

# Edexcel English Literature GCSE

## Poetry: Conflict Collection

A Poison Tree - *William Blake*

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## William Blake

### Brief Summary

'A Poison Tree' depicts a conflict between a speaker and their foe, highlighting the consequences which arise following the suppression of anger. Blake emphasises the idea that emotions should be expressed rather than contained, an innovative and controversial stance at the time.

### Synopsis

- The speaker talks about their different approaches to anger. Communication caused anger to subside but suppression caused it to grow.
- The speaker's anger is presented, metaphorically, as a tree. The tree grew an apple which the speaker's enemy stole.
- Blake doesn't outline what actually happens – only revealing that the speaker was glad to see his enemy's body lying beneath the tree.
- It can be presumed that the enemy ate the apple, which was poisoned, and died.

### Context

#### William Blake

William Blake was an English poet and artist, who was writing during the **Romantic literary era**. He lived in London for most of his life, and saw it as corrupted by greed and inequality. He thought his city was dirty and corrupt, both literally and metaphorically, and as he thought this was largely due to the political situation lots of his poetry was about political subjects. Poetry was his passion and he would use it to try and instigate change. To help him with this, he would write using simple language so his message was accessible to all.

However, believing in equality for both genders was unusual, and Blake was **considered to have radical political views**. He was also anti-monarchy and wanted a revolution to remove it, thinking that revolution was inevitable and necessary.

While Blake can easily be described as a 'Christian', his religious views were more ambiguous. His poetry suggests that he was a believer of God but rejected the institution of the Church, as it was both a religious and political symbol. 'A Poison Tree' can therefore be seen as a critique of the Church's emphasis on the suppression of emotion. Blake experienced political and social change, most prominently due to the French Revolution and its aftermath. This arguably led into some of his more controversial work.



From 'Songs of Experience' (1794)

'A Poison Tree' was published in the collection 'Songs of Innocence and of Experience', as part of the latter section which predominantly dealt with more provocative issues. Although Blake uses child-like rhythms and imagery, he presents controversial ideas through the songs which reflect his socio-political views. This is relevant as Blake explores the negative influence of the Church within 'Experience', furthering the idea that the poem was intended to highlight the faults in its repressive attitude.

**Title**

Published title: A Poison Tree

indefinite article implies that the poison tree is non-specific, creates the impression that the events of the poem are too, presenting them as universally applicable

This creates a juxtaposition as trees are often symbolic of growth while poison connotes ideas of death and destruction. This may prefigure the sinister tone of the poem.

**A Poison Tree**

The symbol of the tree introduces a religious element as it likely references the tree which Adam and Eve ate from in The Book of Genesis.

Draft title: Christian Forbearance

The original title for the poem was 'Christian Forbearance', again evidencing the fact that its purpose was to act as a critique of orthodox Christian practices. This also heightens the effect of the biblical allusions used by Blake, as they become more apparent after the religious undertone is recognised. Although this isn't the published title, it gives the reader a deeper insight into the meaning behind the poem.

Blake outlines that this forbearance is 'Christian', implying that the poem acts as a critique of the Church's approach to emotional expression. This is because this 'Christian Forbearance', that is, the suppression of anger, only brings destruction

The word Forbearance means to exhibit self-control. This closely links to the idea of suppressing emotion.

**Christian Forbearance**

Introduces the religious theme



## A Poison Tree

This is the only disyllabic word, as Blake uses only monosyllabic words to make up the remainder of the stanza. This, alongside the fact that it is repeated, draws attention to the concept of anger, introducing it as a key theme within the poem.

Blake repeats the active voice here in addition to the personal pronoun "I". The Speaker is therefore portrayed as responsible for cultivating his wrath, presenting the idea that his anger is not passive but active. As a result, the speaker appears more villainous as he enables the growth of his wrath.

By choosing to place the words "bright" and "shine" at the end of the stanza, Blake draws attention to the adjectives. He manipulates the positive tropes of natural imagery, using them to present the apple as perfect and therefore tempting. This is despite the fact that the apple was produced out of wrath, presenting it as a symbol of both deceit and anger.

