

Image of Childhood in Some of Blake's Poems

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المخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إظهار الصور المتضادة للطفولة في بعض أغاني البراءة وأغاني الخبرة لوليم بليك وقد تناولت أهمية الطفولة في الرومانتيكية الإنكليزية بصورة عامة وفي شعر بليك بصورة خاصة. ويقسم البحث إلى مقدمة تسلط الضوء على الأسباب التي تقع وراء إهتمام الرومانتيكيين بالطفولة وإلى مبحثين آخرين. حيث تركز الدراسة في المبحث الأول على صورة البراءة والفرح كما يظهران في أغاني البراءة بينما يبين الثاني بعض صور الألم والضيق اللذين يظهران في بعض أغاني الخبرة.

Abstract

One of the Romantic poets who devotes a notable area for childhood in his poetry is William Blake. He does not look at childhood as a golden period of his life like other Romantic poets. Instead, he tests this period through other children whom he sees and observes. In this sense, he looks at this subject objectively. As a result, he depicts children in different moods and conditions. He also attributes the different moods of children to different situations, persons, and institutions. He, sometimes, identifies himself with the children's life, now as a victim now as a saviour. Hence, Blake is sincere in this field. He glorifies the children's happiness and gives indirect solutions for their sufferings.

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Introduction

Among the different reasons that pushed the Romantic poets to devote a notable area of their poetry to childhood there are, at least, two outstanding ones which in their role generate other subsidiary reasons. The first one can be regarded as universal for it is due to the fact that man used to cast his memory back to remember some happenings which left remarkable spots in his life. This act may take part involuntarily; some stimuli may remind man of some past incidents of which he is unaware. However, man is a part of his time and his life is distributed between past, which he lived and become far from his ability to regain it but through memory which can be regained present which soon becomes past and future which lies under the responsibility of fate. In this respect, past is the most active part in man's life for everyone has a sense of past, without past man is without memory, then he is void⁽¹⁾.

The second reason is pure Romantic. It represents man's continuous attempts to beautify his present which is full of gloomy images resulted from the "rapidly developing industrial and commercial world"⁽²⁾ in which the potential dangers of a mass society were totally directed by system of organization⁽³⁾. As a reaction to this new society and this somewhat strange life the dislike of poets, in

general, especially the Romantic turns against industry, in which children played their pitiful part⁽⁴⁾.

However, the English Romantic poetry takes two main directions in its view to childhood. Some poets deal with their own childhood and depict it as a golden period where problems cannot find a path to while others deal with it objectively where joy and pain, happiness and misery can clearly be seen in this period. Among those who adopt the second view is William Blake who never talks about his own childhood but shows children in opposite images. Sometimes they are happy, other times they are sad. He sees that life is a gift given to children and they must live in joy and innocence.

This point of view, however, is not a pure Blakian one. It has its deepest roots in Christianity as well as in literature and Blake's writings are now and then intertextualized with those sources. In Christianity, childhood is regarded as sacred and innocent to the extent that children will definitely enter the kingdom of God because of their innocence: "I tell you truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"⁽⁵⁾. From literature he borrowed freely from Anna Laetitia Baranld's book Hymns in Prose for Children in the area of phraseology, imagery and thematic structure⁽⁶⁾. However, this does not diminish lesson from Blake's originality in this realm. He has his own unique techniques

that overcome these influences and sometimes, blind even the specialist from touching them. His reading of naturalistic philosophy inspired him with so many rich images and special treatment of childhood⁽⁷⁾. Furthermore, Blake does not look at childhood as a happy period nor does he look at children as inexperienced creatures. On the contrary, in some of his poems, especially in "Songs of Experience" he made his children talk about their misery and suffering but they could do nothing and they accuse some other persons and establishments as being the causes of their misery. He also uses certain childish words like: "Shepherd", "angel" "Father" and "Maker". Though these words do have their Christian slang, Blake uses them far from their traditional and theological sense⁽⁸⁾. In "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience", however, he is the simplest of lyric poets and every child may joy to hear the songs⁽⁹⁾. His interest in childhood, however, springs from his seriousness about sex. He sees "that as sex is the buried part of our civilization, so the child is the buried part of the man"⁽¹⁰⁾. As a result his thinking "is always directed to the hidden fountains of our humanity"⁽¹¹⁾.

