

Blake's poetry is multivocal, allusive and intertextual rather than directly expr...

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" Blake's Poetry is multivocal, allusive and intertextual rather than directly expressive; philosophic rather than immediately intelligible." With this assertion as a point of departure I will present a critical discussion of the two poems, 'The Lamb' and 'The Tyger' from 'Songs of Innocence' and 'Songs of Experience' respectively, paying attention to both form and content.

The two poems offered here from 'Songs of Innocence' and 'Songs of Experience' clearly support the statement that Blake's poetry is multivocal, allusive and intertextual. Both 'The Lamb' and 'The Tyger' seem to be alluding to certain social norms and perceptions of the time when they were written and the two of them both clearly express different feelings or opinions of the forces at play in the world around us. The two poems are clearly inter-related as they both seem to offer contrasting opinions of the nature of beings and their creators, and because of the direct reference made to the lamb in the poem 'The Tyger'.

Upon closer inspection of the poem 'The Lamb', we see, in lines 5 to 8, Blake offering an almost serene description of a lamb. Describing the lamb in terms of its tender voice which makes all the vales rejoice, its soft woolly coat being that of delight, and its feeding " by the stream & o'er the mead" (Watson 1992: 133). Blake uses very soft and mostly monosyllabic words to create a very sombre and tender mood in this poem. The mild tone of the poem adds much to the beautiful image of the lamb that is being created. Throughout the description of the beauty of the lamb the question is also being posed of who created the lamb, as is evident in the opening two lines

of the poem "Little Lamb, who made thee?"/"Dost thou know who made thee?" and by asking who gave the lamb all its beautiful qualities.

The second verse of the poem offers an answer to the question of who created the lamb. The creator, God, is alluded to as an answer by saying that he calls himself a lamb and that he became a little child. Watson (1992: 133) presents the facts that "the God who made the lamb is called a lamb Himself, because He was crucified ('Worthy is the Lamb that was slain')", and that "He became a little child at the incarnation." Referring to the creator as 'meek and mild' continues the serene feeling within the poem that was created at the description of the lamb, and adds to the already blissful view of the lamb because of the fact that they share a name.

By looking at the social circumstances of the time when this poem was written, a time of great social and political revolution, where views of authority and people's own self-worth were changing, it becomes possible to give an interpretation of the poem 'The Lamb' based on these social circumstances. The idea of the lamb and the child both having a name that, at different times, were used as a reference to Jesus Christ could be seen as an allusive way of Blake trying to express the fact that all creatures were created in God's own image of himself. This point serves to enhance the fact that all people, animals and other earthly beings all have equal self-worth within the world. So at a time when people were revolting against the Catholic Churches control over them this poem could be seen as an attempt to highlight the fact that all people are equal and deserve to be treated as equals. If God created all living creatures in his perfect image of himself,

which is a Christian belief, then all people should be granted the same status as each other.

In contrast to 'The Lamb' we find its counterpart from 'Songs of Experience' - 'The Tyger'. In this poem, as in 'The Lamb', there is a question of the "unseen power behind the tiger" (Watson 1992: 146). The difference behind the questioning in this poem is the mood that the questions create. The mood is not peaceful and serene as it is in 'The Lamb', but rather the questioning here almost gives the reader a feeling of anger and aghastness at the thought of the same creator who created the lamb creating a creature so fearful as the tiger. The continued use of the word 'dare' leaves the reader feeling as if the whole creation of the tiger was a shameful act. Lines such as "On what wings dare he aspire", "what the hand, dare seize the fire", and "what immortal hand or eye/dare frame thy fearful symmetry" all help to create and complement this feeling.

From the following verse the reader is left with the sense that even the stars were angered and upset at the creation of the tiger:

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?

The image of stars throwing their spears and letting their tears fall in heaven, the place where the creator, God, is believed to reside upon, leads perfectly up to the question "did he smile his work to see?" Here the question is posed as to whether the creator was happy and satisfied at his creation of the tiger. Then, in the very next breath, the question is offered as to whether it is the same creator who created both the lamb and the tiger. Thus leaving the reader thinking how it can possibly be that a divine creator can create two such opposite creatures in this world.

Turning back to the social context of the time when the two poems were written it is possible then to read two contrasting lines, one from each poem, as direct metaphors for society itself. Firstly, from 'The Tyger' - line 2 - "in the forests of the night", and secondly, from 'The Lamb' - line 4 - "by the stream and o'er the mead". The possibility exists that Blake was expressing his fear of the existing society in 'The Tyger' by describing it as a "forest of the night", which creates very dark, almost dangerous images of the existing society where one would not find much hope or serenity. The contrasting line from 'The Lamb', where society can be compared to a stream and a mead can be seen as Blake expressing his hope for society becoming a place as peaceful and beautiful as a stream or a mead.

The tiger then can be related to the people who have control over society at this time. Those people who have 'twisted sinews of the heart' and who's 'dreaded grasp' instil 'deadly terrors' into the people who they attempt to control. The revolution then can have its metaphor in 'The Lamb' where the fears of the people can be replaced by the hope of a life where the 'vales

rejoice' at the 'softness' and 'tenderness' of a 'delightful' life. In 'The Lamb' Blake is perhaps expressing a child like innocence at the thought of living life in the perfect image that God has created for man. Moving on to 'The Tyger' Blake might be showing us that with experience our views of the world around us and the way that we exist within it are much harsher than what a child would dream it to be.

These two poems are both written in the form of a lyric and are done so in order for Blake to express his immediate thoughts and feelings at a specific point in time. The fairly short length of the poems and the simple rhyming schemes, coupled with the contrasting choice of words in each respective poem add to the immediate effect of the feelings, images and moods created within the poems. The inter-relatedness of the two poems gives the reader a very complete feeling of the mood surrounding the time when they were written.

Blake's poetry is clearly philosophic in all concerns and cannot be seen as directly expressive or immediately intelligible. The allusiveness and inter-relatedness of his poetry is clearly expressed in the two poems 'The Lamb' and 'the Tyger' from 'Songs of Innocence' and 'Songs of Experience' respectively. These two poems present two contrasting views of a world and a creator that we are all inextricably tied to but all experience under different social and political conditions and are all able to understand and experience completely differently.