

SEMESTER II CC4

Songs of Innocence and Experience

Synopses and commentary

Songs of Experience

The Tyger

The Tyger - Imagery, symbolism and themes

Imagery and symbolism

Themes

How the human mind sees the nature of the world
and its creator

God in man's image

Imagery and symbolism

Blake makes many references to Greek and Roman mythology in his poetry. Myths are more than stories; they were told to suggest some truths about human nature and experiences or to explain how

the world has become the way it is. They are appropriate in presenting *The Tyger* because the poem deals with ideas about our understanding of life. Like many writers in the Christian tradition, Blake also combines classical with biblical symbols, images and stories.

On what wings dare he aspire – This seems to allude primarily to angels, in particular to the fallen angels who aspired to overthrow God and were cast down into Hell. This would suggest that the Icarusspeaker is inclined to believe that the force who made the tiger is not God but a demonic power, in opposition to God.

It is often seen, also, as a possible allusion to the classical tale of Icarus. Icarus desired to fly and his father made him wings of wax. These wings melted when he flew too near to the sun. As a symbol of humankind aspiring beyond its limits, it suggests that

this creator is being extremely audacious in creating this beast, almost going beyond his own limits.

What the hand dare seize the fire? – Many critics see here a possible allusion to Prometheus who stole fire from the gods to help humankind. This would make it another symbol of daring aspiration. Prometheus' action was benevolent but the context in which this occurs suggests something dreadful about the hand seizing the fire. It is as though the speaker is possessed by the ferocity and power of the tiger; that he is blind to the possibility of something beneficent lying within it.

Hammer .. furnace .. anvil – This is an allusion to Hephaestus, the Greek blacksmith god of fire. His symbols are a hammer and anvil. Hephaestus Some legends say that Prometheus stole fire from Hephaestus' forge and was punished by him. It would suggest that this creator is seen as demonic rather than benevolent.

In his poem *Paradise Lost*, Milton, an influence on Blake, linked this story of Hephaestus with the fall of the angels after their rebellion against God. Milton presented Hephaestus as the creator of Pandemonium, the dwelling-place of all the demons. This would link this image with those of wings and of the furnace.

'When the stars threw down their spears' - is another allusion to the fall of the angels. It suggests that Blake's primary thought is to link the images of wings, seizing fire and throwing down spears with Milton's account of the fall of the angels and the figure of Hephaestus as a demonic figure rather than a benevolent god.

The use of this complex of images suggests the mind of the speaker. He sees ferocious power, daring and energy at the heart of creation, his language suggesting the fascination this vision exerts. Blake

here may also be alluding to the revolutionary spirit of the age, when the 'Terror' was unleashed by French Revolutionaries audaciously seizing power (see Social / political background > The spirit of rebellion – politics).

The Lamb - Blake here alludes to The Lamb (I) and to biblical tradition in the line, 'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?' The Lamb represents all that is gentle, tender, innocent, playful and mild in creation. It represents ideas of divinity as found in Jesus. He is referred to as 'the Lamb of God' who takes away the sins of the world in John 1:29. He is also called a lamb in 1 Peter 1:19 and is identified as a sacrificial lamb in 1 Corinthians 5:7. However, this lamb is not a soft, woolly and cuddly animal but a sacrificial victim whom Christians believe achieves victory over evil for humanity. Thus Blake is drawing together the contraries of dark and light, of might and tenderness, of dark forces and their conqueror.

Investigating imagery and symbolism

How does Blake's use of the story of Hephaestus add to your understanding of the poem?

Themes

How the human mind sees the nature of the world and its creator

According to Blake, 'contraries' are facts about the world and about the nature of the creative force behind it. For example, ferocious power and energy exist alongside what is fragile and tender. Humans falsify their understanding of the creator and of the human beings made 'in his image' when one of these dimensions is excluded from the picture. This creates unnecessary questions and produces unhealthy splits between what are understood as forces of good and forces of evil.

According to the Bible, Heaven and Hell impinge on human experience. Thus, the powerful energies

within the world and the energies and instincts within human beings are necessary and beautiful. They become destructive when they are either denied or seen as the sole factor in life and experience. Blake's sub-theme is that vision based wholly on experience is as incomplete as the inadequacy of ignorant innocence.

