The Garden of Love

POEM TEXT

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.

SUMMARY

Upon going to a place called the Garden of Love, the speaker sees something that he or she has never seen before. A new chapel has been built in the middle of the garden, precisely where the speaker used to play on the grass.

Inspecting the chapel, the speaker sees that the gates are closed. Over the door, a forbidding message reads "Thou shalt not." The speaker then looks back over the garden, which used to be full of beautiful flowers.

Now, though, the garden is full of graves. Where the flowers used to grow, the speaker now finds only gravestones. The speaker then notices that the chapel's priests, who are dressed in black garments, are walking around the garden. The speaker says these priests are using thorny branches to hold back his or her "joys and desires."

THEMES

LOVE VS. ORGANIZED RELIGION

Blake's "The Garden of Love" takes aim against organized religion, arguing that it places unwieldy and unnecessary restrictions on people's lives. Instead of allowing love to flourish, religion binds it with rules and prevents people from embracing joy, desire, and community—those aspects of life that, according to the poem, are both natural and important.

At the start of the poem the speaker finds a chapel standing in the titular "Garden of Love." A kind of takeover has taken place: the garden was once full of "sweet flowers" and made a fun spot for the speaker to play in as a child, but now is filled with tombstones and somber priests. The "chapel" and "priests" are specifically equated with Christianity, though the poem could arguably apply to organized religion in general. In any case, this image clearly represents religion effectively bulldozing over the joys—the "sweet flowers"—of life.

What's more, though the chapel is meant to facilitate an understanding of God within its community, its gates are closed and topped off with a stern sign saying, "Thou shalt not." This phrase evokes the biblical Ten Commandments, the list of rules set out by God for humanity to follow. The poem again emphasizes that, far from allowing love to flourish, religion has just created a world of restrictions in which people are literally locked out from "love" as they grow older.

In this context, religion becomes the exclusive preserve of a small group of elites, those priests who walk around the garden binding up the speaker's "joys and desires." They're dressed in black to demonstrate that they represent a kind of death. Similarly, the flowers that used to flourish in the garden have been replaced with graves and tombstones. Again, this all suggests that organized religion is in fact antithetical to the love it preaches; love has become deadened by the rules and restrictions of the Church.

Importantly, this isn't necessarily a rejection of *God*. Instead, the poem seems to argue that religion has lost its way by becoming too focused on punishing sinfulness. The priests in the poem aren't busying themselves with bringing religious understanding to the people—they're just trying to make sure there is no "joy" or "desire" left in the garden.

In this sense, the poem becomes a sort of rewrite of the story of the Garden of Eden, the biblical paradise from which Adam and Eve were rejected after eating from the Tree of Knowledge and introducing sin into the world. Here, it is the capital-C Church *itself* that has fallen: the poem argues that organized religion has lost its way by becoming too wrapped up in rules and restrictions—things people *can't* do rather than encouraging them to love in any way that they *can*.

Of course, the garden is called "the Garden of Love" for a reason: it flourished when joy and desire were allowed to be free, and is dying now that the chapel and humorless priests occupy the site. This represents a struggle that goes to the very core of what it means to be human, with the poem arguing that love—not fear, shame, and restrictions—is what really matters.

The poem, then, offers a bleak appraisal of the relationship between humanity and its religion. Love—whether romantic, sexual, or spiritual—is presented as something innate and fundamental to being human, yet it's under threat from the dogma of organized religion. People should fight against that, the poem suggests, and reclaim the Garden of Love for themselves.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

CHILDHOOD VS. ADULTHOOD

Though the poem's main thematic target is organized religion, there's a subtle argument around childhood being made as well. "The Garden of Love" comes from the *Experience* section of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, which is the section that looks at the way the adult world restricts the freedom, joy, and love that Blake argues are innate in childhood. Blake believed people are born with everything they need to live a happy life and have a close relationship with God, but that they basically unlearn how to do so under pressure from the misguided restrictions placed on them by the adult world.

This is a poem divided into two distinct times, and this divide maps neatly onto childhood and adulthood. Chronologically speaking, the speaker's original relationship with the Garden of Love is represented by lines 4, 8, and 10. These deal with how the garden *used to be*, and there is an implied link with childhood. The garden was the place that the speaker "used to play on the green"—where, as a child, he would express himself through play, experiencing direct and uncomplicated joy and happiness. This was a time of beauty and abundance, represented by the "sweet flowers" that used to fill the garden.

