

# Imagination and Emotion in William Blake's Poems

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Writer's imagination does not only provide inspiration for literary creation, but also contribute literature works with more dazzling brilliance. As a representative of the British Romantic Poetry—William Blake, whose poems are full of imagination, always concedes his emotion and thoughts in a variety of imageries, exposing the reality of his times within his poetry writing. However, William Blake's imagination is no castles in the air, but based on the religious mythology, historical background, and the poet's life experience and dream pursuit. Only with in-depth understanding of the imagination in William Blake's poems can those hidden emotions and thoughts be grasped and appreciated.

*Keywords:* imagination, emotion, William Blake

## Introduction

Britain at the end of 18th century was mainly under the control of three powers: monarch, religion, and bourgeois, which results in the middle and lower classes dominated under misery and impoverishment. Facing this tragic reality, William Blake, concealing his emotion in the words and imagination, minutely recorded the dark times in his poems.

### Sunflower Is Weary of Time, but Counts Steps of the Sun

William Blake's early poems are likely to show great respect towards Christ and church. In the collection *The Song of Innocence*, most of William's imaginative writings are created on the basis of religious mythology.

However, with years passing, the British society was controlled with more injustice and darkness, so the God and church changed radically in the poets' mind. Thus the imagination inspired by divinities in Blake's poems also changed. The poem *Ah Sunflower* in the *The Song of Innocence* reflects Blake's prominent prediction and profound insight. In this poem, he recounts a total different Greek mythological love story by employing symbolism and other complicated devices, where his extraordinary imagination is embedded in his refined language.

The poem *Ah Sunflower* consists of three major images: sunflower, sun, youth-virgin. In Greek mythology, the sun refers to the God of Solar—Apollo, and the sunflower means a beautiful girl named Clytie who was fascinated at Apollo. While the youth-virgin originate from biblical mythology—Adam and Eve. With his marvelous and fantastic imagination, Blake reveals the British female's fervent desires towards life, freedom, and

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love. Meanwhile, Blake, in creating those images, builds two sorts of relations of unity and opposites, including sunflower and sun, sunflower and the youth-virgin. The sunflower longs for breaking away from the domination of time and desires for arriving at the “sweet golden clime”, which reveals the awakenings of sunflower’s self-consciousness. However, when the youth-virgin who is in the “sweet golden clime” finds the dark side of reality, they start to seek for their desired best destination. In Blake’s imagination, both where the sunflower lives and where she dreams for are absolutely prevailed with unfairness and filthiness. In the place where the sunflower lives, everything in the world is under the domination of the noble shining sun, which represents the church, monarch, and authority in real life, but the humbled sunflower has no choice but to stay in the sun’s domination and bears its tyranny, And because of the colossal pressure, the sunflower enjoys no way to have a struggle for a better life. The sunflower, here in Blake’s imagination is the symbol of the subordination. However, the sunflower, though weaker, which is weary of time, harbors a grudge to the sun—ruler of violence, and doubts her own life value. Therefore, she begins to imagine a golden clime, even comes up with a subjective judgment that the golden clime is “where traveller’s journey is done”. Blake not only endows sunflower with rational wisdom, rebellion awareness, and patricide complex by his imagination, but also shows his dissatisfaction and resent to the British ruling class.

Is the sunflower’s dreamed place really that joyous and carefree? Blake uncovered the answer and his view with metaphors and imagination. On the golden clime, although the youth-virgin (metaphorically means Adam and Eve) live happily and harmoniously, their situation is still extremely anguished. For the young days passed, face comes to old; mind gets to slow and “pined away with desire”. And the pale virgin is shrouded in snow. The clime where sunflower always dreams for is actually prevailed with darkness and sadness. And the youth-virgin, attracted by the golden sunflower, realize their grievous situation, so “they arise from their graves, and aspire where my Sunflower wishes to go”.<sup>1</sup>

Blake depicted a dream pursuing tragedy in this poem, but the “arise” and “desire” he depicted here, factually express the constant pursuit for civil right and freedom, which also aroused reflection of British women

