



## Responsibility and Thought in William Blake’s “The Fly”

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### Abstract

This article is an analysis of William Blake’s poem “The Fly” from the angles of Responsibility and Thought. The article agrees with much of the secondary literature that “The Fly” introduces an attempted identification between an inattentive philosophizing narrator and fly in the first three stanzas and then challenges it in the final two. However, the article makes the novel case that the narrator’s initial attempt at contemplative union with the fly is not completely rebuffed by the quizzical non sequitur contained in the final two stanzas. Blake’s oblique allusion to God is connected to the narrator’s recognition that he and the fly share a real and significant union, even if the two parties interpolate each other in completely alien forms.

**Keywords:** William Blake; The fly; Responsibility; Thought.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Blake’s Dominant Imagery

This poem has not been chosen perniciously for its brevity, but rather for its cryptic gravitas, in order to gain a deeper understanding of Blake and his world. Blake as a child was like a sponge, only more so. Not only did he absorb the intricacies of what I call his normal environs, but also that of some psychic other world. There exists anecdotal evidence that as a boy, Blake saw angels on Peckham Rye. His mother is supposed to have beaten him for saying he had seen Ezekiel. It is even suggested he was the survivor of a twin birth who often received insights from his dead sibling. Whatever the case, Blake was steeped in the religion of his time together with its concomitant superstitions.

Some understanding of this is necessary for any comprehension of Blake’s oeuvre. The poet and artist began his career as a simple engraver and remained so throughout his life. Apprenticed to James Basire, he was almost locked in the past for Basire was of the old school, a man of hard lines. As he progressed, Blake moved on to more modern techniques and eventually developed his own but he can always be viewed as an advocate of his master and belonging to The Gothic.

Late in the 18th Century Blake moved a step away from engraving of others’ work as if on an escalator, letting others pass, and turned to his poetry. He wrote and published his collection *Songs Of Experience*, from which “The Fly” comes, 1793-94. Of course he was still taking commissions for others but this was a fertile time for him, an era when he wrote many of his great poems and produced some of his own great and unique paintings.

As the title *Songs of Experience* suggests, they were the works of an older, wiser poet. So where is the wisdom in “The Fly”? What is it trying to tell us of experience? How does it inform us concerning the Human Condition? For, by now, Blake was well known in artistic circles and, indeed, had much to say about life. The earlier *Songs of Innocence* and later *Songs of Experience* represent two of several artistic pinnacles in Blake’s career which, at a personal level ended in 1810. In this year he had funded an exhibition of his own works, which had been a failure. It is tempting to ask if he looked back at “The Fly” at this point in his life. It would have resonated.

### 1.2. Objectives of the Study

The present study has two main objectives:

1. To examine the flow of the poem stanza-by-stanza and identify the main shift in the poem’s thematic focus from sentimentalism to accusatory riddle;
2. To show hitherto unremarked upon allusions and imagery and make the case that they hint at a subtle agreement and unity underlying the disjointed appearance of a poem that most scholars have regarded as disagreeing with itself.

### 1.3. Research Questions

With these objectives in mind the article will address itself to two main questions:

1. What are the main two contrasting themes of this poem?
2. How does the poem subtly bring two opposites together in employing disagreement in its themes?

## 2. Literature Review

Of all of William Blake's poems "The Fly" is amongst the most obscure. Compared with more famous poems of his like "The Tyger" the secondary literature dealing with "The Fly" is miniscule indeed. Nevertheless enough has been written about it for a fairly lively exchange of opinions to emerge.

Ashley Cross sees the poem as unambiguously negative in its assessment of the narrator as callous and his identification with the dead fly as at first a hedonistic trivialization of life and then a nihilistic equalization of life and death. "Whichever stanza is last ("For I dance, / And drink & sing: / Till some blind hand / Shall brush my wing" or "Then am I / A happy fly, / If I live, / Or if I die."), the effect is the same: the speaker has transformed his sympathetic potential into a state of insensibility in which no action – human's or fly's – matters" (2014, 341). Cross follows Michael Simpson and Warren Stevenson in reading "The Fly" as parodying a certain kind of philosophical sentimentalism. "The Fly" "parodies the philosophical discourse that identifies insect and human in order to assert imaginative power" (2014, 341).

