



Analysis of the Image in *The Tyger* from the Perspective of Blake's Composite Art of Poetry and Painting

Annan Li

Gannan Normal University, Ganzhou, China
Email: liannan2000111@163.com

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Abstract

William Blake's poetry collections *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* have always been studied by later generations. They not only reflect Blake's deep understanding and depiction of the inner side of human nature, but also his profound understanding and analysis of religion and philosophy. As a printmaker, however, Blake's paintings are not just subordinate parts of poetry. From the perspective of Blake's composite art of poetry and painting, the author intends to analyze the image tiger in *Songs of Experience* by combining the poem text and the illustration of *The Tyger*, and comparing the poem text of *The Tyger* and *The Lamb*. The image of tiger in the poem and in the painting is contradictory, which reflects Blake's contradictory feelings of worship and suspicion of the Creator, and conveys his humanistic thought of pursuing spiritual creativity and opposing rational oppression.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Blake's Composite Art, *The Tyger*, Tiger, William Blake

1. Introduction

William Blake, the son of a London haberdasher, was a strange and unique child, whose experience was more at home with brooks and flowers than with the crowd of the city streets. Beyond learning to read and write, he received no education. He was only formally educated in art. At the age of fourteen he apprenticed for seven years to a well-known engraver, read widely in his free time, and began to

try his hand at poetry. Blake is also an engraver. He is a seminal figure in the history of visual arts of the Romantic Age. Blake made, and sometimes engraved, designs in illustration of many works besides his own poems, notably Thomas Gray's *Gray's Poems*, and Dante's *Divina Commedia*, designs which revealed his greatness as an artist. He created a large number of stunning works of art combining poetry and painting in his lifetime. Judging from Blake's combination of poetry and painting, the relationship between poetry and painting in his works presents a complicated situation. The painting that matches the poem is not a simple auxiliary explanation of the poem text. It is active and often produces dialogue and interaction with the poem text, or extends the meaning of the poem text, or is not directly related to the poem text, and some works even produce the situation that the poem painting does not match, or even confronts.

The Tyger is the most famous poem in the poetry collection *Songs of Experience*. In 1794, when Blake was 37 years old, *Songs of Experience* was published and in marked contrast with *Songs of Innocence*. The brightness of the earlier work was placed by a sense of gloom and mystery, and of the power of evil. People find a protest against restrictive codes and an exaltation of the spirit of love.

2. Violence in Poetry

By appreciating William Blake's poetry, readers find it not difficult to feel that there is a strong religious tone in his poetry. However, William Blake shares complex and contradictory thoughts on the Creator in his work. This is the main elements that cause various ideas about the image tiger in this poem. In this chapter, the author introduces the poet William Blake and the poem *The Tyger*.

The Tyger is a romantic poem or a lyric. It has a highly structured rhyme scheme and meter. Blake uses rhyming couplets and groups them into quatrains. The poem flows with a rhythmic synchronization AABB with a regular meter tetrameter. There is no doubt that the central image of the poem is that of a tiger roaming steadily and silently in the dark forests of the night. It remains constant throughout the poem. This poem describes the tiger a beautiful, strong, magnificent but fearsome creature. The speaker in this poem is an awe-struck and pious human being, who gives voice to Blake's inexpressible feelings. The tone of this may be respect, awe-struck and even skeptical.

The Tyger mainly explores the dark and destructive power of the Creator and his creation. In this poem, Blake gradually and slowly leads to some troubling questions. It is a poem where the poet asks the tiger about its creator and his traits. The poet wonders how the Creator would have thought after completing his creation. Is he also the creator of "the lamb"?

The opening question enacts the single dramatic gesture of the poem, and each subsequent stanza elaborates on this conception. Blake is building on the conventional idea that nature, like a work of art, must in some way contain a reflection of its creator. The tiger is strikingly beautiful yet also horrific in its capacity for violence. The power of the Creator is supernatural. But at the same time, what

kind of a God, then, could or would design such a terrifying beast? In more general terms, what does the undeniable existence of evil and violence in the world tell us about the nature of God, and what does it mean to live in a world where a being can at once contain both beauty and horror?

