The Divine Image

POEM TEXT

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
All pray in their distress:
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
Is God, our father dear:
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
Is Man, his child and care.

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.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, Turk, or Jew.
Where Mercy, Love, & Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too.

SUMMARY

In difficult times, everyone prays for mercy, pity, peace, and love. And when people are feeling grateful, it's these same wonderful qualities they thank.

Because God, our caring father, is none other than the forces of mercy, pity, peace, and love themselves. And Humanity, God's beloved child, is *also* an embodiment of these qualities.

That's because mercy appears in the human heart, and pity has a human face. Love takes the shape of the human body, and peace wears human clothing.

Therefore, every single suffering person in the whole world who prays is actually praying to the holy human body, which is the embodiment of love, mercy, pity, and peace.

So everybody must love and care for every person, whatever religion they practice. Since mercy, love, and pity (which *are* God) take human form, that means that God lives inside every person.

THEMES

THE DIVINITY AND UNITY OF HUMANKIND

The poem's speaker says that humanity was made in God's own image, but that doesn't mean that the human *shape* physically resembles God. Rather, it means that people embody God's powerful goodness: his "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" are expressed on earth *through* people. And this connection between humanity and God, the speaker insists, also connects human beings to each other: every person expresses the goodness of God, and every living person is thus holy. All people, whatever their background, are thus united by their shared divinity.

To this speaker, "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" aren't just attributes of God—they *are* God, "our father dear" himself. And, at the exact same time, they're "Man, [God's] child"—that is, all of these qualities are *embodied* by human beings. Mercy, for instance, "has a human heart": it's through real, live human hearts that the divine quality of mercy appears on earth. In other words, humanity *expresses* God.

Since God's virtues appear on earth in human form, it follows that everyone carries God with them, just by virtue of being a person. God's "divine image" lives on earth, the speaker argues, through "the human form divine." When people "pray in their distress" to God, they're thus also praying to the goodness and kindness of *humanity* (because, again that goodness and kindness *is* God).

If God lives in the "human form," the speaker proclaims, then people don't just need to remember that they can seek and express God's goodness in themselves. They need to remember that God's goodness lives in *every* person. That truth cuts across false distinctions between religions and cultures: addressing a predominantly Christian audience, this speaker reminds readers that God lives in "heathen, Turk, or Jew," not just in Christians. All people must love every single "human form" for this very reason. Through "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love," then, God lives in every "human form"—and unites all people.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
All pray in their distress:
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

"The Divine Image" seems deceptively simple at its start. The first lines here feel like a Christian hymn, and, at first glance, not an especially unusual one at that: they declare that everyone in "distress" prays to qualities often associated with God—"Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love"—and then that they thank those same qualities for their good fortune.

The shape of these lines also feels pretty traditional. Using common meter—alternating lines of iambic tetrameter (four da-DUMs in a row) and iambic trimeter (three da-DUMs)—and a simple, singsongy ABCB rhyme scheme, this first stanza could come straight from a nursery rhyme or a ballad. In other words, the speaker of this poem is working right with readers' expectations, opening with familiar, comforting rhythms, shapes, and ideas.

But this is a poem by William Blake—and that means it's going to turn out to be anything but traditional. Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, the 1789 collection this poem comes from, expresses his fiery, prophetic, and unorthodox vision of Christianity. This poem will use a deceptively gentle shape to deliver a revolutionary message.

God, to this poem's speaker, isn't just a merciful, pitying, peaceful, loving dad-in-the-clouds. (Blake rejected this idea of a separate, distant God outright, dismissively calling such a figure "Nobodaddy.") God is right here on earth, all the time, actually embodied by every person alive.

Presenting this idea in a form as simple as a nursery rhyme, the speaker is actually offering a challenge: *this radical belief*, the speaker seems to say, *is in fact so pure, instinctive, and fundamental that I can sing it like a child's song.*

LINES 5-8

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
Is God, our father dear:
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
Is Man, his child and care.

In the second stanza, the speaker begins to unveil a more radical purpose. "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" *are* God, the speaker says—again, a fairly familiar idea. But they're also "Man," humankind. And if that's true, the next logical step is that God and Man are, in some sense, *identical*.

