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Blake's "The Little Girl Lost": An Initiation into Womanhood

by NORMA A. GRECO

Most recent critics view Blake's "The Little Girl Lost" as a poem about an ascent to a higher Innocence that comes through the acceptance of sexuality as spiritual energy. But for most critics, the poem remains frustratingly disconnected and cryptic in its individual symbolic parts, and no critic to my knowledge has shown precisely how its images and symbols piece together to form the poem's obvious "mythic narrative." In arguing that Lyca belongs to the Kore archetype, specifically in the form of Persephone, Irene Chayes provides the most comprehensive analysis of Blake's poem. But Chayes contends that Lyca is a "figure of some complexity" and that the poem's images and allusions lead to other "larger unifying categories" and other "contexts in which she also finds a place." While I agree with Chayes' archetypal approach to the Lyca story, I believe that a more fundamental and inclusive symbolic structure—one that allows for the poem's allusive psycho-mythical dynamics and also offers a "larger unifying category" for Lyca's experience—is the primordial ritual of initiation, particularly initiation into womanhood. The initiatory motif provides a central, defining focus to the poem's symbols and images, drawn from various overlapping contexts, so that under its governing structure "The Little


2. Ackland, p. 11, states this position well when he says that the reader "must grapple with exegetical crises resulting from the problematic relationship of a set of brief, gnomic propositions to a mythic narrative."


Girl Lost” emerges as a coherent and comprehensible whole to which each of its symbols and images contributes with mutually reenforcing and enriching meanings and associations.5

Initiation is a mystical process of spiritual transformation in which the initiate suffers a symbolic death and is reborn into a more sacred self. The purpose of initiation is ontological transmutation, a passage into spiritual life which for ancient man involved “sacred myths and traditions” and “mystical relations between the tribe and the Supernatural Beings.” As Mircea Eliade explains, the initiation motif is central to the myths and sagas of the ancient world, to folklore and fairytales, and even to the dream life of modern man.6 The myth of Kore is itself governed by the initiation theme, as are all myths that involve journeys to the underworld: “To descend into Hell alive, confront its monsters and demons, is to undergo an initiatory ordeal.”7 The adolescent ritual is one of three basic initiatory rites defined by Eliade, and is the one most appropriate to Blake's poem:

It is an act that involves not only the religious life of the individual, in the modern meaning of the word 'religion'; it involves his entire life. It is through initiation that, in primitive and archaic societies, man becomes what he is and what he should be—a being open to the life of the spirit, hence one who participates in the culture into which he was born. For as we shall soon see, the puberty initiation represents above all the revelation of the sacred—and, for the primitive world, the sacred means not only everything that we now understand by religion, but also the whole body of the tribe's mythological and cultural traditions. In a great many cases puberty rites, in one way or another, imply the revelation of sexuality—but, for the entire pre-modern world, sexuality too participates in the sacred. In short, through initiation, the candidate passes beyond the natural mode—the mode of the child—and gains access to the cultural mode; that is, he is introduced to spiritual values.8

Erich Neumann discusses the Kore myth in terms of initiation into womanhood; the finding of Kore by Demeter expresses the “experience of growing from girlhood to womanhood. Rape, victimization, downfall as a girl, death, and sacrifice stand at the center of these events...”9 Kore's adventure is “in the profoundest sense a self-sacrifice, a being-given-to-womanhood, to the Great Goddess as the female self.”10 An initiate into the sanctity of a sexual life, Lyca achieves a higher,
more "genuine" Innocence than that of childhood. The predecessor of Oothoon and Jerusalem, Lyca comes to know her instinctual energies as holy delight, and her experience, as an ascension through the body to a more sacred mode of being, represents the triumph of the adult's innocence of wisdom, the spiritual perception possible only through a willful affirmation of life, even—or perhaps especially—in the midst of experiential terror. Achieved through the conviction that whatever lives is holy, such vision begins in an affirmation of the body as spirit, the "portion of soul discerned by the five senses, the chief inlets of soul in this age" (MHH, p. 106). The understanding of the body as spiritual energy is requisite to ultimate redemptive vision. The Last Judgment will occur only "by an improvement of sensual enjoyment. / But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged . . ." (MHH, p. 114). In Jerusalem, sacred sexual union allows for a regenerative love—the love of Christ:

