

Keats and Blake: romanticism, nature, and the poor



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William Blake's attitude about the poor in his poetry suggests that he is angry at his country, Britain, for allowing so many of its citizens, especially children, to be poor when it's supposed to be a wealthy global superpower. This is shown greatly through his poem Holy Thursday from Songs of Innocence and especially in its companion piece, Holy Thursday from Songs of Experience. (Greenblatt 56)

“ Is this a holy thing to see,

In a rich and fruitful land,

Babes reduced to misery,

Fed with cold usurous hand?”

Holy Thursday takes place in St. Paul's Cathedral where poor children from charity schools are attending Ascension Day services. In line 1, Blake asks if it's truly holy when the children are being exploited and the church is doing nothing about it. In lines 2 and 3, Blake attacks his supposedly rich nation for allowing its child inhabitants to be penniless and abused. Lastly, line 4 talks about charity schools, which took in poor children and gave them a proper education, only to spit most of them out and hand them over to brutal industries who made profits off of child labor and ultimately sent said children to an early grave. (“ Songs Of Experience – Holy Thursday”)

“ Is that trembling cry a song?

Can it be a song of joy?

And so many children poor?

It is a land of poverty!"

I believe the "trembling cry" Blake speaks of in line 5 is the hymns the child parishioners are singing, as Ascension Day is a major holiday in the Christian church. As such, I also believe Blake was, in line 6, asking his listeners to decide whether such singing could really be joyous, since hymnals are supposed to be a happy devotion to God, when, again, the church they're attending and even the God the kids are crying out to, who Blake seems to have been critical of in works such as "There is No Natural Religion", have allowed the children to live destitute and in squalor. The 8th line is Blake yet again attacking Britain's supposed wealth. (Greenblatt 56)

"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"

Blake does not literally mean that that, in British slums, it's always winter, no one sees the sun, the roads and walkways are filled with prickly vines, and those children amongst the poor who work for farmers have perpetually failed crops. Everything in the above stanza, save for line 10, is meant in a purely metaphorical sense, and yet, each line speaks volumes about British treatment of the poor. Line 9, "And their sun does never shine," means that even though it really does, poor children feel as if though the sun doesn't shine on them due to the absolute misery they endure each and every day. Line 10 may not be so metaphorical in sense, however. I believe it talks

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about the farmers some child laborers worked for taking all the crops the kids grew and in return giving them scant pay and no food to bring home to their families. Finally, line 11 speaks of thorns, which I feel represent the tremendous obstacles poor children face, while line 12 means that rather than their lives being rich, joyous, and carefree, feelings that represent “summer”, poor children live lives of constant sadness, which represents an “eternal state of winter”. (Greenblatt 56)

“ From where-e’er the sun does shine,

And where-e’er the rain does fall,

Babe can never hunger there,

Nor poverty the mind appall.”

In the last stanza, Blake says that children aren’t hungry or in poverty “where-e’er the sun does shine,” the “location” of which I’ve taken as Blake meaning the so-called high society. By this, he attacks the aristocracy with what I believe may be a small dose of sarcasm. (Greenblatt 56)

One major element of romanticism in the poem “Ode to Autumn” by Keats is the glorification of nature, which Keats uses abundantly. Each line provides vivid natural imagery, from “With fruit the vines that round the thatch eaves run;” in stanza 1 to “Spare the next swatch and all its twined flowers” in stanza 2 and finally to “The red-breast whistles from garden-croft;” in stanza 3. (Greenblatt 515) However, to relegate Autumn as simply “nature poetry” detracts from Keats’ ultimate meaning in writing Autumn. By focusing on a natural aspect, here the season of autumn, Keats is stimulating his listeners

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into deeper thinking. (Greenblatt 13) In the case of *Autumn*, I feel that Keats wants us to “think deeper” about the poem and conclude that it’s an allegory for the human condition. Another Romantic element in *Autumn* is imagination, which I feel the Romantics appreciated greatly. Keats uses imagination in the lines “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun; Conspiring with him how to load and bless.” when he speaks of the sun “conspiring” with autumn. He also brings out his imaginative side when he likens autumn to both a woman, most likely some sort of harvest goddess, and a gleaner in the second stanza.

(Greenblatt 515) The aforementioned harvest goddess is also a Romantic aspect all on her own. It’s clear that Greece influenced Keats greatly, as many of his works were written as odes, a Greek form of poetry, and many of his poems in our textbook deal with deities belonging to Grecian religions.

(Greenblatt 469-531) Therefore, I came to the conclusion that the woman is most likely the goddess of the harvest, Demeter, though she could very well be Ceres, the goddess of grain, as Keats mentioned her in *Lamia*. (Greenblatt 512) So, the element the goddess represents is belief in spirituality and the supernatural. (Greenblatt 17-19) The final Romantic element I believe *Autumn* encompasses is glorification of the ordinary. On a regular early autumn day, depending on where you live, you can go outside and see bees buzzing around flowers, fruit being picked by farmers, leaves changing colors, and birds flying through the skies. All of this seems perfectly normal to us, but to Keats, a true Romantic poet, it’s an absolutely glorious sight.

(Greenblatt 16)

Works Cited

Greenblatt, Stephen. *The Norton Anthology Of English Literature*. 9th ed., W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 3-27, 43-45, 46, 466-468, 512, 515.

“Songs Of Experience – Holy Thursday”. Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/william-blake-39/blakes-songs-innocence-experience>. Accessed 21 Sept 2018.