A Poison Tree Study Guide

A Poison Tree by William Blake

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Introduction

□A Poison Tree□ is one of the lesser-known of the twenty-six poems William Blake published in 1793 as *Songs of Experience*, which also contains □The Tyger,□ □Ah, Sun-flower,□ and □London.□ *Songs of Experience* is the companion volume to Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, published in 1789. Blake printed *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* in one volume in 1794, adding the descriptive subtitle □Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.□ One of the best sources of □A Poison Tree□ is *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (1982), edited by David V. Erdman and published by Doubleday.

In the poems of *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, Blake contrasts how the human spirit blossoms when allowed its own free movement, which he calls a state of □innocence,□ and how it turns in on itself after it has been suppressed and forced to conform to rules, systems, and doctrines, which he calls a state of □experience.□ The two states recall one of the principal events in the Judeo-Christian story, the fall from innocence caused by Adam and Eve when they eat fruit from the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. The poison tree of Blake's poem suggests that biblical tree.

Although it can be read by itself, □A Poison Tree□ benefits significantly from being read as a further expression of the poems immediately preceding it in *Songs of Experience*, especially □The Garden of Love□ and □The Human Abstract.□ In the three poems, Blake criticizes the imposition of religious and social morality on the human sensibility, suggesting that it stifles the goodness and love inherent in a spirit not fettered by such rules. In Blake's *Notebook*, the original title of □A Poison Tree□ is □Christian Forbearance,□ which the poem criticizes as the cause of hypocrisy.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: English

Birthdate: 1757

Deathdate: 1827

Poet, painter, engraver, mystic, and visionary, William Blake was born in London on November 28, 1757. His parents, James and Catherine, ran a hosiery shop and were political radicals and religious Dissenters. They opposed the tenets of the Church of England and the policies of the English monarchy, such as the war against the American colonies. They believed in the personal, mystical revelation of the Divinity through scripture and in following the dictates of conscience. Throughout his life, Blake's own interpretation of scripture; actual visions of the nonmaterial world; and a dedication to political, religious, and sexual liberty formed the foundations of his beliefs and served as the cornerstones of his work.

Blake's parents did not send him to school but allowed him to wander through the streets of London and the outlying woods. Nevertheless, Blake was not uneducated. From childhood, he read works of philosophy and literature, especially the Bible. Blake's father encouraged him to write and to draw and bought him prints of classic drawings, paintings, and sculptures. When he was ten, Blake was enrolled in a drawing school. At fifteen, he became an apprentice to an engraver. On August 18, 1782, Blake married Catherine Boucher, who was a lifelong admiring and loving companion to him and assisted him in his workshop.

In much of his work, Blake combined poetry and engraving, etching the text of his poetry onto copper plates impressed with images that he colored after printing. It was in such an illuminated book, called *Songs of Experience*, that □A Poison Tree□ appeared in 1794.

To a small circle of admirers, Blake was regarded as a prophet. The visionary and subversive nature of his mystical Christianity, however, and his revolutionary politics gave him the reputation of being a madman in the influential circles of his times. So did his art. Blake's poetry is marked by a private mythology. Blake personified forces of nature, the psyche, and the spirit and gave them names such as Orc, Urizen, and Rintra. He showed these forces in dramatic and mortal conflict with one another. Blake's visual art represents the visions he beheld and the characters he imagined.

Blake lived all his life in poverty, indebted to several benefactors who provided him with commissions. Although he was firm in his belief that his work was appreciated in heaven, Blake often felt bitterness because lesser artists were being rewarded on earth while he was being rejected. *Songs of Experience*, for example, sold only twenty copies in Blake's lifetime. Blake died in London on August 12, 1827, and was buried in an unmarked grave in Bunhill Fields, a Dissenters' cemetery.

Plot Summary

First Quatrain

On first contact with □A Poison Tree,□ a reader may be deceived by the apparent simplicity of the poem. It seems like one more example of the children's verses and nursery rhymes that had become popular and were being published in the later part of the eighteenth century. The most famous collection was the one attributed to □Mother Goose.□ Such verses were intended to teach children moral lessons through easy-to-remember rhymes and catchy rhythms.

□I was angry with my friend; / I told my wrath, my wrath did end,□ Blake begins. The language and sentiment are simple and hardly need to be explained even to a young child. Someone is speaking of his direct experience: He was angry at his friend. He told his friend that he was angry, and the result was that his anger went away. The whole thing is presented in a neat package tied up and resolved by the rhyme of □friend□ and □end.□ In contrast to this way of handling anger, the speaker says, □I was angry with my foe: / I told it not, my wrath did grow.□ Again the verse seems clear and simple, and so, too, the lesson. When people do not say how they feel, the bad feeling becomes worse. The latter two lines of the quatrain, furthermore, seem to reinforce the wisdom of the first two: Say what you feel; do not suppress it, or things will get worse.

