A Poison Tree

POEM TEXT

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.

SUMMARY

The speaker recounts being mad at a friend. The speaker told their friend about this anger, which subsequently went away. By contrast, when the speaker was angry with an enemy, the speaker kept quiet. Their anger then increased.

The speaker cultivated this anger as if it were something planted in a garden, metaphorically nourishing it with fears and tears, both day and night. The speaker's smiles and other gentle deceptions used to hide the anger, in fact only fed the anger further.

The anger grew constantly until it became a tree, which bore a bright apple. The speaker's enemy saw this apple shining and knew it belonged to the speaker.

The enemy snuck into the speaker's garden during the dead of night. The next morning, the speaker is happy to see this enemy lying dead beneath the tree.

THEMES

ANGER AND SUPPRESSED EMOTION

In "A Poison Tree" the speaker presents a powerful argument against the suppression of anger. By clearly laying out the benefits of talking about anger, and the consequences of keeping negative emotions within, the poem implies to the reader that the suppression of anger is morally dangerous, leading only to more anger or even violence.

The speaker presents two distinct scenarios to illustrate the danger of suppressing anger. In the first two lines of the poem, the speaker describes admitting his or her "wrath" to a friend; as soon as the speaker does so, this “wrath” ends. Honesty and frankness, the speaker makes clear, causes anger to disappear.

By contrast, as described in lines 2 through lines 16 of the poem, the poem details the negative consequences of suppressed anger. In these lines, the speaker does *not* open up about being angry. Instead, the speaker actively tends to his or her wrath as if it were a garden, watering it with “fears” and “tears,” and “sunning” it with "smiles" and cunning deceit in a way that indicates a kind of morbid pleasure. The speaker’s careful cultivation of this rage-garden implies an inability to move on from whatever made the speaker angry in the first place, as well as the self-perpetuating nature of negative emotions; anger encourages fear, despair, and deceit—which, in turn, simply nourish more anger. The suppression of emotion thus begins a cycle of festering negativity that eventually takes on a life of its own. Through the growth of the tree and its poisonous apple, the repression of anger is shown to cause a chain reaction that makes the problem far worse than it would have been had the speaker and the "foe" just talked through their issues.

This poisonous growth contrasts with the simple way in which the anger was eliminated in the first scenario—when it was "told." Through this contrast, the poem makes clear a moral choice: either talk and find solutions, or keep quiet and enable the far-reaching, poisonous effects that come when people hold their angry emotions too close to the chest. Implicit in the poem, then, is the idea that the root of human conflict grows from the inability to find common ground through meaningful communication. The fact that, at the end of the poem, the speaker is "glad" to find the enemy lying dead beneath the tree shows the way in which, in the second scenario, the anger increasingly dominates the way the speaker sees other human beings—the speaker becomes a host for the growth of anger, which feeds on others' pain. The poem, then, suggests and warns against the fact that anger is an all-consuming emotion

when allowed to grow unchecked.

The simplicity of the lines and the use of extended metaphor—the growth of the tree reflects the growth of the anger—also makes the message of the poem applicable well beyond the immediate conflict between the speaker and the foe. In fact, these two figures can be read as allegorical representations of different parts of humanity itself, showing the way that war and hatred develop from misplaced anger. This more general reading of the poem's moral message is further amplified by the clear allusion between the poison tree of the poem to the tree in the garden of Eden. The poem can therefore be read as an argument against the psychological suppression of anger on both the personal and even the *societal* level.

"A Poison Tree" ultimately makes a powerful argument in favor of opening up and trusting in the human capacity for empathy and understanding. The alternative, the poem argues, is far more dangerous.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.

The first two lines present the poem's first of two distinct scenarios. Here, the speaker relates what happened when the speaker talked about anger that he or she was feeling toward a friend: talking about the anger made it go away. The straightforward simplicity of these lines suggests the ease with which the anger disappeared, and thus presents being open and honest as an extremely effective antidote to wrath.

Of course, in this scenario, the speaker's anger is directed towards a *friend*, someone with whom the speaker is familiar and, ostensibly, already likes. This raises the question of whether friendship is a prerequisite for open communication—whether the speaker was able to discuss his or her problem, and in doing so end it, only because the speaker was approaching a friend.

However, the use of "friend" here is likely a broader reflection of the stark division between the two ways of approaching not just anger, but other people more generally. Friendship, kinship, and common ground facilitate talking, which diminishes conflict—this in turn cements the positive relationship between people. In other words, the very act of the speaker revealing his or her anger can be seen as making the other person a friend.

Again, the shortness of this scenario reflects the simplicity of this idea: this part of the poem is effectively over by the end of line 2, formally reflecting the way in which the speaker's anger itself was quickly brought to an end. Because the anger disappears, there is no opportunity for it to grow into the poisonous tree that comes about in the second scenario. Given that the reader already knows from the title of the poem that there is a "poison tree" to come, there is a sense that these two lines present the innocent and unspoiled state of humankind, humanity's beginnings before the biblical "Fall of Man." This an idealized state of being, and the way the speaker implies humankind *should* be (but isn't).

