

STUDIES IN LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE

Vol. 2, No. 2, 2011, pp. 179-184

www.cscanada.net

ISSN 1923-1555 (Print)

ISSN 1923-1563 (Online)

www.cscanada.org

British Romantic Poetry and the Concept of Childhood

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Abstract: Childhood is one of the many themes that Romantic poetry comprises. Most of the British Romantic poets underscore the concepts of childhood and innocence in their works. They deal with the notions in many different ways. They illustrate child abuse, and the way little children are oppressed. They highlight the powers of vision which belong to children. They focus upon the fact that the relationship between a child and nature is a must, and should not be lost. They talk over the things they remember from childhood, and their first experience of powers of nature. Blake (1757-1827) in "The Chimney Sweeper" and "The Little Black boy", Wordsworth (1770-1850) in "We Are Seven", "The Rainbow", and "Ode: Intimation of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", Coleridge (1772-1834) in "The Frost at Midnight", and Shelley (1792-1822) in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" all deal with the idea of childhood, one of the dominant themes of Romantic poetry.

Key words: Childhood; Innocence; Romantic Poetry; Blake; Wordsworth; Coleridge; Shelley

INTRODUCTION

From Blake to Shelley, almost all British Romantic poets have reflected the notion of childhood in their poetry. Childhood and a child's innocence have become one of the major themes of Romantic poetry. For instance, Blake in his "The Chimney Sweeper" argues how little children are exploited by referring to the "harsh realities" of his time, or "the realities of children working in appalling conditions as chimney sweeps" (O' Neill 27). In "The Little Black Boy" a boy comes to a conclusion that "black bodies are better able than white ones to withstand the 'beams of love' (1. 14) emitted by a sun-like God" (ibid 25). And as David Erdman observes, the poet "explained that any skin colour is a cloud that cannot obscure the essential brotherhood of man in a fully enlightened society, such as Heaven" (31).

Wordsworth in "The Rainbow", "Ode: Intimation of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", and "We Are Seven"; and Coleridge in "Frost at Midnight" portray the idea of childhood. Wordsworth in "Ode: Intimation of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", emphasizes his "personal experience", and his "preoccupation with loss and with the saving power of memory" (Lawall 550). As Lawrence comments, "the adult is crippled by the inability to retrieve the child's sense of glory" (44). Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" contains a section in which the poet recalls his childhood, and expresses how he underwent "the power of beauty" when he was only a child. In other words,

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*Received March 31, 2011; accepted April 15, 2011.

"stanza 5 offers a humanist equivalent to ecstatic religious conversion as Shelley describes his first youthful encounter with Intellectual Beauty: 'I shrieked, and clasped my hands in extacy!' (l. 60)" (O' Neill 338). This paper investigates the concept of childhood as voiced in British Romantic poetry.

CHILDHOOD AS VOICED IN THE POETRY OF BLAKE, WORDSWORTH, COLERIDGE, AND SHELLEY

Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" is on the tragic conditions of poor children. Blake criticizes the society of the time, which abuses such children. At the very beginning, the boy describes his status:

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!
So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep. (1. 1-4)

It can be said that the opening stanza "spells out the oppression involved in a child being sold, but like the poem as a whole it concentrates on the speaker's state of mind" (O' Neill 27). In "The chimney sweeper" there is a boy, named Tom, who dreams of freedom. Tom's "shaved head, and the vision of the resurrection of the young chimney sweeps from black coffins all attest to the bitter, loveless and cruelty abbreviated lives of child laborers" (Lawrence 10). This freedom is never achieved in reality:

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-
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black, (3. 9-12)
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
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun. (4. 13-16)

It is clear that a movement is felt while reading the poem. According to O' Neill, "the poem's method of presenting is layered; from the speaker's own kind of innocence it moves to Tom's, embodied in his dream (communicated to us by the older sweep) of release and liberation" (27).

Blake in "The Little Black Boy" depicts the fact that there is no difference between black and white. As the poem opens, a black child begins to speak. The boy says: "And I am black, but O! My soul is white" (l. 2). It can be seen that "the child has interiorized socially generated feelings of inferiority, and displays 'a state of the soul' that is both impressive and touching; the child's innocence shows in his capacity for trust in his mother's teaching and admiration for the 'little English boy' (l. 22); his openness to exploitation is equally evident, however" (O' Neill 25). The boy's mother believes that the black colour is just a cloud which fades sooner or later:

And we are put on earth a little space
That we may learn to bear the beams of love;
And these black bodies and this sunburnt face
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove. (4. 13-16)

The boy's mother says that they will rejoice in the end. They will be able to hear the voice of God:
For when our souls have learnt the heat to bear

The cloud will vanish; we shall hear his voice
Saying, "Come out from the grove, my love and care,
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice." (5. 17-20)

