

Commentary on William Blake's Poem "The Tiger"

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"The Tiger" is composed of six four - line stanzas following an aa bb rhyme scheme, and each line is made up of seven syllables. This simple yet sound scheme gives the poem its lightsome alterness and power. A rare blend of harmony and zestful diction is conveyed through the sustained rhythm and powerful metaphors that make up each line.

The first stanza sets the general tone of the poem : one of contemplative amazement, fascinated wonder, and admiring awe . From the outset, it asks a generative question that unfolds throughout the poem in a series of other, subordinate questions evoking at once feelings of fear and fascination with the mysterious and awe-inspiring power behind the magnificent beauty of "the Tiger" :

*Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand and eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry ?*

The dominant image in the poem is that of an awesome sight of "burning brightness", or intensive illumination, fancifully beautiful yet potentially destructive. This is first conveyed by the expression "burning bright" in the first line of the first stanza, casting as on a movie screen the appallingly brisk yet deftly appealing image of the Tiger. This image of intensive and luring brightness is made even more vivid by the contrasting image of darkness of "the forests of the night" in the second line. The potentially destructive beauty and deftness of the Tiger is also

suggested by the image of the Tiger's "fearful symmetry" in the fourth line.

The same image of shining yet fearsome beauty is carried over in the second stanza, particularly through the metaphor of "distant deeps or skies" lighting the burning "fire" of the Tiger's eyes, and that of the hand which dares "seize the fire", in the first, second, and fourth lines:

*What distant deeps and skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes ?
On what wings dare he aspire ?
What the hand dare seize the fire ?*

This image of fearful beauty and power is still pursued in the third stanza through the use of daring metaphors :

*And what shoulder and what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart
And , when thy heart began to beat,
What dread and what dread feet ?*

The image is conveyed particularly through the expressions "shoulder," "art," "twist the sinews," "beat," and "dread hand" and "dread feet," all meant to express the awesome beauty and power of the Tiger—as well as the mysterious power behind its creation.

The image of the Tiger as an awesome and mysterious creation, unattainable in its powerful design or perfection, reaches its climactic degree of power and artful skill in the fourth stanza, with the metaphoric expressions : "hammer", "chain", "furnace", "anvil", "dread grasp," "dread terrors," and "clasp" :

*What the hammer ? what the chain ?
 In what furnace was thy brain ?
 What the anvil ? what dread grasp
 Dare its deadly terrors clasp ?*

The fifth stanza continues the work of depiction of suggestive illumination , showing the brightness of the Tiger outshining that of the stars which ultimately are defeated and cry in surrender :

*When the stars threw down their spears,
 And watered heaven with their tears*

The metaphor in the third line of the stanza suggests the existence of a transcendental or supernatural power at the origin of the creation of this superb Tiger. The Tiger's Creator, having achieved perfection in His artful work, may have smiled with satisfaction at the sight of His achievement :

Did He smile his work to see?

The fourth line of the stanza points to the contrast between the splendid strength of the Tiger and the delicate weakness of the Lamb, both being witness to the skill and power of the Creator in His artful achievement . It asks whether both creatures were not designed by the same powerful Maker or supernatural Designer :

Did He who made the Lamb make thee ?

The last stanza is the very first one, repeated word for word in order to convey the feeling of eternal wonder through the same

generative question that haunts the poet's consciousness in his continuous quest to unveil the mystery behind the awesome magnificence of the Tiger. Thus, to the very end, the poet's questioning goes unanswered and his feeling of nagging amazement and wonder unappeased. His repetition of the generative question at the end of the poem suggests a feeling of dissatisfaction that calls for the resumption of his endless quest to get to the very heart of the mystery behind the power of creation.

William Blake's poem, then, could be seen as a big question, a puzzling wonder, an eternal quest for the ultimate answer, or yet an ongoing search for perfection that is never achieved. Yet, in fact, "The Tiger" is a powerful expression of a moment of shining mystical illumination, revealing some of the splendor and magnificence of transcendental artful perfection and creative skill. The questioning device used in this poem is, in reality, a useful means to delve deeper into the secrets of divine creative power. The end result is a work of art that reaches near perfection, and the beauty of the poem nearly matches that of the Tiger.

- The poem was first printed in Songs of Experience.

Appendice to « Commentary on William Blake's Poem " The Tiger "»

