

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: A Rundown

written by Rusty W. Spell because he's nice and a little nerdy for Blake

Go to <www.blakearchive.org> to see *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in its illustrated glory. And remember that this is the way to look at it for full impact. The "plates" in your textbook refer to the engraved plates that Blake created which he later added colored ink to, a slightly new printing process that he invented. The fact that everything was handwritten and illustrated should give you an idea of why Blake has all the crazy spellings, capitalizations, punctuations, etc. (Sometimes your editors use brackets to include something that is necessary to correctly read it.) For the sake of this rundown, I've "smoothed out" all of this typographical weirdness in the quotations.

And now to the work itself.

Although it doesn't look like it at first glance, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is both a parody and a satire. It's a parody in that it borrows from prophetic writing styles (especially Isaiah) and others, and it's a satire because it is attacking (often in a funny way) different forms of religious thought: specifically the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg and the religion that arises from Enlightenment age philosophy.

Let's start with Swedenborg. Emanuel Swedenborg was a Swedish philosopher who -- like William Blake -- had dreams and visions (which originally attracted Blake to Swedenborg's writings). Swedenborg's work *Heaven and Hell* is one of Blake's primary targets of satire (as you can tell by the title). Swedenborg argued the Enlightenment ideas of dualism, the separation of body and soul/mind (or "Cartesian Dualism," after René Descartes). This and other binaries appear throughout the *Marriage*: heaven and hell, angel and devil, good and evil, etc. Blake wants to "marry" these contraries, and it's good to think about all that the word *marriage* entails: coming together, fighting, sexual energy, working together, becoming one, producing offspring, and more. Swedenborg's name will appear in the work, and we'll talk about him more then. You can read *Heaven and Hell* in its entirety at <swedenborg.newearth.org/hh/>.

Blake begins *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* with "The Argument," which is how he begins each of his six main sections of this book: with an argument, followed by a "Memorable Fancy" to illustrate the point of his argument. This is the only time, however, that he actually uses the words "The Argument" as a header (for some reason).

The opening argument is a poem that is meant to mimic the book of Isaiah (which he eventually cites). Here's a sample of the language of Isaiah, from Chapter 34:2: "For the indignation of the Lord is upon all nations, and his fury upon all their armies: he hath utterly destroyed them, he hath delivered them to the slaughter." "Rintrah" of line one, by the way, is one of Blake's original mythological characters, and this is Rintrah's first appearance. He basically is justified, prophetic anger. This first plate (Plate 2, since Plate 1 is the title illumination) is probably the most confusing; it's the most poetic, while much of the *Marriage* is downright conversational.

In Plate 3, Blake uses some convenient coincidences concerning dates for a few good jokes. Swedenborg had predicted that the Last Judgment would come in 1757, the year Blake was born. Blake is 33 when he is writing the *Marriage*, the age of Jesus' death and resurrection, so Blake compares himself to Jesus, Swedenborg to the angel at Jesus' tomb, and Swedenborg's writings as the discarded grave clothes.

Blake goes on to say that "without contraries is no progression," and he lists several of these contraries: "attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate." He points out that only religious people bother separating "good" and "evil." Religious people think that the mind and reason and being passive is good and will lead you to Heaven, and they think that the body and being active is evil and will lead you to Hell. Much of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is fighting against and making fun of this religious idea, and if you can grasp that, then you can grasp most of the book.

The next section is called "The Voice of the Devil," and it's probably a good idea at this point to demonstrate how Blake is using his terms. Imagine you are someone like William Blake who has a

different way of looking at the world and at God. Imagine how the more traditional or orthodox religious people would view you. They'd view you as a heretic or a devil. So Blake calls himself a devil in this work, and he calls the religious people "angels." He is seeing himself, and them, through their eyes. He's using their vocabulary (including "good" and "evil"). That's why a lot of this work is potentially confusing to readers, because it seems like Blake is merely reversing things for the sake of reversal, but that's not exactly true. It's a specific kind of irony that ends up not being ironic at all.

So Blake -- or "that ol' devil William Blake," if you prefer -- says that bibles and other holy books and codes have caused people to believe in these errors: that there is a separation of the body and soul (Descartes, etc.), that evil comes from the body, that good comes from the soul, and that if man follows his evil body that he will be tortured in hell forever. Instead, Blake (or the devil) argues that body and soul are not separate and that energy is eternal delight (not damnation).

