William Blake and Kahlil Gibran as Social Rebels

Though William Blake and Kahlil Gibran were born at different places, in different times and in a particular social milieu quite different from each other’s, the affinity between these two writers is surprising and at the same time illuminating and enlightening. Both these writers despite being mystics were in Sarter’s term “engaged” (committed). They were intensely aware of the social and political structure of their society and could identify the wrongs which were besetting the society. They were extreme social critics. They were rebels at odds with the social setup which encouraged corruption, hypocrisy and materialism. Both Blake and Gibran strongly opposed slavery and racial prejudice. Both the writers convey truths which are universal in their scope. Their message transcends cultural barriers. They never favored a particular race, color, class, nation and religion. History is witness that writers like Blake and Gibran, in all ages have striven hard to awaken the dead conscience of the masses. Blake and Gibran taught people the lessons of rebellion by singing the sweet melody of love. Both Blake and Gibran rose in rebellion against the rigid laws of church and society. They rejected reason and gave high praise to imagination. They read and interpreted Bible in a way that was not acceptable to a common Christian. Kahlil Gibran like his predecessor, Blake, felt that the foundations of the old order were crumbling down and it needed to be replaced by a new order. The old order had grown stale and the people in power were taking recourse to outdated customs, rituals and traditions in order to suck the blood of common people. Blake’s and Gibran’s interpretation of the holy book, their rebellion against church and its corruption and hypocrisy, their concern for the underdogs and the repressed, their sociopolitical as well as spiritual visions were similar in so many ways. Gibran
after reading Blake at a very young age was deeply influenced by his views, ideas and ideals. Gibran saw in Blake a kindred spirit whose opinions and thoughts on socio-political matters were similar to his own views and beliefs in more than one way. He identified himself with the great master as he read and analyzed his poetry and paintings. Alexandre Najjar writing about Blake’s impact on Gibran says:

Although too young to be able to interpret Blake’s thoughts in their entirety, he assimilated some of his critiques of society and the state, including the rebellion against the prince and the priest, the creative virtue of desire, and the supremacy of imagination linked to an internal God. He also understood, at least in part, the notion of the union of being and the power of Christ, whom he considered a rebel.¹

William Blake was a social rebel with very radical beliefs. He rebelled against prevailing Victorian morals as they put an unnecessary constraint on God-given natural impulses and desires. He believed in following the natural instincts rather than adhering to the artificial standards set by society. He wanted to see society free from corruption and hypocrisy. Hypocrisy, he thought, was the greatest sin and he detested it the more. His vision which he expresses in his writings though seemingly religious is subversive and rebellious. He used the language of religious scriptures in order to censure the elements responsible for the rot which is eating the vitals of the society. He abhorred moral laws because he believed that repression kills the essential self of Man and all the unrealized potential of people goes waste if not realized fully. Blake rejected all laws in the name of liberty. He believed in freedom because it provides space to think and act. A slave has no personal opinion and he has no choice to think

or act by himself. Blake taught men to perceive world quite differently as he challenged the fundamental premises on which the foundations of the world stood. In the words of John Beer, “Blake was one of those men who, by standing at an angle to his age, causes us to look at it, as a whole, with new eyes. Its artistic, social and religious presuppositions are both challenged and thrown into relief.”

Blake hated oppressors and tyrants but at the same time hated passive people who do not revolt or rebel against the cruel forces. In his view people are also responsible for their own downfall because no authority could dare to suppress them if they raise their voice and protest against the wrongs done to them. Blake detested slavery and believed in sexual equality. He held that men and women are equal and hence should be treated the same. Blake fiercely opposed the marriage laws of his day. He disapproved of conventional Christian belief of chastity as a virtue. He was a one man revolution against all the powers that stood for conservatism, orthodoxy, religious dogma and convention. According to J. Bronowski, “He was trying to make men give up systems, rationalist and religious alike.”

Kahlil Gibran’s criticism of society and the state, his rebellion and opposition against the authority of both the king and the priest are in line with Blake’s thought. In a fashion similar to Blake, Gibran revolted against society and its hypocritical standards. He stood against tyrannical powers but at the same time showed his indignation towards the individuals who placed themselves as obedient tools in the hands of tyrants. He hated passive people who do not dare to rise in rebellion against corrupt and cruel forces. Gibran like Blake was pained to see that the influential and dominant people thrived by exploiting the weak members of the society. He was

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deeply hurt when he saw common masses wallowing in the mire of ignorance. He was intensely aggrieved when he saw the poor suffering extreme pangs of hunger and dying of fatal diseases unattended. Gibran’s great aim was to restructure the society for the betterment of general humanity. His voice of reform was loud and harsh at times, because he knew that the ears of the tyrants had grown deaf. The tyrants had grown careless and insensitive to the humiliation and exploitation they were inflicting on God’s creation. All the same, his call for reform had a world wide appeal. Paul Nassar draws a parallel between Blake and Gibran thus, “Gibran was of the mold of William Blake: both angry reformer of old cultural contexts and the Prophet of an expanding consciousness beyond any need of a given cultural context.”

