

## William Blake's Short Poems: Depth in Simplicity

Dr. 'Ala 'Abdulhussein Hashim  
(Lecturer)  
University of Basra  
College of Education  
Department of English

### Abstract

The study aims at giving interpretations to some of William Blake's short poems. The researcher noticed through a survey of the literature on Blake that critics and researchers usually concentrate on his "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" as representative of Blake's simple and deep poetry, while they pay less attention to some other short poems in this concern.

Therefore, in its analysis of certain themes in Blake's short poems, the study tries to show that poems like "Visions of the Daughters of Albion," "America," "The Book of Urizen," and some stanzas from Blake's note-books are simple too, and are no less deep than "Songs of Innocence and of Experience"

The study concentrates on Blake's main themes of his poetry such as innocence, love, religion and God through which Blake's deep insight is demonstrated. It is an interpretive rather than a stylistic approach to Blake's short poems.

---

"Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet...Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

Luke, xxi: 27

-I-

Blake's poems, in particular his long ones refuse conventional interpretations due to their complicated and contradictory conceptions, which might have resulted from the deep-rooted contradictions of his society. In spite of the philosophical thoughts that are reflected in his poems, Blake was not an abstract philosopher. It seems through the poems that he has his own philosophy, or he has adapted philosophy to his personal way of thinking. We should keep in mind that the contradictions and variety of Blake's thoughts and meanings threaten to make them look unharmonious. However, these thoughts are deep and original. It is noticed that when critics and researchers want to illuminate Blake's short poems, they usually concentrate on his "Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience" because of their common themes and

## William Blake's Short Poems: Depth in Simplicity

seemingly clear ideas, which might make them look simple poems. However, these poems are rich in implications. This study aims at showing that not only "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" are simple and deep; it is rather his other short poems that have the same quality of being simple and deep at the same time. Therefore, here is an attempt to see, not through philosophical spectacles, what is beyond some of these short poems. However, a critic like H.C. Robinson believes that even "Songs of Innocence and Experience" are difficult to be comprehended. He adds that they are "metaphysical riddles and mystical allegories"(G..Bentley,ed.2002, p.163), while Bentley himself assures that some of Blake's simple poems "baffled critics"(ibid, p.10). We should mention here that it is not possible to cover all Blake's short poems in such a short paper, so one finds oneself compelled to be selective.

### -II-

In order to express his internal contradictions, Blake resorts to use certain private symbols. He also brings to life particular religious and heathen myths but he handles them in his special way. Although Blake is not consistent in his usage of these symbols and myths, it seems that he uses them as counterparts to interpret things of the world. His thoughts, symbols and myths have changed by distinct stages at particular times in his life, so there is much revision in his works; one symbol can have various or contradictory implications in different poems. It must be mentioned that Blake has not created his own symbols and myths; in fact, he has borrowed, adapted, altered and confused most of them. He has assimilated what he has borrowed to his own way of thinking. This might justify Uttara Natarjan's claim in his book, The Romantic Poets: A Guide to Criticism(2007) that Blake's poetry "attracted little public notice in his lifetime(p.4). In his Fearful Symmetry (1947), Northrop Frye states that "there are exactly as many kinds of reality as there are men (p.19). On this behalf, Blake is not consistent because there are also many kinds of reality for him, but as far as this paper is concerned, it is a matter of depth, not of consistence, that we are looking for.

In their 'Introduction' to their edited book, Blake in the Nineties (2001), Steve Clark and David Worrall admit that "in spite of their depth and imaginativeness, Blake's poems are not abstruse because they can be read by a layman for their apparent simplicity"(p.7). William Keith (1966) cautions that Blake's simplicity is misleading (p.56). But Leopold Damrosch, in his book, Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth (1980) believes that "Blake was far less confused than most men" and his "difficulties arose from the heroic ambition with which he tackled irresolvable tensions at the heart of Western thought"(p.4).

