THE ALAN REVIEW

"And I wrote my happy songs, Every child may joy to hear": The Poetry of William Blake in the Middle School Classroom

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Miss Stretchberry wanted her students to love poetry (Creech 2001). She read to them daily both from the works of acknowledged masters and contemporary poets and encouraged them to write. Jack, an initially skeptical and reluctant writer (boys don't write poetry; girls do), was intrigued by William Blake's "The Tyger." (I have retained all of Blake's spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.) He responded to Miss Stretchberry's oral reading of the poem by writing that he really didn't understand it. However, he admitted, "at least it sounded good/in my ears" (Creech, 2001, p. 8). Not only did it sound good in his ears, but it continued to do so, especially after he composed his own poem based on "The Tyger's" rhyme scheme. He wrote Miss Stretchberry that the sounds of the poem were in him "like drums/beat-beat-beating" (Creech, 2001, p. 9).

The impact of Blake's poem upon Creech's fictional character was strikingly similar to the effect "The Tyger" had upon one of our major American poets as a child. In an interview Bill Moyers asked Adrienne Rich about the first poem that she remembered touching her deeply and awakening her somehow. She answered:

> I think it was Blake's "The Tyger." I was given poems to copy, that was how my father taught me to do handwriting. "The Tyger" was one of them and it was so musical and mysterious. The wonderful image sank very deep very early.
>
> (Moyers, 1995, p. 347)

Whether fictional or actual, Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1967 [1789, 1794]), have been captivating readers and awakening them to the many joys of poetry for more than two hundred years. Recently, Blake's poetry has appeared in a number of children's and adolescent works of literature as a dominant theme or a symbolic touchstone. For example, in addition to Sharon Creech's *Love that Dog* (2001), we find Nancy Willard's Newbery Award winning *A Visit to William Blake's Inn: Poems for Innocent and Experienced Travelers* (1981); this older picture book captured the imaginative vision and spirit that we find in all of Blake's work.

The purpose of this article is to explore some of Blake's poetry that I find suitable for middle school readers and its relationships to a number of current works for young adults. I highlight the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and suggest how Blake might be connected to other literary and musical works. My hope is that this exploration will encourage teachers to reread or read some of Blake's poetry with their students as a means of helping them enter into his particular visionary world and the universe of poetry in general.

Songs of Innocence and of Experience

Most present readers probably know Blake's poetry through his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, which show the "Two Contrary States of the Human Soul." From my long experience reading Blake I have found that a relatively small number of readers and teachers are familiar with his great prophetic poems. These illuminated works are long, complex, and made difficult by Blake's seemingly idiosyncratic symbolism. For example, *The Book of Urizen*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem* require, for me at least, a great deal of effort, numerous readings and the use of critical studies. The *Songs*, however, are accessible to all readers of all ages and at all levels of literary sophistication.

The *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (originally published separately as two books) is one of Blake's "illuminated books." The individual poems were skillfully and imaginatively integrated into copperplate engravings which he then colored by hand with pen or paint brush. Thus, each poem is, to use Blake's own terminology, a "Particular." These poem-engravings, even in the poorest quality facsimiles, shine and sing with a vitality that delights both eye and ear:

> The verse is part of the design, the design part of the verse, in an extraordinary condensed and almost ritualistic way; the visual completeness, the insistent metres, the impersonal skill of the calligraphy, turn these poems into achieved works of art that seem to resist conventional interpretation.
>
> (Ackroyd, 1996, p. 122)

Although these works of art have multiple layers of possible meaning, several general themes arise when we read the *Songs* repeatedly. Some celebrate the spontaneity, naïve vision, joy, and exuberance of childhood. Others are darker, ominous and explore the special concerns and fears of child-

hood. Perhaps they more adequately capture the zeitgeist of our present time in which "hurried," latch-key, and abused children seem not to be uncommon. Lastly, several of the poems deal with questions of morality and provide readers with models of how to live in the world.

