

William Blake (1757-1827)

Though he was virtually unknown and either disparaged or ignored by readers and critics during his lifetime, the English poet and visual artist William Blake is now celebrated as one of the major poetic figures of the English Romantic Age. The utter uniqueness of Blake's artistic style—both in terms of his writings and his visual artistry—renders him nearly impossible to properly classify or categorize. While he was a poet of incredible simplicity, especially in his earlier work, much of his later and more mature poetry is marked by sometimes confounding complexity and staggering emotional and philosophical depth. His visual creations, particularly his etchings and engravings, many of which were produced in accordance with or as commentaries upon either his own poems or the poems of others, are also diverse and dynamic. These images have had a tremendous influence upon a wide range of modern and contemporary visual artists.

Blake lived most of his life in London. He was largely self-educated and displayed a brilliant, highly creative mind very early in his life. Blake was apprenticed to an engraver at a young age and began his professional artistic career at the age of 21. As an art student at the Royal Academy, Blake openly rebelled against the prevailing artistic trends at the institution and advocated on behalf of and practiced different approaches to visual artistry. For his entire career as a poet and visual artist, Blake's work was characterized by overt rebellion against popular artistic trends and critical authorities. His earliest poetic works, particularly *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, focus on the theme of rebellion against authority and oppressive social and cultural trends. As he matured as a poet, Blake's works became increasingly private, complex, and challenging. His later poems, particularly his *Four Zoas*, focused on developing an extensive and unique private mythology concerning the creation of existence and the meaning of life.

Blake is respected and admired today for both his unique and powerful poetic and visual creations as well as for his decidedly enlightened and progressive artistic, social, political, and cultural attitudes. Blake was, as demonstrated overtly in much of his early poetry and suggested more subtly throughout much of his later work, a strong advocate for sexual, class, and racial equality, far more so than even his most liberal contemporaries tended to be. While he is certainly a major Romantic artist and poet, his work does not readily connect with that of any of his fellow Romantics. Blake, instead, professes social attitudes and artistic visions that appear to belong more to the attitudes and tastes of people of the 20th and 21st centuries than those of the 18th and 19th centuries.