

RESEARCH TITLE

A Deconstructive Study of William Blake's Selected Poems

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HNSJ, 2025, 6(9); <https://doi.org/10.53796/hnsj69/19>

Received at 07/08/2025

Accepted at 15/08/2025

Published at 01/09/2025

Abstract

This research paper explores the interpretive possibilities of *William Blake's Songs of Innocence* and *Experience* through the lens of deconstructive criticism. Although published much before than the emergence of the deconstructive theory, Blake's poetry works as key principles of the deconstructive critique. The paper situates Blake's work within a theoretical framework informed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's deconstructive concepts. Moreover, it examines how Blake's selected poems reflect internal contradictions and generate a self-reflexive critique of its own assumptions. Hereby, the study underscores the capacity of pre-deconstruction literary texts to offer a fertile ground for multiple critical inquiry and interpretation.

Key Words: Deconstruction, Derrida, binary oppositions, The Lamb, The Tyger.

دراسة تفكيكية في مختارات من قصائد وليم بليك

المستخلص

البحث الحالي يستكشف الإمكانيات التأويلية لمجموعة قصائد وليم بليك "أناشيد البراءة والخبرة" من خلال عدسة النقد التفكيكي. فعلى الرغم من صدورها قبل زمن طويل من ظهور نظرية التفكيك، إلا أن شعر بليك يتجلى وفق مبادئ أساسية للنقد التفكيكي. ويضع البحث أعمال بليك ضمن إطار نظري مستند إلى مفاهيم التفكيك للفيلسوف الفرنسي جاك دريدا. كما يتناول الكيفية التي تعكس بها مختارات من قصائده تناقضات داخلية وتولد نقداً انعكاسياً لافتراضاتها الخاصة. ومن ثم، تؤكد الدراسة على قدرة النصوص الأدبية السابقة للتفكيك على أن تشكل أرضية خصبة لقراءات نقدية متعددة وتفسيرات متنوعة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التفكيك، دريدا، الثنائيات الضدية، الحمل، النمر.

1. Introduction

Deconstruction as a concept was coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida during the late 1960s to refer to a specific mode of reading that focuses on multiple meanings of any pre-given text rather than finding a true and consistent meaning or a unified message in the text. As Barbara Johnson announced that the deconstructionist study teases out 'the warning forces of signification' at play and waiting to be read in what might be called the textual unconscious. Hereby, the Deconstructionists try all the time to find the internal differences of the text and the chinks or the inherent vulnerabilities as a way to dismantle the violent hierarchy created by the binary oppositions (Yaghoubi, 2006).

In fact, the concept of discovering various interpretations of a particular work, as opposed to a singular and cohesive meaning, originates with the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Husserl used the word 'phenomenon' to refer to the image that appears in a human's mind when he perceives something in the world. Husserl believed that human beings have to make this phenomenon a pure and formal entity without any real-world connections or content. Then, this phenomenon can be true in the mind, as only true ideas can do. For example, the triangle exists only as an idea in geometry (Ryan, 2012).

Ryan (2012) states that Derrida's premise is based on the idea that there is always more than one truth for everything. Derrida posits that there is no center due to the illogical nature of our value system; consequently, there is no absolute truth pertaining to any subject. What the Idealists believe in is totally wrong for Derrida. The Idealists hold a conviction in the existence of absolute truths; for example, the term 'justice' is linked to favorable and positive connotations. In contrast, Derrida contends that no concept such as 'justice' can be fully understood without differentiating it from other concepts. In doing so, he introduces a conceptual counterpart to the Structuralists' idea that the identity of any part of language arises from its difference from other parts. For instance, the word 'hat' only has its own identity whenever it sounds different from 'rat', and this means that the final 'truth' and meaning of a 'thing', as well as its identity, is a differentiation. Hereby, this leads to the fact that the deconstructionist reading means the instability or uncertainty of knowledge since there is no fixed reality for anything. The idea here echoes Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy that there is no center and no absolute truth, claiming that "there is no reality for us not for you either, my sober friend" (Nietzsche, 2010, p.121).

2. Methodology

The study focuses on the analysis of William Blake's two famous poems, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger", depending on a deconstructionist reading. Generally, the deconstructionists' works and especially Jacques Derrida's works concentrate on the following terms to analyze any pre-given text. These terms have changed the French critical thinking deeply and notably those who belong to post-structuralism.

