

Topic Page: [Blake, William, 1757–1827](#)

Definition: **Blake** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

William Blake 1757–1827 Eng. artist, poet, & mystic

Blak•ean \ ■ ■ blā-kē-ən

 [pronunciation](#)

\ adj

Summary Article: **Blake, William** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*



Image from: [Blake, William, watercolour in The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide](#)

English poet, artist, engraver, and visionary, and one of the most important figures of English Romanticism. His lyrics, often written with a childlike simplicity, as in *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794), express a unique spiritual vision. In his 'prophetic books', including *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), he created a vast personal mythology. He illustrated his own works with hand-coloured engravings.

Blake was born in London and, at the age of 14, was apprenticed to an engraver before entering the Royal Academy in 1778. He then became an independent engraver and in 1782 married Catherine Boucher, who collaborated with him on many of his projects. *Songs of Innocence* was the first of his own poetic works that he illustrated and engraved, in his highly individual style which is ultimately based on Italian artists Michelangelo and Raphael. The complementary volume, *Songs of Experience*, which contains the poems 'Tyger! Tyger! burning bright' and 'London', expresses Blake's keen awareness of cruelty and injustice. After 1804 he devoted himself to illustrative work and to large watercolour designs for the biblical *Book of Job* (1821), John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1822), and Dante's *Divina commedia* (1825). Blake's poem 'Jerusalem' (1820) was set to music by Charles Parry.

Early life Blake's father, a hosier, seems to have been a disciple of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, who had prophesied that the year 1757, the date of Blake's birth, would be the 'beginning of a new world'. Blake himself saw visions and conversed with angelic beings, and as a young man was for a time a professed follower of Swedenborg. He was educated at home and at the age of ten he was sent by his father to Henry Pars's (1734–1809) drawing school in London. During his apprenticeship with the engraver James Basire (1730–1802), he was sent to draw Gothic monuments in old London churches. As an independent engraver he met the English sculptor John Flaxman and the English painter Fuseli. From 1800 to 1803 he lived in Felpham, Sussex.

Works His first volume of poems, *Poetical Sketches* (1783), met with an indifferent reception. In 1784 he opened a printseller's shop, having as an assistant his younger brother Robert, who died in 1787. Later that year he experimented in printing with etched copper plates, and claimed that the secret of this process was revealed to him by his brother Robert in a vision. Others, however, say that he learned the process through his friend George Cumberland of Bristol. However, Blake conceived the idea of

simultaneously engraving the texts and illustrations of his poems (afterwards coloured by hand). In 1789 he issued *Songs of Innocence*, the book being entirely designed and produced by himself and his wife. Its simplicity of diction and form owes a great deal to popular hymns. In the same year appeared the *Book of Thel*, the first of his prophetic books. These were followed by *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *The Gates of Paradise* (1793), *America* (1793), *The Vision of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), *Europe* (1794), *The Book of Urizen* (1794), *The Song of Los* (1795), *The Book of Ahaniah* (1795), *Jerusalem* (1804), and *Milton* (1804). He also carried out further experiments in colour printing, producing a series of colour plates in about 1795; for example, *Nebuchadnezzar* (Tate Gallery, London).

In his later years he attracted a group of followers, including the English painter Samuel Palmer, who called themselves 'the Ancients'. Henry Fuseli was another admirer.

Central themes in his work are the importance of passion and imagination, his visionary spirituality – he often claimed that he saw angels during everyday life – and a political radicalism that made him a keen supporter of the French Revolution and of English writer Mary Wollstonecraft, particularly of her views on the rights of women. The frequent targets of his bitter scorn were physical and mental oppression, hypocrisy (particularly religious hypocrisy), and the materialistic rationalism of his age. These themes found their fullest expression in his prophetic books, though their elaborate imagery and complex personal mythology are often obscure.

quotations

Blake, William

essays

Moral Evil and Human Nature

Symbolism – as in William Blake (*Songs of Innocence and Experience*)

documents

Blake, William: 'Jerusalem'

Blake, William: From 'Auguries of Innocence'

Blake, William: 'The Lamb'

Blake, William: 'A Divine Image'

Blake, William: 'Infant Sorrow'

Blake, William: 'A Poison Tree'

Blake, William: 'London'

Blake, William: 'The Sick Rose'

Blake, William: 'The Clod and the Pebble'

Eliot, T S: On William Blake

Palmer, Samuel: On William Blake

didyouknows

Blake, William

weblinks

William Blake Archive

images

Blake, William, watercolour

audios

Blake, William *The Tyger*



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APA

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Harvard

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