

A Poison Tree

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I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I waterd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears:
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night.
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veild the pole;
In the morning glad I see;
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

(Text Source:- <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45952/a-poison-tree>)

About the Poet:

William Blake (28 November 1757 – 12 August 1827) was an English poet, painter, and printmaker. Largely unrecognised during his lifetime, Blake is now considered a seminal figure in the history of the [poetry](#) and visual arts of the [Romantic Age](#). What he called his [prophetic works](#) were said by 20th-century critic [Northrop Frye](#) to form "what is in proportion to its merits the least read body of poetry in the English language".^[2] His visual artistry led 21st-century critic [Jonathan Jones](#) to proclaim him "far and away the greatest artist Britain has ever produced".^[3] In 2002, Blake was placed at number 38 in the [BBC's](#) poll of the [100 Greatest Britons](#).^[4] While he lived in [London](#) his entire life, except for three years spent in [Felpham](#),^[5] he produced a diverse and symbolically rich [œuvre](#), which embraced the imagination as "the body of God"^[6] or "human existence itself".^[7]

Although Blake was considered mad by contemporaries for his [idiosyncratic](#) views, he is held in high regard by later critics for his expressiveness and creativity, and for the philosophical and mystical undercurrents within his work. His paintings and poetry have been characterised as part of the Romantic movement and as "Pre-Romantic".^[8] A committed Christian who was hostile to the [Church of England](#) (indeed, to almost all forms of organised religion), Blake was influenced by the ideals and ambitions of the [French](#) and [American](#) revolutions.^[9] Though later he rejected many of these political beliefs, he maintained an amiable relationship with the political activist [Thomas Paine](#); he was also influenced by thinkers such as [Emanuel Swedenborg](#).^[10] Despite these known influences, the singularity of Blake's work makes him difficult to classify. The 19th-century scholar [William Michael Rossetti](#) characterised him as a "glorious luminary",^[11] and "a man not forestalled by predecessors, nor to be classed with contemporaries, nor to be replaced by known or readily surmisable successors".

Introduction

"**A Poison Tree**" is a poem written by [William Blake](#), published in 1794 as part of his [Songs of Experience](#) collection. It describes the narrator's repressed feelings of anger towards an individual, emotions which eventually lead to murder. The poem explores themes of indignation, revenge, and more generally the fallen state of mankind.

Background

The *Songs of Experience* was published in 1794 as a follow up to Blake's 1789 [Songs of Innocence](#).^[1] The two books were published together under the merged title *Songs of Innocence and Experience, showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul: the author and printer, W. Blake*^[1] featuring 54 plates. The illustrations are arranged differently in some copies, while a number of poems were moved from *Songs of Innocence* to *Songs of Experience*. Blake continued to print the work throughout his life.^[2] Of the copies of the original collection, only 28 published during his life are known to exist, with an additional 16 published posthumously.^[3] Only 5 of the

poems from *Songs of Experience* appeared individually before 1839 with^[4] "A Poison Tree" first published in the 1830 *London University Magazine*.^[5]

The original title of the poem is "Christian Forbearance",^[6] and was placed as number 10 in the Rossetti manuscript,^[7] printed on a plate illustrated by a corpse under a barren tree. The body was shown in a similar manner to the crucified corpse of Blake's "A Negro on the Rack" in [John Gabriel Stedman's Narrative](#).^[8]

Poem

The poem relies on a trochaic beat. It consists of four stanzas, and begins with an emphasis on the first person. The first person perspective changes with the use of the word "And" after the first stanza, while the emphasis on "I" is replaced

The original draft has a line drawn beneath the first stanza, which could denote that Blake originally intended the poem as concluding at the 4th line.^[9] There are also many differences between the manuscript and published versions of the poem, with the original line 3 and 4 reading "At a Friends Errors Anger Shew / Mirth at the Errors of a Foe."^[10]

