

<p>College of Education</p> <p>Department of English</p> <p>Third Stage (Morning)</p> <p>Lecture 6</p>		<p>Instructor: Dr.Mugdad</p>
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WILLIAM BLAKE (1757-1827) - Features and Themes

Family his father denied a small hosiery business which barely supported his family of 6 children (1 of whom died in infancy).

Education he was a self-educated artist with the exception of drawing and engraving: at 10 he went to a drawing school, at 14 he became an apprentice to a famous engraver, later he attended the Royal academy of arts.

Occupations drawing and engraving were to become, with poetry, his most powerful means of expression. He worked for his generous but unimaginative patron *Hayley* until 1804.

Health in 1781 he became ill but recovered thanks to the care of a market gardener, *Boucher*. He died on August 12, 1827 in poverty and obscurity.

Personality he was defined " a visionary poet" because in childhood and throughout his life, he saw visions of prophets and angels. And also of illustrious dead (Dante, Milton and others)

Marriage married *Catherine Boucher* in 1782. They have an happy marriage without children. Blake taught her to read and write and to help him in printing his engravings: her personality was somewhat annihilated by his.

Justice he had problems with justice in 1803. After a quarrel with a drunken soldier he was accused of "seditious expression". Luckily the court knew nothing of his radical poetry and he was acquitted.

Religion he rebelled against conventional religion, rejecting the morality of his day. He denied the existence of God, he was separated from man in fact he was only an imagination to him.

Features and Themes

Vision and imagination: B. rejected the materialistic rationalism of the 18th cent. And stressed the importance of imagination as an instrument of knowledge. He perceived the danger of a materialistic philosophy which relegated man to the status of mechanical instruments in an industrialized world. He found himself in opposition to all the prevailing beliefs and attitudes of his time. He believed that the Adults hadn't imagination because they were corrupt by the industrialized society.

Philosophy: he found necessary to create a philosophy of his own exaltation of the spirit over the body, of instinct and intuition over education, of spiritual vision over the impressions. He saw the infinite and external beyond the material appearance of the finite world.

He hated the timid conservatism and the conformity of the middle class society, the commercial system that underlay the prosperity of the period and the realistic art and literature.

Illuminated printings: it was a particular process of printing, the secret of which he claimed to have learnt from the spirit of his dead brother.

His poems dealt with the realities of the contemporary world and the potentiality of the spiritual world.

Innocence and experience: his contrasting picture of "innocence" and "experience" gave a paradoxical analysis of the human soul which for B. is both innocence and corrupt.

Exaltation of art: he anticipated the aesthetic movement, he believed that art was a creative vision.

Freedom: he rebelled against any form of oppression and slavery, either social, political and religious. He believed that men were born free and that everywhere they were in chains.

Democracy: he opposed any time of institution, including church and state. He sympathized with the downtrodden classes and with women's rights.

Ambiguity: he deliberately cultivated ambiguity and paradox to give his poems wider meanings and to force the reader to think for himself, as well as to accommodate conflicting truths in a single poem or a pair of poems.

The poet was a prophet, whose task was to awaken his generation to the well-organized world of the imagination.

Childhood: represented non only a particular age but a state of soul, a child-like view of life which may persist in maturity, too. Man was close to his divine origin and can partake external truth.

Style:

First type (songs) simple and lyrical language with popular metres (ballad stanza or octosyllabic couplets)

Second type (prophetic works) difficult and committed language with arcane allegory. These types of work were very long and hard to interpret.

Sources and influence: Bible, Milton, Shakespeare, Dante's "Divine Comedy", Spencer, Rousseau (for his idea on childhood, age of innocence), Emmanuel Swedenborg, Swedish mystical philosopher (for him childhood was a state of soul, not an age), Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism.

The Poems of William Blake Themes

Opposition

In the "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," Blake wrote: "Opposition is true friendship." Even the title of that poem points to his theory of a "marriage" between opposites. So much of Blake's work revolves around the theme that opposition represents balance in this world, and a focus on one side over its counter leads to oppression and ignorance. Many people who study Blake argue that he is an extreme radical who was out to abolish any form of order that existed during his lifetime. A close reading of his work dealing with this theme will prove this is not the case. [William Blake](#) was intelligent enough, and courageous enough, to recognize the Age of Reason's over-governing intentions and set out to challenge the notion that sensibility and order are exclusive partners. But Blake did not seek complete anarchy in the world contrary to a lot of interpretation of his work. What the poet did was

illustrate that governing does not have to equal a loss of liberty, and he did so by presenting the opposition to the demanding institutions—church, state, law, monarchy—of his time. By examining ideas and objects in terms of opposites and allowing access to both sides of the scale, man will reach a true state of enlightenment rather than a repressed state where few benefit and most are held in bondage.

