

Economic Exploitation and Animal Ethics in Select William Blake Poetry

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Abstract

This research paper reinterprets the poetry of William Blake through the lens of animal studies, with a particular focus on economic exploitation. It reveals the commodification of animals during industrial capitalism and the emergence of animal ethics in the 18th century, a period when animal rights were not yet fully developed. A new interpretation is given to his major literary poems, and animal law, such as the Martin Act (1822), is discussed in detail. Blake's poetic vision also anticipates contemporary debates on animal ethics by revealing the suffering of non-human beings under early industrial capitalism. He posits the awareness regarding the moral and ethical responsibility of human beings towards these non-human creatures in his seminal work *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The paper situates Blake within the historical context of the rise of capitalist markets. It suggests how he transcends time as a poet, becoming an animal activist in the current century who contributes to society and provides a moral foundation.

Keywords: Economic Exploitation, Animal Ethics, Industrial Capitalism, Commodification, William Blake

Introduction

In contemporary times, Animal Studies is a burgeoning field that is lensed through multidisciplinary subjects such as social sciences, humanities, sciences, law, economics, philosophy, etc., but when it comes to the awareness, animal rights and ethics associated with non-human creatures, not everyone is concerned about it. It is still emerging and making its space in the current world, which is more driven towards commercialization, advancement of artificiality, and a materialistic human world only.

Humans have shared the planet with animals since its civilization, and both creatures hold an equal place when it comes to maintaining the eco-balance of the earth and its ownership. Though the label of ownership has been debatable for ages, the superiority of human beings due to their rational thinking and ability to speak is the only thing that is normalized, considering animals as others. Regarding animal rights, it took centuries for humans to develop even basic laws for these non-human creatures. Both Eastern and Western societies have different practices towards animal welfare and their rights. Animal welfare has distinct definitions in other nations. But it is substantially defined as the well-being of animals, their happiness, their ability to flourish, and their freedom to live in their natural environment. (Calarco, 2020)

Historical Context

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the period in which William Blake lived and wrote, were marked by the onset of the Industrial Revolution—a transformative phase

that radically reshaped economic structures, social relations, and the treatment of living beings. With rapid mechanisation and the shift from agrarian to industrial economies, animals increasingly became commodified as units of labour and production rather than sentient, spiritual beings. This period witnessed the extensive use of animals in factories, mines, and urban transport systems, where horses, donkeys, and cattle were subjected to relentless physical strain to sustain industrial productivity. Animals became essential to the economic machinery: they pulled heavy coal carts in perilous underground tunnels, operated mill machinery, and transported goods and people across rapidly expanding cities.

The rise of capitalist profit culture further intensified this exploitation, as efficiency and financial gain took precedence over ethical considerations. Bodies—human and animal alike—were valued according to their economic output, reducing living creatures to replaceable assets within a growing commercial system. The moral consequences of such commodification were profound, contributing to brutal working conditions, public displays of suffering in markets and slaughterhouses, and the normalisation of cruelty in everyday life. While structured animal rights movements and anti-cruelty legislation had not yet emerged, the increasing visibility of suffering sparked the earliest moral debates on the ethical treatment of animals. It is within this socio-economic climate that William Blake developed his poetic resistance, challenging the dehumanising and de-animalising effects of industrial capitalism through symbolic imagery and spiritual critique.

Emergence of Animal Ethics

In Western society, Pythagoras, the Greek philosopher, is known as the first man to initiate thoughts over animals' well-being. He expressed horror, brutality, and dehumanized behavior of men who ate meat, calling it the sad flesh of murdered beasts. Also, his lines depict his emotions regarding the animals well.

“Loyal, innocent, and kind, and born to labour;

has he done anything that's counted wrong?” (Violin, 1990)

Later, several known authors started discoursing about the emotions of animals, their conditions, and their required rights in their own artistic ways. Like *Leonardo da Vinci* expressed his concern through his paintings and dedicating many of them to the animal figures, calling them as ‘*the image of the world*’ (Seiber, 2019). Jean Jacques Rousseau in his work, *Discourse on Inequality*, focused on the moral duties human beings has towards them. Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill principled the utilitarianism theory that includes animals too in the greater good. Jeremy’s remarkable words are the foundational in the animal rights theory and this led to the formation of the first animal rights ‘*Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade*’ that later on shifted its focus to animal cruelty.