The analogy the reader is led to draw between the first set of two lines, or rhyming couplet, and the second couplet is not exact. The situations are different. In the first couplet, the speaker is angry at his friend; in the second, at his foe. This difference immediately makes the simple poem less simple. The lines are not really moralizing about confessing or concealing anger. They are referring to the way people classify other people as friends and foes and to the different ways people treat friends and foes. By extension, the poem considers the nature and consequences of anger, exploring how it grows and what it grows into.

Second Quatrain

The second quatrain, composed of two more rhyming couplets, seems less like a child's verse than the first quatrain. □And I waterd it in fears,□ the speaker says, □Night & morning with my tears: / And I sunned it with smiles, / And with soft deceitful wiles.□ In these lines, the speaker tells how he has tended and cultivated his anger, how he has made it grow. He is not suggesting a moral, as he does in the first quatrain, but he is examining a process. He is revealing the pleasure he takes in his own slyness. He also begins to speak using metaphor. Metaphor allows one thing to suggest or stand for something else. The □it□ of the first line of the second quatrain refers to the speaker's wrath, but he speaks of his wrath not as if it were an emotion, which it is, but as if it were a small plant. He □waterd□ his anger with his tears, and, using another metaphor, he □sunned it with smiles / And with soft deceitful wiles.□

Wiles are sly tricks, strategies intended to deceive someone into trusting. The speaker is laying a trap for his foe, tempting him to desire something that seems alluring but is harmful. As he pretends to be friendly to his foe, the very act of being friendly strengthens his wrath. The false smiles he bestows on his foe act like sunshine on the plant of his wrath. The friendlier the speaker seems, the more hostile he really is, and the worse are his intentions. The clarity of innocence is gone. The speaker's behavior does not look like what it is. He is not what he seems. By using metaphor, by talking about anger as if it were a plant and about hypocrisy as if it were sunshine, the speaker represents the duplicity of his behavior in his language. He makes his behavior appear more attractive than it is.

Third Quatrain

What is a figure of speech, a metaphor, in the second quatrain seems to become the thing itself, an actual tree, in the third. □And it grew both day and night,□ the speaker says. The □it□ must refer to his wrath, which he has been cultivating with □smiles, / And . . . soft deceitful wiles.□ In the second line of the third quatrain, however, □it□ bears □an apple bright.□ The wrath has become an actual tree. Anger does not bear apples. Apple trees do. A feeling has been given so much weight that it has become a presence, an actual thing. The fruit of the speaker's wrath, then, is not *like* an apple on a tree, it *is* an apple. The speaker has made his anger seem like something else, and then it actually becomes something else. He has made something deadly become alluring and tempting to his foe.

By association, the speaker's anger, which has become a tempting apple, can remind the reader of the apple on the forbidden Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. That fruit seems as if it would offer a world of good, but in the Judeo-Christian story, it actually offers a world of woe. The apple of □A Poison Tree□ is the same kind of apple. The reader may have the uneasy feeling that Blake is suggesting that in the Bible story, what is called God's love is really a form of wrath, that the God of the established Judeo-Christian religion is a god of wrath, not of love. Blake does believe that, as his longer poems repeatedly demonstrate. □A Poison Tree,□ a poem *using* metaphors *becomes* a metaphor. The relation of the angry speaker to his foe comes to stand for the story of an angry god and humankind.

Fourth Quatrain

The climax of □A Poison Tree□ comes rushing on so swiftly that a break between verse paragraphs, which has marked movement from one quatrain to the next, no longer seems necessary. The first line of the final quatrain follows without a pause after the second couplet of the third: □And my foe beheld it shine. / And he knew that it was mine. / And into my garden stole.□ The repeated use of the word □and□□a poetic device called polysyndeton□at the beginning of each line shows how clearly one action leads to and follows another. Blake also accelerates the action of the poem by the way he uses the word □stole.□ □And into my garden stole□ means that his foe came

secretly into his garden. □Stole,□ however, also suggests thievery, what the foe sneaks into the garden to do under cover of darkness. By giving the word □stole□ the strength he does, the speaker is emphasizing the culpability of his foe.

The culpability, in large part, has been created by the speaker himself. The speaker, the tempter, is the one who has laid snares for his foe and is responsible for them. The poem never reveals whether the person called the □foe□ has a feeling of enmity, or ill will, toward the speaker or whether he realizes the speaker even considers him a foe. The poem tells nothing about what sort of person the □foe□ is, why the speaker considers him a foe, or why he is angry with him. Stealing into the garden and eating the apple, moreover, is not necessarily an act of enmity. It is foremost an act of appetite, of desire, which, in fact, has been induced and stimulated by the speaker. The speaker, by using the word □stole,□ shows his own excitement at luring his foe into blameworthiness and transgression, and, unknowingly, he is indicting himself. The only thing Blake allows the speaker to say about his foe is that he □stole□ into the garden □when the night had veild the pole.□ The polestar, that is, the fixed North Star, the star that mariners use to keep them on course, is obscured. In other words, the foe steals into the garden at a moment when, the metaphor of the veiled polestar reveals, his sense of moral direction has been impaired by the speaker's subterfuge.

