

William blake's abolitionism



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William Blake's Abolitionism" I know my Execution is not like Any Body Else I do not intend it should be so." William Blake is arguably one of the most eccentric and enigmatic artists of the Romantic era. His ideas about religion, art and society are often considered anachronistic. In general, Blake's vision is different from other Romantic era artists because of his lower-class background, his personal spirituality, and his interest in the visual arts. However, he does have similar opinions about the important issues of the time, especially concerning the French Revolution, abolitionism and the visionary imagination. In approaching Romantic literature with a global prospective, it is important to consider Blake's unique contribution and influence, as well as his divisions. His oeuvre converges in fundamental ways with the literary art and the limitations of his time, including views on gender and racial equality. In this paper, I will focus on his ideas concerning slavery and the unique ways in which he expresses his abolitionism through an investigation of his poetry and art. I will examine the presentation of slavery and abolitionism through a close-reading of the poems " The Little Black Boy", from Songs of Innocence, and " Visions", from Visions of the Daughter of Albion. The literary analysis will incorporate analysis about various works of art by Blake, including the illustrations of these poems. The two poems demonstrate, through their abolitionist message, the oppressive forces of conventional religion and British moral and social expectations, and that they have corrupted natural relations between human beings. I will exhibit that although his poetry is highly progressive for its day, it still relays the underlying belief of his time that women and racial others are inferior. Blake is successful in exposing the problems of the conventional religion of Britain, but his highly spiritual and mythological vision makes his message less

effective in causing any real change within society. Blake is worthy of academic attention and there is indeed an overwhelming amount of criticism on his works. I have learned a great deal from David Erdman's article "Blake's Vision of Slavery", which outlines abolitionism in *Visions*. Saree Makdisi indicates the necessity of reevaluating the history of the Romantic-era when considering Blake's works. Susan Fox also indicates Blake's anachronistic role within the era, but argues that he exhibits the limitations of his time in utilizing women as metaphors for failure in his works. Anne Mellor indicates the argument of *Visions*, in terms of the human form and Blake's spiritual beliefs, as a criticism of British morality for destroying the vitality of a true spiritual union. My analysis of abolitionism within the two poems will assert that Blake's portrayal of slavery is linked to his larger program of addressing the injustice and false spirituality of power relations in British society. "The Little Black Boy" indicates Blake's beliefs concerning the power of parents over children and racial inferiority, while *Visions* illustrates his ideas about gender equality and sexual relations. Despite his progressive opinions about equal relationships and abolitionism, Blake exhibits many of the divisions and limitations of his time. His greatest limitation is the complex mythological system that renders his artistic message politically ineffective. In the collection *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Blake explores and depicts an "age when God is fully manifest in man" and feels the spiritual and psychological comfort of God's protection and love (Matlak, 274). The poetry is highly profound in its promotion of an equal society based on love and freedom, not simply childlike naivety. This book of poetry, like many of his others, is illuminated with several works of art. Blake is unique in this practice because his artwork does not simply

serve as supplements to the verse; they amplify, complicate and, at times, contradict the poetry. This challenges notions of reading, interpreting and the relationship between the written and visual arts. His artwork is highly original, and often considered anachronistic, within the English artistic tradition. He chose to use uncommon mediums, notably relief etchings for producing his illuminated books of poetry. Blake also painted in watercolor, a medium which rejected the heavy and traditional method of using expensive oil paints. This medium creates artwork that emphasizes light, pure color and lightness, while also rejecting the orthodox artistic notions of the English Academy and encouraging all classes to produce artistic works. The poem “The Little Black Boy”, from Songs of Innocence, portrays the simple spirituality of a child who believes in God’s promise of love, while also indicating the spiritual equality of humanity. The boy sings of the lessons his mother has taught him about the perfect afterlife he will enjoy. In this heaven, he will experience pure joy, but also equality with the white English boy. This simply constructed, childlike verse holds many layers of meaning. The poem poignantly asserts the spiritual equality of all humans, alluding to the Christian argument against slavery of his time. “The Little Black Boy” indicates the spiritual dignity and equality of the boy, therefore, valorizes him. Blake does this in multiple ways, most importantly through the assertion of the religious belief in heaven as a utopia where everyone is equal. The boy is taught that when in heaven he will be released from the oppression and subjugation encoded in his black body, become equal with the white English boy and be loved by God. His spiritual education provides the basis for the boy’s hope, while also promoting the notion of the equal spiritual union in heaven. Blake also promotes the boy’s dignity by

