Ah! Sun-flower

POEM TEXT

Ah Sun-flower! weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the Sun:
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the travellers journey is done.

Where the Youth pined away with desire,
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow:
Arise from their graves and aspire,
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

SUMMARY

Oh, sunflower, so tired of time passing! You keep a close watch on the sun as it moves through the sky. You long for that lovely, sunny world where travelers' journeys come to an end.

The young person who has wasted away with unfulfilled longing and the fair virgin who is buried in the snow both rise up and ascend to this place after death. That's where my sunflower longs to be.

THEMES

LONGING FOR THE DIVINE

Blake's mysterious "Ah! Sun-flower" suggests that life itself is a state of longing. The poem's image of a sunflower reaching towards the light and warmth of the sun evokes the human longing to be reunited with God in heaven. In this interpretation of the poem, life on earth is a journey back to God's loving embrace.

The speaker presents a personified sunflower "seeking after that sweet golden clime"—that is, reaching for the lovely, peaceful warmth of the sun. This flower is "weary of time," however, perhaps because each day seems the same; it stretches and stretches towards the sun but can never reach it. It even "count[s] the steps of the Sun," suggesting that it takes note of the sun's passage into and out of the sky each day (almost like a prisoner chalking off each day of their sentence).

Readers likely get the sense that the speaker isn't just talking about a flower here: that "sweet golden clime" sounds a lot like heaven, a similarity bolstered by the fact that the speaker calls it the place where "the travellers journey is done." The word "traveller" nods to the common metaphor of life as a journey, and the poem thus implies that this "golden" destination can only be reached in death (that is, at the *end* of life's journey).

Note, too, that the sunny, yellow flower *resembles* the sun that it follows; humanity is likewise created in God's image and, the poem implies, thus *naturally* longs to be with God. And the poem's second stanza presents this longing as so intense it sounds almost sexual.

Here, the speaker describes a young person who "pined away with desire" and a "pale Virgin shrouded" (that is, buried) "in snow." The image of this untouched virgin and desirous youth rising from their tombs suggests that life somehow isn't consummated until people are with God again: the virgin in the "snow" is kept on ice waiting for her metaphorical bridegroom (God) while the youth "pined" forever until he died. Only after death can both finally go to that "sweet golden clime" the sunflower itself "wishes to go."

The sun-following sunflower thus stands for people and their desire to go to their heavenly home, which is perhaps why the speaker describes it as "my sunflower." The speaker senses the same longing the sunflower feels to return to "that sweet golden clime" of heaven: a blissful eternity that has no place for the weariness of "time." Living beings, the poem suggests, come from God and *go back* to God, with the adventure of earthly life taking place in between these two points in eternity.

It's worth noting, though, that the poem can also be read as *criticizing* the denial of the joys of earthly life in anticipation of the return to heaven. Blake often expressed the belief that people should embrace their natural instincts rather than give in to the oppressive rules of organized religion. Both interpretations are valid: perhaps the poem is at once acknowledging the longed-for bliss of eternal heaven *and* pointing out how this desire might distract people from the brief but bright temporary pleasures of being alive.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Ah Sun-flower! weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the Sun:

The poem begins with an apostrophe, which also provides its title: "Ah Sun-flower!" This places the flower front and center, hinting to readers that the poem is a meditation on what this

small piece of the natural world represents to the speaker.

Right up top, that humble "Ah" opens the poem to multiple interpretations. That "Ah" might be the expression of sympathy, amazement, or even an exasperated sigh. Of course, it could also be a combination of all these things!

What readers know for sure is that this particular sunflower appears "weary of time"—that is, tired of the *passing of time*. The word "weary" specifically suggests that the flower has been suffering for a while. This is also an example of both personification and the pathetic fallacy; the *flower's* world-weariness might really be a reflection of the *speaker's*.

