"A Heaven of Our Misery": William Blake’s Pre-Marxist Critique of the Industrial Revolution

by Troy Cherrington

Assignment Description: Apply a particular critical perspective (I chose Marxism) to a work. Use at least two secondary sources.

If writers and artists can be said to have a goal outside of creating art, then it is to reflect and comment on the human condition, and the human condition cannot be understood completely if socioeconomic circumstances are disregarded. During the Industrial Revolution in England—wherein, along with the French revolution, we find the roots of the Romantic Movement in poetry in general and the roots of the poetry of William Blake in particular—socioeconomic circumstances were in a dynamic state. This essay will analyze William Blake’s reaction to the Industrial Revolution, and the changes in human life that accompanied it, as expressed in poems from his collection Songs of Innocence and of Experience, and argue that Blake’s poetry shows a keen awareness of the socioeconomic conditions that would later inform Karl Marx.

In their introduction to the Romantic period in Volume D of The Norton Anthology of English Literature, the editors, Jack Stillinger and Deidre Shauna Lynch, tell the story of the social change that Blake’s poems illustrate. The Romantic period took place between 1785-1830, and followed very squarely in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Stillinger and Lynch define the Industrial Revolution, and show its temporal situation in relation to the Romantic period:

The ‘Industrial Revolution’—the shift in manufacturing that resulted from the invention of power-driven machinery to replace hand labor—had begun in the mid-eighteenth century with improvements in machines for processing textiles, and was given immense impetus when James Watt perfected the steam engine in 1765. (3)

The change from wind, water, and hand labor to mechanized labor destroyed the home industry. Home industry embodies what Marxists call “unalienated labor.” Unalienated labor is labor from which the laborer is not disassociated—labor that is not only the production of objects, commodities, but a projection of the self, meaningful to the laborer. In his Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 Marx asks, “What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor?” and he answers: First, in the fact that labor is external to the worker, that is, that it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work,
Therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel well but unhappy, does not freely develop his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.

(136)

Stillinger and Lynch say that during the change from hand labor to mechanized production, common lands, "which had provided the means of subsistence for entire communities" were divided and privatized (3). Rural laborers, who were either being replaced by cheaper, faster machines, or whose means of subsistence were being stolen from them in the process of privatization, went to the cities and towns to find work in the mills. Stillinger and Lynch give Manchester as an example of one such city, saying that its "population increased by a factor of five in fifty years" (3). Stillinger and Lynch say that these changes meant that "the population was increasingly polarized into what Disraeli later called the 'Two Nations'—the two classes of capital and labor, the rich and the poor," (4) or what Marx would call the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. With a greater number of laborers working in factories, alienated labor became the norm for the industrial capitalist society whose center was the city.

Stillinger and Lynch also describe, albeit briefly, what life was like for the proletariat in the city and the country: those who stayed in the country "remained as farm laborers, subsisting on starvation wages and the little they could obtain from parish charity" (3-4); in the cities, the proletariat provided exploited workers with "inadequate wages and long hours of work under harsh discipline and in sordid conditions" (4). The profusion of labor available in the cities, combined with the basic capitalist aim of gaining the most profit at the least expense meant that whole families had to work, including children.

Blake seems to have been very aware of the transition from pre-privatization country life, associated with home industry and unalienated labor, to city life "with," say Stillinger and Lynch, "the factories of the cities casting a pall of smoke over vast areas of cheaply built houses and slum tenements" (4). In *Songs of Innocence* the reader will find a profusion of natural imagery. One example of such a blooming poem is "The Laughing Song." In this poem, Blake describes nature as laughing and being joyous:

> When the green woods laugh with the voice of joy
> And the dimpled stream runs laughing by,
> When the air does laugh with our merry wit,
> And the green hill laughs with the noise of it. (1-4)

Let us try to understand the relationship that is given expression in this poem between human joy and nature. Nature, as this poem’s first stanza shows us, feels compassion. It is a companion to us in our emotions. Line three, by using the word "our," makes it clear that our laughter is common, shared between people and shared with nature. The word "our" is inclusive, communal. In this first stanza, the most basic and powerful expression of joy—laughter—is woven with nature to the extent that nature laughs with us.

The second stanza further ties nature and human beings by introducing characters by name:

> When the meadows laugh with lively green
And the grasshopper laughs in the merry scene,
When Mary and Susan and Emily,
With their sweet round mouths sing Ha, Ha, He. (5-8)
In the third stanza, the connection between nature which can be tied to country life and to home industry, is stressed even further:
When the painted birds laugh in the shade
Where our table with cherries and nuts is spread
Come live and be merry with me,
To sing the sweet chorus of Ha, Ha, He. (9-12)
The image of a table spread with wild cherries and nuts is hyperbolic and figurative. Blake uses the image to express his opinion that nature is the provider, not mills and cities, not the bourgeoisie. Nature, says Blake, will provide us with what we require to be happy. Nature, country life, home industry will provide for us, and we will be joyful. Blake invites us to come live in the country and be merry. The feeling of joy and of connectedness in this poem mirrors—though Blake may not have been aware of it—the feeling of wholeness that the hand laborer, the craftsman whose work and creation is a part of himself, experiences.

