

The Conception of Childhood and Innocence in the Romantic Poetry

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Abstract

This study aims at illuminating William Blake's and William Wordsworth's attitudes, images and conceptions of childhood through their poems. As Romantic poets, they seem to be largely concerned with child. Despite the fact that there are great similarities in their attitudes towards the childhood, since both of them look at childhood positively as a state of perfection and purity, yet they differ in their views. According to Blake, the conception of childhood should be conceded within the visionary and symbolic nature of his poetry, so childhood is timeless and has no limits, according to him the child's innocence can be within man even when he grows up. But according to Wordsworth, childhood is a distant memory of a kind of paradise that is lost. The two poets also look differently at the importance of experience and how it corrupts the child as Wordsworth thinks. But for Blake, it is necessary to get at what he calls the higher innocence. The paper aims to seek what the child symbolizes in Romantic poetry and specifically to William Wordsworth's short poems and William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*.

The paper starts with an introductory chapter in which the development of the Romantic Movement, its ideas and notions are given. It tries to show the political and social changes that lie behind the romantic poet views. The method which is followed is a descriptive – analytical approach. Chapter II is devoted to study Wordsworth and Blake's selected short poems that deal with the subject of childhood and show the differences and similarities between the two poets' views concerning childhood.

Introduction

Romanticism

The Romantic Movement in English sets in 1798; their main themes are the nature, beauty, purity, and innocence. The term Romantic as a designation for a school of literature opposed to the Classic is first used by

the German critic Karl Wilhelm Friedrich at the beginning of the 19th century. The Romantic as a term is first used by the romantic poets in France who depend on the imagination to create a new reality and not to escape from reality. The Romantic poets use their poetry as a medium to change the people's attitude and to evoke their sympathy for the simple and the poor. They express their denial at social injustice.

Political and social changes

If we want to understand and examine Wordsworth's and Blake's poetry about child and childhood, we must consider their work in relation to the features of the period, effected, from the social, political and human conditions to the wider and hazier background of theory and practice, which is called Romanticism. This period witnesses an important transitional period in the history of Britain and the Western world. The most important aspects of this period are the industrial revolution and the rise of the middle class. These aspects are reflected in literature in different forms. Thus, Change was not confined just to the structure of society. The desire to be free from a world that was filled with different kinds of restriction is a common factor about all the Romantic poets in the early Eighteenth century. The long reign of Classicism was withdrawing to an end, and was replaced by the Romantic Movement. As a result, new conventions began to appear, poets started to write in new style that is much different from that of the preceding poets.

CHAPTER 1

Romantic poets' conception of childhood

The Romantic Poets represent a rejection of some thoughts and beliefs as the strict and inflexible treatment of children. They consider the discipline on children cannot give them a chance to express their thoughts or feeling, fear or anger. The Romantic poets value the individual over society, emotion over logic, natural over artificial. Their main inspiration is nature, folklore and the past. Constantly, themes that deal with the concepts of childhood and innocence, and childhood and education, can be found frequently in their poems as they have a deep philosophy and awareness about children. They claim that the relationship between child and nature should be very close and not be lost. The child for them should be protected from the harsh realities of life. Spiritually, they place the child close to God and nature.

They also believe that childlike innocence is a state of mind in which emotions and impressions are more important than reason and logic. Therefore, creativity and child's purity should be respected and protected not, being killed by wrong beliefs.

Consequently, childhood and a child's innocence have become one of the major themes of Romantic poetry. They use the images of the child in different ways. For example, in their criticism and rejection of the society and in their desire to change the world.

For example, Blake in "*The Little Black Boy*" depicts the fact that there is no difference between black and white. He supports the leaders of the Evangelical movement in fighting the injustice of racism and the slave trade. The white- black contrast is very clear from the very lines spoken by the black child. The boy says:

And I am black, but O! My soul is white..

And I am black My mother bore me in the southern wild" (D,G,1973.p92).