The final couplet, □In the morning glad I see; / My foe outstretched beneath the tree,□ is more ambiguous than at first it may appear. How one decides to understand it determines how to understand the entire poem. The first problem of interpretation is whether □outstretched□ means dead. If it does, as the reader is entitled to believe it does because the tree bears poison, then the couplet reveals the baseness of the speaker. It shows the pleasure the speaker takes at the fall of his enemy: In the morning, I am glad to see that my foe lies dead beneath the tree. If, however, □outstretched□ means only outstretched□that the foe is not dead but that the apparently friendly relationship is poisoned and the foe realizes that his apparent friend is not his friend□then the problems of human confrontation, anger, and enmity remain, as they do for all people.

Another problem is that Blake's punctuation of the penultimate, or next to the last, line□□In the morning glad I see;□□allows two readings of the line. There is no punctuation until the semicolon at the end of the line. The word □glad□ can be read as describing either □morning□ or □I.□ If □glad□ describes □morning,□ the interpretation is that in the happy morning, bright with light, as opposed to the □veiled□ night, the speaker is seeing. If □glad□ describes □I,□ the interpretation is that in the morning the speaker is happy to see the sight of his fallen foe. The first reading allows readers to see the speaker enlightened, even shocked by the effect of his anger, that it is fatal to his foe. The glad morning contrasts to the speaker's sober realization. The second interpretation allows readers to see the effect of anger on the character of the person who cultivates it. It is fatal to his innocent regard for humankind. Blake has changed the focus of the story from the Fall of human beings to the fall of God.

By making it a metaphor for the story of the Fall, Blake has constructed the poem so that the speaker's behavior, modeled on God's behavior in the Old Testament,

represents God's behavior and the speaker represents God. Through his analysis and implicit condemnation of the speaker, Blake analyzes the vision that has created the god of the Old Testament and the attitude that this god embodies. Blake warns against that vision, that attitude, and that kind of god, identifying him as a god of wrath and cruelty rather than of love.

Themes

The Cultivation of Anger

The principal theme of □A Poison Tree□ is not anger itself but how the suppression of anger leads to the cultivation of anger. Burying anger rather than exposing it and acknowledging it, according to □A Poison Tree,□ turns anger into a seed that will germinate. Through the cultivation of that seed, which is nourished by the energy of the angry person, wrath grows into a mighty and destructive force.

The Wrathfulness of the Old Testament God

An implicit theme of □A Poison Tree□ is that the god of the Old Testament is a god of wrath, cunning, jealousy, and guile. Blake presents this theme in the poem by alluding to the story of the Fall in Genesis. The tree in Blake's poem is intended to remind the reader of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The bright apple represents the fruit on that tree, which God forbids Adam and Eve to eat, thus making it more appealing. The garden into which the foe steals signifies the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve act in stealth and disobey God. The attitude of the speaker himself is to be understood as a reflection of God's attitude. By showing the speaker of the poem acting in a way reminiscent of God, Blake is showing God to be not a god of love but a cruel god and is thus criticizing the commonly held idea of God.

Suppression versus Expression

To the extent that □A Poison Tree□ teaches a lesson and asserts a moral proposition rather than offering a critique of a theological system, the lesson is less concerned with anger than with demonstrating that suppressing the expression of feelings leads to a corruption of those feelings, to a decay of innocence, and to the growth of cunning and guile. Repeatedly in *Songs of Experience*, not just in □A Poison Tree,□ Blake argues that the religious doctrines intended to train people, especially children, in virtue are cruel and cause harm. In addition, Blake depicts those who implement religious discipline as sadistic.

Hypocrisy

Blake called the original draft of □A Poison Tree□ □Christian Forbearance,□ suggesting that what is meant to appear as a gentle attitude is often a mask for disdain and anger. Furthermore, Blake believed that the attitudes of piety that adherents of conventional Christianity were taught to maintain actually led to hypocrisy, causing people to pretend to be friendly and accepting when they were not. The righteousness that the conventional religion prescribed, Blake believed, allowed people to hide evil

intent and to perform evil deeds, such as stifling the healthy growth of children, under the cover of appearing virtuous.

Style

Iambic Tetrameter

Poetry is measured speech. Its words are organized in rhythmic patterns called meter. The most common pattern or meter for English poetry is the iambic foot, which is composed of two beats, the first unaccented and the second accented. Most often in English poetry, the iambic foot appears in lines of five feet called iambic pentameter, but lines can be shorter or longer. Blake's □A Poison Tree□ is in iambic tetrameter, four iambic feet, but a variation on that pattern is common throughout the poem. In most of the lines, the second beat of the last foot is truncated, or cut off.

