

William Blake

William Blake was born in 1757 in London. He served as an apprentice for an engraver at the age of 14 and entered the Royal Academy at 22. Apart from writing, painting and engraving were his main sources of income. He himself engraved his printed works (and those of other authors) with the technique of **illuminated printing**, transferring the traditional technique of illumination into the printing process. The artist died in 1827. Blake cannot strictly be called a Romantic poet; he was, rather, an outsider ahead of his time, who showed an emotion that would later characterize the Romantic movement. In his poems and aphorisms, in fact, he declared the **supremacy of imagination** over rationalism and materialism. Blake's own art and poetry was not commercially successful and his genius only began to be appreciated at the end of the century.

Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience

Blake's first literary production is *Poetical Sketches* (1783), similar to the nocturnal poetry of Thomas Gray and **Ossian poetry**. His most appreciated collections, *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794), were both written and illustrated by Blake himself. These works are meant to be at the same time complementary and contrary to each other. The former is about childhood, it is mostly written in a child-like, naive language and it adopts a prophetic tone and visionary features. The latter describes the adult world, where people are selfish and insincere. This dual perspective of life shows the interdependence of **evil** and **good**: two coexisting conditions which are symbolized by the **lamb**, representing innocence and childhood, and the **tiger**, referring to evil and experience. *The Lamb* is a poem in two stanzas, structured as a child song in the form of a question and answer. The first stanza poses the question, while the second gives the answer. The subject of the poem, the Lamb, symbolizes the innocence and purity of a natural world still untouched by experience and rules. It refers to Christ and his sacrifice for mankind.

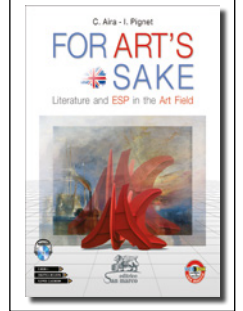
The Lamb

From *Songs of Innocence*

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost¹ thou know who made thee
Gave thee life, and bid² thee feed.
By the stream and o'er the mead;³
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly,⁴ bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales⁵ rejoice!⁶
Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee

GLOSSARY

1 do 2 ordered 3 meadow 4 made of
wool 5 valleys 6 feel joy



Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!
He is called by thy⁷ name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek⁸ and he is mild,
He became a little child:
I, a child, and thou a lamb,
We are called by His name.
Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee.

GLOSSARY

7 your 8 gentle

ACTIVITIES

Text comprehension

1 *Read the poem and answer the following questions.*

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1 Who is the speaker talking to? | 3 What are the qualities of the Lamb? |
| 2 What is, in your opinion, the answer to the question 'who made thee'? | 4 Who is the Lamb compared to? |

2 *Working in pairs explain the following associations.*

- | | | |
|-----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1 Lamb = Christ | 2 Lamb = child | 3 Child = poet |
|-----------------|----------------|----------------|

Vocabulary & style

3 *Answer the following questions.*

- How many stanzas is the poem divided into?
- What is the rhyme scheme?
- Which words in the text have a positive connotation?

4 *Choose the correct alternative.*

- What do the words 'stream', 'mead' and 'vales' refer to?
A A place in nature B Paradise C A place created by man
- What do the words used in the poem suggest?
A A bad world B A world of innocence C A utopian world
- What effect do the repetitions help to achieve?
A The effect of a children's song C The effect of a nursery rhyme
B The effect of a prayer
- Why is the language so simple?
A Because the poet is referring to childhood B Because the poet wants to be clear
C Because this is Blake's style

Speaking

- Can you think about other animals that might symbolize infancy and innocence?*
- Compare the title pages of Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, both engraved by the author himself. What are the prevailing topics? What is the atmosphere?*