“The Laughing Song” is only one of many poems in Songs of Innocence and of Experience that depicts nature in this way. Amongst those other poems are “The Echoing Green”—a poem that depicts nature as the proper setting for the drama of birth, aging, and, finally, death—and “Spring,” a simple poem about new life that ends with the lines “Little boy / Full of joy” (10-1).

In contrast to these poems of natural abundance and joy are those poems wherein Blake utilizes images of corrupted nature to criticize human failings and the church, such as “The Sick Rose,” “My Pretty Rose Tree,” and “The Garden of Love,” and those which depict the city, and industrial capitalism. For the purposes of this essay, I will not dwell on the poems of corrupted nature, since they do not deal with my subject very directly. However, I will return to “The Garden of Love” later. Amongst the poems that depict the city and industrial capitalism are both of “The Chimney Sweeper” poems, which I will discuss later, and “London.”

“London” is a vivid depiction of the horrors of life in the industrial city:
I wander thro’ each charter’d street,
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant’s cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro’ midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse (1-16)

For Blake, life in the city is unpleasant, to say the least. There is no laughter here: only cries, bans, sighs, and curses. The city is dirty, and not only dirty, but bloody. The walls of the church have
been blackened by the smoke which issues from the factories. There is no joy, only “woe.” I do not believe that Blake was aware of alienated labor and unalienated labor, but I do believe that Blake observed the differences that existed within the circumstances wherein these two states of labor existed. In the city alienated labor prevails and people are miserable, whereas in the ideal rural setting labor is unalienated and there is joy. Blake himself was a craftsman, whose labor was unalienated, having illustrated and published his own writings.

“London” is an example of a poem that contrasts city life (industrial capitalism and alienated labor) with country life (home industry and unalienated labor), but “London” in fact contains numerous indictments of capitalism’s corrupting influence that will be familiar to Marxist thinkers. Throughout *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Blake places a special emphasis on the emotional and physical well-being of women and children. In “The Laughing Song” we have Mary, Susan, and Emily, and in “London” we have the harlot. In the collection, Blake famously claims to be “Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.” The world of capital is the place of men, who, according to classic patriarchal gender roles, possess quantitative values of rationality and logic, removed from qualitative concepts of morality, spirituality, emotion, and intuition. Blake, working within patriarchal ideology, sees women and children as belonging to the qualitative as opposed to the quantitative. If one wishes to show the two contrary states of the human soul, it is best if one deals with those who have some engagement in the qualitative spiritual life. Contrary to common patriarchal binary favoritism, Blake valued the qualitative over the quantitative, as is made clear in Stillinger and Lynch’s introduction to him, called, simply, “William Blake,” from Volume D of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. They quote Blake as saying, “The nature of my Work... is Visionary and Imaginative” (77). Capitalism, however, values the quantitative over the qualitative.

In his article, “The Romantic and the Marxist Critique of Modern Civilization,” Michael Löwy addresses the Romantic perspective concerning quantitative thinking:

The central feature of industrial (bourgeois) civilization that Romanticism criticizes is not the exploitation of the workers or social inequality—although these may be denounced, particularly by leftist Romantics—it is the quantification of life, i.e. the total domination of (quantitative) exchange-value, of the cold calculation of price and profit, and of the laws of the market, over the whole social fabric.

(Original italics, 892)

In other words, the Romantic poets, Blake included, abhorred quantification and commodification. Löwy goes on to say that the connection between Romanticism and Marxism “is particularly striking in relation to the crucial issue of quantification,” and that “the criticism of the quantification of life in the industrial (bourgeois) society is central to Marx’s youthful writings” (original italics, 897).

If we observe the two poems that I have thus far given, we can see that they illustrate Blake’s valuation of the qualitative over the quantitative. In “The
Laughing Song,” everything is free and flowing. The subject of the poem is
laughter, human happiness, which
cannot be quantified. The poem utilizes
figurative language and personification,
which itself defies linear thinking. The
very act of writing a poem, creating art,
is to embrace the qualitative, an act that
creates dissension in a capitalist society.

