

# AQA English Literature A-level

## Poetry: Love Through the Ages Anthology (Pre-1900)

William Blake: 'The Garden of Love'

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# THE GARDEN OF LOVE

William Blake

## Brief Summary

'The Garden of Love' is a poem about **religion and love**, generally a **criticism** of **organized religion**. In the poem, a man visits a **garden** from his **childhood**, and finds a **chapel and priests**, 'The Garden of Love' having changed into something **dispiriting and loveless**. The speaker argues that **religion** should have a focus on **love, freedom and joy**, as it once did, not **rules and restrictions**, as he finds now.

## Synopsis

- A speaker goes to a place known as the **Garden of Love**, where he used to visit and play as a child.
- They find it **very different** to what they remember, full of **graves** and closed to the public, examining the garden with a sense of **dismay**.

## Context

William Blake (1757 – 1827)

**English Romantic poet** William Blake was born in London, the son of a hosier and his wife. Both of his parents were **Dissenters**, Protestant Christians who separated from the Church of England in the 17th and 18th centuries. Blake attended drawing school, later continuing his art studies at the Royal Academy. As an adult, he worked as an **illustrator, painter and an engraver**, opening a print shop, where some of his first poems were printed many years later.

Blake himself was **devoutly religious**, though he held reservations on **organized religion, publicly expressing criticism** of the **Church of England** to many of his peers, and exemplified in 'The Garden of Love'. Instead he found his inspiration in the **Bible** and other **religious texts**. In 1789, Blake published his *Songs of Innocence* and in 1794, *Songs of Experience*, of which 'The Garden of Love' is part. Although he didn't receive much recognition during his lifetime, Blake remains hugely **influential** in English poetry as well as in **visual arts**, particularly of the **Romantic Movement**.

## Summary

### **Context**

English poet of Romantic movement //  
trained in art and illustration from a  
young age // born to Dissenter parents  
// devout Christian

### **Structure**

ABCB rhyme scheme // three stanzas,  
12 lines total // anapestic trimeter &  
tetrameter // internal rhyme

### **Language**

Assonance // caesura // alliteration //  
metaphor

### **Key points**

A comparison of the garden from the  
speaker's youth to present // a criticism  
of organized religion // a sense of  
sadness at garden's transformation



## The Garden of Love

'The Garden of Love' was first published in **1789** and formed part of Blake's famous collection *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. It is written from the perspective of an **unnamed speaker** visiting a place known as the Garden of Love, a garden in which they used to **play in childhood**.

The poem explores the relationship the speaker has to their childhood garden. This perspective is different to most poems in the anthology as the majority of poems are either familial or romantic. This poem focuses more on a geographical location and the sentiments it holds.

In the poem, Blake's speaker goes into the Garden of Love, a spot where he used to play, and finds a **chapel** built there. The reader is presented with **religious imagery**. The gates of the chapel are **closed** and there is a **commandment** written on the door. The speaker continues to notice **changes**: the garden has become a **graveyard**, and **flowers** have been replaced by **tombstones**. The contrast between the two versions of the garden - the past garden and the present garden - suggests a very **different idea** regarding love. It depicts a love that starts off as something **free** or **liberating** but subsequently becomes associated with **restriction and death**.

In the **poetic tradition**, gardens are usually used to allude to certain **religious imagery**. In particular, poets may recall the first **biblical garden** - the Garden of Eden, which was lush and abundant and, according to the Bible, part of **Paradise**. Blake **subverts** this concept of the **ideal garden** in his poem, as the present garden is presented as a bleak place associated with death.

Such a depiction of the garden may reflect Blake's **hatred of organised religion**. This is especially evident in the **richly symbolic landscape** of the garden, which he uses to **amplify the difference** between the (Christianity-free) **past and the chapel-dominated present**. Blake was a **deeply spiritual** artist and poet, but disliked the institutions associated with religion. The garden of love, formerly associated with **play and carefree childhood**, is now the **site of a chapel**; a **physical embodiment of the Church**. It is often argued that religions **codify faith**, and that through the process of codification, religion becomes **less liberating** - Blake is **critical** of this.

The poem uses a **first-person narrative voice**, suggesting a **bittersweet tone** in regards to the state of the garden. The speaker is nostalgic about the way the garden used to look in their childhood and is **sentimental** about how it has changed. The reader is likely able to empathise with the unnamed speaker, calling on their own sense of loss that accompanies the **passage of time**. The **lack of detail** about the **speaker's identity** allows readers to universalise them - the speaker becomes a **symbol of wider humanity**. We can argue that this poem is as much about **change, resistance to change and loss** as it is about love and religion.