Take a look at the way the poem uses parallelism in these pivotal lines:

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
Is God, our father dear:
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
Is Man, his child and care.

The repeated shapes of these lines reflect their meaning. In "mirroring" the first couplet with the second, the speaker suggests that God and "Man" are somehow the same, a reflection of each other.

This is close to a traditional Christian idea—but also a radical variation on it:

- The idea of God as a "father" and Man as his "child" alludes to the idea of the Incarnation, in which Christ lives on earth as a human and is God's "son," but is also, mysteriously, God himself. The idea of a "Man" who is at once God's "child" and made of exactly the same "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" as God is one way of stating that belief.
- But the speaker definitely isn't only referring to Christ as an isolated figure here. In fact, the speaker seems to be saying that all of humankind is in some way just the same as Christ: an incarnation of God.
- In other words, to this speaker, all of humanity is in some way embodies God, just as Christ does in the Christian tradition.

That's possible, the speaker says, because God isn't just a separate figure who possesses the *qualities* of "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love." He literally "[i]s" those things. Wherever one finds "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love," one directly encounters God.

In the next stanza, the speaker will investigate how God is thus embodied through "Man."

LINES 9-12

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

In this poem's central stanza, the speaker assigns "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" to different parts of the human body—in essence personifying God.

Once again, there's something deceptively simple going on here. This passage in some way sounds like the not-uncommon idea that God "works through" people—that God's love shows when people are kind and loving to each other. But the speaker seems to mean something a lot deeper, stranger, and more literal here. Even as these ideas are presented in the form of metaphors, there's the sense that the speaker really, truly means what he says: "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" genuinely *have a body.*

Take a look at the way the speaker matches aspects of God with aspects of the body:

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

Here, parallelism draws out the distinctions between these different *aspects* of God. It makes sense to associate "Mercy" with "a human heart," for instance, because the heart is so often seen as the symbolic seat of feelings—like mercy's forgiving tenderness. Likewise, connecting "Pity" with "a human face" suggests that pity (or sympathy for those who suffer) is to do with *communicating*—recognizing, hearing, and talking to other people are all things one does with their face. The face also allows people to relate to each other as individuals; it's how we identify each other.

Things start to get a little more complicated when the speaker assigns "Love" to "the human form divine." Note the distinction between "a human face" and "the human form divine." "Love"—perhaps the grandest and hardest-to-define of all these qualities—takes on not a particular human form, but a sort of archetypal or ideal "human form divine." Love is somehow expressed with the whole body—and not just the whole body, but *every* body, a shared, essential human shape.

"Peace," meanwhile, gets assigned to "the human dress"—another broad idea. Of course, there's no single "human dress": people wear all kinds of things. And perhaps that's exactly what the speaker means! "Dress" here might suggest behavior, the way people present themselves to the world. In other words, "Peace" might be less an attitude or way of being and more an outward action.

Part of what the speaker's saying here, then, is indeed to do with the way that normal, everyday people embody God: by enacting "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" through their own lives, their own bodies, their own behaviors. But the speaker also suggests that "Love," for instance, is a kind of transcendent quality that unites *all* humans, simply because they share in "the human form divine." Everyone has a body—and the body is somehow an expression of shared love in its mere existence.

These ideas aren't simple to unpack or to explain—and Blake doesn't mean them to be! Once again, the simple sounds and rhythms here belie a profound and mysterious view of the world, in which God, in the form of "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love," is everywhere, in all people.

LINES 13-16

> *Then every man of every clime,*
> *That prays in his distress,*
> *Prays to the human form divine,*
> *Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.*

Hearkening back to the idea of "distress[ed]" prayers in stanza 1, stanza 4 reveals that the poem so far has been a kind of long chiasmus—moving from prayer (stanza 1) to God's embodiment in people (stanza 2) to more about God's embodiment (stanza 3) and back to prayer again (stanza 4).

