

William Blake and William Wordsworth's Reactions to the Industrial Revolution

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The Romantic Period in literature roughly between the years 1780 and 1830 was an age of war, upheaval, and in particular, an age of revolutions. With the French Revolution, there appeared new ideals based on 'Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity', which affected the European societies in several aspects including the political, social, and cultural dynamics of the countries. William Blake was hopeful for the outcomes of the revolution. During the first phase of the French Revolution, he wrote a long epic called *The French Revolution (1790-1791)* whose subject matter is the revolution itself and his radical political views. He was in favor of the abolition of the corrupted monarchy and the decaying feudal system. Similar to Blake, William Wordsworth believed in the necessity of changes not only in the political system but also in the social structure of his country. He praised the French Revolution in his long autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*: "France was standing on top of the golden hours / And human nature seeming born again."¹ Nevertheless, both Blake and Wordsworth were disappointed due to the violent acts, riots, and particularly September Massacres, which caused a growing disillusionment with the ideals of the French Revolution.

Apart from the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution brought about many economic and social changes. Poor agricultural labourers and their families had to move to the big cities to work in the factories and they suffered from hardwork and poverty. The shift from the traditional paradigm based on agriculture to a new materialist system was a painful process. William Blake and later William Wordsworth protested such social, cultural, political, and historical changes of their time. Although there are similarities between these two poets in their reactions against the Industrial Revolution, the way they express their attitudes to the social changes differ from each other in respect to their use of imagery in their poems. Whereas Blake directly focuses on the corruption of city life

1. William Wordsworth, "The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind," in M. H. Abrams, *et al.* (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Literature*, 2, 6th edition (New York: W. W. Norton Company Inc., 1993), 1. 341-342.

in his short poems from the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Wordsworth prefers to conceal his criticism of industrialization and humanity by foregrounding the beauties of nature in his sonnets. In this paper I will discuss this view by analysing “London” and “The Chimney Sweeper” poems by Blake and “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge” and “The World is too Much for Us” by Wordsworth.

The Industrial Revolution, which also affected the Romantic writers, created an opportunity for Britain to expand its colonies, and increase prosperity in the country through agricultural productivity and industrial growth. This revolution widened the gap between the class of capital and labor. The growth of industry had a destructive effect on human nature in terms of physical, spiritual and moral aspects of life. Therefore, the Romantic poets revolted against this new system which suppressed human feelings and imagination and turned them into machine-like individuals. The Romantic attitude to industrialism is depicted in their poems through the description of smoking chimneys, noisy factories and idyllic charms of the countryside. Nature was the most important source of inspiration for the Romantic poets. It was regarded as the ideal place where human soul could be healed from the wounds inflicted by the industrialized urban life. By becoming one with nature, man could express his feelings from the heart. For the Romantics, imagination was the power of the poets, which enabled them to perceive common life from an unconventional perspective. Instead of kings, politicians or heroic characters, and their complicated language, they gave voice to the poor, the powerless, the uneducated, the women, and the children with clear and simple language.

William Blake was concerned with nature, believed in imagination and put emphasis on the spontaneous feelings of children in his poems. He states his ideas about nature and the power of imagination in his notes as follows:

“I feel that a man may be happy in This World. And I know that This World is a World of Imagination & Vision. I see Every thing I paint in This world, but Every body does not see alike. To the Eyes of a Miser a Guinea is far more beautiful than the Sun, & a bag worn with the use of Money has more beautiful proportions than a Vine filled with Grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing which stands in the way. Some see Nature all Ridicule & Deformity, and by these I shall not regulate my proportions; & some scarce see Nature at all. But to the Eyes of the Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees. As the Eye is formed, such are its Powers.”²

2. Quoted by Alfred Kazin in “An Introduction to William Blake,” *The Multimedia Library*, May 5, 2013, <http://www.multimedialibrary.com/Articles/Kazin/alfredblake.asp>.

Blake identifies nature with imagination, two important terms of Romanticism to criticize the effects of the Industrial Revolution. He juxtaposes a materialist person with someone who values nature.