The simplicity of these two lines is also sonically satisfying to the reader, with the perfect rhyme of "friend" and "end"—and the end stop at line 2—making it feel as though the poem could almost end right here. The meter, which shifts from trochees in line 1 to iambs in line 2, also has an easy, sing-song-like quality that further reflects its simplicity, with the final stress on "end" again suggesting how easy it would be for people to resolve—or "end"—their issues if only they spoke up about their feelings:

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.

Except, of course, this is a poem of *experience*—not idealism. The shortness of this first scenario, and the fact that it is followed by another fourteen lines, implies that the world, in actuality, is patently *not* like this first scenario. Accordingly, the reader knows that the poem must move away from its peaceful beginnings.

LINES 3-4

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

Lines 3 and 4 present the second, and main, scenario of the poem. Here, the speaker recounts being angry with an *enemy* rather than a friend. Whereas in the first scenario the speaker spoke up about this anger, this time the speaker did not—which caused that anger to grow. In this first stanza, then, the speaker is setting out two antithetical, or parallel, situations, demonstrating what happens with each course of action (that is, talking about anger or letting it fester).

It is notable that these lines do not discuss the particulars of *why* the speaker was angry; instead, the poem is intended as a fable-like morality tale with two clear options and consequences. The *why* doesn't really matter; what matters is how the speaker deals with the anger that he or she feels.

The speaker has already described the "better" way of dealing with anger in the first two lines of the poem: talking about it. Trying to suppress negative emotions is not helpful, suggests the poem, and instead causes them to "grow." The use of this word—"grow"—implies that anger has the potential to increase if not dealt with appropriately. The word "Grow" also begins to

set up the extended metaphor of the tree that will be fleshed out throughout the rest of the poem.

To demonstrate the division between the two different scenarios—talking about anger versus bottling it up—the construction of lines 3 and 4 matches that of the first two lines exactly, in both content and meter:

I was angry with [...]
I told [...]
I was angry with [...]
I told [...]

The alliterative /f/ sounds between "friend" and "foe" further reflects this use of parallelism, which creates the sense that there is a clear choice between "telling" anger or keeping it within.

Here it is also worth noting that Blake's original title for the poem was "Christian Forbearance." Though he later changed the title, the original does suggest that the poem's moral stance toward anger — that it should be revealed and let go, rather than held close and suppressed — is embedded in the Christian tradition of "turning the other cheek." In fact, the title that Blake eventually did use for the poem — "A Poison Tree" — has a religious allusion that also reinforces this interpretation. The "tree" makes readers think of the Tree of Knowledge in the Biblical Garden of Eden, eating from which introduced sin into the world. Taken together, this all suggests that the speaker is presenting the first scenario—speaking up—as correct and moral, and the second scenario—letting anger fester—with sin.

LINES 5-8

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

Lines 5 through 8 in the second stanza shows the speaker's cultivation of his or her "wrath," adding detail to the statement in line 4. Here, the metaphor implied by the poem's title is made apparent as the speaker suggests that anger grows as would a plant (namely, a tree) in a garden: the speaker "waterd" it in tears, "sunned" it with smiles. It's important that the poison tree requires the speaker's *active* engagement, with careful effort going into helping it to grow. The speaker is not a passive bystander, but rather clearly contributing to the growth of this anger. The anaphora of the repeated "ands" in these lines creates a list-like quality, underscoring the active steps the speaker takes in tending to this angry garden.

Lines 5 and 6 present clear negative emotions that are an integral part of the upkeep of the tree and, by extension, of anger itself. The tree feeds off other negative emotions such as fear and despair: these are the fuel that the tree needs in order to live and get bigger. The use of "tears" lends literal credence to the metaphor, as trees need water in order to survive. These details also show the obsessive care that the speaker has to show to the anger-tree, contrasting with the simplicity of the first scenario (in which the speaker talked about his or her anger and it readily disappeared).

Lines 7 and 8 develop a more complex line of thought. Here, the speaker uses a more positive emotion—happiness, as shown by "smiles"—to provide energy to help the tree grow. This shows that anger has *corrupted* what would normally be taken as a sign of compassion and kinship, that these are smiles that cannot be trusted. Perhaps these smiles are those that the speaker shows to the enemy, all the while harboring malicious thoughts that contradict what the speaker's face might show.

This deception is foreground by the use of consonance in line 8. The /f/ sounds in "soft" and "deceitful" make the "wiles"—acts of cunning and manipulation—seem relatively harmless. The sibilance of line 7 between "sunned" and "smiles" creates a similar effect. Of course, this is in keeping with what is being discussed—the language tells the reader a kind of lie, masking the serious consequences that are to follow. These "deceitful wiles" can also be interpreted as the lies and tricks that the speaker has to play on *himself* (or herself) in order to keep such angry emotions suppressed.