Here, the speaker repeats language from the first stanza, returning to the idea of "pray[ing] in [...] distress." But the poem also develops that idea further, building on the mysterious idea of a shared "human form divine" that expresses God. Since God is "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love"—and since those qualities are embodied in humanity—everyone who prays, in this speaker's view, is praying to God-in-the-human, not God-somewhere-else.

Where in the first stanza the speaker said that "all" pray to "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love," here the speaker makes that point even more emphatically. Listen to the diacope here:

> Then every man of every clime,
> That prays in his distress,

"All" here becomes "every man of every clime"—a stronger and more specific statement of the same idea. It's as if the speaker is really leaning on the word "every," and especially on the idea that people make the same prayer in "every clime," every part of the world. This poem's ideas, in other words, aren't isolated to a single group of believers, or a single nation. God, to this speaker, is truly universal: since people embody God, God is wherever people are. (In fact, to Blake, God is embodied in all of existence—but that's a longer story, which one can explore in his other poems.) When people are praying to God, they're praying to God-in-humanity, too.

Here, again, this speaker seems to be reinterpreting a traditional Christian idea. The "human form divine" might easily be a description of Christ, whose "form" was both "human" and "divine." But the Christ the speaker has in mind is a kind of universal Christ, made up of every single person: a beautiful shared embodiment of God.

Closing out this long chiasmus, the speaker repeats the same words he began the poem with (and has been repeating throughout): Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love. But this time, he repeats them with a difference:

> Prays to the human form divine,
> Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

This love-first reorientation also points readers back to stanza 3, where "Love" was connected with the "human form divine." Thinking on the cosmic scale of the "human form divine," the speaker foregrounds the overwhelming and mysterious "Love" associated with it.

LINES 17-20

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, Turk, or Jew.
Where Mercy, Love, & Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too.

Over the first four stanzas of "The Divine Image," the speaker has presented a complex and mystical idea using the simple rhythms of a nursery rhyme. Now, the poem concludes with a kind of moral: to love God, the speaker says, people have to love "the human form" in all its manifestations. This kind of love—and this kind of God!—can never be restricted by false religious boundaries: the "heathen, Turk, [and] Jew" embody God just as much as Christians.

This phrasing makes it clear that the speaker has a specifically Christian audience in mind—likely the Christians of Blake's own late 18th-century London. Blake often decried institutional Christianity, railing against what he felt were joyless, reductive, and false ideas about God, sin, and salvation. This poem, then, might be meant as a corrective to the limitations of conventional piety: Blake believed that "Everything that Lives is Holy," and this poem, with its transcendent "human form divine," is just one way of explaining why.

Here at the end of the poem, it's worth looking back at its title: "The Divine Image." This is an allusion to the biblical Book of Genesis, in which God is said to create humankind "in [his] image, according to [his] likeness." Being made in God's "divine image," in this poem's view, doesn't mean that God looks like a person. It means that God *is people*, his "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" embodied both in individual human bodies and in a great shared "human form divine." Wherever these "dwell," God "is dwelling too"—because "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" are what God *is*.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"The Divine Image" subtly alludes to biblical stories in both its title and its general ideas.

In the first chapter of the biblical Book of Genesis, God is said to create humans "in [his] image, according to [his] likeness." In other words, God builds humans so that they resemble him. To this poem's speaker, that doesn't mean that God is a human-shaped being or humans *look* the way they do because that's how God looks. Rather, the speaker feels that the "Divine Image" of God is a set of qualities that get expressed *through* the human body: "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love." In fact, these qualities *are* "God, our father dear." Anywhere that these virtues appear, then, God himself is present.

The poem's central allusion to the biblical creation myth thus provides a leaping-off point for a big (and, at the time Blake was writing, iconoclastic) idea: every single human being carries God inside them, because every single human being can express "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" (and, again, in the speaker's mind, those qualities *are* God). The "human form" itself is thus "divine" because it's the way that God exists on earth.

Through this idea, the poem also alludes to the Incarnation: the Christian idea that Jesus was completely a human being and completely God at exactly the same time. In this poem, every "human form" is an incarnation of God in just the same way, since everyone can express and contain God.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love, / Is God, our father dear: / And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love, / Is Man, his child and care."

