

WILLIAM BLAKE: INNOCENCE IN CHILDHOOD AND IN ADULTHOOD

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ABSTRACT

In "Songs of Innocence" William Blake deals with the theme of innocence in childhood and regained innocence in the case of an adult. Biographical information provides light on the sources dealing with such a theme in his case. And "The Little Black Boy" from that cluster provides an illustration of what innocence is; its source and effects on people regardless their age.

RESUMEN

En "Songs of Innocence" William Blake (1757-1827) toca el tema de la inocencia y de su posible rescate en la etapa adulta. La información biográfica señala cuáles fuentes pudieron haber incidido en su visión. El poema "The Little Black Boy" de esa unidad temática devela la procedencia y la acción benéfica de la inocencia en la cotidianidad humana.

William Blake (1757-1827), a romantic poet from England, dealt not only with the theme of innocence in childhood but also with the regained state of innocence that may take place in adulthood. In "Songs of Innocence," first engraved in 1789 and incorporated into a larger cluster called "Songs of Innocence and Experience" five

years later, Blake develops his topic successfully, as Berger states,

Has any writer ever evoked more perfectly for us that moment, so precious and so soon spent, when we listened to our child's first cries, and watched its first smite? And by what miracle has this childless poet been able to make it alive before us forever? (1914:293)

Looking at Blake the man can help the reader reach the poet. And the poem "The Little Black Boy" can, likewise, show the miracle, as Berger says, at work. There, Blake develops his idea of innocence amidst life itself in words coming from a child who carefully listens to his mother's explanation on the subject as applied to a very specific situation, and then, offers his own understanding of it.

Biographical information shows a link between the poet and the theme developed in "Songs of Innocence." For one thing, Blake as a romantic writer relied on natural

or spontaneous feelings. And children allowed him to do that; they are unaffected by responses coming from rational sources; their imagination is free, natural, spontaneous, humane (Berbaum; 1948:XXII). Blake was also influenced by mystical teachings such as those of Swedenborg, a man who had even announced that the year 1757, just when Blake was born, was meant to be the time for man to start his quest for moral freedom (Wilson; 1971:56). Blake's own visions, too, led him to interact with angels, prophets, or with "messengers from heaven." (Bernbaum; 1948:111). This in turn explains the purpose he gave to his poetry; not so much for enjoyment but man's own salvation (Gleckner; 1966:10).

Such an objective may be easily related to a central influence on his life, the influence of the Scriptures. Openly, he admitted that whatever he knew was in the Bible (Percival; 1970:32). And Berger mentions two passages Blake was very fond of. One is St. Matthew XVII,

And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, "Verily I say unto you, except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

And the other one is in Saint Mark X,

Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. And he took them up in his arms, put his hand upon them, and blessed them ("Lyrical Poems"; 1914:285).

What Blake then did, according to Burger, was to enter with those children into the kingdom of God, and "with childish purity of soul, he sings of the happy beings who dwell there." (1914:45). Moreover, Christ for Blake, affirms Gleckner, stands for innocence at its best (1966:8).

"Songs of Innocence" became a good means to convey the soothing effects of love, that is innocence, throughout man's existence. Thus his intention, "to show the gospel of love, of good will, and of man's brotherhood with his fellow men and with all nature." (Berger; 1914:45). And the natural world becomes the setting for such an experience. For as Coleridge points out, "Innocence and the truth of Nature must go together. Infancy is too holy a thing to be ornamented." (1970:14). And even when children may be victims of society, they can go beyond the

experience for they "have somehow to preserve their humanity in circumstances that are all but completely dehumanizing." (Nurmi; 1966:16).

"The Little Black Boy" shows a world in which innocence in childhood and innocence regained in adulthood can make the true difference in the way a person treats people. Love can make barriers fall down, in the case of the poem, the barrier of racial prejudice. Two significant moments in the poem show how swiftly love can open the door of communication among men. One is when the boy's mother talks to him on the subject; that is, her message; the other one when he shows his own understanding of what his mother has said to him. In the first case, the reader meets someone who has regained her innocence; in the second one, with one who still remains in that state.

In the first moment, the encounter is with an adult mother instructing her child on the source of all light and warmth—God,

Look on the rising sun; there
God does live;
And gives his light, and gives
his heat away.
And flowers and trees and
beasts and man receive
Comfort in morning, joy in
noonday (Stanza three).

The Supreme Being does not make distinctions as to who should or should not receive His light; it reaches all nature; it generates life and healthy emotions such as peace and merriment. This equation of light=love is suggestive. When light

reaches life, light becomes part of it. That means that love, which is God's not man's, enables man to see his neighbour differently, as a brother or sister, as an equal, as one to whom he can also provide what he has freely received, comfort and joy.

Using another natural element, the wise woman proceeds with her lesson on Love. Like a cloud, a racial barrier can vanish because of the work of the sun and its heat,

For when our souls have
learn'd that heat to bear
The cloud will vanish: we
shall hear his voice
Saying: 'Come out from the
grove, my love and care,
And round my Golden tent
like lambs rejoice.' (Stanza five).

Her language is simple and concrete because she is speaking from within, from his heart. Skin darkness like the cloud becomes insignificant to the man who listens and lives with the heat coming from the Father. The lesson involves a whole symbolic process in which light stands for God; cloud for black skin; lamb for innocence regardless of man's age. But the lesson has been taught in such a way that the child listening to his mother can follow her explanation and grasp the idea. Her job has been done successfully, poetically with concrete, familiar images for her son.

Such effectiveness becomes evident when the child, after internalising what his mother has told him, begins to communicate his



The black child makes use of the image of the cloud, then, but now extending it to indicate that the cloud not only refers to black people but also to whites whose prejudices prevent them from loving others, which in the context of the poem implies living in darkness. In this way, the idea has been restated; only love can possibly provide harmony to all men; only love provides the purity of the soul to live under the same tent.

It becomes clear that the boy admits the fact that only love, not reason or mere words, can take either blacks or

understanding innocently to the white boy, now in his own words,

Thus did my mother say, and
kissed me:
And thus I say to little
English boy,
When I from black and he
from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God
like lambs we joy (Stanza
five).

whites to the same happy
experience of brotherhood,

I'll shade him from the heat,
till he can bear
To lean in joy upon our
father's knee;
And then I'll stand and stroke
his silver hair,
And be like him, and he will
then love me (Stanza six).

The process itself has been grasped: the first step is to stay long enough with God, as long as needed.

Such communion provides innocence—God's own love—that will make the job possible: man's harmonious embrace with life. In other words, the job is not man's, it is God's; it is God reaching out life through man. And the fact that an innocent boy is able to perceive and to express the validity of love to make human barriers fall down in such a clear way makes Blake's intended idea on innocence unrefutable.

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