It is clear that the child has social feelings of inferiority, and displays a state of the soul that is both impressive and touching. The child's innocence shows his capacity for trust in his mother's idea. The boy's mother believes that the black color is just a cloud which fades sooner or later: *And these black bodies and this sun burnt face / is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.* (D.G,1973.p.92)

Another field of the childhood that Blake is interested in is child's feeling and mood. This is clear in his two poems "*Infant Sorrow*" and "*Infant Joy*", where he depicts two different representations of the child. In the first, "Blake shows that the baby is aware of the hostility he must encounter in the world, and the resistance he must face in one form or another." "The birth is a dire struggle for both mother and child ,and once free, the infant , alarmed and blindly assertive, and he is ready to do battle –he leaps into the world as though already and strains against his 'father's hand' and the bands, which forced upon him by a dangerous world." The child says:

*My mother groaned! My father wept
Into the dangerous world I leapt:
Helpless. naked. Piping loud (D.G,1985.p1).*

In the second poem, the speaker who is probably the mother projects her happiness in holding the baby, and she named him 'joy'. The mother describes him as happy in his own being and as a source of joy to herself. She is certain of the joyous nature of her child and blesses it at the end of each stanza hoping that the future will be joyous too. The happy mother says:

*I have no name
I am but two days old
What shall I call thee
I happy am
Joy is my name (D.G, 1973:p.2).*

The short answer of the child represents the fast mood of the poem. And gives a feeling of simplicity and clarity.

One of the themes that Blake wants to pay attention is the religion theme. He reflects his beliefs through the tongue of the child as he thinks that man should not expect helping from anyone but God. In *A little Black Boy Lost* Blake presents an innocent young child who is lost in the dark frost in spite of that, the child is led by a light or spirit (vapor) but the child loses his way. The child here symbolizes the man who is submissive to other Religion Organizations. Blake thinks that there should be only a bridge between man and God.

'And, father, how can I love you

Or any of my brothers more?

I love you like the little bird

That picks up crumbs around the door.'

The Priest sat by and heard the child;

In trembling zeal he seized his hair,

He led him by his little coat,

And all admired his priestly care. (D.G,1985 .p107)

The childhood's concept also has a great importance to Wordsworth, as in different ways he idols the child considering him wiser than an adult. In *The Rainbow*, he calls the child "father of the man," for children own the power of imagination which fades in adulthood. He regrets that he becomes an adult because this makes him lose many things. For instance, he cannot enjoy nature in a way a child can. In his *Ode On Intimations of Immortality* from *Recollections of Early Childhood*, he says: *To me did seem /Appareled in celestial light.* The period of childhood is very valuable short time there is clarity no ambiguity. A child is like a glow stone when one touch it and polish it; in return the stone gives more and more lightness.

Views of childhood during the period / Historical Background

The study gives some explanations and clarification about the historical background of the childhood. The modern idea of childhood that introduced at the time dates from the late 18th century have become widely used since that time. Childhood becomes gradually seen as a separate state, rather than only as a need to be educated and prepared for adulthood. During this time, growing attention was given to the children by parents, artists, and writers. In this period, many writers give increasing attention to protect the innocence of children. Dickens describes them as idols of the heart and household.

As for the education in the Romantic period, most of the people did not know how to write their names. Education was limited only to the upper class. However, during the late 18th century education was allowed to the rich and poor. However, education was based on social structure,

religion, and financial abilities to attend school. These schools were founded by rich individuals or churches and many of these schools founded as charities, then they became united with the church. The main aim of these schools was to build good Christian citizens. Their teaching included religious works. It can be said that most of the schools were run by the church (puritan) at that time.

A half century after this poem Charlotte Bronte has vividly introduced best description of the children in these schools in *Jane Eyre* where conditions were even worse, she takes us to have a look inside Logwood School to recognize the conditions and circumstances that surrounding children and to know about the systems which were used there. Teachers were very strict. They stroke pupils if they couldn't memorize their lesson very well. Students had to walk long hours every Sunday in order to reach Prickle bridge church. No matter how the weather was rainy, snowy, most of the time it was cold winter with bitter winds.

