

William Blake and his poems, *The Lamb* and *The Tyger*

William Blake (1757-1827) was the most remarkable poet among the precursors of the Romantic Revival in English literature. Blake was born in London in November, 1757. His parents were both Dissenters, a group of English Protestants who broke away from and rebelled against the Church of England.. There were five children in the family, Blake was the second one. It appears that the denial and deprivation of love from the family might have generated in Blake's mind, an imaginary world of his own. At the age of seven, he was sent to a good drawing school in the strand, and four years later, in 1772, he began a seven years apprenticeship in engraving. He was an engraver to the London Society of Antiquaries, where he learned his craft as well as some of his poetical and political opinions. In 1779 he began studying at the Royal Academy and within a year he began exhibiting pictures there, often with historical themes. At twenty-four he married Catherine Boucher, who was an illiterate. So, he taught her to read, write, and make colors and prints. He never had children, but he was devoted to his younger brother Robert and taught him drawing and nursed him.

The wide appeal of Blake's poetry ranges from the deceptive cadence of his lullaby-like pastorals and songs to the troubling notes of the tragedy of the unhappy souls and the stormy music of the prophetic works. However, Blake's most widely read poems are contained in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*.

'The Lamb' is taken from the *Songs of Innocence* which was published in 1789. It is a didactic poem. In this poem the poet pays a tribute to Christ who is innocent and pure like a child and meek and mild like a lamb. The little child asks the lamb if he knows who has created it, who has blessed it with life and with the capacity to feed by the stream and over the meadow. The child asks him if the lamb knows who has given it bright and soft wool, which serves as its clothing, who has given it a tender voice which fills the valley with joy. In the first stanza of ten lines of William Blake's poem 'The Lamb', the child who is supposed to be speaking to the lamb, gives a brief description of the little animal as he sees it.

In the poem, the innocent child repeatedly asks the lamb as to who made him. The child addresses Little Lamb to ask him who made him and wants to ascertain whether he knows who made him. The child wants to know who gave the Lamb his life, who fed him while living along

the river on the other said of the meadow. He also wants to know from the Lamb who supplied him with pleasant body-cover (clothing) which is so soft. The lamb is also asked by the child who gave him such delicate bleating voice, which causes an echo of a happy note in the surrounding valleys. The poem is marked by the child's innocence which is the first stage in Blake's search of truth.

In the second stanza of the poem, there is an identification of the lamb, Christ, and the child. Christ has another name, that is, Lamb, because Christ is meek and mild like lamb. Christ was also a child when he first appeared on this earth as the Son of God. Hence the appropriateness of the following lines: "He became a little child:/I a child & thou a lamb,/We are called by his name." The child in this poem speaks to the lamb, as if the lamb were another child and could respond to what is being said. The child shows his deep joy in the company of the lamb who is just like him, meek and mild. The poem conveys the spirit of childhood – the purity, the innocence, the tenderness of childhood and the affection that a child feels for little creatures.

So, the child himself proceeds to answer the questions he has asked the Lamb in the first stanza. The child says that the person, who has created the Lamb and has given many gifts described in the first stanza, is himself by the name of the Lamb. It is Jesus Christ who calls himself a Lamb. 'The Lamb' identifies with Christ to form a Trinity of Child, Lamb and Redeemer (Jesus).

The poem sees in the figure of the lamb an expression of God's will and the beauty of God's creation. It is told from the perspective of a child, who shows an intuitive understanding of the nature of joy and, indeed, the joy of nature. 'The Lamb', then, is a kind of hymn to God, praising God's creation. The poem asks a rhetorical question, "who made thee," but everything that follows is presented as evidence that God is the maker. The first stanza depicts the lamb in its natural habitat, a beautiful pastoral scene in which the lamb is free to run around. All that the lamb needs is provided for it, making the lamb a symbol of freedom and innocent joy. As the first stanza asks the question about the lamb's existence, the second gives the clear reply. Here, the poem takes up the lamb as a symbol. In John 1:29 in the Bible, Jesus Christ is given the title "Lamb of God." So the poem is not just marveling at the lamb itself, but also at the way in which the lamb *is* God, just as the Bible describes Jesus himself to be God. Both the lamb and the speaker, who is a child, are "called by his name." That is, in addition to being called "lamb" and

whatever the speaker's name may be, they are both also called "God." That's because, ultimately, everything that exists was created by God and nothing is separate from its creator. The poem thus expresses deep trust and faith in God's work.

