



Motif of childhood in poetry-With special reference to Blake, Wordsworth, Tagore and other poets

Nasir Ahmed

Assistant Teacher, Department of English, Adhikari Krishnakanta High School, Siliguri, Darjeeling, West Bengal, India

Abstract

The stage of childhood is very much important in everyone's life. It is untouched by the sophistication of culture, complexity and other problematic things. The poet like Blake, Wordsworth, Rabindranath Tagore and other poets manifest this stage with aestheticism. The article focuses the very theme of innocence. This is the stage where people are free from anxiety and over frustration.

Keywords: The best stage of man's life, meek and mild

Introduction

1. "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength" - Bible, Psalm 8:2
2. "A little child shall lead them" - Bible Isaiah 11:6
3. "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea". - Bible, Matthew 18:6

Childhood is a recurrent theme in poetry. The myth of childhood has been an equally significant poetic subject from old English poetry to Romantic poetry along with some later poems. Childhood carries with it some sublime qualities, such as, innocence, purity, devoid of anxiety and the sense of insecurity, playfulness, cheerfulness etc. Briefly we can call it a blissful phase, which every sensitive person would cherish to get back. At it is unanimously acknowledged that childhood is a blissful state and the main reason behind this blessedness which every poet acknowledges is that in childhood there is the heavenly association. The theme of childhood and its associated glory had captured the imagination of many poets. But notable among them are Blake and Wordsworth whose motif of childhood are to be focused here along with some reference of her poets.

Blake's Motif of Childhood as found especially in Songs of Innocence

Since childhood, Blake is highly imaginative. Blake always wants to create, to be active in his creative imagination, which is the primary reality for Blake. Obviously here creation means writing poetry, through the wings of imagination. It is well considered that for writing poetry, heavenly - sent inspiration is responsible. This clearly indicates the sacredness of poetry to which Blake has a profound faith and in this sacred deed, childhood appears to him the only possible and deserving element. For Blake childhood is not only a phase of

life, but a state of soul which may exist in maturity too. So Blake takes for the subject - child like vision of existence. Blake himself becomes the child and views the existence. Here C.M. Bower's comment is significant - 'Blake does not write at a distance of time, from memories of what childhood once was, but from an insistent present anguish at the ugly contrast between the childlike and the experienced conceptions of reality.' (Bowra: p-30)

Blake is called the poet of soul. As a mystic he begins to discover by logical deduction whether the soul exists and if so, what is its nature. 'He discover it to be an unreasoning super - sensuous entity, divine in its origin and destiny whose perception and desire are infinite: [Plowman, Max: p-xii] Here we can very well that the nature of soul is prevalent most in the state of childhood. It may appear that for Blake, a child is nothing but a 'living soul'. Blake shows in his *Songs of Innocence* the original state of the soul, and he takes for his image of that perfect condition of being, the condition of childhood, a state of happiness, unity and self enjoyment.

Basically, *Songs of Innocence* expresses, probably for the first time in English literature, the spontaneous joys of childhood. But faintness is another quality of the happiness of a child. It is like dew which vanishes with the first ray of sun. Blake is conscious of it, and so his utmost effort is to carry out into manhood all the childlike innocence. He gathers the flower with the dew upon it. He does not write about child's happiness, he becomes the happy child himself and there is no false voice in his tone. The world, depicted in *Songs of Innocence* is largely a child's world. The central situation in this world is that of a child or young animal, delighting in life. That is why Blake calls his *Song of Innocence* "happy songs" and says that every child will joy to hear them.

Like Swedenborg, Blake also take the child and the lamb as the image of innocence. Innocence has come from the lord, so the lord is called the child at the same time the lamb.

'I a child and thou a lamb
We are called by his name.'

[Lines 17-18]

That is why the child and the lamb play together with no sense of difference.

In the *Echoing Green*, the word 'Green' indicates the mirth of childhood. By the virtue of God-given intuition, the children perceive every object of God's creation "appareled in celestial light" and they are playing happily. The old John also participates in laughter of the children at play, and he gets the nostalgic feeling to his own childhood. There is neither jealousy nor anxiety and darkness brings them self repose and satiation. In this poem the children's joy, the sun and the nature are shown identical. The spontaneity connects them all. In 'The Divine Image' We are given a picture of human nature as a child would see it. Blake is here saying - 'This is life as seen through innocent eyes. The child eyes see Good truly and see that.

God and man share the same good qualities - 'mercy', 'pity', 'peace,' and 'love'. In the state of childhood life is governed by these qualities and it is they which give to childhood its completeness and security. In the elaborating design of the poem mankind is presented as a man and a woman, while God is presented at the bottom as Christ and at the top is female form.

The presence of both sexes reminds that one of four divine attributes is love, that Blake's *Innocence* is a world of natural sexuality and that this particular poem recommends *Virtues of delight*.

[Hangstrun, J.H.: p.529]

In the *Songs of Experience* Blake makes a severe attack on the priest and the churches for destroying the joy and freedom of the children. But in the *Songs of Innocence*, Blake shows that religion can't be imposed upon children. In childhood religion is self-expression, not repression.