Gibran as a social rebel rejects the complacent, submissive ways of the majority in society. Throughout his writings one can find negative portrayals of clergymen and the encouragement of women’s liberation. He believed that priests have made religion a business enterprise. They use it to amass wealth and enlarge their estate. Gibran’s rebellious attitude towards societal rules and regulations relate him to Blake. Gibran exposes man’s perversion of religious and natural rights. He believes that in the name of religion people are exercising hypocrisies that work in society under the pretext of tradition and justice. Gibran like Blake abhorred slavery and gave a call for self-liberation. He believed like Blake that men and women have equal status and should be treated at par with each other. He was deeply concerned about the condition of women and protested against the injustices meted out to them and the injuries inflicted upon them. Najjar writes, “Having a deep sense for understanding human concerns, he denounced injustice and oppression and relentlessly defended the rights

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of women in the east.” He further states, “He was primarily a reformer preoccupied with the human condition, which he wanted to liberate from all forms of slavery, and he relentlessly advocated his ideal of freedom.” Gibran like Blake was aware that it is freedom alone which guaranties a happier and prosperous society. Freedom gives men confidence to perform and make use of their best capacities and talents.

The religious beliefs of both Blake and Gibran were at odds with the common people as well as with the religious authorities. Blake believed that orthodox religion was a mere hypocrisy and was a source of all cruelty. He was of the view that institutionalized religions preached virtues but seldom practiced what was sermonized. He protested against the age old decayed norms of society. Blake in “The Everlasting Gospel” does not present Jesus as a religious preacher or a traditional prophetic figure who delivered lectures on religion but as a supremely creative being, above dogma, logic and even morality. Blake in this poem presents Jesus as a social rebel and a revolutionary and symbolically urges people to raise their voice against social evils and ills. Blake says that Jesus was not gentle or meek the way priests make us believe. He was a man of authority, resolution, courage and passion. He was a man of action. He could never bow his head to oppressors. He never gave up. He stood firmly against all sorts of oppression and detested meanness. Jesus spent all his life opposing the false ideals of bogus rulers. He hit hard at tyrants and dictators. He was very humble to men but very severe on dishonest rulers.

Was Jesus gentle, or did He

Give any marks of gentility?

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5 Kahlil Gibran: Author of the Prophet, p. 177.
6 Ibid., p. 111.
When twelve years old He ran away,
And left His parents in dismay.⁷

He further writes:

God wants not man to humble himself:
That is the trick of the Ancient Elf.
This is the race that Jesus Ran;
Humble to God, haughty to man,
Cursing the Rulers before the people
Even to the Temple’s highest steeple; ⁸

Kahlil Gibran quite like Blake was a staunch critic of dogmatic religion and orthodox morality. Going against the societal norms he goaded people to rebel against the corrupt priests and cruel religious authorities. He believed that religion in the hands of priests has become an institution of corruption as it bases itself on manmade laws. Clergymen deliberately misinterpret religious scriptures and use them for their personal good. In the opinion of Joseph P. Ghossassin: “… Gibran is harsh on established religion because he sees a similarity between society as an institution built on fabricated laws and the church, another social institution resting on man-made laws promulgated by a self-appointed hierarchy of clergymen.”⁹ Echoing Blake, Gibran in one of his prose pieces called “The Crucified” lambasts all those people who in the name of Christianity exercise hypocrisy, deceit and falsehood. They go to church but at the same time live the life of ignorance and extreme darkness. People have made their religion a mere ritual rather than a practice partaking life. They don’t practice the essentials of religion in their day to day lives. According to Gibran

⁸ Ibid., p. 752.
modern man is shorn of the humanity whose gospel Jesus had taught and spread among people. The priests are making mansions in the form of churches rather than helping the poor and the needy. Gibran’s view of Jesus is quite similar to that of Blake. He believes that Jesus’ kingdom is of heart and soul. Jesus came to change people’s way of living. He came to transform individual’s psyche with the intention that man learns the lessons of true humanity. A passage in “The Crucified” from *Secrets of Heart* reads as:

He [Jesus] came to demolish the majestic palaces, constructed upon the graves of the weak, and crush the idols, erected upon the bodies of the poor. Jesus was not sent here to teach the people to build magnificent churches and temples amid the cold wretched huts and dismal hovels. … He came to make the humans heart a temple, and the soul an alter, and the mind a priest.¹⁰

Blake’s quite vehemently resented orthodox Christianity because he felt that it encouraged the restraint of natural desires and discouraged pleasure. He was a severe critic of religious authorities who saw religion as moral precepts rather than forgiving of sins. He believed that the quality to forgive is one of the greatest virtues and it is greatly respected and loved by gods. For him real morality comes from within. It is an unnatural practice if forced on people. Gibran following Blake opposed church for amassing wealth, exploiting common people and putting restraint on the normal desires of men. According to Najjar, “Gibran was ulcerated by the coercive authoritarianism of some ecclesiastics and their wealth at a time of shortage. He was inspired by Blake, who believed that priests ‘tie up joy and desire in a bramble’.”¹¹