In order to conceive the implied meanings of Blake's short poems, we need to understand how his symbols work. This does not mean that his usage of

symbols is different from other poets. It is well known that symbols are connected with other fields of knowledge like linguistics and Psychology, but it is clear that Blake's symbols derive not so much from these fields or from the implications of symbols in literature as from his theory of the mind (Damrosch 1980, p.11). It is true that many of his visions and thoughts seem ambiguous and strange but Blake uses various symbols borrowed from different cultures, and they all reveal a peculiar Blakean understanding, as if truth is integrate and he is responsible for showing that integrity. Damrosch assures that Blake “struggles arduously to find appropriate symbols and to hammer them into shape, and is certain of what he has to tell” (ibid. p.88). Steve Vine (2002) analyzes Blake's symbols considering them productive of what he (Vine) calls “material sublime” (p.211). Blake's usage of symbols in his short poems is simple, but enchanting.

In her book, Blake and Tradition II (1968), Kathleen Raine discusses how Blake, in his long poems, uses his symbols in sentences of complex and ambiguous grammar, while the sentences that form his symbols in his short poems are short and simple. Northrop Frye states that Blake's imagery and symbols, which are typical in their concentration, have been influential over the great Romantic poets, and these symbols enlighten the critics' understanding of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats (p.167). This concentration does not mean that the implications of his symbols are always clear. Blake does not supply his poem with “adequate clues...because he wants to rouse the reader's faculties to act” (Damrosch 1980, p.11). Blake knows the “limitations” of his symbols but he also knows he must live with them (ibid. p.89). In The Portable Blake (1968), Alfred Kazin believes that Blake's symbols “stood apart from the natural world and defied it” (p.19). This difference from the ordinary things of life and this defiance to its particulars seem to be the limitation of his symbols, which make them difficult to be understood, particularly, the symbols of his long poems.

Blake's depth comes from the depth of his visions which permeate his thinking. If one wants to share Blake his world, one needs to reconstruct one's own imaginative world out of the visionary one presented to him. Sometimes, it seems difficult to understand Blake because his conceptions are not easily presented to perception. In spite of that, he might not present something new to his reader: he only wants to clarify in his own imaginative way what others are already familiar with, but he looks at things spiritually in a “mode of perception very different from the passive sense impressions of empiricist psychology” (Damrosch, p.19). Blake creates a system of perception for his own in order to be completely free from the restrictions of others.

## William Blake's Short Poems: Depth in Simplicity

-III-

Blake's conceptions are in everyman's personal history—in belief, in childhood, in humanistic relationships and in nature. His deepest conception might be “innocence.” That innocence deeply conceals a spirit of suspended anger threatening to explode, if it is not checked by outside oppressive forces. Sometimes, wrath inside man is controlled by mercy. In his short lyric, “Night,” the image of concealed anger is so impressive:

When wolves and tigers howl for prey,  
They [angels] pitying stand and weep;  
Seeking to drive their thirst away,  
And keeping them from the sheep;  
But if they rush dreadful,  
The Angels, most heedful,  
Receive each mild spirit,  
New worlds to inherit.

(Keynes, ed. 1979, p.215)

Mercy here comes from “heedful” angels who watch the scene trying to maintain innocence everywhere. Such a poem reflects Blake's belief that “God is in the lowest effects as well as in the highest causes”(Annotations to Lavater's Aphorisms on Man, No.630 in Keynes, p.87).

The fundamental principle for Blake's innocence is love. Love, to him, has a personal magnetism, to which all creation turns like the flower to the sun. Blake's poems show that love is the moving force of nature; it is an eternal will possessing the meekness of light, water and air; The whole creation is a grand and divine man; innocence is a uniquely beautiful but also especially threatened condition; Black men have more vision than others—and their souls are white; man's good is threatened by his selfhood; the divine essence inside man is divided into four-fold virtues of love, wisdom, good and truth. It seems that these are Blake's main themes in so many of his short as well as his epical poems. Ironically, Blake had always been impatient under the burden of Christian meekness and Christian ethics. If the Bible calls people to love their enemies, Blake called severity in judging another “a great virtue,” and admitted he could not love an enemy (Annotations to Lavater's Aphorisms on Man, Nos. 36, 248 in Keynes, pp.67,72). In a manuscript note-book, he wrote the following lines:

Anger & wrath my bosom rends  
I profess no generosity to a Foe  
He has observed the Golden Rule  
Till he's become the Golden Fool.