- Worth noting here is that this poem appears in the *Experience* section of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and these *Experience* poems tend to express inconvenient truths about the reality of being alive (the *Innocence* poems, on the other hand, are more joyous and idealistic). The world-weary speaker's tone fits right in with this section of the book.

In line 2, the speaker describes the way the sunflower "countest" (or counts) the steps of the Sun." These "steps" refer to the different positions of the sun as it makes its way through the sky from dawn to dusk, before finally disappearing during the night. (Young sunflower blossoms actually do follow the sun as it passes through the sky, something called heliotropism!)

Listen to the meter of this line:

> Who count- | est the steps | of the Sun:

The first foot here is an iamb (da-DUM) followed by two anapests (da-da-DUM). This creates a rising, galloping rhythm that evokes the sun's relentless march across the sky.

Yet notice, too, how the second line also evokes the flower's weariness through quiet sibilance (some of which is also an example of alliteration):

> Who countest the steps of the Sun:

All these whispery /s/ sounds connote sleepiness and even weakness. The sunflower longs to be close to the sun, but for all its sunward stretching, it remains rooted firmly in the earth.

LINES 3-4

> *Seeking after that sweet golden clime*
> *Where the travellers journey is done.*

Lines 3 and 4 continue to discuss the sunflower's longing for the sun, and they also start to associate the sun with the heavenly afterlife.

The sunflower has already been personified as "weary of time" in line 1, and here the speaker presents it as a creature capable of feeling desire: it "seek[s] after that sweet golden clime." In other words, it spends its life stretching upwards to the warmth and light of the sun.

The world of the sun is "sweet" (perhaps in contrast to the bitterness of earthly life) and "golden," a word that literally refers to the sun's light but also treats this light as something valuable, beautiful, and good. "Clime," meanwhile, refers to a region/atmosphere but could also be a pun on "climb," given that this alternative world is somewhere *up there*.

Note, too, how the poem uses alliteration and assonance to link the sunflower's desire with the object of desire, the sun: the flower is "Seeking" that "sweet golden" world. Those long, /ee/ sounds, in particular, seem to evoke the strain of the sunflower's own efforts.

It's no coincidence that this "sweet golden clime" sounds a lot like a description of heaven: a place of eternal joy suffused with beautiful light and gentle bliss. Blake was a strong believer in the afterlife, and line 4 makes it even clear that the speaker isn't just waxing poetic about photosynthesis!

Here, the speaker calls this "sweet golden clime" the place where "the traveller" goes after their "journey is done." This "journey" is a metaphor for life, something that the poem conceives of as ending with a return to heaven. Death, the poem implies, brings with it a sense of relief and release as the soul returns to God. Life on earth is only temporary; while not without its glories, true joy, beauty, and peace await in eternity. This idea concludes the stanza, thus adding to the sense of a journey being completed.

By now, readers have gotten a sense of the poem's rhyme scheme: each quatrain follows an ABAB pattern (lines 1 and 3 rhyme with each other, as do lines 2 and 4). This is a common rhyme scheme, and it lends the poem some predictable music.

LINES 5-6

> *Where the Youth pined away with desire,*
> *And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow:*

The second stanza focuses on two figures other than the sunflower: the "Youth" (or young person) and the "Virgin." Here, it becomes even clearer that the "sweet golden clime" referred to in line 3 is, in fact, the heavenly afterlife. The anaphora of "Where" in line 5 demonstrates that this section of the poem is a continuation of the first stanza—that is, that the setting is the same:

> Where the travellers journey is done.
> Where the Youth pined away with desire,

The speaker first introduces the "Youth." The capitalization suggests this is an archetype of youthful people in general rather than one young person in particular. Like the sunflower,

this person's life is (or was, because the youth turns out to be dead) defined by "desire." Indeed, the Youth was *destroyed* by desire: they not only "pined," meaning they felt deep, unsatisfied longing, but they "pined away," in the sense that their longing took them *away* from earthly life. The long /i/ assonance of "pined" and "desire" has an almost whiney, desperate sound that evokes this state of restless dissatisfaction.

