‘A Poison Tree’ by William Blake

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/clips/zfyjmp3>

# Context

William Blake was born in 1757 and was originally an engraver. He began adding text to his engravings in the form of poems and he was interested as much in the presentation of poems as the poems themselves. In 1789 he published an illustrated set of poems called Songs of Innocence and in 1793 followed this with Songs of Experience (from which A Poison Tree comes). The following year, he combined these two sets of poems, publishing as Songs of Innocence and Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.

The first set of poems is, therefore, generally hopeful and positive while the second set tends to be more negative and pessimistic.

Blake was a deeply religious man and this shows in the moral nature of his work. His poetry was not really well-regarded during his own life. Today he is regarded as a man ahead of his time and he is now thought of as a major poetic writer.

# Themes

A growing apple tree is an extended metaphor for growing anger

A number of unifying ideas or themes run through the poem. Different readers may attach more or less significance to each of these themes, depending upon how they view the poem.

| **Theme** | **Evidence** | **Analysis** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Anger:** the basic human emotion which sets the events of this poem in motion. Although it is not necessarily wrong in itself, how we go about dealing with anger is extremely important.  | '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 first stanza (lines that make up a section of a poem) contrasts two different ways of dealing with anger and the two different outcomes that may occur as a result. |
| **Deception:** the speaker bottles things up and does not talk about his feelings to his enemy. The enemy sneaks into the garden in the dead of night to take the fruit.  | 'And he knew that it was mine,/ And into my garden **stole**' | 'Stole' is an interesting choice of word. While it has the clear meaning that the enemy sneaked in under cover of darkness it also reminds the reader that it is an act of theft. |
| **Communication:** the poet/speaker communicates a direct moral lesson to the reader about the disastrous consequences of his own failure to communicate with another person.  | 'I told my wrath', 'I told it not.' | This simple but direct use of antithesis (the use of opposites) shows how simple it would be to talk about an issue but equally how easy it is to say nothing and let resentment grow. |

**Interpretation**

**Interpretation of the line:** 'And it grew both day and night, / Till it bore an apple bright;'

| **Interpretation** | **Reason for interpretation** |
| --- | --- |
| The apple represents the anger growing large and ripening. | The apple has been chosen as a symbol because it is a common fruit and hatred and revenge are common feelings in human beings. |
| The apple refers to the apple in the biblical story of the Garden of Eden. | The poet chooses the apple as a reference to the Biblical story, a tale that most of Blake’s readers would have been familiar with. The speaker could be likened to a serpent tempting his enemy. |

**Interpretation of the line:** 'And I water'd it in fears. / Night and morning with my tears;'

| **Interpretation** | **Reason for interpretation** |
| --- | --- |
| The speaker intentionally helps resentment and anger to grow. | He deliberately cultivates the growing tree (anger) with tears of frustration and a refusal to communicate with his enemy. |
| The speaker accidentally helps resentment and anger to grow. | His tears are ones of sorrow as he worries about his relationship with his enemy. |

# Form

A Poison Tree is written in quatrains. This straightforward grouping of sets of four lines is one of the simplest and most recognisable poetic forms.

# Structure

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

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

# Language

The vocabulary is simple (even if some of the words are unfamiliar today). Notice the following:

* in the first stanza many of the words are monosyllables except for the word 'angry', which is repeated twice to emphasise emotion and to contrast with the two different ways the speaker deals with this emotion
* the lines in the first stanza all start with 'I' which emphasises that this is a personal story told from an individual point of view
* seven of the other 12 lines in the poem start with 'and' which helps the story to build and increase in intensity

All of the above makes the poem seem like a piece of verse for children and like a simple nursery rhyme with a clear moral message to be learned. The use of 'and' particularly resembles that of a child telling a story. A difficult message is wrapped up in a form and structure which is deliberately simple and using very straightforward vocabulary, to get its point across.