"The Tyger"

"The Tyger" certainly is the most well-known of the *Songs*. Even folks who don't read poetry recognize the opening lines: "Tyger Tyger, burning bright,/In the forests of the night. . ." (Blake, 1967, unpaginated; all references to Blake's poems are from this illustrated and unpaginated collection). Over the last decade while teaching at universities and secondary schools in Ghana, Ukraine, and Norway, I found that if students knew any English poetry, they knew Blake's "The Tyger."

The Songs *are especially appropriate for demonstrating to students that poetry is an* oral *art and meant to be heard, sung, and celebrated.*

"The Tyger" has been discussed by all notable Blake scholars (for example, Bloom, 1965, and Frye, 1947), and it offers readers a lifetime of reading pleasure. Its possible meanings are many, complex, and like all great poetry, irreducible to simple generalizations. The poem doesn't state facts; it raises ultimate questions: "What immortal hand or eye,/Dare frame they fearful symmetry?" and "Did he smile his work to see?/Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"

Like Jack to whom the poem "sounded good/in my ears" and Adrienne Rich for whom it was "so musical and mysterious," the preeminent Blake authority Sir Geoffrey Keynes observes: "It seems better, therefore, to let the poem speak for itself, the hammer strokes of the craftsman conveying to each mind some part of his meaning" (Blake, 1967, p. 148). Keynes continues with advice that should be etched on every teacher's desk: "Careful dissection will only spoil its impact as poetry" (Blake, 1967, p. 149).

"The Tyger" plays a central role in two recent novels for young adults. Kate DiCamillo's *The Tiger Risin*g (2001) deals with a troubled sixth grade boy and his father trying to come to terms with the death of their mother/wife. A caged tiger owned by a local businessman is a symbolic touchstone throughout the novel. When the boy, Rob, shows the caged animal to an equally-troubled and alienated girl, Sistine, she immediately begins to recite "The Tyger." Rob exclaims, "Oh," and nods. "He liked the fierce and beautiful way the words sounded" (DiCamillo, 2001, p. 50).

"The Tyger" and several other poems from the *Songs* are integral to the characters, themes, and mood of David Almond's truly Blakean and luminous novel *Skellig* (1998). Ten-year-old Michael's family is in turmoil because of the serious illness of his baby sister. He discovers a strange creature (part man? part owl? part angel?) living in a crumbling garage and at the same time meets the fiercely independent girl, Mina, who lives next door. Together they befriend Skellig, and Mina opens a world of poetry and vision for Michael.

Mina reads part of "The School-Boy" from the *Songs* to Michael and says, "'William Blake again. You've heard of William Blake?'" He tells her that he hasn't. She then says, "'He painted pictures and wrote poems. Much of the time he wore no clothes. He saw angels in his garden'" (Almond, 1998, p. 59). Later when she observes him reading a book with a red sticker on it and asks what it means, Michael comments that it's for "confident readers." Mina scoffs and asks what would happen if other readers wanted to read it:

> "And where would William Blake fit in?" said Mina. "'Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright/In the forests of the night.' Is that for the best readers or the worst readers? Does that need a good reading age?" (Almond, 1998, p. 90)

Her question is a resonant one for all teachers, K-12 through the university level.

Neil Waldman's picture book version of *The Tyger* (Blake, 1993) is an interesting presentation of the poem. The illustrations are in acrylic, and each page contains a two line couplet. The gray rendition of the forest is punctuated with the orange and black stripes of the tiger, and the various pictures depict parts of the poem, for example, a white lamb standing peacefully and stars throwing down their spears. The individual illustrations are captured together in a four page mural at the end of the book. I like this version because it makes Blake's poem visually accessible to all readers, even to those, as Mina might say, who are not "confident."