At the same time, the use of this extended metaphor of the tree also suggests that, paradoxically, suppressed anger becomes an external, almost physical presence in the world. Though the speaker plays a clear role in helping the anger grow, the anger will eventually *outgrow* its creator and become independent. This idea suggests that human conflicts frequently lose sight of their initial beginnings in a way that makes them increasingly harder to resolve by virtue of the acts that are committed in their name. In other words, anger may grow to the point that it's not clear why it started in the first place; alternatively, anger may grow so large that resolving the initial issue that spurred such wrath is doing too little too late.

LINES 9-10

And it grew both day and night.
Till it bore an apple bright.

Lines 9 and 10 of the poem further develop the growth of the tree, which seems to become more real as the poem goes on. The tree—the metaphorical growth of the speaker's unchecked anger—feeds off the speaker's negative emotions. The use of "day and night" emphasizes the tree's continuous growth and also links back to line 6, which showed the daily cultivation performed by the speaker in service of the poison tree. Now, after so much growth, in line 10 the tree develops fruit of its own.

The apple is an allusion to the biblical story of Adam and Eve. In Genesis, Eve is tempted by the serpent—Satan in disguise—to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, despite having been explicitly forbidden from doing so by God. This act precipitates

the fall of humankind from paradise and introduces sin into the world. In the poem, anger itself is thus aligned with sin and a fall from grace.

Yet whereas in the Biblical account the forbidden fruit is external to humankind, in "A Poison Tree" the apple is literally grown from *within* the speaker; the apple is the natural and organic development of the speaker's own suppressed anger. If the poem is read as an allegory for humankind more generally, then this seems to suggest a degree of agency and responsibility on the behalf of humans to control the way their anger manifests in the world, as well as to suggest that sin originates from within people.

The end-stops of lines 9 and 10 create a sense of progress over time, with these full stops slowing down the speed at which the reader moves through the lines, and therefore for the tree's growth to be represented by the literal time it takes to read the poem. The consonance of the repeated /b/, /p/, and /t/ sounds further slows the lines, instilling them with a sense of precision and force, reflecting the dangerous power of unchecked rage.

The use of "bright" in line 10 suggests temptation, the light reflecting off the apple making it seem appetizing even though it is a product of rage. By portraying the apple as attractive, the poem suggests that anger not only breeds more anger within the speaker, but is attractive to others as well. Anger is an alluring emotion that is all too easy to give in to, the poem seems to suggest. Whether the growth of the poisonous apple is part of the speaker's intentional strategy or simply an accidental byproduct of the speaker's anger is unclear. To a degree, both may be true. Regardless, this anger has taken on a life outside of the speaker and has begun to impact the world around it.

LINES 11-14

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;

Lines 11-14 shift the focus from the growth of the speaker's poison tree to the actions of the speaker's foe. Though these lines spread across two stanzas, they are linked in their focus on this unnamed enemy. No details are offered about who this enemy actually is, nor what the anger between the foe and the speaker is based on. This makes sense, as the poem is chiefly about the way anger snowballs beyond an initial emotion into a dangerous cycle of negativity—the lack of detail about the enemy reflects the way that the speaker's anger has outgrown its origins.

In these lines, the foe sees the shiny apple on the tree and knows that it belongs to the speaker (presumably because it is in the latter's garden). The apple's tempting, luminous toxicity—a reflection of anger's self-perpetuating strength—has drawn the enemy towards it, encouraging conflict in order to reinforce the cycle of hatred. There is an element of jealousy in the mix too, suggestive of the way animosity towards others encourages possessiveness. These lines thus reflect the thematic content of lines 5 through 8, in that they further reveal how negativity breeds further negativity—but while lines 5 through 8 focused on how anger grows within an individual, these lines suggest how anger grows in the world. The anaphora of the repeated "ands" in these lines further echoes lines 5 through 8, and again creates a sense of inevitability about the way anger spreads.

Line 13 develops a sense of suspicion and conflict, with the speaker emphasizing that this enemy has entered the speaker's garden—a zone that belongs to the speaker. At a broad, allegorical level, this could be interpreted as the division of humankind into different tribes and nations, which helps to entrench the categorization of others into "friends" or "foes." The verb "stole" has a literal meaning of "sneaking," but also carries with it the secondary connotations of theft in line with the general atmosphere of divisive suspicion at this point in the poem.

The darkness presented by the night in line 14 is of course describing the way a thief uses darkness to cover his or her tracks. But the way that the darkness of night blocks sight also more broadly represents the way that the speaker and the foe are unable to see themselves in each other. Their perceptions, and empathy, are clouded by their anger. The "pole" is most likely a reference to the North star, which is an important point of reference for maritime navigation. Its hiddenness is suggestive of a more general loss of moral direction.

LINES 15-16

In the morning glad I see;
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

Lines 15 and 16 mark the conclusion of the poem and show a sudden shift into the present tense. This shift in tense makes the allegorical nature of the poem seem more immediate and pressing, rather than a story that happened long ago and is no longer relevant.

