


Plot Summary: "The Tyger"

 DISCovering Authors, 2003

Introduction

Published in 1794 as one of the Songs of Experience, Blake's "The Tyger" is a poem about the nature of creation, much as is his earlier poem from the Songs of Innocence, "The Lamb." However, this poem takes on the darker side of creation, when its benefits are less obvious than simple joys. Blake's simplicity in language and construction contradicts the complexity of his ideas. This poem is meant to be interpreted in comparison and contrast to "The Lamb," showing the "two contrary states of the human soul" with respect to creation. It has been said many times that Blake believed that a person had to pass through an innocent state of being, like that of the lamb, and also absorb the contrasting conditions of experience, like those of the tiger, in order to reach a higher level of consciousness. In any case, Blake's vision of a creative force in the universe making a balance of innocence and experience is at the heart of this poem.

Explication

Lines 1-2:

William Blake's tiger is a passionate, fiery creature. It is a creature, a beast, who lives in the shadows and dark hours of life. Some have considered this tiger representing the dark shadow of the human soul, much as Carl Jung would describe it more than a century later. This is the beastly part of ourselves that we would prefer to keep only in our dreams at night if it has to be anywhere. Night in Blake's poetry often seems to suggest this sort of dream time. The forests might represent the wild landscape of our imagination under the influence of this beast.

Lines 3-4:

These two lines should be familiar in context to the first two lines in Blake's poem, The Lamb. Lined up next to each other they even rhyme. Since they appear in the companion text to *Experience*, we can draw the conclusion that this poem is meant to be understood in comparison and contrast to that earlier power. We are asked not to consider the biological parentage of the tiger, but rather the Divine parentage of the tiger. In doing this we can begin to compare the nature of a lamb to a tiger, and begin to understand Blake's philosophy about creation. The fact that perhaps the same *immortal hand* created both the domesticated and tame nature of the lamb, and the wild characteristic of the tiger is frightening in a way. There is a balance there, but perhaps not the kind of balance we would choose ourselves given the choice.

Lines 5-6:

In contrast to the pastoral setting of the innocent lamb, the tiger is born out of the depths of consciousness, and our highest flights of fantasy. Again, Blake uses the metaphor of fire to describe the way the tiger sees and is seen. This is not the unpretentious vision of the lamb. The tiger has fury and grounds to believe in its own strength. The tiger could be understood as similar to our psychological view of the ego. It is the part of us that believes in its own power, in its own vision.

Lines 7-8:

It could be debated that Blake argues here that the Fallen Archangel Lucifer is the creator of the tiger, or the beastly part of our own nature. Another fallen God was Prometheus. He was damned to having his liver picked out by a bird of prey and have it grow back again every day throughout eternity, because he gave the power of fire to humanity. In mystical thought, Lucifer in creating evil and darkness actually fulfills God's plan that humanity may see what is good and light more clearly in contrast and comparison. Since The Tyger seems to be meant to be seen in comparison to The Lamb one can begin to guess at Blake's intentions for our interpretation of the poem. Fire suggests a hellish beginning, and yet, it is daring that makes this very world possible. God could have imagined this world, but decided to create it. This is the challenge of every artist. What is daring if not courage?

Lines 9-10:

These lines speak to the very power and strength of the tiger, and of its maker. Shoulders and art both carry responsibilities and burdens. Sinews are the very tendons that make the heart work, and they are also known as a source of strength and power. Blake seems to be suggesting that the creator of this powerful creature is awesome in its own right. Here we also get the very image of creativity as it happens. We see the shoulders in action. We see the process of the imagination in blending together the elements that make up a tiger. We see the twisting of the material heart into shape. The heart represents not only the biological engine of the tiger, but perhaps its passion for living.