The word "pole" is also ambiguous. It may be to replace the word tree, in order to fit the rhyme scheme, but may also reference the pole star. Stars are often used as symbols of the heavens. Therefore, by choosing to outline that the star is "veil'd", Blake perhaps highlights the absence of morality. This presents the idea that when anger and vengeance take over, a person's rationality is clouded.

This is an ambiguous word choice as Blake does not stipulate that he is dead. The word "outstretched" means 'to be extended', however, given the context of the title and the speaker's satisfaction, readers are likely to assume that he is dead. This causes the reader to think about the consequences of anger, as they have to decipher what happened to the speaker's foe.

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 **water'd** 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 veil'd the **pole**;  
In the morning glad I **see**;  
My foe **outstretched** beneath the tree.

The parallel structure at the end of each pair of verses (repeated punctuation) illustrates that the consequences of the speaker's actions are inescapable. This creates the impression that if anger is communicated it will subside but if it is suppressed it will undoubtedly grow.

The repeated references to the cycle of day and night establish a relentless time scheme, highlighting how the speaker's anger is consuming him. This shows its increasing power, presenting his wrath inescapable, all-consuming and controlling.

The word "stole" is a homophone, it can mean to sneak into an area or to take something without permission. In either case, the speaker's foe committed an immoral action, preventing the reader from sympathising with him too much due to the active role he played in his own destruction. This highlights the complex morality of the situation, as the reader likely finds it difficult to decide on the identity of the victim, presenting anger as a wholly destructive force.

Here, the tense of the poem changes from past to present. This may be to show readers that actions have consequences and can cause lasting damage. It ends the poem on a sinister tone as the foe's death is happening in the present - the reader is therefore forced into the action of the narrative causing the moral message to become more impactful.



## Perspective

Blake uses a **first person speaker** which makes it seem as though **the reader is being spoken to directly**. This personal quality heightens the **didactic (with an intention to teach)** purpose of the poem. This is because the reader cannot detach themselves from the events within the poem and so are forced to reflect on their own behaviour and actions. As a result they can relate to the action to a greater extent, causing them to be more involved and receptive to Blake's message.

The poem is from the perspective of an unknown speaker who has a conflict with his "foe". It begins as a past tense narrative but in the final two lines Blake changes to the present tense, highlighting the everlasting and dangerous consequences of anger.

Tip - If you don't fully understand the effect of it being written in the first person then replace the first person pronouns (I) with the third person equivalent (he/she). When you do this the events of the poem seem like they are in isolation and not connected to the reader. As a result, the poem loses its didactic quality, causing the moral message to be easily dismissed.

## Opening

The opening of the poem is fundamental to understanding Blake's message as it clearly outlines his overarching ideas. His use of **monosyllabic words** heightens the **lyricism of the stanzas** which makes them easier to remember. This is emphasised by the **punctuation** which ensures this clarity: the **colon** highlights the **direct link between the suppression of anger and the growth of wrath**, while the **full stops** ensure **a sense of finality**. They create the impression that these destructive consequences are inevitable.

This message is built on by Blake's use of **parallel syntax**. The **syntax** highlights that an individual's choice is simple: if they communicate their emotions then their anger will subside, but if they choose to suppress their feelings then they will only grow. The moral complexities that Blake explores arise later on, causing the reader to initially accept and understand his ideas without confusion or debate.

Finally, Blake heightens this effect by using **binary opposites** at the end of each verse: **"friend"** and **"foe"** are the **antithesis** of each other and so are **"end"** and **"grow"**. This highlights the drastically different consequences that will arise following an individual's choice to either suppress or communicate their emotions. By using opposing ideas, Blake is able to further **polarise the two consequences**, making the speaker's wrath appear considerably worse.



## Structure

### Rhyme Scheme

Blake uses an **AABB rhyme scheme**, a relatively simple structure, which allows his more complex ideas to be foregrounded. This is **reminiscent of a nursery rhyme** which often tell a simple message through a complex story.