referencing his mother and his education through her. The boy's loving relationship with his mother (lines 7, 21) illustrates his youth and innocence, but also portrays him as more human and endearing. The boy learns diligently and quickly from his mother, who represents the voice of age and wisdom. Blake emphasizes learning as a significant part of childhood throughout his iconography and artwork. The title page of *Songs of Innocence* portrays two children reading a book lying on a woman's lap, presumably their mother. The idyllic and bucolic scene indicates the spiritual growth of the children, which is in the hands of the older members of society. This illustration also exemplifies Blake's vision of positive womanhood as natural and motherly, which was initiated in *Songs of Innocence*. Mellor and Matlak describe this iconography, "In Blake's aesthetic world, the female is identified with nature, the physical body or matter, and the realm of the domestic. Blake's positive females give birth, raise children, and offer sexual delight and supportive compassion to Blake's males" (Matlak, 274). Another example of this scene of children learning is "Age Teaching Youth", which portrays two children learning from an older figure through reading and verbal instruction. These two works illustrate the poem's message that learning as an integral aspect of childhood and that children learn from the adults around them. The construction of the figures is similar to the second illustration of "The Little Black Boy". Both compositions portray an adult figure sitting and addressing the small children at their feet. This construction emphasizes the authority of the adults, but also the eagerness and attentiveness of the children. They are willing to accept the ideas of the words of the adults. Blake's promotion of the boy's equality in "The Little Black Boy" has many complications and problems. Most importantly, the

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boy's resignation to earthly subjugation and racism, as a result of his acquired belief in conventional religion, is problematic because of it is an acceptance of racial discrimination on earth and indicates that there is no need for real social change. The poem focuses on God's light and heat, symbolizing Divine love, using the racial images of blackness and shadows. The third stanza portrays this clearly, " And we are put on earth a little space, / That we may learn to bear the beams of love, / And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face / Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove" (lines 13-16). Blake indicates the boy's spiritual goodness, along the same racial lines, by associating his soul with whiteness; " And I am black, but O! my soul is white" (line 2). This imagery exhibits the common tendency of Blake's time to associate physical darkness with intellectual depravity. Blake argues against the discrimination the boy suffers on earth, claiming that he will experience a spiritual union with God in the afterlife, where all humans are equal. This vision is highly problematic because despite Blake's efforts to promote the equality of the little boy, the subjugation he experiences on earth seems to be justified or appeased by the idyllic vision of future equality in heaven. The boy resigns himself to the subjugation he experiences on earth as a result of his mother's teachings. He believes in his corporeal inferiority, as it is taught to him, stating in lines three and four, " White as an angel is the English child: / But I am black as if bereav'd of light". The boy focuses on the afterlife and hopes for a union with God, believing that he will be loved then. The last lines of the poem state, " To lean in joy upon our fathers knee. / And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair, / And be like him and he will then love me" (lines 26-28). Note the use of the word " then" to emphasize that he is not loved by God in this life. Blake presents a