Themes

The poem suggests that acting on anger reduces the need for vengeance, which may be connected to the British view of anger held following the start of the French Revolution. The revolutionary forces were commonly connected to the anger with opposing she's that the anger was either a motivating rationale or simply blinded an individual to reason.^[11] Blake, like Coleridge, believed that anger needed to be expressed, but both were wary of the type of emotion that, rather than guide, was able to seize control.^[12]

Poisoning appears in many of Blake's poems. The poisoner of "A Poison Tree" is similar to Blake's Jehovah, Urizen, Satan, and Newton. Through poisoning an individual, the victim ingests part of the poisoner, as food, through reading, or other actions, as an inversion on the Eucharist. Through ingestion, the poisoned sense of reason of the poisoner is forced onto the poisoned. Thus, the death of the poisoned can be interpreted as a replacement of the poisoned's individuality.^[13] The world of the poem is one where dominance is key, and there is no reciprocal interaction between individuals because of a lack of trust.^[14]

The poem, like others in *Songs of Experience*, reflects a uniquely Christian sense of alienation.^[15] As such, "A Poison Tree" appears to play off the Christian idea of self-denial, and it is possible that Blake is relying on [Emanuel Swedenborg's](#) theme of piety concealing malice, which ultimately alienates the individual from their true identity and evil no longer appears to be evil. Blake's poem differs from Swedenborg's theory by containing an uncontrollable progression through actions that lead to the conclusion. The final murder is beyond the control of the narrator, and the poem reflects this by switching from past to the present tense. The poem's theme of duplicity and the inevitable conclusion is similar to the anonymous poem "There was a man of double deed."^[16]

The image of the tree appears in many of Blake's poems, and seems connected to his concept of the Fall of Man. It is possible to read the narrator as a divine figure who uses the tree to seduce mankind into disgrace. This use of the fallen state can also be found in the poems "The Human Abstract" and "London" from the *Songs of Experience* series.^[17] The actual tree, described as a tree of "Mystery", appears again in "The Human Abstract", and both trees are grown within the mind.^[7]

Critical Appreciation of A Poison Tree

A Poison Tree is a four stanza poem with a rhyme scheme: **aabb**, sets of rhyming couplets with full rhyme make up each quatrain.

The metre (meter in USA) is predominantly trochaic trimeter, that is, there are three feet to each line with the beat of **DA**dum **DA**dum **DA**dum **DA**...the stress falling on the first syllable. Look for this in lines 1,3,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15. For example:

I was **angry with** my **friend**;

So the first line has three full feet plus the extra stressed beat at the end, making a total of seven syllables. The trochees seem to force the line on, reflecting the pushiness of the speaker.

In contrast, the iambic lines steady the beat and slow the pace down somewhat:

I **told** my **wrath**, my **wrath** did **end**.

Note the comma, splitting the line down the middle - syllabic symmetry which balances out.

One special line, line seven, deserves focus:

And I sunned it with **smiles**,

This becomes two trochees and an iamb, with a natural pause between it and with, to slightly wrong foot the reader.

Antithesis and Metaphor

Antithesis

The poet uses antithesis to make opposites contrast. This is when a line contains opposing ideas or arguments. For example:

- in the first stanza the opening lines focus on telling a friend about anger which then lessened; in contrast the last two lines depict not telling an enemy about anger which made it grow.

Some of the language reflects this: *end/grow,fears/tears,smiles/wiles,day/night* and so on.

Metaphor

This poem is an extended metaphor - the wrath (anger) becomes a tree, a fruit, a poison apple.

Stanza Wise Analysis

This poem in one sense reads like a nursery rhyme but carries with it a potent message that is still relevant for today. Anger management has become a focal issue for many in society and Blake's prescient poem hits the nail on the head with its antithetical argument for letting go of negative energy.

With repeated emphasis on the self - seventeen times *I, my, mine* - the speaker courageously suggests that responsibility for managing anger is personal. If it is left to fester and not dealt with then the consequences could be dire.

Stanza-1

Something has upset the speaker, be it trivial or serious, but things have been smoothed over because the anger (wrath) was released - he told his friend - the air has been cleared and they can both move onwards and upwards.

