

Context: Biography**Home**

- Born on 28th November 1757, the son of a hosier. He grew up in London.
- Liberal household of the dissenting tradition, meaning that they rejected the Church of England. It is thought that they belonged to the Moravian religious sect.
- The bible was of supreme importance in Blake's childhood, and influenced much of his own work in concepts, themes and style.

Education

- From the age of ten Blake did not go to school. His father let him pursue his own studies at home, and sent him to 'drawing school' at the age of ten. Blake later wrote, 'Thank God I was never sent to school / To be Flog'd into following the Style of a Fool'. His approach was always anti-authoritarian.
- His early influences and explorations included the work of Raphael, Michelangelo and Dürer, and the poetry of Ben Jonson and Edmund Spenser.
- In 1772 he was apprenticed to an engraver, James Basire, at the age of 14.
- In 1779 he became a student at the Royal Academy.

Visions

- The visions that Blake experienced are sometimes called 'eidetic imagery.' They are real sensory perceptions, not just imagination, and the tendency to have them can be very high in some young children. It is, however, unusual to retain this 'ability' into adulthood.
- Blake saw visions from early childhood. At the age of four he saw God's head at the window and started screaming. His mother later beat him for running in and saying that he had seen the Prophet Ezekiel under a tree in the fields (this seems to have been the only time he was beaten by either of his parents). Later childhood visions included angels in a tree and angels walking among haymakers who were working in fields. Blake felt that visions were a 'true' perception of reality, seeing past the 'fallen world.'

Work

- During his apprenticeship to Basire, Blake worked in Westminster Abbey, engraving the tombs and effigies. He was influenced by its gothic style, faded brightness and colour.
- At the Royal Academy, Blake rebelled against what he regarded as the unfinished style of fashionable painters such as Rubens. He disliked the school's first president, Joshua Reynolds, especially his pursuit of 'general truth' and 'general beauty'. Blake continued to prefer the bold, unfashionable lines of artists such as Raphael, rather than the 'blurred' and 'muddy' oil-paintings that were fashionable at the time.
- Blake had some paintings exhibited at the Academy, but did not enjoy critical success in his lifetime. In his later life he was known as an engraver, not a poet or artist. He was a worker, part of the new commercialism, and died almost penniless. In this sense, he should not be bracketed with the upper class 'Romantic poets' such as Byron and Keats.

Marriage

- Blake married Catherine Boucher in 1782. She was five years younger than him and was illiterate. Blake trained her to be an engraver, and she helped him throughout her life. They seem to have remained close throughout their marriage, though they were unable to have children. At one point Blake suggested bringing in a concubine (this was in accordance with the beliefs of the Swedenborgian Society), but Catherine was distressed by the idea.

Views

- Anti-authoritarian.
- Equality for women: feminist Mary Wollstonecraft was a close friend, and Blake illustrated her *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788).
- They shared views on sexual equality and the institution of marriage. In 1793's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Blake condemned the cruel absurdity of enforced chastity and marriage without love and defended the right of women to complete self-fulfillment.
- Racial equality.
- Rejected the restrictions of the Old Testament God, and saw the New Testament God as a positive influence.
- Portrayed the upper class institutions and the Church of England as corrupt and exploitative.

Religion

- Blake has been linked to Swedenborgianism – a religious organisation developed from the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. Many aspects are closely related to Christianity, and the movement is founded on the belief that Swedenborg witnessed the Last Judgment and Second Advent of the Lord.
- Beliefs – one God, the Holy Trinity. Evil originates in mankind and should be shunned. A person's fate after death depends on the character of the person in life – those who love the Lord or love being useful to others are in heaven, and those governed by self-love or love of material things are in hell. Marriage is eternal, and those with a true spiritual marriage will find their spouse in the afterlife. All religions are valid paths to heaven if they acknowledge God and teach charity towards others. They also believe in extraterrestrial life.
- Other writers influenced by the religion include: Honoré de Balzac, Charles Baudelaire, Elizabeth and Robert Browning, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Frost, Walt Whitman.

Links to the *Songs*

Find examples of poems that demonstrate these themes:

- New Testament Christian focus on love, charity and forgiveness
- opposition of Old versus New Testament
- anti-authoritarian views
- visions
- strong visual imagery
- the 'Human Condition'
- against official education or relating to the treatment of children.