



A STUDY OF SEXUALITY IN WILLIAM BLAKE'S POEMS

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper aims to explore prudish & puritan Attitudes towards sexuality in William Blake's poems. Basically, it concentrates on sexuality, selfhood and self-annihilation in William Blake's poetry. The discussion has been formulated by analyses of poems which are thought to be fit for the topic. A fair share has been allotted to both the widely read short poems and the dense/obscure 'Prophetic Books' so that the poems selected can be taken to be representative of Blake's oeuvre. The inspiration for the topic of this paper stems from Blake's acute insight and portrayal of the human psyche- something remarkably radical and ahead of its time. The present research paper first deals with the complex portrayal of sexuality or sexual development- a development which is warped and twisted by adult interference. The poems deal with issues like personal honesty, courage and how people allow themselves to be bullied by prudish and puritan attitudes towards sexuality, it is a phenomenon which ends up driving sex into secrecy. Finally, it explores darkness, secrecy and hypocrisy that lead to destruction and sinister, negative forms of 'love'. The analyses deal with the psychological truths of hidden hostility and repressed emotion. The poems taken together show that one of the root causes for all the evil complexities, as far as sexuality and selfhood is concerned, is fear and selfishness which leads the original descent into dishonesty- resulting in hardening a part of oneself against the natural flow of self-expression. With radical insight Blake exposes how a variety of human behaviors originate in fear ultimately coalesce into a unified concept and lead to tyranny. The heroic struggle every individual must undertake to break the shackles of all this is to destroy the self in a moment of inspired courage. The creative conflict of 'Contraries' must be embraced

rather than shunned out of fear or shame. The individual must continually destroy and re-destroy the hardening self by seeking moments of vision and inspiration.

KEY-WORDS: Repressed emotion, self-expression, contraries, tyranny, puritan.

The process of building false 'selves' and attempting to fix a 'self' beyond the reach of natural change is seen at work throughout Blake's poetry. It seems to spring from a variety of reasons, principle among them being fear. Fear of energy, fear of change, fear of sex, selfish fear of others, and fear of freedom: all develop fixed delusions which close the personality away from infinity, vision and truth. Blake repeatedly emphasizes natural impulse, honesty and freedom in love. He shows us that these fears are everywhere and in everyone. Although he conveys deep sympathy with the fearful feelings of his characters, he castigates them for failing to confront and overcome the intimidating appearance of things, for giving into that fear and allowing that fear to rule their lives. The individual has to force himself out of this vicious cycle of fear, selfishness, dishonesty and tyranny. What follows is an exploration of individual consciousness in his works.

The first two poems under consideration are a pair - *The Blossom* from *Innocence* and *The Sick Rose* from *Experience*. *The Blossom* is a beautiful pattern of words and sound. There is much repetition, typical of Songs of Innocence. It is evident that this is a very simple song playing on a very limited range of language. The colour green carries an echo which emphasizes the colour of youth and innocence. References to a sparrow, a robin and a blossom; a rose and a worm in a storm make it intriguing to find out the core of the poem. There are clues in the fact that the sparrow has been likened to an arrow, seeking a cradle narrow near the speaker's bosom. Similarly, in *The Sick Rose*, the traditional phallic symbol of a snake or worm has dark secret love while the rose herself is on a 'bed of crimson joy'. Although some critics have attempted to build unlikely meanings about 'souls bodies and birth and earth' (Hirsch 181-84), the stories are clear enough that it can be safely said that the poems are on physical/sexual consummation.

A brief analysis of the poem *The Blossom* within the context of Blake's system of contraries will serve our purpose. The poem is an account of joyous and natural sex. 'Blossom' and 'under leaves so green' firmly establishes the benevolent, pastoral mode of Innocence, mildly evoking the backdrop of *The Lamb*. However, the anxieties evoked by the apparent paradox of 'merry' and 'sobbing' should be modified by the reminiscence of the extremities of fear and joy yoked together at the creation of *The Tyger* and the extreme emotions it generates - 'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?'. One of the *Proverbs of Hell* specifically reminds that Blake felt extremes of emotional experience as combining together - a combination of two extremes, producing a

heightened state of wonder and ecstasy- ‘Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps’ (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). All this makes it easier to understand why the robin in *The Blossom* is sobbing with joy.

