

The Revelation of Social Reality in the Poetry of William Blake

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Abstract. As one of the most outstanding representatives of the Pre-Romanticism poet in the 18th century English literature, William Blake lived through and witnessed an era of great political and social upheaval and transitional period: the American War of Independence, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution which brought significant and essential impact on social and historical progress in England. Coming from the social injustices and the coverage of the dark side of industrial England, Blake caught the pulse of his times through his sharp and deep insight, condemned the oppression and exploitation derived from the authority, tyranny and church, and also called on the oppressed to shatter “the mind-forged manacles” come from the ruling class. In this paper, I want to introduce and interpret the revelation of social reality in the poetry of William Blake by analyzing some of Blake’s poems in terms of main ideas, rhetorical devices, and historical contexts which are underlay and concealed in his poetry deeply.

Keywords: William Blake; Social Reality; Romanticism; Poetry.

1. Introduction

A visionary poet and artist, William Blake was often ridiculed during his lifetime but has since been recognized as one of the major poets of English literature. When Blake finished writing “Songs of Innocence”, a collection of poems and paintings that became the classic work of Romanticism, the work did not take off at that time and its sales were not optimistic. When Blake’s brother Robert died of illness, Blake once dreamed that his brother’s soul came to visit him and told him about the new printing method. This inspired Blake to try to carve poems and pictures on the same copperplate. However, Blake’s original style of writing still went unappreciated, just as the famous portrait master Joshua Reynolds once said that Blake’s creation has too much imagination and emotion. The formation of a poet’s writing style must be related to the background of his times. Blake lived in an era prone to apocalyptic feelings: the industrial revolution had replaced manual labor with machines; Europe’s traditional religious ideals were at stake; Newton’s theory of mechanics, Bacon’s materialism, and Locke’s empiricism had made this era dominated by science and reason. At a time when many were hailing the coming of the age of reason, Blake used his poetry to reveal that science will eventually produce an uncontrollable irrationality that leads to the enslavement of the human spirit to material pursuits. His work is distinguished by the creation of a complex mythological system, in which imagination is of paramount importance, serving as the vehicle of humanity’s communion with the spiritual essence of reality. In his early days, Blake was so deeply religious that he believed he had seen and communicated with God as a child. His work at that time contained imagery that was largely drawn from the “Old Testament”. But gradually he found that no matter how much God was worshipped, the poor people at the bottom could not get rid of their miserable existence, they could not even survive. As a result, he began to doubt the meaning of religion and used imagination as a weapon to create a system of myths to combat the hypocrisy of the church. In the words of his mythological character Los, Blake once declared: “I must create a system or be enslaved by another man’s system” (Blake, *The Laocoon* 427). Obviously, this statement clearly illustrates his original intention of creating his mythology. Blake was, as many literary critics agree, a defiant rebel who rejected the orthodox theology of the church of England, preferring to create his mythology to express his insights into human history and the future. The main characters in Blake’s mythology, “Nobodaddy” and “Urizen”, represent tyrants and secular false gods. “Nobodaddy” is a homonym for “nobody’s father” in English (Blake, *The Book of Urizen* 13). In fact, “Nobodaddy” is a figure of a jealous father, which is interpreted by Blake as the “superego” who controls our morality. Urizen represents the reactionary British ruling authorities and institutionalized religion at the end of the 18th

century, exposing the dark political reality of the collusion between theocracy and political power to oppress social progressive thought. It can be seen that Blake's mythological system is a challenge and subversion to the reactionary authorities and orthodox church in England. By bringing his unconventional perspectives to reveal social reality, Blake has become recognized as both a social rebel and a "hero of imagination" who played a key role in advancing the Romantic revolt against rationalism. My goal in this paper is to analyze the social reality reflected by Blake's poetry from the background of his life and historical context, to reveal the suffering life of the toiling masses and the hypocrisy of capitalist politicians, and the darkness of the church power.

2. Backgrounds

2.1 Blake's Personal Experience

Black was born in London on November 28, 1757, the son of a small hosiery merchant. Black had no formal schooling, but from an early age, he showed extraordinary imagination in poetry and painting. Blake's parents were both non-conformist Protestants, and such a family atmosphere may have had some influence on Blake's subsequent religious deviance. At the age of 18, Blake was apprenticed to an engraver, and when he had finished, he began to make a living at it. Despite the originality of his works, his poor life did not change. He was still working until a few days before he died. Black lived his life in poverty, so he knew the suffering of poor people, and this provided real-life material for his poetry. Such a class background also made him have the creative idea of exposing the brutality of the rulers and the dark church.