The "pale Virgin" is a similar character to the "Youth." Both are defined by their relationship to "desire," though the Virgin's preoccupation is more with remaining pure than satisfying an earthly longing (though this figure isn't gendered here, virgins are typically female in Blake's poetry and artwork).

Now, readers might reasonably wonder what the Youth and the Virgin have to do with sunflowers. All three of them exist—or existed—in a state of discontentment on an essential, soulful level. All of them are, in a sense, *incomplete*. And the suggestion here is that the Youth and Virgin will be complete only in the afterlife.

Considering this poem appears in the *Experience* section of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, it's also possible that these descriptions contain an element of criticism. Blake believed that organized religion was an oppressive force and denied people a true relationship with God—and, importantly, made them miss out on the joys of life in a physical, temporary body.

The paleness of the Virgin might, then, suggest weakness (though being pale was also considered an attractive quality at the time). Alternatively, the Youth and virgin might suggest that the intense longing for God is so intensely passionate that it's almost sexual—that is, human life isn't fully *consummated* until a reunion with God takes place.

LINES 7-8

Arise from their graves and aspire,
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

The poem's last two lines describe the ultimate destination of the "Youth" and the "pale Virgin" from lines 5 and 6: the "sweet golden clime" of heaven. This final resting place is only attainable through death; once the Youth and Virgin are in their graves, they can "arise" out and ascend ("aspire") to heaven. This is also the place "Where" (another moment of anaphora) the sun-flower "wishes to go," suggesting that *all* life ultimately longs for this return to God.

Notice how the assonance of "arise" and "aspire" adds energy and emphasis to this important moment in the poem. These words also both feature a rising metrical rhythm ("arise," "aspire") that subtly enacts the soaring movement being described.

Death, as the poem presents it, is a kind of ticket to the afterlife, something linked with the upward trajectory of the soul. Rather paradoxically, only after being buried in "their graves" in their earth can the soul rise up to heaven.

The last line—still using personification—portrays the sunflower as also wishing to ascend to heaven. The interesting twist, though, is that the speaker here uses the possessive adjective "my." The speaker *didn't* begin the poem with "Ah my sunflower," so it's a curious and significant moment.

"My" implies that the speaker feels a connection with the sunflower; the latter's instinctive longing to be with the sun neatly mirrors how the speaker perhaps feels about God. Neither can go where they want to just yet, but in death, the poem suggests, all longing will be fulfilled. The satisfying chime of the rhyme between "snow" (line 6) and "go" makes the ending feel gently optimistic and peaceful, as though the poem at once acknowledges both the strife of being alive and the ultimate release that comes with the ascension to heaven.

SYMBOLS

THE SUNFLOWER

The sunflower's relationship with the sun symbolizes humanity's relationship with God.

The sunflower yearns to be with the sun, whose metaphorical "steps" (or movements across the sky) it counts all day. Its bright yellow bloom even *looks like* the sun! Likewise, Christianity teaches that humanity is made in God's image. And just as the flower reaches for "that sweet golden clime," the poem implies that human beings seek reunion with God in heaven. The use of the word "my" in line 8 further implies that the speaker recognizes themselves in the sunflower—that the flower's "seeking" represents the speaker's own.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 7-8

THE SUN

In the poem, the sun represents both heaven and God.

Religion has often depicted the afterlife as a place of golden light somewhere *up there* among the clouds, so it makes sense that the sun here offers the promise of a "sweet golden clime." This is where "travellers" end up once the metaphorical journey of life has run its course.

Note, too, that the yellow sunflower resembles the sun, just as, according to many religious teachings, human beings are created in God's image. The sun, like God, is also a source of warmth and light that nourishes life on earth.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "Who countest / the steps of the Sun: / Seeking after that sweet golden clime / Where the travellers journey is done."
- **Line 8:** "Where my Sun-flower wishes to go."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration to bring its images and emotions to life on the page. The strongest alliteration appears in lines 2-3:

> Who countest the steps of the Sun:
> Seeking after that sweet golden clime

These sibilant sounds add a gentle hush to the poem's opening stanza. These are soft, sleepy sounds that perhaps evoke the sunflower's weariness; it's tired of chasing after the sun all day, every day.