There is a fundamental difference between *The Blossom* and *The Sick Rose*, a poem which describes the sexual act in more explicit and more conventional symbols. There is a strong contrast between these two poems. The phallic bird, the ‘sparrow’ compared to an ‘arrow’, is transformed into something foul and sinister. The worm of the Experience is invisible and flies in darkness. The phrase ‘found out’ might be safely taken to imply that the worm tries to seek satisfaction against the will of the woman who unsuccessfully attempts to hide from it. The fact that the woman in this poem is the one who hides her ‘bed of crimson joy’ essentially meaning that she hides her own desires, is highly significant. Many critics have been more specific than this when they have suggested that the rose is a traditional symbol of female genitalia so her bed of crimson joy refers to masturbation (Paglia 277). The basic argument is that whether the rose’s sexuality is hidden, or masturbatory or both, does not matter either way, she denies and refuses her natural desires, or her pleasure is self enclosed, exclusive. The ‘howling storm’ through which the worm flies stands for the materialistic world of experience. Dishonesty is repeatedly emphasized in his ‘dark secret’ love. *The Sick Rose* is then densely packed with sinister, disgusting, and dishonest sexuality. Following this line of argument, it can be said that the poem gives an account of selfish male aggression and unwilling female hypocrisy. The effect of this kind of love making – that it ‘does thy life destroy’, is summed up by the final words of the poem.

Locating these two poems in the context of other *Songs* would be highly revealing. There have been frequent references to the idea of natural, uninhibited sexual development, both as a possibility in the world of *Innocence* and as prevented by adult interference. In the development of the second plate of *The Echoing Green*, boys are handing down bunches of grapes to girls, but ‘old John with white hair’ leads some reluctant children away from their games. This can be related with Lyca’s experience who, despite her parent’s fears is not frightened of the lion’s masculine man or ashamed of her nakedness in *The Little Girl Lost*. Blake’s outrage at puritan attitudes to sex has been repeatedly and powerfully expressed. In the *Garden of Love* also where the speaker used to play on the green, there was the Earth’s complaint about ‘That free Love with bondage bound’ and the deadening effect of ‘Thou shalt not’. The criticism is directed at how prudish attitudes are binding joys and desires. In *A Little Girl Lost* (Experience), the opening stanza acts as a kind of sentence or moral and expresses Blake’s outrage at the denial and perversion of natural sexuality in a clear campaigning call:

Children of the future Age,

Reading this indignant page;

Know that in a former time,

Love! sweet Love! Was thought a crime. (*Songs of Innocence and Experience* 51)

So, it is quite evident that there is a clear message about personal relationships to be taken from these poems. Natural sexuality- free from interference by adult prudery, materialism and hypocrisy and unfettered by oppressive laws, is positive, possible and fruitful and is an intense form of ecstasy ('sobbing sobbing...near my Bosom'). It is not sex itself, but darkness, secrecy and hypocrisy that lead to destruction and sinister, negative forms of love. The *Songs* thus reveal a world where religious and social laws imprisoned natural desire, and express Blake's indignation at this state of affairs. The social consequences of driving sex into secrecy are spelled out in 'London':

But most thro' midnight streets I hear

How the youthful Harlots curse

Blasts the new-born Infants tear

And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse. (Songs of Innocence and Experience 46)

The personal consequences of dishonesty in relationships and with one's self are spelled out in the final lines of *The Angel*, with their evocation of a wasted life:

For the time of youth was fled

And grey hairs were on my head. (Songs of Innocence and Experience 41)

Blake provides us with two pictures of infancy to underline the contrasting consequences of natural and perverted sexual relationships, and to indicate how the latter can blight a society as well as an individual- *Infant Joy* in *Innocence* and *Infant Sorrow* in *Experience*.

This poem, in its sweetness and simplicity of vision is reminiscent of *The Lamb*. What is significant is that although Blake is imitating a child's simplicity of language yet the adult adopts simplicity when addressing the child. The poem is simple, repetitive and childish. The poem does express a 'happy' situation, however limited it might be. The infant is 'happy', joy is 'sweet'; the two speakers do 'smile' and 'sing'; and perhaps most significantly the adult does accept the infant's own choice of name and wish for its happiness to continue: ('Sweet joy befall thee'). It is widely known that in Blake's *Innocence*, clouds on the horizon may exist by implication,

but they are still elsewhere, and hardly impinge on this poem's simple 'joy'. 'Infant Sorrow', however is a very different matter.