In the latter half of the 18th century, a new literary movement began in Europe, called the Romantic Revival. It was characterized by a strong fight against the bandage of classicism, and by a renewed interest in medieval literature. In England, this movement showed itself in the trend of Pre - Romanticism in poetry. One of these famous writers was William Blake. Different from the traditions of the 18th century, Blake experimented with meter and rhyme and introduced and implemented bold metrical innovations which could not be found in the poetry of his contemporaries. Blake writes his poems in plain and direct language. His poetry often embodies lyric beauty with immense compression of meaning. He distrusts abstractness and tends to embody his views with visual images. Symbolism in a wide range is also a distinctive feature of his poems. For example, in his poem "The Lamb", Blake used the image of "little lamb" to refer to human beings, implying that God created human beings, which reflected his religious thoughts. In the poem "Ah Sunflower", Blake perceived the natural process of human origin, aging, and death through the description of the "sunflower". In the poem "The Book of Urizen", he created a hidden and abstract world in which there was a god of his own, who was forever gazing at the vast forest he had created. This world embodied Blake's unique religious view and his wonderful imagination.

2.2 Historical Context

After the Glorious Revolution in 1688, England became a constitutional monarchy. The victory of the Anglo-French War (1756-1763) laid the foundation for Britain's supremacy at sea. From then on, the British bourgeoisie more fiercely plundered the colonial resources and even accelerated the primitive accumulation of capitalism through slave trafficking, drug export, child labor, and other bloody ways. In the middle of the 18th century, British politics was in turmoil. The newly elected George III attempted to restore the absolute monarchy and suppressed domestic democracy by coercion. In this case, the domestic democratic movement, the domestic people's revolutionary struggle, and the colonial people's resistance against the British emerged one after another. At that time, the Industrial Revolution had begun in England, which created great material wealth while polarizing all classes of society. It narrowed the difference between the landlord class and the middle class but widened the gap between the middle class and the broad working class, who had to face unemployment, poverty, and artificial hunger. By the end of the 18th century, in the age of great industrial growth, more small producers were thrown into the humble workforce and enslaved to

machines. As a small producer who made a living by carving boards, Blake was naturally deeply affected and had to rely on his friends to make a living and lead a hard life.

At the same time, the British democratic movement was also unprecedentedly high due to the outbreak of the American Revolution and the subsequent French revolution. Like so many other progressives, Blake was an ardent supporter and advocate of these progressive revolutionary movements. In his revolutionary prophecy poems, he eulogized the American and French revolutions. As the French revolution entered the Jacobin dictatorship and the Napoleonic Wars, the British ruling class, like most European countries, intensified repression at home, plundered abroad, and moved towards colonial imperialism. The whole of Europe fell into a reactionary period of suppressing revolution. As an artist, Blake's conscience and nature not only enabled him to actively pay attention to the revolutionary trend at that time but also enabled him to transcend the limitations of time and space and see the predicament faced by the human soul from the complicated historical background, thus reflecting the commonality and individuality of him and his contemporaries. In his works before 1796 (Blake's middle works), it can be seen that he rebelled against capitalist civilization in political, religious, moral, cultural, and other aspects. In "There is No Natural Religion", Blake criticized the rationalism that was prevalent in England at that time. This kind of ideology was synonymous with the suppression of democracy in him, which reflected Blake's initial declaration of the importance of imagination. In "Songs of Innocence and of Experience", we can see the hypocrisy of priests, the physical destruction and mental trauma by schools, churches and capitalist civilization, the cries of chimney sweepers, the curses of street prostitutes, the complaints of racially discriminated slaves, and so on. "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" marks Blake's recognition of the truth of the opposition to everything and the need for struggle and change. In the series of revolutionary prophecy poems, Blake froze the fire of Oak through the terrible ice, thereby making the world lifeless. Oak, on the other hand, was a symbol of the rebellious revolutionary power of human beings. He dared to deny everything and defied existing values. Blake's enthusiasm for the French Revolution was evident, and he regarded it as a precursor to the salvation of the human soul. In Blake's later stage, in "The Four Zoas", his mythological system was fully expressed. It depicted the division and depravity of human beings in the material world due to the neglect of the inner reality, and the process of non-human beings after depravity to reach the ideal world through a series of struggles with the help of imagination. The importance of imagination was reflected here, and the gentle and kind image of the savior made the poetry less aggressive. In his works, Blake criticized the British government's policy of coercion and aggression but also showed his skepticism about the French revolution. It is worth noting that this kind of suspect is different from the negativity and flinch of the Lake Poets, but comes from Blake's unique complex insight as an artist and his deep thinking of individual and society breakthroughs, which runs through all his work. Later in Blake's career, as the French revolution became more severe, his theme and purpose became increasingly apparent. Throughout the theme of Blake's works, we can clearly distinguish the main line, which is against traditional rationality and advocates spiritual freedom. The purpose of anti-rationality is to eliminate the shackles of the old world on human freedom, to completely liberate human emotion, imagination, and creativity, and enable human beings to enter the paradise of "Jerusalem". At the same time, this kind of anti-rationality is not the complete denial and abandonment of rationality, but the combination of it with emotion and enthusiasm.

