

## A Poison Tree

By the end of studying The Poison Tree , I need to know: *A Poison Tree* is a short and deceptively simple poem about repressing anger and the consequences of doing so.

**Plot:** The speaker tells of how they fail to communicate their wrath to their foe and how this continues to grow until it develops into poisonous hatred.

<b>Vocabulary</b>	<p><b>Wrath</b> - Another word for anger. It is one of the Seven Deadly Sins.</p> <p><b>Foe</b> - Another word for an enemy.</p> <p><b>Wiles</b> - devious or cunning stratagems employed in manipulating or persuading someone to do what one wants</p> <p><b>Stole</b> - move somewhere quietly or surreptitiously</p> <p><b>Veil'd</b> - partially conceal, disguise, or obscure</p>
<b>Context</b>	<p>William Blake was also known for his paintings including this one, entitled 'The Ancient of Days'</p> <p>William Blake was born in 1757 and was originally an engraver. He began adding text to his engravings in the form of poems and he was interested as much in the presentation of poems as the poems themselves. In 1789 he published an illustrated set of poems called <i>Songs of Innocence</i> and in 1793 followed this with <i>Songs of Experience</i> (from which <i>A Poison Tree</i> comes). The following year, he combined these two sets of poems, publishing as <i>Songs of Innocence and Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul</i>. 'A Poison Tree' is from <i>Songs of Experience</i>.</p> <p>The first set of poems is, therefore, generally hopeful and positive while the second set tends to be more negative and pessimistic.</p> <p>Blake was a deeply religious man and this shows in the moral nature of his work. His poetry was not really well-regarded during his own life. Today he is regarded as a man ahead of his time and he is now thought of as a major poetic writer</p>
<b>Themes</b>	<p><b>Anger:</b> the basic human emotion which sets the events of this poem in motion. Although it is not necessarily wrong in itself, how we go about dealing with anger is extremely important.</p> <p><b>Deception:</b> the speaker bottles things up and does not talk about his feelings to his enemy. The enemy sneaks into the garden in the dead of night to take the fruit.</p> <p><b>Communication:</b> the poet/speaker communicates a direct moral lesson to the reader about the disastrous consequences of his own failure to communicate with another person.</p>
<b>Deeper understanding</b>	<p>The poem seem like a piece of verse for children and like a simple nursery rhyme with a clear moral message to be learned. The use of 'and' particularly resembles that of a child telling a story. A difficult message is wrapped up in a form and structure which is deliberately simple and using very straightforward vocabulary, to get its point across.</p> <p>The lines in the first stanza all start with 'I' which emphasises that this is a personal story told from an individual point of view</p> <p>Seven of the other 12 lines in the poem start with 'and' which helps the story to build and increase in intensity</p> <p><b>Language of control-</b>It's clear throughout the poem that the persona is in control of his actions. The repeated use of active voice: 'I watered it'/ 'sunned in' reinforces that he is choosing to let his anger grow. The naturalistic imagery here also symbolic of growth- suggesting his anger knows now bounds as it doesn't stop growing- but also suggests how natural it is to allow anger to grow. This control is also reinforced through the juxtaposition between the way he treats his friend and his foe. The poem opens with the persona stating 'I was angry</p>

	<p>with my friend/ I told my wrath my wrath did end'- making it clear that the persona made an active choice to end his anger- the end stop at the end of line two also reinforces this. However,</p> <p><b>Deception-</b> Throughout the poem, the persona is deliberately deceptive. Firstly, the poem is written in trochaic trimeter- the rhythm associated with nursery rhymes. This is because the persona is attempting to appear like her is innocent- his actions could equally be interpreted from an outsider as innocent; he merely 'grew' the poisoned apple, it was the decision of the 'foe' to eat it. His deception is also reinforced through his behaviour towards his enemy- he describes how he 'sunned [his anger] with smiles and with soft deceitful wiles' to reflect how he put on an outwards appearance of happiness and hiding his true intentions. The sibilance here, however, reflects his sinister nature. He is the snake- the devil- tempting his enemy with an apple; the biblical allusion reflecting how, just like Lucifer was, the persona is charming, charismatic and deceitful. The poem is also written in rhyming couplets- often associated with love- and therefore further demonstrates his deception; he puts on a façade of love when he really feels hate.</p>
<p><b>Quotes</b></p>	<p>Antithesis - 'I told my wrath', 'I told it not.' This simple but direct use of antithesis (the use of opposites) shows how simple it would be to talk about an issue but equally how easy it is to say nothing and let resentment grow.</p> <p>'I was <b>angry</b> with my friend:/ I told my wrath, my wrath did end./ I was <b>angry</b> with my foe:/ I told it not, my wrath did grow.' The first stanza (lines that make up a section of a poem) contrasts two different ways of dealing with anger and the two different outcomes that may occur as a result</p> <p>'And I water'd it in fears./ Night and morning with my tears;' He deliberately cultivates the growing tree (anger) with tears of frustration and a refusal to communicate with his enemy or his tears are ones of sorrow as he worries about his relationship with his enemy.</p> <p>'Till it bore an apple bright;' The poet chooses the apple as a reference to the Biblical story, a tale that most of Blake's readers would have been familiar with. The speaker could be likened to a serpent tempting his enemy</p> <p>'And he knew that it was mine,/ And into my garden <b>stole</b>' 'Stole' is an interesting choice of word. While it has the clear meaning that the enemy sneaked in under cover of darkness it also reminds the reader that it is an act of theft.</p> <p>"In the morning glad I see, My foe outstretched beneath the tree" - When the poet wakes up and glimpses in the garden, he sees something that relaxes his mind and calms his vengeance forever. The darkness of the night acted like an invisible cloak for the poet. Now, it is a beautiful morning.</p> <p>There he is; his enemy, dead under the tree of his hatred. He bit the poisoned apple of his vengeance. He is murdered.</p>
<p><b>Terminology</b></p>	<p>Antithesis - 'I told my wrath', 'I told it not.'</p> <p>Repetition - I was <b>angry</b> with my friend:/ I told my wrath, my wrath did end./ I was <b>angry</b> with my foe:/ I told it not, my wrath did grow.'</p> <p>Biblical Allusion - 'Till it bore an apple bright;'</p> <p>Extended Metaphor 'A Poison Tree', 'And I water'd it in fears./ Night and morning with my tears</p> <p>First Person</p>

Monosyllabic language

**Form**

*A Poison Tree* is written in quatrains.

**Structure**

The poem has four stanzas. Each stanza consists of a pair of rhyming couplets in the regular repeated pattern **aabb**. The rhythm of the poem is also straightforward and regular which makes it very easy to read, though not necessarily to understand. The straightforward and seemingly simple way in which Blake has written this poem contrasts with the very complex human emotions he is describing.

The poem also contains two clear turning points which help the reader to understand the character of the speaker. The first comes after the opening two lines and shows the difference in how the speaker handles a difficult situation in two separate cases. In the second, symmetry is introduced in the final two lines and shows the speaker's reaction to what has happened. The wording at this point is ambiguous. It is a new day and a new beginning but the result of the speaker's untold anger is still there to see.

**Reading:**

Read to the punctuation.

Read aloud.

**Links across the poems:**

Cousin Kate

The Destruction of  
Sennacherib

The Man He Killed

What were they Like

Half Caste

Exposure