The first deconstructionist term used in the analysis of Blake's selected poems in this paper is 'binary opposition', which can be defined as a pair of related words or ideas, terms or concepts that are opposites in meaning. Binary opposition also refers to a conceptual framework in which two contrasting elements or objects are positioned in relation to one another, whether through linguistic or cognitive constructions. What must be taken into consideration is the idea that the deconstructionist theory is based on this term more than other terms because deconstruction is the 'event' or 'moment' at which a binary opposition is set to contradict itself and weaken its own authority (Yaghoubi, 2006).

The second Derridean concept is 'aporia'. The concept came from the Greek, referring to "the absence of a passage" (Yaghoubi, 2006, p. 9). In other words, aporia can be seen as a

state of being left with loss and puzzlement or a perplexing difficulty. Aporia also denotes in rhetoric a figure in which the speaker or the author expresses doubt about how or where to begin a discourse, or how to overcome a particular problem or obstacle. According to Derrida, 'aporia' means the textual gaps or stumbling-blocks to which readers should pay attention, and must take them into consideration (Yaghoubi, 2006).

Moreover, the term 'Supplement' is coined and found in Derrida's book *Of Grammatology*. Derrida took the term from Rousseau, who considered it as an inessential extra extension, information, concept or even a word added to something complete in itself. Derrida argues that what is complete in itself cannot be added to, so a supplement can only occur when there is an original lack. In any binary set of terms, the second can be argued to exist in order to fill in an original lack in the first (Derrida, 2002). Thusly, Derrida uses the term to refer to "simultaneously something that completes another thing, and something that may replace it, play the role of substitute for it, and therefore, be a threat for it" ("Derrida The Supplement," 2013, para. 3).

In addition, Derrida uses the term 'difference' with an 'e' to illustrate the origin of presence and absence. In other words, things, words, and meaning are understood by how they differ from others. For example, 'cat' means what it does because it is not 'rat,' or 'bat.' Another example, the theme of power and identity in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is created through oppositions—pig vs. other animals, and leader vs. follower. While the word 'différance', with an 'a', is indefinable, and cannot be explained by the metaphysics of presence. Derrida coined this term to show how meaning is always delayed and unstable. In French, the verb 'déferrer' means both 'to defer' and 'to differ.' Thus, difference may refer to the condition that is deferred or the condition that is different. Derrida illustrates the idea of difference as the opposite state of presence and absence (Derrida, 2002, p. 49). He also adds that the word 'différance' is the linchpin between writing and speech, as well as between inner and outer meanings. So, one can say that since there is meaning, and then there must be a difference (Derrida, 2005).

For example, the language of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is manipulated to hide the truth, change meanings, and delay justice. The animals are caught in a system where real meaning is never accessible. The commandments originally reflect the idea that "All animals are equal" (Orwell, 2025, p. 10), but over time the meaning of the commandments constantly shifts. The animals are tricked by how language is used by the pigs. The truth is deferred, never stable. They can never fully grasp the reality because the rules are always just out of reach of their understanding. The final commandment becomes: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (Orwell, 2025, p. 84)—a perfect example of how meaning is twisted and delayed.

Finally, the last Derridean term used in this paper is 'Logocentrism.' According to Derrida, the term is used to refer to the idea that there is no center and no logical values, as well as no absolute truth for 'things'. When one perceives the meaning of something, he should not associate it with any logo because whenever he associates the thing with a logo, then gives it a specific signified. According to Derrida, this specific signified ends and murders the identity of that 'thing' which is consisted by the uncertainty (Mills et al., 2012).

3. Analysis

William Blake's book *Songs of Innocence and Experience* that was written in 1789 is one of the best and greatest examples that reflect the deconstructionists' ideas. To begin with the idea of binary oppositions, Blake's book presents two contrary states of the human soul. These opposing states are embodied in the contrasting worlds of innocence and experience.

The world of innocence is the place where everything is innocent, trusted, unthreatening, and safe (Peck & Coyle, 2002). In contrast the world of experience represents the fallen state of adulthood, characterized by “repression, industrialization, and religious hypocrisy” (Jha, 2017, p. 657). This fallen world reflects the corruption of both the ideological and material structures of the English society during the Victorian Age.

