

The Life and Works of William Blake

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William Blake is today recognised as a highly original and important poet in English literature, as well as a revolutionary and visionary artist. This, however, was not the case at the time of his death in 1827, for Blake was also an individualist to the point of being isolated from society, and refused to compromise when it came to matters of personal and spiritual freedom for everyone. Indeed, the few obituaries that were written at the time focused more on the man's eccentric behaviour than on his artistic and literary achievements and it took many years before Blake's contribution to art, literature and psychology was properly acknowledged as truly original and groundbreaking.

A life devoted to art

William Blake was born in London in 1757, the son of a London hosier. He was one of four children. Already at the age of nine, he told his parents that he had seen visions, mostly of angels, and he continued to see such visions for the rest of his life. Blake's artistic ability became evident already as a child, and at the age of ten he was sent to drawing school.

At the age of 14, he began his seven-year apprenticeship as a copy engraver, after which he began to make his living by working for London book and print publishers. For a short period of time he attended the *Royal Academy of Arts*, but arguments with his teachers and the lack of interest shown in his work discouraged him from continuing any formal education in painting. Blake's first collection of poems, *Poetical Sketches*, was published privately by supportive friends in 1783. He married in 1782, and his wife Catherine became his devoted assistant. Soon after, Blake set up a print shop that later failed, but he managed to make a modest living from illustrating books, giving drawing lessons, and engraving designs made by other artists.

In 1800 the Blakes moved to Sussex, in the south of England, where he worked for his patron and friend, the landowner and poet William Hayley. This was the first and only time Blake lived outside London. It was during this period that his eyes were opened to the spiritual revelations of the natural world, and he began work on his two great apocalyptic works *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. However, after three years of work that Blake considered creatively and spiritually restrictive, he returned to London.

Blake continued to write and publish his own collections of poems, though toward the end of his life he gave up poetry and devoted himself entirely to painting and engraving. Although many of his contemporaries considered him to be insane, despite his obvious artistic talents, he did win the admiration of a small group of young artists. Although the Blakes experienced periods of commercial success, they also experienced periods when they had difficulty in making ends meet.

The world in which Blake lived

Philosophy in the 18th century

The philosophers' view of the physical world became increasingly dominated by *science*, and the mental world by *rational thinking*. The dominant philosophy at this time was *rational empiricism*, a philosophy that looked to the material world for evidence of God's existence.

A group of poets that later became known as the Romantics, rejected this emphasis on the material and on "commonsense", and saw society as something dark, repressive, evil and greedy. Although Blake was not a typical Romantic poet, he did share this view of the society in which he lived and expressed it in his own work.

William Blake grew up in a world that was undergoing dramatic changes. The second half of the eighteenth century saw the beginnings of industrialisation in Britain (later known as the *Industrial Revolution*), something that made the plight of the poor and uneducated even more miserable and hopeless. Adults and children alike were forced to work long hours in factories, mills, and coalmines, working under dangerous and inhumane conditions for a meagre wage.

Outside of Britain, other important events unfolded during Blake's early life, most importantly the American War of Independence in 1775 and the outbreak of the French Revolution fourteen years later in 1789. These events appealed to Blake's political radicalism, for he strongly believed in the emancipation and freedom of the human spirit. Blake wrote poems about both these historical events.

Blake the radical

Politically speaking, Blake was a radical, with an instinctive opposition to tyranny and a distrust of authority wherever he found it, be it in kings, priests or politicians. He attacked established values and institutions of his time, including the conventional views on slavery, social issues, religion and art.

One particular episode in Blake's life took place during his time in Sussex, and left a permanent mark on the man and his work. In 1803, a soldier had entered his garden, apparently to urinate (according to one version of this dramatic event). While physically pushing the soldier off his property, Blake was said to have sworn at the soldier and to have damned the king. He was consequently charged with sedition and put on trial.

The background to this event is important to remember here, for it took place during the Napoleonic Wars, when England was at war with France. Strict laws were introduced to control civil disobedience, and the penalty for sedition was hanging. Although he was finally acquitted, Blake was convinced that he was being hunted down by the authorities because of his radical opinions.

The artist and poet

All around him, Blake saw tendencies to attempt to restrict human capacity and the freedom of the imagination, all of which strengthened his commitment to man's basic right to social, political, religious and sexual equality. Along with the Romantic poets, Blake sought out a spiritual truth, a truth that could only be achieved by the use of feelings and the imagination. He believed that man originated from a spiritual realm, and was born as a free spirit, but that as a result of the deeply negative influence from the earth itself, man became trapped in the confines of his physical body and the five senses, which limited his capacity for perception.

