



Poets of Mysticism: Jalal ud-Din Rumi & William Blake: A Comparative and Contrastive Analysis

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the similarities and differences between the mystical poetry of Jalal ud-Din Rumi, a Persian poet who lived in the 13th century, and William Blake, an English poet who lived in the 18th century. The focus will be on their respective approaches to mysticism and spirituality, as well as their common themes of divine love, human transformation, and the connection between the material and spiritual realms. Their poetic expressions of mysticism reflect a profound engagement with the transcendent, and they encourage readers to seek higher truths beyond the confines of the physical world. Despite the fact that both poets come from different cultures, their mysticism is in their poetry. The purpose of this comparative study is to highlight the similarities between them in terms of their themes and styles, as well as the differences that stem from their distinct philosophical and theological backgrounds.

Keywords: Mysticism, Spirituality, Divine Love, Themes and Style

1. Introduction

Jalal ud-Din Rumi (1207-1273) and William Blake (1757-1827) are two of the most influential mystical poets in literary history, each representing distinct spiritual traditions yet sharing strikingly similar themes in their visionary works. Rumi, a Sufi mystic from the Islamic world, and Blake, a Romantic poet and artist from 18th-century England, both use poetry as a medium to express their profound spiritual experiences, offering readers a pathway to explore the nature of the divine, the soul's journey toward enlightenment, and the transformative power of love.

Rumi, as a follower of Sufism, grounded his mystical philosophy in the Islamic concept of tawhid—the unity of God—and the path of fanaa, or the annihilation of the self in divine love. His poetry reflects the central tenet of Sufi mysticism: the soul's longing to reunite with God after being separated from Him. This yearning is conveyed through ecstatic poetry that celebrates divine love, unity, and spiritual intoxication. His major works, including the *Mathnawi* and the *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, use metaphors such as wine, the reed, and the beloved to symbolize the soul's relationship with the divine. Rumi's mysticism is deeply experiential, rooted in a personal, emotional connection with God that transcends religious doctrine and rational thought.

William Blake, on the other hand, developed a unique form of visionary mysticism influenced by Christian, Gnostic, and Romantic traditions. Like Rumi, Blake sought to transcend conventional religious structures, advocating for a direct, personal encounter with the divine. His poetry is filled with powerful symbols and mythological figures that express his belief in the imagination as the pathway to spiritual truth. Blake's mystical vision centers on the idea of the human soul's capacity to perceive the infinite within the finite world. His works, such as *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and his epic prophetic poems, explore themes of divine energy, the reconciliation of opposites, and the transformative power of the human imagination.

Despite their different historical and cultural contexts, both Rumi and Blake challenged the orthodoxies of their respective religious traditions. Rumi's poetry often transcends the boundaries of Islamic legalism, focusing instead on the universal, ecstatic experience of divine love, while Blake criticized institutional Christianity, advocating for a more personal, imaginative spirituality. Both poets used their mystical experiences to question traditional dichotomies—such as good and evil, heaven and hell, or body and soul—inviting their readers to expand their understanding of spirituality beyond conventional religious frameworks.

The comparative study of Rumi and Blake as mystical poets offers a unique opportunity to explore the intersections of Sufi and Romantic mysticism. Their works reflect the profound connection between poetry and spirituality, showing how the poetic experience can serve as a vehicle for expressing the ineffable mysteries of the divine. Through their visionary poetry, Rumi and Blake sought not only to communicate their personal experiences of the divine but also to inspire others to seek their own paths to spiritual awakening. This study will delve into the thematic, symbolic, and visionary elements of their works, examining how both poets use mystical language and imagery to convey their spiritual philosophies and transformative experiences.

In exploring their mystical poetry, this paper will focus on key themes such as divine love, spiritual transformation, visionary mysticism, and the use of symbolic language. By comparing and contrasting their approaches, we can gain a deeper understanding of how Rumi and Blake, despite their cultural and temporal differences, both represent the timeless human quest for the divine and the role of poetry in expressing that journey.

Chittick's work is a detailed exploration of Rumi's mystical philosophy, focusing on his use of love as a metaphor for the soul's journey toward God. This text serves as a valuable resource for understanding the theological underpinnings of Rumi's poetry, particularly the Sufi concepts of unity, divine love, and the process of spiritual

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transformation. Chittick emphasizes how Rumi's poetry expresses an all-consuming desire for union with the divine, framing it within the larger context of Islamic mysticism.

2. Contextual Background

2.1. Jalal ud-Din Rumi

Jalal ud-Din Rumi, also known as Mawlana, was a Sufi mystic whose profound influence spans beyond the Islamic world. Rumi's poetry is rooted in the Sufi tradition, which emphasizes the pursuit of spiritual love and union with God. His most famous work, the *Mathnawi*, is a six-volume epic that explores themes of divine love, unity, and the spiritual journey. Rumi's poetry is deeply metaphorical, often using the language of love, wine, and the beloved as symbols for the mystical union with the divine.

Ghose offers an in-depth literary analysis of the *Mathnawi*, Rumi's magnum opus, through the lens of narrative structure and mystical symbolism. This text provides readers with insights into how Rumi weaves Sufi metaphysical ideas into poetic form, focusing on his symbolic representations of the soul's path toward enlightenment. Ghose also compares Rumi's ideas with other mystical traditions, making this an essential resource for understanding the structural and thematic elements of Rumi's poetry.

