

Compare the ways in which Blake and Atwood write about vulnerability essay sample...

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



Vulnerability is one of the key themes that is explored throughout Blake's poetry 'Songs of Innocence and of Experience' and Atwood's text 'The Handmaid's Tale'. However each author chooses to portray vulnerability through different means. Atwood emphasises on the vulnerability of women in a dystopian society whereas Blake focuses on the vulnerability of children and their transition from innocence to experience.

'The Chimney-Sweeper' from Song of Innocence demonstrates how adults exploit vulnerable young children. Similar to 'The Handmaid's Tale' this poem is written in the first person this allows the author to expose the characters' vulnerabilities through their personal thoughts and feelings. The narrator in 'The Chimney-Sweeper' is a child who has been sold into slavery. Through this poem Blake illustrates how vulnerable children are. The enjambment of "yet my tongue Could scarcely cry" demonstrates how the child was too young to speak for himself when he was sold; it shows how the child had to rely on his father to protect him, which he failed to do. The chimney sweepers lack any rights, "when his head... was shaved" the verb "shaved" in this sentence emphasises that the children are at the mercy of those in charge and this means that they are vulnerable to mistreatment. The use of a syndetic listing "Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack" gives the impression that there are many children that are vulnerable it also allows for a more personal perspective on the events. The use of the proper nouns also shows that the children are of a lower class as the names were common amongst that class when the poem was written.

The repetition on “ and” shows the childish narration of the poem. Religion plays a key part to allow for more exploitation. The narrator believes he sees an angel who promises them happiness after they die and upon waking Tom believes that as long as he does his duty he “ need not fear harm.” Through this it highlights the fact that Tom is mentally vulnerable to hallucinations and religion, which is particularly popular in the time the poem, was written. As Blake was not a traditional Christian this extract gives a possible insight into Blake’s personal views and that he felt that Religion made people vulnerable and made them believe things that were not true however he also gives the more positive view that it gives hope to people. It also shows how unhappiness can mean that a person is more vulnerable to the world. “ cold” and “ warm” are antonyms in the penultimate sentence of the poem this backs up how much the dream has affected his thoughts.

Connotations of colour are used as a linguistic technique to enhance the feelings of vulnerability. “ white” is used to connote to the fact that Tom and the other children were young, innocent and pure and therefore vulnerable in their inexperience. The colour is later contradicted by using “ black” this colour has negative connotations of death and also dirt it could demonstrate the fact that the children were once innocent but have been tainted by their experience. Blake then uses the colour “ green” to show how the world could change for the children; this colour connotes nature and lack of experience thus rebutting “ black.” Similarly Margaret Atwood uses colour in ‘ The Handmaid’s Tale. In ‘ The Handmaid’s Tale’ the colours are used in different ways however the meaning behind the colours remain the same. As well as

the previously mentioned colours the excerpt mentions "grey" which is used to reference to experience and that those who travel in those cars are usually more protected than the others.

'The Handmaid's Tale' also references to children in the extract. The simile "Like a child" could be an indication that the narrator is reverting back to a childlike mental state. This could be a mechanism for showing that effectively the narrator has the limits of a child in regards to protecting herself and her wish to be a child again because a child is supposed to be more protected she is. The adjective "cushioned" is further evidence to this point and how she wishes to be protected. "Breathing holes" could refer to the fact that she is now trapped similar to the "coffin" reference in 'The Chimney-Sweeper' both narrators are enslaved due to their society and therefore both share this vulnerability. The imperative sentence "Don't stop on the road" shows how women were exploited and restricted in a similar way to the chimney sweepers. The syndetic and asyndetic listing featured "with cushioned soles and breathing holes, and stars of fluorescent fabric" is to a certain extent monotonous this could show how she has succumbed to society and is therefore mentally vulnerable. The statement "avoid stepping on the cracks" could refer to her restrictive lifestyle. In effect she is not allowed to step out of line for fear of something bad happening this makes her a vulnerable character because she could be exploited due to fear. "Though I never ran at night... only beside well-frequented roads" illustrates that even prior to the Republic of Gilead women were vulnerable.

'The Handmaid's Tale' and 'The Chimney-Sweeper' also differ in the age of the narrators. 'The Chimney-Sweeper' is a young male child whereas 'The Handmaid's Tale' has an older female narrator yet the theme of vulnerability comes across in similar ways.

The poem "London" by Blake once more brings across the theme of vulnerability in the first person perspective, similar to "The Handmaid's Tale" this allows for a deeper comparison between the two. As with "The Chimney-Sweeper" the poem focuses on the loss of childhood and the vulnerability of large groups of people, whilst "The Chimney-Sweeper" and "The Handmaid's Tale" focus on the vulnerability of one type of people i. e. chimney sweepers in the former and women in the latter. "London" concerns various different people from soldiers to babies. In the last stanza of the poem it becomes clear in the extract "youthful harlot's" that the theme of the poem shows the difference between the innocence and experience. "infant's" in the next sentence further emphasises this idea and the contrast of "curse" and "tear" in the sentences shows how the innocent and experienced deal with negative factors in their life, the "curse" indicates an angry feeling towards the world whereas "tear" whilst negative as well denotes a more pathetic feeling and shows how the innocent are not used to what is occurring and despair at their loss of innocence.

