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Early years in London William Blake was born in

London in 1757, where he was raised in a state of economic hardship and received very little formal education. He showed early signs of artistic talent and, at the age of fourteen, became an apprentice in an engraver's shop, where he worked and learned the craft for seven years.

A period of great creativity The year 1783 marked the beginning of a period of great creativity in Blake's life. He published his first volume of poetry, Poetical Sketches, and invented a new method of printing, which he called 'illuminated printing', a mixture of engraving and painting which he claimed his dead brother Robert had revealed to him in a dream. In 1789 he engraved and published his first great literary work, Songs of

Innocence, followed in 1794 by The Marriage of Heaven and Hell and Songs of Experience. His output was outstanding: he made hand-coloured engravings for both his own poems and other authors'. However, his books were not printed and circulated in sufficient numbers to make his work profitable.

Depression and mysticism His disappointment at this lack of recognition led Blake to depression which verged on insanity. This gloomy period lasted seven years, from 1810 to 1817. He lived in a dirty studio, completely alienated from the material world and claiming that visions of angels, spirits, prophets and devils were inspiring his work.

The last years. After 1818 he stopped writing poetry but continued to produce engravings, including the illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy, which he left uncompleted at his death in 1827. He was buried in a common grave in relative obscurity.

> Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience Blake's greatness as one of the leading poets of English Romanticism is best Works

expressed in his 'illuminated books' - Songs of Innocence (1789) and Songs of Experience (1794) - which he re-printed several times. They are visual and poetic masterpieces where art and text are inextricably linked and mutually enrich each other.

The lyrics in the Songs of Innocence are fresh, direct observations and show life as perceived by children; they read like simple, tender poetry written in a natural, unaffected style. However, these simple poems and illustrations often hide deeper meanings and more intricate patterns than first appear. The poems in the Songs of Experience reflect a gloomier vision of the world, where Evil has the upper hand over Good. Innocence and Experience, 'the two contrary states of the human soul', are shown in direct contrast in such poems as  $\mathit{The Lamb}$  ( $\blacktriangleright$  Text E4) and  $\mathit{The Tyger}$  ( $\blacktriangleright$  Text E5).

**Prophetic Books** In the so-called *Prophetic Books*, a series of long symbolic poems which he started writing in 1789, Blake expresses his condemnation of eighteenth-century political and social tyranny. The inspiration for these poems, which reflect Blake's view that the poet/artist is a prophet inspired by visionary messages, is Milton (▶ pp. D14–22), of whose spirit Blake himself believed to be the living embodiment. The Prophetic Books, which contain some of his most powerful images, denounce authority in often abstruse language through a cast of imaginary mythological characters. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell In the same years a prose work, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, develops Blake's idea that 'without Contraries is no progression'. The work includes aphorisms, anecdotes and the 'Proverbs of Hell', such as 'The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction'.

The Profecies A radical all of his life, Blake sympathised with the forces of revolution and he praised the American War of Independence in America: A Prophecy (1793), and the French Revolution in Europe: A Prophecy (1794). Tyranny and freedom are also the themes of the Book of Urizen (1794).

Milton and Jerusalem Blake's mature work includes visionary epics written and illustrated between 1804 and 1818. The most outstanding works are Milton and Jerusalem. In both works Blake chose to have no conventional theme, characters, rhyme, or metre. He based his works on a series of highly personal symbols which are often difficult to interpret.

A romantic poet and a philosopher Appreciated only by his close circle of friends and admirers such as Coleridge (▶ pp. E24–31) and Keats (▶ pp. E52–63), Blake went largely unnoticed in his own time and in the Victorian period. Critics only discovered his work a full century after his death, and gave due recognition to its originality. Today Blake is acclaimed as one of the most inspired and original poets and painters of his time. His belief in the absolute predominance of Imagination over Reason subverted all the rules that governed eighteenth-century art and poetic forms (▶ Visual Link E5). He rejected the basic principles of the Age of Reason and the classic models that restricted free artistic and poetic expession.