Blake believed that men are born with everything they need to live - joy, freedom, and closeness with God. By making the speaker in this poem a child, Blake argues that people need to hold onto the values childhood represents. All of the poem's joyful appreciation of the lamb, nature, and God is tied to the speaker's childhood perspective. Childhood, then, is not a state of ignorance, but one of innate understanding. In the first stanza, the child worships the lamb. The child feels drawn to the small creature, perhaps sensing in the lamb a kind of symbol of himself: innocent, vulnerable, and joyful. The child's ability to appreciate and understand the lamb is to be noted here. Though the child expresses wonder at the lamb's existence, the child is nonetheless able to intuitively understand "who made" the lamb. That is, the child instinctively understands that the lamb is an expression of God's design—and that the child, too, is a part of this design. The child refers to Jesus, pointing out that He was also born into the world with all the innocence, vulnerability, and curiosity of a child. Jesus was God himself, showing that childhood is, in fact, something sacred. To underline this link between the lamb, the child, and God, the speaker states that "we are called by his name." They are unified because they are all parts of God.

Blake had the habit of incorporating illustrations on the contents of his poem in the page of the manuscript. So, students should minutely study the image of the manuscript with the illustration there. In that light, let us analyse the poem again. The poem begins with the question, "Little Lamb, who made thee?" The speaker, a child, asks the lamb about its origins: how it came into being, how it acquired its particular manner of feeding, its "clothing" of wool, its "tender voice." In the next stanza, the speaker attempts a riddling answer to his own question: the lamb was made by one who "calls himself a Lamb," one who resembles in his gentleness both the child and the lamb. The poem ends with the child bestowing a blessing on the lamb.

The poem is a child's song, in the form of questions and answers. The first stanza is rural and descriptive, while the second focuses on abstract spiritual matters and contains explanation and analogy. The child's question is both naive and profound. The question ("who made thee?") is a simple one, and yet the child is also tapping into the deep and timeless questions that all

human beings have, about their own origins and the nature of creation. The poem's apostrophic form contributes to the effect of naiveté, since the situation of a child talking to an animal is a believable one, and not simply a contrived one. Yet by answering his own question, the child converts it into a rhetorical one, thus counteracting the initial spontaneous sense of the poem. The answer is presented as a puzzle or riddle, and even though it is an easy one—child's play—this also contributes to an underlying sense of ironic knowledge in the poem. The child's answer, however, reveals his confidence in his simple Christian faith and his innocent acceptance of its teachings.

The lamb, of course, symbolizes Jesus. The traditional image of Jesus as a lamb underscores the Christian values of gentleness, meekness, and peace. The image of the child is also associated with Jesus: in the Gospel, Jesus displays a special solicitude for children, and the Bible's depiction of Jesus in his childhood shows him as guileless and vulnerable. These are also the characteristics from which the child-speaker approaches the ideas of nature and of God.

'The Lamb' is the counterpart poem to Blake's poem, 'The Tyger' in *Songs of Experience*. Blake wrote *Songs of Innocence* as contrary to the *Songs of Experience*, both, together forming the central tenet in his philosophy. 'The Lamb', like many of the *Songs of Innocence*, accepts what Blake saw as the more positive aspects of conventional Christian belief. But it does not provide a completely adequate doctrine, because it fails to account for the presence of suffering and evil in the world. Taken together, the two poems, 'The Lamb' and 'The Tyger', give a perspective on religion that includes the good and clear as well as the terrible and inscrutable. These poems complement each other to produce a fuller account of Blake's vision.

The Tyger, as part of *Songs of Experience*, was published in 1794. The poem begins with the speaker asking a fearsome tiger what kind of divine being could have created it: "What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame they fearful symmetry?" Each subsequent stanza contains further questions, all of which refine this first one. From what part of the cosmos could the tiger's fiery eyes have come, and who would have dared to handle that fire? What sort of physical presence, and what kind of dark craftsmanship, would have been required to "twist the sinews" of the tiger's heart? The speaker wonders how, once that horrible heart "began to beat," its creator would have had the courage to continue the job. Comparing the creator to a

blacksmith, he ponders about the anvil and the furnace that the project would have required and the smith who could have wielded them. And when the job was done, the speaker wonders, how would the creator have felt? “Did he smile his work to see?” Could this possibly be the same being who made the lamb?

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. One should 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.