The first line of □A Poison Tree□ offers an example of truncated iambic tetrameter. □i WAS / anGRY / with MY / friend□ is a line with three and a half feet. The second line is a full tetrameter line. There are four complete iambic feet: □i TOLD / my WRATH, / my WRATH / did END.□ The missing beat at the end of the first line signals the incompleteness of the thought. The full fourth foot at the end of the second line gives a sense of completion. The pattern is repeated for the same result in the second rhyming couplet. This pattern distinguishes the first quatrain from the ones that follow, as do the straightforward, nonmetaphorical nature of its language and the didactic nature of its content.

In the two middle quatrains and the first couplet of the last quatrain, Blake writes only in truncated iambic tetrameter lines, such as □and I / waTERD / it IN / fears□ and □and HE / knew THAT / it WAS / mine.□ Although the recurring rhymes tie the lines of each couplet together, the missing beat at the end of each line gives a subtle sense of process rather than resolution. In the last couplet, however, Blake returns to the pattern of the first quatrain. The first line of the last couplet, □in THE / mornING / glad I / see,□ lacks a complete fourth foot. The last line, □my FOE / outSTRETCHED / beNEATH / the TREE,□ completes the utterance, resolves the poem, and places a final emphasis on the subject and central image of the poem, the word □tree.□

Metaphor, Simile, and Allusion

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing represents another. A metaphor helps to make an abstract idea concrete by turning something intangible into an image. It also reveals the subtle relatedness between things that may seem unrelated to each other. In □A Poison Tree,□ Blake represents anger as a plant and compares the angry person's relationship to his anger to a gardener's relationship to the plants he tends. Comparison is implicit in metaphor. Blake is saying anger is *like* a plant. A person who cultivates his anger is *like* a gardener. Stating the word □like□ produces a special class of metaphor called a simile. In □A Poison Tree,□ the metaphor of the tree, the apple, and the garden not only represents the speaker's anger, its result, and its boundaries but also *alludes* to the biblical Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the

forbidden fruit that grows on it in the Garden of Eden. An allusion is an indirect reference a speaker or a figure of speech makes to something else not specifically named. By means of allusion to the story of the Fall in Genesis, Blake gives greater depth of meaning to □A Poison Tree.□

Historical Context

Swedenborgianism

Religious dissent in England, which first appeared in 1662 when a group of English Puritans broke away from the Church of England, refusing to take communion in the Church or accept its doctrines and authority, took many forms. Dissenters were persecuted until 1689, when the Act of Toleration was passed. The form of dissent to which Blake was drawn in his youth was known as Swedenborgianism. Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish mystic, philosopher, theologian, and scientist, established the doctrine of correspondences, teaching that the spiritual world and the natural world were joined—that the tangible objects of the natural world were actually physical instances of spiritual realities. Consequently, Swedenborg asserted, it was possible for human beings to communicate with spirits, an experience Blake himself had on a number of occasions, most notably with the spirit of his younger brother Robert immediately after Robert's death.

Swedenborg taught that God is the source of love and wisdom and that humankind, to the degree that it manifests and is guided by love and wisdom, is the seat of the godhead. Christianity, as perverted by the tenets of the established Christian churches, Swedenborg proclaimed and Blake believed and suggests in "A Poison Tree," leads humankind away from God. That loss of touch with God is, according to Swedenborg, the Fall. The Second Coming of Christ, similarly, is not to be thought of as a tangible historical event but as an event of the human spirit to be realized when humankind becomes, again, the source of and is guided by love and wisdom. In his later writing, Swedenborg saw God as a god of wrath and judgment, and the churches founded on his teachings began to emphasize the importance of sin. After 1790, Blake rejected Swedenborg but not all of his ideas.

Revolution

The latter half of the eighteenth century was an age of revolution. In philosophy, John Locke and Thomas Paine, among others, advocated greater individual liberty, democratic government, and human rights. In science, Isaac Newton altered the way the natural world—indeed, the universe—was understood. Rather than finding in Newton's mathematical reasoning and laws of nature grounds for enlightenment, however, Blake thought of them as a source of obscurity. Blake favored the intuitive knowledge produced by visionary revelation.

It was in the realm of politics that the beliefs of the past exploded with warlike fury. The revolutions in the American colonies in 1776 and in France in 1789 brought to an end the predominance of autocratic and monarchical government; extended among citizens the right to own property and to determine taxation; and instituted systems of representative republican democracy based on principles of liberty, brotherhood, and

equality. Blake was an ardent supporter of these revolutions and celebrated them and their principles in his work. He saw them as eruptions of suppressed energy and understood their excesses as inevitable consequences of the suppression of energy.

In England, the conservative reaction to these radical events influenced the way Blake wrote, causing him to express himself symbolically to avoid political persecution. Nevertheless, in 1803, at the height of the English wars against Napoleon, Blake was brought before a magistrate on charges of sedition, against which he successfully defended himself.

