

## **William Blake: The Garden of Love**

### **The Garden of Love**

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.

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. 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.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,  
And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;  
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That so many sweet flowers bore.

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. 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.

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And tomb-stones where flowers should be:  
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,  
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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 gaiety and mirth 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.

### **Imagery and symbolism**

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 green** - This has three, inter-linked aspects. 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.

**Prison** – Blake's opposition to the repression of desires as advocated by conventional Christianity meant that the Chapel seems an image of prison:

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').

Investigating imagery and symbolism

Compare the values represented by the green in many of the Songs of Innocence with the values that now seem to dominate the Garden.

### **Themes:**

#### **The distortion of Christian belief about the future life**

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.

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 Garden of Love” 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.

### 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.

**Acknowledgement: Notes have been compiled from various open sources**