In the first stanza the repetition of "chartered" is similar to the sentence "prayers well out from the machines and disappear again through the slot" from "The Handmaid's Tale" and they both imply the regulation of what is happening in society and how the exploitation is now mechanical and,

particularly in Atwood's writing, how people can easily be replaced. This is a contradiction to how both authors view the world and this is one similarity that both authors share and is used to accentuate the themes in their texts.

"Mind forged manacles" in the second stanza is a metaphor to show how the people of London are chained to their class and living conditions. "mind-forged" would indicate that they are mentally imprisoned this is similar to how the women are in Atwood's novel the fact that they cannot think or, as the extract shows in the declarative sentence "Even this meeting of eye holds danger" that they cannot even look at each other without being in danger Furthermore Blake uses the anaphora of "In every" to explain that everyone is vulnerable in this society and this can be related to Atwood's novel as everyone in that society is vulnerable in some way as they are all being exploited by the new society. The societies in each novel are bound to their class and are prohibited from doing anything that is not part of their duty and cannot do anything to make their lives easier. This prohibition is shown in the second stanza through the use of the verb "ban" it also represents how through this ban the people are vulnerable and their vulnerability may be exploited and they cannot do anything about it.

Both pieces of text have heavy religious connotations particularly allusions to the fact that the church is corrupt. In the extract from Atwood's novel the alliteration of "Soul Scrolls" as well as the capitalisation of the letters shows the importance of religion in this society which is seen as a positive thing within the upper levels of that society however those such as the handmaids consider it to be very corrupt similar to Blake's poem. For example he writes

“blackening church” using the church as symbolism to indicate a corrupt and damaged religion. This may also be perceived as Blake once again bringing across his views on the church and how it corrupts people. The verb “appals” following this quote is an ironic statement to show the contradiction of the church and how it is supposed to help and support people when really it does not. The church in “The Handmaid’s Tale” is the excuse the leaders of Gilead give for doing what they are doing however as what they are doing is considered morally wrong by the handmaids it would be suggested that the church is corrupt. It could be said that the church is why the women are so vulnerable in the novel because all that is happening to them is based from the bible just manipulated. “London” does not feature the church and religion as heavily as Atwood’s novel and “The Chimney-Sweeper” but it does not show the church in a good way when it does.

“the hapless soldier’s sigh” is an example of members of the society giving up because of the poverty that has hit them or everything they have seen in their lifetime. This is reflected in “The Handmaid’s Tale” extract when the two characters look at each other they are giving up the image that both of them are true to the society and revealing who they truly are to each other. The adjective “hapless” shows the soldier is incapable of doing anything to change what is happening to him and reflects the feeling of those in Gilead and they are vulnerable this way. The statement “And the hapless Soldier’s sigh/Runs in blood” from “London” could also hint towards suicide, a theme also explored in “Handmaid’s Tale”, this theme links to vulnerability as they are mentally vulnerable to the things that are happening to themselves and

are thinking of ways to escape through death. The enjambment “ and the hapless soldier’s sigh/ Runs in blood down palace walls” is an insinuation that the soldier’s blood is staining those who govern and that the soldier’s death was pointless and their fault.

The final stanza of “ London” focuses on the night and the sounds of what the narrator hears. The modifying adjective “ youthful” indicates that the harlot is young and most likely has been exploited by those around her and the fact that she curses would indicate experience in being exploited and could be her trying to cover her vulnerability by being offensive. “ Blasts” is a noun that implies that the harlot’s cursing is louder than the baby’s crying and that she is possibly cursing the baby for not coping with his vulnerability better. The verb “ plagues” is a negative expression that is used by the author to represent the fact that the harlot infects other people with negative feelings and ruins marriages. Both texts also use the structure of society to explain the vulnerability in each of the characters. The difference is that in “ London” the narrator is not affected by what is occurring they are merely describing what they see whereas in the novel the narrator is describing what she is experiencing therefore allowing a more descriptive view on the vulnerability of the character and how she cannot escape from it.

Both William Blake and Margaret Atwood have both used their own feelings and opinions on life to emphasise and exaggerate the plots of their poems and books, respectively. The common feature is that both contradict their opinions within their book to make the themes more suited. For example

Atwood reverses her opinion on feminism in "The Handmaid's Tale" to really show the vulnerability of women and how easy it is to take advantage of them." Similarly Blake uses religion in his poems to demonstrate how religion makes people more vulnerable, which makes them being exploited. Another common feature is that the vulnerability featured in the texts and the two poems is that the vulnerability is viewed negatively however in the second extract from Atwood's novel the vulnerability that the two characters show in revealing themselves ends positively therefore showing that vulnerability is not always a negative thing.