William Blake's Racial Ideals

William Blake was born on November 28, 1757 and died on August 12, 1827. He spent his life writing and engraving poetry that is recognized today as work from a genius and are some of the most divergent works in English. However, during his own life, Blake was considered unsuccessful in displaying his works. In 1789, Blake published “The Little Black Boy”, in the book Songs of Innocence. Blake used this poem as a strong political platform to stress anti-racial political points at the end of the eighteenth century.

Europe, during the eighteenth century, was facing a literary movement that continued to spread throughout the United States and Latin America, known as the “Romantic” time period. As the people were protesting the way of order and law, this caused a rebellion within Europe. The revolt encouraged people to take a more creative and self-expressive form of rules, rather than the harsh strict ones they were used to. William Blake took benefit of what was going on in his country and started to draft poems. These poems were influenced by the rebellious nature of the people around him and the challenging of the social contract. He was known as a rebellious and unconventional “political radical” who wrote from spiritual symbols, and illustrated the difference between chastity and the human soul.

Growing up, Blake was homeschooled and began seeing “visions” at the age of eight. One of these visions was reported as a tree full of angels, another that God “put his head to the window.” When he told his parents, his father accused him of lying, but his mother was always on his side. His parents soon realized he was different from his peers around him. From the ages of ten to twelve, Blake attended a drawing school instructed by drawing master, Henry Pars. Then in 1769, at the age of twelve, Blake began to compose poetry.

When he turned fourteen, he became an assistant to an engraver, as drawing school became too costly. His master was the engraver, James Basire, who worked for the London Society of Antiquaries, and sent Blake to Westminster Abbey to draw tombs and monuments. These drawings are where his lifelong love of the gothic art was born.

After his seven-year apprenticeship ended, at the age of 21, Blake became a journeyman copy engraver, and worked on projects for publishers. That same year, he was admitted into the Royal Academy of Art’s Schools of Design, where he began to exhibit his own works the following year (1780). Blake’s artistic abilities had reached new heights, and he privately published, Poetical Sketches, a collection of poems he had written over the previous fourteen years.

In 1782, Blake married Catherine Boucher, an illiterate woman. He then proceeded to teach her how to read and write, as well as draftsmanship. Blake also helped her experience visions, just like his. As years went by, Catherine began to help and support Blake print the illuminated poetry that he is remembered for today.

Two years later, he set up a print shop with a man named James Parker, but this attempt failed years later. The remainder of Blake’s life was spent making a modest living as an engraver and illustrator for published works. He also began to train his younger brother, Robert, in the artistic

skills. Robert fell sick to tuberculosis during the winter of 1787, and as he died Blake reported seeing his brother's spirit "rise up through the ceiling, clapping his hands for joy." Blake also believed that his brother's ghost continued to haunt him and claimed that Robert instructed him how to do the printing technique that was used in Songs of Innocence.

In 1800, Blake moved to the coast in the town of Felpham, where he taught himself Latin, Greek, Italian, and Hebrew, just so he could read and understand classical works in their original language. While in Felpham, Blake experienced new spiritual judgements that led towards his later works written throughout 1804 to 1820. These writings anticipated a new kind of innocence and the human spirit over reasoning.

These new works were met with silence, the only review published described the exhibit as a "display of nonsense, unintelligence and egregious vanity,"(Biography.com editors). Blake was wrecked by the review of his work, and the fact that his work wasn't getting much attention in the first place, so he started to withdraw more and more from any attempt at success. From the years 1809 to 1818, he engraved very few plates, having no record of him producing any engravings from the years 1806 to 1813. He began to sink further into poverty and paranoia.

However, things began to change in 1819, when Blake began to sketch a series of historical and imaginary figures that "appeared and sat for him," (Biography.com editors). By 1825, he had sketched over 100 images, the most famous being his "The Ghost of a Flea."

Trying to remain busy, he started engraving designs for illustrated books, mostly of from the Bible. In 1824, he started a series of 102 watercolor pictures of Dante(from Dante's Inferno), only to be cut short by his death in 1827.

Before he died, Blake described his chronic disease as "that sickness to which there is no name," (Biography.com editors). He died on August 12, 1827, leaving not only the watercolor pictures to Dante, but to an illuminated manuscript of the Bible's Book of Genesis. The obituaries written about him, gave him no justice, describing his unusualness more remarkable than his professional abilities.

