UNIT 8: WILLIAM BLAKE: "THE TYGER"

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the life and works of William Blake, the visionary poet
- analyse the poem in its proper context
- describe the poetic techniques, style and language used in the composition of the poem
- appreciate the poem in its totality

8.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces one of the greatest poets of the Romantic Age, known also as the visionary poet, William Blake. Have you read any of his poems? The unit contains the prescribed poem called "The Tyger" written by Blake. You must have heard about the French Revolution which took place in France in the year 1789. The Romantic Age in

England is said to have begun as a reaction of poets' to this historical revolution. Our point of concern would be to examine how Blake's writings and especially the poem "The Tyger" is influenced by this revolutionary **zeal.** This poem was part of a collection of poems titled *Songs of Experience* which was in turn published in a combined edition with another set of poems titled *Songs of Innocence*. This publication came out in the year 1794 as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience : Showing Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.*



Zeal: great energy or enthusiasm for a cause or aim

We will discuss this poem in the light of the general ideas which permeate through the entire volume of poems. They would be helpful guides in our explanation of the poem, as well as, comprehending the same in its proper context. But before that, we will take a brief look at the poet's life and works after which, we will discuss his poetic techniques along with the poetic form employed by him in the prescribed poem.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. When did the French Revolution take place ?

Q2. How is the Romantic age considered to have begun?

Q3. Name the collection of poems in which the poem "Tyger" was included in?

8.3 WILLIAM BLAKE: THE POET

William Blake began writing from the initial stages of the Romantic Movement. His poems were greatly influenced by the political happenings around him. Most of his poems are very simple to read but there are deeper meanings hidden beneath the apparent simplicity. But before discussing his poem, we will cast a brief glance on his life and then at his works.



Apprentice(d) : one who works for an expert to learn the basics of a trade.

8.3.1 His Life

William Blake was born in London on 28th November 1757. His father was a London hosier. He was educated at home. He widely read the Bible and the English poets and also acquired a little knowledge of French, Italian, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He had from childhood, a strong visually imaginative mind who could vividly recreate in his mind whatever he saw around him. When he turned 14, his father **apprenticed** him to the engraver James Basire. At the age of 21, he entered the Royal Academy.

In 1782, Blake married Catherine Boucher. He stayed in London almost throughout his life except for three years in Sussex. Of all the other Romantic poets, only John Keats was a Londoner. However, unlike Keats, Blake had to a certain extent adjusted himself with the city-life in London. In fact, London provided him with sufficient poetic material to populate his 'world of Experience' as represented in his poems. His frequent walks to the countryside provided him with the 'world of innocence' which he contrasted with that of 'experience'. Also, his profession as an artisan brought him in close touch with the working-class and enabled him to understand their problems in a better light.

With the help of his wife, Blake designed, engraved and produced his own works. In his lifetime, his books circulated among a small circle of readers. His fellow poets and writers never got to know him properly through his writings. Also, poverty remained a constant factor in his life. However, it would not be right to consider him as an isolated figure. His *Songs of Innocence and Experience* explore the contradictory aspects of human nature and as such, it is directly related to the political events of his time. He also took a deep interest in legends and mythologies which lay the foundation for the later Romantic poets in re-discovering the past to enable a proper understanding of the present. It was in the hands of the later generations of

poets that Blake gained his rightful place in the tradition of British poetry in general. He passed away on 12th August 1827 in London.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. How was Blake in his childhood?

Q5. To what extent did his stay in London as well as his profession as an artisan help him?

8.3.2 His Works

In the year 1783, two of Blake's friends printed his first book *Poetical Sketches*, a collection of poems which included "To the Muses" and "My Silks and Fine Array". In 1789, he published the first of his engraved or illuminated books, *Songs of Innocence*. In 1794, he added *Songs of Experience* to constitute a combined volume of poetry titled *Songs of Innocence and of Experience : Showing Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. Blake had his own notion of Christianity. For him, Jesus Christ, the Son of God was the symbol of goodness and mercy whereas God the Father symbolised the tyrannical authority. The Church according to Blake, represented the absolute authority of God the Father. Blake was skeptical about his human authority and expressed his radical dislike of it in his two sets of prose aphorisms called *There is No Natural Religion* and the third called *All Religions are One* (all published possibly, in 1788), as well as *The French Revolution : A Poem in Seven Books* (c. 1791). His most important prose work however, was *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which was engraved in 1790.

