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Human Image in Blake's Poetry

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Abstract

The paper explores the representation of the human in William Blake's poetry. In order to grasp depiction of humankind in all its depth, a number of constructs in close relation to the human image are being investigated including the role and nature of God, nature, animal world, as well as the place and illustration of the world of children and adults.

All of the concepts are examined in regards to the poet's dichotomist depiction of the concepts in his both earlier and later literary works, culminating in the ultimate reconciliation and reunion of the seemingly opposing perceptions within the later literary writings.

Keywords: Blake, Songs of Innocence, Songs of Experience, childhood, adulthood, God, animals, nature.

1. Introduction

William Blake is certainly one of the most remarkable and the most controversial English poets (Vaughan, 2013). He is one of those individualist figures occurring from time to time among the uniform mass of writers to bring a new light and perspective to art, life and the world. Blake is one of those artists, who cannot be easily qualified into a single epoch, for their work is so complex and non-conformist in its essence in regards to the ideology of the time, which is why they are frequently disparaged and misunderstood by their contemporaries (Beer, 2005). However, they are always "rediscovered" by later critics and the literary world. Thus, Blake as a person with a very peculiar, unusual and unique philosophy uncommon to his time was not retained in the past and the historic frame to which he belonged, but a poet whose complexity, broadness of themes and the universal questions he raised turned his opus into a great legacy for the modern thought and the modern audience (Clarke, 1929). Manifold of symbolism and topicality of his poetry have resulted in an ever-lasting discussions and novel interpretations of his poems. He was truly one of those spiritual presences that are (still being) felt in the world.

2. Discussion Blake's Poetry

During the course of his life, Blake was growing, transforming and maturing as a poet and, thus, he gradually altered some of his original beliefs, opinions and worldviews. As a result, his poems present myriad of seemingly opposite and completely contrary states and notions on life, universe, the Creator and the man (Mounsey, 2011). His poetry overflows with divergent

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perspectives of the same subjects and it is often quite challenging to discuss any of his topics in broad terms. Consequently, Blake's poetry offers us a wide scope for speculations and different interpretations for he, indeed, was not a typical representative of his time whose work could be entirely fit into the ideological frame of the epoch, but rather a unique, revolutionary and powerful artist who presented a fresh and groundbreaking perceptions of life, love, cosmos and, most importantly, the man: "There may be others in the English tradition as great as Blake, but there can hardly be many as urgently great, looming over the dither of our situation with a more inescapable clarity, full of answers to questions that we have hardly learned how to formulate" (Frye, 1957: 21). Regardless of the multitude of the themes he explored, they all ultimately have a sole objective: to comprehend the man's disposition and human nature in its entire depth; to depict the reality of human state and to offer us an alternative view to it as the counterpoint to the conventional perception; to draw a distinction between the human molded and produced by society and the human as they inherently could (should) be. Therefore, a man being a complex microcosm in itself and the greatest mystery of all, Blake in his poetry explores plentiful different notions and concepts that should all allow him to grasp human nature more profoundly. In this sense, Blake is a humanist whose principal concern is to speak of the man through talking of all other things that are so human-related (Jamili, Khoskham, 2017). Therefore, Blake's depiction of the man cannot be fully comprehended in isolation, i.e. the endeavor requires analysis, comparisons and contrasts of his portrayal of God, nature and animal world as well as a separate analysis of the world of adults and the imagery of children that he presents us with in his works.

