




Poetry
Professor S.P. Dhanavel
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Lecture 32
William Blake

(Refer Slide Time: 00:15)



William Blake (1757-1827)

- Historical and Literary Context
- William Blake
- Blake on Imagination
- *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789, 1794)
- Four poems
 - "Nurse's Song"
 - "The Chimney Sweeper"
- Analysis



William Blake is a great poet of England. He was a strange poet born in 1751. And he came into the early 19th century, lived along with Coleridge and Wordsworth, contributed to this Romantic moment right from late 18th century. But we bring him here, along with pre-Romantic poets just for convenience. We have to be aware that William Blake is considered the first or the most important Romantic poet today.

First, we will look into the historical and literary context, see a few ideas about Blake, particularly his views on imagination and then, read two poems from Songs of Innocence, and two poems from Songs of Experience. But interestingly, the title is the same: 'Nurse's Song' and 'The Chimney Sweeper.' We will do the analysis.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:28)

Historical and Literary Overview



- Blake is a pre-Romantic and Romantic poet.
- Pre-romantic in time and Romantic in spirit.
- King George III (1760-1820)
- The American Revolution
- The French Revolution
- The Gordon Riots in 1780 – mob rule in London
- The pathetic social conditions of England
- The divide between the rich and the poor
- The slums, prostitutes, child labor, depravity
- *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798



As we said earlier, Blake is a pre-Romantic poet and also a Romantic poet. He is pre-romantic in time, that is he started his writing career in late 18th century. But he lived on into the 19th century; he had that first Romantic urge or spirit. He lived as you can see during this period of King George III. And he witnessed or he heard about this American Revolution, French Revolution, Gordon Riots in London in 1780. He was a witness to many other social happenings, social events, political events of his time.

Unlike many other writers, he was a man who observed life very closely. He saw the pathetic conditions of life in England. He also saw the divide between the rich and the poor. That is why he observed people living in slums, particularly prostitutes, and children in child labour, and the moral depravity of the people. He was too much concerned with all these negative aspects of life, that he observed. And during this time only we have this *Lyrical Ballads* being published by Wordsworth and Coleridge. So, we come right up to the end of Pre-Romantic period and the beginning of Romantic Period.

(Refer Slide Time: 03:03)

William Blake (1757-1827)



- Critical Fuel: Mark Schorer, Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, etc.
- **Versatility:** poet, engraver, printer, system builder
- **Individualism:** "I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man's"
- Innocence: "The Lamb"
- Experience: "The Tyger"
- **"Auguries of Innocence"**
"To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour"



Instead of looking into his life, we see something more interesting. Blake was a poet of intellect and imagination. So, many 20th century critics spend to their scholarly attention on William Blake, and that is why Blake became something like a critical fuel for scholars like Mark Schorer, Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom and many others. A number of PhDs were written, number of books were written number of articles were written on William Blake to revive him as one of the most significant poets of England.

In his own lifetime, he was neglected. He was not at all seriously paid attention. However, he had such a talent. He was a multi-talented person. He was a poet, engraver, printer, and a system builder. And personally, for me, this one sentence is very interesting. I hope many of you will like it. He was a staunch proponent of this individualism. This quotation will tell you about that, "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's."

So, he was concerned with freedom and slavery all through his life. Imagination gave him that freedom; originality gave him that freedom but the established society did not allow him or others to use their own imagination. We have many poems from these Songs of Innocence and Experience. These two are very well known: 'The Lamb' from Innocence and 'The Tiger' from Experience. We have also another example from Auguries of Innocence here. This is again particularly noted for its wisdom:


"To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wildflower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand

And the eternity in an hour.”

These four lines will reveal to us the major concern of Blake as a poet of nature, as a poet of imagination. At the same time, even though he was concerned with some metaphysical or philosophical ideas connecting this world, to see the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wildflower, infinity and eternity in his palm in an hour, he was observant. He was closely watching his surroundings. That is why we have some poems with excellent social consciousness.


(Refer Slide Time: 05:43)

Blake on Imagination



“I feel that a man may be happy in this world. And I know that this world is a world of **imagination and vision**. I see every thing I paint in this world, but everybody does not see alike. [...] Some see nature all ridicule and deformity, and by these, I shall not regulate my proportions; and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, **nature is imagination itself**. As a man is, so he sees. [...] You certainly mistake, when you say that the visions of fancy are not to be found in this world. **To me, this world is all one continued vision of fancy or imagination...**”

(Blake in a Letter to Reverend John Trusler, 1777)



Blake is synonymous with imagination. That is why we have this passage here. He wrote a letter to one Reverend John Trusler, when the Latter gave him some assignment of printing illustration and all that. He was a specialized printer and illustrator and engraver. So, some patrons used to give him some work. So, he wrote like this about imagination:

“I feel that a man may be happy in this world. And I know

that this world is a world of imagination and vision.