Although John Beer notes the poem's satirical element, he also notes it is using cryptic jest to send a message of respect and humility for all life. However, Beer thinks that the way Blake mixes satire and humility here has structural issues: "The main problem with the poem is, however, that the second half does not cohere properly with the first" (Beer, 2005). The result is that the poem is a kind of "mental puzzle" (60).

Simpson (1996), notes that the disagreement between the beginning and end of the poem appears stark enough to entitle one to infer that the two parts of the poem are to be spoken by different narrators.

Hirsch (1964), discusses "The Fly" as an example of how the *Songs of Experience* are trying to send a more mature and cynical message than the earlier *Songs of Innocence* with its more naïve and optimistic outlook in a way that signals a change in attitudes of the author himself. Perhaps this suggests a shift in attitudes of the author within the poem itself.

G.S. Morris is the first to suspect that the fly itself is speaking, arguing against the narrator, in the last two stanzas. Morris notes that even with the way Blake presented this poem his own attitudes seem to have shifted over time. He sees that Blake's earliest picture of the poem to accompany it indicates that Blake initially saw the poem as making a cold-negative message about mocking the phony self-aggrandizing sentimentality of the narrator and the fly's own rejection of that lie, insisting upon irreconcilable difference between them. But that later more positive presentations of the poem indicate that Blake had somehow warmed to the fly's wit and saw the fly as teaching a lesson, sharing something valuable and positive to be learned to someone who can be taught, and thus does care. "Although one can only speculate on the artist's reasons, the gradual alterations in color suggest an early cynicism evolving into an identification with his natural subject. Perhaps Blake's fly won over even Blake." (Morris, 2006). Blake's contrasting presentations of the same poem suggest its internal disagreement is sharp yet ambiguous enough to justify both a negative and positive readings.

## 3. The First Stanza

The first stanza reads as follows:

Little fly,  
Thy summer's play  
My thoughtless hand  
Has brushed away

Blake's use, even misuse of punctuation here makes difficulties for the reader. In itself, the first stanza of "The Fly" could hold several meanings radically at variance with each other depending upon how its deliberately ambiguous grammar is read. More specifically, the stanza does not definitively identify its subject and object. Historically readers have been more inclined to identify the fly's "summer's play" as the object and "My thoughtless hand" as the subject. Indeed this reading is almost unanimous (It is the reading found in: Bloom (1987), Grant (1966), Hirsch (1964), Pagliaro (1987) to name a few of the more prominent examples) From this readers generally infer that the poet-narrator's hand has killed the fly. It can have no more summer's play if it has died, hence it is "away". But it is equally grammatically correct to identify "My thoughtless hand" as the object and the fly's "summer's play" as the subject, in which case the fly has successfully brushed the hand away. This stanza is, of course, part of a poem and poetry exploits ambiguities in language. This poetic phrase is deprived of the clarity, that usually has subjects preceding verbs going to objects, ('I like carrots', for example) found in English parlance. That is, the poetry of the first stanza exploits the rhetorical device of anastrophe. The mere fact that the poet-narrator's killing the fly is more likely to be food for thought than the fly's contact prompting his hand's recoil does not, in itself, imply that this is how the first line is to be read. Even if the popular inference, that the hand has brushed the fly, is made it does not thereby follow that the fly has been killed, the fly could have escaped and left in a state deprived of "summer's play", either through distraction or injury. Michael Simpson has most notably made a point of the anastrophe here to challenge the conventional historical accusation of the thoughtless hand as the fly's killer (Simpson, 1996). Simpson charges that Blake has left the first stanza's grammar ambiguous enough to give the reader the responsibility of making up the poem's meaning.

## 4. The Second and Third Stanzas

The hand brushing the fly interpretation is made more attractive by the fact that the second stanza compares the narrator to the fly:

Am not I  
A fly like thee?  
Or art not thou  
A man like me?