The tiger initially appears as a strikingly sensuous image. However, as we read the whole poem, we may find the tiger plays the role of a symbolic character, and gradually embodies the spiritual and moral problem the poem explores: perfectly beautiful and perfectly destructive. Blake's tiger becomes the symbolic center for an adventure and explore into the presence of evil in the world. Since the tiger's remarkable appearance and nature exist both in physical and moral forms, the speaker's questions about its origin must also encompass both physical and moral dimensions. The poem's series of questions repeatedly ask what sort of physical creative capacity makes the "fearful symmetry" of the tiger. It assumedly only a very strong and powerful being could be capable of such a creation.

The smithy in the poem who seems to create the tiger represents a traditional image of artistic creation. Here, Blake applies it to the divine creation of the natural world. The forging of the tiger suggests a physical forming. It emphasizes the awesome physical presence of the tiger and precludes the idea that such a creation could have been in any way accidentally or haphazardly produced. It also continues from the first description of the tiger, the imagery of fire with its simultaneous connotation of creation, purification, and destruction. The speaker stands in awe of the tiger as a sheer physical and aesthetic achievement, even as he recoils in horror from the moral implications of such a creation. The poem not only focus on the question of who could make such a creature as the tiger, but who would perform this act. In the third stanza, the parallelism of "shoulder" and "art", as well as the fact that it is not just the body but also the "heart" of the tiger that is being forged. The repeated use of the word "dare" to replace the "could" of the first stanza introduces a dimension of aspiration and willfulness into the might of the creative behavior. In addition, there seems to be onomatopoeia in this poem. For example, the pronunciation and the rhythm are like the sound of striking iron, forging iron. And this kind of sound may imply the image of revolution. It sounds like forging weapons.

The reference to the lamb in the penultimate stanza reminds the readers that a tiger and a lamb have been created by the "same" God, and raises questions about the implications of this. It also invites a contrast between the perspectives of "experience" and "innocence" represented here and in the poem *The Lamb*. *The Tyger* consists entirely of unanswered questions, and the poet leaves us to awe at the complexity of creation, the sheer magnitude of God's power, and the inscrutability of divine will. The perspective of experience in this poem involves a sophisticated acknowledgement of what is unexplainable in the universe, presenting evil as the prime example of something that cannot be denied, but will not withstand facile explanation, either. The open awe of *The Tyger* contrasts with the easy confidence, in *The Lamb*, of a child's innocent faith in a benevolent universe. In

this poem, the tiger is the work of God which reflects God's will. From the poem itself, we can feel the poet's respect and awe-struck attachment to God from his description of the image tiger. At the same time, the poet doubts on God's will and intends to revolutionize society and authority.

Above all is the analysis of the image tiger by textual analysis of *The Tyger*, which is from the inner side of the poem. Next is the understanding of the image from the outer side. How could we analyze the image from the perspective of *The Lamb*?

The Lamb has two stanzas, each containing five rhymed couplets. Repetition in the first and last couplet of each stanza makes these lines into a refrain, and helps to give the poem its song-like style. The lines' sounds suggest the bleating of a lamb or the lisping character of a child's chant. The poem begins with the question, "Little Lamb, who made thee?" The speaker, a child, asked the lamb about its origins: how it came into being, how it acquired its particular manner of feeding, its "clothing" of wool, its "tender voice". In the next stanza, the speaker attempts a riddling answer to his own question: the lamb was made by one who "calls himself a Lamb", one who resembles in his gentleness both the child and the lamb. The poem ends with the child bestowing a blessing on the lamb.

The poem is a child's song, in the form of a question and answer. The first stanza is rural and descriptive, while the second focuses on abstract spiritual matters and contains explanation and analogy. The child's question is both naïve and profound. The question "who made thee?" is a simple question, but the child is also exploring into the deep and timeless questions that all human beings have, about their own origins and the nature of creation. The poem's apostrophic form contributes to the effect of innocence, for the situation of a child talking to an animal is a believable one, and not simply a literary contrivance. Yet by answering his question, the child converts it into a rhetorical one, thus counteracting the initial spontaneous sense of the poem. The answer is presented as a puzzle or riddle, and even though it performs like child's play. This also contributes to an underlying sense of ironic knowingness or artifice in the poem. The child's answer, however, reveals his confidence in his simple Christian faith and his innocent acceptance of its education.

