

# THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND SILENT HILL: EXPLORING THE OCCULT PSYCHOLOGY OF WILLIAM BLAKE WITHIN A VIRTUAL HELL

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*“My birds are silent in my hills; flocks die beneath my branches;  
My tents are fallen; my trumpets and the sweet sounds of my harp  
Is silent on my clouded hills that belch forth storms and fires;”  
William Blake, “The Lament of Albion”*

## INTRODUCTION: CREATORS OF SACRED CODE

While it might seem incongruous to compare a video game made during an era where video games had not yet achieved the kind of recognition as art or entertainment as they have today with an 18th century collection of artwork and poetry intended to disrupt the English Church, that’s about where their dissimilarities end. As this paper will show, the 1999 release of *Silent Hill*, a survival horror videogame for the PlayStation, not only bears an uncanny resemblance to much of the artwork and themes prevalent throughout the works of William Blake, (particularly his seminal text, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) but, in several distinct ways, has digitally recreated the metaphorical inward journey that the poet takes into the depths of Hell. In order to explore this connection, this article will look at similarities in the representations of good and evil, the workings of self-exploration, and the use of religious and occult symbolism used to express that exploration in both works.

In the 18th century, William Blake famously used the printing press to invent new ways of printing in color in order to self-publish his “Illuminated Books”, a collection of works made from plates that combine art with text to create an entirely new form of book. His work has been credited as being one of the forerunners of the graphic novel. Edward Terry Jones points out in his essay “Another Look at the Structure of

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that Blake's "patchwork texture" of proverbs, illustrations, poems, and short prose are likely to be purposely representational of contemporaneous childrens' primers of the time, most likely Isaac Watt's *Divine Songs* (Jones 1977, 115). Jones is not implying that *Marriage* is intended for children, but that by casting readers in the role of a student, Blake implies that he is the teacher. In *Silent Hill*, a similar pedagogical relationship exists between the game and its players, and it is not coincidental that a large portion of its early gameplay takes place in an elementary school.

Although Konami's Team Silent and first-time video game director Keiichiroō Toyama did not break any technical molds while creating the first *Silent Hill* game (that wouldn't come until *Silent Hill 2*), they did break new narrative ground by drawing inspiration from occult iconography and avant garde literature, art, and film. Just as Blake sought to push new ground with the printing press, Team Silent was dealing within the early days of full three-dimensional modelling and wanted to push the boundaries of what could be done narratively within a fully realized virtual environment.

Prior to the release of *Silent Hill*, a similar survival-horror game was released in 1996, *Resident Evil*, which was technically ground-breaking in terms of controls, inventory management, and player perspective. However, it is less concerned with its narrative, presenting players with morally unambiguous characters who must explore a zombie infested mansion in hopes of escape. In order to deliberately set itself apart from *RE*, Team Silent chose to use the survival-horror model that *RE* had pioneered to tell a more psychologically haunting narrative, taking their inspiration from myriad literary and artistic sources including film directors like David Lynch and Adrian Lynn, writers such as Stephen King and Fyodor Dostoevsky, and artists such as William Blake and Francis Bacon (Staff 2012).

For example, in the representations of Blake's infamous *Great Red Dragon* painting and one of the character models from *Silent Hill*, there is a similar emphasis on combining angel and devil elements as well as human sensuality and form. Even much of the game has taken on a similar color palette to Blake's work in an effort to heighten its religious and occult overtones.



Figure 1: *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in Sun* (Blake, Rev. 12:1-4).

