

## The Method of Madness

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

(Blake, 339)

In his lifetime, William Blake was known by many names. He was known as an artist who invented a new form of printmaking. He was known as an extremist who wished to bring down the rigid government of Britain. By some, Blake was even known as a pitiable madman who published books full of strange new ideas and struggled to make enough to feed himself. There are many views of Blake, and to some extent, all are true. Blake was a visionary writer who saw many evils within his society and chose to use his skill at writing to thrust these issues into the face of the public. Much of Blake’s writing challenged his society to see the world in an unbiased way, to recognize both evil and good in their world. Blake’s visionary work is still a subject of study and debate even today two hundred years after it was originally written. But why? What makes Blake’s work so thought provoking? A friend of Blake sums up who this mysterious poet was and from this we are able to glimpse at the ingenious man whose essence emanates from his words, “In him you saw the Maker, the Inventor...He was energy itself and shed around him a kindling influence, an atmosphere of life, full of the idea...He was a man without a mask.”(Adams, 326)

William Blake was born in 1757 to a lower-middle-class London family. His

father worked in a hosiery shop and both of his parents were unorthodox in religion and radical in their political views. Because of their viewpoint, Blake's parents and many others around him were in a constant political struggle with the aristocrats of the city. It seems likely that growing up with influences like these may have sown the first seeds of rebellion and radical ideology into Blake's young mind.

At the age of ten, Blake attended a drawing school, a skill at which he excelled. Four years later, he was apprenticed to an engraver and was taught the intricate art of both engraving and printmaking. Though he had no other formal education Blake read literature on a wide array of themes and subjects. He read works such as, history, philosophy, classical literature, the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton and many more English poets. It is not difficult to see that Blake had an inquisitive mind at an early age. In fact, at thirteen he began writing poems of his own. His inspiration for these early works is somewhat confounding though. Blake is quoted as saying that he was inspired to create these poems because of visions that he regularly saw. He said, "I write when commanded by the spirits...and the moment I have written I see the words fly about the room in all directions,"(Blake, 331).

At twenty-five, Blake married Catherine Boucher, a farm girl whom he taught how to read and write. Catherine helped Blake with his literary work and though they had no children, they enjoyed a pleasant life together. It was during this period of his life that Blake created a revolutionary new way of printmaking. He created a way for one to integrate both pictures and text onto one plate. Most print makers at this time would set aside the fusion of these until the final stages of a

print. Blake had created a way to put a unique signature on the visual form of his unique ideas. In 1789, the French Revolution began and with it many long repressed issues were brought to the public's attention in Britain. Blake absorbed the energies that emanated from this conflict and used them to produce some of his greatest literary works. Blake detested the styles of his contemporary writers and so he looked to ballads and poetry models from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for inspiration. From this, he created, "Songs of Innocence," a set of poems that he later added to create one of his most famous works, "Songs of Innocence and of Experience." In this work, Blake puts his philosophical ideas in the form of children's rhymes and explores his two subjects. The prevailing ideas of this work is that, "Innocence, possessed by each of us in childhood or in fantasy, is the proof that we possess the powerful, creative, and divine imagination. Experience is, on the other hand, the analytic state of mind that finds the limits of the world that our fallen perception gives us. Both states 'necessary to human existence,' "(Paananen, 73). The public rarely understood or recognized Blake for his visionary ideas and ingenious writing styles. In 1795, Blake abandoned writing altogether and focused on producing prints. During this time, Blake produced some of the greatest prints in British history. Producing his own prints was expensive, however, and Blake was often hard pressed to make enough money to support him and his wife. In his lifetime, the public never saw Blake for the brilliant writer that he was. In his later years, his art was highly praised by younger artists. However, his poems and other literary works did not come to light until long after the death of their creator.

Blake lived and contributed to the "Romantic Period" of the arts. This was a

time when the cold and calculating ways of reason and science were giving way to new perspectives on how to view the world. Romanticists looked more on the innate spirit of the human being for inspiration and guidance instead of looking to society. They put great emphasis on imagination over reason. Romanticists also sought to evoke pleasant emotions in their audience and often used the theme of romantic love to accomplish this. Blake is quoted to have said that poetry should be pleasing to the listener, but also instruct them on some matter of life.

