INNOCENCE UNDER THREAT: COGNITIVE STRUCTURES IN BLAKE'S "NIGHT"

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Summary

The aim of this paper is to examine William Blake's poem "Night", and to demonstrate that the poem constructs Innocence not as a state of absolute security, but as a condition of conditional safety based on vigilance, compassion, and moral balance. The relevance of the study lies in addressing the gap between classical interpretations of the poem and the lack of systematic explanation of the mechanisms through which danger and protection coexist within a single poetic space. The study integrates traditional Blakean criticism with a cognitive-poetic perspective in order to clarify how meaning is organized at the level of perception and conceptualization. Special attention is given to frames, conceptual metaphors, and image schemas that structure the nocturnal world of the poem. Methods used in the study include general scientific methods (analysis and synthesis), elements of cognitive linguistics (frame semantics, conceptual metaphor theory, image schema theory), and close textual analysis. The results of the research contribute to a deeper understanding of Blake's poetic model of Innocence and may be applied in literary translation for preserving underlying conceptual structures across languages.

Key words: William Blake, cognitive poetics, frame analysis, conceptual metaphor, image schemas, poetic meaning.

DOI https://doi.org/10.23856/7404

1. Introduction

William Blake's poem "*Night*" *(Erdman, 1988: 13-14)*, the fourteenth poem in "*Songs of Innocence*" (1789), has traditionally been interpreted as a lyrical representation of divine protection and nocturnal harmony. Classical scholarship has convincingly demonstrated that the poem simultaneously preserves the mode of Innocence and acknowledges fear, suffering, and death, emphasizing the limited and non-coercive nature of angelic guardianship and the displacement of ultimate harmony into Eternity. However, despite the richness of these interpretations, the mechanisms through which the poem organizes the coexistence of danger, vulnerability, and moral order remain insufficiently explicated.

The relevance of the study lies in its attempt to address this gap by shifting the focus from interpretive outcomes to the cognitive structures that generate meaning in the poem. While previous research has described what "*Night*" signifies within Blake's ethical and theological vision, less attention has been paid to how the text itself constructs this vision at the level of perception, embodiment, and conceptual organization. This problem is particularly important for contemporary literary analysis, as well as for translation studies, where an understanding of underlying conceptual structures is essential for preserving poetic meaning across languages.

The novelty of the study consists in the application of an integrative cognitive-poetic approach to "*Night*", which combines insights from classical Blakean criticism with the analytical tools of cognitive linguistics. The article proposes a systematic analysis of frames,

conceptual metaphors, and image schemas as interacting mechanisms that structure the poem's nocturnal world. Unlike earlier readings, which treat danger and guardianship primarily as thematic elements, the present study demonstrates how these notions function as stable cognitive scenarios that govern the reader's interpretation.

The aim of the article is to reveal how Blake's "*Night*" constructs Innocence as a condition of conditional safety through the interaction of cognitive structures. To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following research objectives: (1) to identify the nuclear and peripheral frames activated in the poem; (2) to analyze the dominant conceptual metaphors that shape the understanding of night, guardianship, and vulnerability; and (3) to examine the role of embodied image schemas in grounding abstract ethical and theological meanings.

Methodologically, the study draws on general scientific methods (analysis and synthesis), elements of cognitive linguistics (frame semantics, conceptual metaphor theory, image schema theory), and close textual analysis. The research is based on close reading combined with cognitive modeling, which enables a systematic correlation between linguistic form and underlying conceptual structures.

The article is structured in a logical sequence that reflects the methodological progression of the study. Following a brief outline of the poem's critical reception, the main sections analyze the system of frames, conceptual metaphors, and image schemas. The concluding section summarizes the findings and outlines their implications for Blake studies and for the translation of poetic texts into other languages.

