

WILLIAM BLAKE AND THE SUPERNATURAL

Tahera Mannan
Assistant Professor
Mahdi Bagh Colony
Dr. Ambedkar Road
Nagpur 440017, India

Abstract

The paper discusses the poems and engravings of William Blake. He has always been associated with the supernatural. At the age of four he saw the face of God against the windowpane and shrank back in terror. He had no difficulty in conjuring up visions and dreams. As an engraver, his designs were always alive and vivid, full of action, full of raw emotion, wrath, hatred, tenderness, sorrow... All the human emotions are depicted one way or another by William Blake.

The paper also discusses the philosophy of William Blake which was given by his vision, highly spiritual and referring often to a higher being. Blake makes many references to God and a supernatural, omniscient, and omnipresent being. Inventing a mythology full of angels, demons, and Gods that mirror a lot of Milton's writings, it becomes obvious that William Blake was fascinated with religion as literary allusion and infuriated with it as a means to suppress man's natural desires.

None of the scenes in Blake's art show landscapes as we know it. All his backgrounds are "eternal", like darkness, or stars. Blake the painter does not do shepherds in a landscape or baby Jesus. Instead, he tackles subjects such as "the ghost of a flea", or a portrait of Newton.

Keywords:- William Blake, Supernatural, Visions, Engraver, Demon, Job.

Introduction

William Blake born on 28th November, 1757, was an English poet, painter and engraver. He was a third of the seven children of a poor family who was unable to support the luxury of proper education. He attended school only to learn how to read and write and was home taught by his mother, Catherine Wright Armitage Blake.

His experience with the supernatural began in his earliest childhood when he saw the face of God in the windowpane and shrank back in terror. The one book that profoundly influenced Blake throughout his life was The Bible. At the age of eight or ten he claimed to have seen, "a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars."ⁱ

He was so deeply influenced by these visions and spiritual adventures that they eventually became a part of his life. His parents were largely supportive of his visions, especially his mother

whose bedroom walls were usually used by Blake for his drawings. His visions were often associated with beautiful religious themes and imagery, and may have inspired him further with spiritual works and pursuits. Certainly, religious concepts and imagery figure centrally in Blake's works. God and Christianity constituted the intellectual center of his writings, from which he drew inspiration. Blake believed he was personally instructed and encouraged by Archangels to create his artistic works, which he claimed were actively read and enjoyed by the same Archangels. In a letter of condolence to William Hayley, dated 6 May 1800, four days after the death of Hayley's son, Blake wrote:

“I know that our deceased friends are more really with us than when they were apparent to our mortal part. Thirteen years ago I lost a brother, and with his spirit I converse daily and hourly in the spirit, and see him in my remembrance, in the region of my imagination. I hear his advice, and even now write from his dictate.”ⁱⁱ

Aware of Blake's visions, William Wordsworth commented, "There was no doubt that this poor man was mad, but there is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott."ⁱⁱⁱ

In a more deferential vein, writing in *A Short Biographical Dictionary of English Literature*, John William Cousins wrote that Blake was "a truly pious and loving soul, neglected and misunderstood by the world, but appreciated by an elect few", who "led a cheerful and contented life of poverty illumined by visions and celestial inspirations."^{iv}

Blake's sanity was called into question as recently as the publication of the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, whose entry on Blake comments that "The question whether Blake was or was not mad seems likely to remain in dispute, but there can be no doubt whatever that he was at different periods of his life under the influence of illusions for which there are no outward facts to account, and that much of what he wrote is so far wanting in the quality of sanity as to be without a logical coherence."

Blake's Engravings

Blake used a unique method of producing most of his books, paintings, pamphlets and poems called 'Relief Etching.' It is also called as Illuminated Paintings or books. Blake also employed intaglio engraving in his own work, most notably for the illustrations of the *Book of Job*, completed just before his death.

Without referring to living models, with figures taken from Renaissance engravings and Gothic tombs, William Blake created his own world. An engraver by trade, he believed in the hard, wiry outline, which he used to contain his own symbols. He put figures together in long fluid and wavelike movements, or in spirals around great trees and oceans. His designs are always alive and vivid, full of action. Full of raw emotion, wrath, hatred, tenderness, sorrows. All the human emotions are depicted one way or another by William Blake.