### **To See a World From a Grain of Seed, and a Heaven From a Wild Flower**

*Poetical Sketches*, which collects many of Blake’s poems written at his early years, describes almost all the natural elements. Between his imaginative lines, the four seasons are endowed with features of liveliness and vividness. Compared with *The Song of Innocence*, *Poetical Sketches* focuses more on the praise of human and nature, innocence and beauty. In his imagination, the four seasons are personified with four different characteristics. In the poem *To Spring*, Blake portrays the lively rainy spring “O thou with dewy locks, who looks down through the clear windows of the morning”; in *To Summer*, the poet adopts “curb thy fierce steeds, allay the heat. That flames from their large nostrils!” to paint a passionate but hot summer. And in *To Autumn*, “O Autumn, laden with fruit and stained. With the blood of the grape, pass not, but sit beneath my shady roof!”<sup>2</sup> is a minute illustration of the harvested autumn; while in *To Winter*, Blake presents a cold and indifferent winter with the lines “O Winter, bar thine adamant doors! The north is thine; there hast thou built thy dark Deep-founded

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.cnpoet.com/waiguo/uk/blake.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.cnpoet.com/waiguo/uk/blake.htm>.

habitation".<sup>3</sup>

As Georg Morris Cohen Brandes once pointed out "English poets are the observers, lovers and admirers of nature",<sup>4</sup> William Blake is definitely of no exception. He shows his love to nature with magical language. In his writing, the four seasons shone with new colors, which perfectly illustrated his poetic line "To see a world in a grain of sand. And a heaven in a wild flower".<sup>5</sup> Blake could see the colorful cosmos and illusory heaven from the nature.

Besides the *Poetical Sketches*, among his later poetry collections, Blake habitually exerted his spectacular imagination on the basis of nature. To compose the short poem *The Sick Rose*, Blake amplifies a natural phenomenon: The flies in the night, under the coverage of a storm, destroyed the life of a rose. No abstruse words are adopted to develop this story, but merely the common words such as rose, flies, bed, and destroy are employed to refer to those ruined beauty and innocence. By writing the beauty of the nature, Blake intends to highlight the cruelty of the reality and strengthen the theme with simple languages.

Blake does not only reflect some phenomena with nature writing, but also expresses his discontent and anger to society by applying human and nature in his poems. In *A Poison Tree* in *The Song of Experience*, Blake compared the hero's anger to a tree, and all the constraint and endurance were illusions and hypocrisy: The faked sun shines the tree and my tears are used to water the tree as well, but the purpose of cultivating it is merely to harvest a poisonous apple for killing the hero's foe. In this poem, Blake's imagination develops both on the religious culture and natural elements. Traditional recognition believes that "tree" is an image of natural plant, while the "poison" is associated with human sin. So the hero's destructive poisonous killing is not due to his indignation, but the foe (society) suppresses his own rage. Blake pointed, directly, the finger of blame at the Christian forbearance and criticized it for causing unexpected disasters by suppressing humanity.

Natural elements enrich Blake's imagination. In his poetry writing, Blake signifies people and social matters by writing animals, plants, weather, and other elements. And such metaphors also reflect the poet's desired dream of the good and hatred of oppression.

### **And the Hapless Soldier's Sigh, Runs in Blood Down Palace-Walls**

Under the cruel domination, people's minds were also confined. However, Blake is more or less an exception. By combining the reality and historical events, in his poems, Blake made the best use of his imagination to satirize the church and monarch.

The ideas and themes in Blake's latter poems were different from his early ones, which was partly due to the oppression of the tough society, partly due to the change of his living condition. Blake was actually living in a time when abstract rationalism and mechanism were highly advocated and accepted. Descartes, Newton, and Locke respectively put forward their theories that the world should be understood with rational data, mechanical principle, and passive acceptance. But these complex and metaphysical theories were against with Blake's Romanticism and wonderful imagination world, which was hard for him to stand. Hence, he poured fervent imagination and passion into his poems. With the world of sense and abstract rationalism, his imagination was not

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.cnpoet.com/waiguo/uk/blake.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.cnpoet.com/waiguo/uk/blake.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.cnpoet.com/waiguo/uk/blake.htm>.

limited by it. On the contrary, he criticized abstract rationalism and mechanism. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake advocated that “Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy. Energy is Eternal Delight”. And in *The Song of Innocence*, the poet is just like “the spirits singing the happy eclogue, leading people to a paradise of peace and love”.<sup>6</sup>