The use of "glad" is slightly ambiguous. It could be an adjective describing the "morning"—this type of noun-adjective inversion ("morning glad" instead of "glad morning") is no longer common but was less jarring at the time of the poem's publication. More likely, though, is that the "gladness" belongs to the speaker as he or she spots the foe lying beneath the tree.

Though the poem doesn't explicitly state that the foe has *died* from eating the poison fruit, it is implied by the poem's title (the poem itself does not say that the apple is poison) and the use of the passive "outstretched" to describe the foe's body. Blake published the poem next to an engraving (a picture), which also seemed to show the foe as being dead.

Here, then, the reader must consider who is responsible for

this death—whether it is a product of the foe's own jealous and selfish desire for the apple, or the speaker's suppressed anger, which has taken on a life of its own. In either case, the speaker's joy at this sight again reveals the ability of anger to warp and corrupt even positive emotions. The speaker's earlier "smiles" and "soft deceitful wiles" have morphed into outright "gladness," a perversion of joy that is based on harm befalling another individual.

Assuming that the foe is dead, the poem thus concludes on a dark, cautionary note. In particular, it warns against the way anger towards others can quickly spiral into a willingness to see them come to harm. What seemed like relatively innocuous beginnings—the speaker's silence about his or her "wrath"—has brought about dire consequences. More broadly, reading the poem as an allegory for humankind, this ending gestures towards the way that anger, held tight and aloud to fester, leads to the horrors that people are capable of inflicting upon others.

SYMBOLS

THE APPLE

The apple plays a key role in "A Poison Tree," representing the way that unspoken anger both grows within an individual (or a society), until it manifests and poisons others.

Whereas the natural world normally has positive associations, the poem inverts this imagery to show how anger can corrupt both the individual and the world. Because the speaker did not "tell" of his or her "wrath," that "wrath" grows. Those hidden feelings of anger then self-perpetuate, leading to fear and sadness that only make the anger more intense. In this way, the speaker cultivates his or her anger, until it grows into a tree that bears an apple. The apple, then, is the literal fruit of the speaker's anger—it's a physical manifestation of the speaker's anger. At the same time, the apple also symbolizes the way in which the speaker's anger has taken on a life of its own, becomes something that even the speaker's foe can see, and in so doing becomes able to "poison" others. The apple symbolizes both the way that suppressed anger fuels its own growth, and the way that it can spread across people, or even across a society.

Importantly, the apple is also a very common fruit. By selecting the apple as the product of the poisonous tree, the poem suggests that the anger that grew the tree is in itself commonplace and unremarkable. That is, the speaker's way of dealing with wrath is by no means unusual.

The apple is also most likely an allusion to the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge in the Bible, eaten by Eve in the book of Genesis. In the Bible, eating the apple leads to humanity being cast out of paradise and introduces sin into the world. This allusion suggests that, in the poem, anger is at once dangerous and tempting; anger produces metaphorical fruit that actively harms those who are tempted into eating it. Using a fruit with such deep religious connotations also lends the poem a sense of allegory and timelessness—this is a poem as relevant now as it was at the time of writing.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "apple"
- **Line 11:** "it"
- **Line 12:** "it"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

The poem uses anaphora heavily in the first stanza, in addition to the recurrent "ands" at the start of later lines. The repetitive quality of the first stanza allows the poem to set out its two competing scenarios (which is also an example of parallelism), and to make it clear that the speaker has a choice between these scenarios: to either express or repress anger. The repetition of "I" underscores that this is indeed a choice, and that the speaker has explicit agency in deciding how to deal with negative emotions.

The later repetition of "and" in the second stanza creates the sensation of a building list, as the speaker outlines all the different ways in which he or she tends to their anger, as if it were a garden. The repetition of "and" is then echoed by the third stanza (and the first line of the fourth), which outlines the *results* of those efforts in almost a one-to-one correlation between lines 5 through 8 and lines 9 through 13: the speaker watered his (or her) anger, which then grew continuously. The speaker "sunned" it with feigned happiness, and now the apple borne from that anger shines brightly. The speaker nurtured his (or her) anger with gentle cunning; the speaker's foe then seems to recognize the speaker's handiwork and is seemingly manipulated into a trap.

The repetition of "and" also creates a sense of inevitability, as each line carries an expectation of the next thing that will happen—what the next "and" will lead to. This suggests the snowballing nature of suppressed anger. This is also an example of polysyndeton.

The simplicity of the poem's language combined with the repetition of "and" also gives the poem a disarmingly innocent quality, which recalls the singsongy verse of nursery rhymes. This fits with the overall project of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Put crudely, the *Experience* section of the book—from which this poem is taken—seeks to show the way adult life corrupts the innocence and purity of childhood, and criticizes the conventions of society that make this corruption

occur. The use of anaphora to achieve this sound of a nursery rhyme, even as the poem itself focuses on a dark topic, emphasizes the poem's tension between innocence and experience.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I was angry with my"
- **Line 2:** "I told"
- **Line 3:** "I was angry with my"
- **Line 4:** "I told"
- **Line 5:** "And"
- **Line 7:** "And"
- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 11:** "And"
- **Line 12:** "And"
- **Line 13:** "And"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"A Poison Tree" is, essentially, one extended metaphor, which begins with the poem's title. The tree of the title is not a literal tree, but instead a symbolic manifestation—a metaphor—of the speaker's unchecked anger.

