

The outcome of hatred: devices and message in Blake's "the poison tree"



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“ The Poison Tree” from William Blake’s Songs of Experience is a poem that tells the story of one who is engulfed by the hatred felt towards a foe. This individual begins with telling the fury they experienced toward a friend who is told of the protagonist’s anger and in doing so diffused it. On the contrary, the anger towards an enemy remains pent-up and the feeling festers. This resentment grows and grows until it becomes a tree bearing an apple of hatred. The foe steals and eats the apple, is poisoned, and is found lifelessly outstretched beneath the tree of wrath the next morning. The one whose hatred bore the apple is glad to see that his foe has suffered and passed. However, despite the fact that they are content for the moment and that the apple is gone, the tree watered and grown with tears and loathing remains. This hatred is to stay with the character growing and producing more apples for the rest of his life. “ The Poison Tree” is suggesting that although hatred is poisonous for the one it is directed at, it causes more suffering for the one who harbors the emotion, an idea that Blake conveys through the use of metaphor, allusion, and language.

First, Blake introduces the metaphor of hatred as a tree in the second stanza of the poem. However, he makes it clear that this tree is atypical, stating “ And it grew both day and night.” (9) as well as “ I watered it in fears,/ Night & morning with my tears” (5). This tree is different in the sense that it grows both during the day as well as at night, implying that the character holds the tree inside himself as any regular plant does now grow at night when there is no sun. In addition to this, the tree feeds off of the character’s emotions: fear, sorrow, and anger. The tree gives deadly fruit in the form of an apple, but an apple tree never growing only a single apple. Apple trees are

gargantuan, producing hundreds of apples, many of which fall to the ground and rot. These fallen apples decompose and give nutrients back to the apple tree, resulting in a never ended cycle of growth. This is the same for anger. The wrath that remains unexpressed nourishes further resentment. With the line “ And in the morning glad I see;” (15) Blake tells that the character is pleased to see his foe’s downfall. Still, the tree remains with the character and as its roots continue to grow and gnaw away at his sense of self, he is further infected by destructive feelings.

Similarly, in the line “ Till it bore an apple bright.” (10) Blake makes an allusion to the story of Adam and Eve in which Eve is tempted by a serpent to eat the Forbidden Fruit, an apple, which symbolizes human sin. In “ The Poison Tree” the apple symbolizes hatred, but in both cases, the tree remains and produces many hating human “ apples”. The one apple that is taken greatly affects the foe in Blake’s poem as well as the human race in the story of Adam and Eve, but despite the fact that the apple is gone the tree is completely unaffected. Due to the fact that the metaphorical tree remains firmly rooted in the character’s mind, it is destined to continue poisoning him with feelings of anger and resentment.

The third way in which Blake conveys the message of hatred hurting those who harbor it is through use of language. In the first half of the poem, Blake continuously repeats the word “ I” for example “ I was angry with my foe:/ I told it not, my wrath did grow.” (3) and “ And I watered it in fears,/ Night & morning with my tears:/ And I sunned it with my smiles,/ And with soft deceitful wiles.” (5). In contrast, once the second half of the poem begins

Blake shifts the use of “ I” to the use of “ it” such as when he writes “ And it
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grew both day./ Till it bore an apple bright.” (9) This shift in word use implies that the character has lost power over his anger and that it has begun to control him.

In “ The Poison Tree,” William Blake conveys that hatred leads to the downfall not only of the one the disgust is directed towards, but also the one who suffers from this angry passion. He does so through use of metaphor, allusion, and language by relating the growth of anger to the growth of a large apple tree, referencing the tale of Adam and Eve in which Eve dooms mankind to suffer by taking a bite of a poison apple, and by implying that while one has control over their anger at the start it begins to engulf them over time. Blake is trying to tell the reader about the dangers that festering anger poses as it infects everyone who comes into contact with it; indeed, he designed this poem to tell how one destroys himself by boxing himself in with anger.