

# The Comparison and Fusion of William Blake's Poetry and Paintings

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**Abstract.** As a poet, painter and artist, William Blake was considered a transitional figure in English literature which followed no style but his own. He was also deemed as a pioneer of romanticism in the united kingdom and an outstanding poet with great achievements and profound influence in the history of English poetry. In recent years, studies have been more likely to conduct an in-depth analysis of Blake's poems or paintings, but there are not many studies that combine them together. The researcher of this paper has found that there is an interaction between the works of his poetry and paintings; it is generally an extension or compensation of each other. The paper also found that his poems present a slow process of indoctrination, colors in his paintings can be the expression of the entire poetry. It can better reflect the theme, idea, metaphor, conception as well as symbol of the poetry. In the research, some of his famous poems and paintings were demonstrated and offered a personally slight apprehension through comparison. It also summarized the structure of this paper, giving an overall view of the whole passage.

**Keywords:** William Blake; songs of innocence; the fusion of poetry and painting; comparison.

## 1. Introduction

William Blake, an English romantic poet and painter in the early 19th century, created numerous fantastic works in his entire life, which can be regarded as a grand feat in art history, and also influenced the whole society deeply at that time. Born in London on 28th November 1757, as a kid, he was already concentrating on imagination, the individual, and nature, all of which are themes of the romantic and transcendental durations. At the age of 10, he was enrolled in a drawing school and was exposed to Greek and roman sculpture, which influenced his later work dramatically. As he continued to develop his cognition in visual arts, Blake also developed his writing skills. In 1783, his first set of poems, poetical sketches, was published. It is worth noticing that the subject matter of his initial work was romantic in nature because it included a discussion of natural religion, the individual, and ideas from his own imagination that laid the roots for the style of his later poetry works.

Politically, Blake was a rebel, making friends with those radicals. He strongly criticized the capitalists' cruel exploitation and cherished great expectations and enthusiasm for the french revolution. He once said, "the dark satanic mills left men unemployed, killed children and forced prostitution [1]." it can be clearly seen that his discontent, frustration as well as anger at the gloom of the present society. In the aspects of literally, Blake was the first important romantic poet perceived by the public as showing contempt for the rule of reason, opposite the classical tradition of the old 18th century, and treasuring the individual's imagination.

Moreover, in terms of poetic art, Blake's work got rid of the old system of classicism and created ballads and non-metrical to praise dream life. He barely used abstract phrases; plain and direct have always been the attributes of his poetry. As far as he is concerned, religious belief has always been one of his inspirations for his work. For example, his well-known poems, 'the tyger' from "songs of experience" and 'the lamb' from "songs of innocence" represent a great sense of adoration and compliment by narrating characteristics of different animals.

Since the 1980s, attention from the academic circle has been paid to Blake's poems and painting works. As post-structure theory became widespread in the west, comprehensive studies on his remarkable works were deepened, which significantly expanded and supplemented the studies on poems of Blake. Nevertheless, most studies focused mainly on his painting works, and only a handful

of studies showed research interest in both of them. They collected well-publicized as well as obscure paintings from different periods of his life to compare and analyze to find out what his core idea is, or they tried to figure out the cause of style variation and more. This paper is going to concentrate on Blake's poems and paintings and study the interaction with each other. By enumerating some examples, this study will explore the combination or differences between the two things in certain works. As a comparison, 'The tyger' and 'The lamb', and the collection 'Songs of innocence' will be mainly discussed.

## **2. Fusion of the Poetry and Painting**

### **2.1. 'The Tyger' and 'The Lamb'**

#### **2.1.1 Analysis of the Poetry in 'The Tyger' and 'The Lamb'**

"There is no progression without contradictions. Human existence requires attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate." William Blake's main concern is trying to address the differences of different states of the human mind. He attempts to address the distinctions of different states of the human mind in his works, songs of innocence and songs of experience, as an 18th-century romantic poet. The main poem from his collection, 'the lamb', insinuates innocence and the relationship between the youngster and the holy. Through this poem, a curious child questions the nature of a gentle lamb in the singsong verse, and he finds what he already knows: god created the lamb. Blake was greatly influenced by world events and by life itself. In the sequel to Songs of Innocence: Songs of Experience, he addresses his loss of "faith in the goodness of mankind" caused by the fall of the French Revolution. The collection's standout poem, 'the tyger,' seeks an answer to an unknown: how can the god who created the peaceful lamb also be the creator of the fierce, destructive tiger? The narrator asks numerous questions but receives no responses. Firstly, the tiger is associated with fire in color in the previous poem: the burning fire is a color between red and orange, similar to the tiger's color; Secondly, the tiger's eyes are like flames and made of flames. The tiger, according to Blake, is the embodiment of God's power in creation: the animal is terrifying in its beauty, strength, complexity, and vitality. Meanwhile, concerning the social background of those poems, the tiger is symbolic of the revolutionary force. It has the potential to demolish the old system and establish a new one. However, by comparing the former with the latter, the author enhanced the meaning of both. These two poems are about evil and the significance of recognizing the evil around us in order to achieve a state of youthfulness. 'The lamb' thus presents views of the world as filtered through the eyes and mind of a child (lamb). Therefore, one existing similarity is that they both concern the loss of innocence. 'The lamb' is a symbol of good things, corresponding to 'the tyger' as the symbol of vice; Blake seeks balance and harmony in this unbalanced world[2].

