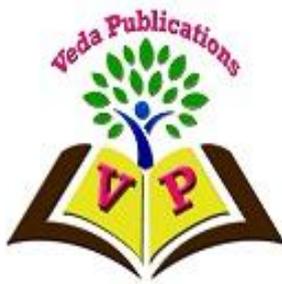


**ON ANOTHER'S SORROW**

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*(Professor of English Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Bahir Dar University, Post Box 894, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia)*E-mail: drcpjose@yahoo.co.uk**ABSTRACT**

In the Introduction to *Songs of Innocence*, Blake was piping and singing and then writing the songs about Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God and in "On Another's Sorrow" which is the transition poem from the state of innocence to the state of experience, Blake once again affirms the imminent presence of Jesus Christ, the Lamb and the Lord and God in all human beings and makes it clear to the children before passing on to the world of experience, being innocent, meek and mild as a lamb and being ready to show compassion on another's sorrow is the best way to follow Jesus Christ and become perfect. The explicit allusion in the lines of the poem to Jesus Christ as the Suffering Servant of Yahweh as mentioned in Isaiah 53: 7b -8, depicts the essence of Incarnation as bearing the burden of man's sin and suffering silently for him, which the Christians proclaim as the Redemption achieved by Jesus Christ, the Messiah or Anointed One. When the angel like child listening to all the Songs of Innocence, piped, sung and written down by Blake, the Piper Bard, is ready to grasp this truth of Christ's empathy and oneness with humanity in his pristine guilelessness, it has reached the cynosure of innocence and it will be ready to step in to the world of experience.

Keywords: *Human love, Compassion, Sympathy, Empathy, Faith in Providence, Divine Love, Suffering, Pain, Woe, Grief, Relief, Sorrow, Rest, Solace.*

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INTRODUCTION

As always in the case when approaching the composite works of William Blake, a threefold approach concentrating on the text, design and biblical resemblances is proposed in this study for a fuller understanding of the poem "On Another's Sorrow".

ON ANOTHER'S SORROW

The poem "On Another's Sorrow" is placed at the end of *Songs of Innocence*. It forms a suitable summary of the central doctrine of the earlier group and stands ironically on the threshold of *Experience* where the answers to its questions will be drastically changed. But in the context of *Innocence* the answers received will be definitely and absolutely optimistic. "On Another's Sorrow" is very much akin to the poem "The Divine Image" where Blake had written:

For Mercy has a human heart
Pity, a human face;
And Love, the human form divine;
And Peace, the human dress.
Then every man of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine:
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace (lines 9-16).

Very much akin to the similarity of these two poems, I saw recently the answer to the question "What are the major themes of the poem "On Another's Sorrow" by William Blake?" posted by Michael Ugulini on 16th March 2016. There he explicates the major themes of the poem "On Another's Sorrow" as: God's love, Faith and Compassion (Retrieved from: <https://www.enotes.com/homework-help/what-major-themes-poem-anothers-sorrow-by-blake-243585> on 17 March 2017).

STRUCTURE AND VERSIFICATION

Blake has maintained a regular rhythm of trochaic tetrameter throughout the poem. Its metrical smoothness highlights the disruption caused by the monosyllabic spondees of 'No, no,' and 'O, no,' in the third lines of stanzas three and six. This is done in order to emphasise the rejection of the ideas raised.

The poem falls into three sections: (a) The first is the set of rhetorical questions regarding human sympathy, which are rejected; (b) The second is a repetition of rhetorical questions regarding God's sympathy for living beings, which are rejected in similar terms; and (c) The third section portrays God's empathy with humanity. A kind of refrain is formed by the repeated phrase 'never can it be' of the first two sections and this refrain is then contrasted with the closing couplet of the third section. This illustrates God's response to the question of suffering. The 'never, never can it be!' is matched with an implicit 'ever' – God can never be indifferent to his children, but will ever be with them, 'Till our grief is fled and gone.' More than anything else, the closed rhyming couplets suggest the contained and complete nature of the thoughts within them. We are invited to accept, rather than to argue with, the statements. This is enhanced by the patterning of repetitions with difference, which has a cumulative, persuasive effect e.g. 'And thy maker is not by ... And thy maker is not near.'

LANGUAGE AND TONE

If we consider the language and tone of the poem the following must be noted. In a very special way, Blake brings about the immediate and active involvement of the reader in the speaker's argument



by the recurring use of emotive rhetorical questions. Aren't the apparently adamant, repeated negatives, emphasised by caesura and exclamation-mark, passionate answers in defence of humanity's goodness?

