

William Blake (1757-1827)









1. Life

Born into a family of humble origin in **1757**.



- Trained as an engraver, he practised this craft until he died.
- He was a poet, painter and engraver and illustrated his own poetical works.
- Was deeply aware of the great political and social issues of his age. He criticized the evil consequences of the Industrial Revolution. He supported the abolition of slavery. He supported the French Revolution and remained a radical throughout his life. He justified even the period of Terror as a necessary evil for the progress of humanity.
- He had a strong sense of religion: the most important literary influence in his life
 was the Bible. He illustrated many works that had to do with religion: the Bible,
 Dante's Divine Comedy, Milton's Paradise Lost.
- He claimed he had visions.
- Died in 1827.



- He attended a drawing school since he was 10.
- Studied the works of Raphael and
 Michelangelo
 from the latter he learnt the
 technique of representing exaggerated
 muscular bodies.
- Later he studied at the Royal Academy of Art.
- He didn't conform to standards of realistic representation but emphasized the power of imagination in art.



William Blake, Vision of the Daughters of Albion, 1793, London, Tate Gallery



- Connected visual arts and writing, creating 'illuminated printing', a combination of picture and poetic text.
- Also made many illustrations for other authors' works, such as Milton's Paradise Lost or Dante's Divine Comedy.



William Blake, Blossom, 1789



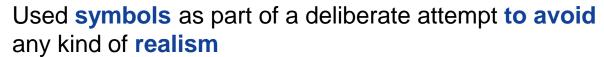


3. Blake the poet

An **individual** poet, original for his **personal vision** and **technique**. He is regarded as <u>early Romantic</u> because he rejected the Neoclassical style and themes.

According to him, the poet becomes a sort of **prophet** who can see **more deeply** into reality.

He stressed the importance of **imagination** over reason. It is through imagination that man can know the world.



→ it is the 'real' world that prevents man from perceiving the **greater Reality** that lies behind him.

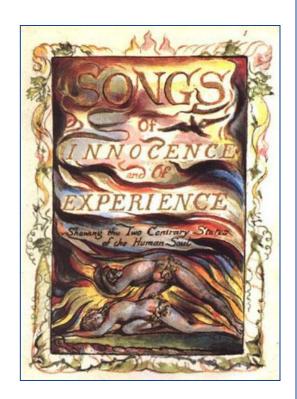






3. Blake the poet

- He wrote two collections of poems: Songs of Innocence (1789) and Songs of Experience (1794).
- Songs of Innocence deals with childhood as the symbol of innocence. The language is simple and musical. The poems celebrate the presence of the divine in all creation.
- Songs of Experience is more complex and pessimistic. It was written during the period of terror in the French Revolution.
 The poems pair those of Songs of Innocence, questioning the themes of the first collection.



Cover engraving from the 1826 edition of *Songs* of *Innocence and of Experience*





3. Blake the poet

- The world of innocence is full of joy and happiness, while the world of experience is full of cruelty and injustice.
- However, childhood and adulthood (innocence and experience) are not considered real opposites but they are complementary, because they complete each other.





4. Blake the prophet

- Blake wrote also some prophetic books (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is the most famous), in which he created his own symbolic characters.
- In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Satan and Hell represent liberty and energy, while Heaven is authoritarian.
- These books express Blake's own personal Romantic and revolutionary beliefs. He attacked the repression of human energy by conventions.
- They were published as printed sheets from engraved plates containing prose, poetry and illustrations. The plates were then coloured by Blake himself.



5. Complementary opposites

Blake believed in the existence of a spiritual world but he thought that **Christianity** was responsible for the **fragmentation of consciousness** and the **dualism** characterising man's life.

In contrast to this dualistic view, he had a vision made up of **complementary opposites**. **Good and Evil**, in particular, are opposite forces but they are also complementary: they are present in the same person or situation.

Both in his painting and in his poetry Blake points out that in every aspect of human life there is a **dialectical opposition of forces**, that can never be reconciled but must co-exist in eternal balance.

'Good and evil, male and female, reason and imagination, cruelty and kindness'

The possibility of progress is situated in the tension between contraries.





6. Blake's style

Blake's language and syntax are simple. He often adopts an **apparently naive style**, using a plain, Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, as well as repetitions, refrains and regular stress patterns which are typical of **ballads** and **children's songs** and **hymns**.

He also created his own system of **symbols**.







The Elohim Creating Adam 1795. Colour print finished in pen and watercolour. The Tate Gallery, London.



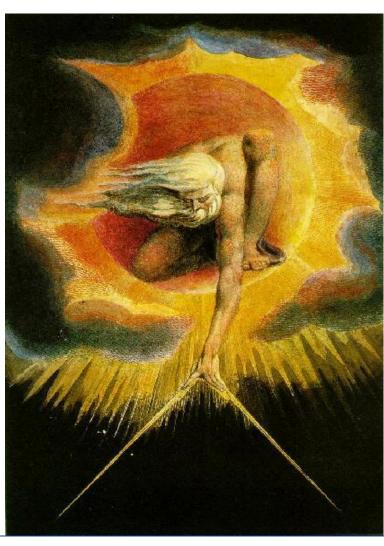
The picture is framed by a disk of a setting sun and its blazing rays.

God is represented with flowing hair and beard, powerful muscles and wings. One hand is on Adam's head.

Adam is beneath God's weight. He appears in agony and is lifting one arm in supplication. Around his leg there is a snake and one of his feet is a hoof.







The Ancient of Days

The **colours** are bright and God is represented in an unusual position. He's kneeling and is holding a compass in his hand. He's got long, flowing white hair and beard. In the background there is a shining sun set against a dark, stormy night. God seems to be measuring the universe.

William Blake, *The Ancient of Days*, 1794 *Etching*





Blake gives a very original interpretation of the act of creation.

In *The Ancient of Days,* God's **action** of measuring the sky means the act of creation, and the clouds and the rays of light that start from Him are symbols of the Divine act. The **light** is the symbol of energy and divine power.

In *Elohim Creating Adam* creation appears to be a very dramatic moment: God seems to fight against evil (the snake, Adam's foot represented as a hoof) in order to pass his energy to man.





William Blake, *The Whirlwind of Lovers*. 1824-1826

The Whirlwind of Lovers

The **subject** is taken from Dante's *Commedia*: there is pathos and a dramatic representation of the dead souls.

The **colours** are duller and darker than those of the previous picture, and the **dynamism** of the painting is no longer positive and lively, but pitiful and sad.



Blake's style in the two pictures is **allegorical**; he mainly employs **curved lines** in order to create a dynamic and active sensation.



William Blake, *The Whirlwind of Lovers*, 1824-1826



William Blake, *The Ancient of Days*, 1794





8. London

Regular rhyme scheme; many **repetitions** (key-words are often repeated). Many references to **sense impressions**: "marks"(sight), "I hear"(hearing).

Theme: the causes of man's lack of freedom.

Blake criticizes many aspects of his **contemporary society**, and many social problems brought about by the Industrial Revolution:

A society where everything is economically exploited ("chartered", first stanza) and where interest and profit prevail over feelings.

Important metaphor: "mind-forged manacles", line 8 (limitation of freedom)

three victims: the chimney-sweeper, the soldier and the prostitute.

Criticism to some important **institutions**: the Church, the Government.

Even marriage and the family are threatened by an immoral society (reference to syphilis that was transmitted from prostitutes, to men and to their wives).