Chapter 2

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

The poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is one of the pioneers of the Romantic Movement in England. He is well known for especially "*The Prelude*," reflects a distinctive philosophy that explains how a moral and spiritual development can be achieved from close proximity to nature. Wordsworth has a faith in the value of nature as an educator and as a moral guide to the child. "Every great poet, he said, is a teacher; I wish either to be considered as a teacher or as nothing." (The Prose of William wordsworth.p286) Therefore, He believes that poetry should both teach and delight and the poet can teach whenever he gives himself fully to the theme he is engaged to.

The image of childhood in Wordsworth's poems

Wordsworth supports the view that morality should come naturally and the child should engage in real life situations and be exposed to the good role models found in nature, and understands the need of sharing, kindness, courage and other values from nature. Most of his poems reflect his believes that childhood is a short period cannot survive in the harm material world. In addition to that Wordsworth strongly supports the idea of that nature should be the first teacher for the child.

However, there is always that deep feeling of sadness, suffering, anguish, lost and finally death that enfold the image of the child. This mood is clearly seen in many poems like" *An Evening Walk*", "*Guilt and Sorrow*", "*and Lucy Poems*."

In his poem" *The Evening Walk*", Wordsworth speaks of a wandering homeless women with her children. The woman and the

children are without a shelter. She is denied to lay her head during cold nights in a hat or straw built shed. She tries to comfort her children by telling them to look at a shooting star, or to play with glow worms as she wishes to:

*Turn to a silent smile their sleepy cry,
By pointing to the gliding moon on high.
When low hung clouds each star of summer hide,
Oft has she taught them on her lap to lay
The shining glow- worm; or in headless play*

Wordsworth presents a very sad image; he uses the technique of juxtapositions when he gives two different states at the same time. The children smile, but without making any sound. The sky is very dark because of the gathering clouds reflect the hopeless conditions of these children. The whole mood of this poem is optimistic. He continues presenting descriptive images, saying:

*Oh !when the sleepy showers her path assail,
And like a torrent rears the headstrong gale;
No more her breath thaw their figures cold,
Their frozen arms her neck no more can fold;*(269-72), (Wordsworth.1994.p7)

The poet is hopeless of the possibilities for children to survive in such horrible weather, so he depicts the image of these children exposed by torrent gales and bitter showers turning their bodies into frozen arms and dying heart . It is clear that Wordsworth finds the best solution to stop the misery of these children by making them dead.

William Blake (1757-1728)

William Blake was on the top of the eighteenth century literary men who had dedicated their writings to the subject of childhood. He is regarded as a unique phenomenon in the eighteenth century children's literature in particular, and English literature in general. Childhood comes to mean for him a symbolic state besides being a period of growth. He lived as a poor man until his death. He got married in 1784 and despite his childless marriage from the very sincere Catherine Boucher; he remained infatuated with the world of childhood. (Anthony .p 158)

He had paved the way for the romantic poet such as Wordsworth to have their contribution in this theme. Blake was born in a shabby quarter of London, but close enough to its edge for a child to wander into green fields and open country. Blake started writing poetry at his early boyhood. In his poetry, there is a mixture of thought and feeling with music that everyone can memorize his poetry easily

An intense conviction of the importance of childhood is seen in Blake, who is also aware of the terror and hostility of conventional adult society. In his famous letter of 23 August 1799, to Dr. Trusler, he asserted his belief in the imagination and importantly related to the child "I'm happy to find a great majority of fellow mortals who can elucidate my vision, & particularly they have been elucidated by children in contemplating my pictures than I even hoped. Neither youth childhood is folly or incapacity. Some children are fools & so are some old men." (Geoffrey. P.9) For him the state of madness in children can be also found in the older men.

