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CALLING THE 'LAPSED SOUL': A STUDY OF THE REPRESENTATION OF ADULTS IN WILLIAM BLAKE'S *SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE*

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Abstract

This paper explores William Blake's representation of adults, and their relationship with the children in his reputed work, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. The author infers that Blake's juxtaposition of the two kinds of adults, the benevolent and the harsh, gives credence to his belief that their ability or inability to empathise with little children stems from their own childhood experiences. However, the Songs belie a direct and simplistic correlation between one's childhood and adulthood: in poems like "The Chimney Sweeper" and "The Little Black Boy", Blake suggests that if little children can display traits like love and forgiveness despite having no prior experience of them, then the indifferent adults in the collection have no excuse for their behaviour. In addition to parents and guardians, Blake also attacks the church (priests in particular) and the education system for aggravating the misery of children. In a world in which the institutions of the family, the church and the school deny children the right to be free and happy, it is the poet who comes to their rescue in his role as a prophet of sorts, and appeals to the 'lapsed souls' to treat children as the divine creatures he believed them to be.

Keywords: Adults, benevolent, harsh, children, 'poet-prophet'

William Blake concurred with philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau's view that human beings were born innocent and good but got increasingly corrupted as they journeyed towards adulthood. However, this view is not entirely realised in Blake's famed work, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*: not every child grows into a depraved soul once he gets there. We

find instead that the Songs are populated by loving, nurturing adults, who outnumber the non-nurturing ones, a clear sign of the poet's faith in the human ability to resist the onslaught of debilitating institutions (familial, educational, religious or societal), and retain into adulthood, the innocence of childhood. Matt Simpson makes this comment about Blake's depiction of innocence in the "Songs": "Innocence is no idyllic state. Innocence is born and has to exist in the world of Experience which is constantly at pains to corrupt and exploit it. It is vulnerable and in need of protectors, a whole range of whom we find at work in the poems" (23). Just as the "Songs" represent adults who act as protectors of the innocence of children, we find adults who do the opposite; this latter group of adults is censured by Blake as the ones with the "lapsed soul", a term he uses in the introductory poem of "Songs of Experience" (21).

In keeping with his presentation of complementary states and elements in the collection, Blake presents the adults in the "Songs" in one of two avatars – benevolent or harsh. This paper explores the poet's representation of both kinds of adults, as also their relationship with the children depicted in the poems. I believe that such an exploration is valuable for the insight it offers into both childhood and adulthood, as perceived by Blake. It seems to me that the poet's representation of the two kinds of adults gives credence to his belief that the inability of some adults to connect with the children around them or in their care is rooted in their own unhappy childhoods. These 'lapsed souls' are wholly unlike those adults who enjoy the company of children, and who are able to reach out to them in love and joy because their own childhoods were filled with joy and laughter. The members of the clergy make for another set of 'lapsed souls', and come in for strong criticism for compounding the misery of the children such that it ultimately falls to Blake himself, in his avatar as a kind of 'poet-prophet' (Martin 2), to make an impassioned appeal to his adult readers to revere children as the divine creatures he believed them to be. Timothy Vines observes how "Blake's poems serve to damn those institutions which, by their advocacy of this rationality, sought to stifle divine energy with oppressive morality" (115). In cautioning his readers against using the institutions of the family, the church and the school as restrictive instruments to curb the spontaneity and spirit of little children, Blake demonstrates how well he deserved the label 'visionary'.

One thing that becomes immediately apparent about the harsh, uncaring adults in the "Songs" is the pithy communication that marks their interaction with the children. Their silence, stubborn and brutal, is a veritable act of violence against the little ones, as bewildering to the readers as to the children themselves. When juxtaposed with the personified natural world in which even the earth, the trees, and the pebbles are given a voice to freely articulate their ecstasy or anguish, the silence of these adults can only be described as 'unnatural'. As Peter Marshall notes about Blake's representation of nature in the "Songs", "In his poems, clods of mud and pebbles talk, flowers feel" (45). Then why does the father in "Little Boy Lost" refuse to either answer his son or keep pace with him? Is the distance he puts between himself and his son deliberate, or is he simply unaware that the child cannot keep up with him? Did the narrator's father in "The Chimney Sweeper" sell his son into the profession of chimney-sweeping because of poverty, or is he an essentially uncaring parent for whom poverty offered a convenient excuse to sell his son? Blake himself does not enlighten us on this matter, but the latter interpretation is borne out by the fact that the chimney sweeper's father sold his son *after* his wife's death though he had one less mouth to feed. And what explains the silence of those who employ these children? Blake's child narrator in "The Chimney Sweeper" finds his wealthy employers far more culpable for a silence that reflects their apathy towards alleviating either child labour itself, or the poverty that bred it. In The Chimney Sweeper" (from "Songs of Experience"), the boy's parents provide no justification for their callous abandonment of their son, an abandonment predicated on a shallow, hypocritical religiosity that endorses the neglect of the boy who is relegated to "A little black thing in the snow" even as they attend a church service (Blake 29). The poet does not make readers privy to what goes on in the minds of such adults, but their silence makes us wonder: Why do they treat the children in their care the way they do? What prompts the kind of callousness they display? Should we attribute it to arrogance, or indifference? Or is it simply the natural outcome of a universal cultural maxim that exempts adults from justifying to children what they do or don't do, even as they expect unconditional obedience and respect from them? Or could it be something more?

