

THE GARDEN OF LOVE - WILLIAM BLAKE

SUMMARY AND BACKGROUND

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. Instead of welcoming him in, the chapel has the negative 'Thou shalt not' of the Ten Commandments written over the door. He is prevented from entering. He attempts to explore the surrounding garden instead.

The place which used to be full of 'sweet flowers' (line 8) has been filled with graves and tombstones. Furthermore, patrolling priests, in dark robes, prevent him from experiencing or reliving his 'joys & desires' (line 12). A chapel should also be open and welcoming. However, this one is closed and forbidding.

He rebels against the idea of original sin and believes that love can't be sanctioned by religion. *The Garden of Love* is an allegorical satire of the Church. The Chapel represents the church. The garden is symbolic of freedom. Blake believed that love and sexuality were natural and shouldn't be dictated or limited by a ruling authority. *The Garden of Love* is a symbol of this belief – that desire and sex should be natural aspects of human life.

Blake attacks cruelty, hypocrisy and the other evils that he saw in society that were destroying imagination and frustrating the natural desires of people.

Stanza 1

Line 1

I went to the Garden of Love

The poet revisited the Garden of Love, open green piece of land where he used to play. *garden of love* – suggests a place where beauty is deliberately cultivated.

Line 2

And saw what I never had seen:

Literally – the place was very different, not the way he remembered it.

Figuratively—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.

He was dismayed to see 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.

Line 3

A Chapel was built in the midst,

The Garden represented the state of innocence where joy prevailed and everybody could enter the place. The Chapel has taken the place of the speaker's old playground. The Chapel represents the Church and its oppressive role. Religion has destroyed the Garden of Love. It is now devoid of any joy.

built – this was an intrusion by man/ society into the free world of childhood and innocence

Line 4

Where I used to play on the green.

play – the innocence of youth

green – nature. The harmony between man and nature no longer existed. The Garden of Love represented human happiness and freedom. However, the imposition of the Church in the form of the Chapel has ruined the setting. Also symbolises growth, fertility.

Tone: Shock at what has changed

Stanza 2 This stanza describes how the Chapel ruins the speaker's freedoms and joys.

Lines 5-6

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

The speaker attempts to enter the Chapel. The gates of the Chapel were closed and above the door he saw the warning 'Thou Shalt Not'.

Thou shalt not – this refers to all of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament and not a specific commandment. This refers to all the restrictions of the Church, which Blake believed were the source of inequality and helplessness in society.

Gates shut implies that people were not free to act.

Capital letter and full stop makes the command forbidding & hostile.

Line 7

So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,

The poet then turned his attention to the Garden of Love. He wanted to see if anything else had changed. He was hoping that the place of his fond memories has not changed; he was expecting to see the beautiful flowers that he remembered.

Line 8

That so many sweet flowers bore.

sweet flowers – represents love, pleasure, relationships and what man naturally enjoys in life. Also symbolic of innocent love. The Church destroyed many of the joys (*sweet flowers*) in life with their rules.

Stanza 3 This stanza depicts the adverse changes that have enveloped the Garden of Love during the present time.

Lines 9-10

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

The Garden portrays an aura of total unease and misery. Instead of flowers, he saw graves and tomb-stones. These had replaced the flowers that the Church had forbidden. The graves and tomb-stones symbolise the death of freedom.

The repetition of "*and*" creates a feeling of finality and a building up of the tone of doom and the feeling that no one escapes.

Line 11

And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,

priests in black gowns – symbols of the church which caused mourning and despair.

walking their rounds – the ritual of the priests was done mechanically. *Rounds* is associated with following a set, inflexible routine. There was no real concern for the people.

The restrictive rules are enforced by "Priests in black gowns," or the clergy. The clergy of the time enjoyed gluttony, mistresses, and many other things while preaching against them to the masses.

Line 12

And binding with briars, my joys & desires.

briars – Briars have thorns. They refers to the painful rules and restrictions of the church.

joys and desires – these include the physical pleasures he is denied by the rule-bound morality of the church.

The speaker is indignant of the discrepancy between deed and word because while the clergy "bind with briars [his] joys and desires" they enjoy the same "joys and desires." They were bound by all the rules and regulations of the church and his *joys and desires* are labelled as sin.

THEMES

The distortion of Christian belief about the future life

Blake attacks the approach of 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 oppressive role of the church / Control of people

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.

Frustration with a religious system that condemns the joy that man finds in nature and in physical pleasure

TONE

Reverie, scorn, indignant, anger, dismay, frustration, disappointment

MOOD

Despondency, dismay

QUESTIONS

1. What is Blake “saying” about the society in which he lives? (3)
2. Discuss the symbolism in the first stanza. (4)
3. What are the connotations of “Thou shalt not” in stanza two? (2)
4. Identify the tone in the second stanza. Substantiate your answer? (3)
5. Why were the “gates shut”? (2)
6. What do the graves, priests “walking their rounds” reflect about the mood of the poet? (3)