William Blake Short Guide

William Blake by James Daugherty

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

In his foreword to William Blake, Daugherty not only introduces his subject, placing him in historical and geographic context, but also emphasizes the immense power of the human imagination, both as a source of artistic inspiration and as an essential ingredient in any fully realized life.

Daugherty declares that, in the twentieth century, a time when it "seems we are getting nowhere faster than ever before," readers should take the time to look at remarkable pictures and read great poetry. Daugherty points out that Blake received little recognition in his lifetime and was considered by many to be a complete failure. Today, however, his work is priceless, his reputation ever-increasing. Blake's courageous battle to celebrate individuality and originality, and his victory for the power of the imagination, should prove inspirational for readers.

About the Author

James Henry Daugherty was born June 1, 1889, in Asheville, North Carolina, to Charles M. and Susan Peyton Telfair Daugherty. He spent his early childhood on an Indiana farm and in a small southern Ohio town. When Daugherty was about nine, the family moved to Washington, D.C., where his father took a government job. In addition to his public schooling in Washington, Daugherty attended the Philadelphia Art Academy for one year and studied in London during his father's two-year assignment there as an agent for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

As important as his formal education were the lessons in storytelling Daugherty learned from his parents and his grandfather. From his mother, a native of Virginia, he heard songs and stories of the pre-Civil War South. From his father, a graduate of the University of Michigan, he heard the best of English and American literature, from Chaucer to Mark Twain. Daugherty's grandfather, meanwhile, told him tall tales about the frontier that had been handed down for several generations.

During World War I, Daugherty camouflaged ships and designed war posters for the U.S. Navy. He also worked on murals and illustrations for books and magazines. Shortly after the war, he became an illustrator for the Doubleday Page Company, and as his reputation grew, he worked for a number of book publishers, as well as for magazines such as the New Yorker, Forum, and Golden Book. During the 1920s he also painted murals in movie theaters belonging to the Loew chain.

Later, as a part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, he painted murals in public buildings, including a high school in Stamford, Connecticut.

His biographical novel Daniel Boons, which he both authored and illustrated, won the 1939 Newbery Medal, and his other biographies for young adults consistently garnered high praise. In 1971 a retrospective exhibit of his work was held in New York.

Daugherty's wife, Sonia Medvedeva, was also a well-known author of books for children and young adults. Their son, Charles Michael (Chris), continued the family tradition, writing young adult books that his father illustrated. In the 1920s the family moved to Westport, Connecticut, where Daugherty lived until his death on February 21, 1974.

Setting

William Blake lived in London for most of his life, and consequently this city serves as the principal setting for Daugherty's biography. The book covers the time period between Blake's birth in 1757 and his death in 1827. The late eighteenth century was a time of great social change brought about by the Industrial Revolution; Daugherty depicts London as a rapidly expanding city, stocked with people who have migrated from the countryside to take advantage of newly created jobs. The city is a bustling and exciting place to live, and for Blake almost anywhere else seems too dull.

Social Sensitivity

Blake is considered by scholars to be one of the most original and radical thinkers in English history. His ideas about society and God remain controversial; people who cannot accept his vision of life often dismiss him as insane. The central element in Blake's philosophy is "four-fold vision"—four hierarchical stages of awareness, the highest of which permits direct communication with God and the afterlife.

Blake vehemently believed that he had reached this fourth level himself; when he stated that he had seen angels in a tree or talked to his dead brother, he by no means meant that he had done so only in a symbolic sense.

Blake was also controversial in his unorthodox beliefs about the nature of God. He often said that every person had the potential to elevate himself or herself to the same level of divinity as Jesus. This idea ran counter to what most people held to be true, as did Blake's opinion of Satan. The accepted theology of Blake's time paralleled the sentiments of John Milton's famous poem Paradise Lost. In this poem, God is depicted as a wise, gentle deity, whereas his fallen angel, Satan, is rebellious and full of spirit. According to Blake, although Satan might be wrong about a lot of things, he is nonetheless striving to fulfill himself. For Blake, Milton's Satan is a seeker of truth, whereas his God is complacent. Blake said that Milton reversed the roles—that his character, Satan, really exemplified the traits of God, and that the repressive God figure was evil. Many people continue to reject Blake's idea.