## The Garden of Love

Blake uses a passive voice, encouraging readers to wonder who is responsible for building, writing 'Thou shalt not' and shutting the chapel.

The chapel was newly built directly over the play area

The poem distinguishes between the garden of the past and the garden now. This contrast is important to establish and justify the speaker's main argument later on.

The speaker physically turns to the garden from the chapel, but this can also be read metaphorically as them shunning religion.

The inverted, unnatural syntax of **"Saw what I never had seen"** suggests the changes themselves are unnatural.

The commandment "Thou shalt not" written over the door creates an intimidating, unwelcoming atmosphere. There is no specific command after this negative imperative 'Thou shalt not', suggesting the Church forbids everything or forbids arbitrarily

The internal rhyme with **"black gowns"** and **"rounds"** emphasises the monotony of the priests' routine and religion in general.

The use of words such as "sweet flowers" and "green" suggests that the garden was associated with innocence, nature, naivety.

The chapel has become a graveyard. Death has replaced life as the tombstones have supplanted the flowers.

The poem ends with some pastoral language and imagery. The Romantic Movement at the time used such imagery to make political or sentimental statements.

The poem is constantly binarising certain concepts to highlight transformation. For example, black and white, death and life, joy and misery, freedom vs restriction.

I went to the Garden of Love,  
And saw what I never had seen:  
A Chapel was built in the midst,  
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,  
And Thou shalt not writ over the door;  
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,  
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,  
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:  
And Priests in black gowns, were  
walking their rounds,  
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.

The comparison is presented from the first stanza, portraying the difference between the past and present. This immediately creates the garden in its former state, comparing it to the present.

The garden has "flowers" only in the speaker's memory, suggesting that it is memory alone where love and joy exist (for the speaker).

The capitalization of the "Garden of Love" shows its significance to the speaker. The capitalisation of "Chapel" gives a sense of the chapel occupying a greater physical space. Furthermore, its capitalization, together with the capitalisation of "Priests", hints that the speaker is referring to the institution of the Church, as well as this particular chapel and group of priests.

The language is quite simple, allowing the speaker's emotion to come through

There is a contrast between freedom and restriction, as the sense of play recalls childhood but the presence of the chapel overwrites this.

There is an allusion to the Garden of Eden, which the first humans joyfully existed. Here, the speaker may be equating the fall of man, not with sin, but with organised religion itself.

Chapels and priests are associated with Christianity, though could be a criticism of any organised religion.

The priests are wearing black not white, which connotes darkness and makes the imagery more ominous.

The idea of them "walking their rounds" suggests that they are almost patrolling the area. This portrays them gatekeeping the love that the place may offer.

Final image of church's restrictive power, internal rhyme, tetrameter becomes longer pentameter, leading to a sense of collapse or deflation. The priests are further doling out commands, by restricting poet's joys and desires.



## Themes

### Love

The message of 'The Garden of Love' seems to suggest that **organised religion** is **anathema to love**, about **imposing control** and restrictions on us, killing our happiness and **curbing our natural desires and wishes**. The **institutions of religion**, unlike the **joyousness of religious belief** itself, turn the world from a **garden** (symbolising growth and life) into a **grave** (symbolising death and decay). **Organised religion** falls short of **ideals** it tried to adopt.

The poem places **religion against love**, commenting on how **organised religion** (or the various denominations of Christianity, which would have been the only publicly acknowledged religions in England at the time) does not allow love to **thrive or flourish**. Instead it places **unnecessary restrictions** on people's lives. This can be seen in the unfinished command "**Thou shalt not**" (line 6) which seems to suggest that Christianity or organised religion in general prohibits, and that such **prohibitions** are arbitrary. Blake highlights how religion binds with rules and prevents people from embracing **joy, desire and community** - those aspects of life that, according to the poem, are both **natural and important**. This is significant as Blake was a highly **individualistic thinker**, going against **conventional ideas about religion** at the time the poem was written. This means that he is commenting on wider society's **adherence and conformity** to **established religious structures**, which only focus on **customs**. The poem explores the **barrenness of the land** when love is lacking, through the **bleak imagery** of the "**tomb-stones**" (line 10) and "**graves**" (line 9).

**Love**, whether **romantic, sexual or spiritual**, is something **innate and fundamental** to being human, yet in the poem it's under threat from the **dogma of organised religion**. For example, the symbol of the "**flowers**" (line 8) represent the **love, beauty, nature and abundance**, lost from the garden. The flowers are a **natural contrast** with the chapel, which is **man-made**. This suggests that the garden has been **unnaturally altered**, cutting off nature. Therefore, a **reclamation** of the Garden of Love is necessary to restore the love that was associated with it before.