Blake's Visions and Creative Mindset

The earlier work is primarily rebellious in character and can be seen as a protest against dogmatic religion especially notable in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which the figure represented by the "Devil" is virtually a hero rebelling against an imposter authoritarian deity. In later works, such as *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, Blake carves a distinctive vision of a humanity redeemed by self-sacrifice and forgiveness, while retaining his earlier negative attitude towards

what he felt was the rigid and morbid authoritarianism of traditional religion. Not all readers of Blake agree upon how much continuity exists between Blake's earlier and later works.

Psychoanalyst June Singer has written that Blake's late work displayed a development of the ideas first introduced in his earlier works, namely, the humanitarian goal of achieving personal wholeness of body and spirit. The final section of the expanded edition of her Blake study *The Unholy Bible* suggests the later works are the "Bible of Hell" promised in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Regarding Blake's final poem "Jerusalem", she writes: "The promise of the divine in man, made in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, is at last fulfilled."^v

John Middleton Murry notes discontinuity between *Marriage* and the late works, in that while the early Blake focused on a "sheer negative opposition between Energy and Reason", the later Blake emphasized the notions of self-sacrifice and forgiveness as the road to interior wholeness. This renunciation of the sharper dualism of *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is evidenced in particular by the humanization of the character of Urizen in the later works. Murry characterizes the later Blake as having found "mutual understanding" and "mutual forgiveness".^{vi}

Although Blake's attacks on conventional religion were shocking in his own day, his rejection of religiosity was not a rejection of religion per se. His view of orthodoxy is evident in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a series of texts written in imitation of Biblical prophecy. Therein, Blake lists several Proverbs of Hell, among which are the following:

Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion.

As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys. (8.21, 9.55, E36)

In *The Everlasting Gospel*, Blake does not present Jesus as a philosopher or traditional messianic figure, but as a supremely creative being, above dogma, logic and even morality:

If he had been Antichrist Creeping Jesus,

He'd have done anything to please us:

Gone sneaking into Synagogues

And not us'd the Elders & Priests like Dogs,

But humble as a Lamb or Ass,

Obey'd himself to Caiaphas.

God wants not Man to Humble himself (55–61, E519-20)^{vii}

In a letter to John Flaxman, dated 21 September 1800, Blake wrote:

[The town of] Felpham is a sweet place for Study, because it is more spiritual than London. Heaven opens here on all sides her golden Gates; her windows are not obstructed by vapours; voices of Celestial inhabitants are more distinctly heard, & their forms more distinctly seen; & my Cottage is also a Shadow of their houses. My Wife & Sister are both well, courting Neptune for an embrace... I am more famed in Heaven for my works than I could well conceive. In my Brain are studies & Chambers filled with books & pictures of old, which I wrote & painted in ages of Eternity before my mortal life; & those works are the delight & Study of Archangels. (E710)

In a letter to Thomas Butts, dated 25 April 1803, Blake wrote: Now I may say to you, what perhaps I should not dare to say to anyone else: That I can alone carry on my visionary studies in London unannoy'd, & that I may converse with my friends in Eternity, See Visions, Dream Dreams & prophecy & speak Parables unobserv'd & at liberty from the Doubts of other

Mortals; perhaps Doubts proceeding from Kindness, but Doubts are always pernicious, Especially when we Doubt our Friends.

In A Vision of the Last Judgment Blake wrote:

Error is Created Truth is Eternal Error or Creation will be Burned Up & then & not till then Truth or Eternity will appear It is Burnt up the Moment Men cease to behold it I assert for My self that I do not behold the Outward Creation & that to me it is hindrance & not Action it is as the Dirt upon my feet No part of Me. What it will be Questioned When the Sun rises do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea O no no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight I look thro it & not with it. (E565-6)^{viii}

Blake was a Londoner and it was London, not some romantic place near a river in the countryside, that was the site of his visions. In his visions, he saw a different London than all those other people that ran through its streets. Blake saw London as a heavenly city; he saw angels, souls, prophets. Hence, to him, London was a “Heavenly London”, a “Jerusalem”, one of his best known poems. In 1916, at the height of the Great War, C. Hubert H. Parry would set it into music, to become known as the hymn “Jerusalem”, a key ingredient in every Last Night of the Proms and to some, almost like a second national anthem, often used as such for sporting occasions. Indeed, upon hearing the orchestral version for the first time, King George V said that he preferred it over the national anthem.

