

WILLIAM BLAKE • LONDON

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WILLIAM BLAKE

William Blake was a versatile poet, dramatist, artist, engraver, and publisher. He was the most independent and original romantic poet as well as painter and printmaker of the 18th century. He was born in November 1757 in London. He was the third of seven children in his family. When he was only ten years old, he left school where he had learned reading and writing. His mother, Catherine, then taught him at home. Blake was baptised at St James's Church, and the Bible had a profound influence on him remaining a source of inspiration throughout his life.

At home, his father bought him some Greek antiquities and he began engraving copies of drawings of them. In these drawings Blake had his first chance to get to know the classical forms through the work of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Albrecht Dürer. He was sent to a drawing school at the age of ten. He studied his favourite subjects actively and it was in this period that Blake made his first explorations in poetry.

At 15, in the year 1772, William Blake became apprenticed to engraver James Basire of Great Queen Street, for the term of seven years. At the age of 21, he ended his apprenticeship and he began engraving on his own and became a professional engraver. In 1782, when he was 24, he married Catherine Boucher, the daughter of a market gardener. William not only taught Catherine to read and write, but he also trained her as an engraver. It turned out that his wife was of great help to his career. She gave him invaluable assistance in his works and endless spiritual support in his misfortunes. She assisted with the printing and hand colouring of his poems. They worked together to publish the *Songs of Innocence* in which William engraved his poems and paintings on the bronze board and Catherine helped with colouring and binding. However, their works did not sell well and their efforts earned them neither money nor reputation because they were not appreciated by many people at the time. Despite the poverty and hardships, they insisted on publishing their works on their own, instead of signing contracts with any publishers. None of the work produced got the attention it deserved while he was alive.



W. Blake

ABOUT HIS WORK

The Songs of Innocence and The Songs of Experience

William Blake was the most extraordinary literary genius of his age. His lyrics display all the characteristics of the romantic spirit. He influenced the Romantic poets with recurring themes of good and evil, heaven and hell, knowledge and innocence, and external reality versus inner imagination. His poems were full of romantic spirit, imagery symbolism and revolutionary spirit. He was the forerunner of romantic poetry of the 19th century.

The Songs of Innocence shows Blake's advance in his artistic achievement as a poet, though some poems are not serious or thought-provoking. The appeal seems to be chiefly to children, and most

of the poems in the collection have a strange, simple beauty, both in their themes and their language, verse form and rhythm. It is a volume of lovely poems, depicting an enjoyable and innocent world with its evils and sufferings. On the whole, the poems in this collection are short and lyrical and are indeed “happy songs”, in which one feels the existence of social harmony. *The Songs of Experience* is a much more mature work. It shows the sufferings of the miserable and it marks the poet’s progress in his outlook on life with the experience which has brought a fuller sense of the power of evil, and of the great misery and pain of people’s life. Its symbol changes from the lamb to the tiger. It is certainly the most important volume of all Blake’s poetry and its poems have reached the heights of lyrical beauty. The poems are short and lyrical and still assume a childlike tongue and use simple language, but we can find the poet’s deeper and more penetrating observation of reality. An atmosphere of intense sorrow and sadness, especially for small children, pervade a lot of poems in the *Songs of Experience*.

THE POEM: LONDON

One of the most outstanding poems in *The Songs of Experience* is *London*, in which Blake utters his social criticism for the miseries of common people. A large number of Blake’s poems focuses on themes that were relevant to the society in which he wrote, such as his poems on industrialisation, child labour and the more general notions of man versus nature and the individual against society. The capitalisation of man suggests that the whole of urbanised society has reached the state of moral decay and misery. It is a sixteen-line poem composed of four stanzas of alternatively rhyming short lines and it is famous for its highly strong musical pattern. Generally speaking, the rhyme and rhythm are very definite and structured: the rhyme is ABAB CDCD, and this poem is written with a metrical pattern of iambic tetrameter sporadically blended with trochaic tetrameter. Repetition is the most striking formal feature of the poem, and it serves to emphasise the prevalence of the horrors the speaker describes.



London

I wander thro’ each charter’d street,
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every black’ning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro’ midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

to appall: *innorridire/disgustare*
ban: *divieto*
to blast: *asciugare*
to blight: *rovinare*
charter’d: *monopolizzato*
hapless: *sfortunato*
harlot: *prostituta*
hearse: *carro funebre*
to mark: *notare*
woe: *dolore*

*Io vago attraverso le strade monopolizzate.
Vicino a dove il Tamigi monopolizzato scorre,
E noto in ogni faccia che incontro
Segni di debolezza, segni di dolore.*

*In ogni pianto di ogni uomo,
In ogni pianto di paura di infante,
In ogni voce: in ogni divieto,
Sento le catene forgiate dalla mente.*

*Come il pianto dello spazzacamino
Disgusta ogni chiesa annerita;
E il sospiro del soldato sfortunato,
Scorre nel sangue dai muri del palazzo.*

*Ma attraverso la maggior parte delle strade a mezzanotte sento
Come la maledizione della giovane prostituta
Asciuga la lacrima dell'infante appena nato.
E infetta il carro funebre del matrimonio.*

COMPREHENSION

1 Answer the questions.

1. Where is the story set? Are specific places mentioned?
2. When is the poem set? A specific or a general period of time? Can you find direct reference to time in the story?
3. What elements make you understand the story is set in the past/present/future?
4. What are the three institutions Blake attacks in the poem?
5. Why do you think William Blake never actually says the word "London" in the poem?
6. What aspects of Romantic literature are evident in this poem?

ANALYSIS

2 Read the text again and answer the questions.

1. Who is the speaker? Why do you think this is so?
2. What are the themes dealt with in the first stanza? Why does the author use the words "wander" and "charter'd"?
3. Why does the poet repeat the word "every" in the second stanza so many times?
4. What does the expression "The mind-forg'd manacles" mean?
5. Why does Blake use the capital letter for specific words?
6. Who are the protagonists of the third stanza? Why and what do they represent?
7. What does the poet criticise in the first part of the last stanza?
8. What does the poet criticise in the last line?

FURTHER ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Work in groups and write a short presentation and commentary of the poem, focusing on the main themes and on Blake's aim in writing this poem.