The Industrial Revolution and the Factory System

During the latter half of the eighteenth century, England was transformed from a country of people who worked on the land or, if they manufactured things, such as spinning cotton or weaving cloth, in their homes, to a country where most people labored in factories using newly invented machinery for the manufacture of goods. The Industrial Revolution and the advent of the factory system not only brought a great increase in commodities and wealth for some members of society□the owners of the factories, importers and exporters, and merchants, for example□but also turned most of the men, women, and children who toiled for pittance wages in the factories into commodities themselves. People became items bought and sold as implements of labor.

Blake found the industrial system abhorrent. It violated the spiritual integrity of each human being and alienated workers from their work by turning them into machinery. The system also produced goods that were uniform and lacked the impression of the hands that had made them. Blake not only wrote against the evils of the Industrial Revolution and the factory system but also resisted them in the manufacture of his works by etching, printing, coloring, and binding his books in his own workshop.

Critical Overview

Blake's friends and circle of disciples published articles in praise of Blake during his lifetime and after his death. These tributes served as the sources and inspiration for the 1863 biography of Blake by Alexander and Anne Gilchrist. Their *The Life of William Blake* was received with enthusiasm by mid-Victorian poets such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Robert Browning, and Algernon Charles Swinburne. The enthusiasm fired the poet William Butler Yeats, who wrote the essay □William Blake and the Imagination□ in 1887 and edited an edition of Blake's poetry in 1893.

In the nearly two hundred years since Blake's death, the manner in which the poet has been regarded both has and has not changed. While Blake lived, his admirers and his detractors did not much disagree on the nature of his genius and the meaning or the quality of his work. It was over the merit of the work and whether Blake's genius was alloyed with madness that there was disagreement. The opposing factions simply differed in their valuations of Blake's work and his thought. Most were dismissive, regarding Blake primarily as a fine engraver. Some people, such as John Giles (quoted in Heims), one of Blake's young disciples, cherished Blake's work and saw him as a prophet who □had seen God . . . and had talked with angels.□

Robert Southey (quoted in Heims), appointed the poet laureate of England in 1813, called Blake □a man of great, but undoubtedly insane genius.□ In 1830, the poet and man of letters Allan Cunningham wrote in *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (quoted in Heims) that Blake was □a loveable, minor eccentric: unworldly, self-taught and self-deluded.□ Blake's champion Henry Crabbe Robinson (quoted in Heims) did not sound a very different note when he called Blake □a Religious Dreamer□ in 1811, but he made his comments approvingly. John Linnell (quoted in Heims), a painter and carver who was both a disciple and a patron of Blake's, wrote of Blake in 1818,

I soon encountered Blake[']s peculiarities, and [was] somewhat taken aback by the boldness of some of his assertions. I never saw anything the least like madness. . . . I generally met with a sufficiently rational explanation in the most really friendly & conciliatory tone.

Perhaps the ambiguity of attitude toward Blake is best expressed by another of his younger contemporaries, the art historian and scholar Seymour Kirkup, who met Blake and later wrote, □His high qualities I did not prize at that time; besides, I thought him mad. I do not think so now.□

Essentially the same understanding of Blake exists in the early twenty-first century as existed in his time. Blake is recognized as a mystic, a visionary, an advocate of liberty, and an opponent of repression. The only difference is that the balance between regard and disdain for his work has shifted. Blake's work has been accepted into the canon of great literature and valued by such respected academic critics and scholars as Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, and G. E. Bentley, Jr. David Erdman, in the preface to his

monumental edition of Blake's written work, calls Blake □one of the greatest of English poets, and certainly one of the most original, and most relevant to us now.□

As if to confirm Erdman's judgment, Blake studies are thriving in academic settings, and his work has been included in the repertoires of such popular and counterculture icons as the beat poet Allen Ginsberg, the rock musician Jim Morrison, and the writer, singer, and social activist Ed Sanders. Ginsberg released an album of himself singing his own settings of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and the Fugs, the 1960s underground rock band founded by Sanders and Tuli Kupferberg, recorded their version of Blake's □Ah, Sun-flower.□ The American composer William Bolcom premiered his grand symphonic choral setting of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in 1985.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Neil Heims is a writer and teacher living in Paris. In this essay, he argues that Blake deconstructs the meaning of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which appears in the story of the Fall in the book of Genesis, by his use of the apple tree, which appears as a symbol of hypocrisy and cruelty in A Poison Tree.

For Blake, intelligence□the faculty of seeing, knowing, and understanding□is a function of imagination. The word □imagination□ has so weakened since Blake's time that its meaning has degenerated and the word is commonly used to represent the capacity for make-believe or for pretending that things that do not exist do exist. For Blake, however, imagination signifies the organic capability to perceive the realities of the spirit world, which the eye, because its capacity to see is limited to the natural, tangible world, cannot do. The imagination is, therefore, a higher faculty than the eye. By means of imagination, for Blake, eternal things and beings, such as angels, which he holds to be real but invisible to the eye and which constitute the actual substance of the spirit, can be perceived in visions and represented by images. That Blake thought of imagination as a bodily organ and the experience of visions as the fruit of its operation is clear from the following anecdote: At a social gathering, after he had described one of his visions, Blake was asked by a woman challenging his credibility, if not his sanity, just where he had seen it. □Here, madam,□ he answered, pointing to his own head with his index finger.

