

Mythological Transformations in the Poem “The Tyger” by William Blake and the Cycle “There Was a Tiger Here” by Gregor Strniša

Dušan Živković

University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Philology and Arts, Department of Serbian Literature, Jovana Cvijića b.b., 34000 Kragujevac, Serbia
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9599-3687>
dusan.zivkovic@filum.kg.ac.rs

This article provides an analysis of the background, processes, and functions of mythological transformations found in the poem “The Tyger” by William Blake and the cycle of poems “There Was a Tiger Here” (“Tu je bil tiger”) by Gregor Strniša. It elaborates on the various levels of analogies between the poetic and semantic aspects on the creation of mythopoetic world, along with the specificities revealed in the relations between Blake’s romantic visions and Strniša’s modern perspectives, in the domains for the following aspects: 1. General poetic features; 2. The analysis of symbolic systems; 3. The nature and functions of spatio-temporal relations; 4. The significance of an image of a tiger in the quest for gaining knowledge of divine thought, eternity, transience and death. Therefore, apart from placing emphasis on the significance of Blake’s mystical tendencies, the purpose of this work is to demonstrate that the poetry of Gregor Strniša is ranked among the world’s greatest literature, considering the fact that it is perceived as an original poetic vision which has contributed to the creation of innovations in the context of modern mythological transformations.

Keywords: English poetry / Blake, William / Slovenian poetry / Strniša, Gregor / mythopoetics / animal characters / tiger / mythological transformations

The metaphysical poetry of William Blake (1757–1827) had its own influence upon the mystical courses of romanticism, and its influence was reflected, in a wider context, within the innovativeness of mythopoetic perspectives of the entire world’s poetry archives. Blake’s visionary poetry represents the anticipation of “embodiment of the romantic vision” (Albert 251) by means of eccentricity and erudition of poetic

imagination, the mission of which was continued by the following poets: Byron, Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley (see Albert 307).¹

In addition, it was in the modernist epoch that the innovativeness of Blake's mythological transformations was acknowledged by Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965) as the key aspect of Blake's "poetic development" (317) and was also directed by Blake's sign posts paved deeply into his consciousness and associated with all these possibilities of creating an authentic world of poetry by means of diverse myths' upgrading and interference.

However, the relations between Blake's poetry and the modern poetic courses of the Slovenian literature have not been given sufficient attention within the study of literature. On the other hand, not enough attention has been given to the contributions made by the Slovenian literature while constructing modern perspectives of the world's literature as well.

In this context, our scientific contribution shall be made within a comparative analysis of the mystical poetry of William Blake and Gregor Strniša (1930–1987) – "a metaphysical poet" (Ferluga Petronio 661) who created some innovations in the context of modern mythological transformations in the Slovenian literature (see Snoj 286–287).

What can be discerned in Strniša's poetic vision is the presence of the following relations of "the relativity of time and space, i.e. temporality and timelessness, spatiality and spacelessness, which are nothing other than synonyms for the concepts of human and divine" (Ferluga Petronio 661). A significant dimension of Strniša's poetry consists of the relations of parallelism, synchronicity, cyclicity, diffusion and interference of time as well" (Živković and Nikolić 607).

The abovementioned viewpoints shall be presented by making comparisons between the mythological transformations in Blake's poem entitled "The Tyger" (published in 1794 as part of the *Songs of Experience* collection)² and Strniša's cycle of poems named "There Was a Tiger Here" ("Tu je bil tiger," *Perspektive* 2.19 (1962): 1037–1038), which became an integral part of the collection of poems named *Odysseus* (1963).

On the one hand, we shall analyze poetic analogies between Blake and Strniša's mythopoetic images of the tiger and the mutual mythological sources; on the other, we shall analyze – specificities, original

¹ The paper was translated from Serbian by Natalija Živković.

² "*Songs of Experience* was Blake's last considerable work as a lyric poet" (Albert 253).

mythical modifications and poetic creations in the modern perspectives of Strniša's poetic and semantic aspects, complete with the specificities found within the relations between Blake's poetic visions and Strniša's poetic innovations discerned while creating a mythopoetic image of the tiger. Therefore, apart from placing emphasis on the significance that Blake's poetic world has for shaping up mystical Romantic tendencies, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the fact that the poetry of Gregor Strniša belongs to the best-rated works of the world literature, as it is considered to be an original poetic vision, the innovations of which are accomplished in the context of modern mythological transformations.

