

The Man of Bliss Possessed By Goodness

A man sits in the hollow cave of darkness, head sunken in bitter doubt and despair. Suddenly, he jumps up, his eyes sparkling with joy and his soul leaping from his mouth in song and prayer at his sudden enlightenment. He has uncovered bliss in the darkness, and can now appreciate its fullness and its reality pulsing within his soul, making him a beacon of light in a world of darkness and doubt. The truth of bliss radiates from the soul of this man like warming heat from a flame: bliss is pure Goodness that cannot be touched by the soiled and grasping hands of evil. Bliss is not held prisoner by time, pain, or ignorance; bliss is a state of pure Goodness that cannot be deterred from its path of salvation by anything. This man is the spirit of bliss in these five interpretations of what bliss truly is; he is a ray of living light in Dante's *Paradisio*; he is at peace with all that is living as the Buddha in the sculpture; he enjoys and appreciates the fullness of life as does Owen Warland in "The Artist of the Beautiful"; he is one with the peace of the natural world as the great composer Beethoven shows through his *Pastoral Symphony*; he is content, joyful, and deserving of his bliss, just like Samwise Gamagee in the *Lord of the Rings*, and in all of these types of bliss, the man of bliss shows how many different forms of Goodness bliss can appear in.

In the 33rd Canto of *Paradisio*, Dante explains how he reaches the final stage of heaven, which he calls the "Divine Essence," where he would meet God face to face and experiences bliss. He describes how he is surrounded by a "ray of living light," and how, when God descends to him in three persons, words fail to describe what he experiences. All he can do is to say that what he is in the presence of "Eternal Light." He also uses the

phrases “High Light,” “Light Supreme,” and “Glory Infinite” to describe the presence of God.

In a state of bliss, Dante drinks in the Divine Presence, and all he thinks about is the glory and goodness of the light; he thinks about nothing else. All he desires is to go on seeing, feeling, and tasting the light, and to understand it more; he does not desire anything except the spirit that gives him true happiness through the presence of its Divine Light. It is at this point that Dante understands that, with his own mind, he cannot comprehend this Light. Then, suddenly, he describes how his mind “there smote a flash of lightning,” and it is then that he understands the presence of the Light. The light, which will go on “turning” his “desire and will,” is the “Love which moves the sun and the other stars.” Therefore, Dante expresses bliss in the Divine Comedy as the presence of living light, from which flows complete Goodness and the untainted love that set the universe in motion.

Just as Dante was a great poet, Buddha was a great thinker and religious leader. When Buddha preached his first sermon, he was preaching about bliss; in his mind, he had achieved bliss by repressing desire. In his mind, desire was what led to suffering, because he thought that there did not exist any desires in the world that could not be disappointed except the desire to not desire. The only way he could disappoint that desire was to desire. It seems simple, but to not desire anything is a nearly impossible task. It cannot be denied, however, that the Buddha was correct in stating that one cannot suffer if one does not desire.

In this piece of art from the fifth century, we see Buddha seated in the traditional East-Indian style of contemplation. In the picture, he is giving his first sermon, which

soon became famous and attracted many followers to him. These followers would start the religion of Buddhism, which is alive and thriving today. Buddhism preaches that nonviolence and goodness toward all living things, along with focused meditation, will eventually enable one to achieve *nirvana*, which is a state of complete bliss and contentment. In the picture, Buddha is smiling softly, with his eyes lightly closed and his hand extended in an instructing gesture. It is clear that the artist who carved this sandstone sculpture of Buddha interpreted the bliss of Buddha as complete contentment and peace with all living things; the artist views Buddha not as uncaring and indifferent to everything, but gentle, appreciative, and happily willing to share his feelings and truths of bliss with everyone else. Buddha's truth of bliss is outlined in the Eightfold Path, which is a set of eight guidelines that the Buddha claimed would enable one to achieve *nirvana*. All the guidelines of the Eightfold Path encourage a life of goodness, nonviolence, and compassion towards all living things. This shows that the sculptor of this image of Buddha believed bliss to be a state of being in which the blissful person is at peace with all living things, and willing to share his or her message of Goodness with anyone who will listen.