## Religion

Blake uses **religious imagery** throughout the poem. The reader may associate the Garden of Love with the **archetypal** garden, the **Garden of Eden**. The Garden of Eden is part of **Paradise** - the place that **Adam and Eve** were shut off from after the **'Fall'**. Thus, the original garden in the poem is linked through **biblical allusion** to a state of innocence and goodness, and it is only after religion is imposed on it (in the form of a chapel) that it becomes degraded, bleak and lifeless. **Ironically**, then, the **degradation** of the garden caused by the imposition of religion links organised religion or institutional Christianity to the Fall, sin or loss of goodness. Blake is critical of **organised religion**, being clear that it has **adverse effects of human liberty and love**. This perspective may be seen as quite **controversial** because it presents religion as **restrictive** as opposed to **enlightening**.

The **playful and joyfulness** that Blake seems to favour is highlighted by the **ambiguous nature** of the garden in his childhood. The reader is barely given any more **details** about how this garden used to be, even though the speaker references it as a **point of comparison**. This suggests that the speaker expects readers to **intuitively** understand how this paradisiacal garden was.

Blake contrasts the **restrictive nature of religion** with **childhood**, a time typically full of **freedom, joy and love**. There is a **sense of regression**; people are born with **love** as a natural impulse but this is **stifled by restrictions** from **religious institutions** e.g. **commandments** of **"Thou shalt not"** (line 6). His **"joys and desires"** (line 12) are also physically restricted - or painfully hemmed in - by the briars (prickly or thorny stems) that the priests metaphorically wrap.

Apart from the speaker, the only other people in the poem are the **priests**. Their presence seems to **reinforce the joyless, serious world of adulthood**. In particular, the **black clothes** adapted by them suggests the **death of childhood**, love and joy. Similarly, the chapel is **closed off to people** and the outside world, suggesting that **organised religion locks people out of love**, religious or other. This is **ironic** as the chapel is supposed to encourage **love and loving acts**. The poem may be interpreted as a call for freedom from **religious strictures** and a return to a **childlike state of carefree expression** - love, joy, and play.

## Structure

The poem is structured in **three quatrains**, **12 lines** in total. It has a simple form which expresses a **clear argument**. The first stanza depicts the **return to the past** while the second stanza focuses on the **transformation** that the garden has undergone. The last stanza, on the contrary, is **ominous in tone**. Blake's other poems are also written in clear and simple language, using the **quadratic form** which summons the **ballad metre** used in **popular oral poetry**.



The poem is written in **quatrains** which are rhymed in **ABCB**. However, the **final two** lines of the final stanza depart from this and instead use **internal rhyme** on “**gowns**” and “**rounds**” / “**briars**” and “**desires**”. Instead of using **tetrameter** (i.e. four feet per line), Blake uses a more **variable trimeter rhythm**, which means that there are **three main stresses** per line.

Furthermore, the poem is in an **anapestic trimeter** where each of the first three lines there is an **iamb** (an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed) and then **a pair of anapaests** (two **unstressed syllables** followed by a stressed). Every line in the final stanza starts with an “**and**”. This insertion of **polysyndetons** builds the poem's **momentum** to the conclusion.

### Rhyme scheme

The **rhyme scheme** of the poem is **ABCB**. The rhyme scheme of the first two stanzas is **ABCB**. In other words, only the second and fourth line rhymes. Although no lines in the third stanza rhyme, there are **internal rhymes** in the **last two lines**. “**Gowns**” nearly rhymes with “**rounds**” (a half-rhyme) and “**briars**” fully rhymes with “**desires**.” The **final rhyme** is linked aurally ‘ire’ and ‘fire’, both of which convey a **sense of anger**.

### Meter

The poem's meter is **not entirely regular**. Each line in the first quatrain has eight syllables, setting us up to expect eight syllables per line for the remainder of the poem. However, our **expectations are subverted**; the second quatrain's first three lines have nine syllables. The last line of the second quatrain and the first two lines of the third quatrain both have eight syllables, but again, the metre is disrupted the moment the priests enter, and so the final two lines have twelve syllables each. In short, the number of syllables per line is **8888, 9898, 88 12 12**. It is notable that the number of syllables change at the moments when religion is mentioned; line 5 which introduces the newly built chapel, is **engorged**, with nine syllables, while the final couplet describing the priests and their activity has 12 syllables per line. Through meter, Blake communicates how religion disrupts the **natural order of things**.

