

E-Learning Materials

On

William Blake: The Lamb & The Tyger



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William Blake [1757-1827]

Let us learn about William Blake, his poems and significance of his contribution as a poet.



William Blake's works find a place beside Picasso's in the Tater Art Gallery in London. This just reflects his multifaceted genius. His poems and their illustrations carry a stamp of his unique style which was ornamental and grand. His artistic engravings on copper plates extended an abiding appeal to the person and his creativity.

Blake's lyrical poems are remarkable for condensed expression carrying rich visual and spiritual symbols. *The Songs of Innocence* published in 1789 encapsulates his genius for writing, engraving, drawing and painting. His poverty impelled Blake to devise a unique and splendid method to print his poems. As is believed a number of copper plates carrying the illustrations and poems of Blake might have been disposed of as material of no consequence.

Songs of Experience appeared in 1794. These two volumes of poems reveal William Blake's convictions, evolution as a poet and awareness of man and his predicament in the universe.

Songs of Innocence

There is a symbolic design on the title page of '*Songs of Innocence*' in addition to the year of publication 1789. A significant title with decorative words with leaves and small branches of a plant encircling them makes it very impressive. There is also an apple plant with two children leaning on the lap of their mother and reading a book. The children's innocence and carefree nature reflect the theme of the poems. A sense of wonder makes childhood beautiful and it is carried in the poems too. In the poetry of Blake, Jesus is the divine who was once an infant like all human infants. Nature, love and joy are splendidly harmonized.

In most of the poems in the book identity of God and child is perceptible. Here God is viewed as child Jesus. Blake's nature is different from that of other romantic poets. He was essentially a Londoner. For the poet, Jesus was a lamb metaphorically. There are certain recurrent images in his poems like the hill side, grazing lambs and extending meadows. Though there is a shepherd there are no cattle except sheep. The tears in the poems are tears of joy blended with innocence. Meekness of the lamb and the child assumes significance in this set of poems. According to Blake the spirit of God invariably saves the children in distress as they are devoid of evil in thought or action. The poet who heard voices and saw visions was intuitive mostly, while crafting these poems. It may be of interest to know, Blake had no children.

The Lamb

This poem may be stated as the simplest of poems by William Blake, who sees unity of all living creatures with Nature and God, particularly Jesus Christ. The lamb has immense symbolic significance.

The expression is at once very simple and a series of questions are asked. This poem may be compared with *Tiger*, a remarkable poem in *Songs of Experience*. Statements are turned into questions. These questions are to be found in the first stanza and the answers are to be found in the second. This can only be a general statement, for you have the question 'Dost thou..?'



Copy of Blake's original printing of *The Lamb*

The second stanza changes the pattern of the poem by identifying the lamb with child Jesus and with the child-speaker in the poem. Jesus is the 'lamb of God' in the European Christian tradition. Lamb, as one knows, symbolizes innocence and gentleness; and the love behind the question 'Dost thou know who made thee?' should be contrasted with the awe behind the question 'Did he who made the lamb make thee?' in the poem *The Tiger*.

The lamb, the questioning child and the Creator look like three different beings in the first stanza, and the second stanza shows them to be one. They are identified with each other.

Though this poem looks simple to read and understand, it requires supreme craftsmanship to compose such a poem. Divine spirit present in every being created is manifest in the lamb. This poem presents a question and answer pattern, so common in communication with children. Child's curiosity and implicit obedience in accepting what is told makes it quite impressive.

Analysis of the Poem The Lamb:

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?

The child, the narrator in the poem, asks the lamb whether he knows who made him. Curiosity of a child is at once so appealing and fascinating. Here these questions are followed by answers, unlike the pattern found in the poem *Tiger*.

Gave thee life and bid thee feed,
By the stream and o' ver the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing, woolly, bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice?

William Blake describes the lamb and uses the simplest of words and terms indicating joy, innocence and brightness, essential qualities associated with childhood. The narration is in harmony with the theme of the poem.

He is called by thy name,
For He calls Himself a Lamb.
He is meek and He is mild;
He became a little child.
I a child, and thou a lamb
We are called by His name.