In his earlier works *Poetical Sketches*, Blake painted London city with rich colors—“the golden London”, “silver Thames River” as well as “The flash of the spire and moored ships”.<sup>7</sup> However, while the European reactionary rulers set to interfere in French Reform, the British government strengthened its power on cracking down the domestic democracy movement. Consequently, the “golden London” faded away its once glory and magnificence, and on the replacement there prevailed with grief and depression. In the poem *London* from *The Song of Experience*, Blake employed sharp and ironic words to describe many tragic scents:

I wandered through each chartered street,  
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,  
A mark in every face I meet,  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.  
In every cry of every man,  
In every infant's cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forged manacles I hear:  
How the chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every blackening church appalls,  
And the hapless soldier's sigh  
Runs in blood down palace-walls.  
But most, through midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful harlot's curse  
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,  
And blights with plagues the marriage-hearse.<sup>8</sup>

In *London*, Blake, using his imagination and precise logic, recorded the dark times of Britain and the cruelty of ruling class, and conveyed his detest to British government. There the London city depicted in *London* evoked a stark contrast of portrait of the London in *Poetical Sketches*. To some degree, this contrast shows that the change of society would have its influence on poet's imagination and creation.

### **We Were Born Black by Sun, and Receiving More Sunlight**

In his poems, Blake narrated women's oppressed social situation with his profound imagination. Before 17th century, British literature was considered as a privilege for male only, and females are mostly defined from male writers' own insights. It caused that females could not make clear and correct definition about themselves for a long time, they even could not understand themselves subjectively. Though Blake tried hard, he still failed to break this limitation. The images of women, in his poetry, were still what men thought women would be. However, Blake, at least, has his introspection on women's social status and provided ideological leadership for British women fighting to get equal rights.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.cnpoet.com/waiguo/uk/blake.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.cnpoet.com/waiguo/uk/blake.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.cnpoet.com/waiguo/uk/blake.htm>.

The women images created by William Blake had direct relation with the then society, and they were also affected by Blake's mother and wife. Blake did not get any education in any school all his life, but his mother offered him good education at home. After marriage, his wife Elizabeth turned out to be a capable assistance for his poem writings. That is why in many of his poems he portrayed many women and expressed his heartfelt eulogy to them. In the poem *The Little Black Boy* from *The Song of Innocence*, Blake recounted a moving story of a black mother who tried to educate and protect her child. Under the domination of the British ruling class, the black were discriminated by the white and they could not enjoy equal rights. Owing to the impoverished living condition, children were forced to work, so the black mother told her child to "Look on the rising sun", because "there God does live, And gives his light and gives his heat away".<sup>9</sup> The black mother, bringing both life and wisdom to her child, was a torchbearer for her child. This kind of female image in *The Little Black Child* embodied Blake's compliment on motherhood and his pursuit for human rights.

Meanwhile, Blake also showed sympathy for women in his poems. At his time, British women hardly had any positions in social affairs. And they even had no rights on financial matters. Once they got married, most men would make women feel spiritually fulfilled with materials. However, those materials, conversely, would become fetters for women's whole life, so they had to live in the way that men had wanted or imagined. What is worse, because of the restrictions of lawsuits, women did not have rights for living freely and independently. Faced with such conditions, Blake wrote many poems for those women who sought for values and criterion. In *The Four Gods*, Blake imagined the universe was a giant of four males, including the rational Youlisen, emotional Lavah, sensory Thomas, and soul Urthna. However, every male has a corresponding female counterpart, and each pair of man and women are mutual complement to each other. The males attacked each other for power, and women also got involved into the war, which eventually caused decadence of human. In this poem, Blake gave the gods different values and criterion. He employed rich imagination and words to emphasize the significance of right values.

The women images in Blake's poems are complicated and changeable, which has direct relationship with his living environment and life experience. And there is no doubt that his poems shows his concern for females and delivers his desires for freedom and human rights.

### Conclusion

Based on the analysis of Blake's poems, it is obvious that his poems are full of rich imagination, and those imaginations were inspired mainly by the poet's social and living environment. And behind those imaginative lines of his poems, Blake expressed his strong emotions to highlight different themes. He not only bashed the feudal autocracy, revealed the dark sides of society, but also eulogized the beautiful nature, pure humanity and conveyed his desires for equality of each individual.

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.cnpoet.com/waiguo/uk/blake.htm>.

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