

E-Learning Materials

On

William Blake: The Lamb & The Tyger



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William Blake: *The Tyger*

Life and times of William Blake: An Overview

Poet, artist, engraver, William Blake is one of the most important personalities of the Romantics. Born in London on 28 November 1757, Blake came to be known as a great artist and poet of his times. His artistic abilities were evident as a child when he enrolled himself in a drawing school and learnt to draw sketches of human figures by copying outlines from the plaster casts of ancient sculptures. Blake is known for his illustrations and engravings even to this day.

He was an avid reader of the Bible and the Greek Classics. Shakespeare's and Milton's works were highly influential in his artistic career. Since his parents could not afford his artistic training for long, Blake sought an apprenticeship under engraver James Basire. His assignments of sketching the Westminster Abbey are often considered as being instrumental in the stirrings of his Gothic leanings.

Blake was accepted to the Royal Academy of Arts where he learnt and exhibited several of his works. Following this, he was employed as a professional engraver working for Joseph Johnson, a procurer of subversive literature. Blake also associated himself with some of the significant thinkers of his period: Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, William Godwin; Rev. Anthony S. and Harriet Matthew among others. Harriet Matthew and

draftsman John Flaxman were instrumental in funding the publication of Blake's first book of poetry: *Poetical Sketches*, published in 1783. His works were of both religious and secular nature. In 1784, Blake establishes his own printing press which enabled him to publish his own works.

Blake is credited with developing the technique called "illuminated printing": He made copper plates engraved with his illustrations as well as his works and he prepared his own ink with which he printed the poems on paper. Every illustration would then be later coloured by hand. Through this process, Blake was able to produce works that were often commissioned and from 1789 onwards, several significant works were developed including the *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* collection.

Blake's works are replete with spiritual concerns. More often, these concerns coupled with the political climate of the period (the American War of Independence and the French Revolution) were highly influential in turning his works into the most radical of themes of the period. Visions had been a part of his formative years and they were instrumental in his writings till his death. Blake claimed to have seen angels; on another occasion, he is said to have sighted the spirit of his brother Robert rise from the dead body at the time of his death. By the end of the eighteenth century almost all of his works became Biblical in nature and mysticism and divine mystery began to pervade most of his works.

Blake also created some of his best known works including *Milton*, *Jerusalem* and also illustrated Dante's *Divine Comedy*. A childless couple, Blake and his wife Catherine Boucher tried to alleviate their poverty through exhibition of his works in 1809 but the event was not well-attended and marked the nearing end of his artistic career. Blake died in 1827 at the age of 69 year.

Now let us turn to one of his most celebrated poems, “The Tyger”. A poem of 24 lines and 14 questions, it deals with the idea of creation: both the jungle cat as well as the work of art. Its six quatrains are made of rhyming couplets.

Poem: Let us now read the poem aloud:

The Tyger

-By William Blake

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

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

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

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

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?

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

Now read the poem silently and note down images of grandeur and divinity from the poem. We shall come back to look at some of these images more closely in the subsequent sections of this module.

Analysis: Structural and Thematic Readings

If you observe closely, the poem opens and closes with the same set of lines: it invokes the fierce power of not just the fearsome tiger but also the one who created the being. The only difference between the two stanzas is that the question in the stanzas considerably differs from each other. The first stanza ends with the line “What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” and the last stanza with the lines ““What immortal hand or eye/ Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?””

The tiger, we are told by the speaker, is not just any animal, but one that is “burning bright”. This draws our attention to the majestic creature that the tiger is. The tiger is known for its bright and fiery fur that adds to its majesty. This ‘burning bright’ may also be read as referring to

the intense power that the tiger has. A lonesome creature, it walks “the forest of the night” fearlessly. The speaker is awestruck by its beauty, its immense strength immediately wondering in awe again: “What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame they fearful symmetry?” This question becomes the central concern of the entire poem: the creator and his creation. Invoking the hand and eye in these lines also make the idea of the hand and sight of the creator involved in the creation of such a majestic creature like the tiger. “Fearful symmetry” is another interesting image. Art is generally characterized by aesthetic beauty owing to its symmetry. By drawing attention to a fearful symmetry, the speaker emphasizes how its beauty is combined with its ability to wreak havoc as a predator on its prey. The sublime nature of the Tiger – its appearance of beauty and fear – is at once characteristic of this creation.

The second stanza asks the question of where the tiger was created. The following stanza exhibits the powerful creature that the tiger is; this is done by invoking powerful images of fire. The speaker wonders in which space of depth was the fire in the tiger’s eyes conceived? Don’t the lines “In what distant deeps or skies/ Burnt the fire of thine eyes?” bring to our mind the space of a blacksmith, moulding and shaping the creation in the midst of fire and heavy tools? (The tools appear in the images of hammer and chain in stanza 3.) If the creation is awe-inspiring and fierce and mighty, wonders the speaker, what then of the creator Himself?

