

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

October 2013 Vol. 4 Issue-V

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)  
[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## Social Realism and Blake's *Songs*

Udayan Gautam

Research Scholar

Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata

**Abstract:** This dissertation addresses the impact of society on William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Experience* and the reflection of socio-historical experiences in a realistic fashion. The poems included in these collections are known as romantic, imaginative, visionary etc., no doubt, appropriately. But, Instead of overloading itself with mere critical appreciations, this article attempts to study a few of the poems keeping in consideration the historical, political and economic events of the period during which the poems were written. This paper also consists of a relevant discussion on realism and social realism with reference to major theorists of the ideas, thereby trying to weave the thematic approach methodically.

**Keywords:** Poetry, History, Realism, Society

Poetry, in all ages, like all other branches of art and culture, either shares a close bond with the society it emanates from, or is built upon overt or covert threads that the society proffers. However latent they may be, partly because poetry is not a direct product of the social phenomena, but very few poets, or none, have so far been able to evade what happen around them in the society. On this note, it's very much arguable whether Blake's poetry results entirely from his contemporary socio-economic existence only because his creations bear close affinity to the English society of his time, and remains so until we make a comprehensive study of his works. But it can safely be said that on many occasions the social-consciousness of him is the 'base' of his poems and other works. The word 'base' in the previous sentence is well-intended to judge how far it casts its spell on the 'superstructure', i.e. Blake's literary creations in this case, will be made clear later keeping in view what Bloom once feared :

No intelligent thoroughgoing Marxist critic has yet studied all of English Romantic literature in any detail, and I shudder to contemplate a reading of Blake's epics or Byron's *Don Juan* in the light of economic determinism alone. (Bloom xiii)

But he doesn't discard the possibility of such study since he puts the word 'alone' in the end. The probability of a social examination of Blake's poetry, rather, is kept alive when he reflects upon the colossal change in the English socio-economic scenario at that period:

When Blake was born, in 1757, and even as late as 1770, when Wordsworth was born, England was still fundamentally an agricultural society. When Blake died, England was largely an industrial nation, and by 1850, when Wordsworth died, England was in every sense the proper subject for Marxist economic analysis [...]. (ibid.)

Social changes had been everywhere while Blake was alive and he was concerned with the whirlpool of events, be it his radically obdurate standpoint against Burke's views or be it his poetic zeal for human liberation. And at the same time he was aware of the symbiotic relationship between the stomach and creativity, even if the creator is a poet or a craftsman or a painter. The material need for artistic sublime is clearly advocated in these lines: "Works of Art can only be produc'd in Perfection where the Man is either in Affluence or is Above the Care of it."<sup>1</sup> The question of social existence and reality is nearly fundamental to Blake's poetry, though we must never, in any way, forget the imaginative, visionary assortment it figures. He was the second child of James, a hosier, and Catherine. Arthur Symons' account shows Blake, still in his childhood, in complete accordance with the financial situation, sharing his familial crisis. Instead

of attaining an apprenticeship to a painter, Blake modestly chose the profession of engraving.<sup>2</sup> He had to toil hard in order to be monetarily capable to marry. All through his life Blake struggled for financial stability, he sometimes negotiated with his patrons to fix up a suitable patronage.

William Blake has very popularly received epithets like romantic, visionary, meek, gentle, religious and so on. Although some tags like 'rebellious' and 'revolutionary' have been placed upon him sporadically, but very few studies have been made on Blake's a major set of poems which postulates his brilliantly conceived progressive and revolutionary urges by means of connotative portrayal of the socio-economic milieu, presentation of class conflicts through his powerful perception of social realism. Many of Blake's creations and compositions are the products of a unity of specific forces and a particular social articulation. Blake's poetic consciousness was to a large extent determined by his social being. Writes Peter Ackroyd : Those scholars who have located the enduring concern of Blake's verse with looms, with garments and with the details of weaving might care to remember that as a child he was brought up among nightcaps, gloves, socks and stockings. (Ackroyd 20)

