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Exploitation, Rape, Bondage—Blake's Revolutionary Reaction

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According to the 18th century thinker Jean Jacques Rousseau, “society's institutions, like government, schools, the arts, and the media, corrupt naturally-good individuals” (WinWise). Rousseau summarizes many of the poetic assertions made by William Blake, a late 18th century, pre-Romantic Revolution poet, who—unlike most of the conservative English enlightenment authors before him—believed that institutions were sources of oppression, injustice, and moral deviance. In order to understand Blake’s purpose for writing, the reader must firstly understand the environment in which he composed his works. Without an interpretive framework, the reader cannot grasp what Blake implies with his selection of detail. By establishing a contextual lens through which to analyze and interpret Blake’s works, one can accordingly evaluate his works. A half century before Blake, Augustinian and Enlightenment authors espoused rationalism, empiricism, and the belief that God established religious and political bodies to guide the sinful human race. Influenced by the spirit of independence and distrust fostered by late 18th century economic, philosophical, and political revolutions, 19th century Romantic authors believed “naturally-good individuals” could transcend corrupt and restrictive institutions. Blake’s poetry reacts to social problems in English urban-industrial society, the English Industrial Revolution, and the French and American Revolutions, because it implies that socially-corrupted individuals undermine society by supporting corrupt institutions, which reinforce societal depravity by sanctioning unjust mores, exploiting economically, and restricting liberty. By addressing societal values and ordinances as hypocritical, corrupt, and unnaturally restrictive, Blake suggests institutions promote moral deviance and perpetuate social problems.

During the 18th century, conservative writers promoted both contentment with the divinely-shaped, natural order and conformity to governing institutions. Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Man* advocates conformity by asserting “Whatever IS, is Right” and by attempting to “vindicate the ways of God to man” (2547.294, 2542.16). By championing docility, Pope strengthened religious institutions, even though he struggled with the economic, educational, and political restrictions that the Protestant Church of England imposed on Roman Catholic citizens (2493). Like Pope, Samuel Johnson defended rationalism and national institutions. Johnson’s works opposed an individual worldview based on feelings, which Jonathan Swift condemned as “vicious fancies” (127). In Johnson’s *Rasselas*, Rasselas’ tutor Imloc discourages independent thought and emotion-based understanding. Through Imloc’s tutelage, Johnson fortified the status quo with the following ideas: individuals should “dread the moment when solitude should deliver him to the tyranny of reflection” and “All power of fancy over reason is a degree of insanity” (2702, 2733). These quotations typify the conservative enlightenment philosophies that discouraged individual cogitation and encouraged individuals to conform to the precepts of dominant institutions.

After Johnson, Pope, and Swift died; economic, political, and religious evolutions compelled the Romantic Revolution—a literary movement pioneered by William Blake.

In 1784, five years after the French deposed Louis XIV and in the midst of England's Industrial Revolution, William Blake formally published the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. "The Chimney Sweeper" from the *Songs of Experience* depicts the hypocrisy and depravity of English Industrial society. When industrialists specialized and mechanized production during the Industrial Revolution, human life lost value due to a labor surplus in cities, which resulted in lower wages, widespread poverty, and child labor. While dominant social institutions objectified children and reduced them to "little black thing[s]" covered in deadly coal dust, parents ignored their children's "notes of woe" and went "to the church to pray" (90.1-4). These lines depict the hypocritical nature of those parents, who "clothed [their children] in the clothes of death, / And taught [them] to sing the notes of woe" (90.7). Adults assessed the effects of chimney sweeping by observing external signals; "And because I am happy, & dance & sing, / They think they have done me no injury" (90.10). When the parents attend church "And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King, / Who make up a heaven of our misery," their children remain at home and suffer from the coal dust in their lungs (90.11-12). Here, Blake not only conveys the parents' hypocrisy, but also accuses them, "God, his Priest & King" of exploiting children, since they "make up a heaven of [their] misery." In "The Chimney Sweeper," like many of Blake's poems, institutions and their subjects uphold cruel and unjust social systems at the expense of an unrepresented minority. By addressing his society's exploitation of children as corrupt, hypocritical, and unnatural, Blake implies that each institution sanctions the murder of children out of greed.

Also published in the *Songs of Experience*, "London" portrays the restrictive and undesirable effects of urbanizing cities by citing the ubiquity of licenses, self-imposed social restraints, corruption, and ill-reputed professions in England's capital. Blake emphasizes these problems to suggest the damaging and oppressive nature of economic, political, religious, and social institutions. This poem conveys a general dissatisfaction with how English citizens were being governed by untouchable, divinely-sanctioned sovereign bodies.

