

A comparative study of Blake's 'Songs of Innocence' and 'Songs of Experience'

Submitted by:

Iftekhar Ahmed (Assistant Teacher)

M.A in English, B.Ed, U.G.C. NET Qualified (English)

Howrah Muslim High School (H.S.)

Residential Address: J-56/2, Fatehpur Village Road,

P.O + P.S: Garden Reach

Kolkata: 700024.

State: West Bengal

1. Abstract:

William Blake, rightly considered as the precursor of Romanticism in English poetry, has shown the world his artistic flavour and aesthetic brilliance through his masterpiece creations in the form of 'Songs of Innocence' and 'Songs of Experience' which are complementary series to each other. In this article, I would endeavour to delve deep into some of his most famous poems featuring in the 'Innocence' and 'Experience' sequence and make a comparative study thereof highlighting their individual charm and pleasantness as well as their interconnectedness in shaping the destiny of a complete man who is not only an embodiment of flesh and blood but is also a heavenly being with a soul possessing both the innocence and naivety of a child and also the awful and terrible manifestation of God's omnipotence in overcoming all the harsher aspects of life. In fact all the poems under the title of 'Innocence' and 'Experience' testify the staunch philosophy of William Blake who disseminates through his works the need of possessing one compact soul that equally harbours 'innocence' and 'experience' within itself to attain salvation hereafter.

Keywords: Innocence, Experience, Soul, Naivety, Child, God, Salvation etc.

2. Introduction:

No other poet before William Blake had so artistically fused the need of not only preserving childlike innocence with unadulterated joys and exquisite pleasures but also strengthening one's soul braving all the dark aspects of human life such as hatred, jealousy, hypocrisy, ostentatious modesty, suppression, repression, oppressive tendencies, heart-wrenching outrageous attitude as well as despotic authorities. It is the amalgamation of both 'innocence' and 'experience' that makes a 'Man' a 'Complete Man' and the absence of either of these qualities strips him off his true personality rendering him an incomplete being of his own self. While innocence looks perfect without facing any outward or inward trouble of conscience or conflict, it cannot be said to have a lasting impression upon the soul of any individual searching for heavenly bliss and ceaseless joy; it is in fact passing through the tough road of experience that an individual learns the art of seeing the essence of every object or idea in its entirety. With a view to justify or corroborate my claim, I hereby present a critical analysis of some of the poems of the 'Innocence' series followed by those of the 'Experience' series, thereby helping the readers understand themselves the obvious viewpoints of William Blake himself.

3. The Pastoral Elements in Blake's Poems of 'Innocence' series:

William Blake, like his most famous Romantic successors Wordsworth or Shelley or Keats, takes avail of maximum advantages of the natural surroundings of the rural areas with their vast meadows, clear open blue skies, ever-fresh lush green grass, free-flowing crystalline water, soul-soothing multicoloured blossoms, ethereal fragrance scattering through the valleys and mountains bringing forth heavenly bliss, innocent bleating of the lambs, sweet warbling of the fascinating birds and free play and boisterous laughter of the children in the fields, they all create a euphoria of pristine beauty with sublime grandeur leading us to forget our everyday troubles of this mundane life and feeling the nostalgic moments of

our own childhood. The very first stanza of the 'Introduction' of 'Songs of Innocence' series sets the tone and mood of the poet for the other poems that follow:

"Piping down the valleys wild,
Piping songs of pleasant glee,
On a cloud I saw a child,
And he laughing said to me:" (Introduction)

The piper who happens to be the poet himself, on the request of the happy child on a cloud, pipes a song about a 'Lamb' which brings tears of joy to the face of that inspirational child who once again asks the piper to write that song in a book so that other children could also feel the joy and sensation of that blissful song. The piper taking inspiration from that heavenly child begins to fulfil the entreaty of that smiling child.

In the poem 'The Echoing Green', Blake shows the carefree play of the happy children amidst natural beauty surrounding the greenery which presents the mind-blowing skill of the poet in painting through words which transports us to that landscape of soul-soothing ambience and we feel ourselves enthralled in their captivating scenery. The advent of the spring, the melodious chirping of the birds like The skylark and the thrush, the ringing of the merry bells and the vigorous and energetic sporting spirit of the children, are all described with simplest of diction suitable for the understanding of the children by this illustrious engraver. The following lines from 'The Echoing Green' are worth quoting here:

"The Sun does arise,
And make happy the skies;
The merry bells ring
To welcome the Spring;
The skylark and thrush,
The birds of the bush,
Sing louder around
To the bells' cheerful sound,
While our sports shall be seen
On the Echoing Green." (The Echoing Green)