2.2. Key elements of Rumi's mysticism:

1. **Divine Love:** Rumi frequently discusses the notion of love as the primary force that binds the universe, representing the soul's yearning for God.
2. **Union with the Divine:** A key Sufi concept, Rumi views the ultimate goal of life as annihilation of the self (*fanaa*) and the absorption into God's presence.
3. **Metaphysical Symbolism:** Rumi uses rich symbols such as wine, dance, and light to express the ecstatic nature of mystical experience.

2.3. B. William Blake

William Blake, a central figure in the Romantic movement, was also deeply mystical in his worldview. His religious beliefs were unconventional, as he rejected institutionalized religion, instead advocating for a personal, spiritual relationship with the divine. Blake's mysticism was intertwined with his critique of materialism and rationalism, both of which he viewed as barriers to spiritual awakening. His major works, including *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, explore themes of dualism, the fall and redemption of humanity, and the visionary imagination as a pathway to divine truth. Nurmi's study of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* focuses on Blake's challenge to orthodox Christian theology and his vision of a non-dualistic, mystical spirituality. Nurmi explores how Blake reconciles opposites such as good and evil, material and spiritual, in a manner that transcends traditional moral frameworks. This text is important for understanding Blake's mysticism, particularly his critique of institutionalized religion and his assertion that true spiritual liberation is achieved through the integration of contraries.

2.4. Key elements of Blake's mysticism:

1. **Imagination as Divine Power:** Blake saw the human imagination as a reflection of divine creativity and a means to access higher spiritual truths.
2. **Critique of Dualism:** While Blake acknowledged the existence of opposites (good and evil, innocence and experience), he sought to reconcile them through his concept of the "divine imagination."
3. **Personal Vision of Divinity:** Blake's God was not a distant figure, but an inner presence that could be accessed through the expansion of human consciousness.

3. Comparative Themes in Rumi and Blake

3.1. Themes of Divine Love and Human Transformation in Rumi and Blake: A Comparative Analysis

Divine love and human transformation are central themes in both Jalal ud-Din Rumi's and William Blake's poetry. Despite their distinct cultural and religious contexts, both poets use the theme of divine love to explore the potential for human transformation, liberation from the material world, and union with the divine. This section examines these themes in both poets' works, highlighting how they conceptualize love as a force that reshapes the individual and brings about spiritual enlightenment. Examples from their poetry illustrate the depth and complexity of these shared mystical themes.

Rāwanqir offers a comparative study of Rumi and Blake, examining the similarities in their mysticism despite their distinct religious and cultural backgrounds. The author focuses on themes such as divine love, the soul's journey, and the use of visionary language in both poets' works. This book is a key reference for comparative mysticism and highlights how Rumi's Sufi mysticism parallels Blake's visionary, romantic approach to spiritual transcendence.

3.2. Divine Love as a Transformative Force

3.2.1. Rumi: The Yearning for Union with God

For Rumi, divine love is the central principle of existence. In the Sufi tradition, divine love is the force that drives the soul toward God, and Rumi's poetry frequently expresses the soul's longing for reunion with the divine. This yearning, or *eshq*, is both painful and ecstatic, representing the soul's separation from its source and its intense

desire to return to God. Rumi often uses the metaphor of the lover and the beloved to symbolize this relationship between the soul and the divine.

In Rumi's famous poem from the *Divan-e Shams*, he writes:

"I died to the mineral state and became a plant,
I died to the vegetal state and reached animality,
I died to the animal state and became a man,
Then why fear disappearance through death?
Next time I shall die to human nature
To lift up my head and wings among the angels."

In this poem, Rumi describes a continuous process of transformation through stages of being, each death symbolizing the soul's release from lower forms of existence in its journey toward divine union. This progression is driven by divine love, which compels the soul to shed its ego and merge with the infinite.

Here, divine love is not merely a passive feeling but an active force that transforms the individual, drawing them closer to God. The culmination of this process is *fanaa*, or annihilation of the self, in which the individual's personal will is dissolved in the divine will. Through this process, the human soul experiences a profound transformation, transcending the limitations of material existence and achieving spiritual enlightenment.

3.3. Blake: Imagination as Divine Love

Blake's concept of divine love is closely tied to his vision of the human imagination as a divine power. While Rumi focuses on self-annihilation and reunion with God, Blake views divine love as an active, creative force that manifests through the human imagination. For Blake, love is a spiritual and imaginative act that allows individuals to perceive the divine within themselves and others. This vision is articulated in *The Divine Image* from *Songs of Innocence*:

"For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity, a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress."

In this passage, Blake equates human qualities—mercy, pity, and love—with divinity, suggesting that the divine is immanent in human beings. Blake's notion of divine love is transformative because it allows individuals to transcend the dualities of good and evil, innocence and experience, and achieve a higher state of spiritual awareness. Unlike Rumi, who emphasizes the dissolution of the self, Blake sees divine love as a unifying force that brings about harmony between opposites.

In Blake's mystical vision, divine love transforms not by annihilation but by integration, where contraries are reconciled and synthesized through the power of the imagination. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake famously writes, "Without contraries is no progression," suggesting that spiritual growth comes from the dynamic tension between opposites, which divine love resolves through imaginative insight.

While not exclusively about Blake, Van Dusen's work explores the influence of Emanuel Swedenborg's mystical visions on Blake's poetry and thought. Blake was heavily influenced by Swedenborg's writings, particularly his views on the correspondence between spiritual and material realms. Van Dusen's analysis helps contextualize Blake's belief in the power of human imagination as a means of accessing divine truths and provides background on the visionary tradition in which Blake's work is situated.