One should not forget also that the whole poem is written by using the present or present continuous tense. This has two effects: First of all, the permanent nature of the human response to another's sorrow is implied herewith. It is now so, because it always has been like that and it will be so in future also. Secondly, God eternal presence is highlighted as ever-present. For example, Jesus did not *become* a child, a finished, past action. He *becomes* one. It suggests he is always becoming a child in the children who are born today and on any day, for that matter.

A careful reader of the poem cannot miss the many examples of repetition of structure or phrases, such as: 'Can I see', 'never can it be', 'Hear the', 'And not, 'He doth' etc. The emphatic force rendered through repetition to the words referring to sadness also cannot be missed by anyone, such as: 'woe/s' repeated thrice, 'sorrow/s' repeated five times, 'grief' repeated four times, 'tear/s' repeated four times, 'weep/ing' repeated thrice, groan, moan, sigh, and fear. Blake's argument is served by many of these words being attributed to God as well as people, with the rhyme of the child's 'groan' being matched by Christ's 'moan'.

THE TEXT OF THE POEM

The form of the poem enjoys the typical symmetry of the *Songs of Innocence*. Of the nine stanzas, the first three stanzas ask some questions about the relationships of human beings.

The first stanza of the poem:

Can I see another's woe,
And not be in sorrow too?
Can I see another's grief
And not seek for kind relief. (Lines 1-4),

cannot be totally understood unless against the background of the New Testament story of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" (Luke 16: 19 – 31). "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores" (16: 19-21). In fact the story does not mention any wrong thing done by the rich man to Lazarus. But the story told by Jesus makes it explicit and evident that the neglect shown by the rich man towards the plight of Lazarus is very much his sin. That is why, the request of the rich man in the being tormented in the Hades after his death to Abraham by the side of Lazarus in heaven, was unheard. "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames", the rich man wailed (16: 24). To which Abraham replied: "Child, remember that during life time you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony" (16: 25). At that moment of course, the rich man might have thought in the line of Blake's first four lines of this poem.

It should be noted that the Piper, William Blake, who sings these songs resorts to the language of an adult in the first stanza and the initial couplet of the second stanza. But, in order to better captivate his audience of the songs of innocence, the children,



the later couplet of the second stanza and the first couplet of the third stanza visualise the paternal and maternal affinity and concern for their children.

And then the final answer to all these rhetorical questions is averred with double intensity in the last two lines of the third stanza:

Can a father see his child
Weep, nor be with sorrow filled?
Can a mother sit and hear,
An infant groan an infant fear-
No no never can it be
No no never can it be (Lines 7 – 12).

It should be remembered that Blake did not bother too much about absolutely perfect punctuations for his lines and the lines must be read as “No, no, never can it be.”

Just like these two lines of definite answer, in fact, all the previous questions are categorical statements formulated as rhetorical questions for emphasis. Thus when the poet asks, Can I see another's woe, / And not be in sorrow too? (Ll. 1-2; K 122), he is definitely sure about the negative answer. In the poem “William Bond” in the Pickering Manuscript, Blake had written: “Seek Love in the Pity of Other's Woe, / In the gentle relief of another's care, / In the darkness of night & the winter's snow, / In the naked & outcast, seek Love there!” (K 436). True, Blake is speaking about Love in this poem. But an understanding of it clarifies the sense of the first lines of the poem under discussion all the better.

The next three stanzas pose similar questions about God and return the same answer.

And can he who smiles on all
Hear the wren with sorrows small,
Near the small birds grief & care
Hear the woes that infants bear.

And not sit beside the nest
Pounding pity in their breast,
And not sit the cradle near
Weeping tear on infant's tear,

And not sit with night & day,
Wiping all our tears away,
O! No never can it be.
Never never can it be (Lines 13 – 24).

