



William Blake

William Blake was born in London on November 28, 1757, to James, a hosier, and Catherine Blake. From early childhood, Blake spoke of having visions—at four he saw God "put his head to the window"; around age nine, while walking through the countryside, he saw a tree filled with angels. Although his parents tried to discourage him from "lying," they did observe that he was different from his peers and did not force him to attend conventional school. He learned to read and write at home. At age ten, Blake expressed a wish to become a painter, so his parents sent him to drawing school. Two years later, Blake began writing poetry. When he turned fourteen, he apprenticed with an engraver because art school proved too costly. One of Blake's assignments as apprentice was to sketch the tombs at Westminster Abbey, exposing him to a variety of styles from which he would draw inspiration throughout his career. After his seven-year term ended, he studied briefly at the Royal Academy.

In 1772 he married an illiterate woman named Catherine Boucher. Blake taught her to read and to write, and also instructed her in draftsmanship. Later, she helped him print the illuminated poetry for which he is remembered today. The couple had no children. In 1784 Blake set up a print shop but this venture failed after several years. For the remainder of his life, Blake made a meager living as an engraver and illustrator for books and magazines. In addition to his wife, Blake also began training his younger brother Robert in drawing, painting, and engraving. Robert fell ill during the winter of 1787 and died. As Robert died, Blake saw his brother's spirit rise up through the ceiling, "clapping its hands for joy." He believed that Robert's spirit continued to visit him and later claimed that in a dream Robert taught him the printing method that he used in *Songs of Innocence* and other "illuminated" works.

Blake's first printed work was *Poetical Sketches* (1783). The poems protest against war, tyranny, and King George III's treatment of the American colonies. He published his most popular collection, *Songs of Innocence*, in 1789 and followed it, in 1794, with *Songs of Experience*. Both books of *Songs* were printed in an illustrated format reminiscent of illuminated manuscripts. The text and illustrations were printed from copper plates, and each picture was finished by hand in watercolor.

Blake was a nonconformist who associated with some of the leading radical thinkers of his day. In defiance of conventional 18th-century thinking, he valued **imagination** over reason in the creation of both his poetry and images. He declared in one poem, "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's." Works such as "The French Revolution" (1791), "America, a Prophecy" (1793) express his opposition to the English monarchy, and to 18th-century political and social tyranny in general. In the prose work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-93), he satirized oppressive authority in church and state.

From 1800 to 1803 Blake lived and worked under the patronage of William Hayley. He taught himself Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Italian, so that he could read classical works in their original language. He experienced profound spiritual insights that prepared the way for his later visionary epics written and etched between about 1804 and 1820. These have neither traditional plot, characters, rhyme, nor meter. They envision a new and higher kind of innocence, the human spirit triumphant over reason.

Blake believed that his poetry could be read and understood by common people, but he was determined not to sacrifice his vision in order to become popular. Some who saw exhibits of his work praised Blake's artistry, but others thought the paintings "hideous" and more than a few called him insane. Blake's poetry was not well known by the general public but he was known to some of the literary figures of the time. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, considered Blake a "man of Genius." Most of the recognition for Blake's work appeared after his death.

Blake's final years, spent in great poverty, were cheered by the admiring friendship of a group of younger artists who called themselves "the Ancients." In 1818 he met John Linnell, a young artist who commissioned him to design illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the cycle of drawings that Blake worked on until his death in 1827.

Websites:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/blakeinteractive/>

www.blakearchive.org