Blake furthers this nursery rhyme like feel through the **lyrical quality** of the poem, which presents it in a memorable fashion. Again, this highlights his **didactic (with an intention to teach) message**. This lyricism **juxtaposes** the immoral events within the poem however, instead establishing a **sinister tone**. It could be argued that the **rhyme scheme reflects the division between the speaker and their foe**, as the stanzas are somewhat separated into two couplets. Therefore, Blake uses the structure of the poem to reflect the theme of conflict.

**JUXTAPOSITION** | Comparing two concepts, characters, or clauses, in close proximity in a passage for the effect of contrast.

### Anaphora

The **conjunction “And”** is repeated at the start of multiple stanzas which **mirrors the growth of the speaker’s anger**. The word is emphasised due to the **trochaic meter** (see below) which increases the pace and obsessive drive of the poem. This highlights the **uncontrollable** nature of wrath, warning the reader of its disastrous effects.

**ANAPHORA** | A word which refers to a previously used word in the text.

### Enjambement

Blake uses **caesura** at the end of each line except in the final stanza (lines 13 and 15). This **enjambment highlights the progression of the speaker’s anger**, as it appears as though there is a lack of control. This is because even the stanzas of the poem are no longer contained by punctuation which again exemplifies the uncontrollable nature of wrath.

### Sibilance

Blake uses **sibilance** at the end of the second stanza:

And I **s**unned it with **s**miles,  
And with **s**oft **d**eceitful wiles

This creates a **gentle cadence** which reflects the subtlety and secrecy through which the speaker nurtured his anger. This tone does not appear as positive however, instead the gentle ‘s’ sounds produce a **sinister atmosphere**. Blake furthers this by including the **plosive ‘d’** sound with the word **“deceitful”**, interrupting the soft rhythm and consequently making his intentions seem more sinister.



**CADENCE** | a rhythm created by the rise and fall of the voice

## Form

### Genre

'A Poison Tree' is often regarded as a **ballad** - a poem which is traditionally sung to convey a clear moral lesson. This allows Blake's message, that emotions should be expressed not suppressed, to be emphasised. Furthermore, it is one of the oldest forms of poetry, presenting Blake's message as one which is significant, timeless, and relevant to all of his readers.

The poem is arranged into **four quatrains**, presenting it as uniform and controlled. This may reflect the idea of **suppression**, as the outward appearance of rigidity and control completely **juxtaposes** the destruction of the poem. This may be because Blake wants to convey the idea that while one may outwardly appear in control, they cannot truly suppress their emotions as this will only lead to damaging consequences.

### Meter

Blake uses two types of **meter** in the poem:

- **Trochaic trimeter** - three stressed syllables in each line, each followed by an unstressed syllable.
- **Iambic tetrameter** - four unstressed syllables, each followed by a stressed one (traditionally used in English ballads).

He alternates between the two types, using **trochaic trimeter** in the first line and **iambic tetrameter** in the second:

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**.

The above example makes it clear that by alternating between the two types of meter Blake is able to emphasise the most significant words in the stanza, such as **"angry"** and **"wrath"**. Furthermore, the combination between the meter and the fact that most of the words are **monosyllabic** causes the words to sound as though they are 'stamping' which adds to the theme of anger within the poem.



There is one line which breaks this pattern however:

**And I sunned** it with **smiles**,

This uses two trochaic (stressed then unstressed) syllables and one iambic (unstressed then stressed), deviating from the pattern. When the poem is read aloud, this line disrupts the rhythm, causing the reader to sense that something is wrong. This is significant as it foregrounds the unnatural and deceitful way through which the speaker nurtures his anger, **highlighting that Blake believes that the suppression of wrath is inherently wrong.**

## Language Techniques

### Tone and Atmosphere

Blake very **rarely references the setting** within the poem. He reveals in the final stanza that the foe snuck into the speaker's garden at **"night"** when the pole was **"veil'd"**, creating an **atmosphere of secrecy**. This uses **common literary tropes** to emphasise the immorality of his actions, building the tension until the final lines.