I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does

not see alike. [...] Some see nature all ridicule and deformity,

and by these, I shall not regulate my proportions;


and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of

the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself. As a man

is, so he sees. [...] You certainly mistake, when you say that the visions of fancy are not to be found in this world. To me, this world is all one continued vision of fancy or imagination...”

A poet, a profound poet concerned with imagination, seeing imagination in nature, seeing vision everywhere. At times, he was considered a mad poet. He did not care for the world; he cared for his art. Today, we care for him.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:15)




Songs of Innocence and Experience:
Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul

| | |
|------------|------------|
| 19 poems | 28 poems |
| Innocence | Experience |
| Childhood | Adulthood |
| Harmony | Discord |
| Beauty | Ugliness |
| Freedom | Repression |
| Motion | Stillness |
| Liveliness | Chillness |



This is a collection of poems called ‘Songs of Innocence and Experience.’ It has a subtitle showing the two contrary states of the human soul. Duality is a fact of life. So, in the first volume of Songs of Innocence, he published 19 poems dealing with innocence, childhood harmony, beauty, freedom, motion, liveliness. And in the second volume, he had 28 poems dealing with the experience, adulthood discard, ugliness, repression, stillness, and chillness. He published all these poems together in single volume later in 1794.


(Refer Slide Time: 08:02)




Nurse's Song (1789) – Innocence
4 stanzas/ quatrains

When the voices of children are heard on the green,
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast,
4. And everything else is still.

'Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,
And the dews of night arise;
Come, come leave off play, and let us away
8. Till the morning appears in the skies.'






Nurse's Song (1789) – Innocence

'No, no, let us play, for it is yet day,
And we cannot go to sleep;
Besides, in the sky the little birds fly,
12. And the hills are all cover'd with sheep.'

'Well, well, go and play till the light fades away,
And then go home to bed.'
The little ones leaped, and shouted, and laugh'd
16. And all the hills echoed.



We have chosen 4 poems actually with the same title, 'Nurse's Song' 2 poems and another one, 'The Chimney Sweeper,' the same title but 2 poems. One in Innocence; another in Experience. So, the song, the poem called Nurse's Song in Innocence published in 1789 has 4 stanzas or quatrains because we have 4 lines. First, let us see this and then see the poem on Nurse's Song in Experience, and then we will move to The Chimney Sweeper.

“When the voices of children are heard on the green,

And laughing is heard on the hill,

My heart is at rest within my breast,

4. And everything else is still.

Then come home, my children, the sun has gone down,

And the dews of night arise;

Come, come leave off play, and let us away,

8. Till the morning appears in the skies.”

Next two stanzas of the same poem: Nurse’s Song from Innocence.

“No, no, let us play, for it is yet day,

And we cannot go to sleep:

Besides, in the sky the little birds fly,

12. And the hills are all cover’d with sheep,’

Well, well, go and play till the light fades away,


And then go home to bed.’

The little ones leaped, and shouted and laugh’d,

16. And all the hills echoed.”

When we come to the same poem called Nurse’s Song in Experience, we find that the 4 stanzas have been reduced to 2 stanzas. There is something interesting about this movement from Innocence to Experience. There is a kind of reduction in expression, though experience is increasing. Let us read.


(Refer Slide Time: 09:31)



Nurse's Song (1794) – Experience
2 stanzas/ quatrains

When the voices of children are heard on the green,
And whisperings are in the dale,
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
4. My face turns green and pale.

Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,
And the dews of night **arise**;
Your spring and your day are wasted in play,
8. And your winter and night in **disguise**.



“When the voices of children are heard on the green,
And whispering are in the dale,
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
4. My face turns green and pale,

Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,
And the dews of night arise;
Your spring and your day are wasted in play,
And your winter and night in disguise.”