In “London,” Blake is fighting
quantification by using figurative
language, by writing a poem, and by
illustrating the effects of quantification.
At the beginning of “London” Blake
says that the Thames and the streets are
“charter’d.” In William Blake: The
Complete Poems, editor Alicia Ostriker
notes, “The charters of London were
ancient guarantees of the city’s liberties.
B.’s use is ironic” (888). The city is not
at liberty. It is subject to the quantitative
thinking that rules capitalist society.
Blake’s choice of words may also be a
pun on the word “charted,” meaning
mapped, that is, understood
quantitatively.

Blake also rails against
quantification in the form of law and
social convention. Laws try to quantify
human behavior and experience. Law is
the quantitative opposition to justice,
which is qualitative. In line seven, Blake
refers to bans, or rules, wherein he hears
the “mind-forg’d manacles” (8). These
bans (laws) are the products of the mind.
This is not the mind of the imagination,
but the mind of rationality and
quantification, as opposed to the heart,
the emotions, the intuition.

Marriage is another form of
social regulation, quantification, and
Blake condemns it in line 12. Ostriker
notes, “The harlot to whom a young man
resorts may infect both him and his
family. But all are victimized by the
deadening institution of the ‘Marriage
hearse,’ which prohibits free love” (888).

The “Marriage hearse,” a social rule, the
product of quantitative thinking, is,
according to Blake, a greater threat to
human well being than emotional and sexual
freedom. The harlot herself is the victim of
capitalism. The woman cannot make a
decent living in the city, where labor is
cheap and abundant, and so she turns to
prostitution. The woman’s body and time
have exchange value; she is a commodity,
an object.

In lines 11 and 12, the soldier’s
sigh becomes blood which runs down
the palace walls. Quantitative thinking
cannot grasp this statement; it is
logically impossible. In order to grasp
the meaning and significance of Blake’s
words the reader is forced to resort to the
imagination and intuition, the agents of
qualitative understanding.

The image of the soldier’s blood
running down the walls of the palace is
Blake’s indictment of imperialism and
colonialism, which is the natural result
of capitalism. In her book, Critical
Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide,
Lois Tyson writes:

Capitalism’s constant need for
new markets in which to sell
goods and for new sources of raw
materials from which to make
goods is . . . responsible for the
spread of imperialism: the
military, economic, and/or
cultural domination of one nation
by another for the financial
benefit of the dominating nation
with little or no concern for the
welfare of the dominated. (63)

Stillinger and Lynch say that during the
romantic period “the British Empire
expanded aggressively” (4). Blake’s
sighing, dying soldier could have been
one who helped to oppress the people of
India, and was killed in an uprising, or
he might have been fighting the French
after the revolution. But, regardless of
who he was fighting, Blake’s dying soldier was fighting because of capitalism, either because of English or French expansionism. The soldier is only another commodity, another object to be used for the accumulation of capital. In Blake’s view, the king and the government are only the agents of capitalism, as is the church.

Tyson says that Marx called religion “the opiate of the masses” (59). Marx understood that religion, Christianity in particular, keeps the oppressed passive by telling them not to be violent, and by promising them eternal paradise after death if they obey the church. In Songs of Innocence, Blake critiques the church, and the false consciousness that its ideology generates, more acutely, and more vehemently, then any other aspect of industrial society.

In “London,” Blake uses the image of the “blackning Church,” in line ten, which he finds appalling, to illustrate how the church is corrupted by industry and capital. The ideals of the church are corrupted by capitalism just as the walls of the church are blackened by industrial pollution.

Blake’s belief, shared by Marx, that the church and state are agents of capital, is best illustrated in the poem “The Chimney Sweeper” from Songs of Experience. In “The Chimney Sweeper” we find our little worker outside in the snow. “A little black thing among the snow:/ crying weep, weep, in notes of woe!” (1-2). The Child is covered in soot from his work. He has clearly worked much already today. He offers his services, but he has a speech impediment, like many young children, and his words come out not as “sweep, sweep,” but as “weep, weep.” His pronunciation is more fitting considering his woeful tone. Blake and the child are telling us to weep for the loss of innocence, to weep for the abuses of our children at the hands of the heartless bourgeoisie. This child, like the soldier and the harlot in “London,” has been commodified, objectified, quantified. He or she is not a human being, but a commodity with an exchange value.

Blake then asks where the child’s parents are. Why aren’t they caring for their child? Why aren’t they fighting to change the system that is brutalizing their young one? Blake writes, “Where are thy father & mother? say? / They are both gone up to the church to pray” (3-4). Instead of taking some action based upon an ideology that has concrete usefulness in the living world, they have allowed themselves to be pacified by the promise of heaven in the world hereafter. The church assists the bourgeoisie in oppressing the proletariat by creating false consciousness. Instead of resisting and demanding workers rights, the child’s parents are praying. The parents are the proletariat that has been pacified by the church and allows the continued suffering and commodification of children and workers in general.