General poetic aspects in the context of figuration of the tiger

As regards Blake's poem entitled “The Tyger,”³ “Alfred Kazin calls it “the most famous of his poems” and The *Cambridge Companion to William Blake* says it is “the most anthologized poem in English.”⁴

In the poem itself Blake directly addresses the tiger with apostrophe, in the spirit of admiration of his divine being, in that multilayered unification – from the ancient totemistic symbol of power (cf. Strauss 74), to the metaphysical characteristic of poetic imagination: “Tiger, tiger, burning bright” (Blake, *Collected* 73). “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”⁵ (Matović 28).

³ “It is one of Blake's most reinterpreted and arranged works. “The Tiger”, originally called “The Tyger”, is a lyric poem focusing on the nature of God and his creations”. Available on ddceutkal.ac.in.

⁴ Available on ddceutkal.ac.in.

⁵ “Modern anthologies often print “The Tiger” alongside an earlier Blake poem, “The Lamb”, published in 1789 in a collection entitled *Songs of Innocence*”. Available on ddceutkal.ac.in. “The Lamb” and “The Tyger” represent creations designed by the wonderful divine providence – from the demonstration of the purity of nature in the first stage of the quest for truth (in the poem *Lamb*), and the author's questioning himself about the dialectics of innocence and experience in: “The Tyger” – “Did He who made the lamb make thee?” (Blake, *Collected* 74), to the point of the unification of innocence and experience in the “fearful symmetry” (Blake, *Collected* 73) – the enlightenment achieved in the cognition of the unity in diversity (see Frye 20).

Anita Kontrec emphasizes the following point of view: “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).

Through the energy he possesses, the tiger overcame the state of innocence and experience and what he announces is an utterly different way of existence” (Kontrec 78). This higher state of poetic consciousness is evoked by means of “overcoming the limitations of models of binary oppositions” (Arsenijević Mitrić 27). Namely, in this context, the idea of poetic imagination, embodied in Blake’s divine Los⁶ was accomplished through the sense of admiration of the divine strength of the Tiger’s nature. In a wider sense, the totality of meanings of Blake’s opus is determined by the idea of Los. In *A Blake Dictionary*, S. Foster Damon provides an explanation of Los’s character in the following manner: “LOS is Poetry, the expression in this world of the Creative Imagination. His planet is the (spiritual) sun; and he creates the material sun. It is reasonable to suppose that his name is an anagram of *Sol*” (Damon 459).

Actually, the key question posing itself in Blake’s poem (which would additionally clarify the nature of the tiger as a royal piece of art⁷) is the following: Who is to be considered the designer of such a magnificent creature, the Creator ruling over life and death, the good and evil? Is the Creator who brought to life such a powerful creature just like the tiger, was also the same one who created such an innocent being just like the Lamb? Did the Creator achieve the highest degree of congruity along with creating innocence as well:

Did He smile His work to see?
Did He who made the lamb make thee? (Blake, *Collected* 74)

During this ongoing communication process with the universal deity that represents “all-penetrating life force” (Schlieper 3), the poet creates new poetic worlds of his own.

The abovementioned Blake’s innovative system of unifying various mythological systems, turning them into the universal divine principle, complete with representing the tiger as a symbol of the poetic imagination – proved to be a fertile ground for numerous incentives and efforts

⁶ Los holds a dominant place in Blake’s late illuminated works.

⁷ For instance, in *The Mahabharata*, a tiger is a symbol of the royal dignity (see Vyasa 54).

made while constructing a figuration of the tiger in the cycle of poems entitled “There Was a Tiger Here” (“Tu je bil tiger”) by Gregor Strniša, a significant Slovenian poet. Strniša addresses Blake, using diffuse phenomena of intertextuality (see Juvan, *History* 11) and in this manner he commences creating a mythopoetic image of the tiger not only as a symbol of power but as an indication of the divine principle that is to be used while integrating the concepts of life and death cognition.

In this context of life and death cyclicity, the emphasis should be placed on the relations towards the concept of “fearful symmetry” of the tiger (Blake, *Collected* 73). 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. On the other hand, Strniša expresses the concept of cyclicity in a significantly more complex form of the poetic cycle with a “fractal composition” (Juvan, *Peripheral* 186), in the dynamism of the context as the unity in diversity – by means of depicting the relations of the cyclicity of the rhythm of nature and the journey motifs of the lyrical subject as well, concerning the fact that it is the journey itself that presents nothing else but the quest for cognition shaped inside the premonition of future encounters with the tiger.