3.4. The Human Soul's Journey of Transformation

3.4.1. Rumi: The Soul's Journey Toward Divine Love

In Rumi's poetry, the human soul embarks on a journey of spiritual transformation that is fueled by divine love. This journey is not linear but cyclical, as the soul continuously moves through stages of purification and enlightenment. Rumi often uses metaphors of travel, ascent, and transformation to describe the soul's progress toward union with God.

In the *Mathnawi*, Rumi writes:

"Come, come, whoever you are,
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving,
It doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vow
A thousand times,
Come, yet again, come, come."

Here, Rumi invites the seeker on a journey toward divine love, emphasizing that the path is open to all, regardless of past failures or sins. The repetition of "come" reflects the cyclical nature of the spiritual journey, where the soul continually returns to God in an ongoing process of transformation. Divine love, in this context, is the motivating force that propels the soul forward, encouraging persistence in the face of difficulties.

Throughout his work, Rumi portrays the human soul's transformation as a return to its original state of divine unity. This journey is both painful and ecstatic, as the soul must shed its ego and its attachment to the material world in order to achieve spiritual liberation.

3.5. Blake: The Journey from Innocence to Experience

Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience presents the soul's journey as a movement from innocence, a state of pure, uncorrupted vision, to experience, which represents the fallen state of humanity. However, Blake does not view this progression as purely negative. Rather, he suggests that through divine love and the power of the imagination, individuals can transcend the state of experience and achieve a higher state of consciousness.

In "The Tyger," Blake explores the tension between innocence and experience, good and evil:

"Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?"

The "Tyger" symbolizes the terrifying yet sublime aspect of divine creation, challenging the simplistic moral dualism of good and evil. Blake's exploration of contraries is central to his mystical vision, as he believes that the reconciliation of opposites leads to spiritual transformation. Through divine love, individuals can perceive the unity underlying these contraries and realize their own potential for spiritual enlightenment.

Blake's journey of transformation is not about escaping the material world, as it is in Rumi's work, but rather about transforming one's perception of the world through the power of love and imagination. In Blake's view, the material and spiritual realms are intertwined, and it is through divine love that individuals can transcend the limitations of experience and regain a state of innocence, this time infused with wisdom and self-awareness.

3.6. Ecstatic Union and Individual Empowerment

3.6.1. Rumi: Ecstatic Union with the Divine

Rumi's poetry frequently describes moments of ecstatic union with the divine, where the individual loses themselves in the overwhelming presence of God. In these moments, the soul experiences a complete dissolution of the self, symbolizing the ultimate form of human transformation. This state of divine intoxication is often depicted using metaphors of wine and the beloved, where the poet becomes "drunk" on divine love.

In one of Rumi's famous ghazals, he writes:

"I have been drunk on love's wine,
No wine have I drunk but the blood of my heart."

Here, the intoxication symbolizes the soul's surrender to divine love, which obliterates all sense of individual identity and merges the soul with the infinite. This experience of annihilation (*fanaa*) is central to Rumi's mystical philosophy, representing the final stage of spiritual transformation where the self is absorbed into the divine reality.

3.7. Blake: The Empowerment of the Individual Through Imagination

While Rumi emphasizes the dissolution of the self, Blake's mystical vision is focused on the empowerment of the individual through divine love and imagination. Blake believes that every human being has the potential to access divine wisdom through the creative power of the imagination, which he views as a reflection of God's creativity. In Jerusalem, Blake writes:

"I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man's.
I will not reason and compare: my business is to create."

For Blake, the transformative power of divine love lies in the individual's ability to create their own spiritual reality. Unlike Rumi, who seeks union with the divine by annihilating the self, Blake seeks to empower the individual to become a co-creator with God, using love and imagination to reshape their experience of the world.

3.8. The Role of Poetry in Mystical Experience

Both Rumi and Blake use poetry as a medium through which to communicate their mystical experiences, but their approaches highlight different aspects of visionary mysticism.

3.9. Rumi's Poetic Mysticism: Expressing the Ineffable

Rumi's poetry serves as a vehicle for expressing the ineffable experiences of divine love and union with God. His verses are filled with metaphors and imagery that attempt to convey the overwhelming joy, sorrow, and ecstasy that come with mystical enlightenment. His use of poetry reflects the Sufi tradition of expressing spiritual truths through metaphor and paradox, as these are the only ways to convey experiences that go beyond the limits of rational language.

For example, Rumi often writes of being "drunk" on divine love or "burning" with the fire of longing for God. These images point to a state of spiritual ecstasy that cannot be fully understood by the intellect but can be felt and understood intuitively through poetry.

3.10. Blake's Poetic Mysticism: Imagination as Revelation

Blake's poetry, on the other hand, is visionary in the sense that it attempts to reveal hidden spiritual truths through the use of imaginative symbols and mythologies. His mystical experiences are often depicted as confrontations with angels, gods, and other spiritual beings, which serve to expand the reader's understanding of the divine. Blake believed that poetry could open the "doors of perception" to allow individuals to see the world as it truly is—a place where the spiritual and material are intertwined.

Blake's work is deeply engaged with the act of seeing—seeing beyond the physical world into the spiritual realities that underlie it. His poetry is meant to awaken the reader's imaginative faculties, encouraging them to perceive the world through visionary mysticism.