But the garden no longer represents the idyllic state of childhood. It now embodies all the rules and restrictions that oppress children as they become adults. This is best conceived as an attitude that says "thou shalt not" instead of "you can"—a narrowing of the world of possibilities instead of an embrace.

This somber, serious world of adulthood is further represented by the priests, who are the only people in the poem other than the speaker. Their black clothing, along with the tombstones, signals the death of childhood, and their incessant efforts to "bind" "joys and desires" show the oppression of the adult world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 4
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 10-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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 first stanza sets up a comparison between two very different times: how the Garden of Love used to be, and how it is now (that is, in the poem's present-day). The poem makes a clear argument in favor of the former state by contrasting the ideal Garden of Love with what might now best be called the "Garden of Organized Religion."

The opening two lines set up the opposition between *then* and *now*. Returning to the Garden of Love—capitalized as a proper noun to show its significance—the speaker comes to a sight that he or she has "never" seen before. The simplicity of the language here helps create a sense of disbelief, as if the speaker is so taken aback by the sight of the chapel that he or she can only in speak in this almost monosyllabic way. This new chapel is an alien structure, an imposter in the Garden of Love. The capitalization of "Chapel" helps give the sense of the chapel occupying physical space, imposing itself on the area where the speaker used to play.

The chapel, then, sets up another opposition, this time between freedom and restriction. The word "play" is associated with childhood, a common theme that Blakes uses to express ideas of freedom and joy throughout his poetry. In fact, Blake believed that "man brings all that he has or can have into the world with him"—in other words, that it is the rules and restrictions of the adult world that are man's undoing. The connotations of the word "green" are important here too: "green" refers to the grass where the garden once was, but also can refer to innocence, inexperience, or naivety.

It's also interesting to note that the poem never goes into too much detail about what the Garden of Love used to be like, even though that's exactly what the speaker feels it *should* be like now. The concept of the Garden is introduced to readers with little explanation, implying that they should have an intuitive understanding of what this place is. This is important, because the poem is making an argument in favor of a kind of intuitive, spontaneous, and playful way of living, the implication being that humanity as it is—with its restrictive religious laws and practices—has lost its way.

Of course, the garden is also an allusion to the biblical Garden of Eden, an earthly paradise in which the first humans joyfully existed (for a while). The poem can be understood as talking about humankind in its pre- and postlapsarian state (a fancy way of saying before and after Adam and Eve were banished from Eden in the Bible), and equating the "Fall of Man" not with sin, but with organized religion itself. This was an astonishingly

radical idea at the time of writing.

Form-wise, all of these lines are end-stopped, as the rest of the poem will also be. This perhaps reflects a subtle sense of resignation: the speaker isn't too happy about the story being told here, but this is just the way things are now.

LINES 5-6

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;

In the first two lines of the second stanza, the poem develops its critique of organized religion. Chapels are supposed to be welcoming places of worship that encourage people to come inside and pray, to commune with one another and with God. But this chapel is both foreboding and forbidding, its gates closed to the very community it's supposed to serve. Not only is the chapel blocking the physical space where people used to play, but it's also denying them access to the very spiritual world that a chapel is supposed to facilitate.

The gates aren't simply closed, either: the door displays a stark warning to anyone trying to enter. "Thou shalt not" has a literal meaning here, making it clear that no-one may enter, the full-stop caesura giving the words an air of authority and finality. The polysyndeton (which can also be characterized as the anaphora of "and") creates a rhythm that feels rather biblical (a sensation that gets stronger when this technique is repeated for the entirety of the next stanza).

The meter of line 6 adds to this sense of authority, as all three syllables of the phrase "thou shalt not" are stressed (with "not" arguably receiving that hardest stress of all). The line feels overloaded because of all these stresses, adding to the characterization of the church as oppressive and overbearing:

And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;

Of course, "thou shalt not" is also an allusion to the biblical Ten Commandments (a.k.a the Decalogue). These are a set of religious instructions said to have been dictated by God to Moses, and these are supposed to tell humanity how to live a life in accordance with the principles and beliefs of the Christian faith (of which Blake was a rebellious but committed practitioner). Indeed, obeying these laws—and denying sinful behavior—is meant to improve an individual's chances of an afterlife in heaven. The clear argument here is that it is in part these laws *themselves* that prevent humankind from accessing the Garden of Love and the true meaning of spirituality and religion.