Blake gives his readers to understand that the inability or unwillingness of these adults to empathise with the little ones is the result of having lost touch with the child within, the reasons for which could be many: perhaps as children their own freedom was curtailed by

authoritarian parents, by a rigid religious institution such as the church, or by an education system that kept them away from nature and play with scant regard for their individuality and spontaneity; perhaps the experience of being at the receiving end of authoritarian parental and social environments that robbed them of their own childhoods has rendered them incapable of experiencing or expressing any modicum of affection for children, even their own. Each of these interpretations has been indicated in the Songs in varying degrees. To begin with, the church as an institution is critiqued through the figures of priests, who are seen enacting its principles to the detriment of the children in poems like "The Garden of Love", "The Little Vagabond" and "A Little Boy Lost". In "The Garden of Love", the chapel that has taken the place of the open ground on which the speaker used to play as a child has a sign that bars entry to the congregation, and the Garden of Love is now "filled with graves / And tombstones where flowers should be" (Blake 38). In "The Little Vagabond", the narrator speaks in the voice of the child complaining to his mother about the church, to underscore the failure of the church in addressing the basic needs of its people. Blake undermines the role of the church and holds it responsible for the little vagabond's disillusionment when he has him say, "But, if at the Church they would give us some ale, / And a pleasant fire our souls to regale, / We'd sing and we'd pray all the livelong day, / Nor ever once wish from the Church to stray" (Blake 39). The priest in "A Little Boy Lost" denounces the child as a "fiend" because he heard him say, "Nought loves another as itself, / Nor venerates another so, / Nor is it possible to thought / A greater than itself to know" (Blake 44).

The education system also comes in for a bitter attack through the voice of the schoolboy in the poem of the same name. The metaphor of the child as a bird compelled to "sit in a cage and sing" at school is as eloquent as it is unsettling in its projection of a bleak future for the children of the day:

> And if the tender plants are stripped
> Of their joy in the springing day,
> By sorrow and care's dismay,
>
> How shall the summer arise in joy,
> Or the summer fruits appear?

Or how shall we gather what griefs destroy,
Or bless the mellowing year,
When the blasts of winter appear? (46)

And then we have the nurse in "Nurse's Song" (from "Songs of Experience"), clearly a victim of an unpleasant childhood, as suggested in the line "The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind, / My face turns green and pale" (Blake 30). The cause and effect relationship established by the adverbs "when" and "then" indicates the connection between her unhappy childhood and the kind of adult she turns out to be: it is only "when" she hears the sound of the children's laughter, that it "then" brings to mind memories that cause her to turn "green and pale". We now understand the reason for her conviction that playing is a waste of time, and for preventing the children from playing for longer than she considers necessary. Had the days of her own youth been different, she would have no reason to believe that "Your spring and your day are wasted in play" (Blake 30).

In stark contrast to such indifferent, joyless adults like the nurse, the fathers in "The Chimney Sweeper" (from "Songs of Innocence") and 'The Little Boy Lost' (from "Songs of Innocence"), or the parents from "The Chimney Sweeper" (from "Songs of Experience"), we have someone like Old John (in "The Echoing Green") who shares an easy camaraderie with children, and delights in their presence. We are given to understand that as an old man "with white hair", he and his other companions can "laugh away care" because their own childhoods were joyous: "Such, such were the joys / When we all- girls and boys/In our youth time were seen / on the echoing green" (Blake 3). Unlike the Nurse in "Nurse's Song", it is the joy and freedom that marked their own childhood that allows Old John and his companions to encourage the children to enjoy theirs, and play until "The sun does descend" (Blake 3).

As opposed to those who distance themselves from children in words as in deed, the nurturing adults are often found in the form of parents who openly weep for children. Lyca's parents in "The Little Girl Found", too miserable to speak, are capable only of 'making moan" as they search for their missing child (Blake 27). The mother in "A Song" is moved to tears because she can see the face of god in her sleeping child; and the mother of the little

black boy tries to comfort her bewildered, hurting son, and repeatedly kisses him as she sets him on her lap and teaches him "the heat to bear" (Blake 5). Sometimes, these adults remain silent too, but their silence is the product of a love that is so overwhelming that it overrides the need for speech. The silent tears they quietly shed say more than words could have said, and act as a sharp counterpoint to the silence of the non-nurturing adults who do not speak because they have nothing to say to the children.