3.11. Spiritual Symbolism in Rumi and Blake: A Comparative Analysis

Both Jalal ud-Din Rumi and William Blake rely heavily on symbolic language to convey their mystical visions and spiritual insights. While Rumi's symbols are deeply rooted in the Sufi tradition of Islamic mysticism, Blake draws from Christian, Gnostic, and Romantic traditions, using symbols to challenge conventional religious ideas and inspire visionary experiences. Despite their different contexts, both poets use a rich tapestry of metaphors to explore the human soul's relationship with the divine, the transformative power of love, and the tension between the material and spiritual realms.

This section will analyze the key spiritual symbols used by Rumi and Blake, focusing on the ways these symbols express their mystical philosophies. Examples from their poetry will illustrate how they deploy symbols to convey the ineffable nature of divine reality.

3.12. The Symbol of Light

3.12.1. Rumi: Light as a Metaphor for Divine Guidance

For Rumi, light is a symbol of divine knowledge, guidance, and the illuminating presence of God. In Sufi tradition, God is often described as al-Nur (The Light), and light is seen as a metaphor for the divine truth that dispels the darkness of ignorance. Rumi frequently uses light as a symbol for spiritual awakening and the soul's enlightenment through divine love.

In one of his Mathnawi poems, Rumi writes:

"The lamps are different, but the light is the same;
It comes from beyond."

Here, Rumi uses light to symbolize the essential unity of all spiritual paths. The lamps—representing different religious traditions or spiritual practices—may appear different, but the light they emit (the divine truth) comes from the same source. This metaphor illustrates the Sufi belief in the unity of all existence under God and highlights the idea that divine guidance is universal, regardless of the form it takes.

Rumi's use of light reflects the soul's gradual illumination as it progresses toward God. The brighter the light, the closer the soul comes to spiritual enlightenment, symbolizing the transformative power of divine love and knowledge.

3.13. Blake: Light as a Symbol of Visionary Truth

Similarly, Blake uses light to represent divine truth and the power of spiritual vision. However, Blake's use of light often emphasizes the individual's ability to perceive spiritual realities through the imaginative faculty. In Blake's poetry, light frequently symbolizes the moment of visionary insight, where the individual breaks free from the constraints of materialism and sees the world as it truly is—imbued with divine presence.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake writes:

"If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite.
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."

In this passage, light symbolizes the infinite, divine reality that remains hidden behind the "doors of perception." Blake's imagery suggests that human beings are trapped in a limited, materialistic view of the world, symbolized by the "narrow chinks" of the cavern. Cleansing these doors—opening up to visionary experience—allows one to perceive the infinite light of divine truth.

For Blake, light is associated with the imaginative process, which reveals spiritual truths that are inaccessible to reason and the senses. This symbolism emphasizes Blake's belief in the power of the imagination to transcend the limitations of physical reality and access the divine.

3.14. The Symbol of the Rose

3.14.1. Rumi: The Rose as the Soul's Longing for the Divine

In Rumi's poetry, the rose is a powerful symbol of divine beauty, love, and the soul's yearning for God. In Sufi mysticism, the rose often represents the beloved, a metaphor for God, whose beauty and fragrance draw the lover (the soul) closer in an act of spiritual devotion. The rose, in its perfect form, embodies the divine qualities that the soul seeks to emulate.

In his poem from the *Divan-e Shams*, Rumi writes:

"Do not seek for my tomb,
Do not look for me in the grave,
For I am the fragrance of the rose."

Here, the rose symbolizes the eternal presence of the divine. Rumi implies that even after death, the essence of the soul, infused with divine love, persists like the fragrance of the rose. The rose's fragrance is both ephemeral and eternal, suggesting the soul's transcendence beyond the material body.

The rose also represents the beauty of divine love, which, like the rose, is delicate, alluring, and capable of both joy and pain. The thorns of the rose symbolize the trials and hardships faced by the soul on its spiritual journey, while the bloom itself signifies the ultimate realization of divine love.

3.15. Blake: The Sick Rose as a Symbol of Corruption and Loss of Innocence

While Rumi's rose symbolizes divine love and beauty, Blake's use of the rose often carries darker, more ambiguous meanings. In *The Sick Rose* from *Songs of Experience*, Blake uses the rose as a symbol of innocence and purity that has been corrupted by external forces.

"O Rose, thou art sick!

The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy;
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy."

Here, the rose symbolizes the soul's innocence and purity, but it has been infected by a destructive force—represented by the "invisible worm." This worm, which acts in secrecy and darkness, represents the corrupting forces of experience, including repression, deceit, and loss of spiritual vision. The "crimson joy" suggests both the passionate energy of life and the dangerous vulnerabilities that come with it.

For Blake, the rose's corruption represents the soul's fall from a state of innocence into the suffering and disillusionment of experience. The imagery contrasts sharply with Rumi's use of the rose as a symbol of divine beauty, emphasizing Blake's focus on the tragic consequences of human separation from divine truth.

3.16. The Symbol of the Wine

3.16.1. Rumi: Wine as Divine Ecstasy

Rumi frequently uses wine as a symbol of divine love and spiritual ecstasy. In the Sufi tradition, wine represents the intoxicating effect of experiencing God's love, where the soul becomes "drunk" and loses its sense of individual identity. This spiritual intoxication leads to a state of *fanaa* (annihilation of the self) in which the soul is completely absorbed in God's presence.

In one of Rumi's *ghazals*, he writes:

"O love, O pure deep love,
become our wine.

