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By Dr Oliver Tearle (Loughborough University)A Poison Tree, one of the most famous poems by William Blake (1757-1827), was first published in Blakes 1794 volume Songs of Experience. Below we offer some words of analysis on this classic poem.A Poison Tree: summary Blake originally gave A Poison Tree the title Christian Forbearance. More on the significance of that earlier title below.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. In summary, the speaker of the poem tells us that when he was angry with his friend he simply told his friend that he was annoyed, and that put an end to his bad feeling.But when he was angry with his enemy, he didnt air his grievance to this foe, and so the anger grew. Whereas we can trust our friends with our true feelings and be honest with them (Blake elsewhere famously said that Opposition is true friendship), a foe is someone who almost by definition we cannot be so honest with. And I watered it in fears.Night and morning with my tears.And I sunned it with smiles.And with soft deceitful wiles.In the second stanza, Blake turns to the central, title metaphor of his poem, likening his anger to a tree that he watered with fear and resentment. Then, more curiously, he says that the false smiles he put on whenever he saw his enemy acted like sunlight helping a tree to grow: by bottling up his anger he made it worse, and by putting on soft deceitful wiles (i.e. tricks and cover-ups to hide his true feelings), his anger continued to grow and morphed into something more devious: the need for vengeance.He is smiling at his enemy while all the while he is (inwardly and secretly) plotting his revenge. Why? The implication of this poison tree is that anger and hatred start to eat away at oneself: hatred always turns inward, corrupting into self-hatred.The Blake scholar D. G. Gillham, in his informative and fascinating study of Blakes poetry, Blakes Contrary States: The Songs of Innocence and Experience as Dramatic Poems, has observed that it is not merely the speakers foe who is poisoned by the speakers actions: the act of poisoning his enemy diminishes and corrupts him, too. The brooding enmity and resentment borne by both parties not only diminish the other party but rebound upon the bearer: hatred eats away at us as much as it affects our foes.Because the speaker was forced to hide his anger, it made him act in a deceitful and false way, and thus his anger for his friend led him to despise himself for being driven to act deceitfully. 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.In this third stanza, an apple sprouts from this poison tree of anger. And into my garden stole.When the night had veiled the pole:In the morning glad I see:My foe outstretched beneath the tree.This apple bright attracted the attention of his enemy, who then sneaked into the speakers garden one night and ate the apple from this tree, when the speaker finds his enemy the next morning, his foe is lying dead under the tree, having eaten the poisoned fruit.A Poison Tree: analysis This powerful and curious little poem is about the power of anger to become corrupted into something far more deadly and devious if it is not aired honestly. The enemy may have stolen the apple (and trespassed on the speakers property he stole into his garden, after all), but he was deceived into thinking that something deadly and poisonous (the speakers anger) was something nice and tasty (the apple).In other words, both the speaker and his foe are deluded: the speaker because he seems unaware that he has diminished himself by his actions, and the foe because he little realised that the apple he stole was poisoned.Since the apple represents human enmity and resentment, the line And he knew that it was mine resonates with bitter irony, because in actual fact both the foe and the speaker fail to realise that the poisoned apple has infected both of them, and belongs to them jointly. Their mutual hatred has corrupted them both.And I watered it in fears.Night and morning with my tears.And I sunned it with smiles.And with soft deceitful wiles.What are we to make of this rather involved metaphor? One possible interpretation is as follows: Blake is saying that repressing our righteous anger makes us scheme into finding underhand ways to get back at our enemies, and consciously or unconsciously we end up setting traps for our enemies in order to bring them down.The fact that the speaker has sunned his tree with smiles (because we talk of sunny smiles, and both the sun and smiles being beaming, etc.) implies that putting on a friendly front and being two-faced towards our enemies grows the tree in ways we little understand.Pouring our anger our sense of having been wronged into the ground (implying suppression or even repression) like watering the soil is only a way of breeding more unhappiness, not a way to solve or cure the hurt we feel. Only by bringing such hurt out into the open and confronting our foe with it can we hope to cure ourselves of it.In other words, Blake does not condemn anger as invariably self-destructive, or even hate: sometimes it is right to hate things which seem to assault our moral sensibilities. But such (righteous) contempt and anger become corrupted when they lead us to deceive, because such behaviour reduces our own moral constitution.Does the end of the poem represent the speakers triumph over his foe in positive terms? Perhaps, but it is a mixed victory. He was succeeded in defeating his enemy because his foe has shown his hand first: his enemys deceitful behaviour in sneaking into the speakers garden to steal the apple causes the foes downfall, leaving the speaker victorious and his enemy destroyed.How far this represents a positive victory for the speaker, who could only bring about his enemys downfall by being deceptive himself, is an open question which deserves close analysis and discussion.Ultimately, it depends on our own perspective on issues of vengeance and retribution. In terms of Blakes own view on the matter, it is perhaps enough to observe that he originally planned to call the poem Christian Forbearance before deciding on the less obviously religious A Poison Tree.As Gillham observes in Blakes Contrary States: The Songs of Innocence and Experience as Dramatic Poems, this title shows Blakes barbed distrust of the idea of Christian forbearance, because, for