
The Role of Nature and Post-pastoral Signs in William Blake's "Night" and "A Little Girl Lost"

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Abstract: This study traces the role of nature in William Blake's "Night" and "A Little Girl Lost" through the application of three out of six crucial features of Gifford's Post-pastoral principles. Within the framework of the Eco-critical paradigm, which is still very much a work in progress, the analysis of these poems from this perspective puts emphasis on the sense of sorrow towards the natural world, the exploitation of the planet, here the Earth, which is of the same as the oppression and exploitation of women and minorities, and the recognition of the inner world and the workings of the outer world; i.e., man's inner nature can be understood in relation to his external nature. Moreover, from Post-pastoral perspective, this paper shows the oppressive treatments of female being and identity which is one of the consequences of the industrialism as well as the restricted norms of British Evangelical Church. Women are among those who are suppressed and deprived from the privileges of life except prostitution. Finally, this study sheds more light on Blake's implication of Jerusalem in relation to man's continuous desire to reach a compromise between the inner and outer natures.

Keywords: Nature, Post-Pastoral, Exploitation of Women, Oppression, Evangelical Church, Prostitution

1. Introduction

Man's disassociation from natural environment has been a major consideration in British culture due to the emergence of industrialism. This technological movement was expanded by "the increase in world trade and the influx of natural or financial resources that Britain received from its numerous overseas colonies and the profits from the British slave trade between Africa and the Caribbean which helpful fuel industrial investment" (Hudson 1992: 5). The following comment by Bloom is also noteworthy:

«Industrialization [is] polluting the outer structure of the churches. Inside, those seeking salvation have trouble finding it. The hard work in the factories and the bleak outlook on life is 'blackening' the hearts the faithful. Instead of enlightenment, religion has become just another obligation. Instead of strengthening spirits, the churches impede peace» (1992: 42-43).

Consequently, the strict social and religious roles of British Evangelical church restricted people in their relationship with God and salvation.

The authorities of Evangelical churches in Britain denied "any forms of sexual feelings in women and restricted the role of sex to a procreative one" (Williams 1973:158). As a

result of such a restriction and treatment of women they "become an outlet, or sacrifice, for men's pent up sexual frustration" (MacDougall: 6). In this regard, one can trace the signs of man's treatment of natural environment which parallels the oppression of females in Blake's "Night" from *Songs of Innocence* and "A Little Girl Lost" from *Songs of Experience*. Blake assumes that double treatment of women might be echoed by their own experiences of the landscape in which they live. In one or another way, he indicates that women are subjugated to exploitation and mistreatment of the masculine society. On the other hand, the whole purpose of his struggle is "to build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land [or] to build the holy as against the unholy city" (Williams 1973: 149).

Having an eye on the consequences of exploitation of natural world as well as the exploitation and oppression of women during industrialization in England, Gifford's post-pastoral approach affords nature a voice both in words and ecological narration. Gifford's post-pastoral "as [a] branch of ecocritical thought [...] investigates the ways in which the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are connected" (Wellman: 19). In addition, the 'post'

of post-pastoral means beyond in conceptual way in the sense of “being beyond the traps of the pastoral, [of] being aware of some of the problematic of the pastoral, [of] pushing into the complexities of celebration and responsibility, [of] being a part of nature and yet uneasy with relationships of ownership and exploitation” (Gifford 2010: 75). The present study focuses on Gifford’s post-pastoral theory considering a set of provisional criteria (three out of six), in relation to environmental crisis in Britain as well as the oppression of women. Moreover, it deals with the exploitation of the earth which equals the exploitation of women and minorities, and the recognition of man’s internal nature in relation to external nature.

2. Environmental Crisis

In order to trace the signs of natural and environmental crisis in Britain in Blake’s poems, the key point is to focus on the consequences of environmental degeneration which implicitly directs the readers’ attention to a “need [to] see language as actually pointing outward to material reality” (Gifford 1999:149). Environmental crisis encourages Blake’s readers to be “aware of the anti-pastoral and of the conventional illusions upon which Arcadia is premised, but which finds a language to outflank those dangers with a vision of accommodated humans, at home in the very world they thought themselves alienated from by their possession of language” (ibid), in an alternative ecocritical paradigm. The first fundamental feature of post-pastoral “[is] an awe in attention to natural world” (ibid: 151).

