

The Department of English

RAJA NARENDRALAL KHAN WOMEN'S COLLEGE

GOPE PALACE, MIDNAPORE, WEST BENGAL

Offers

COURSE MATERIAL ON:

William Blake: 'The Lamb' & 'The Tyger'

For

Semester- II

Paper- CC4: British Romantic Literature (1798-1832)

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1. Towards Romanticism: Late 18th Century Cultural and Literary Ethos

In the realm of English literature, the eighteenth century was dominated by 'Reason'. Neo-classical and Augustan literature was highly satiric, realistic and was chiefly the expression of urban culture. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, there appeared a strong reaction against neo-classical inclinations in the corpus of thinking and literature with the rise of new philosophies and principles of cognitive study (chiefly triggered by the ideas propagated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke et al.). Late eighteenth-century poets were displeased with the ideals of 'wit', 'good sense' and 'blind adherence to pre-existing classical norms'. Eighteenth century spirit restrained the free flow of poetic lyricism in literature.

As a response to it, late eighteenth-century poets (and all literary persons) felt a strong urge for the Romantic Revival that would respond in giving birth to a new aesthetic mode of imaginative sensibility. These poets are generally referred to as the transitional poets or the 'precursors of romanticism'. Poets like James Thomson, William Collins, Thomas Gray, William Cowper, Thomas Chatterton, Robert Burns and William Blake form the group.

If we analyze the features of the poetry of these poets, we would find that:

- (i) These poets believe in 'liberal humanism'. These poets were not so much concerned about rules and conventions, they believe in the principles of liberalism and individualism.
- (ii) Their poetry is a candid assemblage of passion, emotion, and imagination.
- (iii) In them the common trait was "a love of the wild, fantastic, abnormal, and supernatural", as Hudson observes.
- (iv) Their poetry subscribes a new dimension of the world of nature and man-nature-nurture or 'nature-culture' discourse that had been neglected by the neoclassicals.
- (v) In their poetry we can see bold experiments with new measures and stanzaic formations.

2. William Blake: A Precursor of Romanticism

With William Blake (1757-1827) we move across the threshold into the realm of Romantic Movement in English literature. Blake started examining the world with the fresh gaze of a child. He was one of the earliest English poets who raised voice in favour of the call for 'return to nature'. He had the vision of a mystic and artistry of a painter.

Through his works, whether be it painting or poetry, Blake acted as a liberator of the human spirit and the imagination. He appreciated the unsophisticated feelings of ordinary man. He was a man to reflect on the 'short and simple annals' of the poor and the downtrodden. He was the man who played instrumental role in heralding the dawn of Romanticism. Quite rightly Swinburne has observed that 'the school of poetry which we call Romantic' was founded at midnight by William Blake and fortified at sunrise by William Wordsworth. Blake was the greatest of the pre-Romantic poets, of the precursors of the romantic revival in English literature.

3. William Blake: A Painter and a Poet

William Blake was born on 28 November 1757 at Broad Street, London. He was the third of seven children of James and Catherine Blake. His father was a hosier. He attended school for a short period of time and left it at the age of ten. He got his early education at home by his mother Catherine Blake. During this period, the creative genius in him started inclining more towards paintings. On 8 October 1779, Blake took admission at the Royal Academy, England. But there he engaged himself in contradicting the trend of art propagated by Sir Joshua Reynolds, who was the President of the Royal Academy. Blake left the Royal Academy partly because of this growing conflict with Sir Joshua Reynolds.

There seems to have been some subjective antagonism between Blake and Reynolds. The older artist reached the top of fame and prosperity in his profession. However, for the budding artist Blake, Reynolds was the figure always endorsing a homogenous, generalised, 'gaudy' and normative academic art. Reynolds was more involved in emphasizing artist's acquisition of skills; whereas Blake believed in artist's instinct, impulse, freedom of thought and expression.



'Gaudy' paintings of Sir Joshua Reynolds



Blake's Paintings reflecting on artistic freedom of thought and expression

In later part of his life he came very close to Henry Fuseli, a Swiss artist living in England, who was a friend of Blake. His paintings influenced Blake to a great extent.