Blake, it amounted to cowardice and hypocrisy: refusing to stand up to your enemies and instead resorting to more underhand means to attack them, but carried out under the name of pious Christianity.Nevertheless, the apple comes from its own Christian symbolism. The apple represents such wily and devious vengeance: it is significant that it is an apple that grows from Blakes poison tree, and that the speakers enemy steals the apple, because this conjures up the Genesis story of Adam and Eve being deceitfully persuaded to eat the fruit from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge.Satan, disguised as a serpent, is the one responsible for cajoling Eve into eating the fruit, which is commonly depicted as an apple, like the apple in Blakes poem. The Fall of Adam and Eve takes place, of course, in the paradise that is the Garden of Eden; Blakes Edenic garden is where his enemy meets his end. These parallels raise Blakes parable of repressed anger and vengeance to Biblical heights.A Poison Tree is written in quatrains or four-line stanzas rhymedaabb(i.e. rhyming couplets). The metre of the poem is what is technically known as trochaic tetrameter catalectic.This means that the metre used is the trochee: a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, e.g. in the line And he knew that it was mine, AND he / KNEW that / IT was / MINE. There are four such trochees in a line, hence tetrameter.But note that the fourth and final trochee is cut short: the second half of it is missing. Rather than writing, for instance, And he knew that it was mine, O (or something similar) Blake simply writes, And he knew that it was mine, cutting short the line before we get the eighth syllable. This gives the poem a clipped, even abrupt feel, which is reinforced by the short sentences and frequent use of full stops.A Poison Tree is one of English literatures most striking explorations of the corrupting effects of anger. It is one of William Blakes miniature masterpieces. What do you think of A Poison Tree, and what would you add to our analysis?About William BlakeWilliam Blake (1757-1827) is one of the key English poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He is sometimes grouped with the Romantics, such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, although much of his work stands apart from them and he worked separately from the Lake Poets.Blakes key themes are religion (verses from his poem Milton furnished the lyrics for the patriotic English hymn Jerusalem), poverty and the poor, and the plight of the most downtrodden or oppressed within society. He is not a nature poet in the same way that his fellow Romantics are: he seldom writes with the countryside in mind as his principal theme, but draws on, for instance, the rich symbolism of the rose and the worm to create a poem that is symbolically suggestive and clearly about other things (sin, religion, shame, cruelty, evil).Continue to explore the world of Blakes poetry with our analysis of The Lamb, our overview of his poem known as Jerusalem, and his scathing indictment of poverty and misery in London.If youre looking for a good edition of Blakes work, we recommend Selected Poetry (Oxford Worlds Classics).Weve offered more tips for the close reading of poetry here.The author of this article, Dr Oliver Tearle, is a literary critic and lecturer in English at Loughborough University. He is the author of, among others, The Secret Library: A Book-Lovers Journey Through Curiosities of History and The Great War, The Waste Land and the Modernist Long Poem. 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You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation . No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. Share copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. ShareAlike If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. No additional restrictions You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation . No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. William Blake, one of the most renowned poets of the Romantic era, is celebrated for his vivid imagery, deep symbolism, and reflective themes. One of his most famous works, A Poison Tree, invites readers to consider the destructive nature of suppressed anger and the perils of repressed feelings. Understanding the literary elements at play is crucial to grasping the full impact of Blakes verse. The poem serves as a cautionary tale, using the extended metaphor of a tree that grows with the speakers unspoken wrath, ultimately bearing deadly fruit. Through vivid imagery and metaphor, Blake not only paints a picture of internal turmoil but also invites readers to reflect on the destructive nature of harbored animosity. In dissecting A Poison Tree, one must consider its rhythmic composition and stylistic choices, which reinforce its thematic concerns. The historical backdrop and Blakes personal experiences provide additional layers to the poems interpretation, suggesting broader moral questions still pertinent today. This analysis aims to unpack these complex layers, offering insight into why A Poison Tree remains a compelling piece in literature. It encourages further exploration into Blakes work, where similar threads of human experience are woven into poetic form. Exploring the Dark Fruits of Repressed WrathA Poison Tree by William Blake delves into the dark themes of anger, revenge, and the dangers of bottling up emotions. The poems central symbol, the poison tree, represents the growing bitterness that can result from unexpressed anger. As we nurture grudges, they grow and bear fruit, much like a tree. The fruit of Blakes poison tree is a metaphor for the destructive outcomes that can arise from harboring resentment.Blake masterfully employs imagery and metaphor to paint a vivid picture of this internal conflict. He writes, And I watered it in fears,/ Night & morning with my tears;/ And I sunned it with smiles,/ And with soft deceitful wiles. Here, the nurturing of the tree with tears and smiles symbolizes how we may outwardly conceal our true feelings while internally feeding our anger. The poem warns us about the consequences of repressed emotions through its stark imagery. The speakers foe, deceived by the shiny exterior of the apple (the fruit of spite), ultimately falls victim to its hidden venom. This serves as a cautionary tale about the potential harm