Now, the poet's intention becomes clear. Innocence and ability to rejoice looking at simplest things are a child's prerogative. Divine spirit present in childhood slowly makes way to many undesirable elements as one grows up. The way the poet blends figures of the child, lamb and God makes an interesting reading. A questioning mind only finds a solution. Reference to Jesus the child and lamb representing mankind directly link to Biblical images and beliefs.

General Estimate of Poems in this volume:

The poems in this section are exquisitely crafted with simple expression, easily recognizable symbols and poet's preoccupation with Biblical images and lore. Blake's innermost feelings about contemporary society and the manner in which children are made to suffer also are conveyed. However, these poems essentially reflect simple joys in life, craving for peace in life and around and the need to have firm spiritual convictions to lead a quiet and blissful life. A remarkable feature is that words are fused by inspiration and smoothly joined, as they are perfectly adapted to the thought which is simple and delightful.

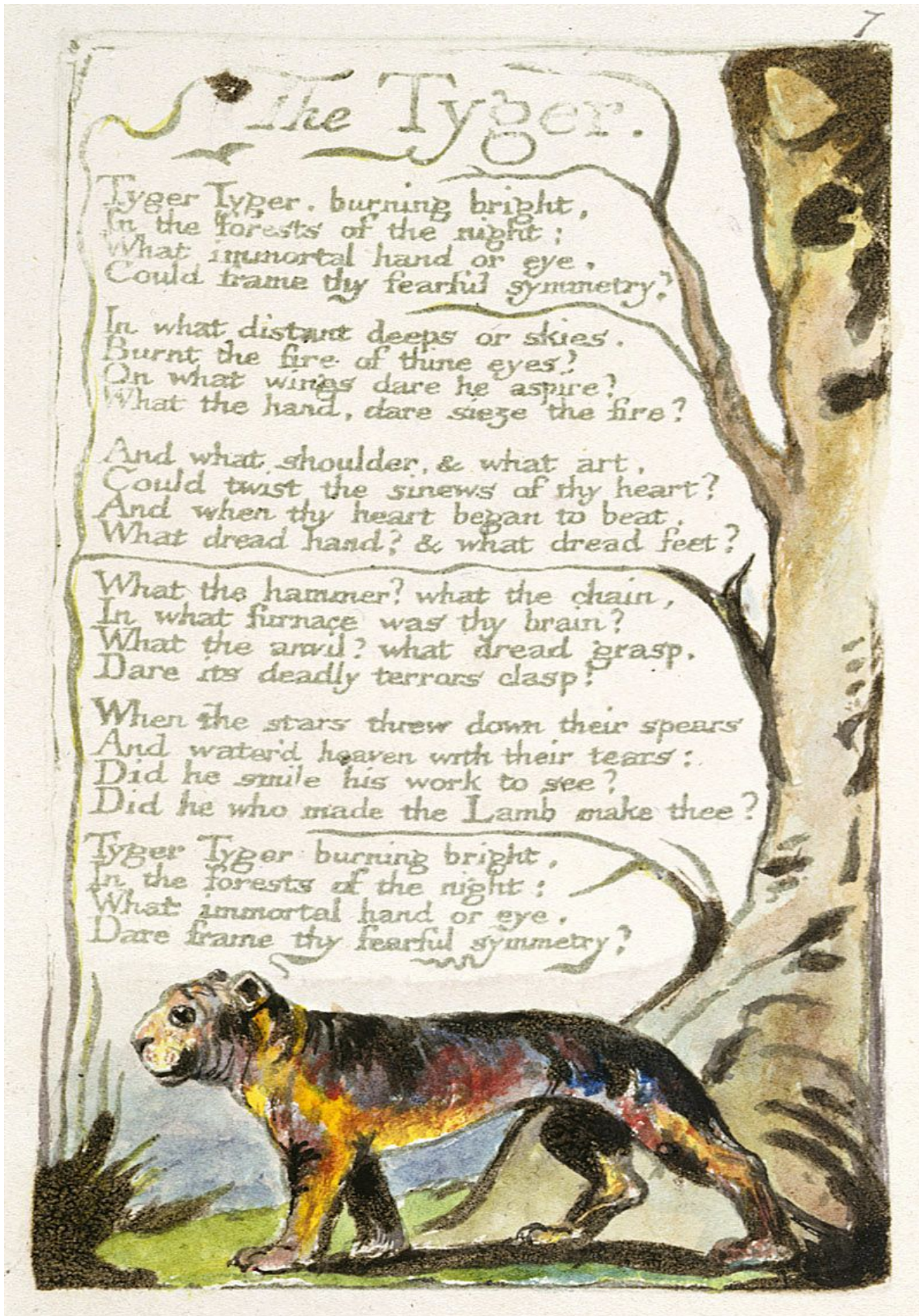
Songs of Experience

This volume has been brought along with the *Songs of Innocence*. The title page of the combined volume of these two sets of poems carries the figures of a man and a woman clad in leaves suggesting they are Adam and Eve. Anguish marks their expression indicating their state after the fall. While Eve is prostrate, Adam bends over her and one may notice swirling flames of fire and a bird on wing. They may be symbolic of joy deserting them. Some critics have opined that the two figures may not be those of Adam and Eve, but represent innocence and experience. The themes and content in this set of poems are remarkable for their high seriousness, complexity in thought and expression in addition to significant symbols employed. Blake's personal views about contemporary society and church are laid bare unmistakably. Tyranny, jealousy, usury, and authoritarianism conspicuous in contemporary society are loathsome to the poet. He's moved by the misery and suffering of the poor children. The indifference of man to man and the irresponsibility of the church to sufferers are appalling to say the least. Thus a child is forced to forsake his innocence, a God given attribute. A child like Adam violated God's command; hence misery, disease and death started haunting him.

The Tyger

This is the most celebrated poem of William Blake, which has been interpreted and commented upon in numerous ways. It stands in direct contrast to 'The Lamb' in *Songs of Innocence*. The narration is so arresting that once the first line is read it inspires the reader to run through the entire poem, leaving the reader in inconceivable awe and admiration of the poetic craftsmanship of Blake and competence of the Tiger's creator.