There's more alliteration in lines 5 and 6, with the plosive /p/ sounds of "pined" and "pale." This alliteration is subtle, given the space between these words, but it still connects the poem's two human figures: the "Youth" who wasted away "with desire" and the "Virgin" who died chaste, "shrouded in snow."

The poem's final line features alliteration as well:

> Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

The /w/ sounds here are softly melodic, and they also chime with the /w/ in "flower" (an example of consonance). They make the ending sound subtly hopeful, and they also link the "flower" with heaven (that "Where") and desire ("wishes").

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "steps," "Sun"
- **Line 3:** "Seeking," "sweet"
- **Line 5:** "pined"
- **Line 6:** "pale"
- **Line 7:** "Arise," "aspire"
- **Line 8:** "Where," "wishes"

APOSTROPHE

"Ah! Sun-flower" uses apostrophe right away: the speaker directly addresses a sunflower (which Blake spells "sun-flower"), something that, of course, can't answer back.

The whole poem flows from this initial moment, in which the speaker looks at the sunflower and sees a kindred spirit, another creature longing for another world. The apostrophe grants the poem a reflective, meditative quality; the speaker is taking a moment to deeply contemplate the natural world that surrounds them.

The specific terms of the speaker's apostrophe are a bit ambiguous, however. That is, the tone of that opening "Ah" is hard to pin down. "Ah" can express frustration, sympathy, pain, amazement, satisfaction—really, almost anything! Perhaps the speaker is expressing a combination of all these feelings; perhaps the speaker sees them all reflected in the flower as it reaches for the sun.

Note, too, how the poem's final line echoes its first, albeit with one major difference: suddenly the speaker calls the sunflower "my Sun-flower." This confirms that the speaker sees themselves in sunflower—that this flower reflects their own feelings about life, longing, and God.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Ah Sun-flower! weary of time, / Who countest the steps of the Sun: / Seeking after that sweet golden clime / Where the travellers journey is done."

ASSONANCE

"Ah! Sun-flower" uses assonance to evoke both spiritual longing and the frustrations of earthly life.

In the sunflower, the speaker sees a creature wishing to escape the confines of its earthbound existence. Line 3 phrases this as "Seeking after that sweet golden clime" (meaning the sun/heaven). Here, the assonance of the long /ee/sounds combines with sibilance ("Seeking" and "sweet") to add intensity and emphasis to this description of the flower's longing.

Note, too, how the shared sounds here link the *feeling* of desire ("Seeking") with the *object* of that desire ("that sweet golden clime," a.k.a. the sun). That long, stretchy /ee/ sound also conveys desperation and effort. Just imagine how different the poem would feel had the speaker had said, "Looking for that nice golden clime." The assonance makes the poem's spiritual frustration all the more vivid for readers.

Other examples of assonance also call readers' attention to this feeling of thwarted desire. In line 5, for example, the speaker describes a "Youth pined away with desire." With this long vowel sound, it's as though the poem has adopted a whiney tone to match the Youth's longing.

"Arise" and "aspire" in line 7 then link death with spiritual release. The dead "arise" from their graves in the earth and "aspire"—that is, ascend—to heaven. The shared vowel conveys how one action (death) leads to the other (rising up to heaven).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Seeking," "sweet"

- **Line 5:** "pined," "desire"
- **Line 7:** "Arise," "aspire"

METAPHOR

"Ah! Sun-flower" uses multiple metaphors (in addition to the figurative device known as personification—more on that in a minute).

First, the speaker describes the flower as a figure "Who countest the steps of the Sun." This is a metaphorical description of the way that young sunflower blossoms quite literally tilt along with the sun as it moves across the sky (something called "heliotropism"). This metaphor brings the flower to life and makes it sounds like the plant is closely and intently watching the sun.