Oh holy generation, image of regeneration!
O point of mutual forgiveness between enemies,
Birthplace of the Lamb of God incomprehensible!
The dead despise & scorn thee, & cast thee out as accursed,
Seeing the Lamb of God in thy gardens & thy palaces,
Where they desire to place the Abomination of Desolation. (7:65-70)

Blake's "The Little Girl Lost" and its companion poem "The Little Girl Found" are distinguished among his earlier poetry by their prophetic nature. As Stevenson notes, they and "The Voice of The Ancient Bard" first introduce the "notion of prophecy" (p. 70), and, in exploring the dreamy realm of the psyche, they foreshadow Blake's later dream visions. The Bard looks into the future redemptive time when the earth "shall arise and seek / For her maker meek" and the "desert wild" will become a "garden mild":

In futurity
I, prophetic, see
That the earth from sleep
(Grave the sentence deep)

Shall arise and seek
For her maker meek,
And the desert wild
Become a garden mild. (p. 70)

The desert is the world of Experience which is chaotic, barren and hostile because human beings have failed imaginatively to perceive it otherwise. And Lyca is not the earth itself, but the means through which
the earth will be redeemed. The poem’s vision is thus split between the states of Innocence and of Experience, and this dichotomous vision, I think, accounts for its equivocal place in the Songs of Innocence and Experience.

Lyca’s spiritual alternative to Experience is defined partly in contrast to a related poem in Experience, “A Little Girl Lost.” Here, Ona too is lost; but unlike Lyca, she is “lost” to the infinite joys of imaginative life opened to Lyca by her acceptance of sexuality. Ona’s father, with his repressive moral code, condemns her sexual desires, and in “trembling fear” Ona obeys his demand for chastity, thereby condemning herself to sexual barrenness. The two “lost” girls reflect mutually on each other: Ona is the barren virgin, bound to the blighted world of Experience, while Lyca achieves an expansive and creative self. In her guilt and obedience to her father, Ona has forsaken the “garden bright” that awaits Lyca at the end of “The Little Girl Found.” In the design that accompanies the poem, the leafless tree indicates Ona’s plight in the world of Experience. At the beginning of her journey, Lyca too is lost in the desert as the second design to “The Little Girl Lost” reveals. Lyca is shown beneath another barren tree, but, unlike Ona, she is ready to make her way out of Experience to the garden of higher Innocence, the garden from which Ona has been expelled. Lyca’s story begins in the desert; Ona’s presumably ends there.

In the first of the three designs for the Lyca poems, a young woman is in the embrace of her lover, reaching her hand towards a flowering vine. Clearly, the young woman is not a child of “Seven summers” as we are told Lyca is. The design tells us, I believe, that in Lyca Blake represents a young woman at the threshold of sexual experience and that we are not to take Lyca’s age literally, especially since, as I hope to suggest more clearly later, the number seven has special symbolic value appropriate to the poem’s theme. The design also effects a more direct relationship between Lyca and both Ona before her fall and the pre-fallen Eve who in the design on the title page for Innocence and Experience presumably is being expelled along with Adam out of paradise. Ona is the woman of Blake’s present age, bound by moral codes of chastity, and Lyca offers a path to future redemption both from that

15. Both Chayes, “Little Girls Lost,” and Erdman, The Illuminated Blake, find a similar parallel between Ona and Lyca. Chayes contends that “Ona undergoes a fall for which Lyca by her wandering performs penance” (p. 68), and that in “A Little Girl Lost,” Ona “enters the state of Experience; at the beginning of ‘The Little Girl Lost,’ Lyca prepares to pass out of it” (p. 69). Erdman more clearly identifies the two. He argues that the Lyca poems are as much about Ona and the alternatives that await both her and Lyca in a future age: they can awake to be like Lyca before her sleep, “lost” in Experience, or they can awake to the paradisical Innocence that remains a possibility but not a promise at the end of “The Little Girl Found” (pp. 76-78). My reading is closer to that of Chayes: I believe that the Lyca poems are essentially about Lyca and that she does achieve a higher spiritual state at the end of “The Little Girl Found.”
16. Ackland, “Blake’s Touchstones to Experience,” p. 13, speaks against a literal interpretation of Lyca’s age, citing the number seven as “mystic or sacred” and symbolic of “maturity.”
bondage and from the sexual warfare that results. With Adam and Eve, sexual division began, and, as the first woman and mother of the human race, Eve represents womankind who must lead the way back to the garden by means of Lyca’s triumph.  