The poem intensifies the metaphor as it moves through each stanza. In the first, the metaphor has yet to be fully introduced, and is only hinted at through the use of the word "grow."

The metaphor really begins to take hold in stanza 2, in which the speaker tends to his or her anger as if it were a plant in a garden. Anger is not *literally* something that grows from the earth, but through this comparison the speaker is able to illustrate how negative emotions are cultivated. Instead of rain, the plant receives fears and tears; instead of sunshine, it has deceptive smiles. Each of the speaker's negative emotions map on to a nourishing element of the natural world, revealing how anger subverts things that should be positive and life-giving. The speaker, then, becomes a gardener devoted to wrath, someone who is actively cultivating negativity with further negativity.

In stanza 3, the metaphor seems to take on a life of its own. No longer is it employed solely as a means to help the speaker explain his or her feelings of anger. Instead, the speaker's figurative comparison outgrows the constraints of metaphor and becomes an active element in the poem's actual plot. The speaker describes the tree in concrete language, noting how it grows an apple—effectively producing life of its own entirely apart from the speaker. In stanza 4, the tree is so real that this fruit has poisoned the speaker's foe.

The extended metaphor of the poem, then, reflects the poem's argument about the danger of letting anger fester. Just as the tree itself seems to shift from purely metaphorical to a real tree in a real garden, the poem suggests that anger, at first something held inside, will grow until it cannot be contained.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-16

PARALLELISM

Parallelism occurs in the first stanza. Line 1 differs from line 3 by just one word—the modification of "friend" to "foe"—and lines 2 and 4 are different by three words. This parallelism contributes to the main set-up of the poem, which is to show two distinct responses to anger. The similarity of the lines in stanza 1 represents the simplicity of the choice at hand: people can "tell their wrath" and end it, or "tell it not" and see it grow. The parallelism suggests that making this choice does not require an impossible effort—both options are clear and available.

The parallel use of the first-person "I" further underscores the agency of the speaker in both situations, and by extension the control that people have when choosing how to deal with their anger. In both of the situations presented in the poem, it was the *speaker* who actively decided either to express or suppress his or her anger. Through parallelism, the different paths are shown to be very close to one another, separated by a single yet extremely important choice. That is, at first the decision to suppress anger might seem relatively harmless, as indeed the decision to "tell the wrath" proves to be. But the rest of the poem—and the way it literally grows out of this second decision—demonstrates that, though the choices might not outwardly seem that significant, their consequences couldn't be more starkly different. One path of these parallel paths of action leads to the end of anger; the other leads to anger's malignant growth and harm to others.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "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. "

CAESURA

There are two moments of caesura in the poem, caused by the mid-line commas in lines 2 and 4. They are both part of the parallel construction present in the first stanza, matching the sense of rhythm and timing in both sentences so that the speaker's choice is made all the more clear. The use of caesura also allows for a sense of causality between the speaker's choice and the following repercussions. After line 2's "I told my wrath" the caesura creates a brief pause after which the next logical stage can follow—*telling* leads to the "wrath" *ending*. Line 4 mirrors this, with the logical conclusion of "telling it not" being that the wrath begins to grow.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “,”
- **Line 4:** “,”

END-STOPPED LINE

Remarkably, almost every line in "A Poison Tree" is end-stopped—each one is marked by punctuation and makes syntactical sense on its own. Part of the effect of this technique is the sense of progressive growth throughout the poem, with each line appearing like a branch on the "poison tree" of the title. The longer that the speaker's anger is allowed to fester, the more branches appear, showing this externalized anger growing stronger. The poem literally grows on the page, mimicking its own extended metaphor of anger growing into a poison tree. Lines 9 and 10 could easily be enjambed, for example—in fact, they would make more syntactical sense that way:

> And it grew both day and night
> Till it bore an apple bright.

But the poet's choice of end-stops emphasizes the way in which the speaker's anger moves through different stages, as a tree does through its growth and seasons. These stages require the speaker's cultivation at every step—without this active participation, the tree (and the anger it represents) will die. The end-stops create a sense of unstoppable logic, as the anger/tree goes through stages—not being expressed; its cultivation; the bearing of fruit; its temptation of the "foe." Each line is like a root of the poison tree taking hold on the page, stretching out and spreading the speaker's anger.