In the poem 'The Lamb', the poet once again highlights the pastoral setting of the meadow by the stream where one of the meekest creatures of God namely the Lamb grazes pastures while it encounters a tender child like itself who out of rapturous joy and sensation seeing the most artistic creation of God in the form of the Lamb, asks a number of questions to the Lamb itself without even waiting for his replies as he was too eager to share with him his heartfelt emotions in describing the supreme creative skill of their Creator. The poet has masterfully depicted a 'Trinity' on Earth by drawing an analogy between the Child, Jesus Christ and The Lamb who are associated with one another sharing their common attributes of innocence and gaiety. The following lines from 'The Lamb' well elaborates this view of the poet:

"He is called by thy name,
For he calls Himself a Lamb.
He is meek, and He is mild;
He became a little child.
I a child, and thou a lamb,
We are called by His name." (The Lamb)

4. The presence of Angels as Guardians protecting every soul:

Almost every poem of the 'Innocence' sequence presents an Angelic figure or figures whose duty is to protect the soul of every living creature from staining or getting besmirched against the unseen presence of dark elements adversely affecting our lives. Since Blake himself had envisioned on multiple occasions strange heavenly figures in the form of Angels, Fairies, Nymphs, Prophets and sometimes even the 'Head' of Almighty God, he had cultivated a knack of depicting those angels and fairies in such a way, that we seem to see with our own eyes the presence of those heavenly figures protecting every living creature on Earth. In the poem 'The Shepherd', the Shepherd is actually being hinted as Jesus Christ or a man of extremely soft nature harbouring sincere emotions towards entire mankind which is represented by 'sheep'. The poet feels profound joy witnessing the sweet lot of the Shepherd in the joyful company of the innocent bleating lambs and sheep which pleases him thoroughly. The Shepherd rightly glorifies the magnanimity and benevolence of the Divine Spirit through his hymnal songs. Another poem 'The Little Black Boy' emphasizes the unconditional and unfathomable love of a mother towards her son who shares his parents' common black colour being their progeny and residing in a country where sun's rays reach directly affecting their skins. The mother like an Angelic guardian consoles her son not to bother too much of his skin colour as this physical body is just like a cloud that is surely going to be vanished when once the soul learns the art of bearing the dazzling resplendence of God's glory in the next life. These lines mentioned below clearly illustrate this point:

" For when our souls have learned the heat to bear,

The cloud will vanish; we shall hear His voice,

Saying: ' Come out from the grove, My love and care,

And round My golden tent like lambs rejoice." (The Little Black Boy')

In 'The Chimney-Sweeper' though the poor innocent children were forced to do the dirty job of sweeping chimneys clad in a soot by the merciless society, yet Tom Dacre had not lost all hopes of liberation and freedom as he had a dream in which he saw an Angel who helped all the chimney -sweepers to release themselves from the coffins in which they were forcefully boxed up. In his dream, Tom soared to the cloud and played with his friends heartily and as consoled by the Angel if they do their duties sincerely and honestly, God will reward them profusely, Tom prepares himself to do his daily work of sweeping rather ungrudgingly and honestly. The following lines of this poem show the merrier mood of Tom with full of hopes and aspirations:

"And so Tom awoke, and we rose in the dark,

And got with our bags and our brushes to work.

Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm;

So if all do their duty they need not fear harm." (The Chimney -Sweeper)

5. Symbolism in Songs of Innocence:

William Blake in his ' Songs of Innocence ' has made use of various symbols with a view to convey his message which could not have been successfully delivered without employing their services. The presence of Child, rivers, valleys, meadows, clouds, skies, blossoms, birds, music, songs, trees, lambs, Angels, Nurses, Mothers, Fathers, Priests and Clergies have been successfully woven to lay before our imaginative eyes the charm of pure innocence without a tinge of any stain of disgrace or humiliation of adulthood. The period of childhood is earmarked with sublime joy and happiness highlighting the benign nature of Jesus Christ with a tender heart and mercy for all mankind and this spiritual sensation remains unfelt to a man of maturity relying heavily on his rationality overlooking the benefits of having imaginative pursuits in which higher truth is revealed whose significance is more than the stark realities of this earthly life.

6. A Crucial Shift from 'Innocence' to 'Experience':

Blake wrote all his Songs of Innocence about children and for children and his motive behind writing these songs was to provide a soothing atmosphere of profound joy and delight to every living soul who yearns for leading a peaceful life without being troubled by any sort of worries or adversities that beset our daily lives. But Blake was fully aware that mere innocence without experience wouldn't be as productive and fruitful as it had been considered. Human beings must pass through difficulties and challenging situations if we truly wish to become an embodiment of Divine Spirits roaming around this globe which we are endowed with by our Creator since our birth. The price of experience is undoubtedly

very expensive as it takes a heavy toll of our fortitude and perseverance. One needs to shed his comfort zone and prepare himself to adapt to the onslaught of the maturity and rationality that do not wholly rely upon his imaginative faculties signifying the realm of the higher truth of spirituality. The shift from innocence to experience is brought out by a great deal of resurgence and rebellion on the part of an individual and this process of metamorphosis leads to conspicuous changes in our outlook, perception and to our rationality. According to Blake, " Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to human existence." If love, tenderness, mercy, pity and peace dominate the series of Songs of Innocence, then cruelty, jealousy, hypocrisy, hatred, oppression, energy, instinctive pleasure and impulsive behaviour dominate the 'Songs of Experience'. These traits have their equal share in shaping up the character of an individual and these are closer to our real nature and not something fanciful or mere a figment of our imagination.