Going back to Blake's 1789 poetic work of "The Little Black Boy", he brings in the idea that life is something to escape from. This was in an age when the African American race was treated more cruel than animals. Blake uses this powerful, political, poem to dramatize the terrible lives of black people at the end of the eighteenth century. He plays with the color "of dichotomy - black and white - to stress his dissatisfaction and anti-racial political points," (Adler).

The poem starts with narration from the little black boy himself. The boy says, "My mother bore me in the southern wild," meaning the southern forest of Africa, (Blake lines 1). He then goes on to describe himself as "black, but O! My soul is white;" meaning his skin color is black, but he has the "innocent" soul of a white person. The boy continues with this idea when he states that he is "white as an angel" and "black as if bereav'd of light" which depicts that all good things come in white, like angels, and all things black are correlated with black, like darkness (Blake line 3-4). Blake writes these lines as a shadow to the issue of slavery in Europe at the time. Black people were seen as inferior to white people in the country, and the world, during this time period.

Blake then brings in a religious idea in this poem, stating that "... God does live And gives his

light, and gives his heat away” (Blake lines 9-10). These lines are lessons his mother is telling him about God’s never ending love, no matter what color one’s skin is. He begins to bring in metaphors, comparing the love of God to the rays of the sun, saying “...[t]hat er may learn to bear the beams of love, and these black bodies and this sunburnt face” (Blake line 14). This line presents the idea that black people are only the color they are because God’s light shines on them more, and because of this they are burnt from the sun’s rays.

The little boys mother continues speaking truth to her child in the fourth stanza where she tells her son that “[they] are put on earth… that [they] may learn to bear the beams of love, and these black bodies and this sun-burnt face Is but a cloud, and like shady grove” (Blake lines 13-16). The lines are saying that colored people are put on this earth to be strong enough to face life being known as a burden and unfairly. They learn to bare the sun’s rays and become worthy of God’s love.

In the next four lines, the mother continues to use the religious aspect with help of the comparison to lambs. She says that once they can become accustomed to the sun, they “shall hear his voice. Saying: come out from the grove my love & care, and round my golden tent like lambs rejoice,” (Blake lines 17-20). These lines describe the idea that they will hear God’s voice asking them to come out of the grove, and to move happily around the tabernacle (Blake’s “golden tent”) like happy lambs. This stanza lets the body be seen as a cover of the soul, only to be worn on earth, and once the child is ready to face heaven, the material protection is no longer necessary.

The little boy then proceeds to repeat what his mother said “to a little English boy,” (Blake line 22). He gives the idea that when people stop looking at the color of skin, then everybody will be able to round the tent of God like lambs. This idea is the message Blake is trying to get across throughout the entire poem. Racial discrimination should no longer be a problem in his society and needs to be fixed.

The last four lines of the poem, the little black boy is speaking again. He says that he will “shade him from the heat till he can bear, To lean in joy upon our fathers knee,” (Blake lines 25-26). The roles have reversed since the first stanza, and now the black boy feels superior to the white boy, and feels the need to protect him from the rays of the sun. Blake then writes that the little black boy will “... stand and stroke his silver hair, And be like him and he will then love me,” (Blake lines 27-28). These lines describe the idea that once the white boy learns to bear the beams of God’s love, then touching each other will become a possibility. The idea of equality and loving one another is Blake’s final message.

The ideas that flew around in the Romantic Movement are illustrated in William Blake’s poem as he conveys a form of free expression of a social issue in his writing. Blake uses the idea that white people feel like they can dehumanize the colored because of skin color. This is ironic because scientifically, black skin is able to withstand the heat of the sun due to the natural darkness of the skin. Blake also has the continuous idea that the black skin is a cloud, and this cloud will disappear when he meets God due to his unconditional love for everyone.

William Blake’s poems have impacted history due to his symbolic writing in the Romantic time period. In his works, Blake offers an idea of a world free of racial discrimination and conflict. His work is free of negative and positive perceptions of black and white. Although he was unappreciated during his own life, he has gained wild popularity since his death and is known as

one of the six most influential poets.

In conclusion, William Blake spent his life writing and engraving art that was not recognized in his life as it is today. He used his work to stress political platforms and anti-racial ideas, as well as religious messages throughout the eighteenth century.