The consonance of the /t/ sounds in "gates," "shut," "shalt not," and "writ" ties these words focused on binding and negativity together. This underscores the idea that organized religion is a detrimental force that locks people out of communion with God rather than welcoming them in. This sensation is all the more apparent when reading the poem aloud: /t/ sounds require you to tap your tongue against the roof of your mouth, creating a closure that could be said to mirroring the chapel's no-entry policy.

LINES 7-8

So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore.

In the second half of the second stanza, the speaker turns back towards the Garden of Love, ostensibly having been astonished by the sight of the Chapel and its warning against entry. The speaker longs to go back to the *old* Garden of Love with its multitude of "sweet flowers"—symbolically, to go back to the way humanity was before organized religion took all the fun out of life. The speaker's physical turning around is a kind of attempt to turn away from the church and back towards paradise. Of course, the speaker is confronted with a very different scene upon looking out over the Garden of Love.

Sound-wise, the second half of this stanza is markedly different from the first. The first feels harsher, more percussive as a result of the consonance of /t/ sounds. These sounds make the reader perform a physical closure of the tongue against the roof of the mouth (again, arguably mirroring the no-entry policy of the chapel).

Yet in the lines 3 and 4, which linger briefly on the speaker's memory of the Garden of Love in its previous glory, the vowel sounds are long and drawn-out, luxuriant even. "T*u*rned," "G*a*rden," "L*o*ve," "s*o*," and "b*o*re" all make the mouth open, mimicking the way that the garden used to be an open and joyous place. "Flowers bore" has a particularly clear assonantal effect, and suggests a state of abundant nature and beauty that has now been lost. This helps paint the Chapel and, by extension, organized religion as distinctly *unnatural*.

Without the poem's third stanza, these lines might be read as a signal of hope—the speaker looks out at the pretty garden that he or she remembers as being filled with lovely flowers. There's no precise indication yet that all these flowers are gone, and the stanza break allows readers to linger in this hope for a bit—perhaps making the realization that the flowers have indeed disappeared all the more painful.

LINES 9-10

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:

Stanza 3 establishes that what happened to the Garden of Love is nothing less than a matter of life and death. That is, the oppression of the garden and what it used to represent goes to the heart of what it means to be alive. This is the next key opposition set up by the poem: the original garden was a place full of life and joy. Since the arrival of the chapel—of organized religion—the symbols of life (the flowers) have been directly replaced by tombstones and graves—the symbols of death. There is no space for the flowers to grow anymore. To follow

the laws and restrictions of religion, then, is to deny life itself.

Here, the poem picks up on the hint of polysyndeton in the repeated "ands" of lines 5 and 6. Every single line in this final stanza begins with "and." This intensifies the sound of the poem, making it seem more authoritative and even biblical (particularly in relation to the King James Version of the Bible, an edition published in 1611 that made frequent use of this literary device).

Interestingly, the phrase "tomb-stones" takes the forbidding consonance of /t/ sounds of lines 5 and 6 and marries them with the luxurious /o/ assonance from line 8. There's also slight assonance with "flowers," linking these two very different symbols. This helps bring sonic life to what is happening in the literal content of the poem: negativity and death have taken over the joyous life that once flourished in the garden.

LINES 11-12

And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.

The final two lines mark a significant shift in the poem. Until now, the speaker has been completely alone, contemplating what's happened to the Garden of Love (with only the reader for company). Now, however, the priests suddenly appear, going about their official—and officious—business.

These are the literal and metaphorical gatekeepers of the chapel and the type of organized religion that it represents. They are portrayed as undoubtedly negative figures, dressed in funereal black to highlight their key role in the death of the garden (and the speaker's "joys and desires"). They are an elite and authoritative group, claiming to know how people should best live a religious life (namely, through the denial of the very things that, according to the poem, make people human).

