

The fall of man in pastoral paradises



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The motif of the fall of man is quite often used in poems and prose alike. More specifically, William Blake uses the motif of the fall of man in his poem *The Book of Thel* as well as in his poem *The Shepherd*. Blake, in this case, uses this motif in some of his poems to incite different feelings through allusions to Adam and Eve. *The Book of Thel* presents to us a world very close to Adam and Eve's, a pastoral paradise in which man and nature are bonded in a form of mystical unity. Thel is able to speak to the nature around her, and gain knowledge of the world, much like Eve gained knowledge after eating the forbidden fruit. This world, although seemingly perfect, traps Thel and is a catalyst for her limitation of herself. Much like *The Book of Thel*, *The Shepherd* presents a pastoral paradise as well, in which there is a Shepherd (an allusion to God) watching over his sheep (God's people). Creating a contrast with Thel's situation, though, Blake presents this world as one in which the sheep, or people, are given free choice and independence because of their knowledge of God watching over them, an effect of the fall of man. In using this motif of the fall of man, Blake both critiques the way in which people limit themselves based on different aspects of life (such as mortality) that are an effect of the Fall, and praises the independence that people have based on the Fall and the consequent independence from God.

The Book of Thel uses the motif of the fall of man to suggest a critique of the way in which people limit themselves and their experiences based, firstly by bringing together the religious and the secular. The first sign of this motif resides in the pastoral paradise in which Thel is living; this paradise mimics the Garden of Eden which Adam and Eve inhabited. Secondly, Thel's innocence and lack of experience are what most closely resemble Adam and

Eve's own relationship with the world around them. Thel wonders aloud, "... why fades the lotus of the water?" (Blake, pg. 45). Her innocence parallels Adam and Eve's, yet unlike Eve's, Thel's fears are eventually what cause her to limit herself, thereby critiquing the way in which the fall of man influences some people. Thel is conveyed as fearing that no one " shall find [her] place" when she dies and that " when [she] complain[s], no one hears [her] voice" (Blake, pg. 45). Blake presents these complaints as normal, especially after the affect God that had on humans after the Fall. It is only when Thel goes to her own grave site, and flees after she hears a voice, that we consider the limits that Thel has put upon herself (Blake, pg. 49). Rather than seeing past mortality, she runs to it. Furthermore, she is said to have " Fled back unhindered till she came into the vales of Har," implying that she is once again hindered (possibly by her own devices) in Har (Blake, 49). In presenting this scene, which is coupled with the allusions to the story of Adam and Eve, Blake depicts the motif of the fall of man as a critique of the limitations that some put on themselves, in fear of God's wrath. In the same way that Adam and Eve fell from God, Thel too falls from grace in continually limiting and questioning herself.

Moreover, Blake combines allusions to religion with mystical allusions to nature to show the way in which earthly mortality becomes akin to a prison for some. In *The Book of Thel*, the unity between man and nature before the allusion to death and the broken bond seems to mimic the theme of the fall of man almost exactly. Blake depicts the Clouds, Lilies, and Clay as helping Thel in her quest to gain knowledge of mortality and of her purpose; her innocence allows her to gain the trust of nature around her, bringing to mind

the unity that Eve had with nature. It is only once she gains knowledge and learns of death that she falls from God—or perhaps from the world’s—good graces, recalling the fall of man after Eve’s having gained knowledge. We can see in the poem that God’s punishments for Eve and Thel, and the fall of man as a motif, relate to the larger question of whether God has created a mortal prison for some or has instead created the joy of life. Blake seems to think the latter, and Blake is apparently critiquing the prison that people make for themselves. In his poetry, he uses religion, nature, and imagination to convey this stance. When Thel fears that no one would notice her gone, the Cloud assures her that when he passes away, “ It is to tenfold life, to love, to peace, and raptures holy,” to which Thel immediately responds that she is “ not like thee” (Blake, 47). In saying this, Thel begins to break the bonds between herself and nature—or, rather, between herself and life—in a manner that recalls Eve’s disruption when she gained knowledge of the apple, deceit, the Devil, and life. Thel uses her own questions about life, which parallel Eve’s questioning, to imprison herself—much as others do because of questions of their own mortality. It is only at the end, though, that Blake’s critiques come forth. “ Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction?” Blake inquires, through “ the voice of sorrow” (Blake, 49). Here, Blake asks why people are incapable of forgetting about their own mortality, why they must question everything and limit themselves based on it. He seems to arrive at this critique of humans based on their fear of God’s wrath, and conveys his sentiments through alluding to the fall of man, among other things.

