

# The Art of William Blake

Image Collection on Media  Smart DVD-ROM



**READING 12B** Evaluate the interactions of different techniques used in multilayered media. **12C** Evaluate how one issue or event is represented across various media to understand the notions of bias, audience, and purpose.

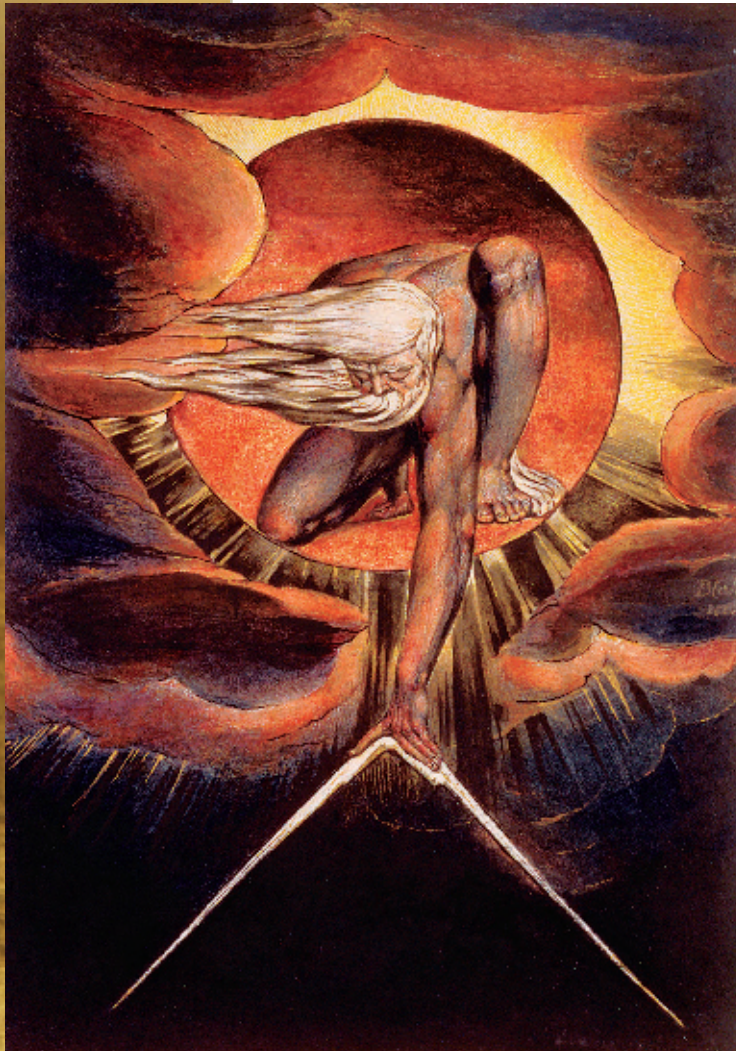
## How can art ENHANCE text?

**KEY IDEA** William Blake was a printer and engraver by trade, and the **illumination** he provided for many of his poems was intended to be interpreted right along with the text. For Blake, the words and images were inseparable. In examining the elements of visual art found in Blake's illuminated poems, you'll see how he integrated the medium with the meaning of his words.

## Background

**Visionary Innovation** From the time he was 15 years old until his death at age 69, William Blake supported himself as a tradesman. He apprenticed as an etcher and engraver for seven years before opening his own printing and publishing business with his friend James Parker. Blake briefly studied art at the Royal Academy but found the atmosphere uninspiring for the art he wanted to create. In the 1780s, the two predominant styles in the art world were the highly decorative rococo and the elegantly linear neoclassical. Blake's visual art didn't fall neatly into either category. He felt that line was superior to color, but the clash between the two elements—perhaps a reflection of both his writer and artist instincts—is readily apparent in his illuminated poems.

In 1788, Blake, inspired by a dream he had of his deceased younger brother, created a new art form he called "illuminated printing." Blake would etch images directly onto a printing plate by hand—including the text of the poems, which he would have to write backwards—then ink the plates and print the complete work with a rolling press. Later, he would paint each image by hand with watercolors. This new approach allowed Blake more control over the image because he could add new etched lines or change the color schemes whenever he wanted. Blake's illuminated printing method allowed him to fuse his visual and poetic visions.





## Media Literacy: Illuminated Texts

Blake intended the poems from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to engage both the intellect and the imagination of his readers. He was working with the limited space that a  $4\frac{1}{2}'' \times 2\frac{1}{2}''$  printing plate allowed, balancing the needs of the text with the visuals he'd imagined for the poem. Longer poems relied less on illustrative pictures and more on decoration; shorter poems often benefited from the additional image space.

Blake's decisions about the **color**, **line**, **shape**, and **texture** of each illustration were informed by the meaning he intended to convey. Consider the visual choices Blake made as you analyze the examples of his work.