This helps the poem make a key distinction. The poem is categorically *not* anti-religious. Rather, it is steadfastly against the way that people have *organized* and *monopolized* religion, divorcing it from its original message of love, joy, and life-affirming happiness. These priests are the earthly administrators of negativity—"thou shalt not"—whereas the poem argues that people should be free. Indeed, this is why the poem has sometimes been interpreted as an argument in favor of 60s-style "Free Love"
(though this is a fairly tenuous interpretation).

The sudden introduction of the priests is also marked by a shift in meter and rhyme. Both of these final two lines are balanced by caesuras in the form of commas, allowing for two internal rhymes: gowns/rounds and briars/desires. All four clauses in the last two lines have almost the exact same meter as well, an iamb followed by an anapest:

And Priests | in black gowns, | were walk-|-ing their rounds,
And bind-|-ing with briars, | my joys | & des-ires.

This builds a sense of finality, as if the words themselves are being bound by metrical restriction—just as the priests cut off the life of the speaker's "joys and desires." Indeed, the alliteration of "binding with briars" has a similar effect, suggesting a kind of enclosure. Human happiness, best represented by the concept of love, has been stifled by organized religion.

The silent authority of the priests leaves the poem on a note of hopelessness, as though humankind may never again recover the former glory of the Garden of Love. The use of past tense and end-stops throughout the poem suggests that this may be a battle already lost.

SYMBOLS

FLOWERS

Flowers are notable for their absence from the Garden of Love. That is, when the speaker revisits the garden with its new chapel, the flowers that filled the garden when the speaker was young are nowhere to be seen. Flowers represent abundance, love, beauty, and nature—all things that, by implication, have been lost from the garden.

The natural element is an important one: flowers are natural, and if we think of them as representing things like love and beauty, then it follows that love and beauty are *also* natural. By contrast, the "Chapel" is something built by people. The poem thus builds an argument that the garden has been *unnaturally* altered, and that the Chapel represents a rules-based world that doesn't allow people to be who they truly are. These religious restrictions hold people back, cutting off life in the same way that the tomb-stones prevent new flowers from growing.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "That so many sweet flowers bore."
- **Line 10:** "tomb-stones where flowers should be: "

GRAVES AND TOMBSTONES

Where once in the garden there were bounteous "sweet flowers," there is now an abundance of graves and tombstones. These, of course, herald a new era of death that contrasts with the joy-filled expression of life that the garden used to represent.

There is also a sense in which the graves and tombstones are linked to the chapel and the priests, in that they are presented as part of official religious activity (the priests are "walking their rounds" in what has essentially become a graveyard). They

speak of a particular philosophy regarding life, death, and spirituality, focused on denying earthly pleasures and joys for the promise of heavenly afterlife.

Here, the poem seems to be arguing in favor of refusing this idea that life is something to be deferred and put off for another time—people should embrace the joy, happiness, and love that *life on earth* offers them. Indeed, this is how (according to the poem) they express the truths of religion and God—not by drawing up a list of things that they can't do. The graves and tombstones, then, help paint this as an issue of life vs. death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "graves,"
- **Line 10:** " tomb-stones "

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used throughout the poem, but is particularly evocative in line 8, line 10, and line 12.

In line 8, the /o/ sounds of "so," "flowers," and "bore" are not exactly the same, yet are close enough to create a flowing and open vowel sound that contrasts with the harsher /t/ sounds that fill lines 5 and 6 (and which have signified the gates/chapel being closed off). These /o/ sounds are the very opposite of closed off, instead suggesting openness—even creating openness in the movement of the mouth as the lines are read.

To be fair, the phrase "over the door" creates a similar sensation of openness in line 6, yet this follows directly on the heels of the sharply consonant "thou shalt not." The assonance here could be said to make that instruction sound all the more restrictive by contrast.

The /o/ sound is again used in line 10 to link "tomb-stones" with "flowers," but to different effect. Here the /o/ sound feels heavy and cumbersome, suggesting the weightiness and immovability of the "tomb-stones" as they overtake the "flowers." Indeed, the fact that the phrase uses the same sound as line 8 helps to show the way in which death and negativity have taken over the Garden of Love—they are now even taking over its sounds!

