Literary And Religious Authority In Blake’s Songs Of Innocence And Of Experience

William Blake’s Songs of Innocence and of Experience is seen as one of the precursors of the Romantic movement. The collection was published in the late 1700s as the society around him was deeply disturbed by important sociopolitical changes, including the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. The collection of poetry stands out in the way that it goes against both the literary and the religious authority of its time. This can be seen in Blake’s radical views and comments expressed in the poems, notably on his remarks on the Church’s inactivity in face of social injustice and how this leads to the corruption of innocence.

Blake, as a writer, goes against the literary tradition and conventions of his time; Songs of Innocence and of Experience is published in 1789, in the heart of deep political turmoil in Britain. Between the French Revolution and the calls for radical changes in the United Kingdom, the difference between reason and fiction was being questioned with the government’s decision that some literature should be considered as constructive treason. Therefore, several dissident groups of thinkers were being targeted and spied on, which was dangerous for them as they could have been arrested, thrown in prison or even sentenced to death. This meant that writers were limited to what they were allowed to write, not necessarily what they wanted to write; they had to be cautious of what was published and what reached the eyes of others. Consequently, this means that Blake is going deeply against the authority of the time with his criticism and his barely veiled calls for social reform. With his Songs, he could have been arrested and tried for sedition; it was a well-known thing that “[t]hose who were exploring new ways of thought might find themselves a prey to … public attack as Jacobins or infidels” (Paley 245). In other words, his poems were rebelling against the usual decorum of writing of his society; some things were just not allowed to be said, but he said them nonetheless.

Moreover, Blake not only defies the political authorities but also against the literary traditions of the time. He is often described as the first Romantic poet because of his style, which is very different from that of other eighteenth-century writers. The Romantic poets, with their more organic and lyrical style, wrote “in an attempt to re-vitalise … and overcome the moribund formalism and decorativeness of eighteenth-century poets” (Crehan 24). Blake, in his return to spirituality, his use of Christian symbolism and his belief in absolute freedom, does just that; he also “[shatters] the carapace of poetic metre” (Crehan 33) by being the first poet to use free verse. For Blake, freedom – especially freedom of expression – is essential. He sees classical reason as “a confinement and contraction of the feelings and senses” (Crehan 35) and that is why he writes the way he does; his need for reform, both in writing and in society, stems from his desire for complete freedom. The relationship between literary authority and religious authority can therefore be seen in his poetry in the way that he uses his voice to denounce inaction in the face of a societal crisis.

Being both a religious man and a man with a strong concern for social injustice, Blake distrusted the Church as an establishment in power and resented its dismissal of the terrible treatment of human beings that was brought by the Industrial Revolution. Contrary to other radicals in his circle, Blake thought that the only solution to the turmoil agitating Britain was a complete liberation from existing political and religious systems; what he wanted was a world where

individuals were “permitted to develop freely, unhampered by laws, duties or obligations” (Crehan 30). He was in deep discontent with the way the Church was handling the crisis of child labour. This is illustrated in several of his poems, both in the Innocence and in the Experience part of the volume. For instance, in the version of “The Chimney Sweepers” in Songs of Innocence, the speaker tells the story of little Tom who had a divine vision of an angel who “open’d the coffins” (14) that thousands of young chimney sweepers were stuck into and liberated them. Blake uses imagery of green fields, the sun shining, and “naked & white” (17) children with “all their bags left behind” (17) to represent the complete liberation that God will allow for the children once they come to Heaven. However, they still have to live through Hell during their time on earth but again, the speaker reassures little Tom and the reader by stating that “if all do their duty, they need not fear ham” (24). In this poem, Blake seems to offer platitudes to highlight how little they might mean to a child who is stuck in this situation in real life. He plays on the Christian idea that those who do not receive rewards in this life will receive it in the next, to show how little comfort that notion brings with it. He contrasts this heavenly honour with imagery of children being sold at such a young age that their tongue could “scarcely cry weep weep weep weep” (3) and they are covered in soot because they have to sweep chimneys. These two images make the certitude of reward in Heaven sound unlikely and undesirable if the children have to live through this to attain their reward.

