

The artist and the power of imagination

For the Romantics, imagination was fundamental, because they thought that poetry was impossible without it. It creates imaginary worlds, and they felt that their task was to shape fleeting visions into concrete forms. They saw imagination as the very source of spiritual energy, regarding it as divine.

The Romantic artists put themselves at the centre of their work because they rejected the corrupted society. So, they put themselves in isolation in unpopulated and wild areas. There they communed with their spirit, and in writing they sent back messages to the rest of their fellow men about what they found in their imaginative and spiritual wonderings.

The Romantics believed that only a few selected men were attuned to the imagination. Therefore artists formed an élite group and create the myth of the artist as a superior kind of men.

William Blake

He was born in London in 1757. At the age of 21 he entered the Royal Academy of Arts, but he left to pursue his own course as an artist. In 1789 he himself published the illustrated volume of *Songs of Innocence*. He died in 1827.

Much of his vision of mankind was related to the times he lived in, so the struggles of men against state tyranny lie behind his exploration of a timeless universal human struggle between the rule of law and reason and the powers of love and the human imagination.

Blake's use of symbols was part of a deliberate attempt to avoid any kind of realism, because it is the "real" world that prevents men from perceiving the greater reality that lies behind it.

Songs of Innocence and Experience

Blake thought that is only through imagination that one understands the injustices of the world and can rebel against them. Reason appeared to him as the agent of the Government and the Church, whose role as institutions was to suppress the liberating and revolutionary force of imagination in the fields of morality and society.

His simple language and his pastoral settings rely on biblical sources.

Blake's first work of importance was a collection of poems entitled *Songs of Innocence* (1789), later published as a joined collection with *Songs of Experience* (1794). Many of the poems from both collections are meant to be read together, one as a commentary on the other showing a contrasting perspective of the human soul as made up of "complementary opposites". *Innocence* corresponds to the world of childhood and represents the qualities that are the source of love, like compassion and

sympathy, which are associated to biblical images related to the Garden of Eden; *Experience* is identified with the harsh world of adulthood, with its cares and responsibilities, and the consciousness of evil.

The Lamb

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

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee

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 & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.

Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee.

The Tyger

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

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat.
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp.
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

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

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

The Lamb: Analysis

The text is composed by twenty septenary verses divided into two stanzas, all of these verses are rhyme couplets.

The structure of *The Lamb* is based on the repetition of a rhetoric question (... *who made thee?*) and its answer.

The main theme of the poem is the Creator and his goodness. The Creator, God, manifests its presence in the Lamb.

The lamb is perhaps the best-known biblical symbol referring to Christ, and it is also used by Blake to represent innocence and purity.

Blake points out how this condition of innocence and purity is a characteristic of men in their childhood: the lamb and the child are both symbol of Christ, how it's possible to read in the second stanza.

Repetitions and rhymes make this poem very rhythmic, quite like a song. The structure of the verses is simple, and there are a lot of archaisms.

The Tyger: Analysis

The poem structure is similar to that of *The Lamb*: questions, repetitions, rhythm, short phrases, archaisms.

The two poems are, however, one the opposite of the other in theme and atmosphere, in this one gloomier.

The Tiger is described as a frightening and dangerous creature, it has infernal characteristics, such as the eyes of fire and the fact of living in "the forest of the night".

The Tiger is the dark side of men, it is the symbol of sufferings that come from experience in the adulthood. This is why Blake wonders if both, the Lamb and the Tiger, were created by the same hand.

In Blake's vision Good and Evil coexist in every man, and this is an inexplicable mystery of nature.