1-1 The Image of Innocence and Joy

Innocence and joy are closely related in so far as the state of innocence engenders different aspects of joy; now in the form of carefree life now in the form of indulgence in all activities of life with

free and innocent mind. However, innocence is a characteristic of children, animals and even adults who live a less complex life. The creatures who have limited capacity can easily deal with their world and with themselves. Thus they behave in a more spontaneous way a matter which makes it easy to reach their goals.

Blake explores these aspects in the children's life from the first moments of birth, through their early years, to the years when they become conscious of what is going around them.

In the "Infant Joy" there are two speakers who are; a newly born child who is only two days old and another person who maybe a mother or a nurse. The child starts talking about his unknown name and his age, then it leaves the remain lines for his mother to describe her feelings which express her wishes of happiness and joy which enfold the child and will continue enfolding it.

I have no name

I am but two days old.

As soon as the child expresses his ignorance about its name, the mother is bewildered of the name she is going to call it by:

What shall I call thee?

However, the question does not reflect her ignorance as much as her bewilderment for all the names of joy and happiness that must be given to it. Then the child chooses the name which suits his state of mind – if he has any!-

Joy is my name.

The mother blesses him and agrees to this name:

Sweety joy befall thee!

She repeats this refrain in the end of the second stanza though she is not certain of the inevitability of this joy, it is merely a wish. However this wish is concentrated on by the mother for she repeats the word "joy" five times in addition to the first time which is uttered by the child, a matter which makes it notable in a very short song with short lines.

Innocence and joy show themselves in some other poems from (Song of Innocence) where all have rural setting and describe children who look at thing innocently and express themselves spontaneously. In "The lamb" we have a child questioning the nature of a lamb, and the nature of its Creator. These questions occupy the first ten lines which form the first stanza. They try to discover whether the lamb knows something about the nature of its Creator who gave it life and made it 'feed by the stream & o'er the mead;'. He is also surprised by the appearance of the lamb which the Creator gave it:

Gave thee clothing of delight.

Softest clothing wooly bright;

In the world of innocence the child speaks to the lamb and marvels in its soft and bright goodness over which stands Jesus who is Himself a lamb⁽¹²⁾. Then the child turns to describe the "tender voice" of the lamb which makes "all the values rejoice:".

It seems that the child in this poem judges things according to appearance; a matter which reflects his innocence. Children, in Blake's (Songs of Innocence) are not aware of so many facts in life. As a result they accept some interpretations about the universe whatever simple and naïve they are.

The innocence of the child does not stop at this point. He starts acknowledging the lamb about the nature of its Creator.

Little lamb I'll tell thee,

Little lamb I'll tell thee;

These two lines contradict the bewilderment which the child shows in the first stanza and results in innocence but not ignorance.

He is called by the name,

For he calls himself a lamb:

The child takes of Christ's instructions concerning this subject as they are. Its innocent mind cannot interpret things symbolically. It cannot differentiate between itself, the lamb and Christ:

I am child of thou a lamb,

We are called by his name,

The mind of the child is simple that it accepts things without delving in some metaphysical matters concerning the nature of God. This aspect suits the situation of pious men, saints and prophets. Hence Blake's child has a touch of divinity where man should not question the ways of God.