Pour in our veins your ecstasy,
so we can become drunk
and forget the world's illusions."

Here, wine symbolizes the divine love that overwhelms the soul, causing it to transcend the illusions of the material world. The act of becoming "drunk" on divine love is a metaphor for the soul's ecstatic state, in which it experiences the boundless joy and freedom of union with God.

For Rumi, wine is not literal but metaphorical, representing the spiritual inebriation that comes from immersing oneself in the love of God. This symbolism is rooted in Sufi poetry, where the tavern and the wine are metaphors for places of spiritual awakening.

3.17. Blake: Wine as a Symbol of Visionary Inspiration

Blake also uses wine as a symbol, though in a more nuanced and multifaceted way. In his visionary works, wine often represents creative inspiration, spiritual liberation, and divine energy. However, like many of Blake's symbols, wine can have both positive and negative connotations, depending on how it is used.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake writes:

"Improvement makes strait roads, but the crooked roads without Improvement, are roads of Genius."

In Blake's visionary universe, wine can represent the liberation of the human spirit from the rigid structures of reason and morality, allowing the individual to experience divine inspiration. However, wine can also symbolize excess and self-destruction if it leads to a loss of self-control. This duality reflects Blake's belief in the necessity of balance between freedom and restraint, imagination and discipline.

Unlike Rumi, whose wine symbolizes complete surrender to divine ecstasy, Blake's wine is more closely tied to the individual's visionary and creative powers, reflecting his belief in the active role of the human imagination in experiencing the divine.

3.18. The Symbol of Fire

3.18.1. Rumi: Fire as the Passion of Divine Love

In Rumi's poetry, fire often symbolizes the burning passion of divine love, which consumes the ego and purifies the soul. For Rumi, the fire of love is both painful and transformative, representing the intense desire of the soul to reunite with God.

In one of his famous lines, Rumi writes:

"Set your life on fire. Seek those who fan your flames."

Here, fire symbolizes the intensity of the spiritual quest, urging the seeker to embrace the transformative power of divine love. Fire, in this context, is not destructive but purifying, burning away the false self to reveal the true, divine essence within.

3.19. Blake: Fire as a Symbol of Divine Energy

Blake's use of fire is also central to his visionary symbolism, though it often carries a more ambivalent meaning. In *The Tyger*, Blake uses fire to represent the dangerous, yet awe-inspiring power of creation:

"Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?"

Here, fire symbolizes both the creative and destructive aspects of divine energy. The "burning" Tyger is a manifestation of divine power, representing the fierce, untamed aspects of creation that inspire both fear and wonder. Unlike Rumi's fire of divine love, which is purifying, Blake's fire is often a symbol of the dualities inherent in existence—creation and destruction, good and evil, innocence and experience.

4. Mysticism in Style and Form: A Comparative Study of Jalal ud-Din Rumi and William Blake as Mystical Poets

Jalal ud-Din Rumi and William Blake, two towering figures in the realm of mystical poetry, crafted their verses in unique styles and forms that reflect their visionary experiences and spiritual insights. Both poets, through distinct techniques, imbued their works with mysticism, using poetic form as a means to explore the divine, articulate the ineffable, and transform the reader's spiritual understanding. While Rumi's fluid and ecstatic verses mirror the Sufi tradition of divine love and annihilation of the self, Blake's intricate and symbolic poetry aligns with his Romantic and visionary philosophy, emphasizing the power of the imagination and the reconciliation of contraries. This section will explore how their styles and forms reflect their mystical journeys, comparing their use of structure, language, and symbolism to convey their spiritual messages.

4.1. Rumi's Mysticism in Style and Form

Rumi's style is deeply rooted in the traditions of Persian Sufi poetry, characterized by a free-flowing, ecstatic nature that mirrors the spiritual states he seeks to describe. His poetry, especially in the *Mathnawi* and *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, is often non-linear and filled with repetitions, contradictions, and paradoxes—literary techniques that echo the mystical experience, where logical boundaries dissolve, and one enters a state of union with the divine.

4.2. Form and Structure: The Flow of Ecstasy

Rumi's most significant work, the *Mathnawi*, is often referred to as the "Persian Qur'an" for its spiritual depth. Written in the form of *masnavi* (couplets), it features rhyming pairs that allow Rumi to dive into seemingly endless spiritual themes without being constrained by formal rules. This form gives his poetry a fluid, dynamic quality, as it reflects the boundless nature of divine love and the journey toward the dissolution of the self. The lack of rigid structure in many of his poems mirrors the mystical state of *fanaa* (annihilation), where the ego dissolves into the infinite.

Rumi's use of narrative digression is also noteworthy. He frequently breaks from the main narrative to offer spiritual teachings, often through parables and allegories. This non-linear form reflects the Sufi understanding of the soul's journey as a winding, unpredictable path rather than a straight line.

For example, in *The Song of the Reed*, one of his most famous poems, Rumi writes:

"Since I was cut from the reed bed, I have made this crying sound.
Anyone apart from someone he loves understands what I say.
Anyone pulled from a source longs to go back."

The reed, symbolizing the soul, expresses its longing for reunion with God, and Rumi's fluid, conversational style allows him to delve into the deeper meanings of separation and return. The repetition of themes and motifs throughout the poem mirrors the cycles of spiritual seeking and realization, creating a rhythmic reflection of the soul's journey.