There are more metaphors in lines 3 and 4, which link the sun with the heavenly afterlife:

> Ah Sun-flower! weary of time,
> Who countest the steps of the Sun:
> Seeking after that sweet golden clime
> Where the travellers journey is done.

"Clime" here means atmosphere, and describing it as "sweet" and "golden" makes it seem like a dreamy, blissful place. If readers haven't yet made the link between this "clime" and the heavenly afterlife, the next line makes it clear: this "clime," the speaker says, is the place where "the travellers journey" ends.

Life is commonly referred to as a metaphorical journey, a trip made from one point in time to another. The "traveller" here is simply someone on that earthly journey, which "is done" when the traveller dies. Blake's poem presents death as a kind of *release* from the frustrations of earthly life. In death, people—and sunflowers—are set free from their longing and reunited with God in "that sweet golden clime" that is heaven itself. (Note that "clime" also works as a subtle pun on "climb," given that all the figures in the poem are reaching or rising up towards this "sweet golden" place.)

Using this metaphor makes sure that the reader doesn't miss the point: the speaker isn't really—or not exclusively, at least—talking about sunflowers and the sun. The poem is really about humanity's relationship with God and the "journey" of life.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Who countest the steps of the Sun:"
- **Line 3:** "Seeking after "
- **Lines 3-4:** "that sweet golden clime / Where the travellers journey is done."

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies the sunflower throughout the poem, granting it a human-like capacity to think and feel. All this personification makes it clear that the speaker isn't *just* talking about a *sunflower's* desires here, but also about some very *human* emotions.

The speaker describes the sunflower as a dissatisfied and "weary" creature. This flower wants very badly to be with the sun, and it follows its idol as it moves through the sky. Almost like a prisoner chalking off days of their sentence, the sunflower "count[s] the steps of the Sun" from dawn to dusk (a metaphorical description of an actual botanical phenomenon: young sunflower blossoms really do tilt to follow the sun's movement). The "steps of the Sun" could also be read as personification, with the sun walking overhead.

This personification clues readers into the fact that the relationship between the sunflower and the sun represents the relationship between humanity and God. People, like the sunflower, "Seek[]" the "sweet golden clime / Where the travellers journey is done"—that is, the golden light of the heavenly afterlife.

In the poem's final line, the speaker suddenly claims ownership of the sunflower: "my Sun-flower wishes to go [to that sweet golden clime]," the speaker says, implying that the *speaker* is the one who's "weary of time" and longing to be reunited with God in heaven.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 8

REPETITION

"Ah Sun-flower!" uses repetition to focus the reader's attention on the "sweet golden clime" in the sky—that is, on the sun/heaven.

Lines 4, 5, and 8 all begin with "Where" (lines 4 and 5 with "Where the"), an example of anaphora that stresses the importance of the poem's setting:

> Where the travellers journey is done.
> Where the Youth pined away with desire,
> [...]
> Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

With three out of eight lines all starting with a word that relates to location, the poem captures the sunflower's apparent obsession with "that sweet golden clime / Where the travellers journey is done." In other words, the poem's structure itself suggests the intensity of the longing being described; it's all the sunflower, and the speaker, can think about.

That "Where" also connects the "sweet golden clime" that the sunflower longs for with the place that "the Youth" and "the pale Virgin" go when they die (when they "Arise from their graves"). In this way, the anaphora makes it clear that the sunny world from stanza 1 represents heaven.

