Title: An overview of “The Tyger”

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[Derek Furr is a freelance writer and has taught composition and literature courses at the University of Virginia and at Virginia Commonwealth University. In the following essay, Furr points out the complexity of Blake's work that leaves questions concerning both the poem's meaning and the identity of the Tyger's creator unresolved]

Given that William Blake's **“The Tyger”** is composed exclusively of questions (note that nearly every line asks a question, and none is answered), you shouldn't be surprised if, upon first encountering it, you come away puzzled. As a matter of fact, it seems fitting to begin a discussion of this “interrogatory” poem with a question: what does **“The Tyger”** mean?

Perhaps some information about the original context of **“The Tyger”** might bring us closer to its meaning. The poem first appeared in 1794, in an illuminated book by William Blake titled *Songs of Innocence and Experience—Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.* A master engraver, Blake conceived of his “Songs” as a set of integrally linked poems and illustrations; for example, the text of **“The Tyger”** ends with a picture of the animal. As the title suggests, the “Songs” are divided between “innocence” poems and “experience” poems, and several of the first set have companion works in the second; **“The Tyger”** is a companion of the innocent “The Lamb.”

Understanding the difference between the “two contrary states,” innocence and experience, is fundamental to understanding **“The Tyger.”** “Innocence” in Blake's book is characterized by the trustfulness and spiritual resilience of childhood. In “The Lamb,” for example, a child begins by asking a lamb: “Little lamb, who made thee/ Dost thou know who made thee?” And, in his innocent state, the child has an unequivocal answer for his question, just as a parent might to his or her child: God, who became incarnate in the lamb of Christ, made the lamb. The contrast with **“The Tyger”** is evident: when the speaker asks who made the tyger, he has no clear answer. Unlike innocence, experience is characterized by darkness, confusion, and pain. Critic E. D. Hirsch has argued that the innocence poems, which Blake actually completed and first printed alone as “Songs of Innocence” in 1789, constitute the poet's celebration of the interdependent and loving relationship between adults and children. In the five years between 1789 and 1794, however, Blake witnessed the French revolution, riots in England, and increasing poverty and pain in London. His “Songs of Experience,” therefore, satirize the naivete of innocence; **“The Tyger”** is a disillusioned response to the naive illusions of “The Lamb.” While not all readers have agreed with Hirsch, most of Blake's critics do agree that Blake believes both innocence and experience are necessary “states” in the development of the human spirit. We are all born innocents, but when we begin to recognize evil or wrong, and are inevitably tempted by it, we pass into a state of experience. Thus, in our lives we reenact the myth of the Fall of Man described in the Book of Genesis in the Bible. But without the fall, without experience, we could not experience redemption—what one of the great twentieth century reader's of Blake, Northrop Frye, has termed a state of higher innocence, in which we knowingly *choose* to live with childlike trust and vision.

So **“The Tyger”** is a song of experience, spoken by someone who once felt he had all the answers, but is now unsure. We can derive at least this much information from the poem's original context, but we still haven't answered our fundamental question: what does **“The Tyger”** mean? The trouble with this question is that **“The Tyger”** is about many things at once, and its meaning is deliberately elusive. The wonderful paradox at the heart of **“The Tyger”** is that its carefully crafted rhythms, vivid imagery, and poignant allusions work together to generate obscurity. Critic and Blake editor Geoffrey Keynes maintains that trying to decipher the meaning of **“The Tyger”** “will only spoil its impact as poetry.” But while we may be remiss in trying to define the fundamental meaning of **“The Tyger”,** this poem, filled with puzzling questions, certainly demands thoughtful investigation. Perhaps the best question to begin with, therefore, is not “what does the poem mean?”, but “how does the poem work?” Analyzing the “fearful symmetry” of Blake's poem helps us feel its “impact as poetry” and, consequently, may help us comprehend some of its meanings.

The sounds of Blake's poem create tension. We, the readers, cannot escape the relentless drumbeat of “Tyger Tyger, burning bright/ In the forest of the night.” Blake creates this effect by drawing on three poetic devices. The first is trochaic meter, in which a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed one, as in “tyger” and “burning.” Strung together, trochees sound like a chant. Each trochee in a poem represents one “foot” of the line; so if a poet strings together four trochees, for example, his or her line of poetry has four feet. This brings us to the next device. Blake drops the unstressed syllable from the last foot of each line. We're stopped in our tracks, as it were, held in suspense—just as Blake's questions hold us in suspense. Each line begins and ends with a thud, and the preponderance of stressed syllables, in such short lines, makes for a relentless thumping. This thumping is made even louder by the third device: alliteration, or the repetition of initial consonant sounds. Notice the “t” in “Tyger” and the “b's” in “burning” and “bright,” each falling in the first, stressed syllable. Another form of consonant repetition, called consonance, reinforces the alliteration. Notice how often hard consonant—“t,” “m,” “n”—appear. In combination, these various poetic devices impel **“The Tyger”** forward, driving toward a conclusion that is decidedly inconclusive.

The sights in **“The Tyger”** contribute equally to the tension we feel in the poem's rhythms. Throughout the poem, Blake flicks the lights on and off, blinding us with sudden light then plunging us into darkness. Again, notice the first two lines. We're dazzled by “burning bright,” then suddenly it's “night”; the two states are held in tension by the rhyme. This evil and threatening “tyger” wanders in the darkness. Yet he is luminescent, even beautiful, like a work of art. His eyes burn with fire. Fire is the pervasive image in **“The Tyger.”** Is the fire a good or bad thing?

Our question about the poem's imagery brings us to the *speaker's* fundamental question in **“The Tyger”**: who made the tyger? If the tyger is associated with darkness and fire and is “fearful,” his creator is doubly so. Indeed, the speaker in **“The Tyger”** seems as “fearful” of the creator as he is of the “tyger.” But who is this creator? Through the technique of allusion, Blake associates the creator with a host of characters from Western mythology: Daedelus and Icarus (line 7), the daring Greek god Prometheus (line 8), Vulcan the blacksmith (lines 9-10 and 13-14), Lucifer and his angels (lines 17-18) and finally the God of the Old Testament. This creator seems to be both daring and foolhardy, creative and destructive, a craftsman, a creator, one who succeeds and one who invariably fails. Like the tyger, he seems to be simultaneously good and evil.

Just as we cannot answer what the poem means, neither can we easily answer who made the tyger and what that maker's intentions were. But while it's clear that the speaker fears the creator, he also respects him. “Fearful” can mean “scary”—the meaning to which we're accustomed—or awe-inspiring. The speaker is in awe of whomever made the tyger and of the tyger as well. Perhaps the point of Blake's poem is to inspire us with awe of the tyger and its maker. Notice the line “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” On one hand, this is a reference to the God of the Bible; but on the other, it could be a reference to Blake himself. Didn't Blake make a lamb, in his poem from “Songs of Innocence?” And hasn't he here made a tyger? Surely, the poem is as awe-inspiring as it is ambiguous. And its carefully crafted obscurity invites constant revisitation and constant questioning.

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