“The question is not, can they reason? nor can they talk? but, can they suffer?”

Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?” (Bentham, 1879)

Animal Rights and Laws

A major turning point came with Martin’s Act of 1822, officially known as the Cruel Treatment of Cattle Act, introduced by Irish MP Richard Martin. It was the first parliamentary legislation in the world aimed at preventing cruelty to animals, specifically targeting the mistreatment of horses, cows, and sheep. Martin’s efforts earned him the title “*Humanity Dick*”, reflecting the moral urgency and compassion driving the movement.

Although imperfect in scope, the Act represented a significant shift in public consciousness, acknowledging animals as beings deserving protection rather than merely property or economic instruments.

Building on the momentum of Martin's Act, a group of reformers founded the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in 1824, which later received royal patronage in 1840 and became the RSPCA. This institution played a crucial role in investigating abuse, campaigning for stronger legislation, and educating society about humane treatment. The emergence of these legal and organisational efforts marked the beginning of a broader ethical transformation, challenging the dominance of capitalist exploitation and questioning the moral costs of industrial progress. Simultaneously, during that period, literary figures kept raising awareness, expressing their love for animals through their use of animals as figures, motifs, symbols, and individual characters.

Although Blake did not live to witness these reforms, his poetic works anticipate the principles underlying early animal rights advocacy. His compassionate representation of animals and critique of systemic cruelty align closely with the ideological foundations that later activists sought to institutionalise. The rise of these movements demonstrates that Blake's poetic vision was prophetic, not only artistically but ethically, as it foreshadowed society's evolving recognition of animals as moral subjects deserving dignity and protection.

William Blake and his Poetic Vision

William Blake was one of the Green Romantic Poets during the eighteenth century, when animal rights were only developing and were in its initial phase. His contribution to literature is remarkable and known to everyone through his distinct beliefs, mysticism, and spirituality; he gave notable numerous works such as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Illustrative Books*, *Book of Urezin*, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, *Jerusalem*, *Auguries of Innocence*, etc., His poetic vision was unique and known to be prophetic by many, and since childhood age, he was believed to incline towards the mysterious power of the natural world. This keenness towards the natural world makes him not just a philosopher, literary figure, or a humanitarian but an ecology activist as well who transcends that century and could be seen as an animal activist in the current period as well whose works can be comprehended from the lens of animal studies that are relatable enough and provides insights to enrich our understanding of his major poetic works.

William Blake's poetry reflects a deep moral concern for the suffering imposed by emerging capitalist systems, in which both humans and animals were transformed into instruments of labour and profit. His critique does not separate human exploitation from animal exploitation; instead, he presents them as interconnected outcomes of a society driven by industrial efficiency and economic gain. Blake's poems expose the dehumanising effects of an economy that prioritises productivity over compassion, illustrating how innocence and spiritual vitality are sacrificed to the interests of capital.

In *The Chimney Sweeper* poems from *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, Blake reveals the commodification of vulnerable bodies, where children are sold into hazardous labour. Their laborious, soot-blackened bodies echo the treatment of working animals in Blake's time, similarly exploited for profit and stripped of autonomy. The image of children as disposable tools in the machinery of industrial progress parallels the plight of horses used to haul coal or cattle driven through crowded markets. Blake's condemnation of these conditions extends to the political and religious institutions that justify such cruelty: "*And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King / Who make up a heaven of our misery.*" This line exposes how authority sanctioned exploitation under the guise of moral order.

In contrast, *The Lamb* embodies innocence, gentleness, and divine creation. By presenting the lamb as a symbol of purity and spiritual essence, Blake challenges the perception of animals as mere commodities. The repetitive questioning in the poem emphasizes moral awareness: *Who made the lamb? Who gave it life?* The poem implicitly critiques a society that fails to recognise the sacredness of life, valuing bodies only for economic utility—whether as meat, wool, or labour.

The Tyger represents a counterforce, invoking awe and fear through imagery of fire and forging: *“What the hammer? what the chain?”* The industrial vocabulary suggests a world where creation is shaped not by divine love, but by mechanical manufacturing. The juxtaposition of *The Lamb* and *The Tyger* metaphorically exposes the duality of innocence exploited and power controlled through economic and industrial oppression. While *The Lamb* reflects divine tenderness, *The Tyger* embodies the destructive potential of a society increasingly invested in mechanisation and domination.

