

William Blake



Three portraits of William Blake; **Thomas Philips, *Portrait 1807*. Plaster Head by James De Ville** (phrenologist) from a death mask. **Catherine Blake, *Portrait of the young William Blake***

William Blake (1757 – 1827) was an English poet, painter, and printmaker. Largely unrecognised during his lifetime, Blake is now considered a seminal figure in the history of the poetry and visual arts of the Romantic Age. What he called his prophetic works were said by 20th-century critic Northrop Frye to form "what is in proportion to its merits the least read body of poetry in the English language". His visual artistry led 21st-century critic Jonathan Jones to proclaim him "far and away the greatest artist Britain has ever produced".

He had a headstrong temperament and attended school only long enough to learn reading and writing, leaving at the age of ten, and was otherwise educated at home by his mother Catherine Blake. The Blakes were English Dissenters. The Bible was an early and profound influence on Blake, and remained a source of inspiration throughout his life.

He was enrolled in drawing classes at Pars's drawing school in the Strand. He read avidly on subjects of his own choosing. During this period, Blake made explorations into poetry; his early work displays knowledge of Ben Jonson, Edmund Spenser, and the Psalms.

Royal Academy

On 8 October 1779, Blake became a student at the Royal Academy in Old Somerset House, near the Strand. There, he rebelled against what he regarded as the unfinished style of fashionable painters such as Rubens, championed by the school's first president, Joshua Reynolds. Over time, Blake came to detest Reynolds' attitude towards art, especially his pursuit of "general truth" and "general beauty". Reynolds wrote in his Discourses that the "disposition to abstractions, to generalising and classification, is the great glory of the human mind"; Blake responded, in marginalia to his personal copy, that "To Generalize is to be an Idiot; To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit". Blake also disliked Reynolds' apparent humility, which he held to be a form of hypocrisy. Against Reynolds' fashionable oil painting, Blake preferred the Classical precision of his early influences, Michelangelo and Raphael.

Gordon Riots

Blake's first biographer, Alexander Gilchrist, records that in June 1780 Blake was swept up by a rampaging mob that stormed Newgate Prison. The mob attacked the prison gates with shovels and pickaxes, set the building ablaze, and released the prisoners inside. Blake was reportedly in the front rank of the mob during the attack. The riots, in response to a parliamentary bill revoking sanctions against Roman Catholicism, became known as the Gordon Riots and provoked a flurry of legislation from the government of George III, and the creation of the first police force.



Blake met Catherine Boucher in 1782 when he was recovering from a relationship that had culminated in a refusal of his marriage proposal. He recounted the story of his heartbreak for Catherine and her parents, after which he asked Catherine, "Do you pity me?" When she responded affirmatively, he declared, "Then I love you." Blake married Catherine – who was five years his junior – on 18 August 1782 in St Mary's Church, Battersea. Illiterate, Catherine signed her wedding contract with an X.

This engraving after **Fuseli, *The Fertilisation of Egypt*** (1791) shows his early training and consummate skill as a printmaker.

Blake started engraving copies of drawings of Greek antiquities purchased for him by his father, a practice that was preferred to actual drawing. Within these drawings Blake found his first exposure to classical forms through the

work of Raphael, Michelangelo, Maarten van Heemskerck and Albrecht Dürer.

In late 1794, publisher Richard Edwards invited William Blake to illustrate a new edition of *The Complaint: or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, & Immortality*, a long poem by Edward Young (1681–1765) written in blank verse. First published in parts between 1742 and 1745, the poem's lasting legacy is in the phrase "procrastination is the thief of time".

Blake's illustrations were made 1795-97. He began by making a series of 537 watercolour illustrations from which he planned to engrave about 200 for publication. The first volume – with forty-three engravings by Blake – was published in 1797, but it was a commercial failure and the expensive publishing venture was abandoned.



The text is set within rectangular panels, with the illustrations occupying the margins; a convention which he later abandoned in favour of integrating text and illustration into a unified, artistic whole.



The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is a series of texts written in imitation of biblical prophecy but expressing Blake's own intensely personal Romantic and revolutionary beliefs, and is probably the most influential of his works. Like his other books, it was published as printed sheets from etched plates containing prose, poetry and illustrations. The plates were then coloured by Blake and his wife Catherine.

The work was composed between 1790 and 1793, in the period of radical ferment and political conflict immediately after the French Revolution.

The title is an ironic reference to Emanuel Swedenborg's theological work *Heaven and Hell*, published in Latin 33 years earlier. Swedenborg is directly cited and criticised by Blake in several places in the Marriage. The book describes the poet's visit to Hell, a device adopted by Blake from Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Unlike that of Milton or Dante, Blake's conception of Hell begins not as a place of punishment, but as a source of unrepressed, somewhat Dionysian energy, opposed to the authoritarian and regulated perception of Heaven. Blake's purpose is to create what he called a "memorable fancy" in order to reveal the repressive nature of conventional morality and institutional religion.

