



Blake - A Biography

William Blake was a Romantic poet and artist, notable for his collections of poetry: 'Songs of Innocence' and 'Songs of Experience'. He is described as a 'mystic enraptured with incommunicable visions' and 'an interruption in cultural history, a separable phenomenon'. He used his poetry to speak for the vulnerable: women, children and those affected by poverty through heavy symbolism and can be considered 'nothing short of a leading author and a key source of passion' in the Romantic movement.

He was born in 1757 in London, where he lived for all but three years of his life. He was the third of seven children, of which two died in infancy and was given a devout upbringing by his parents, dissenters like himself. Although born into a poor family, his wealth fluctuated throughout his life, ranging from being somewhat affluent to living in extreme poverty. From the age of ten he claimed to have visions of angels, spirits, devils and demons, starting with seeing a tree full of angels, conforming to the idea of the time presented by fellow Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, that poets hold 'a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul'.

Around him huge historical events were taking place, most notably many revolutions: the French Revolution of 1789, the American Revolution of 1776 and, closer to home, the Industrial Revolution. He welcomed both the French and American revolutions, seeing them as calls for change and 'decisive stroke[s] for the freedom and emancipation of the human spirit'. He also hoped that they would inspire increased democratisation in England and, as shown in Milton's 'Paradise Lost', felt that repression, by a divine or human oppressor, would always breed revolution, and that that was completely justified. However, he felt very differently about the Industrial Revolution. Seeing as Blake lived in London, he wouldn't have seen the full affect of it on the countryside, but he would definitely have known of the effect it was having on the economy and the implications of the factory system, especially as he made sure to keep track of world events. Contrary to his thoughts on the revolutions overseas, he saw the Industrial Revolution as 'an attempt to restrict human capacity and the freedom of imagination'.

Every event around him and in his personal life, like many great artists, formed the basis of his beliefs that were then translated into his work and creations. The loss of individualism and constriction of imagination brought by the Industrial Revolution led Blake to take on the role of reinstating people's imagination, which he did so through symbolic literature and carefully plotted paint. He soon found it integral to spread his messages through cryptic metaphors so as not to repeat his trial for high treason in 1804!

Interestingly, though Blake may now be known as one of the greatest Romantic poets, in his lifetime he was unknown and only picked up fame towards the very end of his life. He self-published his work, unlike other Romantic poets, in books in which each poem had a page or a part of one, and were all illuminated (all painted out with images surrounding them). His work can be split into three parts: lyrics (e.g. 'Songs of Innocence/Experience', 'Poetic Sketches' etc.), shorter prophecies ('Blake's mythology' was established here (his private repertoire of characters) and included poems such as 'Heaven and Hell') and longer prophecies (in which he attempted to create a complete account of human history in poems such as 'Milton').



Blake's style is very individual, not fitting completely into any category. It is 'anti-classical, anti-official, but at the same time too deeply rooted both, paradoxically, in his own imagination and his everyday environment to warrant any assimilation into the category of Romantic'. He was a follower of the renowned artist Michelangelo, who was known to have a 'hero-quality' to his artwork, had read various theological works, some of Wordsworth's writing (of which he didn't like very much!) and, because he was self-educated and so relied on any texts available to him, read the Bible frequently and therefore had expert knowledge on it.

As previously mentioned, he had strong views on many things, such as:

Religion and the Church: Blake himself was a Dissenting Christian (a Protestant Christian who is separated from the Church of England) and his perception of God varied from biblical and church teachings of Him. He rejected the idea of a vengeful and punitive God as he felt that that was a concept people used to justify their revenge and desire for power, instead he focused on the presence of Christ's Holy Spirit. He saw organised Christianity as a 'distortion of true spiritual life', thought that it made people conform to rules out of shame or fear of punishment instead of spirituality and felt that it was an agent of social control, instead of a 'source of life and liberation'.