### Tense

Blake includes a **change of tense** in the final stanza, moving from past to present. The change is significant as it draws the reader further into the action of the poem. This is because the speaker is informing them that the foe's body is currently lying outside. As a result, the consequences of the speaker's anger appear more serious, increasing the dramatic effect of Blake's message.

### Ambiguity of Language

There are numerous examples within the poem where Blake uses **homophones** and **ambiguous language** in his descriptions. For example:

- **"And into my garden stole"** - the **verb "stole"** is a **homophone** which can mean 'to sneak into an area' or 'to take something without permission'.
- **"When the night had veil'd the pole"** - this is also a homophone as it may either be in reference to the tree or the pole star. Alternatively, it may allude to the polarity between the speaker and the foe, suggesting that the darkness had covered their enmity, allowing the foe to sneak into the speaker's garden.
- **"In the morning glad I see"** - the **adjective "glad"** may reference a cheerful morning or may represent the speaker's happiness at seeing his foe beneath the tree.

The **ambiguity** of these words reflects the **uncertainty of feelings** which highlight that they are complex and should be understood and dealt with properly.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that all three of these words appear in the final stanza, building up to the crescendo of the poem. This may show the lack of control of the speaker as it highlights that just as the meanings and interpretations of words cannot be controlled, neither can feelings and emotions.



## Natural Imagery

### The Apple

Blake uses the apple as a **manifestation** of the **repressed anger** that the speaker is experiencing. He allows us to empathise with the speaker's foe however, as he uses a **semantic field** of beauty when describing its appearance. The **adjectives** "**bright**" and "**shine**" appear at the end of their respective stanzas which draw attention to its allure. This causes the reader to understand the foe's **temptation** which means they can sympathise with his character.

**SEMANTIC FIELD** | A writer uses words which are linked by a theme or topic throughout a text or passage.

Furthermore, by aligning ideas surrounding temptation with the symbol of an apple, Blake overtly draws parallels between 'A Poison Tree' and the story of Adam and Eve. This again allows the reader to sympathise with the foe, as they are familiar with a mistake like this. After all, we are only human and make mistakes. As a result the speaker appears villainous, raising questions about the morality of the situation.

Blake also draws **parallels** between the apple and the speaker, perhaps to emphasise the **theme of deception**. The apple is described as "**bright**" which should present it as a **positive symbol** within the poem. However, the reader is aware that it was created out of wrath which instead portrays the fruit as a **sinister subversion of natural imagery**. Similarly, the speaker outwardly appears content, but in reality, his anger is festering within him, portraying wrath as a deceptive and powerful force.



Through the apple Blake introduces a number of **moral questions** which illustrate the **complexity of human emotion**. After constructing sympathetic descriptions of the foe, Blake causes the reader to question who is at fault for their death. Is it the foe for committing the crime of theft? Or is it the speaker, who creates a tempting apple to lure the foe into his garden? The complexity of these questions is heightened as Blake does not detail the reason behind the speaker's wrath, making it difficult for the reader to decide who is at fault.

### The Tree

Blake **subverts** common tropes surrounding natural imagery within the poem which creates a **sinister tone**. This is seen most notably through the **symbolism of the tree**, which is often used in literature to **symbolise growth and life**. Blake chooses to subvert this trope, however, as the speaker watered the tree with their **juxtaposing** "**fears**".

Furthermore, the tree is the final symbol that Blake references within the poem. He uses it in his description of the death of the foe, again **subverting natural imagery** as he associates it with death as opposed to life. This is likely to make readers feel uncomfortable as it conveys



the idea that the **suppression of anger is unnatural and counteractive**, reinforcing Blake's message.

### The Garden

This symbol may reference the speaker's literal and therefore physical garden, however it may also be a **metaphorical representation of the speaker's mind**. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the speaker's **anger grew into a tree** which presents the idea that their thoughts and emotions manifest within their metaphorical garden.

- When Blake writes that the foe **"stole"** into the garden, it could be argued that he has taken over the speaker's mind which furthers the idea that if anger is suppressed it becomes all-consuming.

