

William Blake: A Not So Hopeless Romantic

Within its introduction, the Romantic Era is considered to be “at least as complex and diverse as any other period in British literature history” (Greenblatt 3). As a whole, romantic literature involved an idealistic, even fantastical view of the world. Writers were considered “professional imaginers” (4) and created seemingly simplistic stories which shared deep and complex emotions. Oftentimes, these poems and stories evoked tones of empathy, sentimentality, and wonder, expressing sincere appreciation for the natural world. Additionally, the speakers of these works sought peace in their interactions with others. At the same time, a dichotomy exists in the form of rejection— a dismissal in regard to the societal standards of the time. Above all, Romantics valued the freedom of expression, a profound sense of unrestrained individuality. While many of these works cover joyful themes, not all stories within this genre fit such a mold. Here, readers can see the divide between light romance and dark romance.

Both *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* involve poems that include various romantic elements. One key concept present between these poems is the classic, romantic reverence for nature. On the one hand lies the aesthetic of springtime and the day— it is beautiful, warm, gentle, vibrant, and peaceful. Such depictions can be found in great detail in “The Echoing Green.” Glancing at the surrounding fields, the speaker writes of the rising sun, saying how the very skies rejoice as it does so. He speaks of how “the merry bells ring to welcome the Spring. The sky-lark and thrush, the birds of the bush, sing louder around, to the bells’ cheerful sound” (50). He paints a lovely picture of the landscape where the young children play from dawn to dusk without care. Much like “Echoing Green,” the poem titled “Nurse’s Song” contains similar descriptions; in fact, it could almost be taken as a continuation of the former. Here, the speaker is keeping watch over the youth and listening to their laughter. The

speaker encourages the children to continue playing, “for it is yet day and we cannot go to sleep. Besides, in the sky, the little birds fly and the hills are covered with sheep” (53). All the creatures, both animal and human, delight in the sunshine.

On the other hand lies the gloom of winter and the night— it is barren, dark, dreary, frozen, and cruel. Blake illustrates snippets of this sorrowful picture starting in the Introduction. Here, the truth-telling Bard character comes into play, crying out to both mankind and the Earth. He calls out first to humanity, “weeping in the evening dew, that might... fallen, fallen light renew” (54)! He then asks the Earth to “arise from the dewy grass; night is worn” (54). Her response as presented in “Earth’s Answer” also demonstrates these depictions. She wakes “from the darkness dread & drear. Her light fled: stony dread! And her locks cover’d with grey despair. Prison’d on watery shore Starry Jealousy does keep [her] den, cold and hoar” (55). The landscape of the Earth has transformed into a desolate shroud of shadows. One can also see prime examples of the effects of winter in “Holy Thursday” from the *Songs of Experience*. Here, readers pick up on the darker side of romanticism and how nature takes hold differently.

Another key concept present between these poems is the extensive expression of emotion. In order to accomplish this, readers should consider the notion of fantasy and imagination (innocence) vs reality and truth (experience). Within *Songs of Innocence*, readers traverse the celebratory aspects of life. Over and over, iterations of joy point to the idea of a romantic love of life. All the children within these poems express excitement and eagerness, an “innocence” natural to their youth. Additionally, Blake incorporates religious allusions in order to show the relationship between the divine and the mortal. One major example of these concepts is “Infant Joy.” While only two stanzas, the opening lines show how one of the first emotions a newborn feels is happiness. The speaker says “I have no name, I am but two days old. What shall

I call thee? I happy am. Joy is my name” (54). Immediately, readers can pick up on the tones of empathy, sentimentality, and wonder mentioned earlier. Another strong example is the poem “The Little Black Boy” which shares the enthusiastic words of a child in regard to God’s love. He says “I am black, but O! My soul is white... we shall hear his voice saying: Come out from the grove, my love & care...” (51). Knowing naught but the love of the Lord, he rejoices in such a pure and innocent way.

Within *Songs of Experience*, the facade vanishes and reality comes into play. Blake drastically changes the personality of these poems and as a result, they become mangled. Hence, many of these poems are essentially darker echoes of the former poems. reprises. Some hold the same title but with entirely different connotations as Blake changes words to their opposites. Often, words such as misery and despair can be found within these works— a sense of hopelessness now befalls the characters. At times, there are even blatant contradictions. Children once laughed— now they can only weep. God is no longer present. He merely watches over those who suffer. Overall, these poems appear to show a transition between the innocence of childhood and the experience of adulthood. A profound example of this is “Infant Sorrow.” Initially, its other half from the *Songs of Experience* spoke of the innocence befitting a newborn child. Here, however, Blake depicts the process of childbirth. The speaker says “My mother groaned! My father wept. Into the dangerous world I leapt” (62). All that remains in the wake of this experience is death and pain and overwhelming grief on behalf of the father. Another example of the more negative emotion prevalent throughout the *Songs of Experience* is that of “Holy Thursday.” Originally, the *Songs of Innocence* version told of the purity of children’s worship. Here, however, their songs are broken. The speaker asks “is that trembling cry a song? Can it be a song of joy? And so many children poor? It is a land of poverty” (56). No longer in a

beautiful church, these children are wasting away in the streets, calling out to a God who doesn't seem to hear them.

In conclusion, despite the greatly contrasting tones presented in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, it is clear that both have romantic elements. Between the vast depth of emotional expression, glorious nature imagery, and the qualities of imagination and independence, Blake's work excellently captures the essence of the era. As a writer and an artist, he takes readers to the center of Romantic values; even as his introduction states, "to read a Blake poem without the pictures is to miss something important" (45). Seeing the divide between light romance and dark romance within these poems, readers can gain a great understanding of the Romantic style.