2. Classical Interpretations

William Blake. Night, objects 26 and 27. Copy L, 1789

Edmund Hirsch emphasizes the dual character of the poem: it is "*neither spoken by a child nor contrived to bring a child joy, but it is emphatically a poem of Innocence*", which "*unlike Experience is much concerned with the fact of death*", since it "*fronts fearlessly 'the cloud of mortal destiny'* " *(Hirsch, 1964: 197)*. For this reason, Innocence is able to acknowledge the real limits of angelic guardianship: they can only "*pitying stand and weep"* when tigers hunt their prey *(Hirsch, 1964: 197)*. Despite this frankness about death, the poem retains the mode of imagistic organization characteristic of "*Songs of Innocence*". The author notes that "*the setting, as in all the poems of Innocence, does not abandon the literal for the symbolic*" *(Hirsch, 1964: 197)*. Nevertheless, the poem effectively demonstrates the duality of night, both sorrowful and "*dreadful*", and, at the same time, peaceful and fulfilling *(Hirsch, 1964: 197)*.

Hirsch gives special attention to a series of linguistic difficulties. The phrase from the second stanza, "*Flocks have took*", is recognized as normative, a claim supported by comparison with Milton's "*Nativity Ode*": "*Now while the heaven, by the Sun's team untrod, / **Hath took** no print of the approaching light*" (*Milton,1645*). The phrase "*Silent moves*" enters into tension with the image of the "*feet of angels*", since silence appears to contradict movement. The expression "*the thoughtless nest*", in which the birds "*are coverd warm*", signifies not only an incapacity for thought but also the creatures' trustfulness *(Hirsch, 1964: 197-198)*.

The final stanzas of the poem unfold a vision of Eternity rooted in biblical texts. The commentator refers to Isaiah 11:6: "*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them*[1]", and Isaiah 65:25: "*The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw*…", emphasizing that Blake's lion "*is more Christian than Isaiah's*", because it is transformed not merely into a peaceful beast but into a «*weeping guardian*» *(Hirsch, 1964: 198)*. The image of «*life's river*» forms part of the paradisal landscape of Revelation 22:1: "*And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal…*". From this same chapter Blake derives the opposition between earthly "*night*" and the "*immortal day*" of Eternity: "*And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light*…" (*Hirsch, 1964: 198; Rev. 22:5*).

In the final part of his commentary, Hirsch focuses on the two illustrative plates accompanying the poem. The first depicts a decorative tree whose branches envelop the text on the right-hand side, beneath which a lion sleeps. Since it is "*neither guarding the fold nor washing in life's river*", it must be a genuine predatory lion, able to "*rush dreadful*". The second illustration shows five figures strolling through a garden; some of them have haloes, which together allude to an iconographic image of Eternity *(Hirsch, 1964: 198)*.

David Gillham connects the religious mythology of "*Night*" with the broader context of "*Songs of Innocence*", particularly with "*The Ecchoing Green*" and "*The Shepherd*", as "*an outcome of the same sense of belonging, of participating and of caring*". *(Gillham, 1966: 238)*. Regarding the first three stanzas, the commentator emphasizes that the poem not only names the angels but also assigns them a specific role: they appear not as symbols of generalized benevolence, but as beings with clearly defined spheres of action – those who "*pour blessing*" and "*look in every thoughtless nest*". In the earlier poems of the cycle, these angels appeared only in the illuminations – as small figures among the letters, engaged in various states of joy or despair *(Gillham, 1966: 238)*. The second part moves toward the frustration of angelic guardianship: the speaker knows that the lamb may be eaten by the tiger, and such knowledge does not destroy his faith. The reason for this lies in the fact that "*the faith is not vested in force but*

[1] Biblical quotations are given according to the King James Version

in love" *(Gillham, 1966: 238-239)*. Angels do not control the elements by imposing their will, but "*only through the exercise of love*". For this reason, they «*seek to drive*» wolves and tigers away, but do not restrain them when they «*rush dreadful*» *(Gillham, 1966: 238)*.

According to the commentator, the final two stanzas affirm the notion of a "*new world*" in which the dominant God's virtues are "*pity*" and "*meekness*". The speaker knows that the values of joy operate productively; therefore, in such a world, the lion and the lamb may live in harmony. Quoting the words of the fifth octet ("… *wrath by his meekness / And by his health, sickness, / Is driven away, / From our immortal day*"), Gillham explains that "*wrath*" is a pathology, a "*sickness*", that is, a deviation from the natural norm. Consequently, the actions of predators in the poem are not a moral anomaly but a manifestation of a "disturbance" which, regardless of the outcome of the encounter, ultimately culminates in the restoration of peace "*in some world, this or the next*" *(Gillham, 1966: 240)*. The scholar stresses that Blake's "*new world*" is not "*a place to be aspired to. It is not the residence of God*" *(Gillham, 1966: 240)*. Such a world appears not as a supernatural dimension, but as a moral order in which the virtues of Innocence – "*pity*" and "*meekness*" – acquire real force.