(Keynes, p.538)

## Dr. Hashim

In many of his short poems, particularly in “Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience,” Blake makes the reader suddenly aware of the loss of innocence. The poems pierce the reader's mind by transforming him from a dreamy world of innocence—in a state of disillusion, to a harsh realistic world. The depth of Blake's simplicity is particularly clear in his poem, "The Sick Rose."

O Rose, thou art sick!  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm,  
Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

(Keynes, p.184)

You may look at the rose from different angles although the poem presents it very briefly. It surely refers to “sexuality and impermanence, making a statement about corrupted sexuality”(Damrosch,p.80), while it could also be seen from a simple point of view as referring to the truth of beauty's fate through the fate of the rose. Somebody may see the poem relevant to political, social or religious suppression. The rose's world of innocence is mercilessly attacked by brutality.

“The Blossom” is another example:

Merry, Merry sparrow  
Under leaves so green  
A happy blossom  
Sees you swift as arrow  
Seek your cradle narrow  
Near my bosom  
Pretty, Pretty Robin!  
Under leaves so green  
A happy blossom  
Hears you sobbing, sobbing  
Pretty, Pretty Robin,  
Near my bosom.

(Keynes, p.202)

In spite of the various implications ascribed to this lyric by different critics, no particular implication can be confirmed as the most relevant. Damrosch interprets the lyrics “symbolic of sexual experience with the sobbing robin expressive of mother love”(p.111). Hirsch 1975 thinks that the lyric refers to the

## William Blake's Short Poems: Depth in Simplicity

soul's decaying imprisonment in the body (p.181). Both interpretations are interesting but they are exaggerated because the lucidity, merriment, prettiness and delicacy of the lyric are not congruous with such implications. Nevertheless, the poem is not merely about a simple world of innocent birds; there is certainly something beyond that, and that is not presented through abstract descriptions nor through explicit symbols; the poem might only be a visionary world of intimations.

In "The Chimney Sweeper," knowing the miserable state of the children, who were being used to clean the soot from chimneys, will enhance one's appreciation of the lyric. Blake uses simple words here because the speaker is a child. The complaints of the child could be ironically understood. In the beginning the sweep says:

When my mother died I was very young,  
And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
Could scarcely cry "Weep! Weep! Weep!"  
(Keynes, p.196)

At the end of the lyric, he tells that another sweep sees in a vision an angel who would seemingly speak with prudence:

And the angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,  
He'd have God for his father, and never want joy  
(Ibid.p.196)

Since the boy is sold by his father, he is urgently in need of a surrogate. The child's fears of never finding a kind father are assured by the unintentional advice of the angel. This advice could furthermore mean that the boy could do nothing but accept his miserable state, feeding himself, from time to time, with cheering dreams.

In "My Pretty Rose Tree," a very beautiful flower was presented to the speaker, but he refuses it for the sake of another flower he already possesses:

A flower was offer'd to me,  
Such a flower as May never bore;  
But I said "I've a Pretty Rose-Tree,"  
And I passed the sweet flower o'er.  
Then I went to my pretty Rose-Tree,  
To tend her by day and by night;  
But my Rose turn'd away with jealousy,  
And her thorns were my only delight.  
(Keynes, p.199)

## Dr. Hashim

Because of a certain impulse— may be his sense of “duty” or “fidelity” to his wife, the speaker was obliged to this refusal (Frye, p.8). The last two lines show that the virtuous soul of the speaker is perversely rewarded. The speaker is saying that when one is loyal to a certain principle, one should insist on sticking to it even if it results in pains. From another point of view, the speaker wants to flee the responsibilities of duty and fidelity though he never declares it. The first lines of the lyric may implicitly mean that he is more infatuated with the new flower.

