



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

“A Poison Tree” and the Bible

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Abstract

If William Blake’s master-piece poem “The Tyger” can be considered to be his symbolic utterance of the divine wrath, another song of experience by him “A Poison Tree” together with ‘The Human Abstract’ explores on the theme of human anger. Delving into many critical opinions about this poem, the present study tries to establish that this poem is a clear tribute to Blake’s dependence on the Bible and the imageries from there. Much more than the ‘attributed’ Blakean criticism of the Bible as some of the scholars have ventured to show, the poem is in fact a clear cut and subtle psychological dig made by William Blake at the pretentious and hypocritical double-dealing of the Pharisaic people with whom Jesus Christ was always at odds throughout His life on earth. The first two lines of the poem consisting of the first incident of it could belong to the Innocence State and the rest of the poem consisting of the second incident belongs to the Experience State.

Keywords

Wrath; Forbearance; “A Poison Tree”; William Blake.



If William Blake’s poem “The Tyger” dwells on the theme of the divine wrath, there are two other poems of Blake which apparently deal with the theme of human wrath: “The Human Abstract” and “A Poison Tree.” Kathleen Raine suggested that both the Tree of Mystery bearing the fruit of Deceit in “The Human Abstract” and the poison tree are the same (II, 32). In the present study the focus is only on the poem “A Poison Tree.” In “A Poison Tree Analysis Using Post-Structuralism” posted by Edwig O’Nguik on the Louie’s Corner blog, the author analyses it in three stages, which contains verbal stage, textual stage, and linguistic stage and concludes: “The disunity can be found among the first, second, third, and fourth stanzas which have different process of the tree which is used as metaphor to symbolize anger. The theme of this poem is ‘suppressed wrath can harm life’. The deeper meaning is the lack of self-control in humanity.”

The present study is a threefold analysis of the poem: namely, putting it in the whole context of William Blake’s composite art of poetry and painting produced and printed by dint of illuminated printing which he invented using etched copper plates, posing the relationship to Innocence and Experience as two contrary states of the human soul, and deeming it in the background of the Bible which for Blake was the Great Code of Art.

Seeing the title, “A Poison Tree” one may think that the poem would be talking about some sort of flora and fauna. But when the reader goes on to read the poem in its entirety, one realizes that “A Poison Tree” must be taken as a symbolic title than depicting any flora or fauna. The structure of the poem is easily carved out as two incidents written in end-rhyming couplets. The poem takes on an “AA, BB” end rhyme scheme in that a sentence (in a couplet) will rhyme with the next. It is interesting to note that the first incident is laconically expressed in the very first two lines of the poem, whereas the second incident

runs through the whole of the remaining twelve lines. The beginning incident of the whole narrative of the poem is compressed into the very first couplet of this poem. Someone who was angry with his friend speaks out his wrath. Thus, the first two lines of the poem present the happy settlement of a quarrel and there is no repression. To quote from Geoffrey Keynes:

I was angry with my friend:

I told my wrath, my wrath did end (K 218).

In the second instance, he was also angry with his enemy. He had never revealed to his enemy. As a result of this, his anger or hate for him grew leading him to get implicated in the 'foe's' murder. The narrator speaks of "I" who is identified by Blake scholars as 'Yahweh' of the Old Testament God, whom Blake has renamed as Urizen appearing in many of his later prophetic writings. Similarly, the poison tree is his (Yahweh's) Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Instead of merely exploring wrath as the consequence of repressed anger, this poem incarnates wrath as an object. Wrath becomes a poison tree. Or rather, since the tree represents the body this anger becomes a sick and infectious body, which has repressed it into hypocritical and thereby perverted honest emotion into wrath and murder.

The poison tree is the growth of a man's concealed hatred for his foe, by which he traps his enemy to death and destroys himself. The first couplet obviously established how easily the burden of one's anger could be relieved by openly conversing with the concerned person. But when the speaker is suppressing his anger it grows up as wrath. A clear parallel can be seen in the Bible. In II Samuel Amnon had spoiled Absalom's sister Tamar, King David was very angry, but "Absalom spoke Amnon neither good nor bad, for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had forced his sister" (II Sam. 13. 22). In other words, David gave vent to the natural human anger at the atrocity done to his daughter, but Absalom did conceal his anger. Thus Absalom could be very much the prototype on whom Blake drew out the speaker in "A Poison Tree." Absalom in guile

hypocrisy pleaded the king to send Amnon in his company and ordered the servants to strike Amnon. Paradoxically, Absalom could not be peaceful even after this. He had to flee away from his own land. This paradox is brought to light by Blake's poem. Probably this is highlighted again in *Milton* when Blake wrote later, "If you account it Wisdom when you are angry to be silent and/ Not to show it, I do not account that Wisdom, but Folly" (K 483).