that can come from not addressing our feelings openly and honestly. Blakes use of symbolic verse invites readers to reflect on their own experiences with anger and its expression.Dissecting the Form and Historical Roots of Blakes VerseA Poison Tree is not just a collection of words but a structured piece of art. The poem follows a simple AABB rhyme scheme, which gives it a nursery rhyme quality, contrasting with its dark themes. This structure lulls the reader into a false sense of security as the narrative unfolds. Blakes choice of meter and rhythm contributes to this effect, with each quatrain following a regular pattern that belies the growing tension.The historical context is key to understanding Blakes work. Written during the late 18th century, an erе with social and political upheaval, Blakes poem reflects the tensions of his time. His own disillusionment with the issues of authority and repression is mirrored in the way the speaker deals with angerby nurturing it in secret until it becomes deadly.The moral lesson is clear: unchecked emotions can lead to destructive outcomes. This message resonates today as we navigate a world where personal grievances can escalate on platforms like social media, often with harmful consequences. By delving into this poem, readers gain insight into not only Blakes world but also the timeless human condition.Conclusion: Understanding the Depths of A Poison TreeIn summary, A Poison Tree by William Blake is a profound exploration of the dark consequences of harboring anger and seeking revenge. Through vivid symbolism, such as the insidious growth of the poison tree bearing deadly fruit, Blake masterfully illustrates the perils of repressed emotions. The poems structured rhyme scheme and meter complement its thematic depth, while historical and biographical contexts enrich our understanding of its creation.Blakes work remains relevant today, reminding us that unresolved anger can lead to tragic outcomes. The moral implications woven into the poem echo contemporary issues, encouraging readers to reflect on their own emotional responses and the potential impact on their relationships.For those intrigued by Blakes symbolic verse, further reading might include The Tyger or The Chimney Sweeper, which similarly delve into complex human emotions and societal critiques. By engaging with Blakes poetry, we gain insight into not only the human psyche but also the transformative power of literary art. Mon, Sep 20, 2004William Blakes A Poison Tree basically uses two symbols (an apple and a tree) to relate its meaning. The tree represents the growing anger in the speakers heart against his enemy and the apple represents the fruit of that anger, an action, in the poem, murder. Blake uses the poem to teach the reader that, just as Christ teaches, we should forgive our friends as well as our enemies and that we should not hold grudges. Line four and five introduce us to the initiating conflict in the poem. The speaker for one reason or another becomes angry with his enemy. Instead of announcing his anger to the enemy, as he had done with his friend in lines one and two, the speaker keeps the anger to himself. The speakers enemy has no idea that the speaker is angry with him.In the second stanza we get greater insight into the speakers concealed anger. We learn that he watered it in fears meaning that he let his anger grow because of fears that his enemy was doing the same thing, or maybe that his enemy was doing something else that he didnt know about just then that would also anger him. We also learn that the speakers anger grew night and morning because the speaker was feeling sorry for himself and becoming depressed, which, of course, the speaker was blaming on his enemy, which increased his anger against him. In lines seven and eight we learn that the speaker also sunned it [his anger] with smiles, / and with soft deceitful wiles. Again, this means that the speakers enemy didnt even know that the speaker was mad at him because the speaker would smile and act nicely towards his enemy. One would think that this kindness towards his enemy would make the speaker less angry, but instead it only continues to increase his anger against his enemy.In the third stanza we learn about the product of the speakers concealed anger, represented by a tree, an action, represented by an apple. In the fourth stanza the speakers enemy steals the apple off the speakers metaphorical tree and apparently eats it, as the speaker finds him dead the next day. What this represents is the speakers anger finally coming out. But, this time, unlike with his friend, the anger has built up to such a point that a simple wrath cannot just be told, it must be acted upon. And acted upon it was. The speaker killed his enemy and was pleased at the sight. In the speakers mind the fear and tears caused by this anger are finally gone.What I like about this poem is that it ends with the speaker being happy. It lets the reader imagine what the speaker will feel like in a few moments. Will he still be happy about the dead he has just committed? My guess is that the speaker will be deeply pained by that action of murder he has just committed. Once the speaker is sober from his rage he will realise what he has done and will be deeply pained by it. This is the conclusion, I think, Blake was trying to push us towards. The symbols Blake uses in this poem, the tree and the apple, are quite interesting. One would usually associate them with the biblical story of Adam and Eve. However, in this poem the tree and the apple obviously have different meanings than in the biblical story. So, why use an apple and a tree? Im not quite sure why Blake used such symbols. Possibly he used them because they are natural symbols. Since Blake was a romantic poet this would make a lot of sense. Another reason Blake might have used the symbols of the tree and apple are because of their familiarity to most people of his time because of the biblical story. Since most people would be familiar with the symbols they would be more apt to read the poem and thus by reading the poem learning the lesson Blake had in store for them.Through his poem A Poison Tree William Blake teaches us, through the symbols of the tree and the apple, that we should forgive our friends as well as our enemies and that we should not hold grudges.

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