The Garden of Love

William Blake
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I went to the Garden of Love
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
and Thou shalt not writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore,

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys & desires.

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William Blake
William Blake was born in London, in the United Kingdom, in 1757. He was a poet, artist and mystic, and his poetry is amongst the most lyrical and prophetic in the English tradition. Blake was a non-conformist and a radical who was concerned with many of the social injustices of the day, as well as being profoundly spiritual. Both aspects are reflected in his works. He died in poverty in 1827, and his genius was only truly recognised after his death.
The Romantic poem The Garden of Love by William Blake, published in 1794 as part of the Songs of Experience, consists of three quatrains, i.e. three stanzas having four lines each. ... One can, however, find a couple of internal rhymes in stanza two (shut - not) and three ("gowns" - "rounds"; "briars" - "desires").
• Blake attacks the approach of some forms of contemporary Christianity which encouraged the denial of sexuality and other powers in the present, in the hope of future reward and bliss. He felt that this led to permanent failure to attain human fulfilment.
THEMES: The effects of ‘fallenness' on repression of sexuality and other emotions

• Blake believed that inhibitions lie primarily within the mind, rather than in external factors. Society makes its fears, guilt and shame into rules and laws which are then enshrined in social institutions such as the authority of parents, the Church and the State or Monarchy.

• The poem is the antithesis to The Echoing Green of Innocence, as it uses the same setting and rhythm to stress the ugly contrast. Blake firmly believed that love cannot be sanctified by religion. The negative commandments of the Old Testament, ‘Thou Shall Not’ could not enshrine the most positive creative force on earth. For Blake, sexuality and instinct is holy, the world of institutionalized religion turns this instinct into imprisonment and engenders hypocrisy. Those rules, which forbid the celebration of the body, kill life itself.
Questions to think about while reading this poem

1. Why do you think the ‘Garden of Love’ (line 1) is written with capital letters?
2. Why can the speaker not enter the ‘Chapel’ (lines 3 and 5)?
3. How does the speaker feel about the presence of this chapel?
4. What has replaced the flowers in the ‘Garden of Love’ (lines 8-9)?
4. What do you understand by the expression ‘walking their rounds’ (line 11)?
In this poem, the speaker describes revisiting a place he remembers from his childhood, only to find that it has been taken over by a chapel or church. He is prevented from entering so he attempts to explore the surrounding garden instead. Here he finds that the place which used to be full of ‘sweet flowers’ (line 8) has been filled with graves and tombstones instead. In addition, patrolling priests, in their dark robes, prevent him from experiencing or reliving his ‘joys & desires’ (line 12).
This poem could be interpreted in different ways. On one level it is simply a mark of the passage of time, and that as a result of human expansion; an open area of his childhood no longer exists. While this is cause for dismay for the speaker, it is surely not particularly surprising.

However, the fact that it is a religious building that has usurped this land could imply a broader comment on organised religion and its influence on ‘innocent’ pleasures and freedom.
SUMMARY

- The speaker visits a garden that he had frequented in his youth, only to find it overrun with briars, symbols of death in the form of tombstones, and close-minded clergy.
SUMMARY

• "The Garden of Love" is a deceptively simple three-stanza poem made up of quatrains. The first two quatrains follow Blake's typical ABCB rhyme scheme, with the final stanza breaking the rhyme to ABCD. The lack of rhyme in the last stanza, which also contains the longest lines, serves to emphasize the death and decay that have overtaken a place that once used to hold such life and beauty for the speaker.
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• Following the specific examples of flowers representing types of love, this poem paints a broader picture of flowers in a garden as the joys and desires of youth. When the speaker returns to the Garden of Love, he finds a chapel built there with the words, “Thou shalt not,” written overhead. The implication is that organized religion is intentionally forbidding people from enjoying their natural desires and pleasures.
SUMMARY

• The speaker also finds the garden given over to the graves of his pleasures while a black-clad priest binds his “joys and desires” in thorns. This not-so-subtle critique shows Blake’s frustration at a religious system that would deny men the pleasures of nature and their own instinctive desires. He sees religion as an arm of modern society in general, with its demand that human beings reject their created selves to conform to a more mechanistic and materialistic world.
The garden of love - The dominant image evokes two gardens in the Old Testament. Firstly, it evokes the Garden of Eden before the Fall of humankind. When Adam and Eve were in the garden, they were able to love without shame and self-consciousness. It was a place, therefore, of innocent, uninhibited sexual expression. The state of the garden discovered by the speaker is therefore akin to Eden after the Fall, when sexuality is surrounded by shame, repression and prohibitions.
The second garden is found in the Old Testament poem, the Song of Songs. This is an unashamedly erotic poem in which garden imagery is used as a metaphor for sexual enjoyment. However, the contemporary Christian reading reinterpreted the original eroticism of the poem, to make it a symbol of a ‘purer’ spiritual love, implicitly demoting the worth of sexuality.
1 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.

