

# Illustration, illumination and creative conflict in the work of William Blake

## *Background Notes*

Dr Naomi Billingsley – 3 April 2019



Thomas Philips, *William Blake*, 1807.  
National Portrait Gallery.



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## **Abstract**

Poet, painter and printer William Blake (1757–1827) was engaged in various forms of illustration throughout his career. Trained as an engraver, for much of his life, his most reliable source of income was from commercial engravings that illustrated a variety of texts. He also had several patrons who commissioned original paintings and watercolours depicting subjects from the Bible and literature. And of course, Blake created his own illuminated poems that combine text and image.

The term ‘illustration’ may not capture the complexity of relationships between image and text in many of Blake’s work. For example: uncompromising in his views, when illustrating texts by others, Blake often used his designs to critique ideas in the texts that he disagreed with, so that his designs are in creative conflict with the texts. Elsewhere, in his own illuminated poems, the relationships between word and image can be cryptic.

The lecture will explore some of these complexities in Blake’s work. It will centre especially on the figure of Christ, who appears in almost all of Blake’s major bodies of work; this focus will act as a guiding thread to explore a range of Blake’s work in different contexts throughout his career.

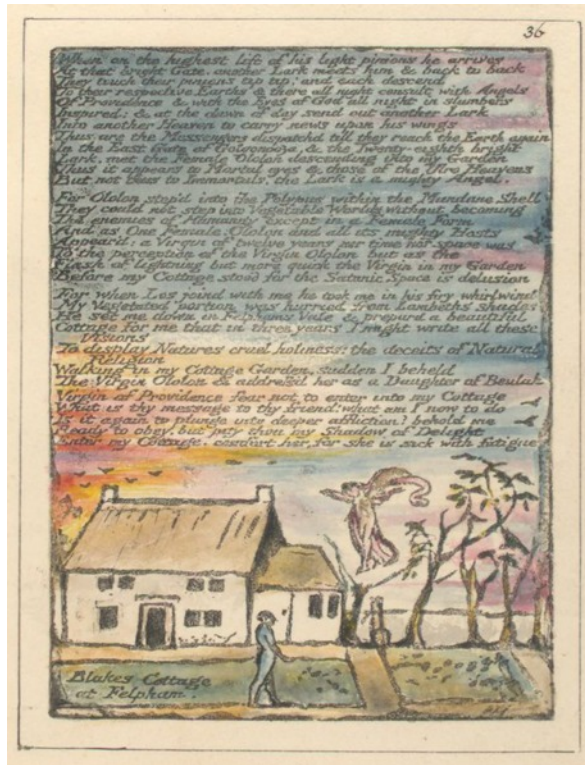
## **William Blake**

Blake was born in London in 1757, the son of a hosier. He attended Henry Pars’ drawing school, and was apprenticed to the engraver James Basire. He was later a student at the Royal Academy Schools.

From a young age, he experienced visions: as a boy he saw angels in a tree at Peckham Rye, and during his apprenticeship, while drawing monuments in Westminster Abbey, he saw a vision of Christ and the Apostles.

For much of his career, his primary income was as a commercial engraver, engraving plates for illustrated books, after his own designs or after other artists. He also had several loyal patrons who commissioned paintings and watercolours, and purchased his illuminated books.

London was Blake’s home for most of his life, except for three years, 1800–1803, when he lived in Felpham, West Sussex: ‘on the banks of the ocean’, as Blake put it.



**William Blake, Milton, A Poem, Copy C, Plate 36 ('Blake's Cottage' at Felpham), c. 1804–1811. New York Public Library.**

In 1803, Blake had an altercation with a soldier, John Schofield, who stumbled into Blake's garden from the nearby Fox Inn. Schofield accused Blake of shouting "damn the King", which resulted in Blake being put on trial for sedition at Chichester. Blake was acquitted of the charge.

He died in 1827. It is said that he was singing on his deathbed.

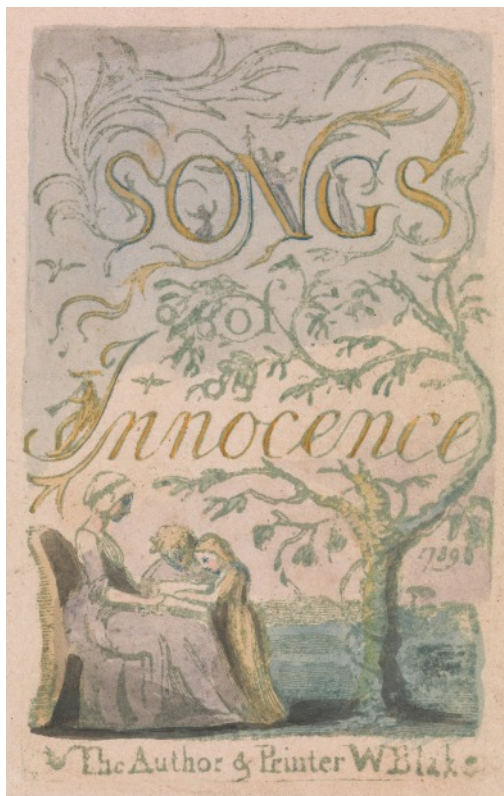
In his lifetime, he was best known as a commercial engraver, and second as a painter; few knew his poetry, as only one small collection was published in his lifetime. Today, this order is reversed: famous lyrics such as 'And did those feet ...' and 'Tyger, Tyger burning bright ...' make him best known as a poet; exhibitions showcase his visual works; his commercial engraving work is less widely known.

Blake will be the subject of a major exhibition at Tate Britain in autumn 2019.