Painting by Henry Fuseli

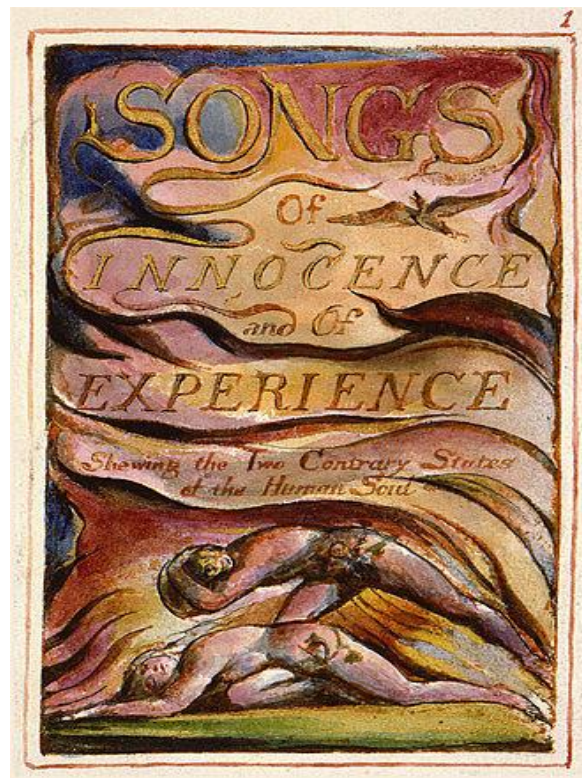


Blake's Paintings: Clearly show Fuseli's influence

Blake is unique among the artists of his time, and rare amongst artists of any era, in his assimilation of writing and painting into a single creative process, and in his use of innovative production techniques to combine image and text in single compositions. Celebrated for his visual output, Blake is also recognized as one of the most revolutionary poets of the early Romantic period, combining a highly wrought, Miltonic style with grand, Gothic themes. Moreover, through original techniques such as his "illuminated printing" Blake was able to adapt his craft to meet the demands of his creativity.

Blake's spiritual vision was central to his creativity, and was crucially and uniquely informed by a complex, imaginative pantheon of his own making, populated by Gods and Goddesses such as Urizen, Los, Enitharmion, Orc etc. However, in his epic poem sequences, Blake envisioned the fate of the human world, in the era of the French and American Revolutions, determined by the battles between thought and imagination, lust and piety, order and revolutionary designs.

4. *Songs of Innocence and Experience:*



Frontispiece: *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

Songs of Innocence and Experience is an illustrated collection of poems by William Blake. It appeared in two parts. A few poems (almost 19) were printed and illustrated by William Blake himself in 1789. Five years later, in the year 1794, he re-published these poems with a set of new 26 poems in a volume titled *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*.

'The Songs of Innocence' portray the naive hope and fear that inform the lives of children and trace their transformation as the child grows into adulthood. Some of the poems are written from the perspective of a child, while others are about children and their world as seen from the perspective of a sensitive adult. Many of the poems draw attention to the positive aspects of natural human understanding prior to the corruption and distortion caused by the world of experience.

The *Songs of Experience* is a study in contrast, a work via parallels and contrasts to lament the ways in which the harsh experiences of adult life tear down everything good in the phase of innocence. These latter poems we see the repressive effects of jealousy, shame, and secrecy, all of which corrupt the

serenity and simplicity of innocent love. Regarding religion, these poems are fond to be attached more with the notion of individual faith than with the institutionalized dictums.

5. Textual Analysis and Critical Estimation:

5.1 'The Lamb':



Included in *The Songs of Innocence* published in 1789, William Blake's poem 'The Lamb' has been regarded "as one of the great lyrics of English Literature." In the form of a dialogue between the child and the lamb, the poem is an assemblage of the Christian theological and doctrinal beliefs and pastoral tradition of lyrical composition. The lamb is the cosmic symbol of innocence, selflessness, sacrificial ethos like Jesus and the 'Divine Humanity'. Throughout the poem, the poet is found to identify the lamb with Christ, and it, in a way forms a 'Trinity' comprised of the child, the lamb and the Redeemer. The poem showcases the ethos of charity substantiating Christian compassion and caritas or caring, the ideals of the Lamb of God.

