

The youthful features of mary english literature essay

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This section of the guidebook will explore the historical, symbolic, religious, philosophical and personal values of La Pieta. On August 27, 1498 Michelangelo was formally commissioned by Cardinal Jean Biheres de Lagraulas, the French King's envoy to the Pope to create a lifesize statue of the Virgin Mary holding Christ in her arms, to be used for the cardinal's funeral monument. After finalising the contract which stated, "... the master is to make a marble Pieta at his expense, for a price of 455 gold ducats of papal gold, to be completed within a year from the commencement of work," the Cardinal wrote to the authorities of Lucca, requesting their help to find the marble for the statue. He stated, "... we have recently agreed with the master Michelangelo that he make for us a marble tombstone, namely a clothed Virgin Mary with a dead Christ naked in her arms... we confidently beg your lordships out of consideration for us to extend to him every help and favour in this matter." Lucca was famous for its marble quarries, including Carrara which 'yielded the largest, finest blocks of the brittle white stone that was so hard to work with', but appreciated and popular among sculptors. [Guide to St Peter's Basilica, Libreria Editrice Vaticana]

Michelangelo travelled to the marble quarries at Carrara to choose the marble block himself as under the artistic discipline of Disegno, he believed that the statue was pre-existing from within the marble, needing only to be freed by the artist. It took Michelangelo nine months to select and transport the block of marble from the quarries to Rome. The statue was to be unveiled to the public at the Jubilee of 1500 in the St Peter's Basilica, however when it was revealed, Cardinal Bilheres had already died.

Historical

Personal:

The fact that La Pieta was the only sculpture he ever signed suggests the great value it had to Michelangelo. La Pieta was unceremoniously placed in the chapel of Santa Petronilla and it is said that Michelangelo himself was impressed and believed that it was more beautiful than any marble statue yet to be seen in Rome. However his pride soon turned to frustration when he overheard a crowd attributing the statue to rival artists. Michelangelo went on to carve (Michelangelo Buonarroti from Florence made this) across the sash of Mary, but later regretted it, vowing to never sign any of his statues again. According to Vasari, "... Michelangelo put in to this work so much love and effort, that he left his name written across the sash over Our Lady's breast."

Philosophical:

Neoplatonism: The youthful features of Mary, the monumental size of the statue and Michelangelo's belief of the artistic discipline of Disegno are all representations of Michelangelo's Neoplatonic beliefs and these aspects all contribute to the philosophical value of La Pieta. Michelangelo's belief, underpinned by Neoplatonic views on physical beauty is that "... chaste women stay fresh much more than those who are not chaste," and that "women who are pure in soul and body never grow old." Therefore Michelangelo presented Mary's physical beauty as a manifestation of a pure and noble soul. It suggests that her character embodies innocence and is closely aligned with the Neoplatonic view that an idealized beauty is a

reflection of God himself. Michelangelo sought to "identify the beautiful, the good and the true as one and the same" in La Pieta. [wr. english. fsu. edu] Monumentality La Pieta was originally intended to be a part of the Cardinal's funeral monument, commemorating his life therefore not intended to be an intimate nor private statue. The figure, unlike David or Moses, is less imposing and overwhelming, however through its colossal weight and monumental size, it represents the "the power and largeness of human endeavour." Michelangelo was known for considering the artistic discipline Disegno in his sculptures. This is because Disegno and Neoplatonism have similar beliefs; that the artist in some way is like God, in the regard that he is freeing or releasing the pre-existing subject from within the marble; similar to how the human soul is thought by some such as Neoplatonists, to be found trapped within the physical body. The artist was therefore attempting to create the concetto; the artistic concept or thought in matter, just as God created beauty in the physical world. This discipline therefore meant that the monumentality of the sculpture was predestined due to the block of stone that Michelangelo identified with. As he believed the statue was pre-existing within the marble waiting to be freed by the artist, he personally sourced the block of marble; spending a total of nine months to select and transport it back to his workshop in Rome.

Religious Value:

The theme of La Pieta in which Mary holds on her lap the dead body of her Son was common in Europe, north of the Alps but not in Italy. This may be the reason why the contract strictly stated how Michelangelo was to sculpt it.

It was to portray " the Virgin Mary draped in a robe with the dead Christ in her arms." [Michelangelo, Alexandra Gromling]Mary's calm, serene facial expression contributes to the religious value of the statue as they are parallel to the Christian views of life and death. Earlier artists, generally depicted Mary in a state of despair and desperation, however Michelangelo depicted a 'highly spiritual and Christian view of human suffering.' [Guide to Saint Peter's Basilica, Libreria Editrice Vaticana]Mary, with her Son's lifeless body on her lap exhibits a sense of acceptance and tranquility, combined with her faith in God. The Christian view on the acceptance of death as a part of life and that the sufferings and pain of life is able to be mitigated is expressed. By depicting Mary's acceptance of her Son's death and not her grief, Michelangelo expressed the value of the Christian view on life and death, claiming that " If life pleases us, death, being made by the hands of the same creator, should not displease us." Therefore in La Pieta, the death of the Son is not as important as the expression of Mary which can be interpreted as presenting to the viewer 'the path to salvation, God's sacrifice for mankind and her sacrifice of her only son to make possible our redemption.' [smarthistory. khanacademy. org/michelangelo-pieta. html]The statue captures an intimate moment which has no biblical reference, although various influences of poems and laments of the Virgin may be apparent. The most suitable assumption would be that the Virgin Mary is holding her son's body after it was taken down from the cross. Another theory of this structure is that Mary is actually holding baby Jesus, however the viewer is seeing the future of Jesus as an adult. Though this is a convincing theory, it was never confirmed by Michelangelo himself or any of