In the first quatrain of "London," the speaker references the liberties given up in urban society as "Marks of weakness, marks of woe," which he finds on "each charter'd street, near where the charter'd Thames does flow" (94.2-4). The phrases "each charter'd street" and "charter'd Thames" imply privatization and the omnipresence of restrictions. In the next quatrain, Blake stresses the self-imposed and socially-reinforced nature of these restrictions, or "mind-forg'd manacles" (94.8). The speaker identifies oppression "In every cry of every Man,/"

In every Infant's cry of fear,/ In every voice, in every ban"; respectively, the general populace or street vendors, young children, and married couples suffer from oppressive institutions (94.5-7). The author's selection of detail—specifically the word “ban,” meaning political and legal prohibition, curse, public condemnation, or marriage proclamation—functions to criticize not only the restrictive nature of the political and legal institutions that govern society, but also the institution of marriage as a source of oppression of human nature and personal freedom. The consequences of restraining sexuality expressed in the final quatrain support this interpretation of how “ban” functions in the first.

By discussing the prostitution in “midnight streets” in the final quatrain, Blake evidences the widespread economic and moral poverty generated by oppression and inequality, while implying that the profession survives, since marriage demands monogamy (94.13). The following lines exemplify an unfortunate scenario in which restraining sexuality with marriage diseases a family. “The youthful harlot's curse,” a sexually-transmitted infection, “Blasts the new-born Infant's tear” by transmitting—first, through the father, and then, through the mother—the infection, which afflicts “the new-born” with prenatal blindness (94.14-15). Financial and sexual inequality forced impoverished women to prostitute themselves, while marital restrictions promoted sexual deviance. Thus, inequality and unnatural social mores propagated moral maladies. Depictions of depravity in “London” illustrate the dearth of liberty, morality, equality, and wealth that resulted from enforcing social restrictions.

Although “mind-forged manacles” played a significant role in broadly reducing the standard of living, the effects of replacing artisans with machines lowered the median income level to a greater extent. After implementing the combustion engine, the English needed to burn more coal to manufacture goods. By utilizing machines, industrialists created a greater income inequality. In the third quatrain “the Chimney-sweeper's cry,” the “blackening Church,” and the “Palace walls” each represent a specific aspect of corruption in English society (94.9-12). First, “the Chimney-sweeper's cry” alludes to an impoverished child, who is forced to sweep the coal-blackened chimneys of homes and factories (94.9). Second, the “blackening Church” depicts church walls that have been blackened by soot, which symbolizes the Church's moral depravity (94.10). The Protestant Church of England regarded the profession of chimney sweeper as a necessary social evil, because, as a state institution, the Church's purse would swell when England's economy grew. Third, the verses “the hapless Soldier's sigh/ Runs in blood down Palace walls” convey the idea that the British Empire was built on the deaths of “hapless Soldiers” and was marred metaphorically by their slaughter (94.12). The blood and soot imagery in this quatrain symbolize London's moral decay and evidence the corruption and social problems that plague its institutions. While each quatrain in “London” addresses specific socio-

economic problems, each segment complements the poem's message by condemning the institutions that sanction restrictions by utilizing symbolic imagery and pointed poetic anecdotes.

In order to reject the religious and social institutions that restrict human behavior in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," Blake adopted the voice of the devil to shock the reader into recognizing the inadequacies of conventional moral categories (Greenblatt Vol. 2, 110). "The Marriage" satirizes institutions and promulgates revolutionary philosophy (110). Like "London," this poem identifies the tenets of oppressive institutions as the source of criminal and moral deviance. The speaker conveys this message with the following: "Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion" (114.1). The first half of this assertion implies that the state indirectly promotes crime and necessitates prison construction by creating and enforcing laws. By restricting individuals' liberty to pursue their desires "with stones of Law," the state encourages individuals to break the law (114.1). The second half suggests that strict moral codes, enforced "with bricks of Religion," restrict individuals' "energy"—the "eternal delight"—and, thereby, promote moral deviance, which supports brothels and prostitution (114.1, 112). Although this satire condemns moral deviance, the speaker blames institutions as oppressive sources of evil and elevates humans as naturally-good beings that pursue natural desires.

When sexual restrictions resulted in sexual abuse in the 18th century, English society would stigmatize the victims as morally deviant. If a woman gave birth after being raped, she would be considered a moral deviant and ostracized. "Since men were seen as purely spiritual and women as the opposite, Ambrose [one of the original four doctors of the western Christian Church in the 4th century] concluded that without women, there would be no temptation and men would be free to exist in the spiritual realm" (MacDougall 5). Ambrose's conclusion—later reinforced by enlightenment scientists—resulted in the common belief that women were at fault for all sexual deviance (MacDougall 5). "For men, there seems to have been little social opprobrium associated with paternity suits. For women, the consequences of an illicit affair were usually disastrous. Publically disgraced, discharged from their job, and in some cases, even sent to a house of correction, they would often be forced to choose between abandoning their child or turning to prostitution to support the two of them" (Davis 79). While western society excused men who deviated sexually, it penalized women with devastating effect, regardless of circumstance. Social, economic, religious, and political institutions participated in maintaining gender bias and women as scapegoats for sexual deviance.