Lastly, in Alice and Martin Provensen's illustrations the Tiger lounges, sleeps, and prowls across the pages of *A Visit to William Blake's Inn: Poems for Innocent and Experienced Travelers* (Willard, 1981). This is a glowing-eyed Tiger that Blake would have approved. In the poem "The Tiger Asks Blake for a Bedtime Story," he recounts how he greedily stole Blake's food and consequently became ill. What can make a "tiger roar again"? Only an "immortal story": "Only William Blake can tell/tales to make a tiger well." The poem concludes with these lovely lines:

> If I should dream before I wake,
> may I dream of William Blake. (Willard, 1981, p. 40)

Willard's collection is a perfect complement to Blake. The poems and illustrations capture the imaginative vision and fancy that we find in the *Songs*. We encounter Blake and his wife in their bed and breakfast. Guests are picked up in "Blake's Celestial Limousine"; "Two patient angels" are the housemaids; "Two mighty dragons" serve as cooks and bakers; a rabbit shows guests to their rooms; a "shaggy old bear" offers his head as a pillow; and Blake himself leads walks on the Milky Way.

This wonderful picture book for all ages is especially appropriate for middle school readers because of its playfulness, wit, and humor. For example, a tailor builds a house out of the "wool of bat and fur of mouse," "moleskin suede," and "robins' wings" because "It's best/ to work with what I know." When the house proves to be unlivable, he and his wife take "rooms at the inn of William Blake" (Willard, 1981, pp. 42-43). Like all of the poems in the collection, this one is a joy to read aloud.

"On a Cloud I Saw a Child"

While sitting at her kitchen table, Mina's mother tells Michael that they must look at the world with new eyes: "The kind of thing William Blake saw. He said we were

surrounded by angels and spirits. We must just open our eyes a little wider, look a little harder" (Almond, 1998, p. 131). And that's what the poems and illustrations of the *Songs* help us do: see imaginatively. Perhaps, as in "Introduction," we see a piper (not so strangely resembling Blake himself) walking down a country road while looking up and listening to a child-cherub floating just above him: "Piping down the valleys wild,/Piping songs of pleasant glee,/On a cloud I saw a child,/And he laughing said to me. . . ." Or perhaps as we read such poems as "Spring," "The Blossom," "Laughing Song," "The Ecchoing Green," and "Infant Joy" we simply share in the spontaneous joy of being alive and seeing the world anew:

I have no name
I am but two days old.—
What shall I call thee?
I happy am
Joy is my name,—
Sweet joy befall thee!

The *Songs* are especially appropriate for demonstrating to students that poetry is an *oral* art and meant to be heard, sung, and celebrated. As the recent past Poet Laureates of the United States, Robert Pinsky and Stanley Kunitz, have stressed, poetry must reconnect with its origins in song and dance. The current Laureate Billy Collins tells students to take a poem and "press an ear against its hive" (Collins, 2001, p. 16). Through such oral performances students and teachers affirm poetry's power to nourish the heart, mind, and soul.

We know from various biographical accounts that Blake would often sing the *Songs*. Fortunately, there are various recordings available today. R. Vaughan Williams set them to music, and different classical singers have performed them. Perhaps if one looks long and hard enough one might be able to find an old recording of some of the *Songs* by the poet Allen Ginsberg. However, the CD that *must* be a part of any middle school classroom that celebrates Blake is folk singer Greg Brown's arrangements of sixteen of the poems in his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (Brown, 1986). Brown's music and renditions are a joy to listen to, sing with, and dance to ("The Ecchoing Green" as a hoe-down!). I can't think of a better way to introduce and celebrate Blake than to play the CD. I'm certain he is smiling somewhere whenever he hears it.

Marks of Weakness, Marks of Woe

The *Songs* not only celebrate innocence. They also acknowledge experience, and that experience is often bleak, cruel, and even horrible. References to Blake's mythological universe abound in Philip Pullman's astounding "His Dark Materials" trilogy that I have found to be favorites with young adults who have expanded their fantasy reading beyond the Harry Potter books: *The Golden Compass* (1995); The Subtle Knife (1997); and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000). Pullman says that "there are three debts that need acknowledgement above all the rest. . . The third is to the works of William Blake" (Pullman, 2000, unpaginated). He incorporates the dark, "Specter" side of experience into his trilogy.

