

## Beauty in the Beast: An Analytical Reading of Blake's "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" from the Perspective of Animal Studies

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William Blake's "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" are two seminal texts written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century which provide rich scope for modern animal studies. The two counterpart poems become very important in the context of the analysis of the complex nature of the human outlook towards non-humans. The poems also pertain to some fundamental issues such as anthropocentrism, the politics of domestication or 'making pets', and the irreducible complexity of human sympathy when it comes to the difference between 'pet' animals and wild animals. Through a dialectical reading of the animal imageries in "The Tyger" and "The Lamb", I wish to establish Blake's views as visionary in the context of his outlook towards animals – a visionary quality which is an extension of the radicalness already confirmed in his religious and socio-political views.

"The Lamb", published as a part of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, expresses the idealized relation between human beings and the non-humans. The poem reverberates with a sense of ideal communion based on tenderness and sympathy between the human child narrator and the lamb. The poem can be regarded as a perfect illustration of what Kevin Hutchings in *Imagining Nature: Blake's Environmental Poetics* regards as "relatively non-abstract universe within which readers might feel a sense of un-alienated communing with all things" (Hutchings 67). The poem emphasizes on a common Creator who created both the lamb and the child and thus acknowledges the equal rights of non-human and humans based on the fact that both of them owe their existence to a common higher Providence.

"I a child, and thou a Lamb,

We are called by His name." ("The Lamb" 17-18)

From subtle glorification of the natural landscape where the lamb feeds "By (by) the stream and O'er the mead" (4) to presenting the valley as to be rejoicing to the "tender voice" (7) of the lamb, Blake creates an idyllic world where the mutual respect and sympathy strengthens the bond



between human, animals and nature to such an extent that one becomes an inseparable part of the other. The child, because of his instinctive purity, is devoid of the knowledge of species-politics within the adult world.

But it is very important to remember that *The Songs of Innocence* which includes “The Lamb” is about a particular state of the human soul and this state is only an utopian state which is far removed from the dark state of adult experience. If the protective curtain of the child’s gaze is removed, then the lamb becomes a typical example of an animal used for exploitation. Its flesh, its “clothing of delight” (5) become mere commodities for human usage and its existence becomes as irrelevant as the child’s empathetic vision in a consumption-driven adult human world.

Another very problematic issue that can be derived from the text of the poem is the politics of domestication or ‘making pets’. Through the poem the pure vision of the child is presented to the readers who belong to the world of experience. And through the gaze of the readers the world of experience intrudes in the text--- an adult world which intentionally or unintentionally continues to engage in the species-politics. Thus when seen in the light of the world of experience, a few aspects of the poem are bound to assume a political colour. For example while the adjectives “meek” (15) and “mild”(15) symbolize love and tenderness in the world of innocence, in the world of experience these refer to subservience of the non-human to human. It is this quality of being subservient and obedient which is the condition for being categorized as a good animal. When it comes to showing outward sympathy for non-human, human beings glorify those qualities which do not threaten human being’s superior status on earth. So a sharp distinction needs to be made between the supreme sense of equality prevailing in the child’s vision and the adult world where even natural sympathy for the non-human species is not free from taints of species-politics which human as a species intentionally or unintentionally engages in. And it is this subtle contestation between what ought to be and what actually takes place which is again an extension of the general dualism in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, that makes the two poems a rich ground for the animal studies project.

This brings us to the question of the inevitable connection between anthropocentrism and the domestication of animals. Projection of human features onto the non-human species is one of the surest ways to strip the species of its independent existence and to appropriate its individuality within the human paradigm. The extent of ‘likability’ of a particular animal is connected to the extent of anthropocentric features that can be imposed on that particular species. If the nature of the species absorb anthropocentric qualities like ‘gentleness’ and ‘docility’, then it becomes a good human ‘pet’. On the other hand, if it resists, then the possibility is that it will be looked upon as the “Other” and hence as enemy of the human beings. Hence, it needs to be asserted that domestication or making ‘pets’ of animals is a deeply political act. The legal theoretician and animal rights activist Gary. L. Francione comments in his blog that “we regard dogs who live with us as refugees of sorts, and although we enjoy caring for them, it is clear that humans have no business continuing to bring these creatures into a world in which they simply do not fit.”(Francione, para. 9)

In “The Lamb” also anthropocentrism exists in the description of the lamb’s “tender voice” (7), woolly clothing and soft texture. This process of bestowing anthropocentric features onto the lamb, when divorced from the genuine egalitarian thrust of the child’s vision, becomes a very problematic issue as it allows a politics of domination, appropriation and exclusion. Thus even the idealized relation between human and non-human cannot escape the anthropocentric framework that bounds the relation.

In the poem "The Tyger" published as a part of *Songs of Experience*, Blake presents a symbolic animal which resists the anthropocentric criteria required for being categorized as a lamb-like nice animal. Its resistance to the anthropocentric framework is reflected in the fundamental sense of mystery that is associated with the image of the tiger in the poem. It is debatable whether the tiger represents good or evil, but one thing is certain that it is the sense of impenetrable mystery, its resistance to any categorization or any explainable meaning in human terms that makes the figure of the tiger supremely awe-inspiring to Blake. The radical nature of Blake's work is reflected in his creation of the "fearful symmetry"<sup>(4)</sup> between ferociousness (assumedly towards humans) and beauty.

