

# Mercy among the children: a privation of paternal protection essay



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Mercy Among the Children: A Privation of Paternal Protection Throughout the book, Mercy Among the Children, the main character, Sydney Henderson is continuously forced to endure the utter embarrassment of being openly mocked, assaulted and publicly victimized. His innocent children watch wide-eyed, secretly wishing for the day when their father will ultimately confront his tormentors and protect their family—not knowing that this day will never come. As the novel progresses, Sydney continues to fail to do so, his cowardice bringing shame and humiliation to his eldest son, Lyle, who strongly believes his father's passive nature is the cause behind all their misfortunes.

While Lyle grows older and becomes aware of the uniqueness of this enduring demeanor which his father possesses, his irritation and hostility towards Sydney strengthens as he begins to become more and more repulsed by his father's lack of response, promising himself that he will never mirror the image his father portrays. In avoidance of this, Lyle rebels, becoming the polar opposite of Sydney by any means necessary—cursing authorities, starting fights, and even committing robbery. As Lyle matures and leaves behind his rebellious youth years, he slowly begins to understand the deeper reasons behind his father's refusal to retaliate. Yet, due to his inability to forgive himself and overlook the terrible crimes he has committed, Lyle holds on to his hatred and refuses to forgive his father, forever bitter—causing a once seemingly perfect relationship to deteriorate. Sydney Henderson's cowardice is first shown when a few drunken men harass his wife, Elly, shouting sexual insults after her—despite the presence of Lyle and his younger sister, Autumn.

Failing to defend her honour—as any brave man should—Sydney refrains from reacting, allowing these men to publicly humiliate him and his family. The relationship between Sydney and his son is strained for the first time as Lyle—though still a only young boy—is ashamed of his father and his lack of response as he says “[Sydney] stopped and waited, smiling at me. I pretended I didn’t see him. For the first time I did not run to catch up, and for the first time I never took his offered hand” (Richards 54).

Through saying this, Lyle shows the resentment he feels towards his father despite his best intentions, and begins to consciously alienate himself— the feeling of shame too deep to ignore. As Lyle gets older, his hostility towards his father intensifies, strongly believing Sydney’s failure to protect his family equates to Sydney, ultimately, failing him as a father. Longing for a father which will provide his family with comfort and security, Lyle says “ My hope was also—if for self-preservation or honour I do not know—that my father would die, and Jay Beard would become my father” (Richards 176). As Lyle says this he displays his inability to look past his father’s meek, accepting nature, blinded by his own thirst for revenge and resentment of Sydney’s lack thereof. Despite Sydney having the best intentions, Lyle now not only hates the fact that his father refuses to retaliate, but begins to despise Sydney as a father figure, as a husband, and ultimately, as a person.

As Lyle and his sister, Autumn, continue to mature, they are forced to endure constant ridicule and ostracism, making it almost impossible to form any meaningful relationships with their peers. Both children struggle to find any means necessary to overcome the hardships associated with being labeled the laughing stocks of their small town. As the family slowly begins to learn <https://assignbuster.com/mercy-among-the-children-a-privation-of-paternal-protection-essay/>

how to cope, Lyle's anger takes control as he begins to manage the only way he knows how: through casting the blame on his father. Though Lyle is aware how little control his father has over their circumstances, he says " And in a real way it didn't matter that my father had caused nothing.

I should not be so quick to forgive him just because he had caused nothing. Because in another way, his inaction had caused it all—all the misery forced upon us was caused because he elected to be passive" (Richards 186). Through saying this, Lyle displays his inability to forgive his father and his willingness to allow their already damaged relationship to be further threatened by the afflictions brought on by the community. As the novel progresses, Lyle slowly begins to understand Sydney's lack of response is not for a lack of courage, but for an excess of devotion to truth and morals as he says " I began to understand what my father had been fighting all his life.

Not that power was not in him, but that, like all mankind, it was. But he fought it! " (Richards 211). This reveals Lyle's final comprehension of Sydney's unique passive demeanor and the truth behind it. Despite this sudden epiphany, Lyle is yet unable to come to terms with his anger and mistrust as he chooses to continue to detest his father, holding all the pain and suffering against him. The poem, *How Do We Forgive Our Fathers* depicts Lyle's ongoing struggle to forgive his own father as it says " Shall we forgive them for pushing or leaning/ [...] Or never speaking" (Laurie 11-14) for these are the issues which burden Lyle—the same ones which cause him to feel a constant hostility towards Sydney.

His disapproval of Sydney's indifferent reaction to his family's suffering, and his constant dependence on others to protect his family, is what holds Lyle back from releasing his temper and finally forgiving his father for causing their family so much suffering. Lyle's feelings of contempt and anger with Sydney haunt him, for he is unable to let go of all the anger, leaving him feeling lost and empty. Lyle's need to let go of all these feelings is expressed when he speaks to a man of his father, and, with tears threatening to spill, Lyle says " Why in God's name could I not have peace from [Sydney]" (Richards 244). Lyle's inability to come to terms with Sydney and the way he has chosen to live his life, unveils a deeper hatred—the one Lyle feels towards himself. The rebellious life Lyle has chosen to live haunts him with guilt, leaving him with a deep self-loathing, which is unleashed against his father.

Using Sydney as an outlet for Lyle's pent up anger, Lyle attempts to cover up and ignore the constant feeling of disgust towards himself—but is unfortunately unable to do so. Lyle's repulsion with himself is first shown as he says " Besides, Father had no guilt. I could not walk past a mirror during the light of day" (Richards 251). It is this in acceptance of himself which refrains Lyle from accepting his father back into his life, leaving him lonely and vulnerable.

Throughout the book, *Mercy Among The Children*, the main character, Lyle, possesses a strong hostility towards his father, Sydney. Blaming Sydney for the pain and suffering brought upon him, Lyle is unable to ever forgive his father—despite his father's best intentions and inability to alter their circumstances. Lyle's rebellious youth years catch up to him as his strong

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feelings of guilt and regret slowly eat at him from the inside out. This leaves Lyle unable to accept himself as a person and, ultimately, unable to accept others. Lyle's inability to love and respect himself robs him of the simple ability of loving and respecting others—namely his father.

One must love and respect themselves first in order to build any meaningful relationship with others. The absence of self-love and self-respect also refrains others from harboring any love or respect for you—which can later lead to a deeper self-loathing than before. Once entered, this vicious cycle of depression can easily overpower one's life, leading it straight into the ground. Had Lyle been able to forgive himself for the sins he had committed, he would be more capable of forgiving his father, which would release much of the strain on their relationship.

Due to Lyle's inability to love and forgive himself, his relationship with his father remained inexistent right up until the death of Sydney—leaving Lyle's already guilty conscience overwhelmed with remorse.