

Mercy, pity, peace,
and love in songs of
innocence and
experience



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William Blake, as a libertarian and political writer concerned with Romantic values concerning the freedom of the human spirit and liberty, wrote his 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' in an attempt to attack the corrupt political systems and institutions around at the time he was writing during the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment; in his songs, Blake proposes rebellion against such systems, alongside setting up his ideal of a Utopia within his 'Songs of Innocence', with the virtues of 'mercy, pity, peace and love' found in 'The Divine Image' aptly summarizing the image of Blake's Utopia, with such virtues being clearly nowhere to be found in the corrupt society which Blake describes in his 'Songs of Experience' in such poems as 'London' and 'Holy Thursday'.

One subject of Blake's social and political protest within his 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' is that of the church, as although he himself was a Christian, he can be seen to attack the twisted version of religion which holds destructive ideologies that exploit and damage the vulnerable, ignoring the traditional values of charity and mercy and instead allowing racism and the suffering of children, as seen in 'The Little Black Boy' and 'Holy Thursday' respectively. In 'The Divine Image', the speaker (presumably either the voice of Blake or voicing Blake's thoughts), personifies the virtues of 'Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love' and states that these are 'God, our Father dear', suggesting that God Himself is the personification of these virtues, that these qualities are what we should be aspiring to within humanity, creating a link between God and humankind as all prayers to 'Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love' should be directed not just to God but to 'the human form divine'; through this, Blake can be seen to stress the superlative importance

of these qualities of heart within humankind and protesting against those religious followers who act hypocritically in allowing children such as those in 'The Chimney Sweeper' or 'Holy Thursday' to suffer whilst those in power and the hierarchical church allow for such vast inequalities within society.

Blake's 'Songs of Innocence' can be seen to set up a Utopia, much like More's, where the virtues of mercy, pity, peace and love are abundant and then shown to be lacking in the world described in his 'Songs of Experience' which criticize and protest against the corrupt authorities of his day, setting up a proposal for rebellion to establish a more idealized, liberated state. In 'The Shepherd', for example, the character of the shepherd can be interpreted as a God-like figure as he acts in a similar way towards his sheep as the omnibenevolent God of the Bible can be seen to act towards humankind, showing love towards his sheep as 'his tongue shall be filled with praise' suggesting that he takes a caring and supportive role over his 'sweet lot', along with 'peace' taking a foreground in the poem as the shepherd is described as 'watchful' towards his sheep 'while they are in peace,/For they know when their shepherd is nigh', alluding to a relationship between the shepherd and his sheep where the sheep place faith in the shepherd as their protector and loving father figure: much like the loving image of God stressed by Blake. In this way, therefore, the virtues of mercy, pity, peace and love as outlined in 'The Divine Image' can be seen to play a role in Blake's description of a Utopian society and his ideal image of religion as a loving, united front between humankind and God, which in turns lends to set up his proposal for rebellion in the 'Songs of Innocence and Experience'.

Blake can further be seen to explore the virtues of mercy, pity, peace and love in his 'Songs of Innocence' poem 'The Little Black Boy', where a black child who has experienced racial prejudice describes a conversation with his mother who assures him that his 'soul is white' and that he will one day go to heaven where God will show him 'love'. In the poem, the child's mother can be seen to show him all four qualities of mercy, pity, peace and love as outlined in 'The Divine Image' as the boy describes how 'she took me on her lap and kissed me' demonstrating a loving, maternal act which shows pity towards the boy who feels as though he is 'bereaved of light', alluding to God's love as 'light' as an image is used often by Blake to refer to the presence of God, suggesting that the boy feels as though God doesn't love him in the same way and the English children around him who are conversely depicted as 'angels', and therefore automatically shown love by God. The little boy's mother then goes on to lovingly assure the boy that he is just as, if not more so, worthy of God's love as other children as he has learnt to 'bear the beams of love' which have caused 'the black bodies and this sunburnt face', working to instill a sense of peace of mind within the child who before being told this showed distress at being set apart from the 'English child' and seen by those as 'bereaved of light'. The depiction of God presented by Blake through the loving voice of the mother in the poem shows these virtues further, as He is quoted as saying 'come out from the grove, my love and care,/And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice', with the image of a 'grove' as a small wood suggesting to a confined, shaded area where perhaps the oppressed such as the 'little black boy' metaphorically reside as they are cast away from the rest of society, and the kind tone paired with the imperative of 'come out' showing the caring, father-like nature of God as he

