

# William Blake: How Innocence and Virginity Corrupts the Church

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## Abstract:

This essay explores how William viewed sexuality, the church, and forgiveness. Pulling from writers Paul Miner and Alicia Ostriker, I'll be piecing things together for why Blake was so fascinated with human sexuality on a spiritual level, and in what way he felt he had justified it in his mind.

## Critical Question:

I wanted to further investigate how Blake perceived sexuality, especially after reading the Book of Thel. I felt like in my own critical thinking, I saw a connection between this and his take on innocence and experience. But knowing many of the things Blake has to say connect to his rebellious spirit towards organized religion, I felt there was still something more there and wanted to do more research on the topic.

## Prompt:

I chose prompt four for the list. "Write an essay about where you think about Blake and one of the 'keys' to his thinking, as I've described them: he's a protesting Protestant; he hates conventional authority; he creates myths. One way to focus, this, for example, is to write about gender and Blake's myth." Specifically, I wanted to focus on his two key ideas and how they work together; his protesting of religion and his take on human sexuality

Common Christian practice teaches us to restrain ourselves from our fleshly desires. Whether it be sex before marriage, having slept with more than one partner within a lifetime, or homosexuality, we must not condone what our humanity prompts us to do. A picture perfect Christian, Catholic, or Protestant is never seen running about doing whatever it is they feel. They translate the Bible to condemn this whenever cities filled with people gave into temptation and sin and began sleeping with one another, male and female alike.

However, William Blake, a Protestant himself, rebels against these concepts in the first few books he printed in his lifetime. His art and content suggest that doing so is rejecting a very human aspect of ourselves, and that virginity, both in mind and of body, can be just as corrupting. What might that say about the church, then, that so prominently stands against this, but rather idealizes perfection and purity? What does this say of the New Testament God that Christians began to sculpt? It very well may be contradictory towards the nature of forgiveness and ‘ripping the veil’. I’ll be exploring this and how many of these questions piece together to form what I, and a few others, have gained from William Blake’s take on sexuality and religion.

From the very beginning, Blake was trying to defy all traditional thought created by the church. One of the most unique things about the way he does this, is it’s never entirely direct but rather allows you to feel the tug between two very prevalent concepts in human life; innocence and experience. Though many of these poems and prose seem to have little to do with sexuality, there are those who argue otherwise.

Alicia Ostriker, author of *Desire Gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality*, is one of these people. Through her translations, poems like “The Garden of Love” were some of the first to advocate Blake’s stance on sexuality. She claims that “the garden is, in brief, at once

the earthly paradise and the body of the woman.” (Ostriker, 156) If we are to continue onward with Blake’s work through this lense on his take on sexuality, it’s easy to see that his earlier poems such as these set up a stance for the reader to accept more of what he has to offer on the subject later on.

The most fascinating part about these poems is that already he has begun to mention the church and sexuality in his paintings. In “The Garden of Love”, he draws a “nude torso of a woman with a cathedral where her genitals should be”. This symbolism seems to show how the natural body is trying to be shamed or covered up by religion by covering up her genitalia with a cathedral. Already, he’s pushing against the walls of the box Christianity and Religion has tried to enclose him in.

Ostriker also mentions how the poem “London” advocates something similar, and puts things together brilliantly by pointing out how a bigger grievance on the church, even more so than economics and politics, was the denial and repression of human sexuality. Why does Blake care so much about sexuality and freeing the church from the bonds it has placed on itself? Why is sexual repression considering such a prison by Blake? Perhaps it is due to the fact Blake also believes that the church has built walls that further encouraged immorality and weakness of constitution and experience, as he mentioned a few times in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

Here, he states things like, “Prisons are built with stones of law, brothels of bricks and religion” (MHH, Plate 8) or “Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained...” (MHH, Plate 5) He not only sees the repression as inhuman, but a cause of turmoil.