The end-stopped lines also affect the pace of the poem, breaking it up into smaller moments. Together with the simplicity of the language, this creates a false sense of harmlessness in the speaker's actions and the growth of the tree. Taken in isolation, each line of action seems almost without consequence. But when looked at together, it's clear how these small actions lead to grave consequences. The poem, then, argues that people's actions carry with them greater responsibility than they might at first imagine.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “friend;”
- **Line 2:** “end.”
- **Line 3:** “foe:”
- **Line 4:** “grow.”
- **Line 5:** “fears,”
- **Line 6:** “tears:”
- **Line 7:** “smiles,”
- **Line 8:** “wiles.”
- **Line 9:** “night.”
- **Line 10:** “bright.”
- **Line 11:** “shine,”
- **Line 12:** “mine.”
- **Line 14:** “pole;”
- **Line 15:** “see;”
- **Line 16:** “tree.”

EPIZEUXIS

Epizeuxis occurs just once in the poem, in line 2, with the immediate repetition of the phrase "my wrath." Lines 1 and 2 present the positive alternative to the poem's dark main scenario, relating an occasion when the speaker "told" their "wrath"—i.e. admitted it to their friend—and in doing so ended that wrath (as opposed to letting it grow into a poison tree). The subtle use of epizeuxis here takes the sting out of the speaker's anger, as the repetition of the phrase emphasizes that it is now merely something to be *talked* about—rather than a deep-rooted emotion taking on a life of its own.

The repetition of the phrase also lends more weight to the conclusion of line 2: "did end" feels stronger because the previous four syllables have said the same thing twice, and this emphasizes how conclusively the "telling" the wrath made it end.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “my wrath, my wrath”

POLYSYNDETON

A significant proportion of "A Poison Tree" uses polysyndeton: lines 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, and 13. In other words, almost half of the poem's lines begin with an "and."

This use of polysyndeton has two chief purposes. First, it emphasizes the step-by-step growth of the poison tree that is set in motion by the suppression of the speaker's anger. The growth plays out stage by stage, with the repetitiousness of the "ands" marking the transitions from one stage to another. Second, the polysyndeton also contributes to the religious context of the poem, echoing the sound and rhythm of the enormously influential King James Version of the Bible, which had been published in England the century before Blake wrote this poem. The KJV (as it is commonly abbreviated) was a remarkable work of scholarship that produced an English translation of the Bible which is often considered the most majestic and poetic version. It is also full of polysyndeton, which has both a hypnotic effect and lends the text a sense of fateful inevitability in the way the "ands" unfold the story from one moment to the next. This, for example, is a quote from a relevant passage, Genesis 3:6:

> And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

Here, Eve's actions grow logically, with each one seeming relatively harmless—in the same way that the speaker's actions unfold in "A Poison Tree." The way that the poem mirrors the sound of the King James Bible lends the poem allegorical weight, creating the sense that its message is not about a particular time period but something more universal.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "And"
- **Line 7:** "And"
- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 11:** "And"
- **Line 12:** "And"
- **Line 13:** "And"

SIBILANCE

"A Poison Tree" uses sibilance in the second stanza. Here, each line contains at least one /s/ sound. In lines 5 and 6, this comes in the lines' final words, "fears" and "tears," yet the true sibilance emerges in lines 7 and 8. These lines essentially turn up the "volume" on the repetitive /s/ sounds with "sunned," "smiles," "soft," "deceitful," and "wiles." While lines 5 and 6 would not be considered true moments of sibilance on their own, when read in combination with the rest of the stanza, the repetitive /s/ sound is impossible to ignore.

This stanza describes the speaker's cultivation of anger, and the sibilance serves to emphasize the fact that the poison tree can only exist with the speaker's active participation in its growth. Each moment of sibilance reflects a specific way in which the speaker has nourished (or "sunned") the tree, with "fears," "tears," "smiles," and "soft deceitful wiles."

The varied intensity of sibilance throughout the stanza, meanwhile, mimics the tree's growth: at first, while the tree is in its infancy, the /s/ sound is subtle. The /s/ sound increases as the poison tree is nourished and matures.

Another common association with sibilance is the hissing sound that snakes make. This association with snakes already exists, however subtly, in the background of the poem, given the poem's allusion to the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. In the Bible, a snake, which is Satan in disguise, tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit from that tree, an action which introduces sin into the world. Sibilance further connects the poem to its Biblical allusion, and can be read as emphasizing the speaker's own angry cunning, or, perhaps, as hinting at the way that anger itself has a kind of cunning that manipulates those who allow it to fester within themselves.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "s"
- **Line 6:** "s"
- **Line 7:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 8:** "s," "c," "s"

VOCABULARY

Wrath (Line 2, Line 4) - Wrath is a kind of extreme anger and implies the desire for retribution or revenge.

Sunned (Line 7) - To sun something is to expose it to the sun's rays.

Wiles (Line 8) - Wiles are cunning and manipulative tricks, used to bring about a certain scenario—particularly in trying to make someone else behave in a particular way.

Beheld (Line 11) - Beheld is the past tense of "behold," which means to perceive through sight/to look upon something.

Stole (Line 13) - The main meaning of "stole" is that the speaker's foe snuck into the speaker's garden. Stole has secondary connotations of theft.

