

William Blake

Encyclopedia of World Biography, December 12, 1998

Born: November 28, 1757 in London, England

Died: August 12, 1827 in London, United Kingdom

Nationality: British

Occupation: Poet

William Blake (1757-1827) was an English poet, engraver, and painter. A boldly imaginative rebel in both his thought and his art, he combined poetic and pictorial genius to explore important issues in politics, religion, and psychology.

William Blake was born in London on Nov. 28, 1757, the second son of a hosier and haberdasher. Except for a few years in Sussex, his entire life was spent in London. Its streets and their names took on spiritual symbolism in his writings, much as the place names of the Holy Land did in the writings of the biblical prophets whom Blake always regarded as his spiritual progenitors. From his earliest years he saw visions--trees full of angels, for example. If these were not true mystical visions, it is probably best to regard them not as hallucinations but as the artist's intense spiritual and sensory realization of the world.

At 10 Blake started to attend drawing school; at 14 he began a 7-year apprenticeship to an engraver, and it was as an engraver that Blake was to earn his living for the rest of his life. After he was 21, he studied for a time at the Royal Academy of Arts, where he formed a violent distaste for the academic canons of excellence in art.

In August 1782 Blake married Catherine Boucher, who had fallen in love with him at first sight. He taught her to read and write, and she later became a valued assistant. Although their marriage was to suffer from some of the normal frictions, his "sweet shadow of delight," as Blake called Catherine, was a devoted and loving wife. On her authority there is a description of his appearance: short with a large head and shoulders; not handsome but with a noble and expressive face; his hair yellow-brown, luxuriant, and curling like flames.

Early Works

From his early teens Blake wrote poems, often setting them to melodies of his own composition. When he was 26, a collection entitled *Poetical Sketches* was printed with the help of the Reverend and Mrs. Mathew, who conducted a cultural salon and were patrons of Blake. This volume was the only one of Blake's poetic works to appear in conventional printed form; he later invented and practiced a new method.

After his father died in 1784, Blake set up a print shop with a partner next door to the family hosiery shop. In 1787 his beloved younger brother and pupil Robert died; thereafter William claimed that Robert communicated with him in visions and guided him. It was Robert, William said, who inspired him with the new method of illuminated etching that was to be the vehicle for his poems. The words, design, or some combination of the two was drawn in reverse on a plate covered with an acid-resisting

substance; a corrosive was then applied. From these etched plates pages were printed and later hand-colored. Blake used his unique methods to print almost all his long poems with the exception of *An Island in the Moon* (ca. 1784), *Tiriel* (ca. 1789), *The Four Zoas* (ca. 1795-1803), *The Everlasting Gospel* (ca. 1818), and a number of short works. *The French Revolution* exists as printer's proofs.

As an engraver, Blake favored the line rather than chiaroscuro, or masses of light and dark. Blake's predilection for the line rather than "blurs" (as he called them) of color and mass had a philosophical as well as an artistic dimension. To him the line represented the honest clarity of human day as distinguished from the mystery of night.

In 1787 Blake moved to Poland Street, where he produced *Songs of Innocence* (1789) as the first major work in his new process. This book was later complemented by *Songs of Experience* (1794). The magnificent lyrics in these two collections systematically contrast the unguarded openness of innocence with the embitteredness of experience. They are a milestone in the history of the arts, not only because they exhibit originality and high quality but because they are a rare instance of the successful fusion of two art media by one man.

After a brief period of admiration for the religious thinker Emanuel Swedenborg, Blake produced in disillusioned reaction *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793). In this satire the "devils" are identified with energy and creative genius, and the "angels" with repression of desire and the oppressive aspects of order and rationality. Some of the same issues arise in *The Book of Thel* (1789-1791) and *Vision of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). The former portrays a timid shepherdess who is reluctant to commit herself to the risks of existence, while the latter shows a heroine who casts off such timidity and chooses psychic and sexual liberation.