Life is just a Bowl of Cherries: *Songs of Innocence*

In the earlier part of his literary life, Blake wrote a collection of poems named *Songs of Innocence*. In the broad array of the poems, he portrays a world of purity, a blissful, serene world of naivety. A reader is introduced with an ideal, idyllic state of the human world. It is a world of children and their unspoiled nature. These poems overflow with the images of joy, tranquility, and human benevolence (Dizdar, 1999). In this poetic cycle Blake offers an optimistic view of the world and the man, which is well expressed in *The Divine Image*: "Mercy has a human heart, pity a human face" (*The Divine Image*, lines 9-10). The recurring characters appearing in these poems are children. A reader becomes overwhelmed with the atmosphere of bliss, lightness and innocence. The children presented in these poems, however, are a powerful symbolic system through which Blake emits his vision of the original and inherent human nature that knows nothing of the sufferings, infliction and malevolence. It is an Eden, a Golden Age of human souls, an ideal world frequently filled with pastoral images and naive biblical allusions. The benevolent man is also surrounded with a benevolent world. The nature is spectacular and pure, the gamboling animals are frolic and joyful, God is merciful and compassionate. The entire universe is an optimistic place and an utmost positive image of all humankind is presented:

"And all must love the human form,

In heathen, turk or jew." (*The Divine Image*, lines 17-18)

One of fine exemplars of this intricate emblematic representation is a poem *The Little Boy Found*. This poem offers us a glimpse into Blake's perception of God. A little boy got lost and the mother "the little boy weeping sought" (*The Little Boy Found*, line 8). In this poem, Blake in his symbolical manner points out that childhood and the world of the youth is an enclosed entity to the adults. For the poet, the child's nature that is an emblem of an ideal innocent human state is beyond the comprehension of the adults and, thus, the child stays solitary in the world that the parents cannot enter. Although the mother is concerned for her child and looks for him "in sorrow pale" (*The Little Boy Found*, line 7), she herself cannot find the boy on her own, as she is denied the access to his world of childhood. Thus, only God is able to rescue him and restore the bliss. Precisely then figure of God seems to be one of the most interesting aspects of the poem. After little boy starts crying for being lost and far away from his mother, "God, ever nigh, appeared like his father, in white" (*The Little Boy Found*, lines 3-4). These verses immediately evoke an image of God being an old man, with a long white beard, mild smile on his face and dressed in a white gown descending to the Earth to take care of His children. Blake compares God to the father, accentuating His protective role. He is a symbol of safety. He is a haven and the sanctuary for the weak, lost and unprotected. This God is also "ever nigh" (*The Little Boy Found*, line 3), an image that instigates an overpowering feeling of hope and security. His divine presence embodied in an image of a fatherly figure suggests that He is

always watching out for his children; He takes care of them and never leaves them to themselves. He is always there to save the day and restore joy and happiness.

This image of the loving, caring God is embedded into many other poems from the cycle as well, such as *The Chimney Sweeper* or *The Little Black Boy*. However, upon close and thorough inspection of the first cycle poems, one cannot fail to notice that this God is not entirely the God as perceived in more conventional terms: a divine figure separated and elevated from humans in its superiority. Rather, a slightly different image and impressions are conveyed through the paintings that Blake engraved next to his poems. Thus, “*In the Little Black Boy* he appears specifically as a Christ. On the flame-flower of *The Divine Image*, he appears as Christ in the lower right, lifting a fallen man, and on the upper left he appears as a female deity descending from the sky. In the frontispiece the divine image is a child on a cloud” (Bloom, Hilles, 1965: 312). The notion that strikes one at this point is that Blake presents God in various human forms. For him, God is human. Every man is permeated with the divine nature: “For Blake, God and imagination are the one; that is; God is the creative and spiritual power in man and apart from man the idea of God has no meaning” (Bowra, 1966: 34). The essence of Blake’s poetic sentiment in relation to the Creator is possibly described and unified best in his own poetic words:

“For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is God, our father dear,
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is Man, his child and care” (The Divine Image, lines 4-8)

Hence, Blake equated the divine and human and thus expressed his anthropocentric and humanist attitude, suggesting that the humans are essentially Blake’s chief and ultimate concern. Love, peace, mercy and all the other positive qualities are all a part of the divine that exists in the humans and make them deities.