A revolutionary spirit Blake lived in a period of great social changes: the American, French and Industrial Revolutions all took place during his lifetime. Embracing these revolutionary ideas, he became a bitter critic of his own time. He asserted that religion, politics and industrialism were 'dark Satanic Mills' and 'Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion'. He called the new industrial England a 'land of poverty' and expressed his bleak vision in many poems. Unlike other British radicals of his time (Wordsworth, ▶ pp. E16-23) he never disowned his views. He was not daunted by the Reign of Terror in France and continued until his death to believe that 'Active Evil is better than Passive Good'.



William Blake, The Ancient of Days (God as an Architect), 1794.

#### TASK

Use the following key concepts to prepare a report about the life and works of William Blake.

- Born into economic hardship
- Early artistic talent
- Engraver's apprentice
- Illuminated printing
- Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience
- Lack of recognition
- Radical politics
- Largely unnoticed during his time
- Literary and artistic innovator

## LEADIN

Today we accept it as natural that there are many theories, both scientific and religious, to explain how the world was made. William Blake, like most of his contemporaries, believed that God made the world. But what is God really like? Here is the first of Blake's two, very different, depictions of God.

Little Lamb who made thee<sup>1</sup>?

Dost thou<sup>2</sup> know who made thee?

Gave thee life & bid thee feed<sup>3</sup>.

By the stream & o'er the mead<sup>4</sup>;

Gave thee clothing of delight,

Softest clothing wooly<sup>5</sup> bright;

Gave thee such a tender voice,

Making all the vales<sup>6</sup> rejoice!

Little Lamb who made thee?

Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!
He is called by thy<sup>7</sup> name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek<sup>8</sup> & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child and thou a lamb,

We are called by his name. Little Lamb God bless thee.

Little Lamb God bless thee.

#### GLOSSARY

- thee: you
   Dost thou: do you
- wooly: woollyvales: vallevs
- 3. bid thee feed: told you to eat
  - ld you to eat 7. thy: your
- o'er the mead: over the meadow, field
- 8. meek: very quiet and gentle

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William Blake, The Lamb (1789).

#### - LEADIN

Is God always kind and gentle and helpful? Read this poem and find out what Blake thinks.

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# (Songs of Experience)

### The Tyger Ten III 🕠

Tyger<sup>1</sup> Tyger, burning bright, In the forests of the night; What immortal hand or eye, Could frame<sup>2</sup> thy fearful<sup>3</sup> symmetry<sup>4</sup>?

In what distant deeps<sup>5</sup> or skies
Burnt the fire of thine<sup>6</sup> eyes!
On what wings dare<sup>7</sup> he aspire<sup>8</sup>?
What the hand dare seize<sup>9</sup> the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art<sup>10</sup>,
Could twist the sinews<sup>11</sup> of thy<sup>12</sup> heart?

And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread<sup>13</sup> hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? What the chain, In what furnace was thy brain? What the anvil<sup>14</sup>? What dread grasp<sup>15</sup>, Dare its deadly terrors clasp<sup>16</sup>?

When the stars threw down their spears<sup>17</sup> And water'd heaven with their tears: Did he smile his work to see? Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger, Tyger burning bright, In the forests of the night: What immortal hand or eye, Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

#### GLOSSARY \$

- 1. Tyger: tiger
- 2. frame: make3. fearful: frightening
- 4. symmetry: symmetrical form or
- shape
  5. deeps: low,
  underground places
- 6. thine: your
- 7. dare: to be brave enough to do something
- 8. aspire: rise up, fly high like Icarus
- 9. seize: to take hold of something suddenly and violently; here it means 'steal the fire' like Prometheus
- 10. art: skill, ability
- 11. sinews: muscles
- 12.thy: your
- 13.dread: frightening
- 14.anvil: heavy iron block on which pieces of metal are shaped using a hammer
- 15.grasp: the way you hold something
- 16.clasp: hold tightly
- 17. spears: poles with sharp ends, used as a weapon in the past