Innocence deepens on the level of the individual in "The Chimney Sweeper". (Songs of Innocence) for the child narrates his whole story and the conditions which made him a sweeper:

*When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue,
Could scarcely cry weep weep weep,*

The child is fully aware of the conditions which collaborate to make him or to force him to be a sweeper. The death of his mother and the cruelty of his father pushed him to live this sort of life. He is neither ignorant nor he is naïve for "ignorance and naïve are not the conditions for Blake innocence"⁽¹³⁾. The child's innocence here lurks in some justifications which he may have learnt from some social and religious instructions. He forgets about his conditions and turns to the problem of one of his friends "Tom Dacre" while his hair is being cut and who is crying:

*Theres littleTom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curle'd like a lambs back, was shav'd,*

He tries to console little Dacre and he gives innocent justification which children may believe on:

*Hush Tom never mind it, for when your head's bare,
You know that the soot can not spoil your white hair*

The tone of bitterness is not absent from what the child says. It seems that it is forbidden for children like Dacre and his friends to have long hair like other children. However, Tom's innocence

generates a heavenly joy through a dream. This dream is a reaction against what happens in reality. Since Tom cannot change anything and since reality dooms those children to miserable conditions there is no other consolation but through dreams where the heavenly father compensates what the children lose in reality. In this dream Tom saw thousands of sweepers "Lock'd up in coffins of black". They are released by an Angel who was sent by "The Children's Father":

And by came an Angel who had a bright key

And he open'd the coffins & set them all free.

As soon as they are released, joy falls on them and they start behaving according to what their childish nature and inclination direct them:

Then down a green plain leaping laughing they run

And wash in river and shine in the sun

The dream has set them free and released them from their bad conditions. They are put in another different setting where woe does not know a path to. In addition to the happiness and joy the children lived in a dream, the angel promised Tom a golden promise which will certainly affect his real conditions. It is a promise of God's fatherhood which will definitely compensate Tom's need of the fondness of a father:

And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,

He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

The child who is adopted by God lives in an eternal joy and he will be no more in need of his cruel father who sold him while he was a little child.

Innocence appears in some of Blake's (Songs of Innocence) on the faces of groups of children. Now it goes out of its individual level to the collective level. In the 'Holy Thursday'. (Songs of Innocence) we have groups of children who celebrate a sacred day:

T was a Holy Thursday their innocent faces clean.

This image reflects the innocence and purity of children who are not fully aware of the sacredness of this day. All what they have to do is to obey the "Grey headed beedles" who walk in front of them steadily. Then they are seated in companies. The noise they make is like that of "multitudes of lambs". Even their hum is innocent. When the celebration starts:

Thousand of little boys & girls raising their innocent hands

and their voices are raised to heaven like "a mighty wind" or a thunder:

Now like a might wind they raise to heaven the voicing song

Or like harmonious the seats of heaven among

In the second and third stanzas of this poem, the organized thoughts and voices of the groups of children are connected with the angels. The children are seated in groups like the angels who sit beneath God's throne in humility and innocence:

*Then I looked, and there before me was
The lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and
With him 144,000 who had his name and
his Father's name written on their
foreheads. And I heard a sound from
heaven like the roar of rushing
waters and like a loud peal of thunder.
The sound I heard was like that of
Harpists playing their harps. And they
sang a new song before the throne and
before the four living creatures and the
elders. No one could learn the song
except the 144,000 who had been
redeemed from the earth... They follow the
lamb wherever he goes... No lie was
found in their mouths; they are
blameless⁽¹⁴⁾.*

Hence the innocence of children is a divine one. When children become like angels they are the most innocent and joyful creatures.

The image of innocence and joy is depicted collectively in the "Nurse's Song" – (Songs of Innocence). It can be touched in both the nurse's speech and orders and in the children's replies and justifications. However, joy precedes innocence as far as the nurse is

concerned while it is generated by innocence according to the children:

*When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still*

The voices of children and their laughing arise joy in the heart of the nurse and everything seems to be calm and quiet as if time stopped its continuous mobility and took the nurse back to her bygone day when she was a child. After these illusive moments the nurse's happiness does not turn to sadness but to gentle order asking the joyful children to come home and to start their childish play when the sun rises again. She is fully conscious of continuity of time now.

