

COOCH BEHAR PANCHNAN BARMA UNIVERSITY COOCH BEHAR

B.A. HONOURS IN ENGLISH

UNDER CHOICE BASED CREDIT SYSTEM

B.A. HONOURS IN ENGLISH: 5TH SEMESTER

Q. William Blake's Theory of Contrariness

William Blake's theory of Contraries is summarized in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence." The essence of Blake's theory is that, in some paradoxical way, it is possible for the contraries of innocence and experience to co-exist within a human being. The crime of "religion" was its attempt "to destroy existence" by ignoring or minimizing the essential oppositions in human nature. The word 'contrary' had a very specific and important meaning for Blake. Like almost all great poets, he was an enemy of dualism. Western thought has been intensely dualistic, seeing everything as composed of warring opposites, head and heart, body and spirit, male and female as though the split between the hemispheres of the human brain were projecting itself on everything perceived. A study of the poems in the two groups shows the emotional tensions between the two Contrary States.

In the "Songs of Innocence", Blake expresses the happiness of a child's first thoughts about life. To the child, the world is one of happiness, beauty, and love. At that stage of life, the sunshine of love is so radiant that human suffering appears only temporary and fleeting. In the Introduction to the first series, Blake represents a laughing child as his inspiration for his poems. And in the poems that follow in this series, Blake gives us his vision of the world as it appears to the child or as it affects the child. And this world is one of purity, joy, and security. The children are themselves pure, whether their skin is black or white. They are compared to lambs "whose innocent call" they hear. Both "child" and "lamb" serve as symbols for Christ. Joy is everywhere. But, above all, there is security. There is hardly a poem in which a symbol of protection, a guardian figure of some kind, does not occur. In *The Echoing Green*, the old folk are close by, while the children play. Elsewhere there is the shepherd watching over his sheep; there are the mother, the nurse, the lion, the angels, and, most important of all, God Himself. There is spontaneous happiness and delight in these groups of poems as "The Infant Boy" illustrates, "I happy am/ Joy is my name".

"These flowers of London town!

**Seated in companies they sit
with radiance all their own"**

In the first *Holy Thursday*, poor children sit "with radiance of their own"; while in the second *Holy Thursday*, the poet deplores the fact that there should be so many poor and hungry children depending on charity in a country which is otherwise rich and fruitful. The second poem is very moving, as it was intended to be. We thus have pictures of contrary states. In the "Songs of Innocence", the prevailing symbol is the Lamb, which is an innocent creature of God and which also symbolizes the child Christ. In the "Songs of Experience" the chief symbol is the tiger as expressed by the first stanza:

**“Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night”**

The tiger burns metaphorically with rage and quickly becomes for some a symbol of anger and passion. The poet asks a crucial question here. Did God Who made the lamb also make the tiger? The lamb, innocent and pretty, seems the work of a kindly, comprehensible Creator. The splendid but terrifying tiger makes us realize that God’s purposes are not so easily understood. The tiger represents the created universe in its violent and terrifying aspects. It also symbolizes violent and terrifying forces within the individual man, and these terrifying forces have to be faced and fully recognized. The two poems called *The Lamb* and *The Tiger* do, indeed, represent two contrary states of the human soul. No contrast could have been more vivid and more striking.

The poems in the second group record the wounds and cruelties of the civilized world. Some of them are bitter comments on the restraints forged by custom and law. Here Blake deplors the dominance of reason, religion, law, and morality, and he deplors the suppression of natural impulses, and more especially the suppression of the sexual impulse. Instead of innocence, joy, and security, Blake finds guilt, misery, and tyranny in the world. The protective guardians have disappeared and in their place are the tyrants. The rigors of sexual morality are depicted in *A Little Girl Lost*, *The Sick Rose*, *The Angel*, and *Ah, Sunflower*.

The contrasts Blake sets forth in the Songs are echoes of English society’s approach to the social and political issues of his era—a time characterized, on the one hand, by increasing desire for personal, political, and economic freedom, and on the other, by anxiety regarding the potential consequences of that freedom for social institutions. Several of the poems directly address contemporary social problems, for example, “*The Chimney-Sweeper*” deals with child labor and “*Holy Thursday*” describes the grim lives of charity children. The most fully-realized social protest poem in the Songs is “*London*,” a critique of urban poverty and misery. Thus contrariness are a must. The language and vision not just of Blake but of poetry itself insists that the contraries are equally important and inseparable. ‘Without contraries is no progression’, wrote Blake. He sought to transform the energies generated by conflict into creative energies, moving towards mutual acceptance and harmony. Thus, by describing innocence and experience as ‘contrary states of the human soul’, Blake is warning us that we are not being invited to choose between them, that no such choice is possible. He is not going to assert that innocent joy is preferable to the sorrows of experience.