Similar to the final quatrain of "London," Blake's "Visions of the Daughters of Albion" presents the "the restriction of sexuality ... as an extremely detrimental limitation" (MacDougall 4). In the beginning of "Visions," Othoon is

raped by Bromion while she waits for her lover, Theotormon. After Othoon is raped and impregnated, both Bromion and Theotormon reject her, and she is imprisoned; “unlike Bromion [the rapist], she will experience lifelong difficulties through the birth of an illegitimate child and ensuing consequences” (MacDougall 6). Following childbirth, Othoon may be castigated, financially crippled, or legally persecuted; while Bromion, a male, whose gender is not bound by the same sexual stigmas, will not be punished by society. “Although it is easy to blame the men of the poem for Othoon’s predicament, it is important to remember they too are enslaved by societal standards and expectations” (MacDougall 9). During the Industrial Revolution, social restrictions prevented men from expressing their emotions and limited their capacity to perceive true justice—a shortcoming reflected in Theotormon’s reaction to Othoon’s rape. After Theotormon learns of Othoon’s rape, he struggles to conceal his emotions. By describing Theotormon’s response with the expression, “secret tears,” Blake “stresses the expectation in society for men to mask their feelings, while fulfilling gender expectations” (MacDougall 11). Thus, “mind-forg’d manacles” extend beyond the victims of restrictive institutions to those who suffer vicariously from society using women as scapegoats for male sexual deviance, which, according to Blake, results from social and religious restrictions on male sexual “energy” (94.8, 112). “The limitation placed on men’s emotions leaves Theotormon incapable of dealing with his emotions and unable to cope with the situation” (MacDougall 11). Theotormon hates and reviles Othoon, because his society stigmatizes sexually victimized women and expects him to react antagonistically. Like his *Songs of Experience* and “The Marriage,” Blake’s “Visions” illustrates the negative consequences of institutionalized expectations and biases.

After a half century of political and religious upheaval, the conservative tenet of the Age of Enlightenment may have appeared to fail, and thus, authors began to doubt the infallibility of God-given institutions. Questioning the rights of employers to exploit underrepresented workers, Othoon says the following:

With what sense does the person claim the labour of the farmer?/
 What are his nets & gins & traps, & how does he surround him/
 With cold floods of abstraction, and with forests of solitude,/

To build him castles and high spires, where kings & priests may dwell.
 (Johnson 62.17-20).

When Othoon distrusts those empowered by sovereign institutions, her sentiment mirrors that of many Romantic authors, including William Blake. Othoon “sees the laborer as being tricked into hard work only for the advancement and strengthening of church and state establishments” (MacDougall 15). Further, the question “With what sense does the person claim the labour of the farmer?” may reference the injustices of “King George III’s ... taxation and

exploitation of the [American] colonies without adequate representation” (MacDougall 16). Although Othoon specifies “kings & priests” when she questions the rights of institutions to take advantage of under-represented people or lower-class workers, her doubts extend to employers such as factory owners (Johnson 62.20). These employers “abused the hard work of their employees,” who “worked in unsanitary conditions, received little pay, and faced mistreatment on the job” (MacDougall 16). By highlighting the injustices and self-serving policies of economic, religious, and political establishments in this victim’s discourse, Blake implies that the aura of infallibility that had once haloed Europe’s institutions had faded.

Through illustrating the consequences of conformity with scenarios in which the dis-empowered are victimized, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” “The Chimney Sweeper,” “Visions of the Daughters of Albion,” and “London” address how institutions damage society by restraining natural self-expression. These social, economic, and political forces maintain power hierarchies of male “kings & priests” and factory owners at the expense of the masses, who sustain their meager existence with crude professions such as factory worker, prostitute, and chimney sweep (Johnson 62.20). In “The Marriage,” “Visions,” and “London,” restrictive forces impel characters to deviate from sexual norms, whereas “The Chimney Sweeper” criticizes state and filial bodies for accepting free market capitalism, despite its lethal effects on child and adult laborers. All these works highlight the undesirable nature of institutions and the corruption and social inequalities that they establish and reinforce. During the American Age of Reason, ten years before Blake completed his *Songs of Innocence*, John Adams penned the following statement in the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to convey how reducing government positively correlates with citizens’ capacities for personal growth:

The end of the institution, maintenance, and administration of government is to secure the existence of the body politic to protect it, and to furnish the individuals who compose it with the power of enjoying, in safety and tranquility, their natural rights and the blessings of life.

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