

The Spectrum of Philosophical Thought in Blake's Works

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Abstract

Using the style of Illuminated printing, Blake stated that he would use the printing technique of his songs and Prophecies to burn away the "Apparent surfaces" and order to release the infinite world beneath. Two central groups of symbols form a dominant pattern in the *Songs*. In *Innocence* there is a Holy Trinity of The Child, The Father and Christ, while in *Experience* there is an unholy triad of Church, King and State. The symbolism of the contraries is an important feature of the *Songs* and become a key metaphor of all his works. Bringing forth the style of the poem, the jingles are carefully constructed lyrics with metrical variations and a rhythmic sometimes incantatory beat. The psychological Myth of Man, as seen in the story of *The Four Zoas*, reiterates man's primary role in the universe. Blake transmuted his teachings into the language of art and interfused his revolutionary Christian vision with neoclassical English poetry.

Keywords: Contraries, State, Church, Christ, Innocence, Experience

The writings of Blake lend themselves to personal, political, psychological, mythology and archetypal interpretation and can function at all these levels at one and the same time. Blake was romantic in his subjectivity but classical in his training.

Anne Kostelantez Mellor calls his work "Romantic Classicism." Using the style of Illuminated printing, this technique itself held symbolic meaning. Blake stated that he would use the printing technique of his songs and Prophecies to burn away the "Apparent surfaces" and order to release the infinite world beneath. He placed words and pictures into totality of a page which he etched backwards, in mirror writing onto a copper plate. The *Songs of Innocence* are also set to music and sung by the poet. Thus, Blake created in his work a Trinity of creativity which fitted in perfectly with his instinct for the Unity of Being, a belief and theory on which all his philosophy and myth is based.

Two central groups of symbols form a dominant pattern in the *Songs*. In *Innocence* there is a Holy Trinity of The Child, The Father and Christ, while in *Experience* there is an unholy triad of Church, King and State. The Jesus shepherd of the New Testament who guided, sheltered and nurtured has become Nobodaddy "Nobody's Daddy", a forbidding Jehovah who has withdrawn from his creation. The Deistic God is unconcerned with the fate of the world and will provide no succour. These symbols recur throughout the *Songs* in various forms.

The Chimney Sweepers of *Innocence* and *Experience* suffered the same fate but in *Innocence* the child is surrounded by others who share his sorrows and joys and there is still hope. Martin K Nurmi points out how Tom's dream of sweeps sporting "naked and white" serves Blake's symbolic purpose in songs. The adult master sweep is present carrying the main burden of soot. A Christ figure rescues the sweep from the grave. In *Experience*, the Chimney sweep is alone, there are no friends, no adults and no God to share his burden. In this manner, Blake's recurrent basic symbols turn into archetypes which add associations to each poem and to the whole.

The symbolism of the contraries is an important feature of the *Songs* and become a key metaphor of all his works. “Without contraries is no Progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate and necessary to Human existence.”

Blake’s characters and all humankind have to be educated through choice between the states of good and evil. This dualistic symbolism is even found in the structure of the *Songs*, the language itself displays the contraries especially in the opposing of major terms: “life” and “death”, “night” and “day”, “love” and “joy”, opposing “sorrow” and “fear”. Both these aspects are present throughout his work, for by presenting the innocent songs of the child along with antithesis Blake was studying and balancing the two contrary aspects of life. On the surface these simple poems of a few lines are delightful, childlike but these contain a symbolic meaning and fit precisely into the larger philosophical context.

Bringing forth the style of the poem, the jingles are carefully constructed lyrics with metrical variations and a rhythmic sometimes incantatory beat. There is use of repetition for parallels and contrasts leading to density and consideration. Words like lamb, child, bird, laugh, mother, father, weep, sleep and joy occur ten times in the poem of *Innocence*. The vocabulary of the poem suggests a child's own limited vocabulary and often portrays a child’s insistence on having his or her own way.

Experience has fewer internal repetitions of words but parallels continue. The speakers are most often children. There are often conversations between children and adults- the adult voice is usually unable to understand the children's different point of view and value system. Adult voices are those of reason and the child becomes representative of a world beyond reason which Blake calls the “imagination”. In a reversal of roles, Blake’s children are the teachers educating humanity in how to grow and lift correctly.

“Allegory addressed to the Intellectual addressed powers...is my definition of the most Sublime Poetry” said Blake. But Blake was to clothe his allegory in a simple popular form- that of the ballad. Ballads appealed to all classes and portrayed essential human feelings in a rhythm and metre which was immediately accessible.

Blake’s songs have a typical eighteenth century didactic purpose “showing the two contrary states of the Human Soul” and Blake was probably influenced in his structuring of the *Songs* by one another source, Issac Watts whose *Divine Songs for Children* were popular. Blake was a prophet who did not believe in the indiscriminate condemnation of humanity because for him *Innocence* is available even after the Fall.

The themes of these poems are often directly in opposition to typical adult world authority- in the State, the Church and the educational system. For growth, the journey from *Innocence* to *Experience* is necessary for the individual and essential for spiritual or mystical advancement to Higher *Innocence*.

