The regeneration of innocence essay

ESSAY ONE: THE REGENERATION OF INNOCENCE: WILLIAM BLAKE'S SONGS AS A PARADIGM FOR UNDERSTANDING THE SPIRITUALITY IN LITERATURE

 In literary theory, scholars endeavor to categorize periods, authors and works by attributing a title or name to the movement that each may represent. Often, these categorizations are overlapping, vague, or irrelevant to the message these authors have tried to convey. Nevertheless, our organization of names, dates, and places aid in the study of literature, and make literature more accessible. I will argue, however, that literature can often be better understood and categorized according to the spiritual state authors depict within their writing. If the reader understands how the author is asserting to see the world, then one can understand the motivations of the author without falling victim to the intentional fallacy.

It is not the intention of this thesis to redefine the limits of categorization; rather, it is my intent to offer a new mechanism by which we may understand the spirituality of literature. In 1789, William Blake first etched the " Innocence" series in what would later be his most definitive work, " Songs of Innocence and of Experience. " The subtitle declares the purpose of the work – to show " the contrary states of the human soul" (Erdman 7). William Blake discovered what I will argue is the best way to understand human action – through the lens of the human soul. In order to demonstrate how an understanding of the states of Innocence and Experience can lead to a better understanding of the spirituality of literature, I will first examine the two states and explain how each function, and relate to one another. I will then demonstrate how the states operate in a specified context.

As a case study, I will examine the poetry of Emily Dickinson and demonstrate how her works correlate to Blake’s theory of contrary states. I choose Dickinson in order to show the far reaching implications of this mechanism; for, Dickinson is an author outside of Blake’s tradition. It is reasonable to assume Dickinson would have had no influence from William Blake in the writing of her work. “ The Songs of Innocence and of Experience” are poems that portray a world of bitter absolutes and liberating truths simultaneously. Katelin Trowbridge describes the poems as “ the discord between inherent human passions and society’s artificial proprieties” (139). The first series, the “ Songs of Innocence,” begins with a pastoral image of a shepherd and a child interacting: Piping down the valleys wild Piping songs of pleasant glee On a cloud I saw a child, And he laughing said to me .

. . (Erdman 7). As the series progresses, the pastoral image becomes Blake’s theme. The child at the first of “ Innocence” encapsulates the substance of the true meaning of Innocence; that is blind joy and untainted knowledge. Harold Bloom says of the poem in his book Blake’s Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument: The Introduction, “ Piping down the valleys wild,” is a poem of immediate knowledge, and evidently celebrates a kind of unsought natural harmony.

The pure reactions of the child to the piper are those of the spirit as yet undivided against itself, free of self-consciousness. The child has not sundered itself to self-realization, and his natural world shares the same unity, as the little poem, A Dream, indicates (39). Bloom goes on to describe this theme as a “ primal oneness” between the human and nature (39).

Thus, the innocence of the child is an innocence born out of an ignorance of reality; I will call this type of innocence “ primal innocence. ” Another example that epitomizes the notion of primal innocence is “ The Chimney Sweeper,” found later in the Innocence series.

In this poem, Blake captures the primal innocence of children by writing the poem through the persona of a chimney sweep. Yet, the overtones of a vituperative criticism of societies disregard for the well-being of children are evident. Observe the opening stanza: When my mother died I was very young, And my father sold me while yet my tongue Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep. So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep (Erdman 10).

In stanza three, one of the children has a vision of his friends in “ coffins of black,” but the children are welcomed into heaven and an angel tells the child “ if he’d be a good boy, / He’d have God for his father & never want joy” (10). The poem concludes with what I would argue is the boldest statement of primal innocence: And so Tom awoke and we rose in the dark And got with our bags & our brushes to work. Tho’ the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm, So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm (11). Duty is always a Urizenic emblem, binding joy and liberation with fetters of the mind.

This bondage is further explicated by Bloom, who draws a parallel between the chimneys and the “ black coffins” mentioned in the poem: The black coffins are at once confining chimneys and the black ragged forms of the sweeps, in the death of the body which has become their life. The Angel’s promise is the loving fatherhood of God which, with the loving motherhood of

Nature, is one of the prime postulates of Innocence (43). The persona of the poem, hence, is sadly unaware of the dim reality of death. To the child, death carries with it not a ceasing of existence, but rather a promise of a better existence.

In the “ Experience” series, the eyes of primal innocence are opened to the ugliness of the world. Dennis Welch describes Experience as a world of “ love fettered [. . .