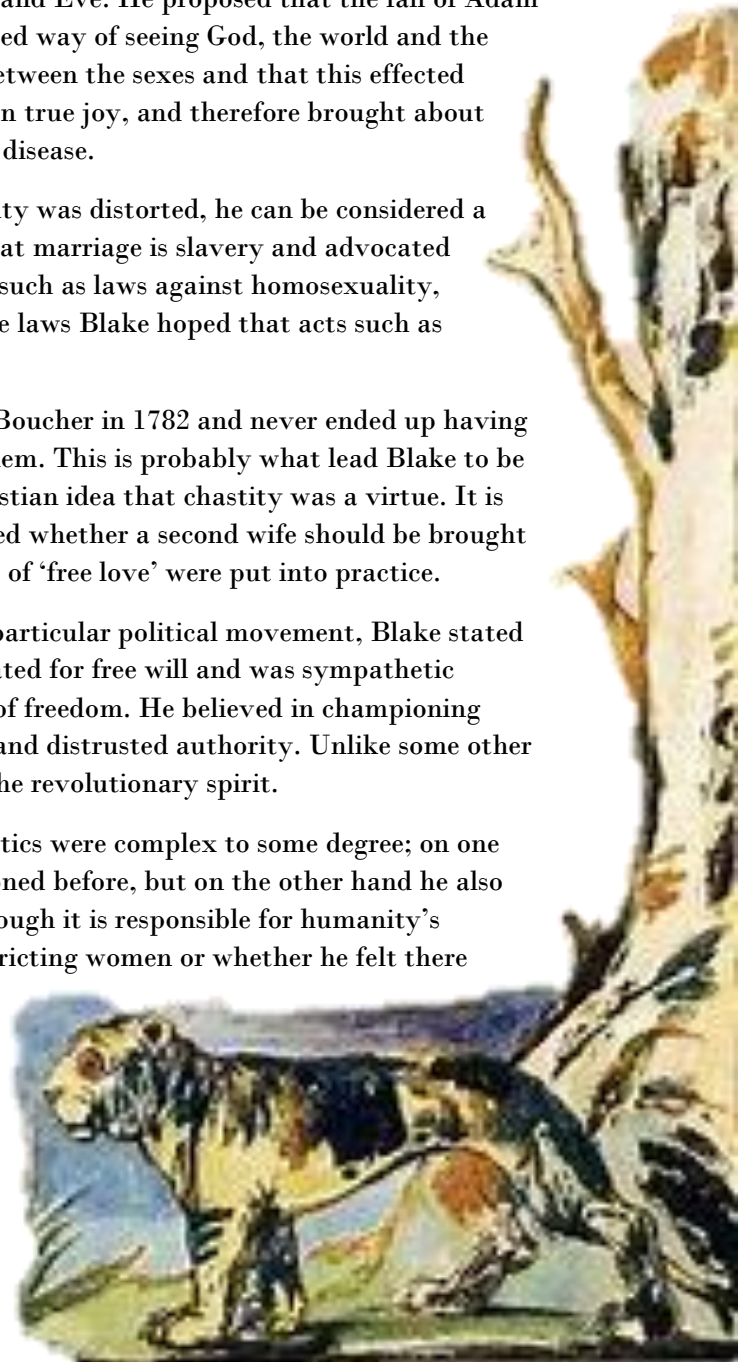
Blake also had strong thoughts on the 'Fall' of Adam and Eve. He proposed that the fall of Adam and Eve wasn't a fall into sin, but a 'fall into a distorted way of seeing God, the world and the self'. He also said that the fall brought a separation between the sexes and that this effected human sexuality, making it about jealousy rather than true joy, and therefore brought about social ills such as prostitution, leading to poverty and disease.

Marriage, Sex and Love: Believing that human sexuality was distorted, he can be considered a forerunner in the 'free love' movement. This stated that marriage is slavery and advocated for the removal of all laws restricting sexual activity, such as laws against homosexuality, prostitution, and adultery. Perhaps by removing these laws Blake hoped that acts such as prostitution would actually become less frequent.

In his personal life, Blake married his wife Catherine Boucher in 1782 and never ended up having children. It is thought that she was unable to carry them. This is probably what lead Blake to be critical of marriage laws and to disagree with the Christian idea that chastity was a virtue. It is said that at a time of difficulty in his marriage he asked whether a second wife should be brought into the house, however it is unknown if his ideologies of 'free love' were put into practice.

Politics: Although not known to be a member of any particular political movement, Blake stated his arguably radical political views clearly. He advocated for free will and was sympathetic towards the French and American revolution's spirit of freedom. He believed in championing change and revolution, opposed slavery and tyranny and distrusted authority. Unlike some other Romantic poets, he never retracted his allegiance to the revolutionary spirit.

Children and Women: Blake's thoughts on gender politics were complex to some degree; on one hand he wrote a lot about sexual liberation, as mentioned before, but on the other hand he also discussed the evil represented by the female will as though it is responsible for humanity's downfall. It is debatable as to whether he was for restricting women or whether he felt there should be some restriction on desire for all (abolishing prostitution etc.). Blake used children in his poetry frequently, treated them as though they have 'divinity within their souls' and explored the duality of childhood.





Nature: A huge feature of the Romantic movement was the appreciation of nature, and Blake conformed to that to some extent. Although he wasn't a 'worshipper' of nature (he criticised many of them), the theme of it features in many of his poems. For him, it is said that nature represented 'the fact of human fall' and was part of the earthly world. It could be used for man to reach an awareness of their place in the

Universe.

It is clear that Blake ended up playing an instrumental part in the Romantic movement. He found a way to explore 'the two contrary states of the human soul' and provided a voice to those that were silenced. He was 'the embodiment of the Romantic purpose, which was to bring man and nature closer together'.