The motif of the fall of man is used more subtly in the poem *The Shepherd*; rather than alluding to the pain that separation from God causes, Blake chooses to explore the positive side of the Fall, showing God's punishment as a blessing rather than a curse. Although God's punishment due to the fall of man is often looked on as a curse, Blake seems to be explaining here that the penchant to be good to others and not sin comes from our knowledge of God's ever-present power. "He is watchful while they are in peace, / For they know when their Shepherd is nigh," Blake says of the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd (Blake, pg. 2). Although this line appear to suggest that the shepherd is only watchful when the sheep are in peace, it could also convey a different meaning entirely. Since the sheep know when their "Shepherd is nigh," Blake seems to be suggesting that the sheep are peaceful (read: well-behaved) whenever their Shepherd—God—is near. If God is ever-present and omnipotent, they are assumed to always be impelled to be good. Rather than God forcing his people to be good citizens and follow his word, he gives them the choice to do so, although under the assumption that God is always watching and will punish them if necessary. Blake highlights this blessing of God's influence by noting that God's tongue is constantly "filled with praise" (Blake, 2). Not only does Blake say that people are compelled to be good because of the Fall, but he also says that they are rewarded in doing so.

The Shepherd begs the question of whether Blake is conveying that people feel forced to do good, or whether they are willingly compelled to do good because of God's influence. Blake seems to think the latter, that God has given people free will, and that they are only slightly coerced. To articulate

this idea, Blake juxtaposes the fall of man motif with the idea that God follows his people, rather than forcing them to follow him. “ How sweet the Shepherd’s sweet lot! / From the morn to the evening he strays,” Blake says of God and his people—here symbolized as a Shepherd and his sheep, respectively (Blake, pg. 2). Rather than depicting God as the force which governs his people to follow him, Blake suggests that God is the one who follows his people. This concept is the exact opposite of what the Bible says about his relationship with humans. Blake seems to say that the fall of man allowed people to have independence from God, rather than limiting their freedom of choice. God’s praise comes from his being a follower. In being “ watchful” of his sheep when he “ follow[s] his sheep all the day,” he is able to see the good that his people do for him (Blake, pg. 2). Beyond this independence is also a love of God that Blake shows through the effect of the fall of man. To this end, Blake writes that, “ He is watchful while they are in peace, / For they know when their Shepherd is nigh” (Blake, pg. 2). Although the poem suggests, in part, that the “ sheep” are compelled to be peaceful and do good for others, it also seems to suggest a reading which means that “ He is watchful when they are in peace because they know when their shepherd is near.” Because God is always present and always watching, the sheep rely on their shepherd for peacefulness. Rather than the fall of man being a complete punishment, people are eased by the knowledge that God is watching, allowing free choice, and praising them. People rely on God to bring them peace, and to compel them to be peaceful as well, Blake suggests. The fall, then, is shown to be a blessing once more.

Blake presents two similar worlds, both pastoral paradises, yet very different in the outcome of the peoples' actions inside of them. Thel's world is one in which nature and man's unity is broken by her knowledge of death, and by her subsequent limitations on herself. The Shepherd's world, though, presents conditions in which the sheep are given free choice and the ability to freely do good in the world because of God's influence, rather than because they are forced to do good. In looking at these two poems, and their implications, we can raise the question of whether Blake is correct in both senses. Are people limited because of their fear of death and God's wrath, as well as sometimes compelled to do good because of his teachings? Perhaps both conceptions are true, in which case we are given a more accurate view of life instead.