Even though Daugherty's biography of Blake emphasizes the artist's originality and eccentricities, the book suggests that Blake—despite being unappreciated and little understood by his contemporaries—nevertheless led a happy, joyous, and fulfilled life. Fame and adulation were unnecessary to a person who gave personal witness throughout his long life to a passionate belief in freedom, both of the human spirit and its artistic expression. Although deemed by many a madman, Blake never wavered in his beliefs. An awareness of his strong sense of purpose, as documented in the story of his life, should inspire others to follow their individual convictions despite opposition, ridicule, or rejection.

Literary Qualities

Most critical writing about Blake is extremely sophisticated, a reflection of the complexity of the ideas expressed in Blake's own work. In contrast, Daugherty's relatively straightforward narrative serves as a useful introduction to the life and philosophy of a great artist whose work many young readers might otherwise have been too intimidated to approach. Daugherty utilizes short paragraphs, a suitable level of diction, and a carefully selected vocabulary. To keep his narrative moving smoothly, he does not rely excessively on dates or on other data more appropriate for historical texts.

Daugherty does, however, include a wealth of information about the American and French revolutions and the major figures involved in these momentous events. Through his examination of Blake's life, Daugherty shows that both world events and individual personalities are affected by changing ideas about human values, society, and methods of government.

Daugherty also makes reference to many of Blake's contemporaries, ranging from scientists and inventors to other artists, both poets and painters.

This material expands the "cast of characters" in the biography, and informs the reader of important movements in the sciences and humanities.

Daugherty goes so far as to contrive conversations between the people in Blake's life. His use of direct—although largely fictional—quotations gives the narrative a flow and informality that might appeal to young readers. Of particular note are the detailed scenes of Blake's childhood; Daugherty describes everyday experiences that both humanize Blake and set him apart as a special, gifted child. Daugherty places details about the complex life of his subject within the context of a world in transition. Blake's poetry, with its poignant call for social reform, echoes the era's revolutionary spirit. By appealing, as Blake himself did, not only to the five senses to evoke his word pictures, but also to the unfathomable realm of imagination, the biographer succeeds in reinforcing his text with the very qualities of his subject's art.

Themes and Characters

Daugherty's biography of William Blake is divided into five major parts, each headed by an epigraph, or brief quotation, selected from Blake's writing to set the tone for what follows. Each of the book's twenty-six chapters opens with an excerpt from Blake's poetry or prose, and Daugherty quotes lengthy segments of the writer's work throughout the text. As a result, Blake's work is introduced to young readers and placed in a meaningful context.

Part One of the biography begins with Blake's birth in London on November 28, 1757, and describes his religious upbringing. His stern father's misjudgment of the sensitive and highly imaginative little boy is tempered by his mother's understanding. When the child tells his parents he has seen a tree full of angels, "the most beautiful sight I ever saw," his father accuses him of lying. His judgment is softened, however, when Mrs. Blake argues that children often have extraordinary experiences, and that their son's tale recalls visionary stories from the Bible.

Young Blake's wanderings around the teeming streets of London lead him into galleries and shops. Seeing the work of famous painters fuels his imagination and provides a storehouse of inspiration for him to draw upon throughout his career. His formal training in art begins with a four-year stint in drawing school, where he learns to sketch the human figure. He later is apprenticed to a famous engraver in London, in whose shop he masters the difficult technique of printing illustrations by means of copper plates, cutting tools, ink, and presses. Blake excels in his work, and at age sixteen begins his first major work, a series of engravings of the antiquities in Westminster Abbey. This task consumes five years of his life, during which time he absorbs the mysteries, spirit, arid glory of gothic art.

The course of world history marks the maturing Blake; he is stirred by the events of the American and the French revolutions. Ideas about liberty and brotherhood greatly influence the young artist, and become a compelling theme that shapes his life and his work.

Another central theme of Blake's work is that of childhood. The death of his beloved younger brother Robert—who lived with Blake and his wife, Catherine Boucher, for three years—inspires Blake to write poems about their happy times together, poems Daugherty describes as "simple and joyous verses about children, for children, written out of a child heart." Blake calls this collection Songs of Innocence (1789), and decides to assemble the poems into a book with each accompanied by an interpretive illustration.

Blake's poems in Songs of Innocence are written from the perspective of innocent children; the poems are spontaneous, ecstatic, unshadowed by reflective thoughts, and freely imaginative. With the help of his wife, he hand-paints each drawing and sews them individually into the bindings of the books. Blake uses a process called "relief

etching" to illustrate Songs of Innocence; now widely employed by engravers, relief etching was a revolutionary technique for its time.

Blake's next illustrated volume of poetry, The Book of Thel (1789), is a mystical poem that tells the story of an innocent soul—the maiden Thel—who rejects the opportunity to live. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1793) follows, and here Blake's vision begins to darken, growing more complex and difficult to interpret.

