

William Blake's the
human abstract:
comparison and
contrast: a critique of
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"The Human Abstract" offers an alternative analysis of the virtues of Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love that constituted God and Man in "The Divine Image", and can be thus considered a companion poem. The speaker argues that Pity could not exist without poverty, and that Mercy would be unnecessary if everyone were happy, and that Peace derives from fear, which gives rise to "selfish loves". Cruelty personified plants and waters a tree in "the human Brain", and utilising and expanding on this gardening or tree metaphor, the roots of the tree are "Humility", the leaves are "Mystery", and the fruit is "Deceit", thus suggesting that negative human characteristics actually stem from originally valuable, noble virtues. On the other hand, it could be said that Blake's "The Divine Image" of "Songs of Innocence" attributes the virtues of Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love to the human form while giving God the glory for the creation of humans in His own image. This suggests that the biblical reference of God making man in his image is true, reflected in the last two lines of the poem, "Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell/ There God is dwelling too". This analysis will compare and contrast the two poems "The Divine Image" and "The Human Abstract", and show that this poem is indeed a critique of its companion. Firstly, the lines of "The Human Abstract" have none of the uplifting and sweet-sounding quality typical of Blake's poetry; the poem's didactic, pedagogical tone and serious subject matter occasion the harsh, severe rhythm he employs. By way of contrast, the opening lines of "The Divine Image" are like a hymn or prayer, reflected in the word "pray" and "virtues", words associated with prayer. The lines "To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love/ All pray in their distress" introduces the cast of Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love in terms of a prayer, which are virtues that are personified and imbued with lifelike qualities and characteristics. By <https://assignbuster.com/william-blakes-the-human-abstract-comparison-and-contrast-a-critique-of-the-divine-image/>

returning "their thankfulness" in prayer to these four anthropomorphic characters, it is acknowledged that these virtues are important in human existence. Secondly, in general "The Human Abstract" preaches that the traditional Christian virtues of mercy and pity presuppose and depend on a world of poverty and human suffering. Furthermore, these virtues represent a kind of passive, useless, resigned sympathy or resignation that suggests no obligation to alleviate or ameliorate that suffering or to create a more just and fair world. The speaker in "The Human Abstract" therefore refuses to think of them as ideals, suggesting and reasoning logically that in an ideal world of universal happiness and genuine love there would be no need of these qualities. This seemingly cynical approach is quite unlike "The Divine Image" where "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love/ Is God our Father dear" can be seen immediately as four ideal virtues belonging to God the Almighty Father. It is suggested that these qualities are from God and thus that makes the world a good, just and fair world. The phrase "and Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love/ Is man, His child and care" also suggests that God loves mankind and has these virtues to protect His children and to care for them, and does not have the negative worldview or weltanschauung present in "The Human Abstract". Furthermore, "The Human Abstract" is a methodical critique of the key and important virtues that were so praised in "The Divine Image". Proceeding through Pity, Mercy, and Peace, the poem then arrives at the phrase "selfish loves", where the word "selfish" conjures up negativism. These clearly differ from Love as an innocent abstraction, and the poem thus explores the growth, at once insidious and simultaneously organic, of a system of values based on stagnation, repression, hypocrisy and fear. This is rather unlike "The Divine Image" which suggests a rather more positive tone

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with respect to Pity, Mercy and Peace. " For Mercy has a human heart/ Pity, a human face" has a tone that suggests that man is so similar to God, and carries a positive connotation. " And Love, the human form divine/ And Peace the human dress" further show that there is little similarity with fear, hypocrisy, repression or stagnation, as love and peace are divine and provide protection in the form of dressing. " Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell/ There God is dwelling too" from a Christian perspective means that God dwells in the heart of men, whenever one can see the virtues of Mercy, Love and Pity. Furthermore, the line " and all must love the human form/ In heathen, Turk, or Jew" can be taken to mean that all heathens, Turks or Jews, meaning all pagans, Muslims or Hebrews, are just as human and have human virtues like everyone else. Clearly there is a more negative atmosphere and negative connotations in " The Human Abstract" vis-à-vis the more positive " The Divine Image". The description and extended metaphor of the tree in the second part of " The Human Abstract" shows how intellectualized and apparently academic values like Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love become a breeding-ground for " Cruelty". The speaker depicts Cruelty as a conniving and knowing anthropomorphic person; in planting a tree, he also lays a snare. This personification allows the poem to express further ideas: Cruelty's tree flourishes on fear and weeping; " Humility" is its root, where the real meaning of humility has been soundly distorted, " Mystery" its foliage; but this growth is not natural or even desired. Rather, the tree is associated with " Deceit", and its branches harbour the " raven", an important and common symbol of death. By the end of " The Human Abstract" we realize that the tree's description is a glimpse into the human mind, and is probably about man's mental experience, with all the negative

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items of mystery, deceit and death. Thus the poem comments on the way abstract reasoning and understanding of virtues undermine a more natural system of values. The result is a grotesque resemblance to the organic, real type of values, which brings forth a tree that lies "sequestered" secretly in the "human Brain". Perhaps it means that all these virtues and ideals actually only exist within the human brain and that Cruelty is inevitably the end result, suggesting a more negative and metaphysical, philosophical ending to the poem. These elements are all missing from "The Divine Image". In summary, "The Human Abstract" differs in tone and atmosphere from its companion poem; this poem preaches that traditional Christian virtues of mercy and pity presuppose a world of poverty and suffering and that these virtues represent a kind of useless resigned sympathy that suggests no obligation to ameliorate suffering, whereas in "The Divine Image", Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love can be seen as ideal virtues belonging to the Almighty God. In addition, "The Human Abstract" is a critique of the important virtues that were so praised in "The Divine Image". Analysing Pity, Mercy, and Peace, these clearly differ from Love as an innocent abstraction, and the poem explores the growth, insidious and organic, of a system of values based on fear, hypocrisy, repression, and stagnation. This is unlike "The Divine Image" which suggests a more positive tone with respect to Pity, Mercy and Peace. The extended metaphor of the tree in "The Human Abstract" ultimately shows how intellectualized academic values like Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love become the breeding-ground for "Cruelty", depicting Cruelty as a conniving anthropomorphic entity; he lays a trap; his tree flourishes on fear; "Humility" is its root, "Mystery" its foliage; this growth is unnatural. Rather, the tree is associated with "Deceit", and its

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branches harbour a symbol of death. The tree metaphor is a glimpse into the human mind, where the poem comments on the way abstract reasoning and understanding of such virtues undermines a more natural system of values. In the final analysis, this poem is indeed a critique and re-evaluation of “ The Divine Image”. Blake’s poetry is far deeper and philosophical than a mere cursory, peripatetic reading suggests. Bibliography Blake, William, David Erdman and Harold Bloom. The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake. California: University of California Press 1982.