

## **Analysis of “Proverbs of Hell”**

### **Blake, William (1757–1827)**

While the works of William Blake did not achieve great popularity or recognition during his own lifetime, he is now acknowledged as one of the most influential artists and writers of all time. His works, which combine poetry with highly charged visual art, have not only inspired other writers and visual artists; they have become a source of inspiration within the realm of popular culture as well. And yet, despite the magnitude of his influence over the passage of centuries and ongoing critical controversies surrounding his work, Blake’s body of work has remained distinctly unique, defying any certain classification. The most recognizable attributes of his works—the display of radical social and religious views; a penchant for commentary on the rapidly changing cultural landscape resulting from industrialization and the drive for economic progress; the employment of myth and allegory; evidence of the influence of classicism; the use of gothic elements; and, most important, passionate emphasis of the significance of imagination and the power of the individual—are the same characteristics that have come to define Romanticism and the countless works that fall under this heading. Despite Blake’s own aversion to classification or abstraction and despite the various places where his work strays from that of other Romantics, his name remains firmly linked to this cultural movement almost 200 years after his death.<sup>1</sup>

### ***The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790)**

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is a book by the English poet and printmaker William Blake. It is a series of texts written in imitation of biblical prophecy but expressing Blake's own intensely personal Romantic and revolutionary beliefs. Like his other books, it was published as printed sheets from etched plates containing prose, poetry, and illustrations. The plates were then coloured by Blake and his wife, Catherine.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Interplay of Contraries**

Central to understanding Blake's work, particularly *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, is his concept of "contraries." In his view, life comprises opposing forces, such as attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate. Blake argued that what is traditionally seen as Good and Evil are, in fact, necessary counterparts to human existence. He posited that Good is passive, adhering to reason, while Evil is the active force, emanating from energy. Consequently, any belief system that elevates one side over the other fails to embrace the complexity of human experience, leading to oppression by the so-called elect. This perspective challenges conventional dichotomies, encouraging a recognition of life's inherent duality.

## Blake's Critique of Institutional Religion

The second key idea in Blake's philosophy emerges from his personal mythology, wherein he critiques the perception of God in Enlightenment thought as a punitive, rule-bound figure. Blake rejected this notion of a ruthless, rational deity, instead excoriating contemporary Christianity as tantamount to idol worship. He viewed the Church of England as complicit in state tyranny, supporting un-Christian practices that included child labor and slavery. More insidious than physical abuses, Blake believed, was the mental enslavement the Church encouraged among its adherents. For Blake, the path to true divine connection lay in the realm of imagination, which he linked to the Logos, or the Word made Flesh, embodied in Jesus Christ. "The Proverbs of Hell" in his work emphasize this idea: creativity originates in imagination, not rational conformity.

## Religious Themes

William Blake's work, particularly *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, explores complex Christian themes that challenge traditional religious interpretations. This early piece by Blake embarks on a quest for unity, aiming to transcend the dualistic nature of body and soul, as well as the physical and metaphysical realms. Though often linked with Gnostic Christianity, Blake's approach uniquely blends his own spiritual insights with established religious beliefs.

### "Proverbs of Hell"

#### 1. *"If others had not been foolish, we should be so."*

This means that people learn proper ways of behavior from watching the excesses of others. Because someone else has done something foolish, others are able to see the negative outcome of that act and choose not to perform a similar behavior—thus those who learn from the foolish person's mistake are able to not be foolish themselves.

This proverb fits nicely with what Blake attempted to do in his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. This set of matched contrasting poems shows the extremes of each subject Blake treats in that book. In "The Argument" section of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake writes,

*Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.*

Blake's poetry delights in showing two sides, the extremes. By considering something from both sides, one can move forward in understanding. Thus in the proverb about foolishness, being foolish could be considered the extreme. It is not desirable in itself, but by considering that extreme, one can advance in understanding to a place of wisdom, that is, not being foolish.

It's good to keep Blake's idea of "contraries" in mind when reading his poetry. At times he seems to elevate something that might not seem as if it should be elevated. The reader can decide whether Blake really wants that quality to be elevated, or whether he only wants to

examine it as an extreme. In many cases, it is probably the latter, and Blake hopes to increase the reader's understanding by examining things that are generally considered foolish, immoral, or extreme. Indeed, the very title of this piece, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," is such a juxtaposition of contraries that could be offensive to a traditional ear but invites the reader to consider its topics deeply and, thus, arrive at a fuller understanding of life.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. *"No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings."*

One of Blake's proverbs from "Proverbs of Hell" speaks to the universal condition of freedom that Blake saw within the human experience. Blake writes that "No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings." This Proverb articulates how human impulses are inclined towards freedom and autonomy. Blake is quite passionate about the nature of human freedom. Representative of the Romanticism movement, Blake affirms the role of human subjectivity in consciousness. It is within the individual realm where decisions are made and choices are accepted. Blake was not an advocate of external structures making decisions for human beings. This comes in the form of institutions such as political orders, realms of social conformity, or domains of spirituality. For Blake, the individual should be able to act without external influence of control. Evident in his life and work, Blake supported the rights of individuals over forces of social and individual control. His embrace of freedom's tenets is evident in how Blake viewed the role of spirituality and Christianity. Blake said about Jesus Christ that "He is the only God ... and so am I, and so are you." For Blake, infallible design in the form of the divine is not meant to supplant individual action.

It is in this light where Blake's Proverb about the soaring heights of the bird and human freedom is consistent with the larger themes in Blake's poetry. Blake's understanding of Romanticism is one that affirms the role of human freedom. Human freedom and the "song of experience" within consciousness is a critical element in Blake's poetry. The proverb speaks to this in how it articulates a condition of being in the world where human freedom is seen as its own intrinsic good. Given Blake's disdain of oppression that he saw in the social and spiritual world in the form of institutionalized religion, the proverb embodies the theme of freedom and its possibilities in the modern setting.<sup>4</sup>

### Sources:

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