Therefore, when someone wants to study this book and analyze it depending on a deconstructive reading, one should begin with the title of the book because the title itself announces clear binary oppositions, which are the world of innocence, beauty, purity, meekness, and rural places vs. the world of experience, ugliness, impurity, and urbanization. Actually, the world of experience is best portrayed through the world of industrialization, moral decay, and (religious, political, and domestic) corruption. To be more specific in understanding and explaining the deconstructive elements within Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, this study focuses on two contrasting poems: “The Lamb” and “The Tyger.” These two poems serve as the foundation for exploring key Derridean concepts. Hereby, this paper examines how terms such as *différance*, binary oppositions, *aporia*..., etc. can be traced in Blake's two selected poems.

According to Derrida, there is no fixed truth or identity for attached to any ‘object’ or ‘concept’ and one cannot fully understand its meaning unless it is defined in relation to its opposite. Therefore, the lamb and the tiger are binary oppositions because the lamb's identity and image as an innocent, mild, and meek animal cannot be created in the mind of the reader or the speaker unless it is compared with its opposite, which is the image of the tiger as a ferocious and predatory animal. The following lines show the contrasting identities of the two different creatures.

Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing woolly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice. (Blake, 2014, p. 8)

Obviously, these lines reflect the lamb's identity, that is, innocent and pure and how it is in harmony with nature. The “clothing of delight” (Blake, 2014, p.8) is a personification that reflects the lamb's adorable features, like its purity, whiteness, and brightness. The luminosity or brightness of the Lamb is portrayed as gentle, innocent, soft, and reassuring—reminiscent of the purity of childhood. It symbolizes spiritual innocence and can be seen as an embodiment of Christ's light. Blake draws a direct connection between the Lamb and Jesus when he declares, “He is called by thy name” (Blake, 2014, p. 8). The lamb shines through innocence, meekness, and a harmless glow. The binary oppositions that are shown through the difference between ‘the lamb’ and ‘the tiger’ could also be reflected and rooted in the idea that Blake makes the readers fear the brightness of the tiger through his use of an astonishing style in the first line (Ryan, 2012). As Blake (2014) opens his poem with an intense celebration of the tiger's fierce existence: “Tyger! Tyger, burning bright” (p. 42).

From this perspective, the reader is left in an aporetic state of confusion and perplexing difficulty. This is because the very exact description of both the lamb and the tiger raises the question and the state of uncertainty inside the reader's mind to ask whether Blake refers to them in his poem as merely two animals or he wants to associate them with other things, for example, the goodness and the evil inside human beings. This exactly fits the meaning of the ‘*aporia*’ that the deconstructionists refer to. The concept of ‘*aporia*’ is being defamiliarized when Blake (2014) says that “in the forest of the night” (p. 42), because if it is a familiar tiger

or merely an animal, then how could he stand “in the forest of the night” (Blake, 2014, p. 42) and if it is an evil, then where is this dark forest located? Does it mean the dark forest literally or the dark side of the heart? Hereby the lamb might be in the bright side of the heart? Hence, these are the kind of questions that surface when the term ‘aporia’ is brought up.

Derrida (1978) proposes that the textual meaning is inherently unstable and perpetually deferred, thereby challenging the notion of an absolute or fixed interpretation. He contends that the multiplicity of signifiers within a text renders the pursuit of a definitive meaning both futile and illusory. This indeterminacy is rooted in the absence of a central, authoritative signified—a concept encapsulated in his critique of logocentrism, which privileges presence and origin. Thus, the reader’s attempt to access the “true” meaning of a text is endlessly postponed in a process Derrida terms *différance*, a neologism that plays on both “difference” and “deferral.” As a result, even the source or “original” text cannot secure its own meaning, nor can it convey an unequivocal message to its reader.

Consequently, the text becomes a site of perpetual interpretation rather than a vessel of definitive knowledge. Derrida (2002) asserts that “there is nothing outside the text” (p. 158), signaling that meaning is not derived from an external referent but from the infinite interplay of signs within language itself. This epistemological stance displaces the authority of the authorial voice and problematizes the idea that one can apprehend a text’s essence simply by returning to its point of origin. That is why Derrida contends that the reader is unable to engage directly with the source itself to discern its true meaning or nature. (Yaghoubi, 2006).