The poet is not only expressing his anger towards his friend as well as his foe in this stanza, but he has also depicted the difference between two types of anger. He states that when you are angry with a friend, you convince your heart to forgive him. Even though you are hurt and you know that he did injustice to you, you try your best to forget the past and end the feeling of vengeance in your heart.

On the other hand, when you are angry with an enemy, it takes ages for you to calm your anger. Yet, the anger and the feeling of vengeance do not diminish, even with time. In fact, the vengeance simply grows.

Stanza-2

In contrast, the speaker's relationship with an enemy has gone badly wrong, simply because the anger he felt was not communicated. The anger began to grow, like a tree, inside his heart and mind. This troubled him greatly, he cried tears of anguish, and despite appearing happy enough in the outside world, inside things were turning toxic. He lost all trust in himself and started to make up stories to try and cover things.

The poet is making a confession in this stanza – it is he, who is solely responsible for the hatred that has grown in his heart for his enemy. It is he, who has increased the vengeance in his heart. He has nurtured the hatred with his fears, spending hours together, crying for the ill that has been caused to him by his enemy.

He has also nurtured hatred with his sarcastic smiles, imagining ill and cursing his enemy to go through the same or worse sufferings that he has been through.

Stanza-3

After a certain length of time the anger became a metaphorical poison apple, bright and shiny perhaps like the one in the fairytale Sleeping Beauty, like the apple Adam and Eve shared in the Garden of Eden. His enemy is taken in by this shining attractive fruit - they are both affected by this toxic emotion - but one more than the other.

The poet states that it is because of his dwelling in the same hatred, that it has grown every day. The hatred gave birth to an apple. The fruit signifies the evil that has taken birth in the heart of the poet. He states that he has now come to a point from where he can't turn back and forget about his enemy, until he does something to soothe his vengeance.

Finally, the day comes when the poet's enemy has met the evil fruit of vengeance, that he has grown with his fears, tears and sarcasm. The fruit has now turned into a weapon. When the enemy confronts with this anger, it is time for the weapon to serve the purpose that it has been made for.

Stanza-4

Tempted, the enemy, in the dead of night, when both are at extremes in their relationship (poles apart), takes the forbidden fruit, eats it and dies. The conflict hasn't been resolved in an amicable manner and the outcome is disaster. Both have suffered from the destructive effects of the suppressed (unconscious) anger.

And, so the poet states, the very next morning, the purpose is served. When the poet wakes up and glimpses in the garden, he sees something that relaxes his mind and calms his vengeance forever. The darkness of the night acted like an invisible cloak for the poet. Now, it is a beautiful morning.

There he is; his enemy, dead under the tree of his hatred. He bit the poisoned apple of his vengeance. He is murdered.

Conclusion: A Poison Tree

A Poison Tree is a poem that focuses on the emotion of anger and the consequences for our relationships should that anger be suppressed. It deals with the darker side of the human psyche.

The speaker tells of how he talked to a friend about his anger and everything was fine but with an enemy he could not do so and kept the anger inside. It began to grow, eventually becoming a metaphorical tree with poison fruit.

The enemy or foe ends up under the tree, destroyed by the speaker's pent up anger. The speaker seems ok about this but is there some doubt about the destructiveness of his anger? Early communication of anger seems the best way to deal with it.

William Blake's poem was written in 1794 and first appeared in his book *Songs of Experience* which followed on from his earlier *Songs of Innocence*.

Society at that time was encouraged to bottle up emotions and to present a polite and unruffled persona to the world.

Blake thought this approach unhealthy and advocated a more expressive mode of being, especially with regards to potentially festering emotions. His ideas were against the prevailing attitudes of the church and state. The original title Blake had for this poem, *Christian Forbearance*, reflects this.

A Poison Tree uses metaphor, antithesis and biblical associations to highlight the self-damage that can proceed from suppressing anger. The emphasis is on letting go of negative emotions and moving on with life before this energy impacts on the health and wellbeing of others.