

## **SYMBOLISM AND ALLEGORY IN ENGLISH ROMANTIC POETRY SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE BY WILLIAM BLAKE**

**\*Nabil Muhammad Hilmy<sup>1</sup>, Juanda<sup>2</sup>**

Program Studi Sastra Inggris, Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Universitas Komputer Indonesia,  
Jl. Dipati Ukur 112-116, Bandung, Indonesia  
[nabil.63720010@mahasiswa.unikom.ac.id](mailto:nabil.63720010@mahasiswa.unikom.ac.id)

### **ABSTRACT**

William Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience is an important work in English Romantic poetry, known for its use of symbolism and allegory. This study looks at how Blake uses symbols and allegories to show the differences between innocence and experience and how these themes criticize the society and religion of 18th-century England. The goal of this research is to identify important symbols and allegories in Blake's poems and explain their meanings. Using close reading of selected poems like The Lamb, The Tyger, and London, the study examines how these symbols work. The analysis also includes insights from other studies, such as Juanda's work on understanding hidden meanings in modern media (Putri & Juanda, 2021). The findings show that Blake's symbols, such as the contrast between innocence and experience or nature and industrialization, reflect Romantic ideals and criticize power structures in society. For example, the contrast between The Lamb and The Tyger shows the mix of gentleness and violence in the world. The study concludes that Blake's use of symbols and allegory adds depth to his poetry, allowing readers to find multiple meanings in his work. This research helps us better understand Blake's poems and the value of symbolic interpretation in literature.

**Keywords:** William Blake, Symbolism, Allegory

### **INTRODUCTION**

William Blake is an English poet, painter, and printmaker, is regarded as one of the most important figures in English Romanticism. His work, often characterized by its mystical and visionary quality, challenges conventional notions of religion, politics, and social order. Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1789/1794) is one of his most celebrated collections, containing a profound exploration of the human soul through the opposing states of innocence and experience. This collection, composed of 26 poems, is divided into two contrasting sections: Songs of Innocence, which portrays the purity and wonder of childhood, and Songs of Experience, which reflects the corruption and suffering found in adulthood (Blake, 1789/1794).

The thematic duality in Blake's poetry innocence versus experience has fascinated scholars for centuries. His use of symbols and allegories in these poems invites a deeper examination of how Blake's personal views on social, spiritual, and philosophical issues are conveyed. The Songs of Innocence present an idealized view of life, closely tied to nature and divinity, whereas the Songs of Experience critique societal institutions such as the church and state, which Blake saw as forces that stifled human potential and spiritual

freedom (Peterson, 2001). This duality, represented through vivid imagery such as the lamb and the tiger, offers a rich field of analysis in understanding Blake's response to the industrial revolution, political turmoil, and religious orthodoxy that shaped his time (Kabbani, 2006).

To analyze Blake's work, we draw on the theories of allegory and symbolism. Allegory, as defined by Auerbach (1953), is a narrative technique where characters and events represent abstract ideas or moral qualities. In Blake's poetry, allegory is used to represent complex moral and spiritual ideas, such as the struggle between innocence and experience. The lamb and the tiger, for example, are not just animals but embody contrasting moral states, symbolizing purity and savagery, respectively. Similarly, symbolism in Blake's poetry functions as a mode of representing intangible ideas through concrete images. According to Foster (1991), symbols in literature carry layers of meaning beyond their literal representation, allowing readers to engage with multiple interpretations. Blake's use of symbolic images, such as the lamb, the tiger, and the city of London, enriches the thematic depth of his poems by offering alternative readings on religion, society, and nature.

Scholars such as Frye (1957) and Turner (2004) have highlighted the complex allegorical and symbolic meanings in Blake's work. Frye (1957) argues that Blake's use of mythological symbols not only speaks to the tension between innocence and experience but also reflects a broader Romantic concern with the individual's struggle against oppressive societal forces. Turner (2004) further emphasizes Blake's critique of religious and political institutions, suggesting that his work reveals a radical vision of liberation and spiritual awakening. However, despite these in-depth analyses, there is still a need for a more focused examination of how Blake's symbols and allegories work together to create a cohesive critique of 18th-century English society.

