

William Blake's Symbolism in Selected Poems of Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience

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Abstract

William Blake used Symbols all over the lyrics Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience. Blake is a unique poet and his verses are rich in images and symbols. For analysis in this paper, I have taken two poems each from Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience. "The Lamb" and "Chimney Sweeper" from Songs of Innocence and "The Tyger" and "Chimney Sweeper" from Songs of Experience. In this paper, I will examine graceful style of Blake and themes of his poetry. Blake's religious perspective about Christianity and God are also discussed. In his poems he uses two alternate points of views. He is sentimental sometimes in his poetry. He uses contrariness in his poetry. Structure of his poetry is awesome. His poetry is melodious. This paper also investigates and analyses Blake's lyrics critically. Primarily, this paper discusses Blake's imagery and symbolism in various poems. The themes of Blake's poetry are related to religion, nature, purity, experience, God, Social injustice, and experience. Important features of four poems of William Blake are analyzed from perspective of symbolism.

Keywords: Symbolism, The Tyger, The Lamb, God, Chimney Sweeper, Smokestack, Vision, Contrary, Religion.

Introduction

A Symbol is an intellectual tool that contains a few layers of consequence. In the first sight, it is obvious to interpret different

angles or ideas or attributes that it represents. Symbol is something more than that it really signifies. It could be an activity or protest. Symbols are used to convey thoughts or ideas that are figures or characters or shades. Symbol is a manifestation of outward things or internal thinking. Symbols are used as references in a story or poems

The writers incorporate Symbols to signify preferences, dispositions, frame of mind or without purposefully expressing the point of view as intended. The authors use characters, protests, and creatures as Symbols to convey their messages in a roundabout way. Symbolism is usage of Symbols to convey ideas and characteristics of some meaning in their exacting sense. Symbolism is taking different structures. Symbolism is speaking in a unique way that is more important and notable. Symbolism gives the writer freedom at two levels of implications to the work, one which is obvious and the other one seems to be real. Symbolism provides comprehensiveness to the characters and the topics of writing. Symbolism in writing inspires passion for readers to find interests of the writer's mind about how he sees the world and sometimes even normal conflicts have intense ramifications.

Blake is a unique writer and his lyrical verses are rich in symbols and references. All the poems in the Songs of innocence and Experience use Symbols. His acclaimed poems like Songs of Innocence and Songs

of Experience, for example “The Tyger”, “The Lamb” and “The Chimney Sweeper” from Songs of Innocence and “The Chimney Sweeper” from Songs of Experience use Symbolism extensively.

Blake, the Poet

William Blake was born in 1757 in London, to James, a hosier and Catherine Blake. Blake told about having visions from early childhood. He learned to write and read staying at home instead going to conventional school. His parents found Blake to be interested in painting, so his parents sent him to drawing school. From a young age, he started writing poetry. He was apprenticed to an engraver as it was expensive for his father to send him to painting school. Blake married Catherine Boucher in 1782. She was uneducated. He trained her in draftsmanship, composing and peruse. Blake’s first printed work is Poetical Sketches (1783). He distributed Songs of Innocence in 1789 and Songs of Experience in 1794. Blake likes freedom and was a free thinker. He was rebellious according to 18th century neo-classical traditions. He liked creative energy over reason in writing his verses and symbols. He wrote about his inward dreams and rather than from his perceptions. His works are: The French Revolution (1791), America, a Prophecy (1793), Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793), and Europe, A Prophecy (1794). He critically exposed eighteenth century political and social oppression. He had serious reservations against English Government. The Book of Urizen (1794) deals with Philosophical oppression. In his work “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790—93), he criticized the state and chapel.

Blake's Symbolism

Symbols overwhelm our lives; they are amazing things. Symbols are used to communicate our ideas and feelings with one another. They are deeply interwoven with our lives. We take help of symbols to talk to ourselves, think, process, and

summarize our experiences and ideas. Every word we employ is a symbol. All art we deal with is symbol in nature. Religion uses symbols. Blake’s verses are noteworthy because, his verses are filled with symbols.