In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* which Wordsworth collaborated with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth outlines the main characteristics of Romantic poetry. He claims:

“The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement.”³

He underlines the Romantic poets' ability to depict nature from a different perspective, which an ordinary mind cannot imagine or perceive. The poet helps the readers see the natural environment with its power and fascinating beauty. By putting emphasis on nature, feelings, imagination, individual experience, and ordinary language of man, Blake and Wordsworth are considered to be the forerunners of Romantic poetry.

Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, a collection of poems which introduces the innocent world of childhood against the adult's world of corruption and repression, was published in 1794. It shows the two contrary states of the human soul: the innocent, naive, and hopeful perspective of the child as opposed to the experienced and corrupted worldview of the adult. In “London” from the *Songs of Experience*, Blake acts as a critic and judges all the faults of the capitalist society. He expresses his criticism of the economic conditions of people, roles of the government, responsibilities of the church, corruption of family institution, and moral decadence of life in London. “In eighteenth century literature, London became the focus of national concern about crime, riots, and social disorder, on account of both of its vast size and of its opportunities for illegality.”⁴ Manufacture in factories and the speed of mechanization created a corrupt and polluted urban society. The rural world of the past was replaced with the new capitalist society of the factory towns. As a result, “from 1750 to 1801,... the city's population increased by an estimated

3. William Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” in M. H. Abrams, *et al.* (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Literature*, 2, 6th edition (New York: W. W. Norton Company Inc., 1993), p.143.

4. John Stevenson, “Industrialization,” in Iain McCalman (ed.), *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.137.

third, from 675,000 to 900,000. Many of those flocking to the city and swelling its population were the rootless poor.”⁵ These people were affected negatively by the Industrial Revolution since their values were degraded and their skills were replaced by mechanization as a result of economic growth. The unhealthy quality of life as well as the social unrest and disorder in London caused Blake to criticize the industrialized society.

Blake starts the poem by focusing on social facts which affect a variety of people from children to prostitutes. The persona of the poem walks “thro’ each charter’d street, / Near where the charter’d Thames does flow.”⁶ The word “charter” has two meanings: first, it refers to a written document outlining the rights or privileges of people. He wants to show the other side of the coin by underlining the fact that “... these charters were freedoms granted to particular classes of people: they automatically involved a loss of liberty for those who did not belong”⁷ to the privileged classes. Second, it means hired for a particular service, which suggests ownership of private property in capitalism. In this sense, both the streets of London and the Thames River are utilized for the purpose of material gain. In an earlier version, Blake wrote “dirty street” and “dirty Thames” in order to refer to the pollution of nature caused by the industrialized city life. In his description of Londoners, the persona notices suffering. He says, “And mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, Marks of woe.”⁸ By repeating the word “mark”, he reinforces the poor conditions of life in London where people are imprisoned and show no sign of lively, happy, and healthy human existence. Such repetitions of words and parallelisms in structure also highlight how streets of London are compartmentalized, and how monotonous the lives of the city-dwellers are.

The second stanza is dominated by the repetition of the word “every”, which generalizes the inhumane situation of people in London. Blake notices men’s cries and suffering saying, “In every voice, in every ban / The mind-forg’d manacles I hear:”⁹ He uses the word “ban” as a synecdoche for the government by which political and legal prohibition is put into practice. In an earlier version, Blake used “German forged manacles” which “was a direct tilt at the Hanoverian monarchy; the London reformers were well

5. Stuart Peterfreund, *William Blake in a Newtonian World* (New York: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), p.170.

6. William Blake, “London,” in M. H. Abrams, *et al.* (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Literature*, 2, 6th edition (New York: W. W. Norton Company Inc., 1993), l. 1-2.