Part Two of the biography covers the next seven years of the artist's life. When visions of biblical figures and long-dead English poets, including Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare, begin to appear to Blake, public opinion labels him a madman. His next major work, Songs of Experience (1794), is a sequel to Songs of Innocence, and differs from the earlier work in tone and voice.

During the "innocent" stage of life the child is untouched by evil; he or she is joyous, peaceful, and filled with wonder.

"Experience" introduces the child to the cares and responsibilities that bind people to earthly sorrow and pain.

In Songs of Experience, Blake unifies his political and social concerns. He attacks the social evils that imprison children of his day—especially child labor and slavery—and condemns the government for ignoring the suffering of innocents. The new work is printed together with Songs of Innocence, resulting in a pictorially beautiful and inspirational volume. Blake's most famous poem, "The Tyger," is included in this later collection, and stands as a companion piece to the earlier poem "The Lamb."

Part Three examines Blake's experimentation with a series of spiritual adventure stories that he calls his "Prophetic Books." These works feature characters from a mythological cast of his own creation, and describe struggles between good and evil, between freedom and slavery, and between imagination and the forces that would restrict it. The abstractions central to these works alienate whatever small audience Blake may have, and the chaotic energy of the action seems incomprehensible to most readers.

In Part Four of the biography, Daugherty documents the events of a period that the Blakes spend in Felpham, a village on the southern coast of England. Here, a misunderstanding between Blake and a British soldier escalates into a court trial against Blake, who is charged with sedition. Because England is at war with France, any resistance to government or to any representative of government is considered grounds for execution. Blake is found not guilty, but he never forgets this personal experience of oppression and the restraint of individual freedom; the vivid memories and images it evokes appear in both his poems and pictures that follow.

Part Five outlines the final years of Blake's life. Increasingly viewed as everything from eccentric to insane, Blake is forced by extreme poverty to sell his lifetime collection of prints. A few artists recognize his plight and collect money on his behalf. This aid enables him to begin his best-known work, a powerful group of water-color illustrations for The Book of Job (1825).

Blake's final years are peaceful and rewarding; he produces one of his greatest works, a set of illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy, and dies peacefully on August 12, 1827.

Topics for Discussion

1. Even though many of his ideas appear to be impractical and eccentric, what does Blake have to say to presentday society?

2. Many people judged Blake's life a failure. In what ways is his life a success, despite the lack of tangible rewards?

3. Why is Blake driven to invent an entire mythological system? How do his reasons for inventing characters relate to his desire to invent new artistic techniques?

4. Why is urban life essential for Blake's artistic inspiration?

5. Because Blake lived in a time of revolutions, can his work be termed "revolutionary"? How?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Although Blake was a highly original and inventive artist, he was influenced by the attitudes and styles of his time, if only by rejecting them. Research and report on "The Age of Reason" (also known as The Enlightenment") in intellectual history. What were the characteristics of the pictures being painted by others during Blake's lifetime?

2. The image of Blake as a "lonely genius" is misleading. In what ways was he not a solitary, rejected figure?

3. To "synthesize" means to bring separate parts together into a whole.

What is meant by the claim that Blake's ambition was to create a vast synthesis, poetic as well as pictorial?

4. What characteristics of Christianity are evident in Blake's work?

5. The twentieth-century father of psychology, Sigmund Freud, believed the mind was divided into three parts which fought against one another for domina tion. If any one of the parts became dominant, the mind became imbalanced, and this could lead to insanity.

In what ways did Blake anticipate the teachings of Freud?

6. "Humanism" is a philosophy centered on humankind and human values, emphasizing human free will and superiority to the rest of nature. How can Blake be seen as a startling and powerful humanist?

7. Research other poets of Blake's time who were influenced by his work.

For Further Reference

Blunt, Anthony. The Art of William Blake. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959. The reader who would like to dig more deeply into Blake's work will find a fuller coverage of his unique art here.

Brownowski, Jacob. William Blake and the Age of Revolution. New York: Harper and Row, 1965. Well-known writer, artist, and television personality Jacob Brownowski emphasizes the momentous period of history in which Blake lived.

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Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959. Emphasizing the contrary roles Blake assumed to introduce Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, this study provides additional material about Blake's poetic accomplishments.

Malcolmson, Anne. William Blake: An Introduction. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967. This general, illustrated introduction puts Blake as man and poet within his times and provides a guide toward understanding his poetry.

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