

# William Blake

## 'Mind-forg'd manacles'

Have you ever felt that you are different to everyone else? That no-one understands you? That you see the world in a different way? That people are always trying to restrict your freedom?

If you have, then you have a lot in common with William Blake.

William Blake was more than just a poet and artist, although he did both of those things exceptionally well. He is important because of the ideas behind his work. Unlike George Bridgetower, he never found fame during his lifetime, and his talent was only recognised after he died.

Born in 1757, he became interested in art at an early age and later studied it at the Royal Academy in London. However, Blake wasn't impressed by the famous artists he met there and spent his time working out his own methods of drawing and printing.

After he left he set up an engraving shop and began to work on his own books. Blake was very interested in religion, but hated the established church. He believed that normal people could have visions and holy experiences and not just priests. Blake claimed to have seen visions of angels all through his life.

In order to put his message across, he produced books of 'Illuminated Poetry', which meant that he carefully illustrated all his poems so that they were works of art in their own right. He was so slow at making these that he only ever produced a few copies, and found it difficult to sell them as they were very expensive. Blake was always poor and only survived because he had a rich benefactor: someone who admired his work and so paid him to draw portraits of his family.

This must have been very difficult for Blake, who hated authority of all kinds. He thought that the government stopped people thinking for themselves, and accused human beings of wearing 'mind-forg'd manacles' (handcuffs created by their own minds). These feelings led him to take an interest in the anti-slavery movement.

He used his artistic skills to create some of the most shocking and famous engravings of the slave trade, *Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave* and *A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs to a Gallows*. He also explored the idea of slavery in his writing.



*A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs to a Gallows*  
engraved by William Blake ©The British Museum



*Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave*  
engraved by William Blake ©The British Museum

## Glossary

- Engraving** A method of printing that involves carving an image into wood or metal.
- Flagellation** Whipping or removing the skin.
- Gallows** The structure used for hangings.

# • • • William Blake Activity Sheet



Portrait of William Blake by Thomas Philips ©The National Portrait Gallery

## Innocence and Experience



1. Look at the sheet *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and think about the discussion points.
2. In the poems on the sheet Blake uses a lamb as a symbol of innocence and a tiger as a symbol of experience. What two symbols would you choose?
3. Now write a poem to show innocence and experience. Think about:
  - how you will show what innocence is
  - how you will show what experience is
  - whether experience is always bad
  - whether innocence is always good

## Illuminated Poems



After you have written this poem, or any other, why not illuminate it like William Blake?

Look carefully at some examples of Blake's illuminated poems. A selection of images can be found at [www.bridgetowerproject.org](http://www.bridgetowerproject.org). Another good

source is the Blake Archive online at [www.blakearchive.org](http://www.blakearchive.org). Click on *Works in the Archive* and then find *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

Note the colours that Blake uses, and the way he writes all his poems by hand. When he illuminated a poem he tried to make the whole page beautiful.

Once you have illuminated your poem, why not put all the class's poems together into your own *Songs of Innocence and Experience*?

## Propaganda!



William Blake knew how powerful pictures can be. When he was asked to make prints of the life of slaves, he chose the most controversial images possible. They were designed to shock people in order to let them know how brutal slavery was.

A more recent example of this is the government's anti drink-driving campaign, which showed horrific images of people dying in road accidents.

Make your own propaganda posters (posters that try to influence the way people think about issues) to campaign for the end of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, or for a more recent issue that is important. How can you strike a balance between shocking people enough to make them think again, and stopping them from being so upset that they don't want to look?

## The Little Black Boy



As part of his book, *Songs of Innocence*, William Blake wrote the poem on the back of this lesson card, *The Little Black Boy*. Blake was part of the anti-slavery movement, and wanted to help children to understand that slavery was wrong.

However, readers today may be uncomfortable with the way that Blake uses language in this poem. Reading it can help us to see how our ideas have changed.