



THE TIGER-WILLIAM
BLAKE
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BLAKE AS A POET

The Tyger is the fifth poem of **The Songs of Experience** by William Blake which was published in 1794, five years after **The Songs of Innocence** which was published in 1789. When the two volumes were published together in 1794, Blake gave the sub-title: *Showing Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. The sub-title is a pointer to what the poet seems to say in these two volumes of songs put together. **The Songs of Innocence** is a child's world, of Mary, Susan and Emily, of the child who asks the poet to write down song with a rural pen so that every child may hear the songs of mirthfulness.

Most of the poems of **The Songs of Experience** are counterpoints to the earlier poems in **The Songs of Innocence**. **The Tyger** is a counterpoint to **The Lamb**. The dreadful creature seems to stand for the fierce spiritual forces that are needed to break the shackles of evil experience.

Blake, like Jacob Boehme, believes in the all embracing nature of the godhead. Hence the apparent evil in the tiger is only an expression of divine strength and energy. This forms the mysticism of Blake who discovers both innocence and evil as the manifestations of the same heavenly spirit.

ANALYSIS-PART 1

The poem begins with two exclamations: 'Tyger! Tyger!' The exclamations have their source in wonder felt by the adult poet. The child poet was struck by the delightful clothing and bleating of the lamb, the experienced poet is astonished by the fearful symmetry burning bright in the forests of the night. The lamb bleated in the merry sunshine, the tiger's eyes burn in the darkness of the night. The wonder, as in **The Lamb**, leads to the question as to whose immortal hand or eye could frame this fearful symmetry. While a strong hand of craftsmanship is required to build the frame of vigour, an artistic eye is also required to bring about the symmetry.

The wonder leads to questions, one after another. And all the questions are related to the craftsmanship of the Creator. Most emphasis is on the fire in the eyes, the fire that speaks of the fierceness and often interpreted as the wrath of God. The poet, not being satisfied with the fire of the eyes as representing the fierceness of the tiger, comes out to stress the dread in the creature. The third stanza conjures up the image of the foundry of a blacksmith where the 'deadly terror' was forged.

ANALYSIS-PART II

Anvil, furnace and iron and the brawny blacksmith suggest the element of fierceness in the tiger's soul as well as in his body and also of the energy of its Creator. The third stanza refers to the satisfaction of the Creator who took as much delight in creating a lamb as the tiger that was not clumsily designed but was a fearful symmetry. The last interrogative line of the fourth stanza takes the wonder to the climax in the poet's inhibited exclamation: "Did he who made the lamb made thee?"

Blake combines the contraries here; God creates not only meek innocence but also fearful vengeance, the vengeance that he demonstrated when he vanquished the rebel angels who had to throw down their spears and water the heaven with tears. The concluding stanza is a repetition of the first, indicating that the poet's wonder that was roused in the beginning lingers even after the mystical suggestion that it was designed by the same God as made the lamb.

ANALYSIS-PART III

Innocence is divine and so is fierceness, not because they are created by the same force but because fierceness is needed to protect the innocence. Blake's reference to the revolt of the angels and their damnation in the hands of God suggests that God does not represent only meekness but also fierceness. He has to be fierce occasionally in order to keep the devil out. Energy works at the bottom of all creative activity, and God who created the world has got to be definitely energetic. We need the loving tenderness of God and also his loving fierceness that would protect us from the evil.

Experience breeds the evil in man and he goes astray. Having committed wrong, he suffers from agony of the soul, and he needs the energy of the tiger to cleanse himself and fight the devil out of his soul and regain the kingdom of the lamb. The innocent child needs the lamb to join him in his merry cheer, the adult needs the clasp of the 'deadly terror' of the tiger to vanquish the Satanic force that creeps into his soul and leads him astray from the kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

In *The Lamb*, the poet imbibes the child's innocence which enables him to sing of the merry cheer of the lamb; in *The Tyger*, he discovers in the burning eyes of the tiger the unrelenting fierceness of God that would not brook the encroachment of the evil in his world. Evil is his creation no doubt, but that is only to make man step ahead cautiously and not succumb to temptation. If by chance, experience darkens human soul, the fire in the eyes of the tiger that is visible in the dark night will burn out the evil and redeem his soul. The two contrary states of human soul are divine innocence and evil experience, but ultimately the conflict is resolved and the contrariety ends up in a synthesis in which the besmeared innocence gains back its position and the stain on the soul is seared by the element of fire in the soul represented by the brightly burning eyes of the tiger. Darkness is there in the forest of experience, but even in the darkness the fire of God is ever watchful. The soul that is able to see this fire is saved, and the paradise is regained.

SYMBOLISM

Blake uses symbols in **The Tiger** as much as he does in **The Lamb**. The fire in the eyes of the tiger represents the divine wrath that made the rebel angels throw down their spears and water the heaven with tears. The dark forest symbolizes experience that satins human soul. The hammer, the anvil, the furnace have reference to the industrial revolution that came about at that time. In fact, the sinewy figure of the tiger could be wrought only in a blacksmith's foundry and nowhere else. And while the tiger is a fearful symmetry, **The Tyger** is a beautiful symmetry. The sight of the tiger inspires awe no doubt, but with God we also smile at its symmetry which is Beauty and therefore a thing of Joy forever. Blake makes sure that his poem's central image — the image of the "Tyger" — receives major emphasis right from the start.

He achieves this emphasis by repeating the title word twice at the beginning of the first line, by capitalizing that word, by spelling it in an unusual way, and by using trochaic meter. Usually in English poetry an accented syllable is preceded by an unaccented syllable (as in the word "revolt"), but Blake here reverses that standard procedure: the very first syllable of the poem receives major emphasis, and the word being emphasized is itself the kind of word we cannot ignore. Even today, however, they are creatures we know we must respect and fear, and so Blake has chosen a central symbol that instantly commands attention.

