

WILLIAM BLAKE AS A PRECURSOR OF ROMANTICISM

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Abstract

William Blake, frequently regarded as a visionary poet, artist, and mystic, is acknowledged as a significant predecessor of the Romantic movement. Although his works are from the late 18th century, a period predominantly characterized by neoclassical principles, Blake's focus on individualism, imagination, emotional profundity, and nature anticipates the fundamental themes of Romanticism. His repudiation of rationality, exaltation of imagination, and emphasis on the spiritual and natural realms signify a notable departure from the Enlightenment's preoccupation with reason and order. This essay examines how Blake's poetry and art encapsulate the concepts that will subsequently characterize Romanticism. This article examines Blake's significant works, including Songs of Innocence and of Experience, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, and The Book of Thel, to elucidate his anticipation of the Romantic revolt against traditional forms, as well as his emphasis on inner vision, individual liberty, and a pantheistic perspective of nature. Blake's advocacy for social justice and his skepticism of institutional authority, coupled with his personal mythology, tie him with the radical principles that were fundamental to the Romantic ethos. The study contends that by examining these thematic and philosophical factors, Blake not only established the foundation for Romanticism but also expanded its limits in distinctive manners.

Introduction

William Blake (1757–1827) holds a distinctive position in literary history, frequently challenging categorization within a singular tradition. Nonetheless, it is broadly acknowledged that his contributions established significant foundations for the Romantic movement, which would prevail in English literature during the early 19th century. Romanticism, characterized by its focus on emotion, nature, individualism, and imagination, has a predecessor in Blake's poetry and artistic expressions. During an era when neoclassicism advocated for reason, order, and societal traditions, Blake diverged from these norms, presenting a profoundly imaginative, mystical, and frequently radical examination of the human experience.

Blake's examination of imagination as a conduit to truth and his resistance to the industrial and institutional suppression of human creativity clearly reflect Romantic ideals. His initial works, comprising Songs of Innocence (1789) and Songs of Experience (1794), examine themes of innocence, corruption, and the influence of the individual's interior landscape on their perspective of reality. This article will analyze Blake's significant works within the framework of Romanticism, emphasizing how his spiritual, aesthetic, and philosophical preoccupations correspond with and foreshadow the movement.

Blake's Break from Enlightenment Ideals

Blake's oeuvre arises during an epoch profoundly shaped by the Enlightenment, a cultural and intellectual movement that prioritized reason, science, and empirical fact. The 18th century experienced an elevation of rationality, objectivity, and dependence on quantifiable truths. Blake, however, dismissed this prioritization of reason as the supreme judge of truth. In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790), he proclaims:

"If the doors of perception were purified, everything would be perceived by humanity as it truly is: Infinite."

Blake's rejection of rationalism ties him with the fundamental principles of Romanticism, which opposed the mechanistic perspective of the Enlightenment by highlighting the significance of imagination and subjective experience. Blake regarded imagination as a divine faculty, crucial for apprehending the spiritual truth underlying corporeal existence. This conviction anticipates the

Romantic concept of the artist as a visionary, able to unveil profound truths regarding the human situation.

Furthermore, Blake's dismissal of empirical science in favor of visionary experience reflects the perspectives of subsequent Romantic poets, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose concept of "primary imagination" as a conduit for understanding divine truths aligns with Blake's beliefs. Blake's critique of contemporary intellectualism not only facilitated the emergence of Romantic ideals but also established a foundation for the movement's later repudiation of established social and philosophical conventions.

Imagination and Vision: Blake's Key Romantic Traits

Central to Blake's poetry and artistry is the exaltation of imagination as a potent, transformational power. He claimed that humans could surpass the constraints of the material realm via visionary experiences. This perspective of imagination as a conduit to elevated understanding is a fundamental characteristic that ties Blake with Romanticism.

In *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Blake examines the duality of imagination as a wellspring of purity and insight, while simultaneously acknowledging its potential corruption by societal limitations. His depiction of innocence and experience as opposing states of human awareness reflects the Romantic focus on the conflict between nature and civilization, childhood and age, and freedom and constraint. The renowned verses from *The Tyger*, within *Songs of Experience*, illustrate Blake's intrigue with the duality of creative and destructive powers.

"Tyger Tyger, burning brightly, in the nocturnal forests; what immortal hand or eye could construct thy daunting symmetry?"

The "fearful symmetry" of the tiger symbolizes the duality of creation, embodying the Romantic reverence for the sublime, which encompasses the immense power and beauty of nature capable of eliciting both awe and dread. Blake's oeuvre consistently emphasizes the sublime, positioning him with subsequent Romantics such as William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, who also examined the awe-inspiring facets of nature and the human psyche.