Blake observed the social changes, certainly did not perceive the rise of capitalism in the Marxist sense, but did realise that the growth of commerce had taken up the sceptre in conditioning human lives :

First Trades & Commerce, ships & armed vessels he builded  
laborious

To swim the deep; & on the land, children are sold to trades

Of dire necessity, still laboring day and night . . . ('Vala, or The Four Zoas, Night The Seventh' 11-14)

Before entering into Blake's *Songs* and discovering feed ups for the above arguments, let's have a look at what his contemporary economist, Robert Owen, has to say:

According to the last returns under the Production Act, the poor and working classes of Great Britain and Ireland have been found to exceed fifteen millions of persons, or nearly three-fourths of the population of the British Islands. (Owen 'A New View of Society')

Setting sail with the Industrial Revolution, British economy altered rapidly and the emergence of factories, along with many other manufacturing units, gave birth to a very prominent working class. Workers, in industries like textile, ship building, blast furnaces and a major building works could hardly make both ends meet. Both the gigantic Cyfarthfa and Dowlais iron works recruited around 5000 men by 1830. The largest textile engineering firm, Platts of Oldham, employed 7000 men by 1875.<sup>3</sup> However, large integrated industries could not flourish because it was more profitable for the factory owners to utilise the domestic production at a very large scale, a major reason being labour and overhead costs were much cheaper and domestic alienated workers could easily be included in or excluded from the industry depending upon the volatility of market. British Government has also played an amicable role to the rise of capitalism in this period. It lacked any definite industrial policy and therefore remained passive in the upheaval. The state had no control over the increase of private property, private industries or ownership providing Marx with the opportunity to grant the British society as a model of capitalism.

Though Blake grew up in a peaceful time and perceived England as a pleasant abode, an abrupt deviation from his romanticism was caused by the American Revolution and the American War with which " a sudden altering and sharpening of focus did come...Blake reached maturity during the American War". (Erdman 5) Again, Gilchrist's account of Blake, on many occasions, characterises him as a member of the New School, a fervent republican who

sympathised revolution and despised kings and kingcraft because of their hegemonic rule over the plebeian classes. Blake's 'America: A Prophecy' is marked by his resentment, disillusion and abhorrence for the stale ruling systems he had experienced. The poem was composed at a serious juncture of alteration in political beliefs and struggles which Europe saw in the 1790s. It ascertains Blake's attack on the old regime, thereby influencing his philosophical, conceptual and political insight.<sup>4</sup>

Society and its variety of facets are protagonists in many poems of *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. The poems were written during or after the French Revolution and published in 1794. Presentation of 'Two contrary states of human soul' being the motto of this publication, clearly points to a definite thought. They are illustrations of childhood – a child's perception of the world and later realisations. The link that binds the two states together is, no doubt, society. The child in *Songs of Innocence* is yet to enter in a social life and hence feel at bliss sharing unity with God, Nature, innocence, affection, love and joy. But disruption creeps in from the moment it makes an entry to the society. Previously the child was content in his own world. But as a bourgeois society treats everything in terms of commodity exchange, most of the poems of *Songs of Experience* are descriptive of social realities like class discriminations, exploitations, labour problems, child abuses and an overall degradation of value in a capitalist society. The inclusion of contemporary social history lends the *Songs* a strong note of verisimilitude, though the poems are far distant from being dry social documents for their inherent poetic quality. But there is certainly a commitment from the part of the poet is performed; it's the commitment of a prophet who makes everybody aware of what was happening and what's was going to happen. "...the history that Blake presents is not a strictly 'factual' account", notes David E. James

[...] neither is it a poetic embellishment or distortion of the facts. Rather, it presents the interpenetration of material history with the meaning of history in such a way that specific events are seen to manifest the larger metaphysical happenings which control and produce them. (James 68)

A realist expression must incorporate in it a tinge of contemporary history, but not merely a chronology of dull day to day activities; rather it succeeds in the delineation of one's social existence and the understanding of the society as a whole. That man is a social animal and his activities originate from and relentlessly shaped by the society he lives in, is the starting point of realism. Though this concept of realism has been accused of being focused upon the mundane affairs, especially onto the lives of the middle and lower classes in a class-stratified society, but the allegations must have overlooked the fact in spite of its 'a slice of life' outlook realism gives out the idea of a 'reality', both in the subjective and the objective senses. Realistic expressions are, as Blake had proven, a delineation excelling in the combination of empirical observation and visionary deduction. In other words, this has often given birth to social realism which is an immediate derivative of it having been reinforced by the poet's recurring attempt of social analysis.