The conception of innocence in Blake's & Wordsworth's poetry

D. G. Gillham explains the meaning of Innocence saying that: 'Innocence' is a term which we apply, usually, to animals, to children, and to adults who led an uncomplicated existence." (D.G, 1973.p14) According to this definition, adults can be innocent too. Gillham specifies the definition more in saying that: "Children have a natural grace which asserts itself easily, but which is rarely seen in the sophisticated adult except in persons with a great natural sweetness of mind. Innocent moments are of greater value in the adult _they bring a more complex being and a wider knowledge into balance than in the case of the child." (D.G, 1973.p.14) Dealing with his earlier work and his most striking poem in *Political Sketches* is "Mad Song". Blake emphasizes his view about the possibility of being innocent even after we grow up. This poem looks like the work of the adults, in it says Victor N. Panen, "we find a man in the mental state that the empirical habits of the eighteenth century would necessary encourage." (Paananen, 1977. P, 49) The singer enfolds his sorrows and gazes on a closed and inhuman world where a dislocation of mind results in a dislocation of nature. The boy says:

*Lo! To the vault
Of paved heaven
With sorrow fraught
My notes are driven.*

Heaven is paved to the one who chooses to dwell in the world of ratio vision. Such one rejects this truth of inspiration and prefers darkness:

*After night I do crowd,
And with night will go;
I turn my back to the east,*

From whence comforts have increased;

But, in the second stanza of the poem a great shift from sadness is made, all the darkness turned to light, joy and clarity have been accorded. Love and harmony combine, as we meet the word "innocence" for the first time:

*Joys upon our branches sit,
Chirping loud, and singing sweet:
Like gentle streams beneath our feet*

Innocence and virtue meet.

The important thing here, is the use of word “innocence” as he compares it with the word virtue, therefore it is not a state of mind that is limited in the period of childhood.

Another example, when Blake combines “innocence” with virtue is in his poem from *Songs of Innocence* is” *The Shepherd*” in which we find Blake pays attention to the virtue of men that support the religious ideas, in spite of that fact that Blake has no real interest in religions. “*The Shepherd*” “offers us a mere hint of the Christian shape of the faith of innocence. At first it depicts the shepherd_ sheep kinship:

How sweet is the Shepherd’s sweet lot!

From the morn to the evening he strays;

He shall follow his sheep all the day,

And his tongue shall be filled with praise. D.G, .1973.p.98)

The shepherd is overlooking his flock granting them in a calm atmosphere. There is no need to make them do anything, only to bestow them his care that offers them freedom. This care is the central theme of the song. The sheep have an awareness of the tender care of their shepherd. “In their dumb way”, writes Gillham, “the flock knows of the existence of a force which in the case of the shepherd fills his tongue with praise”(D.G,1966.p.226). Here, it seems to us, that Blake has put innocence in the same rank with virtue.

Wordsworth contradicts Blake’s opinion of the simple innocence life that” *The shepherd*” live in peace and calm in the Blakeian world, with the harsh and hard life of the shepherd and his flock in Wordsworth’s “*The Last of the Flock*”. We have two different images, two same symbols of the lamb, one of the innocence which last forever, and the second Wordsworthain which lives in the harmful life which ends in death of all the beauty and innocence. Wordsworth starts his poem with astonishment about things going on. He becomes very sad when he saw the shepherd loses his property because of the high rates which improvised many people.

In distant countries I have been,

And yet I have not often seen.

The man did not want

A healthy man, a full grown deep in the public road alone (1-4) Wordsworth.1994.p114

The man did not want anybody to see him shedding his tears, and his agony for the lamb, which he was holding he had just rescued it from death and it was all that is left for him from his flock. Then he started to tell his story when:

A ewe I bought

And another sheep from her I raised

And every increased my store (24-30)

As things were going well with him, he decided to get married and raise up a family. His care for the flock was no less than that for his children whose life dependent on the existence of the sheep:

Sir! 't was precious flock to me,

As dear as my own children be

For daily with my growing store

I love my children more and more (81-84)

Then came the time of need, it was a hard task for him to fed ten children in such circumstances. The dwindling of his flock turned his life to misery, his pleasure and love for his family then began to vanish with the gradual loss of his sheep.

No peace, no comfort could I find,

No ease, with doors or without

As the flock melted away it took away everything good: peace, pleasure, comfort, happiness and love. In this poem Wordsworth presents the child twice. Firstly, as a symbol of the lamb, which has the same features of the child as innocence, purity, calmness and beauty. Secondly, he refers to the children directly. In both of the images the child is dead at the end as the death of the lamb or the child means the loss of the last hope of regaining happiness for the man.