Like Buddha, Nathaniel Hawthorne was concerned about the moral nature of humans and how they could repress evil to achieve bliss. Hawthorne tells us the story of Owen Warland, who is determined to make a real butterfly, one that actually possesses life. He is a watchmaker by trade, but eventually, he abandons his work to labor on his creation. He drops out of the social world, and retreats into his shop to work in solitude on what he calls the "Beautiful." He is scorned, chastised, and mocked for his work, although nobody really knows what he's doing. Peter Hovenden, a retired watchmaker

who leads the people who chastise Owen, represents the material world of humanity, one who scorns those who have appreciation for artistic beauty that praises the splendors of life itself. Owen is so obsessed with creating the “Beautiful” that he cannot act upon the love that Peter Hovenden’s daughter Annie has for him; he cannot abandon his quest for truth and beauty in the creation of the butterfly. Eventually, after years of toil, failure, and setback, Owen Warland finally succeeds in creating the butterfly. Annie has married Robert Danforth, a kind blacksmith, who represents the practical world, one that is not concerned with the Beautiful. They have one son, who is called the Child of Strength, to symbolize the union between the contemplative Annie and the physically strong Robert Danforth. Owen visits their house and shows them his creation. Everyone except Peter Hovenden is amazed and delighted, and wants to touch it. Eventually, Peter Hovenden allows the butterfly to rest on his finger, and its color fades. Owen explains that in an atmosphere of scorn and doubt, the butterfly withers and will die. Annie pleads for her father to take his finger away, and with an “acrid” smile, he does so. The butterfly then flies toward Owen, but he whispers that it will not return, for as he says, “it has gone forth out of thy master’s heart. There is no return for thee!” Then, the Child of Strength makes a grab at it and crushes it in his hand. Annie screams, Peter Hovenden laughs, and Robert Danforth forcefully opens the child’s hand to reveal the glittering fragments of the butterfly’s remains.

However, Owen Warland is not horrified, depressed, or terrified about what appears to be the ruin of his life’s labor. This is because he has entered into a state of bliss that can only be achieved through the Beautiful; one can only achieve true happiness when one understands that life is not something of the mortal senses. As a translation:

Owen Warland has achieved bliss because, through the creation of the butterfly, he has grown to understand that by “rising high enough” to create something with life, he is finally able to comprehend that bliss is not something perceptible to mortal senses, but the “enjoyment of the Reality,” with “the Reality” being everything that is living.

Nathaniel Hawthorne did not see life as the ability to breathe and function; he saw life as a spiritual gift of love that could only be understood through living a life of Goodness and appreciation. Therefore, the author perceives bliss as the enjoyment and appreciation of all life that can be attained through living a life of Goodness.

The great classical composer Beethoven, like Hawthorne, appreciated all that life had to offer, especially the natural world. When Beethoven wrote his 6th Symphony in 1815, his aim was to capture in its notes the spirit of nature. Beethoven was a great nature lover, always taking long walks in the country, rain or shine. He never wore a hat in the rain because he liked to feel the wind and rain against his face. He also loved trees; once, he refused to take a house when he was told there were no trees around it. In his 6th Symphony, Beethoven wanted to encase the bliss he felt when he was alone with nature, alone with its natural and untainted beauty. In the 2nd Movement, entitled “Scene by the Brook,” Beethoven was especially intent on capturing the feeling of the quietly bubbling water that flowed lovingly around the banks of mossy trees and smooth rocks. In his journal, he wrote: “The deeper the water, the deeper the note.” This shows the attentiveness and dedication to detail that makes this symphony such an honest interpretation of bliss.