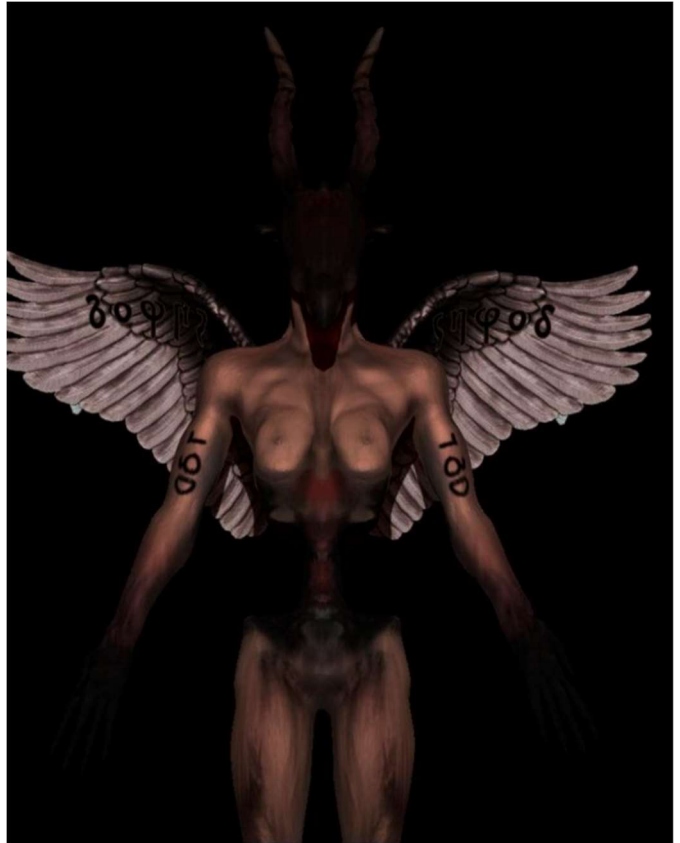


Figure 2: *Incubus (Samael). Final Boss 3D Model, Silent Hill* (freed3d 2020).



Figure 3: *Los enters the Door of Death* (Blake).



Figure 4: *Dahlia Gillespie in the Balkan Church FMV. Still from Silent Hill* (Toyama 1999).

## AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

The strongest link between *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Silent Hill* are their parallel confrontations with the psychology of the occult. Leonard Trawick, in his 1977 paper titled “Blake’s Empirical Occult”, chronicles Blake’s dealings with John Varley, an emphatic occultist. Although Varley “excited Blake” (Trawick 1977, 161), he could not get Blake to “regard Astrology with favour”. In short, Blake’s sense of the occult dealt with it strictly as an internal phenomenon rather than an external one. Trawick comes to the following conclusion regarding Blake:

“Since Blake’s universe is mental, his cosmology is a psychology; by assimilating into his own myth elements not only from the Bible but from the Cabala and from Eastern, Northern, and classical myth, he implies the universality of his own beliefs and the “original derivation” of all from the same Poetic Genius.” (1977, 166)

This is particularly important in Blake’s relationship to the town of Silent Hill because the “cosmology” of the town is also “mental” and also assimilates its own myths regarding the town’s origin and the story of its citizens in particular relation to the player. The game opens with its lead protagonist, Harry Mason, surviving a car accident with his adopted daughter, Cheryl, upon entering the town of Silent Hill. He wakes up to find her missing and sets off immediately into the town to find her on foot. The town has been engulfed in fog and alternates between two states: an eerily dreamlike ghost town and a rusting industrial “other world” of chain link fences and loud sirens. Both worlds are filled with monsters that the player must fight or run away from.

It was only in August of 2018, nearly twenty years after the game’s initial release, that a little known video essayist called Reinstall Paul began publishing a series of videos on YouTube, exploring the connections between *Silent Hill* and the occult from a psychological perspective. His videos draw on Jung’s archetypal imagery to make a compelling and thorough argument that *Silent Hill* is, in fact, an “allegorical tale symbolizing the hero’s journey towards enlightenment” (2018b, 10:00) rather than a straight-forward story of a man trying to find his daughter in a haunted town that it appears to be. Paul argues that this is why the video game has maintained such a strong grip on those who have played it in the twenty years since its release. He credits director Keiichiro Toyama’s interest in the occult as one of the fundamental underpinnings for the occult symbolism within the game (Paul 2018a, 2:25). In the cited article, Toyama notes both his interest in the occult and his desire to make a game that was less scary and more introspective:

“I never liked the really bloody shock-fest sort of horror films, so I was kind of at a loss when we started out. What I am a fan of is occult stuff and UFO stories and so

on; that and I had watched a lot of David Lynch films. So it was really a matter of me taking what was on my shelves and taking the more horror-oriented aspects of what I found. So I really didn't think [Silent Hill] was that much of a horror game, and it was kind of a surprise to me when people told me it was scary after it came out!" (Gifford, 2013).