We could then deduce from Blake's depiction of the two kinds of adults that, as far as he was concerned, one's own childhood determined one's ability or inability to connect with children in later years. However, making such a direct correlation between one's childhood and the kind of adult one develops into with time is perhaps too simplistic, especially when we consider how the Songs affirm the poet's faith in the human ability to rise above one's own bitter experiences in childhood instead of always succumbing to them. The two much-discussed poems in the "Songs", namely "The Chimney Sweeper" (from "Songs of Innocence") and "The Little Black Boy" adequately demonstrate this credo. The protagonists of both these poems should have shown every indication of anger and bitterness given their experience with the adult world. And yet, we see how they override their exploitation to demonstrate a capacity for redemptive love, empathy and forgiveness *in spite of having no prior experience of it*. Despite being inducted into the adult world of work "while yet my tongue / Could scarcely cry ''Weep! weep! weep! weep!" , and despite being deprived of the comforting presence of parents or any other benevolent benefactors, the child narrator of "The Chimney Sweeper" can take on the role of a surrogate parent, and act as a veritable 'father-figure' to his younger colleague, the hapless Tom, offering him a comfort and solace he never got from his own father (Blake 7). Martin states that "For Blake, the state of innocence which characterizes childhood involves the child's inability to perceive evil as it exists in the world" (4), but Blake's chimney sweeper clearly understands that an evil *has* been done to him and his fellow chimney sweepers, evident in the accusatory tone that marks the line "And—your chimney I sweep" (Blake 7). But in empathising with little Tom, the chimney sweeper shows that though children imitate the behaviour of the adults around them, and often replicate their childhood experiences into adulthood, they need not always be completely defined or limited by those experiences.

As for the little black boy, while utterly bewildered by his experience of racism at school, he can still look forward to a utopian ideal where blacks and whites will live in harmony, because *he* will take the initiative to forgive and forget: "I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear / To lean in joy upon our Father's knee" (Blake 5).

One could see the child's belief that he will be loved and accepted for who he is when he becomes like the white boy as evidence of a naiveté typical of childhood: "In reality, Blake gives us the impression that the little black boy passively accepts oppression, racism and injustice without even thinking of rebelling against white people. He submissively waits for death so as to be free at last" (Kroubo 7). Or else one could read the little boy's behaviour in a more positive light as a refusal to succumb to an understandable desire for vengeance in spite of having experienced hatred and abuse, a reading that would lead us to conclude that Blake was using the boy as a symbol of an oppressed child who can still display a wisdom that belies his age to demonstrate how, in the final analysis, we too have a choice. With the examples of the chimney sweeper and the little black boy before us, Blake was perhaps trying to tell his readers that if these little boys did not succumb to the evils of child labour and racism that made up their respective environments, then the insensitive adults in the poems have no excuse for their behaviour.

But even as Blake holds adults squarely responsible for their treatment of the children, he also points an accusing finger again and again in the direction of the Church for encouraging the faithful to believe that merely fulfilling the obligation of attending mass can take precedence over spending time caring for their children, as is suggested in "The Chimney Sweeper" (from "Songs of Experience). Not just the laity, even the religious are censured for turning a blind eye to an openly practised social evil like chimney sweeping, and for failing to teach the faithful to redress the injustices of the world and ring in an egalitarian society. We see this clearly in the chimney- sweeper poems. James A. Dykstra tells us that "The Protestant Church of England regarded the profession of chimney sweeper as a necessary social evil, because, as a state institution, the Church's purse would swell when England's economy grew" (3). In Blake's poem, the angel who appears in Tom's dream to release the child sweepers from their coffins of black, dangles the carrot of eternal joy and freedom from a soot-encrusted life *only if* the chimney sweepers be 'good', and "do their duty"; in other

words, if they return to the harsh world of chimney sweeping until they die, which they will soon enough, given the hazards of the profession (Blake 7). In having God's own emissary endorse the use of little children as chimney sweepers, Blake makes God and his church complicit in supporting this cruel crime, as a result of which, the image of a benevolent God takes a beating. This should not come as a surprise to us, however; duality in God's nature is clearly suggested in Blake's much anthologised poem, "Tyger". If the ability to create something presupposes the artist's ability to first imagine it, then the creation of a wild, violent and ferocious creature like the tiger suggests a violence and ferocity in the creator himself. In effect, God, too, has his dark side, and is just as subject to the contrary states the Songs are about as the humans he created - a disturbing thought even today, and a downright sacrilegious proposition in Blake's time.

