

Explore how ONE or TWO texts on the module might be understood as ‘experiments’

In defining experimental as ‘relating to an experience’¹ both William Blake and J.B Moreton challenge dehumanising systems of slavery by voicing the suffering experienced by marginalised individuals. Whereas Moreton’s ‘Slave Songs’ reproduce the oral form containing authentic experiences of the enslaved, Blake’s ‘London’ fashions the voices of suffering workers oppressed by industrial labour. Nonetheless, both texts relay sensory and emotional observations of exploited individuals to encourage sympathy.

Moreton disseminates authentic voices of enslaved Africans in his historical document ‘Slave Songs,’ providing a direct insight into their lived experiences and emotions. The paratextual remarks of a white, literate, middle-class author initially conveys condescending comments on how ‘their songs have neither rhyme nor measure.’² Whilst this judgement seemingly creates a division in power dynamics and linguistic register between the author and the collective oral voices of the enslaved, these are nonetheless somewhat distilled by Moreton’s ability to sympathise and emotionally connect with the experiences of enslaved Africans. The writer admits to having ‘laughed heartily’ and been ‘struck with deep melancholy at their songs.’³ This spectrum of emotions felt by Moreton at the experiences of the enslaved emphasise how a white, middle-class author can connect with, and therefore vouch for the ‘account’ of suffering and ‘black testimony’⁴ in his sympathetic and emotional response. Smith’s contemporary publication *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* further emphasises the importance of sharing ‘fellow- feelings with the sufferings of others’⁵ to encourage connection and sympathy within society. Moreton’s paratextual comments of concern for marginalised individuals thus demonstrate his direct, emotional sympathy which acts to empower those enslaved. Therefore, in demonstrating

¹ "experimental, adj. and n." *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2022)

² J.B. Moreton “Slave Songs” in *West India Customs and Manners* (London: J. Parsons, Paternoster Row; W. Richardson, Royal Exchange; H. Garnder, Strand; and J. Walter, Piccadilly, 1793), p. 152

³ Ibid, p.152

⁴ Belinda Edmondson *Noise: Early Caribbean Dialect Literature and Performance*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) p.33

⁵ Adam Smith *The theory of moral sentiments*. (London: A.Allardice, 1822) p.46

emotional sympathy and providing observational ‘evidence’⁶ with the voices and experiences of the enslaved, Moreton encourages a white readership to humanise those oppressed by slavery and sympathise with their suffering.

The syntax of ‘Slave Songs’ introduces the experiential struggle of individuals between repression and a desire for freedom. The first stressed syllable in the trochaic tetrameter falls on the speaker’s assertion to ‘tink’ there is a ‘God,’ (l.1) enforcing a strength to her words and opinions. In the remaining quatrains, the stress of the trochee also seems to fall on the ‘t’ sounds, particularly on verbs which depict a desire for liberty (such as ‘want’) and verbs which denote an obstruction to this, such as ‘can’t’ (ll.5-6) in the following line. Whilst the poem’s meter emphasises verbs which present the autonomous desire of the individual, to ‘tink’ and ‘want,’ it also demonstrates how this is immediately quashed by oppression in the next line ‘me can’t go’ (l.6). This repetitive syntax throughout the last three stanzas of ‘want’ and ‘can’t’ present an ongoing antagonism between desire and freedom, conveying the persistent suffering and lived experiences of the enslaved.

Moreover, repetition allows the speaker to assert their identity ‘me no horse, me no mare, me no mule’ (l.3). The speaker’s monosyllabic repetition of negation ‘no’ to portray what they are not conveys a strong tone of assertion and self-definition. The enslaved here is identifying their individuality and directly opposing the dehumanising system of oppression which threatens to treat her as a mere labouring ‘horse,’ ‘mare’ or ‘mule’ using the agency of her own voice. However, the modulation of the trochaic tetrameter presents a stronger and longer stress in the fourth foot of the trochee ‘Obissha’ (l.2). This stress perhaps presents the weight of the overseer’s restraint on the freedom of the enslaved. The modulation can thus present the enslaved experience of oppression and frustration whilst also allowing for individual self-expression in an oral form which resists conforming to any rigid or specifically traditional rhyme scheme. Moreton transcribes the ‘Slave Songs’ with its rhythmical modulation and

⁶ Edmondson, p.33

uncompromisingly maintains the oral quality, thereby preserving the authentic experiences of the enslaved to be conveyed directly to the reader, or listener.

Moreton further reproduces the voices of the enslaved and their lived experiences faithfully through presenting their original creole dialect. This directly elevates voices and the oral tradition of 'Slave Songs' by ensuring that the culture and sensory experiences of the enslaved are accurately represented. The dreams, desires and struggles of enslaved Africans are documented as verbatim and acknowledge 'black sentience and creativity' with 'their views, expressed obliquely or directly through their music'⁷ in their own dialect. 'Slave Songs' therefore allows for a sympathetic immersion into the sufferings of the enslaved through the oral culture of slavery conveying a direct experience or 'sentience'. This text is thus experimental in relaying the authentic experiences and unique oral traditions of slaves, as Edmondson suggests above, whilst also encouraging a reader's sensory understanding and sympathetic engagement with those oppressed.

Whereas Moreton transmits the lived experiences of those marginalised in his text, Blake fashions the emotions of the working class to undermine the dehumanising impacts of slavery and create a connection between reader and individual subject. Both texts thus sympathetically depict the sensory and personal experiences of labouring individuals. As the speaker in 'London,' Blake observes a variety of workers from the 'Chimney-sweeper' to the 'Soldier'⁸ and examines their emotions and experiences produced from being exploited from their role in the industrial revolution. Blake depicts the cumulative worsening of their suffering, progressing from 'every face' denoting 'marks of woe,' (ll.3-4) in the first stanza to an anguish which widens to encompass 'every cry of every Man' (l.5). Blake focuses on the collectively melancholic experience, with the trochaic tetrameter stressing 'every' to accentuate the wide-spread impacts of oppressive labour.

