

# Songs of Innocence and Experience: An Analysis of the Record of Thoughts and Feelings of Students in Unusual Times

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## Abstract

Unusual incidents have ever opened up new broad ways for novel experiences and their expressions. Many of such were the documents of human happiness and many others were of narratives of miseries. Pandemics from the time immemorial have been impediments to the normal life and to its narration. Post-pandemic expressions of art and literature in their major parts were of the narratives of human miseries, worries, and witness of trauma. Perusal of the merit of such artistic or literary creations results in the confirmation of distinguished contributions in both genres. Covid-19, the live pandemic, has also been an inevitable looking glass in perceiving world with its specificity. No single fragment of the society has gone beyond the reach of its malicious hold. Hence students 'perception of human life in these unusual times also can illumine the onlookers' thoughts and visions of the pandemic reality in a comprehensive manner. Though students, not as general proposition, are naïve in their judgment of the reality of world, they express their perceptions innocently as they can. But when they find place for their personal experiences in poems or in any other creative genres they speak of a distinctive version of reality. This paper attempts an analysis of pandemic poems written by the students of UK College of Arts and Science as part of their Creative Writing Class conducted by their instructor Julia Johnson. Each student has literally internalized their instructor's vision and has come out with the best of his/her experience. There were poems longing to delve into the normalcy of natural world, poems portraying miseries and agonies of being in quarantine and there were some other poems deal with the themes of losing hope in human life and mental turbulence and trauma.

**KEYWORDS:** Normalcy, Isolation, Quarantine, Nostalgia, Freedom and Monotony

Reverence to the great romantic and mystic poet William Blake for illumining our first thought and directing our course of memory to his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in any occasion we ponder over something innocent. In these poems the poet expresses two different realms of an individual's thoughts and visions on the realities he perceives. Perceptions of individuals over the realities of this world vary on the basis of the method of their upbringing, geographical area in which they are nurtured, society where they lived and living, and the education they have received. The perception itself constructs a person and his identity and thereby his/ her existence. The last two years of COVID 19 pandemic the world was going through a stage of anxiety, confinement and trauma which has lately adapted physically and mentally to a 'new normal'. Every strata of society has experienced the catastrophic intrusion of corona virus into their lives and the resultant state of affairs. Students being a principal stratum of the world society are inevitably remarkable and their perceptions over these situations have to be recorded, analyzed and proposed for further adequate actions. This paper tries to analyze and unveil 'Record of thoughts and feelings of UK students in unusual times'.

As part of the course practice Julia Johnson, an instructor of Creative Writing Class at UK College of Arts and Science, assigned a task of responding to COVID-19 situation through poetry of different forms. Nascent poets and writers in both Undergraduate and graduate classes expressed themselves through haiku and other kinds of poetry. She says “What I saw was that these students were able to express themselves in ways maybe they couldn’t do before.” (LeComte) Anxiety, uncertainty and trauma of being in quarantine and in isolation have, in fact, changed students’ view of the world. Emily Goldsmith, one of these students shares her experience of writing during the pandemic “I found myself sitting for long periods of time or paying attention to details I often overlooked, I couldn’t escape what was happening nationally and globally. There was an urgency to this subject I didn’t feel in the same way as my other projects.” (LeComte) An analysis of the poems written by twelve students reveals the mood, emotion and reactions of students toward the global pandemic in general. Each one of them has attempted expressing what she felt in quarantine or in isolation in verse form.

Erica Oakley in her poem “Make Me a Bird” longs for the normalcy of life. The bird in her poem is a representative image of the natural world other than human beings. She reminds herself and others that the present crisis has only affected the human beings and all other creatures and seasons remain as they were earlier. The birds twitter and the spring blooms but only for human beings isolation is warranted. She says “I breathe in the birds’ songs/ and the normalcy of spring./to birds, the world is the same;/oh, how I envy the birds.” (lines 2-5) The speaker in the poem wants to escape from the shackles of human body and to fly like a bird with absolute freedom to come and go. The poem is as such a lamentation on the lost normalcy and freedom. It also reverberate what has been mourned by the English romantic poet John Keats in his “Ode to a Nightingale”. Keats says : “Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,/ But being too happy in thine happiness,/ That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees/ In some melodious plot/ Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,/ Singest of summer in full-throated ease.” (lines 5-8) Though the speaker, while addressing the nightingale swears that he is not envy to the bird but is happy in hearing its song and seeing the bird happy. But on the move of developing his thoughts he wants to follow the nightingale and to leave this world of “The weariness, the fever, and the fret/ Here, where men sit and hear each other groan; / Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,/ Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;” (lines 23-26) The speakers both in Keat’s and Erica Oakley’s poems seek solace in the nature and its undisturbed serenity.

The speaker in Chloe Cummings “Better Days” compares her life before the advent of novel corona virus attack with that of the life after. She also mourns on the loss of better days where she took her freedom for granted. ‘Sun beams’ in her poem stands as metaphor for the pandemic. The spread of this disease has been compared to the process of a day where the sun beams control the day as dawn, noon and dusk. Though forecasts an end to the spread of COVID-19, she believes in a hazardous peak in which all the human expectations may topple. Before the coming of such an event she finds room for ruminating how worthlessly she has spent her freedom in the past days. She says; “The sun is beaming/ takes a stance on our bodies/ Before going wild,/ I remember the freedom/ we used to take for granted”. (lines 1-5) It is not the fear of death that haunts the speaker but the freedom matters. Rather than the plunder of human breath the curtailing of freedom is charged as a diabolic nature of the pandemic.

