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Honors English 12 Period: \_\_

William Blake

(1757-1827)

## Everything you ever wanted to know about William Blake. And then some.

William Blake not only wrote poetry; he was also a painter and printmaker, and his poetry is often accompanied by fantastic imagery. He was a pretty unconventional guy for his time: he challenged the social convention of marriage (in the 1700s!), he was a political radical, and he was a big critic of conventional Christianity. His poetry, as we might imagine, is pretty rebellious—not surprising for a Romantic..

### The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790)

Part poetry, part illustration and painting, part aphorisms, it's hard to sum up what, exactly, this book is. That's because it doesn't fit neatly into any category. It's a pretty rebellious text, though (hint: Satan is characterized as a good guy). And of course there's a lot of emphasis on sense and sensuality, that favorite of Romantic themes (and one of Blake's favorites especially).

### Songs of Innocence and Experience (1794)

Now we have graphic novels, but back in the late 1700s, Blake was way ahead of the game when he published his second illustrated book of poetry. Yeah, like graphic poetry. Who knew poetry could be that much fun? In this book, Blake deals with the themes of innocence and experience, among other big Romantic themes: nature, the body, the sublime.

**Chew on This**

William Blake was a big believer in the ideals of the French Revolution. And we can see him attacking the terrible conditions of inequality and oppression in Britain in his poem "London."

The sublime anyone? The speaker of William Blake's "The Tyger" certainly feels a whole lot of awe and wonder in considering a tiger. Who wouldn't?

# THE LAMB INTRODUCTION

## In A Nutshell

Judging by his collection *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, [William Blake](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/116) was obsessed with lambs. If you gave him a Rorschach test (where you look at a random pattern of ink and say what comes to mind) Blake would probably say, "Lamb…Another lamb…newborn lamb…Lamb doing gymnastics…" In his poem titled "The Chimney Sweep," he writes that the shape of some poor kid's shaved head is "curled like a lamb's back." This is definitely one of the stranger metaphors we have encountered in any classic poem.

"The Lamb" takes us to the heart of the matter. We learn Blake's two main reasons why lambs are so awesome: 1) they are soft, happy, and make cool noises; 2) they are associated with Jesus Christ, whom the speaker of this poem regards as the savior of the world.

But we're not going to lie, this poem doesn't exactly make us want to head to the nearest petting zoo. If you're reading "The Lamb" out of a textbook or anthology, you might even think it's a bit, well, boring. It sounds like something you might see embroidered beneath an image of the unbearably cute creature and placed in a pretty frame to hang on someone's bathroom wall. The rhymes are gratingly simple and the speaker repeats himself constantly.

But that's not the whole story. "The Lamb" was published in 1789 as part of a larger work, *Songs of Innocence*, which is itself part of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. This collection is Blake's most famous work, and it's more than the sum of its parts. How so? Blake believed that life could be viewed from two different perspectives, or "states": innocence and experience. To Blake, innocence is *not* better than experience. Both states have their good and bad sides. The positive side of innocence is joy and optimism, while the bad side is naivety. The negative side of experience is cynicism, but the good side is wisdom.

Many of the poems in the *Songs of Innocence* have counterparts in the *Songs of Experience*. The counterpart of "The Lamb" is "The Tyger." If you're tempted to call "The Lamb" boring and childish, remember that it's supposed to complement "The Tyger," and vice-versa. The logic of "The Lamb" is that God creates lambs and that lambs are sweet and gentle, so God must be sweet and gentle. The logic of "The Tyger" is that God also creates Tigers, and tigers are savage and terrifying, so…uh-oh.

One other thing to know about William Blake: he is like a graffiti artist in the sense that the meaning of his words oftentimes cannot be separated from their visual appearance. Blake was an amazing painter, and the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* were published as art books rather than as "literature" plain and simple. Blake's illustrations are actually quite strange and fascinating. For example, check out the illustration for "The Lamb." What's the deal with those curly, intertwining trees? We think Blake gives Dr. Seuss a run for his money, and then some.

**WHY SHOULD I CARE?**

Why should you read this seemingly childish poem about a lamb? For that matter, why read its counterpart, ["The Tyger,"](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/poetry/william-blake/the-tyger.html) [Blake](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/116)'s most famous poem? That lambs have soft fur or tigers like to hang out in forests should come as news to no one. But the division of daily life into periods of "innocence" and "experience" – two sides of the same coin, really – is something that we grapple with every day.

On a very simple level, Blake's conception is similar to the Chinese division of the world into "Yin" and "Yang," forces of light and darkness that can never be fully separated from one another. As Blake puts it, they are "the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul." For him, there are no neat divisions between good and evil.

What's your take? In your life, are there clear cut boundaries between innocence and experience, good and evil? Or do you see the world more like Blake did?

## The Lamb

## By William Blake

## Little lamb, who made thee?Does thou know who made thee,Gave thee life, and bid thee feedBy the stream and o'er the mead;Gave thee clothing of delight,Softest clothing, woolly, bright;Gave thee such a tender voice,Making all the vales rejoice?Little lamb, who made thee?Does thou know who made thee?Little lamb, I'll tell thee;Little lamb, I'll tell thee:He is called by thy name,For He calls Himself a Lamb.He is meek, and He is mild,He became a little child.I a child, and thou a lamb,We are called by His name.Little lamb, God bless thee!Little lamb, God bless thee!