'The Lamb' is structured by two stanzas, each with five rhymed couplets. Cyclic repetition in the first and last couplet of each stanza makes these lines a refrain, and helps in providing the poem its song-like lyrical quality following the tradition of pastoral compositions. The flowing 'l's and soft vowel sounds also make a contribution to this effect, and also bring forth the bleating of a lamb or the lisping character of a child's mumbling chant.

In one way, 'The Lamb' is a didactic poem. In this poem the poet pays a tribute to the almighty Christ who was 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 live a mild life over the meadow. The child asks him if the lamb knows who has given it

bright and soft cover of wool that serves as being its clothing, who has given it a tender voice which fills the valley with ecstatic happiness. In the first stanza of ten lines of the poem 'The Lamb', the child who is supposed to be speaking to the lamb, gives a brief description of the little animal as he observes and examines it.

In the second stanza of the poem, there is an identification of the lamb, Christ, the Redeemer, and the child. To the whole Christian world, Christ is known by another name, the Lamb. It is because Christ is meek and mild just like a lamb. As a child with Divine radiance, Christ appeared in human incarnation among lambs. Here follow the 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.

The pastoral note in the poem is contributing heavily in projecting the poem as almost a poster poem of *The Songs of Innocence*. In the next ten lines of the second stanza of the poem, the child himself proceeds to seek answer of the questions he has asked the Lamb in the first stanza. 'The Lamb' by William Blake has been written in a question-answer pattern. Where its first stanza is descriptive and rural, the second concentrates on abstract spiritual matters and consists of analogies and explanations. The question of the child is both profound and naïve, and the apostrophic form of the poem make a contribution to the effect of naiveté, since the situation of a child in discourse with an animal is a convincing one, and not just a literary contrivance.

5.2 'The Tyger':



As part of *The Songs of Experience* collection 'The Tyger' is published in 1794. The poem begins with the speaker asking a frightening 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 distill this first one.

The poem continues with series of questions like- from which 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 poem is comprised of six quatrains in rhymed couplets. The meter is regular and rhythmic; the hammering beat throughout the poem suggests the smithy that has been remaining the central image in the poem. 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.

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 it. It also invites a contrast between the perspectives of "experience" and "innocence". '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.

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***Note: I am hereby acknowledging my thorough indebtedness to the resources I have got by accessing these web links and portals in the making of the module. I would advise the students to follow these web links and portals for better understanding of the issues discussed here.**

Appendix 1

A Short Analysis of William Blake's 'The Lamb' by Dr Oliver Tearle

'The Lamb' is one of William Blake's 'Songs of Innocence', and was published in the volume bearing that title in 1789; the equivalent or complementary poem in the later *Songs of Experience* (1794) is 'The Tyger'.

It's almost like a riddle, crossed with a nursery rhyme, crossed with a religious catechism. The poem has a simplicity to it, with its rhyming couplets and tetrameter rhythm. 'The Lamb' can be read and enjoyed by children: few words are likely to be unfamiliar, with only a couple ('meads' for meadows, 'vales' for valleys) being of a more 'poetical' stripe. 'The Lamb' reads like one of William Blake's most accessible and straightforward poems, but closer analysis reveals hidden meanings and symbolism. The solution to this riddle is: 'The Lamb made the lamb.' Christ, known as the 'Lamb of God', created all living creatures, including the little lamb – for Christ is not only the son of God but God the Creator.

As he reveals in the poem's second stanza, the speaker of 'The Lamb' is a child, in keeping with the childlike innocence found in much of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. This young speaker addresses the lamb, asking if it knows who made it, who gave it life and its woolly coat, and its pleasing bleating 'voice' that seems to make the surrounding valleys a happier place.

In summary, the lamb doesn't answer. Of course it doesn't. But the speaker answers his own question: 'I know who made you.' It was the Lord God, Jesus Christ, who also – funnily enough – calls himself by the name of 'Lamb', i.e. *Agnus Dei* or 'Lamb of God'. At several points in the New Testament, Jesus is called a lamb: in John 1:29, John the Baptist, upon seeing Jesus, proclaims, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' The Jesus-as-lamb metaphor returns in Revelation, the final book of the New Testament.

