

WILLIAM BLAKE’S “SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE” AS A PRACTICE AND MANIFESTATION OF THE ENGLISH ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

Mustafa CANLI
Faculty of Letters
Karabuk University
Turkey
mustafacanli@karabuk.edu.tr

Abstract

Agricultural and industrial revolutions of 18th century changed Britain radically: rural people became urbanized and the social conditions were terrible and inhumane because of the ongoing economic progress of the Imperial Britain. There was a climate of turbulence and instability, the bygone eras were much remembered and recognized as “good old times” by the people and the literary circles. In this age, a group of artists and poets were disillusioned; they believed in the importance of individual and personal experience. They were called romantics. In this study, William Blake’s “Songs of Innocence and Experience” (1789 and 1794) as a manifestation of The Romantic Movement in English literature is presented and analyzed in depth. Poems form the collection such as “Introduction to Songs of Innocence”, “Introduction to Songs of Experience”, “Holy Thursdays” in “Songs of Innocence” and in “Songs of Experience”, “A Poison Tree” and “Earth’s Answer” are analyzed to find out what Blake manifests in terms of poetry, subject matter and style, and how he puts his romantic ideas into action in his poetry.

Keywords: Romanticism, William Blake, Poetry, Songs of Experience, Songs of Innocence

Before the emergence of the English romantic movement, a clear evidence of a new literary and poetic movement had already emerged in England with the sentimental writings of Robert Burns, Thomas Gray and works of novelist such as Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe. Among these writers, Burns’ idiom was very effective due to its defectiveness and plainness which worked in a way for balance of strengths manifested in the upcoming years in poems such as Blake’s “Songs of Innocence and of Experience” (1789–94) as well as in the collaboration of romantic primaries William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Lyrical Ballads” (Mahoney, 2010, p. 255). “Lyrical Ballads”, which is accepted as the literary declaration of Romanticism and romantic aesthetics and poetic creation in Britain,

was written in 1798 by Wordsworth and Coleridge, whereas the “Songs of Innocence and Experience” was written almost ten years before the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by William Blake which has almost all the prominent features of the romantic creation. As a manifestation of a movement The Preface to “*Lyrical Ballads*” includes idealization of the romantic ideas, ideals and perceptions of poetry, not only poetry but philosophy and sentiment. Although “*Songs of Innocence and Experience*” does not have such assertive prose writing towards a formation of a movement, its poems are experimentation and announcement of a new style in poetry, and Blake puts his ideas into action in these poems. The preferred keywords and concepts of these symbolic poems are similar with the European movement of romanticism: emphasis on imagination, freedom of the poet and the reader, focusing on folkloric roots, self-realization of the poet and the reader, noble savage, experience, rebellion against the norms of Enlightenment, return to nature, isolation and primitivism of the human subject.

William Blake was an important figure for the both the introduction and development of the Romantic Movement in England. He was not as famous as Robert Burns at the beginning, and his poems were not that popular (Alexander, 2000, p. 218). He lived between the years 1757 and 1827, and had a revolutionary spirit throughout his life. He had a reaction against the rationalist philosophy and conventionalism of the government and the church of his age which he thought oppressed the people and especially their creative skills and aesthetic freedom in arts and literature. Considerably disillusioned by the industrial revolution, Blake believed that human reality was political, spiritual and divine and gathered together to create and sense the feelings of the human being (Alexander, 2000, p. 219). Therefore, he saw the world in terms of opposites and dichotomies, and his work “*Songs of Innocence and of Experience*” was made up of binary oppositions which contradict each other and depend on each other to exist and have a meaning. He made use of symbolism most of the time in his poems, and some of his symbols are clear and direct while some are subtle but still in a simple and standard English dialect. Symbolizations and representations of childhood, lamb, Christ or flowers are used instead of innocence and innate human goodness in his poems. He believed that the British culture can be transformed into a better character by unleashing the heritage and literary history of the lost past of the empire and the land itself (Greenblatt, 1993, p. 1406).

