



Theorizing the Discrepancy between the Verse and the Visual in William Blake's "The Tyger"

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Received: 15 Sep 2021; Received in revised form: 19 Sep 2021; Accepted: 19 Sep 2021; Available online: 22 Sep 2021
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Abstract— In this paper I have presented my arguments and views on the dissonance between the verse and the accompanying illustration by Blake in "The Tyger". This discrepancy which I call a "deliberate dissonance" has been discussed deeply in this paper with my interpretations along with the discussion of views of many august critics of Blake. I also present an argument called "the creation in front of the creator" which is my personal reading pointing towards the image being perhaps an incomplete one as "a deliberate error" by Blake to intensify the mysticism in his work. Hence, we will witness throughout this paper how "The Tyger" can be read and seen in various symbolic ways as one of the masterpieces in British Romantic Literature.

Keywords— Astonishment, Blake, Biblical references, Creator, Greek mythography, Sublime, Symbolism, Romanticism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Delving into the world of William Blake, there are many ambiguous dead ends where the reader is forced to land. Talking of "The Tyger", the ambivalence becomes even more pertinent. This deceptively easy to understand poem is actually a multilayered masterpiece. In fact, merely one reading of any of the poems by Blake in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* wouldn't be a reading at all. The copper etchings breathe life into the poems and almost at all times are in consonance with what has been mentioned in the poem except what happens in "The Tyger". It is the most anthologized poem by Blake. The reason why it has been of interest for critics seems to be its veiled landscape. The verse enhances the poet's astonishment at witnessing the tiger's massive, terrifying presence however the visual image accompanying the poem gives an altogether different perspective to the reader and my purpose here is to find reasons behind this verbal-visual dissonance. Blake, a legendary visionary and a highly trained artist with his mastery in the art of copper etchings for the illustrations of his poetry would have surely thought of something considerably important before

accommodating this "deliberate dissonance" and my venture mainly is to decode it by carefully analysing the verse and the visual. I would also be presenting my personal interpretation of the illustration.

II. THE VERSE

The structure of the poem consists of 6 quatrains of 4 lines each. All lines contain 7 syllables except the two 8 syllable lines at the end of the first and the last stanza. They are different from other lines as well as each other in the sense that the 'could' in the first stanza is replaced by 'dare' in the last stanza which many critics have addressed across ages. This also makes the poem seem like an "Ode to the Supreme Creator" whom no being can supersede. To begin with, we can take the first stanza:

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

The first line of the first stanza begins with the

"Tyger, Tyger" repetition followed by the alliteration "burning bright". The repetition emphasizes the fact that the poet is addressing a tiger while the alliteration hints towards the magnificent image of the tiger in the poet's eyes forcing the reader to delve into the deep world of imagination. The dark forest imagery lends an uncanny tone to the poem from the beginning.

The fire imagery may hint towards the appearance of the dark orange colour of the tiger's stripes combined with black ones which together create the visual effect similar to what is exhibited by the flames of fire. These have been seen as "fires of Hell" by Harold Bloom in his essay "Critical Analysis of "The Tyger" ". Another way of interpretation can be the tiger being the only light "in the darkness of the night" like the Christian belief in God "as the light in the darkness".

(John 1:5) "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

This is one of the many speculations the reader is driven to make. The fires may also allude to the destructive power of this beautiful beast almost similar to the fires that burnt the city of Troy in Homer's *Iliad*.

The whole essence of the 1st stanza gives the reader a sense that the poem is about the tiger that the poet has witnessed in the forest at night and the poet is enthralled by the idea as to who "could" have the power to create such a mighty beast. Therefore, the stanza invokes in the reader's mind, this major question that the poem addresses, "Who created the tiger?" and this question is so deeply delved into that even the title of the poem could have been "The Creator" instead of "The Tyger". The "fearful symmetry" of the tiger has been the subject of awe for the poet as well as critics. On the contrary, the copper etching reveals another kind of stature of the creature. The negation of a mortal creating this tiger and the belief that the creator is some ethereal metaphysical entity can be seen in the line "what immortal hand or eye". It is certain that the poet is not yet aware of the creator and proposes to find an answer to his questions. Moving further to the next 4 stanzas:

*"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 the 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?*

Here, Blake thinks of all possible options for the creator- the fallen angel, Lucifer or the Christian God, Jehovah, which is pointed out by "deeps or skies" respectively. Next, Blake introduces images from Greek mythology to a considerable extent. Reference to Icarus through the line, "On what wings dare he aspire?" points towards the ambitious attempt on the part of the creator in the eyes of Blake to create such a bestial figure. Another Greek reference to Prometheus who stole fire from the Olympians to give civilization to human beings hints towards the idea that the creator of man and the tiger are the same. The whole courageous process of placement of the heart within the tiger that gave it life and withstanding its dreadful frame is explained in the 3rd quatrain along with the "dread hand" and "dread feet" imagery which creates a juxtaposition as this dread hand maybe the tiger's paws or may even refer to the hands of the creator. Hephaestus- the Greek blacksmith God of invention is referred to as one of the possible creators in the 4th stanza by references to "hammer", "chain", "anvil" and "furnace". The tiger is a work of hand - perhaps the hand of the all-powerful and omnipotent but who? All this adds the element of "the unknown" to this piece.

Next stanza gives yet another dimension to the poem. Till now the questioner was imagining mighty Gods, now he is imagining the "wars of Eden" between God and the rebel archangels that eventually led to the fall. This is represented by the lines, "when the stars threw down their spears, / And water'd heaven with their tears". Blake then mentions the countenance of the creator, just after he completed his creation, through the line "Did he smile his work to see?" which is also an important argument. Is this a proud smile as that of Satan or a satisfactory smile as that of God? Next, he says, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" that alludes to Jehovah being the most fitting option for the creator as we see in

the following verse from *The Book of Genesis*:

"[1:25] God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good."

