

An Introduction to William Blake – He Was Not Mad

Quiz / Test

As always - or nearly so - we begin the class with a short 5 question quiz (and extra credit) to see if the students did the reading. Another reason for having a quiz is it helps me more easily see who was in class for the discussion and in order to make the quiz up, the students must also listen to a recording of the class.

See my handwritten Lesson Notes for more details on what follows.

Power Point Presentation

The last two years that I taught this lesson - I was moved by Remote Learning to create a Power Point for this lesson. It's not necessary - but it may help with focus. It also differs from the basic lesson by including the biographical material on Blake which we normally would just gloss over (having assumed and verified by the quiz that the students read the bio).

Biographical Material

Usually, I just ask - "What can you tell me about William Blake?" It's important to make sure the students at least mention that he was an artist, a mystic, a printer - and far, far ahead of his time. It should also be noted that his two most famous works are *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. During remote - and when we switched to horrible Block Scheduling, we read the through the book's intro to Blake and talked about it a little. See the Power Point.

The Lamb and The Tyger

I think a great way to begin the class is to ask for two volunteers to read Blake's two poems - "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" - perhaps the two best examples of the divide between Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. How you do this reading for the class is VERY important.

First, ask for a student to read "The Tyger" who can be VERY loud, VERY boisterous, and VERY intimidating. Next, ask for (or have the class select - I varied on the method depending on the class and their sensitivity) a student who can read "The Lamb" - very quietly (and be heard), very SOFTLY, and very meekly.

Time to begin: Have the student who is reading "The Lamb" go first. Let them read the whole poem, but remind them - if you need to - to be as meek as possible (while still being heard by the class, not an easy endeavor at all)

Next, have the other student read "The Tyger" - again, you may have to remind them as

they read to be LOUD, ferocious, and as scary as possible. When they finish - make sure the class applauds both students.

Time to discuss: See my handwritten notes (found below) for more - but here are a few of the points you want to cover:

- Which poem is from *Songs of Innocence*; which is from *Songs of Experience*?
- Start with "The Lamb". Why is it so obvious who made the Lamb - and not so obvious as to who made the Tyger? (Because the Lamb is soft and pure and good - while the tyger, well the tyger is a tyger - scary, cruel, and ferocious.)
- What is the metaphor for the Lamb? (this is a little tricky BUT it is innocence). And Is there another metaphor for the Lamb? (this is even trickier - but the other metaphor is Jesus Christ - the poem even says "He is called by thy name" (Lamb of God))
- What is the question or take away or over-all implication of "The Tyger"? (How could God have made such an evil thing?)

The Greatest Question of the 20th Century

At this point, I usually ask the class this question: At the end of the 20th Century (1999), there was a great listing of "Greatest Things of the 20th Century". For example, Greatest Movies of the 20th Century, Greatest Cars of the 20th Century. So they asked historians, philosophers, theologians, and more - What is the Greatest Question of the 20th Century? The overwhelming answer that came back was: "How could God have allowed the Holocaust to occur?" Then I ask the class - What does this have to do with Blake's "The Tyger"? (It is a form of the same question - why does God allow or even create evil in the world?)

Innocence & Experience

It's at this point in the lesson that I tell the students about my amazing college professor - Gene Ruoff and his explanation that it is far too simplistic to see the poems contained in Blake's *Songs of Innocence* are simple, naive, and from an innocent point of view, and the poems from *Songs of Experience* are mature, jaded, and from an experienced point of view. Blake is much more complex, layered, and brilliant than such a simple labeling.

With this in mind, I ask my students to take another look at "The Lamb". Question: Do any of you know why Jesus Christ (as per the poem - this is not about religion - but

there will most likely be someone in your class who knows the answer to this - in my 32 years of teaching there was at least one student in every class who did) is called "the Lamb of God"? Answer: (Because he was sacrificed). Ah - now the poem does not seem so innocent after all! And most of the "Innocence" poems can be more closely examined through this lens.

You Were Not Mad Video

I made a video showing the "other" side of William Blake - his visual arts side. I usually showed it AFTER we did "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" but it could also be shown after the biographical material is discussed. In any case - you'll want to preface by reminding students that Blake was not only a great writer - he was an incredible artist and printer as well. The students are usually floored by his talent, and the modern feel that it has to it.

A Poison Tree

Next - have a student read aloud "A Poison Tree" - and try to get from the students what THEY think it means. Again, you will be surprised by how modern they think it is - and how much it applies to their own lives. Here are a few of my questions (see my handwritten notes for more)

- What kills his foe?
- What have "apples" been associated with?
- What does the speaker of the poem do with their anger?

London

Unlike most of the poems discussed today - this one exists in of itself (without experience/innocence counterparts). Have four students read the poem aloud (perhaps stopping after each stanza) and discuss. You will probably have to point how to pronounce the name of the river, Thames... Here are a few things you will want to discuss:

- What does the speaker see in the streets of London?
- Line 8 - he says that in every cry he hears the "mind-forged manacles" - What does that mean? (It means that we have created these psychological constraints ourselves. The students will love this - and it confirms what many of them feel!