The previous inherent vulnerabilities suggest that there is no logo and no center. In his poem “The Lamb,” Blake (2014) poses the rhetorical question, “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” (p. 8), which creates a state of loss and uncertainty within the reader. Again, the term ‘aporia’ comes to the surface, because this line has multiple meanings and assumptions. If the same God (Jesus Christ, according to Christianity) creates the lamb (man’s goodness) and the tiger (man’s evil), then what is the benefit of creating such a ferocious and dangerous animal? What is the aim behind announcing these two binary oppositions: the good, innocent, and meek lamb vs. the fearful, ferocious, and dangerous tiger?

In contrast, the coming two lines, “What the hammer? what the chain, / In what furnace was thy brain?” (Blake, 2014, p.42), destroy and deconstruct the first assumption and create a second assumption that stands against the first one. Thus, the prevailing sense of puzzlement and confusion continues to be dominant. The second assumption is that there are two Gods; one creates the lamb and the other creates the tiger. This assumption may enhance the idea of the multiplicity of Gods and there is no certain center which parallels Derrida’s idea of decentralization. Plato, in his *Laws*, mentions that there are two “souls of the world” (as cited in Charles, 2006, p. 75), one of them is a divine soul connected to goodness, purity, and cosmic order. While the other one is linked to human unrest and evil deeds.

This assumption is reinforced by the Greek mythology, suggesting that there are two Gods; one creates the good and one creates the evil, for the word “hammer” is the chink here because it is one of the symbols that refer to Hephaestus. According to the Greek mythology, Hephaestus is the god of blacksmiths, craftsmen, artisans, sculptors, metals, metallurgy, fire, and volcanoes. Hephaestus’ equivalent is the Roman god Vulcan. According to the traditional mythological narrative, he is known as the son of Zeus and Hera, the supreme divine couple. However, alternative accounts suggest that he was born solely from Hera through a parthenogenetic birth. As a result of his unique origin, which was believed to cause his physical deformities, he was cast out of Mount Olympus and compelled to forge weapons and tools for the pantheon of gods (Homer, 1990).

Thus, the hammer in “The Tyger” represents an instrument of the “evil” or wrathful god, paralleling Plato’s vicious soul or part, while the Lamb reflects the good and wise soul. The poem elucidates the dual origins of human nature—linked to both divine light and divine fire—paralleling the Platonic framework that posits a universe influenced by contrasting metaphysical forces. Therefore, the word “hammer” may announce that Hephaestus is the god who created the tiger (the evil), because such a powerful, violent, and fearful creature demands an equivalent hand to create it, as Blake (2014) writes: “And what shoulder, & what art, /Could twist the sinews of thy heart?” (p. 42). At the end of “The Tyger,” the two previous assumptions can also be deconstructed. Blake does not only put the reader in a state of thinking, questioning, puzzling, and lost, but he also leaves them with no closure or the so-called ‘supplement.’ Actually, the following last line in the poem echoes this idea.

Then, the following line, “Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?” (Blake, 2014, p. 42), comes to suggest that there is no divine creator and that even Hephaestus would not dare to forge the tiger, which symbolically represents the destructive and primal impulses within human nature. Here, the idea of the decentralization arises, but at this time it is created by man himself. Man himself decentralized God when he did not obey Him at the beginning of creation, before the fall. As if man announced, from that moment, the death of God and the birth of evil within him. Blake also refers to this assumption when he mentions how the angels “water’d heaven with their tears” (Blake, 2014, p. 42) at the moment of the creation of evil. This reflects again the idea of decentralization; the death of God, Derrida’s idea about Logocentrism which echoes Nietzsche’s idea about the death of God in his book *The Gay Science* in which he articulates: “God is dead. God remain dead. And we have killed him” (Nietzsche, 2010, p. 181).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper posits that Blake’s work, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, serves as one of the most exemplary texts for deconstructive study and analysis. Although the book was published in 1789, predating the emergence of the deconstructionist reading approach, it inherently encompasses the foundational elements of deconstructive theory. The title of the book itself embodies a contrast, reflecting what the deconstructionists refer to as binary oppositions. As indicated by its title, these oppositions represent the states of innocence and experience. Furthermore, the poems within each version are juxtaposed, as exemplified by the poem “The Lamb,” which has its contrasting counterpart in “The Tyger.” Blake’s remarkable intellect enabled him to craft such compelling binary oppositions that reveal multiple interpretations through rhetorical questions regarding the nature of the Creator, encompassing both goodness and evil within humanity. Consequently, Derrida’s concepts of decentralization, binary oppositions, aporia, and supplement are effectively exemplified in Blake’s poems “The Lamb” and “The Tyger.”

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