In a very short poem like “The Fly,” Blake simply identifies himself with the minute particulars of the world. He seems to see himself everywhere in order to be able at a later stage to identify himself with eternity.

Am Not I a fly,  
A fly like thee?  
Or Art not thou  
A man like me?

(Keynes, p.213)

This poem looks very simple but, in fact, it elevates perception. The symbol used here is expressive. The elevation might also arise from the correspondence between simple language and deep implication.

-IV-

This humanitarian or mystical idea of identification is certainly derived from religion, which has a great influence on Blake. His symbols call for an act of faith—which the reader must recognize even if he does not share—in the validity of a way of knowing that sees through the phenomena of the world we live in. This does not mean that Blake is vague or mysterious. His mystery is totally different from the conventional hidden and inexpressible realities that find their expression in symbols. In his book, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 2005, Gershom G. Scholem explains that the symbol “signifies nothing” but makes something transparent which is beyond all expression (p.27). In Blake's opinion, mystery and concealment are abominable, and unless we see clearly we do not see at all. Therefore, his symbols are given through literal signification. The symbol is thus endowed with concrete roots and a certain material density. In spite of that, Blake's symbol is given to thought only by way of an interpretation which remains inherently problematical. Blake's poem might mean nothing unless the reader gives it imaginative life, which involves participating in the symbol-making process and seeing through symbols to the conceptions they express. It is clear that Blake tries to handle appropriate symbols and to hammer them into shape, and is certain of what he has to tell if not of how best to tell it.

## William Blake's Short Poems: Depth in Simplicity

Blake's concept of God is so peculiar; God is present in nature but separate from it. God is an individual being, a man or, sometimes, a woman. In "The Little Black Boy," he appears as Christ; In "The Divine Image," He appears as a child. We quote below Blake's "Annotations to Swedenborg's Wisdom of Angels Concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom," as an example of his belief:

Think of a white cloud as being holy, you cannot love it; but think of a holy man within the cloud, love springs up in your thoughts, for to think of holiness distinct from man is impossible to the affections. Thought alone can make monsters, but the affections cannot (Keynes, p.99).

God is divine and human at the same time. In his "Auguries of Innocence," Blake states:

God appears and God is light  
To those poor Souls who dwelt in night.  
But does a Human Form Display  
To those who Dwell in Realms of day.  
(Keynes, p.186)

The question of the Divine is ubiquitous in Blake's poetry. He tried to renew Christianity in his own way, and to re-symbolize religion. The result—both because it is symbolic, and because it tries to breathe new life into old symbols, is extremely ambiguous. We should know that Blake's religion was not that of the orthodox, and to the end of his life he continued to assert the humanity of Jesus the only God. God, for him, does not exist in the superhuman or inhuman worlds of conventional religion. Blake seemed to believe in a Divine Humanity that was divine as well as human. He might have not adored an implacable God above the heavens, but have welcomed a humanized God. Blake teaches people that Christ was not the son of the biblical Jehovah, so in "A Vision of the Last Judgment," he states, "Thinking as I do that the Creator of this World is a very Cruel Being, & being a worshiper of Christ, I cannot help saying the Son, Oh how unlike the Father. First God Almighty comes with a Thump on the Head. Then Jesus Christ comes with a balm to heal it"(Keynes, p.412). In his poem, "Vala," he admits, "...there is no other/God than that God who is the intellectual fountain of Humanity"(Keynes, p.738).

In his short poems, we notice that the protective father is appropriate to childlike seeing, as he shows us throughout "The Songs of Innocence." Blake disliked domination and cruelty even of a loving father. In "A Little Girl Lost," the hatred of authority is clear.

To her father white



**Dr. Hashim**

Came the maiden bright:  
But his loving look,  
Like the holy book  
All her tender limbs with terror shook.

(Keynes, p. 209)

In “Infant Sorrow,” the relationship with the father destroys marriage:

So I smote him & his gore  
Stained the roots my myrtle bore  
But the time of youth is fled  
And grey hairs are on my head.

(Keynes, p.214)

The son in his turn will grow old, and if he should have sons of his own, the cycle will be repeated.