In poems such as *Holy Thursday*, Blake critiques systems that display charitable acts while perpetuating structural exploitation beneath the surface. The image of children arranged like sacrificial objects mirrors animals displayed in markets, functioning as symbols of economic hypocrisy. Blake reveals how moral blindness allows society to justify cruelty in the name of progress.

Furthermore, analysing his literary works from a new perspective breaks the norm of limiting literature works to only artistic forms. If well read, his poetic vision enlarges the scope to comprehend his views more profoundly.

The Lamb and The Tyger

The lamb is often discussed as a symbol of innocence, purity, and childhood by many critics. However, more interpretations can be achieved from this poem if it is overlooked from the perspective of animal studies. The poem begins with a rhetorical question about who made the lamb, and later, the speaker answers it as God’s creation. The speaker is a little child who sees no difference between him and the lamb, and considering both as beautiful creations by God suggesting Blake’s view of establishing an ideal relationship between a man and an animal. Both share the same creator, hence shackling the norm of the superiority of one over the other.

Furthermore, the speaker compared God with the lamb, saying that it might share the same resemblance as him, again condemning the anthropocentrism and giving the image of a lamb to God despite a man's image and maintaining harmony among all.

The lamb also symbolises the freedom nature provides; he is frolicking in the meadows, and the natural environment hears his tender voice. This phrase shows us two things: how an animal is peaceful when it stays where it belongs, i.e., in its natural habitat. Nature, too, responds to it by proving the ecological balance shared by both. Contemporary animal welfare activists follow the same agenda.

The verbal language is absent here; still, the tender voice of the lamb is heard. Moreover, the speaker calls the lamb’s existence an answer to his lack of speaking ability. Existence is more crucial than verbally communicating and validating one’s presence. A mystic communication lies within the animal kingdom, and hence, humans are no one to question their ability to speak and label them as soulless creatures on this basis. Their equivalent existence answers all these questions raised by creatures who do not consider them part of the world or equal companions.

“Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright” (Blake, Songs of Innocence and Experience, 1789)

The phrase 'clothing of delight' seeks attention as the speaker states clearly that the lamb's coat, the soft white wool, is not just clothing to the lamb but is a delight to it as it is created along with him and for him. The creator created it to keep the lamb warm and delighted; hence, it is not just clothing that humans can snatch for their use. Therefore, by using a short poem, the lamb as an individual character and symbol, Blake represented the whole community of animals and their existence as equivalent.

In contrast to the lamb poem, the Tyger represents the destructive side of nature; this is the most common interpretation of this poem. Blake constructed the fearsome figure of the tiger to show the opposite of innocence and purity. Several critics only studied this poem as the sister poem of the lamb and put the label of evilness to the character of the tiger. Duality is the theme used by the poet. However, this evilness can be an example of binary opposition as well. The binary opposition theory given by Ferdinand de Saussure states that by creating binaries, we are providing superiority to one over the other, for instance, day and night, white and black, etc. Similarly, in this poem, by giving superiority to the good side of nature or the innocent side of the lamb, we are putting negative annotations on the tiger by calling it dangerous, fearsome, and a fiery figure.

The tiger is also beautiful as his skin is described as bright and his eyes burning like fire. Necessarily, it does not represent the danger. Though the speaker repeatedly asks how the creator has performed a daring task by creating a powerful creature like a tiger, the strong muscles and the fearful symmetry he has given culminate the idea of the co-existence of both types of creatures in this universe.

Hence, Blake has successfully used nature as a continual source of inspiration. He has suggested that animals have their own spiritual significance, and in both the poems *The Lamb* and *the Tyger*, animals are divine creations and, therefore, demand respect and empathy.

Economic Exploitation in Other Poetries

In his work, *Auguries of Innocence*, he readdresses the themes of economic exploitation and brutality towards animals. He has questioned all the practices that include cruelty to animals, such as the caging of birds, overdriving of horses and oxen, animal use in war, hunting, cockfighting, etc.

"A dog starv'd at his Master's Gate

Predicts the ruin of the State.

