

William Blake-The Little Black Boy

William Blake (1757-1827) The Little Black Boy

- 1 My mother bore me in the southern wild,
- 2 And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
- 3 White as an angel is the English child,
- 4 But I am black, as if bereav'd of light.
- 5 My mother taught me underneath a tree,
- 6 And sitting down before the heat of day,
- 7 She took me on her lap and kissed me,
- 8 And pointing to the east, began to say:
- 9 "Look on the rising sun: there God does live,
- 10 And gives his light, and gives his heat away;
- 11 And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
- 12 Comfort in morning, joy in the noonday.
- 13 And we are put on earth a little space,
- 14 That we may learn to bear the beams of love;
- 15 And these black bodies and this sunburnt face
- 16 Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.
- 17 For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear,
- 18 The cloud will vanish; we shall hear his voice,
- 19 Saying: 'Come out from the grove, my love and care,
- 20 And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.' "
- 21 Thus did my mother say, and kissed me;
- 22 And thus I say to little English boy,
- 23 When I from black and he from white cloud free,
- 24 And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,
- 25 I'll shade him from the heat, till he can bear
- 26 To lean in joy upon our father's knee;
- 27 And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
- 28 And be like him, and he will then love me.

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Commentary

This is one of the "Songs of Innocence". It was written by Blake as an attempt on his part to help in abolishing slave- trade. It is a plea against "racial discrimination". He believes that

people are equal regardless of their color. Despite of its political subject, Blake here makes use of two major ideas which are intermingled:

A-The Idea that to be good needs an effort, and those who suffer more are thought to be religiously better.

B-The Neo-Platonic idea that the soul is the essential of man; the essence(soul) of mankind is the same, but what differs is their bodies in which their souls are imprisoned. Once it is set free (by the death of the body) it goes back to its divine origin which is God. The body, whether black or white, is a colored cloud that will disappear one day, while the soul goes back to its creator.

The Little Black Boy

Summary

A black child tells the story of how he came to know his own identity and to know God. The boy, who was born in “the southern wild” of Africa, first explains that though his skin is black his soul is as white as that of an English child. He relates how his loving mother taught him about God who lives in the East, who gives light and life to all creation and comfort and joy to men. “We are put on earth,” his mother says, to learn to accept God’s love.

He is told that his black skin “is but a cloud” that will be dissipated when his soul meets God in heaven. The black boy passes on this lesson to an English child, explaining that his white skin is likewise a cloud. He vows that when they are both free of their bodies and delighting in the presence of God, he will shade his white friend until he, too, learns to bear the heat of God’s love. Then, the black boy says, he will be like the English boy, and the English boy will love him.

A black boy compares himself to a white English boy, and at first finds himself wanting. He claims his soul is as white as the English boy’s, but also sees himself as “black as if bereav’d of light.” He then remembers that his loving mother taught him that his black skin is a result of constant exposure to the sun. The mother explains the sun as God’s gift to mankind, sharing both His light and his heat, both of which are forms of His love.

His color, she explains, is a temporary “cloud” to be borne until he can fully learn to dwell in the presence of God’s love. The speaker ends by saying he will tell the English boy this truth and look forward to the day when both of them have put off this cloud and can love one another truly.

Analysis

“The Little **Black Boy**” consists of seven heroic stanzas, which are quatrains following the ABAB rhyme scheme. The first two stanzas describe the boy’s mother and the influence she has had on his life. The third, fourth, and fifth stanzas recall the mother’s exact words in her lessons to her son. The final two stanzas describe how the black boy communicates his lesson to the white English boy for whom he has a great affection.

Stanzas one and two describe the past; stanzas three, four, and five recall the mother’s words as if they were being spoken in the present; the sixth and seventh stanzas include the black boy’s words, which he “will say” to the English boy in the future. Thus, the poem

itself progresses in time from a past (learning), to the present (the lesson itself) and to the future (the implementation or practical outworking of the lesson).

Hints of anti-slavery sentiment and an opposition to racism occur in this poem, but they are not the main message. The equality of human beings is, however, emphasized by the poem in its depiction of God creating the world as an act of divine mercy, giving the sun to shine upon and warm all people everywhere as a preparation for the light and heat of His love.

Form

The poem is in heroic quatrains, which are stanzas of pentameter lines rhyming ABAB. The form is a variation on the ballad stanza, and the slightly longer lines are well suited to the pedagogical tone of this poem

Commentary

This poem centers on a spiritual awakening to a divine love that transcends race. The speaker is an African child who has to come to terms with his own blackness. Blake builds the poem on clear imagery of light and dark. The contrast in the first stanza between the child's black skin and his belief in the whiteness of his soul lends poignancy to his particular problem of self-understanding.

The child's mother symbolizes a natural and selfless love that becomes the poem's ideal. She shows a tender concern for her child's self-esteem, as well as a strong desire that he knows the comfort of God. She persuades him, according to conventional Christian doctrine, that earthly life is but a preparation for the rewards of heaven. In this context, their dark skin is similarly but a temporary appearance, with no bearing on their eternal essence: skin, which is a factor only in this earthly life, becomes irrelevant from the perspective of heaven.

The black boy internalizes his mother's lesson and applies it in his relations with the outer world; specifically, Blake shows us what happens when the boy applies it to his relationship with a white child. The results are ambivalent. The boy explains to his white friend that they are equals, but that neither will be truly free until they are released from the constraints of the physical world. He imagines himself shading his friend from the brightness of God's love until he can become accustomed to it. This statement implies that the black boy is better prepared for heaven than the white boy, perhaps because of the greater burden of his dark skin has posed during earthly life.

Model Questions

1- The Little Black Boy was written by.....

- A- Wordsworth
- B- Byron
- C- Blake
- D- Shelly

The correct answer is (B) Blake

2- Blake believes that people are.....

- A- equal

B- unequal
C-lazy
D- brave

The correct answer is (a)