(Refer Slide Time: 10:35)



Thematic Contrast


| | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Innocence | Experience |
| Children and Adults | Youth and Adult |
| Laughter and Cry | Gay and Pale |
| Rest and Work/Play | Productive Work and Wasteful Play |
| Day and Night | |
| Nature and Humans | |
| Light and Darkness | |



The same poem, the same speaker, probably the similar children, the similar environment but the speaker, the narrator has gained in experience. Let us analyse the poem. That thematic contrast is very interesting. In Innocence, in the first 4 stanzas, we have the contrast between children and adults, laughter and cry, rest and work or play, day and night, nature and humans. We also have light and darkness.

When it comes to Experience, the expression is reduced. So, the contrast is also less. There is an element of comparison between youth and adult, gay and pale, productive work and wasteful play. We have spring and winter as well. But then, we see the contrast is very clear. The play is considered to be wasteful. So, there is an element of anxiety about the future.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:28)



Poetic Devices

Innocence Song

Alliteration: heard, hill (2)

Assonance: everything else is still (4)

Anaphora: And (7 lines begin with and)

Polysyndeton: and 4 times


Alliteration:
The little ones leaped, and shouted, and laugh'd (15)

Syntax: when...then; no, no ... well, well

Experience Song

Anaphora and polysyndeton: and 3 + 3 times

Assonance: night arise (6)



Blake's poem has a number of poetic devices. Nurse's Song in the volume Innocence, we call it Innocence Song has alliteration, assonance, anaphora, polysyndeton. We have this example of heard and hill in line number 2 for alliteration. Everything else is still in line number 4 for assonance. 'And' is repeated several times in 7 lines actually; 7 lines begin with the and. So that is an example of anaphora. And we have the case of polysyndeton that is the same and is used 4 times.

Alliteration is very strong in this one line 15 where we find the liveliness of the children, "the little ones leaped and shouted and laugh'd." The syntax is also very interesting to note. First stanza begins with when and then the second stanza begin with then. Then the third one we have no, no; then the fourth stanza with well, well. So, there is a kind of continuity; there is a kind of harmony in these 4 stanzas. When we come to the Experience Song, we find anaphora and polysyndeton being reduced. We have '3 ands' for anaphora and '3 ands' for polysyndeton. We also have Assonance in 'night arise.'

(Refer Slide Time: 13:05)

Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

Innocence

- 4 stanzas
- Irregular line pattern,
- Occasional end rhymes
- The tone is sweet and atmosphere is joyful.
- The number of syllables varies from 6 to 12, suggesting trimeter and hexameter.
- Iambic rhythm with occasional trochee and spondee

Experience

- 2 stanzas
- Irregular line pattern
- Occasional end rhymes
- The tone is harsh and the atmosphere is anxious.
- The number of syllables varies from 6 to 12 suggesting trimeter and hexameter
- Iambic rhythm with occasional trochee and spondee




The rhyme, rhythm and meter all are also interesting to notice in these 2 poems with the same title: one in Innocence and other in Experience. We have 4 stanzas in Innocence and 2 stanzas in experience. We have the same irregular line pattern. We have some occasional end rhymes in both. In the case of the first poem, we have the sweet tone and joyful atmosphere. But in the case of the second poem, the tone is, a little harsh and atmosphere is anxious.

The number of syllables varies from 6 to 12, suggesting trimeter and hexameter in Innocence Song. The same thing happens in the Experience song as well. We have a Iambic rhythm and

occasional trochee can spondee in the Nurse's Song in Innocence. Similarly, we have Iambic rhythm with occasional trochee and spondee in Nurse's Song in Experience.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:05)




Overall Impression

- **The four stanzas of the innocence song** give a pleasant picture of the scene children laughing, leaping, and playing
- The nurse takes care of the children casually, as the children have some freedom to play a little longer than expected.
- **The two stanzas of the experience song** reveal a contrasting picture of nostalgia and concern for the children.
- The nurse tends to chide the children for wasting their time as the winter of suffering is already foreshadowed in spring.



On the whole, we can say the 4 stanzas of the Innocence Song give a pleasant picture of the scene children laughing, leaping and playing. The nurse takes care of the children casually, without worry, as the children have some freedom to play a little longer than expected. The 2 stanzas of the Experience Song reveal a contrasting picture of nostalgia and concerned for the children. Here the nurse tends to chide the children for wasting the time as the winter of suffering is already foreshadowed in spring. That is, get ready for life. Do not waste time. That is the voice of adults. But the children's voice is different.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:50)




The Chimney Sweeper-Innocence 6 stanzas/ quatrains

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!
4. So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved: so I said,
"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare,
8. You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

And so he was quiet; and that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight, -
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack,
12. Were all of them locked up in coffins of black.