In this process of questions and answers, a kind of identity of the divine and human way of behaviour is achieved, just as in the poem “The Divine Image”. The final set of three stanzas is cast differently and they make positive statements. These three stanzas talk of man and of God simultaneously. It is Christ, who is both man and God who is referred to in these stanzas. The following lines,

He doth give his joy to all;
He becomes an infant small;
He becomes a man of woe;
He doth feel the sorrow too
(Ll.25-28, K 122)

clearly echo Jesus Christ's incarnation, life and the passion. Christ becomes an infant small and all his life he was concerned with wiping out the sorrows of others through his healing presence and during the passion he becomes a man of woe. “He becomes a man of woe” is a condensation of Isaiah 52. Especially in Is. 52:3-5 we read:

He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with
grief; . . .
Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows, . . .
But he was wounded for our
transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment
that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

A concrete example of Jesus feeling the sorrow and weeping tears when he saw the sorrow of the sisters and others, can be seen at the scene of raising Lazarus from the dead, before raising Lazarus from



the dead: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. . . . Jesus began to weep . . . Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. . . ." (John 11:33 -35). Here the happy unity of the creation with his creator is complete. He who smiles on all, including humanity and the animal kingdom, becomes 'an infant small' and 'a man of woe, and shares the sorrows of his creature.

In the last two stanzas the ever vigilant providential care of God for his people is vividly pictured. It is not out of place, to consider these lines as a parody of Luke 12:22-30:

... do not be anxious about your life...
And which of you by being anxious can
add a cubit to his span of life? ... And
your Father knows that you need these
things.

Now consider Blake's lines :

Oh He gives to us his joy,
That our grief He may destroy:
Till our grief is fled & gone
He doth sit by us and moan (Line. 33-
36; K 123).

These lines must be read in the background of Matthew 11: 28-19: "Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Even a slight sigh and a single tear drop is watched over by the ever alert providential care of God.

Think not thou can sigh a sigh,
And thy Maker is not by:
Think not thou can weep a tear,

And thy Maker is not near (Lines 28-30).

For Blake, his Master Jesus Christ is not a God who is up there and out there in the distant heavens, but the Perfect Human Form Divine, very much immanent and down to earth in this world. Moreover, when we consider lines (33-34), "Oh He gives to us his joy/That our grief He may destroy:" in connection with lines 23 and 24, "He becomes a man of woe; / He doth feel the sorrow too" we will get the allusion to Isaiah 53: 8b – 7: "And the Lord has laid on him / the iniquity of us all. / He was oppressed and he was afflicted, / yet he did not open his mouth; / like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, / and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, / so he did not open his mouth." The allusion of course is referring to the Suffering Servant of Yahweh in the person of Jesus Christ, who was expected by the whole of Israel as the Redeemer.

The idea of the poem "On Another's Sorrow" is also very close to that of Matthew 7:11:

If you then, who are evil, know how to
give good gifts to your children, how
much more will your Father who is in
heaven give good things to those who
ask him!

This passage must be read along with Matthew 7:13-14:"Enter by the narrow gate . . . For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few." Against the background of these thoughts from the Bible, Blake the Bard Piper, the speaker of this poem, holding his feet firm in Innocence, accepts the sorrow and suffering as stepping-stones to glory. "The function and origin of pain is not considered" as D.G. Gillham (1966: 109) noticed and the utmost that is stated resembling a natural argument is that God offsets pain by joy: O!

he gives to us his joy / That our grief he may destroy
(Ll. 33-34; K 123).

THE DESIGN OF THE POEM

The analysis of this poem will not be complete if we leave out the nuances suggested by the design of this poem in plate 27 (See Figure 1, retrieved from: <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience> on 17 March 2017). This being the grand finale of the *Songs of Innocence*, this plate is carried in exquisite beauty.

David V Erdman (1975: 68) gives a detailed analysis of this figure. The effect of night and day are brought together by different hues and shades. The colour of the plate changes near the bird of paradise (pointing to the line - "Wiping all our tears away", l. 22). This bird of paradise marks the turn, the wiping away of tears. In the text, the poet, "speaking in the first person as poet, takes upon himself the burden of 'a father!', 'a mother', of all (and of him 'who smiles on all') to 'seek for kind relief' and to offer it, to smile on all (Ibid). The sunny right side of the plate is festooned with decorative tendrils and branches, probably representing the smiles and joys from all his songs: "the bird" of paradise from "The Shepherd" (plate 5), grapes from "The Echoing Green" (plate 6-7), two doves (on a branch after line 4) from "The Lamb" (plate 8), the vine of mercy from "The Divine Image" multiplied, and the woven shade promised in "Night" and "A Dream" spread like a laden table in noon day"(Ibid).