Another poem from *Songs of Innocence* cycle that nicely portrays some of Blake’s conceptual and ideological attitudes in relation to the humankind is *The Lamb*. As the very title suggests, Blake is prone to portraying animals in his poetry (Jamili, Kohskham, 2017). The lamb is a recurrent animal appearing in many of his poems (e.g. *America: A Prophecy*, *Jerusalem* etc.). Besides this meek animal, he tends to embed in his poetry some wild and fiercer animals such as leopards, lions and tigers. However, none of these animals is a sheer representative of their own kinds, i.e. they are often paragons of some concepts and ideas, as in Blake’s poetry it is always possible to “interpret further and further the possible implications of phrases, associations, and symbols” (Ford, 1957: 79). Thus, the animals with frequently religious symbolism become concrete realization of Blake’s abstract ideas. Blake starts *The Lamb* with a question asked by a child: “Little Lamb, who made thee?” (The Lamb, line 1) and proceeds with other questions related to its creation throughout the entire first stanza. Considering the fact that Blake “was brought up on the Bible” (Frye, 1965: 63), it comes as no surprise that his poetry is permeated with religious biblical motifs that he, however, does not perceive in a conventional way, but makes them subdued to his own purpose and objective of writing. The initial question in the poem is the question of creation and divine intervention. The child asks a very simple question, which is, however, at the same time, a universal inquiry raised in all times and places. The lamb is a meek animal that is always perceived as something benign, placid and innocent. Therefore, it serves as a very convenient symbol for Blake’s depiction of the innocent state of human life, of the childhood. In the second stanza, the child itself offers us an answer to its question to the lamb. He says:

“Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee,
Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee.
He is called by thy name,
For He calls Himself a Lamb” (The Lamb, lines 11-14)

Here we see an innocent, simple answer of a child that was taught religious dogma and that naturally accepts it without having it questioned. Therefore, the creator of the lamb - animal is another Lamb, a biblical symbol for Jesus Christ or *Agnus Dei*. Blake gives him characteristics of meekness and mildness, the traits usually associated with the image of Christ. However, only in the following lines, speaking of Christ, we can see the true product of Blake’s mind:

"He became a little child.
I a child, and thou a lamb,
We are called by His name." (The Lamb, lines 18-20)

In these lines Blake equates the lamb animal with the Lamb Christ and the child. Thus, these three become interchangeable in the second part of the poem where once again we witness Blake's relentless and unconditional optimism, humanism and the uniqueness of his ideology. Although he uses common Christian motifs, he incorporates them in his poetry to enforce a completely unorthodox, unconventional and new meaning. Thus, the lamb in the poem can stand for innocence, a child, Jesus, or even sacrifice. In this poem, like in many others, Blake points out that the divine spirit resides in children and innocent creatures living in the Nature. Thus, we see an ecocentric emphasis on the interconnectedness between the world of animals, humans and the divine. It really all is the one concept of peace, tranquility, human mercy, brotherhood and ultimate love that is present in all the poems of *Songs of Innocence*.

Doom and Gloom: *Songs of Experience*

However, in his later cycle that he named *Songs of Experience*, Blake implies that there is the other side of the coin. Being more experienced, dispirited and disillusioned that humans can ever achieve perfection and purity of which he was speaking in his former cycle, Blake takes similar or the same themes and presents them in a completely new light which is always more negative, bleak and pessimistic. It seems that Blake believed that "tough this state of childlike happiness, which he seems to have enjoyed in his first manhood, is wonderfully charming, it is not everything, and it cannot last. To reach a higher state man must be tested by experience and suffering. Experience is not only a fact; it is a necessary stage in the cycle of being" (Bowra: 36). Unlike *Songs of Innocence* that are pervaded with the sense of tranquility, joy, serenity radiating calm and moderate emotions, *Songs of Experience* posses a quality of passion, intensity and rising tension.

While in the first cycle the poet depicts the world of children, in the latter one he introduces us into the corrupt and unjust world of the adults (Glen, 2005). As a sharp observer of society around him, Blake grew not to view his personal conception of a world filled with merry children, to be the actual world of reality. Blake's rationale for this dichotomy seems to be the fact that the humankind, in fact, has a distorted nature.