The third stanza mentions a hand, greater than the human life of the narrator, which also has the power to terminate his fun:

For I dance  
And drink and sing,  
Till some blind hand  
Shall brush my wing.

This parallel between great hands striking inferior beings can only work if the “thoughtless hand” is made the subject in the first stanza. But there is a way of making this parallel and still insisting on reader responsibility. The poem is all about responsibility, the human’s and the fly’s, and in appealing to the reader’s aesthetic responsibility in forging a meaning for the poem, the poet-narrator is alluding to performing the same role for the reader as the fly has performed for him, interrupting and redirecting thought. Herein the narrator becomes like the so-called Gadfly, Socrates nickname, known for prompting his irritated interlocutors into self-reflection, much as the fly has done to the narrator.

Blake’s “The Fly” makes for a good companion piece with his most famous poem, “The Tyger”, for the contrasts of the creatures involved and the way they are related to humans and God. While in “The Tyger” the poet-narrator is awed by the magnificence of that beast and tries to relate himself to it, in “The Fly” the poet-narrator is regarding an apparently insignificant and lowly life-form, relating himself to that. “The Tyger” is a creature who, for Blake attains an almost mythical proportion. Here the narrator asks if there is even a god who could create such a creature? The divine, ingenious power that creates “The Tyger” is perhaps the best analogue to the thoughtless hand powerful enough to interrupt the narrator in “The Fly”. Where “The Tyger’s” creator is engaged in a deliberate preplanned operation “The Fly”’s “thoughtless hand” is that of blind fate having been set to work by He who knows all things. In both cases ultimate responsibility for creation and destruction lies on the shoulders of God.

However it cannot be the hand that is thoughtless but the brain that guides the hand and no human brain is thoughtless. This brushing away by the hand is no automatic response of an autonomous nervous system. No! It is a calculated act. Obviously the poet has developed to see “The Fly” a nuisance and has brushed it away many times, so many times in fact that the deed itself appears to be thoughtless. It is not. It’s the result of many thoughtful moments, which make the act appear like a reflex. And at last, this final brushing away has caused the poet to think even more and even more deeply, beyond “The Fly” and into the human psyche.

The narrator has spent long hours in self contemplation, devoid of true feelings for the world about him, when all of a sudden a small, almost reflex action triggers an analysis of his own state. Both he and “The Fly” are prone to certain functions, both capable of falling foul of more thoughtful, powerful creatures, so much so that the poet himself is able to see himself almost as a fly, open to the whims of fate in the form of a more powerful creatures who might have no cares at all over the existence of a fly but who regard humanity’s existence as a menace.

The third stanza illustrates this concept fruitfully with the use of a slightly different lexicon. Here it is a blind hand that brushes a wing. Is the blind hand any different from the thoughtless one? It is. The thoughtless one has acted by way of thought that once was. The blind hand has never thought. Blake’s “blind” fits in with the common expression of another thing we usually refer to as blind - ‘blind fate’, which implies fate is the true identity of the ‘blind hand’ that can end or change lives.

*En face*, the poem appears as a simple ditty, coagulant of a few petty thoughts. The lines have a simple rhythm but not a consistent one and the rhyming scheme is a simple one. Yet it is in this very simplicity that the complex ruminations I take most and from it that they speak so forcefully to us about the human condition. The repetition of the words hand and thought give the poem a more discreet power. As humans we are as far as we know peculiar in the special powers of our thumb that opposes fingers on our hand. We are the toolmakers, the tool users. Through this we consciously make and destroy. The hand that makes “The Tyger” an organic being is not the human hand. The narrator of that poem indicates that it could only be a being as great as God. And so the owner of the special hand that changes and ends human life must somehow also be God’s. In this context Simpson, Hirsch and Bloom all refer to a simile from Shakespeare’s King Lear, which seems parallel to the simile of fly, human and God that Blake is employing here. The blind character Gloucester notes the death of a fly and identifies with it “As flies to wanton boys, are we to th’Gods; They kill us for their sport” (2.1. 36-37).