In line 12, "binding" and "briars" link together through the long /i/ sound with "my" and "desires," highlighting that it is these personal desires themselves that are no longer allowed to flourish (i.e., that are bound by the priests).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 4:** "u," "o"
- **Line 6:** "o," "o," "oo"
- **Line 7:** "o," "o"
- **Line 8:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 10:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 11:** "o," "ou"
- **Line 12:** "i," "i," "y," "i"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is not used much in "The Garden of Love," though it does make an appearance. The alliteration that is present is not particularly relevant to the overall meaning of the poem, and instead seems more like a scattered series of brief, pleasing literary flourishes. However, the alliteration of lines 11 and 12 is worth interpreting.

Here, "binding" and "briars" share the same first letter, which helps connect these two words sonically and conceptually both to each other and to the priests mentioned in line 11, who wear "black." Together, this establishes the sense that these prickly briars are what the priests use for tying up the speaker's "joys and desires." This is a metaphor that points to the discomfort, or even outright pain, of the binding process: briars are thorny, sharp plants. The double /b/ sounds help to suggest restriction, a narrowing down of possibilities that is in keeping with the poem's critique of organized religion.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "s," "s"
- **Line 8:** "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "b," "w," "w"
- **Line 12:** "b," "b"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used quite frequently in "The Garden of Love," and at times is quite evocative.

In line 3, for instance, there are two subtle /t/ sounds found in "built and "midst." It's no coincidence that the moment when the speaker first sees the chapel is also one of the first moments in which the poem employs any obvious use of a poetic device. The sudden use of consonance foregrounds the way in which the chapel—an artificial, manmade construction—has suddenly appeared on the green.

In lines 5 and 6 there are also a number of /t/ sounds (which seems to be associated with the negative consequences of organized religion throughout the poem). Here, "gates," "shut," "shalt not," and "writ" are all linked by the sound. They work together to form the sense of being closed-off or locked out. Indeed, the way the tongue has to close against the roof of the mouth when making the /t/ sound means that the reader literally performs a sort of enclosure when they read the poem out loud!

In line 8, consonance is created through the repetition of /s/ and /w/ sounds, which lend the line a hushed quality—perhaps reflecting a sort of reverence for the Garden of Love as it once was (that is, filled with flowers).

Later, in lines 11 and 12, /n/ sounds link together "gowns," "rounds," and "binding." These are all part of the official duties of the priests, whether it's wearing the appropriate uniform, walking around the chapel, or binding "joys and desires."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "s," "s"
- **Line 3:** "t," "t"
- **Line 5:** "t," "t"
- **Line 6:** "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 8:** "s," "s," "w," "w," "s"
- **Line 10:** "w," "w"
- **Line 11:** "b," "w," "n," "s," "w," "r," "w," "r," "r," "n," "s"
- **Line 12:** "b," "n," "d," "b," "rs," "s," "d," "r," "s"

CAESURA

Caesuras occur three times in "The Garden of Love": in line 6, line 11, and line 12.

The caesura in line 6 is a very dramatic moment, with the rare use of a full stop in the middle of a line. This helps create an intimidating, life-denying atmosphere around the daunting phrase "Thou shalt not," which is both an instruction to people thinking about coming into the chapel and an allusion to the Biblical Ten Commandments. The poem is an argument in favor of human freedom, and the full stop in the middle of this line contributes to this argument by making the church feel extremely restrictive.

The caesuras in lines 11 and 12 are both commas, and mark a shift in the poem: the arrival of the priests. The caesuras allow for each of the two lines' four clauses (that is, the parts before and after the commas) to be balanced metrically, which helps contribute to the atmosphere of restrictiveness (though there is one more syllable in line 12 than in line 11, the rhythm of the lines is extremely similar on the whole):

> And Priests | in black gowns, | were walk- | ing their rounds,
> And bind- | ing with bri- | ars, my joys | & desires.

The caesuras also foreground the internal rhymes between gowns/rounds and briars/desires.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "."
- **Line 11:** ","
- **Line 12:** ","

POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton occurs primarily in the final stanza, but is also hinted at in lines 5 and 6.

In the final stanza, the polysyndeton creates a sense of propulsion and inevitability. Bearing in mind that the whole poem is told in the past tense, the polysyndeton helps to make the conclusion feel bleak and unchangeable—as though what has happened to the Garden of Love can never be undone.