“Songs of Innocence and of Experience” is a collection of poems with unique and self-made illustrations by William Blake himself around the lines of the poem sometimes covering a whole page. First, he wrote the “Songs of Innocence”, and later he composed “Songs of Experience” and published those in a volume titled “Songs of Innocence and of Experience: Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul”. The word and concept “innocence” is strongly associated with the period of childhood of a human in the poems, whereas “experience” is referred and connoted to evil and fearful events that a human being encounters in his/her life. The poems have various themes of loss of innocence, salvation, hypocrisy, imagination, man and nature, and revolutionary ideas of politics, philosophy, arts and other matters. Moreover, the innocent, pastoral world of childhood is opposed to the world of corruption and repression experienced by an adult in his works creating a double sided perspective and mentality. The style of the poems is simple and direct in language, tone and mood; however, Blake’s crafty art elevates the language and the rhythms, and the ideas he pursues are often complex and hard to understand without having a thorough knowledge of the continental romantic philosophy of the German intellectuals such as Schiller, Goethe and the French thinker Rousseau. Some poems make their points and messages through symbolism or abstractions, though sometimes Blake uses personification and Biblical symbolism to make his message clear. He also explores social behaviour in his works covering a wide range of the field of humanities and arts.

The “Songs of Innocence” deals with childhood, the emotional progress a human goes through adulthood and some of these poems have children as a persona and as a speaker and the character in a poem. The poems aim to show that childhood provides naive and natural outlook on the events experienced by an individual to have a better understanding of the human nature and soul. Christian values are also mentioned with their possible negative implications, while “The Songs of Experience” on the other hand deals with fearful experiences accumulated in the human psychology which destroys innocence. The poems also include themes such as jealousy and shame. In addition, the poems deal with the ugly and terrifying aspects of poverty, disease, war, prostitution, sexual and social repression in England at the time which is a turbulent one in the history of the country (Greenblatt, 1993, p. 1410). As a conclusion, “Infant Joy” becomes “Infant Sorrow” and “Lamb” becomes a “Tyger” pointing to the pleasant and horrifying faces of these latter terms both in the worldly and afterworld life. The most important problem and question to discuss and elaborate is what do innocence and experience mean for Blake? According to Blake, innocence is linked

to childhood and its naive and uneducated perception of life unstained and undisturbed by the cruel world itself. According to him, the first pages of human life on earth with Adam and Eve are the Golden Age of human experience and life where they experienced innate goodness. Moreover, the folkloric traditions and lifestyle is linked to these concepts, so folk and the folkloric are innocent and a proof of bare condition of the human beings without their modern lifestyle like that of Adam and Eve's. On the other hand, experience is the opposite of these ideas; for Blake experience is bad, evil, and unnatural that disturbs and distorts the heavenly human soul. Experience is associated with adulthood which is the later stages both in human life and history that the human is not naive anymore due to the world around him. According to Blake, Classicism is the depiction of this world, so he does not like the idea of classicism and its bearings. For example the murder of Abel is a turning point in this perspective: The heavenly lifestyle of the human is disrupted by death, murder and evil, a concept closely linked with the religious perspectives. From this point of view, it can be claimed that the poems of innocence and experience are their opposites marked by a turning point and thus projecting a change in the imagery of Blake in the poems. In "innocence", Blake presents natural and positive imagery and symbols, however this turns upside down in the experience poems marking the darkest sides of the human soul as symbolized by darker representations. In fact, Greenblatt states that reading a poem by Blake without his wonderful illustrations is missing something very important and deep; his words and images together are in such a relationship and harmony that they become enlightening – sometimes turbulent – but core to the cohesion of the poem's main argumentation (Greenblatt, 1993, p. 1407). Blake's aim is depicted as "the striving of the sentimental poet to become nature, to emulate the naive in his or her own work through a kind of spiral-like movement that allows a return to origins, a conscious innocence" (Ferber, p. 139).