The church also played a role in constraining people's thoughts at that time. Influenced by his parents, Blake was also a devout Christian, believing that as long as he followed Christianity, he would be loved by God and lived a happy life. But, as the spokesmen of God's will, pastors and churches had become the tools of the authorities to paralyze the masses, and even cruelly persecuted the words and deeds that did not conform to Christianity in the name of God. The great contrast between the ideal and the reality made Blake deeply dislike the hypocrisy of the church and put its ugly side to the public.

3. Analysis of Blake's Works

3.1 London

LONDON

I wander thro' each charter'd street,

Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,

And mark in every face I meet,

Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,

In every infant's cry of fear,

In every voice, in every ban,

The mind-forg'd manacles I hear:

How the Chimney-sweepers cry

Every blackning church appals,

And the hapless soldier's sigh

Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most, thro's midnight streets I hear

How the youthful Harlots curse

Blasts the new-born infants tear,

And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse (Blake, *Songs of Experience* 23).

"London" is the most outstanding poem in "Songs of Experience" and the greatest lyric in which Blake utters his social criticism in which in four short stanzas. The poet criticizes the political system and the tyranny of the authorities from different angles. Paul Fussell mentions that stress is what makes English poetry unique. The changes in rhyme and rhythm make the language of poetry have a sense of music, which is consistent with the rise and fall of the poet's inner feelings and plays a deeper role in the theme of poetry (Fussell 21). This poem is written in quatrains in iambic tetrameter with a rhyme scheme as its technical method to color and vivify the depiction, and especially using end rhyme such as "street" and "meet", "flow" and "woe" and "man" and "ban", etc. In this poem, Blake utilized his rhetorical skills such as alliteration, imagery, and repetition to build up a terrible and mournful atmosphere of the city of London.

In the beginning, in the first stanza, the narrator wanders the "chartered" streets near the "chartered" Thames. Here "chartered" implies a meaning of "given the liberty of freedom, but also taken over as private property". Under the political system of the time, the street was no longer the infrastructure of the city, but the private property of the powerful and businessmen. Even the River Thames, which belongs to nature, was controlled by the authorities, and ordinary people lost their proper living space. Blake uses the irony device by adding the word "chartered" to those that were supposed to be the so-called public facilities, and also by repeating the word to reveal he looks down on and satirizes the society-controlled class indirectly. In the meantime, Blake employs alliteration in the fourth line, "marks", "weakness" and "woe". It draws Blake's emphasis on the feeling of sympathy for the miseries of the poor people and resentment of the unfair society.

In the second stanza, “every” occurs five times underlining the sorrowful fate of the poor cannot be cast off and everything is cruel. Blake uses the words like “cry”, “hear”, and “voice” to create a miserable and mournful atmosphere due to these words are connected with sounds. What is more feared is the cry of the baby, which is not usually caused by hunger, discomfort, and other factors, but made by horror. What caused this horrible scene? In the first stanza of the poem, Blake speaks of “chartered”, which is the embodiment of a corrupt political system. In the last two sentences of the poem’s second stanza, Blake points out another reason, which is the “mind-forged manacles”. To consolidate the rule, the authorities put heavy mental shackles on the people with harsh ideological control. Just as Peter Ackroyd pointed out that “manacles” like “chartered” was one of the radical core words of the period that was directed at the oppression of the authorities (Ackroyd, 254). By using this word, the image exceeds the form of the poem and expresses both sides of the oppressor and oppressed in the dark city.

