

Poetry, Power and Social Critique: Reconsidering William Blake's Literary Vision

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

William Blake, Romanticism, poetry, power, social criticism, imagination, innocence, experience, religion, social injustice

Vol. 01, No. 05, 2026

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23204812>

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ABSTRACT

William Blake (1757-1827) occupies a unique place in English Romantic literature by virtue of his aptitude to synthesise poetry, visual art, spirituality, and social criticism. His poetry criticises established religious authority, political oppression, institutional power, economic disparity and limiting moral frameworks. Blake's imaginative creation was not merely an aesthetic form but a way of contesting the existing institutions of authority and restoring human freedom. This article considers the relationship between poetry, power and social commentary in Blake's major works including *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *London*, *The Chimney Sweeper* poems and *The Tyger*. More specifically, it looks at Songs of innocence and of Experience. The research claims that Blake's literary vision is mostly about the struggle between individual imagination and structures that restrict human consciousness. Not only does his contrast of innocence and experience depict childhood and adulthood, but it also displays conflicting views on society, morality, religion, and authority. Blake exposes the hidden forms of subjugation embedded in seemingly respectable organisations using symbolic language, irony, conflicting voices and visionary imagery. The article also considers Blake's critique of industry, organised religion, child exploitation, political power and conventional morality. In the end, Blake appears as a poet whose theory of imagination is inseparable from his social criticism. His poetry invites readers to recognise oppressive structures and create alternative human existences centred on freedom, creativity, spiritual awareness, and social justice.

Introduction

William Blake is one of the most original and intellectually challenging poets of the English Romantic period. Blake was born in London in 1757 and lived through a period of significant intellectual, economic, and political change. The American and French Revolutions, the expansion of industrial capitalism, the rise of urbanisation, and significant debates regarding individual liberty, political authority, and religion were all observed during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Blake's imagination was substantially influenced by these historical developments. Despite the fact that he did not compose conventional political treatises, his poetry and visual art consistently challenge the social institutions and ideological presumptions that govern human existence. Blake's significance as a social critic is partially attributable to his refusal to differentiate between social issues and psychological and spiritual conditions. According to Blake, oppression is not solely the result of economic institutions or governments. It can also result from systems of thought that impede the development of individuals' imaginative and spiritual potential, as well as from moral absolutism, fear, and restrictive beliefs.

Consequently, his poetry investigates power at both the institutional and psychological levels. This approach is most clearly articulated in his two main collections, *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794). The two collections should not be interpreted as mere representations of childhood and maturity. Rather, they offer divergent viewpoints on the nature of humanity. Innocence frequently signifies trust, openness, optimism, and imaginative freedom, while experience illustrates institutional corruption, hypocrisy, exploitation, repression, and suffering. Blake's primary accomplishment is to establish a dialogue between these viewpoints. In poems like "London," Blake depicts the city as a context in which political, economic, and psychological forms of oppression are rendered visible. In "The Chimney Sweeper," he simultaneously critiques religious ideology that encourages victims to accept suffering while drawing attention to the exploitation of children. Blake queries the systems of morality that suppress human energy and challenges conventional distinctions between good and evil in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Consequently, his poetry serves as an intellectual form of resistance. This article investigates the manner in which Blake employs poetry to scrutinise social injustice and power. It contends that Blake's concept of imagination is inextricably linked to his social criticism. Not only does his poetry portray a corrupt society, but it also endeavours to free readers from constrained perspectives and concepts.