Plate 5 explains how your reason can overtake your desire if you are weak enough to let it happen. As an illustration, you should imagine certain Christians who are told from birth that everything they desire (not only the saucier things like sex, but even basic things that bring you happiness) is evil and that they should repress it. These people sometimes live an unhappy, passive life--wondering why the "sinful" people around them seem to be having such a good time, living only with the consolation that those sinners will eventually go to Hell and they'll go to Heaven.

Blake goes on to explain how Milton was a good poet ("at liberty") when writing about Satan in *Paradise Lost* (Milton's epic poem about the fall of man that you should read if you haven't), but a bad poet ("in fetters" or chains) when writing about the Messiah, that Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it."

Now we come to the first "Memorable Fancy." This is a parody of Swedenborg's "Memorable Relations" in his *Apocalypse Revealed*. But where Swedenborg is writing about things he felt actually happened, Blake is writing "fancies." Soon you'll see the importance of this kind of fantasy, but for now you should know that when Blake refers to the "five senses" in a negative way, it's because he's specifically talking about "things you can observe," or scientific empiricism. Blake, unlike the philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment, didn't put all their stock into things you can see or prove. He went beyond the scientific method.

So, in this fancy, Blake (or, in this case, the speaker/narrator of the work, and I apologize for sometimes confusing the two) explains (again) how things that are delightful seem like hell to "angels," and how he is visiting Hell to collect some of its proverbs. Then the speaker sees "a mighty devil," which turns out to be Blake himself since it describes him writing with "corroding fires," a brief explanation of Blake's engraving process (which we'll get more of later).

And now we come to the "Proverbs of Hell," one of the simplest to read and most fun sections of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (at least once you figure out Blake's ideas). The proverbs include calls to rebel against the old ways, encouragement to liberate yourself and not repress yourself, the wisdom of "fools," and also just plain old good-advice aphorisms. I'll highlight and explain a few.

"No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings." Don't be oppressed by anyone who tells you not to go too far. If it's something you're *able* to do, then it's your God-given right to do it.

"If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise." What seems foolish might not be. Think of everything great in the world and how foolish it must have seemed when it was first presented. Add to this "What is now proved was once only imagined," where a foolish imagination became what we now know as fact. And: "Every thing possible to be believed is an image of truth," which suggests that if we can dream it, it must in part be true (which also suggests the power of imagination itself).

"The nakedness of woman is the work of God." Sex is not something to be ashamed of. Furthermore, it is beautiful and Godly.

"The cistern contains: the fountain overflows." If something sits still (as in a cistern), it does nothing. It is dead. However, if it moves and takes action (as a fountain), it's more productive and full of life. A similar parable is "Expect poison from the standing water."

"As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys." Think of what priests try to prevent you from doing. Sex, for one, which is the most joyous thing humans can do together. To prevent something this joyous is death.

"Improvement makes straight roads, but the crooked roads without improvement are roads of genius." Compare this to Descartes' idea of the city that is best when it is planned ahead of time by one person rather than growing naturally.

There are tons more parables, but I hope you get the idea and can analyze the rest yourself.

In Plate 11, Blake is able to sum up, in one page, the death of God and birth of religion. He says that once upon a time, a long time ago, the poets ascribed a god apiece to woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, etc. God is something so complex that he has to be described by poetry. Nothing literal will do. However, this is exactly what happened: priests literalized these poetic images and forced people to worship them ("choosing forms of worship from poetic tales"), eventually saying that it was the gods themselves that ordered the people to worship. And so, as Blake puts it, "men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast."

Blake explains how these ancient poets worked in another "memorable fancy," this time with a story of how he dined with Isaiah and Ezekiel. Blake (or the speaker) asks them how they had the balls to say that God spoke to them and did they worry that they would be misunderstood. Isaiah answers by saying the he *didn't* hear the voice of God or see God--not physically anyway. Instead, he "discovered the infinite in everything" and felt that what he was hearing in himself, "the voice of honest indignation," was the voice of God. He didn't care what people thought; he just wrote. Being firmly persuaded that something is true makes it true.