The Lamb symbolizes the God. The traditional image of Jesus as a lamb underscores the Christian values of gentleness and peace. The image of the child is also associated with Jesus. The Bible's depiction of Jesus in his childhood shows him as guileless and vulnerable. These are also the characteristics from which the child speaker approaches the ideas of nature and of God. This poem accepts what Blake saw as the more positive aspects of conventional Christian belief like many of *Songs of Innocence*. But it does not provide a completely adequate doctrine, because it fails to account for the presence of suffering and evil in the world. The companion poem to this one, is *The Tyger* in *Songs of Experience*. The two poems give a perspective on religion that includes the good and clear as well as the terrible and inscrutable. These poems complement each other to produce a fuller account

than either offers independently. They offer a good instance of how Blake himself stands somewhere outside the perspectives of innocence and experience he projects.

The poems collected in *Songs of Innocence* express the poet's delight in life, even in the face of suffering. The world is seen through the eyes of a child's imagination. Blake's vision of innocence is not that of a child's only. It is a world that can be attained by the adults if they cast away the follies and deceits of the hostile world and seek a visionary world through their imagination. *Songs of Experience* is a collection of poems and songs in which the atmosphere is no longer positive but sad and gloomy. Evil is found everywhere in this world. Through the loss of imagination, man has become a slave to the falsehood and hypocrisy of religion and society, and thus has lost the heaven of innocence and gained the hell of experience. Therefore, the two collections reflect two contrary states of human soul. From the image lamb, we may find that Blake believed in the Creator. His pious attitude toward religion was as innocent as a child's inner world. However, experience of poor and hopeless life made him doubt on the society and his belief—God. *The Lamb* represents the great and selfless God who creates everything in the world. While the tiger represents the evil, mighty and destructive God who protects the evil persons but ignores the poor ones.

3. Peace in Painting

In the early 20th century, Blake's status as an important poet was established, and more and more critics and researchers paid attention to him. His poetry works won the recognition and welcome of many readers. However, until the middle of the 20th century, people's research on Blake's poetry works mostly started from the printed text. Many studies have been made on his poetics, philosophy, aesthetics, theology, mysticism, symbolism and so on. However, many of his combined works of poetry and painting have not been studied from the perspective of this unique art. "These works are increasingly appearing in general printed form." Blake was not satisfied that his poems were 'merely written in word form or printed, as they are usually', arguing that "poetry and images are originally different forms of the same thing" [1]. With the exception of his earliest poem, *Sketches of Poetry*, which was printed in 1783, most of his subsequent poems were both poems and paintings, and were produced by this letterpress etching method, including the most well-known *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. It can be said that from the very beginning, Blake's poetry is not a single text, but a combination of poetry and painting, a combination of abstract text symbols and perceptual, imaginative and visual images.

The study of the relationship between poetry and painting in Blake's works began in the 1970s with Jean Hagstrom [2]. In his book *William Blake, Poet and Painter: An Introduction to the Illuminated Verse*, Blake's style was first named "Composite Art". Later, W. J. T. Mitchell refuted Hagstrom's view that Blake's art was a continuation of medieval manuscripts, arguing that Blake's art did not be-

long to the “ut picture poesis” of the past poesis. He points out that there is no subordination between poetry and painting in Blake’s art. Images and texts as a whole make visual representation free from the control of discourse, and they are equal and independent of each other [3]. According to Lessing, the author of a famous German document, *Laokoon*, has once concluded that poetry, no less than painting, is imitation [4]. In Michel’s view, however, the combination of image and text is not an imitation of the objective world.

This poetic system is rare special feature in the history of Western art. Besides, it is in harmony with the purpose of “there is painting in poetry and poetry in painting” (Su Shi), which is advocated by the Chinese literati painting tradition.