While in the world of the childhood, pity, peace and mercy are all highlighted optimistic features of the human nature; in the world of adults Blake believes that

"Cruelty has a human heart,
And Jealousy a human face;
Terror the human form divine,
And Secrecy the human dress." (A Divine Image, lines 1-4)

Thus we are given completely opposite perception of humankind from the one portrayed in the earlier series of the poems. Here we are confronted with a highly negative image of the cruel, jealous man. The image of the man changes and we can perceive undertones of guilt and accusation in these poems. The entire society is blamed for calamities of the world.

However, not only is the man a resented, criticized figure, but God himself alters from the fatherly, sympathetic figure into "the jealous, love-chaining God" (Ford, 1957: 76). We see a hint of this in the words: "terror the human form divine" (A Divine Image, line 3), where divine and human are still an interconnected web as presented in earlier poems, but now the divine is not standing for mercy, but is rather related to the fear and terror. In the world of experience that is pervaded with cruelty, corruption, injustice, poverty and hatred, there is no place for a merciful God. The new God that Blake creates is an angry and vengeful God that simply created the world and left all the humankind unprotected and in agonies. This God looks indifferently at the sufferings of the people.

A good instance for this alteration of God's nature is a poem *A Little Boy Lost*. At a sermon where a priest recommend us to "love another as itself" (A Little Boy Lost, line 1), a little boy naively and honestly says to his father that he loves him no more than a "little bird that picks up crumbs around the door" (A Little Boy Lost, lines 7-8). For this honesty, the boy is being burned in "the holy place" (A Little Boy Lost, line 21) by the priest while his helpless parents weep unable to save him. Here, a reader is faced with a feeling of helplessness, cruelty and injustice that cannot be defeated. There is no more a God coming and saving His child, restoring the happiness. This God dismisses and neglects the humans leaving them to the brutality of the world. In this poem Blake

harshly criticizes the institutionalized religion, the Church embodied in the priest, but also the humankind itself in the form of the believers that “admired priestly care” (*A Little Boy Lost*, line 16) after the priest took the boy harshly for his hair. Unlike in *The little Boy Found*, in this poem the boy is lost forever by the means of the Church and not protected and saved by anybody, which leaves a reader with a heavy feeling of bitterness and remonstrance.

Presumably, the most famous poem from *Songs of Experience* is *The Tyger*. In the line with his change in the portrayal of humanity and God, Blake also changes his perspective towards the animal world. In this poem, there are no remnants of the sentiments of love and happiness felt in *The Lamb*. The poet starts the poem with a fierce intensity:

“Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” (The Tyger, line – 4)

The opening is filled with the images of blazing fire, frightening and awesome mechanism of the animal. But already in the second stanza, there is a shift from the creation to the Creator:

“On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare sieze the fire?” (The Tyger, lines 7-8)

As with the creation, the poet is equally amazed and mesmerized by the Creator who was able to make such a creature because they are both the sources of energy and passion: “The poem is a contemplation of the fact that, beside peacefulness and gentleness, the world includes fierce strength terrifying in its possibilities of destructiveness but also impressive and admirable, a stupendous part of creation and seemingly a challenge to the idea of a benign Creator” (Ford, 1957: 68). Therefore, the tiger is not being represented as the evil, opposite to the good. We are only faced with the series of rhetorical questions instigated by admiration and amazement of “this fearful symmetry” (The Tyger, line 4). The poet keeps asking about the tools with which and the place in which this animal was made. It all gives a mysterious undertone to the poem, to the creation and the Creator. For we never receive an answer, we are made to wonder: “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” (The Tyger, line 20). Thus we are compelled to absorb the possibility that the meekness of the lamb and the fierceness of the tiger have one and the same source, that they are both the product of the same Power and Energy. Here we see an innuendo of interconnectedness, a close connection between the good and the seemingly evil. They are presented as parts of the One, as having the same origin. This idea is only slightly conceived in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and its true elaboration would come later in Blake’s later work: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Thus, Blake poses a series of questions and provides no answers. He ends the poem with the same questions that are indeed relevant for all times and places: the question of creation that has troubled the humankind from the conception of the world.