The term 'social analysis' is the point I like to begin from. But, I'm not going to put down straight forward critical appreciation or paraphrase of the poems. Rather, I'll deliberately direct my attempts towards presenting the perspectives related to a few of them. The very first poem in *Songs of Innocence*, 'Introduction', has a piper and a child in it, the latter putting forward a few requests. The setting is pastoral, and the piper pipes "...down the valleys wild/Piping songs of pleasant glee" (1-2). The relationship between the piper and the child is also very simple, the former being the producer of what the latter pleases. But the more the songs advance,

the complex the relation becomes. From the rural perspective, the poems assume a more urban concreteness; the songs extend from 'The Shepherd', 'Infant Joy' to 'The Chimney Sweeper' and 'Holy Thursday'. Initiating from the rural invocation, the poems enter the hard, dry, and unimpassioned city which will inevitably shun their nascence in 'London'. One social movement is explicit in the progression - it is the transformation of human society from its preliminary rural being to a city-centric existence; the tender fleecy coat in 'The Lamb' will end up in a binary contradiction presenting a blacksmith's expertise with hammer and anvil in 'The Tyger'. Social analysis has been enmeshed involuntarily, and Blake consciously kept them included in his poems.

More close in substantiating a man's existence in a society and the relationship that society holds with an individual are 'The Little Black Boy' and 'The Chimney Sweeper'. 'The Little Black Boy' is an account of a black boy who leads a life of servitude in England. Skin colour determines one's rank and occupation in common in the European city, but here, we must not forget, it's not a grown up man, but a child that a society treats with disparity. Another aide of society in this treatment is religion and they both relish and nourish racial discrimination by putting the 'whites' in a higher plane. The superiority of whiteness comes to the fore when the child claims his innocent soul to be of that colour - "And I am black, but O! my soul is white;/White as an angel is the English child" (2-3). The colour necessarily associated with superiority and goodness is white, even a man's pure soul is supposed to be white. But how can soul be of any colour since its concretisation is too difficult to make. But, the soul and the body get equated in the hand of an oppressive and exploitative society which has already started to judge human beings in terms of 'use value' and 'exchange value'. The fast emergence of bourgeoisie is not subject to a child's understanding. But that something erroneous and discriminatory is being put into human-social relationship comes to the brainwave of the child. At the end of the poem he draws a harmonious egalitarian picture which gives out shades of liberty and texture of common sharing of the earth's resources.

Before we start analysing 'The Chimney Sweeper' (Both from *Innocence & Experience*) let's have a look at what Jane Humphries has recorded -

Children were important secondary earners. When trends in children participation rates are related to the growing numbers of children characteristic of the period, they suggest an increase in the absolute input of child labour time. In addition, the relatively high and increasing participation rates in factory districts and the influx of population into such areas implies a massive increase in children working in factories. (Humphries 261)

Again, Owen gives us a heart rending description in similar parlance:

In the manufacturing districts it is common for parents to send their children of both sexes at seven or eight years of age, in winter as well as summer, at six o'clock in the morning, sometimes of course in the dark, and occasionally amidst frost and snow to enter the manufactories which are often heated to a high temperature, and contain an atmosphere far from being the most favourable to human life. (Owen 'Observations on the Effects of Manufacturing System')