Blake's renowned phrase, "I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man's" from *Jerusalem*, exemplifies his profound dedication to individual creativity and self-expression, a fundamental principle of Romanticism. For Blake, invention transcended artistic pursuit; it was a spiritual and philosophical necessity, aligning him with the Romantic poets who perceived artistic expression as a means of defiance against societal conventions and constraints.

Nature and Spirituality in Blake's Poetry

Although Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Keats are frequently lauded for their portrayals of nature, Blake's connection to the natural world was more emblematic and spiritual. For Blake, nature was not merely a physical environment to be appreciated but a vibrant manifestation of the divine. His depiction of nature as a mirror of spiritual truths aligns him closely with Romantic concepts of the connection between the natural and the supernatural.

In *The Book of Thel* (1789), Blake depicts nature as a realm of spiritual exploration, wherein the protagonist, Thel, interrogates the significance of life and death. The pastoral imagery in the poem exemplifies the Romantic inclination to utilize nature as a realm for pondering the enigmas of existence. Blake's perception of nature is frequently more intricate and mystical than that of his Romantic peers. His employment of natural imagery in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*—from the lambs denoting innocence to the tiger epitomizing experience and destructive force—demonstrates his perception of nature as infused with divine importance.

Blake's pantheistic perspective, which posits that God pervades all entities, strongly corresponds with the Romantic exaltation of nature as a spiritual power. Similar to Wordsworth's "sense sublime" in *Tintern Abbey*, Blake perceived the natural world as a manifestation of the divine, with each aspect of nature imbued with spiritual significance. His focus on the interrelation of all living entities anticipates the Romantic conviction in the unity of nature and the human spirit.

Blake's Radical Politics and Social Critique

Blake's rejection of institutional authority, especially organized religion and governmental power, foreshadows the insurrectionary ethos of Romanticism. He was profoundly preoccupied with matters of social justice, liberty, and the repressive systems of his era. His political radicalism is prominently displayed in works such as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where he contests the binary distinctions of good and evil dictated by traditional morality, and in *London*, a scathing condemnation of urban destitution and political subjugation:

"I traverse each regulated street, adjacent to the regulated Thames, and observe in every visage I encounter." Indicators of frailty, indicators of sorrow.

Blake's portrayal of the anguish inflicted by the Industrial Revolution and his condemnation of institutional corruption exemplify the Romantic focus on individual liberty and the repudiation of societal limitations. His empathy for the disadvantaged, as demonstrated in his critique of child labor in *The Chimney Sweeper* and his grief for the loss of innocence in *Holy Thursday*, situates him solidly within the Romantic tradition of social and political critique.

Furthermore, Blake's utopian politics, rooted in his conviction that genuine freedom is achievable solely via spiritual emancipation, align with the radical idealism of Romantic poets such as Shelley and Byron. His repudiation of institutionalized religion in favor of a personal, mystical communion with the almighty foreshadows the Romantics' dismissal of orthodoxy and their focus on individual spiritual experience.

Blake's Mythology: A Romantic Innovation

A notable characteristic of Blake's oeuvre is his establishment of a personal mythology, inhabited by symbolic entities such as Urizen, Los, and Albion. These figures illustrate diverse facets of human nature and cosmic forces, enabling Blake to examine intricate philosophical and spiritual concepts. This facet of his work, though frequently perceived as esoteric, also associates him with the Romantic focus on myth and symbolism as a means of conveying profound emotional and spiritual truths.

Blake's mythology, akin to Coleridge's employment of myth in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, functions as a medium for examining universal issues. His employment of mythic frameworks to challenge rationalism, materialism, and institutional authority is both original and progressive, establishing a foundation for subsequent Romantic investigations of myth and the supernatural. Blake's symbolic cosmos parallels Shelley's employment of Prometheus as a representation of human rebellion and innovation in *Prometheus Unbound*.

By creating his own mythical framework, Blake anticipates the Romantics' intrigue with myth while simultaneously expanding the limits of literary form, merging poetry, prophesy, and philosophy in a manner that would impact both his contemporaries and subsequent generations of writers.

Conclusion

William Blake, despite composing before to the apex of the Romantic movement, serves as a visionary forerunner to the subsequent Romantic poets. His focus on imagination as a conduit to spiritual truth, profound affinity for nature, skepticism of rationalism and institutional authority, and advocacy for individual freedom and social justice distinguish him as a pivotal character in the evolution of Romanticism. Blake's distinctive amalgamation of poetry, art, and philosophy established the groundwork for Romantic ideology while simultaneously expanding its limits, presenting a nuanced, intricate perspective of the world that continues to captivate readers and academics. Blake's unconventional concepts and inventive artistic expressions establish him as a pivotal and lasting role in English literature's history.

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