An original notion that Blake conceives in this poem is that there should not be a conventional, traditional distinction between the good and the evil because “the Tyger is the face of the creation, marvelous and ambiguous; he is not evil. This is poem of triumphant human awareness; it is a hymn to pure being. And what gives it its power is Blake’s ability to fuse two aspects of the same human drama: the movement with which a great thing is created, and the joy and wonderment with which we join ourselves to it” (Kazin, 1997).

Yin and Yang: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

As already suggested in *Songs of Experience*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* further emphasizes the fact that the experience is not the evil; it “merely shows us the face of evil as a human face, so that we shall learn that the world is exactly what man makes it, and that its ultimate triumphs occur within his understanding” (Kazin, 1997). In the very title of the poem where he joins together two seemingly opposite concepts, Blake suggests us his revolutionary worldview: that, namely, the good and the evil are the two inevitable and natural opposing states of the human soul. He juxtaposes contraries on many different levels: the bodily and spiritual, the city and the country, cruelty and holiness (Green, 2004). He abhors the dualistic theory of the Church and the common belief in which we should strive to achieve only the good and in which “the evil” in the form of emotions, passion and energy is demonized and suppressed. For Blake, “desire is never vicious in itself; it is only turned to vicious ends when driven out of its real channel. Restraint in the name of the moral code is alone evil, for it distorts man’s real nature. It is a device of the rulers of this world to keep us chained. For life is holy. Energy is eternal delight. Jesus is dear to us not

because he was divine, but because he was a rebel against false Law, and the friend of man's desire" (Kazin, 1997). Blake believes that "without contraries is no progression" (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, line 2) and he presents us his vision of the world that should not offer us confusion, pessimism or a startle, but salvation.

3. Conclusion

As exemplified earlier, almost each of Blake's poems has its counterpart, a different view of the same theme. In all of these poems, Blake's intention is not to speak of the evil and good forces as being in the state of constant struggle. His aim is rather to speak of humans who are trying to find their position within the world of opposite forces. He fuses the good and the evil and makes us realize that they are not the opposite sides in the conflict but rather the parts of the same united world in which the man himself has to find the balance and become the center. Blake himself was an illustration of this concept of opposites united in one: "He was a libertarian obsessed with God; a mystic who reversed the mystical pattern, for he sought man as the end of his search. He was a Christian who hated the churches; a revolutionary who abhorred the materialism of the radicals." (Kazin, 1997) His poems do not mean to draw a classical division of the good and the evil and do not promote traditional God's punishment for the man's sins. He never provides us with the conventional religious consolation and rationale behind the presented contrasts. Blake simply presents us the world blending the light and the darkness, raising a question of the man's position in this world, his awareness of it and his ability to balance and find his own authentic place. Thus, for Blake, the man is the ultimate objective and the theme. For him, "all forms are identified as human. Cities and gardens, sun, moon and stars, rivers and stones, trees and human bodies-all are equally alive, equally parts of the same infinite body which is at once the body of God and of risen man" (Frye, 1968: 60). All the other themes revolve around the issue of the man's position in life and the universe. In this sense, the humans in Blake's poetry are also symbols of this world of opposites and the man himself has to find within him his own human identity. Blake believes that "all that is invisible and infinite to man under the dominion of God, matter, and reason, that he tears away the shell of earth, the prison of man in his own senses, to assert that there is nothing but man and that man is nothing but the highest flights of his own imagination" (Kazin, 1997). Thus, Blake stands for an honest humanist who does not want to offer us a typical religious system and solace or to present man as a sinner, but rather as a lost being who needs to find his own individual and unique way to reach the true human identity. Therefore, it might be concluded that Blake's poetry is a defense of integral human selfhood and an attempt to revolutionize and humanize the world in which the man has to live.

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