The contrast is obvious between Innocence's benevolent adult and these parents who 'groand' and 'wept' at the birth of their infant who is 'Like a fiend'. Moreover, there is only a 'dangerous joy' in place of the 'sweet joy', and the infant is immediately caught up in a struggle against its father. The child is newborn 'Helpless, naked, piping loud'; but then confusingly and ominously described as 'Like a fiend hid in a cloud'. What follows is the struggle against 'swadling bands'. These were tight cloth wrappings wound around babies to prevent them from moving, because it was believed that it would help them to grow straight legs. Blake depicts the 'swadling bands' as a form of imprisonment where the father fights against and binds the child; and this in turn implies that the description 'Like a fiend hid in a cloud' tells us how fearfully the parents view their offspring. Terrified and miserable ('groand, wept') they are impelled to tie up the baby as soon as it is born, when in reality it is 'Helpless, naked'.

The parents' misery and fear is crucial to interpreting this poem. This birth is not the natural and desired outcome of 'free love', like the birth in *Infant Joy*. Here, a feared and unwanted child is the product of some 'dark secret' or perverted sexuality such as that evoked in *The Sick Rose*. The father feels threatened by his child, and fights to control it. Just as the parents contrast, similar is the case with the infant. The infant of this poem is very different from its counterpart in the *Innocence*. This child is not 'happy', but is immediately caught and bound by its father. Obviously, the infant cannot match its father's strength: 'Bound and weary', it is defeated. However, this infant has learned a lesson. With chilling deliberateness, it decides to feed itself ('To sulk upon my mothers breast') to gain strength, so that it can overthrow its father – enemy at some future time. The implication is clear. Eventually the child will become a youth and the father will grow old. It is inevitable that the child will overthrow its father, sooner or later. Acquaintance with Blake's oeuvre will make it clear that the frightened and aggressive patriarch is a form of the figure called Urizen. The infant, only just born and garnering strength for a violent rebellion is already becoming the revolutionary figure called 'Orc'. So, *Infant Sorrow* describes part of what can be called the Orc Cycle- the first fight between father and son, and the implication of the violent rebellion to come. This broadens our understanding of the themes that concern Blake- that attitudes towards sexuality are important for the individual- from what we have come to know from *The Angel* and *The Sick Rose*, that shame, secrecy and perversions will bring fear, horror and misery. *Infant Sorrow* suggests, in addition, that a cleaning of attitudes to sexuality is also vital for the whole of society. In this poem Blake suggests that the pointless and repetitive wars of an 'Orc cycle', where each generation becomes its own Urizen, will continue until 'Love, sweet

Love' is no longer 'thought a crime'. Just as in the final three lines of *London*, the consequences of false attitudes to sexuality are shown to be a fundamental failure of society.

Before moving on to Blake's other poems to elaborate the theme at hand, it is worth remarking Blake's acute and prophetic psychological insight. The relationships between infant, father and mother depicted in this poem are uncannily predictive of the theory of psychosexual development and the 'Oedipus Complex', put forward by Freud more than a century later. Blake's portrayal shows that his intuitive formulation of family relationships was extraordinarily ahead of its time. The four small poems, taken together, then, define Blake's understanding of sex very clearly. But it is important to be cautious about being conditioned in reading them, about not equating our modern paradigms to equate this with promiscuity. Blake is clearly in favour of what Earth calls 'free love'. The one contrast Blake repeatedly makes is highly significant. On the one hand there is the 'dark secret' perverted sex which is almost pornographic (the harlot in *London*), dishonest (the 'maiden Queen, who hides her 'heart's delight' and is then 'armed...with ten thousand shields and spears' in *The Angel*), and wastes our 'winter and night' in 'disguise' (*Nurse's Song*). Whereas natural and open love can bring 'joy', the 'dark secret' kind with its unwanted and threatening infant, is a harbinger of future violence and destruction.