The most famous poem in *Songs of Experience* is *The Tiger*. This poem is probably one of Blake’s most widely circulated poems, and its position in the whole *Song of Innocence and Experience* is self-evident, and even we can glimpse Blake’s overall poetics structure through this poem. Some Western scholars compare this poem to a sponge. Although it has been commented on by critics of all ages and has absorbed a lot of nutrients of criticism, it has never been closed for too much interpretation and thus sunk into the sea of criticism.

In most of the previous criticisms, the critics invariably focus on the poem itself (the text), and the picture of this poem is regarded as the reference image of the poem. Some scholars even believe that Blake’s picture of this poem is a failure in artistic creation. The reason is that such scholars believe that the tiger painted by Blake is quite different from the tiger shown in the poem. The tiger in the poem is full of brilliant light and shadow and full of strength, while the tiger in the painting is thin and has stiff features. The whole tiger is placed in a background full of dead atmosphere, and the whole image shows a scene that is very disproportionate to the poem text [5].

Undoubtedly, first of all, Blake has a strong interest in the image of tiger, which has been constantly expressed in poetry and paintings. Furthermore, referring to the previous discussion, on the one hand, we can find that this animal image does not refer to itself, but to the “man” in the fallen world, because “Blake expanded his own mythology as early as 1807, in which the fallen or vicious animal. The first is the symbol of man himself in his fallen state” [6]. The idea of associating the ferocity of the beast with the depraved man was clearly influenced by Milton. On the other hand, the violence and strength of the tiger are regarded as the important source of revolutionary power because this poetry was roughly under the background of the French Revolution. However, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake wrote, “An angry tiger is wiser than a preaching horse.” That is to say, the anger and violence of the tiger is specific, and the reason why it is more intelligent than the preaching horse is that the anger of the tiger is an irrational existence. It represents strength and passion, and the preaching horse represents a rationality. The tiger’s anger, therefore, appears first of all as the opposite of reason, and the passion it unleashing is a refutation of the reason of inaction, rather than a simple extension of a revolutionary force.

In the traditional Blake's poetry and painting criticism, the most popular question among the critics is: why the tiger in the painting and the tiger in the poem are so different. Here, the poetry and the painting as a whole come from Blake alone. In addition, as mentioned above, we tend to think that the "mistake"—the inconsistency of poetry and painting—reflected in this picture is intentional by Blake.

In the poetry *The Tyger*, the lines "What the hammer? What the chain? In what furnace was thy brain? What the anvil? What dread grasp/Dare its deadly terrors clasp?" The passionate expression depicts the image of a fierce tiger, and multiple rhetorical questions describe the tiger's body, which has suffered from material erosion and has been tempered by reality.

While the image of a toothed and clawed tiger is imminent, Blake's illustration shows a remarkably calm and serene scene. The right side of the text is decorated by a stout tall tree, whose branches extend flat to the left, projecting a peaceful and mysterious atmosphere. At the root of the tree stood a tiger, with bright eyes and a calm, unafraid look. It seems to be sniffing a blade of grass in front of it, and its relaxed posture makes the whole picture softer. Blake uses bold lines to outline the tiger and its body was colored into heavy black, red and dark blue, echoing the words "hammer", "chains" in the poem. The figure of the tiger in Blake's painting appears calmly but performs strong and mighty in its inner world.



Figure 1. The image of a fierce tiger.

According to the picture (See **Figure 1**), there are three main objects more obvious in the whole picture, which are a tree on the far right of the picture, a tiger occupying the lower center position, and a grass-like plant on the right of the picture. The tree on the right has only a trunk, no leaves, and a total of three clearly forked branches. The top branch is divided into three branches; the top and mid-

dle branches enclose the word “Tyger” in the title, and the bottom branch serves as the first division, delineating the first stanza. The middle branch is divided into two branches, the longest extending all the way to the left of the picture, dividing the poem into two parts (three stanzas each). The bottom branch is divided into two branches, and the top branch forms the dividing line between the fifth and sixth stanzas.