Blake’s Philosophy

Blake had a complex relationship with Enlightenment philosophy. Due to his visionary religious beliefs, he opposed the Newtonian view of the universe. This mindset is reflected in an excerpt from Blake's Jerusalem:

I turn my eyes to the Schools & Universities of Europe
 And there behold the Loom of Locke whose Woof rages dire
 Washd by the Water-wheels of Newton. black the cloth
 In heavy wreathes folds over every Nation; cruel Works
 Of many Wheels I view, wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic
 Moving by compulsion each other: not as those in Eden: which
 Wheel within Wheel in freedom revolve in harmony & peace. (15.14–20, E159)

Blake believed the paintings of Sir Joshua Reynolds, which depict the naturalistic fall of light upon objects, were products entirely of the "vegetative eye", and he saw Locke and Newton as "the true progenitors of Sir Joshua Reynolds' aesthetic".^{ix}

The popular taste in the England of that time for such paintings was satisfied with mezzotints, prints produced by a process that created an image from thousands of tiny dots upon the page. Blake saw an analogy between this and Newton's particle theory of light.^x

Accordingly, Blake never used the technique, opting rather to develop a method of engraving purely in fluid line, insisting that:

a Line or Lineament is not formed by Chance a Line is a Line in its
 Minutest Subdivision[s] Strait or Crooked It is Itself & Not
 Intermeasurable with or by any Thing Else Such is Job. (E784)

It has been supposed that, despite his opposition to Enlightenment principles, Blake arrived at a linear aesthetic that was in many ways more similar to the neoclassical engravings of John Flaxman than to the works of the Romantics, with whom he is often classified. However, Blake's

relationship with Flaxman seems to have grown more distant after Blake's return from Felpham, and there are surviving letters between Flaxman and Hayley wherein Flaxman speaks ill of Blake's theories of art. Blake further criticized Flaxman's styles and theories of art in his responses to criticism made against his print of Chaucer's *Canterbury Pilgrims* in 1810.^{xi}

Blake's Poems

The Romantic period is rife with literature that makes reference to the supernatural. In particular Blake's *The Lamb* and *The Tyger* both being from his volume *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* are poems that illustrate Blake's analysis of the supernatural from a Judeo-Christian context. The poems serve as critiques of perspectives of God's interaction with the world revealing a duality that conceptualizes and reflects the burgeoning interests in the sciences and development of pseudo-sciences during the late eighteenth century. Explicating the poems separately and synchronizing the themes and techniques used serve as clarifications as to why Blake's work has profound effects and successes.

In *The Lamb* the speaker of the poem evokes a tone reminiscent of a parent speaking to a child, "Little Lamb, who made thee? [...] Gave thee life & bid thee feed, By the stream & o'er the mead."

The opening stanza is composed of these types of questions clearly preparing to answer these particular questions that would be difficult to answer without a reference to the supernatural. In fact, the opening stanza evokes the religious symbol of the lamb. The lamb in the context of Christianity has an interesting symbolic representation of Jesus Christ and it simultaneously serves as a symbol of God's connection with humanity. In the canon, Christ is described as the Lamb of God but he is also depicted as a Shepherd of lambs. The lambs are, as Blake is hinting to in the opening stanza of *The Lamb*, humanity. The symbol is effective because it solidifies the rapport the speaker is constructing between God and the child.

The questions put forth by the speaker in the opening stanza of *The Lamb* also serve as a psychological calibration for the child. The questions prepare the child for the answers that are to be provided. It is safe to assume that the speaker of *The Lamb* is speaking to a child young enough to not have contemplated the origin of life but old enough to adequately conceptualize theological answers. The introduction of questions and immediate gratification of a clear and basically absolute answer is an interesting technique that is particularly successful because it does not confuse the reader. The calibration basically reveals a side of the human experience that is hidden and the answer that ensues serves as an illumination of the unknown area. The speaker exclaims to the child, "Little Lamb I'll tell thee, Little Lamb I'll tell thee," after posing the primary question "Little Lamb who made thee? Dost thou know who made thee?" Each of these lines are written in short couplets that provide a continuity of simplicity in terms of technique but also an elevated level of excitement in terms of theme. The success of Blake's couplets here are a reflection again of the simplicity of *The Lamb* because the couplets could easily be written by a child, keeping the language and content within the scope of a child's understanding.

Blake's speaker in *The Lamb* follows suit with the psychological calibration by conveying an element of togetherness between Christ and the child, and ultimately all of humanity;

"He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,

We are called by his name”

More specifically, these lines align the child with the supernatural with a comfortable tone that makes the idea warm, encouraging the rapport being spoken of. The technique Blake is using here serves as gratification for the child because it does not have complicated theological terms but simple language that answers the initial questions with the warmth of the lamb who is Christ. Blake proceeds to close the last stanza with another couplet, “Little Lamb God Bless thee. Little Lamb God bless thee”. These lines close the poem with an incredibly positive message. The couplets of The Lamb if read alone could basically be a poem of its own right that illustrates the idea of the entire piece because they simply propose the questions and more or less answer them directly.^{xii}

In retrospect of his poem The Lamb Blake's The Tyger takes an entirely different perspective of God in relation to humanity. The poem has a much more daunting theme introducing the tiger as a key figure relative to the lamb of The Lamb. Similarly to The Lamb, The Tyger opens with a series of questions,

“Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry”?