Lyca’s introduction into the secrets of her divine sexuality strikingly parallels the initiation ritual that Eliade finds basic to myth and folklore. As Eliade explains of adolescent initiation, the young girl is removed from her parents and her society, as occasioned by her first menstruation: “This physiological symptom, the sign of sexual maturity, compels a break—the young girl’s removal from her familiar world. She is immediately isolated, separated from the community. . . .” The girl is then instructed in the “secrets of sexuality and fertility” and ritualistically prepared “to assume her specific mode of being, that is, to become a creatress.” Her education is religious: “it consists in a revelation of the sacrality of women.” Lyca too is lost and separated from her parents, but Lyca’s willing departure from the desert indicates that she is ready for the sacred truths she is to know. Her instincts move her toward a natural course of fulfillment, and, unlike Thel, she willfully submits to them and is not afraid. The “southern clime” in which Lyca wanders “Seven summers old” suggests, as Peterfreund says, “an area of exotic sensuality.” But its symbolism is perhaps more definable. In the context of the Songs of Innocence, summer is the seasonal motif of childhood’s pastoral innocence, and Lyca is, at this point, appropriately an “innocent.” In Blake’s later poetry “south” represents in fallen man that part of the psyche where redemptive energy arises; it is the locale of Orc, the fallen form of Luvah, by whose spiritual and eschatological rage error is consumed. The south, therefore, remains a “burning fire” (Milton, 19:22) out of which in The Four Zoas Orc bursts free from his bondage to Urizen, a “terror coming from the south” (IX:61). This context is meaningful to Lyca’s experience: it is her libido, the “south” of her own psyche, that moves her toward her higher existential destiny. If her parents will not stifle or pervert her desire, as Ona’s father does in “A Little Girl Lost,” Lyca can sleep without guilt:

> How can Lyca sleep,  
> If her mother weep?  
> If her heart does ache,  
> Then let Lyca wake;

17. Chayes suggests that the young woman “might be Ona before her condemnation” and possibly Eve (p. 68). Erdman is more emphatic; the young lovers, he argues, represent “the maiden Ona and youth who meet in ‘garden bright’ . . .” (p. 76). Erdman apparently bases his supposition on the premise that Lyca is “Seven summers old” and the young woman on the design is “an older girl” (p. 76). I think Erdman’s conclusion is unwarranted and unnecessary. Admittedly the young woman is meant to adumbrate Ona, but I see no suggestion or reason to assume therefore that she represents only Ona, and not Lyca as well, if, as I suggest, Lyca’s age is not taken literally.

18. Eliade, Rites and Symbols, p. 41–42.
If my mother sleep,
Lyca shall not weep.'

Lyca's parents regret her passing from them, her rupture from childhood's primal unity, because they perceive it as a fall and a corruption rather than an ascent into a higher unity in which sexual division ceases.

As her "Seven summers" intimates, Lyca awaits a regenerative journey out of the desert. In pagan and Christian religious symbolism, seven represents spiritual quest and the omnipotent power of the divine, as in the Judeo-Gnostic ascent through the seven spheres and the seven Spirits of Revelation (1:4).21 Lyca's ascension begins in the sleep of death and rebirth, the primary pattern of the initiatory theme. Initiation of all kinds involves a death to the profane life as represented by various symbolic forms such as darkness, a cave, hut or forest, all of which suggest "the beyond" and the "darkness of gestation in the mother's womb."22 The symbolism of darkness and moonlight, which prevails over Lyca's nocturnal journey, is emphasized particularly in the initiatory rites of women who are "forbidden to see the sun," a taboo whose "explanation lies in the mystical connection between the moon and women."23

