ENGLISH PROGRAM FOURTH SEMESTER

ENGLISH II, AECC-IV

Topic: William Blake's "The Tyger"

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The Tyger

William Blake - 1757-1827

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 sieze 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?

(Source: https://poets.org/poem/tyger)

ABOUT THE POET:

William Blake, born on November 28, 1757, is famous today as an imaginative and original poet, painter, engraver and mystic belonging to the Pre-romantic and Romantic period. But his work, especially his poetry, was largely ignored during his own lifetime, and took many years to gain widespread appreciation.

The third of six children of a Soho hosier, William Blake lived and worked in London all his life. As a boy, he claimed to have seen 'bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars' in a tree on Peckham Rye, one of the earliest of many visions. In 1772, he was apprenticed to the distinguished printmaker James Basire, who extended his intellectual and artistic education. Three years of drawing murals and monuments in Westminster Abbey fed a fascination with history and medieval art.

In 1782, he married Catherine Boucher, the steadfast companion and manager of his affairs for the whole of his chequered, childless life. Much in demand as an engraver, he experimented with combining poetry and image in a printing process he invented himself in 1789. Among the spectacular works of art this produced were 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', 'Visions of the Daughters of Albion', 'Jerusalem', and 'Songs of Innocence and Experience'.

Although always in demand as an artist, Blake's intensely felt personal mythology, derived from radical ardour and the philosophy of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, led to wild mental highs and lows, and later in life he was sidelined as being close to insanity. On his deathbed, he saw one last glorious vision, and 'burst out in Singing of the things he Saw in Heaven'.[1]

(Source: https://www.bl.uk/people/william-blake)

SYNOPSIS:

William Blake's "The Tyger", published in 1794 is one of the most anthologized poem in English Literature. In 1794 the poem was published as a part of Blake's *Song of Experience* collection. "The Tyger" is the sister poem to "The Lamb", from his *Songs of Innocence* collection. Blake is famous for portraying concept of contraries. In contrary to the human innocence reflected in "*The Lamb"*, Blake reflects upon the duality between 'aesthetic beauty and primal ferocity' in *"The Tyger"*.

Appearing in *Songs of Experience*, 'The Tyger' is usually understood as the companion piece of 'The Lamb' in *Songs of Innocence*; both poems ask the same question: where do we come from? In 'The Lamb', an answer is given: God made us – a simple affirmation of faith. 'The Tyger' only implies the answer by posing the rhetorical question: 'Did he who made the lamb make thee?' Indeed, one of the most noticeable features of 'The Tyger' is that it takes the form of a series of questions, none of which are answered. Whereas 'The Lamb' posits the process of creation as natural and harmonious, 'The Tyger' shows us something much more violent and mysterious; the tiger comes from 'the forests of the night' and its eyes burn in 'distant deeps and skies'. Its creation is an act of confrontation and audacity. The poem shifts between 'could' (ability) and 'dare' (which implies transgression and disobedience), ending in 'dare' in the final stanza, a direct repeat of the first except for the change of verb at the start of the final line, which is marked with a spondee[3] ('Dare frame') rather than the iamb[4] of the first stanza ('Could

frame'), emphasizing its significance. (Source: https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-the-tyger).

CENTRAL IMAGES IN THE POEM:

Images of rebellion and revolution

The poem is full of references to rebellion: to Satan's revolt in *Paradise Lost* ('the stars threw down their spears'), to Prometheus, a favourite rebel of the Romantics ('What the hand dare seize the fire?'), and, perhaps to Icarus ('On what wings dare he aspire?' – though this line might just as easily evoke Milton's Satan). Such images have led some critics to see the tiger as a metaphor for revolution. As Peter Ackroyd suggests,

'Even as Blake worked upon the poem the revolutionaries in France were being branded in the image of a ravening beast – after the Paris massacres of September 1792, an English statesman declared, "One might as well think of establishing a republic of tigers in some forests in Africa", and there were newspaper references to "the tribunal of tigers". At a later date Marat's eyes were said to resemble "those of the *tyger cat*"'.[5]

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes post-revolutionary Paris as 'a place of fear […] Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam'. The tiger, powerful, unpredictable, gorgeous but deadly, becomes a potent image for what W B Yeats would later call the 'terrible beauty' of revolution.

Images of industry

Another complex aspect of Blake's metaphor is that, unlike the lamb, who is 'made' by God, the tiger owes its existence to a combination of human labour and industrial process. Stanza three focuses on human effort, the shoulder and the art which 'twist the sinews of thy heart'. Stanza four conceives of the tiger's creation in terms of industry, using a series of metonyms for the blacksmith's forge: 'hammer', 'chain', 'furnace', 'anvil'. While, like all the Romantics, Blake was repelled by the Industrial Revolution and its objectification of human beings, this stanza has undeniable energy and a fascination with what industry can produce: 'what dread grasp | Dare its deadly terrors clasp?' It's interesting that both the worker and the tiger are represented by a strange combination of body parts ('shoulder', 'heart', 'sinews', 'hand', 'feet', 'brain'). A parallel can perhaps be drawn with the creature constructed in a 'workshop of filthy creation' in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, another text which draws upon both *Paradise Lost* and the Prometheus myth, asking questions about who makes us, and deploring industrialisation.

Uncertainty and ambiguity

Where 'The Lamb' offers the reader simple certainties and the loving, benign God of the New Testament, 'The Tyger' presents creation as enigmatic and unknowable. Some critics see this as indicative of the painful, fallen world of experience where faith is impossible, 'the distant deeps' offering only insecurity and epistemological chaos. 'The Tyger' thus becomes part of the *Experience* poems' pessimism and anguish. But perhaps there is another way of understanding the refusal to offer straightforward answers. As Heather Glen suggests, Blake's ambiguity is part of a broader challenge to 18th-century readers, who

would have been familiar with the fashionable instructive literature of the time – literature that provided clear, didactic, moral concepts. 'The contemporary reader', writes Glen, 'might well have been disturbed by the view of life implied by the Songs; but more fundamentally – though perhaps less consciously – disturbing is the fact that there seems to be no obvious argument propounded in them at all'.[6] The radical nature of Blake's poetry, Glen suggests, is due to its ambiguity and its lack of clear moral explanation. For Blake, the imagination is the ultimate creative force: 'What is now proved was once only imagined,' he wrote in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. His complex and enigmatic metaphor creates a space where imaginative energies can be released. Ever the enemy of narrow, earth-bound materialism, Blake reveals 'the forests of the night' as a place where we may dare to aspire and unleash the 'fearful symmetry' of the imagination.

(Source: https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-the-tyger)

References:

https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-the-tyger

Heather Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's 'Songs' and Wordsworth's 'Lyrical Ballads'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.19.

https://poets.org/poem/tyger

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/blake_william.shtml