A series of questions are asked in succession, without giving a chance to pause and respond. The poet convincingly establishes that the creator of a meek and innocent Lamb also is capable of creating an awesome, fierce, mighty creature like the tiger. The lamb and the tiger may represent the divergent traits of man and the creator as well.



Copy of Blake's original printing of *The Tyger*

Analysis of the Poem *Tyger*:

Tyger!Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night ,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Two burning bright eyes represent the tiger in darkness of night. The background presented is at once astonishing and amazing. 'Forests of the night' refers to density of darkness as well as thickness of the forests where the fierce tiger roams freely. 'Eye' and 'hand' by implication suggest the supreme ability to conceive the very idea of creating the tiger and the consummate craftsmanship required to execute the task. A hint at the inexhaustible and enormous power of the animal is hinted by 'fearful symmetry' 'Immortal' makes it obvious that it is beyond the ken of ordinary human beings to embark upon such a task. 'Burning bright' not only is related to the eyes but to the tiger as a whole. 'Burning' may imply fierceness, but it is modified by 'bright' implying incandescence.

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat ,
What dread hand? and what dread feet?

These lines throw ample light on the superb poetic competence of Blake. One finds a series of *wh* questions. Nowhere an answer is provided. The reader has to infer all by himself. The poet's curiosity to know the impact of tiger's creation is also evident here. How the world reacted or responded is the moot point. Was there a design or desire in creating the tiger? If so, what might it be? To scare or control who? Where is the need to create the tiger at all? These questions haunt any sensible reader.

What the hammer?
What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil?

What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

These lines exhibit the beauty lying in creating a cluster of half-activated associations and potential feelings and meanings. All the tools used in a smithy are mentioned, a common poetic practice of Blake. He himself an engraver, the poet knows how to design and bring to life an inanimate object on a sheet of copper. Different critics offered divergent views diligently. In spite of all academic attempts to evaluate the poem, it still retains its own eternal charisma enigmatically.