William Blake and the Historical Context

An understanding of the historical conditions of Blake's lifetime would be necessary to fully appreciate Blake's social criticism. Blake lived in a period of industrial technology, of shifting social structures and of revolutionary political ideology. The French Revolution raised passionate discussions about the role of government, equality and liberty, while the Industrial Revolution changed the nature of employment and city life. Blake reacted in a complex way to these changes. He was deathly scared of institutional power and institutions that tried to pigeonhole people as economic or social. His question was not about which political system is better than the other. Rather, he questioned the greater systems that control human people. The expansion of industrial employment gave rise to serious social problems of child labour, poverty and hazardous working conditions. Such conditions are described in Blake's poem "The Chimney Sweeper". Similarly, in "London" the city is depicted as a place where the order of ordinary life appears to be linked with sorrow. Religion was also a target for Blake. Blake was not anti-religious. But he distinguished spiritual experience from institutional religion. He was against that form of religious leadership which converted spiritual truths into rigid standards of obedience. Authentic spirituality, his poetry continually insists, should liberate man, not imprison him. Blake's poetry is intertwined with the intellectual and revolutionary spirit of his period (Beer, 1970). His work shows the clash between established authority and new notions about individual freedom.

Poetry as a Form of Social Critique

Blake's poetry shows how literature may be social critique without being political propaganda. Mostly he does a symbolic, imaginative and visionary approach. Blake does not make systematic political arguments; he creates scenes, people and imagery which reveal paradoxes in society. For example, in "London" the speaker explores the streets and meets people whose suffering symbolises bigger socio-economic structures: "I walk each chartered street. Particularly essential is the term "charter'd". It indicates the city is divided, run and governed by the power of institution. The usage of the word only further confirms the concept that even seemingly open environments are subject to systems of ownership and control. The poem proceeds to a sequence of people who are in pain. The speaker hears the "mind-forg'd manacles" of the populace. This phrase is important to Blake's

conception of power in that it implies oppression is both within and outside. The word “manacles” generally indicates literal imprisonment, but Blake calls them “mind-forg’d. Social institutions are powerful when people have internalised the beliefs that underpin them. This observation anticipated a key part of current theories of ideology and power: dominance is most effective when it is internalised. Blake’s criticism is not limited to political institutions. He addresses questions regarding how social systems influence awareness itself. The poem concludes with portraits of the soldier, the prostitute and the chimney-sweep, which are graphic in their depiction of a society saturated with misery. Blake links personal suffering to institutional systems, and proposes that poverty and exploitation are societal results, not failures of the individual.

Innocence and Experience as Social Perspectives

A major element in Blake’s vision of literature is the distinction between innocence and experience. *Songs of Innocence* offers a world of spiritual optimism, pastoral beauty, childhood and trust. *Songs of Innocence*, meanwhile, exposes hypocrisy, repression, social inequity and misery. But Blake does not just say that innocence is good and experience bad. Experience gives a knowledge which innocence does not have. Meanwhile experience can be negative, leading to scepticism, repression and lack of inventiveness. It is therefore necessary to assess the two states together. As Frye (1969) argues, Blake’s symbolic system is often dependent upon the interaction of opposite states rather than simple oppositions. famously states in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “Without Contraries is no progression; This principle is crucial to comprehending his societal criticism. Society becomes oppressive when it tries to purge itself of conflict and to forge a singular meaning of human behaviour, religion or morality. Hence for Blake the tension between intellect and imagination is fundamental. Seeing various alternatives is a necessity of freedom, as opposed to adopting one authorised explanation of reality.

Child Labour and Institutional Exploitation

The exploitation of children is one of Blake’s most pressing social issues. The two “Chimney Sweeper” poems offer different perspectives on the suffering of children. The chimney-sweeper (*Songs of Innocence*) is a young child sold into servitude. The poem describes not only the harsh conditions of chimney sweeping, but it also presents a picture of freedom. The baby sees an angel, who promises freedom and joy. The poem appears, on the face of it, hopeful. But this optimism is deeply paradoxical. The youngster has been exposed to a dangerous working environment and religious solace is a part of the system wherein suffering is accepted. The poem in *Songs of Experience*, however, is far more direct in its criticism. The baby is born into a society ruled by the church, the government and the parents. The poem ends with a harsh attack on institutional hypocrisy: “And gone to glorify God, his Priest and his King. Blake links the exploitation of minors to religious and political authority. There is extreme social hardship, alongside institutions that pretend to protect morals. This is one of Blake’s greatest contributions to social criticism. He demonstrates how injustice often survives in the language of morality. A society can be religious, respectable, and orderly, and at the same time allows vulnerable people to suffer misery.

