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**WILLIAM BLAKE- AN ENLIGHTENED VISIONARY**

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William Blake an English painter poet and printmaker is considered as a seminal figure in the history of poetry and visual arts of the Romantic age. In the realm of imaginative painting Blake stands quite alone, and to find any real parallel to this extraordinary man of genius one must go back to the illuminators and sculptors of the twelfth century. Born out of time, with no tradition of imaginative painting to guide him, the intense flame of his genius burns fitfully blazing with an unbearable brilliance. Blake, for his idiosyncratic views is held in high regard by critics for his expressiveness and creativity, and for the philosophical and mystical undercurrents within his work. His paintings and poetry have been characterized as part of the Romantic movement are Pre-Romantic for its large appearance in the 18<sup>th</sup> C. Reverent of the bible but hostile to the Church of England, Blake was influenced by the ideals and ambitions of the French and American Revolutions.

**Key- Words:** Visual arts, Romantic, Bible.

William Blake was a poet, visionary and mystic and all his pictures are poetically conceived. Even his illustrations to his own poems are not simple translations of the written word into pictures, rather the poems and the pictures are counterparts in their proper medium of the image in his mind. These mental images had for Blake an almost objective reality and he did not regard them as poetic fancies but as actual visions of a reality veiled from the sensual eye. Blake started engraving copies of drawings of Greek antiquities purchased for him by his father, a practice that was preferred to actual drawing. Within these drawings Blake found his first exposure to classical forms through the work of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Albrecht Durer. It also accounts to some extent for its medieval quality and for his insistence both in practice and words on the importance of outline. Believing, as he did, in the absolute reality of forms, effects of light and shade, atmosphere, and all that goes to the making of the ordinary retinal picture were to him mere hindrances and veils between him and reality, and accordingly he rejected all the technical improvements from the fifteenth century onwards which were aimed at a more accurate rendering of the retinal vision. With outline alone he could record the silhouette of form and to this he added only just so much light and shade as would give the appearance of solid bulk to the forms represented. He had thus by a purely logical process and without any direct imitation returned to the outlook of the gothic and pre-gothic artists.

In Blake's work the gift of linear pattern, a marked feature of English medieval work, emerges after lying dormant for nearly four hundred years. Artists like George Romney (1734-1802) showed some feeling for line, but Blake extracts from its rhythmic cadences a strange spiritual expressiveness now exultant, now brooding, now terrible. The variety of his rhythms is



extraordinary and his art has a richness of spiritual content which can be compared to Michelangelo alone.

In 1788, aged 31, Blake experimented with “relief etching” a method he used to produce most of his books, paintings, pamphlets and poems. The process, is also referred to as ‘illuminated printing’ and the finished products as illuminated books or prints. Illuminated printing involved, writing the text of the poems on copper plates with pens and brushes, using an acid-resistant medium. Illustrations could appear alongside words in the manner of earlier illuminated manuscripts. He then etched the plates in acid to dissolve the untreated copper and leave the design standing in relief. This is a reversal of the unusual method of etching, where the lines of the design are exposed to the acid and the plate printed by the ‘intaglio method’. Relief etching allowed Blake to control all aspects of a book’s production- he composed the verses, designed the illustrations preparing word and image almost simultaneously on the same copper printing plate, printed the plates, colored each sheet by hand and bound the pages in together in covers. The resulting ‘illuminated books’ were written in a range of forms – prophecies, emblems, pastoral verses, biblical satire and children’s books - and addressed various timely subjects – poverty, child exploitation, racial inequality, tyranny, religious, hypocrisy. These works rank among Blake’s most celebrated achievements. Blake’s technical experiments of the 1790s culminated in a series of large color prints notable for their massive size and iconic designs. Unaccompanied by any text, they comprise his most ambitious work as a visual artists. Blake described his technique as “Fresco”. It appears to be a form of monotype – using oil and tempera paints mixed with chalks. Blake painted the design onto a flat surface of copperplate or millboard, from which he pulled the prints simply by pressing a sheet of paper against the damp paint. He finished the designs in ink and water color, making each, rare, impression unique.

