

ZIPTALES™

Reading the Poem

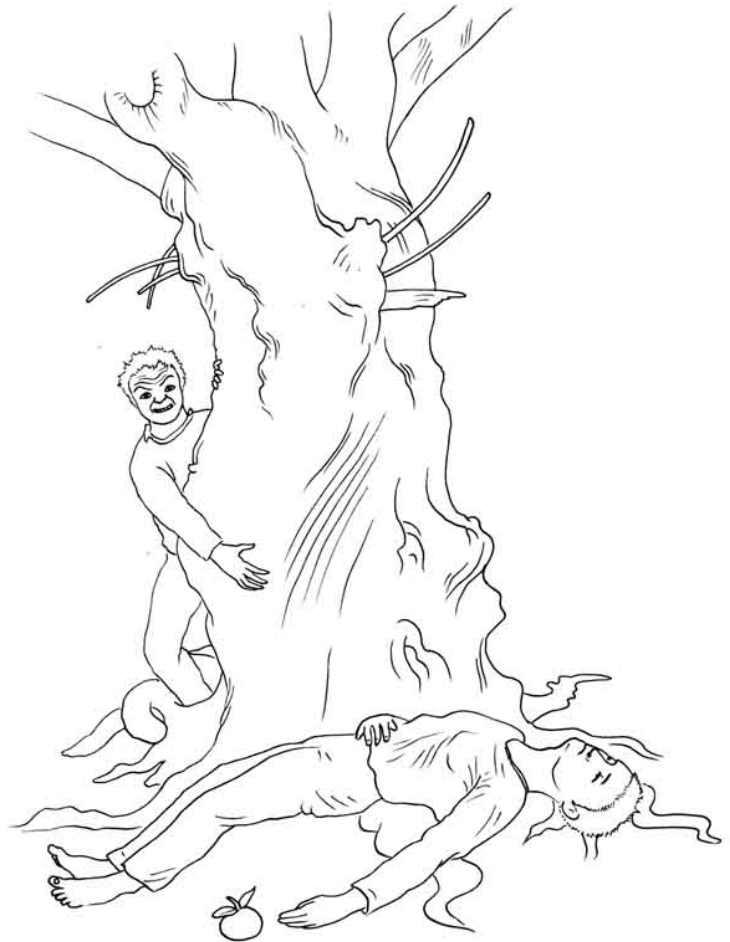
The Poison Tree

The Poet

William Blake (1757-1827) is one of England's most celebrated poets. He was born the son of a London hosier. He did not go to school, which was not compulsory in those times. However, he was taught by his mother, and from childhood showed extraordinary aptitude. His family belonged to a strict Christian sect, and Blake was brought up to be very devout.

In 1772 he was apprenticed to an engraver, and in 1779, because of his talents, became a student at the Royal Academy, where he studied painting. He married Catherine Boucher in 1782. It was a happy marriage, though they had no children.

After his father's death, he and his brother opened a print shop. He was beginning to write and illustrate as well, and in 1783, a benefactor paid for his first work, **Poetic Sketches**. In 1789, he self-published **Songs of Innocence**, the first of his really major collections. **Songs of Experience** followed in 1794.





Reading the Poem

The Poison Tree

The Poet



Blake had a powerful sense of personal morality. He was deeply mystical in his beliefs. He took very seriously the idea of Christian charity (ie loving kindness towards other people), and was appalled by some of the cruelties he saw around him. Among his most famous poems are '**The Chimney Sweeper**', a devastating portrait of the wretched lives of the poor, and '**Jerusalem**', an anguished reflection on the imperfection of life, which contains the now immortal expression 'dark satanic mills' (a reference to the factories of the industrial revolution).

Blake was something of a revolutionary in his time. He mixed with such celebrated radicals as Thomas Paine, author of *The Rights of Man*, and Mary Wollstonecraft (later Mary Shelley), an early feminist and author of *Frankenstein*. He was opposed to the class system, which served to keep poor people down, and even the monarchy. He was disgusted with the effects of the industrial revolution. He rejected the Old Testament idea of a punishing God in favour of the New Testament idea 'Love thy neighbour [other people] as thyself'. His poems more often than not have moral themes, though these are usually presented by means of symbolism – partly to avoid being too controversial, and partly to use the power of imagery and metaphor. The classic '**A Poison Tree**' is one of these.

ZIPTALES™

Reading the Poem The Poison Tree

The Poem

'A Poison Tree' seems, like so many of Blake's shorter poems, very simple – both in the form and in the message. In fact, it is quite complex. Its insight into human psychology is startling. It is a kind of parable (moral expressed in narrative form).

The poem begins with a couplet which sets out the healthy effects of being frank. The 'I' of the poem is angry with a friend. 'I told my wrath [anger]' and that was the end of the anger. This is then contrasted with another bout of anger. This time, 'I told it not [I said nothing of my anger]'. This allows the anger to 'grow'. The rest of the poem then takes the latter case (the secret anger), and shows what happens – how devastating the consequences are of unexpressed or repressed rage.

At this point, the beginning of stanza two, the poem shifts from statements of principle – anger and its resolution versus anger left unexpressed – and moves into the world of metaphor. Blake likens the anger to a (figurative) 'tree'. The angry man 'watered' it with fears (ie allowed fears to increase the anger). He 'sunned it' with hypocrisy – that is pretending to be friendly, while secretly despising the 'foe' (enemy).



ZIPTALES™

Reading the Poem The Poison Tree

The Poem



Stanza three takes the metaphor a stage further. The tree (of anger) grows quickly ('both day and night') and produces an 'apple'. This image has powerful connotations. In the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve took a forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Though the Bible never says so, this fruit is often thought of as an apple. The taking of the apple is associated with the 'original sin' and 'fall' of mankind - the loss of innocence and the beginning of all human suffering. Blake knowingly allows this echo. His 'apple' is the apple of anger. To some extent, Blake is suggesting that the 'original sin' - or cause of all human suffering - is/was lack of charity. Anger has become the fatal fruit that ruins people.

The last stanza shows what sort of fruit anger is. At dead of night (a clear indication of evil) the foe takes the fruit, and eats it. He dies. The 'I' of the poem discovers his body and is 'glad'. This is the very reverse of Christian charity. To rejoice in the death of another is the absolute opposite of 'loving' other people. Thus, in a sense, the death of the foe is also the (spiritual) death of the 'I'.

ZIPTALES™

Reading the Poem The Poison Tree

The Poem

Of course, no one literally dies of anger. But the point made by Blake is a powerful one. Anger can grow. Anger can be poisonous. People can be hurt by anger. And the most subtle form of destruction is the loss of innocence, or goodness, of the angry person.

The poem has a compact structure – four quatrains (four line verses), each one a pair of rhyming couplets. The lines are seven or eight syllables long. As suggested above, the first verse outlines the ‘argument’; the last three show it in parable form.

Why is this poem considered so important? Because it is a celebrated short work by one of the great poets. It has a striking moral, expressed in an unforgettable miniature story.