Blake's theory of contraries was not a belief in opposites but rather a belief that each person reflects the contrary nature of God, and that progression in life is impossible without contraries. Moreover, he explores the contrary nature of reason and of energy, believing that two types of people existed: the "energetic creators" and the "rational organisers", or, as he calls them in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the "devils" and "angels". Both are necessary to life according to Blake.

Blake's text has been interpreted in many ways. It certainly forms part of the revolutionary culture of the period. The references to the printing-house suggest the underground radical printers producing revolutionary pamphlets at the time. Ink-blackened printworkers were comically referred to as a "printer's devil", and revolutionary publications were regularly denounced from the pulpits as the work of the devil.

The Ancient of Days was originally published as the frontispiece to the 1794 work *Europe a Prophecy*. It draws its name from one of God's titles in the Book of Daniel and shows Urizen crouching in a circular design with a cloud-like background. His outstretched hand holds a compass over the darker void below. Early critics of Blake noted the work as amongst his best, and a favourite of the artist himself.

Representing the event given in the Book of Proverbs viii. 27, "when he set a compass upon the face of the earth," the subject is said to have been one of the 'visions' experienced by Blake. The copy commissioned by Tatham in the last days of Blake's life, for a sum of money exceeding any previous payment for his work, was tinted by the artist while propped up in his bed. After his revisions, Blake is said to have, threw it from him, and with an air of exulting triumph exclaimed, "There, that will do! I cannot mend it."

The image was used as the cover for Stephen Hawking's book *God Created the Integers*.





The Night of Enitharmon's Joy or *The Triple Hecate/Hecate* (1795), painted with deep tones and bold masses, is considered to be one of the most brilliant and significant of Blake's pictures. Depicted is Enitharmon, a female character in Blake's mythology, or Hecate, a Greco-Roman goddess of magic and the underworld. The work presents a nightmarish scene with fantastic creatures.

"She is triple, according to mythology: a girl and a boy hide their heads behind her back. Her left hand lies on a book of magic; her left foot is extended. She is attended by a thistle-eating ass, the mournful owl of false wisdom, the head of a crocodile (blood-thirsty hypocrisy), and a cat-headed bat."

Blake often drew on Michelangelo to create and compose his epic images, including Hecate's, according to a consensus of critics. "Blake is indebted to Michelangelo for many of his giant forms"

The image may also allude to the Three Fates — the Moirai of Greek and the Parcae of Roman mythology. Notwithstanding these allusions, critics point out that a contemporary trigger for Blake's inspiration probably was the return to popularity of Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. As Hecate listens offstage, the three witches, in arranging Macbeth's doom, chant: "Double, double, toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble".

Blake printed his illuminated *Europe a Prophecy* in 1794. The bulk of the book, according to one scholar, "is devoted to the night of Enitharmon's joy, when she establishes her Woman's World with its false religion of chastity and vengeance: a religion of eighteen hundred years, which is the error of official Christianity." In other words, it is said to represent a Feminine Will over a patriarchal Christianity. Blake's character is described as "the Moon of love to Los's Sun", hence its relationship with Hecate, one of the Moon Goddesses alongside Diana/Artemis and Selene. In *Europe: a Prophecy* Enitharmon's night is presented in this way:

*"Now comes the night of Enitharmon's joy!
Who shall I call? Who shall I send?
That Woman, lovely Woman! may have dominion?
Arise O Rintrah thee I call! & Palamabron thee.
Go! tell the human race that Womans love is Sin!
That an Eternal life awaits the worms of sixty winters
In an allegorical abode where existence hath never come:
Forbid all Joy, & from her childhood shall the little female
Spread nets in every secret path."*

There are other literary sources for the myth of Hecate, such as *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, and Blake himself: "The Gods all Serve her at her will; so great her Power is, like fabled Hecate, she doth bind them to her law." (Blake, *Then She bore Pale desire...*). But not only in his poetry *The Triple Hecate* makes a connection: it is seen as an opposition to his painting *Pity*, circa 1795, where the piety provides a "possibility of salvation" in the fallen world. Here, both witchcraft and curse, associated with Hecate, are factors to human perdition. Geoffrey Keynes wrote about it:

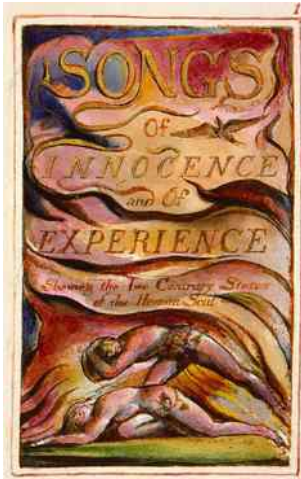
"Hecate, an infernal Trinity, crouches in the centre. An evil winged spectre hovers over her. On her left an ass is grazing on rank vegetation, while an owl and a great toad watch from between rocks. The theme of the Moon Goddess is derived from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*."

