

The Tyger Is Strikingly Beautiful yet Also Horrific In Its Capacity for Violence by William Blake

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Abstract—the tiger Songs of Innocence and of Experience Summary and Analysis of "The Tyger" In this counterpart poem to "The Lamb" in Songs of Innocence, Blake offers another view of God through His creation. Whereas the lamb implied God's tenderness and mercy, the tiger suggests His ferocity and power.

Keywords—Tyger, symmetry, hammer, fearful, violence, immortal hand or eye, innocence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Poetry is a form of literature that uses aesthetic and rhythmic qualities of language—such as phonaesthetics, sound symbolism, and metre—to evoke meanings in addition to, or in place of, the prosaic ostensible meaning. Poetry has a long history, dating back to the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh. Early poems evolved from folk songs such as the Chinese Shijing, or from a need to retell oral epics, as with the Sanskrit Vedas, Zoroastrian Gathas, and the Homeric epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey. Ancient attempts to define poetry, such as Aristotle's Poetics, focused on the uses of speech in rhetoric, drama, song and comedy. Later attempts concentrated on features such as repetition, verse form and rhyme, and emphasized the aesthetics which distinguish poetry from more objectively informative, prosaic forms of writing. From the mid-20th century, poetry has sometimes been more generally regarded as a fundamental creative act employing language. Poetry uses forms and conventions to suggest differential interpretation to words, or to evoke emotive responses. Devices such as assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia and rhythm are sometimes used to achieve musical or incantatory effects. The use of ambiguity, symbolism, irony and other stylistic elements of poetic diction often leaves a poem open to multiple interpretations. Similarly figures of speech such as metaphor, simile and metonymy create a resonance between otherwise disparate images—a layering of meanings, forming connections previously not perceived. Kindred forms of resonance may exist, between individual verses, in their patterns of rhyme or rhythm. Some poetry types are specific to particular cultures and genres and respond to characteristics of the language in which the poet writes. Readers accustomed to identifying poetry with Dante, Goethe, Mickiewicz and Rumi may think of it as written in lines based on rhyme and regular meter; there are, however, traditions, such as Biblical poetry, that use other means to create rhythm and euphony. Much modern poetry reflects a critique of poetic tradition, playing with and testing, among other things, the principle of euphony itself, sometimes altogether forgoing rhyme or set rhythm. In today's increasingly globalized world, poets often adapt forms, styles and techniques from diverse cultures and languages.

II. CHAPTER-I

William Blake

William Blake (28 November 1757 – 12 August 1827) was an English poet, painter, and printmaker. Largely unrecognised during his lifetime, Blake is now considered a seminal figure in the history of the poetry and visual arts of the Romantic

Age. His prophetic works have been said to form "what is in proportion to its merits the least read body of poetry in the English language". His visual artistry led one contemporary art critic to proclaim him "far and away the greatest artist Britain has ever produced". In 2002, Blake was placed at number 38 in the BBC's poll of the 100 Greatest Britons. Although he lived in London his entire life (except for three years spent in Felpham), he produced a diverse and symbolically rich oeuvre, which embraced the imagination as "the body of God" or "human existence itself".

Although Blake was considered mad by contemporaries for his idiosyncratic views, he is held in high regard by later critics for his expressiveness and creativity, and for the philosophical and mystical undercurrents within his work. His paintings and poetry have been characterised as part of the Romantic movement and as "Pre-Romantic". Reverent of the Bible but hostile to the Church of England (indeed, to almost all forms of organised religion), Blake was influenced by the ideals and ambitions of the French and American Revolutions. Though later he rejected many of these political beliefs, he maintained an amiable relationship with the political activist Thomas Paine; he was also influenced by thinkers such as Emanuel Swedenborg. Despite these known influences, the singularity of Blake's work makes him difficult to classify. The 19th-century scholar William Rossetti characterised him as a "glorious luminary", and "a man not forestalled by predecessors, nor to be classed with contemporaries, nor to be replaced by known or readily surmisable successors".

III. CHAPTER-II

William Blake's portrait in profile, by John Linnell. This larger version was painted to be engraved as the frontispiece of Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* (1863).

Blake's work was neglected for a generation after his death and almost forgotten when Alexander Gilchrist began work on his biography in the 1860s. The publication of the *Life of William Blake* rapidly transformed Blake's reputation, in particular as he was taken up by Pre-Raphaelites and associated figures, in particular Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne. In the twentieth century, however, Blake's work was fully appreciated and his influence increased. Important early and mid twentieth-century scholars involved in enhancing Blake's standing in literary and artistic circles included S. Foster Damon, Geoffrey Keynes, Northrop Frye, David V. Erdman and G. E. Bentley, Jr.