In the third stanza, Blake describes two occupations of the time: chimney sweeper and soldier. In British society at that time, chimney sweeping was a high-risk job, and most of the chimney sweepers were homeless children because only children of this age could enter the chimney and clean the flue. There are many such children in the works of British writers, such as the little Tom in Charles Kingsley’s “The Water Babies”, who started as a chimney sweeper with his master, and the protagonist in Dickens’ “Oliver Twist” who was also sold as a chimney sweeper. Because of the peculiarities of flue cleaning, many children died by accident, and many contracted respiratory diseases from breathing soot for long periods. What was more frightening was that these children were not treated as people at all, but as commodities to be traded. At the beginning of the third stanza, usually the poet describes the sound of the chimney sweeper as “Sweep, sweep...” But here Blake writes that the shouts and cries of these children shocked the dark churches. The church is supposed to be a holy place of happy and peaceful paradise, but the cry of the chimney sweeper is a testament to God’s impotence, and even the church that does God’s will cannot eliminate the dangerous occupation of chimney sweeping, leaving those children to live in the midst of fire and water. Moreover, although we all know that the duty of soldiers is to protect the country, there are just and unjust kinds of war. Britain’s long-term overseas aggression plundered a lot of wealth, but also caused disasters to the people of the invaded areas. When the contradiction is irreconcilable, war is imminent. The biggest victims of war are always the common people. Many people had to join the army in order to make a living. The war had taken the lives of tens of thousands of soldiers, whose blood had become a river and dyed the palace walls red.

The fourth stanza of “London” reveals the complex meanings of the poem and also fills with amazing imagery and writing. Blake describes the most frightening late-night streets, where there are young prostitutes who have to sell their bodies to make a living. They dress up beautifully, but they curse the world they live in. The “youthful harlot” as mothers, many of whom are unable to escape the fate of transmitting sexual diseases to their children. They cry out in a heart-wrenching way because their children are their hope, and when their children are dying, their hope is destroyed. The metaphor “marriage hearse” in the last line of the fourth stanza symbolizes that marriage is responsible for harlotry and every problem is linked to it. In this poem, Blake suggests marriage is an oppressor that leads to prostitution. As Camille Paglia has remarked, “in Blake’s radical philosophy, prostitution is created by religious prudery and social hypocrisy” (Heather, 162).

All in all, this masterwork shows that Blake wants to criticize and fierce attack the cruel and brutal institution of the church and government, which were both very powerful and tyrannical in 18-19th century England. He also criticizes the deformed and unfair marriage system as well as capitalists. At meanwhile, he expresses his sympathetic feeling for those miserable people, such as chimney sweepers, soldiers, and harlots who are struggling with unfortunate fates and making a terrible living in the dark and 18th century British society.

3.2 A Little Boy Lost

A LITTLE BOY LOST (Songs of Experience)

Nought loves another as itself,
Nor venerates another so,
Nor is it possible to thought
A greater than itself to know.
'And, father, how can I love you
Or any of my brothers more?
I love you like the little bird
That picks up crumbs around the door.'
The Priest sat by and heard the child;
In trembling zeal he seized his hair,
He led him by his little coat,
And all admired his priestly care.
And standing on the altar high,
'Lo, what a fiend is here!' said he:
'One who sets reason up for judge
Of our most holy mystery.'
The weeping child could not be heard,
The weeping parents wept in vain:
They stripped him to his little shirt,
And bound him in an iron chain,
And burned him in a holy place
Where many had been burned before;
The weeping parents wept in vain.

Are such things done on Albion's shore (Blake, *Songs of Experience* 28)

As mentioned above, the hypocrisy and darkness of the church aroused Blake's dissatisfaction, and in "A Little Boy Lost", the poet portrays the cruelty of the church. This is a poem of six heroic quatrains, which presents an honest search for understanding on the part of the titular boy.

The first stanza of the poem is a prologue to thinking about the nature of love, especially the love of self and the understanding of thought. To the little boy, love is selfish in nature, and no one can love another more than himself; Secondly, thought cannot know more than thought itself. The second stanza of the poem continues to reflect on the nature of love and thought, and the salutation "father" tells the reader that this is the boy praying. The core theme of the prayer is to say: "How can I love you more? Father, or my brother more? Since men love themselves the most?" The questions the boy asks in the first stanza and the prayer in the second stanza are childlike and naive, but they run counter to the core values of Christianity, which emphasizes self-sacrifice and devotion. In a narrow sense, the boy asks the question because he is too young to fully understand the origins of Christianity; In a broad sense, Blake's doubts about Christianity can be seen in essence, for in his view there is nothing wrong with human beings as individuals taking care of themselves.

In the third stanza, returning to the poem itself, the prayer of the little boy was heard by a priest whose zeal for Christian righteousness was so strong that he trembled with anger, which gave the impression that he was more faithful to it than the other priests. Out of anger, he grabbed the boy by

the hair and pulled at his coat, a stark physical contrast that still haunts the mind. The priests who watched, instead of stopping him, admired what he had done because a small mistake by the boy had given them the opportunity to kill. The last two words of this stanza, “priestly” and “care”, are very ironic. The priests thought it was their innate duty to punish the boy violently, and they even thought it was for the boy’s own good. Blake reveals that the real purpose of the church is to make the people meek and obedient, and consciously follow the Christian doctrine.