The Song of Los (1795) is one of William Blake's epic poems, known as his prophetic books. The frontispiece shows Urizen presiding over the decline of morality.

The poem consists of two sections, "Africa" and "Asia". In the first section Blake catalogues the decline of morality in Europe, which he blames on both the African slave trade and enlightenment philosophers. The book provides a historical context for three other 'prophetic' books: *The Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania*, and *The Book of Los*, and also ties those more obscure works to *The Continental Prophecies*, "*Europe*" and "*America*". The second section consists of Los urging revolution.

The work begins with a title page image of an empty, dead world with an old man looking at the title of the work. The story of the work begins in Africa with Los singing of Adam, Noah, and Moses and how they were granted laws by Urizen. This involve abstractions being granted to Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato, a gospel being given to Jesus, a bible for Mahomet, and a book on war given to Odin. These caused the world to fail, as they were chains that bound the mind.





An illustrated collection of poems appeared in two phases in 1789; five years later he bound these poems with a set of new poems in a volume titled **Songs of Innocence and of Experience Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul**.

"Innocence" and "Experience" are definitions of consciousness that rethink Milton's existential-mythic states of "Paradise" and "Fall". Blake's categorisation of our modes of perception coordinates with a chronology that would become standard in Romanticism: childhood is a state of protected innocence rather than original sin, but not immune to the fallen world and its institutions.

This world sometimes impinges on childhood itself, and in any event becomes known through "experience", a state of being marked by the loss of childhood vitality, by fear and inhibition, by social and political corruption, and by the manifold oppression of Church, State, and the ruling classes.

The volume's "Contrary States" are sometimes signalled by patently repeated or contrasted titles: in *Innocence*, *Infant Joy*, in *Experience*, *Infant Sorrow*; in *Innocence*, *The Lamb*, in *Experience*, *The Fly* and *The Tyger*. The stark simplicity of poems such as *The Chimney Sweeper* and *The Little Black Boy* display Blake's acute sensibility to the realities of poverty and exploitation that accompanied the "Dark Satanic Mills" of the Industrial Revolution.

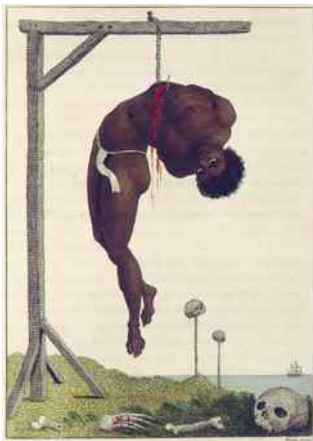
Blake's inspiration and aim:

Blake uses the simple structure of short, lyrical poems to subtly question and criticise the practices of his society. In *The Chimney Sweeper* and *The Little Black Boy*, Blake attacks the negative treatment of racial minorities and the suffering caused by child labour. Most interestingly, Blake uses much of Experience to highlight the negative influence of the Church, which he saw as corrupt and repressive. This can be seen especially in *The Garden of Love* and *A Little Boy Lost*.

For Blake, we need to break the "mind-forg'd manacles" (*London*) caused by repressive religion, and embrace natural and physical pleasures as harmonious and essential for healthy development of content adulthood. As seen in *The Little Girl Lost*, *The Little Girl Found* and *A Little Girl Lost*, Blake holds hope for the future, that society will reject the flawed doctrine and embrace a pastoral life with a combination of the good of innocent and experienced perception.

London, from Songs of Experience, relief etching

In 1788, aged 31, Blake experimented with relief etching, a method he used to produce most of his books, paintings, pamphlets and poems. The process is also referred to as illuminated printing, and the finished products as illuminated books or prints. Illuminated printing involved writing the text of the poems on copper plates with pens and brushes, using an acid-resistant medium. Illustrations could appear alongside words in the manner of earlier illuminated manuscripts. He then etched the plates in acid to dissolve the untreated copper and leave the design standing in relief (hence the name).



This is a reversal of the usual method of etching, where the lines of the design are exposed to the acid, and the plate printed by the intaglio method. Relief etching was intended as a means for producing his illuminated books more quickly than via intaglio. Stereotype, a process invented in 1725, consisted of making a metal cast from a wood engraving, but Blake's innovation was, as described above, very different. The pages printed from these plates were hand-coloured in water colours and stitched together to form a volume. Blake used illuminated printing for most of his well-known works, including *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, *The Book of Thel*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Jerusalem*.