In the first poem “Night”, specifically the first and second stanzas, Blake presents a situation in which the time of danger and nightmare resists against the time of peace and tranquillity of pastoral convention:

«The sun descending in the west,
The evening star does shine;
The birds are silent in their nest,
And I must seek for mine.
The moon, like a flower
In heaven’s high bower,
With silent delight,
Sits and smiles on the night.
Farewell, green fields and happy grove,
Where flocks have ta’en delight.
Where lambs have nibbled, silent move
The feet of angels bright;
Unseen they pour blessing,
And joy without ceasing,
On each bud and blossom,
And each sleeping bosom» (N lines 1-16)

Blake’s “Night” marks on an awareness of environmental crisis, concerning a strong sense of possible death of nature. The first two stanzas of this poem elaborate the world in an everlasting darkness, with ‘the moon like a flower’, smiling ‘on the night’ and the birds ‘silent in their nest’. Regarding the expansion of industrialism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, “a shift from agrarian and the

rural based occupations to predominantly urban-based industrial and service employments[...] which resulted in radical shifts in social relations” (Hudson 1992: 4); therefore, the peasantry was destroyed as a substantial source of resistance to such economic and social movement. Due to the continuous moaning of innocent creatures across Britain’s landscapes, man was allowed to chop down massive innocent trees and destroy natural resources for the purpose of improvements:

«As farmers they replaced water-efficient native perennial plants with water-wasteful annuals. They chopped down vast swathes of trees, allowing groundwater to rise and bring poisonous salt to the surface. They did not understand the unique geological, hydrological, and biological nature of the country they were emigrating to, and they did not understand that their land use changes and animal introductions would cause biological havoc» (Wilson: 5).

In this way, the pastoral life gives ‘Farewell’ to its ‘green fields and happy grove’, or to its ‘joy without ceasing’ where ‘flocks’ and ‘lambs’ are sleeping in buds and blossoms. It is evident that “a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community; mysterious maladies [...] everywhere was a shadow of death [...] There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example, where had they gone? [...] It was a spring without voices” (Marx 1964: 380).

The environmental crisis throughout Britain was increased chiefly because of man’s voracious appetite for improvement. Human behavior in this decade contributes to pollution, improper use, and depletion of resources, and a continuing destruction of natural balances, which are essential to life. The following quotation is also noteworthy:

«The extraordinary pleasantness of the Weadier, and the goodness of the Fruit, lead People into many Temptations. The clearness and brightness of the Sky, add new vigour to their Spirits, and perfectly remove all Splenetic and sullen Thoughts. Here they enjoy all the benefits of a warm Sun, and by their shady Groves, are protected from its Inconvenience. Here all their Senses are entertain’d with an endless Succession of Native Pleasures. Their Eyes are ravished with the Beauties of naked Nature» (ibid: 82).

Sadness in the voice of the speaker throughout the poem takes the reader’s attention to “what begins as calming, even ‘tranquil’ turns into a granting roar” (Gifford 1999: 117), due to man’s disassociation from the natural world. In this way, Blake not only presented in the lines of his poems man’s urgent need to be aware of environmental crisis in Britain is, but also marked on the presence of the speaker and readers in the poem. Therefore, one of the fundamental features of Gifford’s post-pastoral principles might be related to Blake’s assumption and manipulation of the reader’s sense of a global environmental crisis, even by his presence as perfect imageries in “Night”.