Heather Glen emphasizes that the theme of darkness receives its fullest and most explicit presentation. Whereas in "*Nurse's Song*" this experience is deferred, and in "*The Ecchoing Green*" it is only briefly mentioned in the final darkening, in "*Night*" Blake "*enters the world of darkness*" *(Glen, 1983: 141)*.

Within a broader intellectual background, the author turns to Swedenborgian doctrine, in which the concepts of "*night*" and "*faith*" are closely connected: "*Faith is called "night", because it receives its light from charity, as the moon does from the sun*…" *(Glen, 1983: 141)*. In this sense, faith is also likened to the moon. Although Blake's poem may contain a certain echo of this correlation, the author insists that the text is not a Swedenborgian allegory *(Glen, 1983: 141)*. The poem operates on a different level of poetic abstraction – through generalization, condensation, and the reorientation of motifs drawn from other songs of Innocence.

A significant structural gesture is the rejection of pastoral attributes characteristic of the idyllic horizon of the cycle. The author describes this rejection as explicit and transparent, referring to the second stanza: "*Farewell green fields and happy groves, / Where flocks have took delight; / Where lambs have nibbled, silent moves / The feet of angels bright*" *(Glen, 1983: 141)*. This marks the end of the familiar vision of "*green fields*" and "*happy groves*", within which Innocence could exist as a form of recurring joy. In "*Night*" Blake moves beyond this frame, opening a space where darkness and threat become organic components of experience.

In this new scene, angelic guardianship appears not as a calm pastoral presence, but as a dynamic, though internally limited, compassion. The scholar provides a characteristic list of verbs denoting active agency: angels "*pour blessing*",

"*look in every thoughtless nest*", "*visit caves of every beast*", "*pour sleep*", and "*sit down by their bed*". These activities, however, contrast with their powerlessness in the face of genuine "*harm*": "*The protecting angels seem powerless … theirs is a curiously passive role*…" *(Glen, 1983: 142)*.

The final stanza ("*And now beside thee bleating lamb, / I can lie down and sleep; / Or think on him who bore thy name, / Graze after thee and weep. / For, wash'd in lifes river, / My bright mane for ever, / Shall shine like the gold, / As I guard o'er the fold*") moves from a reality confronted with chaos toward a projective vision of order that "*shall flow*", forming an image of transcendence over chaos. The author describes this as a "*vision of the Eternal Now*", which "*echoes and condenses elements of other Songs of Innocence*", where the lamb is called "*by his name*" ("*The Lamb*"), and the chimney sweepers "*wash in a river and shine in the Sun*"

(“*The Chimney Sweeper*”). At the center stands the purified and restrained lion, whose energy acquires both timeless permanence (“*shine like the gold*”) and contingency (“*guard o'er the fold*”) *(Glen, 1983: 143)*.

Stanley Gardner notes that the opening lines of “*Night*” continue the intonations with which “*The Ecchoing Green*” and “*Nurse's Song*” conclude, extending the theme of care into the sphere of the “*night hours*” and the “*after-life*”, and revealing “*revelation concealed from daylight activity*” *(Gardner, 1986: 56)*. Central to his reading is the angelic formula “*New worlds to inherit*”, interpreted as «*an extension into eternity of the state of Innocence on earth*» *(Gardner, 1986: 56)*. In the subsequent analysis, the image of nocturnal light becomes central: the moon appears as a “*flower*” that emits “*silent delight*”, and its radiance “*smiles*” *(Gardner, 1986: 57)*. Central to a philological reading is Gardner’s interpretation of the word “*thoughtless*”. He clarifies that it does not mean “*mindless*”, but rather a state “*free from anxiety*” *(Gardner, 1986: 57)*, which supports the overall tonality of serene nocturnal protection.