Lines 11-12:

Now, the creation itself, the tiger, has a life of its own. No longer under the control of the artist, Blake wonders what the artist could have been thinking in creating it. Notice that Blake, or his narrator, speaks directly to the tiger, as did the speaker to the lamb. We perceive the narrator's reaction to speaking directly to the tiger in the descriptive language, and in these lines "dread" is the main idea. There seems to be an unspoken question implicit here, namely, "Why?" Perhaps, this is an attempt to reconcile the wild beast with a sense of order about the universe and its workings. Can God have created a dreadful creature, and if so does this task make God's hands dreadful? If the artist is an earthly reflection of God's creative nature, what does that say about the artist's hands?

Lines 13-14:

Again, the imagery in these two lines is more infernal than heavenly. Hammers, chains and furnaces sound like an industrial factory more than an artist's workshop. One of the themes throughout *Songs of Experience* is the condemnation of the Industrial Revolution. These lines could suggest that the encroachment of industry on the pastoral world of Blake's childhood was the tangible hell to which the poet was referring. Again, we must return to the image of a fiery tiger whose very thinking began in a furnace. Here creation doesn't come so much from divine inspiration as divine perspiration.

Lines 15-16:

The anvil is a tool of both industry and art. The artist or God or devil clasps and grasps in passion and with courage. What makes this courage and enthusiasm so deadly and terrifying? The nature of creativity is also a favorite theme of Blake's. In these lines he confronts his worst fears about what it means to create. He never suggests, however, that the tiger shouldn't have been created.

Lines 17-18:

These lines reinforce the idea of defeated and fallen angels. Lucifer's minions, when defeated and condemned to hell, were thought to have created the milky way with their tears. Their battle had been over making angels superior to humanity in God's eyes, but God refused. The difference, it is said, between humankind and the angels, is that humans were created with the capacity to improve. Lucifer, as the Devil, would have us forget this possibility. What does this myth have to do with the tiger? Perhaps, Blake is playing with the idea of perception. It is how we perceive the tiger that makes him terrifying or passionate. Remember, if we continue with the Judeo-Christian-Islamic canon, God created Lucifer and his followers, as well as the lambs. This is a fairly awesome concept. Something beautiful comes out of even the fallen angel's descent—the stars themselves.

Lines 19-20:

Finally, Blake gets down to business, and asks the fateful question. Did the same God who made the lamb also make the tiger? This makes all the more awesome the concept of God, if it is true. It suggests that God knows something that we human beings do not. It suggests that God has the capacity for tenderness and dread, and that neither one or the other is more pleasurable. This also speaks to the romantic view of artists. Artists sometimes create art that is distasteful to the public, but does that mean that they should not *smile* at their own work, and realize that in time it may be better understood? This must have been something that Blake himself struggled with during his lifetime, as his poetry was not embraced by the public until much later in his career.

Lines 21-22:

Blake uses repetition to reinforce his ideas, and to ask us to take another look at the meaning. If the tiger is not only burning, but it is burning brightly, then isn't it a creature of light? If it is a creature of light, walking through the darkness, then doesn't it serve to illuminate the shadows within ourselves, and out in the world? Finally, if this tiger, with its inner strength and prowess, serves as a guiding light through the darkness then doesn't our fear of it become rather shortsighted? Again, it is highly recommended that a student of Blake's poetry attempt to view his illustrations in concert with interpreting his poetry. There are several different illustrations of the tiger, and in some it does appear to be a ferocious beast, but in some drawings the tiger appears to be more of a guiding light. Blake seems to have enjoyed creating the same ambiguity that he perceived in God's creations.

Line 23:

This is a fearless *immortal* who made both the docile lamb, and the fiery tiger. To consider the creature, we are asked to consider the creator. In reflection, we must also look at the creativity in the microcosm of this world by the artist. It is significant that Blake chooses the word "*dare*" in the last line, instead of "*could*" because once again it emphasizes the concept of courage in relationship to creation. Finally,

we must once again compare and contrast the beast with the tamed one, and consider the proper balance of nature framed by the hand of the Divine.

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