2 Because of the savor of thy good ointments thy name is as an ointment poured out: therefore the virgins love thee.

3 Draw me: we will run after thee: the King hath brought me into his chambers: we will rejoice and be glad in thee: we will remember thy love more than wine: the righteous do love thee.

4 I am black, O daughters of Jerusalem, but comely, as the tents of Kedar, and as the curtains of Solomon.

5 Regard ye me not because I am black: for the sun hath looked upon me. The sons of my mother were angry against me: they made me the keeper of ye vines: but I kept not mine own vine.

6 Shew me, O thou, whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou liest at noon: for why should I be as she that turneth aside to the flocks of thy companions?
7 If thou know not, O thou the fairest among women, get thee forth by the steps of the flock, and feed thy kids by the tents of the shepherds.

8 I have compared thee, O my love, to the troupe of horses in the chariots of Pharaoh.

9 Thy cheeks are comely with rows of stones, and thy neck with chains. 10 We will make thee borders of gold with studs of silver.

11 While the King was at his repast, my spikenard gave the smell thereof.

12 My well beloved is as a bundle of myrrh unto me: he shall lie between my breasts.
SONG OF SONGS/SONG OF SOLOMON

13 My well beloved is as a cluster of camphire unto me in the vines of Engedi.

14 My love, behold, thou art fair: behold, thou art fair: thine eyes are like the doves.

15 My well beloved, behold, thou art fair and pleasant: also our bed is green:

16 The beams of our house are cedars, our rafters are of fir.
IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM: The Green

• The colour green is associated with growth, fertility and spring. Village greens were places of play and freedom. They represented the importance of play, and therefore of imagination, in human life. Village greens were not owned by anyone, so represented freedom from the rule or demands of an authority figure.

• In the *Songs of Innocence*, the green is a place of play and freedom for children. It evokes a time of innocence in which ‘play' could include innocent, unselfconscious sexuality. Here it has been taken over by repressiveness.
IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM: The Chapel

It is bounded by 'gates' which are 'shut'

It is a place where people are not free to act ('Thou shalt not')

It is associated with the loss of life ('graves')

Its priests wear uniforms (they are all 'in black') and patrol the grounds like warders. They confine any initiative toward freedom ('binding... desires'), in a potentially painful way (using 'briars').
Here, in this poem, the poet rebels against the idea of original sin. Man was expelled for eating of the fruit of knowledge and, cast out of Eden, was shamed by sexuality.

In the poem, the poet undermines orthodoxy and the patriarchal authority figures of the daddy and God and his Priests.

The Dissenting tradition to which Blake’s family belonged believed in “inner light” and “the kingdom within”.

Moral laws without any rationale are not to be obeyed.

In ‘The Garden Love’, interfering priesthood and the powers of prohibition stain innocent affections. The Church of Experience like the King and State rely on such powers to ensure obedience.
A contemporary reference linked with the poem is that of the Marriage Act of 1753, passed by Lord Hardwicke.

These Acts stipulated that all marriages had to be solemnized according to the rules of the Church of England in the Parish Church of one of the parties in the presence of a clergyman and two witnesses.
With the loss of rural society and extended families in villages this legislation was perhaps necessary, especially in urban centres. However, for Blake this was equal to curbing individual freedom. For him, each prohibition created repression, therefore in The Garden of Love, we see a bleak, unproductive landscape of unfulfilled yearning where sterile resentment, fear, guilt and joylessness replace the open freedom of innocence.
THE GARDEN OF LOVE: ANALYSIS

The twelve lines of the William Blake’s poem The Garden of Love belong to the state of Experience that characterizes the present day world. Experience stands in total contrast to the state of Innocence.

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.
THE GARDEN OF LOVE: ANALYSIS

The poet revisited the Garden of Love, open green piece of land where he used to play with boys and girls together. He was dismayed to see there what he had never seen earlier. He found that in the green open place, a Chapel (church) had been erected in the middle of the place where boys and girls together used to play. Institutionalized religion thus destroyed the Garden of Love. In the world of Experience, the harmony between man and nature no longer existed. Earlier the Garden of Love seemed to be in state of idyllic beauty, but the present day scenario of the place is one of utter sadness and gloom.

