

Blake's Mysticism and Symbolism with Special Reference to the Lamb and the Tyger

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William Blake is a mystic par excellence, and perhaps the greatest poet in English Literature who expresses his mystical thoughts through symbols. Like Shelley, he uses the objects of nature as symbols to suggest the spiritual reality that lies behind appearances.

Songs of Innocence are apparently very simple but not always actually so. Moreover, often they have great depths and are capable of encouraging a number of interpretations. These songs are lyrics which deal with rural life, with childhood joys, with trees, flowers and birds, with lambs and shepherds. Blake's 'Introduction' indicates the origin of the collection: 'Piping down the valleys wild';

Blake has a vision of a child cradled on a cloud. In the very opening lyric Blake makes connection with the Christ – child through the symbol of Lamb.

The two sections of Blake's book, the Songs of Innocence and the Songs of Experience are contrasted elements in a single design. The first part sets out an imaginative vision of the state of Innocence; the second shows how life's challenges corrupt and destroys it. The lamb and the tiger are symbols employed to exhibit two different states of human soul. When lamb is destroyed by experience, the tiger is needed to restore the world. The Lamb and The Tyger testify to Blake's mysticism and symbolism. In The Lamb, Blake writes about innocence which is a mystical state; he identifies this mystical state with childhood. His poem seems actually to be spoken by a child. The child asks questions about the creator of Lamb and lamb's food and his soft woolly bright clothing. The child can answer the questions because the child has the intuitive mystical knowledge of the secret of creation and of the creator. The child knows instinctively that God is lamb and became a little child. God is meek and mild:

'I a child and thou a lamb

We are called by His name'.

God is the divine presence which exists in the child and the lamb and potentially is every man and woman. In this poem, the lamb and the child are the symbol of mystical knowledge.

'Clothing of delight' suggests innocence as the clothing of the soul.'

He is called by thy name' suggest that the maker of the lamb is no other than God, who has himself become the lamb, another child and everything else Christian ideas about God are conveyed in the line: 'He is meek and He is mild'.

In 'Songs of Innocence', Blake describes the security and assurance of existence that belongs to lamb's under a wise shepherd or to children with loving parents. Songs of Innocence records the terrifying and disillusionary experience of adult life when the 'shades of the prison-house' had already closed upon the maturing man. But the apparent evil of existence has its bearing upon the formation of a man's character, as Browning also would emphasize a century later. Even the most forbidding things of life have, perhaps a beauty and justification of their own, that seems to be the message of the poem 'The Tyger', a remarkable lyric which Charles Lamb rightly described as

'glorious'. Most of the poems of Songs of Experience are counter points to the earlier poems in Songs of Innocence, the tiger being a counter point to the lamb. The tiger seems to symbolize fierce, spiritual forces which are needed to break the shackles of experience. Blake believes in the all-embracing nature of God-head. The apparent evil in the tiger is only an expression of divine strength and energy. Thus Blake's view of good and evil, as manifestations of the same heavenly spirit, is essentially mystical. In fact, Blake's saying, 'without contraries is no progression', is the basis of all his philosophy.

Real enlightenment, however, is necessary for appreciating this truth. Those who are unenlightened can appreciate the spirit of gentleness embodied in the lamb. But they can only be appalled at the spirit of fierceness embodied in the tiger. The Right approach is not to be contemptuous of vigour and energy but to accept them as steps towards a fuller life. 'Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to human existence'. Blake's tiger has been traditionally interpreted as the symbol of divine wrath, the wrath which Blake found in Christ ; his symbol of the divine spirit was the means by which he hoped to unite innocence and experience in some tremendous synthesis. Ordinary minds generally appreciate the lamb but are terror-struck by the tiger element in the universe –nature 'red in tooth and claw' or the tiger and ape in human nature. Unlike the lamb, the tiger is terrifying. But this terror is a manifestation of divine force. Blake seems to think that love cannot be absent from power. God's very power is a guarantee of His love. The lamb may stand for Jesus and for the redemption which is assured through His love.

In this poem , Blake also sets up before us the stars in two conditions-wielding their spears and weeping. The former probably symbolize our imperfect glimpses of God as a just judge and as the punisher of the wicked . The latter may stand for His sympathy and love for His suffering creatures.

Critics like Kathleen, Raine and Roy. P.Basler, however, find the traditional explanation –that the tiger symbolises the wrath of God-unacceptable. According to Roy.P.Basler, the tiger may not represent supernatural at all., but something within the soul of man. Blake's poetry testifies abundantly to the fact that he was most appalled by the infinite extremes of the human psyche., - love-hate, trust –fear. This interpretation is, of course, thought provoking but the symbolism inherent in the tiger seems to be, in all probability , that energy is, after all, eternal delight. So the tiger may symbolize for Blake , as it has been rightly suggested, the 'abundant life' assured by Christ. When the lamb is destroyed by experience, the tiger is needed to restore the world.

Author's Biography



The author works as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Basic Science and Humanities(English) in Camellia Institute of Technology, Kolkata-700129 since January 2009 till date. Interest lies in ELT and English Literature. Involved in research for the comfort zone of learners(ESL learners).