Pole (Line 14) - This is most likely a reference to the Pole star (a.k.a the North star). This star has been important to maritime navigation for centuries, and its hiddenness in the poem indicates a loss of direction. Alternatively, "pole" could be a stand-in for the northern hemisphere, indicating that night has fallen.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Poison Tree" has a simple form, consisting of four quatrains with two rhyming couplets in each. Yet the poem can also be divided between the first two lines and the following fourteen, and this second structure, underlying the more evident simple format of the poem, echoes the poem's meaning.

Lines 1 and 2 set out a scenario in which the speaker discusses his or her anger and in doing so puts an almost immediate end to it. The following 14 lines of the poem, however, detail the way in which anger grows when it is suppressed, and the grave consequences that follow. The poem uses the extended metaphor of a growing poison tree to express this idea of the dangers of suppressed anger, and the length of the poem's second section gives *formal* representation to this argument. In other words, the poem gets long as the speaker's anger grows.

Another effect of the poet's choice of form is that the poem's

apparent simplicity lends the poem a sense of universality—this is a poem about humankind in general, not specific people at a specific point in history. The poem's clear, straightforward form also allows the focus to remain on the poem's content; this is a poem not particularly concerned with showing off or adhering to specific formulaic conventions, but rather with sending a moral message.

METER

The meter in "A Poison Tree" has a singsongy quality to it that makes the poem feel almost like a nursery rhyme. One of the main effects of the meter, in combination with the perfect rhyme throughout, is to make the verses simple and memorable. This memorability lends weight to the interpretation of this poem as a cautionary tale—it is a warning, and therefore deserves a meter that makes this warning as stark and straightforward as possible.

Technically speaking, the poem is primarily trochaic tetrameter, with each line consisting of four stressed and then unstressed syllables: Da-dum. Trochees have a forceful sense of propulsion, which in this poem functions to make what happens seem inevitable. Because the poem is mostly in the past tense, the meter matches the idea that it is too late to prevent the growth of the anger into a poison tree and the death of the speaker's foe.

If you actually count the number of syllables in most of the lines, though, you'll see that most of the lines of the poem actually only have seven syllables, rather than the eight you would expect from trochaic tetrameter. That is because, whereas a true line of four trochees would end with a weak (unstressed) syllable, each trochaic line in "A Poison Tree" ends with a catalexis, which is the deletion of a syllable as part of a metrical foot. For instance, the poem's first line, which is indicative of the general meter throughout, shows the way that most lines of the poem begin with a stress *and* end with a stress.

I was | angry | with my | friend

The first foot begins with a stressed "I," while the final foot consists of a stressed single syllable, "friend." The poem would read drastically differently with pure trochees, and each line would have a considerably weaker sound. For example, if "friend" were replaced with "brother":

I was | angry | with my | brother

This modified line lacks the energy and insistence of the poem's actual meter, the weak syllable at the end making the line die away gently. The poem's modified trochaic meter gives it a kind of forceful muscularity, which is both in keeping with the idea that the poem serves as a kind of warning to the reader, while also making the poem itself pulse with a sort of "anger" that is similar to what the speaker is experiencing. The lacking final syllable also seems to push the lines one into the next, so that the lines pile up in the same way that the anger seems to perpetuate itself.

While *most* of the lines of the poem follow the pattern of trochaic tetrameter with a dropped final syllable, there are three lines — the only three lines of the poem that have eight syllables — which use a different meter entirely. These three lines — lines 2, 4, and 16 — are all written in regular iambic tetrameter, with no dropped syllables. These lines are all eight syllable lines with an alternating unstressed-stressed pattern.

The iambic lines feel complete in a way that the trochaic lines with their dropped syllables do not, and so in the first stanza the iambic lines neatly divide that stanza up into its two contrasting scenarios: telling about anger, and suppressing anger. Meanwhile, line 16, the final line of the poem, offers an ending to the relentless build up from the trochaic meter of lines 5 through 15. Further, the eight syllables of the final line following upon the many seven-syllable lines proceeding it, feels stretched, mirroring the image of the foe lying poisoned "beneath the tree:"

My foe | outstretched | beneath | the tree

The line literally stretches out, the move away from trochees suggestive of the inaction and stillness of the body, and ending on the final stressed syllable of the poison "tree" that grew out of the speaker's suppressed anger.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme in "A Poison Tree" is extremely simple, with each quatrain consisting of two couplets rhymed AABB. All of the rhymes are perfect rhymes, which, together with the straightforward meter, gives the poem an easy, yet forceful nursery rhyme quality.

The poem comes from Blake's collection entitled *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, in which the other poems also keep things simple in terms of rhyme. This is in part because Blake associated innocence with childhood and, though this poem comes from the more jaded *Experience* section of that work, it retains its simplicity in part to keep the content in tension with the presentations of innocence in previous poems in the work. That is, when this poem is read in context with the other poems in the *Songs of Innocence*, the sound is not altogether different. This poem, as with those, has a childlike simplicity to it; in the earlier poems, this simplicity is matched by the general content: the innocence of childhood, human joy, communion, the power of the imagination. But the content of *this* poem is radically different—it is based on actual experience, and contains some of humankind's worst traits (anger, deceit, fear).

