

The Human Abstract

By William Blake

Pity would be no more,
If we did not make somebody Poor:
And Mercy no more could be,
If all were as happy as we;

And mutual fear brings peace;
Till the selfish loves increase.
Then Cruelty knits a snare,
And spreads his baits with care.

He sits down with holy fears,
And waters the ground with tears:
Then Humility takes its root
Underneath his foot.

Soon spreads the dismal shade
Of Mystery over his head;

And the Caterpillar and Fly,
Feed on the Mystery.

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,
Ruddy and sweet to eat;
And the Raven his nest has made
In its thickest shade.

The Gods of the earth and sea,
Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree
But their search was all in vain:
There grows one in the Human Brain .

Introduction Of The Poem :-

‘The Human Abstract’ is written by the English poet William Blake. This poem was published as a part of his collection entitled “Songs Of Experience” in 1794 . Blake’s ‘The Human Abstract’ is in contrast with his other poem entitled ‘The Divine Image’. In this poem, Blake has tried to showcase that

the human mind is responsible for its own downfall . In this poem , Blake has analyzed the four virtues, that is, Mercy , Pity , Peace and Love that were formerly glorified by him in his poem entitled , “The Divine Image” . According to Blake , virtues (goodness) cannot exist in this world without the existence of suffering . Through “ The Human Abstract” , Blake has tried to highlight that the four divine virtues, that is, Pity , Mercy , Peace and Love are not “the virtues of delight” rather they originate from the selfish motives of the human race . Throughout the poem , the rhyme scheme used by the poet is AABB . In this poem , Blake has largely tried to challenge religious notions and has tried to convey that if God wants His followers to imbibe the virtues like Truth, Mercy, Peace and Love , then God must accept a world of poverty and suffering . This is because of Blake’s

belief that goodness and suffering are linked to each other and the two cannot exist in isolation .

Explanation Of The Poem :-

Pity would be no more,
If we did not make somebody Poor:
And Mercy no more could be,
If all were as happy as we;

In the aforementioned quatrain , Blake has tried to convey that Pity cannot exist without the existence of poverty. This means that people try to feel virtuous and portray themselves as virtuous by feeling pity towards those who are poor . Hence , people often give monetary (financial) help to the poor people but they rarely make any attempt to ensure that no one remains poor. No one tries to do anything significant enough to end poverty completely. Blake

further states that Mercy will cease to (stop) exist if everyone is equally happy . It is sadness that gives rise to Mercy . If there is no sadness or sorrow , there will be no Mercy .

And mutual fear brings peace;
Till the selfish loves increase.
Then Cruelty knits a snare,
And spreads his baits with care.

Meaning Of Difficult Words :-

Snare :- A trap

Bait :- Something used to attract or tempt someone

In this quatrain, Blake has asserted that peace arises not from the love of others but from the fear of the conflicts and the destruction that might take place if peace is not made between people who otherwise dislike or hate each other . Further, he says

that love that originates from this temporary peace is selfish and false love . Behind this selfish and false love, cruelty prepares its trap in the human mind and waits . Then, cruelty spreads its trap that is filled with baits and waits for its prey to get trapped in its trap.

He sits down with holy fears,
And waters the ground with tears:
Then Humility takes its root
Underneath his foot.

Meaning Of Difficult Words :-

Humility : The characteristic of being humble, that is, not having a high opinion of oneself.

In this quatrain, Blake says that the cruel man sits and waits with feeling of fear for his opponent's (enemy's) fall. The cruel man then weeps after the misfortune (bad luck) of his opponent. However, the

innocent people who witness the cruel man shedding tears for the fallen (trapped) enemy think that the cruel enemy is full of humility. Hence, Blake says that the innocent people think that the roots of humility grows from underneath the foot of the cruel man. However, according to Blake, this kind of false humility is not a virtue rather it is a vice (a bad habit) as it is wrongly used by the tyrant (that is, the cruel person who oppresses others) for portraying himself as a good person .

Soon spreads the dismal shade
Of Mystery over his head;
And the Caterpillar and Fly,
Feed on the Mystery.

Meaning Of Difficult Words :-

Dismal : Undesirable

In this quatrain, dismal shade refers to the undesirable shade created by the Tree of

Mystery. In this poem, Blake has used the Tree of Mystery as a symbol of organized or exploitative religious philosophies.

Actually, Blake has tried to state that the cruel people use the shade of mystery in order to hide the cruelty and oppression that they impose on other people. The caterpillar and fly symbolize the priests who use religion as a source of profit for themselves. The poet means to convey that priests are like parasites (that is, caterpillar and fly) who use religion in order to fulfill their own ill motives. Also, the priests collaborate and cooperate with the cruel tyrants in order to exploit the weak section of the society .

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,
Ruddy and sweet to eat;
And the Raven his nest has made
In its thickest shade.

Meaning Of Difficult words :-

Ruddy : Reddish in colour

The poet then says that the Tree of Mystery (that is, organized religion) bears the fruit of hypocrisy and deception (actions that are undertaken in order to mislead someone) .

In this poem, deception or deceit symbolize the false morality which is taught by

organized religion .The fruits of hypocrisy and deception look very reddish and sweet to eat . The “rave” symbolize the Pope (the head of the Church) who derives maximum profit from the thickest shade of the tree .

This means that Blake is asserting that the authorities of the Church are corrupt as they exploit the institution of religion for their own profit .

The Gods of the earth and sea,
Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree
But their search was all in vain:
There grows one in the Human Brain .

Meaning Of Difficult Words :-

Sought : To try to find

Vain : Something that ultimately turns out to be pointless.

In the final quatrain, Blake states that the Gods of the earth and sea, that symbolize the real and helpful Gods , try to find out the harmful mysterious tree but they ultimately fail to find it. They did not become successful in finding it because the Tree of Mystery does not exist physically rather it exists in the brains of those human beings who have themselves created a God of cruelty and a mysterious system of false religious beliefs in order to fulfill their own selfish motives. To be more accurate, Blake is trying to convey that the real Gods and Prophets became unsuccessful in finding out the false or the

organized religion (which promoted hypocrisy, oppression and deception) because its source was human brain and it had no validation from the true Almighty. Thus, Blake condemns hollow religion throughout the poem as it is destructive, selfish and oppressive in nature.
