Extremes: A Look at Good, Evil, Simplicity, and Complexity

Is it possible to know light without knowing darkness or to know warmth without knowing coldness? The relationships of such extremes are symbiotic, whereby the very existence of one depends on the other. Just as warmth is defined by degrees of coldness, light is defined by degrees of darkness. It is this idea of symbiosis that makes themes of this nature so compelling and thought-provoking. In William Blake’s “The Lamb” and “The Tyger,” William Carlos Williams’ “Red Wheelbarrow,” and F.J. Bergmann’s “An Apology,” the authors highlight the antithesis of themes, such as good and evil and simplicity and complexity, in order to illustrate the differences of these extremes and convey the authors’ perspectives based on the imagery detailed in each poem.

Good and evil have both been a part of human nature since the beginning of time. Why do these extremes exist? Why would God create both? These are questions that William Blake endeavors to examine in “The Lamb” and “The Tyger,” probing the themes of good and evil through his use of symbolism and allusion.

In “The Lamb,” Blake utilizes symbolism that supports the idea that the lamb represents good and uses allusion to suggest that God created this goodness. Blake depicts good by describing the care of a child as he wrote “Gave thee life & bid thee feed” (3) and “Gave thee clothing…” (5). Life is given through love and continuance of the provision of food and clothing. He also wrote “Softest clothing…/ …tender voice” (6-7), which suggests an additional
level of care. Babies are usually dressed in soft clothing or wrapped in soft blankets and talked to very tenderly. “Dost thou know who made thee?” (10). “He is called by thy name” (13). In this question and answer, Blake alludes to God as the Son, Jesus Christ. “He is meek & he is mild,/ He became a little child:/ I a child & thou a lamb,” (15-17) alludes to the familiar reference of Jesus as the Lamb of God, since he is God’s child, and supports the idea of innocence and goodness of children and links these ideas to the lamb as a symbol representative of good.

In “The Tyger,” Blake utilizes symbolism that supports the idea that the tiger represents evil and uses allusion to suggest that God created this evil. In the lines “Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright/ In the forests of the night,” (1-2), Blake describes a creature lurking in a dark forest. He goes on to describe the attributes of the creature that should be feared when he writes “What the hand that dare seize fire?// And what shoulder…” (8-9) and “What dread hand? And what dread feet?” (12). He further writes “…what dread grasp/ Dare its deadly terrors clasp?” (15-16). This illustrates a form that is powerful, could do great harm, and should be feared. This creature is large in breadth and has very large hands and feet that could seize, mutilate, and slay easily. Blake alludes to God’s creation of the tiger in “What immortal hand or eye? Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” (3-4), and he questions “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” (20). He questions how God, who made something so good as the lamb, could make something so evil and fearsome as the tiger.

There are many interpretations of the nature of good and evil and the creation of each. In the previously mentioned poems, “The Lamb” and “The Tyger,” Blake appears to put good and evil on opposite ends of a spectrum, but Jeffrey Russell wrote, “For Blake, no goods or evils are absolute…and no element of the psyche is wholly good or evil” (Russell 224). Good and evil
have both been a part of human nature since the beginning of time, but there is some question to a middle ground. This is explained by the definitive nature of the Blake’s response in “The Lamb,” “Little Lamb I’ll tell thee!” (Blake 12). Blake is sure that God created good and is confident enough to give a conclusive response, but, in “The Tyger,” Blake is more uncertain, and he is asking for an answer rather than giving one. Yes, the creature looks fearsome and could harm an individual, but does it? Would it? The definition of good and evil rests in the human perception of each, which is neither black nor white but in a gray area because every individual’s idea of good and evil is distinctive.

Turning to the themes of simplicity and complexity, which manner of life would people prefer to live, simple or complex? Depending upon one’s opinion of the importance of particular qualities of life, the answer may be as easy as choosing whether to live in the country or the city. When country life is described, usually it is portrayed as slow-paced, far from concentrated commercialism, laid-back, and simple. When city life is described, usually it is portrayed as fast-paced, everything right around the corner, bustling, and complex. Imagery of these opposing themes are contrasted in William Carlos Williams’ “Red Wheelbarrow” and F.J. Bergmann’s “An Apology.”

In Williams’ “Red Wheelbarrow,” he points to a theme of simplicity by detailing elements of life in the country. He draws on words that are commonly associated with farms and begins with “so much depends/ upon// a red wheel/ barrow” (1-4). This is indicative of country life on a farm and the necessity of a wheelbarrow for practical, everyday uses. “[Glazed] with rain/ water” (5-6) insinuates that the wheelbarrow had been left out in the rain. This illustrates a laid-back, slow-paced atmosphere in which work stops so individuals can relish the little pleasures in life, like sitting in a rocking chair on the porch watching the rain and watching the
children splash around in the puddles. Williams writes that the wheelbarrow is situated “beside the white/ chickens” (7-8), which provides an effective image that the reader can visualize and indicates that the atmosphere is a less structured one. In addition, white chickens are an ordinary, plain, and simplistic color, which contributes to the perception that country life is simplistic.

In Bergmann’s “An Apology,” he focuses on a theme of complexity by detailing elements of life in the city. He uses details that are more associated with life in a heavily populated area. This poem is an apology “for backing over/ and smashing/ your red wheelbarrow” (2-4), which provides a vivid image of the situation and indicates that there is little care for the damage to the red wheelbarrow. It appears that the person apologizing for the damage may have run over the wheelbarrow hurriedly and purposefully, which suggests that it was more important for the individual to get to where he or she was going than to move the wheelbarrow out of the way. In the statement, “It was raining/ and the rear wiper/ does not work on/ my new plum-colored SUV” (5-8), it is implied that this is the excuse for smashing the wheelbarrow, and that this new plum-colored SUV was more important than the wheelbarrow, as if to say that the wheelbarrow is destroyed but look at the new SUV. Further, “I am also sorry/ about the white/chickens” (9-11) alludes to a lack of remorse for the incident, which relates to the social detachment of many people who live in cities because of the fast-pace of life and the choice to stay busy, always be on the way somewhere, and not ever stop and smell the roses.

In “Red Wheelbarrow” and “An Apology,” the authors ascribed specific characteristics to the motifs of country and city living. In accordance with these poems, country life is portrayed as more simplistic, concentrating on practicality and functionality, and city life is portrayed as more complex, concentrating on self-importance and materialism. However, as noted by
Murray Gell-Mann, “measures of something like [simplicity and] complexity…are to some extent context-dependent or even subjective” (Gell-Mann 16). This suggests though simplicity is the antithesis of complexity, the characteristics of each are based on individual perspectives as previously discussed with regard to good and evil. In more rural areas, there are degrees of technology in use, just as there are gardens and parks in cities, which suggests that there are many degrees of simplicity and complexity. As Confucius once said “Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated” (Confucius).

Ultimately, one might ask whether it is possible to know one extreme without knowing another. In William Blake’s “The Lamb” and “The Tyger,” William Carlos Williams’ “Red Wheelbarrow,” and F.J. Bergmann’s “An Apology,” such themes as good and evil and simplicity and complexity are highlighted and the differences of these extremes are illustrated to convey the author’s perspectives through their imagery. Through consideration of the author’s perspectives and breakdown of the characteristics of each, one can conclude that the relationships between such extremes are subjective, and it is not possible to know one without also knowing its antithesis. “For had you never sat blindly through the darkness of night, your eyes wouldn’t turn toward the sunrise to appreciate its warmth and illumination” (Goodrich).
Works Cited


Goodrich, Richelle E. *Goodreads*. Web. 4 November 2014