This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing the symbolic imagery and allegorical structures in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. By focusing on poems such as *The Lamb*, *The Tyger*, and *London*, this research will explore how Blake's use of contrasting symbols not only illuminates his views on the human condition but also critiques the social and political environment of his era. This paper will also draw on recent studies, such as Putri and Juanda's (2021) work on illocutionary acts in contemporary media, to demonstrate how symbolic interpretation can be applied across various literary contexts. Ultimately, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of Blake's poetic vision and its lasting relevance in the study of English Romantic literature.

## **METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing on textual analysis of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Given the symbolic and allegorical nature of Blake's poetry, this research method allows for an in-depth exploration of the meanings embedded within the poems. By analyzing the language, imagery, and thematic structures within the selected poems, the study seeks to uncover the underlying symbolic representations and allegorical narratives that Blake constructs.

For this study, selected poems from Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* were chosen based on their prominent use of symbols and allegories. Poems such as *The Lamb*, *The Tyger*, and *London* were selected as they exemplify Blake's ability to convey complex philosophical and social critiques through symbolic imagery. *The Lamb* and *The*

Tyger are prime examples of Blake's exploration of dualities innocence versus experience, gentleness versus ferocity while London serves as a critique of the societal and political corruption present in Blake's time (Peterson, 2001). These poems were analyzed for their symbolic and allegorical content, with a particular focus on how these elements reflect Blake's views on religion, nature, and social justice.

This research uses symbolic interpretation and allegorical analysis as the primary frameworks for analysis. The symbolic interpretation follows Foster's (1991) definition of symbolism as a mode of representing abstract concepts through concrete images. Blake's use of imagery such as the lamb, the tiger, and the city of London serves as a medium to convey philosophical ideas about creation, innocence, experience, and societal oppression. Allegorical analysis, following Auerbach's (1953) framework, interprets Blake's poems as containing narratives where characters, events, and objects stand for larger moral or philosophical concepts.

The primary data source for this research is the collection of poems in Songs of Innocence and of Experience by William Blake. Secondary sources include a range of scholarly articles, books, and journal papers that discuss Blake's use of symbolism and allegory. Key sources for this research include Peterson (2001), Kabbani (2006), and Turner (2004), who provide comprehensive discussions of Blake's thematic concerns and literary techniques. Additionally, works by Frye (1957) and Auerbach (1953) offer foundational theories on the role of allegory and symbolism in literature.

This study also draws on recent research, such as the work of Juanda (2021), which highlights the application of symbolic reading strategies in various contexts, demonstrating how allegorical and symbolic readings can extend beyond traditional literary analysis to contemporary media and discourse.

The goal of this research is to provide a deeper understanding of how Blake's use of symbols and allegories reflects his critique of 18th-century society and his exploration of human nature. By examining Blake's poetic techniques, this study expects to uncover new insights into his philosophical and spiritual views, as well as his engagement with the social and political issues of his time. The research also aims to demonstrate the enduring relevance of symbolic and allegorical interpretation in understanding literary texts, particularly those that deal with complex human themes.

## **RESULTS**

The analysis of William Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience highlights the poet's deliberate and layered use of symbolism and allegory to convey his core themes. Through detailed examination of key poems such as The Lamb, The Tyger, and London, it becomes clear that Blake intertwines personal, social, and spiritual ideas in a way that engages readers with deeper meanings beneath the surface text. The findings emphasize how these literary devices function to bridge the abstract concepts of innocence, experience, and the human condition with concrete images and narratives. The scope of the analysis is summarized in the table 1:

**Table 1. The research Results**

No	Literary Device	Total Count
1	Allegory	5
2	Symbolism	9

## DISCUSSION

William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is rich with symbolic imagery, where ordinary objects, animals, and figures are imbued with deeper, often philosophical meanings. The use of symbolism in Blake's poetry is not simply for aesthetic purposes but serves as a powerful tool to convey abstract concepts, such as purity, corruption, innocence, and experience. As Foster (1991) suggests, symbolic images in literature go beyond their literal meanings to convey broader, often moral or philosophical ideas. In Blake's case, this symbolic imagery is critical to understanding the spiritual and social messages embedded in his poems.