*Come come leave off play, and let us away
Till the morning appears in the skies*

The children's reply on the other hand is very innocent. It reflects their unawareness about the tragic mobility of time. They think that when this day ends another day will follow and their play will continue. Besides, they try to exploit day like birds and sheep. This indirect comparison shows the innocence and purity of children:

*No no let us play, for it is yet day
And we can not go to sleep*

*Besides in the sky, the little birds fly
And the hills are all covered with sheep.*

When the nurse is convinced that there will be time to stop playing,
the children are taken by a frenzy of joy:

*The little ones leaped & showed & laugh'd
And all the hills echoed*

The three successive verbs (*leaped & showed & laugh'd*) express the deepest aspiration of joy and happiness which nature inspires the children with. Again innocence generates joy and both are closely related in some of Blake's poems (Songs of Innocence).

1-2 The Image of Pain and Loss

Like the image of innocence and joy, the image of pain and loss appears in some of Blake's songs – especially those of experiences, now on the level of the individual, now on the level of the collective. However, it shows how children are suffering and are exploited in a society where its people and institutes are responsible for this suffering. Sometimes, children are depicted in this image since the first moments of their birth as if they were aware of the gloomy future through which they have to pass. In "Infant Sorrow" a newly born baby describes his parents' and his feelings in the moments of his birth:

My mother groond! my father wept,

If it is a usual act for a mother to groan during and after giving birth it is unusual for father to weep. These two actions, however, prophesize the gloomy future which awaits the child. These feelings are clarified and further developed in the second line:

Into the dangerous world I leapt:

The world to which the child is thrown is dangerous and it seems that the child discovers this fact by his natural instinct or else why should every newly born baby goes out crying?

This matter is clearly explained by one of Ibn Arromi's Lyrics:

لما تؤذن الدنيا به من صروفها
يكون بكاء الطفل ساعة يولد
والأفما يبكيه منها وأنها
لأوسع مما كان فيه وأرغد^(١٥)

The world is really wider than the mother's womb. However, the child itself leapt but it is, 'helpless naked, piping loud' as if he were not a human being but it is:

Like a fiend hid in a cloud

It does not surrender but it struggles in its father's hands and strives against its swadling band. It is bound and weary and it finds no other choice but to 'sulk' on its mother's breast:

*Struggling in my father's hands,
Striving against my swadling bands:
Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk up on my mothers breast.*

The verbs used in the upper lines express the child's continuous attempts to be free. It "struggles" and "strives" but it seems that its efforts are all in vain. Finding no hope in release because it is "bound" it accepts its fate which dooms all people and "sulks" upon its mother's breast. In addition of expressing the child's surrender the verb 'sulk' in the last line of the poem expresses the inevitability of life however gloomy and harsh it will be. The parents and child take part in pain for they are aware of the dangers which await the child and which they have undergone.

The image of pain and loss continues its presence on the level of the individual in "The Chimney Sweeper" – (Songs of Experience). The image of loss precedes the image of pain. The poet depicts the child in an environment which does not suit his age and which shows hostility and indifference towards him. Everything is against the child in this poem; even nature:

A little black thing among the snow;

The contrast between size and colour expresses many facts about the child's loss. The adjective 'little' contradicts the wideness of the snow which extends wherever one turns his eyes, a matter which expresses loneliness and loss. Furthermore the child is not looked at as a human being but as an inanimate "thing" whom no one would care about. This little thing is "black" and stands among a wide white snow. He is surrounded by an environment which shows no mercy to him besides its refusal of this intruder. Then the image of pain works

as the child "cries". His crying expresses his deep pain, however they are in vain for no one is ready to save him from his misery:

Crying weep, weep in notes of woe

When someone asks him about his father and mother he answers that:

They are both gone up to the church to pray.

The irony in the child's answer is clear for it is not the job of father and mother to leave their child suffering and go up to church to worship God! Here, there is an indirect attack to all institutions of the society where "the church itself is not absent from those institutions under attack"⁽¹⁶⁾

After this the child shows the reasons why his parents launched him to this miserable job:

Because I was happy upon the heath

And smil'd among the winters snow:

They clothed me in clothes of death.