The next poem up for analysis is *A Poison Tree* from *Experience* – a poem which focuses on honesty in personal relationships, something that it straightforwardly recommends. Whatever our feelings towards others they should be expressed. Hidden feelings and dishonest behavior breeds poison and destruction. The imagery is typical of Blake, where the abstract performs concrete actions. So 'tears' water the tree and 'smiles' sun it, while the tree itself is a concrete manifestation of hidden, growing 'wrath'. Adding this poem to analogous imagery in other *Songs*, and parallel narratives in his poems will enrich the understanding of this poem and will express how the *Songs* act together to express a complex, and fully integrated analysis of human behavior.

It is quite evident that this poem is about hidden hostility and disguised murder. But what makes things interesting is the fact that the tempting apple and a special tree, in a garden prove lethal to the speaker's 'foe'. The reference to Eden and the Fall is too obvious to be missed. The figure variously described as the 'Holy Word' walking in the Garden of Eden and the 'Selfish father of men' is used by Blake to propose a subversive and radical reinterpretation of the Bible. This figure is the type of Urizen. He is hypocritically sad ('Weeping in the evening dew') and overwhelmed by 'Cruel jealous selfish fear'. As a result, this Old Testament God oppresses man and woman with vicious punishments and imprisons them in chains of fear. He is the origin of the dictatorship of 'Thou shalt not'- those rigid and unnatural laws that bind 'free Love' and 'joys and desires', and responsible for 'every ban' which forges the 'mind forg'd manacles' of tyranny. Any exploration into trying to decipher the identity of the nature and role of god in *A Poison Tree* is illuminating because it takes Blake's

analysis of tyranny much further. The speaker of the poem owns both garden and apple; and the victim is both tempted by the fruit ('my foe beheld it shine') and knows whose possession it is ('he knew that it was mine'). The poem's speaker is also responsible for punishing the thief, having poisoned the apple himself just as God was responsible for the curses heaped upon Adam and Eve, and binding Earth in 'this heavy chain/ that does freeze my bones around', in *Earth's Answer*. The poem explores shocking implications to Blake's analysis which is radically suggestive. First, it suggests that God's hypocritically hidden hostility to man carries the blame for the entire story of the Fall. It was God who set the first ban and demanded the first obedience to law. It was God who placed the forbidden apple in the garden. The logical conclusion which is unavoidable is that, it was God who tempted mankind. What could have been the motive behind all this? To work out hostility he felt but denied all along. But even more radically- the image of a poison tree implies that God knew what the outcome would be: he poisoned the tree in advance. What Blake suggests in short is that the jealous, Urizenic God of the Old Testament set a deceptive trap for mankind, and anticipated the satisfaction of issuing punishment and feeling self-righteous. Moreover, he always wanted to use eternal human guilt as a leverage to manipulate future generations.

The second point relates to how this poem fills out a psychological story. Unspoken emotion and unacted feeling is the villain of this piece. Here, Blake, like the true visionary that he was anticipates a dynamic truism of modern psychology- that suppressed emotion does not go away: instead the more it is suppressed or prevented from expressing itself, the more it grows and seeks another outlet. The apple image conveys another truism of modern psychology- the analysis that repressed urges, when they do show themselves, often come out in deceptive clothes, pretending to be something different often the opposite from what they actually are. Blake is categorical in this statement the negative wrath has transformed in appearance into a tempting, 'bright' apple containing the hidden poison of hostility which ultimately allows wrath to fester and infect. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake calls for the 'cherub with his flaming sword to leave his guard at the tree of life'. He argues that this will lead to an 'improvement of sensual enjoyment' and will melt 'apparent surfaces away'. Here again Blake attacks jealousy, possessiveness & hypocrisy. The passage from the *Marriage* also reminds us of what should actually be in the place of the poison of selfish hypocrisy. A friendship, rather than being 'finite and corrupt' should be 'infinite and holy'. The evil of repression is again emphasized when he asserts that 'man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern'. It is well known that Blake blamed the idea of the separate body and soul for much of the oppression he saw around him and for the psychological prisons people fashion for themselves. *A Poison Tree* highlights another internal division in operation- repression divides people internally, preventing their natural emotions from finding an outlet. The speaker's natural wrath in *A Poison Tree* and other natural urges and desires are called 'Energy', while the agent of repression is called 'Reason'. In the *Marriage* Blake goes on to say that 'Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active

springing from Energy'. The following two *Proverbs of Hell* further reinforce the importance Blake attaches to emotional honesty and the danger he sees in its opposite:

He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence. (*The Complete Writings of William Blake* 151)

Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires. (Ibid. 152)

The bright and poisonous apple which is the final outcome of a character – process in the speaker has a variety of qualities. It is lethally destructive, tempting, and attractive and selfish. Blake uses the apple as a symbol of what the character's original dishonesty has made. The process which grew the tree and its apple is also clearly given. It is watered with 'fears' and sunned by 'soft deceitful wiles'.

Let us now take up parts of the Prophetic Books for discussion to examine how they can illuminate the issues being explored in this paper. *The Book of Thel*, a Prophetic poem is a study in fear of life. The speaker Thel is an unborn soul overwhelmed by thoughts of her future death, and the mutability of things. To place her in a discourse on Blake and use a familiar context to the one that is being developed - Thel lives in an undeveloped world of Innocence, the kind of ironically limited paradise of *The Lamb* and *The Echoing Green*. She fears experience and is unwilling to leave. There is a subtle irony in her refusal to accept experience. Blake manages to portray Thel, at the same time appealingly as sympathetic and slightly nauseating. The irony lies in the passage's hints at Thel's underlying obstinacy. The happiness Thel feels and refuses to part with is infantile and so is her pointless complaint which only rejects life without making any attempt to understand. The range of emotions she chooses for herself- rainbow, cloud, reflection, shadows, dreams and so on, are significantly restrictive. They are all vague, evanescent and soft. There is an absence of solidity: of rocks, mountains and beasts - of solid earth itself.

At the end of the poem Thel is allowed to visit the physical world into which she refuses to be born. In the interval, Thel has consulted a lily, a cloud, a worm and a clod of clay; and all of them have advised her. Each of their accounts of life is limited but they have faith and accept their lot. Although gentle, Blake's satire highlights the hard core of selfishness and isolation in his weeping character. This part of the poem is a reminder that she cannot see clearly in 'valleys dark'. Ironically, it seems as if what Thel sees and hears in the real world is only a reflection of her own lamentation: a shadowed reiteration of her own insubstantial complaint. At the end, Thel is further terrified by the natural senses which are open to life and its terrors. With increasingly intense irony, the poem reiterates her rejecting question 'why?' before she runs back to her infantile state 'with a shriek'.

The Book of Thel is a sensitive portrayal of fear of life, then. It is profoundly revealing because it reveals the origins of Urizenic tyranny and personal hypocrisy. As Thel looks around her she realizes that all the beauties she sees are in the same state- doomed to non- existence- and this reinforces her first impulse, to reject. Rejection is a fundamentally selfish act. It asserts the supreme importance of preserving 'I', and to do so it attempts to isolate 'I' and insulate itself from all challenge or attack. Subtly enough, the fixed self is unwilling to develop because it wants to protect its dream of permanence. In *Thel*, the fixed self only runs; but her alliance with the God of Genesis reveals the vicious potential that lies in such a fixed self. Urizen is also a fixed self, fighting to survive unchanged. He tyrannically imposes his own dream of permanence upon the world around him. This poem thus reveals that the infantile attitude of fear and rejection unnaturally survives childhood. In Blake's picture of personality development, the driving motive behind adult cruelty and error is this self-preserving fear- an impulse of rejection which can begin at the beginning of life. This analysis reveals Blake foreshadowing psychoanalytical theory, in that it suggests that the imbalance and destructiveness of adult personality is caused by a failure to cope in infancy. Thus the poem explores a story about the early genesis, in infancy, of the hardened self-protective delusion Blake came to call the 'Selfhood'. The poem narrates an early phase in its development, when the heroine fails to overcome her fears, and chooses to run away.