It is apposite when discussing Blake’s work to mention Milton with whom Blake had a love/hate relationship. In an oblique way, Milton affected much of Blake’s work. Milton sought characters on whom to project his fears, of life, love, religion. Blake was a more Gothic writer, a dark reasoned like Rodan’s Thinker who questioned much in short gritty verse. If he did not directly answer these questions, he left leading clues to their answers. In this place Blake’s religious subversion is tackling Milton’s account of free will in *Paradise Lost* that both makes humans divine and debased. The comparison between human and fly becomes sacrilegious, for it simultaneously raises the ‘thoughtless hand’ of humanity to the level of the ‘blind hand’ of God’s ‘blind fate’; simultaneously debasing that divine hand to, not omnipotence, but blindness. “The first speaker makes the common mistake of imagining a god as thoughtless and careless as himself, and, by implication, makes himself the fly’s god, undermining his superficial

solidarity with the fly” (Morris, 2006). The way the narrator asserts solidarity with the fly also distances the narrator from it.

Miner (2011), into the effects of the illustrated literature on microscopic organisms gives discusses how biological comparisons with tiny organisms had become a hot topic for Blake and descriptions, which he had annotated, found their way into the poem.

I am most definitely not a fly but the third stanza does not lead me to this conclusion in any form whatsoever. The opposite is apparent, defiant in its presence. I cannot see “The Fly”’s dancing akin to mine, shaken as it is of any intellectual artifice. Buzzing is not singing and while they drink (or rather suck through their straw-like mouths) no fly has the capacity for alcoholism or even procuring the warm feelings that alcohol can bring. If “The Fly” drinks it is not as I. Yet here is the rub. Parallels between human activity and that of “The Fly” are strained. We have attained the pinnacle of the food chain. However even as such we often become ‘worm’s meat’, to quote Shakespeare, where the worm is the lava of “The Fly”. The fourth stanza challenges the parallel between human and fly in the third stanza. There is a significant body of critical appropriations of Blake’s “The Fly” noting an ironic criticism of the sentiments in the first three stanzas in the fourth and fifth these include (Bloom, 1987), (Pagliaro, 1987), (Wagenknecht, 1973).

## 5. The Fourth and Fifth Stanzas

The fourth stanza is a conditional clause beginning with the tiny word ‘if’.

If thought is life  
And strength & breath  
And the want  
Of thought is death;

This word nonetheless is full of pitfalls for the reader. On first reading, it appears that the word ‘if’ is inviting us to accept the pursuant words as true in themselves, without qualification. Accepted on face value, the word if could easily lead us into simple cogitations to find simple conclusions within the poem. Nothing about the poem is simple save its rhyming scheme which has second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyming. This, in itself, leads the reader into a sense of false security. ‘This little poem is easy to read. It has a basic rhythm and the rhyme leads me from beginning to end in one easy stride’. Do not be fooled. The thought the fourth stanza introduces is concluded in the fifth and final stanza:

Then am I  
A happy fly,  
If I live,  
Or if I die.

Here are twenty lines, which ask you to stand aloof for a moment, to read and read again. Consider this sentence: If everybody were rich then would the world be a happy place. Blake’s conditional in the fourth and fifth stanzas does not use the subjunctive after if as I have in the previous sentence. That is merely a grammatical form. He does however invert verbs and subjects as I did, for you to find your own meaning. Ambiguity here is a prompt for thinkers’ responsibility over constructing the poem’s meaning. Morris contends that with the fourth and fifth stanzas “Instead of a moral, we have a non sequitur that becomes more absurd the more one considers it” (Morris, 2006). He posits that there are two speakers of the poem, the silly philosopher who pretends to identify with the fly in the first three stanza’s and the fly itself, mocking the philosopher for his sentimental self-delusion.

