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BLAKE'S THE BOOK OF THEL
ANALYSING THE PURPOSE OF LIFE THROUGH SACRIFICE AND THE INFLUENCE
OF AWARENESS IN CHOICE MAKING

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ABSTRACT

This paper will analyse William Blake's perspective of sacrifice as a leading force in the purpose of life, taking into consideration awareness' role in choice making within his poem "The Book of Thel" (1789). The poem revolves around young Thel's search for her purpose and existence in a world in which she is bound to perish; the narrative will be assessed based on Blake's biographical content, the Romantic historical context, and the themes of nature, mortality, innocence and experience. Based on this, the characters will be investigated as representations of real-life elements in the hopes of attaining a deeper understanding of Blake's intertwined and multifaceted work. Further, Thel's actions and will be explored, focusing not only on the outcome but on the choices she takes along the way and the processes that present her as a complex character with a load of fears and strengths.

Keywords: sacrifice; purpose of life; awareness; choice making; The Book of Thel; nature; innocence and experience.

1.INTRODUCTION

The Romantic period was a time that overflowed with a desire for innovation and renewal; through these inclinations, new art was developed in the hopes of attaining a deeper sense of self which would ultimately lead into a more great understanding of the implications of life. The Romanticists sought after a new kind of awareness that saw man as part of a much larger and complex system in the world (OERLEMANS, 1961), searching for answers and new understandings through contexts such as nature. The relationship between man and nature was seen as fundamental and began to be reanalysed, giving it a distinguished position: a force that would approximate man to his epitome of existence and understanding (CUNNINGHAM & JARDINE, 1990).

William Blake's "The Book of Thel" explores the anguishes of Thel, the main character, in search of a meaning behind her fleeting existence, which will certainly end in death. Thel ventures in search for answers, and, in her journey, encounters different beings in nature, the Lily of the Valley, the Cloud, the Worm, and the Clod of Clay, that offer their own interpretations and readings of existence; this allows for an increase of awareness in her understanding that the purpose of life revolves around self-sacrifice, and Blake shows this through a series of different resources and questionings. Ultimately, Thel gains awareness and is conscious enough to the point of being capable making her own choices that affect not only her but her surroundings; she is conscious of the implications of self-sacrifice within her realm, yet not ready and mature enough to accept its implications. Blake's ending creates speculation in regards to Thel's future, after fleeing to the Vales of Har, and allows the reader to reflect on the effects of her awareness and future decisions, now conscious of the role of self-sacrifice in the purpose of life.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

The Romantic period spanned through the late 18th to the early 19th centuries, and its origin in Europe gave rise to an artistic-literary movement which brought forth a series of reflections on the nature of man and diverse underlying questions of self-understanding. This literature allowed the unfolding of new interpretations in regards to the reading of life as had been understood thus far, and created a break in tradition; as Romantic writer Emerson once put it, "why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe?" (EMERSON, 1836, p.3), rather than being retrospective, he and many others called upon his generation for introspection. Further, a society's creative production is a reflection of its state and the conditions through which the population exists; the major influence and large number of Romantic writers during this period of time manifests their intense desire for self-awareness.

Within the theme of self-understanding underlies a spectrum of other definitions and considerations. In order to delve deeper in such processes, Cunningham and Jardine (1990) suggest the critical roles between the self and nature during this period; once having been at one with nature, the Romantic movement sought to recover this original (and perhaps ideal) relationship which had been lost. Amid the diversity of interpretations and influences, the self and nature are now seen under different lights, as a bond essential in the attempt of a step forward towards understanding. Blake himself explored these elements in his work, which also have a significant role in "The Book of Thel", where a majority of the characters present are elements of nature in communication with man.

This use in Blake's work was a common literary device and can be identified in other works of the time: "For oft, when on my couch I lie/ In vacant or pensive mood/ They flash upon that inward eye/ Which is the bliss of solitude;/ And then my heart with pleasure fills,/ And dances with the Daffodils." (WORDSWORTH, 1802, p.) The personification above indicates an inherent bond between man and nature, and the use of memory as a tool of lingering connection asserts the relationship between the two. Not only does Blake personify the natural elements in the story, but also the 'Desire' which is Thel's drive throughout the poem; furthermore, Marjorie Levinson (1980) adds that Blake's use of such device gives Thel a different voice, allowing her to create a wider understanding of her own beliefs and concealed thoughts through her interactions with the elements of nature.

