
UNIT 3 WILLIAM BLAKE: ‘THE TYGER’, ‘THE LAMB’, ‘THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER’

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will help you understand:

- William Blake as a Romantic poet
- William Blake’s idea of dualism in his Songs of Innocence and Experience
- Blake as a critic of social evils in the ‘Chimney Sweeper’ poems

3.1 INTRODUCTION

William Blake was one of the most mysterious Romantic Poets in the 18th-19th centuries, Britain. He was not only a poet but also an engraver, a painter, and a mystic. He amalgamated imagination with originality to create a most curious concoction. Mixing word with image, most of his poetry is accompanied by rich art work. Despite his inherent mysticism, his works displayed a heightened sensibility and sensitivity towards social issues. He can be called a “veritable polymath” since he was also a musician, giving tunes to his own poetry and singing them aloud as songs.

Blake was born on 28th November, 1757 in a middle class family which lived in Soho in London, the city where he spent all his life. In 1772, he joined as an apprentice with a renowned engraver called James Basire where he was gradually drawn towards medieval art and history. He produced many spectacular works which were unique blends of poetic and artistic genius memorable to generations after him. The most famous of these are: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Jerusalem and Songs of Innocence and Experience. All of his works emerge from a personal mythology which could be seen as radical. Because of his dense philosophy, he never achieved the acclaim which he should have received during his lifetime and in his later years, was relegated to being close to insane. He was married to Catherine Boucher, who assisted him throughout in his pursuits but died childless.

3.2 THE SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

The poems in this unit are from William Blake's work titled 'Songs of Innocence and Experience'. This was a collection of his poems first printed by Blake himself in 1789, also illustrated with his own sketches. He republished the work five years later by including additional poems and called it *Songs of Innocence and Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of Human Soul*. Innocence and Experience are states of consciousness for Blake, neither of which is dispensable. Both, according to him, go on to make a composite whole. These two ideas suggest a mythical dualism which is a characteristic of the universe which incorporates binaries. The poems here are called 'songs' because as one of Blake's associates reported, Blake sang them aloud. Music was an important social skill with songs and singing being a vibrant and dominant culture among all sections of the society of the times. Operas and oratorio for the wealthy and street ballads for the poor were fairly common.

Though these poems seem to be relatively simple, even as they are written in childlike rhythms and rhyming patterns, they are deeply political, conveying complex emotions and commentary on existing social vices. Through images and imagery of everyday life, children, nature, animals and flowers, Blake portrays social injustices such as poverty, child labour, and abuse. As Julian Walker suggests, Blake's "Songs of Innocence and Experience", can be seen in relation with the development of children's literature as a genre. According to him:

The 18th century saw the development of children's literature as a genre: by the middle of the century it had become a profitable business. William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* look superficially like traditional 18th century verse for children. But, in fact, the poems challenge and overturn many of the ideas and conventions contained in children's literature, exploring complex ideas about childhood, morality and religion.

Various types of children's literature proliferated at this time, depending on various ideas and constructions of childhood at the time. According to the Christian morality of 'original sin', children were perceived as inherently evil who had to be redeemed by training and punishment to become good Christians. On the other hand, in John Locke's work such as "Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693)", the child's mind was perceived as an impressionable blank slate, to be carefully managed in order to create obedient, law abiding citizens. Jean Jacques Rousseau on the other hand thought of children as distinct entities, different from adults. The Romantics followed closely on his heels and constructed childhood as the ideal human state of pre-lapsarian innocence and adulthood as necessarily corrupt, characterised by a loss of innocence. Literature for children ranged from emblem books where animal anecdotes administered moral lessons, natural history books dealt with flora and fauna and school hornbooks that displayed both the alphabets and Biblical texts on a wooden

paddle covered with transparent horn. These developed later into spelling and grammar textbooks and instructional books, most of which were illustrated, just like Blake's works. However, in very many ways, Blake went against these widely prevalent children's literature and subverted it. Fundamentally, Blake's view and voice are that of a child rather than of a preaching adult. Blake refuses to offer a clear moral resolution which is very uncharacteristic of children's literature such as the chapbook. Without making a moral judgment, Blake's poetry elicits a respect for the duality of natural world and of existence.