4.3. Language: Mystical Metaphor and Symbolism

Rumi's use of metaphor and allegory is central to his mystical style. He often employs symbols such as the beloved, the reed, the wine, and the flame to express the various stages of the soul's mystical experience. His language is sensuous, filled with images of love and longing, which allows him to convey the emotional intensity of his spiritual vision.

The metaphor of the lover and the beloved, for instance, runs through much of Rumi's poetry. This symbol is drawn from the Sufi tradition, where the lover represents the human soul, and the beloved represents God. Rumi's language is often intimate and passionate, suggesting that the relationship between the soul and the divine is one of intense, overwhelming love.

4.4. Blake's Mysticism in Style and Form

William Blake's mystical vision, in contrast to Rumi's, is conveyed through a structured yet symbolic style that reflects his visionary imagination. Blake believed in the divine power of the human imagination and saw poetry as a tool for unlocking spiritual truth. His work often challenges traditional forms, merging poetry with art in illuminated manuscripts and using symbolic characters to express his spiritual philosophy.

4.5. Form and Structure: Songs, Prophecies, and Contraries

Blake's early work, such as *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, demonstrates his unique approach to form. The collection is composed of short, lyrical poems, often using simple rhyme schemes and meter that give them a childlike quality. However, this simplicity is deceptive. Beneath the surface, these poems explore complex spiritual themes, particularly the tension between innocence (associated with purity and divine vision) and experience (associated with suffering and worldly knowledge).

In his more ambitious prophetic works, such as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Jerusalem*, Blake moves beyond traditional lyrical forms to create his own mythological structure. His prophetic poems are filled with allegorical figures—Los, Urizen, Orc—that represent various aspects of human and divine experience. These figures engage in cosmic battles that symbolize the struggle between imagination and reason, freedom and oppression, and innocence and experience.

For example, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake challenges the binary opposition of good and evil, arguing instead for the reconciliation of contraries. His use of free verse in this work allows for a fluid, expansive expression of his mystical vision, much like Rumi's free-flowing couplets.

"Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion,
Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence."

Here, Blake emphasizes that spiritual growth comes from the interaction of opposites—a theme that runs throughout his work. His use of oppositional imagery and structure mirrors his mystical belief that true vision comes from embracing rather than denying life's paradoxes.

4.6. Language: Symbolism and Visionary Myth

Blake's language is highly symbolic, drawing from Christian, Gnostic, and Romantic traditions to create a unique mythological system. While Rumi uses familiar Sufi symbols such as the reed and the wine, Blake invents his own symbolic universe to convey his mystical ideas. Characters such as Urizen (symbolizing reason and law) and Orc (symbolizing revolution and passion) embody spiritual principles that Blake believed were central to human experience.

In his poem *The Tyger* from *Songs of Experience*, Blake uses the symbol of the tiger to explore the mystery of creation and the coexistence of good and evil:

"Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?"

The tiger, with its fierce beauty, represents both the creative and destructive aspects of the divine. Blake's questioning of who could create such a being reflects his mystical concern with the dualities of existence—creation and destruction, innocence and experience—and the role of the imagination in comprehending these divine mysteries.

4.7. Comparative Analysis: Mysticism in Style and Form

While Rumi and Blake differ in their cultural contexts and religious influences, their styles share a common goal: to transcend the limitations of language and form in order to express the mystical experience. Both poets reject rigid structures in favor of more fluid, symbolic approaches that allow them to explore spiritual themes more freely.

- **Fluidity vs. Structure:** Rumi's poetry is characterized by its fluidity and spontaneity, reflecting the ecstatic states of divine love and union. In contrast, Blake's works, particularly his prophetic poems, are more structured, often following symbolic patterns and allegories. Yet, both poets use these different forms to explore the infinite and transcend ordinary experience.
- **Use of Symbolism:** Both Rumi and Blake rely heavily on symbolism to convey mystical truths. Rumi's symbols, drawn from Sufi tradition, express the soul's journey toward God, while Blake's mythological symbols reflect his vision of the human imagination as a divine force. In both cases, the symbols serve to bridge the gap between the material and spiritual worlds, allowing the poets to express the ineffable.
- **Language of Contradiction:** Both poets use paradox and contradiction as central elements of their mystical expression. Rumi's poetry is filled with references to the simultaneous joy and pain of divine love, while Blake's works explore the idea that spiritual growth comes from the reconciliation of opposites. In this way, both poets challenge conventional understandings of spirituality, offering a more complex and nuanced vision of the divine.

In their respective styles and forms, Rumi and Blake offer rich, visionary expressions of mystical experience. Rumi's ecstatic, flowing verse mirrors the Sufi ideal of dissolution into divine love, while Blake's structured yet symbolic poetry reflects his belief in the transformative power of the imagination. Despite their differences, both poets use their art to explore the profound mysteries of existence, inviting readers to move beyond the material world and engage with the spiritual realities that lie beneath the surface of life. Through their unique approaches to style and form, Rumi and Blake remain two of the most influential voices in mystical poetry, offering timeless insights into the nature of the divine, the soul's journey, and the power of poetic expression in articulating spiritual truths.

5. Differences in Mystical Philosophy: A Comparative Study of Jalal ud-Din Rumi and William Blake as Mystical Poets

Though Jalal ud-Din Rumi and William Blake are both celebrated as mystical poets, the foundational elements of their mystical philosophies diverge due to their distinct religious, cultural, and intellectual contexts. Rumi's mystical philosophy is deeply rooted in Islamic Sufism, emphasizing unity with God, the annihilation of the self, and divine love. Blake, on the other hand, developed a more personal and radical mystical philosophy, grounded in Christian and Gnostic thought, which placed emphasis on the imagination as the divine force, human autonomy, and the reconciliation of contraries. This comparative study will explore the key differences in their mystical philosophies, analyzing how their distinct spiritual traditions shape their poetic expressions of mysticism.

