**William Blake: Imposing Meanings on Poems**

Blake has a reputation for being deep because he seems so simple. Could it be the case that some of his poems appear simple because they’re simple?  There’s little evidence from his life and character that he valued obscurity. Isn’t it more likely that he wanted to get his messages across (and he certainly wanted to preach – or promulgate his own views of life, the universe and everything) through the medium of simple allegories / parables or, like Aesop and la Fontaine, mini-fables?  A fable would be more impersonal – the bear and the fly perhaps?  How would it be if you re-worked it like that?

Little Fly,
Thy summer's play
My thoughtless hand
Has brushed away.

Am not I
A fly like thee?
Or art not thou
A man like me?

For I dance
And drink, and sing,
Till some blind hand
Shall brush my wing.

If thought is life
And strength and breath
And the want
Of thought is death;

Then am I
A happy fly,
If I live,
Or if I die.

For all it’s being rooted in a concrete image, the hand and the fly, the language of the poem is otherwise quite abstract. He doesn’t really give us much of a fable to go on.

Life is short and can end suddenly and capriciously…so to some extent this is a call to live now. Seize the day.  Whose, though, is the blind hand?  A supernatural power, aimlessly swatting a human, seems more akin to a Greek god than the Christian one which Blake believed in – or at least based his beliefs on.  Is it the hand (or fickle finger) of Fate?  Perhaps Blind Chance is more appropriate.

Allow students to have a field day with possible ‘meanings’. Some possibilities are

* The life of the mind (‘thought is life / And strength and breath’) is valued as much as sensual pleasures (‘dance / And drink, and sing’)?
* Humankind (‘I’) shares the world with even the most insignificant creatures (the fly) and should treat all creatures with respect (more a Buddhist principle than a Christian one – and one we see elsewhere in Blake)?
* Is the meaning of the last 2 verses arcane or simple?   If I’m alive, aware of thought and of senses, then I have all I want and am happy – once dead, I cannot think and therefore cannot feel unhappiness.

Am I missing something?   In spite of what I said at the start, I suppose these few lines have led me to express some quite deep thoughts at some length. So perhaps, after all, they were right…?

But then, I turn to this little poem:

Merry, merry sparrow!
Under leaves so green
A happy blossom
Sees you, swift as arrow,
Seek your cradle narrow,
Near my bosom.
Pretty, pretty robin!
Under leaves so green
A happy blossom
Hears you sobbing, sobbing,
Pretty, pretty robin,
Near my bosom.

I don't think even a child would find this very appealing. Whose bosom are we talking about - the tree's?  Why is the sparrow merry?  Why is the robin sobbing?  Why is the blossom happy?  Why am I writing this?

Blake’s poems have been made to bear some very contentious interpretations and because they are very ‘open’, one can make all sorts of theories fit.  A case of misplaced energies in many cases, I feel.  Now if you want to go to town with interpretations, pass by the Robin and the Fly and settle on The Sick Rose…  Now you’ve got something to go at!

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