Blake was a great believer in natural impulses and hated all restraints. Consequently, he condemns all those who exercise restraints upon others. He states in “Holy Thursday II”:

And their ways are fill’d with thorns
It is eternal winter there (Yeats, Blake poems, 2005)

It is apparent from the above discussion; Blake’s poetry is thrilling with symbols. Blake has portrayed human nature and nature; plant and animal life in a simple manner but with profound symbols; “contrary states of the human soul” are the examples used for good and evil, or innocence and experience in the course of his poetry. Blake’s symbols are unique as they are created by him on his own and not imitating other’s symbols. The symbols are related in-worldly. They lead us from outer world to the inner world. Blake’s symbols are personal in nature. He confronts attractiveness of truth with the technological know—how. He opposes the suppression of human nature through ethical dogmas. Blake created a persona of his own.

Concisely, Blake is an influential and powerful symbolic or allegorical poet. His symbols are live, natural, and cinematic. He paints a pulsating and natural photographic existence in front of us. Especially, Blake uses symbols like ‘solar-flower’ in his poetry which leaves an indelible impression on the mind of the reader that it is tough to forget. He mentions a tiger and it becomes a symbol of God’s power, his lamb turns out to be a symbol of suffering innocence and Jesus Christ and his tree is symbolic of anger and choice to triumph over enemies; the darker aspect of human nature. Symbolism is the principle trait of William Blake as a dramatist and as a poet and this

has been effectively portrayed in his mystical work, *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

Blake's Poetic Style and Themes

Blake uses wide variety of poetic forms in the Songs of Innocence and Experience, and often evolves his Symbols in unanticipated ways. "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" sense differently from each other on a modern printed page and as original plates of Blake. But the impressions the poems create are simple in expression and striking. In several poems, Blake depicts the lives of common people, especially children and deals with their joy and suffering. And his simple language of poetry was against higher order of Neo-classicism.

Blake's mastery over his ability to unfold his thoughts packed with mysticism and vision in simple language of ordinary man in his poetry is exception. Moreover, Blake is a great Modernist poet because he broke many traditions of the past. He disagreed with orthodox Christianity and ideas that "nature" and "God" must be respected and praised; his innovative free writing verses were more formal poems. He employed slant rhymes and metrical variations. He embraced many themes and subjects of poetry like free love, sex, equality of race etc. He focused on human imagination, consciousness and individual (Blake himself), and laid foundation for poets to come.

Blake was pioneer and unique in many ways. He was prophetic, mystical, and visionary of the major poets of the west. He manifested at the right time to become immensely influential in changing the way people thought. During Blake's lifetime many people started questioning the "infallibility" of the Bible and the "divine rights of Kings". According to the Bible, Kings were selected by God. And women and children were fated by God to be obedient to men. Slavery and serfdom had been instituted by God. Sex was treated as "evil" unless approved by marriage. It is meant that Bible was compendium of many

innumerable verses. If a verse is proved incorrect, then it was up to public to decide which verse to believe or not. Science proved many biblical facts to be incorrect. The authority of the Bible was undermined and began to fall. Free thinkers started interpreting the Bible as they preferred either ignoring or rehabilitating verses they disagreed with. Many have become atheists or agnostics.

Blake contrariness in themes

One of the 'Proverbs of Hell' had already, and more bluntly, use the same example to make the same point:

A fool sees not the same tree
that a wise man sees.

And about 1803, in an unpublished poem called *The Mental Traveler* Blake would write that 'the eye altering alters all.' It is not only opinion that is subjective: perception itself is unique and personal to each individual. So, you cannot adopt another's viewpoint, you can only encounter it and react to it.

To quote one of the 'Proverbs of Hell':

"The crow wished everything was
black, the owl that everything was
white" (Gilchrest, Life of Blake,
1880)

So, recognition of the existence and the importance of alternatives he called them 'contraries'—is fundamental to Blake's thinking, to his conception of human growth and learning.