In the following years, Blake did some of his most famous engravings which included those for 'The Book of Job'. At this time, he had also started working on his 'prophetic books.'

They were in the form of visionary poems through which Blake put forward his personal mythology and philosophy. In 1793, he published *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* which introduced Urizen and Orc, the two prominent figures of his personal mythology. While Urizen symbolised morality and restriction, Orc stood for the arch-rebel. The drama of opposition between them is represented in *America : A Prophecy* (1793), *Europe* and *The Book of Urizen* (1794), *The Book of Ahania*, *The Book of Los* and *The Song of Los* (1795). In the book *The Four Zoas : The Torments of Love and Jealousy in the Death and Judgement of Albion the Ancient Man* (1797), he introduces the figure of Jesus as Redeemer following the condemnation of Urizen's oppressive moral code and the triumph of Orc and liberty.

Other important works of Blake are *Milton : A Poem in Two Books, To Justify the Ways of God to Men* (1803-8) and *Jerusalem : The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804-20). The latter delineates the struggle of Albion (Man) who is caught between the opposing forces of imagination and of natural religion. Challenging Byron's *Cain*, he wrote *The Ghost of Abel* (1822), a minute poetic drama of 70 lines. Two of his notable but lesser known poems are *Auguries of Innocence* (c.1802) and *The Everlasting Gospel* (C.1810).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6. What was Blake's notion of Christianity?

Q7. Name the two prominent figures of his personal mythology. What do they symbolise or represent?

8.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM

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, and what art,
Could twist the **sinews** of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? And 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 watered 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?



Thy: your.
Symmetry: the quality of being similar or equal.
Thine: yours.
Aspire: have an ambitious plan or a lofty goal.
Sinews: a tissue connecting a muscle with its bony attachment.
Furnace: an enclosed chamber in which heat is produced to heat, melt or refine ores.
Anvil: a heavy block of iron or steel on which hot metals are hammered to take a particular shape
Thee : you.

8.4.1 Context of the Poem

The poem "The Tyger" appears in the *Songs of Experience*. It is closely related to a poem titled "The Lamb" from *the Songs of Innocence*. The lamb and the tiger could be understood as representing two aspects of Christ. As already mentioned, Blake gives a human/humane dimension to Jesus and therefore, when he is compared to a lamb or a tiger, it means that he has acquired those qualities which characterise them. He can be as meek as a lamb and also equally ferocious and wrathful like a tiger. Taking these two images of Christ in mind, we will now try to provide an explanation to the poem which would help us comprehend their applicability to Blake's entire poetic argument.

8.4.2 Explanation of the Poem

The poet begins the poem with two exclamatory addresses to the tiger whose contrasting stripes of black and yellow are glowing in brightness against the dark background of the forests of the night. Notice the fact that it is not night-time. The forest is not dark because it is night time but because darkness here is the ruling principle. The entire poem is a series of questions. The poet expresses wonder at the awful beauty of the creature and asks what "immortal hand or eye" could have framed it. Note the two words "immortal" and "fearful". They signify the fact that the tiger is a symbol of both terror and divinity.

In the next stanza, the poet enquires about the specific place wherefrom the tiger got the fire in its eyes whether it was from the region beneath the earth's surface or from the heaven above. One can imagine the tiger being forged out from the **smith's** fire. The poet is inquisitive of its maker too as he further asks who can dare to aspire to such a height of



Smith: a blacksmith

magnificent creation and whose hand can mould its perfect form out of the eternally burning fire. Who else except God could dare to do such a thing? When Blake refers to the "deeps", he might have meant the volcanoes where the workshop of Vulcan was located. Vulcan is the divine smith of the Roman mythology from whose name the word 'volcano' is derived. Again when Blake refers to the 'wings', he could have had Daedalus in mind. Daedalus was a figure from Greek mythology who made wings of wax to fly beyond the unknown. Finally, the act of seizing the fire has possible reference to Prometheus who had stolen fire from God for the sake of mankind. By indirectly referring to all these mythical and legendary figures who had the creative potential and who sought to do something extraordinary, Blake perhaps wished to present the tiger as the product of revolutionary zeal.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q8. Explain the implications of the two words 'immortal' and 'fearful' in relation to the image of the tiger.