Just as the number of syllables change throughout the poem, **stresses** also change. The poem's **dominant metrical foot** is the **anapest**, which has a ‘da da DUM’ rhythm, for example line 5: “And the **gates** of this **Chapel** were **shut**”. Nevertheless, few lines are **entirely anapestic**; the first line, for example, is composed of an iamb and two anapaests: “I **went** to the **Garden of Love**”, as are lines 3, 4, 8 and 10. The poem closes with **amphibrachic tetrameter** (four metrical **feet**, each of which have three syllables which follow the pattern of unstressed, stressed, unstressed): “And **bind** ing | with **bri** ars | my **joys** and | de **si** res”. The **refusal** of the poem to **settle into a regular anapestic meter** perhaps reflects the fact that it is a poem about **conflict** - a conflict between love and organized religion.



## End-stopped lines

All lines are **end-stopped**, which means that each line stops at the end of the line. This reflects a **subtle sense of resignation and acceptance**, despite the speakers' **disappointment** at the state of things. It also adds to the **simplicity** of the poem, making its message clear to the reader.

## Repetition

The use of **repetition** by poets helps to emphasize a point and make a **speech easier to follow**. Repetition also helps **persuade** readers of the point being made. Repeated words include “**Garden of Love**”, “**flowers**”, and “**Chapel**”. For Blake, flowers are a simple symbol of joy and beauty, and their presence indicates abundance. The chapel, on the other hand, represents institutional Christianity and therefore their opposite: **strictures**, **lifelessness** and the **strangling** of the spirit.

## Language

### Assonance

Assonance refers to when the **sound between syllables** of nearby words are similar, particularly emerging after they are **rhymed or stressed**. Assonance can be found in lines 8 with “**so**” and “**bore**”, which have **similar vowels**. Line 12 also uses assonance with the long ‘i’ sound of “**binding**”, “**briars**” and “**desires**”. This slows the pace, denoting the speaker’s **reluctance to accept the changes** that have occurred.

### Consonance

**Consonants** are words that sound similar that are close to each other. The **consonance** of the ‘t’ sounds in “**gates**”, “**shut**”, “**shalt not**” and “**writ**” (lines 5-6) ties these words - focused on **binding and negativity** - together. This perpetuates the view that **organized religion** is a significant force that **locks people out of a relationship with God** as opposed to **welcoming them** in.

### Allusion

The **title** itself is an **allusion** to the Garden of Eden, which was a place that **harboured true love** and **innocence** - a place where **humans flourished**. There, Adam and Eve were able to **love each other and make love without any shame**. The new state in which the speaker sees the garden reflects the **Edenic garden after the Fall**. The chapel in the middle of the garden implies that the church and **religious restrictions** are preventing humanity’s return to this **Edenic sense of Being**.





## Comparisons

The Garden of Love	At An Inn
<i>"I used to play on the green"</i>	<i>"Veiled smiles bespoke their thought / Of what we were"</i>
<i>"I saw it was filled with graves"</i>	<i>"Love lingered numb"</i>
<i>"And binding with briars, my joys &amp; desires"</i>	<i>"once let us stand / As we stood then!"</i>
Both poems use allusions to the past and refer to a place where love was harboured more strongly, they both do this in the first person to highlight the transformation of their love	

### 'The Garden of Love' & 'Remember'

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A <b>sense of loss</b> permeates both poems, which is highlighted through the <b>sentimental/ nostalgic tone and language</b></li> <li>Both speakers refer to <b>religious imagery</b> in order to express their <b>feelings</b>, the evocation of such imagery aids to <b>affirm both of the author's personal convictions</b>.</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In TGL, the speaker is not appealing to a particular love interest but speaking to a <b>childhood memory/ love for a childhood place</b> whereas in 'Remember', on the other hand, is an address to a lover.</li> <li>TGL has a <b>direct, simple message</b> about <b>organised religion</b> being <b>constrictive and limiting love</b> for individuals. In contrast, the speaker in 'Remember' wants her lover to <b>remember</b> her but mid-way through the poem accepts/acknowledges that they may not. Thus, TGL's message is constant through whether <i>Remember's</i> speaker changes her mind.</li> </ul>

### 'The Garden of Love' & 'Walking Away'

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both poems centre on <b>reflection and childhood</b>, and harbour a sense of <b>nostalgia</b> for the past</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>WA centres on a father / son <b>familial relationship</b>, whereas TGL reminisces about the <b>loss of love</b> for their <b>childhood playground</b>.</li> <li>WA has a more <b>bittersweet tone</b> as the speaker alludes to the <b>growth</b> of the child <b>distancing</b> themselves from their parents; TGL's tone and message can be interpreted as <b>bitter</b>.</li> </ul>

