

12. "The Tyger" by William Blake

POET

William Blake (1757-1827)

William Blake is a famous English poet and artist. He was born into a working class London family and only attended school until he was ten years old. He was an early influence upon the Romantic Movement in art which tried to redress the dehumanising effects of the Industrial Revolution through a return to nature and the past. Blake was a radical and original thinker who admired the ambitions of the French and American Revolutions to bring equality to the masses. He was also a committed Christian whose non-conformist faith is evident in many of his works.

His most famous poems were published in 1794, called "Songs of Innocence and Experience". The book contained two collections of poems; one was called Innocence and the other Experience. The "Songs" juxtapose poems which contrast a childlike perception of the world, with poems about the loss of that innocent view.

BACKGROUND

"The Tyger" is located in the Experience section of the "Songs". It is therefore part of the grouping of poems told from the point of view of an experienced speaker who has lost a childlike view of the world. In the 1790s in London there were few opportunities to see tigers. Therefore the animals had a mythic status as powerful beasts. The spelling of tiger is odd in the poem because at the time Blake was writing the spellings of words had not yet been fixed.

SUMMARY

The poem is spoken directly to a tiger. The speaker asks the tiger what sort of a creator would make an animal which is both beautiful and deadly. The poem dwells on this thought, but never provides an adequate answer. Instead, it communicates the poet's wonder at the way God is responsible for bringing both goodness and evil to mankind.

ANALYSIS

The title of the poem describes its focus; it is not only about a tiger – it is spoken to a tiger. The first stanza of the poem addresses the animal in one long sentence. The rhythm and rhyme scheme of the poem have a clear structure. Each line of the poem has seven syllables. The seven syllables are divided into trochees or a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. This means the lines have a strong rhythm, like the beating of a hammer or the padding of stealthy paws. Because the last syllable of every line ends with an unstressed, there is a sense of something left unfinished. This reflects the way the poem fails to answer the speaker's question, communicating instead how difficult it is to understand God. The rhyme scheme of the poem is AABB. This uniformity again provides a strong impression of the pounding of the tiger's feet.

The poem opens with a call to the beast "Tyger, Tyger". There is alliteration not only of the 't' sound which creates a staccato, stealthy opening, but also of the following 'b' sound in "burning bright". This is a metaphor describing the tiger actually alight or in flame. This description captures the mottled orange colour of the tiger vividly. However, it also

highlights the dangerous and beautiful nature of the animal. Like fire, the tiger is deadly, but also magical.

The stanza concludes with a question – “What immortal hand or eye, Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” This is the question which dominates the entire poem; it asks what “immortal”, or what type of god, would “frame”, or create, the tiger’s “fearful symmetry”, or terrifying symmetrically-patterned being. Here the tiger does not simply represent an apex predator, it also symbolises the idea of destruction in the world. Blake’s question may seem silly at first sight, but if it is considered in greater depth, we see that it gets to the heart of man’s experience of the world. Blake is asking a question all of us must have wondered about at one time or another – if God is good then why has he created a world with both kindness and cruelty in it.

The reader will notice that the first and final stanzas are essentially the same. They are both the same question addressed to the tiger, wondering what sort of god would have brought destruction to the world. However, there is one word which is different from stanza one. In the first stanza the poet wonders who “could” or is able to “frame” the tiger, while in the final stanza, Blake asks who would “Dare frame” it. The word “dare” here means be brave or bold enough to create it. Thus the thoughts of the speaker of the poem have progressed from wondering who would create evil to wondering who would be reckless enough to create it. Therefore the speaker’s anxiety is not alleviated in the poem. By the end of the poem, they feel even more horrified by the fact God deliberately created evil to prey on mankind.

The second stanza wonders where the tiger must have been created. It is important to notice here that every sentence in the poem is a question apart from one in line sixteen. This repeated question structure suggests the way the speaker cannot get beyond the thought of God making evil; his question just keeps cycling through the poem, never finding an answer.

The poet describes the “distant deeps or skies” where the creator must have found “fire” for the tiger’s “eyes”. This description underlines the extremity of the beast, as a creator must have gone to the very top and bottom of the universe to search out the correct element to make the animal. The poet goes on to wonder “On what wings dare he aspire?” This uses the metaphor of flying to suggest the lofty ambition God must have had when he made the tiger. The last line of the stanza imagines God’s hand which must “seize the fire” to create the animal. This image is relatable to the reader; we can imagine the bravery and foolhardiness needed to take fire in one’s hands. This suggests that the tiger is made from materials such as flame which are more commonly associated with hell rather than heaven. This begins the suggestion that God may not be as meek and mild as Christians think.

