

Choice and freedom of the human spirit



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. William Blake, in line with his standing as a Romantic and being both politically and ideologically a libertarian, can be seen in his 'Songs of Innocence' to express his views as to the superlative value of the freedom of the human spirit, by presenting a Utopia where individuals are free of oppression, institutionalized religion, and corrupt governmental authorities. Although, Blake can be seen in his 'Songs of Innocence' not only to present the importance of the freedom of the human spirit but of his ideas surrounding innocence, the relationship of humans with nature and protesting the abuse of children, too, as part of his conception of an idealized world.

Blake, much like other Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, held children in high esteem due to their innocence, their freedom of the soul and of the imagination: this depiction of children being one way in which Blake champions the freedom of the human spirit within his 'Songs of Innocence'. In linking imagery of the natural world with that of children, Blake demonstrates his ideas as to the freedom of the human spirit within children in line with his values as a Romantic of the sublimity and freedom within the pastoral world.

In 'The Ecchoing Green', a harmony between children and nature can be seen as the children play 'sports' 'on the Ecchoing Green', with the color symbolism of 'green' hinting to nature as a whole rather than just one specific place, and the setting of the poem taking place in 'Spring' mirroring the youth of the children themselves, the positive lexical field throughout the poem such as the use of the words 'merry' and 'happy' giving the overall sense that Blake regards both children and the pastoral world in high regard.

Blake can be seen to further compare the freedom and innocence of children with that of nature in 'Holy Thursday' through the simile where children can be seen to walk into St Paul's Cathedral 'like Thames waters flow', and too in 'The Lamb' where the child narrator says to a lamb 'I a child, and thou a lamb,/We are called by His name', the use of the collective pronoun 'we' drawing a comparison in the minds of the reader between the lamb, an often religious symbol for innocence and purity, and the child.

As a social and political protest text, throughout 'The Songs of Innocence' Blake can be seen to juxtapose the freedom of the human spirit, particularly that of children, with the oppression and suppression faced by children in 18th century England, making the poems a form of criticism against child slavery and the corrupt education system of that time. Moreover, Blake frequently presents innocence as a form of freedom against constraints and self-consciousness leaving those with innocence, such as children, full of trust for those around them, placing them in a state of corruptible fragility and painting innocence as not wholly desirable, as such as state leaves the individual ignorant of the realities of the postlapsarian world and the possibility of future betrayal and exploitation. The vulnerability of innocence can be seen in 'The Little Boy Lost' as the boy is left alone and unprotected due to the obvious lack of concern for his care by his father, as 'no father was there' for the boy's guidance, the description of the setting being that 'the night was dark' alluding to the boy's lack of experience and his vulnerability to exploitation because of his innocence. Blake can be seen to further criticize the exploitation of children in 'The Chimney Sweeper' as he describes how the slavery of children as chimney sweepers keeps them

restricted from freedom: the image of ‘coffins’ works as a metaphor for the restrictions of the children and the way they have had their livelihoods taken away from them by the corrupting influence of those in power; the depiction of the children sleeping in ‘soot’ criticizes not only the poor living conditions of the chimney sweepers but perhaps too the attempt of others to oppress them beyond resistance but the ultimate freedom of their spirit as the narrator later goes on to say ‘that the soot cannot spoil your white hair’, lending to the ultimate freedom and goodness at the core of their existence.

In his ‘Songs of Innocence’, Blake can be seen to criticize racial prejudices, holding the belief that in the eyes of God all races are equal and that the physical body is nothing more than a vessel for the metaphysical soul, which is far superior to the body itself. In this way, Blake can be seen to present the view of the soul, or human spirit, as having ultimate freedom whilst the body lends to restriction, and especially in case of racial minorities, suppression of the individual. In ‘The Little Black Boy’, Blake uses the color imagery of black and white to present the black child’s purity and goodness of soul by describing it as ‘white’, putting him on a level of equality with white children; moreover, Blake goes against the views of his contemporaries in a clear form of social protest as he employs the imagery of God’s love being in the form of sunbeams, leading to the accepting of God’s love making the individual become ‘sunburnt’, meaning that black children such as the narrator of the poem are more receptive than others of God’s love. Blake’s views on Christianity are crucial in analyzing his ‘Songs of Innocence’ as a social and political protest text, as during these poems he can be seen to illustrate his views as to the corruption of institutionalized

religion and the teachings of contemporary Christianity during the Enlightenment period which taught people to accept present suffering and injustice due to the promise of bliss and the lack of suffering in the afterlife, along with the stressed idea of the 'fall' and the 'fallen' person who commits sin as a result of their ultimate freedom and the previous sins of Adam and Eve. This idea can be shown in 'The Chimney Sweeper' as the narrator (and too the other chimney sweeps) is presented as being an innocent, good Christian boy who is encouraged to accept his position of oppression, with the promise that 'if all do their duty, they need not fear harm', through which Blake can be seen to clearly criticize the view that those in positions of powerlessness and oppression should accept their mistreatment for there will be equality in the next world, an idea which a Marxist critique would point out as being another way for those higher up the power hierarchy to enforce their laborers, such as the chimney sweeps, to accept their dehumanization as means of production in order to profit the bourgeoisie. Blake, therefore, can be seen to champion the ultimate freedom of the human spirit and attack the way in which institutionalized religion and the ruling classes of the 18th century attempt to oppress and suppress the freedom of the individual.

In his 'Songs of Innocence', Blake can be seen to champion the freedom of the human spirit, closely relating the innocence and goodness of children with pastoral imagery in order to demonstrate the overwhelmingly good freedom of the individual, along with using imagery of binding and restrictions in order to show how the human spirit is often suppressed by corrupt institutions and those in power, which he attacks through presenting

these as an evil and destructive force which corrupts the sublime utopia laid out in his ' Songs of Innocence'.