

William Blake's "The Tyger" In "Songs of Experience" A contrary vision

Marwan M. Hussain⁽¹⁾

المخلص

يناقش البحث قصيدتين مشهورتين للشاعر الإنكليزي وليم بليك، وهي "أغاني الخبرة" و "أغاني البراءة"، ولاسيما الأفكار الرمزية ل (النمر والحمل) المذكورين في هاتين القصيدتين. إنه محاولة لفهم الرؤية المتناقضة التي يقدمها الشاعر باستخدامه لمعنى النمر وذلك عن طريق تحليل النص الشعري والكشف عن مواضيعه وأبعاده وأخيرا طرح أسئلة لتبيان الغاية التي تكمن وراء هذا الخلق.

Abstract

The following paper is a discussion of two poems by the English poet, William Blake---"Songs of Experience" and "Songs of Innocence" mainly the symbolic concepts of the Tyger and the lamb. It is an attempt to understand Blake's contrary vision in "The Tyger" by analyzing it, finding the general themes, and finally questioning creation.

⁽¹⁾ Teacher, Department of English, College of Arts,
University Of Mosul.

The Tyger / William Blake (1757 – 1827)

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

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

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?

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? ²

William Blake, born 1757 and died 1827, is an English poet, painter, engraver, and visionary mystic whose hand-illustrated a series of lyrical and epic poems, beginning with "Songs of Innocence"(1789) and "Songs of Experience" (1794), from one of the most striking original and independent bodies of work in the western cultural tradition.

A poet and artist whose works deserve frequent assessment, William Blake's vision gains depth as well as complexity. simple songs turn out to be intricate knots; lines between innocence and experience blur.

Blake's Ideas and Themes in "The Tyger":

The "Tyger" from the "Songs of Experience" is considered to be the famous and greatest song among "Songs of Experience". It is a symbolic poem; it refers to the fearful power of worldly experience.

(²) George K. Anderson and others eds., The Literature of England (Illinois: Scott, Foresman and company, 1979), P.635. All references to this poem are based on this edition.

“The Tyger” in “Songs of Experience” counterbalances “The Lamb” in “Songs of Innocence”. Between the two comes the French Revolution, of which Blake was for a time an enthusiastic partisan. The world after the Revolution is unhappy; lacks love and gaiety. Religion is poisoned by hatred. The symbol of life is no longer the lamb but the tyger, marvelous, no doubt, but an object of terror whose existence bears witness that not all creation is good.³

When we read the poem line by line, we immediately get the impression that the poem is a contemplation of the fact that besides peacefulness and gentleness, the world includes fierce strength terrifying in its possibility of destructiveness but also impressive and admirable. An amazing part of creation is to see that the Tiger’s fierceness and the lamb’s gentleness are also contrasting qualities of the human mind. Blake tries to show us the two sides of the world.

Blake presents the fierceness of nature not through a symbolic object “a tiger” but through the object itself embodied in a particular language. The “burning bright” may refer to the two burning eyes in the darkness, but the phrase itself makes the whole tiger a symbol of a burning passion.

(³) Albert C. Baugh, ed, A Literary History of England Vol. IV. (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1967), P.1133.

We have so many questions in this poem without answers⁴, as if the questions are left to be answered by the readers; each one depends on his point of view. Among the questions Blake asks is whether the Creator smiled with satisfaction in what He had made when in fact its ferocious strength was so appealing that even the stars deserted their armed formidability and broke down in tears⁵.

As Gardner suggests that the stars-symbols of material power cast aside the instruments of strife and take on pity; and the Creator “smiles upon the triumph of the Lamb. The lamb, the tiger are all will live in harmony; the tiger lies down with the lamb. However, we can see that the experienced tiger corrupts the pure lamb; the worldly experiences do not leave any one to stay in his/her innocent state. One can learn too much by experience and be corrupted too much. It is obvious that Blake considers experience as a transitional stage between lamb and tiger. It may be Blake’s direct moral comment on the London world at his time.⁶

(⁴)Boris Ford, ed., The Pelican Guide to English Literature Vol. V. (London: Harmondsworth Cor., 1957), PP.424 – 425.

(⁵) Paul McCormick and Winifred Post,ed., Adventures in English Literature (New Jersey: Hartcourt Bruce Jovanovich Cor., 1968), PP.424 – 425.

(⁶) Ford, ed., P.70.