The cycle

Cycle is very similar to the theme of opposition. Where Blake argues each object or abstract idea has an equal and valid opposite form, he also contends that nature of these objects and abstractions pass back and forth through one another. Most obvious in “The Season” poems studied here, but also in many other works of Blake, the reader learns of his static belief that nature operates in cyclical terms. William Blake would use this theory as evidential support for the changes of his time, especially the Revolutions that were happening in America and France. Frustrated with a long period of repression in Europe, Blake felt it was time for the people to rise and fight back, and that a political and philosophical cleansing was not only a positive part to the progression of mankind and evolution of societies, but that it was as natural as the rotation of the earth, the changing of the seasons, and the maturity of humans.

Oppression / Repression

Blake lived in a period of aggressive British colonialism, slavery, social casting, Revolutionary change in America and Europe, as well as the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Being a member of the lower class, an uneducated artist (in the formal sense of the term, although Blake was clearly quite intelligent), and considered by many to be an inferior poet bordering madness, Blake experienced firsthand the struggles of oppression. Using words and illustrations, Blake fought back against his countrymen, political leaders, and religious principals(ples). The theme of the repressed is the easiest to identify and extract from Blake’s poetry. Most all of his work will feature a wearisome protagonist who is attempting to revolt against some greater being, whether it be politically, religious, or even the shackles of love and marriage. Many times, this theme is represented in the form of mythology, literary allusion, and the personification of natural objects.

Sexuality

There has been a lot written on the hidden sexual references that are laden in Blake’s poetry. While some of the examples put forward by Blake scholars who seek sexual innuendo in all of Blake’s writings is debatable, there are some instances where sexual reference is prevalent without doubt. There has been some work on homosexuality and homoeroticism appearing in the poems as well, and this is a harder case to prove. Regardless of the directed gender of the metaphor, sexuality does play an important role in Blake’s canon. Due to Blake’s feeling that the human imagination and desire is oppressed in all forms, it makes complete sense that he

would also draw upon the supposed dishonor and immoral act of copulation as just one more facet of persecution against nature's intent. The most repeated reference made to this is the literary allusion repeatedly made to Milton and the fall of man from the Garden of Eden as a result of his sin for love.

Innocence and Experience

Similar to Blake's focus on man's fall from grace, Blake was constantly exploring the moment of lost innocence. This repeated theme in Blake's poetry is almost like a paragon for a combination of all the other themes so far discussed. The theme of the separation, transition, and difference between innocence and experience is highlights the theory of opposition, cycling, repression, and sexuality. Songs of Innocence and Experience aside (which can be found in a separate Grade Saver Note), Blake continues to explore and personify this transient moment and investigate its consequences. Recognizing that in a world of "reason" or "sensibility" we risk forgetting all of our primitive desires and suppressing all of our natural intuitions. Blake attempt to invoke recognition for the imaginative spirit that lies in all of us, but since our moment of experience, has been subjugated to the areas of our mind we are called upon to ignore.

Religion

It is unclear exactly where Blake stood in terms of his beliefs in God. Some contend that through his works it is clear he was an atheist; others argue he was more agnostic. While it is impossible to say for sure, it is not the opinion of this author that Blake had no belief in a super-being, God-like, creator. Blake makes many references to God and a supernatural, omniscient, and omnipresent being. That being said, it is very valid to assume Blake had a distinct disdain for religion as an institution. The theme of religion appears in a lot of Blake's work, and in his "opposition is friendship" manner, he usually counterbalances this theme with references to nature, showing his belief in a natural superpower rather than mythological creator. Blake views religion as one of the paragons of tyranny. Inventing a mythology full of angels, demons, and Gods that mirror a lot of Milton's writings, it becomes obvious that William Blake was fascinated with religion as literary allusion and infuriated with it as a means to suppress man's natural desires.

Poetry/Imagination

By the time William Blake began writing poetry at the very young age of twelve, he was already frustrated with the stale situation English poetry was in at that time. Blake felt poets needed to seek new ways to express their words and ideas and sought to step away from the Classic traditions of English poetry that had not really changed since Spenser (so Blake thought anyhow). As readers, we witness Blake play around with no forms and seek new methods to get across his message. In some of the poems, literary reference becomes the theme itself ("Memory, hither come" and "To

the Muses” for example). William Blake was continuously finding new ways to express his philosophical beliefs and articulate his extraordinary imagination.