THEMES

The Existence of Evil

“The Tiger” presents a question that embodies the central theme: Who created the tiger? Was it the kind and loving God who made the lamb? Or was it Satan? Blake presents his question in lines 3 and 4:

What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Blake realizes, of course, that God made all the creatures on earth. However, to express his bewilderment that the God who created the gentle lamb also created the terrifying tiger, he includes Satan as a possible creator while raising his rhetorical questions, notably the one he asks in lines 5 and 6: In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thy eyes?

Deeps appears to refer to hell and *skies* to heaven. In either case, there would be fire--the fire of hell or the fire of the stars.

Of course, there can be no gainsaying that the tiger symbolizes evil, or the incarnation of evil, and that the lamb (Line 20) represents goodness, or Christ. Blake's inquiry is a variation on an old philosophical and theological question: Why does evil exist in a universe created and ruled by a benevolent God? Blake provides no answer. His mission is to reflect reality in arresting images. A poet's first purpose, after all, is to present the world and its denizens in language that stimulates the aesthetic sense; he is not to exhort or moralize. Nevertheless, the poem does stir the reader to deep thought. Here is the tiger, fierce and brutal in its quest for sustenance; there is the lamb, meek and gentle in its quest for survival. Is it possible that the same God who made the lamb also made the tiger? Or was the tiger the devil's work?

RHYME SCHEME

Rhyme Scheme - aabb with a near rhyme ending the first and last stanzas, drawing attention to the tiger's "fearful symmetry."

Meter and Rhythm - the rhythm is created through short lines and rhyming couplets, similar to "The Lamb." Repetition of "Tyger" in line 1, "dare" in lines 7 & 8, "heart" in lines 10 & 11, "what" in lines 12, 13, & 15, "Did he" in lines 19-20, and several repeats in stanzas 1 & 2 establish the poem's nursery rhyme like rhythm.

Alliteration - alliteration in "The Tyger" abounds and helps create a sing-song rhythm. Examples include the following:

- "burning bright" (1)
- "distant deeps" (5)
- "what wings" (7)
- "began to beat" (11)
- "dare its deadly" (16)

RHETORICAL DEVICES

The question an analysis must answer is what is Blake's purpose in using so much alliteration in "The Tyger" (other than to create rhythm(see 7 and 8 below)). Line 1 is an example of **synecdoche**, a literary device used when a part represents the whole or the whole represents a part. In line 1 "Tyger! Tyger! burning bright" alludes to the predator's eyes. Fire imagery includes "burning bright" in line 1, "burnt the fire of thine eyes" in line 6, "in what furnace was thy brain" in line 14, the entire fourth stanza's resemblance to a forge. Line 20 contains an allusion to Blake's poem "The Lamb." Note the alliteration of "he who" in this line, the most difficult back to back words to say in the entire poem. Coincidence? Line 20 contains the key to understanding the theme of the poem. Blake asks how is it possible for something as innocent as a lamb and as ferocious as a tiger to exist.

RHETORICAL DEVICES II

Alliteration: Tiger, tiger, burning bright (line 1); frame thy fearful symmetry? (line 4)

Metaphor: Comparison of the tiger and his eyes to fire.

Anaphora: Repetition of *what* at the beginning of sentences or clauses.

Example: *What dread hand and what dread feet? / What the hammer? what the chain?*

Allusion: *Immortal hand or eye:* God or Satan

Allusion: *Distant deeps or skies:* hell or heaven

RHETORICAL DEVICES AND SYMBOLISM

How can we account for good and evil in the world? How is it possible that human beings can be both good and evil? It's a philosophical dilemma that has confounded scholars for centuries. What do you think? The last stanza serves two purposes: (1) it ties in the first stanza of the poem to the last stanza; (2) it emphasizes the question asked in the previous line. **Symbolism:** the meaning of symbolism in "The Tyger" answers the previous question.

Examples include: (1) **the tiger** represents the dangers of mortality; (2) **the fire imagery** symbolizes trials (baptism by fire perhaps); (3) **the forest of the night** represents unknown realms or challenges; (4) **the blacksmith** represents the Creator; (5) **the fearful symmetry** symbolizes the existence of both good and evil, the knowledge that there is opposition in all things, a rather fearful symmetry indeed. The meaning of symbolism in "The Tyger" is open to interpretation.

METER

The poem is in trochaic tetrameter with catalexis at the end of each line. Here is an explanation of these technical terms:

Tetrameter Line: a poetry line usually with eight syllables.

Trochaic Foot: A pair of syllables--a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable.

Catalexis: The absence of a syllable in the final foot in a line. In Blake's poem, an unstressed syllable is absent in the last foot of each line. Thus, every line has seven syllables, not the conventional eight.

The following illustration using the first two lines of the poem demonstrates tetrameter with four trochaic feet, the last one

catalectic:.....1.....2.....3.....4
TIger,..|.. **TI**ger,..|.. **BURN** ing,..|.. **BRIGHT**
.....1.....2.....3.....4
IN the..|.. **FOR** ests..|.. **OF** the..|.. **NIGHT**

The poem consists of six quatrains. (A quatrain is a four-line stanza.) Each quatrain contains two couplets. (A couplet is a pair of rhyming lines). Thus we have a twenty-four-line poem with twelve couplets and six stanzas—a neat, balanced package. The question in the final stanza repeats (except for one word, *dare*) the wording of the first stanza, perhaps suggesting that the question Blake raises will continue to perplex thinkers ad infinitum.

REFERENCES

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