The Chimney Sweeper - Innocence

And by came an angel who had a bright key,
And he opened the coffins and set them all free;
Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run,
16. And wash in a river, and shine in the sun.

Then naked and white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds and sport in the wind;
And the angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,
20. He'd have God for his father, and never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark,
And got with our bags and our brushes to work.
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and
[warm;
24. So if all do their duty they need not fear harm.



Now let us move to the next poem “The Chimney Sweeper” from these two volumes from Innocence and from Experience. We have 6 stanzas for the first one so let us read them.

“When my mother died, I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue,
Could scarcely cry ‘weep! Weep! Weep! ‘weep!
4. So, you are chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.
There’s little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,
That curled like a lamb's back was shaved: so I said,
Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head’s bare
8. You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.
And so he was quiet; and that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight,
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack,
12. Were all of them locked up in coffins of black.
And by came an angel who had a bright key,
And he opened the coffins and set them all free,
Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run,

16. And wash in a river, and shine in the sun.
 Then naked and white, all their bags left behind,
 They, rise upon the clouds and sport in the wind;
 And the angel told Tom, if he would be a good boy,
20. He'd have God for his father, and never want joy.
 And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark,
 And got with our bags and our brushes to work.
 Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and
 [warm;
24. so if all do their duty they need not fear harm.

This is a first poem from Innocence on the title, The Chimney Sweeper.


(Refer Slide Time: 16:35)


The Chimney Sweeper – Experience
3 stanzas/ Quatrains

A little black thing among the snow,
 Crying “weep! weep!” in notes of woe!
 “Where are thy father and mother? Say!”--
 4. “They are both gone up to the church to pray.

Because I was happy upon the heath,
 And smiled among the winter's snow,
 They clothed me in the clothes of death,
 8. And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

And because I am happy and dance and sing,
 They think they have done me no injury,
 And are gone to praise God and his priest and king,
 12. Who make up a heaven of our misery”





Now, we move to this second poem in Experience volume. There are 3 stanzas. Again, like the Nurse's Song, the number of stanzas reduced to half; from 4 to 2 now from 6 to 3.

“A little black thing among the snow

Crying “weep! weep! in notes a woe!

“Where are thy father and mother? Say!”

4. They are both gone up to the church to pray.

Because I was happy upon the heath,

And smiled among the winter's snow,

They closed me in the clothes of death,

8. And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

And because I am happy and dance and sing,

They think they have done me no injury,

And are gone to praise God and his priest and king,

12. Who make up a heaven of our misery”

(Refer Slide Time: 17:26)

Thematic Contrast

Innocence

Children and Parents
Life and Death
Laughter and Cry
Comfort and Discomfort
Angel and Devil
White and Black
Good and Bad
Day and Night
God and Humans
Light and Darkness
Cold and Warm

Experience

Black and White
Cry and Laughter
Parents and Children
Woe and Comfort
Church and Family
Sad and Happy
Hell and Heaven
Society and Individual
Religion and Man



The dramatic contrast between these 2 poems or within these poems, point to a number of binaries. We have children and parents, life and death, laughter and cry, comfort and discomfort, angel and devil, white and black, good and bad, day and night, god and humans, light and darkness, cold and warm in the innocence Song. And we have on the other hand, black and white, cry and laughter, parents- children, woe and comfort, church and family, sad and happy, hell and heaven, society and individual, religion and man.

This is a poem which illustrates Blake's challenge to the established authority of the Church of his time. He did not believe in the church; he did not believe in God as propagated by the church. The religion of man was something different. That is the religion of imagination for Blake. You could see the child labour that was described in the poem. 'Chimney Sweepers,' they were sent up the chimney those days. If you read up a little about the social history of England, at the time, you would understand small children were sent up the chimney to clean the dark soot.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:51)

Poetic Devices



Innocence song

Alliteration: sweep, soot (4), soot, spoil (8), leaping, laughing (15), bags, behind (17), bags, brushes (22)

Simile: like a lamb's back (6)

Metaphor: locked up in coffins of black (12)

Narrative: Dream story

Syntax: complex, conditional clause,

Experience song

Reification: a little black thing (1)




A number of poetic devices are found in both poems. Alliteration, we have examples like sweep, soot; soot, spoil; leaping, laughing; bags, behind; bags, brushes. We also have a simile like a lamb's back. Metaphor is something very strong: 'locked up in coffins of black.' The children death and darkness or this blackness, they are all connected symbolically. So, the children are locked up in the coffin, that means they are dead even before they grow up.

