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William Blake’s “Songs of Innocence and Experience”: A Close Reading on Religion

William Blake’s “Songs of Innocence” and “Songs of Experience” are so very alike and yet so extremely different; Blake brings to life in one instance the innocence of childhood and then in another takes it away with the experiences of life that one must endure as they enter adulthood. Some of William Blake’s poems have been known to portray a child that lives in such poor or terrible circumstances that the child is forced to adjust immediately from innocence to experience. In observing Blake’s “Songs of Innocence and Experience”, I notice that he put a large emphasis on the relationship between religion—as it were—and children, or childhood. This is because Blake viewed priests and kings as tyrannical oppressors who exploited the poor, repressed sexuality, and stifled art. Also because of this, Blake did not agree with the upbringing of children in the church. However, in all of that Blake had very profound religious beliefs as well. It was reported that as a child Blake had several “visions”; these “visions” however, did not stop when he became an adult, they continued into his adulthood as well. I will explicate two of Blake’s most controversial poems; one of which comes from Blake’s “Songs of Innocence”, and the other, from “Songs of Experience”. The main theme will be religion. I will discuss the tone, content, context, and overall meaning of these poems.

“The Lamb” from William Blake’s “Songs of Innocence” is the first poem I will discuss. First the name stands out to us. Religiously Jesus is known as the Lamb of God so obviously there is a strong reference to Jesus. Also the term “lamb” is symbolic of innocence, purity, and ultimately sacrifice. Therefore, we can infer that Blake is talking about a child brought to sacrifice, or a lamb brought to the slaughter. As far as religion goes it seems that Jesus–born a child and then sacrificed for our sins—is the lamb that Blake is referring to. However, using the term “lamb”, Blake could also be referring to a child who is brought into this world and then loses its innocence and pure view of the world simply because of life. I believe Blake meant for the Lamb and the child to be equal in meaning and significance. Blake begins with the first stanza, “Little Lamb, who made thee? / Dost thou know who made thee? / Gave thee life and bid thee feed, / by the stream and o’er the mead; / Gave thee clothing of delight, / softest clothing wooly bright; / gave thee such a tender voice, / making all the vales rejoice! / Little Lamb who made thee? / dost thou know who made thee?” (909). The first two lines in the first stanza repeat and then again are repeated in the last two lines of this stanza. The emphasis here is the rhetorical question of: “Little Lamb, who made thee? / dost thou know who made thee?” Blake also gives us quite a bit of imagery with the sixth line: “Softest clothing wooly bright”. This could be a reference to the purity found only in a child or “lamb” as Blake would have it. The clothing of the lamb is still bright and white; which is a color of purity too. Then, in the second stanza the tone is changed to, “Little Lamb I’ll tell thee! / Little Lamb I’ll tell thee! / he is called by thy name, / for he calls himself a Lamb: / He is meek and he is mild, / he became a little child: / I a child and thou a lamb, / We are called by his name. / Little Lamb God bless thee. / Little Lamb God bless thee.” (909). There is a transition between stanza one and two in the tone, the wording, and the punctuation. The first stanza questions who made the little lamb, and the second stanza comes to a conclusion about who *did* make the little lamb. With the seventh line of the second stanza; we realize Blake is proposing this poem through the point of view of a child. The child is our speaker; this only makes sense, after all how could an adult speak of such things when they are no longer innocent to the ways of life? The speaker in the second stanza comes to the conclusion that Jesus is the maker of the little lamb saying that “He is called by thy name / for he calls himself a Lamb:” In the fourth line of the second stanza the term “Lamb” is capitalized; it is here that we know that the child is talking about Jesus as a Lamb and that he—the child—may very well be a lamb too. Already the child is going through the transition from innocence to experience. He is realizing a sad truth that comes with every human life; there will be sacrifices along the way. He is realizing that soon life for him will no longer be an easy task. Blake had a very realistic idea of the world around him at this time. I do not believe William Blake meant for this to be a happy, joyous, or innocent poem to say in the least.