] involve[ing] distortions of … imaginative love” (242).

One may better understand the difference between Innocence and Experience by analyzing the difference between the poems which have been coupled by title in the two texts. In order to further understand this dialectic, we will examine the Innocence version and Experience version of the “ Nurse’s Song. ” In the Nurses’ Songs, Blake employs much of the same diction in both. Thus, examining where the texts deviate from one another and determining the reasons behind this differentiation offer the reader explication of the opposing states. In the following example, the texts of Innocence and Experience are identical in the first two lines; the final two lines of the stanzas are, I would argue, diametric oppositions: 5 Then come home my children, the sun is gone down and the dews of night arise 7 your spring & your day, are wasted in play 8 and your winter and night in disguise [Experience Version] (Erdman 23). The nurse of Experience proclaims that the children’s days are wasted in futility and born out of an ignorance of reality.

In Innocence no such proclamation is made: 7 “ Come come leave off play, and let us away 8 Till the morning appears in the skies [Innocence Version] (Erdman 15). Here, the nurse simply asks the children to “ leave off play until tomorrow. ” The nurse of Innocence shows no disapproval of the children’s play. Harold Bloom describes the Innocence poem as an example of “ delicate premonitions of the sundered state” (47).

He elaborates on the poem’s significance: Here the poem’s meaning is in the implied time-to-be, when the voices of children are no longer heard on the green, and the heart ceases to rest in their laughter (47). Bloom then makes an astute observation that introduces us to a second form of innocence, he states: To become as little children is not always to remain children, and to find knowledge of delight we need to discover sorrow (47). Contradictory to traditional Blakean scholarship, I argue that Innocence is a double-sided coin. Primal Innocence is the innate state of innocence experienced by untainted individuals. What I will call Regenerated Innocence (Robert Gleckner calls it “ Higher Innocence” and Blake calls it “ Four-fold Vision”) is Innocence maintained in the face of Experience.

The nurse in the Innocence version is the epitome of this state of the soul. Experience, thus, is the state between Primal and Regenerated Innocence. Therefore, Experience is not characterized by the presence of reality, but rather the absence of understanding. As to my analysis at hand, I would argue the Nurse’s Song in Experience is best understood by noting the absence of text at its conclusion.

The passages quoted above from Experience (lines 5-8) are the final lines of the poem. After the nurse tells the children how their play is wasted, the poem ends (quite abruptly); whereas, the Nurse’s song of Innocence continues: 9 “ No, no let us play, for it is yet day 10 And we cannot go to sleep; 11 Besides in the sky, the little birds fly 12 and the hills are all covered with sheep. ” 13 “ Well well go & play till the light fades away 4 And then go home to bed. ” 15 The little ones leaped & shouted & laughed 16 and all the hills echoed (Erdman 15). When the children protest to having to go inside, the nurse of Innocence allows them to play, but in Experience the children do not question the authority of their nurse. Poetically (and metaphorically) note the “ convenient” similarities between the diction of the children and nurse of Innocence (e.

g. “ Come come,” “ No, No,” and “ Well well”). This similarity seems to equate the voices of children with the nurse; whereas, in Experience the voices of the children are never heard. In fact, the “ laughing” of the children are never heard in Experience. In Innocence, the “ laughing” children are “ heard on the hill” (line 2), but in Experience the “ whisperings” of the children are “ heard in the dale.

” Please note the diametric opposition of these two lines. Here, Blake uses demography as a metaphor for spiritual enlightenment and purity. The children of innocence are on the hill – open, high and free. The children of Experience are in the dale – low, closed, and almost imprisoned. The nurses’ reactions to the children establish touchstones for how Experience and Innocence react to one another. The children of the Experience poem are not

plagued with experience, they are in fact examples of Primal Innocence; thus, the nurses are reacting to the presence of innocence.

In the Innocence version there is an immediate assimilation to the children's Innocence by their nurse – indeed the nurse is as innocent as those for whom she cares: 1 When the voices of children are heard on the green 2 and laughing is heard on the hill, 3 My heart is at rest within my breast 4 and everything else is still [Innocence Version] (Erdman 15). The difference exists in the type of Innocence; the nurse here is an example of Regenerated Innocence. Note the similar diction of the poems, but the ardent contradiction of the Experience poem with the values held by Innocence: 1 When the voices of children are heard on the green 2 And whisperings are in the dale: 3 The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind, 4 My face turns green and pale [Experience Version] (Erdman 23). The difference between Innocence and Experience, therefore, is not the ignorance of reality as opposed to the understanding of it.

