

# Reading Blake Through Burke's Screens: Dramatism in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

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## Abstract

William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* presents a dichotomous vision of human perception, morality, and divine creation. In this paper, I employ Kenneth Burke's concepts of Terministic Screens and Dramatism to analyze how Blake's poetry not only reflects but actively constructs and mediates reality. Burke argues that language functions as a filter that shapes perception. Based on this idea of Terministic Screens, I argue that Blake's contrasting poems, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger", serve as rhetorical screens that define innocence and experience. By applying Burke's Terministic Screens, I demonstrate how Blake's imagery, symbolism, and diction selectively direct the reader's understanding of creation's dual nature—both gentle, as depicted in "The Lamb", and fearsome, as portrayed in "The Tyger". Furthermore, through Burke's Dramatistic Pentad, I examine how Blake dramatizes the process of creation by positioning the divine creator and the act of questioning within a rhetorical framework. My analysis reveals how Blake's linguistic and rhetorical choices not only distinguish innocence from experience but also interrogate the complexities of divine intention. By reading Blake through Burke's rhetorical lens, my study contributes to both literary and rhetorical discourse, illustrating how language functions as an instrument of perception, persuasion, and philosophical inquiry.

*Keywords:* dramatism, terministic screens, dramatistic pentad, rhetorical discourse, philosophical inquiry

William Blake (1757–1827) is an exemplary Romantic poet celebrated for his poetic brilliance and his ability to intertwine human nature with both the natural and divine realms. As a Romantic poet, Blake responds to the shifting social and political movements of his time by exploring their impact on morality, perception, and creative expression. His poetry, though simple and rhythmic in structure, is rich with symbolism and multilayered

meanings as they offer multiple possible interpretations. Through vivid imagery and symbolic language, Blake dramatizes the complexities of human experience, particularly the tension between innocence and experience, inviting readers to reflect on the moral and spiritual conflicts that shape both human existence and divine intention. His linguistic and rhetorical choices do more than describe reality; they construct and mediate it, making his work an ideal subject for rhetorical analysis.

Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) is one of his most renowned works, illustrating the tensions between purity and corruption, joy and suffering, and faith and doubt. Originally published as two separate books, *Songs of Innocence* (1789) presents a pastoral, childlike, and joyful perspective, while *Songs of Experience* (1794) shifts toward a darker, more anxious tone, confronting the harsh realities of the world. By juxtaposing these contrasting poetic voices, Blake offers a more nuanced critique of the societal norms, spiritual beliefs, and the complexities of human nature. His poems not only reflect the tensions between purity and corruption but also raise questions about the nature of divine justice and human agency. His poems and poetic terms function as screens that allow his readers to view human experiences in the real world through symbolism and metaphors.

I have applied Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theories, particularly his concepts of Terministic Screens and Dramatism, to analyze how Blake's poems from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* construct and mediate reality. According to Burke, language is more than a tool for communication; it is a filter that shapes perception and directs understanding. By viewing Blake's contrasting poems "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" through Burke's theoretical lenses, I examine how Blake's poetic language functions as an instrument of perception and persuasion by revealing the intricate balance between innocence and experience.

In the exploration of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, scholars have employed a variety of theoretical frameworks to analyze the complex relationship between language, perception, and morality. Romantic readings of Blake often highlight his focus on imagination and his critique of reason, especially within the context of the Industrial Revolution, as Romanticism seeks to engage with the emotional and imaginative response to industrialization and societal change. Psychoanalytic literary critics, on the other hand, delve into the unconscious desires and psychological tensions expressed in Blake's vivid poetic imagery, often interpreting his work through Freudian or Jungian lenses. For instance, Serenah Minasian explores the psychological duality in Blake's work, writing, "Part One would be the dream

and Part Two would be the nightmare that is truly reality" (7). This duality, present throughout Blake's poetry, underscores the tension between innocence and experience and provides fertile ground for further theoretical exploration.

