

Irony in William Blake's Poetry

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Abstract:

Irony, stating something meaning another, turns into a philosophical method of understanding opposite concepts with Friedrich Schlegel's *Fragments* published in the eighteenth century. It accords irony an ontological and epistemological function and changes its scope. William Blake, one of the prominent names of Romantic poetry, employs the binary oppositions and creates a different perspective of irony. In addition to the usage of traditional binary systems such as; good and evil, heaven and hell, he structures new binary systems. The traditional binary systems used by Blake are challenging as he redefines the opposite concepts in a holistic manner. On analyzing these three poems; "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell", "The Tyger" and "The Lamb" it would be fair to claim that he presents a different perspective of construing the world with the employment of irony using integrative binary oppositions in the Romantic period.

Keywords: romantic poetry, irony, William Blake

1. Introduction

In his *A Blake Dictionary, The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*. S. F. Damon (2013) states that: "Every sect is self-limited, whereas Truth is universal. Instead of any religion, Blake wanted the truth—the whole truth including all errors, life including death, the soul including the body, the world of mind including the world of matter, the profound discoveries of the mystics reconciled with the scoffings of the skeptics, heaven and hell married and working together, and in the ultimate heart, Man eternally in the arms of God"(61).

2. Analysis

William Blake, one of the first and major representatives of Romanticism in England, is a challenging poet with his works full of opposites, which gives birth to the employment of irony. The changing scope of irony displays its effects on William Blake's works. M. A. R. Habib (2011) explains the changing scope of irony as follows:

By the end of the eighteenth century, irony had risen from being a mere rhetorical device to an entire way of looking at the world. Schlegel's *Fragments* of 1797 accords irony an epistemological and ontological function, seeing it as a mode of confronting and transcending the contradictions of the finite world. ... At the core of irony as formulated by most nineteenth-century thinkers was a romantic

propensity to confront, rather than overlook, the obstinate disorder, contingency, flux, and mystery of the world. In this sense, an ironic vision accepts that the world can be viewed from numerous irreconcilable perspectives, and rejects any providential, rational, or logical foreclosure of the world's absurdity and contradictions into a spurious unity.(147)

Habib, (2011) also states that William Blake, the first major figure of English Romanticism, had recourse to mysticism and a mythical vision of history, and he saw the world as inherently harboring opposites and contradictions which was the poet's task to harmonize (153). In these lines, Habib defines Blake's perception of the world and the function of the poet very clearly. It can be said that Blake is very good at reflecting his perception of the world by combining these contradictions. However, he does not only apply these contradictions, but he also redefines them in a holistic manner. Even the titles of his works prove it; *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *The Songs of Innocence* and *The Songs of Experience*. He chooses to unite these concepts perceived as opposite by mankind. Reading Blake's poems makes the reader question, criticize and revalue concepts such as; heaven, hell, angel, devil, good, and evil which are considered to be the traditional binary oppositions in western thought.

'The Romantics' only recourse was to an ironic vision which insisted that reality is not confined to here and now but embraces the past and is located in a Platonic ideal realm.' (Habib,148). William Blake is also one of these poets who is endeavoring to define the reality. Damon (2013) states that Blake's basic purpose was the discovery and recording of new truths about the human soul. He asserts that for Blake the most exciting thing possible was the discovery of these truths (55). In this paper, the poems; *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *The Tyger* and *The Lamb* will be analyzed in terms of the employment of irony through the usage of opposites and contradictions in the light of Blake's search of truth.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, the title, which is to be examined first, gives the readers some clues about Blake's usage of seemingly opposite concepts. Blake redefines and reshapes the heaven and hell in a philosophical point of view and unites them. Habib's lines explaining the relationship between Romanticism and irony, also helps the reader understand the fundamental disposition of Blake's poetry;

The ideals of Romanticism included an intense focus on expressing human subjectivity, an exaltation of nature, of childhood and spontaneity, of primitive forms of society, of human passion and emotion, of the poet, of the sublime, and of imagination as a more comprehensive and inclusive faculty than reason. The most fundamental philosophical disposition of Romanticism has often been seen as irony, an ability to accommodate conflicting perspectives of the world. (Habib, 145)

The heaven and hell are perceived as conflicting perspectives. However, it would not be right to say that Blake depicts the heaven and hell as places designed for afterlife to punish or reward the souls. John Beer (2005) claims that the heaven and hell are described as 'the states

of the human soul' by many critics (67). The title *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* welcomes the reader to the world of contraries blending and forming a unity. The following lines are taken from the very first section of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* called 'Argument':

Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call good and evil. Good is the passive that obeys reason; evil is the active springing from energy.

Good is heaven. Evil is hell(Blake, 163).

