

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF

“The Tyger”

The 24 lines of “The Tyger” are often all of Blake’s work with which readers become acquainted. Readers find in the verses 14 questions. This is a creative work, centered on creation: the very origin of this fearsome jungle cat. Blake captures the wildness of the beast—its burning eyes, its strength—with his words. The powerful opening verse is repeated to complete the poem.

In the first stanza, we meet “The Tyger.” The luminous creature roams the forest at night. The writer is struck by the beauty, strength, and balance of the beast and questions what inspiration is behind its creation. Some scholars believe the tiger is Blake’s version of the angel Lucifer. Like Lucifer, the tiger works alone and inspires thoughts of death; it also is strong and beautiful, as the Bible portrays the fallen angel.

The second stanza continues the powerful imagery, comparing the fire in the tiger’s eyes and the fire used to create it, suggesting that the tiger is a reflection of the fires of Hell. Also given is the image of wings: a reinforcement of the connection between the tiger and angels—or possibly an image inspired by Greek mythology, particularly the myths of Prometheus and of Icarus.

Next, Blake poses more questions to the creator of the tiger, first pondering the two tiers of strength needed to mastermind the mighty animal: The architect who created the animal had to be physically strong to create its powerful heart and emotionally strong to stand up to the cat’s intimidating form and nature. Then Blake mulls over the tiger’s first fearful footsteps. Images follow that remind the reader of a blacksmith’s shop. The verse turns to talk of the hammer, chain, and anvil used to forge the tiger and indicates the force needed to put the animal together.

The raw power of the tiger appears to be too much for the heavens to take. Blake describes the denial of dominance over the animal. The stars give up rather than fight for mastery of the tiger.

When the stars threw down their spears
And water’d heaven with their tears:

The writer then wonders if the Divine Being responsible for the tiger was pleased with the creation. He asks outright if the same being produced "The Tyger and The Lamb." This sets in contrast the gentle lamb with the wild-eyed "Tyger." To close out the poem, the first stanza is repeated:

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

The words do emphasize the beauty and strength of the animal. Seeing them again also reinforces the image of the strong animal, the night hunter, inspiring fear in all who see it. The last verse appears to be a refrain worth repeating. The reciting of these words again also strengthens the sound of the rhyme and rhythm of the work.

Blake's "Tyger" takes on a terrifying form. Brute strength and the ability to inspire fear are just two of the mighty cat's characteristics. Its creator must also have similar traits: strong shoulders to bear the responsibility of such an animal; a big heart to survive the tests of dread and fear; and a strong spirit to look into its fiery eyes and to master "The Tyger." Line by line, the tiger grows more powerful and frightening: a beast without boundaries. Yet, the speaker tries to reason with the mighty animal, asking about its creator and its opposite of the animal kingdom: the lamb. The work bears a similarity to Blake's "The Lamb", which appears, appropriately, in the "Innocence" part of the volume of poems. "The Tyger" is part of the "Experience." Did Blake believe that transformation from the gentle lamb into the powerful tiger is an integral part of maturation?

Students of Blake believe many of his writings reflect the major changes of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. For example, the revolutions: Industrial, American, and French. These changes in the economy, society, and politics changed the way people lived. Blake's tiger is strong, intimidating—a solitary, peripheral creature, independent of its shifting surroundings.

While attracted to Christianity, Blake did not subscribe to the tenets of one faith or another for very long during his life. Certainly the images of the lion and the lamb are rooted in the Bible. Perhaps Blake wishes to point out the Creator's hand in each animal and yet

suggests the flames seen in the tiger's eyes are a reflection of the fires of Hell. Further still, the wings mentioned in the second verse can be compared to the wings of an angel. Is Blake reminding readers that the Divine Being who created the meek and gentle lamb, is the same who created the intimidating tiger? Or perhaps it is mankind who is responsible for the beast, creating it out of mankind's worst traits. If God created the tiger, then is this creature supposed to be everything that the Lamb is not—a relationship meant to symbolize the symbiosis between good and evil? If so, then does Blake mean evil to appear stronger and more attractive than the mild goodness of the Lamb?

It would be simplistic to state that "The Lamb" is good and "The Tyger" is evil. And it is probably not what Blake intended. "The Tyger" is experience. It is bright, energetic, and vital. It is familiar with its domain and is assertive in its environment. While the Lamb merely follows the flock, the tiger has learned from experience and is autonomous. No longer following the crowd or a single shepherd, the tiger is a hunter directly in search of satisfaction. Knowledge has given the animal its power: the intensity of it is seen in the beast's bright eyes.

There is one major discrepancy. While Blake's words describe power, the artwork that accompanies the poem paints a very different picture of "The Tyger"—a feline by no means ferocious. Some call the picture timid; was it Blake's intention to mitigate the effect of his textual work? While he describes a horrific animal, he paints a picture of a tame one. Why describe vivid colors and burning eyes and then offer the image of an animal clearly close to domestication? Further still, why pair imagery of a hammer and an anvil with an illustration of docility?