

23. THE TIGER

William Blake belonged to the late 18th century. He was born in 1757 and died in 1827. He wrote when the period of Classicism was almost over. He is called a pre-romantic poet. Romantic elements are found in his poetry but not in that full form in which we get it in Wordsworth or Shelley. Blake maintains the classical form of poetry but in content he marks a great departure from the Augustan Poets. In Blake's time there were a few more pre-romantic poets who paved the way for the future Romanticists--Gray, Collins and Burns. Blake, of course, is the greatest of all the Pre-romantics, and he is essentially symbolic and mystical. '*Poetry fettered fetters the human race. Nations are destroyed, or flourish, in proportion as their poetry, painting, and music are destroyed or flourish,*' says Blake. Blake's books of poetry were unique in their combination of visual and literary art. He produced most of them by a method of relief etching that he invented. In this method, which he called 'illuminated printing,' Blake used pens and brushes to apply an acid resistant substance to a copper plate. Each page was printed and then hand-coloured by Blake and his wife Catherine, and each book was bound by hand. The originals that survive are ranked among the art treasures of the world. Full of striking designs that sparkle with glowing colour and line to accompany his equally brilliant poems, these books establish Blake's unique contribution to both art and literature. His well-known poetic works are *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* demonstrating the two conflicting states of the human soul.

The present poem *The Tiger* is included in Blake's *Songs of Experience*. The tiger is a terrible animal. It is strong and ferocious. Its eyes burn like fire in the night when it moves in the forest. The poet wonders at the strength of God who could create as dangerous a creature as the tiger. God must have brought the fire from some distant sky or sea to make the eyes of the tiger, and He must have gone there on His great wings. The poet wonders at the hand of God which could hold the terrible fire. The poet wonders at the strength of God. He must have a very strong body and He must know the wonderful art of controlling great powers; only then it could be possible for Him to create the tiger. The poet wonders at the strength of God who could hold the tiger after the heart of the tiger had begun to beat. God has been imagined as a blacksmith. He made the tiger in His factory. He used the hammer, the anvil, the chain and the furnace in His great creation. The poet wonders at the strength and courage of God who held the tiger in His grasp after it had come to life.

When the tiger was created, the stars (the soldiers who guard the heaven) threw down their spears in dejection and defeat. They wept in sorrow and the tears flooded the heaven. Was God happy at His own creation? Did He smile to see the tiger? The poet wonders at it. The poet also wonders at the fact that on the one hand, God has created the lamb which is the perfection of innocence and on the other, He created tiger, the great evil. 'Lamb' suggests Jesus Christ who is called the lamb of God. The Christ is the son of God sent by him to the earth to preach His message. Jesus preached the message of love. Then why God created people as dangerous for the world as a tiger. The poet fails to understand the nature and intention of God. He simply wonders at Him. Herein lies the mysticism of Blake.

Blake takes us to a mystical world. We can experience nothing but awe and wonder there. So, this poem simply raises questions. There can be no answer perhaps. Only a feeling of astonished bewilder remains. Blake in the poem strikes at the very root of theodicy. If God is all powerful and good, why has He created the tiger which is the embodiment of evil. After having created the tiger, how did God feel about His own creation? Did He smile His work to see? What kind of smile it is? The smile of the creator who takes glory in his versatility? or is it a diabolical smile? Blake discovers a strange aspect of God's nature. There are critics who go to the extent of saying that Blake imagines two Gods: the benign God who has created the lamb, and the malign God who has created the tiger. If truly Blake had imagined this, he was perhaps doing it under the influence of Zoroastrianism.

The tone of Blake is satiric also. There is an element of humour too in Blake's picture of God as a blacksmith creating the world with hammer, anvil and chain and going on his great wings to distant lands and seas to procure material for his creation. This satire suggests Blake's disapproval of evil in the world. The poem becomes very interesting because it challenges the very Christian concept of God. Lyricism also makes the poem very interesting and popular. Each question comes as a violent challenge but it's all fit into the total lyrical structure. The last stanza is almost a repetition of the first stanza and function of this repetition is to highlight the element of awe and wonder. The only change is that word 'could' of the first stanza becomes 'dare' in the last. Blake suggests that the tiger is perhaps more powerful than God, its creator. Perhaps he has seen that in this world wrongdoers are not punished which means that evil is more powerful than God who says that He must punish the sinners.