

William Blake

William Blake was born in London in 1757. His father, a hosier, soon recognized his son's artistic talents and sent him to study at a drawing school when he was ten years old. At 14, William asked to be apprenticed to the engraver James Basire, under whose direction he further developed his innate skills. As a young man Blake worked as an engraver, illustrator, and drawing teacher, and met such artists as Henry Fuseli and John Flaxman, as well as Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose classicizing style he would later come to reject. Blake wrote poems during this time as well, and his first printed collection, an immature and rather derivative volume called *Poetical Sketches*, appeared in 1783. *Songs of Innocence* was published in 1789, followed by *Songs of Experience* in 1793 and a combined edition the next year bearing the title *Songs of Innocence and Experience showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*.

Blake's political radicalism intensified during the years leading up to the [French Revolution](#). He began a seven-book poem about the Revolution, in fact, but it was either destroyed or never completed, and only the first book survives. He disapproved of [Enlightenment](#) rationalism, of institutionalized religion, and of the tradition of marriage in its conventional legal and social form (though he was married himself). His unorthodox religious thinking owes a debt to the Swedish philosopher Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), whose influence is particularly evident in Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In the 1790s and after, he shifted his poetic voice from the lyric to the prophetic mode, and wrote a series of long prophetic books, including *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. Linked together by an intricate mythology and symbolism of Blake's own creation, these books propound a revolutionary new social, intellectual, and ethical order.

Blake published almost all of his works himself, by an original process in which the poems were etched by hand, along with illustrations and decorative images, onto copper plates. These plates were inked to make prints, and the prints were then colored in with paint. This expensive and labor-intensive production method resulted in a quite limited circulation of Blake's poetry during his life. It has also posed a special set of challenges to scholars of Blake's work, which has interested both literary critics and art historians. Most students of Blake find it necessary to consider his graphic art and his writing together; certainly he himself thought of them as inseparable. During his own lifetime, Blake was a pronounced failure, and he harbored a good deal of resentment and anxiety about the public's apathy toward his work and about the financial straits in which he so regularly found himself. When his self-curated exhibition of his works met with financial failure in 1809, Blake sank into depression and withdrew into obscurity; he remained alienated for the rest of his life. His contemporaries saw him as something of an eccentric--as indeed he was. Suspended between the neoclassicism of the 18th century and the early phases of Romanticism, Blake belongs to no single poetic school or age. Only in the 20th century did wide audiences begin to acknowledge his profound originality and genius.

Analysis

Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) juxtapose the innocent, pastoral world of childhood against an adult world of corruption and repression; while such poems as "[The Lamb](#)" represent a meek virtue, poems like "[The Tyger](#)" exhibit opposing, darker forces. Thus the collection as a whole explores the value and limitations of two different perspectives on the world. Many of the poems fall into pairs, so that the same situation or problem is seen through the lens of innocence first and then experience. Blake does not identify himself wholly with either view; most of the poems are dramatic--that is, in the voice of a speaker other than the poet himself. Blake stands outside innocence and experience, in a

distanced position from which he hopes to be able to recognize and correct the fallacies of both. In particular, he pits himself against despotic authority, restrictive morality, sexual repression, and institutionalized religion; his great insight is into the way these separate modes of control work together to squelch what is most holy in human beings.

The *Songs of Innocence* dramatize the naive hopes and fears 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 children, while others are about children as seen from an adult perspective. Many of the poems draw attention to the positive aspects of natural human understanding prior to the corruption and distortion of experience. Others take a more critical stance toward innocent purity: for example, while Blake draws touching portraits of the emotional power of rudimentary Christian values, he also exposes--over the heads, as it were, of the innocent--Christianity's capacity for promoting injustice and cruelty.

The *Songs of Experience* work via parallels and contrasts to lament the ways in which the harsh experiences of adult life destroy what is good in innocence, while also articulating the weaknesses of the innocent perspective ("[The Tyger](#)," for example, attempts to account for real, negative forces in the universe, which innocence fails to confront). These latter poems treat sexual morality in terms of the repressive effects of jealousy, shame, and secrecy, all of which corrupt the ingenuousness of innocent love. With regard to religion, they are less concerned with the character of individual faith than with the institution of the Church, its role in politics, and its effects on society and the individual mind. Experience thus adds a layer to innocence that darkens its hopeful vision while compensating for some of its blindness.

The style of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is simple and direct, but the language and the rhythms are painstakingly crafted, and the ideas they explore are often deceptively complex. Many of the poems are narrative in style; others, like "[The Sick Rose](#)" and "[The Divine Image](#)," make their arguments through symbolism or by means of abstract concepts. Some of Blake's favorite rhetorical techniques are personification and the reworking of Biblical symbolism and language. Blake frequently employs the familiar meters of ballads, nursery rhymes, and hymns, applying them to his own, often unorthodox conceptions. This combination of the traditional with the unfamiliar is consonant with Blake's perpetual interest in reconsidering and reframing the assumptions of human thought and social behaviour.