Apart from the abovementioned specificities discerned in the ideas of cyclicity and all-pervasive, universal divine energy, the aspect affirming the connection between Blake and Strniša’s poetry is the mutual attitude which they have when it comes to one significant aspect of an antique myth in the mythopoetic upgrading of the antique tradition, which means that: the tiger is no longer considered to be a peaceful, Apollo-like congruity of parts to their whole, but is considered to be the wild imagination, enthusiastic, Dionysus-like principle (see Nietzsche 2), for Dionysus is the one showing all his power through his ability to transform himself into a tiger. Therefore, the tiger’s energy represents one of Dionysus’s immanent attributes.⁸

⁸ A dominant belief in the antique mythology was related to the fact that the gods can transform themselves into other forms by their own free will. The tiger was typically associated with the god Dionysus: “One Greek legend narrated by Plutarch, provided an explanation of why the Mesopotamian river was named after the Tiger, although its previous name had been Sollax. In order to seduce Alpheisboea, an Asian nymph he was in love with, Dionysus turned himself into a tiger. Having reached the river and not being able to cross it, she let the beast help her reach the other side

In addition, we should emphasize the innovativeness of Strniša's poetic world as well. Namely, the title of Blake's poem ("The Tyger") refers to compendiousness and universality of the poetic symbol in the quest for the omnipotent poetic definition, whereas, on the other hand – the title of Strniša's cycle of poems ("There Was a Tiger Here") has a much higher degree of narrativity in comparison with Blake's poetic expression,⁹ indicating the beginning of a legend – in the unification of archetypal consciousness, as "primordial images" (Jung 67) and modern poetic expression:

You still remember well the day
when first you saw the tiger's trail. ("II," Strniša 275)¹⁰

Blake expresses his fascination with the tiger in the direct encounter, which is shown in the form of a question, by means of apostrophe:

And what shoulder and what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart? (Blake, *Collected* 73)

On the other hand, Strniša's cycle of poems contains an indication of the tiger's nature, without having a direct encounter, whereas the suggestion of its power is being intensified by means of gradation:

Just then you spot in the wet ground before you
the wide, the clear, the deep impressions. ("I," Strniša 275)¹¹

of the river. Their son, Medus, was the hero who gave his name to the Medes, and the river Tigris was named after the nymph and god who united on its banks" (Grid 29; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 969). "Tigers, leopards, lynxes and panthers are Bach's animals, harnessed to his vehicle" (Živković and Nikolić 613). Under the influence of the Greek mythology, a figure of the tiger appears in the Roman art as well (the fact is confirmed in *The Aeneid*, an epic poem written by Vergil, at the point of demonstrating the power of its characters (see *Virgil* 96, 154, 221, 228, 261). In addition, "Dionysus wears a tiger skin in Claudian (*Rape of Proserpine* 1.17–18). The point here is surely that Bacchus/Dionysus represents the power to tame what is wild or fierce" (Ferber 217).

⁹ Blake shaped the poetic image of the tiger in the form of a linked verse (as hypnotizing, obsessive rhythm, made of six quatrains; double rhyme is characteristic of the second to the fifth quatrains, but in the first and sixth quatrains – the rhyme scheme is aabc), whereas Strniša's poetic cycle of poems contains a modernist suggestion of the tiger's nature presented in a free verse.

¹⁰ In original: "Še zmeraj se spominjaš tistega dneva, / ko si prvič videl tigrovo sled" (274).

¹¹ "Takrat zagledaš pred sabo v mokrih tleh / široke, ostre in globoke odtise" (274).

Nevertheless, whereas Blake is the one calling upon the principle of ancient origins and simultaneously aspiring towards forming an expression of the tiger’s rhythm of universality of space-time perspectives where the present tense is prevailing, as well as the unity of contrasts; on the other hand, Strniša’s cycle of poems is structured by virtue of the past times’ systems perceived from the perspective of travellers themselves, entangled in an incessant metamorphosis of space-time perspectives, with the four seasons quickly shifting one after the other:

A bright spring rain fell the day through. (“I,” Strniša 275)¹²

Soon after that morning, autumn came;
then we had the long, damp winter,
and wet snow covered a dark city. (“II,” Strniša 275)¹³

Due to the dynamism of spatio-temporal aspects, Strniša gives an indication of the tiger’s clues, as remaining parts of the irrefutable signs of his power, whereas the lyrical subject keeps on questioning his own perception, in the spirit of a metaperspective of modern literature; which is why the path towards the cognition of divine universal time remains to be uncertain, with all that tension arising between the subject’s alienation and contours of the moments of surmising divine providence, and all those shadows and lights playing around. Due to Strniša’s slight indication of the tiger’s presence in different locations, a labyrinth of mystical paths is being shaped up, the same one that the very labyrinth of the lyrical subject’s life also depends on, while awaiting with anticipation for the final encounter with the tiger.¹⁴

Therefore, the abovementioned principles of contrasts between the mystical power of ancient mythical world and modern man’s alienation, an endless quest for cognition, complete with the impossibility of finding one’s own Self in the modern world – are accomplished within Strniša’s journey motif. What is created in this manner is a con-

¹² “Svetel pomladni dež je padal ves dan” (274).