complicated argument for racial equality that seems to appease the injustice experienced on earth. By illustrating the boy's belief and hope for the afterlife, Blake indicates the oppressiveness of conventional religion. English Christianity colludes in the subjugation of the boy, through the mother's instruction, to accept his inferiority on earth. Indeed, Blake presents the oppressive morality and society institution of the conventional religion, but also the adult's role in continuing the oppression through the education of the youth and promotion of the conventional ideas. The second illustration to "The Little Black Boy" illustrates this in a subtle, but important way. The Christ-like figure's garment looks like stone. The heavy, flat and severe cloak is associated with Blake's iconography with rationality and conventional religion. Another important message of the illustration is the use of light, an important motif throughout the poem. The sun is a prominent part of the composition's background, but does not give off a great deal of light. In fact, the sun seems to be setting, as darkness creeps into the picture field. This seems to suggest a limitation in the heat and light of God portrayed in the poem, contrasting with the optimism of the verse. Finally, the composition portrays black boy standing behind the white child, who actually touches the God figure. This important placement, along with the fading sun, indicates the subordination of the black boy even in the afterlife. This is not explicitly explained within the composition, but one possible explanation is the oppressiveness of conventional religion. "The Little Black Boy" indicates some of the limitations of Blake's time concerning race and racial equality. Although Blake compellingly illustrates the spiritual equality of the afterlife, this is inherently limited because it seems to offer a justification or acquiescence to the racial injustices of English society, including the slave

trade and slavery. The vision of an equalized spiritual utopia, and the criticism of conventional English religion, eclipses the abolitionist message of the poem. In representing this vision and the maladies of organized religion, Blake portrays his mystical view of human relations; they are ideally mutual spiritual relationships, while social standards and customs create unnatural power relationships that are oppressive and damaging. In "The Little Black Boy" this is demonstrated through the control that white, English society have over black populations, the influence that the mother has over her child which causes him to believe he is inferior and, finally, the conventional God who dominates over the children in the second illustration. Blake's important poem, *Visions*, also demonstrates his ideas about power relations and unnatural relationships. This poem describes Oothoon's victimization by Bromion's rape, and Theotormon's belief that she is defiled and unacceptable, despite his love for her. Oothoon is enslaved by her condition as an exploited woman, while Bromion is trapped by his violent act, and Theotormon by the social constructions he abides by. The poem begins, "Enslav'd, the Daughters of Albion weep a trembling lamentation", immediately connecting slavery with the subjugation of women in English society. This is influenced from Mary Wollstonecraft's argument in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* that women in England have the same political and civil status as slaves. *Visions* complexly portrays the repercussions of society and religion's warped control over human interactions, addressing several different power relations, including the dominance of men over women, master over slave and organized religion over society. David Erdman states, "...love and slavery prove to be the two poles of the poem's axis" (Erdman, 242). This poem promotes a more equal

treatment of women by indicating Oothoon's sadness and extreme despair. She grieves, " Are both alike: a night of sighs, a morning of fresh tears" (Plate 2, line 39). Her exploitation is obviously condemned in an interesting way because this oppression connects her to horrors of the institution of slavery, including sexual abuse and emotional despair. Blake presents quasi-feminist and abolitionist arguments against the sexual and economic exploitation of humans, because it distorts freedom and natural relationships. Institutionalized subjugation and enslavement does not simply destroy the victimized, such as Oothoon, but the entire society because it warps all human interactions. Bromion becomes enslaved by his violent act, while Theotormon is enslaved by his jealousy and inability to love Oothoon after she has been defiled. He is trapped by the standards of conventional religion and morality, specifically the notions of marriage. The frontpiece to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* serves as a dramatic visual representation of the poem's portrayal of mental and physical bondage. Oothoon is shackled to Bromion, facing opposite directions from one another. Bromion faces out towards the sea with a look of horror, while Oothoon directs herself towards Theotormon, bending downwards in despair and resignation. Lukacher states that, " her jealous and inhibited lover cowers and withdraws into himself on the cavernous ledge about the enchained figures" (105). Theotormon's body language indicates his self-entrapment and despair because the social restrictions he believes in prohibit him from being with the woman he loves. This composition utilizes Michelangelo-esque nudes and opposing body languages to contain and reduce the complex drama of the poem. The landscape also conveys the bleak tone of the literary work. The entrance to the grotto frames the figures and the background including a