In the fourth stanza of the poem, the real cause of the priest’s anger is revealed, the little boy is regarded as a demon, not because he is an accomplice of Satan, not because he has wronged his companions, but because he has applied reason to the domain of the church. In the priest’s eyes, the boy’s behavior was immoral and sinful, so he deserved to be punished.

The last two stanzas of the poem describe the tragic end of the little boy, who is stripped naked and bound in chains, despite the cries of the boy and the pleas of his parents. The boy was burned alive in a so-called holy place. Many people had been burned in this way before, and the boy would not be the last. Could such a thing have happened in civilized England, the poet finally asked in a skeptical tone. While the actual burning alive of a blasphemous boy may never have taken place in the England of Blake’s day, the poet witnessed the abuse of innocence by those with religious authority. Blake explains his philosophy that extols human rationality as a means of understanding spiritual matters, but simultaneously rejects reason as a more powerful force than imagination. The little boy exemplifies both: he is thinking through his beliefs but dares to ask his imagined questions of this seemingly unknowable heavenly Father. That the boy addresses God with his questions, rather than the earth-bound church authority of the priest, shows that Blake seeks to relate to God outside the confines of the intellectually and emotionally repressive religious institutions of his day.

3.3 Other Representative Poems of Blake

Blake’s poems “Songs of Innocence” and “Songs of Experience” express the two opposing states of the human mind, as well as the opposition between nature and civilization. “Songs of Innocence” represents a state of harmony between man and nature, while “Songs of Experience” represents a state of erosion of human nature in a civilized society. Blake sets the keynote of happiness and joy for “Songs of Innocence”, which comes from the harmony between man and nature. The difference is that in the “Song of Experience”, Blake reveals the darkness and various ugly phenomena in the society, and the disclosure of the ugly phenomena in the society itself is also a criticism of social civilization.

One of the poems in “Songs of Experience”, “Infant Sorrow”, has three symbolic images: the son, the mother, and the father. The son symbolizes the primordial vital force, which is a sensual power. The mother represents the natural force that gives birth to the life of her son. As for the father, from his behavior, he is a symbol of the constraints of civilized society on people. In the poem, this conflict between constraint and primordial vitality is represented as the conflict between son and father. As a new force, the son replaces the father and develops into the spokesman of the new civilization. However, the son’s new life will not last forever, and he will be replaced by his descendants. In this way, civilization is just like human reproduction, replacing the old with the new. This cycle is represented by the elimination of the old generation and the birth of a new generation. The child is a new life, it always symbolizes the new vital force.

In another poem, “The Mental Traveler”, Blake describes a traveler who travels across the earth and hears terrible stories about the ancient earth that no other human being has ever known. “For there the Babe is born in joy,/ That was begotten in dire woe, / Just as we Reap in joy the fruit,/ Which we in bitter tears did sow” (Blake, *The Mental Traveler* 6). Blake uses the changes in the growing environment of children and seeds to show that primitive vitality and civilization are two important factors for the survival and growth of living individuals, and we human beings live under such dual factors. Obviously, Blake does not simply believe that civilization has destroyed the harmony between man and nature, and does not feel indignant about the industrial civilization that has destroyed human life close to nature. On the contrary, he writes all the factors of primitive vitality,

nature, and civilization in his poems. All these factors exist in contradiction and influence each other. They are not only opposites but also depend on each other. In essence, Blake's criticism of the ugly phenomena in society is rooted in his criticism of civilization. But Blake criticizes civilization, but he doesn't completely deny it. What he wants is to make our civilization more complete and more human. Therefore, in Blake's idea of the cycle of civilization, civilization progresses at the end of each cycle.

4. Conclusion

Blake's poetry is concerned with social criticism, exposing political tyranny, economic exploitation, feudal church, and other evils and the dark reality in his day. The fight for freedom, equality, and fraternity especially for the inner spiritual freedom and equality of the individual is also a major topic in Blake's poem. Blake's striking volume of poetry should be remembered mostly for his "Songs of Experience", in which he poured out his bitter social criticism on the reality of his time. He utilized his critical, satiric, and allegorical poetry to strip the philanthropy mask of the ruling class profoundly and lashed their extreme brutality and corruption severely. Unlike Wordsworth, another famous romantic poet, Blake was fair in pointing out the evils of civilized society. He did not call for its abolition, nor did he escape the evils of civilization and live a life of seclusion in the natural landscape, as Wordsworth did. In my opinion, it is because of the diversity of his poetic themes and the uniqueness of his creative techniques that Blake's poems are admired and celebrated around the world, crossing the boundaries of history and space.

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