



READING 2A Compare and contrast works of literature that express a universal theme. **3** Evaluate the changes in sound, form, and figurative language in poetry across literary time periods.

Selected Poetry

by William Blake

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML12-768A

Meet the Author

William Blake 1757–1827

In William Blake's own day, few saw or read any of his illustrated books, and those who did often dismissed them as the works of a madman. More than 100 years passed before people began to recognize Blake's stunning achievements as a poet and artist.

An Unusual Youth The son of a hosier, Blake spent nearly his entire life in London. As a schoolboy, he was precocious, reading the Bible and the works of John Milton at a young age, attending art school when he was only 10, and writing poetry by age 12. From early on in his life, Blake saw visions—first of angels and ghostly monks, and later of the Virgin Mary and various historical figures. He attributed these visions not to a supernatural source but to the interaction of his imagination with the world and with the infinite, or God. Blake believed that children's unfettered imagination was something of a state of grace. Though he was a Christian, he found church doctrine inadequate and thought it was used primarily as a form of social control.

Marriage and Art In 1782, Blake married Catherine Boucher, a poor, illiterate woman whom he taught to read and paint. The couple enjoyed a close, loving marriage, though

Blake's mysticism sometimes exasperated his wife. "I have very little of Mr. Blake's company," she once quipped. "He is always in Paradise."

In 1784, Blake opened his own print shop, where he developed a technique called illuminated printing, which involved engraving a poem's text and illustration on the same plate. Blake's first illuminated book of poems, *Songs of Innocence*, appeared in 1789; in 1794, he added a group of contrasting poems called *Songs of Experience*. Blake indicated that his purpose in putting them together was to show "the two contrary states of the human soul."

A Modern Prophet Blake's later works were written on a grand scale, marked by prophetic and mythic visions. Imaginatively illustrated and difficult to understand, these complex works were almost totally ignored by his contemporaries. In his 60s, Blake at last found admirers among a group of younger artists. During this period he created some of his best designs, including illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Blake died three months before his 70th birthday, "singing," a friend reported, "of the things he saw in heaven."

Author Online

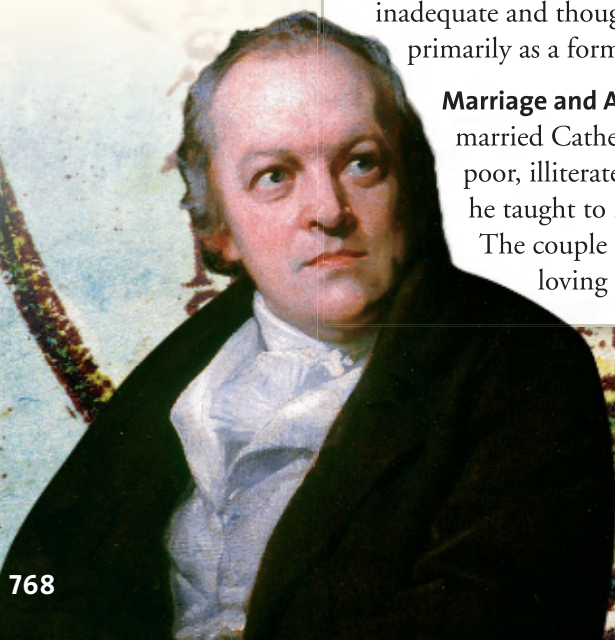
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DID YOU KNOW?

William Blake ...

- met the radical American thinker Thomas Paine and supported the American and French revolutions.
- was charged with treason for cursing King George III but was later acquitted.
- championed racial and sexual equality.



LITERARY ANALYSIS: SYMBOL

One of the most powerful tools a writer can use is symbolism. A **symbol** is a person, place, object, or action that represents an abstract idea or feeling. Symbols work by association, and they often have more than one meaning. For example, the subject of Blake's poem "The Lamb" symbolizes innocence and gentleness, but Blake also alludes to the lamb as a symbol for Jesus Christ in the New Testament. In addition to such common meanings, a symbol may take on a particular meaning from the context of the work in which it appears.