Q9. What does Blake achieve by his indirect reference to the mythical and legendary figures?

As already mentioned, the tiger is the symbolic manifestation of both terror and beauty. The terror becomes vivid in the third and the fourth stanza as the poet dwells further around the bodily details. It brings out the tiger's dreadfulness. It is shown to be the work of a hand which is twisting and forging. The use of the words like 'hammer', 'chain', 'furnace' and 'anvil' reinforces the imagery of the smith at work on his dreadful creation. However, it also re-emphasises the terrific symmetry invoked at the beginning as the smith gradually moulds the individual body-parts of the tiger. The words like 'grasp' and 'clasp' suggest the immensity of control of the



Ferocity: the nature of being wild or fiercae.



Relinquishing: turning away from something; giving it up.

immortal creator over his creation. Do you think he can control the **ferocity** of the tiger after it has been fully created?

The fifth stanza takes a leap forward and moves from the actual process of creation to its consequences. The tiger is a product of revolution. The 'stars' and 'heaven' represented the restrictive authority of God the Father. Or it may also indicate political repression exercised by the kings, nobles and the Church during the time when Blake was writing. The image of the stars throwing down their spears can be interpreted as an act of **relinquishing** authority and the triumph of political liberty. The two questions at the end of the stanza again reinforces the identity of the maker. Is the creator happy to see his creation fulfilling the purpose for which it was conceived? One could provide a political answer to this question. If the tiger is the product of the revolutionary zeal which in turn lies at the heart of the masses, then the victory of the tiger over the 'forests of the night' symbolises the victory of the masses against political tyranny. The second question however brings the poem back to its Christian origin. At this point, remember the poem "The Lamb" mentioned at the beginning and Christ's embodying the figure of the lamb and the tiger. If the figure of the lamb is necessary to spread the message of gentleness and mercy, then the dreadful image of the tiger is equally necessary to fight against the evil power of darkness.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q10. What does the image of the stars throwing down their spears symbolise ?

Q11. Try to explain the connection between the figure of the lamb and the tiger. What does it say about Christ?

The last stanza re-emphasises the question posed at the beginning of the poem, but in a different manner. The word

'dare' in the last line replaces 'could' of the first stanza. What it does is to stress on the element of wonder and **bewilderment** initially felt by the poet. The image of the tiger is complete and it has supposedly fulfilled its purpose. But the poet is still filled with wonder. Could a spectacle like the one we have just witnessed be really conceived? Who could dare to do so? The answer is already provided but the poet but the poet still questions if such a revolution could really take place. Will Christ actually appear in the form of a tiger to restore the lost order of the contemporary times? This final stanza places the poem in the contemporary context of French Revolution and its consequences.



Bewilderment: confusion resulting from failure to comprehend something.

ACTIVITY

Try reading the poem called "The Second Coming" by W.B. Yeats. This poem deals with the image of Christ as a rough beast.

8.5 POETIC STYLE

Personification is the key poetic technique which permeates the whole poem. It is a manner of representing an abstract quality or idea as a person or a creature. The image of the tiger represents one aspect of Christ as well the product of a revolution. Throughout the poem, the tiger **embodies** one meaning or the other. The suggestion of the 'immortal' creator through body parts such as 'hand or eye', 'wings' and 'shoulder' serve as helpful pointers towards their possible association with one or the other figures from the legends and the mythologies. Also, the embodiment of Christ in the figures of the lamb and the tiger invoke Christian associations which in turn, help us to understand the poem through Blake's peculiar ideas about Christianity. Blake's use of the symbols of the stars throwing



Embodiment: giving a concrete or personified form to an abstract



Repentance: a feeling of remorse for one's past conduct.

down their spears and of heaven has for him, contemporary historical relevance. Similar images are used in "The French Revolution" to refer to the king and his assemblies, and in 'America' to the thrones of the kings. They symbolise the defeat of the tyrants and their weeping either because of **repentance** or of unrepentant anguish.

The poems in the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* are known for their apparent simplicity. The poet takes up simple subjects and treats them with tremendous economy of language. It is to be noted that Blake used to engrave his poems. His use of words was therefore extremely precise and **meticulous**. Not a single word or phrase is **superfluous**. Every word or phrase is therefore, loaded with meaning and it makes their apparent simplicity very deceptive. In the present poem, the word 'tiger' has more than one meaning. Also, the presence of the words like 'wings', 'fire' etc. are replete with mythological **allusions**. The overwhelming presence of direct questions sustain the pace of the poem thus keeping alive the poet's sense of wonder and bewilderment.



