

## Lecture Thirteen: A Study of William Blake's A Poison Tree

### \*Lesson Plan

- 1-Introduction
- 2-Biography of the Poet: Who is William Blake?
- 3-Analysis of the Poem
- 4-Evaluation

### \*Lesson Objectives: by the end of the lesson, students will be able to

- To analyze Blake's use of figurative language providing the main figures of speech.
- To summarize the central theme of *A Poison Tree* in few sentences explaining how suppressed anger develops into destructive consequences.
- To explore Blake's use of poetic devices to affect the theme, tone and structure.
- To study the rhythm, rhyme then scan few lines from the poem.
- To evaluate the moral or didactic message of the poem

### \*Keywords

Poem analysis, A Poison Tree, William Blake, Romanticism, Biography

### A Poison Tree (1794)

by William Blake (1757-1827)

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 my 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 outstretch'd beneath the tree

## 1-Introduction

“A Poison Tree” is one of Blake’s poems in “*Songs of Experience*”. It was written in 1794. Based on the lines and appearance this poem is close structure and consists of four quatrains. This poem is about the dark side of human nature; anger and desire to triumph over the enemies. The speaker had a disagreement and felt anger toward his friend and his enemy, because his enemy stole his apple (poison apple) and ate it. Finally the speaker found his enemy dead under the tree. The speaker was glad and satisfied.

## 2- Biography of the poet: Who is William Blake?

William Blake began writing at an early age; at age 10. He studied engraving and grew to love Gothic art, which he incorporated into his own unique works. He is a misunderstood poet, artist; engraver and visionary throughout much of his life. William Blake was born on November 28, 1757, in London, England. He only briefly attended school, being chiefly educated at home by his mother. Blake's artistic ability became evident in his youth, and by age 10, he was enrolled at Henry Pars' drawing school, where he sketched the human figure by copying from plaster casts of ancient statues. At age 14, he apprenticed with an engraver. Blake's master was the engraver to the London Society of Antiquaries, and Blake was sent to Westminster Abbey to make drawings of tombs and monuments, where his lifelong love of gothic art was seeded.

At age 21, Blake completed his seven-year apprenticeship and became a journeyman copy engraver, working on projects for book and print publishers. Also preparing himself for a career as a painter, that same year, he was admitted to the Royal Academy of Art's Schools of Design, where he began exhibiting his own works in 1780. Blake's artistic energies branched out at this point, and he privately published his *Poetical Sketches* (1783), a collection of poems that he had written over the previous 14 years. In August 1782, Blake married Catherine Sophia Boucher, who was illiterate. Blake taught her how to read, write, draw and color. He also helped her to experience visions, as he did. One of the most traumatic events of Blake's life occurred in 1787, when his beloved brother, Robert, died from tuberculosis at age 24.

In 1804, Blake began to write and illustrate *Jerusalem* (1804-20), his most ambitious work to date. He also began showing more work at exhibitions, but these works were met with silence, and the one published review was absurdly negative; the reviewer called the exhibit a

display of "nonsense, unintelligibility and egregious vanity," and referred to Blake as "an unfortunate lunatic." Blake was devastated by the review and lack of attention to his works, and, subsequently, he withdrew more and more from any attempt at success.

In the final years of his life, Blake suffered from recurring bouts of an undiagnosed disease that he called "that sickness to which there is no name." He died on August 12, 1827. Unappreciated in life, Blake has since become a giant in literary and artistic circles, and his visionary approach to art and writing has not only spawned countless, spellbound speculations about Blake, they have inspired a vast array of artists and writers.

### **3- Analysis of the Poem**

**a-Structure and Form:** the poem is a lyric; it is also a descriptive poem due to the provided descriptions and the words used for that description. It is composed of four quatrains and each two couplets rhyme together. Most of the lines are run- on lines and the punctuation used by the poet confirms the point.

**b-Content of the Poem (Theme):** this poem tells about anger and desire to triumph over the enemies; the dark side of human nature. The poem discusses the catastrophic effects of unexpressed anger. The poet, very artistically, delves deep into the darker side of the human mind and captures the damage that anger does to the heart where it nourishes and becomes a poison. The speaker's anger is toward his friend and his enemy. He had a disagreement with his friend and he can solve it. He also had a disagreement with another person that is his enemy, but towards his enemy he did not express relief of his anger. The enemy grew his fury. Secondary themes also include hatred, revenge, self denial, alienation, grudge, wrath, and death.

**c-Language & Literary Devices:** Blake has given great importance to the word diction and the tenses used to convey his ideas. There is a remarkable shift from the past tense to the present simple tense in the last stanza; that transition is highly significant.

- **Antithesis:** An antithesis is a figure of speech that refers to the juxtaposition of opposing or contrasting ideas. Blake has used this device in the first stanza. The opening line focuses on telling a friend about anger, and it vanishes. The next two lines show the

opposite act about hiding his anger from the enemy, and it grows. This is a juxtaposition of two contrasting ideas.

