

II BA ENGLISH

BRITISH LITERATURE – BEN31

UNIT I – Poetry

‘The Tyger’ William Blake (1757-1827)

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

William Blake (1757 – 1827) is poet, painter and print maker. Though he was largely unrecognized during his life time, today he is chiefly remembered as a pre-romantic poet. Beginning in the 1740s pre-romanticism marked a shift from the Neo-classical “grandeur, austerity, nobility, idealization, and elevated sentiments towards simpler, more sincere, and more natural forms of expression.” The poem “Tyger” stands as the most appropriate example of pre-romantic poetry. The poem is written in six short stanzas of four lines each. Of these, the sixth stanza is a repetition of the first stanza. It follows an end rhyme pattern of aabb, ccdd... The chief emotion aroused by the poem is wonder, and the object of wonder is a single animal tiger. All these factors make it the best example of pre-romantic simplicity and anticipates the poems of the romantic age.

“The Tyger” appeared in the collection *Songs of Experience* published in the year 1794. It is often contrasted with “The Lamb” another poem by Blake which appeared in the collection *Songs of Innocence* (1789). ‘The Tyger’ is arguably the most famous poem written by Blake. The poem’s opening line, ‘TygerTyger, burning bright’ is among the most famous opening lines in English poetry. Framed as a series of questions, ‘Tyger Tyger, burning bright’ (as the poem is also often known), in summary, sees Blake’s speaker wondering about the creator responsible for such a fearsome creature as the tiger. The fiery imagery used throughout the poem conjures the tiger’s aura of danger: fire equates to fear. Don’t get too close to the tiger, Blake’s poem seems to say, otherwise you’ll get burnt. The first stanza and sixth stanza, alike in every respect except for the shift from ‘Could frame’ to ‘Dare frame’, frame the poem, asking about the immortal creator responsible for the beast. The second stanza continues the fire imagery established by the image of the tiger ‘burning bright’, with talk of ‘the fire’ of the creature’s eyes, and the notion of the creator fashioning the tiger out of pure fire, as if he (or He) had reached his hand into the fire and moulded the creature from it. (The image succeeds, of course, because of the flame-like appearance of a tiger’s stripes.) It must have been a god who played with fire who made the tiger. In the third and fourth stanzas, Blake introduces another central metaphor, explicitly drawing a comparison between God and a blacksmith. It is as if the Creator made the blacksmith in his forge, hammering the base materials into the living and breathing ferocious creature which now walks the earth. The fifth stanza is more puzzling, but ‘stars’ have long been associated with human destiny (as the root of ‘astrology’ highlights). For Kathleen Raine, this stanza can be linked with another of William Blake’s works, *The Four Zoas*, where the phrase which we also find in ‘The Tyger’, ‘the stars threw down their spears’, also appears. There it is the godlike creator of the universe (Urizen in Blake’s mythology) who utters it; Urizen’s fall, and the fall of the stars and planets, are what brought about the creation of life on Earth in Blake’s Creation story. When the Creator fashioned the Tyger, Blake asks, did he look with pride upon the animal he had created? How might we analyse ‘The Tyger’? What does it mean? The broader point is one that many Christian believers have had to grapple with: if God is all-loving, why did he make such a fearsome and dangerous animal? We can’t easily fit the tiger into the ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’ view of Christian creation. As Blake himself asks, ‘Did he who made the Lamb make thee?’ In other words, did God make the gentle and meek animals, but also the destructive and ferocious ones? Presumably the question is rhetorical; the real question-behind-the-question is why. (This might help to explain Blake’s reference to ‘fearful symmetry’: he is describing not only the remarkable patterns on the tiger’s skin and fur which humans have learned to go in fear of, but the ‘symmetry’ between the innocent lamb on the one hand and the fearsome tiger on the other. (‘Fearful’ means ‘fearsome’ here, confusingly.) Indeed, we might take such an analysis further and see the duality between the lamb and the tiger as being specifically about the two versions of God in Christianity: the vengeful

and punitive Old Testament God, Yahweh, and the meek and forgiving God presented in the New Testament. What bolsters such an interpretation is the long-established associations between the lamb and Jesus Christ. The tiger, whilst not a biblical animal, embodies the violent retribution and awesome might of Yahweh in the Old Testament. But none of these readings quite settles down into incontrovertible fact. 'The Tyger' remains, like the creature itself, an enigma, a fearsome and elusive beast.

[Courtesy: www.tvu.edu.in](http://www.tvu.edu.in)