Feminist theory has also been instrumental in examining Blake's representations of gender and his subversion of traditional patriarchal norms. Scholars have noted his awareness of the social implications of gender roles and his critique of the restrictions placed on women. Charles Moffat, for example, observes that Blake, being deeply conscious of the natural environment, recognized how gender roles were socially constructed. He writes, "Blake believed it was the ignorance of the older generation that socially conditions children to become a specific gender role. He saw this as chopping off their wings and their sexual freedom" ("William Blake's Ecofeminism"). Anne K. Mellor further comments that although Blake understood the social injustice "involved in treating women as property or slaves," he struggled to transcend the traditional gender roles assigned to women in his time (154). In Blake's poems, female figures often take on nurturing, supportive roles such as mothers, lovers, and emotional caretakers, which highlight the gendered limitations imposed on women, even within his broader critique of societal structures.

Marxist critics have also contributed to the discussion of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* by focusing on his critique of capitalism, social inequality, and the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. Laura Ellen Rutland emphasizes this point by stating, "Blake is piecing together working-class Protestant thought and more middle-class and upper-class aesthetic forms in an attempt to protest church and state abuses without losing the imaginative richness of the religious language that he loves and knows to be familiar to people of all social classes" (10). These approaches offer important insights into Blake's social and political commentary but often overlook the rhetorical dimension of his work, specifically, how Blake uses language to shape the audience's perceptions and provoke critical reflection on power, creation, and morality. Rutland further underscores the inseparable connection between language and history, stating, "For Blake, symbolic actions produce history. One cannot talk about language without talking about history, and one cannot talk about history without talking about language" (11). This insight highlights the rhetorical force of Blake's work and the crucial role that language plays in his broader critique of societal structures.

In my paper, as a rhetorician, I offer a unique contribution by applying Kenneth Burke's concepts of Terministic Screens and Dramatism to Blake's contrasting poems "The Tyger" and "The Lamb" to explore how language,

through symbols and metaphors, shapes perception. Through Burkean screens, Blake's poetic vision is not merely a reflection of innocence or experience, but a deliberate act of linguistic construction, framing the world in ways that direct the reader's emotional and philosophical responses. By focusing on the rhetorical act in Blake's poems, my analysis brings new clarity to the moral and existential tensions by providing a fresh perspective on his engagement with creation, power, and human agency. I also examine how Blake dramatizes the human condition by positioning divine creation and poetic voice within a rhetorical framework. By using Burke's screens to read Blake's poetry, I highlight how language functions as an instrument of perception and persuasion and how linguistic and rhetorical choices define human experience.

Since my paper examines how literary language shapes perceptions of innocence in "The Lamb" and experience in "The Tyger", I argue that Kenneth Burke's concept of Terministic Screens serves as an effective theoretical framework for analyzing Blake's use of imagery, symbolism, diction, and the underlying tensions in these poems. Burke's concept of Terministic Screens explores how language filters and shapes human perception. As he states, "we must use terministic screens, since we cannot say anything without the use of terms" (121). He further explains, "even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality" (115).

Kenneth Burke posits that language is not a neutral medium but a filter through which we perceive and interpret reality. By selecting specific terms, writers emphasize certain aspects of reality while simultaneously deflecting others, thereby constructing a particular perspective. In his concept of "Terministic Screens," Burke uses the metaphor of a screen to illustrate how language frames perception by filtering meaning based on the writer's context, ideology, and intent. This implies that language does more than describe reality as it actively constructs it by highlighting and selecting certain elements and obscuring and deflecting others. The way we speak or write about concepts like innocence and experience shapes our understanding of reality and influences how we relate to the world. By applying this framework to Blake's poems, we can see how his poetic choices guide readers to perceive innocence and experience through specific rhetorical and symbolic screens.

Additionally, while Terministic Screens serve as my primary analytical tool, I have also incorporated Burke's Dramatistic Pentad to explore the dual nature of existence in Blake's work. Burke describes Dramatism as a method of analyzing human motives and relationships by examining how

individuals present themselves through language and action (135). The Dramatistic Pentad, comprising scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose, offers a framework to understand the dynamics of Blake's symbolic world. According to Burke, "for there to be an act, there must be an agent. Similarly, there must be a scene in which the agent acts. To act in a scene, the agent must employ some means, or agency. And it can be called an act in the full sense of the term only if it involves a purpose" (135).