The polysyndeton also has a biblical sound to it, related to the King James Version of the Bible which made frequent use of "and" (first published in 1611). It has been said of Blake that there is nothing in his poetry that wasn't first in the Bible, and it's certainly true that many of the poems in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* share sonic elements in common with religious scripture.

Blake also often used an ampersand (the "&" symbol) in place of the word "and" in his poetry, as can be seen in the final line of this poem. Perhaps simply a stylistic quirk, this also can be read as differentiating this final "and" from the polysyndeton throughout—implicitly focusing attention on that polysyndeton as a deliberate choice.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "And"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 11:** "And"
- **Line 12:** "And"

ALLUSION

The poem makes two allusions. The first runs throughout the fabric of the entire poem, as the "Garden of Love" itself recalls the biblical Garden of Eden. According to the Old Testament, this was the earthly paradise in which the first humans, Adam and Eve, lived in innocence and joy. They were banished from the garden after Eve was tempted by Satan (in the form a snake) into eating forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, introducing sin into the world.

The poem, then, is discussing mankind in prelapsarian and postlapsarian state—in other words, in the times before and after the biblical "Fall of Man." Yet while organized religion may claim to have the answers to helping people find their way out of sin, the poem implies that it is in fact *organized religion itself* that brought about this Fall. It did so by losing track of the original purpose of religion: love, joy, freedom, and communion with God.

The poem's second allusion is also biblical. This comes in line 6, in which the poem alludes to the Ten Commandments. In Abrahamic religions, these are a set of laws given to humankind

by God that dictate how to live a religious life. Some famously begin with the phrase "thou shalt not"—i.e. "thou shalt not kill." The poem is implicitly critical of these laws, suggesting that they're the product of fear and restrictions. By describing the phrase "Thou shalt not" as being written over a closed chapel door, Blake subtly connects these laws to a sense of exclusionary power on the part of the Church. Religion should be about the freedom to love, the poem is saying, not about control and punishment.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Garden of Love, "
- **Line 6:** "Thou shalt not"
- **Line 7:** " Garden of Love, "

END-STOPPED LINE

Every line in "The Garden of Love" is end-stopped. Combined with the poem's past-tense, this creates a sense of weary inevitability about the changes that the poem describes. As the poem chronicles the loss of "joy and desire" at the hands of religion, the steady way in which this loss unfolds makes it feel as if this change is final—it is too late for humanity to return to its more innocent, joyful, and free state.

Conversely, the end-stops could also be interpreted as adding a sense of authority to the speaker's argument. The end-stops mimic the tone of religious laws and scripture in order to show that the Church—its officials and its controlling manner—have ruined the Garden of Love for humanity.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ","
- **Line 2:** ":"
- **Line 3:** ", "
- **Line 4:** "."
- **Line 5:** ","
- **Line 6:** "; "
- **Line 7:** ","
- **Line 8:** ". "
- **Line 9:** ", "
- **Line 10:** ":"
- **Line 11:** ", "
- **Line 12:** "."

METAPHOR

Though the entire poem can be thought of as symbolic, a specific metaphor occurs in the final line. Here, the speaker mentions the black-clad priests "binding with briars, my joys & desires." The priests are not *literally* tying up the speaker's joys and desires with these prickly plants, and instead this serves to figuratively reflect the way that religion restricts people's joyful (and in the mind of the speaker, natural) impulses.

Briars are thorny, which suggests that this process of binding is quite uncomfortable—likely even painful. The association between the dour priests and sharp briars casts these supposed men of God in a distinctly negative light, and suggests that their many rules and regulations are actively harmful. Organized religion is like a spiky vine, twisting itself around—and squeezing the life out of—the speaker's happiness.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds, / And binding with briars, my joys & desires."

VOCABULARY

Midst (Line 3) - "Midst" is a synonym for "in the middle."

The green (Line 4) - A piece of grassy land.

Thou shalt not (Line 6) - This phrase is taken from the biblical Ten Commandments, which are rules that tell people how to live in accordance with God. It means "you must not."

Writ (Line 6) - Written.