### The Lamb

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

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

William Blake's "The Lamb" is a poem that explores themes of innocence, purity, and divine creation through a simple conversation between a child and a lamb. The lamb in the poem serves as a symbol of Christ, often referred to as the "Lamb of God" in Christian theology. By asking the lamb who made it, the child reflects a natural curiosity about creation, but the answer provided links the lamb to a deeper spiritual meaning: Christ, who is both the creator and the one who embodies meekness and humility. The child's innocent faith is symbolized in their simple understanding of divine love, emphasizing a pure connection with God. Through the repetition of the phrase "Little Lamb," Blake creates a gentle, almost lullaby-like tone, reinforcing the themes of innocence and peace. The lamb's soft, woolly clothing symbolizes the protection and care provided by God, while its tender voice reflects the harmony in creation. The poem's structure, with its simple rhyme and rhythm, mirrors the uncomplicated worldview of a child and highlights the purity of faith. Ultimately, "The Lamb" functions as an allegory

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for Christian ideals, with the lamb symbolizing Christ's purity and sacrifice, and the child representing humanity's innocent faith in God's love and creation.

The Tyger

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

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,  
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?  
What the anvil? what dread grasp,  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

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?

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

William Blake's "The Tyger" from Songs of Experience serves as a stark contrast to his earlier poem, "The Lamb", by exploring themes of creation, power, and the duality of existence. The poem begins with the child's awe and fear as they question who could have created such a terrifying creature as the tiger. The repeated question, "Tyger Tyger, burning bright, / In the forests of the night," captures the mystery and grandeur of the tiger, whose ferocity and beauty leave the child in wonder. The tiger, with its "fearful symmetry," symbolizes both the creative power and danger of the divine. Unlike the lamb, which represents innocence, purity, and meekness, the tiger embodies strength, destruction, and the darker side of creation. The child's question "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" highlights the tension between the gentler and the more violent aspects of creation, suggesting a complex, even paradoxical, view of God as the creator of both innocence and power. The poem explores the mystery of creation, as the speaker cannot comprehend how the same creator could be responsible for both the innocent lamb and the fearsome tiger. The repetition of "Tyger Tyger" reinforces the hypnotic, almost

otherworldly nature of the creature, while the rhymed couplets and rhythmic structure evoke a sense of rhythm and control, perhaps mimicking the majestic power of the tiger itself. Ultimately, “The Tyger” explores the paradoxes of creation, asking profound questions about the nature of the creator and the complex, sometimes terrifying beauty of the world.

London

I wander thro’ each charter’d street,  
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow.  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infants cry of fear,  
In every voice: in every ban,  
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry  
Every blackning Church appalls,  
And the hapless Soldiers sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro’ midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlots curse  
Blasts the new-born Infants tear  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

William Blake’s “London” from his Songs of Experience presents a bleak portrayal of the city of London, highlighting the social and political corruption that Blake saw during his time. The speaker in the poem walks through the streets of London, observing the suffering and oppression around him. The repeated refrain, “I wander thro’ each charter’d street,” immediately introduces a sense of entrapment and restriction, where even the streets themselves are controlled and owned, symbolizing the loss of freedom and the dominance of authority. The use of the word “charter’d” suggests the commodification of the city, as if its very soul has been commercialized and controlled by those in power.

Blake’s imagery is stark, as he describes the “marks of weakness, marks of woe” seen on every face he encounters, symbolizing the physical and emotional toll of poverty, disease, and social inequality. The speaker sees the impact of poverty and institutionalized injustice on the people of London, and the poem is filled with images of suffering: the “chimney-sweeper’s cry” represents child labor, while the “hapless soldier’s sigh” reflects the despair of those forced into war. Blake condemns the institutions that perpetuate this suffering, particularly the church and the monarchy both of which, in his view, fail to address the pain of the oppressed. The “blood down palace walls” refers to the corrupt political system and the violence that results from it, suggesting that the powers that be are complicit in the suffering of the people.

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The poem's tone is one of hopelessness and frustration, as the speaker realizes the city is deeply marred by both physical and moral decay. The use of rhyme and rhythm in the poem gives it a rhythmic, almost chant-like quality, which emphasizes the repetitive, unchanging nature of this suffering. Blake's "London" is not just a literal city; it is a symbol of the oppressive forces in society economic, political, and religious that stifle human potential and freedom. Through his powerful imagery and social critique, Blake urges his readers to confront the injustices of the world around them, calling for a change in both the physical and moral landscape.