In his moody poem "Introduction to Songs of Innocence", Blake opens with a pastoral scene, the persona is playing the pipe happily and a child weeps and tells him to play his song again. It is interesting that the child there wants to hear a playful song about the Lamb – which represents innocence therefore Christ as the embodiment of this concept originating from the child's innate ability to embrace the pure and heavenly. Then the child wants him to write so that everyone hears what Blake says in the poem to make it possible to be heard by the readers and listeners. It is interesting that Blake enters his poems with such lines which set a pastoral and natural scene, as we see reaching the last lines of the poem like a manifestation of a new artistic perspective with these concepts at hand: "And I made a rural pen, /And I

stain'd the water clear, /And I wrote my happy songs /Every child may joy to hear” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 60). Blake’s rural pen stains the clear water, which symbolizes that Blake is writing a new subject matter with new forms different from the contemporary poetic tradition of the late enlightenment period. And he is writing for the children whom he targets for emphasizing innocence and the naivety of the new born human being. As the setting of the poem, nature was a place of moral perfection according to romantic poets. There is a spiritual process in nature and that must be gained by the poet to add creativity and imaginative powers to his prophetic vision and artistic capabilities. Moreover, according to Mahoney the aim that Blake chooses “may” instead of “will” is that he gives us a very clear message that “our response, our mediation of his meanings, will be crucial to his poetry’s effect” (Mahoney, 2010, p. 22). This could be a reader response method where the reader is vacuumed into the deep meanings of the text allowing him to create and open for his own layers of meanings and inference. Realizing and being aware of this technique Blake announces his prophetic poetry skills and calls himself a bard who can see all. Moreover, he recalls the history of the world from the beginning and he is very old: “Hear the voice of the Bard! / Who Present, Past, & Future sees / Whose ears have heard, / The Holy Word, / That walk’d among the ancient trees” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 215). The holy word represents the voice of God in Eden heard by Adam and Eve in their pure and unstained creation. Unlike the happy child in the introduction to innocence poems, the bard has experienced the fall and sent to earth to awaken it and experience chaos: “Turn away no more: / Why wilt thou turn away / The starry floor / The watry shore / Is giv’n thee till the break of day” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 216).

According to Greenblatt, in Blake’s symbolism the starry sky signifies rigid control and the sea signifies chaos (Greenblatt, 1993, p. 1417). If the two introductions to Blake’s poems are compared, the “innocence” introduction depicts a child happy to hear the heavenly melodies of the bard who has started his folk songs, whereas the experience introduction portrays a bard who is prophetic and sent from Eden to raise the earth from its sleep and experience chaos on the land. Blake’s poem cycle here continues with the “Earth’s Answer”, the bard called the earth in the introduction: “O Earth O Earth return! /Arise from out the dewy grass; /Night is worn. /And the morn / Rises from the slumberous mass” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 216). The earth now reacts to the bard’s call and explains why she as the earth and land are not be able to renew and revive the light without the help of others and how much she struggles:

*Earth raised up her head
From the darkness dread and drear,
Her light fled,
Stony, dread,
And her locks covered with grey despair.*

...
*Selfish father of men!
Cruel, jealous, selfish fear!
Can delight,
Chained in night,
he virgins of youth and morning bear.*

...
*Break this heavy chain,
That does freeze my bones around!
Selfish, vain,
Eternal bane,
That free love with bondage bound.* (Stevenson, 2014, p. 217)

As depicted in the poem the earth has become desolate and grey with the loss of divine light and complains of the evil doings of the humankind on its surface darkening the souls and griming the innocence on the earth. Moreover, the earth is fed up with jealousy and bored of the father of the ancient men who is Urizen. According to Blake, this man, Urizen is a tyrant and a despot who in various ways and demeanours ties the human mind to the natural world and also forces his own ethical strains on the human sexual desire and other layers and levels of human energy. The earth names him as selfish and cruel, and thinks that he is blocking the imagination and worldly pleasures, especially love.