Religious Views of Blake

Blake's attack on conventional religion was unanticipated in his days. His orthodox outlook can be observed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, this work is an imitation of Biblical prophecy. The proverbs of Hell, is given here:

Prisons are built with stones of Law,
Brothels with bricks of Religion.

As the caterpillar chooses the fairest
leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest
lays his curse on the fairest joys.

Jesus, for Blake, symbolizes the vital relationship and unity between divinity and humanity:

All had originally one language, and one religion: this was the religion of Jesus, the everlasting Gospel. Antiquity preaches the Gospel of Jesus." (Descriptive Catalogue, Blake 1809).

Blake's strongest opposition to orthodox Christianity is that he felt it encouraged the suppression of natural desires and discouraged earthly joy. In *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, Blake says that:

Men were admitted into Heaven because men cultivated understanding. Not because men restrained and controlled their passion or altogether they didn't have passion. The resources of Heaven are not disagreement of passion but truth of Intellect from passions erupted unrestrained in their Eternal Glory.

Blake is one of the well-known figure in Romantic Period (1785-1830). Romantic poets had idealistic view about human spirit, which will be spoiled with worldliness. One of the very important themes at that time was revolution which means replacing industrial with natural lifestyle. Poets at that time were playing the role of prophets who warned people against such happening. Many of the Symbols used by Blake have their roots in the Bible. (Pakzadian, 2013)

Symbolic contrast in Songs of Innocence and Experience

Blake viewed life from two different perspectives—innocence and experience. For Blake experience is not better than innocence. Both have positive and negative sides. Positive side of innocence is optimism and happiness, on the contrary negative side is lack of wisdom and cynicism. For Blake division of life is divided into period of Innocence and Experience. Two sides of same coin. They are the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul—there is no division between god and evil. Songs of Innocence and of Experience is a collection of William Blake's poems.

Blake creates the symbols of his writing from what he has witnessed as facts and events in the spiritual world. Blake used allegory to describe this world as it is suitable to express. He uses symbols and myths to instill the meta-physical and religious concepts with life. This gives a humanist coloring and secular outlook to the religious concepts. He made use of Symbols like experience, corruption, innocence, energy and so on.

“The Lamb” and “The Tyger” from Innocence and Experience

Poem “The Tyger” is taken from *Songs of Experience* and “The Lamb” is taken from *Songs of Innocence* for analysis. These two poems invoke Jesus Christ in two different aspects. Blake portrays these two poems with vibrant and amazing Biblical Symbols. William Blake spelled Tyger with ‘y’ because he wanted to put forward violence and create a loud vibrating sound. The Tyger itself is a symbol of anger, passion and as well as the Symbol of Christ.

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
(Yeats, Blake poems, Tyger, 2005)

“The Tyger” signifies the dangers of mortality and it is a Symbol of protection. ‘The forest of the night’ represents unknown realms or challenges. The ‘fearful symmetry’ symbolizes the existence of both good and evil and the awareness that there is opposition in all things. The meaning of the symbols in “The Tyger” is free for interpretation from their viewpoint.

The lamb is the symbol of love, pity, joy, virtue, and mercy that joined the world of creatures. The lamb is as innocent as a little child. God is found in the lamb by the innocent child. The child had passion for Christ. Blake sees modesty of the lamb through the vision of the child.

“The Lamb “is a Christian poem. The symbol “lamb of God” refers to Christ -- the *lamb* of God. The child tells instinctively that the lamb is God, and God is a child. So, the child told the lamb that:

I a child, and thou a lamb,
We are called by His name.

In fact, *the lamb* and *the tiger* are symbols of two different states of the human soul. Two parts of *Innocence* and *Experience* are distinct elements of a one design. The first part gives an imaginative vision of state of innocence and second part exhibits how life spoils, changes and corrupts. Despite all these, experience cannot be escaped. It is fact that nobody can deny. It is a stage all have to accept in cycle of life.