7. John Beer, *William Blake* (England: The Gresham Press, 1982), p.20.

8. William Blake, “London”, l. 3-4.

9. William Blake, “London”, l. 7-8.

aware that the Government could call German mercenaries to its aid in the event of any crisis.”¹⁰ People are afraid of being punished if they resist the wills of the government or the church. This fear causes their dependence on institutions. By replacing that word with “mind,” Blake “embraced a more difficult truth, for the evils of London are not political in a narrow sense but social, woven into the lives of all Londoners.”¹¹ Through the criticism of the institutions such as the palace, the church, and the family, Blake depicts not only the sufferers and victims of the industrialized society but also the oppressing rulers who put pressure on the working class.

In the third stanza, Blake introduces the suffering chimney sweeper as an example to child abuse by materialism and industry. “Blackning Church” is a criticism on the clergymen who disregard the misery of such children.¹² Like the chimney sweepers, the soldiers are shown to be suffering individuals. Blake depicts them as “hapless Soldier’s sighing” to underline their fear of death and miserable situation since they were forced to fight for their country.¹³ He uses the visual imagery of “blood down Palace walls” to reflect the corruption of the government whose only purpose was to expand its territory through wars.¹⁴

In the last stanza, it is midnight and the “harlot” is introduced as another victim of this corrupted society. Her curse, according to Blake, “blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.”¹⁵ Blake criticizes the family institution, which is supposed to be formed by love; however, “hearse” connotes death and reflects the corrupted bourgeois morality. The middle class women refused to accept their natural instincts and sexual desires, which caused the middle class men to look for happiness with prostitutes in the industrial towns to satisfy their desires. Owing to the harsh life conditions and bourgeois understanding of marital sexuality, prostitution increased rapidly in Britain. “The Marriage hearse” is a striking closing line that shows the tragic culmination of societies on the threshold of industrialization. This is an age in which there is lack of morality, exploitation of children, and degradation of human feelings and imagination.

“The Chimney Sweeper” from the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* shows the dark picture of child labor and social injustice in England in the late eighteenth and nine-

10. William P. Jessup, “The Making of London,” *The New Reasoner Winter*, May 2, 2013, 58/3, <http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/nr/03-65.pdf>.

11. Michael Ferber, *The Poetry of William Blake*, (London: Penguin, 1991), p.48.

12. William Blake, “London,” l. 10.

13. William Blake, “London,” l. 11.

14. William Blake, “London,” l. 12.

15. William Blake, “London,” l. 16.

teenth centuries in detail. In “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Innocence*, Blake introduces the optimistic speaker and his friend Tom Dacre who are forced to sweep the soot in the chimneys. The speaker, having lost his mother, has to work due to his father’s lack of financial gain. Victor N. Paananen claims, these “tiny, half-starved children died of suffocation or of skin cancer as a result of the employment into which they were indeed sold.”¹⁶ The innocence of children is suggested through their white curly hair like the wool of the lamb. The speaker’s friend Tom Dacre’s white curly hair is shaved off, not to be dirtied by the soot and with this reference Blake implies the abuse of a child by the industrialized society. Since the real world cannot provide them a peaceful and comfortable life, Blake creates a pastoral world of afterlife where these children will be happy and have a loving Father, God. Tom dreams of an angelic figure who sets them free from their “coffins of black,” which metaphorically means their unfortunate death because of being exposed to soot.¹⁷ In the last line of the poem, the chimney sweepers are ironically given a promise of a happy future that “if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.”¹⁸ To put it another way, the oppressors deceive the naive and innocent children into thinking they will have a better future as a result of their hardwork. Through this promise, Blake shows the hypocrisy of his society.

Unlike the state of innocence and optimistic tone of the previous poem, “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Experience* reflects the darker and more pessimistic side of life in England under industrialization. Blake starts the poem with a contrasting image of a black boy lying on white snow to emphasize the mischief of parents forcing their children to work as chimney sweepers. The color “white” symbolizes hope, nature, and naivity of children whereas “black” stands for death. At the time, those children were dying from working under unhealthy conditions or from malnutrition. Similar to its counterpart, in this poem, Blake uses the sorrowful song as well as metaphor of wearing clothes in black which show the pathetic situation of the young children and the insensitivity of their parents. The fact that the parents pray in the church while their children work as slaves illustrates the corruption and hypocrisy in England. Hence, the child uses the paradoxical term that his parents went to church “to make up a heaven of our misery.”¹⁹ In both poems from

16. Victor N. Paananen, *William Blake* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p.74.

17. William Blake, “The Chimney Sweeper,” from the *Songs of Innocence*, in M. H. Abrams, *et al.* (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Literature*, 2, 6th edition (New York: W. W. Norton Company Inc., 1993), l. 12.