Many children used to die. Many children used to lose their limbs, because they would fall from the chimney. There is an interesting case of a dream experience. There is a story of this angel coming into the dream of a child saying, 'be a good child, God will be your father.' Because as we saw in the next poem, parents forget the children. They go to church. They pray to god. They do their service to the king, church and state. They do not care for the children.

There is obviously the sentence structure is very complex. There is also a conditional clause, if you behave well, if you do your duty, God will take care of you. We human beings will not


take care of you. That is a kind of practical truth that Blake and conveys in this poem. The Experience Song has one poetic device called reification that is objectification. It is a very strong phrase, a little black thing. It is not a child. It is a ball of black thing. It is used to remove black things in the chimney.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:40)



Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

| Innocence song | Experience song |
|--|--|
| <p>Rhyme: AABB, <u>6 stanzas</u></p> <p>Full: young, tongue; head, said; bare, hair; night, sight; run, sun; boy, joy; warm, harm</p> <p>Partial: dark, work</p> <p>Eye: behind, wind</p> <p>Perfect: weep, sleep; Jack, black</p> <p>Internal: sweep, sleep</p> | <p>Rhyme: AABB, <u>3 stanzas</u></p> <p>Full: sing, king</p> <p>Feminine: injury, misery</p> <p>Eye: heath, death</p> <p>Internal: notes, woe</p> <p>Repetition: Word & Phrase</p> <p>weep, snow, clothe, sing, happy, because, notes of woe</p> |



Rhyme, rhythm and meter point to certain interesting things we can see. We have this rhyme scheme of AABB in the 6 stanzas. Similarly, in the 3 stanzas in Experience, we have full rhymes: young, tongue; head, said; bare, hair; night, sight; run, son; boy, joy; warm, harm. We do not have such full rhymes here in this Experience Song because there is more discard. We have partial rhyme: dark and work. Eye rhyme like behind and wind. Perfect rhyme like weep and sleep. That is perfect because that is the only suffering that the children are familiar with. Jack and black also. Jack is black. Jack is black is death for children. We have internal rhyme like sweep and sleep.


In the case of this Experience Song, we have a full rhyme in 2 cases. Feminine rhyme we have 'injury and misery' because they have double syllables. We have eye rhyme like 'heath and death.' Some internal rhyme also we have; notes and woe. That is what we find. We have some repetitions of words like: weep, snow, clothe, sing, happy, because notes of woe.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:03)



Overall Impression

- The first person speaker of the **innocent song** believes in the received wisdom from society about religion, god, angel, humans and accepts the human condition stoically.
- The speaker blindly accepts the story of the angel freeing the chimney sweepers after death and the statement about doing duty sincerely will not bring any harm to the children.
- The first person speaker of the **experience song** is aware of the deceptive face of religion as he exposes the irresponsibility of the church toward poor people.
- The speaker pretends to be happy while actually inhabiting “a heaven of our misery.”
- The two poems on child labor reveal Blake’s challenge to the established views of his day.




To summarize the poem with an overall impression, we have these things to say. The first speaker of the innocent song believes in the received wisdom from society about religion, God, angels, humans. And so, accepts the human condition stoically, patiently. The speaker further blindly accepts the story of the angel freeing the chimney sweepers after death and the statement about doing duty sincerely. But this will not bring any harm to children. That is what the angel says.

The first-person speaker of the experience song is aware of the deceptive phase of religion as he exposes the irresponsibility of the church and the state toward the poor people because both church and king are brought into this poem. Here the speaker pretends to be happy while actually inhabiting ‘a heaven off our misery.’

The two points together on child labour reveal Blake's challenge to the established views of his day. Many questions were discussed, raised in the parliament, but the children's plight did not find their place. It took a long time for these children to be freed from this kind of slavery.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:29)

References



NPTEL

Dike, Donald. 1961. "The Difficult Innocence: Blake's Songs and Pastoral," *ELH*, 28 (4): 353-375.

Gallagher, Philip J. 1977. "The Word Made Flesh: Blake's 'A Poison Tree' and the Book of Genesis," *Studies in Romanticism*, 16 (2): 237-249.

Gleckner, Robert F. 1961. "William Blake and the Human Abstract," *PMLA*, 76 (4): 373-379.

Simpson, Mat. 1992. "Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience," *Critical Survey*, 4 (1): 22-27.



Some references we have. Hope these are useful to you. You will learn more about Blake and his poetry. Thank you.