In addition, the garden may be in reference to **The Garden of Eden**. This is interesting, as all of the natural images that Blake uses can in some ways be connected to the Bible (the apple relates to the story of Adam and Eve while the tree relates to the 'Tree of Life' that they ate the apple from).

Blake draws **parallels** between both the action and the setting, and so it is likely that readers will pick up on these references and associate the poem with the story of Adam and Eve. It could therefore be argued that Blake presents the suppression of anger as mankind's 'fall from grace', presenting the idea that just as Adam and Eve were punished for eating the apple, mankind will face the consequences of their anger and wrath.



Alternatively, it could be argued that Blake is using the poem to critique the Church, presenting the idea that just as Adam and Eve made a mistake, the Church are wrong in advising people to suppress their emotions.

### **Themes and Ideas**

#### Religion and The Bible

The **theme of religion** is introduced from the offset of the poem through Blake's references to the speaker's **"wrath"**, as this was a term often used to describe the anger of God in the Old Testament. This causes the **themes of anger and religion to interlink**, allowing them to build on each other and arguably become the two most prominent themes that Blake explores.

The speaker doesn't confront their foe, instead they choose to suppress their emotions. This is a response that the Church encouraged but one which Blake strongly disagreed with. He presents the alternative idea that confrontation is sometimes necessary to resolve a problem and prevent emotions from growing out of control.

Furthermore, Blake draws **parallels** between the poem and biblical stories, as both the foe and Adam and Eve took an apple which was



not meant for them. This presents the idea that all humans are the same - they have been making the same mistakes since the beginning of time. He therefore highlights that these **emotions are an innate part of human creation** and that instead of suppressing them we should try to express and understand our feelings.

The **biblical imagery** above attributes a greater weight to Blake's argument, as he is able to use these ideas to add substance to his writing. This causes his viewpoint to appear superior to the preachings of the Church, allowing the poem to act as an effective critique of their methods and teachings.

### Anger

The **theme of anger** underpins the poem and is arguably the most central concept within the narrative. Blake explores multiple aspects of the theme, but presents them in an **accessible way** so that readers are able to benefit from his message. The poem is easy to read and has a relatively **simple structure**. Perhaps this reflects how the approach towards anger is simple: rather than suppressing emotions they should be expressed.



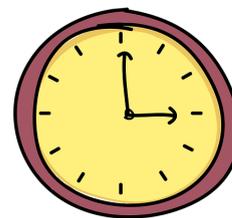
Blake includes a **volta** in the poem after the first two lines. It is significant that this occurs so early on, as the poem is divided into two remarkably unequal sections. The first section discusses the **effects of expressing and communicating anger**, while the second explores the **consequences of suppressing this emotion**. Interestingly, the section which details the suppression of anger is much longer, perhaps to convey the idea that anger is uncontrollable if it is not dealt with properly, or that it is a stronger emotion.

Blake **explores the reactions and perceptions to anger** in a way which mimics life. He details that in the final stanza the speaker feels a sense of satisfaction, highlighting that his anger makes him feel good. The reader, however, is likely to respond to this reaction with disgust - a response which is furthered by the **sinister undertone** and **subverted natural imagery**. In this way Blake presents the idea that while anger may bring satisfaction to the person who experiences it, those around them will likely be repelled by it.

Blake also suggests that anger is a part of a **self-perpetuating cycle**. This cycle is seen in the second stanza where Blake writes that the speaker's anger causes fear and sorrow, which in turn causes his anger to grow. He therefore highlights that it is a dangerous emotion, and that the only way to truly stop the cycle from occurring is to communicate emotions early on.

### Time scheme

Blake establishes a **relentless time scheme within the narrative** by repeatedly referencing the cycle of day and night. This allows the reader to appreciate the **all-consuming** nature of the speaker's wrath, as it causes them to witness its inescapable quality. This reinforces the idea that the suppression of emotions only causes anger and wrath to grow stronger.



## Lies and Deceit

Blake presents the **theme of deceit as one which closely interlinks with anger**. This presents human emotions as **multifaceted** and more complex than they may initially seem. The speaker's anger and deception build on each other, establishing a cycle which is powered by fear and despair.