18. William Blake, “The Chimney Sweeper,” l. 24.

19. William Blake, “The Chimney Sweeper” from the *Songs of Experience*, in M. H. Abrams, *et al.* (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Literature*, 2 6th edition (New York: W. W. Norton Company Inc., 1993), l. 12.

the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Blake criticizes his society from different aspects. As Alan Tomlinson claims,

“The main difference between them is that in *Innocence*, the liberating vision of the Angel shows the reality of the spiritual life and its potential for improving the quality of material life. In *Experience*, however, this is lost behind the hypocritical practices of a church that supports the social and political establishment while being indifferent to the sufferings of the weak and helpless.”²⁰

Similar to Blake, Wordsworth reacted against the disorder of his society under the influence of industrialization. He was heavily impressed and inspired by nature since he was born and grew up in the Lake District. Due to his belief in the power of nature and imagination, he expresses his criticism of the Industrial Revolution by foregrounding the beauty of the natural world. When he moved back to his countryside after his visits to the European countries during the revolutions, he immediately started writing about nature because he realized the potential dangers of industrial growth. Having seen the changes in his homeland, he showed his reaction not only in his poems but also in his letters. To illustrate, in one of his letters to Christopher Wordsworth, he expressed his grief on the proposal of building railways through the Lake District. He states:

“What do you think of a Railway being driven as it now is, close to the magnificent memorial of the piety of our ancestors? Many of the trees which embowered the ruin have been felled to make way for this pestilential nuisance. We have also surveyors at work with our beautiful valley the line mediated to pass through Rydal Park and immediately behind Rydal Mount.”²¹

Owing to the reformations in agriculture and industry, the natural landscapes were being destroyed.

In some of his sonnets from *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), he uses specific dates and places to refer to his intimate feelings and ideas about his concerns with industrialization. “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802” is one of them which is related to his trip to France with his beloved sister Dorothy. On the way, they stop and look at the magnificent city, London. The way he describes London is different from Blake’s direct depiction of the city with its social disorder and unrest among people. Instead, Wordsworth puts emphasis on the beauty of the city early in the morning comparing it

20. Alan Tomlinson, *Macmillan Master Guides: Songs of Innocence and of Experience by William Blake* (London: Macmillan Education, 1989), p.35.

21. William Wordsworth, *The Letters of William Wordsworth: A New Selection*, Alan G. Hill (ed.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.84.

with the perfection of nature. In fact, this sonnet is an example of expressing “spots of time” feelings, which Wordsworth explains in the twelfth book of *The Prelude*:

“There are in our existence spots of time,
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence depressed
/... /
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds are nourished and invisibly repaired;
A virtue by which pleasure is enhanced,
That penetrates, enables us to mount,
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.”²²

With respect to the importance of “spots of time”, Wordsworth, in his sonnet, describes the city by referring to the man-made ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples, which make the persona of the poem remember the unspoiled urban life before the Industrial Revolution. As John L. Mahoney claims, “There is a perfect immediacy about the expression, a concentration on securing a single effect, the rare calm and peace that comes over a great city as the night dies and the day begins to dawn, that brings the sensitive soul to an awareness of a presence that pervades natural phenomena.”²³ Through the remembrance of the past and the city’s uncorrupted connection with nature while people are still asleep, the persona is relieved of the depression created by industrialization. Moreover, Wordsworth declares that for a person who is indifferent to the beauty of nature “Earth has not anything to show more fair: / Dull would he be of soul who could pass by / A sight so touching in its majesty:”²⁴ The persona describes the city as arousing impressive effect early in the morning with its vastness and grandeur. He emphasizes his feeling of familiarity with the uncorrupted city before industrialization and distance at the same time due to its dissappointing industrial growth. For the persona the beauty of the city is a transient one since he says “This City now doth, like a garment, wear / The beauty of the morning.”²⁵ However, in a few hours the city will wake up and this beauty will culminate in industrial work including noise and pollution.