The antithetical God and the antithetical authority are implicit in poems like “The Book of Urizen” and “America.” Urizen symbolizes intellect in the two poems. He and his minions live in caves under the ground. They are inhuman beings resembling gnomes, possessing flesh and blood but no spirit. Urizen has a frosty beard on which his tears freeze. He creates bones of solidness, fetters of ice and other cold horrors. The two poems implicitly reflect Blake's sharp attack upon the established church of his day and upon the intellectual formulations and the political alliances of orthodoxy. Urizen becomes a perversion of the good—a reduction to evil of a noble virtue. He is the worst of all evils, the corruption of the best. His only human response is an uncompromising disobedience.

...who commanded this? What God? What Angel?  
To keep the gen'rous from experience till the ungenerous  
Are unrestrain'd performers of the energies of nature;  
Till pity is become a trade, and generosity a science  
That men get rich by; & the sandy desert is giv'n to the strong?  
What God is he writes laws of peace & clothes him in a tempest?  
What pitying Angel lusts for tears and fans himself with sighs?  
What crawling villain preaches abstinence & wraps himself  
In fat of lambs? No more I follow, no more obedience pay!

(Keynes, “America,” p.271)

In “The Everlasting Gospel,” Blake ironically attacks the religious establishment—the humble Jesus who loves his enemies but who betrays his friends. The superficial obedience of Christ conceals a distortion to heavens and

## William Blake's Short Poems: Depth in Simplicity

to the soul. In its deep layers, the poem shows that superficial religious thinking and behavior poison perception and lead to secret love and secret adultery. In fact, Blake is destroying such a Christ, not glorifying him. The humbleness of this Jesus becomes responsible for the evils in society; innocence and love are made destructive and lifeless. The picture is clearer in "Visions of the Daughters of Albion," where innocence is poisoned and love survived only on tears, hypocrisies, jealousies and prostitution.

Infancy! Fearless, lustful, happy, nestling for delight  
In laps of pleasure: Innocence! Honest, open, seeking  
The vigorous joys of morning light; open to virgin bliss.  
(Keynes, p.193)

Therefore real innocence will never be gained anew unless restrictions are removed:

I'll lie beside thee on a bank & view their wanton play  
In lovely copulation, bliss on bliss, with Theotormon:  
Red as the rosy morning, lustful as the forest born beam,  
Oothon shall view his dear delight, nor ever with jealous cloud  
Come in the heaven of generous love, nor selfish blightings bring.  
(Ibid., p.195)

In his poem, "Morning" from his Note-Book, Blake portrays a great change that befell him by Christian "mercy." The poem is a clear example of Blake's simple wording that reflects deep implications.

To find the Western Path  
Right thro' the Gates of Wrath  
I urge my way;  
Sweet Mercy leads me on:  
With soft repentant moan  
I see the break of day.  
The war of swords & spears  
Melted by dewy tears  
Exhales on high;  
The sun is freed from fears  
And with soft grateful tears  
Ascends the sky.  
(Keynes, p.421)

This "mercy" leads him "thro' the Gates of Wrath" with "repentant moan" to "the break of day." The poem might seemingly reflect a conventional return to

Christianity, but this is not what Blake might have meant, for that kind of Christianity, as we have known, Blake continued to fight in his poetry and controversies. Nor is it an acceptance of conventional meekness and piety. The “war of swords and spears,” which can be a symbol for conventional religious thoughts is substituted by an intellectual war, which destroys these swords and spears leading the poet to a magnificent world where the “sun is freed from fears” and he “ascends the sky” in a different mood and state. If “swords and spears” are destroyed, nature and life are made more human and beautiful than they have been before.