his contemporaries. Mary's youthful features are not only a representation of Michelangelo's Neoplatonic beliefs, they also contribute to the religious value of the La Pieta. Mary's youthfulness allows her to be seen as both the mother of Jesus and the daughter of God. According to James S. Jeffers, the term Pieta was originally associated with the 'sense of duty a child has towards their parents'. In later years, the Romans compared this to one's obligations to their god(s). La Pieta reflects both of these views in the sense that Mary and Jesus have a complex parent to child and human to God relationship. As portrayed by Michelangelo, Jesus' weak, lifeless body is supported by His strong yet dismal mother, who is " simultaneously a weak human, looking to her God for comfort." [constructingjesus. blogspot. co. nz/2010/02/la-pieta-michelangelo-jesus-through. html]Another interpretation of her youthfulness is that God is the source of beauty and since Mary is one closest to God, His beauty is reflected in her physical beauty. Almost identical to the main Neoplatonic belief is the Christian belief that the exterior beauty is a representation of the inner beauty, thus the Virgin Mary is morally beautiful.

Symbolic/ Iconic:

In the physical representation of La Pieta, Michelangelo has left out the extreme emotionalism of the theme of Mary in despair over her son's death, and has rather shifted towards a more idealized version of the tragic moment. One of the most distinctive symbolic elements of Michelangelo's La Pieta is the expression of Mary and Jesus' body. Jesus' body appears to be the body of a young man; his ribcage and abdominal muscles are well-defined, his neck is exposed to the viewer, his left foot hangs in mid-air and

he appears extremely vulnerable. The surface of his skin appears smooth and there is a stark contrast with the drapery of Mary's robe. Mary is cradling her son in her lap which relates to the aspect of Madonna and Child iconography thus " linking Christs' death and birth in a single sculpture." [Art in Renaissance Italy, John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke] Mary with an idealised and youthful face is seated majestically, holding her son in her lap which appears enlarged due to the heavy drapery of the cloth. The contrast of the sizes between Mary and Jesus emphasises His weakness and frailty whilst in his state of death, appearing much smaller cradled by his mother. However, His body still has traces of life; the veins of his arms and legs expanded due to the pulse of life. Due to the absence of wounds and indications of pain nor death in Christ's body and Mary's youthful features, the attention is drawn to Christ's incarnation. Mary's left hand open and pointing forward appears gentle and like an unconscious choice due to her contemplative face which seems deep in thought over the future of her life and that of her son's. Michelangelo successfully focused the sculpture on the success of Christ's atonement rather than the popular depiction of Christ's death. He did not want to emphasise the pain and torture that Christ experienced but rather his triumph in bringing salvation to all. Michelangelo's exceptional talent in sculpting is depicted in this statue. For La Pieta, the marble block was wider than it was tall and from it, he carved in a pyramidal shape, a compact yet monumental statue of two figures; the seated and upright Mary with the limp, horizontal Jesus. Christ's body is predominantly framed by the figure of Mary and this emphasises 'the strong attachment of mother and son.' [Michelangelo, Alexandra Gromling] Throughout the statue,

there is also a consistent use of contrast; the left hand of Mary clutching Jesus' body, the other open outwards, the smooth, limp body of Jesus lying on top of the heavy drapery of Mary's robe and while Mary sits upright with her feet firmly planted on the ground, indicating a strong connection with the earth, Jesus is only gently sweeping the ground with the tip of his right foot.

(This also emphasises Christ's ascension to a higher level;

Neoplatonism)The values of the symbolic features of the La Pieta is that they helped to differentiate it from previous representations which were solely focussed on the sorrow of Christ's death; the manifestation of historical and religious narration. However, what Michelangelo emphasised is the Catholic perspective; the acceptance of death as a part of life, Christ's triumph in bringing salvation to all and God's sacrifice for mankind to make possible our redemption. Michelangelo was not concerned in portraying what happened, but what came to be as a result of that. According to Vasari " the body of the dead Christ exhibits the very perfection of research in every muscle, vein, and nerve. No corpse could more completely resemble the dead than does this. There is a most exquisite expression in the countenance. The veins and pulses, moreover, are indicated with so much exactitude, that one cannot but marvel how the hand of the artist should in a short time have produced such a divine work. " Comparisons of two works of art are often used in both research papers and exam responses. They provide an opportunity to combine formal analysis with knowledge of the artists, the subjects, and relevant background information needed to make inferences about the relationship between the two works. Begin by asking yourself what aspects of the two works stand out as particularly notable and whether or not these

attributes are shared. A comparison typically starts with similarities; if the two works share a stylistic background, have the same artist or relative period, or depict the same subject, mention the commonality as grounds for establishing a comparison. Then, move on to the ways in which the two works differ, beginning with the obvious and moving on to the more subtle and specific. Conclude each point by analyzing what this difference might reveal. The deep hues of yellow and green in the central man's clothing complement the red and blue in the woman's, and form the palette for the rest of the onlookers, a simple, pure combination of colors that contributes to the sense of order. The almost perfect symmetry of the scene, as well as the relatively empty middle ground, underscore both the spiritual theme and the aesthetic values of the time