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.
In the second stanza, the poet gives further description of the place of his revisit. The gates of the Chapel were closed. And the closed door had got written on it ‘Thou Shalt Not.’ So, the visitor (the poet) turned his attention to the place of the Garden of Love where it used to bloom a number of flowers but found them missing.
THE GARDEN OF LOVE: ANALYSIS

In fact, the very idea of chapel and the negative “Thou Shalt Not” suggests the concept of private property, which is the source of all inequality and helplessness in society. The gate is closed to the passerby and on it is inscribed the warning ‘Thou Shalt Not’. The warning is emblematic of the classic dictum of the Old Testament God-Jehovah who is seen as a prohibitive and a vindictive tyrant.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut, And Thou shalt not. writ over the door; So I turn’d to the Garden of Love, That so many sweet flowers bore.
The lines of the third stanza depict the adverse changes that have enveloped the Garden of Love during the present time. The Garden portrays an aura of total unease and misery. At present, the garden seems to be filled with graves and tombstones which are images of death, and so horrendous and undesirable. Even the priests wrapped in black gowns forebode an ill-omen and an act of mourning and despair. The priests depict a total official manner devoid of any compassion or even forgiveness. This seems to be the basic factor that binds the narrator’s desires and joy.
It could be that earlier, the Garden presented the state of innocence where an environment of cheerfulness and laughter prevailed and everybody could enter the place without any discrimination whatsoever. But now it seems that the Garden has been lent or sold out to a private individual who exerts the sole authority and hence, the others are devoid of any joyous moment. The present day scene looks quite dismal where even such a simple resort as the garden is unable to escape the evils of industrialization and subsequent phenomenon of private ownership.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.
FORM AND STRUCTURE

• This poem consists of three stanzas of four lines each. The stanzas are used to focus attention on different issues: The first stanza tells us of the speaker’s discovery; the second reveals the speaker’s feelings about the building but expresses hope for consolation to be found in the garden; the third stanza describes the speaker’s disappointment that this, too, has undergone drastic change.

• The rhyme scheme makes use of end-rhymes in the first two stanzas, using the pattern of a-b-c-b, d-e-f-e. The poet uses internal rhyme with ‘gowns’ and ‘rounds’ in line 11, and ‘briars’ and ‘desires’ in line 12.
POETIC/LANGUAGE DEVICES

• PUNCTUATION:

• Blake makes use of punctuation to add emphasis to his content: ‘Garden of Love’ (lines 1 and 7) is capitalised as the proper noun to name a special place, one that had a specific name. The word ‘Chapel’ (lines 3 and 5) is also capitalised, which given that ‘chapel’ means a ‘small church’, seems to underline the importance of its position to the speaker. This is echoed by the capital letter for ‘Priests’ (line 11), as if these members of the church loom large in this place. The capital letter and fullstop are used to highlight the sign ‘Thou shalt not’ (line 6), making the command forbidding and hostile.
POETIC/LANGUAGE Devices

• DICTION:

  The poem’s diction is simple and straightforward, capturing the natural expression of the speaker’s experience. The use of innuendo is apparent as the speaker does not express his anger, disappointment or outrage explicitly, but implies it in the phrase ‘where flowers should be’ (line 10) and ‘binding with briars’ his ‘joys & desires’ (line 12).

  The reference to the ‘Priests in black gowns’ (line 11) who are ‘walking their rounds’ (line 11) is not a positive image. A perfectly acceptable situation where priest are perhaps saying prayers in the chapel grounds is given rather sinister overtones. The ‘black gowns’ seem somewhat threatening, while the action of the priests suggests they are like guards or sentinels to keep out ‘undesirables’.
POETIC/LANGUAGE
DEVICES

• TENSE
• The use of tense in ‘never had seen’ (line 2) and the garden that ‘bore’ (line 8) flowers in the past suggests the passage of time. In a figurative interpretation, it could be implying that this experience amounts to a sudden realisation of what has been in front of the speaker for some time, but he was unable to ‘see’ the reality clearly before.
SOUND DEVICES

• The rhythm in the poem is mostly regular, due to the steady meter and rhyming. However, the change in rhyme, pace and rhyme structures of the final two lines draws the reader’s attention.

• Perhaps the speaker suggests that his world is now out of balance with his realisation, and this new reality requires a different form of expression.
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<td><strong>the green</strong></td>
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Contextual Questions

1. Refer to line 1: 'I went to the Garden of Love'. How does the word, 'Garden' create an expectation in the mind of the reader? (2)

2. Refer to lines 3–4: 'A Chapel was ...'/'on the green.' Explain the significance of these lines in the context of the poem. (2)

3. Refer to lines 3–4: 'A Chapel was ...'/'on the green.' Explain the significance of these lines in the context of the poem. (3)

4. Refer to the final stanza: 'And I saw ...'/'joys and desires.' Comment on how these lines convey the central idea of the poem. (3)