Jesus is associated with the lamb for several reasons: because Jesus' sacrifice echoed the Jewish concept of the 'scapegoat', because of the use of lambs in animal sacrifices, and because of the image of 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' which the New Testament goes some way towards promoting (to counter the smiting and vengeful God, Yahweh, from the Old Testament). This Christian symbolism is integral to a full analysis and understanding of 'The Lamb'.

But if both the literal lamb addressed in the poem and the 'Lamb of God' that is Jesus Christ are associated with each other in the poem, then the poem's speaker – in being a child – is linked to both: a child is a young person just as a lamb is a young sheep. They are also connected by their innocence. But the word 'meek' in the second stanza recalls Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount: 'Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the Earth' (Matthew 5:5). The child is exactly the sort of 'meek' Christian who might be viewed as an inheritor of the Earth. Speaker, lamb, and Christ are all linked by their innocence – making 'The Lamb', among all of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, one of the most innocent of all.

Appendix 2

A Short Analysis of William Blake's 'The Tyger' by Dr Oliver Tearle

'The Tyger' is arguably the most famous poem written by William Blake (1757-1827); it's difficult to say which is more well-known, 'The Tyger' or the poem commonly known as 'Jerusalem'. The poem's opening line, 'Tyger Tyger, burning bright' is among the most famous opening lines in English poetry (it's sometimes modernised as 'Tiger, Tiger, burning bright'). Below is this iconic poem, followed by a brief but close analysis of the poem's language, imagery, and meaning.

'The Tyger' was first published in William Blake's 1794 volume *Songs of Experience*, which contains many of his most celebrated poems. The *Songs of Experience* was designed to complement Blake's earlier collection, *Songs of Innocence* (1789), and 'The Tyger' should be seen as the later volume's answer to 'The Lamb', the 'innocent' poem that had appeared in the earlier volume.

Framed as a series of questions, 'Tyger Tyger, burning bright' (as the poem is also often known), in summary, sees Blake's speaker wondering about the creator responsible for such a fearsome creature as the tiger. The fiery imagery used throughout the poem conjures the tiger's aura of danger: fire equates to fear. Don't get too close to the tiger, Blake's poem seems to say, otherwise you'll get burnt.

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 (or He) had reached his hand into the fire and moulded the creature from it. (The image succeeds, of course, because of the flame-like appearance of a tiger's stripes.) It must have been a god who played with fire who made the tiger.

In the third and fourth stanzas, 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 (as the root of 'astrology' highlights). For Kathleen Raine, this stanza can be linked with another of William Blake's works, *The Four Zoas*, where the phrase which we also find in 'The Tyger', 'the stars threw down their spears', also appears. There it is the godlike creator of the universe (Urizen in Blake's mythology) who utters it; Urizen's fall, and the fall of the stars and planets, are what brought about the creation of life on Earth in Blake's Creation story. When the Creator fashioned the Tyger, Blake asks, did he look with pride upon the animal he had created?

How might we analyse 'The Tyger'? What does it mean? 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; the real question-behind-the-question is why. (This might help to explain Blake's reference to 'fearful symmetry': he is describing not only the remarkable patterns on the tiger's skin and fur which humans have learned to go in fear of, but the 'symmetry' between the innocent lamb on the one hand and the fearsome tiger on the other. ('Fearful' means 'fearsome' here, confusingly.)

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, Yahweh, and the meek and forgiving God presented in the New Testament. What bolsters such an interpretation is the long-established associations between the lamb and Jesus Christ. The tiger, whilst not a biblical animal, embodies the violent retribution and awesome might of Yahweh in the Old Testament.

But is the Christian belief-system the only way of approaching Blake's Tyger? Returning to the significance of 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 (literally, in being able to create fire). 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 none of these readings quite settles down into incontrovertible fact. 'The Tyger' remains, like the creature itself, an enigma, a fearsome and elusive beast.