This newly developed sentiment towards nature fixed itself strongly within the Romantic tendencies, so much so that it was deeply rooted in the American Romantic literature with authors such as Emerson and Thoreau carrying forward the theme. This line of thought considered that man was part of a larger consciousness or spirit which led one to the totality which was the 'spirit' of nature, that there was more beyond solely human life (Oerlemans, 1961). This permeated into man, Blake included, an urge to delve into the unknown powers and influences that nature had within human understanding of the world. The study of the essence of nature, as well as direct contact with it was a great source of inspiration for these writers, and this journey is taken by Thel in her search for answers of the purpose for life, directly through contact with both live and still elements of nature, which provoke an expansion in her field of consciousness.

The Romantic literature entailed a revolution in form. Despite the strong tradition and weight in aesthetics and form, the Romantics challenged the typical framework for poetry and, thus, altered the use of word choice for a simpler, more palpable vocabulary. It is suggested that Blake's literary work used form "as a mode of criticism, even critique" (WOLFSON, 2000, p.11) during his time period through the tentatives of escape from tradition and norms. Additionally, Blake's innovative style did not only signify a disdain or neglect towards the customary practices, but were also an active undertaking against said conventions; his "assaults on all sorts of visual and poetic traditions render poetry "a form of action rather than a form of representation" (WOLFSON, 2000, p.11).

Despite having sold few exemplars of "The Book of Thel" plates during his lifetime, Blake's regard grew as different interpretations and speculation of his work have expanded and branched out throughout the academic world. According to Levinson (1980) Thel is a character which behaves as a surrogate to the viewer, meaning the reader is meant to think similarly to her, and thus, sympathise and understand Thel's thought process and behaviours; the reader, rather than taking their own choices and actions, will see themselves through Thel. She adds that Thel is the being that reflects her identity and thoughts into the elements of nature, for once she utters a word or thinks a thought, she must give a body unto it; by doing so, the speech then becomes the hero of the poem, for it is what enables the development of the story as well her growth as an insecure character. This viewpoint illustrates the potential power that nature has over man, and the knowledge that is obtained through such interactions.

For Simpkins (1988), the struggle itself, as presented in the story is more important than the potential solution that could derive from it. The wrap of the story, ending in frustration and a lack of outcome are not as important when compared to the process of struggle through which the character goes, for a complete and proper finalization would not leave as much space for questioning and reflection as the given ending does; by putting emphasis on the influence of the world in the unrolling of the story, he adds that Blake draws attention to the flaws and weak points in language's limited capacities of correctly and fully communicating.

Because of her naivete, Thel laments not only her inability to find satisfaction through her questions, but also the insufficiency of the medium she chooses for these investigations. (However, she realizes at the end that the questioning mode is probably the most useful form of language available.) (SIMPKINS, 1988, p.27)

Meanwhile, Thel's realization is reached through a process of trial and experimentation through which the readers also go, accompanying her journey and her thought development process. In spite of the fact that neither Thel nor the reader reach an immediate conclusion, they are able to share a set of parallel experiences.

The period of time and location in which Blake lived affected influenced his work, and he was also able to shape some of the themes by which the romantic period is defined. Blake was born on 28 November, 1757 in London to James and Catherine Blake, and at a young age began to develop his painting skills; however, at the age of fourteen, his father chose for him the path of engraving, in the hope of ensuring a more steady income. He followed through with the profession and went as far as working for publishers of authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. In 1787, tragedy struck when Robert, his brother died; despite being one of the most traumatic incidents of his life, through visions, Blake would communicate with Robert, which would teach and inspire him until many years after his death (EAVES, 2006).

His criticism of the Church as seen in his work posed serious questions regarding their true intentions and effects on the largely Christian society of the time, denouncing the Church's mistreating of the population as well as the hypocrisies which lie within its preachings. Blake's vision on religion was highly unorthodox, and despite such ceremonies as his christening and marriage having been accordingly to the Church of England, he had his own particularities and interpretations of the different aspects of religions, repudiating institutionalized religion especially (BENTLEY, 2018). Such ideas are exemplified in *A Little Boy Lost*, where he states

"The weeping parent wept in vain:/ They stripped him to his little shirt,/ And bound him in an iron chain,/ And burned him in a holy place/ Where many had been burned before;/ The weeping parent wept in vain./ Are such things done on Albion's shore?" (BLAKE, 1789, l.?)