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¹¹ *Kahlil Gibran: Author of the Prophet*, p. 149.
Blake and Gibran were acutely conscious of political developments which were taking place in their times. They both had a natural affinity with revolutionary forces. They were born revolutionaries. Rebellion was in their blood. Blake was a political radical influenced by his contemporaries like Thomas Paine, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. He supported the American rebels in their struggle to liberate themselves from the British control. He supported French Middle class in their fight to unshackle themselves from the repressive clutches of aristocracy. Blake also supported the resistance of working class against economic and social inequalities in England in the wake of Industrial Revolution. He was a staunch critic of capitalists and a great friend of working class. He disliked industrialists for they violated the rights of laborers. He was an ardent supporter of French Revolution and the ideals it espoused. In fact some of Blake’s best works were inspired by political upheavals like The French Revolution. William Blake wrote a poem by the name of French Revolution in 1791. He wanted to compose it in seven books but only one book could reach the public. In this poem, Blake discusses the evils inherent in the French monarchy and wishes that the Bastille be destroyed for the cause of freedom. Blake in this poem describes the events surrounding the French Revolution. Blake emphasizes the ills of the feudal system and the corruption and decay of the totalitarian regime and church. Blake was never a part of any radical political party in England at the time of the French Revolution, but his works contain radical revolutionary thoughts. This poem is a witness of his participation in the debate over the worth of the French Revolution. Blake as we know was an early supporter of the American Revolution and he had a firm belief that it would bring about liberty to the entire humanity. According to Blake the French were trapped in a tricky feudal system that was represented by the Bastille, a prison in which the enemies of state were confined. In
the opinion of Blake it was American Revolution which motivated the French revolution. In this poem the ideas expressed are in direct contrast to those men who wrote and preached against the French Revolution. Blake in this poem combines myth with history and he is able to create an apocalyptic vision which sounds the trumpet of revolution.

The noise of trampling, the wind of trumpets, smote the palace walls with a blast. Pale and cold sat the king in midst of his peers, and his noble heart sank, and his pulses suspended their motion;¹²

Following Blake, Gibran strove consistently in his writings to wake up the people of Orient. He urged his countrymen to free themselves from the Ottoman tyranny and from other oppressive forces. Gibran was quite actively engaged in the political developments which were taking place in Syria. In the words of Irfan Shahid, Blake and Gibran had a highly developed political consciousness and their contribution to political revolutions of their times was not confined only to their literary works and paintings but also in their being active political activists. Shahid writes:

Both [Blake and Gibran] were rebels. Blake like all English Romantic poets and men of letters was a supporter of the ideals of French Revolution. … So was Gibran a rebel against the social and ecclesiastical feudalism that was rampant in the Lebanon of his time. He wrote trenchantly against it and also against the hold of Ottoman Sultans over not only Lebanon, but also the

¹² *Blake Complete Writings*, p. 147.
Arabs. The rebelliousness of both did not remain academic and both were political activists.\footnote{Dr. Irfan Shahid, “Kahlil Gibran Between Two Millennia.” The Inaugural Farhat J. Ziadeh Distinguished Lecture (2002) (University of Washington, Seattle=\texttt{http://www.alhewar.com}, p. 9.}

Gibran wrote for his society in the belief that people will shed their passivity and actively participate in revolutionizing the social setup for their own good and well being. According to Joseph P. Ghogassin, “In general, one of the direct implications Gibran was trying to achieve with his social writings was to awake his countrymen from slumber to rebellion. I am not too wrong in suggesting that he was looking for a blood-shedding revolution.”\footnote{Sherfan Andrew Dib, ed. A Third Treasury of Kahlil Gibran (New Jersey: The Citadel Press, 1975)255.}

Blake was one of the earliest champions of feminism and Gibran also stood for the rights of women and believed in equality between the sexes. In Blake’s as well as Gibran’s age women were treated as slaves and had no identity of their own. They were forced to obey the male dictates. Blake and Gibran rose in rebellion against their societies as both of them opposed forced marriage which subjects women to extreme torture and humiliation. They despised the patriarchal structure which had reduced a woman to nonentity. William Blake in his “Visions of Daughters of Albion” and Gibran in \textit{Broken Wings} shocked their readers by the bold stand which they took in relation to the place and status of women in the society. In “Visions of Daughters of Albion”, Blake registers his protest against the false morality of his society. Though this poem narrates a story having mythical figures as it characters, yet it reads like any other tale related to our own day to day world. Blake’s mythical figures represent common men and women. Oothoon, a very sensitive and emotional female character, is in love with Theotormon. Theotormon stands for the chaste man who is filled with
a false sense of morality and virtue. Oothoon craves for Theotormon’s love and Theotormon loves her too. Unfortunately she is violently raped by Bromion, a violent and ferocious rapist. Bromion symbolizes any man who takes pride in defiling the honour of female sex. After Oothoon is raped, both Bromion and Theotormon consider her impure. They run away from her because they are both chained by the expectations of society and its worn out laws. It seems that Theotormon holds Oothoon responsible for the sexual act instead of blaming Bromion. He also falsely believes that sex is illicit. Bromion, on the other hand, is enslaved by his own violent act. Blake in this poem comes out as a vehement social rebel. The theme of this poem is suppression of women. It talks about the rape of innocence. The theme is partly a criticism of sexual morality of Blake’s times. It also offers Blake’s view of the evils of organized religion as well as comments on slavery.

At entrance Theotormon sits, wearing the threshold hard
With secret tears; beneath him sound like waves on a deserted shore
The voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children bought with money,
That shiver in religious caves beneath the burning fires
Of lust, that belch incessant from the summits of the earth.\(^\text{15}\)

It is about sexual jealousy and double standards. Blake voices his feminist concerns and laments that women are used as bonded slaves by men. She has no command over her own sexuality. She has no right over her own body. Blake abhors the tradition of marriage, because it is through this institution that church forces a woman to marry against her wishes. How can any sane woman be expected to live in the same house,

\(^{15}\) *Blake Complete Writings*, p. 190.
under the same roof with somebody she dislikes. Her whole life becomes hell. She carries the pain all her life and dies dissatisfied.