Blake also explores the different **manifestations of deceit**. The speaker is outwardly deceptive, fuelling their anger with **“smiles”** and self-describing their actions as **“soft deceitful wiles”**. On the other hand, the foe is deceptive in a more subtle way. They sneak into the speaker's garden under the cover of **“night”** in order to steal the apple. This shows how deceit can be either covert or overt, again highlighting the complexity of human emotion.

This also develops the moral questions that Blake proposes (see: 'The Apple' below), as both the speaker and the foe can be described as calculating. It could be argued that the speaker appears more villainous as they spend time crafting the apple with the intention to deceive. This presents the speaker as more malicious which could cause the reader to sympathise with the foe.

Finally, it could be said that Blake is deceptive to the reader due to the way he structures the poem. He arranges the poem into **four simple quatrains**, and uses a **simple rhyme scheme** and **rhythm which mimics a nursery rhyme**. This causes the poem to appear as though it is simple and child-like, when in reality it is complex and presents a profound message.

## Foe

It is interesting to note that Blake refrains from giving the foe a name, he **remains unidentified** during the poem. This may be to allow the message of the poem to be universal, so that all readers can relate to and therefore benefit from its lessons. Alternatively, Blake may have done this to ensure that the **reader's focus is on the speaker's wrath and the consequences of anger**, rather than on the identity of the foe and what they might have done.

In this way, it becomes clear that the foe is only important in their relationship to the speaker, rather than as a character themselves. Maybe the foe is simply a **plot device**, as they are not a significant character in their own respect.



Arguably, the foe remains nameless in order to **prevent the reader from forming a relationship with them**. This limits the empathy they feel for his character, ensuring that readers are not excessively saddened by the foe's death. Through this Blake ensures that the readers emotions do not cloud their perceptions of the poem, allowing them to fully benefit from the didacticism of the events.



## Human Psyche

Blake uses the poem as an **exploration of human nature**, scrutinising the emotions of anger and wrath and the effect these have on the speaker. The poem is **mysterious**, as readers are unaware of what prompted the speaker's anger and are not certain of whether the foe is dead. This ambiguity highlights the complexity of the human condition and because it's not specific means the poem can be universally applicable. This means readers can draw on elements of the poem and apply it to their own experiences, increasing its relevance.

While it may seem as though the speaker's anger begins subconsciously, it cannot be denied that they play an active role in developing their wrath. Blake uses both the **personal pronoun "I"** and **active verbs** which are seen when the speaker says **"I water'd it"** and **"I sunned it"**. This ensures that the responsibility of the uncontrollable wrath lies only with the speaker.

Blake presents the idea that because the speaker suppressed their emotions, feelings of anger and wrath have taken over. The speaker can be seen as a **slave to their emotions**, actively taking care of them and causing them to grow stronger. 'A Poison Tree' presents the idea that this could have been avoided if the speaker had simply communicated their anger, because they haven't done this the speaker is portrayed as villainous and uncontrollable. This highlights to readers that they should be firmly in control of their emotions to prevent disastrous consequences. Instead, you need to gain a better understanding of them and act accordingly - a progressive suggestion at the time of publication.

## Absence of Regret

There is a distinct lack of regret within the poem as the speaker does not discuss nor display any remorse following their actions, despite the fact that much of the poem is **narrated in the past tense**. Instead, Blake adopts a **matter of fact tone** when describing emotions of anger and despair. This **tone** means the reader makes their own judgement about the speaker and their actions as there is an **absence of self-criticism**.

As the speaker is not reflecting on and condemning their own actions, the reader feels more strongly that this is their responsibility. This prompts them to **reflect on the themes and morals** within the poem, as it means they think about them more deeply which allows Blake to achieve his aim of conveying a greater message through the poem.

Furthermore, this **absence of regret** develops the reader's understanding of the speaker's persona. Blake outlines that following the foe's death the speaker feels satisfaction as opposed to remorse. This highlights how anger and wrath have the ability to diminish an individual's humanity, as the final impression of the speaker is one of psychological corruption.

