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Literature Review

Abstract

This literature review paper focusses on the subject of the role of dreams and the relationship between those dreams and hope. For this purpose three readings of different genres have been selected, to see what and how the three writers have expressed their dreams. The three pieces of literature under study are, a poem called 'The Chimney Sweeper' by William Blake, Martin Luther's speech 'I have a dream' and the speech by Abraham Lincoln, popularly known as the 'Gettysburg Address'.

'The Chimney Sweeper' by William Blake addresses the issue of child labor and the social oppression that a young eighteenth century chimney sweep went through. The poet was inspired by the movement and protests made at that time to safeguard the young chimney sweeps and felt deeply for their safety. We see the deep melancholy tone and imagery in the poem which expresses the poet's thoughts and dreams for the chimney sweep with great emphasis. Blake advocates for children's rights and tells the readers of the dangers involved for the children in the work of sweeping chimneys. The poem is a real account of the narrator, a young boy, who "Could scarcely cry 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!'" / So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep." (Blake, lines 3-4). The poet invokes pity through these lines, supported by the use of anecdote. The child is unable to form speech and speak so it was all the more unfair to put such young children into such a dangerous line of work.

The narrator in the poem is an experienced sweep, who encourages and consoles a new sweep Tom Dacre "who cried when his head/ That curled

like a lamb's back, was shaved" (Blake, lines 5-6), by saying " Hush Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare,/ You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair." (Blake, lines 7-8) The consolation given is that a shaven head is better than having hair filled with dirty soot stuck in the hair. The poet here tries to show the innocence of a child who remains so optimistic in an oppressive and hopeless situation and can see the silver lining in the cloud.

Further in the poem the child goes on to dream about an angel, " And by came an Angel who had a bright key,/ And he opened the coffins & set them free" (Blake, lines 13-14), who can set the chimney sweepers free from oppression. Here in the poem the dream is of liberation from oppression in the form of death. The dream of death is in contrast to the real death caused by working in the narrow black chimneys where death can be suffocating and horrifying. The narrator innocently dreams of a better life after death where, " Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,/ And wash in a river and shine in the Sun." (Blake, lines 15-16) The hope given is that life after death is a beautiful and happy one. Therefore, the poet expresses a dream of freedom and relief from the dirty job of sweeping chimneys.

However, it is strange to read that the angel tells Tom, " if he'd be a good boy,/ He'd have God as his father & never want joy." (Blake, lines 19-20) This raises a question in the reader's mind that is the angel telling Tom to be good in the sense of continuing working hard as a chimney sweeper and work quietly under the oppression of injustice.

What kind of hope is that if the chimney sweepers can't first be liberated from the black soot cleaning that they are forced to do while they live. The

innocence of the children is shown to be taken advantage of that they can be duped into believing anything. Blake shows this downside of innocence in the poem in the last lines of the poem where, “ Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;/ So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.” (Blake, lines 23-24) The poor child continues to do the disgusting and dreary work on a terribly cold morning, but based on the hope given to him he feels happy and warm inside. The poem reveals the physical and mental suffering both of the young boys. Their physical health is in danger by working in such inhumane conditions, and in addition to this they are mentally being encouraged to believe that once they finish their hard labor and “ do all their duty, they need not fear harm.” (Blake, line 24) But the irony is that they are working and living in very harmful conditions as chimney sweepers. The dream mentioned in the poem seems to relieve them from their misery, but it actually comforts them in a way so they continue in their misery and servitude in a happier manner. The dream endorses hope in the poem, but in reality one needs to take action to free the young boys from the blackness and harshness of the exploitation. This is what the poet proclaims through the poem.

It is full of dramatic irony in showing childhood innocence and horrors of exploiting children. Blake uses the device of contrast to show the folly of the children’s belief in the dream. While the narrator in the poem talks of the bright connotations of the dream, the bitter reality is that the child (narrator) is absolutely lonely. The angel comforts the child by saying that “ He’d have God for his father” (Blake, line 20), whereas in the very beginning when the child was very young, his own father abandoned him.

The other two readings are speeches and therefore different in form from the poem above. The two speeches 'I have a dream' by Martin Luther and 'Gettysburg Address' by Abraham Lincoln, were critical to the development and growth of the United States of America. Both address the oppression that the African-Americans underwent in America. Though the speeches were made at different times, the common goal of both the writers was to get equality for all. When Lincoln wrote the speech in 1863 the battle over states rights had finally reached its peak and he wrote the speech in order to encourage the troops. He opened the speech beautifully and in a poetic way by saying "Four score and seven years ago" (Lincoln, para. 1). It sounds more elegant than saying eighty-seven years. It was befitting to start with the number of years that United States had won freedom from Britain. In this powerful speech Lincoln reminds the citizens, of the foundation of liberty and equality on which the country was founded. But these very principles were now under attack and it was very important to inspire people to fight for their rights and values. By saying, "Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. (Lincoln, para. 2), Lincoln stated that the Civil War was actually testing the standards and principles of America's foundation. The speech not only inspires the Americans but also acknowledges the sacrifice of the soldiers who laid down their life with such valor and determination. According to Lincoln, nobody can consecrate the ground as well as the brave soldiers did, "The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract." (Lincoln, para. 3) and this shows the use of