Ezekiel explains how even his (and Isaiah's) poetry *did* become mere religion. Originally Ezekiel was simply trying to preach against priests and philosophers of other countries because their gods were just derivatives of this purer idea of poetry. "Poetic Genius" was the only real thing, that which comes from "the human breast." But, unfortunately, eventually everyone simply followed "the Jews' code" and "the Jews' God," falling into this pattern once again. If people started worshipping the mythology of William Blake and treating it as a religion, the cycle would continue (since Blake is trying to follow in the path of these prophets).

In Plate 14, Blake once again predicts that the world will eventually be rid of these restrictive thoughts of the Enlightenment (including Cartesian Dualism), which appear to Blake to be "finite and corrupt." The cherub with the flaming sword who guards the Garden of Eden will have to leave, and people will be able to have fun again. Blake makes another reference to his own artwork that he creates in order to help this come to pass: "by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives." This is another good example of Blake being funny, since he's being serious about the part he will play while also being slyly self-depreciative.

Plate 15 is when Blake most specifically describes his printing process, though in a poetic way, calling it "a printing house in hell." Blake is again suggesting that his work will have a lasting impact (and it has), saying that his new printing methods will be transmitted from generation to generation. I should say that Blake's printing methods *were* a bit of a revolution. Because he did everything himself, he didn't have to go to a traditional publisher and he didn't have to follow their rules. This is why, today, indie rock music is so much more interesting than something put out by Sony or Virgin. It's okay if the images of the dragon-man, dragon, viper, etc. don't make sense. This is just another poetic way of describing something that's actually fairly mundane: the printing of a book.

Plate 16 takes us back to the giants (or antediluvians) that are briefly mentioned in the flood story of the book of Genesis. (They are discussed in greater detail in some of the non-canonical books of the Bible.)

These are our energies, while the "devourers" are the oppressors of the energies. Religion tries to make the two friends, but Jesus Christ wanted to separate them and make them enemies. To put things simply, and at the risk of being reductive or even "wrong," Blake seems to be suggesting that the things that the creative fight against are somewhat necessary to keep us going, to keep us fighting and producing. "Without contraries is no progression."

In the next "Memorable Fancy," Blake quotes an angel who sounds like a typical hellfire preacher: "Oh, pitiable foolish young man... consider the hot burning dungeon thou art preparing for thyself to all eternity..." The speaker says they should compare eternities to see which is better, so the angel takes him "through a stable" and "through a church" (a goofy joke that should be obvious to you), then into a church vault (suggesting death or something locked away) with a mill at the end (the mill standing for rational thought). Through the eyes of the angel, the narrator's future looks like hell and the angel runs away with fear--which then causes the place (now through the narrator's eyes) to look pleasant. Of course, through the narrator's eyes, the angel's future looks even more bleak: chained monkeys who were killing each other and worse. In the course of this fancy, Blake makes fun of Swedenborg once again and also of Aristotle's logic. This is another example of seeing through other people's eyes and how things become reversed as a result.

Plate 21 is a specific stab at Swedenborg. He compares Swedenborg to a guy who carries around a monkey and becomes vain because he's "a little wiser" than that monkey. Blake says that Swedenborg pretends to write things that are new, but he actually is just repeating what everyone else has already said; furthermore, he only repeats "all the old falsehoods." Blake says that anyone could copy writers like Paracelsus or Jacob Behmen (who were averagely okay for Blake) and be ten thousand times better than Swedenborg. Or they could copy Dante or Shakespeare (who were loved by Blake) and be infinitely better. Either way, these writers would only be holding "a candle in sunshine."

The last "Memorable Fancy" tells us what worshipping God really is. It's not prayer or going to church or anything like that. Instead, it's honoring truly creative men, "loving the greatest men best," etc. If you are able to honor what is valuable in each other, you are worshipping God--and Blake says that there is no other God than what is found inside of us. An angel, of course, calls this idolatry and brings up Jesus Christ. The devil says that if Jesus Christ was the greatest man (which was pretty much Blake's view of Jesus, that he was the most creative and the best of us), then he should be loved best. He also points out that Jesus broke all of the ten commandments, and that "no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments." Jesus was great, Blake says, because he didn't follow religious rules but acted from impulse instead. At this point, the angel becomes a convert. He's now a devil.

Blake ends the fancy by promising the "Bible of Hell," which alludes to the works he will write and illustrate in the future. And this is where *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* properly ends, though Blake also adds (to some copies) "A Song of Liberty," which sings specific praise for the American and French Revolutions.

There you go: a run-down to help you sort it all out. You can thank me later.