While Blake had a significant role to play in the art and poetry of figures such as Rossetti, it was during the Modernist period that this work began to influence a wider set of writers and artists. William Butler Yeats, who edited an edition of Blake's collected works in 1893, drew on him for poetic and philosophical ideas,^[10] while British surrealist art in particular drew on Blake's conceptions of non-mimetic, visionary practice in the painting of artists such as Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland.^[11] His poetry came into use by a number of British classical composers such as Benjamin

Britten and Ralph Vaughan Williams, who set his works. Modern British composer John Tavener set several of Blake's poems, including *The Lamb* (as the 1982 work "The Lamb") and *The Tyger*.

a. Form

The poem is comprised of six quatrains in rhymed couplets. The meter is regular and rhythmic, its hammering beat suggestive of the smithy that is the poem's central image. The simplicity and neat proportions of the poems form perfectly suit its regular structure, in which a string of questions all contribute to the articulation of a single, central idea.

b. Commentary

The opening question enacts what will be the single dramatic gesture of the poem, and each subsequent stanza elaborates on this conception. Blake is building on the conventional idea that nature, like a work of art, must in some way contain a reflection of its creator. The tiger is strikingly beautiful yet also horrific in its capacity for violence. What kind of a God, then, could or would design such a terrifying beast as the tiger? In more general terms, what does the undeniable existence of evil and violence in the world tell us about the nature of God, and what does it mean to live in a world where a being can at once contain both beauty and horror?

The tiger initially appears as a strikingly sensuous image. However, as the poem progresses, it takes on a symbolic character, and comes to embody the spiritual and moral problem the poem explores: perfectly beautiful and yet perfectly destructive, Blake's tiger becomes the symbolic center for an investigation into the presence of evil in the world. Since the tiger's remarkable nature exists both in physical and moral terms, the speaker's questions about its origin must also encompass both physical and moral dimensions. The poem's series of questions repeatedly ask what sort of physical creative capacity the "fearful symmetry" of the tiger bespeaks; assumedly only a very strong and powerful being could be capable of such a creation.

The smithy represents a traditional image of artistic creation; here Blake applies it to the divine creation of the natural world. The "forging" of the tiger suggests a very physical, laborious, and deliberate kind of making; it emphasizes the awesome physical presence of the tiger and precludes the idea that such a creation could have been in any way accidentally or haphazardly produced. It also continues from the first description of the tiger the imagery of fire with its simultaneous connotations of creation, purification, and destruction. The speaker stands in awe of the tiger as a sheer physical and aesthetic achievement, even as he recoils in horror from the moral implications of such a creation; for the poem addresses not only the question of who could make such a creature as the tiger, but who would perform this act. This is a question of creative responsibility and of will, and the poet carefully includes this moral question with the consideration of physical power. Note, in the third stanza, the parallelism of "shoulder" and "art," as well as the fact that it is not just the body but also the "heart" of the tiger that is being forged. The repeated use of word the "dare" to replace the "could" of the first stanza introduces a dimension of aspiration and willfulness into the sheer might of the creative act.

The reference to the lamb in the penultimate stanza reminds the reader that a tiger and a lamb have been created by the same God, and raises questions about the implications of this. It also invites a contrast between the perspectives of "experience" and "innocence" represented here and in the

poem "The Lamb." "The Tyger" consists entirely of unanswered questions, and the poet leaves us to awe at the complexity of creation, the sheer magnitude of God's power, and the inscrutability of divine will. The perspective of experience in this poem involves a sophisticated acknowledgment of what is unexplainable in the universe, presenting evil as the prime example of something that cannot be denied, but will not withstand facile explanation, either. The open awe of "The Tyger" contrasts with the easy confidence, in "The Lamb," of a child's innocent faith in a benevolent universe.

IV. CHPATER-III

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 sieze 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 watered 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?

The Themes of The Poem

Religion

You can't get away from religion in "The Tyger." In Blake's day, religious individuals and their institutions held great sway over people, far more than they do now in Europe. Questioning.

Awe and Amazement

Closely related to the theme of religion, awe and amazement are what the divine or sublime inspire. The sublime is a specific term that used to mean more than it does today. Now, you can say a bowl...

Literature and Writing

When a piece of literature is about literature in general, things can get a little tricky. What it means for a poem to be about poetry is that its content somehow reflects on the process or craft ...

V. CHPATER-IV

Summary

"The Tyger" contains only six stanzas, and each stanza is four lines long. The first and last stanzas are the same, except for one word change: "could" becomes "dare."

"The Tyger" is a poem made of questions. There are no less than thirteen question marks and only one full sentence that ends with a period instead of a question mark. Addressing "The Tyger," the speaker questions it as to its creation – essentially: "Who made you Mr. Tyger?" "How were you made? Where? Why? What was the person or thing like that made you?"

The poem is often interpreted to deal with issues of inspiration, poetry, mystical knowledge, God, and the sublime (big, mysterious, powerful, and sometimes scary. Ever heard the phrase, "To love God is to fear him"? That's talking about something sublime). But it's not about any one thing: this is William Blake.

For better or worse, there really is no narrative movement in "The Tyger": nobody really does anything other than the speaker questioning "the Tyger." The first stanza opens the central question: "What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?" The second stanza questions "the Tyger" about where he was created, the third about how the creator formed him, the fourth about what tools were used. The fifth stanza goes on to ask about how the creator reacted to his creation ("the Tyger") and who exactly was this creator. Finally, the sixth restates the central question while raising the stakes; rather than merely question what/who could create the Tyger, the speaker wonders: who dares.

