

5th Lecture

William Blake's The Little Black Boy

*My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
White as an angel is the English child:
But I am black as if bereav'd of light.*

*My mother taught me underneath a tree
And sitting down before the heat of day,
She took me on her lap and kissed me,
And pointing to the east began to say.*

*Look on the rising sun: there God does live
And gives his light, and gives his heat away.
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort in morning joy in the noon day.*

*And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love,
And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.*

*For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear
The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.
Saying: come out from the grove my love & care,
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.*

*Thus did my mother say and kissed me,
And thus I say to little English boy;
When I from black and he from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:*

*I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear,
To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him and he will then love me.*

Summary

A black child tells the story of how he came to know his own identity and to know God. The boy, who was born in “the southern wild” of Africa, first explains that though his skin is black his soul is as white as that of an English child. He relates how his loving mother taught him about God who lives in the East, who gives light and life to all creation and comfort and joy to men. “We are put on earth,” his mother says, to learn to accept God’s love. He is told that his black skin “is but a

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cloud" that will be dissipated when his soul meets God in heaven. The black boy passes on this lesson to an English child, explaining that his white skin is likewise a cloud. He vows that when they are both free of their bodies and delighting in the presence of God, he will shade his white friend until he, too, learns to bear the heat of God's love. Then, the black boy says, he will be like the English boy, and the English boy will love him.

Form

The poem is in heroic quatrains, which are stanzas of pentameter lines rhyming ABAB. The form is a variation on the ballad stanza, and the slightly longer lines are well suited to the pedagogical tone of this poem.

Commentary

This poem centers on a spiritual awakening to a divine love that transcends race. The speaker is an African child who has to come to terms with his own blackness. Blake builds the poem on clear imagery of light and dark. The contrast in the first stanza between the child's black skin and his belief in the whiteness of his soul lends poignancy to his particular problem of self-understanding. In a culture in which black and white connote bad and good, respectively, the child's developing sense of self requires him to perform some fairly elaborate symbolic gymnastics with these images of color. His statement that he is "black as if bereav'd of light" underscores the gravity of the problem. The gesture of his song will be to counteract this "as if" in a way that shows him to be as capable and deserving of perfect love as a white person is.

The child's mother symbolizes a natural and selfless love that becomes the poem's ideal. She shows a tender concern for her child's self-esteem, as well as a strong desire that he know the comfort of God. She persuades him, according to conventional Christian doctrine, that earthly life is but a preparation for the rewards of heaven. In this context, their dark skin is similarly but a temporary appearance, with no bearing on their eternal essence: skin, which is a factor only in this earthly life, becomes irrelevant from the perspective of heaven. Body and soul, black and white, and earth and heaven are all aligned in a rhetorical gesture that basically confirms the stance of Christian resignation: the theology of the poem is one that counsels forbearance in the present and promises a recompense for suffering in the hereafter.

The black boy internalizes his mother's lesson and applies it in his relations with the outer world; specifically, Blake shows us what happens when the boy applies it to his relationship with a white child. The results are ambivalent. The boy explains to his white friend that they are equals, but that neither will be truly free until they are released from the constraints of the physical world. He imagines himself shading his friend from the brightness of God's love until he can become accustomed to it. This statement implies that the black boy is better prepared for heaven than the white boy, perhaps because of the greater burden of his dark skin has posed during earthly life.

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This is part of the consoling vision with which his mother has prepared him, which allows his suffering to become a source of pride rather than shame. But the boy's outlook, and his deference to the white boy, may strike the reader (who has not his innocence) as containing a naive blindness to the realities of oppression and racism, and a too-passive acceptance of suffering and injustice. We do not witness the response of the white boy; Blake's focus in this poem is on the mental state of the black child. But the question remains of whether the child's outlook is servile and self-demeaning, or exemplifies Christian charity. The poem itself implies that these might amount to the same thing.