

Interpreting the Nature of Thel in William Blake's *The Book of Thel*

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Abstract: *The Book of Thel* deals with grave issues such as existence and morality. The first part of the poem depicts Thel as an un-fallen child living in a world of purity and beautiful natural elements as it is typical in *The Songs of Innocence*. The other part, which illustrates sorrow and death associated with knowledge, is typical in the fallen world of *The Songs of Experience*. Therefore, this paper attempts to interpret how Thel views her own existence in light of these two worlds that are depicted in *The Book of Thel*.

Key words: Thel • *The Book of Thel* • Blake • Innocence • Experience

INTRODUCTION

The title plate of *The Book of Thel* shows Thel standing beneath a withering tree looking in despair at a young couple in a state of affection and harmony. Thel, who is described as the mistress of the beautiful and peaceful vales of Har, stands alone holding a shepherdess's crook that may be of no need in such a serene and pastoral setting. The plate shows that Thel's tree is dry whereas the plant of the young couple is blossoming. The plate indicates that their plant will grow further and flourish because it offers new buds as the one growing toward Thel's feet.

Review of Related Literature: *The Book of Thel* deals with grave issues such as existence and morality. The first part of the poem depicts Thel as an un-fallen child living in a world of serenity and beautiful natural elements. This pure world is typical of the world that exists in *The Songs of Innocence*. However, the other part of the poem illustrates sorrows and death that are associated with knowledge as in the fallen world that exists in *The Songs of Experience*. In *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake* [1], E. D. Hirsch, Jr. states that innocence for Blake is an inadequate state that requires for completion a representation of the contrary state, which is experience. He says that both of these states are necessary for an adequate conception of the human soul (14-15).

In *The Illuminated Blake* [2], David V. Erdman explains that Thel is standing under a thin arching willow, which is a tree of paradise or sorrow (33). George Wingfield Digby says in *Symbolism and Image in William Blake* [3]: "Blake's art can open our eyes and shock us into relationship with the living experience. Out of this experience, when gradually and intelligently assimilated, can grow understanding" (95).

Blake states at the beginning of the poem that Thel is the youngest daughter of Seraphim. Harold Bloom explains in *The Visionary Company* [4] that the daughters of Seraphim are traditionally the highest order of angels and are frequently depicted as having the heads of children (49). Kathleen Raine in *Blake and Tradition* [5] says that Thel in the title plate stands beside a pasque flower associated with the vegetation-god, Adonis. She states that Blake views Thel as a fairy because fairies are spirits of vegetation (104). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* [6] provides another interpretation about the nature of Thel in the sense that she is perceived by some commentators as an urban soul and that the name "Thel" probably derives from the Greek word for "wish" or "will" (97). However, upon the examination of the poem, the name "Thel" in this context is to be incorporated with indecisiveness due to her state.

In *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* [7], Northrop Frye explains that Blake's archetypal myth is about man perceived through a religious perspective in light of conceptions of redemption, judgement and

immorality; and that such relevant poetry as *The Book of Thel* is considered to be a part of his apocalyptic prophecies (168). In the same line of thinking, Mona Wilson in *The Life of William Blake* [8] states that Blake explores Greek thought and also utilizes Greek symbolism in his adoption of the doctrine of pre-existence (37).

DISCUSSION

The poem opens with Thel's motto:

Does the Eagle know what is in the pit?
Or wilt thou go ask the Mole?
Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod?
Or Love in a golden bowl?

Bloom argues that the first two lines imply the necessity of descending into the pit. He states that Blake's usage of "a silver rod" and "a golden bowl" is in order to present a sexual symbol and that the conceptual scheme of *The Book of Thel* is the failure to move on from the world of innocence to the world of experience (48-49). Robert F. Gleckner states in "Point of View and Context in Blake's Songs" [9] that Blake created a system in which innocence and experience are vital parts. He says that Blake views that these states are separate and that they represent the two contrary states of the human soul. He argues that these songs were written not merely for one's enjoyment or even education, but rather for human salvation (10).

Frye believes that all life or imagination in the world is illustrated in a regular rhythm in nature that correlates with the bursting energy of life in spring and the buried repose of life in winter. The fact that life or all imagination shows this alteration of rhythm indicates its existence in Paradise (230). Even though the poem takes place in spring, the time of birth and fruitfulness, Thel is dissatisfied because she believes that she will inevitably fade away like the morning's beauty and also, according to Bloom, like her older sisters (48).

Thel is uncomfortable to the extent that she voices her lamentations by questioning why are beautiful creations, such as the lotus, created just to die at the end of their course of life. A crucial point in the poem is that Thel views herself as not fully existent since she associates herself with a parting cloud and a reflection in a glass in the air. This indicates that she feels her existence is merely temporary. She also refers to Genesis 3.8 in the first plate by saying: "And gentle sleep the sleep of death and gentle hear the voice of him that

walketh [sic] in the garden in the evening time" (98). Bloom views that such a reference indicates that Thel's garden is similar to Adam's paradise and that it is a place from which we must fall (49-50).