In *Holy Thursday*, Blake speaks of the innocent faces of the children. They are the children of charity school and Blake describes them as 'these flowers of London town'. 'They sit with radiance all their own'. They are multitudes of Lamb.

In 'The Chimney Sweeper', the little boys are destitutes, as they are sold by their parents to sweep the soot. The soot stick to their bodies so much, that the boys in their dreams see themselves 'lock'd up in coffins of black'.

So as the children are innocent, we should not be ignorant of the fact that children may get lost or punished or have to live in orphanages or are sold as slaves or chimneysweeper. But it must be noticed that 'in innocence, even though the children may be victimized by circumstance, they retain a spiritual resilience with joy and contentment, they love their enemies and dream of a better world". [Johnson, M.L. & Grant, J.E.: p-16]

In 'Holy Thursday' Blake shows that despite the bitter experience in the hands of charity school. Patrons, the children sing of the triumph of innocence - "The hum of multitudes as there, but multitudes of lambs/ Thousand of little boys and girls raising their innocent hands'. [Lines 7-8]

Blake's "Infant Sorrow" is actually a counterpart to his 'Introduction' and in this poem, Blake shows that even in the beginning of childhood, there is a spirit of unrest and revolt:

"My mother groan'd ! My father wept
Into the dangerous world I leapt:

Helpless, naked, piping loud:

Like a friend hid in a cloud".

[Lines 1-4]

In the 'Nurse's Song', of *Innocence* part, we find the carefree play of imagination. The voice of the Nurse appears charming and soothing. But in same poem of *Experience* Part, the voice is cruel and envious of children's happiness. The voice cruelly tells the children:

"Your Spring and your day are wasted I play,
And your winter and night in disguise." [Lines 7-8]

Tagore's Treatment of Childhood - Resemblance with Blake

The myth of childhood pervades every literature. While treating Blake's concept of childhood quite spontaneously comes the name of Rabindranath Tagore.

Regarding the theme of childhood, we find a similarity between Blake and Rabindranath. And what is most dominant in their poems is the motif of deification to the state of childhood.

Books like 'Sishu' and 'Sishu Bholanath', a child is presented as the symbol of purification and also as the inspiration of a poet.

In Tabore's 'Kabikahini' we find that a child, taking his lesson from Nature and in his lesson he is helped by the divine power of his imagination.

A child is playing lonely in a garden. He is carelessly wandering. Sometimes he smiles and sometimes he also weeps.

In fact the child is not lonely. He has always been accompanied by his memories of heaven. The earthly garden appears to him as the *Garden of Eden*. Here the child is constantly guided by imagination which is also worshipped by the poet. Thus the poet and the child here are identified as two different parts of One entity.

In the book *Sandhya Sanget*, Rabindranath says that in the state of childhood, there is only affection and love. But in the same book the poet says

At the end of festival, the dry garland
Carelessly falls here and there,
The lamps are covered with dust
And its light is getting faint and faint".

Here the poet indicates that the child of today is going to fall in the dungeon of fire.

In the poem "Khela" Tagore sees the child as a fountain of love and also emphasizes that only in a child we can see the glimpse of our Great Father. Because the child is guided by mercy, pity love which symbolize the God.

Wordsworth's Doctrine of Childhood as Encapsulated in Prelude and Immortality Ode

Like Blake, Wordsworth is a great poet of child life. He has a mystic conception of childhood. He focused his attention not on the seemingly innocent external appearance of the child, but on some mystical element in his carefree existence. His interest in child-life is evident in poems like "There was a boy", "The Idiot Boy", "The Immortality Ode", 'Lucy Gray'

etc. The influence is cultivated mainly under the influence of Rousseau.

In many ways Wordsworth was an extraordinary child, more close to nature than anyone else. In the first two books of "The Prelude", he analyses his childhood memories and draws valuable lessons from them. Recollecting his childhood, in book - I, Wordsworth says:

"... even then I felt
Gleams like the flashing of a shield;
- the earth / A common face of Nature spake to me
Rememberable things;..."

(Lines: 585-588)

The "Stolen Boat Episode" in *The Prelude* in which a mountain seems to take the shape of a giant and rushes after Wordsworth because he had gone on a nocturnal adventure after stealing someone else's boat, proves the chastising influence of nature on the child. In the following lines from Book - II of *The Prelude*, the child's creative faculty and imagination are exalted:

For him, in one dear Presence, there exists
A virtue which irradiates and exalts
Objects through widest intercourse of sense;
[Lines: 238-240]

In this 'Immortality Ode', "Wordsworth chooses the immortal nature of human spirit for his central theme. And this is something to which a child is well-acquainted through his intuition. Wordsworth also regrets because, the same thing is partly forgotten by the growing man. But he is hopeful that in maturity it can be known once more through intense experience of heart and mind.

Wordsworth glorifies childhood mainly for its immense creative and imaginative faculty, which is he himself enjoys in his finest, most creative moments. C.M. Bowra says - "In *Children*" Wordsworth "sees the creative power in its purest form. The child fashions his own little worlds of the mind because he is divinely inspired by heavenly memories."

