

IMAGERY OF CHILDHOOD IN THE POETRY OF FRANCIS THOMPSON

Raman Kumar

Research Scholar, Department of English, Sri Varshney College, Aligarh

Abstract

Francis Thompson was a gifted poet. He was led by circumstances to live life of vagaries in his early age. His power of words was so strong that he got time and revived his poetic energy to fulfill his promise. Thompson had peculiar interest in the innocent activities of the children. He conceived blessings of God on childhood. Thompson's fondness for childhood is self evident as he wishes to be remembered as a child forever. The glory of childhood was packed in similies and metaphors. In his poem "Making of Viola" he conceives of childhood in multiple images and appearances. In his poem "Hound of Heaven" the poet recalls his childhood as the period of charm and happiness amidst his tortured self while roaming wayward. His childhood imagery attracts the attention of all literary scholars.

Keywords: *Innocence, Blessings, Spiritual, Penury, Fraternity, Concern, Beauty, Love etc.*



Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

INTRODUCTION

Francis Thompson was a born poet, but he was pushed into unfortunate conditions of his life so as to forget all about his innate dignity of the beautiful pictures of his mind and imagination. He had to struggle all day to earn a few pennies for his daily meals and a little opium of which he was an addict. He had to live life of vagaries in London streets forgetting all about what he wished to be. But the urge of poetry and appreciation of poetry was so strong that his receptive mind was storing images of the down-to-earth life where a sizable number of children was wasting infantine simplicity and childhood glory in muddy and careless situations. The power of words was so strong in the mind of Thompson though it was imperceptible to his surroundings that he went on scribbling certain meaningful things on the rough papers or clumsy notebooks during his menial labour as a load carrier or a cab fetcher. These notes were later on discovered and found to be unique in the exposition of the thoughts of higher kind in a language that bears the stamp of classical nature. When Thompson was discovered by Mr. Meynell on the basis of his article which kept on lying on his table unheeded for a long time, he got time and revived his poetic energy to fulfill his promise which he considered himself destined to.

CHILDHOOD IMAGERY

Francis Thompson had peculiar interest in the innocent activities of children. He conceived blessings of God on childhood. Therefore, his fondness for children was of most natural kind. He never wanted to grow into what manhood brings to the life of humanity. The instinctive urges of the children displayed to him a wonder-world in which he wanted to remain for ever. He saw in childhood what a poet aspires to achieve – to turn pumpkins into coaches, and mice into horses. The high range of imagination working in children brought the poet in him close to the innocent and infantine activities opening for all the golden gates of God's blessings. Francis Thompson's unaffected child-love forced him to pick up his images of childhood even in the spiritual revelations in his poems.

In his poem, "To My Godchild" he expresses his wish to be placed in "The Nurseries of Heaven". Let us mark the following lines revealing his supernal statement about childhood thus:

Then, as you search with unaccustomed glance
The ranks of Paradise for my countenance,
Turn not your tread along the Uranian sod
Among the bearded counsellors of God;
For if in Eden as on earth are we,
I sure shall keep a younger company:

x x x x x x

Pass the crystalline sea, the Lampads seven:-

Look for me in the nurseries of Heaven. (Thompson CP 74-75)

The lines quoted above have in them the poetry of the highest order. We may trace in them Shakespearean grandeur and Shelleyan heights alongwith the innocence and purity of Wordsworth and Blake. Francis Thompson's fondness for childhood is self evident as he wishes to be remembered as a child forever. If there is degree or category even in the immortal world, the category of children will be the best option for him.

Having crossed the travails of penury and destitution in the youthful years of his life, Francis Thompson got an unusual atmosphere of fraternity in the house of Mr. Meynell. Mrs. Meynell and her two young daughters extended all lovely features of behaviour in welcoming him in the corridors of their house. At such a time, he felt that his childhood of life was revived. His imagination retained its fertility, and, thus, the glory of childhood was packed in

similes and metaphors. In his poem, "Making of Viola" he conceives of childhood in multiple images and appearances. In this poem, he projects God's special concern with the beauty of childhood, The Creator wise instructs His assistant angels, Cherubims and Jesus to take special care in the preparation of the different physical features of Viola, the child with heavenly graces. The Father of Heaven gives direction for the creation of the eyes of Viola thus:

Scoop, young Jesus, for her eyes,
Wood-browed pools of paradise –
Young Jesus, for the eyes,
For the eyes of Viola. (Thompson CP 70)

The angels comprehend the meaning of the Father of Heaven and therefore they pass the order below in the hierarchy of Heaven to prepare "dusky eyes" for Viola. The Father of Heaven further instructs for the creation of the interior cells of the eyes of Viola:

Cast a star therein to dawn
Like a torch in cavern brown,
Sink a burning star to dawn
Whelmed in eyes of Viola. (Thompson CP 71)

The child angels are asked to spread "roseal hoverings" on the cheeks of Viola. Having given direction for the creation of the beautiful appearance of Viola, the Father of Heaven expresses his concern for the tuneful voice of Viola so that her name may match with the sound.

