A Poetic Sense of Evil

Xiao-xuan DU¹,a,*

¹School of Foreign Languages, Dalian Neusoft University of Information, Dalian, Liaoning, China
²duxiaoxuan@neusoft.edu.cn
*corresponding author

Keywords: Evil, Good, Natural state.

Abstract. This paper is intended to analyze the theme of William Blake’s poem The Tyger in the perspective of “evil”. The interpretation comprises of three sections, namely a brief introduction to the author—William Blake, analysis of this poem and comparisons with the other two poems written by Blake, reaching to the conclusion that “evil” is a natural state and an inseparable part of social progress.

1. Introduction

The Tyger was first published in William Blake’s first volume of Songs of Experience in 1794. The Songs of Experience was written to complement Blake’s earlier collection, Songs of Innocence (1789). The Tyger could be seen as the later volume’s answer to The Lamb, the “innocent” poem in the earlier volume. The Tyger is the best known of all William Blake’s poems and is known as the most cryptic lyrical poem of English literature.

The poem’s opening line, ‘Tyger Tyger, burning bright’ is one of the most famous opening lines in English poetry. The poem expresses great astonishment about the creation of a fiery tiger. There is limitless depth in the poem, for with every subsequent reading, it can conjure fresh images in the mind of the receptive readers.

There are many interpretations of this poem. One most common and popular interpretation embraces traditional Christian theology. In this view, Jesus Christ is the Tyger who represents the significance of God’s power. He, at the end of time, will judge all people and punish sin and evil. On the other hand, divine exists in the world, and Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”. I will mainly concentrate on the sense of “evil” in this poem.

2. Introduction to Author of The Tyger—William Blake

William Blake was a British poet, a painter, a visionary mystic whose views became recognizable in his work and an engraver who illustrated and printed his own books. He is one of the most significant poets in British Romantic period, and still exerts great influence on today’s poets. [1]

Blake’s poetic language is plain, simple and direct. Typical of his poems are long, flowing lines and violent energy, combined with aphoristic clarity and moments of lyric tenderness. Blake’s poems often carry lyric beauty with immense compression of meaning. A wide range of symbolism is also a distinctive feature of his poetry. He tends to embody his views with visual images. The nature of his poetry is visionary-imaginative. Full of lyrical and metaphysical strength, many of Blake’s works are based on a mythological structure. His poetry is concerned with social criticism, exposing political tyranny, economic exploitation, and other evils of the reality in his day. The fight for freedom, especially for the inner spiritual freedom of the individual, is also a major topic in his poetry.

Thy Tyger is one of his representative works, which I’m going to analyze for better illustration of the sense of “evil”.
3. Analysis of The Tyger

3.1. Analysis of Literary Devices in The Tyger

Blake uses some literary devices in The Tyger to present the frightening and yet impressive image of a tiger. Some of the literary devices used in this poem are analyzed below.

The poem makes use of the literary device of assonance, such as the sound of /i/ in “Tyger Tyger, burning bright” and /ae/ sound in “What the hand, dare seize the fire?” There is alliteration in the poem, such as the sound of /s/ in “When the stars threw down their spears” and the sound of /m/ in “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” Apostrophe appears in the first line, “Tyger Tyger, burning bright,” to call somebody from far.

Blake uses a series of rhetorical questions in this poem to make the point clear such as given below:

“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?”

Of 15 poetic sentences in The Tyger, 13 sentences are special questions, through which the poem wants to know about the creator responsible for such a fearsome creature as the tiger. According to Epstein’s research, for appropriate answers, the questioner and the answerers must share relevant information. Not having received the essential information from the questioner, no wonder we analyze and understand this poem according to our own knowledge, experience and religion. That is also where do different interpretations of The Tyger come from.

There are metaphors in the poem. For instance, in the sixth line, “Burnt the fire of thine eyes?” he compares eyes of the tiger with fire or something evil. The poet uses metaphorical language to probe into the problem about the origin of humans and also deal with the twofold effects that reforms and changes bring about. [2] There is personification in the fifth stanza where he considers stars as humans,

“When the stars threw down their spears
And watered heaven with their tears.”

Blake uses symbols to signify ideas and qualities, giving them symbolic meanings that are different from the literal meanings. “The Tyger” represents the evil and beauty, “the forest of the night” represents unknown challenges, “the fearful symmetry” symbolizes the existence of both good and evil and “the blacksmith” represents the creator. The poet uses imagery to show the unique creation of God such as “Burnt the fire of thine eyes?” to make the readers perceive things with their five senses. [3]

The literary analysis shows that Blake skillfully employs these devices to make the poem simple to understand.

3.2. Analysis of Poetic Devices in The Tyger

Here is the analysis of some of the poetic devices used in this poem.

The Tyger contains six quatrains entailed in rhymed couplets; and the rhyme scheme followed perfectly in the entire poem is the pattern of AABB. The rhyming words are “bright”, “night”, “skies” and “eyes.” In the case of the first and the sixth stanzas, the word “symmetry” is pronounced in such a way that it rhymes with “eye”. End rhyme occurs within the second and third lines and again within the second and fourth lines. There is a repetition of the phrase, “Tyger Tyger burning bright,” which becomes a refrain as it is repeated in first and last stanza and creates a musical quality in the poem.

