

The garden of love

[Life](#), [Love](#)



This poem uses the deterioration of an Edenic garden to represent the corrupting effect of organised religion upon our internal state of being. Blake's 'The Garden of Love' functions as a criticism upon organised religion, poignantly reflecting on its capacity to replace humanity's innocent joys with rules and empty routines. Stanza 1 The name 'Garden of Love' almost appears hackneyed through its traditional, Edenic connotations. It is a representation of innocence, with green, open spaces often being associated with childhood in Blake's poetry.

The speaker comments that they saw " what [they] never had seen", which seems to imply that something material has changed external to themselves, namely the altered landscape that is subsequently detailed; however, this poem, in the context of the 'Songs of Innocence and Experience', symbolises an internal fall from innocence, and it is therefore only the speaker's perspective that has changed. The Church is then introduced as the object of the poet's condemnation, represented through the synecdoche of the " Chapel".

It is built " in the midst", implying that organised religion is central to the corruption that infected the zeitgeist of the late 18th century. Furthermore, the aural suggestion of 'mist' subtly evokes a somewhat disquieting image of the Chapel being shrouded in vapour, which is often a symbol of materialism in Blake and could therefore imply a preoccupation with wealth in Christianity. This contrasts with the " green", a representation of childhood, where the speaker used to " play", a verb with similar connotations.

Stanza 2 The gates of the chapel are said to be " shut", suggesting that the religiosity of the Church is an exclusive privilege. Indeed, Blake was very critical of an institution which effectively heralds its clergy as closer to God than ordinary worshippers; in his eyes, every human is equal before the natural order. He extends his condemnation to the Old Testament in the subsequent line, commenting that " Thou shalt not" was " writ over the door".

This is an allusion to the Ten Commandments, which Blake deemed to be overly regulatory; he instead put his faith into the New Testament, which conversely advises humanity as to how it should conduct itself, therefore placing a greater emphasis on free will. The speaker then " turn[s]" to the Garden of Love, unveiling a poignant tableau in which they realise that the green innocence of their youth, which " so many sweet flowers bore", has become devastated beyond hope.

The final stanza is extremely bleak, alluding to death through its evocation of " graves" and " tombstones", which have now replaced the " flowers" of the speaker's youth. The poem ends with a rhyming couplet, whose swaying rhythm represents an endless cycle of innocence into experience, an idea reinforced by the use of language such as " rounds" and " briars". The reference to priests confirms that this poem is an attack on organised religion, which has repressed our " joys and desires". It therefore serves to mentally imprison us, acting, along with the government, monarchy and other formal institutions, as a fortification of experience.