SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

Key Points
1. Blake's Songs use simplicity rhetorically. This does not mean that they are themselves simple.
2. The 'innocence' of the voices of children in the poems is not treated straightforwardly nostalgically, as something that threatens to be lost. Rather Blake's remark that 'unorganized innocence' is 'an impossibility' suggests that – on the contrary – 'innocence' is something much more radical and difficult to achieve, and is something that needs to be strived for.
3. 'Innocence' in Blake's songs often takes the form of a kind of illogical, counter-intuitive, or otherwise surprising train of thought or argument: something which 'short-circuits' the oppressive logic of 'experienced' adult thought.
4. It needn't be the case that Blake is inviting us to approve of the specific statements being made by his various innocent characters: what it seems he does approve of however is the counter-intuitive 'innocent' logic by which they reach them.
5. This is true of both 'The Chimney Sweeper' and 'The Little Black Boy'. Both of these poems show children who have been undeniably damaged by their world, but who nonetheless have a source of radical innocence in the surprising thought processes they evince in the poems.

Quotations
• Both of the poems discussed appear in 'Songs of Innocence'. 'Unorganiz'd Innocence: An Impossibility' is among the notes written on the manuscript of 'The Four Zoas' (1797).

Suggested Passages
1. Try thinking of Blake's Songs as a kind of novel, where characters' or speakers' positions are neither wholly approved of nor necessarily treated ironically or satirically.
2. Consider Blake's world as one in which human beings are all damaged in some way. In what ways does Blake try to be hopeful about human relationships?
3. What could be the meaning of the 'Unorganiz'd Innocence: An Impossibility'?

Further Reading

Web Links
• An introduction to the life and work of William Blake, including contextual materials: http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/william-blake
• An amazing collection of Blake’s beautiful illuminated texts: http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/