3.3. Analysis of the Major Themes of The Tyger

There are words related to the tools used by an ironsmith, for instance, “hammer”, “chain”, “furnace”, and “anvil” in the fourth stanza. Also, we can find words related to Nature, for example, “forests” (line 2), “skies” (line 5), “Tyger” (lines 1 and 21), and “Lamb” (line 20). Above all, Blake uses expressions related to Creation when he writes words or phases like:
“What immortal hand and eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?”

The sentence helps the understanding of the main topic and major concepts, which are Evil, Good, and God.

The first impression that William Blake gives is that he sees a terrible tiger in the night. As a result of his state of panic, he exaggerates the description of the animal. However, paying more attention to what comes next, he talks about Evil and Good as mentioned above. These two essential ideas are symbolized in the “Tyger” and the “Lamb” respectively. Immediately after seeing the “Tyger” in the forests, Blake asks what deity could have created it. The word “immortal” gives us a clue that the poet refers to God. Then, in the second stanza, the poet wonders in what far-away places the tiger was made, maybe referring to those places that cannot be reached by any mortal. In the third stanza, the author asks again, once the tiger’s heart began to beat, who could make such a frightening and evil animal. Next, in the forth stanza, Blake asks questions about the tools used by God, and he names the elements of the hammer, the chain, the furnace, and anvil, all of which are used by an ironsmith. Thus, according to the poet, God is a kind of craftsman. After that, in the fifth stanza, the poet asks two significant questions. The first one refers to God’s feelings “Did he smile his work to see?” In other words, was God happy with his creation? The second question is “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” He does not understand why or how the deity who is responsible for good and innocence, is the same one who inserts violence and evil in this world. However, the poet does not make any statement at any moment. He only asks questions which invite the reader to think about. Finally, the last stanza is the same as the first one which may indicate that the poet is not able to understand the world where we live.

4. “Evil” in The Tyger

4.1. Comparison with A Divine Image

The Tyger praises for the beauty of power and symmetry of the tiger. At the beginning of this poem, the tiger’s power is thoroughly expressed by the sharp contrast between the darkness and the bright. Besides, rhythm, structure arrangement and selection of symbols play an important role in reflecting the power.

At the same time, the evil of the tiger is described in the fourth stanza, which arouses our fear for the tiger when appreciating its greatness.

Blake’s another poem A Divine Image included in Songs of Experiences describes the evil of human beings. In this poem, cruelty, jealousy, terror and secrecy are personated to a human heart, face, form divine and dress, which are compared to iron, forge and furnace.

By comparison of the two poems, we could find out that Blake preferred to combine the sense of evil with the images like forge. Though he abhorred evil as deadly foes, he considered evil as an essential part of existence. Opposing to the traditional idea that life is good step by step, life of freedom and vitality in his mind is related to evil. “I am standing on the side of the devil” as he said, he saw vitality, and therefore creativity from evil. In his opinion, “positive evil is better than negative virtue”.

4.2. Comparison with The Lamb

According to W. H. Stevenson, “Did he smile his work to see? Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” is only a figure of speech, which presents that the tiger and the lamb are in a paradoxical status in Creation.

The Tyger is included in Songs of Experience, while its antithesis is The Lamb from Songs of Innocence. The subtitle of Blake’s another poetry anthology Songs of Innocence and Experience is “Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul”. What are the two contrary states of the human soul?

We will get a better understanding of a pure world if we have a look at the engraving picture Blake made for The Lamb. The lamb is in a peaceful and harmonious world which is located nearest
to heaven, while the tiger is living in the ordinary dark and evil world which is full of tyranny, slavery and deception. The tiger is closely linked to evil, but this does not mean the lamb is better than the tiger. They are only two statuses in human beings’ revolution. Blake said that “no antagonism, no progress”. In religion, Good and Evil just come out from the antagonism. Good is the positive side obeying to sense; while evil is the negative side brought about from energy explosion. Good and Evil relatively exist, as a result, the existence of lamb definitely means the existence of the opposing tiger.

5. Conclusion

The theme of this poem is good versus evil. The whole poem expresses awe and wonder about the creation of the tiger. While observing the amazing symmetry of the tiger, the poet could not understand how the same God who created the gentle lamb could create a vicious tiger at the same time. However, this poem shows the inability of human beings to understand the supremacy of God and his work.

The evil is a natural state and an inseparable part of social progress. According to Allen Tate, the meaning of poetry lies in its tension and is the combination of extension and outreach, and that is also where the enchantment of *The Tyger* lies. All in all, the sense of evil is one of the numerous kinds of interpretation of this poem. The emerging numbers of explanations are the most eloquent testimony to the artistic charm of *The Tyger*.

References

[1] Wang, Ziwei. The Alteration from "Innocence to "Experience" in William Blake's Poetry[J]. Overseas English, 2017.

[2] Wang, Xuefang. A Stylistic Study on William Blake's Poetry from the Perspective of Meta-phorical Iconicity[J]. Overseas English, 2019.

[3] Tian, Qing. The Perfect Symmetry of Blank’s Poem Named “Tiger! Tiger!”[J]. Journal of Shangqiu Vocational and Technical College, 2011.