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Comparative Estimate of Blake's Songs of Innocence

↳ Songs of Experience

William Blake's poetic expression ranges from the lyric to the epic and includes even a big drama, and in much of his poetic works, which are didactic in nature, he persuades the readers forcefully and dramatically to his way of thinking. The work of William Blake, which we are chiefly to consider here is but a small fragment of Blake's work as a poet, which was itself only part of his accomplishment as an artist-in-general.

The Songs of Innocence was printed in 1789 & Songs of Experience in 1794. Blake saw a close relationship between the two, which though written separately appears together as a complete whole. Blake wrote an additional page in which he speaks of 'Songs of Innocence and of Experience' showing the two contrasting States of Human Soul. The Songs of Innocence needs little explanation as far as its central theme is concerned: it is summed up aptly in the simple title which Blake has given it. The general tenor is of harmless simplicity (as it takes ^{of} ^{its} ^{own} ^{kind}) ^{of} ^{its} ^{own} ^{kind} attention the picture of a child or of unsophisticated nature and uses such images to convey a world of joy. There are some qualifications that need to be made in speaking of this general one of innocence and freedom from harm, but certainly the immediate impression that Blake seeks to create is one of peace and security. Songs of Experience on the other hand speak as a whole of a world that is threatened and insecure. The child and nature have become vitiated to a great extent by the unempathetic pressures that otherwise exist in a harsh world. Once again, this general effect needs to be subject to certain qualifications, but it too would stand as a fair description of the aim Blake seems to have in the composition of these poems.

In his 'Introduction' Blake talks about how he saw a little child one day who was delighted to hear his flute and requested him to sing a song about a lamb. Before disappearing mysteriously, he requested the poet to write as many such songs as possible. The poet immediately complied and dedicated such poems to the children. Here in his 'Introduction'

of being Biblical. "the imagery of the Sunday School" as it has been in
and shepherds and their flocks, "God with his golden tents, angles, pines"
pastures.

Blake represents a laughing child as his inspiration. Bl.
refused to accept the child as a miniature adult, and
set out to give us a vision of the real world that appears
before the child. This world Bl. says as as pure, secure and
full of joy as the children themselves. It is alike to the
children of all races and communities. The child is often
thought of in Blake's poetry as being synonymous with the
infant Jesus. The children are compared to the lambs
"these innocent call his head", and the lamb and the
child both serve as symbols for Christ. In 'The Lamb' while
giving the simple narration of the creation of the animal he
introduces one of the central paradoxes of Christianity: that the
very creator of man became just such a man and even agreed
to being called by the name of the lamb as a sign of his meek &
mild nature. The Biblical ring is present in 'The Shepherd'
'and his tongue shall be filled with praise' and distinct echoes
of the parable told by Christ of the lost sheep which the shepherd
seeks. In 'The Blossom', 'The Chimney Sweeper', 'The Cradle
Song', 'The Holy Thursday', 'The Infant Joy', 'On Another's
Sorrow' ^{the Christian approach is further reinforced} shows Blake's strong ^{belief} in the
fact that every child finds his origin in the East where
God dwells in light, and that there is God in every
infant. This is as Blake agrees with his contemporary
William Wordsworth's ^{own} claim that we indeed have
an existence with God prior to our life on earth, and as we
grow older we move further away from God. ~~Holy Thursday~~

Blake as a poet of his time can be seen in his
pastoral setting. 'Piping', the opening word of the 'Introduction'
immediately summons up for us the pastoral picture. The
notion of the "shepherd boy and the flute 'Piping down
the valleys wild'" is worth noticing. "And I made a rural
poet" are all references to pastoral images. The shepherd is one
of the 'innocence' symbols. The Lamb, The Blossom,
The Laughing Song' are all full of unalloyed pastoral bliss; with
no sense of threat anywhere. The scene is set in
a ^{with woods} full of life, pleasant streams bubbling along and
the air full of happy songs and the birds join the children
in their laughter. Joy is everywhere; in the "Joy but two
days old" in the laughing and shouting of the "little ones",

in the sun, in the bells and in voices of the birds. In the 'Laughing Song' and 'Mature rejoices'. Above all. So in the 'Songs of Innocence' there is a sense of security. There is scarcely a poem in which a symbol of protection, a guardian figure of some kind does not appear. The "old folk" are by, while the children play; the shepherd "yallow his sheep all day". The mother, the nurse, the lion the angels, and above all there is God Himself who protects and shelters. In "A Dream" there are the glow-worms and the beetle represent to give protection to the child.

The "Songs" are not merely about children, but ~~for children~~ and such that "Every child may joy to hear". Again the vocabulary is extraordinarily simple. To express delight words like "merry", "happy", "joy", "glee", "delight" are repeated constantly. "Pleasure" and "sweet" go together. The verse forms are the familiar ones of the jingle and nursery rhyme, which young children have a natural feeling for. The express simple simple ideas, fables involving talking animals etc. "Laughing Song" makes non-human objects behave as "people", a thing which young children themselves so often do.

