

Romanticism and the process of life



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The mystery of the ceaseless nature of life and death has baffled thinkers, great and small, for millennia. Hundreds of years passed with nothing except speculation to interpret your place in the world, but the spread of the Enlightenment and the idea of scientific reasoning brought a new wave of assumptions to Europe. Men and women started using reason in order to make sense of the world around them.

This led to the delegitimizing of what came to encompass the Romantic movement; observation of nature, the sublime, and individual expression; among others. These poets wished to bring back an emphasis on the more indescribable and mysterious aspects of life. Thought and emotion guided their documented experiences, especially when it came to the interpretation of life and death. Although Blake, Shelley, and Keats each discuss the process of aging and resulting death, Blake believes it to be a necessary aspect of nature while Shelley and Keats view it as burdensome.

Blake represents the first generation of Romantic poets, who ardently stressed a harmonious relationship between man and nature. The most visible example of this association lies in the collection *Songs of Innocence*, wherein Blake considers the brightest side of humanity, meaning before the Biblical fall of man. This includes the process of aging and eventual death as, in a perfect relationship between man and nature, growing older is accepted and as much a part of life as the changing of the seasons. No one fights against it or looks with jealousy upon those younger than them. For example, in *Echoing Green*, a group of children play while the older men and women watch them nostalgically; these elders laugh away care as they look on, but do not reference any feelings of wanting to go back or hold anything against

the children, themselves. They recognize that youth must fade (Blake, *Echoing Green* 10-14).

Another aspect of a perfect correlation between man and nature is the joy that comes along with the birth of new life. In *Infant Joy*, a mother welcomes her child into the world and asks the newborn what she shall be called. The infant replies, I happy am,/ Joy is my name. The mother blesses her child and sings her to sleep, wishing that Sweet joy befall thee! Both poems exhibit instances in which life, at all stages, is cherished and exalted (Blake, *Infant Joy* 4-12). No worry or sadness exists over the prospect of having to grow old or to bring forth another mouth to feed. Men, women, and children accept their place within the natural order and even celebrate it.

Conversely, *Songs of Experience*, emphasizes the fallen, corrupted aspects of human nature, including the reluctance to accept aging. The subjects of *Songs of Experience* find themselves to be jealous and hostile towards those who still have their youth. *Nurse's Song*, especially, references ill feelings that the nurse has for the children in her care. Watching the children play on the green triggers a flood of childhood memories for the nurse, causing her face to turn green and pale. She longs for what the children have, youth and the opportunity that it brings.

However, the nurse knows that it has already passed her and resents the children for what she cannot have. This is seen through her scolding of their childish ways, Your spring & your day, are wasted in play/ And your winter and night in disguise. Her reprimanding not only exhibits a reluctance to age, but also a kind of resentment towards those forces that caused her to grow

old (Blake, Nurser's Song 1-8). Life, in Songs of Experience, is not revered, but despised. Children are shackled and taught to ignore the inherent freedom of their nature while families fear the idea of new life, as it means a new mouth to feed. For example, in Infant Sorrow, an infant enters the world crying and struggling to a family that does not want her. The parents view the child as a burden on them, a person they will have to support into adulthood (Blake, Infant Sorrow 1-8). The happiness that resulted from the birth of the newborn in Infant Joy, does not appear in this particular poem. It is obvious that the stages of life are not to be celebrated in a world that has been corrupted by man.

The two separate collections, Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience exist in order to illustrate the contrast between a pre and post-Biblical fall world. From that point of view, Blake's own thoughts on inequality and the perception of aging shine through. Blake recognizes that the world consists of imperfect people trying to live in correlation with nature, despite their tendency towards folly. Blake, himself, believes in an acceptance of the natural order, including the processes of aging, and acts as a sort of prophet. He tells the youth, and all those reading his poetry, to listen to his words, as many ...wish to lead others when they should be led (Blake, The Voice of the Ancient Bard 11). The two collections represent the perfect versus the realistic. Blake asserts that the world should be as is described in Songs of Innocence, but Songs of Experience shows that to be false. Humans do not act in accordance with God and nature. They fight against their steady aging and look with disdain upon those who are farther away from dying than they.