Blake grew up within an environment where many radically opposed the authorities of the day, so it is no small wonder that Blake came to speak out against them as well. However, Blake was considered radical even among his revolutionary friends. Many of the revolutionaries of the day sought to replace the current government with a more democratic one. While Blake shared many of these ideals he denounced anyone who put too much emphasis on rationality, mechanical science or individual rights. Blake desired an environment that would encourage imagination and spirit. Blake used his skill with a pen to bring to light many of the injustices of the day, injustices that were often caused by the upper-class aristocrats that Blake targeted in many a fiery poem. One such poem is his work, "Holy Thursday." In this poem, Blake describes an event that was carried out by the rich of London. On the holiday known as Ascension Day well-to-do families would take an orphan off the streets or from a charity school and clean them up and bring them to church. Blake mocked these families because as soon as the festivities ended they would return their orphan to the gutter. The orphan none the better for meeting these individuals, but the rich folk felt good because they had done something for a

poor homeless child, hadn't they? This infuriated Blake.

Another subject of Blake's pen was the chimney sweeps. In this time period, chimneys were cleaned by sending gutter children from the ages of five to ten down a chimney to clean it. By the time the child turned ten they were usually too big to fit down a chimney and often had become physically deformed and had breathed in years worth of soot and ash, leading to a cold death back in the gutter. In, "The Chimney Sweeper," Blake tells the tale of a chimney sweep from the view point of the child. In his poem, he expresses the innocence and trust of a helpless child who is nothing more than a tool from the bag to his master.

Blake was rarely one to hold his tongue about anything. This led many people of his age, and even some of the modern age, to see him as being slightly mad in his way of thinking. However, W.J.T. Mitchel has formed a unique and refreshing viewpoint on this aspect of Blake's personality. Mitchel says, "Blake occupies an often ambiguous border line between the divine madness of inspiration, and the demonic madness of incapacity and false or fruitless labor, a madness of irrationality, slavery and compulsive repetition," (Cooper, 585). Mitchel goes on to say, however, "the formalist aesthetic...finds the method in his madness and calls it sanity. But what if we began to see the method *as* the madness," (585). Blake's method of madness is hard at work in all of his poems, but this fusion of new ideas and creative language come together in two of Blake's most beautiful and mystifying poems: "The Lamb" and "The Tyger."

Blake created these two poems to show, "the two contrary states of the human soul," (Blake, 334). In, "The Lamb," Blake paints a portrait of the

innocent thoughts of a child. He describes the nature of the lamb as meek and mild. He also seems to allude to the fact that sometimes children innately understand faith, love and even the nature of God. Children can have faith simply for the sake of faith, but most adults need proof. Adults need to understand. Thus, "The Tyger" was born.

In, "The Tyger," Blake portrays the hunger for knowledge and reason that adults have. He personifies this desire as a fearsome tiger lurking in the depths of a dark forest. In a tone of frightful marvel, he describes the tiger as a wonderful and terrible creature. He contrasts the meek and mild nature of the lamb with the strong and dark essence of the mighty "tyger." A beast to represent the cold methods of reason, the silent, emotionless, unending quest to understand the world. Yet, Blake also makes a curious inquiry to the Maker in this poem. Referring to God Blake asks, "Did he smile his work to see? Did he who made the lamb make thee," (Blake, 339). Blake asks if there is any relationship between reason and innocence. Could these two drastically different views of the world have possibly come from the same source, the same mind? We all grow out of the innocence of a child and into the reason of an adult, but is there another way? Is it possible to live holding reason and innocence in equal shares, to see both sides of the world, to see the truth in the world? Blake himself may not have known the answer.

In his life, William Blake accomplished many things and inspired many people. After his life had ended, he inspired even more. Few in literary history have been able to craft works that express the whims of the heart and mind in the way he did. His mind thrived on the radical ideas that he created. Some called him an artist,

some a poet, some a madman, but if he was truly mad, he was driven to it by  
brilliance.

#### References

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