Here there is no settlement or peace both to the speaker as well as to the foe. For the speaker it becomes a tree to be cultivated carefully. Stealthily nurturing a tree wishing to eschew the sight of a neighbour can really be a cumbersome botheration for one who does it. The more he dissembles the more it grows until finally it produces a poisonous fruit. Consider the lines:

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 (K 218).

Taking this poem as an example of Blake's use of 'Objective Syntax' Donald Davie commented:

the reason why the action grows so easily out of the logic is that, as in 'The Human Abstract', each stanza, whether narrative or not, contains two syntactical members, so that every stanza seems to parallel every other one, in syntax as in metre and in rhyme. But the 'growth' is easy ('fatally easy', we might say, for the growth of the narrative is also the growth of the dreadful tree) in another way. For in a sense the poem never moves out of the realm of its initial terse logic. (83)

Both day and night, repressed anger was growing inside the speaker, bereaving him of peace of mind. As Linda R. Ranieri of West Chester University observes in her explication of the poem:

The speaker's vigilance results in "an apple bright" (10) in the third stanza – similar to the apple from the Tree of Forbidden Knowledge, this fruit stands at once as a harbinger of danger and a tantalizing temptation for the speaker's unsuspecting foe. The speaker becomes the Serpent that tempted Eve, capitalizing on and exploiting envy, a deadly sin by allowing his foe to "behold its shine" (11). The crafty speaker brags about reading his foe's mind: "And my foe beheld it shine, / and he knew that it was mine" (11-12), implying the ease with which he could fool his enemy by taking advantage of his foe's natural curiosity and covetousness. Blake ends this stanza with a comma instead of a period, accelerating the fatal line of action into the fourth and final stanza, filling the reader with dread and anticipation. (Ranieri)

Similarly, for the foe too, this unsettled wrath was a total discomfiture. Even though they were apparently at peace with each other due to the untold and repressed wrath, at the core of his heart, the foe wanted to steal the speaker's fruit and become his foe indeed. In Linda Ranieri's words,

The foe falls for the ruse, deceptive in his own right as he stealthily slips into the speaker's garden to steal the shiny object (and proving the speaker's suspicions right). Blake combines the acts of breaking and entering and of theft into the word "stole" at the end of Line 13 (an ironic line choice, too, if one is superstitious), with no ending punctuation that would let the reader hesitate or stop for a breath" (Ranieri).

He tries to be resolved with his own ill feelings to the speaker by coming to steal it by the night. The result is obviously the death of the foe:

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 (*K* 218).

But the speaker himself cannot take pride in it nor be happy about it. He is getting destroyed himself by this wile hypocrisy. He could have very well averted or avoided this outcome, had he shown spontaneous frankness in the beginning. In that event he would never have become an enemy. So the speaker of the poem is more culpable than the foe. In the words of Linda R Ranieri:

A *Poison Tree*' suggests to me a prisoner's confession without actually naming or describing the crime itself. The speaker takes the time to brag about how he implemented his plan, without admitting his crime. Thus this poem's impact lies in the dangers that can arise from allowing one's anger to grow unchecked and take over our minds, hearts, and souls, like a wild plant in the garden of our experience. (Ranieri)

The idea of graver responsibility to the speaker can be supported by observing the illustration to the poem. There the poison tree is pictured as if purposefully taking its root from the suppressed wrath of the speaker (See Fig. 1; retrieved from <www.blakearchive.org>).