#### **2.1.2 Analysis of the Painting in 'The Tyger' and 'The Lamb'**

In order to make better expressing of their thoughts, some writers would like to put a picture (sometimes sketches) underneath the poem, thus making their works more attractive and convincing. With these purpose, William Blake made integration of drawing and poetry into many productions. For example, in these two poems, Blake usually emphasizes his unique viewpoint by adding a lot of their own illustrations. They blend with each other and constitute a sense of harmony.

There are a number of copies of his same work; they might have shown a huge difference from each other. Taking 'the lamb' as an example, "songs of innocence and experience" was edited and published by G. Keynes in 1967, which includes most of Blake's latter years' work. On the whole, the works are made-up of bright-colored scenes and unrestrained lines; the oak took up nearly half of the picture, showing a strong burst of his ideas. Meanwhile, one of the well-known copies included in the "complete works of William Blake" printed in 2001 has basically shown the same theme: scenes are created with clear lines and distinct overall contours, looking lively and bright in color [3]. In the distance, the oak is against the blue sky, which forms a pleasant contrast with the moving herds of sheep and the child, representing harmonious idyllic scenery and a leisurely state of life. In general,

the depiction of the oak on both sides seems to interpret the artist's thought. In the two paintings, the intertwining branches of the towering tree canopy the herds of sheep and the innocent child like a "sealed cover", so the image of the oak expected to be a protector is nearly replaced by that of a tyrant. As the paper mentioned before, 'the lamb' showed a conversation between the innocent child and lambs; they integrated with the tree (the god) successfully. God is the protector who protects the naive children and lambs.

In terms of 'the tyger', the tiger in some copies is not so fierce but even can be described as tame. However, it looks ferocious against a bright-colored background in other copies to further illustrate the variation of the image. According to G. Keynes, these copies realize the transformation of the tiger from "a predator painted in red" to "a tame cat" by the color scheme [4].

### **2.1.3 Comprehensive Analysis of 'The Tyger' and 'The Lamb'**

As can be clearly seen from these two poems, although poetry and paintings belong to different artistic fields, his dual identities empower him to create a fantastic work appropriately, thus forming a typical mode of intertextuality in mutual interpretation. Overall, the value of the works of art is enhanced by mutual fusion and interpretation, which demonstrates lively Blake's creative skill: using "ideographic" to respond to every work [5]. For example, in these two works, the text is in the middle with illustrations on the sides: not only can it represent his unique viewpoint lively but also convenient for readers.

## **2.2. The Collection 'Songs of Innocence'**

### **2.2.1 Analysis of the Poetry in the collection 'Songs of Innocence'**

This collection was basically written at the end of the American revolutionary war when Britain was embracing a period of temporary peace. Many of the poems in this collection are written from the perspective of children, using metaphors and similes to depict the positive and beautiful sides of society in that period. Blake painted a picture of joy and happiness in languages so simple that they could be chanted by children and created a paradise out of a gloomy London. Moreover, most of the poems are short as well as a reflection of the poet's ineffable emotions, abounding in childish innocence and sweetness. He described in plain language a harmonious world with blossom, grass, lamb, mountains and rivers everywhere.

Unsurprisingly, his collection has been studied for a long time. Some scholars think that the writer is adept at using children's language to display perfectly the innocence deep in someone's soul. The basic words used in this collection can be connected to create symbolic or abstract concepts featuring childishness, naivete, and nonchalance to the mundane world, among others. Using the poem 'the blossom' as an example, with blossom as the theme, finely selected words such as 'merry', 'happy', and 'pretty' are used to create a lively and cheerful scene in nature. Meanwhile, the blossom can be symbolically interpreted as love, and the repeated use of the exclamation mark at the end of the lines reveals the author's devotion to life and his infinite zest for passion. However, the poem 'the echoing green' shows a different expressing way which is an allusion [6]. He used a bunch of simple expressions to describe enthusiasm and a sense of spirituality, such as 'bells ring', 'birds', 'sing louder', 'cheerful sound' as well as 'echoing green', thus abstractly reflecting its theme with the tone of the poem a naive simplicity.