The theme of embryonic return is evident in all initiatory legends wherever the central figure is swallowed by darkness and returns triumphant.24 Descent into the womb of life signifies rebirth and at the same time death to a previous existential mode and can be understood psychologically as a descent into the unconscious. Neumann describes the initiatory theme in terms of the Great Mother archetype in what he calls her transformative character. He explains that transformation is possible only when what is to be transformed enters wholly into the Feminine principle; that is to say, dies in returning to the Mother Vessel, whether this be earth, water, underworld, urn, coffin, cave, mountain, ship or magic caldron. Usually several of these containing symbols are combined; but all of them in turn are encompassed in the all-embracing psychic reality, the womb of night or of the unconscious. In other words, rebirth can occur through sleep in the nocturnal cave, through a descent to the underworld realm of the spirits and ancestors, through a journey over the night sea, or through a stupor... but in every case, renewal is possible only through the death of the old personality.25

In his analysis of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Jung discusses the initiatory ritual similarly as a death to a previous personality, specifically the rational self.26 Initiation is a mystical journey inward to truths that lie beneath the ego, and the initiate's symbolic death is a simultaneous rebirth into the more sacred wisdom of the subconscious; it is the

22. Eliade, Rites and Symbols, p. 42.
23. Eliade, Rites and Symbols, p. 42.
24. Eliade, Rites and Symbols, pp. 47-68.
"reversal of the mind's intentions and outlook, a psychological 'Beyond' or, in Christian terms, a 'redemption' from the trammels of the world and of sin." Such an altering of the mind's perception is basic to Blake's epistemology; reality lies within, and the spiritual centre is both the point and field of vision. In *Jerusalem*, he writes:

> What is above is within, for everything in Eternity is translucent:
> The circumference is within: without, is formed the selfish centre.
> And the circumference still expands, going forward to Eternity. (71:6–8)

It is in "your own bosom" that "you bear your heaven / And earth; & all you behold, though it appears without it is within" (71:17–18).

Lyca's sleep beneath the proverbial tree of life and death is a turning inward to truths that reside within and a release from the desert of light. Lyca prays to the night which hovers paradoxically around the "desert bright," and it is this light of material reality—Urizen's "cold light"—from which Lyca seeks escape into the creative night of her own spiritual centre. Though not always, sleep for Blake can symbolize the regenerative activity of the psychic realm. One need look no further than the *Songs of Innocence* to find this meaning. In "Night," a poem whose imagery is strikingly similar to the Lyca poems, the child's dreamy sleep is transformative, revealing the eternal "sweet delight" behind the apparent terror of nature, including the instincts:

> When wolves and tigers howl for prey
> They pitying stand and weep—
> Seeking to drive their thirst away,
> And keep them from the sheep.
> But if they rush dreadful,
> The angels most heedful
> Receive each mild spirit
> New worlds to inherit. (p. 67)

Lyca's sleep likewise transforms nature into a benevolent harmony which Chayes calls a "form of the sleep of Beulah." The connection between Lyca's sleep and the psychic state that Blake later defines more precisely as Beulah is crucial to an understanding of Lyca's experience. Beulah, where all "contrarieties are equally true" and all life appears in the moonlit beneficence of mutual love, is much like the situation into which Lyca's sleep takes her. As developed in Blake's later prophecies, Beulah is the dreamy realm of the subconscious characterized by

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28. Ackland, p. 12, says that no "reason is offered for her location" beneath the tree; but I believe when the tree is considered in its traditional symbolic role as a giver of life and death, Lyca's sleep there becomes understandable. The tree's meaning in this context is apparent in Christian myth and in cabbalism (see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* [New York: Schocken Books, 1961], p. 180). For a more archetypal study of its symbolism see Neumann, pp. 48–51, 241–59. Neumann discusses the tree in terms of cabbalism and alchemy as a symbol of death, rebirth and destiny.