¹³ “Kmalu po tistem jutru je prišla jesen, / potem smo imeli dolgo, vlažno zimo, / po temnem mestu je ležal moker sneg” (274).

¹⁴ While aspiring towards the transformation into the shape of the tiger, but still, not being able to accomplish the entire mystical process, Strniša’s cycle of poems entitled “There Was a Tiger Here” corresponds with the cycle of poems “Odysseus” in his own collection of poems bearing the same name: in the first poem from the cycle named “Odysseus” Strniša transforms the figure of the tiger, which does not appear literally in a form of an animal, but it converts into a metonymic designation of the heart of the lyrical subject (see Živković and Nikolić 619).

trast between the modern melancholic world and the heroic world of Homer's *Odyssey*: his suggestion centers on the tragic conscience of the modern subject that is found to be alienated from its own identity while being on the journey that eventually leads to its being deprived of the divine protection, in "a delirious horror of nothingness" (Juvan, *Peripheral* 186):

So you live, you're always off to distant places,
down foggy seas, up snowy mountain ranges. ("V," Strniša 279)¹⁵

Therefore, based on the analysis of the abovementioned aspects, we come to the conclusion that Blake's lyrical subject is obsessed, as if hypnotized, with his/her own perception of the tiger, presenting it through the fascination with beauty, power and creative freedom, whereas in Strniša's poetic vision, on the one hand – there is a similarity with Blake's shaping the image of the tiger to the point of transforming it into the universal, poetic symbol of all-pervasive divine energy, but on the other – it is in the modernistic perspective that Strniša is coming up with an innovation in terms of shaping the theme of anticipation, in the drama created among the feelings of alienation, fear and simultaneously awoken feelings of yearning for an encounter with the tiger, as a being who is about to initiate major life changes and ultimately leave its mark on the cognition of death as well.

A hint of death cognition

The dominant images found not only in Blake's poem "The Tyger," but in Strniša's cycle of poems entitled "There Was a Tiger Here" as well – are the ones depicting the mystery of sublime power the tiger embodies, just like the metaphysical themes of death cognition found in Blake's poem.

Namely, what is presented at the very beginning of Blake's poem is a contrast between the tiger's light and "the forests of the night" (73).¹⁶

¹⁵ "Tako živiš, odhajaš daleč v svet, / po meglenih morjih, po zasneženih gorskih hrbtih" (278).

¹⁶ What is accomplished in this particular verse is giving an indication of the synthesis of various mythological systems: 1. The images of forest of sins in "Canto I" of Dante's *Inferno*, of the same dark forest that Dante himself, just like the reader, are supposed to come out (see Dante 1), purified of all the earthly passions, on their journey towards *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*; 2. additionally, the tiger's "strength symbol-

The Creator of the tiger designed the principle of all-originating life, simultaneously igniting the spark of life into his body and in this manner did everything so that his “heart began to beat” (73), but it is the Creator himself who rules over the mysterious darkness as well. The symbolism of the forest suggests the quest for the cognition of unity of opposites that Blake, being only a mortal, can nevertheless become aware of, in a close encounter with death, since it is the tiger who has the experience of the other world (thence the name *Songs of Experience* is derived) and knows the principles of the hierarchical order of the universe (see Langer 427). In other words, the one who gets to know the tiger’s nature is the one who shall get to know the secret of life and death as well. “The tiger is a creature of beauty; but the same one that also inspires fear” (Gilroy 88). The duality presented by Blake in intertwining the experience of beauty and fear, as the “quest for the Last Truth” (Ferluga Petronio 661) plays a significant role in Strniša’s cycle of poems entitled “There Was a Tiger Here.” Due to his mortal nature, Strniša’s poetic subject can only surmise the glowing providence of the tiger’s nature:

But him himself you haven’t met yet.
Whomever the tiger looks at soon dies. (“V,” 279)¹⁷

Therefore, it is one glimpse of the tiger that hinted at the cognition of the relation between this earthly world and the world beyond, at the moment of death, which simultaneously means a path leading to the mystical enlightenment, from the point of searching throughout the darkness to the point of uniting with the divine light.¹⁸

izes, in Buddhism, the power of faith, the spiritual effort, going through the *jungle of sins* presented by the bamboo woods” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 968). – Therefore, in such dreadful areas of darkness such as “the forests of the night” (Blake, *Collected* 73), the lyrical subject wishes to feel the light of the tiger’s being, so that he could achieve a higher level of human consciousness – the cognition of all-pervasiveness of divine providence.

