

William Blake's
innocence and
experience: the
creator, the lamb and
the tyger



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William Blake presents two contrasting views of life in his Songs of Innocence and Experience: the innocent and idyllic world of childhood is set against the dark and ominous world of adulthood. Several of the poems in this collection can be read as pairs, each representing one end of the spectrum of either innocence or experience. The usefulness of looking at the pair poems is the observation of the same phenomena by opposing world views. This black and white view, however, is more complex than it seems. The world of innocence may seem naive and too trusting in its optimistic and positive manner; it seems to turn a blind eye to the evils of the world. At the same time, the world of experience or the "bad" world seems a little too cynical and in its own way does not present the complete reality of existence. However, together they form a balance between the light and dark forces of the world and present a picture of reality that acknowledges both forces. It is important to note that the poet himself does not concur wholly with either worldview, but is as objective as possible about each. One pair of poems that can be so compared are *The Tyger* and *The Lamb*, representing experience and innocence respectively. In both poems, the poet wonders about the nature of the creator of each animal, however, the nature of the animal concerned as well as the tone of the poet creates the contrast between the two explorations of the Creator and creation itself. As Blake is distant from the voice of the poet in the poems themselves, even the nature of the ones who wonders helps to add to the contrast between the two poems. In *The Lamb*, for example, the tone is one of happy, innocent wonder and awe at the seemingly benevolent creator who has created the gentle lamb, as seen in the lines. As the poem progresses, the questions asked in joyous

wonderment in the first verse are answered in serene faith in the second
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verse: here, the asker of the questions identifies himself - he is a child as "meek and mild" as the lamb itself, a symbol of childhood and innocence. Also, the benevolent creator is identified as a similar gentle spirit, as seen in these lines: "He is called by thy name, For He calls Himself a Lamb. He is meek, and He is mild; He became a little child. I a child, and thou a lamb, We are called by His name. Little Lamb, God bless thee!" The Tyger, by contrast, has an unidentified observer who is also awestruck and amazed at the creator and the creation - the tiger itself - but the tone is entirely different. The awe is tinged with fear and a touch of horror: the benevolence of the creator is no longer a precedent that is taken for granted. Words related to death and terror are used throughout the poem: "fearful", "dread", "deadly". The creator is no longer a meek or mild gentle child but a blacksmith who has forged something as immense and fearsome as the tiger. The speaker is anonymous, but when he asks the question: "Did He who made the Lamb make thee?", one wonders if this is the same young child who has made a transition from his innocence and has turned into an experienced, cynical, darker adult. This supposition is enhanced by the fact that this question is preceded by these lines: "When the stars threw down their spears / And water'd heaven with their tears: / Did he smile his work to see?" The unspoken terror in these words at the smile of the fearful creator juxtaposed with the crying of the heavenly stars enhances the sense of darker experience and real knowledge of darkness and its forces that the speaker seems to have undergone. However, the knowledge of evil is balanced by the fact that evil must be explored in order to truly understand, appreciate and cherish innocence, hence creating the balance that was striven for by Blake in the creation of these parallel texts. It is also

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interesting to explore the symbolism that enhances the contrast between the two poems. The lamb is the ultimate symbol of childhood and innocence whereas the tiger represents adulthood and experience. The lamb is gentle, timid and pure whereas the tiger is powerful, intimidating and monstrous even in its magnificence. The spirit of curiosity is maintained in both poems although it changes form because of the polarity of their lenses. Ultimately they explore the same basic issues: related to God, the existence of good and evil, and the divine intervention that makes the forces of light and dark exist in the universe. Deeply connected to this is the human being's relationship with the creator and the creation - which encompasses himself - and a self awareness about both views expressed in the contrasting poems. Reading the Tyger and the Lamb together creates a better understanding of the Songs of Innocence and Experience as a larger whole itself, and what Blake was attempting to achieve in writing it.