- **Alliteration:** Alliteration is the repetition of the same consonant sounds in the same line such as in “my, my”, “bore, bright”
- **Allusion:** Allusion is a belief and an indirect reference of a person, place, thing or idea of a historical, cultural, political or literary significance. In this poem, “Garden”, “apple” and “tree” are the illusions of Adam, Eve and the Garden of Eden.
- **Personification:** the poet personifies emotions like wrath as a growing entity inside the human heart, eg: (I told my wrath: as if wrath is **listening** to the speaker).
- **Oxymoron:** with soft deceitful wiles, how can a deceitful wile be soft?
- **Metaphor:** It is a figure of speech in which an implied comparison is made between the objects different in nature. There is one extended metaphor used in this poem. It is used in the second line of the third stanza “Till it bore an apple bright.” Here the apple is the metaphor of the fruit of his grudge. Another example of metaphor is in “I water’d it, I sunned it” the speaker compares wrath with the tree that needs water and sun to grow.
- **Symbolism:** Symbolism is using symbols to signify ideas and qualities, giving them symbolic meanings different from literal “Tree” symbolizes his wrath and anger whereas, “garden” is the symbol of the heart where the hatred is natured.
- **Imagery:** Imagery is used to make readers perceive things with their five senses. William Blake has used visual imagery throughout the poem to make his reader create a mental picture such as, “And it grew both day and night.” “Till it bore an apple bright”, “My foe outstretched beneath the tree.”

Blake has beautifully employed these devices to show the negative impacts of anger. The appropriate and careful use of these devices has made the poem captivating and thoughtful for the readers.

**d-The Poetic Voice:** the poem is told from first person point of view

**e-The Rhyme Scheme and Scansion of the poem:** The rhyme scheme followed in the poem is {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 contradicts with the very complex human emotions he is describing. The poem meter ranges between the Trochaic Tetrameter (line 1) and the Iambic Tetrameter (line 2).

I was | angry | with | my | friend |  
1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

I told | my wrath | my wrath | did end |  
1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

### f-Summary of the poem

The speaker tells that he was angry with his friend, and he openly expressed that he was angry. It ended there and then. However, when he grew angry with his enemy, he could not tell him why he was angry, and it continued growing. The poet wants to state that when you tell the reason for your anger to a friend, it ends but as you definitely do not tell the same to your enemy, it never ends. Rather, it continues growing.

The speaker again comes up with the same argument that he continued watering his fears every night and every morning and shed tears for it. He continued smiling thinking about how to remove this fear and thought about innocent wiles to harm his enemy. This means that if you have a fear of something or somebody, you continue raising stakes about your enmity and think about destroying your enemy.

The speaker continues telling that his fear grew day and night. The more he thought of it, the more it grew until it bore a fruit, an apple. He means that it is perhaps the same apple that our forefathers Adam and Eve ate. When his enemy looked at that apple, he knew that it was his and that the enemy's likely plan was to get it by hook or by crook. The speaker means that fears or anger grows very quickly into such sweet plans.

The speaker states that his enemy planned to steal his apple and entered his garden with these intentions. In fact, this apple seemed to be a bait the speaker threw before his enemy to trap him. He was right that his enemy entered the garden at night and the night veiled the pole with which the apple was hanging. The enemy got caught and lay there prostrated. When the speaker saw him in the morning, he was glad that his enemy was trapped and lying there under the tree. This means that his plan worked, and he was successful in trapping his enemy. This also shows

the power and results of negativity. This stanza completes the main idea of negative emotions and their power of destruction.

#### 4-Evaluation

##### 2-A Short Test

###### a- Are the following statements true or false?

- The speaker openly expresses his anger to his enemy at the beginning of the poem.
- The speaker's anger grows because he conceals it instead of expressing it.
- The "poison tree" is a literal tree growing in the speaker's garden.
- The apple represents temptation and concealed hostility.
- The enemy becomes aware that the apple is dangerous before eating it.
- The poem suggests that suppressed anger can lead to destructive consequences.
- The tone of the poem is entirely joyful and celebratory.
- The poem is included in Blake's collection *Songs of Experience*.

###### b- Fill in the gaps with the correct word

- In the poem, anger that is openly expressed tends to .....while anger that is hidden tends to increase.
- The speaker compares his growing anger to a .....that he carefully nurtures.
- The emotion is metaphorically "watered" with .....and sustained through deception.
- The speaker uses false .....to conceal his true feelings.
- Over time, the anger produces a symbolic .....that appears attractive but is deadly.
- The enemy is drawn to the fruit because it looks .....and appealing.
- By the end of the poem, the concealed anger results in the .....of the foe.
- The poem ultimately warns that repressed emotions can become morally and psychologically .....

#### B- Global Task:

-What makes William Blake's poem entitled A Poison Tree called a romantic poem? Discuss Blake's use of the characteristics of Romanticism reflected in that poem.

-Write a short paragraph to summarize the main symbols found in that poem