- Line 9 - chimney sweeps - this is a good time to go over the life of the poor chimney sweeps. The students will have read about them in the intro to the Romantics background in their textbook. But a few important facts:
 - The lifespan of a chimney sweep was short - most lived less than a year due the soot that would drown their lungs.
 - They were sold like slaves by their parents to the adult Chimney Sweepers.
 - They were used because the industrial revolution meant there wasn't enough wood to keep warm and coal was used in chimneys that were designed for wood-burning. The coal clogged the chimneys and they needed someone small enough to get in the stack and clear it out.
 - Sometimes they would get stuck and die in the chimney or have their bones broken in order to remove them.
- Lines 9-10 - Who does the speaker (persona) blame for the Chimney Sweeps plight? (The Church). Why? (Because they have done nothing to stop these evil practices.
- Lines 11-12 - And who does the speaker blame for Soldiers' deaths? (The King, The government). Why? (Because they are the ones that create the wars that the soldiers will die in.
- Lines 13-16 - What is the worst of these offenses, according to the speaker? (The cry of the Harlot? [prostitute]). And who does the persona blame for their plight and the unwanted births that accompany it? (Marriage). *This is a touchy and sensitive area and you will have to feel out the maturity of your students. I also make it a point to remind them that William Blake was very happily married and loved his wife dearly.*

The Two Holy Thursday Poems

Next, read the two Holy Thursday poems and discuss them as you read them. These poems contain a great example of the idea that the Innocence versus Experience differentiation is not as clear as it appears at first glance.

"Holy Thursday" from *Songs of Innocence*

There are few tough words here (ie "beadle"), make sure the students understand them as you read the poem (or 4 students read each stanza). You may need to set the scene: On Holy Thursday (the Thursday before Easter) the "wise" leaders of London would take the poor children from the workhouses and orphanages and clean them, give them new clothes, feed them - and take them to St. Paul's Cathedral for the Holy Thursday. This (the Innocence version) paints this as a wonderful thing to do - and those who follow this lead will be blessed.

"Holy Thursday" from *Songs of Experience*

Now have four students (one for each stanza - of course, if you're pressed for time - the teacher may read it). After you read it discuss it: What is different about this poem? (It is asking a question rather than stating a fact). What is the Question that it is asking? (It's asking if what these rich old men do with these poor children - is indeed an act of Charity - or is in fact a terrible thing?) Are the children really singing with joy in their hearts? (No, they are being forced to). What is life like for these children? (It is bleak, black - and for them, the sun never does shine).

A Reexamination of "Holy Thursday" from *Songs of Experience*

AH - now that you see the more mature view, time to take another look at the first version - the Innocence Version (see above for the reason on this reexamination). What is the metaphor used in this poem for the children being led by the beadies? (They are like lambs being led by shepherds). And where are lambs led to? (to the slaughter....see the poem "The Lamb" - and the discussion on it).

William Blake - the Romantic

This is a good time to ask the students: "So what makes William Blake a Romantic". (the primary answer - again going back to that opening lesson on the Romantics - is his writing about the everyday life of everyday people.) No one does this better than Blake - and his concern for the poor and the common man is unparalleled. Another important Romantic quality of William Blake is his incredible use of imagination (seen in both his poems and his visual artwork).

The Chimney Sweeper Poems

For the two Chimney Sweeper poems - I do something completely different. First I want to see if the students which poem comes from Experience; which poem comes from Innocence. With that in mind, I have combined the two poems into one on the student handout (found below). After getting a couple of students to read the combined poem (or the teacher may have to if you are running short on time), I ask the student "which is

first - Innocence or Experience?" (The answer is Experience comes first and ends with "in soot I sleep".)

We then talk about the two poems covering their content. Here are a few key points (questions)

- How does he end up as a sweep? (His parents sell him like a slave)
- What is the play on words in the opening lines? (The children would really cry "Sweep!" to advertise their services - Blake changes it to "Weep" to demonstrate the sweeps sadness at their situation and betrayal by adults.
- What does Blake say about the parents? (They are hypocrites who go to church to praise God, all the while they have committed "murder" with their young sons.
- And then you can go over the story that is told in the 2nd half of this combined poem - Little Tommy Dacre and the fact that he has to get his hair shaved when it becomes so matted from the soot.
- Talk about the metaphor - why do the boys dream of flying? (Because it is the universal metaphor for freedom)

Pedro Dreams of Flying Away

To end the lesson - and to give that very strong lasting feeling of - "We Read to Know that We're Not Alone", after we finish discussing "The Chimney Sweep" poems - a play a very modern (well it was when I first did this lesson in 1989) song by Lou Reed. The song (the students have the lyrics on their handout) is about a young boy who is forced to live in poverty, in an abusive home - who finds a magic kit and dreams that he can disappear and "fly, fly, away...". It contains the exact sentiments of the Chimney Sweep poems (and "London") over 200 years later. The students eyes usually open wide with wonderful smiles of recognition as they listen. WARNING: The song contains two obscene moments - and I created (and I suggest that you do the same) a censored version. The students' lyrics on their handout are censored - and it is clear from the gaps in the song that I've taken those parts out (I believe in transparency). If you download a program like Audacity - it only takes a few minutes to take those parts out.

It is the perfect way to end this lesson.