5.1. Rumi's Mystical Philosophy: Union with God and Self-Annihilation

Rumi's mysticism is fundamentally grounded in the Sufi concept of tawhid (the oneness of God) and fanaa (the annihilation of the self). The ultimate goal of the mystic, in Rumi's vision, is to transcend the ego and merge with the divine. His poetry is filled with expressions of longing, love, and the desire for union with the beloved, who represents God. For Rumi, the path to God is a path of surrender, where one's individual self dissolves into the greater reality of divine love.

5.2. Union with the Divine

One of the central tenets of Rumi's mystical philosophy is the soul's yearning to reunite with its divine source. This idea of returning to God is central to Sufi teachings, where human existence is seen as a temporary exile from the divine. Rumi's poetry often expresses this longing for union, which is fueled by the pain of separation. For Rumi, the mystic's journey is a cycle of loss and reunion, expressed through a deep, almost physical yearning for God. In his *Divan-e Shams*, Rumi writes:

"I died as mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose to animal,
I died as animal and I was human.
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?"

This passage reflects Rumi's belief in the soul's eternal nature and its continuous evolution toward unity with God. The soul's journey involves shedding layers of materiality and ego until it can fully dissolve into divine love. The mystic achieves enlightenment by losing the self in the infinite.

5.3. Self-Annihilation (Fanaa)

The concept of fanaa, or the annihilation of the self, is another cornerstone of Rumi's mystical philosophy. In Sufism, the self is seen as an obstacle that stands between the individual and God. The ego, with its attachments to worldly desires and identity, must be annihilated in order for the soul to become one with the divine. Rumi frequently explores this process of self-dissolution in his poetry. The poet's voice often shifts between the lover (the individual soul) and the beloved (God), reflecting the soul's loss of self in divine union.

In *The Song of the Reed*, Rumi writes:

"Since I was cut from the reed bed,
I have made this crying sound.
Anyone apart from someone he loves
understands what I say."

The reed, a metaphor for the soul, expresses its pain at being separated from its divine source. Rumi's mystical philosophy teaches that the soul must dissolve its attachments to the self and the material world in order to achieve reunion with God. The reed's song of longing symbolizes the soul's call for fanaa, where the self is annihilated and replaced by divine presence.

5.4. Blake's Mystical Philosophy: The Divine Imagination and Reconciliation of Contraries

In contrast to Rumi's Sufi mysticism, William Blake's mystical philosophy centers on the power of the human imagination and the reconciliation of opposites. Blake's vision of the divine is closely linked to his belief in the transformative power of the imagination, which he viewed as a divine faculty that allows humans to perceive spiritual truth. Unlike Rumi, Blake does not emphasize union with a transcendent God but instead sees divinity as something that exists within the individual and the material world. His philosophy is marked by a radical reinterpretation of Christian thought, advocating for personal spiritual autonomy and the rejection of external authority.

5.5. The Divine Imagination

For Blake, the imagination is the key to unlocking spiritual truths. He viewed the imagination not simply as a creative faculty but as a divine power that allows humans to perceive and interact with the spiritual world. Blake believed that through the imaginative vision, individuals could transcend the limitations of the material world and gain access to higher spiritual realities. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he writes:

"If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."

Blake's emphasis on perception reflects his belief that the divine is accessible through the human mind's ability to imagine and envision the infinite. The imagination, for Blake, is the seat of divine revelation, and through it, the poet-mystic can experience the spiritual dimension that lies beyond the physical.

This contrasts with Rumi's focus on union with God, as Blake does not seek to dissolve the self in divine love but rather to use the self as a means of perceiving and interacting with the divine. For Blake, the individual does not need to annihilate the self; rather, they must expand their imaginative vision to see the world as it truly is—spiritual, infinite, and divine.

5.6. Reconciliation of Contraries

Blake's mystical philosophy is also characterized by his belief in the reconciliation of opposites. Where Rumi's philosophy seeks to dissolve the self into oneness with God, Blake's vision embraces the existence of opposites and tensions as essential to spiritual growth. His works, particularly *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, reject traditional Christian dichotomies of good and evil, heaven and hell, or body and soul. Instead, Blake argues that contraries are necessary for human existence and spiritual progress.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he writes:

"Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion,
Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence."

For Blake, spiritual growth is not about eradicating one aspect of life in favor of another but about balancing and integrating opposites. This philosophy differs from Rumi's, which focuses on transcending worldly attachments and merging into divine unity. Blake's mysticism, on the other hand, is rooted in the idea that true spiritual insight comes from embracing and reconciling contraries within oneself and the world.

5.7. Rumi's God-Centric Mysticism vs. Blake's Human-Centric Mysticism

The most fundamental difference in the mystical philosophies of Rumi and Blake lies in their perspectives on the divine and the role of the individual in relation to God.

5.8. Rumi: God-Centric Mysticism

Rumi's mysticism is entirely God-centered. The individual soul exists only in relation to the divine, and the ultimate goal of existence is to return to God by transcending the self. In Rumi's view, God is the absolute reality, and all of creation is a reflection or manifestation of divine love. The soul's purpose is to dissolve back into this love through the process of *fanaa*. Rumi's mystical philosophy places the divine at the center of existence, with human life seen as a journey toward God.