Blake uses the fate of children in England as the basis for destroying the veneer of holiness the church cloaks itself with, and concludes that a country in which so many children are poor and miserable cannot lay claim to being a holy nation: "Is this a holy thing to see / In a rich and fruitful land, — / Babes reduced to misery, / Fed with cold and usurous hand?" (Blake 24).

If the doors of the chapel are shut and the garden of love, is " filled with graves, / And tombstones where flowers should be;" if "priests in black gowns" go about "binding with briars my joys and desires" (Blake 38); and if a priest can burn a child "in a holy place / Where many had been burned before;" right before the eyes of his weeping parents for merely stating the obvious truth that one can't possibly love anyone more than oneself, whom can these children turn to, and what hope can they possibly have? (Blake 44).

As it so happens, abandoned and betrayed by everyone on earth and in heaven, the only recourse of the oppressed is the poet-speaker himself, "the Bard/Who present, past, and future, sees; / Whose ears have heard / The Holy Word / That walked among the ancient tree" (Blake 21). In taking on the mantle of a quasi-activist out to right the wrongs of the world, blessed with a divine ability to see what other mortals cannot or do not want to see, the strongest approbation of childhood comes through the figure of Blake himself. In the introductory poem titled "Introduction" (from "Songs of Innocence"), the poet-piper

privileges the child by placing him on a cloud, reversing the power equation such that it is the child who dictates a set of instructions for him to follow. The piper's ready deferral to the child sets the tone for an important theme that underlies the Songs: the need for adults to acknowledge, as the piper does, the wisdom and innocence of children. The piper's obedience to the child's directives reflects his recognition of the superiority of the child as a divine creature who he must take inspiration from, so that when he does, "Then the strong, clear joy of the divine child is successfully transmitted to the adult piper, as evidenced by the pleasing harmonies released by the piper at the child's behest ... Given that the piper obeys the child, he is then equivalently instructed by Jesus Christ, and the piper is swelled with divine inspiration. (Musante 14)

Kirvalidze and Davitishvili tell us that as an early Romantic, Blake "was actively engaged in trying to create a new kind of poetry that emphasized intuition and imagination over reason and the pastoral over the urban, focusing on the reconciliation of man and nature" (1582). Seeing how children are aligned with the natural world in the 'Songs', it seems that in seeking a reconciliation between man and nature, Blake's aesthetic was directed equally at achieving a reconciliation between man and child.

As one of the benevolent adults himself, a number of poems have the poet-narrator expressing delight in children, whether bounding about at play or sitting in repose at church: "Oh what a multitude they seemed, these flowers of London town! / Seated in companies they sit, with radiance all their own" (Blake 24). The speaker's awe of and reverence for the little ones, easily discernible in these lines, is just as evident in all those poems where children are united with the natural and animal world: the "merry voice, / infant noise" of the little ones is as welcome as the crowing of the cock as both "Merrily, merrily" herald the arrival of spring and ring in the new year (Blake 16). The dynamic, animated voices of children signify a virtual lifeline for the human race, as crucial as nature itself: "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, / And everything else is still" (Blake 17). Harmony in the universe is possible only when the sound of children's laughter echoes in the countryside; conversely, the weeping of the little ones portents a disruption of order , the result of denying them the right to be spontaneous, free, and at play.

Time and again children are represented in terms of their voices, but it is only the benevolent adults, including the poet himself, who can respond to their laughter, not just as a sound that reverberates with the joy of life, but a sound that *is* life itself. In "Laughing Song", the poet-narrator is only too happy to let his voice mingle with the "Ha, ha, he" of children, and he exhorts others to do the same: "Come live, and be merry, and join with me, / To sing the sweet chorus of ''Ha, ha, he!'' (Blake 10).

Martin tells us that the Songs were initially directed at young readers but "Only later, as he began to think of himself as a bard, comparing himself even to the Biblical prophets of the Old Testament, did Blake broaden his vision to entail what can only be described as a scathing indictment of contemporary evils that very much appealed to adult readers" (2). As McCLard observes, the chimney sweepers accept their miserable lot, but Blake depended "on the reader's emotional response and personal values to help him or her recognize the injustice" (14). Sadly, Blake realised that his readers were quite indifferent to his message delivered in his new avatar as 'poet-prophet', a role he begins to adopt from the first poem of "Songs of Experience": "Now, instead of seeing himself as a mere piper inventing songs and stories to amuse children, his poems take on a redemptive, indeed almost a messianic purpose, as he pleads with his readers to "turn away no more," (Martin 2). Blake's "scathing indictment of contemporary evils" might have fallen on deaf ears in his own age, but it would be just as tragic if contemporary readers were to respond in the same way. There is much that we, in the modern world, can take from the work of a visionary, a mystic, and a social critic who was far ahead of his times, not the least being his message that disregarding the needs of children does not augur well either for the adult individual, for the family, or for society at large (Martin 2). Let us not find ourselves added to the poet's list of 'lapsed souls'.

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