7. Concept of God in Songs of Experience:

According to Blake, the God of 'Songs of Experience' is not as simple or benign as the God of 'Songs of Innocence' series. The God of 'Innocence' series was an all-loving entity just like Jesus Christ known for his love for entire mankind. There the God was rejoicing in the company of happy and sportive children and He seemed to have provided an idyllic atmosphere for His servants who obey Him from the core of their hearts. Children were rollicking and having fun in the company of protective guardians in such an amazing environment but this is not the case in 'Experience' series at all as the advent of maturity upon the individual have had its profound effect and now he begins to see the essence of everything relying upon his instincts and impulses. It is no longer peace, and love that act as a driving force for entire mankind for the Creator rather it's the sadistic nature of God Himself that dominates in watching the miserable state of mind of helpless creature who bows to His will willy-nilly. In Blake's terminology the 'Christ' of 'Innocence' series is replicated with 'Urizen' (Reason/Energy) with which mankind associate themselves. This God is not all-loving and most beneficent rather He is jealous and cruel towards human beings' happiness and prosperity. He seems to rule on earth through His despicable agents in the form of 'Priests', 'Monarchs', 'Bishops', 'Kings' and 'Statesmen'. The 'State' and the 'Church' both work in tandem to glorify His wrongdoings to humanity at large. Here Blake seems to have segregated himself from following the conventional religion of 'Christianity' that in the name of 'Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love' actually propagate for their opposites. The following lines from the poem 'A Divine Image' rightly elucidate this observation:

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

8. False code of morality and chaos:

There are many songs in 'Experience' series that abound in denouncing the hypocritical tendencies of the dwellers of London City whose very faces are marked with a sense of disgrace and woe. People in general pretend to follow fake principles of following God's commands whereas in reality they actually harbour ill-will against their fellow brethren. In the name of piety and righteousness, they just promote poverty and atrocities upon the wretched fellows, especially upon children who are their soft targets. Instead of showing love and affection to these tender souls, they exhibit callous attitude towards them by forcing them do the dirty job of sweeping chimneys of the churches and attractive palaces. Children are forced to live a life of beggar and the institution of charity schools are encouraged. This cruelty doesn't make them feel ashamed rather they take pride in it and they thank God by worshipping their Creator who too seems to have approved their inhuman treatment towards fellow brethren. Just take a look at the following lines from 'Holy Thursday' and see how rotten the English society of Blakean era turned out to be:

" Is this a holy thing to see
In a rich and fruitful land
Babes reduced to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand?" (Holy Thursday)

In the poem 'London' Blake deals with the subject of self-imposed restrictions and falsified code of ethics that each of the inhabitant of the London City strictly follows to their own destruction and depression. Let's read these lines from the same poem and feel the tinge of satire aimed against the Londoners of Blakean time:

" In every cry of every man,
In every infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged menaces I hear." (London)

William Blake in his another remarkable poem entitled 'The Tyger' tries to convey a stark contrast to the Creator of both The Tyger and The Lamb and he wonders how these two altogether different types of animals have been created by the same Creator and he just gets astonished at the supreme artistic skill of Almighty God whom he associates with a veteran blacksmith of the highest order whom none can challenge in His authoritative power and craftsmanship. Similarly Blake also criticizes the repressive attitude of the so-called maiden Queens or youthful girls who try to protect their chastity by suppressing their urge of experiencing the thrill of intercourse with their desired male partners. They don't react impulsively rather they follow the fetters that the society binds her with which according to Blake is quite unnatural. Blake prefers 'The Lily' instead of 'The Sick Rose' as is evident from his understanding of the sexual morality. Love is not love if it is suppressed by the lover fearing the outcome of the sexual intimacy in the eyes of the society. Only a defenceless beauty in the form of the Lily can know and experience the sensation of true love as per the opinion of Blake.

9. Conclusion:

Thus the analytical reading of all those above-mentioned poems of both the series opens before us a vista of Blakean thought -process who seems to be fully aware of the fact that neither innocence alone could ever uplift the morale of an ignorant yet ecstatic soul nor the world of experience proves to be too much handy for a knowledgeable person in an isolated condition who is entangled in some messy situation following the false code of ethics and values imposed forcefully by 'the mind-forged menaces ' of society which he willingly puts on to conform to the ways of the world. It is the successful fusion of both 'innocence' and 'experience' that guarantees the progression of human soul which he hankers after for every hour of his existence on this mundane world.

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