In conclusion, Gardner characterizes “*Night*” as “*a superbly controlled symbolic statement of the nature of Innocence*” *(Gardner, 1986: 57)*, in which night does not contradict the daylight world, but transforms and deepens it.

Alan Tomlinson devotes particular attention to the phrase “*thoughtless nest*” in the third stanza, explaining it by reference to the unpublished “*Motto to the Songs of Innocence & of Experience*” (1793), where it is stated that “*The Good… Think not for themselves*”. For this reason, “*the nests of innocence are ‘thoughtless’*” *(Tomlinson, 1987: 43)*. This characteristic is presented not as a deficiency, but as a structural feature of the state of innocence. The reason for this “thoughtlessness” is formulated directly: “*They have no need to do so because the angels, the protective ministers of love, ‘keep them all from harm’*” *(Tomlinson, 1987: 43)*.

At the same time, the critic warns against an idealized perception of this world. He stresses that angelic guardianship “*does not mean that suffering and death are excluded*” *(Tomlinson, 1987: 43)*. To support his argument, he turns to the poem’s final stanzas, where the imagery of predators who “*howl for prey*” emerges. In defining the function of the angels, it is stated that “*The angels, most heedful*” “*try to turn them aside*”. This intervention, however, is not coercive. If diversion fails, the angels perform another action: they “*Receive each mild spirit, / New worlds to inherit*”. According to Tomlinson, in heaven the spirits of both predators and victims are taken up “*on equal terms*” *(Tomlinson, 1987: 43)*.

Samuel Damon interprets the motif of the Lion within the context of biblical symbolism, where the Lion appears as a “*noble beast*” representing Judah (*Gen. 49:9*) and Jesus (*Rev. 5:5*). The scholar notes that the poem is often associated with a widespread, though inaccurate, formula about “*the lion shall down with the lamb*”, derived from a mistaken citation of Isa. 11:6. In Blake’s text, the Lion functions as the protector of the sheep from wolves and tigers; however, it is emphasized that “*the innocents are eventually killed*”. The harmonious union of the Lion and the Lamb is possible, according to Damon, only in Eternity, where the earthly drama of predation is abolished *(Damon, 1988: 242)*.

3. Cognitive Approach and Frames

Classical interpretations of “*Night*” usually emphasize the idyllic calm of the nocturnal scene, divine protection, and the harmony of the created world, treating night as a temporal pause in which evil is neutralized by the presence of angels. At the same time, such approaches scarcely explain how the text itself organizes the reader’s perception or why motifs of danger

and guardianship coexist without open conflict. A cognitive approach makes it possible to move from interpretive outcomes to an analysis of frames – stable mental scenarios through which the poem constructs the imagined space of Innocence. Central to this process are nuclear frames, which establish the basic cognitive scenario and remain present throughout the text, while peripheral frames specify, modify, and deepen this scenario.

Among the nuclear frames is that of "**nocturnal danger**", which establishes the initial condition of the entire scene. Night appears not as a neutral background but as a state of potential threat, concretized through images of predators and the lexis of hunting: "*wolves and tygers howl for prey*", "*rush dreadful*". The threat is not realized in the form of direct violence; however, it is constantly present as a possibility that structures the overall emotional background.

In parallel, the frame of "**vulnerable beings**" unfolds, formed by the nominations, such as "*lambs*", "*sheep*", and "*children*", as well as by repeated references to sleep, in particular the paradigmatic forms of the lexeme "*sleep*". Here sleep functions as a cognitive marker of the loss of agency: the beings are physically present but deprived of the capacity to act or defend themselves. This frame directs the reader toward an empathetic mode of perception and highlights the asymmetry between threat and defenselessness.

A response to this asymmetry is provided by the frame of "**angelic guardianship**", constructed around the image of "*angels*" and the lexis of care and surveillance – "*pour blessing*". Syntactically, this frame is reinforced by the active role of the angels as agents of action: they move, observe, and bless. Against the backdrop of passive, sleeping creatures, angelic presence creates a sense of compensatory protection.