## 6. The Picture

The poem’s illustration is highly important to the case Morris is making. Complexity can be simplicity and simplicity can be complexity. It is difficult to say which is of more consequence, when referring to Blake, the written word, the painted composition or the illuminating of a manuscript. What we take as a given now, that every picture tells a story, because pictures are more accessible and more easily reproduced, was not the case in Blake’s era. The techniques he used for illuminating were not simple; they were laborious involved, time consuming. It is therefore unthinkable that Blake would ever have labored on something facile, that he would ever have bothered illuminating “The Fly” in his *Songs Of Experience* if he did not feel that he had something portentous and profound to say in his words.

The picture presents a nurturing scene. A nurse is between two children, who are playing under an arch formed by the branches of two trees that frame the scene. These are “thick, leaflessly sterile trees” (Paley, 1978). Blake makes use of this kind of tree because their Spartan foliage accentuates their encircling shape. A girl extends her racquet to a midair shuttlecock on the left and behind the nurses back. The nurse is bending over a toddler of indeterminate sex holding the infant’s hands above its head to help it stand on the right. The image is symmetrical with the presentation of the poem ranging over it; one of the branches of a tree wringing the shorter column of words of the fourth and fifth stanzas on the right while the longer block of text, the first three stanza’s is outside, on the left. The nurse’s arms form a circle similar to the branch’s position around the words of the column on the right. Morris notes that the reference to the “blind hand” of the third stanza appears near the badminton playing girl’s hand, associating that thought with her. On the other hand the line he supposes relates to the fly “If I live or if I die” is close to a bird in the distance (18). Morris suggests this indicates Blake’s attraction to belittling the pontificating narrator, he is plying a game, while the fly is made into a healthy bird, giving it the better end of the exchange. This is an attractive way of reading the image. Yet if the fly is given all the credit for the realization that the sentimental



sympathy the first three stanza's display is wrong then the nurturing, guiding, learning imagery of the poem is lost. Play is, Blake knew as well as any, an important part of learning, and if the first three stanza's seem frivolous then the rupture of the fourth and fifth nevertheless must belong to the same train of thought; they are still the conclusion of one single poem. The fly cannot simply know more than the narrator if it is to act as the gadfly, the inspiration of thought. If the narrator has failed to identify with the fly contemplatively he has nevertheless succeeded in creating a shared experience with the fly that is whether or not the fly is even alive.

## 7. Conclusion

Not like a blind man are you being led to concrete conclusions about this poem. It is never easy to integrate one's thoughts to those of any poet. Blake is more oblique than many. And we come to the final stanza. It is an enigmatic conclusion to a poem which asks many questions but on close inspection answers few. The compulsion to write the piece obviously came from the poet's encounter with a fly; most probably more than one fly, a humble insect with little or no thought, buzzing from one place to the next in search of sustenance and procreation in these ways it is indeed similar to the narrator. But the means by which this is discovered and the ways in which this similarity are announced create as much separation as unity between the two. If the want of thought is death then I am a happy fly whether alive or dead. What an odd conclusion to a poem. It does however point to the poet's belief in life after death which, for "The Fly" is happy, whatever. "The Fly" is without responsibility, comes and goes as it pleases, haphazardly on with purpose, dancing and singing in its own inimitable way. The human interrupts this process just as this process interrupts the human's train of thought. Herein lies the life of the human and fly, the interruption of one another is only possible because the two characters belong in the same world (just as the two thoughts belong in one poem) or rather make the same world for one another by colliding. The two characters do not become one but they belong to a greater oneness which allows them to interpolate one another. In this way, Blake's appeal to God, here read as a vector or marker point for a shared context is perhaps a "common mistake" for the narrator but not for the poem.

"The Fly" is about the complexity of human life and also about its frailty. We are not necessarily important in the scheme of things except that we can conceptualize and contemplate and this makes us different from insects. We live in our grandeur, seeking, pleasure, passing time, eating, drinking and making merry but this is in a thoughtful way and thus not like the fly's life. Yet the fly can become human life in prompting and interrupting thought. The thoughtless can take responsibility for the thought and the thoughtful can be responsible for thoughtlessness. All of this life that separates humans from the other creatures of their world is prompted and dependent upon perpetual encounters with those other creatures through which mysterious fleeting unions are formed.

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