Michael Phillips speaks of the illustration on the title page of the Songs of Innocence which depict:

Two children standing at the knee of their nurse or mother reading from a book, out of doors, in a garden or the countryside. Symbolically a young vine entwines itself for support around the trunk of a tree that in turn provides shade. Birds rise up through the lettering of the title. A piper in a broad brimmed hat leans against the capital letter of I of Innocence, while higher up, children can be seen playing higher up in O and G of Songs and an angel leans back against the letter N engaged in writing in a book.

Phillips, who compared this to other children's books of the times, finds Blake so much more progressive than the others. The picture spoken about above, in choosing an outdoor setting, makes the scene positively Romantic in its orientation. The children are placed in an idyllic surrounding, reading out to the adults. They are in control of their knowledge. This significant shift makes the adult acknowledge the children's way of experiencing the world.

3.3 THE LAMB

The Lamb is one of the simplest poems of Blake. It came out in his 'Songs of Innocence'. The symbolic meaning is almost obvious and overtly stated. There is a simple affirmation of faith. The companion piece for this poem is thought to be "The Tyger" in his Songs of Experience where he asks the rhetorical question, "Did he who made the lamb make thee?" The Lamb posits the process of creation as natural and spontaneous. In this poem, the speaker seems to be a child who compares the lamb with Jesus Christ and himself, a child. Addressing the lamb, the first of the two stanzas is full of questions:

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life and bade thee feed.
By the stream and o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing woolly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!
Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee?

On the other hand, the second stanza gives answers to the ones posed in the first part:

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek and he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child and thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee.

William Blake: 'The
Tyger', 'The Lamb',
'The Chimney
Sweeper'

The Lamb's innocence and gentleness is associated with that of Christ, the archetypal shepherd: the shepherd who was in charge of his herd. This of course, is only symbolical of Christ as a guide of mankind. Just as a lamb leads a completely natural existence feeding on grass and drinking from streams and clothed in soft wool, similarly a child is also, as the Romantics believed, and in the words of Wordsworth, "the father of man" in its state of innocence and oneness with nature. This oneness is reminiscent in turn with man's euphoric pre-lapsarian past in the Garden of Eden, man's original existence. By that logic, the father of man, Adam is also a child.

The gentle bleating of the lamb is similar to the merry chirping of the child which liven up the fields and valleys and the pastoral outdoors with their frolic and make it a repository of joy and happiness. They are both united in this as they share and inherit the gentleness of Christ, the Son of God. In Christian symbolism, Christ is memorialised, visualised, and worshipped as a little child in the arms of Virgin Mary. His vulnerability at the hands of worldly vices throws his innocence to even sharper contrast. The child then is pitted against the adult and the lamb is thereby contrasted with the tiger. The lamb and the tiger go to represent the dual facets of creation and the continuum of life. Good and vice are also the two aspects of the human soul. The stanza and therefore, the poem ends with uttering sincere prayers of long life to the lamb who is a representative of childlike innocence. As long as innocence is alive, the soul is alive and the world is balanced against the odds. The implicit meaning of this poem becomes even clearer when read in the light of its companion poem "The Tyger".

Check Your Progress -1

1. The Lamb symbolises:
 - a. Experience
 - b. Anger
 - c. Innocence
 - d. Sadness
2. The companion poem of The Lamb is:
 - a. The Chimney Sweeper
 - b. The Book of Urizen

- c. The Tyger
 - d. The Lion
3. The Lamb is compared to:
- a. Jesus Christ
 - b. The God of Old Testament
 - c. The God of New Testament
 - d. Nature

3.4 THE TYGER

This poem appeared in *The Songs of Experience*. Along with *The Lamb*, *The Tyger* asks the same question about human beings' birth, origin, and creation. "The Lamb" in "*The Songs of Innocence*" affirms that God made the lamb. Whereas the lamb posits the process of creation as natural and harmonious, the tiger is a vehicle to reflect the sinister designs existent in the universe. Together, they make what Blake calls "the fearful symmetry". The reverberating question here is "Did he who made the lamb make thee?" The silent response of course is that the same hands dared to make both. The carnivorous tiger is a predator, whereas the herbivorous lamb is a meek and timid animal meant for prey. Though the lamb and the tiger are antithetical to each other, the same maker has shaped them. The ecological cycle places them within a continuum which balances evolution and nurturance.