Till she who burns with youth, and knows no fixed lot, is bound
In spells of law to one she loathes? And must she drag the chain
Of life in weary lust? Must chilling, murderous thoughts obscure
The clear heaven of her eternal spring;…

The poet shows a severe disdain for the hypocritical modesty and selfishness of males in dealing with female folk. At the same time Blake, as always, denounces the conservative morality which suppresses Man’s normal instincts of sex. He believes that love should be given its due freedom, so that it grows and flourishes. Blake exposes abuses perpetuated by a patriarchal moral code and ends with a high promise that life is holy. In a patriarchal setup a woman is thought of as an outcast and ‘the other’. A woman who is defiled and raped by a man is left by her own near ones in a lurch. A woman is punished for a sin she never committed and a man is exonerated of all his transgressions. A woman is left craving for the attention of her beloved, who corrupted by unnatural morality declines to accept her.

Silent I hover all the night, and all day could be silent
If Theotormon once would turn his loved eyes upon me.
How can I be defiled when I reflect thy image pure?

The person she trusts the most, refuses to accept her because she is no longer thought as pure.

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16Ibid., p. 193.
17Ibid., p. 191.
Kahlil Gibran through his novella, *The Broken Wings*, registers a strong protest against age old stale and rotten societal norms. This novella is a tale of love doomed by restrictions and restraints in a cruel society where love is laid waste by greed, corruption, false conventions and patriarchy. It expresses the plight of Oriental woman and criticizes the greed and corruption inherent in the clergy. It talks about wealth as an impediment to true happiness. Selma, the heroine of the novella, has to sacrifice her true love for rotten social customs as she is under tremendous social pressure. The story is autobiographical in nature. Here the narrator, who is actually Gibran himself, talks about his first love, Selma. The narrator visits the house of Selma and seeing in her a heavenly beauty falls in love with her. Selma seeing in him a noble soul starts worshipping him. The narrator soon comes to know that Selma being the daughter of a wealthy but an innocent man will certainly be exploited by the rich clergy. Selma as well as her father knows that Bishop will try to contrive the marriage of his greedy nephew with her, for no other purpose than for wealth and property. Narrator sees a heavenly spirit in Selma but finds her silent when the arrangements of her marrying with the nephew of bishop are being made. Her being silent shows that a woman of the Orient knows about her tragic fate and destiny because of the context she is living in. The fate of Selma is decided by her father, and under the cruel gaze of Bishop, she is married to Bishop’s nephew.

Thus destiny seized Selma and led her like a humiliated slave in the procession of miserable Oriental women, and thus fell the noble spirit into the trap after having flown freely on the white wings of love in a sky full of moonlight scented with the odor of flowers.  

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Her father could not dare to protest because the society was not there to support him. The Oriental woman has no choice. The narrator feels distraught after his beloved has got married to a cruel man. But Selma encourages him to face the facts bravely. Soon after the marriage her father dies and the two lovers resume meeting each other. When Bishop comes to know about Selma’s going out of the house once in a month, he gets suspicious. She is confined to her room. The narrator wants his beloved to rebel but she refuses because she is afraid that the cruel forces within the society will not let them live in peace. Selma dies after giving birth to a dead child.

Gibran in this novella scathingly criticizes Christian Bishop, Moslem Imam and Brahmin Priest for sucking the blood of common people. They amass wealth and riches and also see to it that all their kith and kin are prosperous and wealthy. They resort to all the unfair means in order to achieve their goals and live by cheating and robbing.

The heads of religion in the East are not satisfied with their munificence, but they must strive to make all members of their families superior and oppressors. The glory of prince goes to his eldest son by inheritance, but the exaltation of a religious head is contagious among his brothers and nephews. Thus the Christian bishop and the Moslem Imam and the Brahman priest become like sea reptiles who clutch their prey with many tentacles and suck their blood with numerous mouths.19

People have no right to raise their voice against the cruel treatment meted out to them. Gibran says that the eastern woman goes as a slave to her husband’s house. She has to do all the household chores and she can never claim to own anything in her new

19 Ibid., p. 380.
home. Quite often she has to live in awe and fear of her in laws; her husband has absolute power over her and she has no right on her own person. About Selma, Gibran writes:

Unaware, she symbolized the Oriental woman who never leaves her parents’ home until she puts upon her neck the heavy yoke of her husband, who never leaves her loving mother’s arms until she must live as a slave, enduring the harshness of her husband’s mother.20

Gibran says that women in the modern materialist world (which is predominantly patriarchal) are deemed as nothing but a commodity to be bought and sold. Within the greedy community of money lovers, a woman is valued till she is capable of providing necessary service to her husband and his people. Once her beauty fades and her strength dwindles she is left to die without being attended.