We see this when men like Bromion had been restraining himself of sex and desire in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* until suddenly marrying Oothoon and acting out after. Bromion represents sexual violence, sure, but what if he also represents what the church and culture were trying to create out of a man? Ostriker suggests this, as men in the church back then, and even now to a much duller extent, are normally expected to be manly and aggressive, so as to take what they desire. That is what Blake means when he speaks of those weak enough to be restrained. Bromion was weak enough to be restrained by the church to fit the mold that was created for him, and in the end, it still produced something foul and immoral in our eyes today.

What is even more powerful about this writing of Blake's is the fact that Oothoon began to take her power back when she decided to defy what is normally expected of her in the church and open up her sexuality to Theotormon. That by their love, even though Theotormon is not a typical aggressive male, they became looked to be more powerful and wise than Bromion in the eyes of the Daughters of Albion.

That in and of itself is extremely profound. That by setting up these harsh rules and denying the needs that God created us to have, more bad of it can come than good. Of course, the ideal of purity still plays a huge role in Christianity back then and today. Even with that, Blake seems to think it is detrimental, which ties back to why he included some aspects of sexuality being a good thing back in the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The best source in order to back this idea up is the *Book of Thel*.

By my own interpretations, this book really stresses the importance of experience, using sexuality as an example, over innocence. The fact that Thel is a woman is of high importance in this work. She is looking to learn what more there is to life and what she can learn from others

and the nature around her, yet she yearns to make herself pure. The ending of *The Book of Thel* vocalizes through “the voice of sorrow breathed from the hollow pit.” That entire second to last stanza reminds me of Luke 11:33-36 or Matthew 4:24 that mention to be careful what you are exposed to. In popular culture Christianity, kids are often introduced to the song “be careful little eyes what you see, be careful little ears what you hear...” and so on. But instead, this voice in the dirt tells the virgin the opposite. That she must expose herself to these things. It skews the entire concept of purity and virginity being a great deed. Not only that, but this terrifies Thel, who can no longer handle going out into the world with this reality because of how overwhelming and new all of it was. She was too inexperienced to understand any of it and returned back to a safer place.

Why is Blake against this? Paul Miner, who wrote *Blake and the sinful arts of forgiveness*, may have an answer. Though he doesn’t address this too directly with the examples just named, Miner advocates how forgiveness was something that Blake was trying to stress, especially in his later work. This included much about sexuality and purity as well. He so much as states in his first sentence of the work, “William Blake irrevocably associated the sexual act with the Forgiveness of Sins and artistic Inspiration...” (Page 1, Miner) William Blake isn’t just blindly excusing things he believes the Bible blatantly speaks against, but understands sexuality in such a way that forgiveness is far more powerful than purity.

The New Testament was brought to light in order to convey the news of sins being forgiven, and in some ways it’d be easy to see that Blake would be advocating that purity is no longer needed anymore. Which, in all honesty, is considered an extreme and radical way to approach

Christianity, even today. We know that he was trying to make this connection, as well, since he compared the tearing of the veil with a woman's loss of virginity in his later work.

This means that he sees virginity and purity to have been transformed when Jesus died on the cross. But in his eyes, the church still binds us away from the freedom that we were given. Rather than living our lives in purity and perfection, Blake sees that experience and wisdom by going out into the world and trying things is far more valuable. That human sexuality should not be denied, and that worse things are ahead when brothels are being built by the bricks of religion.

Some of this may seem like the ramblings of a mad man. But there is truth to many of the things William Blake is bringing forth. One example is the silly tale of a pastor's kid, who either entirely falls for Christianity and purity in all ways, or goes off the deep end after being restrained for so many years. Or how there are many people of the Catholic church, and other branches of Christianity, that have had sexual scandals and immoral actions committed by the participants and leaders of the organization. At the very least, it must be acceptable to say that denying ourselves experience completely could end in ruin, and that there is mercy for those who put themselves out there anyway.