Despite his feelings towards the Church, Blake had, as can be seen in his writing, a sincere and intense belief towards the figure of Jesus Christ, which in turn shaped the way he viewed and created his mythological work and his themes of religion and the sublime. His creation of Prophetic Books and poems and the development of a series of characters and realms that would represent religious characters as well as create new perspectives and narratives, along with his criticism towards the Church in poems such as "The Garden of Love" and "A Little Boy Lost" in his Songs of Experience are the works that strongly shaped him as an author and attempted to change the vision of the surrounding population.

3.METHODOLOGY

Based on the nature and the numerous interpretations which can be taken from Romantic poetry and thought, and the present discussions on Blake's work, the analysis will take place based on a qualitative approach, that will take into consideration the different themes and topics explored by Blake, as well as the influence of the external historical context with the development of his work. The study will be based on the primary text, "The Book of Thel" (1789) by William Blake, and will take into consideration the character's actions and thoughts, Thel's journey and transformation throughout the development of the story, and the presence of prevalent Romantic themes within the poem. Furthermore, the paper will take into consideration the series of events that ultimately lead Thel into her final decision. Aside from the primary literary object, a selection of Blake's poems will serve as parallel comparisons and additions to the main piece. Finally, different authors' works and perspectives on Blake will be discussed and explored in order to contextualize and further enrich the question of the topic of awareness and self-sacrifice within Blake's work and the dynamics of the characters when relating to Thel.

4.ANALYSIS

Blake's "The Book of Thel" is a Prophetic Book that tells the story of the youngest daughter of Mne Seraphim, Thel, a shepherdess that tends her flocks by the river of Adona in the Vales of Har. Thel sees herself consumed by the aching mysteries of life and death, and seeks to understand why her life, along with all other living things must come to an end: "O life of this our spring! Why fades the lots of the water?/ Why fade these children of the spring? Born but to smile & fall." (BLAKE, 1789, p.3) In the midst of such disquietude, she is offered comfort by the Lily of the Valley, the Cloud, the Worm, and the Clod of Clay, which overall explain that one does not live life for themselves, that life is better without questioning, and that even in death, one can be of use to others. Before the closing of the story, the Clod of Clay invites her to the realm of the dead of which Thel will one day be a part; however, she is distraught by a series of even more harrowing questions about life and existence, and so flees, with a shriek, back into the Vales of Har.

The poem opens with a cryptic 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?" (BLAKE, 1789, p.1). The condition in which the eagle and mole are, describes the limitations of each point of view; while the mighty eagle is praised for its sight and ability to fly, it does not have the capacity to see beyond its perspectives; on the other hand, the mole, with its limited sight and movement, has access to a part of the world that from which the eagle is restricted. When seen in this perspective, the motto turns out to be the formula or structure that emulates the journey through which Thel goes, while also describing two contradicting ways of being and knowing (LEVINSON, 1980). Thus, it can be observed that the frailest creatures have a conscience and awareness that Thel does not; while she, on one hand, lives with a limited perspective of her own, the remaining characters share an expanded point of view. Additionally, Simpkins explains how the placement and use of a motto allows an ampler understanding and preparation to the reader, "The Motto offers evidence that Blake was aware of the potential benefit of a preparatory cue for the text, since it establishes a framework of questioning and draws our attention to the apparent significance of Thel's interrogations" (SIMPKINS, 1988, p.27).

The name Thel derives from the Greek word meaning 'desire' or 'will'; by doing so, Blake emphasizes her urges in seeking and entering into a different reality of understanding or

experience. Each of the interactive elements of nature have different roles in the processes through which Thel goes, and each character assists her with the understanding of the different circumstances which life entails. After Thel's initial lamentations, the Lily of the Valley offers her share of wisdom; according to her, albeit she is so weak "the gilded butterfly scarce perches on my head" (BLAKE, 1789, p.3) and transient, she is cared for and important in the eyes of God; if that is so, then, says the Lily, Thel has nothing about which to complain. In doing so, Blake directly challenges the societal beliefs and practices; although largely Christian, the culture in which he was inserted was strongly rooted in classicism and social prejudice. The Lily's assertion, in direct contrast, emphasises the Romantic belief that man is not to be bound to the artificial and material objects, but to a self-understanding and consciousness; if even the weakest of the creatures is cherished by God, then Blake creates an awareness with the fact that the actions of man speak louder than the artificial societal positions which are so highly regarded. However, Thel is not satisfied; the Lily has a great deal to offer to the survival and thriving of other living beings in the world:

Thy breath doth nourish the innocent lamb [...] Thy wine doth purify the golden honey, thy perfume,/ Which thou dost scatter on every little blade of grass that springs,/ Revives the milked cow, & tames the fire-breathing steed. (BLAKE, 1789, p.4)