END-STOPPED LINE

This poem's many end-stopped lines help to give it its steady, nursery-rhyme-like pace. Note how many of the poem's quatrains (or four-line stanzas) get divided into two end-stopped couplets, like this:

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
All pray in their distress:
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

End-stops like these help the poem to feel balanced, measured, and steady. The speaker is delivering big ideas calmly and simply, and the pauses that these end-stops introduce help to make the speaker's voice sound unrushed.

End-stops also often allow the poem to juxtapose striking (and unexpected) ideas:

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
Is God, our father dear:
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
Is Man, his child and care.

Here, end-stops help to communicate a complex idea in a simple way.

- First, the speaker suggests that God himself *is* "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love"—that these qualities are God's nature and God's substance. Then, an end-stop creates a pause, as if the speaker is saying: "Are you with me so far?"
- The next couplet introduces the more unusual idea that humanity is *also* "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love"—implying that humanity and God are at root the same thing! The end-stop here helps the

speaker to deliver this unorthodox idea in a slyly matter-of-fact tone.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "distress:"
- **Line 4:** "thankfulness."
- **Line 6:** "dear:"
- **Line 8:** "care."
- **Line 10:** "face:"
- **Line 12:** "dress."
- **Line 16:** "Peace."
- **Line 18:** "Jew."
- **Line 20:** "too."

PARALLELISM

Parallelism helps the speaker to expound the poem's big idea: that God is embodied in humanity through "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love." For instance, take a look at the way that parallelism shapes the second stanza:

> For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
> Is God, our father dear:
> And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
> Is Man, his child and care.

These similarly constructed lines express the speaker's striking point—that God and humanity are essentially the same—in their very shape. In this speaker's eyes, God and humanity share the same "Divine Image," and these mirrored sentences (literally!) reflect that unity.

The parallelism of stanza 3 drives that point home:

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

Lining up these similarly structured declarations one after the other, the speaker essentially says the same thing over and over, insisting on one central point: all of God's qualities are embodied through living, breathing people.

But this parallelism here also draws attention to the subtle *differences* between God's qualities. Relating "Mercy" to the "human heart" and "Peace" to "the human dress," for instance, the speaker might invite readers to consider how God might be expressed internally (through feelings) versus externally (through behavior).

Parallelism can also evoke the speaker's obstinate, prophetic tone, as in line 13:

> Then every man of every clime,

The repeated "every" here (a device called diacope) makes the speaker sound insistent: yes, *every* person, in *every* place—no matter their culture or believes—expresses God in just the same way.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love, / Is God, our father dear: / And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love, / Is Man, his child and care."
- **Lines 9-12:** "For Mercy has a human heart, / Pity, a human face: / And Love, the human form divine, / And Peace, the human dress."
- **Line 13:** "Then every man of every clime,"

REPETITION

Repetition helps to give this poem its singsongy, nursery-rhyme-like tone, and keep the speaker's ideas about the way that humanity embodies God front and center.

Throughout the poem, the speaker insistently returns to the words "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love": all four of these words appear in almost every stanza. (The one exception is stanza 5, when the speaker drops the word "Peace" from the list in order not to break the poem's meter!) This pointed repetition makes these qualities feel like the poem's backbone, the structure that holds everything else together.

Remember, in this speaker's eyes, "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" aren't just God's personality traits: they're God himself. Since this poem is all about the way that God gets expressed through every human being, it makes sense that God should also be expressed in every stanza! The repetition of "the human form divine" stresses the speaker's idea that it's *through* the human body that God enters the world.

The speaker also uses repetitions to shape the poem's argument. For instance, lines 1-16 form a chiasmus: they begin and end with the idea that everyone in "distress" prays to "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love." By the time the idea of "pray[ing] in [...] distress" returns in line 14, though, the speaker has introduced a new idea: in praying to those four virtues, the poem has insisted, people are actually praying to "the human form divine." Chiasmus thus carries the reader to a whole new understanding of the idea the poem initially introduced.