Allusion : passing reference or indirectly mentioning.
Superfluous : more than is needed or required
Meticulous : marked by extreme care in the treatment of details.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q11. Note down the different meanings which emerge out of the word 'tyger' in the context of the poem.

Q12. Choose the correct option :

Blake's use of words in the poem is _____ (economical/ not economical).



8.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, we have developed a fair understanding of the poem. We have discussed the life and works of William Blake and learnt how he tried to portray life and its transition from the state of innocence to experience. We also have been familiarised with his views on Christianity. The poem as we have seen, can be interpreted in Christian terms and also in accordance with the contemporary revolutionary zeal .

The tiger may embody the wrathful and vengeful aspect of Christ or it may also be the symbol of energy and regeneration, born out of the revolution. While discussing the poetic techniques, we realised the presence of deeper meanings within the apparent simplicity of the words in the poem. Blake's use of words is economical, but he infuses them with meanings which move beyond our general or literal interpretation.



8.7 FURTHER READING

1) Bhattacharji, Shobhana (ed.) (2002) *The Romantics*. Doaba Publications.

2) Bottrall, Margaret (ed.) (1970) *A Casebook, William Blake Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Casebook Series Macmillan Student Edition.

3) Ousby Ian, *Cambridge Paperback Guide to Literature in English*. Cambridge University Press.



8.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1. The French Revolution which took place in France in the year 1789

Ans to Q No 2. The Romantic Age in England is said to have begun as a reaction of poets' to this historical revolution.

Ans to Q No 3. Collection of poems titled *Songs of Experience*… published in the year 1794 as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience : Showing Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.*

Ans to Q No 4. William Blake was born in London on 28th November 1757. His father was a London hosier. He was educated at home. He widely read the Bible and the English poets and also acquired a little knowledge of French, Italian, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He had from childhood, a strong visually imaginative mind who could vividly recreate in his mind whatever he saw around him. When he turned 14, his father apprenticed him to the engraver James Basire. At the age of 21, he entered the Royal Academy.

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remained a constant factor in his life. However, it would not be right to consider him as an isolated figure. His *Songs of Innocence and Experience* explore the contradictory aspects of human nature and as such, it is directly related to the political events of his time. He also took a deep interest in legends and mythologies which lay the foundation for the later Romantic poets in re-discovering the past to enable a proper understanding of the present. It was in the hands of the later generations of poets that Blake gained his rightful place in the tradition of British poetry in general. He passed away on 12th August 1827 in London.

Ans to Q No 5. London provided him with sufficient poetic material to populate his 'world of Experience' as represented in his poems. His frequent walks to the countryside provided him with the 'world of innocence' which he contrasted with that of experience. Also, his profession as an artisan brought him in close touch with the working-class.

Ans to Q No 6. Blake had own notion of Christianity for him, Jesus Christ was the symbol of goodness and mercy whereas God the Father symbolised the tyrannical authority. The Church to him represented the absolute authority of God the Father…Blake skeptical about his human authority and expressed his radical aphorisms *There is No Natural Religion* and the third called *All Religions are One* (all published possibly, in 1788), as well as *The French Revolution : A Poem in Seven Books* (c. 1791). His most important prose work however, was *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* which was engraved in 1790.

Ans to Q No 7. In 1793, he published *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* which introduced the two prominent figures of his personal mythology. The two prominent figures of his personal mythology Urizen and Orc, where the former symbolised morality and restriction, Orc stood for the arch rebel.

Ans to Q No 8. The poet expresses wonder at the awful beauty of the creature and asks what "immortal hand or eye" could have framed it. Note the two words "immortal" and "fearful". They signify the fact that the tiger is a symbol of both terror and divinity.

8.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1: Analyse the role of William Blake as a Christian poet with a revolutionary bent of mind.

Q2: Do you think the poet is hopeful of a revolution, that could restore the lost order in the society? Examine the possibility by considering the last two stanzas of the poem.

Q3: Explain with reference to the context :

a) "What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?"

b) "In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?"

c) "On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?"

d) "When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,"

e) "Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"

f) "What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?"

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