In "The Tyger" Blake uses the imagery of a blacksmith creating his product by using his tools like "hammer"<sup>(13)</sup>, "chain"<sup>(13)</sup> and "anvil"<sup>(15)</sup>, to demonstrate the raw energy and power that is associated with the creation of the tiger by its Creator.

"What the hammer? What the chain? In what furnace was thy brain? What the anvil?  
[...]" ("The Tyger" 13-15)

Even the tiger's heart that is its source of life and which distinguishes the living creature from a mere machine, is also a product of such mechanical 'art'. This imagery involving mechanical tools posits a certain mechanical nature at the core of the tiger which is contrasting to the mildness of the lamb. And this is where human knowledge enters into an uncharted territory, being unable to explain and appropriate the un-knowability at the core of the tiger within the known human paradigm. While the anthropocentric framework in "The Lamb" focuses on the similarity between the lamb and the human child, in "The Tyger" it is the foreignness of the animal which is foregrounded. Blake's visionary quality lies in the fact that he does not attempt to demystify the mysteriousness of the tiger by using an anthropocentric framework but instead glorifies the independent existence of the species. Following Michel Foucault's notion regarding the interconnection between knowledge and power, it can be said the human desire for gathering more and more knowledge of the undomesticated animals as well as the propensity towards generalizations and categorizations is actually connected to the human need for controlling the non-humans. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault comments that "it is this fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (Foucault 187). It is precisely this onslaught of knowledge that the tiger, dwelling in "the forests of the night" (2), resists. This approach of not trying to humanize the non-human and instead showing respect for the "Other"ness of the species on Blake's part, becomes very essential when it comes to the complex nature of the relation between human and non-human.

I would like to draw attention to the first two lines of the fifth paragraph of "The Tyger".

"When the stars threw down their spears?  
And water'd heaven with their tears?" (17-18)

Stanley Gardner in his book *Infinity on the Anvil: A Critical Study of Blake's Poetry* interprets the stars as symbols of material power and it is this material power that surrenders to the inexplicable awe that comes at the sight of the tiger. Critics have generally agreed upon the fact that the stars represent cold reason which is overpowered at the sight of the tiger by a noble emotion--- an unexplainable emotion the source of which is outside the grasp of pure reason. In *The Four Zoas*, through the image of Urizen, Blake presents cold reason entrapping imagination embodied in the figure of Los. Judging from Blake's consistent not-too-favourable view on cold

rationality, it can be said that the awe-inspiring mystic beauty of the tiger is a challenge to the rationality-centrism of human discourse. Right since the age of Enlightenment, rationality, which is the forte of human beings, has been given the supreme importance in human discourse. And this centrality of reason in human discourse leads to an easy justification for subjugation of the non-humans on the basis of their weaker reasoning faculty.<sup>1</sup> The use of reason as a tool to justify human domination of non-humans is challenged by J.M.Coetzee in his 1999 novella *The Lives of Animals*.

“For seen from outside, from being a man who is alien to it, reason is simply a vast tautology. Of course reason will validate reason as the first principle of Universe—what else should it do? Dethrone itself? Reasoning systems as systems of totality, do not have that power.” (Coetzee 123)

Thus, Blake’s “The Tyger” goes a long way in de-centring and subverting the totalitarian force of reason in the context of human and non-human relationship and helps in opening up a more neutral discursive space whereby human and non-human will be assumed to exist on a more equal status.

A dialectical reading of the dualism in the two counterpart poems “The Lamb” and “The Tyger” is a truly enlightening process (not to be confused with the Enlightenment which is an out and out human discourse glorifying the faculty of reasoning). The idealistic vision of the child narrator in “The Lamb”, when relocated to the adult practical world, generates a lukewarm sympathy towards animals which is based mainly on pity and Blake could almost see through the naivety of such an utopian vision. It must not be forgotten that this sentimental appeal to pity which is the basis of the working of many Animal Welfare Organizations, is actually a product of Humanism which itself is bound by its anthropocentric framework. Centrality of pity, though apparently appreciable, leaves unchallenged the very foundation of inequality on which species-politics thrives. Such a view can be linked to seeing animals as sympathy-inciting species on which humans as a superior species ought to feel pity for.

Blake’s positing beauty in the image of the tiger with a conscious effort not to humanize the animal image, anticipates Cary Wolfe’s concept of Posthumanism. Wolfe states that “the philosophical and theoretical frameworks used by humanism to try to make good on those commitments reproduce the very kind of normative subjectivity—a specific concept of the human—that grounds discrimination against nonhuman animals and the disabled in the first place”(Wolfe xvi ). Instead a more pluralistic paradigm needs to emerge where centrality of human specifications will be de-centred and non-humans should have equal rights as humans. This view is based upon seeing human as one among the innumerable species on the earth without any added superiority.

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<sup>1</sup>R.G.Frey in his book *Interests and Rights: The Case Against Animals* used the same premise of animal’s weaker reasoning faculty in stripping animals of their rights.

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