Her capacities largely differ from the Lily, and she becomes aware of the differences which exist between herself and her counterpart. Although being capable of understanding the Lily's purpose in life, she still cannot figure out hers and attributes fault to her nature and essence, rather than to a lack of understanding. The lily is a flower usually associated to death and lugubrious scenarios; however, in another poem, "The Lily" (BLAKE, 1789), Blake mentions the purity of the lily, contrasting it to the rose and its thorns, and a sheep and its horns. According to Antal "In Thel the lily basically stands for innocence and in its illustration the flower is shown as a miniature version of Thel, the unborn spirit" (ANTAL, 2008, p.30); despite being a symbol for innocence, it still remains in the realm of experience, evidencing that both experience and innocence can dwell together, and allows Thel to take on the awareness that the Lily's life entails a sacrifice that in return gives life to number of creatures.

Next comes the Cloud, he explains that his life cycle takes place so that he may give life to others; his fleeting existence is not a cause of concern, for others live through him. In these passages, Blake displays how life is not lived solely for our own pleasures, but for others. This is

perfectly displayed in the many elements of the continuous cycle which is nature; once aware that one must die in order for life to be passed on forward, the perspective one has on life shifts. Just as the still elements of life must be renewed, so must the live and interactive ones, and according to what can be seen in *The Book of Thel*, humans are equated within this process. The thirst for a more long lasting existence, and the despair over death are no longer as relevant for our own wants become secondary; life exists in the present moment because others have ceased to exist in the past, and the sacrifice that is the fleeting and perishable existence is no longer a burden, for death becomes, in a way, a messenger of life.

The Cloud summons the Worm after affirming that "Then if thou art the food of worms, O virgin of the skies,/ How great thy use, how great thy blessing! Every thing that lives/ Lives not alone, nor for itself" (BLAKE, 1789, p.5). Despite the insights offered thus far, Thel remains unsatisfied for she cannot relate to either of the creatures and yet fears that past her death, others will question "did she only live to be at death the food of worms?" (BLAKE, 1789, p.5). Differently from the Lily of the Valley and the Cloud, the next characters, however, stand on different ground; Thel is not capable of hearing the Worm, and whether this is a fault attributed to the Worm himself, due to an inability to do so, or to Thel, that does not wish for the action to be completed, a communication does not take place and so the process is cut short and the next step into awareness does not occur.

Thel identifies the Worm with a state of duality; his representation of an infant shows him as a helpless, while his existence as a symbol for the masculine brings Thel to see him as weak. She cannot in any way relate or connect to him, and that may be because of the difference in their nature; both Cloud and Worm are male figures, yet the Cloud is not a direct representation of the masculine and gives forth the wisdom of living for the sake of others, whereas the Worm does not communicate at all, and instead can only weep. In the sequence, the beings that succeed each other may be seen in a hierarchical order, and the Clod of Clay is the lowest in such. She has a maternal relationship towards the Worm for she is the one who cares after him and other creatures that dwell within her; she, similarly to Thel, does not understand the circumstances behind her existence and treatment before God, yet does not seem to question it for she is appreciated and loved. "I live and love" (BLAKE, 1789, p.7).

Thel accepts the Clod of Clay's knowledge and adapts it to her own circumstances; she is now aware of the love God has for each creature regardless of external characteristics and

weaknesses. Thus, Thel is invited into the realm of the dead, to which Thel will one day belong; entering, she encounters the land of the dead where she is met with lamentation and sorrow. Reaching her own grave, she hears from a voice a series of harrowing and even more distressful and cryptic laments regarding her own existence, life, and death; "Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction?/ Or the glistening Eye to the poison of a smile? [...] Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy?/ Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire? (BLAKE, 1789, p.8)" These questions are more profound than the ones initially posed, and are much too overwhelming. From the first interrogations, which question the physical capacities and motivations, to the last ones which explore more prohibited and sensitive topics to her as a young girl, Thel cannot deal with them and rejects any kind of premature consciousness, so much so that she escapes that realm altogether and returns to her safety and innocence within the Vales of Har, where awareness can be left behind and forgotten.

The interactions Thel experiences with each one of the character provides a favorable space for reflections and realizations, each of which complement the previous one. It is exactly through each of these understandings that Thel is able to expand her consciousness and further explore her ephemerality, thus becoming more familiar and at ease with the idea of mortality within her reality. Within this narrative, Blake evidences the role of awareness within the context of seeking the realities and purpose of life and the end result of sacrifice in the conscious process of living; these processes can be identified, and Thel's interactions with the characters that evidence them provide the exemplification of these thought operations and their practical uses within real life situations.