Perhaps this is an apt representation of Blake's imagination, in fact an apt source of Blake's interpretation.

Quoting Harold Bloom again from his "Critical Analysis of "The Tyger" ",

"...while the lamb merely follows the flock, the tiger has learned from experience..." that highlights the inward quest of man to choose between the right and the wrong, pointing towards the freewill of man which thus becomes another way of looking at the lamb-tiger imagery.

But, what is also important to note here is that "the Lamb" is written with a capital "L" which symbolizes Christ as in the poem "The Lamb" in *the Songs of Innocence* by Blake. So perhaps the poet is saying that the creator of Christ and the tiger are the same but what is certain is the poet's uncertainty. Harold Pagliaro in his essay, "The Changing View of "The Tyger" " says:

"He who made the Lamb made the Tyger, and he made man as well, who is both Lamb and Tyger and more."

However, after much speculative study regarding the ultimate creator, by the time the reader reaches the last stanza s/he is sure that the creator is God and not some evil entity like Satan as the last stanza says:

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

This question in the last line thus, becomes rhetorical. It is not that this word "dare" is appearing for the first time in this poem. It is in fact occurring for the fourth time here as he uses this word in the second and the third quatrain as well. Thus, the whole study of this change from "could" to "dare" becomes a little less important. It is certain by this time that "dare" is an important expression for Blake since creating this creature is an ambitious task to undertake.

III. THE VISUAL

Now coming to the visual, the tiger in the image definitely seems to be innocent. It's a part of *Songs of Experience* but here it seems to be some figure from the *Songs of Innocence* - like a harmless cat or even a lamb. Perhaps by painting a cub-like illustration of the tiger, Blake is trying to point out that in childhood all are innocent and

experience shapes them to become something else, something "fearful" sometimes.



Fig.1: Image 31 of Blake, William, Henry Crabb Robinson, and Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.* [London, W. Blake, 1794] Pdf. Retrieved from the Library of Congress

Nothing is mentioned of the tiger's movement. It is not doing anything, just being. The tiger's stripes are not clearly visible on the body except the face and the front legs. The brownish-orange and black tinge is merging. The tail seems like a part of the tree itself, again not clearly distinguished. Coming to the facial expression of the tiger- it clearly is one of Astonishment not Anger. The tiger's eyes wide open make it seem shocked or astonished for its innocent catlike structure doesn't make it look furious in rage for us to conclude that these eyes are full of fury [as in "burnt the fire of thine eyes"]. This establishes the first evidence to my argument of a deliberate dissonance between the verse and the visual.

It seems that Blake has made an attempt to humanize the tiger through its facial expressions. I also define this illustration in further two ways- first, the tiger's astonishment as representing Blake's facial expression on

seeing the tiger thus also "poetic vision" and second, "the creation in front of the creator" idea.

The creation which is definitely the Tiger here and the creator which might be God or other references that Blake has made. It looks like the tiger has seen an unearthly perhaps divine being. The magnificent presence of the creator puts the tiger in a trance from which it is difficult to get out. A similar trance that romantic poetry puts the reader into. A trance that is difficult to escape for a while, in which the reader is left to ruminate. Thus this may be an incomplete image. Perhaps the creator is also there in the original image in Blake's imagination but only in blurred vision. In fact, the visual interpretation and representation of the line "Did he smile his work to see" might have been the completion of this piece.

What's also important here is the narrator of this poem and other poems in *the Songs of Experience*- the Bard who "Present, Past and Future sees". He is able to see the past, the beginning of creation but in blurred vision. The question thus is - who/what would lend clarity to this vision?

Next is the tree that lies on the right side of the image. It seems devoid of life and somewhat looks similar to the tree from the poem "The Poison Tree", also part of Blake's *Songs of Experience*. The far-reaching branches of the tree in "The Tyger" also resemble the tiger's stripes. The tree has no leaves or flowers or fruit which may also represent death that came upon man after the fall.

The sky too doesn't seem as explained in the poem which supplies another evidence to my argument. As opposed to "the forests of the night" it is a sky with different tinges of light blue and orange merging as if the sun is setting or rising. The sun's rays might be falling on the tiger's skin which make it appear as if it's burning in its dark orange color.

Next, the eagle in the sky symbolizes knowledge and clear vision. Something which the poet wishes to gain by the end of his poem is a clear image of the creator of this world not just the tiger.

IV. CONCLUSION

Overall, there are some differences in the image and the verse. Why these errors have been incorporated in this work of Blake is imperative. "Deliberate errors" is what I like to call them. the ambiguity and mystery that they create lend the poem the qualities of "the sublime". Since there is no exactitude but only approximation in Sublime, so is the imaginative landscape where Blake leaves his readers to ponder and decipher the ideas he is trying to communicate through his poem. In *A Philosophical*

Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, Edmund Burke says in Part II, Section I, "Of Passion Caused by the Sublime":

"The passion caused by the great and the Sublime in 'nature', when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror."

These lines clearly remind us of the astonished face of this creature as seen in the illustration, as I mentioned earlier.

In "Point of View and Context in Blake's Songs", Robert F. Gleckner says,

"Blake simply asked his reader to do more than merely understand: that he said, is a 'corporeal' function. He wanted them to imagine as he imagined, to see as he saw, even to recreate as he created."

which I most certainly agree with. He expects his readers to think like him and thus, leaves the ends loose for the generations of his audience to speculate on. His "deliberate dissonance", which I have established through my argument, is therefore subject to as many interpretations as the readings this poem gets, which ultimately are countless.

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