3. The Feminine Life in Misery

Blake, in his poems, puts emphasis on the environmental

crisis across natural landscape of Britain, which can be compared with the misery of women. In Gifford words, "the exploitation of the planet [is] of the same mindset as the exploitation of women and minorities" (1999: 164). This aspect of post-pastoral approach is related to ecofeminism in which "concern for the exploitation of people (in terms of gender, class and race) must accompany concern for the environment (in terms of species, elements and atmosphere) and vice versa" (ibid 165). In "A Little Girl Lost", Blake constantly denounces the loss of innocence in the life of women which subsequently corresponds with the practice as a form of violence in the male dominant society. This poem focuses on the restrictive 'norms' of British Evangelical church concerning sex and gender, and dissects the decline of innocence and spiritual sterility during industrialism:

«Children of the future age,
Reading this indignant page,
Know that in a former time
Love, sweet love, was thought a crime» (ALGL lines 1-4).

In the opening line of the poem 'Love, sweet love, was thought a crime', Blake makes a direct reference to the authority of British Evangelical church concerning the marginalized role of women in the society. During Blake's life, there was a growth of sexual repression since the feminine purity was of utmost importance. In addition, the purity and innocence of the female gender were the topics of great discussion. The value of women "maintaining their virginity in the West became highly emphasized with the birth of Christianity and the proclamations of the four church fathers, Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, and Jerome" (MacDougall: 5). More to the point, "atonement took control over salvation out of the hands Christian followers and into the hands of the Evangelical church" (ibid 12).

On the contrary, since the emphasis on purity and chastity for men was not strong, they were freer to pursue their desires of sexual relations. Consequently, the women were considered as the source of temptation and the victims of men's sexual frustration since such a "rage could build and eventually culminate in rape" (MacDougal: 6). In addition, the status of the feminine is often seen as subject to rape and sexual exploitation. Blake frequently uses such enticing imageries to open up this oppression particularly in the fourth and fifth stanzas:

«Then, in rising day,
On the grass they play;
Parents were afar,
Strangers came not near,
And the maiden soon forgot her fear.
Tired with kisses sweet,
They agree to meet
When the silent sleep
Waves o'er heaven's deep,
And the weary tired wanderers weep» (ALGL lines 15-24).

Blake's imageries depicted in the life of the women in his poems work greatly with the rise of mechanized factories. Although the rise of industrialization greatly created job

opportunities for them, it paved the way for the increase of a kind of oppressive behavior towards the women. For instance, the female workers who worked in harsh as well as nasty conditions were mistreated in their working conditions; in other words, they were forced to yield their virginity to their masters' sexual advances, which stand at the center of these conditions. One of the images in Blake's life during the late eighteenth century might show the traces of the notion of sexuality:

«When people are placed under conditions which appeal to the brute only, what remains to them but to rebel or to succumb to utter brutality? Moreover, when the bourgeoisie does its full share in maintaining prostitution—and how many of the 40,000 prostitutes who fill the streets of London every evening live upon the seduction of a bourgeois! How many of them owe it to the seduction of a bourgeois, that they must offer their bodies to the passers-by in order to live?—surely it has least of all a right to reproach the workers with their sexual brutality» (Engels 1987: 80).

In this regard, it can be noted that the factory owner's treatment of female workers is considered as the ability of power to corrupt them. The moral consequences of the employment of the feminine workers in factories are even worse than one might think. Inappropriately, the enslaved women with their illicit children were the only ones affected by the harshness norms of British Evangelical church:

«For men, there seems to have been little social opprobrium for associated with paternity suits. For women, the consequences of an illicit affair were usually disastrous. Publically disgraced, discharged from their job, and in some cases, even sent to a house of correction, they would often be forced to choose between abandoning their child or turning to prostitution to support the two of them» (Davis 1993: 79).

The number of women as well as their innocent girls came to be prostitute "not as passive, but because their choices were so limited, [and] the reformers would have been forced to recognize that causes of juvenile prostitution were to be found in an exploitative economic structure" (Gorham 1978: 335). Blake's central image 'the maiden soon forgot her fear' carries the burden for the growth of awful temptations in the maiden's heart, because she accepts her feeling of sexuality and loss of virginity. Blake's specific use of the words 'Tired with kisses sweet', when 'they agree to meet' in 'the silent sleep', shows that the maidens were exhausted from aggressive treatment and behavior.

