

'The Tyger' Annotated Teacher Copy

Below is an annotated copy of the poem, 'The Tyger'. It's a highly complex and profound poem which bears lots of re-reading. Down the left hand side there is a paraphrase of each stanza, which it is worth absorbing fully before going into more detail. On the right there are comments about the poem's broader meaning and some of its allusions.

N.B. we strongly recommend that almost all of these comments are only for teachers only. References to the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and The Book of Job are likely to place far too much of a burden on students' working memory as they are already tackling a poem which is challenging even in its simplest form. This document is designed for your interest and to give you an efficient way to develop your subject knowledge, rather than to stretch students.

If you would like to read around the poem, very good places to start are 'The Lamb' and 'The Book of Job' and there are also lots of recommendations on the reading list.

Paraphrase:

'The Tyger'

William Blake (1757-1827)

What creator could make something so intensely beautiful and fierce?

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

Where could you have been made and who would dare to create such a powerful beast?

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?

Who could have both the strength and the skill to create your beating heart?

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 mysterious blacksmith dared to conceive of and then create you?

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

Did the creator smile when he made you, even though the stars cried? Did he make the Lamb as well as you?

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?

What creator would dare to make something so intensely beautiful and fierce?

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

Commented [CP1]: Title establishes expectations that it will be about a magnificent/ exotic/ dangerous/ fierce creature.

Commented [CP2]: The tiger is compared to fire which confirms expectations of the tiger being beautiful. It might even be shimmering and representing hope. However, there's also an undercurrent of the tiger being dangerous and difficult to control.

Commented [CP3]: The first description of the creator. It is strongly implied that this is God. This stanza can also be seen as asking, in a broader sense, 'who made us?'

Commented [CP4]: The creator resides somewhere beyond our conception. By using 'deeps' as well as 'skies' Blake doesn't suggest this being is totally heavenly - there's space for the tiger to be quite a satanic creation too.

Commented [CP5]: Classical references: Icarus flying too close to sun and Prometheus stealing fire from the gods. These are images of rebellion. Some see the poem as about the French Revolution when the rebels were referred to as tigers by Wordsworth and others.

Commented [CP6]: Some have read the poem as about the Industrial Revolution, with the tiger representing the cities that now look like they are burning because of coal production, and the creator as the working man. 'Shoulder', 'art', 'hand' and 'feet' could be metonymy for working men who are used only for their ability to build.

Commented [CP7]: Again, the blacksmith imagery has been related to the workers who created huge industrial cities.

Commented [CP8]: The syntax can be confusing here. The 'its' in the final line refers to the tiger's brain e.g. 'which furnace was your brain made in? ... what dreadful grasp could clasp your brain's deadly terrors?' Blake suggests that the tiger's brain is full of bloodthirsty thoughts so wonders what kind of creator would make such a creature.

Commented [CP9]: Confusing and interesting lines: the stars are crying but it's not clear whether with joy or sadness. Are they throwing down their swords in surrender to such a mighty and terrible creator? Are they attacking, as if to rid the world of the murderous tiger? This is also a possible reference to The Book of Job ('the morning stars sang together') but given a much more ambivalent tone here.

Commented [CP10]: This is where the creator seems most terrifying. The Lamb is a symbol of innocence and righteousness. The question in the last line could be wondering at the magnificence of a creator who can make a world of such infinite variety. However, they could also be wondering at the almost monstrous cruelty of creating both ferocious tigers and gentle beings that are born to suffer and die. This is possibly a reference to The Book of Job and the problem of suffering. It's also worth checking out the childlike approach to the question of creation in 'The Lamb' (the companion poem to 'The Tyger') and thinking about how this poem contrasts with lots of big questions that aren't answered.

Commented [CP11]: The first stanza is repeated with only the word 'could' replaced with 'dare'. It could be that what seems like awe and admiration of the creator in the first stanza has been given a darker shade by the end of the poem, after the voice has chewed over what it actually ...