The foe is lying dead and outstretched beneath a tree, which seems to be deriving the tendrils of its roots in earth from a twig starting from the 'y' of 'My' in the last line of the poem, which "grow up the page, enclosing the title, and expanding down at the right margin, to become a tree of seventy year's growth, rooted in the earth and dying", as has been pointed out by David V Erdman. As explained by Linda R Ranieri,

The final image conveyed in the last couplet is of the foe lying 'outstretched beneath the tree' (16), breaking the poem's flow of action by flashing forward to the following morning. With the dawn

comes the poem's resolution: the speaker is "glad [to] see" his foe dead, apparently from ingesting the poison apple. The speaker seems satisfied that his scheme of deception has worked, getting rid of his source of wrath by poisoning it with his unchecked anger and desire for revenge. (Ranieri)

"A Poison Tree" has obvious allusions to the "Tree of Life" and "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" in Genesis chapters 2 and 3. Kathleen Raine has pointed out that Blake was probably influenced by Jacob Boehme's idea of the "Tree of Life" and the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil". According to Boehme the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil were one and the same, but manifest in two worlds; the one perceived as it is in eternity and the other perceived as it is in this fallen world. After quoting extensively from Boehme, Kathleen Raine seems to conclude: "Adam instead of feeding upon the bread of heaven, 'the fruits of Life' (So Boehme calls them), ate the earthly nature of the trees, in which was hidden wrath of God the Father (II, 38)."

Having the complex symbolism at his mental arena, Blake is now conveying a human theme which is not at all obscure. As Raine suggests, "We do not need any special knowledge to recognize the force of Blake's argument that it is better to clear the air by an honest expression of anger than to accumulate the far more deadly and insidious poison of concealed wrath which goes under the name of 'Christian Forbearance' (II, 38-39)." It should be noted that originally Blake's title for this poem was "Christian Forbearance" as has been established by R.B. Kennedy. Drawing internal evidence from a cancelled line written into Blake's *Notebook* about 1793, R.B. Kennedy observes in connection with the change of title, that "the idea of a poisonous tree may owe something to the upas tree of Java ('*Antiaristoxicaria*', its native-name means 'poison')" The cancelled line reads: "There is just such a tree at Java found" (186).

In the poem Blake was battling against the traditional Christian teaching with a sense of deep psychological insight. As Anne K. Mellor observes: “Church and King join forces . . . to restrict emotion to ‘polite’ discourse (thus preventing simple anger into murderous frustration, as in “A Poison Tree”) . . . Every sign of Energy or exuberant physical activity is suppressed as the threat to the established system” (55). Blake categorically asserts that aggressive feelings in case suppressed, will certainly destroy interpersonal relationships. Self-effacement may easily become destructive self-assertion; similarly, humility and gentleness can degenerate into ‘soft deceitful wiles.’ With the change of title from “Christian Forbearance” to “A Poison Tree” Blake wanted to emphasize that even Forbearance, when misguided, can be a poison tree because “Each tree is known by its own fruit. . . . The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Lk. 6. 44-45). Moreover, an actual practice by the Lamb like Jesus Christ Himself restraining from such a hypocritical forbearance is recorded by John:

Jesus answered, ‘I have always spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret’. . . When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face . . . Jesus answered, ‘If I have spoken wrongly testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?’ (Jn. 18. 20-23)

Indeed, this incident not to argue that it expressed the anger of Jesus, but Jesus did not at all offer his other cheek to the police, waiting for the police to beat him there too. Certainly His annoyance at the misbehaviour of the police is spoken out.

There are scholars like Kathleen Raine (II, 38), Philip J. Gallagher (246-248) and others who mainly depended on the tradition of Boehme, and consider that “‘A Poison Tree’, while seeming to criticize only human behaviour, gives

occasion for a more far-reaching criticism of God.” God is accused of concealing his wrath in the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and ensnaring man. But a close reading of the Bible will reveal that such an accusation is unfounded. God was from the beginning telling them not to eat of a particular tree. The tree and the fruit are only symbols. The guilt of Adam and Eve was disobedience or disloyalty to the God who had been so kind and benign to them. And once they fell, He did not conceal His wrath, but He cursed and banished them. And in the curse itself is implied the hope for Salvation. God actually expressed His wrath and surely did it end at that moment itself. God, the Son undertakes the task to untie the knots of this curse in due time. If at all one thinks in quite a human way, Adam’s fall would have been less culpable, had he questioned God’s prohibition openly, without stealing and eating the forbidden fruit. And moreover, God, neither before nor after the fall, acts like a hypocritical foe. It is the men who are hypocritical and twist these truths by their guile plans. So Blake is battling not against God or Yahweh Himself, but against the false prophets assuming the role of minor deities and exhorting people for ‘vices’ like ‘Christian Forbearance,’ considered in the traditional verbatim sense.