The spiritual world, for Blake, is not independent of the natural world. Each is seamlessly a part of the other, fosters the existence of the other, and determines its quality. □Man has no Body,□ Blake asserts in □The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,□ □distinct from his Soul for that calld Body is a portion of the Soul discerned by the five Senses.□ Similarly, God for Blake is not an idealized, abstracted, unreachable presence in the distant heavens existing as an eternal force in a time sphere different from the one human beings inhabit, as Blake understood the Judeo-Christian God the Father of the Old Testament to be. God is a man-god, the ever-present Jesus existing as a person, in each person when each person follows the precepts of love and wisdom rather than hatred, suppression, and guile. The eternal power of God consequently becomes the ever-present capability of individuals to create the earth as a reflection of heaven rather than as a type of hell, which, according to Blake, it has been made by adherence to a Christianity perverted by belief in the repressive authority of a wrathful, beguiling father-god. Blake calls it an error fostered by □Bibles or sacred codes□ to believe □that God will torment Man in Eternity for following his [Man's] Energies.□

Two principles lie at the root of Blake's imaginative intelligence, are the basis for his belief system, and confirm his own visionary experience: the principle of correspondences and the principle of contraries. Blake derived the principle of correspondences from the writing of the Swedish mystic Swedenborg. Swedenborg taught that the spiritual world is represented in the natural world and can be apprehended through visions. Thus the two realms correspond to each other. According to Blake, the human being is the architect of this correspondence. Blake believed that

the way human beings imagine the spiritual world determines how they fashion the physical world in which they live. Here, Blake uses the word □imagine□ in its profound sense, meaning the way in which the human being forms his or her image of the world or concretely perceives that world, which is invisible to the unaided eye. Consequently, it matters greatly what conception of God humans imagine and what vision of the invisible world they behold.

The other principle, the one that provides humankind with the ability to choose, is the doctrine of contraries. According to this doctrine, there are forces and states in opposition to each other□innocence and experience, love and hate, attraction and repulsion, reason and energy. The list is Blake's own set forth in □The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,□ in which he writes that □without Contraries there is no progression□ and that they □are necessary to Human Existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil.□ What is radical in Blake's understanding is not only that he challenges the way these two contradictory terms□good and evil□are conventionally valued but also that he identifies good and evil as lying on one continuum. Referring to how the terms are conventionally defined, Blake writes, □Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy.□ Blake himself believes that □Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.□ Blake defines reason as the force that contains energy□in the sense of keeping it within fixed limits. The degree to which reason is a virtue depends on how reason is guided by Blake's belief that □Energy is Eternal Delight.□ Reason that thwarts energy, according to Blake, is evil and promotes evil. It is not for reason to determine what boundaries to impose on energy, but energy must determine the boundaries with which reason ought to surround it.

If Blake's definitions and distinctions seem confusing, perverse, or even dangerous, it is clear from them that Blake is challenging the accepted categories and values of conventional Christian morality. Conventional Christian virtues, he insists, are not real virtues. They are the result of the repression of energy and themselves are dangerous□the source of ill, not of good. In Blake's understanding, the repression of human energy, fostered by state and church, for example, during the ancien régime, or the political and social system in France before the Revolution of 1789, was the cause of the brutal and violent explosion of energy called the Reign of Terror in 1793. □Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires,□ Blake writes, and □Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion.□ On the foundation of this reinterpreted idea of virtue and his associated condemnation of suppressing the energy of bodily passion, which is a position in direct contradiction to the behavioral precepts and moral regulations of conventional Christianity, Blake builds the vision and derives the values that support the implicit argument of □A Poison Tree.□ In □A Poison Tree,□ Blake argues that the repression of wrath, the form energy takes in the poem, is a fault that leads to hypocrisy and cruelty. The experience or the expression of energy (in the instance of the poem, wrath) does not. The idea that repression is what passes for virtue and is actually harmful is one that Blake develops in several poems in *Songs of Experience*. In □The Garden of Love,□ which comes five poems before □A Poison Tree□ in the collection, Blake expresses the idea directly.

The □I□ of this poem is a different □I□ from the □I□ of □A Poison Tree,□ in which the □I□ indicates a corrupted actor. In □The Garden of Love,□ the □I□ indicates an observer of the world's corruption. The contrast and the conflict presented by the □I□ of □The Garden of Love□ are between love (energy) and repression (the priests who thwart love). In the poem, Blake has inverted the values that governed the morality of his time. The same moral inversion is at the root of □A Poison Tree□ and is the source of the cruelty the poem recounts.