Blake does not only use the contraries to strengthen his narration or strike the reader. He attributes more to the contraries seeing them as a must. Damon (2013) expresses this notion in his words; "These two worlds, Hell and Heaven, are essential to each other; they exist simultaneously in God. Thus there is the Opposition of Contraries in God himself, without which there could be no life "(213). Beer criticizes Blake stating; "How far Blake expected his ideas to be taken completely seriously is hard to determine. Allowance must certainly be made for his sense of irony. The very fact that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* was cast in precisely those terms suggests that he was allowing for a possible equality of value between the two sides "(Beer, 23). The readers can agree with Beer on the issue of irony, but it is hard to say that Blake was allowing for a possible equality of value between two sides. In Blake's definition of heaven and hell, it is clear that he foregrounds the hell and the components of hell. The definition of devils and the comparison of the angels and the devils, and the flames in hell can prove it. First, Blake destroys the image of hell, which is a place for the corrupted, full of torment and cruelty. Damon's lines also reflect it; 'God is good; all things that proceed from him are good in essence, nor can that essence ever be corrupted. Therefore 'Hell' which is of God must be good; and the life force proceeding from it cannot be evil and far from being everlasting pain, is eternal delight. Everything that lives is holy (Damon, 214). To propound that hell is a formidable, scary place would be wrong in Blake's world of perception. Damrosch's ideas on the Blake's perception of hell supports this idea;

In celebrating what he calls Hell, Blake has in mind something very different from the usual connotations of that word. The fundamental idea in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is that theologians and preachers have wrongly stigmatized energy as diabolical, even though it is absolutely essential to existence. They claim that "good is the passive that obeys reason; evil is the active springing from energy." Blake's counterclaim is that Heaven and Hell must interact as vital contraries, like partners in a marriage who are different yet joined. Both are equally important. (Damrosch, 101)

We all have a concept of hell in our minds, but Damon (2013) asserts that the hell depicted by Blake in his paintings of the last judgment is the lake of fire into which errors, but not people are cast and annihilated (72). Even the fires of the hell are thought to be 'the flames of

inspiration' by Damon (Damon, 772). The comparison of the angels and the devils is also very striking:

Devils for Blake are usually evil spirits, probably accuser of sin; but in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for once they are the original geniuses, those who are familiars in the hell of the subconscious, which is the source of all energy. They are contrasted to the Angels, the restricting spirits of conventionality. ...All genius varies thus. Devils are various. Angels are all alike.(Damon, 445)

Devils are not portrayed to be wicked creatures, their liability is not to make humankind commit a sin, but to remind them that they are capable of committing sins. Northrop Frye (1990) defines devils as follows;

‘If man,’ Blake asks, ‘is considered as only evil and god only good, how then is regeneration effected which turns the evil to good?... Satan in the Bible is called ‘diabolos’ or accuser because he is forever reminding man of his own insufficiency. ... For Satan is not himself a sinner but a self-righteous prig’. (65)

Harold Bloom (2003) interprets *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in characteristics of two kinds of people; ‘Blake now gets back to the “contraries” mentioned earlier in the work. He contends that there are only two kinds of people, the Prolific and the Devouring, and that these opposites are both inimical to each other and necessary—for ‘if they were reconciled mankind would cease to exist ’ (105).

Proverbs of Hell, the second part of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* starts with a note; A Memorable Fancy – 1;

As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of genius, which to angels look like torment and insanity, I collected some of their proverbs, thinking that as the sayings used in a nation mark its character, so the proverbs of hell show the nature of infernal wisdom better than any description or buildings or garments.(Blake, 165)

In this section of the poem, Blake goes on expressing the concepts using their opposites and his ironic manner can be clearly analyzed in his lines;

Prisons are built with stones of law, brothels with bricks of Religion.

The best wine is the oldest, the best water the newest.

Prayers plough not; praises reap not; joys laugh not; sorrows weep not.

The head sublime, the heart pathos, the genitals beauty, the hands and feet proportion.(Blake, 168)

Leo Damrosch (2015) explains the section, Proverbs of Hell, as a dictionary of anti-proverbs;

A memorable section of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is entitled “Proverbs of Hell,” which are really anti-proverbs. Ordinary proverbs convey conventional

truisms, ... Blake's aphorisms are anything but conventional: "Exuberance is beauty"; "The cistern contains, the fountain overflows"; ... "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." At times these anti-proverbs seem deliberately intended to shock: "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires." (103)

The second poem which will be analyzed is 'The Tyger' which has been a source of speculation with its different interpretations;

When the stars threw down their spears
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did He smile His work to see?^[SEP]
Did He who made the Lamb make thee?