But then, the "Songs" are not only for children, as they have a deeper level of significance, though crystal clear. The 'choir of Green' has the idea of passing time, the old age and, setting of the sun. The 'green' is no longer ~~echoing~~ but 'darkening' - surely having a thence 'weep' - a weeping epithet. In 'The little Black Boy' there is the reality of social injustice which found goes so far, well, ~~into the heart~~ ^{into the heart} of expression in the slave trade. "And be like him, and he will then love me". The image of discomf, feelings helplessness. ~~there is also~~ ^{there is also} ~~one shows~~ ^{one shows} that there is no disguising the serious import; the reality of ~~any~~ ^{any} ~~that~~ ^{that} ~~is~~ ^{is} ~~being~~ ^{being} placed in 'Songs of Innocence'. Of the ~~given~~ ^{given} ~~of~~ ^{of} ~~these~~ ^{these} ~~two~~ ^{two} ~~Songs~~ ^{Songs} "shows, as Blake's title page tells us, the ~~two~~ ^{two} ~~contrary~~ ^{contrary} states of the human soul." We cannot overlook the fact that in these 'Songs of Innocence' we have disturbing hints of Experience to come.

In the 'Songs of Experience' instead of finding innocence, joy, security, Blake finds guilt, misdeed, tyranny; the mood is one of disillusionment. The benign

guardians have disappeared, and in their place are the hyrcants.

"Happiness turns to grief and content to rebellion". The setting
lyric of 'piping down the valleys wild' changes in the
"introduction" of 'Songs & Exp' to the strict ominous and
emmanuating tones of "Hear the voice of the Bard!"

Who Present, Past & Future sees.

The poems songs seem smacking of rebellion. Some songs
boast the rhetoric of the orator that would seek to change
the way of the world. In 'Holy Thursday' there is the
insistent questioning of the injustice that is apparent
in the treatment of children.

Is that humbering cry a song?

Can it be a song of joy?

And so many children poor?

It is interesting that a land of poverty...
in the Songs of Experience we find evidence of open attacks on
the Church and the State, challenging the complacency of
the establishment. In the title 'Lamb' Blake uses a
more aggressive attitude, when he describes of the church-

god who neglects his duties at home in order to pray at
church. "Such usage in Heaven will never do well". This
nation occurs also in 'The Chimney Sweeper'.

In 'A Little Boy Lost' the priest robed in black, and set about
spinning with briars my joys & desires, is presented as
burning a child before the perplexed eyes of his parents.

In London again Blake is less gentle in his criticism of the
church. Again in poems 'Songs & Exp' we find Blake's vision of
the poet as a preacher, a prophet and a Bard, which is a synthesis
of him, too, as a poet of 18th. In the 'Introduction' Blake
mentions the poet as a messenger of God, who spreads the
message of universal salvation extending sympathy to the
sinner. The role of a Bard is totally assumed by the poet in
'Holy Thursday' and 'The Voice of the Ancient Bard'.

In 'Experience' all faiths vital energies
are poys, and death gives voice to her plight and says she is
a prisoner of jealousy, and appeals for help... The 'Schoolboy'
refers to buds being ripped, and the "blossoms, blown away
& "tender plants are stripped". Here Blake continues in
the anti-intellectual vein of W. Wordsworth in 'The
... the "lashed" ... it may be ... the ...

London

Church

London

Again the sick face is attacked by the invisible worm; And there are unnatural growths; the tombstones sprouting where flowers used to be; the Poison Tree and Tree of Mystery, both rooted to human brain. The spring, the summer, the daytime of Songs of Sun is replaced by "eternal winter" with darkness and howling storms around. The in the "Poppoey" the predominating image is that of binding, the earth is "chained in night" and frozen; "free love" is "bondage bond"; the priests "bind with briars"; the schoolboy is "imprisoned" like a bird in a cage; the infant with "swaddling-bands" and we hear the "munch-forged manacles". It seems to paint a series of ironic contrasts as compared to "Songs of Len".

In each set of paired poems Blake seems initially to provide a sense of well being and contentment. In each case, as in the first set, a hint of an underlying criticism but not enough to disturb completely the air of innocence & joy. In the 2nd stanza poem Blake's contentment is so vividly drawn that the first impression is unclouded and we see exposed the injuries meted out to the innocents. However this fact cannot be overlooked that there are certain poems in the "Songs of Experience" which are not characterized by disillusionment.

The little "Girl Lost" for example is fully happiness. For these a convenient name would be "Songs of Imagination". The "Songs of Exp" tell us of a conflict in the human soul between reason which attempts to crush the energies and imagination which attempts to free them. In the Intro "the Bard gives his message to men, and we find it again in "The Voice of the Ancient Bard" - that a new age of delight will dawn, if they will but listen to the imagination is the voice of God within them, and recognise the vital nature of their natural impulses.

As to the little boy that staves his father's plow and says that - his father's plow is the unpleasant thing that he has to do and a peculiar honesty which is particularly terrifying. Blake presents only the essential only, in fact, what can be presented and need not be explained."
 See to J. Hanney Barton, "He was setting down what a child had thought, setting it down as an exp. of human nature as he saw & had observed it".
 S.F. Bolt is of the opinion that "The problem of these

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songs lies in its naivety. This is not the simple naivety of
 childhood, the simplicity of incomplete experience, but to
 its origin in "no experience at all." The images of the
 songs of Sur are seen in a vision "within a moment, a
 Pulsation of the Artery." ~~Comparing~~ Making comparisons
 he says that "In WW, the individual observes cooperates,
 is expanding and at the same time contracting the
 implications of the actual situation which the poem
 presents. In contrast B's poem never leaves the strophic
 with which it opens & the reason for this is that the
 personality of the observer has been removed." He says
 that "simplicity of this kind means the absence of elements
 of individual exp." but he accepts that "this is simplicity
 of a rare order & has been carefully achieved." He is
 C. M. Bawa. "His subject is the child like vision; existence
 Blake doesn't write at a distance of time from memories
 of what childhood once was but remains insistent, present
 at the very center of it" between the child like
 experienced conceptions of reality. When he compared the