So, Blake has structured the poem to ring with incessant repetitive questioning, demanding of the creature, “Who made thee?” In the third stanza, the focus moves from the tiger, the creation, to the creator – of whom Blake wonders “What dread hand? & what dread feet?” In ‘The Lamb’ and ‘The Tyger’, Blake presents similar ideas from a different perspective which is known as his concept of “contraries”. With ‘The Lamb’ bringing our attention to innocence, ‘The Tyger’ presents a duality between aesthetic beauty and primal ferocity, and Blake believes that to see one, the hand that created ‘The Lamb’, one must also see the other, the hand that created ‘The Tyger’: “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” The *Songs of Experience* were written as a contrary to the *Songs of Innocence* – a central tenet in Blake's philosophy, and central theme in his work. The struggle of humanity is based on the concept of the contrary nature of things,

The fiery imagery used throughout the poem conjures the tiger's aura of danger: fire equates to fear. The first stanza and sixth stanza, alike in every respect except for the shift from 'Could frame' to '*Dare* frame', frame the poem, asking about the immortal creator responsible for the beast. The second stanza continues the fire imagery established by the image of the tiger 'burning bright', with talk of 'the fire' of the creature's eyes, and the notion of the creator fashioning the tiger out of pure fire, as if He had reached his hand into the fire and moulded the creature from it. In the third stanza and fourth stanza, Blake introduces another central metaphor, explicitly drawing a comparison between God and a blacksmith. It is as if the Creator made the blacksmith in his forge, hammering the base materials into the living and breathing ferocious creature which now walks the earth.

The fifth stanza is more puzzling, but 'stars' have long been associated with human destiny. When the Creator fashioned the tiger, Blake asks, did he look with pride upon the animal he had created? The broader point is one that many Christian believers have had to grapple with: if God is all-loving, why did he make such a fearsome and dangerous animal? We can't easily fit the tiger into the 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' view of Christian creation. As Blake himself asks, 'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?' In other words, did God make the gentle and meek animals, but also the destructive and ferocious ones? Presumably the question is rhetorical. Indeed, we might take such an analysis further and see the duality between the lamb and the tiger as being specifically about the two versions of God in Christianity: the vengeful and punitive Old Testament God, and the meek and forgiving God presented in the New Testament.

So far as the significance of the fire in the poem, it's worth noting that this fiery imagery also summons the idea of Greek myth – specifically, the myth of Prometheus, the deity who stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind. From that daring act of transgression, man's development followed. Once man had fire, he was free, and had the divine spark. Blake's question 'What the hand, dare seize the fire?' alludes to the figure of Prometheus, seizing fire from the gods and giving it to man. The Tyger seems to embody, in part, this transgressive yet divine spirit. But, ultimately, 'The Tyger' remains, like the creature itself, an enigma, a fearsome and elusive beast.

Here also, the students are exhorted to have a look at Blake's illustration in relation to the poem. 'The Tyger' clearly works on a metaphorical level. It is full of references to rebellion: to Satan's revolt in Paradise Lost ('the stars threw down their spears'), to Prometheus, ('What the hand dare seize the fire?'), and, perhaps to Icarus ('On what wings dare he aspire?' – though this line might just as easily evoke Milton's Satan). Such images have led some critics to see the tiger as a metaphor for revolution. Another complex aspect of Blake's metaphor is that, unlike the lamb, who is 'made' by God, the tiger owes its existence to a combination of human labour and industrial process. Stanza three focuses on human effort, the shoulder and the art which 'twist the sinews of thy heart'. Stanza four conceives of the tiger's creation in terms of industry, using a series of metonyms for the blacksmith's forge: 'hammer', 'chain', 'furnace', 'anvil'. While, like all the Romantics, Blake was repelled by the Industrial Revolution and its objectification of human beings, this stanza has undeniable energy and a fascination with what industry can produce: 'what dread grasp | Dare its deadly terrors clasp?' It's interesting that both the worker and the tiger are represented by a strange combination of body parts ('shoulder', 'heart', 'sinews', 'hand', 'feet', 'brain'). Where 'The Lamb' offers the reader simple certainties and the loving, benign God of the New Testament, 'The Tyger' presents creation as enigmatic and unknowable. Some critics see this as indicative of the painful, fallen world of experience where faith is impossible, 'the distant deeps' offering only insecurity and epistemological chaos. 'The Tyger' thus becomes part of the *Experience* poems' pessimism and anguish.

The following topics may be prepared for long answers:

1. Compare and contrast 'The Lamb' and 'The Tyger'.
2. How does 'The Lamb' and 'The Tyger' illustrate Blake's concept of contraries.
3. Write a note on Blake's use of symbols in 'The Lamb' and 'The Tyger'.

For semi-long answers, the following may be prepared:

1. How is childhood depicted in 'The Lamb'?
2. "Little Lamb who made thee" – Comment.
3. Pick up the images of industry from 'The Tyger' and explain them.
4. "The Tyger' is structured in a series of questions" – Discuss.