Toyama's reference to both the occult and to the works of Lynch indicate a conscience desire to link the studio's requirement of a popular survival-horror style game with an interior universe of the unconscious that mirrors the physical universe.

June Singer, in her book *Blake, Jung, and the Collective Unconscious*, published in 2000, makes a similar case for *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, arguing that the work delves into Jungian archetypes and primordial psychological energies. However, in *Marriage*, it is Blake who is the traveler who, like Dante, gives us an account of his own inward journeys and fearful visions. Singer writes: "it is the one book which is undeniably subjective, and in which Blake writes of mystical experiences of so private a nature that in approaching them one is often seized by an acute sense of embarrassment," (2000, 45). In *Silent Hill*, the player—through the protagonist Harry Mason—delves into a virtual Hell to experience a simulated environment of the unconscious. Indeed, much of the same themes that Singer attributes to the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* apply in equal measure to *Silent Hill*:

"...the basic duality of man as expressed in the terms "material and spiritual" or "body and soul" and the nature of the relationship between them; the class of the forces of freely flowing libidinal energy with the inhibiting forms of reason; the confrontation of conscious personal attitudes with the accepted values of contemporary society; and the relationship of the personal unconscious... and a collective unconscious... which is shared by all mankind," (2000, 53).

This "basic duality" is a central theme to both *Marriage* and *Silent Hill*. For Blake, the duality is reflected by the need for "Infernal wisdom" and "enjoyments of Genius; which to Angels look like torment and insanity," as well as the Swedenborgian principles of "Good" that he rebukes, (Blake 1790, 6). The cover image (Fig. 5) represents this visually by contrasting the bright blue world on the top of the painting with a darker lower half.

In *Silent Hill*, the duality is a part of its virtual environment. The game shifts throughout the game from a "Good" world (Fig. 6), being cloaked in fog and light, to an "Evil" world (Fig. 7), being an exact replication, but with blood-soaked corridors and walls of flesh. Both are reflected in the Hermetic aphorism, "As above, so below," which insists that "our inner states have a fundamental role in affecting our circumstances" (Amir 2011, 7) or, as Singer puts it, "Every phenomenon consciously experi-

enced by man is accompanied by its polar opposite in the unconscious, and the psychological state of man is determined by the kind of relationship which he is able to maintain between these opposites," (Singer 2000, 51).

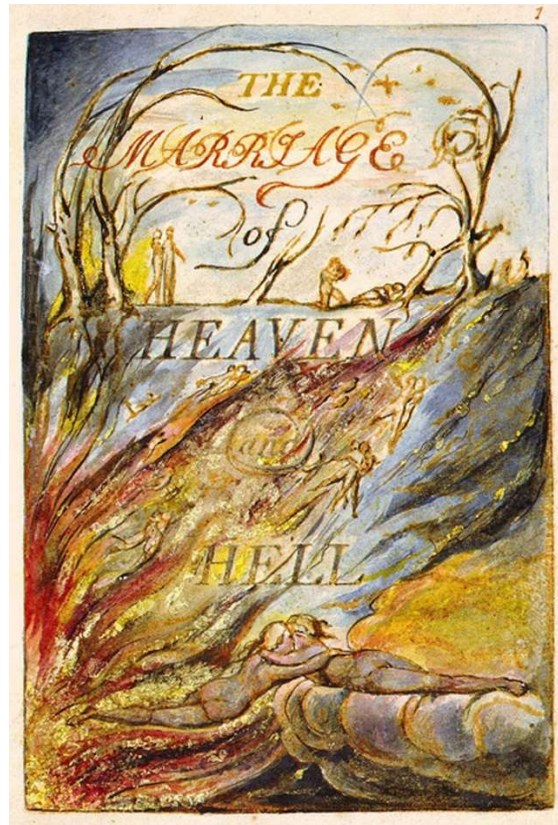


Figure 5: Marriage of Heaven and Hell cover (Blake).



Figure 6: The "light" world of Silent Hill. Illustration: Konami (The Guardian 2019).



Figure 7: The “dark” world of *Silent Hill*. Illustration: Konami (*The Guardian* 2019).