The woman is looked upon as a commodity, purchased and delivered from one house to another. In time her beauty fades and she becomes like an old piece of furniture left in a dark corner.21

Gibran in his novella, with all his emphasis, favours love outside marriage, because when marriage is not based on love and mutual respect it is doomed to fail. Marriage as an institution can succeed only when husband and wife love and respect each other. Love cannot be bought or given birth to with a few chants sung at marriage ceremonies. If a man and a woman are married and they don’t share the bond of love with each other, it is better to dissolve the relationship before it becomes a real hell and destroys them. In fact Gibran believed that if two people are in love with each

20 Ibid., p. 385.
21 Ibid., p. 398.
other, marriage ceremony is a mere formality, because in truth they are united before any man made law or institution would grant so. Gibran champions the cause of women and lays stress on the values of human freedom and dignity. Gibran’s social rebellion, his fierce criticism of Orthodox Church, corrupt priests, forced marriage and his advocacy of love outside marriage bears the stamp of Blake’s ideas on the same issues.

William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* though written in prose has a poetic force and bursts with revolutionary energy. This prose poem is revolutionary at different levels and presents Blake as a severe social rebel up in arms against the traditional age old religions and traditions which believe in separation of soul from body and render body as evil. Blake believes that body and soul are one unity and demands of both body and soul need to be satisfied for an overall balanced personality. Blake believes that instincts should be given their necessary freedom because if suppressed they lead to imbalance and destruction. Blake topples orthodox morality upside down. Blake in the part of the poem called “Proverbs of Hell” goes against the popular beliefs of society and comes up with the conception of hell not as a place of punishment and retribution but as a source of genuine energy and vigor. Hell is depicted as opposed to the static and regulated perception of heaven. For him hell is the symbol of passion, energy and revolutionary fervor. In a way Blake celebrates the energies of Devil, who for him symbolizes artistic inspiration and creativity. Blake reveals to his readers the repressive nature of conventional morality and institutionalized religion. He launches a satiric attack on orthodoxy in general and utters a revolutionary prophecy. In “A Song of Liberty” which ends this prose poem, Blake revels in revolution and prophesies a new era of political freedom. It is an exhortation to the different peoples’ of the world to break the shackles of religious
and political oppression. Throughout this work, Blake presents a series of contraries – Heaven and Hell, Good and Evil, Reason and Energy etc. – but then topsy-turvy’s them, reversing their conventional values. He is seen celebrating energy, Evil, Hell and even Satan. Blake believed that contraries are essential for the growth of human nature but conservative morality and orthodox religion has polarized Man’s dual qualities, using one side of their own nature to repress the other. Conservative theology has given soul greater importance over body. In fact it denounces body as the originator of sins. Blake also attacks law enforcing agencies for restraining and infringing upon the rights and freedom of people. Blake castigates the religious authorities, because by forcing people to suppress their normal sexual instincts, they give birth to brothels. Excessive repression is the cause of prostitution. Blake Says, “Prisons are built with stones of law, Brothels with bricks of Religion.”22 He fiercely attacks the priests for laying a curse on the sweetest of joys. The sweetest joys of humankind lie in the fulfillment of their instinctual desires.

As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys.23

Blake deflates the notion that organized religion is in any way natural. He deems it as a part of custom and a mere superstition. Priests have made it seem natural and are taking advantage of it. It helps them to exploit people because people easily yield to the discourse called religion. Blake believes that virtue lies in our impulses. Rules, regulations and commandments deaden our natural senses. He believes that Jesus acted through impulse and not through reason.

22 *Blake Complete Writings*, p. 151.
23 Ibid., p. 152.
I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking these Ten Commandments. Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules.\textsuperscript{24}

The concluding ‘chorus’ ushers in the dawn of freedom where there is no curse on joy and love. Life is holy and needs to be lived with all the fervor and energy.

Let the priests of the Raven of dawn, no longer in deadly black, with hoarse note curse the sons of Joy. Nor his accepted brethren – when, tyrant, he calls free – lay the bound or build the roof. Nor pale religious letchery call that virginity that wishes but acts not! For every thing that lives is holy.\textsuperscript{25}

One can trace the themes related to rebellion which are found in \textit{The Marriage of heaven and Hell} in the writings of Kahlil Gibran. “John the Madman” from \textit{Secrets of Heart}, is a story where Gibran exposes corrupt church. He exposes the greedy and cruel priests who for the sake of material gains oppress the poor. They don’t give them freedom to read the scriptures and interpret it on their own. John is not mad as the title suggests. The church calls him mad because he raised his voice against the corrupt monks and dared to read the scriptures in their true light. His mother has to pay her precious possessions in order to free her son from the clutches of cruel clergy. Gibran scathingly criticizes the priests for they believe in amassing wealth at the expense of the poor. They are tyrants who force the poor into submission. Whatever they do they do it for their own personal interests. They live a life of revelry at the expense of the poor. They are false in their words and deeds.

Oh Jesus, they have built these churches for the sake of their own glory, and embellished them with silk and melted gold. … They left the bodies of Thy

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 158.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 160.
chosen poor wrapped in tattered raiment in the cold night. … They filled the sky with smoke of burning candles and incense and left the bodies of Thy faithful worshippers empty of bread. … They raised their voice with hymns of praise, but deafened themselves to the cry and moan of the widows and orphans.\textsuperscript{26}

Gibran’s “Cry of the Graves” from Spirits Rebellious, is a story where the narrator lambasts the man made laws enforced by the rich on the poor.