Finally, the speaker's closing lines use polyptoton on the words "dwell" and "dwelling" to underline the point the poem has been making all along: wherever "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" live, God lives.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,"
- **Line 2:** "pray in their distress:"
- **Line 5:** "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,"

- **Line 7:** "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,"
- **Line 9:** "human"
- **Line 10:** "human"
- **Line 11:** "human form divine"
- **Line 12:** "human"
- **Line 14:** "prays in his distress,"
- **Line 15:** "human form divine"
- **Line 16:** "Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace."
- **Line 17:** "human form"
- **Line 19:** "Mercy, Love, & Pity," "dwell"
- **Line 20:** "dwelling"

METAPHOR

This whole poem could be read as a complex extended metaphor, in which the "human form" is used as an *image* of God. However, William Blake meant this idea perfectly literally! As the rest of his writings reflect, Blake truly believed that God lived in every single human being, and that all people were part of God.

However, it's still worth looking at the metaphorical possibilities here, to see what they reveal about how Blake thought about the relationship of humanity to the divine.

For instance, take a look at lines 9-12:

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

Here, the speaker personifies each godly virtue, and also relates them to a specific part of the human body:

- Pointing out that "Mercy has a human heart," the speaker suggests that "Mercy" is associated with deep feelings and tenderness—for which the heart is a common symbol.
- And "Pity," with its "human face," seems to be related to, well, relationship: how we see, hear, and communicate with each other, how we care for each other.
- "Love," however, is expressed with the entire "human form": it's a whole, complete, and overwhelming aspect of God.
- "Peace," meanwhile, appears as "the human dress": in other words, clothing. It's an outward behavior, something one *does*.

While this poem is declaring that God and "the human form divine" are truly one and the same—no metaphor about it—reading its images metaphorically also reveals a lot about how the speaker imagines God might be expressed on earth.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** "For Mercy has a human heart, / Pity, a human face: / And Love, the human form divine, / And Peace, the human dress."

ALLITERATION

Much of the alliteration in this poem appears in its repetitions. Because the words "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" appear over and over, so does the repeated /p/ sound. Alliteration thus strengthens the effect of all that repetition, drawing even more attention to the poem's central concerns.

By creating a strong link between the words right in the middle of this repeated line, alliteration also helps to make "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love" feel like one connected and continuous thing, not just four separate qualities. And that makes sense! The speaker *sees* these virtues as aspects of one thing: God himself.

Alliteration can also just plain make things sound musical. In the first stanza, for instance, the /p/ sound links "Pity" and "Peace" in line 1 to "pray[er]" in line 2. That connection gives these lines a little bit of musical continuity, and helps to establish the poem's singsongy, nursery-rhyme tone.

And in line 9, the repeated /h/ of "Mercy has a human heart" introduces the image of the godly virtues as *parts* of the human body with a gentle sound—a soft sighing /h/ that suits the tender "Mercy" these words describe.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Pity," "Peace"
- **Line 2:** "pray"
- **Line 5:** "Pity," "Peace"
- **Line 7:** "Pity," "Peace"
- **Line 9:** "has," "human," "heart"
- **Line 16:** "Pity," "Peace"

VOCABULARY

Mercy (Line 1, Line 5, Line 7, Line 9, Line 16, Line 19) - Loving forgiveness.

Pity (Line 1, Line 5, Line 7, Line 10, Line 16, Line 19) - Compassion for suffering.

Distress (Line 2, Line 14) - Suffering or difficulty.

Dress (Line 12) - Clothing.

Clime (Line 13) - Region, country.

Heathen, Turk, or Jew (Line 18) - In other words, non-Christian believers. Here, "heathen" is a catch-all category for people who profess a non-Christian faith (or have no faith at

all), and "Turk" suggests Muslims.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Divine Image" is one of William Blake's poem's in *Songs of Innocence*, a collection he eventually merged with a companion volume, *Songs of Experience*, to form (you guessed it) *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The poems in this collection approach grand mysteries of human life with deceptive simplicity, using straightforward forms to explore complex ideas.

