

# Reimagining the Nation: Visionary Community and the National Identity in Blake's Jerusalem

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## Abstract

William Blake's short lyric "*And did those feet in ancient time,*" later titled *Jerusalem*, has long held a paradoxical place in British cultural and national identity. This research paper argues that William Blake used his poetry to challenge the cultural, industrial, and political norms and changes of his time. While different revolutions were taking place simultaneously, and while England Christians led monarchy lived in abundance and riches, people were living in poverty, disaster and illness, hence Blake uses a language that brings forward not only mythic imagery to challenge conventional notions of English national identity, but also proposing a prophetic vision, which is both imaginative and ethical in terms of his nation. Blake uses the art of poetry and engraving to raise a voice and call for collective moral effort and striving for one purpose: the hope of restoring the nation's status as a great country, in which people would live in prosperity and abundance. Making England green again echoes Ezekiel's prophetic voice in which dry bones are brought to life, symbolising the possibility of national and spiritual revival. The poem critiques industrial modernity ("dark Satanic mills") even as it calls for the construction of a new symbolic "Jerusalem" through inner transformation and collective moral striving. This analysis aims to demonstrate that any change in ideology will affect national identity and people's lives. Artists and poets play a crucial role in raising awareness and becoming the voice of the people to address such matters, often in a radical tone.

**Keywords:** identity; national; cultural; nation; transformation; moral; norm; revival

## Introduction

William Blake lived during a crucial period in Western history, when national and cultural identities were forming. A significant event during Blake's time was the American Revolution, which began in 1776 and led to American Independence. The impact of this revolution on his artistic work is widely reflected in his longer prophetic poem *America*. Additionally, the French Revolution was widely supported among artisans, including Blake, who wrote a lengthy poem titled *The French Revolution*. This work, intended as a poetic history of the event, illustrated Blake's understanding of the changes and was divided into seven books, first published in 1791. Although William Blake was not part of any radical political groups in England during the French Revolution, his writings show a connection to revolutionary ideas, and "the poem

serves as his contribution to the debate over the merits of the French Revolution” (Crafton, 1997). Lisa Crafton argues that Blake’s poetry should be viewed both within its historical and cultural context and through the lens of his own myth-making, a web of meaning that helps deepen our appreciation.

According to David Daiches, the French Revolution had a significant impact on the work of all Romantic writers, especially Blake and Wordsworth. David Daiches maintains that “the French Revolution – or at least the idea of the French Revolution, and the mystique associated with it, was for a brief period one of the great stimulating forces on the English literary imagination. Without its impact, neither Blake nor Wordsworth would have been the poets they were” (Daiches, 1968).

The Industrial Revolution (c. 1760–1840) marked a profound economic and social transformation, replacing traditional handicraft production with machine-based industry, presenting new chemical and iron processes, and a shift from organic fuels to coal. Originating in Britain, it rapidly spread across Western Europe and the United States, generating unprecedented productivity but also deepening social inequality and labour exploitation. Poets such as William Blake, and later Thomas Hardy, responded critically to these conditions, using poetry as a vehicle of social protest. Blake’s “The Chimney Sweeper” exposes the harsh realities of child labour in late-eighteenth-century England and accuses both Church and State of their complicity.

*“And did those feet in ancient time”* later titled *“Jerusalem”*, was written as part of the prophetic book *Milton: A Poem in Two Books*. The poem raises important questions about the impact of the Industrial Revolution (Rowland, “William Blake: a visionary for our time”, 2007) and about how England’s identity is shaped by it, as Blake refers to it as “the dark satanic mills”. According to the scholar John H. Lienhard, William Blake portrays the Industrial Revolution as a form of human evil. (Lienhard, 1999). The words of the poem stress the importance of people taking responsibility for the change and building a better future for society, “in England’s green and pleasant land”. (Rowland, 2007).

Scholars have long noted Blake’s stance against empire and conventional nationalism. According to Northrop Frye “Jerusalem” appears today as a patriotic anthem, but Blake originally wrote it to critique England’s spiritual and political corruption. (Frye, 1947) Later, Erdman interprets the poem as offering a prophetic indictment of the nation’s moral failures. (Erdman, 1954)

Blake’s poetry is not a mere literary piece of art but an instrument to address political corruption and call the community’s collective responsibility to preserve its nationhood. Hence, Blake can be powerfully situated within Benedict Anderson’s concept of the nation as an imagined political community (Anderson, 2006) precisely because Blake uses poetry not simply as aesthetic expression but as a vehicle for collective self-understanding and moral responsibility.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate how William Blake's *Jerusalem* constructs, critiques, and reimagines English national identity through its symbolic language and prophetic rhetoric. While the poem is widely recognised today as a patriotic hymn, this research aims to uncover the original intentions ingrained in Blake's prophetic writing and to distinguish them from the cultural, ideological, and musical reinterpretations that later altered the poem's public meaning. As students, if we want to really understand the meaning woven behind each verse, we have to revisit the historical context and translate the symbolic language through the lens of the Bible, particularly the KJV translation into English. By examining the poem within the broader context of Blake's *Milton* and his views on industrialisation, institutional authority, and spiritual regeneration, the study seeks to clarify how the text functions as an intervention in contemporary debates about England's moral and social direction and ultimately the national identity of Britain in the face of such important changes that were coming through the industrial revolution.