And hence such lines like "A little Black thing among the snow/Crying 'weep! weep!' in notes of woe" ('The Chimney Sweeper' 1-2) occur. Slavery, child labour and its abuses are conspicuous in both 'The Chimney Sweeper' poems. They portray the essence of a capitalist society and the poet's fervent critique of it. In *Experience* the child has been termed as a 'thing', a mere existence, a mere item of utility in a society where disparity runs hand in hand with exploitation. In the last line of the poem in *Experience* the child enlists God, 'his priest' and the

king as the prime accused, thereby touching religious hegemony, its corrupt machinery and the ruling ideology spread through the veins of his society. All these acrimonies are summed up perhaps nowhere else better than in *London*. It is the apex of every social details Blake has so far been dealing with. The poem is representative of the social life that ordinary, working class people experience every day. The poem is in no way different from its counterparts in *Songs of Innocence*, but a continuation of the depiction which Blake has been so far weaving on the evils of his contemporary bourgeois social customs and it is in its true sense the best example of Blake's socio-realistic perception which also hints at a 'true consciousness' as claimed by Georg Lukacs. He writes – "A correct aesthetic understanding of social and historical reality is the precondition of realism" (Lukacs 97) and later on affirms the role of true consciousness from the part of an artist in order to develop not only social realism, but socialist realism. He goes on emphasising the necessity of this consciousness as this "...enables the writer to obtain the fuller understanding of the life of the individual and of society" (ibid 100) Where else can we get a better excerpt in support for this argument than in these epic lines:

How the chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every black'ning church appals;  
And the hapless soldier's sigh  
Runs in blood down palace walls. ('London' 9-12)

It would be over-ambitious on my part if I term Blake's *Songs* as propaganda for socialist realism as expounded in Soviet Union in the 1930s, nor can I tag them as proletariat expressions in an outright fashion but it is for sure that many poems in Blake's *Songs* tend to take the form of concrete understanding of the development, structure and objective realities of Blake's contemporary society accompanied with a definite futuristic imagination about a utopian land of probability, in short, an egalitarian society where –

...the sun does shine,  
And where-e'er the rain does fall:  
Babe can never hunger there,  
Nor poverty the mind appal ('Holy Thursday' 13-16)

Thus, with a certain inkling of a well thought revolutionary zeal, Blake wrote by means of "...building the most intimate portion of his poetry, its imagery, not on the frills of freedom but on the facts of contemporary life"<sup>5</sup>

### Notes & References:

1. From 'A Vision of the Last Judgment', ed. Geoffrey Keynes, *The Complete Prose and Poetry of William Blake*, p. 646
2. See Arthur Symons, *William Blake*, p. 23
3. See Pat Hudson, 'Industrial Organisation and Structure', *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain* Vol.1, Eds. Roderick Floud & Paul Johnson, p. 37
4. See Saree Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s*, pp. 19-20
5. See Mark Schorer, *William Blake : The Politics of Vision*, p. 154

### Works Cited:

- Ackroyd, Peter. *Blake*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1997
- Blake, William. *The Complete Prose and Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, The Nonesuch Press, U.K. 1989
- Bloom, Harold. *The Visionary Company*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London, 2006

- Erdman, David. *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1969
- Hudson, Pat. *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain*, eds. Roderick Floud & Paul Johnson Cambridge University Press, U.K. 2004 pp. 28-56
- Humphries, Jane. *ibid* pp. 238-267
- James, David E. 'Angels out of the Sun: Art, Religion and Politics in Blake's *America*', *New Casebooks: William Blake*, ed. David Punter, Macmillan Press Ltd. London, 1996 pp. 54-70
- Lukacs, Georg. 'Critical Realism and Socialist Realism', *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John Mander and Necke Mander, Merlin, London, 1963
- Makdisi, Saree. *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s*, University of Chicago Press, USA, 2003
- Robert, 'A New View of Society', Political Economy Reference Archive, n.d. Web.  
< <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/economics/owen/ch01.htm> > 5<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2013
- 'Observations on the Effects of the Manufacturing System', Political Economy Reference Archive, n.d. Web.  
< <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/economics/owen/observations.htm> > 5<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2013
- Schorer, Mark. *William Blake: The Politics of Vision*, Peter Smith, Mass, Gloucester, 1975
- Symons, Arthur. *William Blake*, Books Way, Kolkata, 2010