Blake And Swift Essay, Research Paper

18th century London, it seems, was not a city of beauty or mirth; that is, at least, for the poets William Blake and Jonathan Swift. Blake’s “London” and Swift’s “A Description of a City Shower” are both poems in which the pervading theme is one of a dark, miserable city. London is portrayed as a cold and unredeemable city in both the 1710 poem of Swift, and the 1793 poem of Blake. These works, over eighty years apart, are so strikingly similar in their themes and focus that it is evident that English society, especially that in cities, had changed little, retaining its oppressive social order. Blake and Swift, acutely aware of such problems, use their poetry to make scathing social commentaries.

Blake’s dismal “London” connects various characters and socio/political institutions in order to critique the injustices perpetrated in England. The busy, commercial city of London functions as a space in which the speaker can imagine the inescapable connections between social institutions and the citizens of that society. Although separated by differences of class and gender, the citizens of London brush up against each other so that the misery of the poor and dispossessed is a direct indictment of the callousness of the rich and powerful, and also the institutions of state and religion.

The speaker of the poem emphasizes the social and economic differences that separate the citizens of London. By repeating the word “chartered” in the first two lines, he reminds the reader of the commercial nature of the city, the fact that portions of it are owned (even the river Thames), and that not everyone has equal access to goods or property. Even though there is a distinct separation of class and prosperity, Blake notices “marks of weakness, marks of woe…in every voice…the mind-forged manacles” (lines 4-5, 7-8). The suffering is universal, evidently brought on by the folly of man himself. Man creates industry and thereby sentences himself to its miseries, which neither the rich nor the poor can escape. The people of London are thinking and feeling their environment to an acute level, and this is what is causing their morose condition.

Such a theme of the universality of suffering is evident in Swift’s poem as well.

“A Description of a City Shower” describes a sudden shower and plays on the reactions of the people caught in it. Susan takes down her linens from the line, women crowd into stores and pretend to peruse the goods, and Tories and Whigs “forget their feuds, and join to save their wigs”(line 41). All the people of the city are placed in the same position: they must find shelter from the shower, no one better off than the other. He goes on to discuss the incredible stench and filth of the London sewers, and this serves its purpose as well. Swift describes what can be found floating up out of the sewers when there is a downpour (dead cats, turnip tops, butchers’ scraps, etc.). The effect is to level all the pretensions of the street’s human dwellers to a more dirty, animalistic sense of humanity. The disgusting things that spring from the city gutters during the rain serve to eliminate the illusion of difference between the people and force them to acknowledge their fundamental similarities.

The politically and economically divided London seems to a main focus for both Swift and Blake. Blake’s use of the word “ban” in line 6 can have many connotations. The word ban can mean a political prohibition, a curse, or an announcement of marriage. The political or social meaning is an obvious one in this poem, Blake’s dislike of the rampant commercialism and the focus on science and technology is not a hidden agenda. Society’s narrow and aggressive pursuit of material things was in direct violation with Blake’s devotion to the spiritual and natural, yet provided an important dichotomy that is evident in much of his work. Commercialism, so it would seem, is a curse on the very people who are benefiting from it because it prevents them from finding a true and lasting happiness.

This “ban” that Blake speaks of can also be thought of as a curse in another sense. And, consequently, another connotation of curse during that time was venereal disease. This, as well as the disease’s relation to marriage comes up later in the poem. All things in Blake’s poem are interconnected, and the speaker’s emphasis on the tightly knit matrix of London’s citizens becomes more specific in the last two stanzas of the poem. In stanza three, he connects the misery of the chimney sweep to the hypocrisy of the church and the suffering of soldiers for the policies of the state. Blake begins this stanza speaking about “how the chimney sweepers cry every black’ning church appals” (lines 9-10). The supposedly pure, pristine institution of the church is actually dirtying itself by using these young boys to clean its chimneys. Blake then refers to the “hapless soldier’s sigh runs in blood down palace walls” (lines 11-12). Perhaps in reference to the war with France, the sarcasm and blunt disapproval of Blake is most likely intended for the royal family. The soldiers give their lives for a country that allows them to live in abject poverty, while the country’s rulers live behind the safe luxury of the palace walls.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker offers the most startling connection between two seemingly separate citizens or institutions. In this stanza Blake speaks of the “youthful harlot’s curse” (line14). These young, poor, and optionless girls were often the spreaders of this “curse”. The “curse” that he speaks of is venereal disease, which was a critical problem in Blake’s time. The disease was spread from prostitutes to husbands who then gave it to their wives. When he speaks of how the curse “blasts the new born infants tear” (line15), he is explaining how the disease is spread from the mother to her newborn child. Again, as earlier in the poem, Blake predicts no hope for even the most innocent creatures in society, the children and infants. They are doomed before they are born, and once born, are forced to live in a derelict world with nothing to offer.