The only way to be freed from this confinement was by what he called "Imagination", the capacity to apprehend realities beyond the prison of the physical world.

Illuminated Printing – "A method of printing which combines the painter and the poet" (William Blake)

Blake's works were never "published" in the modern sense of the word. Instead, he published the poems himself using a process he called "illuminated printing", a method that was unique in the history of English writing.

Unlike other printing methods at the time, Blake's method made it possible not only to print both text and illustrations on the same page and in a single printing process, but also to print on both sides of a page.

When considering the totality of Blake's work, it has been suggested that he worked on two levels; a commercial, or worldly level, and a spiritual level. On the one hand he worked as a commercial engraver, undertaking engraving and printing jobs for his customers. On the other hand he produced his personal, spiritual work, and it was this part of Blake's work that inspired his development of illuminated printing and prophetic books, written "so that the spirits could see them". The poems in Blake's *Prophetic Books* were exciting texts of a mystical nature, and very few people could understand them—not even Blake's closest friends. Today they are considered to be masterpieces, expressing Blake's belief in a spiritual world and his hope that man can overcome all limitations by means of the spirit within himself.

Blake was above all a great religious thinker who used both art and words to express mental and spiritual truths that had been forgotten by an increasingly materialistic society. Blake's great achievement was to uphold the image of the spiritual man in a world dominated by material forces. This he was able to do because he felt himself part of a vast spiritual world, a world that had been revealed to him in his visions. Some regarded him as not clearly in his right mind, but others were convinced that what he saw was true. It is a question of what kind of world you believed in. And to Blake, reality *was* spirituality.

Songs of Innocence and Experience

Blake published *Songs of Innocence and of Experience: Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul* in 1794, and this collection of forty-six poems has a unique position in English literature. Some of them—*The Tyger*, for example—are among the best-known poems in the English language.

The book combines two sets of poems: *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. These two sets of poems have generated much critical discussion as to how Blake intended them to be understood. But there is general agreement that the two sets of poems are related by the principle of contrast; a contrast between the state of Innocence—to be understood as childhood, idealism, hope—and that of Experience—to be understood as adulthood, disillusionment, social criticism, and despair.

The poems were also meant to be interpreted on another level; that of the world before and after the Fall of Man, and of the struggle within the soul itself. Blake came to see these two states as "contraries in the human soul!". At first, *Innocence* is the world of the Lamb, the world of the true God of Love and Understanding, or Jesus, while *Experience* is the work of the false God, or the great negative influence. But if we can see this, then Experience can also be a means of achieving true insight.

Blake does not tell the reader how these poems should be read, nor is he trying to say that one state is better than the other, but rather leaves it up to the readers to draw their own conclusions.

Suggested topics for philosophical discussion

1. Visions

Blake had *visions* all his life. He "saw" angels and probably many other "things" that he was convinced were actually real. What is the difference between a vision and an idea? If you think very hard about a person, are you then having a *vision* of that person? And if you dream about ogres and fairies, are you then having a *vision* about them?

2. Civil disobedience

If we break the law, we are usually considered criminals. But sometimes the law itself is considered "criminal" because it violates the sense of justice that most people in a society feel. Then we might have what is called *civil disobedience*: people refuse to act in accordance with the law. Do you think that civil disobedience should be punished? Or should the state automatically change its laws because the majority of the people dislikes them? Did Blake exercise civil disobedience when he pushed the soldier off his property?

3. Innocence

What is *innocence*? Is it something that only children possess, or can adults also be *innocent*? Can you be *innocent* even though you have great knowledge, or even though you have done evil things towards other people? Are innocent people happy? Or can you be innocent and unhappy?

4. Experience

What is *experience*? Why is this quality associated with grown-ups only, and not with children? How old do you have to be to have *experience*? Do you think Blake was right in believing that we look at life differently as we grow up to become adults? If so, why? Or do we always look at life in the same way, no matter how old we become? Do we automatically become better people when we gain experience of the world around us?

5. Radical

What is a *radical*? Is it a good thing to be, or is it bad? Can you think of anyone whom you would call a *radical*? If so, which qualities does that person have that make him a radical? What is the opposite of being radical? Is it possible to be radical and conservative at the same time?

6. Reality and spirituality

To Blake "reality *was* spirituality". In other words, he believed that the visible, audible and tangible world, is *not* reality as such. Reality, or the "real" world, can only be grasped by the human spirit with the help of "imagination". Do you think there are two separate worlds: one material and one spiritual world? Or is the one just a copy of the other? Do you feel that you know anything about the *spiritual world*? Are there ways of telling whether two persons have the same idea about the spiritual world? Or must each person necessarily have their own idea about the spiritual world, one that is different from the ideas of other people?