Moreover, this research paper aims to argue that *Jerusalem* serves as Blake's radical intervention in the discourse over England's national identity, positioning him as a poet who exposes historical and contemporary injustices in hand, while envisioning the possibility of a morally and imaginatively renewed society, a better England, on the other hand. Aware of the impact the sacred text had on the people of England, Blake takes a step forward in leading them toward this transformative vision, using symbols and images from the Bible for the purpose of strengthening his message and asserting that genuine national greatness arises not from wealth or institutions but from the ethical and creative strength of its citizens. Hence, the collective responsibility of building the national and cultural identity of their own country.

## Methodology

This research paper has employed a qualitative research approach grounded in close textual and comparative analysis. It draws on a wide body of scholarly literature to examine how William Blake critiques the Industrial Revolution and articulates a vision of national identity through the lens of biblical and prophetic rhetoric. Although it is a very short poem, Blake's "Jerusalem" elaborates a wide-ranging social behaviour change occurring at the same time, from moral, spiritual, and political ones, hence the need to use a comparative approach and analyse the sacred literature, particularly the biblical texts, in order to understand Blake's message. The KJV Bible plays a crucial role; it is a dictionary that informs Blake's symbolic vocabulary. Biblical passages are therefore referenced to illuminate Blake's use of scriptural imagery and to clarify how his poem seeks not only to preserve but to *revive* a national moral conscience, as suggested by the poem's concluding vow "not [to] sleep" nor "cease [his] mental fight" until the change that he so longs to see, is indeed achieved.

## Findings and Results

The analysis of *Jerusalem* reveals that Blake constructs a complex critique of national mythology, institutional power, and the spiritual conditions of his society, while also proposing an alternative vision of national identity grounded in his imagination and imaginative liberation. The poem's opening questions do more than recall the familiar legend of Christ's presence in England; they destabilise the authority of national sacred narratives. As David Bindman suggests in his book *Blake as an Artist* published by Oxford University Press, "Blake deploys myth not to affirm national exceptionalism but to expose the imaginative work, through which such histories are crafted and created". (Bindman, 1977)

*And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon Englands mountains green:  
And was the holy Lamb of God,  
On Englands pleasant pastures seen! (Jerusalem, Blake)*

It can be stipulated that Blake's poem *Jerusalem* functions, in part, as a critique or even a satire of nationalist sentiment. The poem opens in a nostalgic tone, recalling the past. Memories of "pleasant pastures" and the presence of the "Lamb of God" seem distant and far! It is interesting, though, that the poetry emerges in the context of a revolutionary era, marked by the American Revolution of 1775 and the French Revolution of 1789, which occurred almost simultaneously. In early nineteenth-century England, fears of a French invasion were pervasive, and the government was equally concerned about the potential for domestic revolutionary activity. The investigation further shows that the "*dark Satanic Mills*" serve as a central symbol of national self-condemnation. Far from referring narrowly to industrial factories, the Mills encompass a broad variety of oppressive structures: industrial, religious, political, and psychological.

*And did the Countenance Divine,  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here,  
Among these dark Satanic Mills? (Jerusalem, Blake)*

E. P. Thompson's interpretation of the Mills to which Blake refers as both "dark" and "satanic" aligns with Blake's broader critique of systems that suppress human creativity, and it sees these Mills as signs of spiritual mechanisation under capitalism. (Thompson, 1993). In comparison to the study found in *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* written by Thompson, another scholar named D.V. Erdman in his book titled *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* maintains that "the Mills represent in fact the repressive institutions," and this consequently, it is believed, reinforces the fact that Blake deliberately used his poetry

as an instrument of resistance to the forces that constrained moral and imaginative freedom. (Erdman, 1988)

Blake's turn to KJV discourse and the prophetic language, especially in his call of the "bow of burning gold" and "arrows of desire," highlights a move from external critique to internal transformation. Blake is therefore looking for a transformation from within the self and the collective community, not from the position of the state powers. Harold Bloom asserts that "Blake situated actual conflict within the imagination to help clarify the poem's call to 'Mental Fight' (Bloom, 1963) – a struggle that is both spiritual and intellectual, and it is aimed at awakening individuals to their own creative and moral capacities. Thus, Blake reframes national renewal as a process of inner resistance, rooted in visionary perception rather than political domination.

William Blake's *Jerusalem* resonates strongly with Biblical symbols and themes of moral responsibility, spiritual renewal, and social justice, but most importantly, it reflects his vision of a revived England. The poem's call to "build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land" parallels the prophetic pictures of Ezekiel in which dry bones are brought to life, symbolizing the possibility of national and spiritual revival:

*"So, I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone ... And I will put my spirit in you, and ye shall live"* (Ezekiel 37:7, 10, KJV).