In the poem “Holy Thursday” as a double poem in the “Songs of Innocence”, children who are very poor from charity schools are enrolled in a religious service in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. The pure innocence of the children there is explicitly emphasized by Blake: “Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean, / ...Oh what a multitude they seem’d, these flowers of London town! / .../The hum of multitudes was there, but multitudes of lambs, / Thousands of little boys and girls raising their innocent hands” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 65). The children sing their harmonious song of peace and innocence to heaven above with their protectors beside them. This poem is best understood with its counterpart in the experience songs which counteracts the atmosphere in the poem with its opposite thus emphasizing what is lost along with innocence and childhood. In “Holy Thursday” of “Songs of Experience”, Blake provides a real picture of the poor and lower class children during the industrial revolution: the Rich are taking advantage of them and the children are not treated

well, with such depictions and symbolizations, Blake identifies alienated labour as a signature of the world of experience (Mahoney, 2010, p. 140). Blake questions the religious morality of the people while saying that the scene is not holy at all: “Is this a holy thing to see, / In a rich and fruitful land, / Babes reduced to misery, / Fed with cold and usurous hand?” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 225). Moreover, the strong and harmonious song in innocence poem is a cry of the poor children now. It is not a song of joy: “Is that trembling cry a song? / Can it be a song of joy? / And so many children poor? / It is a land of poverty!” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 226). Blake is questioning that the empire is in its heydays; however, the children are in poverty and in this land such one that has a magnificent wealth but the children are starving and dying in mines and chimneys. The children of society are doomed with “eternal winter”: “And their sun does never shine. / And their fields are bleak & bare. / And their ways are fill'd with thorns. / It is eternal winter there” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 226). For the discussions of this poem Richardson states that the poet targets and scrutinizes the educational institutions and their methods of teaching and conduct in such poems which aim at forming a new literary industry on children’s literature (Richardson, 2004, p. 5).

The imagery and symbols change radically in innocence and experience poems. While the innocence songs provide the innate heavenly life and undisturbed human nature which bears no sins, the experience songs talk about the sins and evil humankind carried out since the fall of Adam and Abel’s murder. In this respect, “A Poison Tree” in experience songs talks about human vices. Vengeance and wrath lead to murder in the poem and are depicted as evil features of human. Blake says that when anger is not unleashed it poisons the human mind and grows like a tree inside it. What is more is that the human feeds it with small wretched sins and ugly experiences which lead to the spread of this poisonous tree: “And I waterd it in fears, / Night & morning with my tears: / And I sunned it with smiles, And with soft deceitful wiles” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 219). The poem ends with the death of the foe of the persona in the poem, he lays under the tree lifeless reminding us of the first murder in history by Cain a dark page that leads to unleashing of malignancy and evil to the world and loss of innocence and good intentions. Kept in the dark and secret, the poison tree unleashes an anger symbolized with “apple bright” inflammation, cultivated in secret, produces an “apple bright,” inflamed with anger. The enemy in the poem craves for this fruit primarily because he wants the speaker not to have it a sign of envy as a big sin. In this respect, the symbol that the apple represents is revenge in order to bring destruction and downfall to its owner (Stauffer, 2005, p. 78).

As a conclusion, imagination and creation with an innate and sensible way were special and indispensable for romantic poets. They believed that an artist uses imagination to see beyond reality and express his or her own way of expressions with words in an aesthetic and artistic way in line with the teachings of the Romantic Movement. The poet should try to find the secret world in his mind with imaginative skills with simple but creative words so that everyone can see that nature and the human emotions are alive against the rational mind and the earthly body. In Blake's poems mentioned and analyzed above, we are able to see that challenge to achieve a non-universal imagery created by the prophetic inspiration of the poet himself. Isolation, simple language, the cult of childhood, nostalgia for the past, escaping from hypocrisies and moral destruction of the industrial revolution are all apparent in this collected poems of William Blake who paved the way for the next generation of romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats who fulfilled and mastered the art of writing and creating romantic poetry with their own understanding of the world, nature, human and its emotions.

References

- Alexander, M. (2000). *A History of English Literature*. Macmillan.
- Coyle, M., Garside, P., Kelsall, M., & Peck, J. (Eds.). (2002). *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*. Routledge.
- Ferber, M. (2005). *A Companion to European Romanticism*. Blackwell.
- Greenblatt, S. & Abrams, M. H. (1993). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (Vol. 2). WW Norton.
- Mahoney, C. (Ed.). (2010). *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Richardson, A. (2004). *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832* (Vol. 8). Cambridge University Press.
- Stauffer, A. M. (2005). *Anger, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Vol. 62). Cambridge University Press.
- Stevenson, W. H. (2014). *Blake: The Complete Poems*. Routledge.