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

The *Tyger* is full of strong aggressive words like "burning", "night", "fearful", "deeps", "dread", "deadly", "terrors", which carry the sense of dark, awe-inspiring experience. This makes the reader aware of the terror that is essentially connected with creation. The tiger reveals to us the darker and fiercer side of creation.

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?

In Blake's personal mythology, the maker of tiger seems to bear a reference to Prometheus, who in Greek mythology, stole fire from the land of gods to gift human beings their civilisation. The fire that glows in the luminescent eyes of the tiger in the night seem to be the same, which was tamed and trapped by the bold hands of Prometheus and stolen from the land of gods. Prometheus was a Titan, a rebel and a cultural hero celebrated by many poets during this time, the most prominent being P.B. Shelley, whose *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) was an iconic work. In Blake's own personal mythology, he revises the creation myth to take us before creation. Him who he calls Urizen is a self-absorbed creator of a novel universe and its rules and his son Orc is also a spirit of rebellion,

resistance, and freedom. As the French Revolution triggered admiration and response in much of Romantic poetry and its imagery, this spirit of rebellion and freedom from authoritarian aristocracy is celebrated and written about with gusto. The tiger's ferociousness also symbolises bold challenge to prescriptive rules and thus becomes a vehicle of challenge and freedom.

The poem is full of references to rebellion and therefore references to mythological characters emblematic of resistance and rebellion abound here. Along with Prometheus, there are overt and covert references to Satan who was struck by thunderbolt "As stars threw down their spears", and to Icarus "Of what wings dare he aspire?" or Vulcan/Mulciber "In what furnace was thy brain?". These have led most scholars to identify the tiger as a symbol of revolution. Peter Ackroyd is of the opinion that:

Even as Blake worked upon the poem, the revolutionaries in France were branded in the image of a ravaging beast – after the Paris massacres of 1792, an English statesman declared, "One might as well think of establishing a republic of tigers in some forest of Africa" and there were newspaper references to the "tribunal of tigers". At a later date, Marat's eyes were said to resemble "those of the tyger cat".

In his Prelude (1850), Wordsworth talks of post-revolutionary Paris in the section 'Residence in France' as a "place of fear [...] Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam". [Book X]

Many critics have also read the poem as a response to the progress of industrialisation so rampant at this time. Along with fire, which stands for human civilisation and industry, the next two stanzas speak of the creation of the tiger as a divine industry:

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?

The tiger seems to be like a paranormal being. Every bit of the tiger's physical form exudes a preternatural aura. There is absolute awe, majesty, and mystery in the fashioning of the tiger's lethal muscular form, of its agile gait. The definitive suggestion of another worldly intervention is pitched to another level, to a level beyond human imagination: of a supernatural power nearly like those ingenious machines whose novelty had a whole generation spell bound for their miraculous abilities.

What the hammer? What the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp,
Dare it's deadly terrors clasp?

This stanza carries an implication of Vulcan, the God of fire and also of metalwork and smithery, referred to as Mulciber in Milton's Paradise Lost or as Haphaestus in Greek mythology. Vulcan was thrown over the crystal battlements by an angry Jove. As Mulciber in Paradise Lost, he was the designer and architect of Satan's palatial Pandemonium which housed his notorious 'Stygian Council'.

The fire, the anvil, and the hammer are the signature instruments related to the dark god, Vulcan, who also becomes the representative of industrialisation and thereby an antagonist of the benevolent Christ of the poem *The Lamb*. This latent ambiguity is foregrounded in the next stanza:

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heavens with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who make the Lamb make thee?