And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

Now, the family as a smallest institution of the society is attacked ironically and the feelings of happiness the child once felt among the snow are turned to image of loss and pain. The child in this stanza is quite aware of the reasons behind his misery. Instead of clothing him the clothes of happiness which children should wear the child's parents clothed him the clothes of death which refer to the dangers and fears of the job in which the child is launched. They also

taught him to sing not songs of happiness which suit the children's tender voice but songs of woe.

The child's natural tendency to joy resists all the miseries and pain in which he lives and the parent's went on thinking that they haven't done him harm. Happiness and joy have their roots in childhood and whenever they find an outlet they show themselves.

And because I am happy & dance & sing.

They think they have done me no injury:

The attack which the child's carries out against his parents through irony is carried out against some persons and institutions directly:

They are gone to praise God his priest & king

Who make up a heaven of our misery

The child is aware of the reasons of his misery as well as the reasons of other children who suffer like him. He attributes it to the hypocrisy of some religious men who do not preach the responsibilities of parents towards their children. They are busy of some hypocritical ceremonies which seem more important than building a human life.

The school, which seems far from the institutions that should be attacked and regarded as sources for children's pain and loss, is also attacked in so far as it prevents children from living carefree life like birds and other joyful creatures. It stands as an obstacle in front of the children's inclination towards joy, In "The School Boy" we read:

*How can a bird that is, born for joy.
Sit in a cage and sing,
How can a child when fears annoy
But droop his tender wing,
And forget his youthful spring.*

The school according to Blake may corrupt the sense of joy and the spirit of innocence in children. It appears as a cage where birds are imprisoned. It takes children far from their natural environment represented by the open nature where no cares rather than playing and dancing know a path to this life. Blake "identifies a bird in conjunction with the image of the child"⁽¹⁷⁾. Going to the school for the children brings about misery and dismisses joy:

*But to go to school in a summer morn,
O, it drives all joy away;
Under a cruel eye out worn,
The little ones spend the day,
In sighing and dismay.*

It is really something melancholic for children to go to school and to leave at summer's joy behind waiting for the "cruel eye" to let them out to enjoy their time. However, between their going to school and their being set free there are sighs and dismay a matter which does not suit the children fondness of being free. To curb children's freedom even if it is for their own benefit something contrasts their natural impulses for a joyful life which does not know limits. Hence

any action and institution which stand in front of children's joy brings a lot of pain to them.

The image of pain deepens and is showed collectively in the "Holy Thursday" (Songs of Experience). It starts with a question and astonishment to see babies live in miserable conditions while England is rich and fertile land:

Is this a holy thing to see.

In a rich and fertile land.

Babes reduced to misery

Fed with cold and usurous hand?

The condition in which children live and the hands that are responsible for feeding them make them live in misery and pain. The children's voices are a mixture of cries and songs as they are trembling. Those children are doomed to live in pain forever where spring is absent and winter continues its presence. They never see the sun which symbolizes freedom and joy:

And their sun does never shine

Their ways and fields are also depicted as something which brings about misery rather than happiness. Pain and loss surround them:

And their fields are bleak of bare,

And their ways are filled with thorns

It is eternal winter there.

Again the reason behind the children's misery is religious institution represented by a church which suffocates the children's voice of joy and dooms them to pain and misery in order to show itself as a divine institution which deserves to be sacred on the behalf of those children.

Conclusion

One of the Romantic poets who devotes a notable area for childhood in his poetry is William Blake. He does not look at childhood as a golden period of his life like other Romantic poets. Instead, he tests this period through other children whom he sees and observes. In this sense, he looks at this subject objectively. As a result, he depicts children in different moods and conditions. He also attributes the different moods of children to different situations, persons, and institutions. He, sometimes, identifies himself with the children's life, now as a victim now as a saviour. Hence, Blake is sincere in this field. He glorifies the children's happiness and gives indirect solutions for their sufferings.

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