Discovering Literature
www.bl.uk/discovering-literature

Teachers' Notes

Author / Work: William Blake, ‘The Tyger’
Theme: A Close Reading

Rationale
‘The Tyger’ is one of a collection of poems from Blake’s Songs of Innocence and Experience. Like many literary works it is well known to the few, yet not universally known. In Blake’s society this would have been because he was viewed as something of a radical. His work was also not widely circulated due to the modest number of publications produced. In today’s society however, Blake’s work is kept alive through the study of literature: in primary school as an animal poem; as part of a scheme of work in the early secondary years or studied in depth by post-16 students.

Wherever this poem is encountered it delights, worthy of the scrutiny that it is given both as a literary work and as a work of art in its own right. Through these teaching ideas students are encouraged to explore Blake’s innovative approach to creating and displaying his poetry, developing their understanding of the multi-talented individual whose poems and artwork continue to intrigue and delight a wide variety of audiences today.

“Well a line is drawn without intention... as Poetry admits not a Letter that is Insignificant, so Painting admits not a Grain of Sand or a Blade of Grass Insignificant, much less an Insignificant Blur or Mark.” William Blake, ‘A Vision of the Last Judgement’, showing the two contrary states of the human soul.

Content

Literary and historical sources:
- Illustration of ‘The Tyger’ from Songs of Innocence and Experience (first published 1794)
- The Notebook of William Blake, containing the draft copy of ‘The Tyger’ (1787-1818)
- The Marriage of Heaven and Hell by William Blake (1790-93)

Recommended reading (short article):
William Blake, ‘The Tyger’ by George Norton

Documentary films:
A selection of short documentary-style films (approx. 10 minutes each):
www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/videos
Key questions

- What is Blake's purpose and who is his audience for ‘The Tyger’?
- In what ways does Blake use questions to encourage the reader’s exploration of the poem?
- How important is Blake's fusion of sight and sound as an artist and poet?

Activities

1) Before encountering the poem, give students a list of verbs and ask them to predict what the subject of the poem might be:

   burning        beat        frame        was        dare
   threw          burnt       water'd      dare        smile
   seize          made        aspire       make        twist

   Show students the manuscript copy of Blake’s notebook and discuss where they can see his thinking changing as he revises his ideas.

2) Prepare a copy of the poem with all the punctuation removed. For differentiation purposes either give students the missing punctuation, for example 13 question marks and ask them to work in small groups to decide where they should go, or for extra challenge do not provide any clues. Compare with an unedited version for further discussion.

3) After an initial reading, ask students to focus specifically on the sounds (phonology) of the poem. Draw attention to the plosive sounds, for example ‘T’ as a dental plosive and ‘B’ as a bi-labial plosive. Invite students to do one or more of the following:

   a. Echo the anvil by reading alternate words, exaggerating the consonants.
   b. Split the alphabet in two and assign words, emphasising the beginning and end of words.
   c. Choose their own rendition with a focus on the sounds of the words, for example one person just reads the question words (what? when?).
   d. When they have had time to experiment, students can record and listen back to their efforts, discussing the impact or perform their version.
4) Read the poem to students with an exaggerated emphasis on the rhythm. If possible, have a strong rhythmical piece of music playing in the background. Ask students to consider what the rhythm contributes explicitly and implicitly.

5) Show students the image of ‘The Tyger’ whilst discussing Blake's intentions, with reference to the quotation from the ‘Rationale’ and in light of their discussions on vocabulary, punctuation, sound and rhythm. How does the colour and image add or detract from the impact of the poem?

Extension activities

- Compare this experience poem with the innocence of ‘The Lamb’ from the same collection and explore the contrasting imagery used.
- Read the article by George Norton and compare with students' own explorations of the two poems.
- Explore further links from the Discovering Literature website connected with Blake to enhance student understanding of the ‘artist, poet, mystic, visionary and radical thinker’ that he was.
- Revisit ‘The Tyger’ and examine possible interpretations in more detail. Compare Blake’s representation of revolution with the tiger as a metaphor, with current global revolutions for example the Arab Spring, Syria, the Ukraine. Who or what is ‘the tiger’ and who or what is ‘the lamb’?