

Lauren Vosler

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Corrupting the Innocent: The Paradoxes in “A Poison Tree”

The oxymoronic nature of “A Poison Tree” strangely contrasts the overarching metaphor. Throughout the poem, a tree, grown through the thriving spite of the speaker, produces a venomous apple which the foe consumes bringing joyous cries to the speaker. The poem speaks not only with symbolic symmetry and rhyme scheme but also adds central paradoxes and universal Biblical allusions that create a mystifying aura. In addition, its metaphor brings an apparent meaning, but an underlying paradox culminates in the final quatrain to create a morality theme. At that point, the pollution of the speaker makes clear the flawed process of anger and the poisonous nature of antagonism. While the speaker has control of his anger towards the friend, an unrelenting and rampant anger towards the foe results in the growth of an entire garden of evil. The speaker’s poison tree, grown with resentment, disorientation, and fear, buds a single beautiful apple that signals death. Through an extended metaphor, an oxymoronic nature, and various Biblical allusions, “A Poison Tree” details the impending effects of harboring anger.

The poem begins with an emphasis on form and symmetry. It is divided into four quatrains of four lines with additional punctuation strengthening the symbolism of the form. It begins, “I was angry with my friend; / I told my wrath, my wrath did end.” (1-2). The second line is separated directly in the center, with the four words on either side of the dividing comma, alluding to the cycle of life that both symmetry and the number four represent. It has often been used in literature as an archetype of the stages of life, totality, and creation. In this poem, a creation allusion is present throughout the quatrains depicting a corrupted translation of the original Garden of Eden which was also divided into four quadrants. Genesis 2:10-14 details the

four major rivers, Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates, that separated the fertile land where the cycle of life began (New International Version). By referencing this creation event in the four archetype, the poem begins its own cycle— the cycle of anger, with death being the final phase. Similarly to the Biblical cycle of holiness, death is the consequence; but the poison tree’s cycle of anger focuses on the death that accompanies a vengeful spirit.

The Biblical story continues when the Israelites went through their own cycle of Apostasy, Servitude, Supplication, and Salvation based on the level of reverence they had toward God (Longman 128). When the Israelites were punished for worshiping other gods, the cycle ended in the death or defeat of thousands. Similarly, “A Poison Tree” outlines the psychological cycle of anger through its use of an archetypal four; these stages are as follows: Triggering Event, Negative Thoughts, Emotional Response, Physical Response (Phillips). The anger towards a foe is the triggering event; the watering of the tree is negative thoughts; the growth of the tree is the emotional bloom; and the death of the foe is the physical response. This cycle parallels the sin cycle, but because the poison tree leads to intentional death and not death from punishment, it creates a central paradox in the final two lines; “In the morning glad I see; / My foe outstretched beneath the tree” (15-16). In the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Life represents good, but because this tree is poisonous, it is the corrupted echo of such a tree, and therefore details the fallacies in harboring anger. Because the speaker craves the death of his foe, he acts like Eve who craved the knowledge of good and evil. She brought death not only to herself, but also to the world according to the Bible, and through this paradox, it is clear that the desire of this apple will be detrimental to the life of the speaker.

Further Biblical allusions begin to clarify the paradox embedded in the growth cycle of a poison tree. Lines five and six grow the tree with negative thoughts; “And I waterd it in fears, /

Night & morning with my tears.” The poison tree feeds off fears, darkness, and sadness, but a Biblical tree feeds off goodness and produces heavenly fruit. A parallel allusion to Jeremiah 17:8 highlights the faults of a fearful growth process. “They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit” (New International Version). This plentiful tree grows due to a confidence in a higher power and a pursuit of the holy life, represented by the refreshing nature of the river. In addition, this tree has no reason to fear and produces good fruit. The poison tree, however, grows from the constant attention of worry and sadness; it cannot survive without the production of tears, showing the moral dilemma of such a growth.