A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs to the Gallows (1796) is an illustration to J. G. Stedman's *Narrative, of a Five Years' Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796)

Blake abhorred slavery and believed in racial and sexual equality. Several of his poems and paintings express a notion of universal humanity: "As all men are alike (tho' infinitely various)". In one poem, narrated by a black child, white and black bodies alike are described as shaded groves or clouds, which exist only until one learns "to bear the beams of love":

*“When I from black and he from white cloud free,ñ
 And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:ñ
 Ill shade him from the heat till he can bear,ñ
 To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.
 And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,ñ
 And be like him and he will then love me.”*

Blake retained an active interest in social and political events throughout his life, and social and political statements are often present in his mystical symbolism. His views on what he saw as oppression and restriction of rightful freedom extended to the Church. His spiritual beliefs are evident in *Songs of Experience* (1794), in which he distinguishes between the Old Testament God, whose restrictions he rejected, and the New Testament God whom he saw as a positive influence.

Lambeth

From 1790 to 1800, William Blake lived in North Lambeth, London, at 13 Hercules Buildings, Hercules Road. Much of his most important prints and illustrated books were made there with the assistance of his wife, Catherine, who he had taught to read and write as well as draw and paint. The property was demolished in 1918, but the site is now marked with a plaque.

He had a studio at the new house that he used while writing what were later called his "Lambeth Books", which included *The Song of Los* in 1795. Like the others under the title, all aspects of the work, including the composition of the designs, the printing, the colouring and the selling of them, happened at his home.



12 Hercules Buildings 1916

When William and Catherine lived here there were open fields to the side and in front to the river, and it was a reasonably salubrious district. Within a few minutes walk, however, the streets south of the church, bordering the river were narrow and run down, where people lived in cramped, unhealthy and pitiable conditions. It was walking these streets that inspired his cry of protest in his *Songs of Experience* in poems such as *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-sweeper's 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.*

Although Blake has become better known for his relief etching, his commercial work largely consisted of intaglio engraving, the standard process of engraving in the 18th century in which the artist incised an image into the copper plate, a complex and laborious process, with plates taking months or years to complete, but as Blake's contemporary, John Boydell, realised, such engraving offered a "missing link with commerce", enabling artists to connect with a mass audience and became an immensely important activity by the end of the 18th century.

A series of 70 mosaic panels of Blake's poems are placed in the nearby railway tunnels of Waterloo Station.



Portrait of Catherine

The Sick Rose

*O Rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.*



1792 A year of Revolution

February 1792 Publication of the second part of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, defending the French Revolution and the right of citizens to seize power when the government didn't safeguard their natural rights. Inspired by the French Revolution and the revolt of the American colonies societies were formed to discuss reforms of parliament, democratic representation and the abolition of the monarchy. Membership was largely constituted of tradesmen, artisans, publishers, printers, authors and artists.



On August 15th a times correspondent reported from Paris that a 'mob' of 30,000 men, women and children went to the Thuilleries and forced the Palace doors, a great many people were killed and the King, Queen and Dauphin fled to the National Assembly for protection. A tumultuous debate followed, after which a decree was passed declaring the KING IS DETHRONED.

The engraving of 1792, *Invasion of the Cellars* after **Zoffany** portrays a riotous crowd completely out of control. Such images terrified the authorities in London.

Other reports state that on the 10th August 11,000 persons were massacred in Paris, and from 4th to 6th September a further 12,000 were slaughtered, 'their trunkless heads and mangled bodies carried about the streets on pikes.'

Fearing a similar popular uprising in England May 1792 saw the publication of the Royal Proclamation against seditious writings – signalling the beginning of Prime minister William Pitt's Reign of Terror and strenuous efforts to seek out and destroy any society or individual deemed to be questioning the constitution or the rights of the hereditary Monarchy.

In response to these events, and fearful of revolution and sedition spreading to England, on 20th November the newly formed '**Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers**' met at an inn in The Strand. In the chair one John Reeves esq. A public announcement was made calling on 'loyal' citizens to denounce supporters and societies for reform, and print shops and publishers of seditious material; and for parishes throughout the land declare their loyalty.

The borough of Lambeth was the first borough south of the Thames to declare.

William and Catherine's print shop was well known – the large printing press clearly visible in the front room. He was the only one of his revolutionary friends who had the courage to wear the *bonnet rouge* openly in the street. They had lived in the community for two years and had friends amongst their neighbours, but in December a delegation arrived at their door with a declaration of loyalty which they refused to sign.