Probably, these are the contrasting and important poems in the Songs. Traditional Symbol of innocence signifies the lamb. Christ is the Lamb of God. It is depicted in Bible. Often Lambs are sacrificed to compensate sins of humankind. As a result, we can conclude that the act Symbolizes God’s love for humanity. Blake in his poems recognizes Christ as the real Lamb to which he speaks:

He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a lamb.
He is meek, & he is mild.
He became a little child.
I a child, & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name. (Yeats,
Blake poems, Lamb, 2005)

In contrast, God’s anger is symbolized by the tiger in the poem “The Tyger”. The narrator of poem “The Lamb” is a child, who sees only purity and innocence of the Lamb. It is extension of the nature. The narrator of “The Tyger” is colored by experiences from a different perspective. The narrator is preview to other side of the nature. The writer’s unawareness of complexities of reality betrays him. It is

concluded from the fact that “The Tyger” poem has many unanswered questions, whereas the child in the poem “The Lamb” confidently answers all the questions that were asked.

By comparing the parallels between “The Tyger” and Blake’s mythological symbols, we can conclude that tiger was created by Urezin and not created by God. In the poem “The Tyger” the star symbolizes the creation of Urezin and association of Blake with it. In the poem “The Tyger”, the tiger inquires what kind of divine being could have been created by the animal, subsequently, in the poem “The Lamb” it is asked about the origins of the animal. It is obvious that the narrator in the poem “The Lamb” is a child. While the narrator in the “The Tyger” is born from the fire—of experience—that is given in the poem itself.

In the poem “The Tyger” many rhetorical questions were asked, but answers were not found. For example, the narrator asks how could God create such a terrifying and fearsome animal? How could the God create Lamb and Tiger simultaneously? All these questions were about wisdom of God; we all want to know why God created good and evil. From this is it is evident that these two poems contradict each other in theme. “The Tyger” is critical for the creation of as fearsome as tiger. Lovely Lambis creating a happy and joyful animal.

In *The Lamb* and *The Tyger* Blake tried to draw a picture of God's creation of meek and fierce creatures together. Blake believed in Transcendentalism which means God is present in all creatures. Romantic poets were considered as prophetic poets and their poems were considered as their prophecy. (Padzadian, 2013)

“Chimney Sweeper” of *Innocence* and “Chimney Sweeper” of *Experience*

Long ago, in cold countries, fireplace is a must in every home; the chimneys become dirt very quickly. Apart from the ash that's left in the fireplace, whole lot of soot also gets filled inside the chimney. It has to be cleaned from time to time; otherwise, serious problems might erupt. Small children who were about the age of four or five years old were employed to clean the chimneys. Children employed in this profession were either paupers or orphans. They all were working under Chief Master Sweeper. He used to act like a boss for all of them. Work of chimney sweeping was third rate profession. Children were probably covered in soot as they were not bathing regularly due unavailable facilities.

The first poem published in 1789 in a volume called *Songs of Innocence* took children and their joys of childhood innocence as their subject. But many of the poems in *Songs of Innocence*, like "The Chimney Sweeper", are about the ways in which childhood innocence is destroyed. As the first stanza of the poem says:

When my mother died, I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry 'weep! 'weep!
'weep! 'weep!
So, your chimneys I sweep, and in
soot I sleep. (Chimney Sweeper)

The poem is narrated by one of his fellow chimney sweeps who recounts a dream of one of his companions which shows the angels rescuing the poor chimney sweeping boys and took them to a place full of light—a sunny meadow.

And by came an angel who had a bright key,
And he opened the coffins and set them all free.
Then down a green plain leaping,
laughing, they run,
And wash in a river, and shine in the sun.

From the above lines, Blake used multiple points of views in his ballads. He knows

that it was deception, which corrupted the universe of experience. After he distributed *Songs of Innocence* in 1793, he distributed another form of ballad to the similar title "The Chimney Sweeper". "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Experience* takes opposite view of primary ballad "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence*. The author writes that "And in light of the fact that I am glad, and move and sing, they think they have done me no damage" (*Experience*). Subsequently, he lists parent's wretchedness; he says, "God and his Priest and King and their "Paradise of hopelessness" (*Experience*). In the concluding part of the lyric, *Songs of Innocence*, these poems end with the poet narrating that one can't expect sky in anticipation.