The state of Regenerated Innocence acknowledges the presence of malevolent things without becoming corrupted by them. Just as Innocence is multifaceted, however, Experience is also a state defined by degrees. The notion that Innocence and Experience are more of a process than product is not foreign to Blakean critics. Robert Gleckner says in his article " Point of View and Context in Blake's Songs:" The series as a whole might be stated as a kind of progression: from the states of innocence and experience to the " Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience," to each individual song within the series, to the symbols within each song, to the words that give the symbols their existence 535).

If we assume Experience is like a spiral with Regenerated Innocence at its top and Primal Innocence at its core, we can observe the varying degrees of Experience as sequential rungs on the spiral. Blakean scholar, Jean Hagstrum, describes this dissent: Experience is blighted Innocence. It is not a period of horrible but healthy probation, a purgatory we must inevitably traverse en route to the heavenly kingdom (529). Just below Regenerated Innocence is the state of Experience Blake calls “ Beulah. The word “ Beulah” according to Northrop Frye in his work Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake is “ derived from Isaiah which means ‘ married,’ and is used to describe the relation of a land to its people” (50).

Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant define Beulah as a “ three-fold sexual paradise” (293). Frye better explains the term correlating this “ three-fold” vision as a “ father, mother and child” (50). Just as parents can understand the needs of their child, those within this realm of Experience understand the facets of Innocence but cannot subscribe to the truth of its precepts. Below Beulah is the state of Experience Blake titles “ Generation. ” In the Experience poem, “ To Tizrah,” Blake makes the first use of the term: Whate’er is Born of Mortal Birth, Must be consumed with the Earth To rise from Generation free; Then what have I to do with thee (Erdman 30).

Generation is a world of absolute truths etched in black and white. Frye defines this state as “ the ordinary world we live in, a double world of subject and object, of organism and environment” (49). In this state of Experience the individual is bound by self-imposed rules and limitations – n “ London” (from “ Songs of Experience”) Blake names these limitations “ mind-forged manacles” (Erdman27): In every cry of every Man, In every Infant’s cry of

fear, In every voice, in every ban, The mind-forg’d manacles I hear (27). The bottom rung of Experience is a frightening place Blake calls “ Ulro. ” Ulro, according to Johnson and Grant, is a “ single vision of barren physicality or isolated subjectivity” (293).

Blake elaborates on this state in his epic poem “ Milton:” But the Fourth State is dreadful: it is named [Ulro]: The First State is in the Head, the Second is in the Heart: The Third in the Loins & Seminal Vessels & the Fourth In the Stomach & Intestines terrible, deadly, unutterable. And he whose Gates are opened in those Regions of his Body Can from those Gates view all these wondrous Imaginations (Erdman 134). In an article entitled “ Blake’s Treatment of the Archetype,” Northrop Frye describes the singularity of the state of Ulro: Everywhere in the human world we find that the Ulro distinction between the singular and plural has broken down. The real form of human society is the body of one man; the flock of sheep is the body of one lamb; the garden is the body of one tree, the so called tree of life. . .

.] [A] great principle of Ulro is the principle of hierarchy of degree which produces the great chain of being. [. .

.] There is nothing in Ulro corresponding to the identity of the individual and the total form in the unfallen one. But natural religion, being a parody of real religion, often develops a set of individual symbols corresponding to the lamb, the tree of life, the glowing stone, and the rest (518). Hence, Ulro is a state of single-mindedness. The individual in this most debased state of Experience is unable to understand anything except oneself. Whereas Regenerated Innocence is self-less – Ulro is selfish and self-absorbed.

Each of these three states: Ulro, Generation, and Beulah, comprise the substance of Experience. This complex system of categorization acts as a paradigm of human existence. Since works of literature are the accounts of human existence, it is my argument that literature can be understood in light of these states. Just as the reader can identify the nurse of Experience as being one who resides in the single-mindedness of Ulro, readers can identify what state of the soul is at work in any literature.

To illustrate this statement I will examine the life and work of Emily Dickinson and explain how the state of her soul is manifested within the lines of her poetry. As a young girl in Amherst, Massachusetts, Emily Dickinson was surrounded by those of faith. Her family was of the Puritan tradition, and her father was a staunch Calvinist Puritan who according to Emily was “ pure and terrible” (Foerster np). Edward Dickinson was a lawyer and the treasurer of Amherst College. According to an article from the Cambridge History of English and American Literature, Norman Foerster says of Emily’s relationship with Edward: Her affection for him was so largely compounded with awe that in a sense they were strangers (np).