In addition, it is obvious that Blake used clear line to shape the tiger and the tree. Blake believed that only the “line” can express the spirit clearly and completely. This concept differs from that of most romantic artists. Many romantic artists (especially in France) used strong and vivid colors to express emotions. The “line” here mainly refers to the “outline line” of the painting object. This has a lot to do with his first study of printmaking into the palace of art, and his admiration for Gothic art style. In many of Blake’s paintings, you can see the human body in sharp, knife-like lines and long, flowing lines. According to Andrew Wilton, he wrote that Blake’s naked figure seems to have been stripped of its skin, which actually means more than we think. Blake really seems to be looking beyond the surface—peeling off the timeless outer skin of his characters and painting the intense and energetic insides of his characters—the soul of his mind. Blake’s emphasis on “line” is also his way of expressing spirit in a concrete and realistic way. The “line” paints a concrete image. However, both the lines and the objects they depict are in the service of the spirit. It is also a way of interweaving the physical world with the spiritual world.

Then, why does Blake choose to design such a calm and peaceful tiger as the illustration of *The Tyger*? Blake research expert Joseph H. Wicksteed said that we know that he never saw a tiger in the forest, if you look at the picture, this tiger is more like a tiger in a zoo. From the creatures in the images alone, one might hope that Blake chose to paint a purely spiritual image.... But he tried to outline the divinity in the smile on the tiger’s lips, and to show the perfect “human divinity” in this most brutal of beasts—unless the whole image was a mask to make fun of those who tried to see the divinity in this drawing [7]. While this interpretation of Wicksteed was challenged by Grant, who said Wicksteed had misread the tiger’s facial expression, which was more a sign of concern than a smile [8]. Whether it’s a smile or a scowl, perhaps a matter of opinion, is not a problem in itself. But the point is that, according to Wicksteed’s interpretation, the tiger should be in a certain state of innocence.

It seems that through Wicksteed interpretation, we can come to the conclusion that the problem of the disunity of poetry and painting in Blake’s *Tyger* lies in the fact that the poem depicts a world of experience, while the painting gives an innocent picture. But the question is, if Blake really wanted to strike a balance of innocence and experience between the scene depicted in the picture and the text, then why is the tree not alive in the painting?

Moreover, indeed, from the text, we can begin to read the meaning of redemption and revelation from the fifth verse, and if the image here shows the innocent

state of the tiger after its redemption, then why does it still exist in the same picture with the lifeless tree? For this tree in the painting, scholars tend to think of it as a microcosm of the whole fallen world. Grant believes that in this painting: “it symbolizes the darkness of the night, the Black world....” [8]. In this light, the tiger is indeed still in the world of fallen experience.

Under the pressure of reason, the tiger is no longer violent. It walks on as if fleeing from this fallen world of experience. When we analyze the text, we find Blake’s respect and awe-struck emotion to God from his description of the image tiger. At the same time, Blake doubts on God’s will and intends to revolutionize society and authority. After viewing the illustration of *The Tyger*, we begin to reflect that Blake wants to express his hope and pursuit of peaceful and innocent life.

4. Conclusions

William Blake is the most maverick poet of all the romantic poets of the 18th century. For a great part of his life, he was the poet of inspiration alone, following no man’s lead but that which he heard in his own mystic soul. Though the most extraordinary literary genius of his age, he had practically no influence upon it. Indeed, we hardly yet understand this poet of pure fancy, this mystic, this transcendental madman, who remained to the end of his busy life an incomprehensible child.

Blake’s poetry is closely related to religion. He felt the joys and sorrows brought by religion in his own extraordinary imagination world all his life, and gradually constructed and improved his own religious system. Blake’s religious thoughts in his poetry are very contradictory. On the one hand, he was full of worship and praise for God, and at the same time, he saw the contrast between religious ideal and reality, and turned to doubt, criticize and negate religion. The contradiction and transformation of Blake’s religious thought cannot be separated from the social background. He expresses his religious attitude and accuses the social evil meanwhile. In the end, Blake tried to reflect the political reality in his self-created religious system, and explored the way out for the development of human society by constructing an imaginary ideal world. Black’s tiger contains mysterious symbolism in its straightforward and easily understandable words and painting, leaving more space for the readers to imagine.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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