Moreover, the "dramatistic pentad can be used in exploring every action, including action by statement" (Booth 12). By using dramatistic pentad, I have investigated how Blake's use of poetic language, including symbols, metaphors, and other literary devices, makes meaning and shapes readers' perception, how the actions are framed through language, and how these dramatizations reveal deeper philosophical inquiries into innocence and experience. With these theoretical lenses in place, I now turn to an analysis of "The Lamb", a quintessential representation of innocence that frames divinity and creation through a gentle and nurturing perspective.

"The Lamb", one of the most widely read poems from *Songs of Innocence*, embodies Blake's exploration of innocence, creation, and divinity. Divided into two stanzas and written in a simple, childlike tone in a pastoral context, the poem poses profound questions about the nature of existence and the identity of the Creator. Blake uses a gentle and nurturing screen to depict the world as harmonious and innocent, just like a child. He begins,

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 wooly bright;  
Gave thee such a tender voice,  
Making all the vales rejoice!  
Little Lamb who made thee  
Dost thou know who made thee

The opening stanza invites readers into a seemingly simple inquiry in a childlike tone: "Little Lamb who made thee / Dost thou know who made thee". However, through a Burkean screen, this question becomes a profound act of rhetorical framing. The tone is childlike, which sets the speaker as a curious and innocent child who is eager to know who creates the "little Lamb". By using language, Blake displays the selection of innocence and purity and the

deflection of complexity and doubt. The innocent child narrator lists the basic needs, such as food and clothing, that fulfill a life. The selection of such words offers the readers a screen that filters other materialistic needs out of the frame and only brings what “making all the vales rejoice”.

Moreover, the imagery of “softest clothing woolly bright” and a “tender voice” reinforces this innocence by associating the lamb with vulnerability, purity, and divine care. The ambiguity of the Creator’s identity, which is left unanswered in the first stanza, not only sustains the poem’s innocence but also subtly leads Blake’s readers towards a theological understanding. Blake’s rhetorical choices guide the audience to perceive innocence as a divinely sanctioned, ideal state of being, and corruption free: in a word, innocent. The repeated question in the last two lines of the first stanza emphasizes a continued curiosity of the child narrator and his urge to look for a divine creation rooted in gentleness and nurturance. This constructs a screen that filters perception through an idealized innocence and also prepares the reader to find answers in the next stanza.

In the final stanza of “The Lamb”, Blake shifts from questioning to declaration. He writes,

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.

The transformation from inquiry to statement is interesting. This rhetorical shift can be understood through Burke’s concept of Terministic screens, as the speaker’s language now actively selects innocence as a reflection of divinity while deflecting any moral ambiguity. There is no confusion, no blurriness, and no ambiguity in the childlike inquiry. The child narrator says twice: “Little Lamb I’ll tell thee/ Little Lamb I’ll tell thee”, to invite innocence in the form of the lamb and the readers to reveal the divine truth. By drawing a parallel between the lamb and creator in “He is called by thy name, / For he calls himself a Lamb”, the child narrator establishes a screen that frames innocence as a divine attribute. This screen also filters the idea of the creator as innocent.

Though the child narrator does not mention Christ, Blake's target audience, the Christian English readers in the Romantic era, perceive the creator as Christ, the God. As the child narrator says, "I a child & thou a lamb, / We are called by his name", he blurs the boundaries between creator and creation, nature and human, animal and divine. The symbolic merging of "a child" and "a lamb" emphasizes purity, humility, and divine sacrifice, which are the essence of Romantic poetry. It also celebrates the oneness, wholeness, and unity between the creator and His creations.

Finally, the closing benediction: "Little Lamb God bless thee/ Little Lamb God bless thee", solidifies the rhetorical framing of innocence, holiness, and divine grace. The curious child narrator becomes the agent who claims his agency to bless the little lamb and embrace its spiritual energy. Reading the poem through Burke's Dramatistic Pentad, the act of creation unfolds within an innocent, pastoral scene. The divine creator, as the agent, performs the act of creation within this serene setting, intending to celebrate divine grace and unity.