Her awe of her father led her down similar paths. But, unlike her father, her faith began to taper and skew later in her life. The presence of her faith, and moreover, the state of her soul, dominates many of her poems. I will argue that her poetry presents the reader with some insight into her pursuit of Regenerated Innocence, and furthermore, the lack of her discovery. This pursuit can be followed by assuming there are three mind-sets in her writing. There is an undeniable Christian mind-set, an agnostic mind-set, and ultimately an atheist mind-set.

The Christian mind-set of her poetry is finite and infrequent. Norman Foerster declares that her insight into “ the mind and the soul” is the “ insight […] of a latter-day Puritan completely divorced from the outward stir of life, retiring, by preference, deeper and deeper within” (np). An example of Dickinson’s innocent faith in a life after death is her poem “ Death is a Dialogue between The Spirit and the Dust.

In this poem she asserts that despite the “ Overcoat of Clay” the spirit has “ another Trust” (Johnson, Thomas 456). Moreover, in “ Because I could not stop for Death -” Dickinson states that after her death she makes progress past “ the school, where children strove,” past “ the Fields of Gazing Grain” even past “ the setting sun” (350). This poem culminates in her realization that the “ Horses’ Heads were toward Eternity” (350). This poem was written in 1863, just one year before (in 1862) she wrote a poem stating “ This World is not Conclusion” (243). In this poem she decrees that life in the hereafter is “ Invisible, as Music-/ But positive, as Sound” (243).

The poem climaxes at its end where she declares, “ Strong Hallelujahs roll-/ Narcotics cannot still the Tooth/ That nibbles at the soul-” (243). Indeed, her relationship with God is resolute within these poems. Her poetry asserts a certainty of things to come. This mind-set implies a sense of Primal Innocence.

This truth is encapsulated most clearly in a poem she wrote in 1860, “ Some keep the Sabbath going to Church-” (153). In this poem she says of her relationship with God that: God preaches, a noted Clergyman- And the sermon is never long So instead of getting to Heaven, at last- I’m going, all

along (Johnson, Thomas 153). This very religious mind-set and absolute faith becomes very self-contradictory as she writes from a second mind-set of agnosticism. As one reads more into her poetry, Emily Dickinson appears to become apathetic to notions of faith. Her desire to find God in her life apparently brings her no results. As Jacob Mueller, of the University of Illinois at Chicago states: Despite a longing for a secure faith, Dickinson was nevertheless unable to make a profession of faith (np).

The poetry written with this mind-set is more touching, yet more repressed. The reader can glean sentiments of disappointment and hurt within the confines of this mind-set. For example, the poem " I reason, Earth is short-" epitomizes this notion of uncertainty, an uncertainty that was before absent in the face of absolute faith. A sense of Experience is implied within the lines of this poetry. Note the following lines from the poem: I reason, Earth is short- And Anguish- absolute- And many hurt, but, what of that? I reason, we could die- The best Vitality Cannot excel Decay, But, what of that? I reason that in Heaven- Somehow, it will be even- Some new Equation, given- But, what of that (McMichael 1034)? In this poem, her desire for Innocence and spirituality is hindered by dualistic reasoning – an hallmark of the state of Generation. This notion of desire for Innocence and the attendant emotion of failure and disappointment is reiterated in her widely anthologized " I never lost as much but twice.

" In this short analysis of her pursuit, she declares: Twice have I stood a beggar Before the door of God! Angels- twice descending reimbursed my store- Burglar! Banker- Father! I am poor once more (1027). The preceding poem can be easily compared with a poem written significantly later, " My

life closed twice before its close. ” This poem further explicates her feelings of agnosticism (and bitter Experience), yet as opposed to the final mind-set in her poetry, this poem still possesses quite a bit of hope in the face of uncertainty: My life closed twice before its close: It yet remains to see If immortality unveil A third event to me. So huge, so hopeless to conceive As these that twice befell. Parting is all we know of heaven. And all we need of hell (1056).