Sam Cundiff in her poem “At Wits End” portrays the stillness and impediments afflicted to the smooth flow of life. She describes how the sudden emergence of the pandemic has affected the everyday consciousness and even the words people use in their casual talks. The peaceful, steady, and focused situations of pre-pandemic periods have been contrasted with that of canceled, closed, and delayed status quo of the pandemic times. She says: “Smooth sailing/  
I glide through the ever so easy month of March/ Peaceful, steady, focused/ Utter silence... broken like a wine glass/ From the television/ Canceled, Closed, Delayed/ Sinful words to me,” (lines 1-7) The speaker in the poem is longing for a time in which those sinful words are revoked from the mouth of everyone in a way that they will

never return. The speaker in Katie Gardipee's "No Place like Home" comes to a state of 'epistemology of losses', loss of mirth and happiness of school days and being with friends. She says: "Home is where the heart is..." (line 7) her heart is not at home where she is physically at home. She misses the past days, college town, friends, and awful dining hall food. The unchanging movement from kitchen to room, feeling of cemented at a single place, panic stricken hours, agony of shrinking inside the four walls, and suffocation of surviving out of stock takes her back to the memories of those sunny days of the near past. She says:

Home is where the heart is, but now home is where staying alive is./The only thing that make you smile is thinking of the past./ Your college town you love so much is now unattainable./ The walls of your room are shrinking smaller and smaller./ You somehow miss the absolutely awful dining hall food./ The journey to and from the kitchen seems like a lifetime./ Your friends across the country are light-years away now./ The only thing keeping you going is being able to go back.(lines 7-14)

Thought of a better future and the belief in being things normal give the speaker strength and power to survive. She concludes her poem as "Home is where the heart is, but my heart is far away from home now." (line 15) Home quarantine has immensely altered her vision of the notion 'at home'. Physical dwelling in a place does not make it a home but home is the abode of heart which is outside the home with friends, school, and with the sweet memories of past. "Today I Will Make Another to-do List" is a poem written by Emile Goldsmith, one among the students of Julia Johnson's creative writing class. Goldsmith's poem is an exact portrayal of turbulences and satiety of monotonous life of a person in isolation. The thought of the speaker in the poem develops by the mentioning of a normal condition of routines to the abnormalities and panic. In home isolation she attempts various actions to cope up with the loneliness and frustrations, but none of them helps her find focus and come to calm and peacefulness. She says: "I watch all eight seasons of Game of Thrones in 12 days. / When Game of Thrones ends. I feel less like I want to get out of bed. / Getting restless, staring at walls, / I can't fall asleep without Benadryl." (lines 9-12) She prepares to-do list for a day only to revise it the next day, covers the window pane to not to see children playing outside, she becomes like the mythological Tithonus who became impotent to enjoy the beauty of his beloved as depicted by Alfred Lord Tennyson in his poem "Tithonus". Tennyson says about the inability and morbidity of Tithonus as: "To dwell in presence of immortal youth, / immortal age beside immortal youth, / And all I was, in ashes." (lines 21-23) In quarantine she recognizes the relativity of feeling of time. Time poses a horrible threat to her by slowing down its paces, she longs for the next dawn as soon as the sun rises for this day. Nevertheless she keeps hope alive in thinking of a morrow when she can come out and join the world.

Alyssa Feldner's poem "The Masked Man" presents a new perception on human beings in the time of pandemic. She philosophizes the new attire and gesture of everyman. The face mask everyone wears and the latex the use of which forms a peculiar gesture have been observed as obstacles for freedom of movement. Neighborhood turns out to be the only place where one can move with limited access. The word 'Face mask' had been a metaphor for covering one's identity on stages and to exhibit only the persona whereas it became a literal mask to hide one's face from everything. She says: "Encased in rich grief / He wanders the neighborhood / Cloth over the mouth / And hands submerged in latex / A demoralizing scene." (lines 1-5) Erin Eberlee in her poem "A Craft?" tells about a new craft of making masks. People sit beside and are making masks. These craft men do not know who sits near by the other for all of them have worn masks and they are making masks. Usually a craft's man expresses himself with unique artifact he creates but here, Eberlee says, the craft work is to hide one's identity. She is doubtful to call this a craft. She says: "Was a hot glue gun / A pillowcase, rulers too / We were making masks / Yes, strange but everyone was / What a time to be alive." (lines 1-5) She is cursing and wondering in her mere thought of a time in which unknown people are working together for making people unknown. Her poem reminds us of Bob Dylan's famous poem "The Times They're a Changin'" where the poet advises people to be prepared to face any change happening in this world.

In a nutshell students' responses to the pandemic times are a mixture of various emotions and sentiments. The mounting grievances were of boredom of monotony and pain of lost freedom. The discussed poems, though written by students, depict meticulous observations or experiences they have witnessed in this pandemic times. These poems have no the pomp of philosophical burden where the events and incidents have been viewed from the children's perspective and expressed in a plain language. The innocence is remarkable while they do not venture to fill in their poems with abundance of prosaic expressions. But all together the poems are, in a way, natural and original that an illiterate can digest their content for being identical with the experiences they had with the time. However most of these emerging poets have shown the sign of overcoming the pandemic panic towards the end of their versification and proposed a futuristic world devoid of disillusionment.

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