The poem also uses parallelism in lines 5 and 6:

> Where the Youth pined away with desire,
> And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow:

The similarity of the language here reflects the similarity between the Youth and the Virgin. Neither Youth nor Virgin has their "desire" fulfilled until death, at which point they can finally, metaphorically consummate their relationship with God. The similarity of the lines, then, suggests that reunion with God *through death* is a universal experience, making life a brief journey between two points in eternity.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Where the"
- **Line 5:** "Where the"
- **Line 6:** "the"
- **Line 8:** "Where"

SIBILANCE

Sibilance appears throughout "Ah Sun-flower!" and adds a gentle, reverent hush to the poem. Listen to lines 2 and 3, for example, in which the speaker explains why the sunflower is "weary of time":

> Who countest the steps of the Sun:
> Seeking after that sweet golden clime

These sleepy /s/ sounds capture the sunflower's weariness. All the flower wants is to be with the sun, and it spends every day trying to stretch upwards towards it. These wispy, whispery /s/ sounds suggest the flower's breathless, exhausting longing.

Sibilance then conjures a wintery atmosphere in line 6's "shrouded in snow." The final line is quite sibilant as well: "Sun-flower wishes." The poem ends with gentle, delicate, hushed sounds that suggest the tenderness of the flower's longing.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "countest," "steps," "Sun"
- **Line 3:** "Seeking," "sweet"
- **Line 6:** "shrouded," "snow"
- **Line 8:** "Sun-flower wishes"

VOCABULARY

Weary (Line 1) - Deeply tired, exhausted.

Countest (Line 2) - Counts, takes note of.

Clime (Line 3) - Region, atmosphere, or climate (with a possible pun on "climb").

Pined Away (Line 5) - Longed for to the point of weakness/death.

Shrouded (Line 6) - Covered or buried.

Arise (Line 7) - Get up.

Aspire (Line 7) - Ascend (to heaven).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Ah! Sunflower" has a simple form, consisting of two quatrains (a.k.a. four-line stanzas) with an alternating ABAB rhyme scheme. Quatrains are common throughout Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and poetry in general. Here, they're a simple container for a profound and mysterious set of ideas, one that doesn't distract readers with fancy or unexpected formal twists.

METER

"Ah! Sunflower!" uses a meter loosely organized around anapaests: feet with two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable (creating a da-da-DUM rhythm). Most lines contain three anapests, making them anapestic trimeter. Line 4 provides a clear example of this meter at work:

> Where the trav- | ellers jour- | ney is done.

This is called a rising meter, meaning it moves steadily from unstressed to stressed beats. In this way, it subtly evokes the endless "Seeking" of the sunflower itself as it stretches towards the sun. Anapests also convey a galloping or marching rhythm, perhaps evoking the relentlessness of this desire for the sun/heaven.

The poem features some metrical variations as well. Line 2 uses an iamb (da-DUM) in its first foot, for example:

> Who count- | est the steps | of the Sun:

This is still a rising rhythm, but the shorter line speeds things up a bit—perhaps adding some intensity and excitement to the sun's movement across the sky. There are a few similar variations throughout the poem, which keep the poem's language from becoming too stuffy or repetitive.

RHYME SCHEME

"Ah! Sun-flower" uses a simple alternating rhyme scheme:

ABAB CDCD

This rhyme scheme appears throughout Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. For the most part, the rhyme propels the poem forward, makes the poem's language memorable, and gives complex ideas a deceptively simple sound.

SPEAKER

Like most Blake poems, "Ah! Sun-flower" doesn't give much away about its speaker. Keeping the identity of the speaker somewhat mysterious is part of what gives Blake's poems their visionary, mystical, and universal quality. Rather than specifically dealing with one person's experience, the poem digs at fundamental truths about what it means to be alive,

With that in mind, though, perhaps this poem reveals more about its speaker than first meets the eye. Readers might wonder, for example, if the speaker's readiness to address the sunflower through apostrophe—and to paint it as "weary" and spiritually unfulfilled—might actually be a mirror to the speaker's own thoughts and feelings. The last line offers a little twist to support this idea when the speaker refers to "my sunflower." In using this possessive adjective, the speaker implies that they feel a certain kinship with the sunflower. Perhaps, then, the poem chronicles the speaker's own spiritual frustrations—and their longing to be reunited with God in the blissful eternity of heaven.

