William Blake  (1757-1827)

Performer - Culture & Literature
Marina Spiazzi, Marina Tavella, Margaret Layton © 2012
1. Life

- Born into a family of humble origin in 1757.
- Trained as an engraver, he practised this craft until he died.
- Was deeply aware of the great political and social issues of his age.
- A political freethinker, he supported the French Revolution and remained a radical throughout his life.
William Blake (1757-1827)

1. Life

- He had a strong sense of religion.
- The most important literary influence in his life was the Bible.
- He claimed he had visions.
- Died in 1827.
2. Blake the poet

- An **individual** poet, both in terms of his **personal vision** and **technique**.

- Contemporary of the **American War of Independence** and the **French Revolution** → supported abolition of slavery and egalitarian principles.
2. Blake the poet

- Explored the timeless struggle between the role of law and reason and the powers of love and imagination.

- Used symbols as part of a deliberate attempt to avoid any kind of realism. It is the ‘real’ world that prevents man from perceiving the greater Reality that lies behind him.
3. Blake the artist

- Studied the works of Raphael and Michelangelo from the latter he learnt the technique of representing exaggerated muscular bodies.
- Studied the monuments in the old churches of London, particularly Westminster Abbey.
- Later he studied at the Royal Academy of Art.
3. Blake the artist

- Connected **visual arts** and **writing**, creating ‘**illuminated printing**’, a combination of picture and poetic text. He considered the two aspects as a **counterpart** of each other.

- Also made many **illustrations** for other authors’ works, such as Milton’s **Paradise Lost**.
3. Blake the artist

- Many of his paintings dealt with religious subjects.

- Also drew illustrations for the Bible and a cycle of drawings inspired by Dante’s Divine Comedy.
3. Blake the artist

The Ancient of Days

The **colours** are bright and God is represented in an unusual position. His **action** of measuring the sky means the act of creation, and the clouds and the rays of light that start from Him are symbols of the Divine act. The **light** is the symbol of energy and divine power.

William Blake, *The Ancient of Days*, 1794
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3. Blake the artist

The Whirlwind of Lovers

The subject is taken from Dante’s *Commedia*: there is pathos and a dramatic representation of the dead souls.

The colours are duller and darker than those of the previous picture, and the dynamism of the painting is no longer positive and lively, but pitiful and sad.
Blake’s style in the two pictures is **allegorical**; he mainly employs **curved lines** in order to create a dynamic and active sensation.

William Blake, *The Whirlwind of Lovers*, 1824-1826

William Blake, *The Ancient of Days*, 1794
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4. Blake the prophet

- Blake wrote some **prophetic books** (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *America* and *Europe*).
- These books express Blake’s own personal **Romantic** and **revolutionary** beliefs.
- They were published as printed sheets from engraved plates containing **prose**, **poetry** and **illustrations**. The plates were then coloured by Blake himself.

5. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790-1793)

- The book describes the poet’s visit to Hell, a device adopted by Blake from Dante’s *Inferno* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.
- Unlike that of Milton or Dante, Blake’s Hell is not a place of punishment, but contrasts with the authoritarian and regulated Heaven.

William Blake, Title page of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1794
5. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790-1793)

- Blake’s purpose was to reveal to his readers the repressive nature of conventional morality and institutional religion.
- In the most famous part of the book, the Proverbs of Hell, wisdom is conveyed through provocative and paradoxical proverbs. Their purpose is to energise thought.
- The book ends with a series of revolutionary prophecies and exhortations urging the different peoples of the world to rebel against religious and political oppression.
Blake believed in the reality of a spiritual world but he thought that Christianity was responsible for the fragmentation of consciousness and the dualism characterising man’s life. So he had a vision made up of complementary opposites.

‘Good and evil, male and female, reason and imagination, cruelty and kindness’
He stated: ‘without Contraries there is no Progression’.

The possibility of progress is situated in the tension between contraries.

The two states coexist in the human being and in the Creator.

‘Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to Human Existence’

‘The Creator can be at the same time the God of love and innocence and the God of energy and violence’
7. Blake’s imagination

- Blake considered **imagination** as the means through which man can **know the world**.
- He did not believe in man’s **rationality**. For him the representatives of a **rationalistic** and **materialistic** philosophy were great **heretics**, since they denied the value of **faith** and **intuition**.
- For him, **faith** and **intuition** were the only source of **true knowledge** and he denied the truth of **sensory experience**.
- The **internal mind** really builds the **external world** that man sees.
8. The poet

The poet becomes a sort of prophet who can see more deeply into reality and who also tries to warn man against the evils of society.

William Blake, Portrait of Newton, 1795
9. *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794)

- *Songs of Innocence* is written in the **pastoral mode** with **simple imagery**. It deals with **childhood** as the symbol of **innocence**.

- *Songs of Experience* is more **complex** and **pessimistic**. The poems **pair** those of *Songs of Innocence*. 

Cover engraving from the 1826 edition of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*
9. *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794)

- The world of **innocence** is full of **joy** and **happiness**, while the world of **experience** is full of **cruelty** and **injustice**.
- The **child** becomes the object of Blake’s poetry because he is closer than the adult to the original state of **harmony with nature**.
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10. Blake’s style

Blake uses complex symbolism.

However, his language and syntax are simple. He often adopts an apparently naive style, using a plain, Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, as well as repetitions, refrains and regular stress patterns which are typical of ballads and children’s songs and hymns.

To him a lamb or a tiger, a chimney sweeper or a London street were visions; they were never to be taken at their face value.

Child: innocence

Father: experience

Christ: higher innocence
11. The Chimney Sweeper

- **Theme:** the exploitation of children.
- **Key images:** the cry ‘weep’, darkness, the angel.
- **Devices:**
  - **Symbols** of innocence (lamb, happy, dance, sing).
  - **Contrast** (black / white).
  - **Irony** to criticise the institution.

William Blake, *The Chimney Sweeper*, in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 1794
• **Theme:** the causes of man’s lack of freedom.

• **Key images:** ‘The mind-forg’d manacles’; three victims: the chimney-sweeper, the soldier and the prostitute.

• **Devices:**
  - **Repetitions:** ‘(in) every’ and ‘mark(s)’.
  - **Metaphors:** ‘blackening’ contrasts with ‘appals’ (makes pale).
  - **Hyperbole:** ‘runs down in palace walls’.

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William Blake, *London*, in *Songs of Experience*, 1794

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13. The Lamb

- **Theme:** innocence and the creation.
- **Key images:** the Lamb, the child, Christ.
- **Devices:**
  - Repeated questions, directed to the lamb.
  - Answers given in the second stanza.
  - Idyllic setting of ‘stream and mead’.
  - Image of God ➔ both the ‘Good shepherd’ and ‘The Lamb of God’.

William Blake, *The Lamb*, in *Songs of Innocence*, 1789
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14. The Tyger

- **Theme:** The power of creation
- **Key images:** The tiger as seen by Blake’s poetic imagination: ‘fearful symmetry’; ‘burning bright... fire of thine eyes’.
- **Devices:**
  - Repeated (rhetorical) questions.
  - **Hammering rhythm** (like casting a spell).
  - The Creator presented as a blacksmith.
- **Reference to myth:** Icarus and Prometheus.