The interaction of these structures gives rise to the frame of "**conditional safety**", which has no single lexical trigger but emerges from the overlap of danger, vulnerability, and guardianship. Safety in the poem is not presented as a guaranteed state: it exists only as long as the protective action continues. Accordingly, Innocence appears as a fragile equilibrium rather than as an ontologically secured space.

Alongside the nuclear frames, the poem activates peripheral frames that do not create an autonomous scene but refine the mode in which it is experienced. Thus, the frame of "**surveillance**" deepens angelic guardianship by shifting the emphasis from outcome to process. It is formed by verbs of duration and repetition, as well as by the image of circular movement "*round*", which underscores the continuity of nocturnal watchfulness.

The frame of "**boundary**" structures the nocturnal space through the nominations "*fold*", "*den*", and "*Heaven's gate*". The world of the poem is organized as a system of demarcations between the protected and the dangerous, the internal and the external, the earthly and the heavenly. In this sense, night is conceived not as a homogeneous space but as a network of zones with differing degrees of vulnerability.

Finally, the frame of **"cyclicality"** inscribes night into a broader diurnal and cosmic order. The repetition of the motifs of sleep, watchfulness, and blessing mitigates the absoluteness of threat: night appears as a phase with a beginning and an end and therefore becomes subject to order and control.

4. Conceptual Metaphors

In "*Night*", conceptual metaphors shape the way night is understood as a space of tense coexistence between threat, guardianship, and sacred order. By mapping properties of natural, spatial, and bodily domains onto ethical and theological meanings, Blake constructs a model of Innocence that does not deny danger but balances it through the presence of vigilance and mercy.

1. "**Night is a time of active threat**". The phrase "*When wolves and tygers howl for prey*" projects the conceptual domain of hunting onto the temporal dimension of night. In this metaphorical mapping, night appears as a period in which danger is not concealed but acoustically and verbally marked ("*howl*"). This is not abstract evil, but a concrete activity that determines the background tension of the entire scene.

2. "**The nocturnal world is a pastoral space of Innocence**". The simile "the moon like a flower" and the personification "sits and smiles on the night" transfer the domain of natural beauty and gentle vitality onto the nocturnal cosmos. The moon is conceptualized not as a cold luminary, but as an aesthetically and emotionally engaged element of the world. The metaphor creates a pastoral background in which night appears as a space capable of harmony.

3. "**Vulnerable beings are lambs**". The word "*lambs*" structures the perception of nocturnal inhabitants through the pastoral-biblical domain of innocence, dependence, and the need for care. Here the lamb functions not merely as an animal image, but as a cognitive model of defenseless existence that requires external protection.

4. "**Guardianship is a quiet, unobtrusive presence**". The lines "*Unseen they pour blessing*" and "*Where lambs have nibbled silent moves / The feet of angels bright*" map the domain of noiseless movement and proximity onto sacred action. Protection is conceptualized not as force or surveillance, but as an unnoticed being-near.

5. "**Safety is being in proximity to the body**". The phrases "They pour sleep on their head, / And sit down by their bed" depict protection as bodily closeness. Guardianship is neither distant nor spatially abstract; it is localized beside the sleeping body. The metaphor brings sacred protection closer to gestures of human care.

6. "**Mercy is compassion without violence**". The formula "They pitying stand and weep" (in the context of "wolves and tygers") maps the domain of emotional empathy onto the response to threat. Angels do not destroy predators or drive them away, but respond with compassion. The metaphor models an ethical mode of balancing danger rather than eliminating it.

7. "**Peace is the coexistence of incompatible**". The phrase "And now beside thee bleating lamb, / I can lie down and sleep" enacts a mapping in which harmony is conceived as the spatial coexistence of opposing entities. Predator and victim are not removed but brought together within a single space. The metaphor thus defines the innocent world as balanced rather than purified of tension.

5. Image Schemas

Frames and conceptual metaphors in the poem establish overarching semantic scenarios for understanding night as a space of harmony, protection, and moral order. At the same time, these abstract structures rely on more basic, pre-rational mechanisms of conceptualization rooted in embodied and spatial experience – namely, image schemas.

1. **PATH**. In the line "*The sun descending in the west*", night is conceptualized as a stage of directed movement rather than as an abrupt rupture from daytime. The setting of the sun models a temporal trajectory with a beginning, development, and completion, within which night appears as a regular phase of the cycle of being.