Blake's clarifies about the life of the children as Chimney Sweepers, how their life is spent in smokestacks all day till they rest and fall asleep. Additionally, artist narrates that Tom, the Kid, and the protagonist of the lyric has his head shaven, as his hair resembled sheep's hair. Which might interfere with his profession?

Blake depicts the life of little Tom. As he was confronting savagery at a little age despite the fact that he was pure like sheep. Little Tom has white hair before he shaved. Its exposed youngsters' imagination as "white" and mists are white. Whiteness in the poem is an image of adolescence and honesty. It is seen differently in the obscurity of residue, stacks, pine boxes and various other terrible things.

The little kid feels terribly upset when he watches kindred sweepers in "Pine boxes". The casket signifies that loss of life of young men. The word "dull" communicates that young men who were smokestack sweepers are drowsy as they work in fireplaces day long. And they wake up in the wee hours in the morning before the first light and carry their sacks and run towards their daily obligation with drowsy eyes. Moreover, the second lyric

(Experience) has an important significance. Ash is “dark”; the child is shrouded in it, but also his “darkness” is felt in another way. He seems to be part of death. He wears the “garments of death” and it exhibits glaring difference to the “white” snow. The whiteness of the snow is an image of nature, of impulsive nature, and it comes out exceptionally unnatural existence of the smokestack sweeper.

In Blake’s second (Experience) sonnet there are “religious images”, for instance, when the sweeper conveys to the speaker that his fellow sweepers have gone to the chapel, despite that it doesn’t symbolize to be thankful for. The folks: for example, are more worried about their religious commitments than the youngsters are out alone in the snow. Furthermore, it is felt that like God and his “Cleric” and all the individuals in power are bad, they “make up a paradise” of tyke’s dejection. Blake reviews the story from the youngster’s point of view in both lyrics taking opposite views. He emphasizes the contrasts in circumstances of life. In these ballads Blake demonstrates himself as a social critic raising his voice against shameful acts which are pervasive in the society during that period.

Conclusion

Reading Blake’s poetry brings delight to all of us. No other writer provides such enchantment as Blake. Blake couldn’t see mankind suffering. He was against cruelty and inhuman treatment given to children specially and individuals generally. He is positive always. He never makes us feel uncomfortable even in poems like Songs of Experience in which he was cynical towards the world. He could see and feel God within. God always will be with us and weeps for us in good times and bad times. A person who considers God’s creation and reason for life absorbs most of Blake’s poetry.

Blake took up the cause of social justice. He felt miserable looking at the exploitation of weak individuals and children. Blake believed in different cultures and conventions. He lived in hardship. Furthermore, his poetry indicates strong interest towards social insubordination, social change and otherworldly existence and sentimentalism. Blake best works are filled with pure creative energy. However, he puts forth prevailing social issues in the society. He was against universal house of worship. He focuses on subjects like observation, creative energy, honesty, happiness, recovery, youth, and excellence. He raised his voice against in equal society and vouched for perfect society. If we carefully observe two lyrics, the Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience comparing them. Blake was using various Symbols to emphasize his focuses.

For example, in the lyric "The Tyger" he uses Symbols of the metal forger's apparatuses, 'pound', 'chain', 'heater', "fire" and "blacksmith's iron" represent tiger indirectly. Interestingly "The Lamb" has words like 'delicate', 'wooly', 'mead', 'stream', "splendid" to demonstrate effortless which is much the same as blamelessness.

Therefore, it is obvious that Blake’s style of writing is very intense and unique. He used Symbols to explain his thoughts to convey the message to the public. He wants to bring social justice to the weaker sections of the society—Children, women, and helpless individuals. Blake’s poetry is relevant to this day because there is abuse and exploitation of people who are weak to this day in our society and around the world.

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