Pity (c1795) is a colour print on paper, finished in ink and watercolour; one of the group known as the "Large Colour Prints". Along with his other works of this period, it was influenced by the Bible, Milton, and Shakespeare. The work is unusual, as it is a literal illustration of a double simile from Macbeth, found in the lines:

*And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air.*
- Macbeth (1.7.21–23)

Like other members of the group it is a monotype produced by printing from a matrix consisting of paint on gessoed millboard,

with each impression then finished by hand. By this unusual means Blake could obtain up to three impressions from a single painting.

Martin Butlin wrote that this colour print is one of the most inspired of all 'literal' illustrations of a text in the history of art. In fact, "pity and air", two words of the Shakespeare's verses, are also two motifs used by Blake in this picture: a female cherub leans down to snatch the baby from its mother.

Pity is seen as in opposition to Blake's print *The Night of Enitharmon's Joy* (c. 1795) — which shows a Hecate surrounded by fantastic creatures and macabre elements of a nightmare — because it provides a "possibility of salvation" in the fallen world through pity. Both prints refer to Macbeth. As Nicholas Rawlinson has noted, the play was undergoing a major revival in popularity at the time, being performed nine times in 1795.

The image is a personification of a Christian element that some critics, however, argue was a negative virtue for Blake, since pity is associated with "the failure of inspiration and division".

In **Newton** (1795) Isaac Newton is shown sitting naked and crouched on a rocky outcropping covered with algae, apparently at the bottom of the sea. His attention is focused upon diagrams he draws with a compass upon a scroll that appears to unravel from his mouth. The compass is a smaller version of that held by Urizen in Blake's *The Ancient of Days*.



Blake's opposition to the Enlightenment was deeply rooted. In his annotation to his own engraving of the classical character Laocoön, Blake wrote "Art is the Tree of Life. Science is the Tree of Death." Newton's theory of optics was especially offensive to Blake, who made a clear distinction between the vision of the "vegetative eye" and spiritual vision. The deistic view of God as a distant creator who played no role in daily affairs was anathema to Blake, who claimed to regularly experience visions of a spiritual nature. He contrasts his "four-fold vision" to the "single vision" of Newton, whose "natural religion" of scientific materialism he characterized as sterile. Newton was incorporated into Blake's infernal trinity along with the philosophers Francis Bacon and John Locke.

Blake's Newton demonstrates his opposition to the "single-vision" of scientific materialism: Newton fixes his eye on a compass (recalling Proverbs 8:27, an important passage for Milton) to write upon a scroll that seems to project from his own head.

*I turn my eyes to the Schools & Universities of Europe
And there behold the Loom of Locke whose Woof rages dire
Washd by the Water-wheels of Newton. black the cloth
In heavy wreathes folds over every Nation; cruel Works
Of many Wheels I view, wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic
Moving by compulsion each other: not as those in Eden: which
Wheel within Wheel in freedom revolve in harmony & peace.*



Blake's print would later serve as the basis for Eduardo Paolozzi's 1995 bronze sculpture *Newton*, which resides in the piazza of the British Library.

Blake believed the paintings of Sir Joshua Reynolds, which depict the naturalistic fall of light upon objects, were products entirely of the "vegetative eye", and he saw Locke and Newton as "the true progenitors of Sir Joshua Reynolds' aesthetic".

The popular taste in the England of that time for such paintings was satisfied with mezzotints, prints produced by a process that created an image from thousands of tiny dots upon the page. Blake saw an analogy between this and Newton's particle theory of light. Accordingly, Blake never used the technique, opting rather to develop a method of engraving purely in fluid line, insisting that:

'..a Line or Lineament is not formed by Chance a Line is a Line in its Minutest Subdivision[s] Strait or Crooked It is Itself & Not Intermeasurable with or by any Thing Else Such is Job.'

It has been supposed that, despite his opposition to Enlightenment principles, Blake arrived at a linear aesthetic that was in many ways more similar to the Neoclassical engravings of John Flaxman than to the works of the Romantics, with whom he is often classified. However, Blake's relationship with Flaxman seems to have grown more distant after Blake's return from Felpham, and there are surviving letters between Flaxman and Hayley wherein Flaxman speaks ill of Blake's theories of art. Blake further criticized Flaxman's styles and theories of art in his responses to criticism made against his print of Chaucer's *Caunterbury Pilgrims* in 1810.

Blake's marriage to Catherine was close and devoted until his death. Blake taught Catherine to write, and she helped him colour his printed poems. Gilchrist refers to "stormy times" in the early years of the marriage. Some biographers have suggested that Blake tried to bring a concubine into the marriage bed in accordance with the beliefs of the more radical branches of the Swedenborgian Society, but other scholars have dismissed these theories as conjecture. There is a suggestion that William and Catherine's first daughter and last child was stillborn, for which *The Book of Thel* is an elegy, explaining the unusual ending with a child conceived as dead.