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bleak sea, clouds and a darkened sun. Visions clearly argues against the subjugation of women and the institutions that promote economic and physical exploitation on human beings, most significantly slavery and marriage. Blake promotes, instead, love as a equal spiritual and physical union. This notion of free love rejects the standards of Christian marriage in England, promoting an equal union between man and woman. The composition, Circle of the Lustful, exemplifies this notion well. This illustration portrays Virgil standing over the fainted Dante. Dante envisions his Paolo and Francesca released from purgatory and re-united together in the luminous orb. A whirling vortex of punished lovers rushes out of the river of purgatory. Blake liberates the lovers, freeing them from the sin that society condemns them for. The figures are mostly androgynous, indicating Blake's vision of the ideal human form as containing both the male and female genders. This composition promotes free love, asserting the goodness of spiritual love, while also overturning Dante's tradition that imposes strict moral and sexual codes on society. Blake's work, like Visions and Circle of the Lustful, deals with subjugation and exploitation as distortions of power and human relations. Blake condemned those who abused and exploited others through the misuse of power. His portrayals of this exploitation prompted Saree Makdisi to promote the reevaluation of his time. A specific example of Blake's condemnation of the powerful is The Ghost of a Flea, a composition that portrays the profane spirit of this powerful man as a reptile-like creature. The comet indicates a supernatural event and the dramatic, stage-like setting emphasize the evilness of this creature. Although this composition is a specific condemnation of English industrialists, it demonstrates Blake's view of the powerful that exploit and

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subject the rest of society. Blake's mythological vision asserts their impending punishment. *Visions* condemns the mental and physical bondage promoted by the institutions of slavery and marriage. The poem is not, however, highly effective in promoting any real change. In a similar manner as "The Little Black Boy", *Visions* addresses too many issues to be efficacious in directly promoting the feminism of Mary Wollstonecraft or the abolitionist cause. The poem is also rendered ineffective because the definition of slavery is blurred and turned into a multifarious term that applies any lack of freedom. In fact, the poem seems to deal more with spiritual and mental enslavement than with the political and economic practices of the slave trade and slavery. Blake concerns himself most greatly with the condemnation of the sexual limitations and moral codes of conventional religion. Susan Fox claims that Blake's feminist agenda in *Visions* is ineffective because Oothoon lacks real assertiveness. "No woman in any Blake poem has both the will and the power to initiate her own salvation - not even the strongest and most independent of his women, Oothoon" (Fox, 513). Blake presents gender and sexuality in a similar way as many artists of his time; although he promotes the dignity and worth of women, the representation ultimately affirms feminine inferiority and lack of agency. *Visions'* large and far-reaching messages about slavery, power relations, sexuality and religion addresses many issue in a liberal and progressive way, but these multifarious and complex issues render the poem unable to directly confront any one issue to prompting real change. Blake is most successful in directly promoting abolitionism through the illustrations of actual events and atrocities of the slave trade, such as *A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs to the Gallows*. These etchings are politically subversive in a

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direct and real sense, because they specifically address the institution of slavery's violation of human dignity. These images are clear criticisms of the atrocities committed by the slave trade, calling for real political action. These illustrations, however, are very simple artistic constructions that portray one figure's suffering, asserting their humanity and dignity. Although they are not artistically complex or important, they do serve to directly promote the abolitionist cause during his time. In conclusion, abolitionism is not the main concern of "The Little Black Boy" or Visions. Slavery is the starting point of the poems, which is used to condemn the abuse of power and conventional religion. The other social ills addressed in the poems, such as gender and racial inequality, are similarly presented as aspects of the larger spiritual program. Although these aspects are highly progressive in promoting human equality, they include the underlying belief of racial and gender inferiority, common throughout the Romantic era. Blake's overarching concern for his poetry and artistic illustrations is the portrayal of ideal mystical vision of natural, vital and equal human relationships. Makdisi states, "Blake must be seen to be trying to rescue against all odds the possibility of a political aesthetic of immortal joy, which we can understand as an affirmation of joyous unity and collective freedom. This amounts to a refusal of the very logic of domination, of warrior power over others" (Makdisi, *The Impossible History*, 258). The spiritual attention distinguishes the theme of slavery in Blake's poetry from direct and bold abolitionist poetry of the Romantic era, such as the works by Hannah More and Ann Yearsley. "The Little Black Boy" and Visions are concerned with promoting the esoteric mythological vision, not with the instigation of real social change. The mystical investigation of bondage and slavery in these poems offers interesting artistic portrayals of

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