Obviously for Blake, a creature like the tiger was not created in this world, but in “distant deeps or skies” referring to both hell as well as heaven respectively. One of the conventional readings of the tiger has been that it symbolizes Lucifer, the fallen angel. This is also emphasized by the reference to the wings in the line: “On what wings dare he aspire?” The recurrent invocation of fire-images emphasizes how Blake is drawing a picture of Hell, invoked also by the image “forests of the night”. Harold Blooms remarks: “Like Lucifer, the tiger works alone and

inspires thoughts of death; it also is strong and beautiful, as the Bible portrays the fallen angel".(See Harold Bloom on "The Tyger" for more on this reading.) One of the fundamental questions that seizes Blake's imagination is not just the creation, but also the sublimity of its creator.

By beginning to wonder about the creator, the speaker now asks if the tiger of such brute force has been created, what about the strength of the creator himself? This is evident in the lines "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?"

We are then taken to the workplace of a blacksmith hard at his art work. In this stanza the questions are much shorter and gain more pace. More number of questions begins to be asked. The speaker turns to the creation again and wonders what would happen to the ones held by the tiger's deadly clasp.

The brute strength of the tiger is so immense that the speaker observes how even the stars give up their move to dominate the skies. The speaker then wonders what the creator Himself must have thought about this creation: Was He happy to see the tiger? "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" wonders the speaker. Is the tiger then the opposite of the gentle-eyes lamb? We must note here that "lamb" is a poem in the Songs of Innocence collection. The naivety of the lamb is contrasted by the growing power of the tiger. Blake wishes the readers to see the creator's hand in each creation and closes the poem with the opening lines.

One way to begin thinking about Blake's Tyger is to ask the question "How does the tiger assert itself in its environment?" In fact, what is its environment? By not providing a concrete setting, but merely referring to a dark forest and deeps and skies, Blake has been able to keep the

setting and its themes nebulous. The tiger is an elusive creature, and keeping with this spirit the reader is not given a concrete setting to locate the tiger.

Very often this poem is seen in contrast to the poem from the Songs of Innocence collection “The Lamb”. Let us look at Blake’s “The Lamb”.

The Lamb

- By William Blake

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!
Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee.

Comparative Analysis of “The Tyger” and “The Lamb”

Like “The Tyger”, “The Lamb” which appears in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* begins with a question about its creation, too. The speaker asks how the lamb was created; how it is a gentle and meek creature, which implies its creator must be gentle and loving too. (Consider this in the light of what we have discussed with regard to “The Tyger”: Blake wonders if the Tiger is ferocious and sublime, its creator must be powerful and sublime too). For Blake innocence and experience complement each other and one state must not be seen as being better than the other state.

While Blake refers to the tiger’s appearance as burning bright, referring to its fiery coat, Blake speaks of the Lamb’s appearance as “... clothing of delight,/ Softest clothing woolly bright”. Both the poems when seen alongside each other clearly shows how there are no clear divisions between the good and bad; between danger and security.

That the Lamb is also a Christian symbol of Christ as Lamb of God cannot be missed here. Blake remarks how Christ himself was mild and meek. The poem underscores the Christ-like values of gentleness and meekness. When seen in opposition to the lamb, the Tiger does not follow the flock. On the other hand, the tiger, we know, is an animal that learns from experience. As a single, autonomous ruler of its environs, the Tiger gains its power from the knowledge gained through experience.

Points to Ponder:

- “The Tyger” and “The Lamb” are two most often anthologized poems of William Blake. Think about why these two poems continue to hold the interest of the reading public even today.
- Blake was writing at a time when the European colonial project was extending its tentacles across different continents. “The Tyger” was published in 1794 at a time when Tipu Sultan, the Tiger of Mysore, put up a strong resistance to the British forces in India. Read the poem in the light of this colonial encounter.
- Read other Romantic poets and attempt an understanding of the difference in the Romantic Thought espoused in Blake’s poetry in comparison with other Romantic poets.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Blake was viewed as a madman in his times; he is now heralded for his immense contributions to Romantic poetry.
- Blake’s wife was illiterate; he taught her to read and write to help him with his drafts and publish his works.
- Blake was self-taught in Greek, latin and Hebrew.
- Blake wrote his text in reverse on the copper plates and then illustrated them
- Blake helped Thomas Paine escape to France when his *Rights of Man* was deemed too inflammatory in a revolutionary climate.