This poem, for instance, uses only five short quatrains (four-line stanzas), a simple ABCB rhyme scheme, and down-to-earth common meter. The effect is rather like a nursery rhyme—except, this is a nursery rhyme that proclaims the nature of God himself! Many of the *Songs of Innocence* play similar tricks, presenting grand (and sometimes unsettling) ideas in a voice of childlike simplicity.

Part of Blake's point in using such a simple form is to suggest that truths like the ones this poem expresses are all part of a natural human wisdom—an instinctive religiosity that people lose as they grow up, and must work to regain.

Many of the poems in *Songs of Innocence* also have a counterpart in *Songs of Experience*—a companion poem that approaches the same ideas from a sometimes grim or world-weary adult perspective. This poem's counterpart is called "A Divine Image," and it uses the same basic form as this poem to make the point that humanity embodies not just "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love," but all kinds of evils, too.

METER

"The Divine Image" uses common meter: a back-and-forth pattern of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. That means that the meter alternates between lines with four iambs—metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm—and lines with three iambs.

Here's how that sounds in lines 1-2:

> To Mer- | cy, Pi-| ty, Peace, | and Love,
> All pray | in their | distress:

This singsongy meter feels simple and gentle, and might remind readers of nursery rhymes. That makes sense considering this poem's context: one of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, this poem speaks to a joyful, childlike understanding of the world. But common meter is also traditionally used in hymns—and there's certainly a lot of powerful religious sentiment here, too.

RHYME SCHEME

Like a lot of poems written in common meter, "The Divine Image" uses this rhyme scheme:

ABCB

This back-and-forth pattern appears in lots of down-to-earth, folksy flavors of poetry, from nursery rhymes to ballads. Here, these rhymes might even feel deceptively simple: this poem is using straightforward sounds and language to deliver a complex and awe-inspiring message of human divinity.

This poem also plays with this simple scheme in some interesting ways. Take a look at the rhymes in the fourth stanza, for instance:

> Then every man of every clime,
> That prays in his distress,
> Prays to the human form divine,
> Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

While this stanza still essentially follows the ABCB pattern, it's also doing something more complicated. The B rhymes "Distress" and "Peace," which would usually be perfect rhymes in this pattern, are instead slant rhymes, sharing a sibilant /s/ consonant sound, but using slightly different vowel sounds. And at a second glance, the A and C, "clime" and "divine," are slant rhymes, too: they share an assonant long /i/ sound. Linking similar-but-different sounds across this stanza, the speaker mirror the connections between "every man of every clime" that these lines describe: people, too, are similar across their differences!

SPEAKER

"The Divine Image" doesn't give readers much direct information about its speaker, but nevertheless makes it clear that this speaker is a person of deep (and unorthodox) faith.

To this speaker, everyone in the world is equally part of the "Divine Image." All humans express godly virtues merely by being human. That belief cuts across boundaries of culture and religion: a connection to God doesn't come through any one belief system, but through plain old humanity.

In proclaiming this fervent belief, the speaker of this poem sounds a lot like William Blake himself. Blake believed in (and indeed, invented) a famously wild, anti-denominational, and prophetic version of Christianity, in which every person is a version of Christ, embodying God.

But the reader should remember that this poem isn't Blake's final word on the matter of human divinity: in a corresponding poem in Blake's *Songs of Experience*, "A Divine Image," humanity also embodies a multitude of evils! This poem's speaker thus expresses just one facet of Blake's prismatic imagination.

SETTING

There's no distinct setting in "The Divine Image": this is a philosophical statement of belief, not a story grounded in a place. In a sense, then, this poem is set anywhere that the "divine image" appears. In other words, the "action" of this poem takes place all over the world: wherever there's a person to embody godly virtues, the speaker suggests, this poem is relevant.

However, there's certainly a hint here that this speaker has a particular place and time in mind. The exhortation to extend love to "heathen, Turk, or Jew" suggests that the speaker's audience doesn't fit into any of those categories—and that they might, in fact, be the predominantly Christian people of 18th- and 19th-century London, the time and place where Blake wrote this poem.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Blake (1757-1827) is often considered one of the earliest English Romantic poets—but he's unlike any other. In fact, Blake is a unique figure in literature, full stop. His wild, prophetic poems (which he illustrated, hand-engraved, printed, and distributed himself) express a whole cosmology of his own.