SETTING

"Ah Sun-flower!" doesn't have a clear setting, though, given that it's talking about a sunflower blossom following the sun's movement, it certainly takes place outside!

Beyond that, readers can think of the poem as broadly conjuring up two different worlds:

- The sunflower, like the speaker (and the Youth and the Virgin), is a creature of the earth. Earthly life in the poem is both temporary and wearisome. Rooted in the ground, the sunflower follows the sun through the sky, wishing it could be *up there*. But no matter how hard it tries, it can't leave its earthly home while alive.
- Beyond the earth exists the "sweet golden clime" of heaven, which is conflated here with the sun. This realm represents the blissful eternity to which all "travellers"—that is, those who experience earthly life—end their journeys.

The speaker suggests that it's only in death that living beings can make their way from the earthly world to the heavenly, and that this final journey comes with a strong sense of relief and release.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Blake (1757-1827) is a poet unlike any other. Often considered one of the first of the English Romantics, he also stands apart from any movement as a unique philosopher, prophet, and artist.

Blake published "Ah! Sun-flower" as part of the *Experience* section of his best-known work, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794). This two-part book examines what Blake called "the two contrary states of the human soul," and many of the poems in *Songs of Innocence* have a counterpart in *Songs of Experience*—a twin poem that reads the same subjects from a new perspective.

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

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

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

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

William Blake was a deeply religious man, but he was highly critical of *organized* religion. He was born to a family of Dissenters, a group of English Protestants who broke away from and rebelled against the Church of England (and instilled in Blake an early distrust of the religious status quo). He generally saw top-down religious structures as getting in the way of a more direct relationship between humanity and God.

Blake also spent much of his life railing against the cruelties of 19th-century British society. And he had plenty to rail against! The England of Blake's time was just getting caught up in the Industrial Revolution, a period during which the economy shifted from farming to manufacturing. The countryside began to empty out, and the cities began to swell. And English class

divisions, always intense, began to seem even more pronounced as impoverished workers lived cheek-by-jowl with the fashionable and wealthy in newly crowded towns.

Workers during the early Industrial Revolution got a pretty raw deal. Even young children were forced to work in factories, dig in mines, and sweep chimneys (an absurdly dangerous job, contrary to the cheery Mary Poppins image many are familiar with: chimney-sweeps as young as three or four years old regularly suffocated in narrow flues). Adults didn't have it much easier. With few regulations to keep factory owners in check, bosses could impose impossible working hours, or withhold pay for any number of trifling offenses.

For Blake, the factories of the Industrial Revolution represented a form of physical and mental enslavement—the "mind-forg'd manacles" mentioned in his poem "London." His poetry proceeds from both a deep commitment to God and an even deeper dissatisfaction with the ways in which society spoils this spiritual relationship.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Songs of Innocence and Experience — Visit the Blake Archive to see this collection as Blake originally published it: as a beautiful, illuminated manuscript. (http://www.blakearchive.org/work/songsie)
- "Ah! Sun-flower!" Engraving — Check out the poem in its original layout and with its accompanying artwork. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ah!_Sun-flower#/media/File:Songs_of_Innocence_and_of_Experience,_copy_AA,_1826_(The_Fitzwilliam_Museum)_object_43_My_Pretty_Rose_Tree.jpg)
- Blake's Biography — Learn more about Blake's life and work at the website of the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/william-blake)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to the famous Beat Poet Allen Ginsberg read "Ah! Sun-flower." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5gKZ8vI8Gk)
- Blake's Visions — An excerpt from a documentary in which writer Iain Sinclair discusses Blake's religious visions. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8hcQ_jPIZA)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- A Dream
- A Poison Tree
- Holy Thursday (Songs of Innocence)
- London
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Innocence)
- The Clod and the Pebble
- The Divine Image
- The Ecchoing Green
- The Garden of Love
- The Lamb
- The Little Black Boy
- The Sick Rose
- The Tyger
- To Autumn

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