

Selected Poetry

by William Blake

What Is a VISIONARY?

William Blake once wrote that “mental things are alone real.” This belief is reflected in both his life and his work. Blake was a visionary who used the images that came to him to create innovative poetry and striking artwork.

PRESENT A visionary may be someone who envisions a better future or someone who claims to see people or events in dreams. Think of a person you know or have read about who, like Blake, is a visionary. Create a brief profile of this person. Explain what makes this person a visionary. Present your profile to your classmates.

Profile of a Visionary

Name: _____

Profession or Interests: _____

What Qualifies This Person

as a Visionary: _____

Text Analysis: Symbol

A **symbol** is a person, place, object, or action that represents itself and something beyond itself. Symbols can often represent more than one thing. For example, the lamb that is the subject of Blake’s poem “The Lamb” symbolizes innocence and gentleness. Blake also uses the lamb as a symbol for Jesus Christ.

Although Blake’s poems may appear simple, they deal with important ideas. Blake uses symbols to express these ideas and evoke emotions associated with them. As you read each poem, analyze the subjects in the poems to determine their symbolic meaning. Record your thoughts in a chart like the one below.

Poem	Symbols
“The Lamb”	The lamb symbolizes innocence and gentleness. It also symbolizes Jesus Christ.

Reading Skill: Compare and Contrast Poems

Blake wrote his landmark *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** his poems by examining the following elements:

- **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, consider the similarities and differences for each pair of poems. Use this chart to record the information.

	“The Lamb”	“The Tyger”
Word Choice	<i>little woolly bright tender voice</i>	<i>burning bright fire of thine eyes</i>
Ideas		
Tone		



SET A PURPOSE FOR READING

As you read, think about what God, the lamb, and the speaker have in common.

from SONGS OF INNOCENCE
THE LAMB

Poem by
WILLIAM BLAKE



BACKGROUND William Blake first published *Songs of Innocence* in 1789. Blake conceived the state of “Innocence” as a state of genuine love and trust toward all humankind, accompanied by a belief in Christian doctrine. “The Lamb,” from that collection, has often been read as a statement of Christian faith. However, Blake’s other writings show Christ not as a “meek” and “mild” lamb with which this speaker identifies but as a fighter against injustice. The speaker’s viewpoint is thus an incomplete representation of Blake’s beliefs and just one aspect of Blake’s worldview.

PAUSE & REFLECT

The speaker keeps asking the Lamb, “who made thee?” What does this question mean? What effect does this repetition have?

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life & bid thee feed,
By the stream & o’er the mead;¹
5 Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales² rejoice!
Little Lamb who made thee?
10 Dost thou know who made thee?

PAUSE & REFLECT

1. **mead:** meadow.
2. **vales:** valleys.



SET A PURPOSE FOR READING

As you read, think about whether the ideas expressed would have offered comfort to a poor chimney sweeper.

THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER

Poem by

WILLIAM BLAKE



BACKGROUND In Blake’s London, buildings were heated by coal or wood-burning fireplaces, and every building had at least one chimney that required regular cleaning. Poor children often did this hazardous work because they could fit into the narrow chimney passages. Desperate for money, some poor parents sold their children to “masters” who managed—and often mistreated—crews of young sweepers. In this poem from *Songs of Innocence*, and in its companion poem from *Songs of Experience* (page 226), Blake speaks for these children who were forced into backbreaking labor.

B SYMBOL

What is Tom Dacre compared to lines 5–8? Based on this comparison, what might Tom Dacre symbolize?

Poem

“The Chimney Sweeper”



Symbol

Tom Dacre symbolizes

Four horizontal lines for writing a response.

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry “ ’weep! ’weep! ’weep! ’weep!”¹
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.” **B**

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



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. **PAUSE & REFLECT**

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 want² 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. **C**

PAUSE & REFLECT

What might Tom's dream represent?

C COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Reread lines 17–24. Underline the reward for being good and dutiful. What view of meekness and gentleness is expressed in this passage and in “The Lamb”?

2. want: lack.



**SET A PURPOSE
FOR READING**

As you read, think about how the speaker in the poem feels.

THE LITTLE BOY LOST

Poem by

WILLIAM BLAKE

BACKGROUND Blake saw the world as a set of signs and symbols representing religious ideas. The symbols in his writing tend to have many different meanings. As you read “The Little Boy Lost” and its companion piece “The Little Boy Found” (page 223), consider what the images in the poems might mean.

“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 mire¹ was deep, & the child did weep,
And away the vapor² flew. **D**

D SYMBOL

If the father in this poem represents God, what might the action of being lost **symbolize**?

1. **mire**: wet, swampy ground.
2. **vapor**: mist; fog.



THE LITTLE BOY FOUND

Poem by

WILLIAM BLAKE

BACKGROUND Blake’s poetry and art show his fascination with the Bible and his struggle to find answers to questions that bothered him, such as: What is the source of evil in the world? Can evil be overcome? Blake came to believe that good must actively oppose evil.

