

William blakes life



William Blake was born in 1757, the third son of a London hosier. Blake lived in or near to London, a city which dominates much of his work, whether as the nightmare 'London' of the Songs of Experience, or the London which Blake saw as the 'New Jerusalem', the kingdom of God on earth.

As the son of a hosier, a generally lower middle class occupation in late eighteenth century London, he was brought up in a poor household, a preparation for the relative poverty in

which he would live for most of his life. He also received little formal schooling, which is all

the more remarkable given both the depth and range of his reading of the Bible, of Milton

and Greek and Latin classic literature, evident throughout his work. His intellectual and

psychological growth, however, was dominated by the influence of his brother, Robert, who

died of consumption at the age of 20. Blake, witnessing his brother's death, remarked that

he saw his brother's soul "ascend heavenward clapping its hands for joy", and continued,

from that point on, to feel Robert's inspirational influence over his work.

Blake, who had

already testified to seeing visions - (at the age of ten he tried to convince his father that he

had seen hosts of angels in a tree in Peckham Rye) - retained this strong faith in the spirit

world throughout his life, affirming that he often spoke with the apparitions, angels, devils

and spirits which populate his work. It was this psychical interest which also brought him into

contact with that strange world of late eighteenth century London psychics, visionaries, and

various other Christian and progressive free-thinking writers and intellectuals such as

Blake's subsequent career as an artist was inaugurated by his apprenticeship, in 1771, to

James Basire, a noted Engraver, after which he enrolled as a student at the Royal Academy

(1797), an Academy then dominated by the influence of its Principal, Sir Joshua Reynolds.

From 1779 he was employed as an engraver for a local Bookseller, and Blake continued to

earn an often precarious living from contracted engraving until, with the help of his friend

John Flaxman (1755-1826), he was able to set up his own engraving business at 27 Broad

Street, which proved not to be a successful enterprise.

It is from this point, 1784, that Blake's career as an engraver-poet-prophet began in earnest.

Working with the help of his dedicated wife Catherine Boucher (the daughter of a market

gardener, whom he married in 1782), Blake divided his time between composing and

engraving illustrated poetry, and eking out a precarious living as a contract engraver. His

first works in illustrated painting - All Religions Are One and There is No Natural

Religion (1788) - followed on from the satirical verse of An Island in the Moon (1784-5),

but it was in 1789, the year of the French Revolution and the Storming of the Bastille, that

saw Blake's early masterpieces, The Book of Thel and Songs of Innocence.

Between 1789 and 1800, when the Blake's moved to Felpham, Blake was ferociously

active, composing *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-93), *The French Revolution*

(1791), *America: A Prophecy* (1793), *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), *The*

Book of Urizen (1794), *the Songs of Experience* (1793-4), *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794) *The Book of Los* (1795) and *The Four Zoas* (1795-1804). Uniting all of these was

an extraordinary mixture of apocalyptic vision, political fervour, revisions of Christian

theology and psychological exploration. Part of the reason for this extraordinary creative

energy was that Blake felt compelled to work through his responses to the political

upheavals of in Europe and America in this period. The American Revolution of 1775, and

the Declaration of Independence in 1783 was, for Blake, just one example of youthful

energetic rebellion against the forces of Autocratic Authority. Blake, who met Tom Paine in

<https://assignbuster.com/william-blakes-life/>

the early 1790s, sided with the American forces, mythologising them in his writings into the

epic cosmic struggle between the forces of the Authoritarian Jehovah (the figure of "Urizen")

and the forces of youthful rebellion (symbolised by the mythological figure of Orc). The

French Revolution of 1789 represented, for Blake, a similar irruption of necessary rebellion

against the corruption of the 'Ancien Regime' and, once again, his sympathies were with the

revolutionaries and supporters such as Paine (whom he helped save, in 1793, when Paine

was in danger of being arrested, allowing him to escape to France). The British war with

France, 1793, and the introduction of rigorous laws of civil obedience were, for Blake, yet

further instances of the hold which the forces of Authority (Church and State) held over the

common people: like Wordsworth, and Shelley and Byron a generation later, Blake was

politically both a Radical and a libertarian. Yet, as Blake himself realized, the forces of

youthful rebellion which had promised to usher in a new dawn in human consciousness

swiftly gave way to the bloodshed and anarchy of the Reign of Terror and the imposition of

new stricter forms of social control in both France and Britain. His works, from 1794

onwards, reflect a sense of the paradoxes and complexities of rebellion although, as his

work also testifies, Blake remained unwaveringly committed to the principles of equality in all

forms (social, political and sexual), to liberty and to justice.

In 1800 Blake moved to West Sussex and spent nearly three idyllic years there, until the

dramatic events which led to him being charged with sedition: in 1803 he was charged, at

Chichester, with high treason (for being too vocal in his responses to a soldier he found

urinating in his garden). That year Blake returned to London, where he lived until his death in

<https://assignbuster.com/william-blakes-life/>

1827. Yet the final 24 years of his life saw Blake producing voluminous amounts of illustrated

work and engraving, including the monumental work Milton (begun in Felpham but finished

only in 1808) and Jerusalem, 1804-20), and illustrated versions of Dante and The Book of

Job. These later years were, however, disappointing for Blake: he had not found the fame

and recognition he longer for and, as for most of his life, he was never far from penury. What

did not change also was Blake's passionate commitment to a vision of Christianity

revised, and to a Spiritual, Psychological, Political and Sexual Renaissance, brought

about by discarding the narrow moralising and conventionality of orthodox Christianity, and

his vision of Albion reborn, in Everyman and in England.

Blake died in 1827, and was buried in a common grave.

Bibliography:

<https://assignbuster.com/william-blakes-life/>