Barbauld’s Prophecy And Blake’s Imagination Essay, Research Paper

Barbauld’s Prophecy and Blake’s Imagination

The Romantic Era was a time of widespread cultural, social, and political reform. Industrialization was taking the place of the agrarian lifestyle, which introduced problems such as higher poverty, a larger segregation of class, and overworking of both adults and children. The wars in America and France paved the way for political upheaval by introducing new ways of thinking and radicals who wanted change. With all of this turmoil and chaos many writers turned to escapism, which involved both imagination, and prophecy. Imagination and prophecy are merely two ways the writers of this time thought, hence, being deemed the Romantic Era. Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” displayed a great deal of prophecy while William Blake’s use of imagination and opposing opposites is clearly evident in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.”

The element of prophecy was common in the poems and prose of the Romantic period. Prophecy didn’t necessarily mean that the events were actually going to happen. When encountering the word “prophecy or prophetic” we tend to think about those visionaries as Moses and Nostradamus, but their use of prophecy was different. Writers such as Anna Barbauld wrote in accordance with what was going on at that time (American and French Revolutions). It wasn’t as though she was saying that the demise of Britain was going to happen, but that it could if things didn’t change. “?The apocalyptic vision of England in decay?”(Damrosch, 29), that is how Barbauld’s “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” is described. Although the majority of this piece is synonymous with the above quote, there are a few instances when Barbauld indicates that no matter what happens, England will flourish and will never be left in the shadows.

Thine are the laws surrounding the states revere,

Thine the full harvest of the mental year,

Thine the bright stars in Glory’s sky that shine,

And arts that make it life to live are thine.

If westward streams the light that leaves thy shores,

Still from thy lamp the streaming radiance pours,

Wide spreads thy race from Ganges to the pole,

O’er half the Western world thy accents roll…

Barbauld conveys that even though England is losing her grasp on America, “?If westward streams the light that leaves thy shores?,” She will still prevail and stand strong, “?Still from thy lamp the streaming radiance pours.” Barbauld’s style of writing seems to sugar coat the message she is sending by her use of rhyme and rhythm; yet, it is evident that this poem is prophetic. Her prophecy, however, is filled with contradictions. “?That time may tear the garland from her brow/ And Europe sit in dust, as Asia now.”(Barbauld, 38) insinuates that one day, America will prosper as England had, and that Europe will be left in the dark as Asia is. Ultimately I believe that the prophecy of Britain’s demise is her intention, as by the end of the poem she writes, “But fairest flowers expand but to decay?thy glories pass away?”

The imagination was a useful and necessary tool for the writers and poets of the Romantic Era. There was often debate about using ones imagination rather than facing what was true and real. Poets found imagination particularly important and rather than defining what it was, their definitions would explain what it wasn’t. “?Thus, imagination vs. reality; imagination vs. reason; vs. science; vs. the understanding; vs. mere ‘fancy’; even vs. religious truth.”(Damrosch, 4) In other words, the imagination had nothing to do with the material world. William Blake’s “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” is a product of the dark side of imagination and religion. He taps into the dark side of his readers’ minds by telling the tale of the fall of man from the Devil’s perspective (the evil side of the story). It’s far more exciting to read something that society may consider to be morally “bad” than to read a story through the eyes of the good guy. Damrosch wrote, “Blake presents devils who are a lot more fun than his angels.” We are so used to reading the Bible and related stories from the perspective of God and Heaven that Blake’s perspective, while being laden with satire, still shocks us. He seems to be toying with the minds of his readers by narrating it from a more negative point of view; it’s almost as if he knew that “The Marriage between Heaven and Hell” could be controversial. He also uses the binary device, which is opposites working against each other, such as Love and Hate, Good and Evil, and Passive and Active. Ultimately they all tie in, love equals good and passive while hate is equivalent to evil and active. The “Proverbs of Hell,” while evidently satirical, catches the reader’s eye, and even though it is the “evil” point of view there are many proverbs that are humorous. The proverbs, alone, must have taken a great deal of imagination to invent. “The rat, the mouse, the fox, the rabbet; watch the roots/ the lion the tyger, the horse, the elephant, watch/ the fruits.” That is such an inane line, I really have no idea what to think of it, and I believe that might be his point. There are also many proverbs that are serious and “good.” “Improvent makes strait roads, but the crooked roads/ without Improvement. are roads of Genius.” This simply means that often times the straight and narrow isn’t always the smartest path to take. It also implies that the true genius may lie within the mind of the person who is eccentric, the non-conformist. Blake was a non-conformist in his writing and today is a part of the canon. He refers to his illuminated poems as “The Bible of Hell.”

In Plate 4 he claims that imagination is the only life. I think that is stated in the first contrary, “Man has no Body distinct from his Soul/ for that calld Body is a portion of Soul discernd/ by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.”(Blake, 128) Of course, the entire Plate exemplifies it better, but I understood it more when reading the first contrary.

The Romantic Era produced a great many writers and poets. Escapism was also a product, which included the use of imagination and prophecy. Through the turmoil of what was taking place in reality, the writers of this time such as Blake and Barbauld, saw the importance in the strength of the mind and subjective writing. Blake’s use of imagination in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” was both important and exciting. Barbauld’s prophetic “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” was insightful and enabled us to see the chaos of that time.

Damrosch, David, ed. The Longman Anthology of British Literature. New York: Longman, 1999.