Blake had become a political radical and was in sympathy with the American Revolution and with the French Revolution during its early years. At Poland Street and shortly after his move to Lambeth in 1793, Blake composed and etched short "prophetic" books concerning these events, religious and political repression in general, and the more basic repression of the individual psyche, which he came to see as the root of institutional tyranny. Among these works (all composed between 1793 and 1795) are *America*, *Europe*, *The Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Los*, *The Song of Los*, and *The Book of Ahania*. In these poems Blake began to work out the powerful mythology he refined in his later and longer prophecies. He presented this mythology completely in his first epic-length poem, *The Four Zoas* (ca. 1795-1803). This difficult but mighty myth shows how religious and social evils are rooted in the internal warfare of man's basic faculties--reason (Urizen), passion (Luvah), instinct (Tharmas), and inspiration or prophetic imagination (Los or Urthona, who becomes more markedly the hero of Blake's long epics). But Blake was apparently unsatisfied with *The Four Zoas*. Although he drew freely on it for his later epics, he left the poem unengraved.

Felpham Period

Blake spent the years 1800 to 1803 working in Felpham, Sussex, with William Hayley, a minor poet and man of letters. With genuine good intentions Hayley tried to cure Blake of his unprofitable and unseemly enthusiasms and secured him commissions for safely genteel projects--painting ladies' fans, for example. Blake finally rebelled against this condescension and rejected Hayley's help. One result of this conflict was Blake's long poem *Milton* (ca. 1800-1810). In this work the spiritual issues involved

in the quarrel with Hayley are allegorized, and Blake's larger themes are dramatized through an account of the decision of the poet Milton to renounce the safety of heaven and return to earth to rectify the errors of the Puritan heritage he had fostered.

In 1803 Blake had a still more disturbing experience when a soldier whom he had evicted from his garden accused him of uttering seditious sentiments--a charge that in the witch-hunting atmosphere of the time was serious indeed. Blake was tried and acquitted, but he saw in the incident further confirmation of his views on the conflict between a sadistic society and the man of humane genius. The trial experience colors much of Blake's titanic final epic, *Jerusalem* (ca. 1804-1820).

Later Years

Back in London, living in South Molton Street, Blake worked hard at his poems, engraving, and painting, but he suffered several reverses. He was the victim of fraud in connection with his designs for Blair's *The Grave* and received insulting reviews of that project and of an exhibition he gave in 1809 to introduce his idea of decorating public buildings with portable frescoes. Blake wrote three prose pieces based on the events of this time: *Descriptive Catalogue* (1809), *Public Address* (1810), and *Vision of the Last Judgment* (1810).

The next decade is a somber and obscure period in Blake's life. He did some significant work, including his designs for Milton's poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (1816) and the writing of his own poem *The Everlasting Gospel* (ca. 1818), but he was sometimes reduced to hackwork and the public did not purchase or read his prophecies. After 1818, however, conditions improved. He became acquainted with a group of young artists who respected him and appreciated his work. His last 6 years were spent at Fountain Court, where Blake did some of his best pictorial work: the illustrations to the Book of Job and his unfinished Dante. In 1824 his health began to weaken, and he died singing on Aug. 12, 1827.

Continuing Influence

Blake's history does not end with his death. In his own lifetime he was almost unknown except to a few friends and faithful patrons, like Thomas Butts and the young disciples he attracted in his last years. He was even suspected of being mad. But interest in his work grew during the mid-19th century, and since then painstaking commentators have gradually elucidated Blake's beautiful, intricate, and difficult mythology. The 20th century has made him its own; he has been acclaimed as a kindred spirit by psychologists, writers (most notably William Butler Yeats), radical theologians, rock-and-roll musicians, and devotees of Oriental religion. He has furnished texts to a wide variety of rebels against war, orthodoxy, and almost every kind of psychic and personal repression.

Further Readings

- The standard editions of Blake's writings are Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *The Complete Writings of William Blake* (1957; rev. ed. 1966), and David V. Erdman, ed., *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (1965), with commentary by Harold Bloom. Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake* (1863), is still a standard biography; another biography is Mona Wilson, *The Life of William Blake* (1927; rev. ed. 1948). A recommended biography is G.E. Bentley's *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake* (2001). For Blake the artist see Anthony Blunt, *The Art of William Blake* (1959). For the reader making his first acquaintance with Blake, Max Plowman, *An Introduction to the Study of Blake* (1927; 2d ed. 1967), and Herschel M. Margoliouth, *William Blake* (1951), are recommended. The most searching critical study is Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of*

William Blake (1947). Excellent commentary on the longer poems is provided by S. Foster Damon, *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (1924), and Harold Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (1963).

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Source Citation

"William Blake." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, Gale, 1998. *Student Resources in Context*, link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/K1631000716/SUIC?u=tall78416&xid=6ccec053. Accessed 10 Jan. 2017.

Gale Document Number: GALE|K1631000716