For Blake, the bible was the greatest work of poetry ever written and comprised the basis of true art, as opposed to the false, pagan ideal of classicism. During the decade (1799-1809), Thomas Butts commissioned from Blake, a series of illustrations to the Bible that included about fifty tempera paintings and more than eighty water colors. Despite using Christian imagery repeatedly, Blake was a mystical prophet, not a biblical prophet. According to Blake, imagination is not a state; it is the human existence itself. He considered memory to be an aspect of time and hence what Christianity labeled the fallen world and salvation were imaginary states for him, where he could transcend time. In 1788 he produced his first illuminated book “All Religions are one.” According to Blake, all religions were products of the imagination or poetic genius and therefore contain the same essential truths. It was a response to the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that increasingly displaced religion. In ‘the songs of innocence’ Jesus – the forgiving shepherd God and not the vengeful God the father, plays a central role. The pictures have a curved and flowing style with many symbols. Trees and vines suggest security and fruitfulness. The flaming red and gold of sunset and sunrise spread across the pages. Blake intended the text and picture to complement each other and they do. The whole work achieves a subtle and warm confidence in humankind. Even when orphan children are dragged to Church to sing for their benefactors, they sing their hearts out, their innocent voices soaring above the meanness below. One has the feeling that Blake has great confidence in humanity. By 1794



Blake was selling ‘Songs of Innocence’ combined with ‘Songs of Experience’ showing the two contrary States of Man’- a complex amalgam of songs ,complementing and subverting each other. Here is ‘The Nurses Song’ from the songs of innocence:-

**“When the voices of children are heard on the green  
And laughing is heard on the hill,  
The little ones leaped and shouted and laughed  
And all the hills echoed”**

Beneath the poem is a small engraving showing seven children in loose clothing, holding hands, dancing in a circle. The nurse sits reading her book under trees that forms a protective enveloping canopy.

The title page for ‘Jerusalem’, Blake’s longest illuminated book was also dated 1804 – but none were printed before 1820s. Its 100 plates elaborate earlier themes about the Biblical Fall of Man, the need for forgiveness rather than accusation, freedom of art and the problems with rationalism. In it, Blake wanted to reunite England with Jerusalem on a truly revolutionary and early Christian religious basis. Blake abhorred slavery and believed in racial equality and several of his poems and paintings express a notion of universal humanity. “As all men are alike ( tho’ infinitely various)”. In one poem narrated by a black child, white and black bodies alike are described as shaded groves or clouds, which exist only until one learns “ to bear the beams of love”.

**When I from black and he from white cloud free,  
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy.....  
And then I’ll stand and stroke his silver hair,  
And be like him and he will then love me.**

Blake claimed to experience visions throughout his life which were associated with beautiful religious themes and imagery. He believed he was personally instructed and encouraged by Archangels to create his artistic work, which he claimed were actively read and enjoyed by the some Archangels.

Considered from any point of view, Blake is one of the most interesting and extraordinary figures in the whole history of English painting. The love of linear pattern in English art is usually considered to be derived in the first place from the Irish illuminators, and if this is so, the fact that Blake, through London born, had Irish blood in his veins, may be significant. The commissions for Dante’s Divine comedy came to Blake in 1826 through Linnell, with the aim of producing a series of engravings. Blake’s death in 1827 cut short the enterprise and only a handful of watercolors were completed which are among Blake’s richest achievements engaging fully with the problem of illustrating a poem of this complexity. The mastery of watercolor has reached an even higher level than before, and is used to extraordinary effect in differentiating the atmosphere of the three states of being in the poem. Blake shared Dante’s distrust of materialism and the corruptive nature of power and clearly relished the opportunity to represent the atmosphere and



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imagery of Dante's work pictorially. Even as he seemed to near death, Blake's central preoccupation was his feverish work on the illustrations to Dante's 'Inferno'. He is said to have spent one of the very last shillings he possessed on a pencil to continue sketching. In more recent imaginative painters and illustrators, traces of his inspiration constantly appear and in his insistence on pattern and emphasis on the abstract elements of design, even at the cost of distortion he was a forerunner of much modern art.

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