### STRATEGIES FOR ANALYZING ILLUSTRATIONS

- **Color**, or hue, can help create the mood of an image. Blake hand-colored his prints with watercolors, so the mood of a piece could well have depended on the materials he had available or on his feelings at the time. Think about what the color of this image suggests about the mood of the poem.
- Like many artists, Blake used **lines** to give an image expressive qualities. For example, the use of thick or jagged lines can suggest rigidity or harshness.
- **Shape** is the outline of the objects in an image. Depending on an artist's choices, shapes can be geometric, with distinct angles, or natural, to closely match objects found in nature. Note that much of the image area is white, so the shapes stand out in stark contrast.
- To give an image **texture**, an artist can mimic the surface quality or "feel" of a real object. For example, varying the colors of a tree's bark can simulate the bark's rough texture. Blake created texture by etching on the printing plates. Notice the difference in texture between the area behind the poem and the area around the chimney sweeper.



## Media Smart DVD-ROM

- **Selection 1:** "The Chimney Sweeper"
- **Selection 2:** "The Fly"
- **Type:** Illustration
- **Illustrator:** William Blake



## Viewing Guide for

# The Art of William Blake

Access the full-sized illustrations on the DVD. Read each poem and examine the images closely, considering Blake's use of color, line, shape, and texture. Look for common visual elements among the prints: Does Blake frequently use a specific color to represent similar subject matter? Is his use of line clearly evident or subtle? How does his use of art elements reflect the meanings of the poems? Use these questions to help you analyze the images.

### NOW VIEW

#### FIRST VIEWING: Comprehension

1. **Identify** Describe the setting of "The Chimney Sweeper" image.
2. **Identify** What is the girl in the background in "The Fly" doing?

#### CLOSE VIEWING: Media Literacy

3. **Analyze Shape** Based on your understanding of the poems, how well does each image reflect Blake's meaning?
4. **Compare Color and Line** Blake's use of color and line are vastly different in "The Chimney Sweeper" and "The Fly." Compare the choices Blake made about color and line in these images.
5. **Examine Art Elements** Reread "The Chimney Sweeper." In the poem, Blake is commenting on the horrible conditions many children were forced to endure in 18th-century England. Describe how Blake's use of any one of the art elements contributes to the meaning of the poem. Consider the following lines:
  - "A little black thing among the snow"
  - "Because I was happy upon the heath"
  - "And are gone to praise God & his Priest and King / Who make up a heaven of our misery."





## Write or Discuss

**Analyze Form** Blake was highly creative as a child, attending art school at age 10 and writing poetry by age 12. His unique blending of visual art with poetry was a natural extension of his artistic nature, as was the development of his illuminated printing process. Based on the examples you’ve viewed, how successful do you think these poems are as both visual art and poetic expressions? Write your opinion in two paragraphs. Consider

- the relationship between the images and the poems’ meanings
- the way Blake employs color, line, shape, and texture in the images
- the limitations of the printing plate and coloring method



**READING 12B** Evaluate the interactions of different techniques used in multi-layered media. **12C** Evaluate how one issue or event is represented across various media to understand the notions of bias, audience and purpose. **WRITING 15C** Write an interpretation of a literary text. **15D** Produce a multimedia presentation.

Media  
Tools



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KEYWORD: HML12-781



## Produce Your Own Media

**Illustrate a Poem** A visual accompaniment to a poem can simply reflect the theme or mood of the poem or bring additional meaning to both the image and the words. Blake was unique in that he did both simultaneously. Choose a poem—your own or one you’ve read—and create an **illustration** to accompany it. You can draw or paint an image, use a computer program to create an illustration, or try a mixed-media collage. The important thing is that your creation fit the theme or mood or main idea of the poem you’ve chosen. Be creative; your illustration doesn’t have to be a literal depiction of your poem.

**HERE’S HOW** Keep the following in mind as you create your illustration:

- Decide if you want to closely tie your illustration to specifics in the poem or if you want to use the poem as inspiration for your own vision.
- Keep in mind the visual art elements of color, line, shape, and texture.
- Consider how someone viewing your illustration will understand the connection between the text and the images.

### Tech Tip

If available, use a design program to incorporate photographs, clip art, and image-manipulation tools.

## Further Exploration

**A Question of Color** Look at the multiple versions of Blake’s “The Fly” on the DVD. Because he painted each individual poem print in watercolors by hand, the colors in each of these versions is different. Does the color variation affect the relationship between the words and the image?

**An Artist’s Interpretation** Blake also did illustrations for other writers’ works, including Dante’s and Milton’s. Find an image that Blake created for another writer’s work and determine how Blake’s interpretation illuminates the text.