The usage of "sleep" and "evening" suggest an end. It is as if she anticipates the ceasing of her own existence. Therefore, on the symbolic level, this implies that Blake views Thel to be a representation of the human soul that is given a chance to choose either innocence or experience. If she chooses innocence then she is to stay pure as a child and remain in paradise, whereas if she chooses experience then she will gain knowledge by falling from paradise.

In answer to her misery, a Lilly comments on Thel's condition by pointing out that despite the fact that it is small, weak and humble; yet after melting from the summer's heat it will be rewarded by flourishing in eternal valleys in paradise. As a result, the Lilly wonders why Thel is complaining about her condition if reward will be granted to those, who deserve it after all. Here, Thel explains to the Lilly that it is of great use as its perfume, for instance, delights Christ and is essential for the making of honey. But Thel insists that she is unlike the Lilly because she is useless and will not be missed when she ceases to exist just like a faint cloud. In a following episode, an encounter between Thel and a Cloud does take place.

At the time that Thel wonders why does not the Cloud complain about its existence as it will eventually fade away in an hour's time, the Cloud stresses that it - unlike Thel - is useful after all as it brings rain to the tender flowers. Here the Cloud stresses another significant point, which is that everything does not live alone and that it does not live only for itself. This is true indeed as even if one dies, he/she is survived by his/her children, who are of the same bloodline, but Thel fails to comprehend that. In light of her innocence, Thel's ignorance surfaces here as she fails to comprehend what she is told. At this stage, Thel believes that she is of no use to any and that she is leading a vain and purposeless life. Frye states that Thel's world is unreal as it is a world of dissolving and arbitrary fantasy; a looking-glass world of talking flowers. Being an unborn soul, Thel longs to be of "use". She desires to materialize her potential life into an actual one, but in order to do so; she must come into a world of generation (233).

In this regard, Raine states that the imagery of the poem is appropriate to the "watery" world of generation. To illustrate, Thel's lamentation "falls like morning dew". Thel speaks about "the lotus of the water" and she

converses with the Lilly that calls itself "a watery weed". At the time that the Lilly is a symbol of vegetated life; the Cloud and dewdrop, the moist Clay, the worm upon "its dew bed" and the "dewy grave" are suitable images to theme of generation (108).

Thel encounters afterwards the Clod of Clay and here the juxtaposition between them is evident as even a "clod" recognizes that life is not worthy to be lived in solitary. In spite of the uselessness of the Clod of Clay, it still lives and loves unlike Thel. Thel expresses her exasperation by saying that she no longer enjoys her life as it is and finds no satisfaction, for instance, in sweet little flowers and warbling birds because she is incapable of affecting anything at all:

"But Thel delights in these no more, because I fade away,
And all shall say, 'Without a use this shining woman liv'd [sic],
Or did she only live to be at death the food of worms?' " (100).

Due to her sighs and complaints "of fading away", the Clod of Clay invites Thel to enter its house revealing to her the sorrows in dark valleys. Alizadeh and Ahmadzadeh [10] argue that the only one, who was able to convince Thel to conduct action is the Clod of Clay as they both share a sense of humbleness and helplessness (69).

Raine states that Thel's garden is similar to the garden of Adnois, where souls await generation. Raine says that such a garden has two gates, one of birth and the other of death; indicating north and south (100). Frye argues that all life is born in "sexual" Beulah and that the energy of that life forces it into our world of generation. Beulah has two gates; the northern one is for mortals, while the southern one is for gods (232). Thel enters through the northern gate in an attempt to finally become human and to become "of use". She keeps on going until she reaches a "hollow pit" that turns out to be her own grave. All the human senses are mentioned in the final part of the poem since the portrayed life at this stage is the actual one.

Frye states that when a plant grows out of a seed, it grows as an ascent, but imaginatively it is a descent to a lower world. He says that nothing materializes into reality without going through physical existence. So the failure in *The Book of Thel* is depicted in declining to reach that necessary descent. Based on that, Frye argues that Thel could be viewed as an imaginative seed of an

undeveloped form ranging from a human baby to an artistic inspiration and that her tragedy could be anything from a miscarriage to a lost vision (232-233).

CONCLUSION

It is explained in *The Illuminated Blake* that the final plate of the poem shows a huge serpent bearing three children. It is thought that this plate may be a revised version of the poem's conclusion (40). The image of the serpent and children indicates that Blake probably saw a kind of "marriage" between knowledge achieved through experience on one hand and innocence on the other; as Blake does not favor suppressing such a desire attained through knowledge.

Jared N. Powell [11] states that because of Blake's eccentric printing and publishing method, multiple copies of most of his poems exist (4). Therefore, in a later version of *The Book of Thel*, Blake most likely viewed later on that compensation could be reached by taming knowledge. However, the former version reveals that Thel's visit to the Clod of Clay actually maximizes her fear as she goes back to her original state releasing a shriek of horror. At the end of the poem, Thel is described for the first time to be "The Virgin" indicating that she will never succeed in living the state of experience as she becomes her own jailor.

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