William Blake's House in Felpham.

In 1800 until 1803, Blake moved to a cottage at Felpham, in Sussex (now West Sussex), to take up a job illustrating the works of William Hayley, a minor poet. It was in this cottage that Blake began *Milton* (the title page is dated 1804, but Blake continued to work on it until 1808). The preface to this work includes a poem beginning "And did those feet in ancient time", which became the words for the anthem "Jerusalem". Over time, Blake began to resent his new patron, believing that Hayley was uninterested in true artistry, and preoccupied with "the meer drudgery of business". Blake's disenchantment with Hayley has been speculated to have influenced *Milton: a Poem*, in which Blake wrote that "Corporeal Friends are Spiritual Enemies".



Blake's trouble with authority came to a head in August 1803, when he was involved in a physical altercation with a soldier, John Schofield. Blake was charged not only with assault, but with uttering seditious and treasonable expressions against the king. Schofield claimed that Blake had exclaimed "Damn the king. The soldiers are all slaves." Blake was cleared in the Chichester assizes of the charges. According to a report in the Sussex county paper, "[T]he invented character of [the evidence] was ... so obvious that an acquittal resulted". Schofield was later depicted wearing "mind forged manacles" in an illustration to *Jerusalem*.

Blake is sometimes considered (along with Mary Wollstonecraft and her husband William Godwin) a forerunner of the 19th-century "free love" movement, a broad reform tradition starting in the 1820s that held that marriage is slavery, and advocated the removal of all state restrictions on sexual activity such as homosexuality, prostitution, and adultery, culminating in the birth control movement of the early 20th century.

The 19th-century "free love" movement was not particularly focused on the idea of multiple partners, but did agree with Wollstonecraft that state-sanctioned marriage was "legal prostitution" and monopolistic in character. It has somewhat more in common with early feminist movements (particularly with regard to the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, whom Blake admired). Blake was critical of the marriage laws of his day, and generally railed against traditional Christian notions of chastity as a virtue. At a time of tremendous strain in his marriage, in part due to Catherine's apparent inability to bear children, it is said that he directly advocated bringing a second wife into the house (although some authorities have questioned this.) When he realised that Catherine was upset by the suggestion he dropped the idea. His poetry suggests that external demands for marital fidelity reduce love to mere duty rather than authentic affection, and decries jealousy and egotism as a motive for marriage laws.



It is believed that the young Blake placed too much emphasis on following impulses, and that the older Blake had a better formed ideal of a true love that sacrifices self. Some celebration of mystical sensuality remains in the late poems (most notably in Blake's denial of the virginity of Jesus's mother). However, the late poems also place a greater emphasis on forgiveness, redemption, and emotional authenticity as a foundation for relationships.

The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with Sun (1805) is one of a series of illustrations of Revelation 12.

Also around this time (circa 1808), Blake gave vigorous expression of his views on art in an extensive series of polemical annotations to the *Discourses* of Sir Joshua Reynolds, denouncing the Royal Academy as a fraud and proclaiming, "To Generalize is to be an Idiot".

Nebuchadnezzar (c1805) is a colour monotype print with additions in ink and watercolour portraying the Old Testament Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II by the English poet, painter and printmaker William Blake. Taken from the Book of Daniel, the legend of Nebuchadnezzar tells of a ruler who through hubris lost his mind and was reduced to animalistic madness and eating "grass as oxen".

According to the biographer Alexander Gilchrist (1828–1861), in Blake's print the viewer is faced with the "mad king crawling like a hunted beast into a den among the rocks; his tangled golden beard sweeping the ground, his nails like vultures' talons, and his wild eyes full of sullen terror. The powerful frame is losing semblance of humanity, and is bestial in its rough growth of hair, reptile in the toad-like markings and spottings of the skin, which takes on unnatural hues of green, blue, and russet."



Nebuchadnezzar was part of the so-called Large Colour Prints; a series begun in 1795 of twelve 43 cm × 53 cm colour monotype prints, of most of which three copies were made. These were painted on millboard, after which the board was put through Blake's printing-press with a sheet of dampened paper to make the prints. After they were printed, Blake and his wife Catherine added ink and watercolour to the impressions. It existed in four impressions (copies), now in: Tate Britain in London, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and a fourth which has been missing since 1887. Blake believed that Nebuchadnezzar was connected to the Christian apocalypse and to his personal view on the stages of human development.



Penance of St. John Chrysostom



Dürer, *Penance of St. John Chrysostom*

Blake had a great admiration for Durer. It has been suggested that this engraving might be the source for his Nebuchadnezzar.

Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Werewolf* (detail) 1512

Another source, suggested by Sir Kenneth Clarke, is the woodcut by Cranach the Elder.