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lovingly, whilst showing pity towards those who have been residing in the 'grove', invites the oppressed to 'like lambs rejoice' in his 'love and care', the image of the 'lamb' being one found throughout Blake's poetry as a symbol of innocence and purity. With racial prejudice being a focus of Blake's social and political protest, therefore, the depiction of God as a loving father figure who shows pity and love in particular to all without regard of their race as demonstrated in 'The Little Black Boy', acts as a form of protest against the conservative, racist views held by the government of his time and acts as a proposal for rebellion against those who perceive white children as superior to black children as in the eyes of God, Blake illustrates, individuals of all races are perceived as equal and are equally as worthy as one another of His love.

Mercy, pity, peace and love can further be seen as apt descriptions of Blake's proposal for his rebellion when looking at his own political ideologies, alongside his depictions of these virtues within his poetry. Blake was politically a radical libertarian, who admired Thomas Paine and can be seen to draw from his ideas concerning the advocacy for equal political rights and the attacking of hierarchical government and monarchy as laid out in his 1790's novel 'The Rights of Man', and to an extent the attacking of the contradictory claims held by the Christian Church in his 'The Age of Reason'. These virtues are pertinent throughout his 'Songs of Innocence', through, for instance, the narrator of 'A Dream' who describes how 'Pitying, I dropped a tear', explicitly demonstrating pity towards the emmet who had 'lost its way' and in 'On Another's Sorrow' where empathy for those with a 'falling tear' is presented as the universal human reaction; mercy as shown in 'The

Chimney Sweeper' as the oppressed chimney sweep narrator describes how 'if all do their duty, they need not fear harm'; peace in 'The Echoing Green' between the pastoral landscape, the children playing on the green and the elderly folk watching them play; and love shown in a plethora of the songs, one example being in 'The Little Boy Found' where a form of caring, parental love is shown both by the presumed figure of God who leads the boy to his mother who shows distress in the loss of her son as 'her little boy weeping sought'.

In his 'Songs of Experience', however, Blake's attention to these virtues as a proposal for rebellion turns towards the cruel injustice that he sees coming from the state and the corrupt authorities of his time, repeatedly using the word 'chartered' in 'London' as to depict the restrictive nature of the city and using the device of rhetorical question a plethora of times throughout his songs in order to address the reader directly and invite them to question the nature of the state of the time- asking in 'Holy Thursday' whether it is a 'holy thing to see' for innocent, impoverished children to be treated poorly and 'reduc'd to misery', emotively showing the lack of mercy, pity, love and peace which is in fact shown by the state and the Church towards those who are in need. It can be argued, therefore, that 'mercy, pity, peace and love' do not make for a fully apt description of Blake's proposal for rebellion in his 'Songs of Innocence and Experience', but are used to set up an ideal, imagined state before showing the lack of such virtues present in England during the 1800s, with his proposal for rebellion lying moreso in his vivid descriptions of oppression, restriction, and the cruel treatment of those in need in order to encourage his audience to rebel against such a system, by

way of peaceful protest as suggested in his chosen form of protest being through his written songs, his values as a Romantic, and through how he stopped supporting the French Revolution despite its aims aligning with his belief due to the fact that it involved violence and the turn of revolutionaries to tyrannical oppressors themselves.

The four qualities of mercy, pity, peace and love as laid out in the 'Songs of Innocence' poem 'The Divine Image' can be seen, to an extent, to be an apt description of Blake's proposal for rebellion, as he suggests through his featuring these virtues in his depiction of a Utopia in the 'Songs of Innocence' that such are the qualities he believes all of humankind should exhibit and that, as seen in 'The Divine Image' we should all 'pray' to these qualities within both humankind and God whilst forming a united brotherhood with such values at the foreground: however, it could be argued that Blake's proposal for rebellion more lies in his exploration of oppression of the vulnerable by those in power and his ethos of anti-clericism and anti-establishment illuminating to the audience his proposal for rebellion more vividly than his initial description of an idealized state in his 'Songs of Innocence'.