Blake points out that Christian forbearance, if not properly understood and practised, will become a poison tree. Instead, Christian forbearance must be a combination of forgiveness and at the same time wrath with pity. Blake, who professed himself to have an interest in Jesus, the friend of sinners, affirms in the prefatory note (To The Public) to *Jerusalem*, that “the Spirit of Jesus is continual forgiveness of sin” (K 621). The same idea he reiterated in “The Everlasting Gospel” (K 745-786). Even in the lamentation of Enion in *The Four Zoas* one of her follies lamented over by herself had been “I have planted a false tree in the earth; it has brought forth a poison tree” (K 290). Finally she realizes the value of Experience: “what is the price of Experience? do men buy it for a song? / Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No, it is bought with the price / Of all that a man hath, his house, his wife, his children” (K 290). After extolling

the wrath of God symbolized in the tiger, Blake interprets that in the human situation especially the wrath should not be concealed. Wrath which speaks out frankly and settles things, is nothing but wrath with pity and understanding. “A Poison Tree” is an allegory which implicitly invites us to a sort of synchronising wrath and forgiveness of sins. *Tell the wrath and end the wrath* is the clear and irresistible message of the poem. Centuries ago, Blake probably anticipated one of the best-selling assertive training books from Transactional Analysis School authored by Herbert Fensterheim and Jean Baer entitled, *Don't Say Yes When You Want to Say No: Making Life Right When It Feels All Wrong*.

Philip Gallagher in his article proposes a hypothesis that Blake through this poem wanted to prove that the Fall Narrative in Genesis is a fraud:

In other words, the writers of Genesis, desiring as they did (according to Blake) to justify their murderous ways, went so far as to pronounce that the gods (Yahweh and the serpent) had ordered events which in the lyric pertain exclusively to the demon wrath, which resides in the breast of its human narrator. Thus the destructive repression of unmotivated anger becomes, under the aegis of the Bible, the occasion for allegedly just punishment of man, now fallen and therefore subject to the ways of sin which is death: Blake's poem is designated to expose the fraud. (246)

John Brenkman also suggests such an understanding of the poem in one of the footnotes of his article “The Concrete Utopia of Poetry: Blake's ‘A Poison Tree’”:

If one were immediately to draw the meaning of the image from its Biblical source to supply what is missing in the conceit [of the poison tree], the poem could be construed as a satire of the Eden myth. God would become the speaker, humankind, the foe ensnared by the temptation of something enviable. (188)

To both of these one may laconically answer that the Genesis account is not presenting a picture of repression of anger or concealed wrath. Neither is

the anger of God totally unmotivated, nor did Blake wish to criticise this Biblical Book by his poem “A Poison Tree”. If Blake really wanted to fulminate upon the Bible, he would not have inscribed on his *Laocoön* plate, “The Old & New Testaments are the Great Code of Art”, and filled the surrounding area of the whole picture with plenty of inscriptions from the Bible to establish his view points as an Artist and creative painter and poet committed to the Bible (see Fig 2; retrieved from <www.blakearchive.org>). Decoding these inscriptions in the possible order in Blake’s mind would be another interesting study which does not come under the purview of this article.

The anger of God and the anger of the speaker in the poem “A Poison Tree” are not analogical, nor at the same level. With all respect to the scholarly inquisitiveness of Gallagher and Brenkman, the researcher disagrees with them and aver Gallagher’s assertive allegation that Blake through this poem “implicitly uncovers what is perhaps the Bible’s most insidious doctrine”(248) to be certainly a far-fetched idea, especially, if one considers it in the whole background of Blake’s life-responses to the Bible. This fact is admitted by Gallagher himself in the conclusion of his paper (248, 249). Blake, of course, did examine and tried to interpret the Bible in his own way. But to say that he was trying to prove the Books of the Bible as fraudulent, is certainly not well-founded. In that case Blake would not have depended on the Bible so much. Nor would he have taken the pains to reach an Oxford Scholar’s level in studying and mastering the two Biblical languages Hebrew and Greek at the age of 45, with a view to understand better the core of the Bible which for him was the Great Code of Art. Moreover, Blake would not have ventured to reproduce the whole Bible in his own newly invented composite art form of illuminated painting and engraving, of which, unfortunately, he could only finish the first few chapters from the Book of Genesis alone. “A Poison Tree” is certainly a subtle psychological dig made by William Blake against the pharisaic hypocrisy and

double-mindedness, which Jesus Christ was bent on fulminating, at all costs, throughout His life here on Earth.