Blake's use of the themes of innocence and experience as a tool in the development of the story provides the reader with not only a familiarity of such themes within his work that provide a certain relatability, but also with a more extensive understanding of their existence within all that surround us; the inevitability of their presence aid the reader with analysing their daily reality. Thel is, as the poem begins, an innocent being, existing within the innocent realm of the Vales of Har, tending sheep; she is yet to initiate contact with the experiences of life, but as her lamentations begin, she allows experience to take a potentially bigger role in her life, while her fear of perishing becomes an obstacle in the way of her total innocence. Similarly, in his Songs of Innocence and Experience (1789), Blake portrays a series of stories, some of which are seemingly duplicated, such as The Lamb and The Tiger, and both versions of The Nurse's Song;

the first set reflects the realities of innocence, whereas the second set takes place in the realm of existence, and has generally a more somber outcome. In her own context, however, Thel has the option of choosing whichever one of the options, or outcomes, she prefers; in a way, she is the author of her own story and her choice will depend on her vision of the leading force in the purpose of life.

The Vales of Har in this context is the state of self-love, and, thus, Thel is self-centered and still unaware of the significance and implications of self-sacrifice (DAMON, 1988). However, in "The Book of Thel" the reader accompanies Thel as she takes a journey through innocence and experience, deciding, ultimately, to find shelter within innocence, as she "Fled back unhiderd till she came into the Vales of Har" (BLAKE, 1789, p.8). It could be said that, up to a certain extent, the state of awareness lies within experience, and, despite deciding to return into innocence, Thel can never completely and truly undo what has been done. One can consciously attempt to forget or ignore awareness, but once it is acquired it becomes an integral part of the thought processes. However, sacrifice is a conscious choice, while awareness is not, and it is one that she decides not to take. Thel's decision has been to consciously ignore the realities of her awareness, returning to her innocent past, but the extent to which she is capable of doing this remains unknown to the reader; Thel does not return in any of Blake's other stories and her existence after such interactions stands as a mystery.

Further, the references Blake makes of The Vales of Har to Genesis, and the description and contextualization he makes reminds the reader of the similarities that exist between the Vales of Har and the Garden of Adam and Eve; Bloom explains that this is a place to which one must not belong, and from which one must fall (BLOOM, 1961). This space provides the perfect environment for heedlessness, as the characters each have their own tasks and a lack of problems or ambitions which leads them to a detached existence.

When speaking of Blake's change of scenery growing up in England, and referring to the prophetic books, Sinclair (2012) explains how "the landscape of London physically affects him and it becomes part of him"; it is likely that Blake's intention might have been to transfer this sensation onto the reader because, after all, what affected Thel's awareness and knowledge was the space in which she was, which allowed her interactions with the different characters. Had she not changed her physical location, such experiences would not have taken place. On top of that, Bloom (1961) explains that Thel's posthumous laments can be juxtaposed with Blake's Songs of

Innocence and Experience in the sense that the first ones grieved the transience of life in an innocent perspective, whereas the final ones lament her senses having been enlarged, yet incapable of the indispensable alertness she desired; he states that "Thel's world is precariously beautiful; one false phrase and its looking-glass reality would be shattered." (BLOOM, 1961, p.49); had Thel remained within the reality she ultimately fleeds, she could have regained Innocence.

5.CONCLUSION

The study of self, and the desire to learn of one's nature and purpose promoted an increase in the creation of arts during the Romantic period that reflected such urges and sought to further explore such themes. Through the "The Book of Thel", Blake is able to offer a timeless perspective on a diversity of themes, including the purpose of life through self-sacrifice, and its shaping through awareness through a story with which the reader can sympathise and relate. The approach taken by Blake in creating such a poem is simple and effective when viewing its structure and the order of events; it is, however, of extreme depth.

The choices Thel takes were solely up to her and based on her fears and strengths, which were also built up by her interactions with the remaining characters; it offers a reading of Blake's world through fictional characters that represent the reader's reality. The duality of innocence and experience control the flow of the story and can be marked out within Thel's environment, and her final actions expose the dynamics between the two forces, as well as a natural progression in the process of growing up, where innocence tends to transition into experience. As Simpkins (1988) points out, Thel's struggle is the most important aspect of the poem, rather than the solution itself, because it provides an appropriate space for questioning and reflection. Thus, "The Book of Thel" serves an instrument to the reader that, such as Blake, sought to understand his purpose and existence in life.

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