

Transformation of Blake in “Holy Thursday”: From a Spiritual Prophet to a Social Reformer

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Abstract

William Blake was one of the pioneers of the Romantic Movement in English literature. He was a late 18th century poet and artist of extra-ordinary vision and imagination. However he was not content with the role of a poet or an artist. With an ardent zeal of an idealist, he set out his course in the realm of literature as a prophet of spirituality and Biblical Christianity. He simultaneously commenced his idealistic journey as a social reformer and critic of contemporary social evil. This dual role of Blake as a poet of spirituality and social awareness became clearly evident when he published some poems under the title “Songs of Innocence and of Experience”. Through this book he was not only sending his spiritual message but also playing an important role as a social critic. This particular aspect has been uniquely reflected in two of his poems with a similar title. The poems are titled “Holy Thursday”. Although both the poems deal with the subject of poor street children of the poet’s country, they mark a clear transition in their message and tone. In “Holy Thursday” of “Songs of Innocence”, Blake plays the role of a spiritual prophet inspiring people to realize the true beauty and innocence of children. On the other hand, in “Holy Thursday” of “Experience”, Blake transforms himself into a fiery social critic and a reformer. This transition and change of the poet’s role in “Holy Thursday” reflect the overall design of “Songs of Innocence and of Experience in an accurate way.

Key Words: Transformation, spiritual prophet, social reformer, innocence, contrast.

The general expectation from a work of art or literature is a problematic issue to deal with in most cases. The issue is too complicated to analyze. However, if it is dealt with in a simplistic manner, one of the probable opinions may be that the readers expect to derive pleasure from a work of art or literature. If one judges William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* from this perspective, one is bound to emphatically declare that the poems in that book are wonderful works of art. Starting from the introduction of *Songs of Innocence* to the last poem of *Songs of Experience*, a sense of sheer sensuous delight excites the readers, whether they recite the poems or read them silently. A sweet, all pervading element of melody runs through these lyrics. These lyrical poems not only appeal to the audio-visual senses of the readers but also inadvertently touch their souls with the magic of poetry. However, along with providing pleasure, these poems also transmit spiritual, moral and socio-political messages and guidelines to the readers. Although Blake does not moralize in his poems as a lawgiver, or preach spirituality as a theological teacher, the sincerity and spiritual insight of the poet naturally blend into the poems and set a spiritual and moral tone in their diction. In addition to this fact, the messages in the poems of *Songs of Innocence* witness significant transformation in the poems of *Songs of Experience*. ‘The bond

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between *Innocence* and *Experience*, as contradictory states of soul, does not indicate a clear-cut, steady contrast but depicts dynamic shifts of tensions' (Johnson L. Mary & Grant E. John, 2004). The messages and symbols in "Holy Thursday" of *Songs of Innocence* transform and assume new meanings in "Holy Thursday" of *Songs of Experience*. This transformation becomes remarkably evident and meaningful through the shifting tone of a single theme. The juxtaposition of "Holy Thursday" of *Innocence* and "Holy Thursday" of *Experience* will enable the readers to trace the changing nature of Blake's message from *Songs of Innocence* to *Songs of Experience*. Analysis of both the poems of the same title will mark a clear pattern of transition. While in the first "Holy Thursday" the message is predominantly spiritual and directed to individual conscience, the message in the second "Holy Thursday" is more socio-political in nature and aimed at stirring the collective conscience of the English society. In this manner Blake manages to transform himself from a spiritual teacher to a social reformer in these two poems of similar title.

In the poems of *Innocence* Blake extols the virtue of innocence. He uses the symbols of the 'lamb', the 'children', 'flowers', 'shepherds' and other symbols to eulogize the uncorrupted goodness of innocence. This trend is clearly evident in "Holy Thursday" of *Innocence*. In this poem the poet describes how the poor orphan children, the symbols of innocence, are taken to church on the occasion of 'Holy Thursday'. This 'Holy Thursday' is a very significant day in Christianity as it is celebrated to mark the ascension of Jesus to heaven. Thus, Blake connects the theme of innocence with Christian spirituality. The poem also draws the attention of the readers to London's destitute children who studied in different charity schools of the city during Blake's time. These children were taken from their schools to attend services at St. Paul's Cathedral once a year on a Thursday during the Easter season. During the church service the children sang religious songs. In the poem the poet paints a wonderful picture of these children singing in the church.

In *Innocence* Blake divided "Holy Thursday" into three stanzas. In the first stanza the poet presents before the readers picture of innocent children going to mass on a 'Holy Thursday' in a procession. He says in the poem,

*Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
The Children walking two & two in red & blue & green;
Gray headed beadle walkd before with wands as white as snow,
Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames waters flow.* (Blake, line 1-4)

Blake uses the phrases 'innocent faces' and 'clean' to evoke a sense of purity in the minds of the readers. He also uses the eyes of a painter when he describes the children walking in perfect discipline in different colors. Thus, he creates a vivid and colorful image of beauty in the children. Then he goes on to describe how the elderly churchmen lead the procession of children into St. Paul's Cathedral. In these lines he suggests an image of benevolent guidance and supervision of innocent children by the elderly.

In the second stanza, Blake paints the children as the most wonderful thing on earth and compares them with the flowers of London when he says,

*O what a multitude they seemed, the flowers of London town;
Seated in companies the sit with radiance all their own.*

*The hum of multitudes there but multitudes of lambs,
Thousands of little boys and girls raising their innocent hands.* (Blake, line 5-8)

Blake repeatedly uses the word 'multitude' to emphasize on the large number of little boys and girls. He portrays the picture of radiant and happy faces raising their innocent hands to accept the blessed communion. These lines of the poem create a sublime vision of angelic and innocent children and draw a parallel between Jesus Christ and them by using the Biblical symbol of the 'lamb'. As a result, Blake's message assumes a spiritual nature here.