A Critical Analysis of “the Tyger”:

The poem deals with experience, being a contemplation of the fact that the world includes opposite aspects: beauty and gentleness on one side, strength and destruction on the other side. “The Tyger” tackles the idea of how God could make such a terrible and beautiful animal as the tiger. The poem begins by addressing an imaginative tiger:

Tyger! Tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night.

What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Clearly, this tiger is part of the whole creation but its features make its presence fearful and uncommon. It has become the symbol of terror but the reader is attracted by its description in such a way that he is amazed by its beautiful image. “The forests of the night” represents the world of experience with its blindness, ignorance and repression.

The song opens with a question and closes with a question unanswered. The poet emphasizes the tiger’s symmetry, depicting the beast as a very fascinating creation. He indicates to the tiger’s divine nature by referring to the immortal hand or eye. However, the first stanza says that the beast is part of the creation

but the Creator cannot be described. We see the tiger's shoulders so powerful, whose beauty and strength delight the reader. Thus the ability of the Creator must be fearful and wonderful because His tiger is terribly wonderful:

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?

The lines above convey a feeling of the tiger with flashing eyes; it is like a fire in the jungle which shines from a distance. The third coming stanza presents the tiger as a wonderful creature; every one is terrified by its appearance. It is a single question reflecting the wonder felt at the image of this beast:

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

The twisting of the beast does not convey only the greatness of God but it also shows the dreadful image of a beast formed in an amazing way.

The fourth stanza offers the image of this wild beast through concrete details. It reminds the reader of the fearful strength of the tiger and suggests that if a tiger terrifies us by its strength we should be puzzled by the Creator's divine power:

What the hammer? What the Chain?
In what furnace was the brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

Blake's introduction of the stars and heaven, in the fifth stanza, makes a turning point in the composition of the song:

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?

The stars here seem capable of heavenly care and of pity and passion.

Why do the stars woe?

Presumably, they weep for the suffering of humanity...for the existence of sorrow and misery in our universe. The last line of the stanza above offers a sense that the Creator who made this wild beast is able to create also a tender lamb. Hence, both are

the art of God, the first one with its strength and fearful beauty, and the other with its gentleness and mildness.

Generally speaking, the tiger embodies something more than a mere symbol; the tiger seems to represent some morally ambiguous force or potency in the universe, self-assertive energy in an absolute contrast to the tameness and mildness of the lamb⁷.

Another representation of the tiger is the connection between art and rebellion which is reinforced by “ What the hand, dare seize the fire? ” (line 8), referring to Prometheus who stole the fire from the gods and gave it as a gift to humanity.⁸

Blake's symbols in “The Tyger”:

To understand “The Tyger” fully, one needs to know about Blake's themes and symbols. One of the major themes in his major works is about creation. Blake identifies God's creative process with the work of an artist; it is the 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.

(⁷) Karen Lawrence, et al, The McGraw-Hill Guide to English Literature Nol. 11. (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Co., 1958), PP.13 – 14.

(⁸) Ibid., P.4.

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. Blake's books describe God's creation of animals and people within the world of nature⁹.

In believing that creation followed a cosmic catastrophe and a fall of spiritual beings into matter, Blake recalls Agnosticism, a religious movement that has run parallel to Christianity; however, unlike most other Agnosticizers, Blake considers our own world to be a fine and wonderful place. For him the purpose of creation is a place for our 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.

For the casual reader, the poem "The Tyger" is about the question that most of us ask when we first hear about God as the benevolent Creator of nature: Why is there bloodshed and pain and horror?

⁽⁹⁾ Ed Friedlander, World Literature Vol. II (Internet 2001), P.1.

There are many various answers that are obviously not true. "The Tyger" which usually finishes without an answer, is about our experience of not getting a completely satisfactory answer to this essential question of faith.

Furthermore, "The Tyger" conveys new approaches and new outlooks at traditional symbols, such as, for example, the case of stars. In the story of creation and in particular "Job", the stars sing for joy at creation, a scene Blake used to illustrate in his art.

However, in Blake's later books, the stars throw down their cups at the collapse of a previous clockwork universe founded on pure reason.

For Blake, the stars represent cold reason and objective science. Although Blake was hostile to attempts to reduce all phenomenon to chemistry and physics, he greatly appreciated the explosion of scientific knowledge during his era ¹⁰.

But there is something about seeing a tyger, which one cannot see without the sense of awe and fear. And here the idea of the tyger is associated with evil. That is why:

The stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears

(¹⁰) Ibid., P.4.

