



An Examination of William Blake's Use of Gothic Themes in an Excerpt from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

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This excerpt from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* by William Blake is part of a visionary Gothic text written in the late 18th century which establishes many early features of the genre. In this essay, I will examine Blake's use of Gothic themes, focusing primarily on desire versus restraint, sensibility, and narrative framing, to explore how Blake posits and develops early conventions of the Gothic genre.

In the excerpt, Blake takes the convention of a medievalist, pre-rational Gothic (established in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*) and applies it philosophically to themes of desire and restraint. Blake wrote *Heaven and Hell* during the Enlightenment, a period associated with science and reason, but conveys anti-Enlightenment ideals when writing 'Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy'. His suggestion that Reason binds or otherwise restricts 'Energy' promotes a pre-rational, intuitive state of being. Blake's work strongly associates Reason with his contemporary society, with 'bound' implying that society has put mankind in chains, enforcing a kind of spiritual slavery. Blake's metaphorical approach to the Gothic theme of entrapment or imprisonment thus depicts society as an obstacle to true 'life' and 'delight', resulting in spiritual suffocation. In the Gothic, emotional responsiveness, irrationality and desire are often contrasted with society's moderating impulses, and Blake's text develops this tradition to critique Enlightenment thinking, encouraging his readers to follow their 'Energies' in order to liberate themselves from society's restrictions. Furthermore, Gothic texts often feature a pursued protagonist, in which the pursuing force relentlessly acts negatively on a character; in *Heaven and Hell*, Blake presents this pursuing force as society, whilst the pursued protagonist is mankind, therefore criticising the imposition of rationality over

what he deems as mankind's natural state. Blake believed that paradise on earth would be achieved if everyone was free to follow their desires, evident when he defines Energy as 'Eternal Delight', subverting Catholic teaching of 'Energy, call'd Evil'. Instead, Blake promotes Energy as a positive force, conducive to happiness when exercised freely.

The outcome of following one's Energies, Blake suggests, is an emotionally heightened state of being referred to in the Gothic as sensibility. Blake writes that 'that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses', disputing the notion of 'a Body & a Soul' as two ontologically separate 'principles'. Enlightenment thinking considered the body as a clearly defined form allowing people to exert autonomy over the world, whereas Blake establishes a conversely Gothic set of principles connecting the body with the world on an innate, emotional level. The theme of sensibility is prevalent in later Gothic texts, but unique in Blake due to additional associations with the spiritual and imaginary. Empiricism argues that humanity's physical senses provide us with worldly knowledge, however Blake believed that sensory experience could also apply metaphysically and that imagination could expand one's worldly understanding. Blake's engravings convey this notion by depicting imaginary scenes, which are visually symbolic. For instance, in the excerpt, Blake illustrates a figure whose bent posture draws a parallel between him and the dog he is walking, whose movement is restricted by a lead. In contrast, the extended limbs of the man behind him convey his liberation; his posture mirroring that of the tree suggests his alignment with nature, and a natural state of being. Blake's depiction of a liberated man reaching out to a restricted man, appealing for him to seek his freedom, reflects Blake himself appealing to the reader, encouraging them to expand their own sensory experiences.

Throughout *Heaven and Hell*, Blake employs various narrators and framing devices to explore his Gothic themes, and elects to frame this excerpt as originating from 'The voice of the Devil'. Firstly, the Devil can be considered a stock character of Gothic fiction, exemplified in texts such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which was an evident influence on Blake, as he writes

of Milton later in the text that he was 'a true poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it'. Blake, like Milton, characterises the Devil as a Gothic villain-hero, who reveals hidden truths to the reader. The structuring of the excerpt as a list of three 'Errors' followed by three truths conveys it as factual, an impression supported by Blake exclusively using statements, such as 'are True', 'Energy is', 'Man has no', etc. By employing this language, Blake conveys his assertions as legitimate and indisputable, and the narrative framing of the Devil's voice also gives the impression of an authoritative and knowledgeable source. Moreover, this allows Blake to explore controversial ideas by displacing them onto a different source, a trait often featured in Gothic texts. Instead of embracing anti-Enlightenment and anti-Catholic ideas disputing 'Bibles or sacred codes' as his own, Blake posits *Heaven and Hell* as a variation on the found manuscript convention typical of the early Gothic, providing the impression that he is merely a transmitter of visions, rather than the author. This plays upon another Gothic theme: that of dreams, portents and visions revealing truths to a character or glimpses of the future. In *Heaven and Hell*, Blake assumes the metafictional role of experiencing these visions and assigns himself the task of sharing them. Therefore, the list structure could alternatively imply Blake having compiled and compacted his visions into facts, reported like scientific findings, understandable to an Enlightenment-era reader and enhancing the impression of legitimacy which the found manuscript trope aspired to.

Overall, this excerpt from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* exemplifies how Blake built on existing themes of the early Gothic such as desire versus restraint, sensibility, and narrative framing with his own values, placing primary emphasis on human freedom. Blake also developed his own themes such as society's enslavement of mankind, the role of imagination in acquiring knowledge and experience, and narrative framing through spiritual vision to form part of an emerging Gothic tradition and influence many Gothic texts since. Ultimately, Blake advances previous understandings of the Gothic to encompass the religious, spiritual and philosophical, and utilises the genre as an avenue for social criticism.