## Blake as illustrator

In this lecture, we will be looking at a number of Blake's key illustration projects:

- Training and early commercial engraving work. We will begin by looking at Blake's background as a commercial engraver, and explore some of the early engraving projects that he worked on. During his apprenticeship, Blake's work was signed by his master, James Basire, as was common practice at the time, but scholars have deduced which works from Basire's studio Blake worked on. Early commissions in Blake's own name include plates for Bibles and contemporary poetry.



**William Blake**, *Songs of Innocence*, titlepage, Copy F, 1789.  
Yale Center for British Art.

- Illuminated printing: *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789/1795). In the late 1780s, Blake devised a method of printing that included text and images on a single plate. It is known as 'illuminated printing' because it is reminiscent of mediaeval illuminated manuscripts where text and images are intertwined on the same page. The *Songs* are one of Blake's earliest works in this medium, and are probably the best known and accessible of Blake's illuminated books. Blake's works in this medium were produced speculatively, rather than commissioned by specific patrons and therefore are very personal expressions of Blake's own beliefs.
- Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1795–1795). The publisher Richard Edwards commissioned Blake to design and engrave plates for the popular 18th century poem *Night Thoughts*. Blake produced 537 watercolour designs for this poem, and 43 engravings (only one of the planned four volumes was published). Young's theology was often at odds with Blake's views, and consequently there is a dynamic of creative conflict in many of these designs.



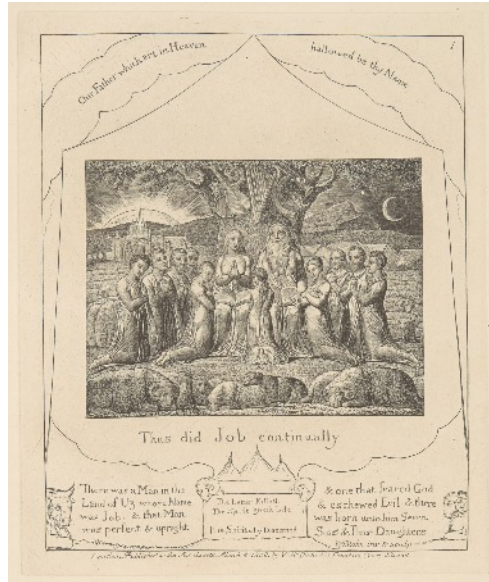
**William Blake, *The Nativity*, 1799–1800.**  
Philadelphia Museum of Art.

- Biblical temperas (1799–1800). The civil servant Thomas Butts was one of Blake's most important patrons. His first major commission was for fifty pictures illustrating the Bible. Blake disliked oil painting, and adopted a technique that he called 'portable fresco'. The method is a form of tempera painting, where he mixed his pigments with carpenter's glue (traditionally, tempera uses egg white) and painted onto a white ground.
- Biblical watercolours (1800–1806). Butts' next major commission was for a series of watercolour illustrations to the Bible. About eighty were produced over a five year period. Butts was a very generous patron, who allowed Blake plenty of freedom in the work that he commissioned. Thus, Blake's works for Butts are as much an expression of his personal vision as his illuminated books.



**William Blake**, *The Creation of Eve*, 1822.  
National Gallery of Victoria.

- Milton watercolours (1801–1822). Blake produced several series of designs to John Milton’s poems, for three patrons: Butts, Revd Joseph Thomas, and the artist John Linnell. As with the designs for Young, there is creative conflict at work in Blake’s designs.



**William Blake, *Illustrations to the Book of Job, Plate 1, Job and His Family*, 1825. Yale Center for British Art.**

- *Illustrations to the Book of Job* (c. 1805–1826). Blake returned to the Book of Job several times in his career. Often said to be his masterpiece, his *Illustrations to the Book of Job*, published with the assistance of John Linnell in 1826 are the culmination of Blake’s visual engagement with this biblical book. Each of the 21 plates includes a central image, surrounded by a margin that includes quotations from the Book of Job and other passages from the Bible, and visual motifs.
- *Illustrations to Dante’s Divine Comedy* and Bunyan’s *A Pilgrims’ Progress* (1824–1827). In the final years of his life, Blake began work on these two major illustration projects, both of which remained incomplete at his death. We therefore see Blake’s illustrative schema in progress in these series.

## Further reading

*The volume of Blake scholarship is enormous. The following reading suggestions would be good starting points for reading more about Blake's visual art.*

### Surveys of Blake's visual art

David Bindman, *Blake as an Artist* (Phaidon, 1977)

Anthony Blunt, *The Art of William Blake* (Columbia University Press, 1959)

### Exhibition catalogues

Robin Hamlyn and Michael Phillips (ed), *William Blake* (Tate, 2000)

Andrew Loukes (ed), *Blake in Sussex: Visions of Albion* (National Trust, 2018)

Michael Phillips (ed), *William Blake: Apprentice and Master* (Ashmolean Museum, 2014)

### Related to the lecture

Naomi Billingsley, *The Visionary Art of William Blake: Christianity, Romanticism and the Pictorial Imagination* (I.B. Tauris, 2018)

### Online resources

The William Blake Archive: <http://www.blakearchive.org/>

*A growing digital archive of Blake's works. View many of Blake's artworks and manuscripts in high resolution images, read Blake's complete writings, and access back issues of the scholarly journal Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly (most recent five years require a subscription; earlier issues are open access).*

Zoamorphosis: The Blake 2.0 Blog

*Blog run by Professor Jason Whittaker (University of Lincoln); publishes reviews and 'Blakespotting' blogs about Blake in popular culture.*

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