29. Chayes, p. 72, and Ackland, p. 13, both note the similarity between the two poems.

30. Chayes, p. 69.
pastoral innocence and sexual fulfillment. In the “marriage” of Beulah, all strife between the sexes ends, and human sexuality emerges fully as spiritual delight; there, “every female delights to give her maiden to her husband,” and the male in turn “feeds her with the food of Eden” (Jerusalem, 69:15–18). A lower paradise, Beulah awaits those in generation who have achieved its vision of higher Innocence. Lyca’s sleep is a foreshadowing of Beulah as it later becomes: the mental perspective in which sexual instincts are experienced as divine energy, and love between the sexes is mutual and giving.

Once Lyca’s journey is underway, the nocturnal beasts of prey, manifestations of Lyca’s own instinctive energies, emerge from the “caverns deep” of her own mind. The place of her sleep, of her symbolic death and rebirth, is hallowed by the sanctity of her body and the sexual experience she is about to undergo:

The kingly lion stood
And the virgin viewed;
Then he gambolled round
O’er the hallowed ground.

Blake alludes overtly to the traditional role of the lion as protector of virgins, one he definitely would have known from Spenser’s story of the lion and Una. But Blake effects a characteristic twist of cultural tradition: the lion here delights in anticipation of the deflowering to come in the final two stanzas.

Traditionally in the art and literature of western culture, animals represent human passions. Neumann explains such images as projections of unconscious energies that are universally portrayed under the control of goddesses who signify the “authority that conditions and orders the instinctual drive.” Thus, Homer’s Aphrodite tames the wild beasts: “After her came gray wolves, fawning on her, and grim-eyed lions, and bears, and fleet leopards, ravenous for deer; and she was glad in heart to see them.” The lion seemingly has a particular affiliation with human instinct as is evident by its widespread association with the Great Goddess who subdues it. Neumann explains that for millenniums she stands or sits enthroned upon lions . . . in Mycenae, where she is symbolized by a tree or pillar standing between lions; or in Crete, playing with a pair of lions, or standing upon the lion-flanked mountain before a worshiping youth. It is the same goddess who in Phrygia appears with Attis between two lions, who was worshiped in

32. Most critics assume that the animals represent Lyca’s passions; however, Ackland, p. 13, argues that the “context is not specific enough to allow us confidently to claim they symbolize the passions.”
33. The Great Mother, p. 278.
34. “Hymn to Aphrodite,” as quoted in Neumann, p. 274.
35. In the Christian tradition, the lion often appears as a symbol of rapacious passions; for example, it is likened to carnal love which “invades us ferociously in adolescence like a lion,” as quoted in D. W. Robertson, A Preface to Chaucer (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), p. 155. Robertson gives a helpful commentary on the use of animal images in Christian literature and discusses the lion in this context, pp. 151–56.
Lycia, Lydia, Thrace, Syria, Phoenicia, and other places. At a later period, she stood on a lion in Sparta; held lions in the character of Capuan winged Artemis ... or—thousands of years later—as Fortuna sat in a chariot drawn by lions ... and as the Christian Madonna, she still sits on a throne adorned with lions. 36

Like the goddesses of antiquity and Christianity, Lyca too “tames” the animal passions, but does so according to Blake’s own purpose: Lyca’s mastery comes not through a repressive reign over them, but by surrender to them.

The beasts suggest also the divine wrath of the Last Judgment. Again symbolic meanings overlap to reinforce the redemptive nature of Lyca’s sexual experience. Chayes argues the point cogently, likening the animals to Isaiah’s wild beasts of prey: “‘They seem to represent part of the violence of the Last Judgment, in Blake’s full meaning of the term: a last manifestation of material power, including the human passions, that is also the first manifestation of divine power and is indispensable to a return to the state of Eden.” 37 Like God’s apocalyptic fury, Lyca’s beasts are loving to those who truly see, while they are ferocious to those who, from experience, recognize only their terror. 38 A symbol of Christ, St. John’s “lion of Judah” (Revelation 5:5), the lion is significant here as well. As instinctual desire, the lion is Lyca’s means to a resurrected self; like Christ, he is redemptive, and in his wrath truly loving to those like Lyca who have found their revelatory powers of vision. In The Four Zoas, the “lion of terror” refers to Luvah and Christ who at the Apocalypse will reveal his love:

‘The lion of terror shall come down, & bending his bright mane
And couching at their side, shall eat from the curled boy’s white lap
His golden food, and in the evening sleep before the door.’ (IX: 703-05)

Through her rebirth, Lyca finds her “maker meek” within her own expansive self.