"-See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,
some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art"
[Lines: 91-93]

"The Child's whole vocation seems to *endless imitation*, because his creative spirit is still unsullied and unhampered"
[Lines: 197 -199]

Wordsworth's philosophical view of childhood can be summed up thus "The child entered intuitively into the dream-like wonders of the natural world, and there slaked his thirst for the divine: man must learn through suffering heart and his thinking mind another way into the abiding world of the spirit."

Vaughan's Glorification of Childhood - His Cravings for a Renewal of that blissful state

Like Blake and Wordsworth, Vaughan also emphasizes the close relation between the child and the God. Vaughan thinks

that a child can be happy by gazing the weaker glories of earth, simply because he finds in them the 'shadows of eternity.' Then Vaughan regrets that maturity comes and the conscience becomes replete with 'sinful sound.' Then Vaughan presents the longing of every human being. Getting fed up with worldly vices, corruption, anxiety, we deeply cherish to get back the days of innocence and happiness. But we know that in life 'backward steps' is not possible. But in 'The Retreat', Vaughan consoles our soul by asserting that we can enjoy the innocence, happiness, security etc. of childhood again by crossing over a barrier, that is death.

"And when this dust falls to the urn
In that state I came return."
[Lines 31-32]

The Theme of Childhood and Old English Poetry, such as Pearl

The motif of the child-protagonist in a poem is found, interestingly in a medieval English poem of exquisite beauty called 'Pearl'. Pearl is actually the name of a girl, who, in the poem had died when she was only two years old. Many years later, one fine morning in August, when the girl's father pay a visit to her grave, he falls asleep and sees his dear little daughter in a dream. The maiden begins a long discussion on salvation, God's dispensation, on earthly life and eternal life in Paradise. In the end the man sees the child as the queen of Christ in the New Jerusalem.

Thomas Hood's nostalgic feeling for Childhood in I Remember, I Remember

Thomas Hood in his famous poem 'I Remember, I Remember', deals with childhood with nostalgic feelings. The poet remembers his days of childhood. He remembers *the house, the little window, The fir trees dark and high*. The poet also recalls -

"I remember, I remember
Where I was used to swing
And thought the air must rush as fresh
To swallows on the wing".
[Lines 17-20]

Concluding remark

From all these discussions, we can say that the state of childhood is like a newly blossomed red rose, and hardly anyone can be found who would not like to breathe its sweet incense. All the poets mentioned here, have treated childhood with the motif of deification. Purity, innocence, love, affection, imagination are shown as ingredients of childhood. But unfortunately that is not the final picture. Gradually a wind appears and the rose begins to lose its petals.

In childhood happiness seems to be based, not on law and reason but on love protection and peace. Such view of life may also appear as an illusion derived from an excess of economic security. In the post-Freudian and post William Golding world we find that the myth of childhood is shattered. A child is shown not so innocent as he looks. He is actually a little bundle of anarchic will whose desires take to account of either the social or the natural order. (Frye, Northrop, *Blak's Poetry and Design: A Norton Critical Edition*. p-511)
So it is emphasized that child-psychology is no less

complicated. As now-a-days juvenile crime is on the rise. But here what is responsible more is the complicated circumstances all around. And in this situation the childlike innocence and purity appear more valuable. To maintain a happy peaceful world, it becomes necessary to retain the glorifying qualities of childhood.

References

1. Bateson FW. Wordsworth A Re-Interpretation, Longman, Green and Co, London, New York, Toronto, 1954.
2. Bowra CM. The Romantic Imagination, Oxford University Press, 1950.
3. Darbishire, Helen. The Poet Wordsworth, The Clark Lectures, Trinity College, Cambridge, 1949.
4. Johnson, Mary Lynn, Grant JE. eds, *Blakes Poetry and Designs*, A Norton Critical Edition, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. New York. London, 1979.
5. Paley Morton D. ed. Twentieth Century Interpretations of Songs of Innocence and experience, Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1969.
6. Mitra, Manjubhas. *William Blake O Rabindranath*: Paschimbanga, Tagore Issue, Journal, Information and Cultural Dept., West Bengal, 2003.
7. Plowman. Max. 'An introduction to the study of Blake', Aldine press, London, 1927.
8. All the quotations of Bible are taken from the Gideons International Edition of the Holy Bible, printed in U.S.A, 1961.
9. All the lines of Blake's Poems are taken from - *Blake's Poetry and Design* - A Norton Critical Edition ed. - Johnson, Marylynn and Grand, J.E.
10. The Lines of the poem 'the Prelude" are taken from - *William Wordsworth: The Prelude* - Book First and Book Second - Macmillan's Annotated Classics.
11. The Lines of the poem *Immortality Ode* are taken from - *Fifteen Poets Oxford University Press*. Page, 242-247.
12. The Lines of the poem 'The Retreat' are taken from - *The Metaphysical Poets - Penguin Classics*, page, 265.
13. The Lines of Thomas Hood's Poem, I Remember, I Remember are taken from Higher Secondary English Selections (Poetry and Drama), WBCHSE. 1976.
14. Translations of poetic extracts from Tagore have been done by me.