Good and Evil Angels struggling over a child (1795-c1805)

In his annotations to a text by the poet and philosopher Lavater, Blake claimed that 'Active Evil is better than Passive Good', rendering the figures in this picture somewhat ambiguous. Perhaps the chain attached to the 'evil' angel's ankle suggests the curtailing of energy by misguided rational thought?



Sir Jeffrey Chaucer and the Twenty Nine Pilgrims on their Journey to Canterbury c1808

Blake clearly regarded the Chaucer subject as an attempt to win patronage for himself. Having conceived the idea of portraying the characters in Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims, Blake approached the dealer Robert Cromek with a view to marketing an engraving. Knowing that Blake was too eccentric to produce a popular work, Cromek promptly commissioned Thomas Stothard to execute the concept. When Blake learned that he had been cheated, he broke off contact with Stothard, formerly a friend.

He set up an independent exhibition in his brother's haberdashery shop in the Soho district of London. The exhibition was designed to market his own version of the Chaucer illustration, along with other works. As a result he wrote his Descriptive Catalogue of 1809, which contains what Anthony Blunt has called a "brilliant analysis" of Chaucer.

The Catalogue contains a diatribe against those artists he excoriated for a lack of design and form. He maintained that 'Colouring does not depend on where the Colours are put, but on where the lights and darks are put, and all depends on Form or Outline, on where that is put; where that is wrong, the Colouring never can be right; and it is always wrong in Titian and Correggio, Rubens and Rembrandt. Till we get rid of Titian and Correggio, Rubens and Rembrandt, We never shall equal Rafael and Albert Durer, Michael Angelo, and Julio Romano.

The exhibition was very poorly attended,



Imagination of A man who Mr Blake has rec[eive]d instruct[ion] in Painting &c, from The Visionary Self-portrait of William Blake (c.1818)

The Visionary Heads is a series of black chalk and pencil drawings produced by William Blake after 1818 by request of John Varley, the watercolour artist and astrologer. The subjects of the sketches, many of whom are famous historical and mythical characters, appeared to Blake in visions during late night meetings with Varley, as if sitting for portraits. The drawings are contained in three sketchbooks and there are a number of loose leaves indicating the existence of a fourth sketchbook. Like most of Blake's other works, they have been subject to academic scrutiny and study.

Visionary Head, *The Ghost of a Flea* c1819

From a young age, William Blake claimed to have seen visions. The first may have occurred as early as the age of four when, according to one anecdote, the young artist "saw God" when God "put his head to the window", causing Blake to break into screaming. At the age of eight or ten in Peckham Rye, London, Blake claimed to have seen "a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars." According to Blake's Victorian biographer Gilchrist, he returned home and reported the vision and only escaped being thrashed by his father for telling a lie through the intervention of his mother. Though all evidence suggests that his parents were largely supportive, his mother seems to have been especially so, and several of Blake's early drawings and poems decorated the walls of her chamber. On another occasion, Blake watched haymakers at work, and thought he saw angelic figures walking among them.



***The Ghost of a Flea* 1819-20**

1819–1820. Having informed painter-astrologer John Varley of his visions of apparitions, Blake was subsequently persuaded to paint one of them. Varley's anecdote of Blake and his vision of the flea's ghost became well-known.

Blake claimed to experience visions throughout his life. They were often associated with beautiful religious themes and imagery, and may have inspired him further with spiritual works and pursuits. Certainly, religious concepts and imagery figure centrally in Blake's works. God and Christianity constituted the intellectual centre of his writings, from which he drew inspiration. Blake believed he was personally instructed and encouraged by Archangels to create his artistic works, which he claimed were actively read and enjoyed by the same Archangels.

***The Minotaur* from illustrations to Dante's Inferno**

The commission for Dante's Divine Comedy came to Blake in 1826 through Linnell, with the aim of producing a series of engravings. Blake's death in 1827 cut short the enterprise, and only a handful of watercolours were completed, with only seven of the engravings arriving at proof form. Even so, they have earned praise:

'[T]he Dante watercolours are among Blake's richest achievements, engaging fully with the problem of illustrating a poem of this complexity. The mastery of watercolour has reached an even higher level than before, and is used to extraordinary effect in differentiating the atmosphere of the three states of being in the poem'.



***The Whirlwind of Lovers*, Illustration for Dante's Inferno illustrates Hell in Canto V**

Blake's illustrations of the poem are not merely accompanying works, but rather seem to critically revise, or furnish commentary on, certain spiritual or moral aspects of the text.

Because the project was never completed, Blake's intent may be obscured. Some indicators bolster the impression that Blake's illustrations in their totality would take issue with the text they accompany.