What is law? Who saw it coming with the sun from the depths of heaven?\textsuperscript{27}

Punishing the criminal they meet evil with evil. These laws have no stamp of God. The ignorant law punishes the woman when she searches for her true love outside marriage and the law never touches the sinful father. The ignorant law punishes the laborer when he tries to snatch his share from the priests after their refusal to grant him any food. The ignorant law punishes the man who tries to save the honor of a woman.

In America, a Prophecy Blake says that the spirit of rebellion once aroused cannot be suppressed by the tyrant powers. Blake celebrates the spirit of rebellion and believes that it is only after revolt that people attain freedom, dignity and peace. Blake rages against orthodox religion, man made laws and exults in following the instincts rather than suppressing them. Blake believes that the oppressed will finally vanquish the oppressor, provided they show patience and resolution. They need to see beyond the prison walls. The world belongs to them because they are the producers. They

\textsuperscript{26} The Greatest Works of Kahlil Gibran, p. 204.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p. 277.
produce and create with their sweat and blood. Capitalists, oppressors and tyrants are parasites.

Let the Slave grinding at the mill run out into the field,
Let him look up into the heavens and laugh in the bright air;
Let the inchained soul, shut up in darkness and in sighing,
Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years,
Rise and look out; his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are open;
And let his wife and children return from the oppressor’s scourge.28

Blake is of the view that revolt is a natural struggle for freedom against tyranny and for the regeneration of the social order. The liberation of Orc (god of revolution) from the oppressive religion of Urizen (god of reason) is an allegory of America’s struggle against England in particular and of all social revolutions in general. The predominant theme of this poem is liberty and the overthrowing of long established repressive systems, both religious and political. The man made laws and corrupt theology are the greatest hurdles in the way of liberty. To follow religion blindly is to fall in the trap wherefrom it is very difficult to escape. The only way out is to rebel and revolt against the oppressive forces which corrupt the whole social order in the name of religion.

That stony law I stamp to dust, and scatter religion abroad
To the four winds as a torn book and none shall gather the leaves;29

In the same way as Blake, in his prose poem “My Countrymen” from Secrets of the Heart, Gibran expresses his dismay over the sloth his countrymen are in. He wants his

28 Blake Complete Writings , p. 198.
29 Ibid., p. 198.
countrymen to strive for the glory and dignity which the divinity has bestowed on his creation. He is pained to see that his countrymen believe in superstitions and live in the fears of the powerful and the cruel. His countrymen are used by clerics for their selfish ends. They believe in magic and follow magicians. They live in the constant dread and cannot stand against despots. They live in the mire of ignorance and hence are unaware about the filthiness of the environs they are living in. He derides their hypocrisy and falsehood. This prose poem shows Gibran’s love hate relationship with the country of his descent. He laments that his people have no courage to face their enemy. They are living a life of weakness and ignorance. They have grown in years but are immature in their minds. For Gibran his countrymen are as good as dead, for, they have lost the concept of living a dignified and meaningful life.

Your souls are freezing in the
Clutches, of the priests and
Sorcerers, and your bodies
Tremble between the paws of the
Despots and the shedders of
Blood, and your country quakes
Under the marching feet of the
Conquering enemy; what may you
Expect even though you stand
Proudly before the face of the
Sun? … 30

30 The Greatest Works of Kahlil Gibran, p.188
One of the very important revolutionary poems of Blake is “Tiriel”. The message of this poem is that slavery can not be done away with unless there is rebellion. Rebellion is a must in every age to keep tyrants from incessantly harming and exploiting the weak and meek. In every era people challenge the old stale customs and rituals. History has witnessed so many revolutions in which the weak have overthrown the strong. Though tyrants use all the means possible to crush the spirit of rebellion, they can not escape their fate. Tyrant’s fall is a part of natural cycle because their rise being at the expense of the poor masses, their fall becomes inevitable. Blake abhors man made laws because they can not account for the difference and diversity within the human community. Laws are unjust as they are applied to all blindly without taking into account the heterogeneous nature of society. Society is a blend of different temperaments, dispositions and personalities. Within a single world there are as many worlds as there are individuals because every individual being has a personality quite distinct and different from every other.

Tiriel is a tyrant who rules by oppression and repression. He overthrows his own parents, Har and Heva. He forces his brother Ijim into exile in the wastelands, and chains Zazel, his other brother, in a cave in the mountain. Not happy with only this, he makes his own children slaves. But Heuxos, Tirel’s eldest son helped by his siblings, rebels and overthrows Tiriel. Though his children offer him refuge Tiriel refuses and goes into exile in the wilderness with his wife, Myratana. The poem begins in the ‘medias res’ showing the now blind Tiriel returning to the kingdom, he previously ruled. His wife is dying, and he wants his children to see her death. He accuses them of being responsible for her destitute state and curses them for betraying him five years before. Soon thereafter, Myratana dies, and his children once again ask Tiriel to remain in the palace but he refuses and returns to the wilderness. He goes on cursing
them and telling them he will have his revenge. After some time wandering, Tiriel reaches the Vales of Har, where he finds his own parents, Har and Heva. However, they have both grown old and scrawny and have regressed to a childlike state to such an extent that they believe their protector, Mnetha, is their mother. Despite being recognized by Har, Tiriel lies and keeps his identity a secret. He tells them that he was thrown into exile by the gods and his race was destroyed by them. Har and Heva are animated by Tieral’s visit. They ask Tiriel to help them catch birds and listen to Har's singing. Tiriel refuses to stay however and begin again his wanderings. He then meets his brother Ijim in the forest. At first Ijim threatens to kill him, but upon seeing Tiriel's weakened state, he is filled with sympathy for him. Ijim carries him back to the palace. He is dismayed to see that Tiriel's children refuse to accept him even when he is a mere skeleton. Ijim's leaves and after his departure, Tiriel descending ever more hurriedly into lunacy, curses his children yet more fervently. With that cursing, four of his five daughters and one hundred of his one hundred and thirty sons are destroyed, including his son Heuxos. Tiriel then asks his youngest daughter, Hela, to lead him back to the Vales of Har. She agrees, but condemns and accuses Tiriel for his actions. Tirel is filled with wrath and he turns her hair into snakes. On the way through the mountains Tiriel and Hela pass the cave in which lives Zazel. Zazel with his sons throws filth and stones at Tiriel and Hela. They poke fun at them as they pass. At last Tiriel and Hela reach the Vales of Har. In his last speech, Tiriel denounces his parents, his children and all society. He expands on how his father's laws and his own wisdom all end in a curse. He then breathes his last at his parents' feet.