Figure 1

On the left margin, the piper is piping beside the line "That our grief he may destroy." We know that this line applies to Jesus, the Lamb. Comparing the child's request in "Introduction" to pipe and sing a song about a Lamb, we can affirm that in this final song of Innocence, the piper is yet singing a song which explores how, the Lamb is "destroying our grief." Above him after a blank white space something like the tree of Jesse (Compare Figure 1 above & Figure 2, Retrieved from: <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience> on 14 March 2017) is sprouting and the human forms are struggling to people the

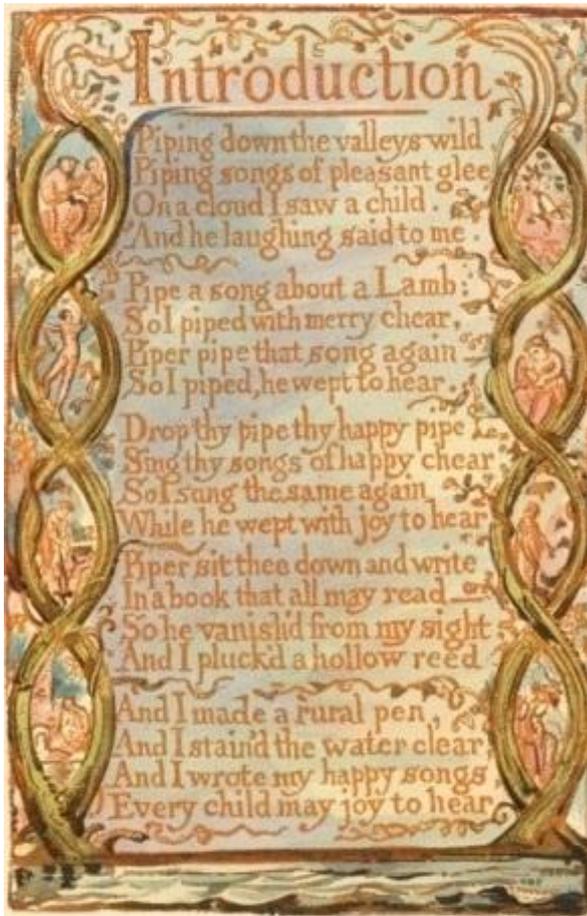


Figure 2

leafless branches in it. In the central part of this tree of Jesse is painted the face of "thy maker" who doth feel the sorrow and is by, is near. Only on close observation we can recognize this face of sorrow, eyes, nose, mouth, looking a bit downward close by the last lines of the third stanza. Blake probably has in mind the Scriptural tradition that Jesus who is suffering to lessen our grief would be from the root of Jesse, and his piper is singing the songs about this Jesus and his love and concern for the sheepfold. Morton D. Paley & Michael Philips, Eds. (1973) has included Jean H Hagstrum's essay entitled "Christ's Body" where she affirmed: "In *Innocence* Christ is immanent in nature and appears as Child, Shepherd, Lamb and Lion" (p. 129). Thus almost all the Songs of

Innocence can be said to be in some way or other alluding to the Christ figure.

CONCLUSION

As asserted on the blog "On Another's Sorrow" – Psychoanalytic Criticism" by Ha Fura on 17th May 2012: "This poem speaks about pain, suffering or any negative feelings that humans can feel. Blake wrote his worldly questions of whether God will be there to comfort and take pity on those who are in need of his presence in a poetic way. He was a religious man in the inside and wasn't afraid to express his feelings and thoughts about God" (Retrieved from: <http://eura-ha.blogspot.nl/2012/05/on-anothers-sorrow-psychoanalytic.html> on 17 March 2017).

In the Introduction to *Songs of Innocence*, Blake was piping and singing and then writing the songs about Jesus Christ the Lamb of God, and in "On Another's Sorrow" which is the transition poem from the state of innocence to the state of experience, Blake once again affirms the imminent presence of Jesus Christ, the Lamb and the Lord and God in all human beings and makes it clear to the children before passing on to the world of experience, being innocent, meek and mild as a lamb and being ready to show compassion on another's sorrow is the best way to follow Jesus Christ and become perfect. As we saw in the allusion made to Jesus Christ in the above quoted lines of Isaiah 53: 7b -8, the essence of Incarnation is bearing the burden of man's sin and suffering silently for him, which the Christians proclaim as the Redemption achieved by Jesus Christ, the Messiah or Anointed One. When the angel like child listening to all the Songs of Innocence, piped, sung and written down by Blake, the Piper Bard, is ready to grasp this truth of Christ's empathy and



oneness with humanity in his pristine guilelessness, it will be ready to step in to the world of experience.

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