From the narrator's point of view, throughout the poem, analyzed through Burke's Dramatistic Pentad, the child narrator, as the agent, moves from a seeker of knowledge to a revealer of divine truth. The act of revelation occurs within a pastoral scene of nature that symbolizes simplicity, innocence, and spiritual purity. The agency of the narrator suggests authority derived from spiritual insight to affirm the connection between innocence and divine grace. The purpose is twofold: to understand the origins of innocence and to affirm its divine connection through the symbolic image of the Christian God as the Lamb. Using Burke's Dramatistic Pentad preserves the essence of the poem in which the Lamb, the child, and the creator become synonymous and one.

Blake's deliberate linguistic choices ultimately construct a worldview where innocence, symbolized by the lamb, is not just protected but divinely cherished, reinforcing a screen that elevates spiritual simplicity over intellectual complexity. The rhetorical power of the poem is in its ability to shape readers' perception that innocence is not merely an abstract quality but a divine essence intricately tied to the divine creator. Blake's use of dramatism emphasizes that the act of questioning and the act of revelation are not separate but interconnected as both contribute to a holistic, sacred understanding of innocence. Similarly, by intertwining the creator with the creation, Blake suggests a harmonious, innocent unity between the divine and the mortal.

While "The Lamb" embodies innocence and gentle divinity, "The Tyger" presents a contrasting exploration of creation, evoking a sense of awe

and fear that challenges the simplicity seen in “The Lamb”. One of the most anthologized English poems, “The Tyger” is also a symbolic poem. It consists of 6 stanzas and 24 lines. “The Tyger” from the *Songs of Experience* is considered to be the most famous and greatest song. It refers to the “fearful power of worldly experience” (Hussain, 2005). The Tyger is the symbol of God’s power in creation, but it can be related to Satan or the devil, (Tarihoran, 2016). The idea is complex and ambiguous. Anita Kontrec, while discussing the ambiguity in the symbolism, emphasizes, “The tiger is the one being close to the Good and Evil and his energy can bring into existence or lead to destruction, therefore he is the one who spreads hope and fear, but perhaps above all that we are the ones who remain fascinated with his strength and beauty” (78). Hence, the tiger in “The Tyger” is the symbol of both beauty and destruction. The complexity in ideas and understanding are poetically embedded in the stanzas. Unlike “The Lamb”, “The Tyger” begins with an inquisitive and fearful tone. Blake writes,

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

In the first stanza, Blake employs a powerful and familiar rhythm and immediately draws attention to the awe-inspiring and terrifying nature of the creature. Written in trochaic tetrameter, “The Tyger” carries a rhythmic quality similar to a nursery rhyme like “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” establishing a familiar screen for Blake’s readers. While the rhyme creates a childlike tone similar to “The Lamb,” the poem’s complexity emerges through its rhetorical questions and striking word choices. The repetition of “Tyger” also emulates the style of nursery rhyme and heightens the intensity of the question the narrator asks at the end of the stanza. The use of “burning bright” and “forests of the night” contrasts light and darkness, evoking the duality and complexity of the creation. Unlike the lamb, the tiger is a complex creature that embodies both beauty and danger. The narrator asks “what immortal” to refer to the divine creator and sets the stage for a deeper inquiry into the divine creator’s role in crafting such a terrifying yet captivating creature. He continues in the second stanza,

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?

Blake's use of language constructs a Terministic screen that guides the reader to perceive the "Tyger" as both a creation of immense power and a symbol of mystery and danger. The phrase "In what distant deeps or skies" immediately establishes the vastness, while the term "fire" draws readers' attention to the sharp flame in the Tyger's eyes. The fire is both useful and destructive. It is a complex metaphor in itself. The question "Burnt the fire of thine eyes?" directs attention toward the Tyger's gaze and its intense quality that symbolizes not only the creature's power but also the potential for destruction. Blake dramatizes the act of creation by portraying the Tyger as both terrifying and magnificent, with the divine creator as the agent of this awe-inspiring act. This dramatic positioning invites deeper reflection on the nature of the creator. In the third stanza, the narrator introduces yet another screen through which readers perceive the Tyger's magnificence and, in turn, the power of its maker:

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?