During his lifetime, he was seen as an eccentric: even the noted Romantic visionary Samuel Taylor Coleridge once remarked that "I am in the very mire of common-place common-sense compared with Mr. Blake." But since his death, Blake has become one of the best-known, best-loved, and most influential of poets. His works have left deep marks on writers from Olga Tokarczuk to Philip Pullman (to name only two recent examples).

"The Divine Image" first appeared in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, perhaps Blake's most famous work. The two halves of this book treat related ideas from different angles. The *Songs of Innocence* read the world from a visionary, childlike perspective of unity, joy, and delight (tempered with intense indignation about 19th-century cruelty to children and people of color). The *Songs of Experience* consider what happens when people *forget* their sacred connection to God, each other, and their own souls—and the ways in which organized religion, in Blake's view, downright demands such amnesia.

Many poems in *Songs of Innocence* have a counterpart in *Songs of Experience*, and "The Divine Image" is one of them. In its partner poem, "A Divine Image," the speaker points out how humanity expresses, not just "Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love," but "Cruelty," "Jealousy," "Terror," and "Secrecy."

Blake conceived most of his poems not just as text, but as illuminated manuscripts in which illustrations deepen (and sometimes complicate or contradict) the meanings of the words. He produced his books using an innovative technique he called the "infernal method." Where most engravers would carve *into* the copper plates they printed with, Blake painted his poems and pictures directly onto his plates with a resilient ink, then submerged them in a bath of acid so that the material *around* the images was burnt away. This process fit right in with his philosophy: he believed his role as an artist was to burn away the dross of falsehood to reveal "the infinite that was hid."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

William Blake spent much of his life writing poetry that railed against the cruelties of English society. And he had plenty to rail against!

The England of Blake's time was just getting caught up in the Industrial Revolution, a period during which the economy shifted from farming to manufacturing. The countryside began to empty out, and the cities began to swell. And English class divisions, always intense, began to seem even more pronounced as impoverished workers lived cheek-by-jowl with the fashionable and wealthy in newly crowded towns.

Workers during the early Industrial Revolution got a pretty raw deal. Even young children were forced to work in factories, dig in mines, and sweep chimneys (an absurdly dangerous job, contrary to the cheery Mary Poppins image many are familiar with: chimney-sweeps regularly suffocated to death, wedged in narrow flues). Adults didn't have it much easier. With few regulations to keep factory owners in check, bosses could impose impossible working hours, or withhold pay for any number of trifling offenses.

Blake's passionate, prophetic stance on humankind's innate divinity also made him a fiery critic of the societal inhumanity he saw all around him in the streets of his native London. And Blake was only one in a long series of writers who saw 19th-century working conditions—and the poverty that always threatened workers—as an affront to humanity. Charles Dickens would later make similar protests in novels like *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist*.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Blake's Beliefs — Read noted scholar Kathleen Raine on Blake's ideas about how humanity relates to the divine. (https://thehumandivine.org/2017/02/28/blakes-christ-consciousness-by-kathleen-raine/)
- Blake's Influence — Read novelist Philip Pullman's appreciation of Blake. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/28/philip-pullman-william-blake-and-me)

- Songs of Innocence and Experience — Learn more about the Songs of Innocence and Experience, the famous collection this poem comes from—and see this poem in its original form as a hand-engraved, beautifully illustrated print. (https://www.bl.uk/works/songs-of-innocence-and-experience)
- The Poem as a Song — Listen to this poem set to music by the English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. (https://youtu.be/ZjDCRiBBJbU)
- The Blake Archive — Visit the Blake Archive to learn more about Blake's life and work, and to see images of his visionary art. (http://www.blakearchive.org/)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poem read aloud (complete with a creepy animation of Blake's face). (https://youtu.be/N6LvjW-H3iU)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- A Poison Tree
- London
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Innocence)
- The Clod and the Pebble
- The Garden of Love
- The Lamb
- The Little Black Boy
- The Sick Rose
- The Tyger

HOW TO CITE

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