Within the lines of this poem and others akin to it, we see Dickinson as one who has experienced the pursuit of her hopes, but revels in the knowing not — instead of in the knowing. This kernel of understanding is explained best in an article by Michael Myers: In a sense she redefined the meaning of deprivation because being denied something–whether it was faith, love, literary recognition, or some other desire– provided a sharper, more intense understanding than she would have experienced had she achieved what she wanted: “ heaven,” she wrote, “ is what I cannot reach! This line, along with many others, such as “ Water, is taught by thirst” and “ Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne’er succeed,” suggest just how persistently she saw deprivation as a way of sensitizing herself to the value of what she was missing. For Dickinson hopeful expectation was always more satisfying than achieving a golden moment (np). Dickinson has an unquenchable desire to know the thoughts of God and re-attain her childhood Innocence. Her mind-set in regard to her spirituality becomes an urgent appeal to God for his revelation, and often the reader is presented with the results of her asking. In the following poem, she parallels the reality of the world with the pseudo-reality of the spiritual realm.

She admits she “ never spoke with God” and she “ never visited Heaven” but her certainty surrounding the existence of a higher power ordaining the actions of men is undeniable: I never saw a Moor- I never saw the Sea- Yet know I how the Heather looks And what a Billow be. I never spoke with God Nor visited in Heaven- Yet certain am I of the spot As if the Checks were given (Johnson, Thomas 480). The certainty of this higher power’s existence begins to wane as she is continually refused confirmation of her suspicions. This waning often drives her into the final mind-set present in her poetry – the atheist mind-set. The atheism of her poetry acts as an antithesis to some of her other notions toward God and the importance of embracing those things which are not seen. The Bible defines faith as “ the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11: 1).

Dickinson, in a letter to her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson, states “ faith is doubt” (Walker np). In many of the poems that characterize this phase of her writing there are overriding themes of morbidity, sadness, and a notion that life is meaningless and empty. Interestingly, these poems are the most widely anthologized and most famous poems of Emily Dickinson. When she discovers an absence of God, her writing excels in a way that was before unknown. The images become crisp and clear; whereas, other poems are categorically idealistic and sentimental.

This atheist mind-set at work in her poems displays many of the characteristics of Experience. In the poem “ I heard a fly buzz when I died,” after explaining to the reader that she was at the point of death, and she had willed away that “ portion of [herself that] be assignable” she states that: There interposed a Fly-With blue- uncertain stumbling Buzz- between the

light- and me- And then the Windows failed-and then I could not see to see (McMichael 1041). The fly, a symbol of rot and death, stood in between herself and the light of regenerated innocence. Then as her eyes shut that anticipated light was absent.

She discovers in this poem that there is no more to life than mortal existence allows – literally, nothing followed her death. This discovery is the theme of many of her poems that bear hardness toward the uncertainty of what she before thought to be certain (e. g. he existence of God), and the unwanted certainty of that which bears sadness within her heart: Innocence is beyond her grasp. This focus on the self and her self-imposed isolation are clear indications of a state of Ulro. This notion is articulated best in her poem " I died for Beauty – but was scarce.

" In this poem she discusses a conversation she had with another soul who had died in the adjoining tomb. She says of her conversation in the conclusion of the poem: And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night- We talked between the Rooms- Until the Moss had reached our lips- And covered up – our names – (Johnson, Thomas 216). Indeed if we analyze the poetry of Emily Dickinson through the guise of these arbitrary divisions of spiritual mind-sets, the thoughts of Dickinson become clearer, and the often obscure reclusive poet is understood better in light of the state of her soul. The poems of her Christian mind-set are born out of a blind necessity and Primal Innocence. Rebelling against the axioms of her childhood, the agnostic mind-set demonstrates an uncertainty in the things of God and delineates her spirituality into a dualistic show of Generation.

These poems act as a segue into her ultimate dive into the heart of Experience, Ulro. This reading of her opus is at once illuminating to the reader who may have misunderstood this complex voice in the American Literary Tradition and allows the poetry of Dickinson to be categorized according to her spiritual state. Any spiritual reading of a work of literature will be subjective. In spite of this fact, the analysis of spirituality in light of Blake's Innocence and Experience and their attendant sub-states yields an understanding of the work's spiritual message. The reader can utilize this mechanism in addition to all other classifications and categorizations in order to make literature more accessible.

The spirituality of literature, therefore, can become another coherent facet in determining what the author is attempting to say. William Blake's " Songs of Innocence and of Experience" acts as a touchstone for this type of analysis. Within the simple songs of both series there are spiritual truths that can transform our ignorance into understanding. Bibliography Abbott, Collamer M. " Dickinson's Because I Could Not Stop for Death. " The Explicator.

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