⁷ Edmondson p.33

⁸ William Blake *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 1992) p.41-42, ll.9-11

'London' uses sensory imagery to highlight the suffering of individuals. The interlocking rhymes of the 'chimney-sweeper's cry' and 'the hapless Soldier's sigh' mirrors the 'cry of fear' which Blake 'hear[s]' (ll.6-11). In associating 'fear' with 'hear,' and 'cry' with 'sigh,' a connection is created between the sensory reception to 'hear' and ability to outwardly express emotion, presented by the verbs 'cry' and 'sigh'. These individuals are thereby characterised by their external expressions of human suffering.

The aural quality, trochaic meter and lyricism produced by the consistent ABAB CDCE rhyme scheme in 'London' produces a similar effect to Moreton's 'Slave Songs'. These sounds produce an 'intimate and communal' ability to 'bind the speaker and the audience'⁹ and forge a relationship of sympathy founded on the sensory experience and suffering of marginalised individuals. Much like 'Slave Songs,' which, as an 'oral poem' contains 'elements such as repetition, rhythm, expressions of spontaneous emotion' and 'a consistent pattern of rhyme and meter,'¹⁰ the aural quality of lyricality and rhythmic regularity in Blake's 'London' draw on the emotional and sensory individual experience. Therefore, the reader or listener is encouraged to connect with the voice presented, which challenges the segregating and dehumanising systems of slavery. Both poems use different elements of aurality to convey the sufferings of others, Moreton in transcribing the oral 'Slave Songs' and Blake in his rhythmic lyricism.

Furthermore, 'London' depicts how authoritative and industrial systems are accountable for the injustice faced by workers. In the third stanza, Blake uses apocalyptic imagery to refer to the outcomes of exploitative labour, hinting at the state's exploitation of individuals with the Soldier's 'sigh' running 'in blood down Palace walls' (ll.11-12). This grotesque imagery mirrors Marx's description on the harrowing effects of exploitative labour, in that 'the history of [the laborer's] expropriation is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire'.¹¹ The suffering of the chimneysweep and soldier can be clearly linked to the oppressive institutions, whether religious 'black'ning Church' (l.10) or monarchical 'Palace walls'. In the 'blood' and

⁹ Lauri, Ramey *Slave Songs and the Lyric Poetry Traditions* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) p.34

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.18

¹¹ Marx, Karl "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation" in *Capital* (Chicago: C.H. Kerr & Company, 1906) p.786

‘sigh’ acting as an almost sacrificial product of the soldier’s labouring service, this third stanza reiterates the apocalyptic imagery of Marx’s ‘blood and fire’. Both soldier and chimneysweep are characterised by their professions, exploitation and their subsequent anguish. Likewise, the tormented ‘cry’ of the labouring chimneysweeper is directly linked to the religious institution of a ‘black’ning Church’. The poem evidently draws upon the relationship between the working individuals and institutional systems of oppression. Whilst Blake nonetheless focuses on the personal experience of a ‘cry’ or ‘sigh,’ the poem emphasises the role authority has in exploiting this ‘social relationship of power and control’. Whilst this Marxist ideology is ‘most starkly apparent in the case of the slave,’ and is demonstrated in the voices of Moreton’s ‘Slave Songs,’ Blake highlights the sufferings of an ‘industrial worker hired for a wage to work under the control and direction of management’.¹²

The paratextual elements of Blake’s poem further encourage a humanisation of marginalised individuals. Just as ‘London’ challenges the dehumanisation of oppressive systems through immersing the reader in their experiences, so, too, does the poem’s creative printed form. The emergence of the industrial revolution not only prompted the ‘enslavement of men... to industry’ which forced them to ‘sell their humanity’¹³ but also the inauthenticity of material goods. As a ‘craftsman’ and ‘engraver by profession’ Blake witnessed how the ‘skills of the workman’ were being ‘abandoned’¹⁴ in favour of industrialism. Marx notes how ‘the industrial capitalists’ and ‘potentates’ (represented in ‘London’ through the metonymy of the ‘black’ning Church’ and ‘Palace walls’) were opposed to ‘displace the guild masters of handicrafts’.¹⁵ Blake politically and physically opposes the inauthentic and oppressive systems of industry endorsed by ‘industrial capitalists’ and ‘potentates’ through his unique craftsmanship of each book which contains the human and sensory experiences of individuals. Thus, Blake challenges the dehumanisation of laborers in elevating the experience of individuals within his poem ‘London,’ whilst also using his authentic printing process to defy the need for industrial machinery, making *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* as a publication experimental.

¹² E.C Cuff, W.W Sharrock, D.W Francis *Perspectives in Sociology*, 4th edn. (London: Routledge, 1998) p.24

¹³ Kathleen Raine *Blake and the New Age* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1979) p.107

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.108

¹⁵ Marx, p.786

Blake's 'deep sympathy for the misery of slaves in bondage'¹⁶ allows for an exploration of individual experience, which help to break the 'mind-forg'd manacles' (Blake, l.8) of industrial oppression. Moreton, too, observes experiential suffering, but of lived emotions and voices of enslaved Africans. Both depict the senses outwardly expressed by individuals, which the aurally consistent rhythm of 'London' and the oral form of 'Slave Songs' contribute to. The paratextual elements of Moreton's commentary and Blake's craftsmanship also act as another medium to encourage a sympathetic connection between wider society and marginalised individuals. The poems and political intentions of 'Slave Songs' and Blake's 'London' are thus experimental in engaging with and transmitting voices of the enslaved and experiences of those oppressed.

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