2. **VERTICALITY.** The downward movement of the sun is combined with the motif of angels descending into the earthly realm: "*The feet of angels bright; / Unseen they pour blessing*". The vertical orientation from above to below cognitively encodes the approach of the divine toward the earthly and shapes the perception of night as a time of spiritual proximity rather than separation from the sacred.

3. **CONTAINER.** The nocturnal world is conceptualized as a space of shelter and protected localization, verbalized through images of the nest and the place of rest: "*The birds are silent in their nest, / And I must seek for mine*". This schema conceptualizes safety, belonging, and order within the night space, in which each being has its own place.

4. **PROTECTION.** Angels perform an active guarding function: "They visit caves of every beast, / To keep them all from harm". Through this schema, night appears not as a sphere of danger but as a space of universal guardianship that extends both to vulnerable creatures and to predators.

5. **LIGHT / DARK.** The transition from day to night is not accompanied by a value-based opposition between good and evil. Darkness in *"Night"* does not negate moral order, since angelic presence preserves light in the spiritual dimension. In this way, light and darkness are reinterpreted within the coordinates of Innocence, where night becomes a condition of rest rather than threat.

6. **REST.** Recurrent motifs of silence, cessation of movement, and sleep form an embodied experiential schema of rest, culminating in the state in which creatures "*lie down and sleep*". This complements the image of the path, emphasizing that movement does not disappear but is temporarily suspended for renewal.

7. **WHOLENESS.** In the poem, all living beings – humans, birds, lambs, and beasts – are included within a single nocturnal space without the opposition of "one's own" versus "the other". This schema constructs a model of the world as an integral moral system in which the nocturnal order encompasses all of creation.

6. Conclusions

This article has examined William Blake's poem *"Night"* from *Songs of Innocence* through an integrative perspective that combines classical Blakean criticism with a cognitive-poetic framework. Engaging with established interpretations that emphasize the poem's status as a work of Innocence confronted by fear and mortality, the limits of angelic guardianship and the primacy of love over force, the rejection of pastoral security and the entry into darkness as experience, and the extension of Innocence into an eschatological horizon of Eternity, the study has shown that these readings, while mutually consistent, leave open the question of how such tensions are structurally sustained within the text.

The cognitive analysis developed in this study does not replace these readings but clarifies the textual mechanisms through which they operate. By identifying nuclear frames such as **nocturnal danger**, **vulnerability**, and **angelic guardianship**, alongside peripheral frames including **surveillance**, **boundary**, and **cyclicality**, the analysis demonstrates how the poem constructs a coherent cognitive scenario in which Innocence appears as a state of **conditional safety** rather than absolute protection. This framework explains why motifs of threat and care coexist without contradiction or narrative resolution, a tension repeatedly noted by commentators but not previously systematized.

The examination of conceptual metaphors further reveals how Blake balances darkness and moral order at a pre-reflective level of experience. Metaphors of unobtrusive guardianship ("*Unseen they pour blessi*ng"), compassionate restraint ("*They pitying stand and weep*"), and coexistence without violence ("*beside thee bleating lamb, / I can lie down and sleep*") articulate the ethical vision described by Gillham and Gardner through embodied and spatial mappings. At a more fundamental level, image schemas such as **PATH**, **VERTICALITY**,

CONTAINER, **PROTECTION**, and **REST** integrate night into a cyclical and ordered world, supporting Glen's observation that darkness in "*Night*" is not deferred or denied but fully entered and conceptually mastered.

Beyond literary interpretation, the results of this study have direct implications for the translation of Blake's poetry into other languages. By making explicit the cognitive structures that organize meaning in "*Night*", the analysis helps translators move beyond surface lexical equivalence toward the preservation of underlying frames, metaphors, and image schemas.

Further research may extend this integrative and translation-oriented approach to other poems in "*Songs of Innocence and of Experience*", tracing how cognitive structures interact with established interpretive traditions across the two states. In addition, combining cognitive analysis with the study of Blake's illuminated plates may further illuminate the multimodal foundations of his poetic and visual art.

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