"The Lamb"

Summary 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.

Form "The Lamb" has two stanzas, each containing five rhymed couplets. Repetition in the first and last couplet of each stanza makes these lines into a refrain, and helps to give the poem its song-like quality. The flowing /s and soft vowel sounds contribute to this effect, and also suggest the bleating of a lamb or the lisping character of a child's chant.

Commentary The poem is a child's song, in the form of a question and answer. 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 literary contrivance. 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 knowingness or artifice 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. This poem, 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. The pendant (or companion) poem to this one, found in the *Songs of Experience*, is "The Tyger"; taken together, the two poems 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 than either offers independently. They offer a good instance of how Blake himself stands somewhere outside the perspectives of innocence and experience he projects.

"The Tyger"

Summary 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?

Form The poem is comprised of six quatrains in rhymed couplets. The meter is regular and rhythmic, its hammering beat suggestive of the smithy that is the poem's central image. The simplicity and neat proportions of the poems form perfectly suit its regular structure, in which a string of questions all contribute to the articulation of a single, central idea.

Commentary 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. 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.

"London"

I wander thro' each charter'd street, Near where the charter'd Thames does flow. And mark in every face I meet Marks of weakness, marks of woe. In every cry of every Man, In every Infants cry of fear, In every voice: in every ban, The mind-forg'd manacles I hear How the Chimney-sweepers cry Every black'ning Church appalls, And the hapless Soldiers sigh Runs in blood down Palace walls But most thro' midnight streets I hear How the youthful Harlots curse Blasts the new-born Infants tear And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse

Summary The speaker wanders through the streets of London and comments on his observations. He sees despair in the faces of the people he meets and hears fear and repression in their voices. The woeful cry of the chimney-sweeper stands as a chastisement to the Church, and the blood of a soldier stains the outer walls of the monarch's residence. The nighttime holds nothing more promising: the cursing of prostitutes corrupts the newborn infant and sullies the "Marriage hearse."

Form The poem has four quatrains, with alternate lines rhyming. Repetition is the most striking formal feature of the poem, and it serves to emphasize the prevalence of the horrors the speaker describes.

Commentary The opening image of wandering, the focus on sound, and the images of stains in this poem's first lines recall the Introduction to *Songs of Innocence*, but with a twist; we are now quite far from the piping, pastoral bard of the earlier poem: we are in the city. The poem's title denotes a specific geographic space, not the archetypal locales in which many of the other *Songs* are set. Everything in this urban space--even the natural River Thames--submits to being "charter'd," a term which combines mapping and legalism. Blake's repetition of this word (which he then tops with two repetitions of "mark" in the next two lines) reinforces the sense of stricture the speaker feels upon entering the city. It is as if language itself, the poet's medium, experiences a hemming-in, a restriction of resources. Blake's repetition, thudding and oppressive, reflects the suffocating atmosphere of the city. But words also undergo transformation within this repetition: thus "mark," between the third and fourth lines, changes from a verb to a pair of nouns--from an act of observation which leaves some room for imaginative elaboration, to an indelible imprint, branding the people's bodies regardless of the speaker's actions. Ironically, the speaker's "meeting" with these marks represents the experience closest to a human encounter that the poem will offer the speaker. All the speaker's subjects--men, infants, chimney-sweeper, soldier, harlot--are known only through the traces they leave behind: the ubiquitous cries, the blood on the palace walls. Signs of human suffering abound, but a complete human form--the human form that Blake has used repeatedly in the *Songs* to personify and render natural phenomena--is lacking. In the third stanza the cry of the chimney-sweep and the sigh of the soldier metamorphose (almost mystically) into soot on church walls and blood on palace walls--but we never see the chimney-sweep or the soldier themselves. Likewise, institutions of power--the clergy, the government--are rendered by synecdoche, by mention of the places in which they reside. Indeed, it is crucial to Blake's commentary that neither the city's victims nor their oppressors ever appear in body: Blake does not simply blame a set of institutions or a system of enslavement for the city's woes; rather, the victims help to make their own "mind-forg'd manacles," more powerful than material chains could ever be. The poem climaxes at the moment when the cycle of misery recommences, in the form of a new human being starting life: a baby is born into poverty, to a cursing, prostitute mother. Sexual and marital union--the place of possible regeneration and rebirth--are tainted by the blight of venereal disease. Thus Blake's final image is the "Marriage hearse," a vehicle in which love and desire combine with death and destruction.

(adapted from www.sparknotes.com)