Man is central to Blake's vision. Martin K Nurmi sees Blake as “probably the most extreme humanist of all time.” For Blake, individual and the divine are interchangeable terms.

Thou Art a Man, God is no more
Thine own Humanity, learn to adore

The psychological Myth of Man, as seen in the story of *The Four Zoas*, reiterates man’s primary role in the universe. It also emphasises human choice and judgement. All Blake's works act in linear progression, leading from *Innocence* of childhood through *Experience* and the doubts and divisions of the Prophetic Books to “Heaven's Gate.”

On the title page of the *Songs of Innocence* a protective mother and the children at her knee are sheltered by an apple tree laden with fruit. The tiny Piper Bard Blake is placed with letter I of Innocence, who is just beginning on his task of educating humanity. The open book on the lap of the mother from which the children read, re-stresses the theme of education and learning.

The Lamb, one of the greatest lyrics of English literature, is a dialogue between the child and lamb. The lamb is a universal symbol of selfless innocence, Jesus the lamb is the gentle imagination, the Divine Humanity. The Lamb identifies with Christ to form a Trinity of Child, Lamb and Redeemer. The poem presents the ideal of Charity and substantiating Christian compassion and caritas or caring, the ideals of the lamb of God. The poem is a mixture of the Christian spirit and the pastoral tradition. Divinity is transferred to a serene, domestic, rural location, it is a familiar and traditional world. In *The Lamb* the harmony grows out of a deeper Union.

I a child and thou a lamb
we are called by his name (Blake, lines 17-18)

In *The Little Black Boy* the pain of being born with a different face is genuine and acute. Martin Price opines that Blake enters imaginatively into the condition of the boy and his mother. The poem deals with the issues of slavery and racism. While in the English countryside every child has the birthright of divine love, the little black boy has to strive to be worthy of acceptance. The black child has to cast off his coloured skin to find friendship from the white child. It is a tragic vision but the poem remains in Innocence because there is belief in the happiness and redemption available once the body is cast off.

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
White as an angel is the English child:
But I am black as if bereav'd of light. (Blake, lines 1-4)

Blake's poem exposed the evils of chimney sweeping as part of the cruelties created by sudden increase in wealth. While in both *Innocence* and *Experience*, the Chimney Sweeper suffered the same fate, in *Innocence* there is still belief in the divinity and a deep human sympathy available in the companionship of little sweeps. The sufferings in this world of Innocence are temporary for if a human father sells his child, the real Father or Christ is still at hands to cherish, protect and remove to a perfect world.

In the Chimney Sweeper, Foster Damon points out how Blake accuses the Church directly for depraving of these children. In *Songs of Experience* the picture of a London sweep carrying his wire brush and a sackful of soot walks alone and barefoot in snow. The child has been abused by authority, and made a victim of a cruel society whose Trinity is God, Priest and King. There is no recourse to faith and companionship, the authority divinity, here, is the opposite of Jesus the saviour.

London is a poem of concentrated wrath directed against the corruption of civilization by the power of Reason, whose "mind forged manacles" have restricted every natural joy into a terrible agony. The street cries of the chimney sweeps are accusations against the Church; and the death-sigh of the soldier is a stain upon the state. Love itself, when so bound, makes the marriage bed a disease blighted hearse.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,

The mind-forg'd manacles I hear (Blake, lines 8-12)

“Faith and Certainty is changed to Doubt.” (Vala or The Four Zoas)

In the *Songs of Experience* the key metaphor is that of blight; sharing and selflessness has become the Ego and a narrowing of identities at all levels is seen. The Urizenic world is full of repression and prohibitions. *Experience* contains several poems on lost Children and loss becomes another metaphor. Fetters, both physical and psychological, have replaced the expanding vision of the “Albion Rose.”

The Tyger was created in this fallen world of Reason, and his appearance caused Urizen’s Aristotelean reactions of terror and pity. *The Tyger* is more than a topical poem about the French Revolution, it is a dualistic symbol, an active living contradiction and perfect example of the unity of opposites. The thirteen questions of *The Tyger* are the unanswered questions of all religions and philosophies. The structure of the poem is inherently dualistic, “bright” and “night” in themselves symbolise an active unity of opposites.

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?(Blake, lines 1-4)

The lyric is the most tightly structured of all Blake's poems. It delineates the actual process of creation where first the fires of the tiger's eyes are gathered from the cosmos, followed by the shaping of the heart in the furnaces and forging of its feet and brain. The Tyger then is a poem about seeming evil created by a good God, and it leads man to realise that *Innocence* and *Experience* are both necessary for human development. *The Tyger* uses fiery power to overcome obstruction and therefore becomes not only a symbol of wrath but also of cleansing. Destruction is inevitable if renewal has to come.

Blake transmuted his teachings into the language of art and interfused his revolutionary Christian vision with neoclassical English poetry. This “Gospel of art” is fundamentally spiritual but his psychological insights survive along with his literary and technical brilliance to give meaning to the twenty-first century.

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