## A MEMORABLE FANCY

For Team Silent, the “confrontation of conscious personal attitudes with the accepted values of contemporary society” (Singer 2000, 51) was a literal confrontation. The team was forced to create something that would be commercially viable, pass through various censors, and therefore could not openly criticize traditional orthodoxy in the way that Blake was able to as a self-publisher. Although it should be mentioned that Blake also had to be careful not to become a political target and did a lot of symbolic cloaking of his own. This is why so much of *Silent Hill*’s esotericism has remained hidden for so long.

There has been an ongoing debate in video games studies over the importance of narrative elements within video games, which often boils down to varying definitions of interactivity within the medium (Barab 2010, 240). Indeed, many books, such as *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, are also “interactive”, but as fully realized three-dimensional environments rose to prominence with the popular releases of Sony’s PlayStation in 1994 and the Nintendo 64 in 96’, game creators could now build on the foundations of environmental storytelling whose groundwork had been laid in popular PC games like *Myst* (1993). However, the most financially successful of these new 3D virtual environments most often situated the player into positions of relative power such as *Goldeneye 007*, *Tomb Raider*, and *Doom*. *Resident Evil*, similarly, cast the player as a special forces officer that needs to escape a mansion overrun with zombies. These

games offer environments in which the player is able to see themselves as a protagonist who can engage in fantasies of power where they become the hero or heroine of their own story. *Silent Hill* immediately reclaimed that power by casting the player in the role of an emotionally and physically weak avatar.

In the first ten minutes of the game, as the player hunts through a labyrinth of alleyways in search of Cheryl, they are confronted by a swarm of creatures that resemble children with knives. The player would necessarily respond by relying on similarly structured game-interactions, to explore their inventory to find a solution to the problem, however, there is no solution to this puzzle. The result is always the same. The player is killed. Then, a short cutscene plays in which Harry Mason wakes up, and wonders aloud if everything is a dream. Keith Stuart, of *The Guardian*, in an article titled “*Silent Hill* at 20: the game that taught us to fear ourselves”, outlines one of the games central questions, “Is this environment degradation real, or is it symbolic of Harry’s mental deterioration?... *Silent Hill* might be a horror game about a small town that gets swallowed up by a cultist evil. Or it might be about mental health and anxiety,” (Stuart 2019). Because of the way in which the game focuses on the psychological and occult aspects, it becomes analogous to mental struggle and problem-solving rather than fighting external forces using physical strength.

Dahlia Gillespie, who serves as the game’s main antagonist, is analogous to the role of Blake’s relationship with the Church, by operating as the head of the cult of the Order of Silent Hill. She first appears as a savior, helping the player by offering tools and hints that progress the player further into the game, but later is revealed to have kidnapped Harry’s daughter for a sacrifice to the God of the Order, with the aim of controlling that God to her own will. Leonard Trawick points to a similar notion behind occult practices in the works of Blake. More particularly, in the poem, “Jerusalem”. “Any conscious attempt to use spirit to achieve a natural effect would itself be a Satanic ‘wheel without wheel,’” (1977, 165). Dahlia Gillespie’s attempts to use Cheryl’s and Harry’s purity to control the God of the Order are analogous to Blake’s views of the English Church’s attempts at controlling the Christian God. By rebuking her, the player reenacts Blake’s rebuke and reclaims the Poetic God, which is within themselves. Of course, this only works if the player does the work of decoding the occult psychology of the game, but while Blake’s work begs its readers to decode it, *Silent Hill*’s narrative plays dumb, allowing for many of its players to miss its more evocative subtexts.

Singer eludes to the idea of Blake’s overcoming his inner demons through the production of *Marriage* when she points out that prior to its writing, “[Blake’s] production was relatively slight and sparse. Afterwards he was able to labor with unflagging energy, to the exclusion of virtually every other interest, even without pausing in times of illness,” (2000, 49-50), asserting that, like Harry Mason, Blake had delved into the darkness of his subconscious and defeated his inner dragon. Reinstall Paul points out

that Harry Mason, whose name literally means “to build with stone”, (as in the Freemasons, who take their name out of a similar tradition of cathedral building (Britannica, 2019)) conducts a series of ritual inward journeys that marry his unconscious “Hell” with his conscious “Heaven” in order to achieve a unity of self that has been fractured after the death of his wife, Jodie (Paul 2018d, 15:00). But, because this is a video game, it is in fact the player who goes through this exercise by virtue of the video game dynamic and having Harry as the playable character, it is they who are now effectively called to the journey and consequent emotional/ spiritual exploration.