## To make this poem a little more fun, let's imagine it from the lamb's perspective. There we are, munching on some grass in a beautiful English valley, when suddenly some little rug-rat kid comes running up for a chat. He asks if we know who made us, to which our answer is, "(Munch, munch) This grass is delicious!"He asks if we know who gave us life and made us eat this sweet, sweet grass as we roam through fields and next to streams. He asks if we know who gave us our "clothing wooly bright" (6) and our pleasant voices. Then he says he's going to tell us who made him. He says our creator is also called a "Lamb" because he was so "meek" and "mild" (15). Despite being a lamb, this creator also "became a little child" (16).Finally, he blesses us twice in the name of God and runs away.

# THE TYGER INTRODUCTION

## In A Nutshell

"The Tyger" just might be William Blake’s most famous poem. Kids read it in elementary school because it rhymes and is about a tiger (yay!). High schoolers read it because their teachers want to give them something tougher to chew on (like a tiger!...OK, we’ll stop). Scholars debate about it because it connects to much of Blake's other work and its themes touch upon a lot of the central issues of Blake’s craft (marvelous!).

Published in a collection of poems called Songs of Experience in 1794, Blake wrote "The Tyger" during his more radical period. He wrote most of his major works during this time, often railing against oppressive institutions like the church or the monarchy, or any and all cultural traditions – sexist, racist, or classist – which stifled imagination or passion. Blake published an earlier collection of poetry called the Songs of Innocence in 1789. Once Songs of Experience came out five years later, the two were always published together.

In general, Songs of Innocence contains idyllic poems, many of which deal with childhood and innocence. Idyllic poems have pretty specific qualities: they’re usually positive, sometimes extremely happy or optimistic and innocent. They also often take place in pastoral settings (think countryside; springtime; harmless, cute wildlife; sunsets; babbling brooks; wandering bards; fair maidens) and many times praise one or more of these things as subjects.

The poems in Songs of Experience, on the other hand, wrestle with issues of what happens when that innocence is lost. "The Tyger" is often paired with the poem called "The Lamb" from Songs of Innocence. The former references the latter and reexamines the themes of "The Lamb" through the lens of experience. "The Lamb" is one of those idyllic poems which asks the Lamb who made "thee" (just like "The Tyger"), praises how soft and cute it is, then tells it that God made it and how wonderful that is. Blake's tone almost seems ironic (i.e., he actually means something very different than what he seems to be saying). Many scholars have argued just that, especially when paired next to his poems about the dangers of religious dogma.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

"The Tyger" is Blake’s most-read poem, hands down. It is easier to read than a lot of his work, but by no means a walk in the park. Even though the themes and meaning are about as elusive or difficult as you can muster, but not so obscured you don’t understand a thing.

The excitement that Blake inspires in a lot of really smart people, as well as normal people like us, is pretty compelling. He questions everything: religion, politics, poetry itself, history, science, and philosophy. He attacks traditional order, systems of rules and regulations, and people who think they have it all figured out. No one is spared from his critical eye, not angels, gods, God, kings, priests, or even you, the reader.

In any case, Blake is awesome, and "The Tyger" is a great introduction to the rest of his work. His poetry is a bit like [Michael Moore](http://www.michaelmoore.com/) meets [Emily Dickinson](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/155). He’s topical, sometimes very critical, and can be clever. He also has a brilliant poetic mind, and the eye of a visionary who sees the world in ways of which we can only dream. Not to mention, "The Tyger" is short, and doesn’t require knowledge of Blake's personal mythology (ever heard of Urizen, Los, Oothoon, Enitharmon, Thel, or Beula; Orc, Rintrah, Bromian, or Leutha? Don’t worry; neither had anyone else until Blake made them up).

# The Tyger

BY [WILLIAM BLAKE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-blake)

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?

## "The Tyger" contains only six stanzas, and each stanza is four lines long. The first and last stanzas are the same, except for one word change: "could" becomes "dare.""The Tyger" is a poem made of questions. There are no less than thirteen question marks and only one full sentence that ends with a period instead of a question mark. Addressing "The Tyger," the speaker questions it as to its creation – essentially: "Who made you Mr. Tyger?" "How were you made? Where? Why? What was the person or thing like that made you?"The poem is often interpreted to deal with issues of inspiration, poetry, mystical knowledge, God, and the sublime (big, mysterious, powerful, and sometimes scary. Ever heard the phrase, "To love God is to fear him"? That’s talking about something sublime). But it’s not about any *one* thing: this is William Blake.For better or worse, there really is no narrative movement in "The Tyger": nobody really *does*anything other than the speaker questioning "the Tyger." The first stanza opens the central question: "What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?" The second stanza questions "the Tyger" about where he was created, the third about how the creator formed him, the fourth about what tools were used. The fifth stanza goes on to ask about how the creator reacted to his creation ("the Tyger") and who exactly was this creator. Finally, the sixth restates the central question while raising the stakes; rather than merely question what/who *could* create the Tyger, the speaker wonders: who *dares*.