When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Now comes the time to assess the impact of tiger's creation. The poet asks in all curiosity, whether the stars surrendered themselves by laying down their arms of 'steely glitter' and watered the sky with their tears. 'Watchful stars' ever awake in the sky at times exhibit 'jealousy.' Did the creator desire to teach them a lesson? Then, Blake asks how the creator responds and reacts to his own work of creativity? There is an art. There is a reason. There is a purpose to be served. Blake wants to know did He smile with satisfaction for what he has done? Then the last line unravels the mystery of creation associated with the concept of tiger. There is equal space for the meek as well as the mighty in god's creation. Harmony is the key to survival.

It is pertinent to recall what Prof C.D.Narasimhaiah stated about the tiger and this poem of Blake. He strongly felt that the Tiger is an 'udhbhava murthy'[that which sprang to life] than an 'uthsava murthy'[idols taken in procession during temple rituals]. Hence, the abiding charm of the poem which pulsates with rhyme, rhythm and vitality! A former Professor in EFLU, Hyderabad opined that in Indian context emergence of the Narasimhavtara to end menace of wicked demon Hiranyakasipu also may be mentioned, to illustrate how God manifests himself in myriad forms to establish reign of peace and dharma on earth, protecting the meek and the faithful and punishing the evil doers.

General Estimate of Poems:

Blake's righteous indignation and love of mankind make the poems more impressive. The poems are patterned differently with exquisite expression making them eminently enjoyable. These poems are in contrast to those in *Songs of Innocence* both in content and themes. Blake's images are highly symbolic in nature. A city dweller's experiences and disenchantment with cherished values in society on account of prevailing pathetic condition of the disadvantaged are emphatically conveyed. Some of the poems like 'The Tyger' have immortalised William Blake.

William Blake as a poet and significance of his contribution:

William Blake is known for his epigrammatic expression conveying profound ideas with the help of alluring symbols in his poems. These symbols are at times quite simple to understand and appreciate and at times complex beyond the comprehension of the common reader. His ability to conceive patterns consciously and unconsciously makes his poetry eminently enjoyable. A careful reader can find common concepts, familiar ideas and extension of expression in his poems.

'Holy word' at the beginning of his poem 'Introduction' in *songs of Experience* provides key to all allusions and symbolic expression in the poems to follow in the book. The reference is to the Biblical notion of 'First there was the word.' It connects several aspects of creation, fall of man and subsequent suffering depicted subtly or explicitly in the poems under reference. Man's suffering is shifted to the earth who questions ways of god in some of the poems. At times God is presented as a jealous, uncompromising patriarch who carefully keeps a watch all the time, suggested by the jealous stars and their feeling of superiority in controlling man's destiny. It also helps in understanding the creation of the tiger and the line 'Did he smile his work to see?' Of course, the poem 'Tiger' is a multi-layered, brilliant poetic extravaganza.

Blake's concern with childhood, the associated joys and fears witnessed in *Songs of Innocence* is perfectly in tune with the practice of romantic poets extolling childhood and its impact in their poems. The Lamb, the Child, sheep, the Shepherd, flowing meadows, hills, vines all combine to create an ambience absolutely required in depicting the basic traits of man, his innocence and simple joys in life. Meekness and faith in the Master mark his nature. Tears shed in joy enhance the impact of a state of bliss associated with early stages in life. Here, probably

the poet is preparing a platform for the ideas and symbols to be found in *Songs of Experience*. Biblical allusions unmistakably extend elegance to his expression in all his poems. Some poems in this volume reflect his resentment and disenchantment with the prevailing social practices and pathetic condition of the disadvantaged in contemporary society. His bitterness at the hypocrisy of the clergy and failure of the Church in offering succor to the suffering is conveyed obliquely as well as directly. Symbolically conveyed flashes of fleeting ideas and visions characterize his succinct expression that enriches judiciously crafted poems. His experience as an engraver enhances the appeal of his poetry. Though he loved to be socially invisible during his times, his poems extend an elevated status to William Blake and his poetry. Modern critics employ psycho-analytical techniques to unravel some of his symbols and poems. Blake sought social justice, the term extensively employed at present, as reflected in his poems in the Victorian age itself.