William Blake's poetry, particularly "The Lamb," "The Tyger," and "London," offers a sharp critique of the religious, political, and social structures of 18th-century England. Through his use of allegory and symbolism, Blake challenges the authority of both the Church and the monarchy, as well as the oppressive systems that marginalized the poor and exploited the powerless. His works reflect a deep dissatisfaction with the state of society, revealing how the institutionalized systems of religion and politics perpetuated inequality, corruption, and spiritual decay. Blake's poems are a call for a return to a more genuine, personal spirituality and an end to the suffering inflicted by the powers of the time.

In "The Lamb," Blake presents an image of innocence and purity through the symbolic use of the lamb, which represents Christ as the Lamb of God. The gentle nature of the lamb, combined with the child's innocent inquiry about its creator, symbolizes the ideal relationship with God—one that is pure, untainted by the corruption of institutionalized religion. Blake critiques the Church of England, which he saw as rigid and controlling, offering a personal, intimate connection to God as an alternative to the dogma and authority imposed by religious institutions. The lamb's innocence is contrasted with the complex power represented in "The Tyger," where Blake explores the mystery and terror of divine creation. The question "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" interrogates the paradox of a God capable of creating both innocence and ferocity, highlighting the moral ambiguity inherent in the divine and critiquing the simplistic religious views of Blake's time.

The social critique in Blake's work is perhaps most directly found in "London." The poem paints a stark picture of the suffering of the poor and the corruption of the ruling elite. Blake walks through the city, observing the marks of weakness and woe on every face, from the chimney-sweeper's cry (a symbol of child labor) to the hapless soldier's sigh (representing the exploitation of soldiers). These images illustrate the economic exploitation and social injustice that permeated England during the Industrial Revolution. The repeated mention of charter'd streets symbolizes how even the city itself has become controlled and commodified by those in power, stripping it of its soul. The "blood down palace walls" is a powerful symbol of political violence, referencing the monarchy's complicity in perpetuating inequality and suffering among the common people.

Through these poems, Blake critiques both religious institutions and political systems for perpetuating systems of oppression. In "London," Blake explicitly condemns the monarchy and the church for their failure to address the suffering of the poor, emphasizing the corruption and violence inherent in these institutions. The blood on the palace walls represents the violent and oppressive nature of the ruling class, whose power rests on the exploitation of the lower classes. Blake's poems urge readers to confront these societal injustices and reflect on the ways that religion and politics have been used to control and oppress the most vulnerable members of society.

Through his allegories and symbols, Blake's poetry critiques not only the religious structures of his time but also the social and political systems that he believed were complicit in the degradation of human beings. The lamb and the tiger serve as symbols of the duality of creation, highlighting the contrast between innocence and experience, while "London" exposes the moral and spiritual corruption of a society that places material wealth and power over the well-being of its people. Blake's work ultimately calls for a return to spiritual purity and a rejection of the oppressive forces that stifle human potential, both on an individual and societal level.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, William Blake's poems "The Lamb," "The Tyger," and "London" provide a profound critique of the religious, social, and political structures of 18th-century England. Through the use of allegory and symbolism, Blake explores the dualities of creation, divine power, and the corruption that pervaded both religious institutions and political systems during his time. In "The Lamb," Blake presents a symbol of innocence and purity, critiquing the institutionalized Church for its rigid and controlling nature, while in "The Tyger," he confronts the moral complexity of creation, questioning the divine power that allows for both innocence and violence in the world.

"London" shifts the focus to a scathing social critique, highlighting the suffering of the poor and the complicity of the monarchy and the Church in perpetuating inequality. The use of powerful symbols like the "blood down palace walls" and charter'd streets critiques the systems of power that commodify the city and perpetuate the suffering of the oppressed. Through these works, Blake not only condemns the social injustice of his time but also calls for a spiritual awakening, urging individuals to seek a direct, unmediated relationship with the divine, free from the corruption of institutionalized religion and political authority.

Blake's poems ultimately offer a vision of moral and spiritual renewal, calling for a return to innocence, purity, and spiritual truth, while also condemning the institutions that stifle human freedom and potential. His work remains a powerful critique of 18th-century England's societal values, offering a lasting commentary on the importance of personal spirituality, social justice, and the complexity of the human experience.

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