William Blake (1757-1827)

Life and character.-
William Blake was born in London in 1757, became an engraver by profession, though he gave much of his time to poetry and painting, and closed a long life of struggle, poverty, and neglect in 1827. Essentially mystic and visionary, Blake appeared as a new kind of man in the rationalistic 18th century. Even as a child he had in his lonely rambles seen angels among the trees and in the sky; he always believed himself in intimate intercourse with the spiritual world, and he died singing the things he saw in heaven. This mystical quality pervades all his work, whether with graver, brush, or pen. The bias of his mind and his literary taste are clearly shown in his imaginative illustrations to such works as the Book of Job, Night Thoughts, and The Grave.

Works and characteristics.-
Blake’s principal writings are:

Poetical Sketches (1783)
Songs of Innocence (1787)
The Book of Thel (1787)
The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790)
The Gates of Paradise (1793)
The Vision of the Daughters of Albion (1793)
America (1793)
Europe (1794)
The Book of Urizen (1794)
Songs of Experience (1794)
The Song of Los (1795)
The Book of Ahaniah (1795)
Jerusalem (1804)

Most of these belong to the class of apocalyptic literature; to the casual reader they appear chaotic and obscure, and often quite unintelligible. Despite the daring originality and pregnancy of their thought (as in the remarkable Marriage of Heaven and Hell), they will appeal only to a few chosen disciples here and there. On the other hand there are gems of Blake’s poetry that concern every lover of literature is to be found in the Sketches, Songs of Innocence or Songs of Experience. These have a spontaneity, and a charm which make us forget their not infrequent technical imperfections. In the purity of their lyric note they are all
but unique in the English literature of the time. Their democratic sentiment is also important. But most significant of all is their love of nature, of simple life, of childhood, home, and honesty, in which they point directly forward to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Blake stood apart from the general literary movements of his age. But he reveals the influence of the Elizabethan revival, of the growing love of Spenser, of Percy’s *Reliques*, of Chatterton, and, in the formlessness, or liberal form of his apocalyptic writings, of *Ossian*. Though his work is in many ways prophetic, it was little known, and therefore exercised a very slight influence only on his contemporaries and immediate successors.