Tiger, tiger, burning bright^[SEP]
In the forests of the night,^[SEP]
What immortal hand or eye^[SEP]
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry? (Blake 67-74)

In this poem, it is clear that Blake uses 'the tyger' and 'the lamb' as contraries. The tyger and the lamb are not clear-cut opposites like the heaven and hell, but the characteristics of the tyger and the lamb can be considered to be considerably diversified. Bloom (2003) explains the characteristics of the tyger and the lamb stating that;

It would be simplistic to state that "The Lamb" is good and "The Tyger" is evil. And it is probably not what Blake intended. "The Tyger" is experience. It is bright, energetic, and vital. It is familiar with its domain and is assertive in its environment. While the Lamb merely follows the flock, the tiger has learned from experience and is autonomous. No longer following the crowd or a single shepherd, the tiger is a hunter directly in search of satisfaction. (19)

Though there are different explanations of the tyger, Bloom sees it as a luminous creature roaming the forest at night. He also identifies the tyger with Lucifer and thinks that Blake is struck by the beauty, strength, and balance of the beast, and questions what inspiration is behind its creation. The powerful imagery, comparing the fire in the tiger's eyes and the fire used to create it, suggesting that the tiger can also be a reflection of the fires of Hell (Bloom 2003, 17).

Line by line, the tiger grows more powerful and frightening: a beast without boundaries. Yet, the speaker tries to reason with the mighty animal, asking about its creator and its opposite of the animal kingdom: the lamb. The work bears a similarity to Blake's "The Lamb", which appears, appropriately, in the "Innocence" part of the volume of poems. "The Tyger" is part of the "Experience." Did Blake believe that transformation from the gentle lamb into the powerful tiger is an integral part of maturation?(Bloom 2003, 18)

These lines above bring a new perspective to the relationship of the tyger and the lamb. The question; ‘Did Blake believe that transformation from the gentle lamb into the powerful tyger is an integral part of maturation?’ also brings a new dimension to the speculation. Though lamb is seen and stated as opposite, it can be the superior version of the tyger. As William Blake sees the opposites and contraries as complementary, it can be assumed that the tyger and the lamb are also complementary elements, which are created by the same power embodying all the contraries.

The third poem is *The Lamb*, in which Blake asks the same question, but this time it is about the creator of the Lamb. However in this poem, we have the answer, Blake states that ‘the creator’ calls himself a Lamb.

Little lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?

Little lamb, I’ll tell thee;
Little lamb, I’ll tell thee;
He is callèd by thy name,
For He calls Himself a Lamb.(Blake44-49)

As it was mentioned before that William Blake sees the opposites as complementary, it can be said that the Tyger and the Lamb are also integrative elements. Damon (2013) supports this notion in his *A Blake Dictionary*. ‘In the song of Innocence and experience, it counterbalances ‘The Lamb.’ The Lamb symbolizes the Loving God; the Tyger, the Angry God. ... The Tyger is not the contrary of the Lamb, but its negation’ (1577). The quotation below, defines the concept, the Lamb and also foregrounds the embodying feature of the creator. Blake is against the idea of interpreting God as having only good characteristics. Goodness cannot define God, as it is not enough to define the source of everything created. However, goodness can be a concept created by God, as good, evil, heaven, hell, angels, devils, the Tyger, and the Lamb were created. Everything is unified and represents God in Blake’s poetry.

But that is not what Blake meant when he made the lamb the symbol of innocence. He meant that there really is behind the universe an eternal image called the lamb, of which all living lambs are merely the copies or the approximation. He held that eternal innocence to be an actual and even an awful thing. ... God is not a symbol of goodness. Goodness is a symbol of God.(Bloom 2008, 96)

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, in the poems *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *The Tyger*, and *The Lamb*, Blake employs the contrary ideas, a way of irony, to criticize and portray the effects of the social transformations of his age. However, the reader needs to gain a deeper understanding of Blake’s purpose. To see the concepts as only contrary on the surface may not fulfill his

purpose. He tries to unite all the contraries, which are sprung from the same source. In *The Tyger*, Blake asks a question; ‘Did He who made the Lamb make thee?’ (Blake, 74). To categorize and label the concepts as purely ‘good’ or ‘evil’ is not a good way to follow in the journey of understanding them. Blake tries to define some of the concepts with their contraries, but in his perception, he gives a different meaning to them. Blake’s depiction of hell, for example, is completely different than the sense of hell, which was depicted by religion. It can be said that the contraries of Blake as the substance are distinct from the contraries of mankind, but the characteristics referred to them are opposites. Blake’s utilizing irony in his definitions of the concepts is a good example of the view that in a philosophical disposition of Romanticism has often been seen as irony, an ability to accommodate conflicting perspectives of the world (Habib, 145).

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