hyperbole to emphasize on the fight the soldiers fought so bravely. There is alliteration also of “ poor power” in these lines which shows the eloquence and dexterity with which the speech has been prepared. Lincoln highlights on the fight of the soldiers and their actions as unforgettable in the speech by saying “ The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.” (Lincoln, para. 3). But Lincoln was ironically wrong here, because the speech has become so famous that nobody has forgotten it till this day nor will ever forget in the days to come. Similar to Blake, Lincoln also uses the device of contrast effectively by stating, “ those who here gave their lives that that nation might live” (Lincoln, lines 6-7) and shows the contrast between life and death. More examples of this contrast from the speech are “ the living” vs. “ honored dead”; and “ these dead shall not have died in vain” with “ this nation shall have a new birth of freedom”. This is an important contrast which speaks to the people with a lot of force and impact.

In the lines “ But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground.” (Lincoln, para. 3), the use of the word “ can not” three times in succession makes the delivery of the speech of a very powerful cadence and rhythm. Moreover the speech is full of inspirational words such as “ honored”, “ highly resolve”, “ noble”, “ great”, “ birth” and “ freedom”. These words not only inspire the people but effectively give them hope of a better future as well.

Lincoln’s speech not only inspires the soldiers and others, but also gives hope at a challenging time of war. It’s a hope of a new birth and freedom for the country, and an assurance also “ that government of the people, by the

people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” (Lincoln, para. 3) The aim of the President was to encourage people to preserve the country and live by the principles of equality set eighty-seven years ago. The Gettysburg Address allowed the people to see death in a new light, and an honorable way because the death of the soldiers was for a purpose. The soldiers didn’t die in vain and those who were living had the responsibility to complete the “unfinished work”. The address teaches loyalty to one’s country and stresses on the need for unity of the states. The speech ends with a call to action and leaves the audience with a powerful thought of serving their country. Lincoln’s speech tells the readers of a dream to unite the country, for everyone to live in equality and harmony, for the nation to prosper and have a better future.

Martin Luther’s speech “ I have a dream” also had the same purpose as Lincoln’s speech i. e. to end discrimination and give African-Americans the freedom and equality they rightly deserved. The speech was delivered in 1963 and had a massive impact on the audience as it provided hope to the depressed and oppressed African-Americans. The duration of the speech was seventeen minutes and in such a short time Martin Luther was able to tell people about racial equality and fairness. The scholars say that the speech is a masterpiece of rhetoric as it is supported by all the three rhetorical modes of ethos, pathos and logos. Through the speech Luther shows the pitiable condition of the Negroes, the truth about civil rights movement and the bright hope of the future. It was a clever move to start the speech with the miseries of the Negroes such as, “ crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination” (Luther, para. 3) so that it invoked

sympathy in the listeners. The aim was to make the people hate racism not the Negroes, so the metaphor rightly given by Luther was that “ racism was a “ dark and desolate valley” while racial justice a “ sunlit path.” and it was important to uplift the nation “ to the solid rock of brotherhood”. (Luther, para. 5)

Further on in the speech Luther expresses the dream that “ little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” (Luther, para. 18) This instills hope of equality, freedom and joy in the hearts of the Negroes.

The repetition of the phrase “ I have a dream” helps Luther to paint a picture of his vision and hope in the mind of the people. The statements made in the speech are optimistic and encourage the audience. When it is mentioned that racial equality can only be achieved until “ justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” (Luther, para. 9) an attack is made on those who enforced racism. Luther uses many literary devices in the speech, such as metaphors (“ jangling discord”), similes (“ as a joyous daybreak”), literary allusions (“ summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality.”) and device of contrasts to invoke sympathetic feelings, courage and the determination to fight for justice. All these devices aid in making the audience understand the ideas and bring them to a point of strong realization. Therefore, the speech became very popular and played a major role in bringing the changes in America when it was in the grip of racism and discrimination. It not only inspired the people then but continues to inspire people from generation to generation.

In all the three readings, by now we have seen that people were suffering from oppression and discrimination. The writers of all the readings write with a common purpose and aim to encourage the people and give them hope of a better future. Death is presented as honorable and purposeful. The writings also encourage people to stand up boldly for their rights and fight for justice. Equality, freedom, happiness and determination are the common ideas and concepts running through each of these. The writers express dreams, visions and hopes and in this way try to make the victims (chimney sweeps & African-Americans) feel better and hopeful of a better life ahead of them. The very mention of dreams and hopes brings joy and happiness in the hearts of the people, and helps them forget their pain. For instance, the Tom felt happy and warm working on a cold morning, after the dream. The dream brought about positive and productive changes in the people and their situations. Especially in America, the two speeches made a big difference in bringing change in the society at large.

Contrast and opposites create interest and energy, and draw the attention of the readers. It also helps in keeping the audience fully engaged and we see this being successfully fulfilled in all the three readings.

The three readings selected for this paper have effectively thrown light on the role of dreams and hope for a better future expressed by the writers. Positive dreams give a ray of hope to the people and bring about productive changes. The selected readings are all about positive realistic dreams and optimism, so essential for motivating and inspiring people, no matter what situation they are in.

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