The narrator continues questioning the Tyger's making process. The question "what shoulder, & what art/ Could twist the sinews of thy heart?" invites the reader to imagine the force and skill required to shape such a powerful creature. The body parts, such as "shoulder" and "heart," symbolize both the physical strength and the emotional core of the Tyger. The "shoulder" represents an image of strength and labor, while the "heart" implies the essence of life and emotion. The juxtaposition of both qualities reinforces the complexity of the Tyger, which eventually justifies the central theme of *Songs of Experience*. All these symbolic references construct a terministic screen that frames the Tyger's creation as not only physical but metaphysical and dramatizes the act of creation in a more complex way. Blake further intensifies the tension surrounding the creation of the Tyger by invoking images of industrial and forge-like processes as the narrator speaks,

What the hammer? what the chain,  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? what dread grasp.  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

The use of the words "hammer," "chain," "furnace," "anvil," and "grasp" invokes the imagery of a blacksmith crafting a powerful creature. Applying Burke's Terministic screens, Blake's choice of industrial imagery transforms the Tyger from a mere wild creature into a product of industrialization, which

largely influenced the Romantic poets and writers. By describing its creation with tools used for metalwork and the imagery of a furnace, Blake directs the reader's attention toward a more complex idea of industrialized creation. This metaphorical forging of the Tyger connects the divine and the terrifying, which underscores the duality at the heart of Blake's exploration of existence itself. Blake continues to explore the tension between creation, innocence, and experience as the narrator asks,

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?

The imagery of stars throwing down their spears and watering heaven with their tears introduces a cosmic and divine element of sorrow. The question, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" brings forth the screen of innocence through which Blake's readers once viewed the meek and gentle lamb. This contrast between the two creations suggests that innocence and experience are inherently tied together, prompting Blake to question the divine intentions behind creation. His question is not only rhetorical but also revelatory, exposing Blake's concern with the duality of creation and the complexities of divine intention. By highlighting this duality, Blake's rhetorical strategies emphasize the complex relationship between innocence and experience, creation and destruction, light and dark. The cosmic and divine questions presented here suggest that creation is not a simple or easily understood act; rather, it involves contradictions that are both beautiful and terrifying. Matović writes, "What can be recognized in that combination of beauty and destruction is a mutual relationship between innocence and experience, the same one that brought such a being into existence in the first place – the monumental tiger from Blake's poem." (28)

As the poem ends, with the repetition of the first stanza, the questioning begins anew, suggesting that the tension between innocence and experience is an ongoing and unresolved cycle that is a fundamental part of the human condition. Živković writes, "This general idea in Blake's poem is being accomplished by means of a cyclic composition, considering the fact that the first and the last verse in Blake's poem *The Tyger* are identical. The unity of content and form is thus accomplished in Blake's poetic structure, which symbolizes Blake's cognition of the providence of the cyclicity of nature found in the metaphysical vision of the tiger" (237).

Both "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" describe creation, but the linguistic and symbolic choices direct audience perception differently. The "lamb" is gentle, simple, pastoral, whereas the "Tyger" is fiery, complex, and powerful. The contrast reveals how perception of the world is shaped by the terms we use. This shows a Burkean insight into language's power over reality. Through Burke's terministic screens, we can see how Blake's use of language constructs contrasting perceptions of innocence and experience, with "The Lamb" symbolizing divine purity and "The Tyger" embodying the darker, more complex aspects of creation. The rhetorical strategies employed in both poems, framed by Burke's dramatism, highlight the tension between these dualities and suggest that creation itself is a complex and multifaceted act. By engaging with these contrasting visions of the divine, Blake challenges readers to confront the inherent contradictions within existence. Through this lens, Blake's poetry emerges not just as a reflection on innocence and experience but as an invitation to explore the complexities of creation and the human condition.

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