-V-

When Blake tackles topics such as sex, he uses smart symbols. Sex can also show Blake's depth, for it produces emotional as well as conceptual anxiety in him. Sex has always been seen by many poets as a release from the prison of selfhood. It has also been seen by others as the prison itself. It is well known that the sexual life in human society is subject to the strictest constraints and taboos. Therefore, to be free from prohibitions, Blake tries to rediscover primordial liberty and blessedness; the state which preceded the present human condition, in fact, the paradisiacal state. From another point of view, sex to Blake is mingled with revulsion and bestiality. It might be difficult to reconcile the two opposite attitudes, but a thorough reading of Blake's poetry, in particular his long epical poems, will reveal this ambivalence. His short poems reflect that equivocal ambivalence covertly. This situation can be clarified in “The Temple of Love.”

I saw a chapel all of gold  
That none did dare to enter in  
And many weeping stood without  
Weeping, mourning, worshiping  
I saw a serpent rising between  
The white pillars of the door  
And he forced &forced &forced  
Down the golden hinges tore  
And along the pavement sweet  
Set with pearls & rubies bright  
All his slimy length he drew  
Till upon the alter white  
Vomiting his poison out  
On the bread &on the wine  
So I turned into a sty  
And laid me down among the swine.

(Keynes, p. 231)

In his long poems, when Blake tackles religious and political affairs, he associates sex with freedom; when he thinks of sex itself, he is drawn into an

## William Blake's Short Poems: Depth in Simplicity

ancient symbolism of defilement. In the previous lyric, the temple can be a symbol for innocent love, which is defiled by repression or debased sexuality. A deeper interpretation might carry the argument a few steps further. The chapel represents the vagina which is violated by the phallus. To Blake, the serpent connotes sexual degradation; ejaculation is imaged horribly as the serpent "Vomiting his poison out/ On the bread & on the wine." The serpent is loathsome in his slimy length and in his brutal attack with which "he forced & forced & forced" until the vomit comes. The poem ends with the speaker lying down among the swine as a confession of bestial condition. Sex has produced here powerful imagery of attraction mingled with revulsion. The chapel has turned out to be seductive and bestial

### References

- Bentley Jnr, G. E., ed. (2002). William Blake: The Critical Heritage. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Clark, Steve and David Worrall (2001). Blake in the Nineties. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Damrosch, Leopold, Jr. (1980). Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Frye, Northrop (1947). Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- , ed. (1966). William Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc.
- Hirsch, E. D. Jr. (1975). Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to William Blake. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Kazin, Alfred (1968). The Portable Blake. New York; New York University Press.
- Keith, William J. (1966). "The Complexities of Blake's 'Sun-flower': An Archetypal Speculation." In Frye, ed.
- Keynes, Geoffrey, ed. (1979). Blake Complete Writings with Variant Readings. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Natarajan, Uttara, ed. (2007). The Romantic Poets: A Guide to Criticism. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Raine, Kathleen (1968). Blake and Tradition. II. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Scholem, Gershom G. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (2005). Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Vine, Steve (2002). "Blake's Material Sublime." In Studies in Romanticism, 41.

## قصائد وليم بليك القصيرة: عمق في سهولة

### الخلاصة

تهدف الدراسة إلى تقديم تفسيرات جديدة لبعض قصائد وليم بليك القصيرة، فقد لاحظ الباحث من خلال استعراضه للكتابات النقدية عن بليك أن النقاد و الباحثين غالبا ما يهتمون بمجموعته الشعرية "أغاني البراءة و أغاني التجربة" كمثال لشعره السهل و العميق في ذات الوقت، متناسين بعضا من قصائده القصيرة الأخرى.

ولذلك تحاول هذه الدراسة من خلال تحليلها لبعض المواضيع التي يتناولها بليك في قصائده القصيرة، أن تبين أن قصائد مثل "رؤيا بنات البيون" و "أمريكا" و "كتاب أورزن" و مقاطع مدونة في دفاتر ملاحظاته هي سهلة أيضا لكنّها لا تقل عمقا عن "أغاني البراءة و أغاني التجربة".

تركز الدراسة اهتمامها في مواضيع البراءة و الحب والله و الدين و هي الموضوعات الرئيسية التي تظهر عمق بصيرة بليك. والدراسة ليست محاولة لفهم أسلوب وليم بليك بقدر ما هي محاولة لتفسير بعض من قصائده القصيرة.