### **2.2.2 Analysis of the Painting in the Collection 'Songs of Innocence'**

As mentioned above, what discriminates William Blake from other poets is that he has reached the highest artistic boundary, the "fusion of drawing and poetry." Using the title page of "songs of innocence" as an example. as can be seen from the illustration, the letters are depicted in the form of leaves. They are twists and turns, just like birds flying in the wind full of vitality. As for the title, the letter O of the word "songs" takes the most eye-catching position in the middle of the image. The author drew a little boy on the top, looking down at the flutter and the woman. Their facial expressions showed that they enjoyed themselves and seemed peaceful. On the top of the letter N, a man is writing; his existence echoes the little girl near the letter G. as for the entire title page, the birds on both sides

of the image, together by the flying leaves, looked like they are protecting those who above, forming a beautiful and tranquil scene. In general, the tone running the collection has been set through the beautiful and natural idyllic scenery presented on the title page.

### 2.2.3 Comprehensive Analysis of ‘Songs of Innocence’

Throughout the drawings of the front and the poems behind, what Blake has been doing all the time is to make a fusion of these two elements. The vivid depiction of the title page brought the emotionless letters (S, O, N, G) to life. It gave letters a particular image that enriches people’s imagination and, more importantly, makes echoes with the poems following the title page. In summary, poetry creation is simply about the description and expression of one’s inner thoughts, whereas the narrative method adopted by each poet demonstrates the poet’s artistic achievements. In research into Blake’s narrative methodology, some scholars pointed out that “the basic feature of narration which is the linear and continuous development of time, is completely eliminated from his works [7].” Instead, his works take on a distinct character of integration of poems and illustrations, where poems serve to explain illustrations and illustrations function to extend what the poems convey, stretching the whole work spatially through the linear flow of time. Moreover, Blake’s marvelous works, with these two elements combined, draw away the reader’s attention from the texts to encourage their reflections and arouse their imaginations.

## 3. Comparison of Blake’s Poetry and Painting

His poetry characteristic can be manifested into three main parts, which are about religion, radical criticism of reality and symbolical, representative of ‘the tyger’, ‘the blossom’ and ‘the echoing green’ as shown previously. As for the painting, it shared more common features with his poems. Mostly all of Blake’s drawings or sketches embodied a great sense of respect, were more symbolic and paid more attention to reality. Take “London” as an example; in this work, the painting part illustrates a kid who leads an elderly man on crutches through the dark street while a ray of light from behind seems to show them the way [8]. Taking the dilapidated streets in London back then as the backdrop, he introduced his rational thinking into his work and critically expressed the devastation of the British industrial revolution and social corruption on human’s naive nature. In addition, a symbolic technique has been displayed. He portrayed the kid as pure representatives who had never been contaminated, hoping that they would lead the country out of adversity. In terms of content, both demonstrated further thinking and personal passion. Furthermore, on emotion, they despaired eternal and valid truth mutually [9]. As an explanation, Blake was born in the period of the beginning of the industrial revolution in the UK, which has made citizens suffer for quite a long time. During this period, he gave firm support and showed strong sympathy for the french revolution, as his thoughts were greatly impacted by it. He has been obsessed with artistic creation all his life through the fusion of poems and paintings in view of his experiences, concepts, thoughts, and more. By properly integrating these together, Blake has naturally interpreted his understanding of poem and painting arts, revealing his pursuit and yearning for the beatific world. With so profound a faith in god and monarchy, people were captured and placed into the confinement of materialism. As an activist that craves to change the current situation, what he has felt was people’s miserable living conditions, making the direction of the works clearer. Additionally, as Samuel Palmer said: “Blake is the artist who never pretends and wears no mask; he is single-minded in ambition, moving along the righteous road. More, he is nothing but generous, noble, delighted and elegant, but asking for little[10].” His simple and honest personality of ‘classicism’ seems to be innate. Different from formalist artists in the 18th century, he naturally revealed his genuine creative ideas in the constant changes of poetry and painting, thus using them to express his true feelings.

#### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has elaborated William Blake's poems and paintings from two of his works in general, and obviously, what he was trying to do for his works is make the expression easier but directly in the first place, followed by a "combined art of poetry and painting" way to enhance the value of the works of art with his ample inspiration and imagination. Most of Blake's artistic works were presented by this technique, so it is definitely worth analyzing the small differences as well as the unity of his poetry and paintings so as to let people get a better understanding of these two fields and his creation mode. Thus, they can appreciate it in an aesthetic way. If his works can be regarded and known as an imaginative kingdom, then his poetry and painting can usually be two indispensable elements to form it, and the fusion of these elements can be seen as a remarkable way to interpret his innermost emotions. By doing so, though the whole work, poetry and painting complement each other while converging slowly, stimulating the vitality of his painting art and achieving the integration of the inner spirit, capturing a serene picture of his inner world.

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