God in man's image

Blake disagreed with the creation of the image of an external God-figure, as simply being a projection of human needs and attitudes. Blake felt that merely human understanding created a limiting vision of the creator, simply as a projection of its own human qualities:

Those who see only gentleness and tenderness in nature and in themselves produce an image of a creator who is mild and gentle but lacks energy and power

Those who have fallen into divided selfhood see the creator only in terms of their own capacity for jealousy, cruelty and possessiveness. They create an image of God as a tyrant who is a tyrannical ruler and must be appeased.

Here, the speaker struggles to hold together the qualities of the lamb and the tiger and, therefore, seems to believe in separate creators and in the malevolent nature of the creator of the tiger.

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Songs of Innocence

The Lamb

The Lamb - Imagery, symbolism and themes

Imagery and symbolism

Themes

The nature of innocence

How the human mind sees the nature of the world
and its creator

God in man's image

Imagery and symbolism

Blake was concerned to express what he believed was his true understanding of Christianity. He was writing for a public that, for the most part, was Christian and shared Blake's familiarity with the Bible. Thus, he used Christian images that he knew his readers would recognise, but in ways which questioned how the image was commonly understood. Here he uses two images, that of the

lamb and the child, and draws on related biblical ideas.

The poem is in the pastoral tradition of an idyllic rural scene, with words suggesting that everything is perfection – 'delight', 'softest', 'bright', 'tender', 'rejoice'.

Photo by Canadian Centre for International Studies and Cooperation, available through Creative Commons
By the stream....an allusion to Psalms 23:1-6, in which God is a shepherd tending his flock and his people are sheep and lambs needing care and protection

For he calls himself a lamb – Jesus is called 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world' in John 1:29. He is also called a lamb in 1 Peter 1:19 and is identified as a sacrificial lamb in 1 Corinthians 5:7. This lamb is not a soft, woolly and cuddly animal

but a sacrificial victim. He is associated with human violence and treachery, with the consequences of evil. The context and connotations of these well known references are very different from the image of the lamb in the poem.

He is meek and he is mild – In a famous lesson given by Jesus, known as the Beatitudes, the quality of meekness is praised:

‘Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth’. (Matthew 5:5)

Jesus is portrayed as meek like a lamb before his accusers in Isaiah 53:7. Again, the context for this meekness and mildness is the experience of human violence and injustice.

He became a little child – at one level, this is an image of innocence and gentleness. In the Gospels, Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to those

who become like little children in their innocence and humility. However, the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth and childhood include experience of human violence and so emphasise the vulnerability of the child:

He is acclaimed by the prophet Simeon as one who will bring about the fall and rise of many (Luke 2:34-35)

Then his parents become refugees to escape King Herod's attempts to kill Jesus by ordering the slaughter of all boys under two (see Matthew 2:16-18).

Investigating imagery and symbolism

Click the above Bible references

How does the biblical context affect your understanding of the way in which the lamb and child images are used in the poem?

Themes

The nature of innocence

The poem introduces the theme of the vulnerability of innocence and of the incomplete vision of the innocent speaker. The child's view is limited on account of an absence of awareness of the total reality of human experience.

How the human mind sees the nature of the world and its creator

According to Blake, 'contraries' are facts about the world and about the nature of the creative force behind it. For example, ferocious power and energy exist alongside what is fragile and tender. Humans falsify their understanding of the creator and of the human beings made 'in his image' when one of these dimensions is excluded from the picture. This creates unnecessary questions and produces unhealthy splits between what are understood as forces of good and forces of evil.

The child sees the creator only as like a lamb and a child. The reader knows there are other forces at play in creation that the child cannot see. And if they are in creation. are they not also in the creator?

God in man's image

Blake felt that merely human understanding created a limiting vision of the creator, simply as a projection of its own human qualities:

Those, like the innocent child here, who see only gentleness and tenderness in nature and in themselves, produce an image of a creator who is mild and gentle but lacks energy and power

Those who have fallen into divided selfhood see the creator only in terms of their own capacity for jealousy, cruelty and possessiveness. They create an image of God as a tyrant who is a tyrannical ruler and must be appeased

Here, the innocent child can imagine only a tender, gentle creator because this is all he himself knows.