Rumi writes:

"I am in love with love and love is in love with me.

My body is in love with the soul and the soul is in love with the body."

This line reflects Rumi's view of divine love as the unifying force of existence. Human existence is meaningful only insofar as it leads to the divine, and the mystic's task is to recognize this and strive toward union with God.

5.9. Blake: Human-Centric Mysticism

In contrast, Blake's mystical philosophy is more human-centric. For Blake, the divine exists within the individual, and spiritual growth is not about annihilating the self but about realizing the divine potential within human life. Blake's vision of mysticism emphasizes the creative power of the human imagination, which allows individuals to perceive the divine in the world around them. Rather than seeking to merge with a transcendent God, Blake's mysticism is about realizing that God is present in all aspects of life, including the human mind and body.

In *Jerusalem*, Blake declares:

"I will not cease from Mental Fight,

Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:

Till we have built Jerusalem,

In England's green & pleasant Land."

Blake's vision of *Jerusalem* is a metaphor for spiritual enlightenment that can be achieved here on earth, through the expansion of the human imagination and the reconciliation of opposites. Unlike Rumi, who seeks a transcendent union with God, Blake believes that divinity can be realized and manifested in the physical world through human creative and spiritual efforts.

6. Conclusion

The comparative study of Jalal ud-Din Rumi and William Blake as mystical poets reveals a profound exploration of spirituality, divine love, and the human soul's journey. Despite the vast differences in their cultural, religious, and philosophical backgrounds, both poets used their art as a means of accessing higher truths and articulating the ineffable. Their works transcend the limitations of ordinary experience, offering readers a glimpse into the spiritual realm. Yet, their mystical philosophies, while intertwined by common themes, present distinct paths to enlightenment, shaped by the unique contexts in which they lived and wrote.

Rumi's mysticism, grounded in Islamic Sufism, emphasizes the soul's longing for union with the divine. His poetry is characterized by the central Sufi themes of *fanaa* (the annihilation of the self) and *tawhid* (the oneness of God), and his works explore the ecstatic love between the soul and God. Rumi's mystical vision is deeply relational, centered on the idea of dissolving the ego to merge with the divine. His fluid, non-linear poetic form mirrors the unstructured and boundless nature of mystical experience, allowing the reader to enter a state of spiritual reflection and transcendence.

Blake's mysticism, on the other hand, is rooted in Christian and Gnostic thought, but it diverges from traditional religious frameworks by emphasizing the creative power of the human imagination. Blake sees the imagination as the divine faculty that allows humans to access spiritual truths and transform the material world. His belief in the reconciliation of contraries—such as innocence and experience, good and evil, and reason and imagination—shapes his vision of mysticism, wherein opposites are necessary for spiritual progression. Unlike Rumi, who seeks the dissolution of the self, Blake's mysticism affirms the individual's potential to perceive and embody the divine through the imagination.

In terms of mystical philosophy, Rumi's God-centered vision differs from Blake's human-centric approach. Rumi's poetry focuses on the soul's journey back to God, often depicting the painful longing for divine union. For Rumi, the divine is transcendent, and the mystic must dissolve the self to achieve reunion with the beloved. In contrast, Blake views divinity as immanent, located within the individual and accessible through creative imagination. His vision does not involve the annihilation of the self but rather the expansion of human consciousness to perceive the divine in all things.

In style and form, Rumi's free-flowing verse, filled with rich metaphors of love, nature, and longing, reflects the ecstatic nature of his mysticism. His frequent use of symbolic imagery, such as the reed, the wine, and the flame, conveys the soul's journey toward annihilation and reunion with God. Blake, meanwhile, combines traditional lyricism with complex mythological symbolism, using visionary characters and allegories to convey his mystical ideas. His poetic works, particularly his prophetic books, are structured around the idea of cosmic battles between opposing forces, emphasizing the need for spiritual integration.

Despite these differences, both Rumi and Blake share a common goal: to transcend the material world and access a deeper spiritual reality. Their mystical poetry offers readers a path toward greater understanding of the divine, the soul's purpose, and the nature of reality. Rumi's emphasis on divine love and the soul's return to God resonates with Blake's belief in the transformative power of love and imagination. Both poets challenge their readers to see beyond ordinary perception and engage with the spiritual truths that underlie existence.

In the broader context of mystical literature, **Rumi and Blake's contributions are invaluable**. Rumi's Sufi mysticism offers a deeply relational and love-centered approach to God, reflecting the universality of spiritual longing across cultures. His influence extends far beyond Islamic traditions, touching the hearts of readers from all religious and philosophical backgrounds. Blake's mystical vision, radical in its rejection of religious orthodoxy, presents a path of spiritual autonomy, where human creativity becomes the key to divine revelation. His work continues to inspire poets, artists, and thinkers in the pursuit of visionary experience.

Ultimately, the study of Rumi and Blake as mystical poets highlights the diversity and richness of mystical expression across time, culture, and religion. While they followed different spiritual paths, their poetry reveals the universality of the mystical quest—a desire to understand the divine, to transcend the ego, and to grasp the deeper mysteries of existence. Through their poetry, Rumi and Blake guide readers toward a greater awareness of the divine presence, whether it is found in the self, in the world, or in the infinite beyond. Their work continues to inspire seekers of truth, inviting them to embark on their own mystical journey.

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