The harsh working condition of the maidens in Blake's poems shows the feudal system which deprived the members of the lower class of all privileges except that "of sexual indulgence and drunkenness, [were] worked every day to the point of complete exhaustion of their mental and physical energies, and [were] thus constantly spurred on to the maddest excess in the only two enjoyments at their command" (Engels 1987: 65). They were three times marginalized since they were not male, but the members of oppressed women (the other), and they were considered as tools of men's sexual relations. It is clear that, drunkenness, sexual irregularities, brutality, and neglecting the rights of property were the chief

points with which the patriarchal system charges them. Without the means of protection, many young maidens were pregnant and often died as a result of either dangerous abortion attempts or in childbirth. William Blake like other poets of romantic period attacks the norms of British Evangelical church as well as the negative effects of industrialism regarding the unbearable and dirty conditions in the factories or workhouses in which the feminine are forced to endure exploitation and oppression. These tyrannical orders sprang from the view of the natural sex difference, which maintained that the feminine role and position in such a society are related to both social and environmental exploitation in Britain. In Gifford's words, "crimes against nature are crimes against women, in this case, as in so many others around the globe" (Gifford 2012: 27).

4. Blake's Prophetic Voice

Despite the recognition of the oppression of female sex during industrialization, Blake depicts and puts emphasis on the new generation in relation to freedom which might be achieved in the everlasting Eden of Jerusalem:

«In the age of gold,
Free from winter's cold,
Youth and maiden bright,
To the holy light,
Naked in the sunny beams delight» (ALGL lines 5-9).

William Blake in "A Little Girl Lost" particularly in the second stanza presents the third feature of the post-pastoral principles "the inner is also the working of the outer, that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature" (ibid 1999: 156). Blake's prophetic voice in this stanza is that "[the] destructive-creative processes in the natural world around us can give us images for understanding our inner processes" (ibid 2012: 23). In this way, the holly images such as 'youth and maiden bright', 'holy light', and 'the sunny beams delight' are the references to mothering even though the innocent maidens are in the degenerative condition. More to the point, the holly images might be considered as the voices of innocence and freedom, which once existed at the beginning of man's life.

In Blake's perspective, lovemaking is a device to interrogate the social and spiritual freedom so that man can release himself from the degenerations of his life. Blake's portrayal of sacred sexual union in a moral framework has to be viewed in this context:

«If only our civilization had taught us...how to keep the fire of sex clear and alive, flickering or glowing or blazing in all its varying degrees of strength and communication, we might, all of us, have lived our lives in love, which means we should be kindled and full of zest in all kinds of ways and all kinds of things» (Eldridge and Eldridge: 55).

In this poem, Blake shows the possibility of rebuilding Jerusalem and God's kingdom on earth while he came to see the life, which is more tragically in the innocent maidens. Thus, the poem echoes, "the dualities of calmness and suffering, and of mothering and dying, [which are]

woven not only within female experience but in the whole of nature" (Gifford 1999: 159).

5. Conclusion

This study shows the role of nature in William Blake's "Night" and "A Little Girl Lost" from *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* (1992) through interpreting three out of six crucial features of Gifford's post-pastoral approach within the framework of an Eco-critical paradigm. The three noticeable features from this perspective include sense of sorrow towards the exploitation of natural world, which parallels the exploitation of women and minorities. It also shows how William Blake puts emphasis on the recognition of the working of man's inner and outer natures. In this regard, it can be noted that Blake marks on these crucial features and at the same time challenges the rigid orders of Britain's Evangelical Church as well as the emergence and expansion of industrialism, which brought about the environmental crisis and the oppression women.

Under the influence of environmental crisis in Britain the idealized life for all innocent creatures is associated with the harsh sounds of choppers and chain saws which signify Blake's intentions in his poem "Night". In addition, this study traces the signs of crime against nature which are similar to the crimes against women and minorities in such a patriarchal society. The oppressed women were disregarded, exploited, and disadvantaged of many privileges, which can be traced in "A Little Girl Lost." Although the unholy condition encompasses the holly nature of the feminine life, Blake recommends rebuilding Jerusalem of a free society similar to the holy life of the past.

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