Stanza three develops this thought. It begins with a conjunction “And”. Conjunctions are meant to connect two parts of a sentence. Here it introduces one, showing that the speaker is in a rush of ideas, desperately trying to express his fear and wonder. The poet goes on to wonder at the effort which must have been necessary to make the tiger, “what shoulder, & what art, could twist the sinews of thy heart?” Strangely, the creator is imagined here with powerful shoulders used to bend and form the muscles of the tiger’s heart. Again, Blake is challenging the reader to see God in a more powerful and frightening way. This idea of the power of the creator is underlined in the last line of the stanza which wonders at “What dread hand? & what dread feet?” Here the poet cleverly challenges the reader. The “dread” or terrifying “hand” could be God’s, while the “dread feet” could belong to either the animal or

the creator. Blake is bringing the tiger and God together here to show that someone who makes such a ferocious beast, might also be ferocious themselves.

The next stanza develops this unusual view of God. Here God is described through an extended metaphor as a blacksmith working at a furnace. This could also be a description of the newly-built factories of the Industrial Revolution where men worked long hours in terrible conditions, often smelting metal in massive fires. The poet wonders at what sort of "hammer", "chain" and "furnace" were required to make the "brain" of the tiger. This focus on the mind of the tiger as made of metal and formed in fire is terrifying. It suggests the beast has great strength, endurance and power. The description goes on to imagine the "anvil" where the tiger's brain must have been beaten into shape. An anvil is a heavy iron block on which metal is hammered out. This metaphor not only depicts an awe-inspiring beast, it also creates a frightening view of God.

God in this stanza is a burly blacksmith whose muscles are used to twist and shape the ferocious tiger. This is startling. God is being described here through imagery we normally associate with hell and the Devil; he is a God of fire, muscle and "dread". The shocking nature of this description is emphasized in the punctuation. The verse ends with an exclamation mark, "Dare its deadly terrors clasp!" The exclamation mark suggests the poet is overwhelmed by the thought of a muscular God creating the tiger in a fire.

The penultimate stanza imagines what happened after the tiger was created and unleashed on the world, "the stars threw down their spears And water'd heaven with their tears". The stars are personified here. Stars are often associated with heaven. It is possible the stars represent the disapproval of the heavens at God's creation of the tiger. The stars throw down "spears". This might mean that the stars are trying to hunt down the tiger and kill it before it does any damage. However, the description could also mean that the stars "threw down" or discarded their spears in a protest against violence when they were confronted by the tiger. Whichever reading you choose, the stars are ultimately dismayed by the creation of the animal; they weep. This sense of heavenly sorrow is scary; even the universe thinks the tiger is a bad idea.

This stanza ends with two questions: "Did he smile his work to see?" Here "he" is God. The poet is wondering could God really be pleased with himself when he realised what he had created. He concludes "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" The lamb is an important symbol here. Most obviously, a lamb is a gentle, vegetarian animal which is normally the food for vicious animals like the tiger. Therefore the poet is asking how could God create both the hunter, or tiger, and the hunted, or lamb. In other words, why would God create an entire system on earth based upon the conflict between powerful animals and their victims.

This image of the lamb has even deeper meanings. The lamb is a religious symbol of Christ. This is because lambs are innocents who are killed; this is like Jesus who was pure and good, but was executed by mankind. Thus the allusion to the lamb also suggests that the poet is wondering why God made both Jesus and the Devil; why God made both goodness and evil, both victim and villain, both hunted and hunter, both bullied and bully. He is making the reader think about the opportunity God must have had to create a world without cruelty and death. Instead, he chose to create the tiger.

Therefore the poem ends with the same question with which it began, suggesting there has not been an answer found which adequately explains God's actions in making the tiger.

Moreover, the replacement of the word “could” with “Dare” leaves the reader dwelling upon the reckless nature of a god who created the ultimate killing machine to prey upon mankind.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“Prayer Before Birth” – provides useful comparisons as both poetic voices are trapped by their wonder at the cruelties of the world.

“War Photographer” – provides points of comparison as both poems show a speaker who wants the world to notice the horror which exists.