Trial as a character in the poem is seen as one who puts a constraint on the desires of men. He is a tyrant and a hypocrite. He puts curse on his own children and finally
reaches his own fall. Tiriel forms laws of morality which are impossible to keep and he is filled with disdain for those who transgress them. His children have no choice but to rebel an overthrow him. He is overthrown by his own children because they can no longer stand his cruelty and tyranny. They taunt him when he curses them because they know that it in only after rebellion that the yoke of slavery will be removed from their necks.

Old man! unknowing to be call’d the father of Tiriel’s race!

For everyone of those wrinkles, each of those grey hairs

Are cruel as death and as obdurate as the devouring pit!

Why should thy sons care for thy curses, thou accursed man?

Were we not slaves till we rebel’d? Who cares for Tiriel’s curse?

His blessing was a cruel curse. His curse may be a blessing.\textsuperscript{31}

Quite in accord with the arguments in “Tirial”, Kahlil Gibran, in the first part of ‘Kahlil the Heretic” from \textit{Spirits Rebellious}, writes about a rich man and shows how the rich man exploits the poor and manipulates their minds and forces them into slavery. The story shows cruelty of the rich on the poor. It talks about how much the poor are afraid of raising their voice in the face of tyranny. In the third part of the story Gibran criticizes the clergy in the form of a young man. This young man was expelled from the convent because he dared to rebel against the false aims and methods of clergy. He told the clerics that they are robbing and looting the common people of their money and property. He detested the clergy because they violated the rights of poor orphans. He told them that they sell their prayers in order to add to their riches.

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Blake Complete Writings}, p. 99.
My stomach could not hold bread baked with the tears of orphans. My lips could not utter prayers sold for gold and food by the heads to the simple and faithful people. I was expelled from the convent like a filthy leper because I was repeating to the monks the rules that qualified them to their present position.32

Later this man goads his people to rebel against cruel forces and they succeed in overthrowing the tyrant. One of the passages of this story which directly relates with Blake’s Tiriel is:

A father who makes his son a slave is the father who gives his child a stone when he asks for bread. Have you not seen the birds of the sky training their young ones to fly? Why then, do you teach your children to drag the shackles of slavery?33

In Blake’s poem “Tiriel”, it was the father who had made his sons his slaves. He had put all kinds of constraints on their activities. He had confined them in the prison of laws which he had framed in order to perpetuate his rule and authority.

It is not only in his longer and complex works that Blake comes out as a staunch rebel but in his simple and lucid songs he shows the same spirit. “The Chimney Sweeper” of Songs of Innocence shows Blake’s indignation towards child labor. For Blake children are innocent and happy creatures by their very nature and should be given all the freedom in the world to play and enjoy. Children are forced by the cruel society to work. This poem is a strong criticism on the society and the people responsible for making the lives of children miserable, sad and dull. In fact parents

33 Ibid., pp. 327-328.
themselves sell their children because being poor they cannot feed and bring them up. It is a pity to see juvenile children working when they should have been playing and enjoying. The very first stanza reads as:

When my mother died I was very young,  
And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
Could scarcely cry ‘weep!’ ‘weep!’ ‘weep!’  
So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.\(^{34}\)

*Songs of experience* has many poems which come up with a strong social protest. In ‘Holy Thursday’ Blake castigates and lambasts the clergy and the society for reducing children to misery. The sun never shines and the rain never falls in their life because they are exploited by the Orthodox Church. These poor children live a miserable life. They are underfed. Their whole childhood is spent in weeping and their lives are ruined and spoiled.

The first three stanzas of “Holy Thursday” are:

Is this a holy thing to see  
In a rich and fruitful land,  
Babes reduced to misery,  
Fed with cold and usurous hand?

Is that trembling cry a song?  
Can it be a song of joy?  
And so many children poor?

\(^{34}\textit{Blake’s Poetry and Designs},\textit{ Edit. Mary lynn Johnson and john E, Grant (New York: Norton, 1979) 25.}\)
It is a land of poverty!