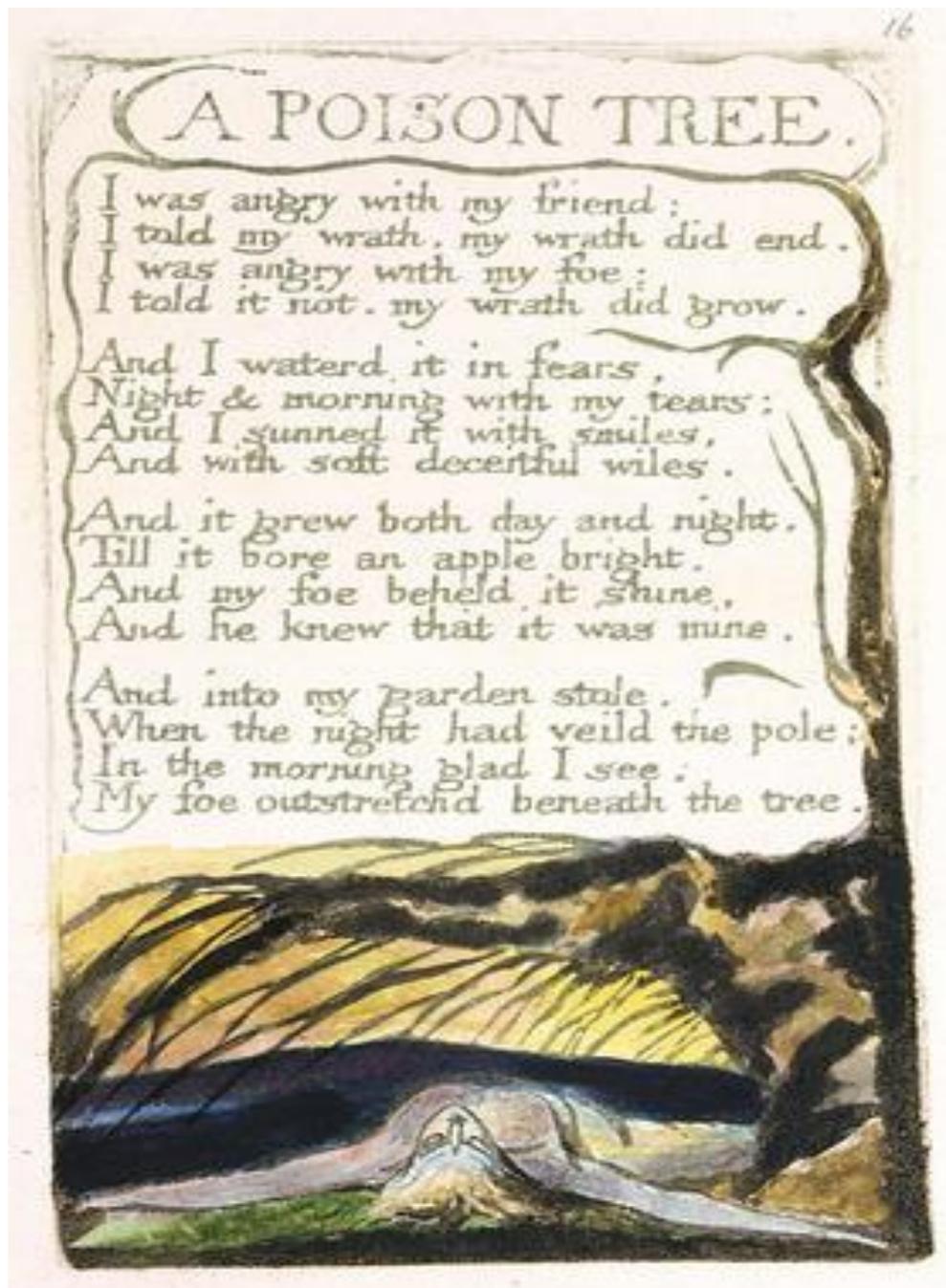


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

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MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Jose, Chiramel Paul. ““A Poison Tree” and the Bible.” *Literary Quest* 1.8 (2015):
1-15. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.