

'A Poison Tree', one of the most famous poems by William Blake (1757-1827), was first published in Blake's 1794 volume Songs of Experience.

A Poison Tree: summary

Blake originally gave 'A Poison Tree' the title 'Christian Forbearance'. More on the significance of that earlier title below.

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 didn't 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.

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 Blake's poetry, Blake's Contrary States: The 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' as Dramatic Poems^[OBI:OBI], has observed that it is not merely the speaker's foe who is poisoned by the speaker's 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. This 'apple bright' attracts the attention of his enemy, who then sneaked into the speaker's 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 speaker's property – he 'stole' into his garden, after all), but he was deceived into thinking that something deadly and poisonous (the speaker's 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 speaker's 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 enemy's deceitful behaviour in sneaking into the speaker's garden to steal the apple causes the foe's 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 enemy's 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 Blake's 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 *Blake's Contrary States: The 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' as Dramatic Poems*^{[OBJ][OBJ]}, this title shows Blake's 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 with its own Christian symbolism. The apple represents such wily and devious vengeance: it is significant that it is an apple that grows from Blake's poison tree, and that the speaker's 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 Blake's poem. The Fall of Adam and Eve takes place, of course, in the paradise that is the Garden of Eden; Blake's Edenic 'garden' is where his enemy meets his end. These parallels raise Blake's parable of repressed anger and vengeance to Biblical heights.

'A Poison Tree' is written in quatrains or four-line stanzas rhymed aabb (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' the stresses are as follows: '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.

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"A Poison Tree" is a poem by English poet William Blake, first published in his *Songs of Experience* in 1794. In deceptively simple language with an almost nursery-rhyme quality, the speaker of the poem details two different approaches to anger. In the first, openly talking about anger is presented as a way of moving past it. In the second, the speaker outlines the danger of keeping anger within. The poem uses an extended metaphor to describe the speaker's anger as growing into a tree that bears poisonous apples. The speaker's enemy then eats an apple from the tree and dies. The poem is generally interpreted as an allegory for the danger of bottling up emotions, and how doing so leads to a cycle of negativity and even violence.

Read the full text of "A Poison Tree"


"A Poison 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.

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"A Poison 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.

"A Poison Tree" 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.

"A Poison Tree" Poetic Devices & Figurative Language

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.

Form, Meter, & Rhyme Scheme of "A Poison Tree"

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 preceding 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.

"A Poison Tree" 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.

“A Poison Tree” 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.

Literary and Historical Context of “A Poison Tree”

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."