The little boy lost in the lonely fen,¹
Led by the wand’ring light,
Began to cry, but God ever nigh,²
Appear’d like his father in white.

5 He kissed the child & by the hand led
And to his mother brought,
Who in sorrow pale, thro’³ the lonely dale,⁴
Her little boy weeping sought. **E**

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- 1. **fen**: swamp; marsh.
 - 2. **nigh** (nī): near.
 - 3. **thro’**: through;
 - 4. **dale**: valley.

SET A PURPOSE FOR READING

As you read, think about what the poem is saying about the power of God.

E COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Review “The Little Boy Lost” and “The Little Boy Found.” Think about the images in each poem and what they might symbolize. What different **ideas** about life or religious faith do the poems present?

Ideas in “The Little Boy Lost”

Ideas in “The Little Boy Found”



SET A PURPOSE FOR READING

As you read, think about what the tiger might symbolize.

from SONGS OF EXPERIENCE
THE TYGER



Poem by
WILLIAM BLAKE

BACKGROUND While almost everyone agrees that “The Tyger” is one of the most powerful of Blake’s *Songs of Experience*, there has been much disagreement about the poem’s central symbol. One possibility is that the tiger represents a strong revolutionary energy that can enlighten and transform society—a positive but dangerous force Blake believed was operating in the French Revolution.

F SYMBOL

Some readers have said that the tiger symbolizes the dangerous but beautiful power of nature. Circle words and phrases that support this interpretation.

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?¹

5 In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he² 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? **F**

1. **symmetry** (sĭm'ĭ-trē): balance or beauty of form.
2. **he**: the tiger’s creator.



What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?

- 15 What the anvil?³ 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? **G**

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

G COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Reread lines 13–20. Underline details that describe the creation of the tiger. Think about how Blake’s **tone** in these lines differs from the tone he used to discuss creation in “The Lamb.” Describe the tone of each poem in the chart. (Remember—**tone** is an author’s attitude toward the subject.)

Tone in “The Lamb”

Tone in “The Tyger”

3. **anvil** (ăn'vīl): iron block on which metal objects are hammered into shape.



THE SICK ROSE

Poem by
WILLIAM BLAKE

BACKGROUND Though a firm believer in Christianity, Blake thought the English Church encouraged passive obedience and acceptance of oppression among citizens. Recognition of this social agenda marks what Blake called the state of “Experience,” a disillusionment with human nature and society. “The Sick Rose” is one such powerful expression of disillusionment from *Songs of Experience*.

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. ❶

SET A PURPOSE FOR READING

As you read this poem, think about what the Rose represents, and why the Rose is sick.

❶ SYMBOL

Reread the poem. Circle the thing whose “dark secret love” destroys the rose. Think of the qualities that describe a healthy rose. What might the rose’s sickness symbolize?

Text Analysis: Symbol

Review the notes you took on symbols as you read. Then, explain what the subject of each poem might symbolize in the chart below.

Poem	Symbolism
"The Lamb"	
"The Little Boy Lost"	
"The Little Boy Found"	
"The Tyger"	
"The Sick Rose"	

Reading Skill: Compare and Contrast Poems

Review the information you recorded about the two chimney sweeper poems. What differences do you see in the **tone** of these poems and the **ideas** they convey? Write your response in the chart.

	"The Chimney Sweeper" from <i>Songs of Innocence</i>	"The Chimney Sweeper" from <i>Songs of Experience</i>
Tone		
Ideas		

What is a VISIONARY?

The word *visionary* can describe someone who is inspired by visions. It can also describe a person who has great imagination and foresight. After reading William Blake's poems, what type of visionary is William Blake? Use examples from his poems to support your answer.

Academic Vocabulary in Speaking

device differentiate function inherent technique

TURN AND TALK Think of two symbols from your everyday life that have opposite symbolic meanings, such as a TV remote control representing inactivity, and a running shoe representing physical exertion. Discuss your symbols with a partner and **differentiate** between their meanings. Use at least two of the Academic Vocabulary words in your discussion. Definitions of these words are on page 215.

Assessment Practice

DIRECTIONS Use the poems to answer questions 1–4.

- In "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Innocence*, Tom Dacre cries because —
 - he is hungry
 - he has no friends
 - his work is dangerous
 - his curly hair was shaved
- What happens to the boy in "The Little Boy Found"?
 - God returns him to his mother.
 - He dies and goes to heaven.
 - He is unable to find his way home.
 - His brave mother rescues him.
- As part of the symbolism in "The Little Boy Lost" and "The Little Boy Found," Blake uses a contrast between —
 - fast and slow
 - old and young
 - wet and dry
 - dark and light
- In "The Tyger," Blake represents the forces of nature as —
 - wondrous
 - dreadful
 - both wondrous and dreadful
 - neither wondrous nor dreadful