The language Blake uses here suggests a fearful view of God. It is question why God would create a dangerous creature like the tiger. This provides the reader with a more critical lens of analyzing God's interaction with humanity. The speaker of The Lamb speaks in absolutes in reference to the supernatural, while in The Tyger, the questioning does not bolster a rapport with God, but questions why there should be one. Blake creates a theme of fear of the unknown here that is interesting because it is in the same volume of The Lamb. The Tyger is basically the negative reciprocal of The Lamb because it challenges God.

The images in The Tyger are also constructed with darker themes that portray a more cold and violent God.

“What hammer? What the chain?
On what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp”?

The imagery here is akin to the blacksmith and not to the gentle Shepard of The Lamb. The images are rigid and evoke images of fire, molten metal, a dangerous environment which ultimately translates to a negative creator that is not as concerned with the safety of humanity as suggested in The Lamb. Blake is structuring a system here that defies the comforts provided to the child in The Lamb. The Tyger balances the perspectives of God, being reluctant to suggest that God is an absolute being of good. It could also serve, however, as a mystification of God because humanity would not suggest absolute benevolence and create a dangerous creature like the tiger. Blake deepens the mystery of God after suggesting his readers relate to God. The technique used here is successful because it inverts the notions of The Lamb.

William Blake's poem The Lamb is an interesting piece that can serve as a survey of popular perspectives on God and humanity. The Tyger can be used to challenge the themes of The Lamb and reference possibly the challenges of religion by the growing interest in science of the late eighteenth century. Both of the pieces are reminiscent of the comingling and disagreements of the scientific community and religious communities of the eighteenth century and it continues to be a key issue modernly.^{xiii}

Conclusion

With his individual visions William Blake created new symbols and myths in the British literature. The purpose of his poetry was to wake up our imagination and to present the reality between a heavenly place and a dark hell. In his Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience he manages to do this with simplicity.

Blake's beliefs in the essentially subjective nature of the world — indeed his belief that the objective world arose from a spiritual fall into a material illusion. In his massive prophecies (and over the course of his life), he created a pantheon of characters, both gods and monsters, which represent aspects of human experience. His imagery is potent and complex, but in essence it is this: Man is fallen from unity into division, his spiritual 'aspects' warring with each other and in the process determining the nature of the material world. The Eternal Man, Albion, falls because he comes to believe that he must build an objective world around himself in order to be safe. His gigantic body lies beneath the world as we know it, forming its template, but will one day arise, rejoined with his various alienated aspects into a dynamic unity. This will happen (and in a way continually happens) whenever human perception widens and recognizes that the true nature of reality is subjective and that the objective, or Death, world can hold no power over us.

References:

-
- ⁱ Bentley, Gerald Eades and Bentley Jr., G. William Blake: The Critical Heritage. 1995, page 36-7.
- ⁱⁱ Johnson, John (1823). *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Blake*, ESQ Vol II. London: S. and R. Bentley, Dorset-Street. p. 506.
- ⁱⁱⁱ John Ezard (6 July 2004). "Blake's vision on show". *The Guardian*. UK. Retrieved 24 March 2008.
- ^{iv} Cousin, John William (1933). *A Short Biographical Dictionary of English literature*. Plain Label Books. p. 81. ISBN 9781603036962.
- ^v *The Unholy Bible*, June Singer, p. 229.
- ^{vi} William Blake, Murry, p. 168.
- ^{vii} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Blake
- ^{viii} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Blake
- ^{ix} Ackroyd, Peter (1995). *Blake*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson. p. 285. ISBN 1-85619-278-4.
- ^x Essick, Robert N. (1980). *William Blake, Printmaker*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. p. 248.
- ^{xi} Erdman, David ed. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, Yale Anchor Press
- ^{xii} Blake, William. "The Lamb." *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*. 2nd ed. Vol. E. New York: Norton, 2002. 783. Print
- ^{xiii} Blake, William. "The Lamb." *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*. 2nd ed. Vol. E. New York: Norton, 2002. 783. Print