The simple certainties and moral explanations of “*The Lamb*” disappear, giving way to a set of anxious ruminations and ambiguities. If the process of creation of the docile and submissive lamb is natural and organic, the creative force behind the making of the tiger is much more aggressive and passionate. However, as Blake expresses in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the creative process is inherently enigmatic encompassing dualities and a complex intermingling of energies. Therefore, it is beyond the scope of a moral and didactic knowledge to understand the synergic harmony of the universe inhabited by diverse creatures and also of schizophrenic tendencies of human impulse and spirit which is only a reflection of this divine duality. This brings us to the final lines of the poem, which seems to be almost identical to those in the end of the first stanza:

What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

There is a difference of only a word “dare” in the last stanza. This variation is pregnant with meaning being perceived as definitive and deliberate to the intention in the poem. This disparity has duly received a lot of critical attention. The lines shift from “could” in the first stanza to “dare” in the last signalling a sense of transgression and disobedience. The tone too shifts from the childish iambic pentameter which is the dominant rhythm in both ‘*The Lamb*’ and ‘*The Tyger*’, to an inconsistent trochaic meter in the ending line. This makes creation an act of audacity, challenge and disobedience.

Check Your Progress - 2

1. *The Tyger* is a poem which talks of:
 - a. Human goals
 - b. Divine virtue
 - c. Innocence
 - d. Divine creations
2. The hammer, the chain, the furnace refers to:
 - a. Icarus
 - b. Vulcan
 - c. Satan
 - d. Jesus Christian

3. A dominant theme of The Tyger is:
- Innocence and docility
 - Magnanimity
 - Audacity and transgression
 - Beauty and virtue

William Blake: 'The Tyger', 'The Lamb', 'The Chimney Sweeper'

3.5 THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER POEMS

Like The Lamb and The Tyger, The Chimney Sweeper appears in two different forms in both "the Songs of Innocence" and "the Songs of Experience" and like the earlier two poems, charts a progression from innocence. These poems deal with the prevalent cruel practice of those times when boys of the age as less as six were employed as chimney sweepers in London. Many poor families who were unable to feed their children decided to sell little boys for chimney cleaning work to masters who ran these services. Being small in size enabled little boys to climb up the chimneys to clean the channels. The job of cleaning these chimneys was not only difficult but also hazardous to health since long exposure to the dark and toxic soot ridden channels led to deadly diseases in many. The House Report on sweepers showed innumerable cases where respiratory diseases, stunted growth, fractures from falls, cancers and even death were suffered by children who were employed in these services. Blake placed his two poems in these two works to reflect dual and contrasting perspectives on the young chimney sweepers he saw on the streets of London.

The Chimney Sweeper in "the Songs of Innocence" narrates a tale of a life under bizarre circumstances that the sweep finds himself in. This is a painful tale of the boy narrator, who, at a tender age when he had barely got over liting was sold off to a master as a slave after his mother died:

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry "weep! weep! weep!"
So your chimneys I sweep and in soot I sleep.

Yet, through all this cruelty, the boy manages to find optimism and he consoles his friend, another young chimney sweeper, when his head is shaved by the master. We find his innocence and sympathy alive in his words:

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved, so I said,
"Hush, Tom! Never mind it, for when head's bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

Tom's hair, which was like the woolly coat of a lamb, was symptomatic of the lamb-like innocence. The loss of hair therefore suggests the deliberate and forceful stripping of innocence in children put to labour in order to survive. The narrator comforts Tom by saying that this was a good riddance since now, his hair would not be dirty from the sooty deposits from chimney cleaning. On the other hand, the words seem to further suggest that the childlike innocence can never be polluted irrespective of the cruel circumstances.

The next stanza describes a dream which Tom sees at night further enhancing the comforting tenor of the narrator. The children's terror of going up the chimney and their apprehension that they would die there, indeed comes true in Tom's dream when he finds all his companions dead and lying in "coffins of black":

And so he was quiet, and that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack,
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black;

These coffins are metaphors of the dark and dreadful chimneys where they are condemned to die. Nevertheless, there appears to be light at the end of the tunnel as the messenger from the Saviour, an angel, unlocks their coffins to set them all free. And for the first time they experience freedom from the drudgery of urban life, in a sprawling green valley exuding idyllic charm. In the lap of nature, they are united with the creator and like the image in the cover page of the Songs of Innocence, ramble and play as children are meant to.

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he opened the coffins and set them all free;
Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

They sport and frolic and are united back with nature where they originally belong. Their death gives these children an opportunity to regain their innocence as they return to the state of "naked and white" purity. This is also a blessed union with God which is blissful and eternal. The Angel reminds them that their good conduct would determine whether they could make this dream come true.

