

Bahar Saber

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Josh King

William Blake Rare Item Presentation.

William Blake is revolutionary and learned man. He is the author of extraordinary poems and the illustrator of remarkable pictures. The rare item I presented on was the book that contained the poem, "The Grave", the illustrations that Blake did for the poem, and a dedication in the beginning to the Queen. This can be found in the Armstrong Browning Library in the 19th Century Collection. He is a man who was well ahead of his time and was able to prophesize during a changing world about a new future that was coming. Blake's profound ideas and way of thinking is why I chose to do my rare item presentation about him.

William Blake had all of these extraordinary ideas; however, his fan base was minimal. He was known as a painter, not as a poet. This meant that his poems were not widespread and well known. For this reason, he uses his illustrations to convey his true feelings about the changing world he lived in. The dedication to the Queen may have seemed strange because he was a radical man and not one who usually would praise the government or monarchy. The profound thing about Blake though, was that not everything he did was what it seemed like. He actually used the dedication to the Queen and even the poem itself, as a way to highlight his own illustrations. His illustrations were supposed to be a companion to the poem, but in this case, Blake made the dedication and poem companions to his illustrations. In his dedication to the Queen he is basically saying when someone is alive, they are blind to many things; however, when

they die, their souls are awoken and they can see the truths of the world. Blake says that he has been on the other side of the grave and he has this immortal vision that other living people do not possess. In order for people to see the truth, they need to pass through the grave, and from there they will come to the golden gates of heaven. In his dedication though, the golden gate actually leads to his illustrations. This means that his version of heaven is not a place far away and only accessible after death; rather, it can be a place here on earth, a place we can find through art. He believes that art is a gateway to heaven and we don't necessarily need to be dead in order to experience heaven. This awakening of the soul can happen here on Earth when someone is alive, and this awakening is found through art.

Two of his illustrations that I focused on were *The Good Old Man Dying* and *the Strong and Wicked Man Dying*. In the illustration of the good man dying, there are people praying around him, he has a Bible in his hand, and angels are leading him to heaven. In the picture of the wicked man dying, there is alcohol, people grieving around him, and him leaping into the flames to be taken to hell. At a first glance, one might think that the good man going to heaven is a positive thing but Blake incorporates his own viewpoints on the type of people who go to heaven and hell in his illustrations. He makes the good man very weak, old and basically lifeless. He can't even get to heaven by himself. He needs to be carried by angels. This serves a stark contrast to the wicked man who is very handsome, young and seems to be leaping into the flames. He is full of life and energy even though he is captioned as a wicked and bad man. The audience at the time this book was released was probably not familiar with Blake's poems and other works of literature but in Blake's poem, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," he provides

commentary on what he really thinks of the angels in heaven and the people in hell. He describes the people in hell as being intellectuals, people full of energy and life, while the angels are portrayed as judgmental, unwelcoming, and full of only reason. This means that not only good people go to heaven, and bad people to hell. The world is not as simple as that. What we may see as good might actually just be people conforming to tradition and society, suppressing any type of change.

Any student or teacher who is interested in not only art, but also history and literature as well can explore this rare item. This rare item presentation helped me learn more about how Blake was able to use art to portray his own ideas on life. It was fascinating to see how he was able to draw such vivid images that not only accompanied the poem, but also were able to express his own ideas and values. He doesn't let the fact that he doesn't have a strong fan base stop him; rather, he is able to use authors that are more widely read in order to have his opinions heard.