The concept of childhood is of great importance to Wordsworth. In "The Rainbow", he calls the child "father of the man," for children own the power of imagination which fades in adulthood. According to Gillen D'Arcy Wood, "in 'Ode: Intimation of Immortality' Wordsworth takes his antipicturesque poetics further by setting the poem within a placeless interiority, and reducing nature to a set of generic signifiers: a rainbow, the moon, 'land and sea' a 'pansy at my feet' (II. 30, 54)" (237). At the beginning of "Ode: Intimation of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", the poet sounds hopeless, and owns a sense of nostalgia, for he is not a child anymore. Therefore, he cannot enjoy nature in a way a child does:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it has been of yore;
Turn wheresoe'er I may
By night or day
The things which I have seen I now can see no more. (1. 1-9)

The poet maintains that what he used to have as a child is lost now. He is unable to undergo such childhood experiences anymore:

But there's a tree, of many one,
A single field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone;
The pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream? (51-57)

The poet then discusses the memories of childhood and past and their significance. At the end of the poem, Wordsworth becomes hopeful. Although those days are gone, joy will never die. Joy and love give meaning to life. Thus, the poem is divided into three parts. In the first section, "the poet articulates his sense of loss for 'the glory and the dream' (I. 57), despite attempts not to grieve;" in the following part, "his personal sense of loss is placed in a later context and explained as an experience that occurs in every life as we all move further away from our origins in pre-existent splendor;" in the last part, the poet "accepts the fact of loss, argues that, because of memory, it is not absolute, and claims that time does not only erase, since it also makes us wiser as we reflect on suffering" (O' Neill 162). Thus, it is obvious that Wordsworth in this poem "expands on the concept of child's special powers of vision" (Lawrence 44).

Wordsworth in "We Are Seven" portrays a little girl who believes that death will not put an end to life. That is to say, life goes on. She behaves as if she is a philosopher. Here the narrator asks an eight-year-old girl a question. She says that they are seven. She believes that the dead are still alive. The narrator tries to persuade her that they are five, not seven. But, his efforts are all in vain. The girl's imagination helps her come to that conclusion.

Coleridge in "Frost at Midnight", one of his "meditative conversation poems" (Greenblatt 426), describes a nocturnal scene in which his baby is sleeping. It is midnight, and what can be found would be quietness and darkness:

The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully. (I. 4-7)

Thus, it is a good time for thinking and contemplation. The poet then remembers his childhood when he would look at the bars of the fireplace in hope for a stranger to emerge; he recalls his birthplace, and tolling of church bells:

But O! how oft,
How oft, at school, with most believing mind,
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,
To watch that fluttering *stranger!* And as oft
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
Of my sweet birthplace, and the old church-tower,
Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day, (2. 23-30)

Another picture of his childhood which Coleridge spells out is his strict teacher and the way he was pretending to read books, but in fact, glancing in search for a stranger to come:

And so I brooded all the following morn,
Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye
Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
For still I hoped to see the stranger's face (2. 36-41)
Later on, the poet addresses his sleeping babe:
Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
Whose gentle breathings, heard in his deep calm,
Fill up the interspersed vacancies
And momentary pauses of my thought! (3. 44-7)

He admits that he did not enjoy nature in childhood, for he lived "In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim, / And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars" (3. 52-3). He hopes his child will be in nature:

But thou, my babe! Shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds, (3. 54-6)
This may enable the child to hear the language of God:
So shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible

Of that eternal language, which thy God

Utters, who from eternity doth teach

Himself in all, and all things in himself. (3. 58-62)

Therefore, "by a series of beautifully managed transitions, Coleridge comes back to the baby by his side, and from looking back to his own childhood he now looks forward to his son's growing up, which he hopes will be nourished by nature and thus differ from his own 'pent' schooling 'in the great city' (1. 52)" (O' Neill 221).

Shelley in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" discusses "spirit of beauty", which gives meaning to life, and is not easily understood. He asks this power not to depart, for without the power, life would be full of sorrow:

Depart not as thy shadow came,

Depart not – lest the grave should be,

Like life and fear, a dark reality. (4. 46-8)

In the fifth stanza Shelley reminisces his childhood. He used to look for ghosts, and wanted to talk to the dead:

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped

Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,

And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing

Hopes of high talk with the departed dead. (5. 49-52)

He tried his best, but his hopes did not work. He did not hear them, and did not see them: "I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed; / I was not heard – I saw them not -" (5. 53-4).

Suddenly, something unexpected occurred. The shadow of the spirit of beauty fell on Shelley, and made him glad and joyful: "Sudden, thy shadow fell on me; / I shrieked, and clasped my hands in extacy!" (5. 59-60). Therefore, it is clear that the poet has been influenced by that power even as a small child. Later in the poem he asks the power to be with him for the rest of his life.

CONCLUSION

All in all, British Romantic poets, such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley attempt to depict the question of childhood as one of their major themes in their poetry. Blake shows how children are forced to work in the cruel society of the time. He depicts their innocence. Also he mentions that there should be no difference between black bodies and white ones, as both groups will meet God after death. Wordsworth says that children own powers that enable them to enjoy the beauty of nature in a way that adults will not be capable of doing so. Coleridge likes his son to have a better experience of nature. Shelley remembers the time he experienced the Spirit of Beauty when he was a young boy. Accordingly, such poets deal with the notion of childhood in various ways so as to make childhood as one of the dominant themes of Romantic poetry.

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