The third stanza of the poem continues with the spiritual message and gives it a definitive shape. But the tone of the poem experiences a subtle shift at this point. The poem is no longer only about innocence and tenderness. There is an implied reference to the pain of these poor children. The poet says,

*Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven their voice of song
Or like harmonious thundering the seats of heaven among.
Beneath them sit the aged men, the wise guardians of the poor.*

Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door. (Blake, line 9-12)

In the above mentioned lines the voice of the children are likened to harmonious thundering near the seat of heaven. The implied suggestion of tempestuousness and high pitch of their song evoke a sense of divine anger in the mind of the readers. It suggests that all is not well with the institutional charity of the orphan schools as the song of the children very subtly conveys an image of pain and cry for justice towards heaven. This stanza of the poem marks a transition in the spiritual and moral message of the earlier stanzas. The poem at this point indirectly reminds the readers of the sorrow and pain of the street children who were neglected by the society. Although this poem in *Innocence* does not fully expose the hypocrisy of social institutions and religious authority, it shows how the children transcend the earthly boundary through their song and raise themselves above the control of elderly churchmen to reach the heavenly sphere. In this poem the message is mainly spiritual and directed to individual conscience. It compels the readers to rethink their behavior towards the downtrodden and destitute street children who resemble the 'lamb' in their innocence and piety.

In "Holy Thursday" of *Songs of Experience* the same theme takes a new shape when Blake champions the cause of destitute children in a more dramatic and bold tone. In this poem Blake sounds like a firebrand revolutionary and his sincere concern regarding the plight of the children touches the heart of the readers. Blake's language is fiery, radical and stirring in this poem. The readers get a great jolt when the poet says in "Holy Thursday" of *Songs of Experience*,

*Is this a holy thing to see,
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduced to misery,
Fed with cold and usurious hand?* (Blake, line 1-4)

Compared to the sweet and mellow lines of the first *Holy Thursday*, these lines of "Holy Thursday" in *Songs of Experience* come as a rude awakening to the readers. The poet satirizes and savagely criticizes the pretension of holiness and false religiousness of the elite section of the

society. In the first poem, the elderly churchmen were described as walking with ‘wands as white as snow’ (Blake, line3), where as in the second poem the readers get the impression that these elderly guardians are in fact cold and usurious (Blake, line 4). The observance of ‘Holy Thursday’ in London seems like a pathetic hypocrisy. The poet transforms himself from a proponent of spiritual truth to an active social reformer who wants to stir the conscience and moral sense of obligation among the readers. He declares in “Holy Thursday” of *Songs of Experience*,

*Is that trembling cry a song?
Can it be a song of joy?
And So many children poor?
It is a land of Poverty!* (Blake, line 5-8)

Blake intensely satirizes the practice of making the poor children sing songs on ‘Holy Thursday’. The readers can realize the poet’s pain and anguish at the religious and political establishment of his country. He also satirizes the claim of his country as a rich nation when he describes her as ‘a land of poverty’. The poet does not stop here. He then goes onto pronounce his judgment about what should happen in a country and how the children should be treated. He says in the same poem,

*For where-e’er the sun does shine,
And where-e’er the rain does fall:
Babe can never hunger here,
Nor poverty the mind appall.* (Blake, line 13-16)

The poet laments the condition of the poor children in a deeply touching way. He masterfully paints the agony and pain of the children and emphatically declares his homeland to be a ‘land of poverty’. Then he uses the symbols of ‘thorn’ and ‘winter’ to describe the conditions of the poor souls. The imageries and metaphors used in this poem are very powerful and they portray the genuine anguish and heartfelt pain of the poet. The readers cannot help being deeply moved by the depiction of human sorrow and plight. As a true social reformer Blake tries to raise social awareness regarding destitute children through his bitter but stirring lyrics.

These two poems of similar title called “Holy Thursday” contain contrasting elements of a single discourse. Blake purposefully juxtaposes these twin poems in order to project before the readers his full vision of an ideal society. He does not transmit messages in fragments, and he also does not differentiate between the secular and spiritual realms of human life. As a sincere humanist, Blake puts equal emphasis on religious spirituality and on issues of social equality and overall human welfare. So, he wants to perform two roles simultaneously. Firstly, he wants to preach his spiritual beliefs as a visionary Christian. Secondly, he wants to reform the society as a critic of social and political evils of his times. Significantly, it is very interesting to note what Peter Ackroyd says about *Songs of Innocence* in his book titled *Blake*. He says, “In Songs the components of Renaissance emblems, biblical themes and the pastoral imagery from Elizabethan poetry are combined in the single focus of Blake’s intense vision. But the truth is that they could only have been written by an artist who believed him-self to be a spiritual poet;” (Ackroyd, 1996). On the other hand, Blake’s consciousness and concern as a social reformer and critic can

be traced from his own words in marginalia to Watson's *Apology for the bible*. To protest against the suppression of civil liberty in England Blake says, "The Beast [of the state] & and the Whore [of state religion] rule without control (Blake's, 1798).

In the two poems titled "Holy Thursday", Blake uses a single theme to convey two contrasting visions. He does so because from *Innocence* to *Experience* he wants to achieve a transition. In the contrasting environment of *Innocence* and *Experience* he intends to guide the growth of his spiritual message to the culmination of a complete humanistic message which contains socio-political vision along with spiritual teaching. He, carefully, plans the path of his own growth as a poet. From a spiritual prophet in the first "Holy Thursday" he transforms himself into a social reformer and critic in the second "Holy Thursday". So, the poems titled "Holy Thursday" are unique in the sense that they bear the testimony of the transformation of Blake's message as well as his role as a poet.

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