What is certain after reading these contrary poems that Blake and Wordsworth have different views about childhood. It is not accident that many of Wordsworth poem end with the images of dead children as in other poems like "The Ruined Cottage", "Descriptive Sketches", "The Thorn:", and "The Resolution and Independence." In all these poems, Wordsworth gives the impression that there is no room for the child or innocence to live in this harsh world.

As for Blake, in his collections "Songs Of Innocence", we find the Blakeian children enjoy the world despite its difficulties. He presents his children in a world of light and not of darkness, of joy and pleasure and not of gloominess, a world of spontaneity and not pressure, of freedom and not of slavery and restrictive creeds. He also thinks the child has it special way to explore life step by step until it becomes an adult. He hates the means that man use in order to speed the growth of his children.

Conclusion

The use of the childhood conception and the image of the child as important devices for carrying the poets' thoughts, attitudes and feelings have been a common practice among the Romantics. William Blake and William Wordsworth are the first Romantic Poets, who deal with childhood as a symbol of a state of the soul and is therefore, perfectly compatible with maturity.

Wordsworth thinks that the adults can't enjoy the same innocence that child enjoy, this goes in contrast to Blake, who thinks that we can keep innocence after we grow up, even we get experiences. These experiences make us stronger and at the same time, we can enjoy life more. For Blake, childhood can live more than this; it can penetrate the minds of adults if they still love each other and try to protect each other. In "Songs of Innocence", *Blake* deals with the innocent joyous perspective of the child and the more worldly-wise perspective of the adult. For him, children were no occasional interest, no vehicle for a mere nostalgia. They are not only a symbol of innocence, but also the expression of imaginative joy and essential humanity.

As for Wordsworth, whose poems about the lost childhood and the memory of his childhood with nature in the innocent world still an inspiration for all the young poets who came after him who want to describe the relationship between man and nature and specifically between child and nature. Wordsworth is a gentle poet who believes that innocence is too pure to be held by adults who are exposed to the cruel and harm world. It is an ordinary thing to have nostalgia for home, but for Wordsworth, he always has the nostalgia for the period of his childhood and spent the rest of his life regrets that he becomes older and shortly finished his wonderful childhood and he reflects this clearly in his poems" *the Prelude*."

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الخلاصة

يهدف هذا البحث الى لقاء الضوء على وجهات نظر كل من الشعارين وليم وردسورث ووليم بليك . كشاعرين من الحقبة الرومانسية من خلال مجموعة من القصائد المختارة حيث يبدوان مهتمين بموضوع الطفل الى حد كبير. ان كلا من الشعارين ينظران الى مرحلة الطفولة كحالة ايجابية من الكمال والنقاء. ومع ذلك فهناك بعض الاختلاف. وفقا لـ بليك فان مفهوم الطفولة يجب ان يتوافق مع رمزية ورؤية شعره. لذا فان مرحلة الطفولة هي مرحلة غير منتهية وليس لها حدود وعلية فان براءة الاطفال ممكن ان تظل داخل الطفل حتى عندما ينضج. اما بالنسبة الى الشاعر ووردسورث فهو يعتبر مرحلة الطفولة حالة من ذكريات بعيدة تمثل الجنة المفقودة. يختلف الشعاران ايضا في اهمية الخبرة والتجارب حيث يعتقد ووردسورث بانها تقسد الطفل على عكس بليك الذي يظن بان التجارب ضرورية للوصول الى مايسمى قمة البراءة. يبدأ البحث بمقدمة عن نشوء الحركة الرومانسية افكارها ومفاهيمها واطهار التغيرات السياسية والاجتماعية التي تقف خلفها. اما المبحث الاول فيتناول قصائد مختارة لـ بليك ووردسورث التي تهتم بموضوع الطفولة واطهار التباين والاختلاف في وجهات نظر الشعارين لموضوع الطفولة في بعض من القصائد المختارة .