At the implicit sexual activity of the final two stanzas, the lion is transformed into spirit, and Lyca’s initiation into sexuality is complete:

While the lion old,
Bowed his mane of gold,
And her bosom lick;
And upon her neck,
From his eyes of flame
Ruby tears there came;

While the lioness
Loosed her slender dress,
And naked they conveyed
To caves the sleeping maid.

36. The Great Mother, pp. 272-73.
37. Chayes, p. 70.
Lyca's nakedness is appropriate to her initiatory experience: not only is it sexually evocative, but it suggests as well her "embryonic" form and her passage into a higher mode of being. The "garments" of sexual strife and fallen human form have been stripped away by the delights of love. 39

In "The Little Girl Found," Lyca's parents join her in the lion's palace, sharing in the wisdom that the body's energies are divine. Their love for Lyca that led them in pursuit presumably has resulted in a revelation of spirit: the lion appears to them in his true form, a "spirit armed in gold." In their "lonely dell," Lyca and her parents achieve a lost paradise where they fear neither the "wolvish howl" or the "lions' growl." That Lyca does not return to the world of light, that she remains in the psychic caves of rebirth, departs from most initiatory patterns but accords with Blake's own intent: Lyca waits in Beulah-like sleep for a further ascent into Eden and "fourfold" vision. 40 The design that accompanies "The Little Girl Found" reaffirms that Lyca's sleep has transformed the desert into a garden of love. The barren tree under which Lyca was lost and under which she sleeps has blossomed into a flowering tree of life. Beneath the tree a naked young woman sleeps, surrounded by children playing freely with wild animals. Erdman is correct in saying that the "tale of the picture is that there is nothing lonely about living in a sunny dell where children of all ages and sexes can sleep without fear. . . ." He contends, however, that the sleeping maiden has "no dress to identify her as Lyca or Ona." 41 I suggest that, to the contrary, the woman's nakedness identifies her precisely as Lyca whose nakedness in the poem symbolizes her spiritual rebirth and new-found higher Innocence. I believe that the most important tale of the picture is that Lyca has become the "creatress," a giver of life, whose own children now share in her vision of innocence. This same paradise awaits both Ona and Eve—and all humankind—in a future age.

I have wanted to propose a reading of Blake's "The Little Girl Lost" that brings under the focus of initiatory death and rebirth the poem's richly evocative but tantalizingly elusive symbols and images. Lyca's name, a disputed subject among critics of the poem, proves recalcitrant to any one definition, and perhaps, like much of the poem, it too should be allowed to allude in mutually reflective and inclusive ways. 42 I have wanted as well to affirm the relevance of Lyca's experience to the larger

39. Raine finds that Lyca's nakedness does not accord with her neoplatonic exegesis: "In Lyca's cave it seems as though Blake, in attempting to keep all of his multiple meanings in mind simultaneously, has failed at this point. Those dying from this world discard a garment; those who 'die' from eternity assume one," Blake and Tradition, I, 141. Generation is for Blake explained mythologically in images of weaving and garments; thus, Enitharmon weaves "Bodies of vegetation" (Four Zoas, VIII, 30-31). Garments are also the "not-human," the spectrous self, as in Albion's "filthy garments" which must be annihilated.
40. Both Chayes, p. 73, and Ackland, p. 17, argue similar positions; Erdman, The Illuminated Blake, pp. 76-78, considers redemption one possibility.
41. Illuminated Blake, p. 78.
42. See Raine, I, 393; Chayes, pp. 71-72; and Peterfreund.
content of Blake's poetry. The poem describes Lyca's initiation into the Innocence attainable only through a "leap of faith," a commitment to act in the conviction that whatever is is holy. When undertaken as spiritual delight, the sexual act rends the veil of mystery and death. Though not edenic in itself, it is an initial but indispensable means to Eternity when sexes will cease to be at all, and, as the bard predicts, the earth will rise redeemed.

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