The central image cluster of □A Poison Tree□□the tree and the bright apple□begins as metaphor. It is a figure of speech that represents wrath and its result as a tree and the apple that grows on it. As the poem progresses, this image cluster is transformed from metaphor into concrete actuality. In □The Human Abstract,□ a poem coming once removed before □A Poison Tree,□ Blake prepares the reader for this transformation of metaphor into the thing itself and states directly the doctrine of correspondence between the spiritual and natural worlds that is effected by the mind.

In □The Human Abstract,□ Blake turns humility into a tree. First, he shows how □Cruelty,□ which Blake personifies, that is, writes of as if it were a person rather than a behavioral characteristic, □knits a snare, / And spreads his baits with care□ in a way that is quite similar to the way the speaker sets his trap in □A Poison Tree.□ Cruelty □sits down with holy fears, / And waters the ground with tears.□ This is the same process as the one described in □A Poison Tree,□ and the same rhyming words are used to describe it. After □Humility takes its root / Underneath his [Cruelty's] foot,□ a □dismal shade / Of Mystery□ spreads □over his [Cruelty's] head.□ Finally, □it [the tree grown from Humility] bears the fruit of Deceit, / Ruddy and sweet to eat.□ In the last stanza of the poem, Blake explains the nature of the tree itself by pinpointing its location:

The Gods of earth and sea,

Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree

But their search was all in vain:

There grows one in the Human Brain.

By constructing the two trees in □The Human Abstract□ and □A Poison Tree□ and showing them as visionary structures representing the negative characteristics cruel humility and deadly hypocrisy, Blake offers a reinterpretation of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil planted by the Judeo-Christian father-god of the Old Testament in the Garden of Eden, the story surrounding it, and the very nature of God himself. In □A Poison Tree,□ implicitly relying on the formula of correspondence presented in the last stanza of □The Human Abstract,□ Blake deconstructs the Tree of Knowledge and its story and re-presents them according to what he sees as their true nature. Thus, from the circumstances of the Bible story, Blake derives the contrary state, which he believes is deeply embedded in those circumstances.

What is understood in □A Poison Tree□□that the behavior of the god of Genesis is the model for cruel and unloving human behavior because of humankind's corrupt vision of virtue□is made explicit in □The Human Abstract.□ The Old Testament story is the cause of human evil because of the belief and value systems it instills, and the story itself is a projection of a faulty vision. The deadly tree grows in the human brain, not in nature. Taken from the imagination, the tree is planted in culture. It is transplanted from inside the mind, where it is a cruel mental image, into literature (the Bible), where it becomes a cruel concrete representation of a mental image and from there reenters the mind as a cruel religious value. Thus, through the process of correspondences, an insubstantial, mental construction is given concrete form as the poisonous tree, as Blake construes it, of the Garden of Eden. The trees Blake represents in □A Poison Tree□ and □The Human Abstract,□ which he derives from the biblical tree, are visions resulting from a corrupted imagination, as is the Edenic tree, in his view. They are visions produced by an imagination formed by the priests who have destroyed the garden of love and installed within it both a chapel with □Thou shalt not□ written over the door and the tombstones of those felled by that doctrine.

Blake's deconstruction of the story of the Fall brings the force of the doctrine of contraries into play. By implicitly opposing his vision of the story of the Fall and the nature of the tree that figures in that story to the story in Genesis, Blake endeavors to heal the imagination and restore its power. He supplants what he sees as the false vision of an imagination beguiled by repression and a false idea of virtue with a vision that plants in its stead an implied contrary model of love and wisdom expressed freely in the graceful energy of bodies, and therefore spirits, freed from the □Priests in black gowns□ who bind □with briars□ our □joys & desires.□

Source: Neil Heims, Critical Essay on □A Poison Tree,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

Famous Authors: William Blake (1996), a documentary on the life and work of the poet, with commentary from scholars, was produced by Kultur Video.

Pioneers of the Spirit: William Blake (2005), put out by Vision Video, looks at the visionary and mystical elements of Blake's art and writing.

Topics for Further Study

In □A Poison Tree,□ Blake maintains that restraining anger, rather than preventing cruelty and aggression, gives extra energy to aggression and strengthens cruelty. Organize a class debate to argue whether it is better to tell other people how you feel when you are upset with them or have a difference of opinion or to keep it to yourself and try to be accommodating.

Stated perhaps overly simply, Blake's idea of correspondences suggests that the way people imagine or think about something affects the way it actually is in the concrete world. Choosing an event from your own experience, write an essay that shows how the way you thought about or imagined something influenced how it □really□ was. As an alternative, choose a social, national, or historical event and discuss how expectation influenced outcome.

After assembling a questionnaire, conduct a series of interviews with at least ten people. Find out what they think about a widely held or controversial moral or religious value or about a current law. Try to determine whether these people believe the law or moral stance accomplishes what it is supposed to accomplish and whether that goal is a worthy one. Make sure to interview people of different ages, races, sexes, religions, and class backgrounds. Report the results to the class, highlighting both individual differences and similarities among the respondents.