Bore (Line 8) - "Bore" usually means something similar to "gave birth to" or "carried." Here, the garden "bore" the flowers, which means that it facilitated their growth and displayed them.

Rounds (Line 11) - The regular walks that the priests took around the garden.

Briars (Line 12) - Prickly shrubs/branches.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Garden of Love," as with many of Blake's poems, has a simple form. The poem is comprised of three quatrains, creating twelve lines in total. The simplicity of the form allows for the expression of a clear argument, lending a sense of gravity and occasion to the lines as they unfold. The first stanza describes the speaker's arrival back at the Garden of Love, which he or she hasn't visited for some time. The second deals with the speaker's closer inspection of the chapel and the garden. The third focuses on death, and brings in the ominous figures of the priests.

Chronologically speaking, the poem deals with two different times—the garden as it was in the speaker's youth, and the way it is now. But though the simple stanzas draw a clear distinction between these two times, the entire poem is told in the past tense, lending a sense of foregone conclusion to the poem's bleak assessment of organized religion.

Every line in the final stanza begins with an "and." This polysyndeton also helps build the poem's momentum to its conclusion, again suggesting inevitability and, ultimately, a certain powerlessness on the speaker's part to return the garden to its former glory.

METER

The meter in "The Garden of Love" is unusual, but doesn't sound overly forced. Most lines have eight or nine syllables and the most dominant metrical foot is the anapest. However, only a few lines are entirely anapestic (da da DUM | da da DUM | da da DUM). For example, take line 5:

> And the gates of this Chapel were shut:

and line 7:

> So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,

These lines are written in trimeter and contain three stresses, as do most lines in the poem. But it's probably easier to think of the general meter as iamb-anapest-anapest, e.g.:

> A Chapel was built in the midst,
> Where I used to play on the green.

It's subtle, but the poem's refusal to settle into a purely anapestic meter perhaps embodies the fact that it is at heart a poem about conflict—between love and organized religion. The poem refuses to precisely conform to a more obvious metrical feel.

There are a couple of particularly interesting moments in terms of meter. Line 6's use of caesura helps the line feel like it is overloaded with stresses, which represents the restrictive and imposing nature of religious laws and restrictions:

> And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;

In the poem's closing two lines, caesuras are used again to create a balance between the four separate clauses, which also allows for the brief use of internal rhyme. This helps create a newfound sense of metrical rigor, in keeping with the image of the priests binding up people's "joys and desires:"

> And Priests | in black gowns, | were walk- | ing their rounds,
> And bind- | ing with bri- | ars my joys | & desires.

The poem switches to tetrameter here. The clauses here line up almost perfectly (and indeed are perfectly matched if we scan "briars" as being one stressed syllable), suggesting regularity and uniformity in keeping with their thematic content.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem has a fairly simple rhyme scheme which follows this general shape:

ABCB

This has a ballad-like feel which signals that the poem is telling a story—though of course it is too short to really be deemed a ballad.

In the first stanza, "seen" is rhymed with "green" to emphasize that the glory of the Garden of Love is in the past-tense; it is now just a memory. Note how speaking these rhymes aloud causes the mouth to stretch almost into a smile—perhaps a reflection of the happiness that the garden once evoked. Later, "door" and "bore" in the second stanza perhaps playfully hint at the other meaning of "bore," implying that the restrictions of organized religion are solemn and dull.

An interesting shift in the use of rhyme takes place in the final stanza. None of the lines rhyme here, in fact, though there are two internal rhymes in the concluding two lines. If rhyming can be considered a kind of binding-together of words, the increase in rhyme at the very end of the poem represents the ominous presence of the priests as they go about binding "joys and desires."

SPEAKER

The poem's narration is unambiguously first-person. The reader gets the sense that the Garden of Love was a special place to the speaker, and that the speaker is shocked to find the garden in its current state: dominated by the chapel and brimming with graves and tombstones.

This "I" (like Blake himself) is categorically opposed to the rules and restrictions imposed on humanity by organized religion. He or she laments the loss of joy and desire, remembering the "sweet flowers" that used to fill the garden.

Though the poem is told exclusively from the perspective of one individual, the lack of detail about the speaker's identity also makes this person into a universal figure. In essence, the speaker stands in for humanity, while the priests represent the oppressive force of organized religion.