In the second half of the sonnet, the sun, the river, the houses and finally, the whole city is personified. “And all that mighty heart is lying still!”²⁶ The persona visualizes the

22. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet’s Mind*, 1. 208-218.

23. John L. Mahoney, *William Wordsworth: A Poetic Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p.179.

24. William Wordsworth, “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802,” in M. H. Abrams, et al. 2 (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Literature*, 2, 6th edition (New York: W. W. Norton Company Inc., 1993), 1. 1-3.

25. William Wordsworth, “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge,” 1. 4-5.

26. William Wordsworth, “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge,” 1. 14.

city as if it is lying and sleeping in bed before the day starts. Wordsworth, through his personifications in the sonnet, creates the impression that the city, similar to nature, is a living being which has a great power on human life and imagination. He describes the city as if he describes his countryside by focusing on the nature elements of the city to escape from the burdens of industrialization since these are the “spots of time” that can heal our souls.

Unlike the previous sonnet, “The World is too Much with Us” has a negative tone which opens with a complaint about the life in England under commercialism. While Blake focuses on the corruption of the city and the misery it creates on people, Wordsworth, in this sonnet, underlines the corruption of people by emphasizing their alienation from nature since there is economic growth and rapid industrialization. The persona of the poem states that “The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.”²⁷ He emphasizes the fact that people are more concerned with consuming than being in contact with nature due to industrialization. They work all the time and think only about “getting and spending”, which destroys their ability to feel nature. They are alienated from nature because they “Little see in Nature that is [theirs]; / [They] have given [their] hearts away, a sordid boon!”²⁸ Here, Wordsworth uses a paradox for people’s isolation from nature by saying “sordid boon” since boon is a reward or gift given to man but it is a sordid one, as humanity has lost commitment to the natural world. With respect to Wordsworth’s emphasis on the importance of nature, this separation will bring the end of the world. Although there are a lot of references to nature such as the sea, the moon, and the winds, Wordsworth uses them not to praise nature but to criticize man’s failure to comprehend the importance of nature because of advancements in the industrialized modern world. By saying “It moves us not. — Great God! I’d rather be / A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;”²⁹ the persona shows his admiration of and longing for an ancient world which is better than the modern one. He underlines his desire to unite with nature like a pagan as well. Hence, he states that he could be a happier man in nature “standing on this pleasant lea, / Have glimpses that would make [him] less forlorn;”³⁰ Through references to the gods in Greek mythology such as Proteus and Triton, Wordsworth elaborates on the importance of the relationship between

27. William Wordsworth, “The World is Too Much With Us” in M. H. Abrams, *et al.* (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Literature*, 2, 6th edition (New York: W. W. Norton Company Inc., 1993), l. 1-2.

28. William Wordsworth, “The World is Too Much With Us,” l. 3-4.

29. William Wordsworth, “The World is Too Much With Us,” l. 9-10.

30. William Wordsworth, “The World is Too Much With Us,” l. 11-12.

nature and man, and in this way reflects his belief in pantheism, another characteristic of the Romantic poets.

In conclusion, as the forerunners of Romantic poetry, William Blake and William Wordsworth revolted against industrialization, its negative effects on human nature and elaborated on the relationship between nature and humanity in their poems. While Blake harshly criticizes his society in his poems by using very striking visual imagery and ironic language, Wordsworth expresses his criticism by focusing on the beauty of nature through the personification of nature elements and “spots of time” that heals human psychology. On the one hand, Blake puts more emphasis on the corruption of city life with its institutions and people under industrialization. On the other, Wordsworth underlines the corruption of people and their alienation from the natural world. Despite their differences in writing, both poets represent the common characteristics of Romantic poetry, such as depicting nature to express feelings, emphasizing the importance of imagination, individual experience, and using the simple language of common men.

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