Write a poem in rhyming couplets in which you describe a vision you have had. Using the same subject, write a poem that is unrhymed. In a paragraph, describe the difficulties writing each poem presented.

Choose any Bible story and write a well-developed essay discussing how it is conventionally interpreted. Then show how it could be interpreted differently.

Write a short story in which one character deceives another while pretending to be his or her friend or believes that the deception is for the other person's □own good.□

Using watercolors or pastels, draw a scene from □A Poison Tree.□ Afterward, try to find a copy of *Songs of Experience* with Blake's illustrations to see how he illustrates his poems.

Compare and Contrast

1790s: In his poetry, Blake opposes the emotional repression advocated by the morality of his time and posits that it has harmful spiritual, social, and individual effects.

Today: Conservative cultural voices call for sexual abstinence among young and unmarried people. Many people who have been influenced by psychologists such as R. D. Laing (in his books *The Divided Self* and *Knots*) argue against the defenders of conventional morality, asserting that the repression of honest emotional and sexual expression is responsible for mental health problems and for many of the problems facing society as a whole.

1790s: Revolutionary upheaval against monarchy and the Reign of Terror in France causes the British government to enact measures intended to guard against attacks on English soil and limit freedom of expression.

Today: In response to acts of terrorism by members of fundamentalist Islamic sects in the United Kingdom, the British government seeks to draft tough antiterrorism legislation and to strengthen the power of the police.

1790s: Because of the factory system, workers, including children, are confined to factories for as long as fourteen hours a day, engaging in painful drudgery that ruins their health and breaks their spirit.

Today: Although it has been abolished in Britain, child labor exists in many third world countries, which supply the people of the United Kingdom with consumer goods. The British Broadcasting Company reports that □more than half of British workers are suffering from stress□ and that □companies [are] adding to employee stress levels by demanding long hours.□ In the United Kingdom, one third of employees work more than forty-eight hours a week, and □three out of five people are working unpaid overtime.□

What Do I Read Next?

In *Othello* (1604), one of Shakespeare's great tragedies, Iago, who hates Othello, pretends to be Othello's friend in order to destroy him.

In *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel of New England Puritanism, Roger Chillingworth, a physician, pretends to be the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale's friend and takes on the care of the clergyman's troubled soul in order to discover his terrible secret.

A. E. Houseman's poem □Is My Team Plowing?□ in his collection *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), is written in a rhyming pattern similar to that of □A Poison Tree.□ In Houseman's poem, one of the two speakers gently deceives his dead interlocutor, or the other person in the discussion, about the way things are after his death.

In Sherwood Anderson's short story □Hands,□ included in the collection *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), the fate of the gentle Wing Biddlebaum testifies to the evils of sexual repression and the force of unleashed wrath.

In Igor Stravinsky's opera *The Rake's Progress* (1951), libretto by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, Nick Shadow (the Devil) befriends Tom Rakewell and tempts him with money, happiness, and fame, leading him away from a life of love and virtue to madness and death.

In Patrick Hamilton's play *Gas Light* (1939), which was made into the film *Gaslight* (1944), directed by George Cuckor, the protagonist pretends to be a loving and caring husband, but he is actually driving his wife crazy and planning her murder.

Further Study

Bentley, G. E., Jr., *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake*, Yale University Press, 2001.

Bentley's highly regarded biography of Blake contains more than five hundred pages of careful and profound scholarship that draws on documents from Blake's time, which Bentley weaves into a narrative analysis of Blake's life, work, beliefs, and thought.

□Book of Genesis, 2:8-19,□ in *The Torah: The Five Books of Moses*, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980.

This passage of Genesis tells the story of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which God plants in the Garden of Eden. The forbidden fruit, the satanic temptation, and the divine punishment appear.

Erdman, David V., *Prophet Against Empire*, 3rd ed., Dover, 1977.

Erdman, Blake's major modern editor, offers a thorough and scholarly examination of the political and historical contexts of Blake's work.

Frye, Northrup, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, Princeton University Press, 1947.

This book is a classic study of the development of Blake's religious symbolism and mysticism set in the context of the eighteenth-century background against which he rebelled.

Ruskin, John, □The Nature of Gothic,□ in *The Genius of John Ruskin*, edited by John D. Rosenberg, Riverside Press, 1965.

In this excerpt from his book *The Stones of Venice*, the nineteenth-century art and social critic John Ruskin, who was a great admirer of Blake, reacts against the Industrial Revolution by analyzing the medieval workmanship and the philosophy of craftsmanship that characterized the building of the great cathedrals in the Middle Ages.

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Blake, William, □The Garden of Love,□ in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David Erdman, Doubleday & Company, 1965, p. 26.

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□Long Hours 'Stress British Workers,'□ BBC News, November 7, 2001, available online at news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/1642472.stm

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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