The child tells us the rest of his story:

Because I was happy upon the heath.
And smiled among the winters snow:
They clothed me in the clothes of death.
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

And because I am happy. & dance & sing.
They think they have done me no injury:
And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King
Who make up a heaven of our misery. (5-12)
The child was once happy in the country
where he had time to play in a pleasant
setting, where the child’s family made
enough money that he didn’t have to do
this dangerous, unhealthy work, where
one’s work is an extension of one’s self.
The child says next that he is
happy, which we know to be untrue. In
times of financial hardship we are told
that we should be happy to have work,
no matter how miserable that work
is. The bourgeoisie tells us, and itself,
that workers are happiest when working;
that is what a worker’s life is for. The
child is echoing the false consciousness
of the capitalist society in which he/she
lives. The dance the child is doing is the
dance of death, the song he/she sings,
the song of woe.
The child then smashes the false
consciousness of her/his elders. “They
think they have done me no injury: / And
are gone to praise God & his Priest &
King / Who make up a heaven of our
misery.” God (the church) and the
priests (who ought to know better) and
the King (the state) have helped in the
commodification, the quantification of
human beings, including women (the
harlot) and children. The God which is
being praised is the God of capital. And
if God is capital, then the king has power
only because of socioeconomic
circumstances. We see here the
rumblings of revolution. The King does
not serve the people. He claims to serve
God, but when he says God he really
means capital. He has turned his back on
both the people and on true faith. Does
he deserve to rule?
The very sort of pacifying message
that the church tells the proletariat is echoed
in Blake’s ironic poem “The Chimney
Sweeper” from Songs of Innocence. In
this version of the poem, a child dreams
that he and his chimney sweeper
companions are locked in black coffins.
In his dream, an angel comes and
releases them. They then run down to a
river and bathe. The angel tells the child
that “if he’d be a good boy, / He’d have
God for his father & never want joy”
(19-20):
The poem concludes:
And so Tom awoke and we rose
in the dark
And got with our bags & our
brushes to work.
Tho’ the morning was cold, Tom
was happy & warm.
So if all do their duty, they need
not fear harm. (21-4)
Part of what establishes the
poem’s irony is its shared title. I have
shown above that “The Chimney
Sweeper” from Songs of Experience is a
powerful social critique that makes
many of the same socioeconomic
observations that would later inform the
work of Karl Marx; particularly, the role
that is played by organized religion in
the oppression of the proletariat. By
placing the two poems at odds with one
another, we can see that one is ironic
and one is an honest statement.
There is a thin line between
innocence and naïveté. The child in this
poem has a dream, but a dream is not
real. Dreaming is a passive activity, not
like Blake’s active vision and
imagination. If this version of the poem
does anything, it illustrates the appeal of
the church’s message, the comfort that is
offered, which is powerful indeed.
Innocence is blessing, says Blake, but it
can be blinding; the world does not
always respect innocence, and frequently
betrays the innocent.
Blake offers us a spiritual option in another poem from *Songs of Innocence* called “The Divine Image.” Blake begins the poem by telling us that:

To Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
All Pray in their distress:
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness. (1-4)

This poem would, at first, seem to support the church’s assertions that we see made in the *Innocence* “The Chimney Sweeper,” and see critiqued in the *Experience* “The Chimney Sweeper,” but later in the poem Blake’s true message comes clear. He writes:

For Mercy has a human heart
Pity, a human face:
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

These divine virtues which will save us from oppression and pain are enacted by, and embodied in, human beings. We are the ones who will set the children free and do the will of God. People, not some abstract religious principle but flesh and blood human beings, are the purveyors of mercy, pity, peace, and love, unquantifiable virtues that can save human beings from oppression, commodification, and pain.

I believe I have sufficiently shown that William Blake reacted to the social changes which took place during the industrial revolution in much the same way that Marx eventually would. Marx and Blake decried the same problems that arose as a result of technologically advancing industrialism in a capitalist society: the alienation of the working class, the encouragement and spread of imperialism, and general social disease. It is also clear that Blake suggested a similar balm for these ills, namely human responsibility for mankind now, as opposed to abstract religious answers beyond the individual and the present. I suggest, in light of the common perspectives between Marx and Blake, that Blake can be understood as a pre-Marxist, or proto-Marxist. The observed similarities between Blake’s and Marx’s social thinking also illustrate that Marx did not exist in a social vacuum; that is to say, Marx was not the only thinker dissatisfied with capitalism and industrialism.

In closing, I urge the reader to remember that the industrial revolution is continuing, and that the observations of William Blake and Karl Marx continue to be relevant. Indeed, writers and artists can fulfill the role of social commentator, as Blake did, and the very nature of the written document allows the meaning of the ideas contained therein to travel through time and maintain their force and potency, especially if the world outside has not changed so very much.

Works Cited