¹⁷ “Vendar pa njega samega še nisi srečal. / Kogar pogleda tiger, kmalu umre” (278).

¹⁸ With regard to the light of knowledge, death and metamorphosis of the tiger’s nature, both Blake and Strniša keep in mind the following hidden meaning of Eastern words of wisdom: “In Malesia a healer has the power to turn himself into a tiger. One should not forget that the entire Asian South-East perceives a Tiger – An Ancestor as a *ressurector*. It is the tiger who makes neophytes follow him into the jungle so that he could resurrect them, actually to kill them and perform the ritual of resurrection” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 968).

Conclusion

In our analysis of the relations between Blake's and Strniša's poetic figurations of the tiger, we have determined not only the similarities, but the specificities of general poetic and semantic aspects, along with the metaphysical elements at the point of hinting at the cognition of death.

In the context of general poetic dimensions, we emphasized Blake's mystical fascination with the tiger's nature, just like the idea of divine force of the poetic imagination. In addition, we placed an emphasis upon the relations between Blake's notion of poetic creation and unity of diversity in Strniša's cycle of poems entitled "There Was a Tiger Here"; on the other hand – we determined the innovative characteristics of the poetics of Gregor Strniša, in the form of giving our own contribution to this mystical theme in the world's poetry: by means of the unification of archetypal consciousness and narrativity of a modern metaperspective – in the drama existing between indications of beauty, alienation, fear and a simultaneous desire to have an encounter with the tiger.

However, instead of an antique blessing of a heroic spirit in the ancient epic world, what can be observed in Strniša's cycle of poems entitled "There Was a Tiger Here" – is a premonition of modernism that, at one point, the lyrical subject is deprived of his divine protection on his journey, in a drama of the modern quest for identity. Using the alienation and journey motifs, Strniša was able to universalize and give a poetically innovative shape to the experiences gained by the lyrical subject of the modernist epoch in the domains of mythological transformations.

In addition, in the following chapter – dedicated to the theme of death, we placed emphasis upon the closeness noticed between Blake and Strniša while intertwining beauty and destruction, and we also gave a hint of the cognition of death that was about to reveal the secret of the Universe creation.

However, whereas Blake's encouragement lies in the enlightening vision of the tiger, that remains to be something he is eternally fascinated with; on the other hand – Strniša addresses the lyrical subject – a passenger, in the second-person singular, during the entire cycle of poems. In this manner, Strniša unifies all of his experiences gained while searching for the divine cognition of the tiger, demonstrating his double – his *alter ego*, and at the same time he addresses all of his previous, present and future readers as being his fellow sufferers in the gnosis.

tic quest. That is how Strniša addresses Blake through the centuries that are yet to come: in his premonition of a future encounter with the tiger he meets both Blake and the Creator ruling over death, and he gets to know the “fearful symmetry” (Blake, *Collected* 73) while depicting the life cycle – as the circle joining life and death together.

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Mitološke transformacije v pesmi »The Tyger« Williamia Blaka in v ciklu »Tu je bil tiger« Gregorja Strniše

Ključne besede: angleška poezija / Blake, William / slovenska poezija / Strniša, Gregor / mitopoetika / živalski liki / tiger / mitološke preobrazbe

V članku so analizirane osnove, procesi in funkcije mitoloških transformacij v pesmi »The Tyger« Williamia Blaka in v ciklu pesmi »Tu je bil tiger« Gregorja Strniše. Preučene so podobnosti in posebnosti Blakovih poetičnih značilnosti v primerjavi z zgradbo Strniševega mitopoetskega sveta, njuni skupni mitološki viri, pa tudi specifičen odnos med romantičnimi vizijami Williamia Blaka in Strniševo moderno perspektivo. Obravnavani so naslednji vidiki: 1. splošne poetske odlike; 2. analiza simbolnih sistemov; 3. narava in funkcija prostorsko-časovnih odnosov; in 4. značaj mitopoetske slike tigra v iskanju spoznanj božanskega smisla, večnosti, minljivosti in smrti. Poleg poudarjanja pomena mističnih tendenc Williamia Blaka je cilj tega prispevka pokazati, da

tudi poezija Gregorja Strniše pripada vrhovom svetovne književnosti, in sicer kot originalna poetska vizija, ki je ustvarila inovacije v kontekstu modernih mitoloških transformacij.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article

UDK 82.091-1:2-169

821.111.09-1Blake W.

821.163.6.09-1Strniša G.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3986/pkn.v43.i2.11>