

William Blake: Songs of Innocence and Experience (1794)

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“To see the World in a Grain of Sand

And a Heaven in a Wild Flower

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hands

And Eternity in an Hour”

1. Thus William Blake says in his *Auguries of Innocence*. This poem sums up the credo of the English Romantic Movement that is viewing the world through the eye of Imagination, that ‘inward eye’, going beyond the immediate corporeal understanding of the world so as to paint the ordinary in the colours extraordinary delight.
2. Though Blake is categorized as a Pre- Romantic poet in the history of English literature, his poems set up a scaffold for the later Romantic writers and he sets up the foundation of a new kind of Romantic sensibility.
3. Being a visionary himself, he created a world of myths, which distinctly sets him apart from his contemporaries. “I must create a System or be enslaved by another Man’s” as he says in *Jerusalem*. In the Blakean world of myth, Urizen represents the voice of Reason which is always trying to repress the voice of Imagination, characterized by another mythic figure Los.
4. It is this idea of contraries which Blake explores in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), “showing the two contrary states of the human soul” and this forms the crux of his argument. In this class I want to do an analysis of two canonical poems of Blake, The Tyger and the Lamb which reveal this ambiguity brilliantly.
5. By ‘innocence’ Blake meant a perfect, idyllic, Ideal world of unadulterated joy. It childlike state of being close to God. But such a world of naivety is only susceptible to violence and will be destroyed inevitably. ‘Experience is a Necessary Evil’ as Blake says and will soon destroy innocence. The meekness of the Lamb symbolizes this world of

Innocence. The world of Experience is 'thou shalt not' and the ferocity of the tyger is needed to burn the brutal forces of repression.

6. But what astounds Blake is the duality of the Creator, who has created both the lamb and the tyger. Blake's tyger is distinct from the natural beast with the spelling of the tyger- the 'y' in the spelling essentially catches on this ambiguity. The 'burning' energy is the necessary energy required to burn the shackles of oppression, 'the mind forg'd manacles' as Blake says in his poem *London* which has fettered the free Imagination which is shrouded in the dark 'forests' in the world of Experience. Experience is a 'dangerous world' as the little child says in *The Infant Sorrow*. It is the world where priests walk in black gowns in *The Garden of Love* and binds with briars the joys and desires, it is the world where the nurses call the children early from their play and parents abandon their children, the harlots curse blights the marriage hearse and the chimney sweepers are clothed in notes of woe and notes of death, where there is no Mercy, no Pity and no Peace and Love. Experience is the world of suffering and pain.
7. The tyger is burning with incandescent energy and passion. The creation of the tyger is mired in doubt as the wrathful immense energy of the tyger is sometimes compared to the revolutionary zeal of Prometheus when he dared to steal fire from heaven, the fear induced by the beast reminds us of the failed rebellion of Satan against God in heaven..
The tyger is thus both the symbol of rebellion and the instrument of violence. It is here where Blake himself is at a loss of vision; 'Dare frame thy fearful symmetry' encapsulates this dilemma.
8. But at the end both the contraries merge. Blake talks about a journey from a world of Innocence through the world of Experience to that of Higher Innocence, from Beulah to Eden. "Without contraries there is no Progression" as he says in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The contraries are resolved in a synthesis of ideas, and at the end we see a reflection of the lamb in the tyger, announcing that both the lamb and the tyger are the one and the same face of the Creator.
9. Blake's ideas have inspired the later Pre-Raphaelite poets who emulated his style of painting in natural colours, William Butler Yeats who created a world of his own myths and edited Blake's poems, to Allen Ginsberg and the later Beat generation writers. He

was also a phenomenal figure to writers such as Aldous Huxley who wrote *The Doors of Perception* and Jim Morrison who had named his album *The Doors*.

Blake in Ten Sentences

1. "To See the World in a Grain of Sand/ And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/ Hold Infinity in the Palm of your Hand/ And Eternity in an Hour" – Blake and Imagination.
2. Though Blake is classified as a Pre- Romantic Poet, he sets the foundation of the Romantic sensibility which would be found in the later writers.
3. Visionary- "I must create a System or be enslaved by another Man's"- Urizen vs Los.
4. Contradiction is found in Songs of Innocence and Experience (1794) showing the two contrary states of the human soul. *Tyger* and the *Lamb*.
5. Innocence – state of absolute joy- being closer to God. Such a world will be inevitably destroyed- Experience is a Necessary Evil. Experience world of repression and darkness.
6. Lamb- innocence. Tyger- experience necessary for burning the shackles of Reason and oppression which is there in the world of experience. Experience is a fallen world- Dangerous world- Infant Sorrow, priests walk in black gowns and binds with briars the joys and desires, Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love.
7. Tyger- Ambiguity- 'y'- The duality of the Creator- symbolic of the rebellious spirit of Prometheus and the spirit of terror who forces Satan to surrender.
8. In the end duality gets intensified- Dare frame thy fearful symmetry- Same God- the Tyger and the Lamb are the twin sides of the same soul- Marriage of Heaven and Hell- Without Contraries there is no Progression.
9. Journey from Innocence- Experience- Higher Innocence.
10. Influences on Pre- Raphaelites, Yeats and Allen Ginsberg, Beat Generation writers.