Perhaps the most haunting line of the entire poem is the last: “And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse” (line 16). It is rather chilling the way Blake equates marriage with death. Perhaps not only a social death (women became the property of their husbands) but also a death by disease. Men had very little regard for their family’s health, and consorting with prostitutes was a prime was of introducing disease into the family.

Swift’s poem deals with the issue of the blatant disregard and carelessness as well. An oblivious servant girl sprinkles dirt on whomever is standing never as she mops, and instead of correcting her behavior, she perpetuates it, more and more aggressively. As Swift says “some careless quean flirts on you from her mop, but no so clean: you fly, invoke the gods; then turning, stop to rail; she singing, still whirls on her mop” (lines 19-23). Although a careless wench and a diseased husband are very different, they illustrate the points of both Swift and Blake by showing how much society is degraded. People care nothing for eachother, and live only for their own selfish pleasures.

Blake is presenting his perceptions of a changed world, molded and suppressed by human hands. Dark abysmal depictions of the city shape Blake’s London, as well as Swift’s. The bleakness of the city is more apparent in Blake’s, however, whereas Swift seems to make light of the city while incorporating graphic and vulgar depictions of life in the city.

Swift’s poem is quite detailed in its descriptions. It is perhaps more amusing than Blake’s, using light sarcasm and awkward situations to illustrate a point. This, however, does not detract from the more sinister theme of the dismal and melancholy nature of the city. In Swift’s satirical poem, his animosity towards the state of disrepair in London is apparent. Yet, he did more than merely satirize, he, like Blake (or rather Blake followed Swift) was also a recorder of historical information. Swift’s “A Description of a City Shower” is disconcerting in the evidence it gives to the state of disgust people felt for London, and the level to which the city needed improvement in sanitation, food, etc.

In a sense, the title of Swift’s poem doesn’t fit. Be it his ironic and satiric humor or an intentional attempt to mislead the audience from the beginning, “A Description of a City Shower” contains enough carnage and disquieting images to justifiably be called a description of a colossal (not to mention deadly) flood. Upon reading the title, one immediately expects—and envisions—a gentle drizzle falling over a bustling metropolitan center. This assumption is further reinforced by the first several lines, which paint an almost na?ve picture of a town waiting patiently under gray skies for the drops to fall.

What Swift gives the reader, however, is a deluge that seems second only to the Great Flood, complete with “blood” and “dung,” “drowned puppies,” and “dead cats.” Far from an innocent spring shower, the rain described in the work is magnificent and awesome in its sheer power and destructive force. It begins lightly, as a “first drizzling shower” (line 18), but in a matter of lines, it becomes “contiguous drops” and is finally labeled a “flood.” From here, the speaker begins focusing not on the rain itself, but on the destruction it is causing. He speaks of “swelling kennels” bearing “trophies” and “filth,” expanding on this image to include all manner of disgusting refuse. It is after this description, after the reader is told of this repulsive stew of garbage and mud “tumbling down the flood,” that the poem ends.

Neither Swift nor Blake, in their poems, offers any consolation to their disturbing images and metaphors. The endings of the poems are just as bleak as their contents, and reflect the thinking of their authors. Blake’s short poem, simply entitled “London” is redolent with his opinions of the injustices of his time, and the dismal social situation of many of the city’s inhabitants. The city, for Blake, carries an aura of damp, cold, listless people and social institutions. Swift’s “A Description of a City Shower” achieves basically the same thing, although in a more humorous manner. It does, or course, comment on the sense of entrapment and depressing monotony of life, the superficial worries that bog down human existence. It is striking how many of these problems continue to plague modern society, as we have grown increasingly commercial through time. In the works of Blake and Swift, we see a reflection of nearly any large city in Europe today, perhaps minus the extreme and abject poverty that we now only associate with third world countries.