HOUND OF HEAVEN

In his poem, "The Hound of Heaven" the poet recalls his childhood as the period of charm and happiness amidst his tortured self while roaming wayward. His sufferings disheartened him and he began to question about the justification of his acute sufferings. That is why, he was pursued by the Hound of Heaven with the force of Love. Amid the torments and tabernacles of his surroundings, he longs for the love of children for relief. Let us mark the following lines thus:

Come then, ye other children, Nature's - share
With me (said I) your delicate fellowship;

Let me greet you lip to lip,
Let me twine with you caresses,
Wantoning
With our Lady-mother's vagrant tresses,
Banqueting
With her in her wind-walled palace,
Underneath her azured dais,
Quaffing, as your taintless way is,
From a Chalice. (Thompson CP 54)

The poet recalls to his mind the child like activities of the daughters of Mrs. Meynell in the beloved presence of the lady mother (Mrs. Meynell). He gets tremendous pleasure in looking at them and becoming a portion of that loveliness. At a time when he was almost torn from inside, these playful activities of the children in that homely environment were strong relief to his soul, and, thus, it was saved from going astray. In 'Sister Songs' also the activities of these innocent daughters are noticed in beautiful images:

With some sweet tenderness they would
Turn to an amber-clear and glossy gold;
Or a fine sorrow, lovely to behold,
Would sweep them as the sun and wind's joined flood
Sweeps a greening sapphire sea; (Thompson CP 91-92)

The children in the house of Mrs. Meynell arouse the emotions of the poet for arresting their beautiful appearances and innocent acts of gilded gold.

In Thompson's poems, love is evoked as a sort of spiritual desire and he does not hesitate to link it with his love for children. He declares that the innocent and pure love of children rescued him from the pitfalls of life towards which he was advancing for his ruin. Let us mark his poetic expression in this regard thus:

Stretched on the margin of cruel sea
Whence they had rescued me
With faint and painful pulses, was I lying. (Thompson CP 104)

The smile of a child cleaves to him the white radiance of the reality of love. He experiences unique delight of spiritual love as a direct blessing of God. Let us see how he projects the image of the child in the following lines thus:

One forgotten day,
As a sick child waking sees
Wide-eyed daisies
Gazing on it from its hand,
Slipped there for its dear amazes;
So between thy father's knees
I saw thee stand,
And through my hazes
Of pain and fear thine eyes' young wonder shone
Then, as flies scatter from a carrion,
Or rooks in spreading gyres like broken smoke
Wheel, when some sound their quietude has broke
Fled, at thy countenance, all the doubting spawn;

(Thompson CP 105)

INNOCENT KISSES OF CHILDREN

Francis Thompson was peculiarly charmed and excited whenever he was in the company of the children. He experienced divinity in their presence. His poem, "Sister Songs" is full of the images of childhood, its purity, its encouraging tiptoes and its kisses for spiritual realization. He exclaims thus:

A Kiss? for a child's kiss?
Aye, goddess, even for this.
Once, bright Sylviola, in days nor far. (Thompson CP 96)

He has the experience of divine element in the kiss of a child. All the world is dross if it is devoid of childhood. The poet speaks in authentic words thus;

Therefore, I kissed in thee
The heart of childhood, so divine for me;
And her, through what sore ways,

And what unchildish days,
Borne from me now, as then, a trackless fugitive.

(Thompson CP 96)

The poet remembers his ugly days as a fallen state from the glory of his childhood. The image of childhood is beautifully carried through the symbol of spring flower thus:

Then there came past
A child; like thee, a spring flower; but a flower
Fallen from the budded coronal of spring,
And through the city streets blown withering. (Thompson CP 96)

CONCLUSION

To Francis Thompson the essence of life lies in childhood. It is from here that he could have a direct communion with the reality of life hidden behind Beauty and Love. That is why, the images of childhood bring for him an elated mood of poetic creation.

References:

- Meynell, Everard. "Communion and Excommunication." *The Life of Francis Thompson, E text prepared by Emmy and Conlon Peter, The Project Gutenberg eBook, eBook # 45106, 2014, <http://www.pgdp.net>*
- Thompson, Francis. *The Collected Poetry of Francis Thompson, Edinburg University Press, 2013 (All quotes from this book have been referred as Thompson CP with page number).*
- "Making of Viola." *The Collected Poetry of Francis Thompson, Edinburg University Press, 2013.*
- "Sister Songs." *The Collected Poetry of Francis Thompson, Edinburg University Press, 2013.*
- "The Hound of Heaven." *The Collected Poetry of Francis Thompson, Edinburg University Press, 2013.*
- "To My God Child." *The Collected Poetry of Francis Thompson, Edinburg University Press, 2013.*