VI. CHAPTER-V

CONCLUSION

As an online William Blake fan, I receive at least one request per month from students asked to interpret William Blake's wonderful lyric, "The Tyger."

The contrast with "The Lamb" is obvious. ("Little Lamb, who made thee? Dost thou know who made thee?" The answer is God, who became incarnate as Jesus the Lamb.) "The Tyger" asks, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" And the answer is, "Yes, God made the Tyger too."

To understand "The Tyger" fully, you need to know Blake's symbols. One of the central themes in his major works is that of the Creator as a blacksmith. This is both God the Creator (personified in Blake's myth as Los) and Blake himself (again with Los as his alter-ego.) Blake identified God's creative process with the work of an artist. And it is art that brings creation to its fulfillment -- by showing the world as it is, by sharpening perception, by giving form to ideas.

Blake's story of creation differs from the Genesis account. The familiar world was created only after a cosmic catastrophe. When the life of the spirit was reduced to a sea of atoms, the Creator set a limit below which it could not deteriorate farther, and began creating the world of nature. The longer books that Blake wrote describe Los's creation of animals and people within the world of nature. One particularly powerful passage in "Milton" describes Los's family weaving the bodies of each unborn child.

In believing that creation followed a cosmic catastrophe and a fall of spiritual beings into matter, Blake recalls Gnosticism, a multi-faceted religious movement that has run parallel to mainstream Christianity. Unlike most other Gnosticians, Blake considered our own world to be a fine and wonderful place, but one that would ultimately give way to a restored universe. Blake believed that his own visions, which included end-of-the-world images and sometimes a sense of cosmic oneness, prefigured this, and that his art would help raise

others "to the perception of the infinite." For Blake (and for many, if not most, mainstream Christians), the purpose of creation is as a place for our own growth, in preparation for the beginning of our real lives. Although the natural world contains much that is gentle and innocent ("Songs of Innocence"), those who are experienced with life ("Songs of Experience") know that there is also much that is terrible and frightening. (The "fearful symmetry" might be that of the lamb and the tyger, innocence and experience. What do you think?)

A casual reader or student does not have to understand Blake's mystical-visionary beliefs to appreciate "The Tyger". For the casual reader, the poem is about the question that most of us asked when we first heard about God as the benevolent creator of nature. "Why is there bloodshed and pain and horror?" If you're like me, you've heard various answers that are obviously not true. "The Tyger", which actually finishes without an answer, is (on this level) about your own experience of not getting a completely satisfactory answer to this essential question of faith.

There is more. "The Tyger" is about having your reason overwhelmed at once by the beauty and the horror of the natural world. "When the stars threw down their spears / And watered heaven with their tears" is the most difficult section of "The Tyger". In the creation story in "Job", the stars sing for joy at creation, a scene that Blake illustrated. In Blake's later books, the stars throw down their cups (the notebook poem "When Klopstock England Defied...") and in "The Four Zoas" figure prominently in the account of Urizen's failed clockwork universe founded on pure reason. For Blake, the stars represent cold reason and objective science. (They are weaker than the Sun of inspiration or the moon of love. Their mechanical procession has reminded others, including the author of "Lucifer in Starlight", of "the army of unalterable law"; in this case the law of science.) Although Blake was hostile (as I am, and as most real scientists are) to attempts to reduce all phenomena to chemistry and physics, Blake greatly appreciated the explosion of scientific knowledge during his era. But there is something about seeing a Tyger that you can't learn from a zoology class. The sense of awe and fear defy reason. And Blake's contemporary "rationalists" who had hoped for a tame, gentle world guided by kindness and understanding must face the reality of the Tyger.

Other people will tell you the Tyger represents evil. When I hear the word, I think of (among other things) a blathering alcoholic adult bully ridiculing and beating a small child. This should not happen, and makes no sense, but it happens all the time, and when it does, "the stars throw down their spears / and water heaven with their tears." Given that different people use the word "evil" in different ways, you'll need to decide for yourself whether the Tyger encompasses more. It seems to me that it is not "evil" for a real tiger to eat a lamb, but is part-and-parcel of our world. Yet it still inspires a certain horror and a sense of awe, that we are in the presence of a transcendent mystery at the very heart of creation -- and a certain terrible beauty. If Blake's lyric has brought this to our attention, it has been successful.

The poem is often quoted. One extended example is in the graphic novel "Origin: The True Story of Wolverine", in which it reminds the heroine of the clawed hero's ferocious character and mysterious origins.

If you found that you really enjoyed "The Tyger", then I hope you'll have a chance to explore more of Blake's writings -- even the difficult "Prophetic Books" -- as well as his own influences (especially the Bible and "Paradise Lost"). You may

also enjoy learning about his times, and the social injustices of which he was so deeply aware.

WORK CITED

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