innocence. There is no pain in the Vales of Har, as the only discomfort Thel knows stems from her own perceived monotony. Thel no longer wants to fly above this dangerous yet enigmatic plane; she longs for experience. The motto also mentions the mole, a creature that by nature is blind and revels in the pit, which symbolizes humans. Humans are blind to their surroundings, just as a mole is, and must dig their way through the dirt and grime that living in the world of experience offers. In order to find out about life, Thel needs to lower herself down to the mole's level. Just as a soaring eagle could not mingle with a lowly mole, Thel cannot experience life from her protected Vales of Har.

Blake leaves the motto purposefully ambiguous, and this has caused a great deal of debate among scholars. Den Otter begins his essay on "'The Question' of Thel" by describing these lines as providing no "fundamental statements about the appropriate or characteristic nature of the text and its personae" (Den Otter 633). However, one could argue that Blake's use of symbolism tries to formulate some of the biggest questions known to humankind. Lines three and four of the epigraph ask if "wisdom can be put in a silver rod?" or if "love" could exist in a "golden bowl?" (Blake "The Book of Thel"). Can true wisdom and love, two pure and unattainable concepts, exist in a sexual world? By viewing the "silver rod" and the "golden bowl" as symbols for humans' innate sexuality, Blake foreshadows the sexual world Thel encounters at the very end of her book (Blake "The Book of Thel"). Thel is exposed to a world filled with radical and negative stimuli. She chooses to reject the world of experience with its death, dirt, and sickness, and instead chooses a land where every creature shares a personal relationship with God and is equal to one another. Blake uses his motto to foreshadow, reflect, and dissect the nature of mankind's colossal questions in ways that are relevant not only to his poem but also in life itself.

Wordsworth's epigraph also exercises interesting symbolism in order to emphasize further the messages found in his "Intimations Ode." The ode's epigraph is taken from the

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concluding lines of another of Wordsworth's poems, "My Heart Leaps Up" (Manning 527). Beginning with the line "The Child is the Father of Man," the epigraph declares the main message of the ode: the importance of childhood and its relationship to nature (Wordsworth "Ode: Intimations"). The child represents the highest tier of morality that man can ever hope to achieve because the child remains close to God. The child's tangible, though slowly fading, connection to the world of innocence illustrates the ultimate role of the child as not only a student of nature, but also a teacher demonstrating man's place in it. Though these lines were not the first epigraph to Wordsworth's controversial ode, they establish "at the head of the text the constant relation of man and nature" (Manning 540). This "constant" relationship with nature begins the life of every person and the child is a symbol of nature's ultimate gift to man (Manning 540). However, it is a gift that is too precious to endure and thus fades as man grows out of childhood. Manning asserts that the "unambivalent celebration of the child as the father of man" is a "backward-facing gesture" compared to the rest of the ode (Manning 539). In actuality, the epigraph intends to establish a positive perspective of looking to a child for spiritual guidance. Wordsworth places this message at the beginning of his ode to plant the idea that humankind should strive to look at nature through the eyes of a child. The child who imitates the "dialogues of business, love, or strife" is still untouched by the darkness of life (Wordsworth 7.98). Through the observation of a child's innocence, Wordsworth believes there is evidence supporting the pre-existence of the soul. The child is the empyreal symbol of innocence and its biggest affirmation.

William Blake's "The Book of Thel" and William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" both speak to a part of the human existence that has been forgotten. Whether it is in Blake's idyllic Vales of Har or Wordsworth's "visionary gleam," the world of innocence is depicted as wonderful, filled with life, love, and harmony with nature (Wordsworth 4.56). The contrary side of existence, experience is described as something lacking the aforementioned wondrous traits, but it is no less awe-inspiring. "The Book of Thel" heralds the mortal earth as something frightening and ruinous while Wordsworth's ode portends that he lives his life with a constant sense of loss. Like the concept of *déjà vu*, the fear of the unknown and the fond recollections of childhood are universal. These works attempt to paint two differing pictures of how one should go about living; one can keep to the safe and familiar while forgoing growth, or one can accept the world of experience and choose to see beauty within its imperfection. Ultimately, the poets leave this choice up to their readers, and this debate could endure eternally.

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Biographical Sketch

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Baby's Gun

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About a month ago, my two outdoor cats, Gertie Mae and Emma Clare were being disturbed by an opossum after nightfall. I sat down on the potting bench by the side of the garage where the marauder was last seen and waited.

Within moments, I heard a low growl just feet from where I sat; I rise quietly, shotgun in hand and shine the light up into one end of the cat run. When much to my surprise was the burly and elusive opossum, bearing teeth and claws; it was quite caught in the cat run.

This will be "point and click"; as Dr. Young at Prescott Family Clinic would call it. I set the light down on the ground and stuck the gun barrel into one end of the cat run and gently pulled the trigger toward me.

I decided to wait until morning to "clean up the 'possum mess" so the cats could once again enjoy their run. So, here it is; midnight at the farmhouse; and peace has once again settled upon the Old Home Place, or so I believed...

Gertie Mae begins to bat something with her foot and I realize a part of the stock from the antique "410 of my childhood" is on the ground and Gertie Mae is playing with it. I look down and a triangular piece where the stock attaches to the action portion of the shotgun is missing. I picked it up and just felt sick.