A Horse misus'd upon the Road

Calls to Heaven for Human blood." (Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, 1959)

Several striking lines are used in this poem that directly condemns the humans and even ask for the heaven's rage upon them for mistreating the animals. In his earlier works, Blake has mostly used animals as metaphors and symbols but here in this poem, he has used numerous animals who are raising their individual voices against ill practices towards them. Birds, dogs, lions, wolves, skylarks, hares, bees, deer, bats, owls, horses, flies, etc., all are used in this poem to show the collective strength of the animal kingdom against the beings.

Moreover, the distinct quality of Blake that makes him an animal activist is that he did not marginalize small animals. He has even used worms, insects, pests and scavengers in his poetry, indicating that his literary works involve not only the main animals but all kinds of creatures and this gap is still studied by current animal study theorists.

For instance, in *The Book of Thel*, he has brilliantly described a worm as a helpless, naked, and an infant child. In the poem, *A Dream*, he has used ants, glow worms and beetles. One

poem is dedicated to the fly in songs of Experience. (Blake, Songs of Innocence and Experience, 1789)

In the poem, *The School Boy*, Blake begins the poetry with the chirping birds sitting on branches of trees and how a child enjoys the company of a skylark who is singing, indicates the idea of companion species by Donna Haraway in the present century and how he had already used this idea of animals as companions in his eighteenth-century works. Later in the poem, he again condemns the activity of caging birds, and James Thompson calls them pretty slaves, comparing women with the birds. This notion of slavery and the caging of birds was later on studied from a feminist perspective as well by critics.

Blake's critique of capitalist exploitation is reinforced through his deliberate use of economic vocabulary, industrial metaphors, and imagery associated with labour, machinery, and ownership in his other poems, such as *The Sick Rose*, *My Pretty Rose Tree*, *The Echoing Green*, *The Book of Thel*, etc., .. His poems frequently deploy language drawn from financial and mechanical contexts—such as “*chains*,” “*hammer*,” “*price*,” and “*gain*”—to expose the reduction of living beings to commodities in an increasingly commercialised society. This linguistic strategy underscores the devaluation of spiritual and emotional life when measured solely against material productivity and profit.

Northrop Frye, in his seminal work, *The Fearful Symmetry*, (Frye, 1974) also talks about how animals are not only used as mere symbols in Blake's work; instead, they reflect the complexities of capitalism. He has detailed his mysticism, spiritualism and love for the natural world both positively and negatively. Other critics like A.S Byatt, Wordsworth, T.S Eliot, etc., have different opinions regarding his works.

Conclusion

William Blake successfully transcends the eighteenth century and is relatable as an animal activist in this current century. He emerges as a profoundly visionary figure whose poetic imagination anticipates modern ethical debates surrounding the rights and humane treatment of animals. Although he wrote before the formal establishment of animal welfare legislation, his works articulate ideas that resonate strongly with contemporary concerns regarding species hierarchy, moral responsibility, and the economic exploitation of living beings. His poetic stance challenges the anthropocentric assumptions of his time, rejecting the notion that animals exist merely as property or labour resources. Instead, he affirms a shared spiritual existence between humans and non-human creatures, envisioning a world grounded in compassion, equality, and divine interconnectedness.

Blake's poetic universe rejects the mechanistic worldview that dominated the Industrial Revolution, in which scientific rationalism and capitalist logic reduced bodies—human and animal alike—to measurable units of production. By insisting that all living beings contain spiritual essence, he destabilizes the economic ideology that legitimized systematic exploitation. In poems such as *The Lamb*, Blake elevates the animal's identity beyond commodity value, presenting it as a symbol of innocence and divine creation. Conversely, *The Tyger* critiques the violent power structures that forge existence through force and domination, mirroring the destructive energy of industrial capitalism. These symbolic tensions reflect Blake's prophetic warning: a world governed solely by material profit inevitably leads to moral decay.

Thus, Blake may be regarded as a visionary activist whose poetry extends beyond literary boundaries into ethical and socio-political responsibility. His poetic voice challenges readers to rethink the economic systems that privilege profit over life, urging a paradigm shift from exploitation to compassionate coexistence. In positioning animals as moral subjects rather

than economic objects, Blake not only critiques the injustices of his time but also provides a philosophical foundation for ongoing debates in animal studies and welfare activism. His legacy endures as a prophetic call to recognise the interconnected fate of humans and animals within a shared moral universe.

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