They weep for the suffering, for the misery, and for evil on earth. And Blake has brought this image to our attention ¹¹.

The Tyger Versus The Lamb:

Truly, this contrast is best seen between Blake's poems "The Tyger" and "The Lamb". The poems are written with very different tones and subjects but they have some similarities which make the comparison more intriguing.

In "The Tyger" from "Songs of Experience", the speaker is much older than the child of "The Lamb". The tone is dark and questioning. The speaker asks: What immortal hand or eye/ could frame thy fearful symmetry? Blake's question shows us the loss of innocence and trust even in the immortal hand of God. Further, the questioning continues throughout the Tyger and illustrates the mistrust that the speaker has for the maker who made the Lamb and the Tyger. The Tyger is described in this poem as almost a metallic being forged with furnace, hammer and anvil. The Tyger burning bright, as if still hot from the fire coming from the depths of hell, this imagery is meant to burn the question posed in line twenty: Did he who made the lamb make

(¹¹) J.E. Grant, A Discussion of William Blake (New York: Heath & Company, 1961), PP.50 – 52.

thee? Into the minds of the readers. How can this be ..the lamb and the Tyger of the same God?

There is no real answer resolved within the poem, but the question is what really matters ¹².

Questioning Creating:

Who Made Thee?

In most cases, the poems written by the same author often display similar themes. The author usually concentrates on a certain particular topic or idea and strongly states it in his writings. Sometimes, authors use aspects of their own lives as a basis for their writing. In Blake's poem, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger", he uses a similar theme in both poem; they deal with the question of creation and religion.

To Blake, the Lamb represents a state of innocence and fragility.

Baby Jesus is referred to as "The Lamb of God". And because Blake is a mystic, obsessed with God, he refers to the entity that created the Lamb as the entity by which he himself was created. What was Blake trying to say here? Did he feel that his life was just as symbolic as that of the "Lamb" or Baby Jesus, life? Or did he think that he would be recognized as a prophet of the Lord in

(¹²) Patrick Chee, World Literature Vol. 11 (Internet, 2001), P.3.

a future reference of religion? A distinction is hard to make in this matter.

In “The Tyger”, Blake portrays the Tyger as a symbol of evil. This can be seen when Blake writes: what the anvil, what dread grasp/ Dare its deadly terrors clasp? By repeating the word “Dread” throughout the poem, the author emphasizes the evil that consumes the Tyger. And as in “The Lamb”, Blake ties the Tyger to creation and again questions it as an entity: Did He who the Lamb make thee? Although the poem deals with a similar theme, “The Tyger” does not question; ‘How’ it was created, rather it presents another big question... ‘why’ it was created:

When the stars threw down-their spears,
And water’d heaven with their tears,
Did He who made the Lamb make thee?

Seemingly, together “The Lamb” and “The Tyger” focus on the importance of knowing evil (the tiger), even though it is not always seen. This fable is incorporated in hope of attaining a state of innocence (the lamb). Thus the lamb becomes a symbol of innocence and the tiger becomes a symbol of evil. And if the lamb is not aware that the tiger is nearby, it will be devoured; implying the loss of innocence. However, innocence will survive if the lamb exhibits some degree of self-awareness.

Conclusion:

In brief, the tiger seems, symbolically, to suggest the presence of destruction, horror, strength and beauty which pervade every corner of the universe. At the same time, the poem suggests that the world of Experience is really a complex one.

As for the contradictions and paradoxical visions presented in both poem, I think there is no need for amazement because it is God who created the lamb created also the tiger, because there is no need of Lamb without the presence of tiger as there is no need of Heaven without the experience of Hell, and vice versa.

Bibliography

1. Anderson, George K. and others, eds., The Literature of England Illinois: Scott, Foresman & Company, 1979.
2. Baugh, Albert C., A Literary History of England Vol. IV. London: Routledge and Kegan, 1967.
3. Chee, Patrick, World Literature Vol. 11. Internet 2001.
4. Fond, Boris, ed., The Pelican Guide to English Literature Vol. V. London: Harmondsworth Cor., 1957.
5. Friedlander, Ed, World Literature Vol. 11. Internet 2001.
6. Grant, J. F. A Discussion of William Blake New York: Heath and Company, 1961.
7. Lawrence, Karen, et al, The McGraw-Hill Guide to English Literature Vol. 11. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Com., 1958.
8. Cormick, Paul and Post, Winifred, eds., Adventures in English Literature. New Jersey: Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich Cor., 1968.