And their son does never shine,
And their fields are bleak and bare,
And their ways are filled with thorns:
It is eternal winter there.\(^\text{35}\)

In “The Chimney Sweeper” one can see Blake castigating the church and the state for making people and their children wretched. Even the parents are not spared for exploiting their own children in making them work instead of giving them required freedom to grow. Blake, a social rebel, believes that the priests as well as the state make use of religion in order to gain material prosperity. These cruel forces cannot see the happiness of children and hence fill their lives with sadness, affliction and woe. Blake goes deep into the psyche of children. Children, even if they are seemingly happy while performing their chores, they are not so in reality. Deep in their hearts they feel the pain and suffering and pray for the end of their confinement. They long and crave for their freedom. The last two stanzas of the poem are:

'B because I was happy upon the heath,
And smiled among the winter's snow,
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

'And because I am happy and dance and sing,
They think they have done me no injury,

\(^{35}\) Ibid, p.42.
And are gone to praise God and His priest and king,

Who makes up a heaven of our misery.\textsuperscript{36}

In “London” Blake comes out as a true social rebel. The poet while observing people in the streets of London sees despair in their faces and feels apprehension and repression in their voices. Their minds and hearts are full of dread and terror. The seed of fear has been sown deep in their minds and they are led as slaves by the powerful. The mournful cry of the chimney-sweeper stands as a sentence on the Church and its high handedness. The blood of a soldier blemishes the walls of the ruler’s dwelling. The cursing of prostitutes corrupts the newborn infant and slanders the institution of marriage. In this poem Blake once again castigates the church and the state for oppressing people in the name of religion and patriotism. State leads to wars and bloodshed. Church is responsible for child labour. These agencies of repression manipulate the minds of people into meek submission. Blake criticizes the institution of marriage because the church forces the marriage to consummate even where there is no natural love. This poem needs to be reproduced in full:

\begin{quote}
I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 46.
The mind forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning Church appalls;
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new born Infant's tear,
And blights with plague the marriage hearse. 37

Kahlil Gibran quite in accord with Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, in one of his prose pieces called “Slavery” from *Between Night and Morn*, laments the fate of Man who has lived in a perpetual state of slavery since he came into this world. He is a slave of life itself and life constantly drags him into submission of different sorts. Gibran like Blake voices the idea that at every level of the hierarchy in the society we live as slaves. They structure of the society is such that nobody has freedom. This is a curse of civilization that everybody is a slave of some other person.

And I saw the apprentice slaving for the artisan, and the artisan slaving for the employer, and the employer slaving for the soldier, and the soldier slaving for the governor, and the governor slaving for the king and the king slaving for the priest … 38

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37 Ibid., p.53.
38 *The Greatest Works of Kahlil Gibran*, p. 120.
In “Decayed Teeth” from *Thoughts and Meditations*, Gibran vehemently criticizes the corrupt politicians and leaders. He says that there are lots of decayed teeth in the form of corrupt people and practices in the mouth of his homeland. But the so-called social reformers and leaders never try to extract these decayed teeth. They never try to apprehend the real criminals as they roam free without the fear of chastisement. Instead, they mask their crimes and present them as honest, sincere and true.

In the mouth of society are many diseased teeth, decayed to the bones of the jaws. But society makes no effort to have them extracted and be rid of the affliction. It contents itself with gold fillings. Many are the dentists who treat the decayed teeth of society with glittering gold.39

In “Narcotics and Dissecting Knives” from *Thoughts and Meditations*, Gibran scathingly criticizes the Orient for its lazy and passive people. Orient is full of superstitions. Gibran resents the Oriental people because in his opinion they hate truth and love falsehood and hypocrisy. They praise the oppressor and ignore the oppressed. If some social rebel or a social reformer raises his voice, he is silenced either by force or by using money.

About his own rebellious nature and about what the society thinks of him, Gibran writes:

He [Gibran] is excessive and fanatic to the point of madness. Though he is an idealist, his literary aim is to poison the mind of youths. … If men and women were to follow Gibran’s counsels on marriage, family ties would break,

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39 Ibid., p. 31.
society would perish, and the world would become an inferno peopled by
demons and devils.\textsuperscript{40}

He further writes:

\begin{quote}
Such is what people say of me and they are right, for I am indeed a fanatic and
I am inclined toward destruction as well as construction. There is hatred in my
heart for that which my detractors sanctify, and love for that which they reject.
And if I could uproot certain customs, beliefs and traditions of the people, I
would do so without hesitation.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

William Blake’s and Kahlil Gibran’s harsh criticism of the ways men conduct
themselves explains why all of the major figures in their poems are rebels and
outlaws. Their heroes try to preserve their identity in a world governed by stereotyped
man-made laws which are cruel and rigid to the core.

What Mona Wilson writes about Blake holds true about Gibran as well:

\begin{quote}
He dreamt, it would seem of a time when the return of the Golden Age was
very near, when human nature had so changed that selfhood, jealousy, and lust
were banished from the earth.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

And Northrop Frye writes, “Society to Blake is an extremely unwilling recipient of
culture: every genius must fight society no matter what his age.” The word ‘genius’ is
applicable to both Blake as well as Gibran, for both of them apart from being creative
writers par excellence, stood for the forces of rebellion and change in their respective
ages.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{40}Ibid., p. 94.
\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., p.95.
\textsuperscript{42}Mona Wilson, \textit{The Life of William Blake} (London: Oxford University Press, 1971)72.
\end{flushright}