While Blake considers this mindset to be a byproduct of humanity's corrupted nature, Shelley views aging through the lens of Songs of Experience, burdensome and almost torturous. In *To a Skylark*, Shelley struggles to encapsulate the immortality of the bird's song in comparison to the doomed mortality of his, and mankind's, own. Shelley structured the piece to mimic a prayer. The opening line reads, *Hail to thee, blithe spirit!* and follows with a praise of the skylark's ability to sing such a heavenly song. The speaker then details the fact that the bird's song is not tainted as the poet's because it cannot comprehend the pains that accompany human existence. The skylark is not conscience of its own being, let alone its own mortality. Therefore, its song is pure, unaltered, and continuous. In contrast, a man understands the fact that he will die one day and is deeply troubled by his own consciousness. Man's poetry, even that concerning a happy subject, brims with the knowledge of his own death:

We look before and after,

And pine for what is not:

Our sincerest laughter

With some pain is fraught;

Our sweetest songs tell of saddest thought (Shelley, *To a Skylark* 86-90).

The speaker continues by asking the skylark to allow him to sing in a similar way, so that *The world should listen then, as I am listening now* (Shelley, *To a Skylark* 105). Unlike Blake, Shelley never explicitly references the aging process, but he discusses the prospect of death, itself. Instead of advocating an acceptance of death and its place in the natural order, as Blake does, Shelley questions the consciousness of man. Treating the understanding of

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aging and death as a curse, he details how a man's poetry could never match that of a bird's due to his own comprehension of his impending mortality. He ponders the depth of the knowledge of the skylark, believing that perhaps the bird is cognizant of more than humans. Thou of death must deem/ Things more true and deep/ Than we mortals dream (Shelley, To a Skylark 81-84). Therefore, Shelley claims that the burden of the human existence is not the process of aging and death, but the knowledge of its inevitability. As a fellow member of the second generation of Romantic poets, Keats also views the natural order as taxing and questions his own cognizance.

Keats's poetry more explicitly references death, as he contracted tuberculosis at a young age. Like Shelley, Keats regards recognition of one's own mortality as true death. In Ode to a Nightingale, he stresses how much he longs for ... a draught of vintage, hoping to numb his ability to contemplate the greater purpose of life. Keats states that he wants to be left alone with the nightingale to ... fade away into the forest dim. He hopes to dissolve into the night with the bird, forgetting all knowledge he has of his own impending death. Keats describes the pains and sorrows of the human experience that have escaped the nightingale, as it cannot recognize its own misery (Keats, Ode to a Nightingale 11-20). Both Shelley and Keats look to nature, specifically birds, as representative of the freedom which alludes all of humanity. Doomed to feel and interpret all the sadness life entails, especially death, the poets long to be as the nightingale or the skylark, ignorant of their own precarious nature. Because the birds are not able to foresee their own deaths, their song reaches an immortal significance. The

poet's voice and message may change, but a bird's song remains the same from generation to generation. Keats illustrates this when he tells the nightingale, Thou was not born for death, immortal Bird! (Keats, Ode to a Nightingale 71). Aging may be apart of the natural cycle of life, but the knowledge of such a sequence is a significant burden, according to Shelley and Keats.

Blake emphasizes the necessity of accepting one's position in life, whether that be a young child or an elderly person. In a pre-Biblical fall, i. e. perfect, society, man and nature should have a harmonious relationship in which humans respect and work within the context of the natural order. This obviously is not actually the case in the outside world. Blake observes that men try to control nature and force it to bend to their whims, proudly thinking it will kneel to them. They feel jealousy and hostility towards those that have the things they once did, such as youth. The world described in Songs of Experience is one that Shelley and Keats try to make sense of. The two poets detail their consciousness of aging and death as burdensome and almost unnecessary. They do not advertise living within the natural order, but instead represent exactly what Blake was arguing against, not accepting your age as part of the everchanging and continuous circle of life.