The apple itself contends a new Biblical metaphor. According to Genesis 3, Eve gave into temptation when she saw the attractiveness of the apple and the power it would bring to her (New International Version). Similarly, the poison apple brings the speaker power over his foe. “And my foe beheld it shine, / And he knew that it was mine” (11-12). The nature of the apple, shining and beautiful, draws the foe to its mercy, claiming to be nutritious and good. Grown out of anger, tears, and darkness, this apple also appears “bright” (10). The speaker’s corrupted appeal to such a fruit results in death, and just as Eve fell to the temptation of the apple in the garden, the speaker fell to the temptation of anger by channeling fear and darkness into a physical product. The foe is attracted to the healthy apple, but it only brings him death; the poem’s diction contradicts itself, further proving that the gladness of the speaker in his anger is misplaced.

Not only does the apple detail the faults in animosity, but the oxymoronic nature of the title also depicts the treacherous nature of such a tree. Trees bring life when their leaves flow

freely through the air to produce oxygen, but the poison tree cements the speaker to itself through constant attention and robs him of his freedom. The title itself reveals the egregious nature of sheltering anger, while the ironic structure of the poem proves corruption. Written mostly in iambic pentameter, “A Poison Tree” adopts a naïve and innocent feeling in the nursery rhyme rhythm of the lines. A poem concerning such a serious topic should adopt a more serious tone, but the additional rhyming couplets give the text an ironic ambiance. The poem’s metaphor contradicts itself, meaning the cycle of anger is also contradicting to the life of the speaker.

Furthermore, the speaker “sunned [the tree] with smiles, / And with soft deceitful wiles” (7-8). Sun is an essential element to any plant growth, but the crooked nature of this tree requires deceit to flourish. This line also introduces another paradox in the tragedy of the smile. Greek drama is often portrayed in the dual persona of Thalia, the smiling muse, and Melpomene, the frowning muse. Melpomene is often depicted holding a knife in one hand, and in some mythology, she is the mother of sirens (Taft). “A Poison Tree” uses this allusion to deepen the meaning of the sunning smile. While a smile seemingly represents happiness, in this poem, it is reflected with the corruption of anger; it becomes tragedy which, like Melpomene, symbolically breeds seductive beings, in this case, apples, while simultaneously prompting violence. This smile is the catalyst in growing the poison apple. It appears to be good, but the façade of happiness grows the hypocritical tragedy of hostility, thus creating an oxymoronic paradox. These paradoxes in the title, structure, and diction of the poem combine to mirror the apparent fault in the joyful attitude of the speaker at the death of his foe. Because the text itself is an oxymoron, the speaker’s evil desires must also be.

The poem ends in a shroud of darkness. It states, “And into my garden stole, / When the night had veild the pole” (13-14), creating a metaphorical shield around the poison tree and the

speaker. An overwhelming hostility has blotted out any light in the mind of the speaker, “veiling” him from any moral navigation represented by the star Polaris, “pole,” which stands as a constant in the sky. In addition, the “garden stole” is a protective garment which the speaker wears to satisfy his internal complacency with the cycle of anger and defend him from outside forces that could attempt to stop the physical intentions of his fury. After the stole is introduced, the speaker is beyond moral repair. The dark imagery and defensive language of the poem contend that the speaker’s hostility is clouding his judgement and forcing him into violence.

“A Poison Tree” uses several paradoxes to confront the speaker’s cycle of anger. The title, structure, and precise diction combine in showing the paradoxical nature of the overarching metaphor. Detailing the methods and conclusion of growing a poison tree through animosity, this poem seemingly states that violence towards a foe is acceptable, but because of the irony in the nature of the text, it is clear that this method is faulty. Not only is the speaker killing the foe, but it is revealed through Biblical allusions to creation and the story of Eve that he is also hurting himself. The imagery of the poison tree paints a tainted picture of reality where harboring anger leads to self-fulfillment, but it is immediately confronted by the divisive ambiance in the many oxymorons present throughout the poem. Anger never produces good fruit, and the growth of the poison tree only produces more suffering.

Works Cited

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A POISON TREE

By William Blake

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I waterd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears:
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night.
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veild the pole;
In the morning glad I see;
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.