The Garden of Love – William Blake

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION
About the poet:
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.

William Blake was deeply religious, but he liked neither the Church of England nor any type of organized religion. He felt the Church, in general, had perverted the real meaning of Christ’s love. Blake’s view on the church of those days isn’t the most pleasant one and for a reason. When he saw people getting poorer and poorer everywhere around him, he couldn’t understand the church getting even richer, when one of its most important purposes includes taking care of those who suffer. Instead of that the only thing that the church seemed to value is the love of power and money and exclusivity.

About this poem:
He was considered a ‘non-conformist’ and much of his work reflects a prizing of imagination and creativity over logic and reason. Although he was interested in theology and had a deep reverence for the Bible, Blake was fiercely anti-religion in any organised sense. His views on natural human desires and sexuality have seem him considered as a forerunner to the 19th century “free love” movement which sought to remove state restrictions on sexual activity. Blake believed the church controlled and crushed the divine within the human spirit and this anger toward the church can be felt in his poem, The Garden of Love.

Title:
- ‘The garden of Love’ refers to an actual garden that the speaker visited BUT
- It also represents a state of innocent joyfulness.
- The capital letters used in the title for ‘Garden’ and ‘Love’ indicate the symbolism.

STRUCUTURE
- The poem consists of 3 stanzas of 4 lines each (3 quatrains), each dealing with a different issue i.e.
  stanza 1 = the speaker’s discovery of the chapel,

IMAGERY
METAPHOR – The title itself is metaphoric as it is an allusion to the Garden of Eden, a time when humans truly understood the meaning of love and innocence.

The chapel in the midst of the garden implies that the church and religious dogma are preventing humanity’s return to the Edenic state.
The words over the door ‘Thou shalt not’ is a metaphor for the restrictive nature of the church with an attitude like a closed door concerning itself only with that which is forbidden. ‘tomb-stones where flowers should be’ indicates the church’s emphasis on sin and death, putting the fear of God so to speak in people in the process destroying beauty and the pure joy of living.

ALLITERATION – (line 12) ‘binding with briars, my joys & desires’ is an allusion to the crucifixion, the briars representing Christ’s crown of thorns, which was a tool used to torture him. The author implies that the laws imposed on society by the church are cruel, restrictive and painful. The harsh ‘b’ sound emphasizes the harshness of the church and also the author’s simmering anger.

SYMBOLISM –
- ‘green’(line 4), this colour represents life, growth and the natural world. It is an anthesis to the black-robed priests who are obsessed with preaching death and sin.
- ‘flowers’(line 8) symbolizes the speaker’s memories of his youth when he was unburdened by restrictions or shame. He finds those memories all gone, now replaced by a chapel that represents the restrictive nature of the church.

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 creative powers in
Stanza 2 = the speaker’s feelings about the building and an expression of hope for consolation to be found in the garden.

Stanza 3 = speaker’s disappointment at a place of good memories and youthful exuberance has been turned into a restricted area.

- **RHYME** – There is a distinct lack of a clear rhyme scheme but internal rhyme has been created with ‘gowns’ and ‘rounds’ as well as ‘briars’ and ‘desires’. The first two stanzas have end rhyme of ABCB and DEFE. 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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**TONE/MOOD**

**Mood:** despairing/powerless/angry

**Tone:** disappointment/disapproval/dismay/simmering anger

- The **REPEITION** of ‘And’ is an indication of the speaker’s description of the changes and how these changes evoke unpleasant feelings in him.

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**DICTION**

- **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.

- 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 and 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.

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the present, in the hope of future reward and bliss. He felt that this led to permanent failure to attain human fulfillment.

- **The effects of ‘falleness’ 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 deals with the way in which our natural instincts and capacity for joy are restricted or even destroyed by institutions such as the Church. The Church teaches that worldly joys and pleasures are evil and that we should focus on the possibility of life after death.