Accordingly, the poem quivers with the tension between the

innocent, almost naive sound of the verse and the world-weary message contained therein. There is also another important reason why the rhyme scheme is so simple—it pushes the poem's cautionary moral to the fore, making it more visible and memorable. Rhymes make language easier to remember, and this is a poem with a message that is intended to stay with the reader, and to inform their actions in the future.

SPEAKER

The speaker in the poem is not specified. It could be a man, woman, or even a child. As this is a fable-like poem with a strong moral message, it makes sense that the speaker is treated in this way. By keeping the speaker anonymous, the speaker gains a sense of universality. The speaker could be anyone, which allows the reader to identify with both scenarios presented by the speaker, and examine their own responses to anger.

From line 3 onwards, the speaker suppresses his or her anger from a "foe." No details about the specific nature of this anger or the foe are presented, again contributing to the intended universality of the poem.

The speaker shows him or herself to be fearful, even sorrowful, and entirely gives into suppressed anger, and is controlled by that anger. Lines 7 and 8 further suggest that the speaker purposefully stokes his or her anger—it seems possible that the speaker *knows* his or her will attract the foe and bring about the latter's demise. In general, the speaker is intended to stand in for some of the worst aspects of humanity—namely, its capacity for division and the loss of empathy.

SETTING

The poem takes place in the past tense until the final two lines. Accordingly, it is on the one hand a monologue, without a specific setting. This is part of the poem's overall universality; its lesson is applicable to any and all situations. But the poem is also a telling of two different memories, and as such the reader is also placed within the speaker's mind. The second of the two scenarios outlined is a surreal mix of metaphor and descriptive language, which transforms the speaker's psyche into a garden in which the speaker's anger grows into a tree bearing poison fruit. The poem creates some overlap, then, between this general setting of the speaker's mind and the Garden of Eden—and in doing so suggests that envy and anger can enter the mind just as it entered the Garden.

The switch to the present tense in the last two lines suggests that the event described has only just taken place, which gives the events of the poem an immediacy that it would otherwise lack.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"A Poison Tree" was published as part of the *Experience* section of William Blake's best-known work, *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (first published in 1794, though *Innocence* was published individually a few years prior). This book of poems is essentially a didactic work of poetic moralizing, though Blake resists oversimplifying difficult situations. Innocence and experience can be mapped onto the idea of the Biblical Garden of Eden and the Fall, and Blake's work is generally full of opposites: childhood vs. adulthood, life vs. death, empathy vs. animosity.

A key poetic influence on Blake was John Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* also creatively examined humankind's relationship to God. But Blake was also a wide reader of religious scholarship, which undoubtedly played a formative role in his poetry. For example, the influence of Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish Lutheran theologian, can be seen in the way Blake consistently depicts the fundamental spirituality of humanity.

Blake was not well-known as a poet in his time, and many of his contemporaries considered him to be a madman. He worked primarily as a painter, printmaker, and engraver, and felt that his poetry was misunderstood in his era. He did not enjoy the poetic success of some of the other poets associated with the same time period, such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge. This sense of isolation gives Blake's poetry a radical and prophetic quality, his poems small acts of rebellion against the status quo of the day.

Important to his work is the idea of the visionary—there are many accounts of Blake witnessing angels or other spiritual ephemera and this plays into the prophetic quality of his writing. He is often grouped together with the Romantic poets, though it is important to emphasize that he is better regarded as a singular entity in English literature with certain common ground with the Romantic ideals that dominated the late 17th and early 18th centuries. These ideals include the importance of childhood, the imagination, and the power of nature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

William Blake was a deeply religious man but was highly critical of the Church of England during his lifetime, and of organized religion more generally. He saw the top-down religious structures as restrictions on individual liberties, and an obstacle between the direct relationship between humankind and God. His rebellious streak owed something to the American and French revolutions, which seemed to briefly allow thinkers to dream of better forms of society. Blake was also writing during the accelerating Industrial Revolution, and saw its economic, social and environmental changes as a threat

to humankind. For Blake, the factories represented a form of physical and mental enslavement—the "mind-forg'd manacles" mentioned in his poem "London."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Songs of Innocence and Experience — Full text of the book in which "A Poison Tree" appears. (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1934/1934-h/1934-h.htm)
- Blake's Poison Trees — An article exploring possible influences on the poem. (http://bq.blakearchive.org/35.2.stauffer)
- Blake's Visual Representation of the Poem — The poem as it originally appeared, with Blake's own illustration. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Poison_Tree)
- Blake's Radicalism — A clip in which author Iain Sinclair discusses Blake's political views. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl0yBrI24XM)
- Britten's "A Poison Tree" — A musical setting of the poem by English composer Benjamin Britten. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oh7ppcvEnx4)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- London
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Innocence)
- The Garden of Love
- The Lamb
- The Tyger

HOW TO CITE

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