Although Blake's poems may seem simple and straightforward, he uses symbols to convey important themes. As you read, analyze the subjects of his poems to determine their symbolic meaning.

READING SKILL: COMPARE AND CONTRAST POEMS

As stated in the biography on page 768, Blake wrote *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* to explore "the two contrary states of the human soul." To further your understanding of his view of human nature, you can **compare and contrast** poems using the following criteria:

- **Word choice**—Look for descriptive words, and note how they are used to emphasize characteristics of the subject.
- **Ideas**—Identify common or contrasting ideas expressed in the poems.
- **Tone**—Notice the author's attitude toward the subject.

As you read, use a chart like the one shown to record similarities and differences for each pair of poems.

	"The Lamb"	"The Tyger"
Word Choice	little wooly bright tender voice	burning bright fire of thine eyes
Ideas		
Tone		



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

What is a VISIONARY?

Blake once wrote that "mental things are alone real," which is reflected in both his life and his work. Think about people you know or have read about who, like Blake, are visionary. It may be someone who claimed to see people and events in dreams, or someone who envisioned a better future. What kinds of visions—past, present, and future—have they had? What changes in their lives did their visions bring about?

DISCUSS With a small group, generate a list of people—living or dead—whom you consider to be visionaries. Note the qualities and traits that these individuals have in common. Then discuss the ways in which these individuals have made a difference in the world.

Visionaries

1. William Blake—poet, artist; wrote about the real world and visions that appeared to him.
2. Gandhi—political figure, spiritual leader; envisioned a better way for people to live.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

from SONGS OF INNOCENCE

THE LAMB

William Blake

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life & bid thee feed,
By the stream & o'er the mead;
5 Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!
Little Lamb who made thee?
10 Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!
He is callèd by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
15 He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are callèd by his name. **A**
Little Lamb God bless thee.
20 Little Lamb God bless thee.

4 mead: meadow.

8 vales: valleys.

13–14 He . . . Lamb: In the New Testament, Jesus is sometimes called the Lamb of God.

A SYMBOL

In lines 13–18, Blake uses the symbol of the lamb to connect the poem's three characters. What is he suggesting about the relationship between them?

Analyze Visuals ►

How does the style of this illustration reflect the **tone** of Blake's poem?

The Shepherd from *Songs of Innocence* (1789), William Blake. Color printed relief etching with water color on paper, 7.6 cm × 7 cm. © Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund, United States of America/Bridgeman Art Library.



THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER

William Blake

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry “ ’weep! ’weep! ’weep! ’weep!”
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

5 There’s little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curl’d like a lamb’s back, was shav’d, so I said,
“Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head’s bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.”

And so he was quiet, & that very night,
10 As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,
Were all of them lock’d up in coffins of black;

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he open’d the coffins & set them all free;
15 Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom, if he’d be a good boy,
20 He’d have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
Tho’ the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm. **B**

3 ‘weep! ’weep!: the child’s attempt to say “Sweep! Sweep!”—a chimney sweeper’s street cry.

Language Coach

Etymology The origin of *cry* relates to the way it sounds: Its Latin ancestor, *quis*, imitates the squeal of a pig. *Cry* means one thing in line 3 and another, in the past tense, in line 5. How are the two meanings different?

18 sport: play or frolic.

20 want: lack.

B **COMPARE AND CONTRAST**
Reread lines 17–24. What view of meekness and gentleness is expressed in this passage and in “The Lamb”?

THE LITTLE BOY LOST

William Blake

“Father, father, where are you going?
O do not walk so fast.
Speak father, speak to your little boy,
Or else I shall be lost.”

5 The night was dark, no father was there;
The child was wet with dew;
The mire was deep, & the child did weep,
And away the vapor flew.

7 mire: wet, swampy ground.

8 vapor: mist; fog.

THE LITTLE BOY FOUND

William Blake

The little boy lost in the lonely fen,
Led by the wand’ring light,
Began to cry, but God ever nigh,
Appear’d like his father in white.

1 fen: swamp; marsh.