The two "Chimney Sweeper" poems raise starkly (though beautifully) images of how children have been, and are, often misused by adults. The little sweeper in the "Innocence" poem begins: "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." The sweeper in the "Experience" poem highlights the hypocrisy of his parents who have "gone to praise God & his Priest & King/Who make a heaven of our misery."

I often have found the sweeper poems to be most resonant with adolescents, both here and abroad. Their sense of common decency and justice is aroused when they read and then discuss them and several others, for example, "Holy Thursday": "Is this a holy thing to see,/In a rich and fruitful land,/Babes reduced to misery,/Fed with cold and usurous hand?"

Similarly, the poems that deal with friendship and love call into question our understanding of those concepts. These are complicated and difficult issues for early adolescence, and Blake's *Songs* offer a way to "step back" as it were and explore them. In "A Poison Tree" we see the difference between forthright anger and simmering resentment: "I was angry with my friend:/I told my wrath, my wrath did end./I was angry with my foe:/I told it not, my wrath did grow." And to the speaker's joy, the wrath eventually kills the foe.

In the epigraph to "A Little Girl Lost," Blake writes: "Children of the future Age,/Reading this indignant page;/Know that in a former time,/Love! sweet Love! was thought a crime." And in the apocalyptic "London" we encounter the results of a society that represses honest discussion of sexuality on the one hand and commercializes it on the other: "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." Certainly this is truer today than even Blake could have imagined.

"For Mercy Has a Human Heart"

Poetry, like most good literature, has the power not only to delight but also has the potential to instruct. This is true of the *Songs*. By exploring the "Two Contrary States of the Human Soul," the poems embody what the imaginative psychologist James Hillman (1989) calls poetry's soul-making power. Let's look at a few of the *Songs* that raise questions of how we might be and act in the world.

Blake begins "On Another's Sorrow" with a series of rhetorical questions:

Can I see another's woe,
And not be in sorrow too?
Can I see another's grief
And not seek for kind relief?

He then answers categorically: "No, no! never can it be!/Never, never can it be!" Similarly, in "The Human Abstract" he argues:

Pity would be no more,
If we did not make somebody Poor:
And Mercy no more could be,
If all were as happy as we. . . .

These poems address directly the moral ties that bind all of humanity together, regardless of religion or ethnicity, Christian or Muslim, Israeli or Palestinian. They are a yea-saying to the fact that we all are not only brothers and sisters under the heavens, but that as such we have responsibilities for the welfare of one another. In today's world, this is a message that needs to be artistically, compellingly, and non-didactically affirmed in our classrooms.

Blake further develops the nature and responsibilities of humanity in "The Divine Image." The third stanza reads:

> For Mercy has a human heart
> Pity, a human face:
> And Love, the human form divine,
> And Peace, the human dress. . . .

By sharing these poems with students and by helping them relate the poems to their own lives and experiences (for example, by asking them how *they* feel when they see someone sad or crying and what they might do in such situations, or by having them make a collage of the "human dress"—Peace), we not only are exploring great poetry with them but also are engaging in the best kind of non-didactic moral education.

"He whose face gives no light, shall never become a star" *(Blake, 1988, p. 35).*

In "The Marmalade Man Makes a Dance to Mend Us" (Willard, 1981, p. 36) Willard addresses the same concerns as Blake. She says, "Lamb and tiger, walk together./Dancing starts where fighting ends." Dancing is poetry's metaphoric partner, and Blake's work and those of the others I have presented in this essay celebrate innocence and experience, joy and sorrow, and the beauty of language imaginatively used. But more, for middle school students in today's difficult time, they affirm the necessity of envisioning, of believing in, of dancing and celebrating the possibility of a more universally peaceful world and more loving and visionary people. "Maybe we could all see such beings, if only we knew how to," Mina's mother tells Michael, tells us (Almond, 1998, p. 132). Blake can teach us how.

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