In *The First Book of Urizen*, the Selfhood is portrayed in a more violent phase, creating itself in hostility and striking out against life. This paper will deal with the formation and rise of the Selfhood and Urizen's first promulgation of the terrible 'One law'. The opening section gives a clear indication of Urizen's state of mind- 'dark solitude' and 'set apart' reveal his self- concerned separation from life. The corollary of such isolation is 'Hidden' implying that for all his boastfulness and 'stern' counsels, he hides from fear and failure. The vicious self-righteousness which is characteristic of Urizen is suggested by 'holiness'. Just like what we saw in *Thel*, the tyrant's delusion is as facile and equally self-evidently wrong. He searches for 'a joy without pain' and 'a solid without fluctuation', both of which are false dreams in a world in which progress comes through a dialectical struggle of contraries and where movement and change are principle governing forces of life. Urizen utters the same pathetic and plaintive question as Thel- 'Why will you die, O Eternals?' This section thus reveals that Urizen's error is the same as the infantile Thel's.

Blake hints that Urizen's 'void immense' which is a 'deep world within' is not the enemy Urizen believes it to be, when it is described as 'Nature's wide womb'. Far from being his enemy, it is Urizen's own imaginative potential that he battles to destroy as he tries to make reason supreme. This of course is an error and carries further errors in its wake. Finally Urizen promulgates his law. The passage clearly presents the birth of tyranny, and we recognize the Urizenic character easily. This is the oppressor who supports Albion's angel in *Europe, A*

Prophecy. What we have discovered here is that Urizen should not be dismissed as a mere hate-figure. He is characterized with subtle psychological depth. His cruelties are firmly rooted in fear and error and Blake's satire acknowledges that we can identify with these. The final poem up for discussion is one of the three longer prophetic poems, *Milton, A Poem*. Blake sees the seventeenth century poet returning to earth to correct his mistakes and renew his inspiration. When he descends to earth into Blake's cottage garden, Milton still carries his own errors within himself. A cursory knowledge about the futile battles of Orc and Urizen and the constant re-creation of a negative, hard shell called the 'Selfhood' is well-known in the realm of Blake studies. As he descends to earth, Milton still carries all these negative struggles and errors with him in the form of a figure that represents his Selfhood, which is here called his Spectre, or Satan. When Milton addresses this Spectre or Satan, he describes the futile struggle between Orc and Urizen- the destruction of a 'Selfhood' by a new 'Selfhood'. This process, just like the 'Orc cycle' is eternally pointless and brings no change. So, Milton describes it as continuity: each apparent change is merely Satan under a new covering. He then proposes something different: a real change and a solution to the endless conflict, which he calls 'Self Annihilation' Milton's proposed self-annihilation goes beyond the laws of Urizen/Satan's 'false heavens'. In this passage self-annihilation seems to consist of sheer courage: it is to 'despise death' in 'fearless' majesty, and laughing scorn to all the laws and terrors of Urizen. Milton's speech reveals the task each individual must undertake- to destroy the self in a moment of inspired courage.

This inspiration, imagination and vision occur outside the restrictions of time. So Blake developed the concept of a 'moment in which vision occurs and truth is revealed; and he contrasted this with the limited structure of time itself. In an inspired moment 'all' can be seen in a flash; within time, on the other hand, only little parts of the whole can be seen, each in turn. To use the words of Northrop Frye, such 'moments' can help us achieve 'fulfilled desire and unbounded freedom' (Frye, 26-7). The following lines from Milton beautifully express this concept:

Every Time than a pulsation of the artery
 Is equal in its period and value to Six Thousand Years,
 For in this Period the Poet's Work is Done, and all the Great
 Events of Time start forth and are conceived in such a Period,
 Within a Moment, a Pulsation of the Artery. (*The Complete Writings of William Blake* 528)

Milton describes his purpose as to go on, in fearless majesty annihilating the self. He talks about the selfhood which must be put off and annihilated away- a painful and agonizing process which will cleanse his spirit by self-examination. The point is that self-annihilation cannot be a one and done event. The selfhood constantly rebuilds and re-creates itself. So constant self-examination and self-annihilation is necessary.

Having arrived at the end of our quest we have discussed the origin, growth and anatomy of what Blake called the 'Selfhood', and identified this as essentially the same hardening process within a society, or within the personality, that can be variously called Urizen, Satan or Specter. Blake calls for a renewal within each individual, and suggests a solution to obstructions, blindness and divisions within the personality. His philosophy as a whole applies to individual consciousness, and urges a renewal on psychological, spiritual and imaginative levels- a ringing assertion of idealism.

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