3 nigh (nī): near.

5 He kissed the child & by the hand led
And to his mother brought,
Who in sorrow pale, thro’ the lonely dale,
Her little boy weeping sought. ©

7 thro’: through; dale: valley.

© **SYMBOL**
What do the actions of being
lost and found symbolize?

from SONGS OF EXPERIENCE
THE TYGER

William Blake

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

5 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,
10 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?
15 What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
20 Did he who made the Lamb make thee? **D**

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

4 symmetry (sĭm'ĭ-trē): balance or beauty of form.

7 he: the tiger's creator.

Language Coach

Roots A word's **root** may produce an image that helps you remember the word's meaning. The root of *aspire* (line 7) is *spirare*, "to breathe." What image helps you remember it means "reach toward a goal"?

15 anvil (än'vĭl): iron block on which metal objects are hammered into shape.

D COMPARE AND CONTRAST
How does Blake's **tone** in lines 17–20 differ from the tone used to discuss creation in "The Lamb"?

Analyze Visuals ►

Note that in the reproduction of the original printing of "The Tyger," the hand-colored illustration is intertwined with the text. What does this composition suggest about Blake's attitude toward his work?



The Tyger: Plate 43 from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1802–1808), William Blake. Copy R, page 124–1950. Etching, ink and water color. © Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom/Bridgeman Art Library.

THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER

William Blake

A little black thing among the snow
Crying “ ’weep, ’weep,” in notes of woe!
“Where are thy father & mother? say?”
“They are both gone up to the church to pray.

5 “Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smil’d among the winter’s snow;
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

“And because I am happy, & dance & sing,
10 They think they have done me no injury,
And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King,
Who make up a heaven of our misery.” **E**

2 **’weep, ’weep:** the child’s attempt to say “Sweep, Sweep”—a chimney sweeper’s street cry.

5 **heath:** a tract of open land that cannot be farmed.

E COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Reread lines 5–12. What words and phrases suggest that this speaker is less naive than the speaker of “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Innocence*?

THE SICK ROSE

William Blake

O Rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm
That flies in the night
In the howling storm

5 Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy. **F**

F SYMBOL

What does the rose’s sickness symbolize?

Comprehension

1. **Recall** In “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Innocence*, why does Tom Dacre cry?
2. **Summarize** What happens to the boy in “The Little Boy Found”?
3. **Clarify** In “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Experience*, what does the speaker suggest with the phrase “make up a heaven of our misery”?



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Literary Analysis

4. **Examine Repetition** Reread “The Lamb” and “The Tyger,” looking for repetition of phrases, lines, and stanzas. What does Blake emphasize through the use of repetition? Cite evidence to support your answer.
5. **Interpret Symbol** In “The Tyger,” Blake uses the animal to symbolize his very complex view of creation—both heavenly and artistic. What troubling aspects of creation does the tiger represent? Cite details.
6. **Compare and Contrast Poems** In Blake’s time, it was common practice in London to use small boys for cleaning chimneys, which was dangerous and often fatal work. Review the information you recorded in your chart relating to the “The Chimney Sweeper” poems. What difference do you see in the **word choice** and **tone** of these poems and in the **ideas** they convey?
7. **Analyze Imagery** In many of these poems, Blake uses words like *night* or *dark* and *light* or *bright* as a way to contrast ideas or characters. However, he doesn’t always use the words to mean the same things in the poems. How does Blake employ the “night/light” contrast in the following?
 - “The Little Boy Lost” and “The Little Boy Found” pairing
 - “The Tyger”
 - “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Innocence*
 - “The Sick Rose”

Literary Criticism

8. **Critical Interpretations** One critic has suggested that Blake pits himself against despotic authority, restrictive morality, and institutionalized religion: “His great insight is into the way these separate modes of control work together to squelch what is most holy in human beings.” In your opinion, does this comment apply to the poems you read? Explain.

What is a **VISIONARY**?

The word *visionary* can be used to describe someone who is inspired by visions or who has great imagination and foresight. Based on the poems you have read, what do you think makes Blake a visionary?