In the margin of *Homer Bearing the Sword and His Companions*, Blake notes, "Every thing in Dantes Comedia shews That for Tyrannical Purposes he has made This World the Foundation of All & the Goddess Nature & not the Holy Ghost." Blake seems to dissent from Dante's admiration of the poetic works of ancient Greece, and from the apparent glee with which Dante allots punishments in Hell (as evidenced by the grim humour of the cantos).

At the same time, Blake shared Dante's distrust of materialism and the corruptive nature of power, and clearly relished the opportunity to represent the atmosphere and imagery of Dante's work pictorially. Even as he seemed to be near death, Blake's central preoccupation was his feverish work on the illustrations to Dante's *Inferno*; he is said to have spent one of the very last shillings he possessed on a pencil to continue sketching.



The Simoniac Pope. Illustration for Canto 19, Dante's Divine Comedy (1824-27)



The Stygian Lake with the Ireful Sinners Fighting 1824-27

Beatrice Arriving in Her Car to meet Dante

At the end of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante is guided through Heaven by Beatrice, his ideal woman. Here she is surrounded by the four apostles, depicted as embodiments of the symbolic animals with which they are traditionally associated. Luke resembles an ox, a creature Lavater, the Swiss poet, theologian and philosopher, described as severe and simple, while Mark appears as a lion, which Lavater saw as strong and bold. John has the face of an eagle, which, according to Lavater, means he 'must be a brave man'. Matthew is shown as a man with idealised, Christ-like features that seem to echo those of Beatrice.



Los as he Entered the Door of Death

'Los, the artist-poet-architect, alter ego of Blake himself in the guise of a night watchman, crosses the threshold of a dark grave-like place, his hair and garments blown back by a rush of wind. He raises one hand to salute what lies within; the other holds a brilliant sun to light his way.

Los took his globe of fire to search the interiors of Albions Bosom. In all the terrors of friendship. entering the cave Of despair & death, to search the tempters out...(lines3-5)

'...a decorated border shows thorns beneath Los's feet and manacles at the sides, drawn outside ruled lines; these endow his entry into the grave with a Christ-like significance and hint at the suffering he will find within Albion in his Fallen state. The artist illuminates the darkness of the world by his imagination, and the body passes through death to eternal life.' David Blayney Brown

Blake designed his own mythology, which appears largely in his prophetic books. Within these he describes a number of characters, including "Urizen", "Enitharmon", "Bromion" and "Luvah". His mythology seems to have a basis in the Bible as well as Greek and Norse mythology, and it accompanies his ideas about the everlasting Gospel.

"I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man's. I will not Reason & Compare; my business is to Create."

Words uttered by Los in Blake's *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion*.

One of Blake's strongest objections to orthodox Christianity is that he felt it encouraged the suppression of natural desires and discouraged earthly joy. In *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, Blake says that:

Men are admitted into Heaven not because they have curbed and governed their Passions or have No Passions but because they have Cultivated their Understandings.

On the day of his death (12 August 1827), Blake worked relentlessly on his Dante series. Eventually, it is reported, he ceased working and turned to his wife, who was in tears by his bedside. Beholding her, Blake is said to have cried, "Stay Kate! Keep just as you are – I will draw your portrait – for you have ever been an angel to me." Having completed this portrait (now lost), Blake laid down his tools and began to sing hymns and verses. At six that evening, after promising his wife that he would be with her always, Blake died. Gilchrist reports that a female lodger in the house, present at his expiration, said, "I have been at the death, not of a man, but of a blessed angel."

The Ancients (also known as the Shoreham Ancients) were a group of young English artists and others who were brought together around 1824 by their attraction to archaism in art and admiration for the work of William Blake, who was a generation or two older than the group.

The core members of the Ancients were **Samuel Palmer**, **Edward Calvert** (1799–1883), and **George Richmond**. Except for Palmer, the central members who were artists were all students at the Royal Academy of Arts. They met in Blake's apartment, dubbed the "House of Interpreter" and at the home of Samuel Palmer in the Kent village of Shoreham.

Samuel Palmer, *In a Shoreham Garden* (1820s or early 1830s)



Edward Calvert, *Ideal Pastoral Life* 1829

The Ancients made little impact on the English artistic scene during the ten years or so that the group continued, but several members were later significant artists, and interest in the group has gradually increased since the late 19th-century.

They were the first English manifestation of the formalised artistic "brotherhood", an artistic movement whose aims included elements of communal living and promotion of a general vision for society. Continental groups of this sort included the German Nazarene movement and the Barbours in Paris, and the most successful later English example was to be the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Like these groups they represented an oppositional break-away from the academic art establishment, and looked back to an idealised version of the past.

George Richmond, *Christ and the Woman of Samaria* (1825)