Religion, Morality and Power

Blake’s poetry also questions the validity of political authority. His imagination was shaped by the discussions on political liberty and his work was produced in a time of revolution. Yet Blake’s critique of authority is more than a simple hostility to a particular administration. He is nervous about any system that limits human freedom. Political institutions are dangerous when people are made into passive subjects.

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Political Authority and the Problem of Oppression

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Industrialisation and Urban Modernity

Blake’s social criticism can be read also as an early resistance to industrial modernity. He lived in an age of rapid change, when society was being transformed by industrial capitalism and mechanisation. There is a constant fear in his poetry of systems that turn human beings into instruments. “London” is a city of power institutions. People walk the streets of business regulation, poverty, and pain. The chimney-sweepers are another characteristic of industrial society. They do physically dangerous and economically exploitative work. Blake’s representation of them challenges the notion that economic progress is synonymous with human progress. This is particularly pertinent to the Romantic critique of industrialisation. Romantic writers often emphasise individual experience, nature and imagination. They are against mechanical rationality. Blake’s standpoint is unusual because he does not glorify nature. Rather he emphasises the human imagination as the primary source of resistance to mechanisation. His critique is thus still audible in contemporary discourse of economic and technological progress. Blake argues that progress is not simply the result of increasing material wealth or productivity. Real progress must mean human freedom and imaginative creativity too.

Symbolism and the Language of Power

His social criticism is particularly potent because of Blake’s symbolism. His poetry rarely states the whole argument. Rather, he uses symbolic forms and imagery to create a complex sense of meaning. One of his most famous symbolic creations is perhaps the “Tyger”. In “The Tyger” Blake asks the following question: “What mighty hand or vision, Dare frame thy terrifying symmetry? The Tiger is the symbol of creative force, energy and scary beauty. Does the same creator make both the innocent and the violent? His understanding of human life is enhanced by the question of the poetry. There are no

simple categories of good and evil to explain reality. There is beauty and fear, creation and devastation in the earth. Similarly, the lamb of “The Lamb” is a symbol of spiritual faith, compassion and innocence. Together, the two poems produce a complex meditation on the origin of the world when read as a pair with “The Tyger.” Thus Blake’s symbol-ism subverts traditional readings. The reader is encouraged to think critically, rather than passively receive a moral lesson.

Imagination as Resistance

Blake’s literary vision is founded upon the idea of imagination. Blake’s creativity is not limited to the power to invent stories. It is a kind of perception that allows human beings to perceive beyond the boundaries of conventional reality. In Blake’s famous line in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “The imagination is not a state: it is the human existence itself. This sentence explains the relevance of imagination in his societal criticism. Imaginative perception is a form of resistance to authoritarian institutions that control how people understand reality. Imagination allows individuals to recognise that the social systems that now exist are not necessarily natural or permanent. People can imagine something other . This is why the poor , the unequal , the religiously restricted and the politically authoritative can be questioned . Thus, Blake’s poetry is more than a cry against oppression. It attempts to modify the state of consciousness. Literary scholars have given a lot of attention to this facet of Blake’s work. Erdman (1977) stresses Blake’s interest in political and revolutionary ideas, whereas Bloom (1963) is concerned with the visionary and psychological aspects of his poetry. They are different yet show how difficult it is to separate Blake’s political critique from his imaginative and spiritual vision.

Gender, Sexuality and Social Control

Blake also takes issue with narrow views of gender and sexuality. His poems are typically directed at regimes that enforce rigid moral boundaries on human relations. Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is an assault on traditional morality, exalting desire and energy. His argument implies that sexual repression may be a form of social control. Nevertheless, Blake’s gender is complex, and cannot be read through a contemporary lens alone. His work is a blend of the traditional and the liberating. But his critique of repressive moral systems gives a basis for challenging social regulation of desire. This is of particular importance given Blake’s linking of sexual repression to larger mechanisms of power. The same systems that regulate religious belief also regulate the body and personal connections. His idea of freedom in literature is so complex: political, spiritual, creative, physical.