In contrast with “The Lamb” William Blake wrote “The Tyger”. The only reason Blake spelled tiger with a “y” was because in his era grammar and spelling were no big deal. Therefore the spelling of the title has no real significance. However, a tiger is a great way to contrast a lamb; the lamb is to eventually be eaten by the tiger. In the poem of “The Tyger” the first stanza begins, “Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright / in the forests of the night, / what immortal hand or eye / could frame thy fearful symmetry?” (913). By now we know that Blake is referring to an immortal creator and it is creating something fearful; this either being an actual tiger, or symbolic of something else. We must then determine that God is the Immortal Creator. The second stanza continues, “In what distant deeps and skies / burnt the fire of thine eyes? / On what wings dare he aspire? / what the hand dare seize the fire?” (913). Now we are beginning to see more imagery with fire, like in line two and four of the second stanza. With line four asking, “what hand dare seize the fire?” With this kind of imagery and language Blake may want us to infer that the created thing is Satan; in line four Blake could be referring to the casting into hell of Lucifer. Stanza three continues with: “And what shoulder, and what art, / Could twist the sinews of thy heart? / and when the heart began to beat, / what dread hand? And what dread feet?” (913). This gives us a vague description of Satan after he was cast into hell. “What the hammer? What the chain? / In what furnace was thy brain? / What the anvil? What dread grasp / dare its deadly terrors clasp?” (913). “When the stars threw down their spears, / and watered the heaven with their tears, / did he smile to see his work? / did he who made the Lamb make thee?” (913). Stanza five brings the Lamb back into play. Continuing to ask a question; however, this time the speaker is asking if what made the fearful beast also make the innocent “Lamb” again capitalizing the “L”. Therefore we know the speaker is referring to Jesus. In stanza five the Fall of Man has happened. The question arises “Did he smile to see his work?” The “he” in this line is a reference to Satan possibly when he tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. I do not believe “he” was God because then the following line, “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” We now know that God is the Creator. The huge irony here is that the Lamb of God and the Anti-Christ come from the same Source, only they both chose different paths. Blake ends with the sixth stanza, “Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright / In the forests of the night, / What immortal hand or eye / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?” (913). The last line of stanza six is different from the last line of the first stanza in the way that the first word is different. This also changes the tone of the poem. The speaker goes from a tone of shock and curiosity, to a tone of confidence and slight arrogance. At the beginning of the poem the speaker sounds as if he isn’t sure who could have made such a beast as this tiger, then he almost implies that God is the Creator of the tiger as well as the Lamb. Blake gives Satan a lot of credit, for his disobedience and power. However in the last line he still hails God as the only God. Since it is implied that God is the Creator of this beast; He is still of higher stature than the “tyger”.

Ultimately these are two very different poems. “The Lamb” is made to sound sweet and innocent, but when you think about it, it is really a horrible realization of what some children experience in childhood. The tone that Blake gave the poem, however, is not the meaning. Blake did this intentionally; The “Songs of Innocence” poems that Blake wrote sounded so innocent because the speakers were all children. However, each poem--when read carefully--presents a terrible outcome for each child speaker. This is meant to catch us by surprise and allow us to see the truth in the world we live in. “The Tyger” on the other hand sounds scary and devious, which is how it is meant to sound. There is no innocence found in this poem, it is a poem of experience. However, these poems have at least one similarity and that is the truth that Blake wants us to see is not fully evident. The reader may know what Blake means, but it is difficult to put into words, or fully understand it.

William Blake had a very realistic idea of how the world worked, and that can sometimes borderline with pessimism. However, there is a lot of hard, undeniable truth in his poems. These two poems are a perfect example of how Blake perceived the world around him. Blake believed his poems could be better read by a child; this is because Blake knew that adults had often times been blinded by their experiences. Either way, his poems have definitely challenged me to think, and observe; to question, and take action!

Works Cited

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