Blake’s dissatisfaction with this issue is even more present in the version of this poem in Songs of Experience. This time, the speaker outwardly blames the Church for the misery the children endure: he states that the poor “little black thing” is crying alone in the snow because its parents have “both gone up to the church to pray” (4). Moreover, he addresses the fact that parents and the Church – in other words, figures of authority – think that the children are fine and uninjured in their situation because they “dance & sing” (9). However, it is very clear that even if they do have fun and act like children, it is still unacceptable to make them suffer like this. Blake goes even further by accusing the Church, the priests and the king to “make up a heave of [their] misery” (12). He accuses them, through the rise of industrialisation, which goes on par with child labour and lack of human rights, of profiting off of the backs of the helpless working class. Therefore, with his radical reformative poetry, Blake assumes the voice of marginal figures who would otherwise never get a chance to stand up against authorities so powerful as the Church.

Throughout Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Blake uses the motif of the child to oppose the idyllic nature of childhood and the repressive morality of the Church and its corruption of mankind. He sees children and their innocence as central to the world being a better place because of what Jesus says in Matthew 19:14: “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs;” that is why he uses the motif repeatedly. However, Blake also sees how the Church as a political institution interrupts the children’s full development and simply corrupts their innocence. As for “The Chimney Sweepers,” this motif is again used in “The Garden of Love,” where Blake details how a church has been built over a playground where the speaker used to go when he was a child. The playground invokes good memories for the speaker, where he “used to play on the green” (4), but now the Chapel takes up the whole space. Its doors are shut, with inscriptions of “Thou shalt not” (6) written over it; this apparition of the famous phrasing of the Ten Commandments and the imagery of shut doors remind the reader of how religion is repressive and how it simply prevents people from doing what they want. In this poem, the building itself can be seen as a representation of the Church as a whole, which harkens back to Blake’s idea of liberating society from oppressive authorities to find true freedom. The speaker sees how, before the

chapel was built, the garden was filled with flowers and love but now there are only tombstones and priests in black gowns making it impossible to feel joy. In this poem, Blake therefore clearly describes how children were innocent and lived good lives before the Church emerged and corrupted them with its views and ideas – now, they cannot play, nor feel joy.

Blake's philosophy is that life is full of contradictions, and that is how he writes Songs of Innocence and of Experience: as an experimentation on the contrary nature of life. This idea of mankind as corrupt stems from the fact that he does not see life as a battle between a divine good and evil, simply because he sees "evil as the result not of some primitive act of disobedience but of the misuse of human faculties" (Paley 246). However, according to Blake, the fact that there is violence in the world is not inherently bad, because he knows it is a reflection of the Creator; just like a work of art is in some way a reflection of the artist, the world is in some way a reflection of God. This is where he finds this "fearful symmetry" (Blake); in the way the presence of evil is not only undeniable, but also deliberate. In "The Tyger," Blake explains how God created the tiger, this incredibly violent, deadly, and terrible creature; the repeated use of rhetorical questions leaves the reader faced with the inscrutability of the divine will when faced with such a creation. In this respect, Blake understands that evil is inevitably part of society and that God made it that way; however, he writes in the hopes that society as a whole may find a way to resolve this contrary. Therefore, Blake understands that children are suffering at the hands of industrialisation, but he thinks the Church should help resolve the issue, to bring about the reconciliation of the contrary nature of life between suffering and childhood innocence.

In conclusion, in Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Blake uses the themes of children and of innocence to highlight the deep corruption that the Church brings about. He rebels against literary and religious authority by calling for a reform of the political and religious institutions in his poetry, which is actively trying to distance itself from other eighteenth-century writers. Blake uses his voice to talk for marginalized figures, which makes him an authority himself; in his lifetime, he is known for being surrounded by radical characters and for his own radical writings.