Blake’s Literary Vision and the Romantic Movement

Although his work is very different than that of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Blake is often considered an early Romantic poet. Like other Romantic writers, he values emotional experience, subjective perception and creativity in his poetry. Blake’s poetry, by contrast, is more openly visionary and symbolically radical. Wordsworth often finds rejuvenation in nature and recollection, while Blake often confronts the reader with paradoxes, urban anguish and symbolic violence. His *London* is not only a geographical space, but a psychological and intellectual terrain. Hence, in Blake, Romanticism is inseparable from resistance. He rejects the usual divisions between art and politics, religion and social criticism, poetry and the visual arts. In this respect, his illuminated volumes are of exceptional importance. Blake crossed the boundaries of literary and visual expression, bringing together language and image. His artistic technique acts as a critique of the dominant cultural authority.

Blake’s Continuing Relevance

Blake’s social criticism continues to be the focus of scholarly study because many of the issues he raised remain relevant. Ideological control, political domination, institutional hypocrisy, economic

injustice and child abuse remain major challenges in modern cultures. The idea of “mind-forg’d manacles” is especially relevant in contemporary studies of social conditioning. Constraints may be experienced not only by physical power, but also by inherited preconceptions, social expectations, and ideological narratives. The same is true of Blake’s focus on the value of imagination. In a world increasingly impacted by technology, mass communication and automated processes, critical and creative thinking are nevertheless irreplaceable. Blake also argues that social criticism cannot be divorced from questions of human dignity. Economic prosperity does not necessarily mean equality and freedom, and a society may be prosperous but not equal or free. And thus his poetry promotes a broader view of progress. Human advancement must also be the extension of consciousness, creativity and freedom, not just material development.

Research Gap and Critical Perspective

Although scholarship has addressed Blake's politics, religion and psychology in great detail, it is still useful to collate a number of views into a coherent framework that foregrounds the relationship between poetry, power and social critique. Some interpretations emphasise Blake's revolutionary politics, others his mystical imagination. These are related elements, as a combined approach illustrates. Blake’s political critique is grounded in his conception of human consciousness, and his spiritual vision provides a basis for the rejection of oppressive structures. The study therefore places Blake within an interdisciplinary framework that embraces literary criticism, social history and theories of power. Blake's poetry should not be labelled as 'political' and 'spiritual', it says. His social criticism is therefore essentially imaginative and spiritual, for he sees oppression as a state of mind and of society.

Conclusion

William Blake’s poetry is a unique voice of social and intellectual criticism within the English Romantic literature. His work challenges the power of governments, the dogma of religion, the exploitation of the economy, child labour, rigid ethics and the structures that inhibit human creativity.

Blake in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* demonstrates different levels of consciousness and exposes social contradictions. "London" demonstrates the mental consequences of institutional power, while the "Chimney Sweeper" poems depict the victimisation of children and the hypocrisy of institutions that allow suffering to occur. The *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* denies conventional moral categories and celebrates human energy and inventiveness. “The Tyger” and “The Lamb” are examples of Blake’s fascination with paradox, genesis and the complex nature of existence.

The underlying principle of all of these creations is creativity. Blake argues that real freedom starts when people recognise the limits placed on them. His “mind-forg’d manacles” are among the most powerful metaphors for the relation between social power and human consciousness. Thus Blake’s literary standpoint is not merely a negation of the norms of society. It is an effort to imagine a different social order where creativity, freedom, spiritual awareness and human dignity can flourish. His poem reveals that literature can resist power not only by describing injustice but also by changing the reader’s point of view. In the end Blake’s significance is that he would not separate art from life. To him, poetry is a creative force that can challenge the conventional beliefs and show the new possibilities of human life. His work always stresses that social change is not simply a matter of institutional reform but of the liberation of human creativity.

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