### THE INFINITE WHICH WAS HID

Trawick recognizes that “Blake uses emblematic images and hieroglyphs reminiscent of ... alchemical and magical signs: eagles, serpents, five-pointed stars, comets, winged and cog-toothed suns, moons, -- all reduced to a stylized shorthand with no attempt at naturalistic representations,” (1977, 162). All of these same signs and representations are found throughout *Silent Hill* as well, and often have correlating symbolic meaning, so that the player is given corresponding assignments that reenact the kind of self-discovery William Blake is going through in a ritualized way. For instance, on Plate 14 of *Marriage*, Blake writes, “But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged; this I shall do by printing in the infernal method by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid,” (Blake 1790, 14). Here, Blake refers to an alchemical process of purification, but rather than the exoteric supernatural occult sense of changing a lesser physical substance into a higher one, most often lead to gold, Blake refers to the more esoteric meaning of transmutation of a lesser self to a higher self. As Carl Jung points out, “The alchemical operations were real, only this reality was not physical but psychological,” (“*Silent Hill Secrets and Symbolism - PART 3: The Holy Trinity*”, 2018c, 15:00).

In *Silent Hill Elementary*, the first real location in the game that symbolically acts as a teaching ground for the player, Harry finds what appears to be a dismembered hand. But solving the puzzle in a chemistry lab, which is actually labelled “Alchemy Laboratory”, means using a corrosive element to melt the wax hand away to reveal a golden medallion within. Unifying the golden medallion with a silver one will progress the player to the next area. So the player uses an alchemical reaction to melt a representation of the body to reveal the gold, or higher substance, within. Just as William Blake’s ritual alchemy is printing the books, the player’s ritual alchemy is solving the puzzle. Many players have been baffled by the inclusion of this puzzle and many others because there is little indication that the disembodied hand is made of wax, or to the reason why it’s located at the school. For these players, it’s easiest to chalk it these inconsistencies to horror tropes for the purpose of progressing the game, or even issues

with cultural translation, as Team Silent was made up entirely of Japanese designers making a game aimed primarily at Western audiences. However, once an occult lens is applied, many of these puzzles finally make sense, such as several puzzles that involve the unification of two, body with soul, masculine with feminine, silver with gold, light with dark; often with symbols involving those familiar to readers of William Blake.

## CONCLUSION

The occult iconography in both of the works discussed in this paper are so numerous that when laid out it's difficult to see *Silent Hill* as being unintentionally derivative of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. However, it is not this paper's intention to assert that Team Silent intentionally sought to invoke Blake, but that the inner occult psychology that drove Blake to use the mystic symbolism and coded references also drove Team Silent in their effort to create an intensely personal experience of horror. Indeed, many of the other admitted influences for *Silent Hill* also use the occult to express the inner battles of personal demons. David Lynch's *Eraserhead*, for instance, explores many of the same themes of human sensuality and dream worlds that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Silent Hill* do. Only it trades the occult symbolism for surrealism. What is more important to note is that by emulating the voyage between the realms of the conscious and the subconscious in a virtual environment like *Silent Hill*, players can find themselves coming into contact with similar demons to Blakes'.

It is worth mentioning, as a final note, that Team Silent was finally disbanded by Konami in 2005 after making four games in the *Silent Hill* series, all of which carried through these occult themes and psychological layering that are still in the process of being studied. Although the series was continued for several games afterward, it was done so by another team and the games have received mixed to poor reviews. However, Masashi Tsuboyama and Kazuhide Nakazawa, two of the highest-ranking members of Team Silent, later went on to join famed video game auteur Hideo Kojima at his Kojima Studios which released *Death Stranding* in 2020, which was later nominated for Game of the Year in several categories. When the game was first announced in 2016, it was introduced with this cryptic quote from William Blake: "To see a world in a grain of sand / and a heaven in a wildflower. / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / and eternity in an hour."

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