Hence, just as Ezekiel envisions the restoration of bones, literally of lifeless people, Blake imagines his England being revived through the inner power of its own people, whose true identity emerges only through collective ethical and imaginative effort, challenging prevailing notions of a nation defined by wealth, empire, or industrial might.

As Benedict Anderson emphasises in his *Imagined Communities*, first published in 1983, that nations are "inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 2006), Blake pushes against these limits by proposing a spiritual and ethical universality that transcends national boundaries. His England becomes a symbolic site for universal human liberation, not merely British cultural pride. This positions Blake both as a participant in the imagined community and as a critic of it, using his poetry to reconstruct that community from the inside out.

*"I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:  
Till we have built Jerusalem,  
In Englands green & pleasant Land"* (*Jerusalem*, William Blake)

Finally, the study finds that Blake's aspiration to build a new land, namely the "Jerusalem" in England, unfolds his vision of a regenerated humanity, depicting a different kind of land, a different way of living, and a different sort of culture. In the biblical context, Jerusalem symbolizes an ideal life, the promised land, in which "milk and honey flow" (Exodus 3:8). It represents hope and a desire to maintain an identity that seems to change amid ongoing industrial, economic, and political shifts. Jerusalem emerges as a symbol of spiritual liberation, serving as an ethical and imaginative alternative to the oppressive structures critiqued earlier in the poem. Transforming England into an ideal nation requires collective effort and moral commitment, not merely celebrating existing national greatness. F. S. Damon's interpretation in his book "A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake" positions Jerusalem as the peak of Blake's prophetic project (Damon, 1988), while Saree Makdisi emphasizes that Blake's idea of a counter-nationalism is rooted in liberation rather than conquest (Makdisi, 2003). Together, these perspectives suggest that Blake's poem reimagines national identity as a collective pursuit of justice, creativity, and spiritual awakening.

Overall, the findings in this study demonstrate that this poetry written by Blake at a time of turmoil and amidst industrial and ideological changes, Jerusalem is not just a patriotic hymn, but more than that, it represents a protest raised through a radical voice re-envisioning of nationhood. This voice not only criticizes but also challenges historical mythmaking and contemporary oppression while proposing a transformative ideal rooted in the human imagination. The poem culminates in its collective aspiration "*Till we have built Jerusalem in England's green & pleasant Land.*"

England's "green & pleasant Land" becomes a conditional statement: the land will become enjoyable, and fit for living, it will become literally "pleasant" and "green" only after moral and spiritual transformation. Interestingly, the green pastures of England are overshadowed by the dark, black smoke of mills, symbolising the high-speed factories of the Industrial Revolution. This passage represents Blake's ultimate vision of an England whose national character is defined by justice, compassion, and collective moral striving, rather than by the success that came from industrial change and achievement, or imperial domination. In this way, Blake's prophetic imagination represents a radical redefinition of Englishness and the national identity that Blake saw as being at stake from the consequences of such significant changes. This imagination is rooted in his belief in the ethical and moral capacities of his own people to make change possible and a reality. The final statement is remarkable, showing that one's love for their country means being resilient and continuing to fight for its identity until the vision becomes a reality.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that William Blake's Jerusalem serves as both a work of art and a social instrument for critiquing the profound changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The poem serves as a platform for Blake to reimagine English national identity, revealing the tensions inherent in a society marked by industrialisation, social inequality, and institutional authority. Through mythic and prophetic language, Blake exposes England's moral and spiritual shortcomings, challenging the conventional narratives that celebrated national greatness while ignoring widespread oppression, poverty, and illness. The poem's imagery, particularly the "dark Satanic Mills," underscores the multifaceted nature of this critique, encompassing industrial, political, and religious structures that suffocate human creativity and ethical responsibility.

Blake offers an aspirational vision of national renewal, portraying the construction of a symbolic Jerusalem as a collective moral and imaginative endeavour. This vision reframes patriotism not as a celebration of existing power or conquest but as a call for ethical action, spiritual awakening, and creative engagement. By situating transformation within the human imagination and emphasising the necessity of collective striving, Blake presents an alternative model of nationhood rooted in justice, ethical integrity, and visionary hope. In this poem, we have seen Blake as a radical advocate for the poor and the oppressed, a voice who fought for a better England, opposing monarchy, organised religion, industrialisation, and the established political order.

Ultimately, we can conclude that Jerusalem is a radical intervention in debates over England's identity, revealing Blake as a poet who not only critiques historical and contemporary injustices but also inspires the possibility of a regenerated society, encouraging change for good while daring to draw parallel lines with biblical discourse to strengthen his mission in leading the people of his country into his vision. Its enduring relevance lies in its insistence that true national greatness emerges not from material wealth or institutional power but from the moral and imaginative capacities of its people. His vision was that people should never cease fighting for their identity, even if it takes a lifetime.

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