



An Introduction to William Blake

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(Sem. - II :: Paper C4 T :: BRITISH ROMANTIC LITERATURE)

- Poet, artist, engraver, William Blake is one of the most important personalities of the Romantics.
- Born in London on 28 November 1757, Blake came to be known as a great artist and poet of his times.
- Blake's artistic abilities were evident as a child when he enrolled himself in a drawing school and learnt to draw sketches of human figures by copying outlines from the plaster casts of ancient sculptures.
- Blake is known for his illustrations and engravings even to this day.



Blake's *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with Sun* (1805) is [one of a series of illustrations](#) of [Revelation](#)

- He was an avid **reader** of the **Bible** and the **Greek Classics**.
- **Shakespeare's** and **Milton's** works were highly influential in his artistic career.
- Since his parents could not afford his artistic training for long, Blake sought an apprenticeship under engraver **James Basire**.
- Blake's assignments of **sketching** the **Westminster Abbey** are often considered as being instrumental in the stirrings of his **Gothic leanings**.
- Blake was accepted to the **Royal Academy of Arts** where he learnt and exhibited several of his works. Following this, he was employed as a **professional engraver** working for **Joseph Johnson**, a procurer of **subversive literature**.
- William Blake's works find a place beside **Picasso's** in **Tate Art Gallery** in London.



William Blake's image of the [Minotaur](#) to illustrate *Inferno*, Canto XII, 12–28, The Minotaur XII



Europe Supported by Africa and America (1st December 1792) engraving by William Blake



- Blake also associated himself with some of the significant thinkers of his period: **Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, William Godwin; Rev. Anthony S. and Harriet Matthew** among others.
- **Harriet Matthew** and draftsman **John Flaxman** were instrumental in funding the publication of Blake's first book of poetry: *Poetical Sketches*, published in 1783.
- Blake's works were of both **religious and secular** nature.
- In 1784, Blake establishes his own printing press which enabled him to publish his own works.
- Blake is credited with developing the technique called "**illuminated printing**": He made copper plates engraved with his illustrations as well as his works and he prepared his own ink with which he printed the poems on paper. Every illustration would then be later coloured by hand. Through this process, Blake was able to produce works that were often commissioned and from
- 1789 onwards, several significant works were developed including the *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* collection.

- Blake's works are replete with **spiritual concerns**. More often, these concerns coupled with the political climate of the period (the **American War of Independence and the French Revolution**) were highly influential in turning his works into the most radical of themes of the period.
- **Visions** had been a part of his formative years and they were instrumental in his writings till his death.
- Blake claimed to have **seen angels**; on another occasion, he is said to have sighted the **spirit** of his brother **Robert rise from the dead body** at the time of his death.
- By the **end of the eighteenth century** almost of his works became **Biblical** in nature and **mysticism** and divine **mystery** began to pervade most of his works.
- Blake also created some of his best known works including ***Milton, Jerusalem*** and also illustrated ***Dante's Divine Comedy***.
- A childless couple, Blake and his wife Catherine Boucher tried to alleviate their poverty through exhibition of his works in 1809 but the event was not well-attended and marked the nearing end of his artistic career.
- Blake **died** in 1827 at the age of 69 years.

The Songs of Innocence

- *The Songs of Innocence* published in 1789 encapsulates his genius for writing, engraving, drawing and painting.
- There is a symbolic design on the title page of ‘Songs of Innocence’ in addition to year of publication 1789.
- *A significant title with decorative words with leaves and small branches of a plant encircling them makes it very impressive. There is also an apple plant with two children leaning on the lap of their mother and reading a book.*
- The children’s innocence and carefree nature reflect the theme of the poems. A sense of wonder makes childhood beautiful and it is carried in the poems too.
- In the poetry of Blake, Jesus is the divine who was once an infant like all human infants. Nature, love and joy are splendidly harmonized.





The Songs of Innocence

- In most of the poems in the book identity of God and child is perceptible.
- Here God is viewed as child Jesus.
- Blake's nature is different from that of other romantic poets. He was essentially a Londoner.
- For the poet, Jesus was a lamb metaphorically.
- There are certain recurrent images in his poems like the hill side, grazing lambs and extending meadows.
- Though there is a shepherd there are no cattle except sheep.
- The tears in the poems are tears of joy blended with innocence.
- Meekness of the lamb and the child assumes significance in this set of poems.
- According to Blake the spirit of God invariably saves the children in distress as they are devoid of evil in thought or action.
- The poet who heard voices and saw visions was intuitive mostly, while crafting these poems. It may be of interest to know, Blake had no children.

Songs of Experience

- This volume has been brought along with the *Songs of Innocence*.
- *The title page of the combined volume of these two sets of poems carries the figures of a man and a woman clad in leaves suggesting they are Adam and Eve.*
- Anguish marks their expression indicating their state after the fall. While Eve is prostrate, Adam bends over her and one may notice twirling flames of fire and a bird on wing. They may be symbolic of joy deserting them.





Songs of Experience

- Some critics have opined that the two figures **may not be those of Adam and Eve**, but represent **innocence and experience**.
- The themes and content in this set of poems are remarkable for their high seriousness, complexity in thought and expression in addition to significant symbols employed.
- Blake's personal views about **contemporary society** and **church** are laid bare unmistakably.
- Tyranny, jealousy, usury, and authoritarianism conspicuous in contemporary society are loathsome to the poet.
- He's moved by the misery and suffering of the poor children.
- The indifference of man to man and the irresponsibility of the church to sufferers are appalling to say the least.
- Thus a child is forced to forsake his innocence, a God given attribute. **A child like Adam violated God's command**; hence misery, disease and death started haunting him.



Nebuchadnezzar, the king with impulse control problems whose heart changed



Pity

Thank You



The Great Red Dragon and the Women Clothed in Sun

*“To see the world
in a grain of sand,
and to see heaven
in a wild flower,
hold infinity in the
palm of your
hands, and eternity
in an hour”- Blake*



The Ancient of Days