Then naked and white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father and never want joy.

However, as one would expect, this was only a dream and waking up threw them back into the rude reality and to the drudgery of life, routine of work, and labour. The glow of the lit up outdoors had disappeared and in its place was the known damp darkness that Tom was familiar with. The dream had left behind the warmth of realisation which eventuated in reconciliation with their unfortunate circumstances. Also, the Angel's reminder about their conduct made them assume that their disciplined behaviour on earth would beget them fruits after their death.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags and our brushes to work.
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm;
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

The poem seems to end with the children finding peace and solace in a false sense of security that is offered by religious faith. Within this narrative, there was an end to their misery even if their lives were put to an untimely end due to calamitous circumstances. Within this framework of innocent and unstinted

belief, their oppression and miserable lives was normalised and justified. It is as if they were put to test in their earthly lives for which they would be rewarded later in their afterlife. The sadness of their present life only became a necessary precondition to their enjoying everlasting joy in their afterlife. In "the Chimney Cleaner" poem of the Songs of Experience, Blake discloses the unjust system of organised religion which offers a charade of glory to oppression and impoverishment. This poem has a narrator who, unlike that of the one in "Songs of Innocence" is aware of this injustice and thereby can see through the narrative of faith which offers the logic on which their precarious lives are predicated upon.

A little black thing among the snow Crying "
'weep! 'weep! In notes of woe!
"Where are thy father and mother? Say?"
They are both gone up to the church to pray.

The first line itself reveals the experience and misery of the child window sweeper "a little black thing" as a contrast against the backdrop of purity of the "white snow". Like the child of Innocence, he too cries "weep! weep!" However, this child has been abandoned by his parents who have left him behind to go to the church to pray. Since he had not shown signs of resentment when he was left alone on the heath, nobody noticed his suffering and sadness.

Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smil'd among the winter's snow,
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

The parents' assumption that their child was content anywhere made them decide a life of woe for him, thinking he would not realise the brutality. His work as chimney sweeper may even lead to his death but that is of no concern to the insensitive parents who might have forced this hazardous occupation upon him to earn some money for their family's daily survival. Moreover, his misery and suffering were normalised beneath an apparently harmonious vehemence "notes of woe" of Christian faith. This, to Blake is excruciatingly painful as it is cruel. His prior innocence was taken for granted by an unjust and lopsided system which saw no wrong in child labour and abuse.

And because I am happy and dance and sing,
They think they have done me no injury
And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King,
Who make up a heaven of our misery".

This also marks the end of the child's narration who displays a thorough understanding of his predicament and of his parents' as well. This child of Experience directs his anger at the organised religion which keeps people blindfolded to the evils and sorrows which exist in the society. In the Innocence poem, there is suggestion that religion only normalises the feelings triggered by poverty and dispossession that is pain and sorrow within a narrative of life of hardship and an afterlife of bliss. There is a suggestion in the Experience poem that the Church and the institutions of religion even stand to gain by selling this myth. It only serves to maintain the status quo of social classes where the poor continue to be put to misery so that the rich can live a life of comfort by

trampling on the rights of the dispossessed. Ultimately, the Christian doctrinal practices of the Church are exposed as shallow and unfair if they cannot rescue children like the chimney sweeper from their unfortunate predicament and give them a better and improved life and opportunities to transcend the social status into which they are born.

Check Your Progress - 3

1. The Chimney Sweeper is a poem you will find in:
 - a. 'Songs of Innocence'
 - b. 'Songs of Experience'
 - c. Both the 'Songs of Innocence' and the 'Songs of Experience'
 - d. 'The Book of Urizen'
2. In The Chimney Sweeper, Blake addresses the issue of:
 - a. Poverty and hunger
 - b. Corruption
 - c. Child labour and abuse
 - d. None of the above

Questions for Further Study

1. Comment on Blake's portrayal of children and childhood in his Songs of Innocence and Experience.
2. Explain the concept of "fearful symmetry" in Blake's poetry.
3. How is the issue of organised religion treated in the two 'Chimney Sweeper' poems.

3.6 SUGGESTED READINGS

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