SETTING

The setting of the poem is, of course, the Garden of Love. But there are essentially two different gardens. One of these gardens exists only in the speaker's memory. This is the Garden of Love as it was meant to be: full of flowers, joy, and love (with no chapel built on the green).

The second garden is the one that the speaker finds when he next visits, and this one is very different from the first. The

chapel imposes its physical brutality on the green, tombstones have replaced the flowers, and solemn priests walk where children used to play. In other words, at the time of the poem's telling, the setting is a garden shrouded in negativity and oppression. The fact that even the speaker's more recent experience of the garden is told in the past tense lends the poem a sense of foregone conclusion, as though it is already too late to recover the garden's former glory.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Garden of Love" was published as part of the *Experience* section of William Blake's best-known work, *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (first published in 1794, though *Innocence* was published individually a few years prior). This book of poems is essentially a didactic work of moralizing through poetry, though Blake resists oversimplifying difficult situations. Innocence and experience relate closely to the Biblical ideas of the Garden of Eden and the Fall, and Blake's work is generally full of such opposites: childhood vs. adulthood, life vs. death, freedom vs. imprisonment. This poem exemplifies that trend through its focus on joy and love vs. oppression and rigidity.

A key poetic influence on Blake was John Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* also creatively examined humankind's relationship to God. But Blake was also a wide reader of religious scholarship, which undoubtedly played a formative role in his poetry. For example, the influence of Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish Lutheran theologian, can be seen in the way Blake consistently depicts the fundamental spirituality of humanity.

Blake was not well-known as a poet in his time, and many of his contemporaries considered him to be a madman. He worked primarily as a painter, printmaker, and engraver, and he felt that his poetry was misunderstood in his era. He did not enjoy the success of some of the other poets associated with the same time period, such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge. This sense of isolation gives Blake's poetry a radical and prophetic quality; his poems often seem like small acts of rebellion against the status quo of the day.

Also important to his work is the idea of the visionary—there are many accounts of Blake witnessing angels or other spiritual ephemera, and this plays into the prophetic quality of his writing. He is often grouped together with the Romantic poets and his work does share certain common ground with the Romantic ideals that dominated the late 17th and early 18th centuries. These ideals include the importance of childhood, the imagination, and the power of nature. However, his life and writings are distinct enough that it may make more sense to regard him as a singular entity in English literature, rather than as a solely Romantic poet.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

William Blake was a deeply religious man, but he was highly critical of the Church of England, and of organized religion more generally. He was born to a family of Dissenters, a group of English Protestants who broke away from and rebelled against the Church of England. Questioning the religious status quo was therefore instilled in Blake from a very young age. He saw top-down religious structures—represented here by the physical structure of the chapel—as restrictions on individual liberties, and as obstacles to the direct relationship between humankind and God. Blake's rebellious streak owed something to the American and French revolutions, which gave thinkers opportunities to dream of better forms of society.

Blake was also writing during the accelerating Industrial Revolution, and he saw its economic, social and environmental changes as a threat to humankind. For Blake, the factories of the Industrial Revolution represented a form of physical and mental enslavement—the "mind-forg'd manacles" mentioned in his poem "London." Indeed, the Garden of Love implicitly argues that mankind has lost touch with nature, and the real-life forces of advancing industry likely shaped Blake's thoughts on this issue.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Illustration and Other Poems — A resource from the Tate organization, which holds a large collection of Blake originals. Here the poem can be seen in its original illustrated form. (https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/william-blake-39/blakes-songs-innocence-experience)
- Blake's Radicalism — An excerpt from a documentary in which writer Iain Sinclair discusses Blake's radicalism. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl0yBrI24XM&t=1s)
- Blake's Visions — An excerpt from a documentary in which writer Iain Sinclair discusses Blake's religious visions. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8hcQ_jPIZA)
- Full Text of Songs of Innocence and Experience — Various formats for the full text in which "The Garden of Love" is collected. (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1934/1934-h/1934-h.htm)
- A Reading by Allen Ginsberg — Beat poet Allen Ginsberg reads the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U99bJp_Rks)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- A Poison Tree
- London
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Innocence)

- The Lamb
- The Tyger

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