Beethoven’s idea of bliss, expressed through this symphony, is in being one with nature; he felt completely happy away from the human world, with all of its squabbles

and follies. He wanted to be alone with nature, to enjoy its woods, brooks, and fields, and to appreciate its Creator, who, in Beethoven's view, was the epitome of peacefulness and goodness. Beethoven believed that nature, in its pure beauty, was an echo of the spirit of the Creator himself, in all of his wonder and Goodness. For Beethoven, the human world was one that was too practical. Like Owen Warland in "The Artist of the Beautiful," Beethoven valued the beautiful and the artistic over the hard and practical. "The Scene by the Brook" conveys Beethoven's bliss and joy in being one with nature and its Creator; the slow flowing notes of it echo both the slow flowing of the water in the bubbling brook and the slowly flowing peacefulness that Beethoven experiences in nature. So in Beethoven's view, bliss is the flowing peacefulness and joy of the soul in being one with the pure Goodness of nature and its Creator.

J.R.R. Tolkien was one of the twentieth century's greatest writers, and echoing Beethoven's idea of bliss, he made hobbits, which are a peaceful and joyful people who loved nature, as some of the chief heroes in his stories. When Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, he stated that one of his prime motives for writing the book was the "encouragement of good morals." In *The Return of the King*, we see the destruction of the evil of Sauron, his malicious shadow being wiped from the face of the earth with the paper towel of faithfulness; it is by the faithfulness of Samwise Gamgee that Frodo is able to destroy the ring and bring lasting peace and happiness to Middle Earth. Naturally, Frodo deserves credit as well for his bravery, courage, strength, determination, and will to destroy that which is evil. However, it is in the faithfulness of Samwise to Frodo that enables Frodo to go on; Sam is the one who keeps Frodo on his feet, and when Frodo

falls, Sam is the one who carries Frodo up Mount Doom so that Frodo may fulfill his quest to destroy the ring.

It is only after the destruction of the ring of power that bliss is able to be experienced in Tolkien's story. This is because Tolkien's idea of bliss was that it could only be experienced after it had been earned; one could not be in a state of complete happiness unless one performed some deed or deeds to earn that complete happiness. In the case of Sam, he goes on the long, grueling mission with Frodo to destroy the ring, which represents all that is evil in the world, and he has to endure countless sufferings and make innumerable sacrifices in order to see the mission fulfilled. When the ring is finally destroyed, it is as if the burden on Sam is lifted, and he is almost able to be completely happy. Peter Jackson, the director of the film, knew Tolkien's ideas well and echoed them perfectly onscreen. However, as the movie shows, Sam cannot be truly happy until he understands why Frodo must leave the Middle Earth and go to the Grey Havens, which is the equivalent of heaven in our sense. In the end, Sam understands that Frodo must go because he was a ring bearer, because he understands that ring bearers, especially Frodo, had to endure, control, and resist the power that the rings held; ring bearers were a separate class, not in ranking or superiority, but in spirit. Sam finally understands that he cannot understand what Frodo has endured, and that is why he is able, at the very end of the movie to sigh to his wife, "Well, I'm back." These last words symbolize that Sam has finally come home to bliss; he has finally realized that true and complete happiness is achieved through sacrifice, courage, and understanding of what cannot be understood. Tolkien thus ends his epic trilogy on the blissful words of his most noble character. So Tolkien viewed bliss as the state of complete happiness,

contentment, and joy that is earned through sacrifice, courage, and understanding that ultimately happens after all evil is destroyed by a determination to see the will of Goodness fulfilled.

These five interpretations of bliss may seem very different in how they view complete happiness. However, they are all the same in that they all echo the same spirit that every human being, at some point or another, has tried to understand. This spirit is the Spirit of Goodness, and behind all the interpretations of bliss is Goodness. This is because human nature is naturally possessed by the Spirit of Goodness. Humans may try to kill Goodness; we may try to choke it with envy, slash it with hatred, boil it with pride, or burst it with pleasure. However, no matter how much we try to destroy it, Goodness will continue to play hide and seek with us in the form of (barely) attainable bliss.