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Sample Paper for Writing about Poetry:

A Reading of Blake's "Garden of Love"

William Blake's "The Garden of Love" explores the Romantic dilemma of altered perception in adulthood. While it seems at first to offer an idealized pastoral portrait, Blake's poem eventually stresses the pain in losing one's ability to process experience as we grow up. This often results in an adult method of seeing that is narrow and restricted. As such, Blake falls squarely in mainstream Romantic thought regarding the philosophy of seeing; but because he stubbornly fails to embrace the ultimate optimism that accompanies and finally redeems Wordsworth's treatment of the same subject, Blake's poem fails to transcend its pessimistic tone.

Blake's poem opens with a deceptively attractive scene of a man returning to a childhood hideout:

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. (lines 1-4)

The monosyllabic vocabulary, the regular meter, and simple rhyme scheme combine to offer a soothing effect upon the reader. This demonstrates Barbara Raines' point about "how poetry can have a physical effect upon us" (27). We begin to associate Blake's scene with positive emotions no doubt shared by the narrator. As one critic points out, "readers are often duped into sharing the point of view of Blake's narrator, since they cannot resist being drawn in by the accessible language" (Pedant 246). Likewise, the repetition of the "I" in this opening stanza encourages the reader to trust the speaker's point of view.

The opening quatrain also contains familiar Nature imagery, the revisitation of a special place, and meditation initiated by perception. One expects all these features in a typical Romantic lyric. In fact, these devices anticipate Wordsworth's approach in "Tintern Abbey," an observation that supports William Trite's argument that "Wordsworth and Blake are far more brother and sister than we are willing to allow" ("Sleeping" 34). Although the speaker does not mention he visited the Garden as a child, we may assume his youthful familiarity with the place through his reference to "play" (4).

The pleasant tone shifts, however, in the second stanza of the poem, when the speaker comes upon shut chapel gates and reads "Thou shalt not" (6) above the door. In light of Blake's own radical religious views and his support of liberty in all facets of one's life, this blanket condemnation of action--it explicitly alludes to the Ten Commandments--suggests a darker side to the poem. Blake reiterates the ability of such commands to bring a halt to activity by stressing each syllable in the phrase, thus breaking up what had been a regular meter up until this point. Joseph Scansion suggests readers pay particular attention to this side of Blake, for "he never alters the meter without tying that alteration to meaning" (87). The speaker's response to this ominous development is natural: he turns towards the part of the Garden that gave him pleasure as a youth: "I turn'd to the Garden of Love, / That so many sweet flowers bore . . . " (7-8).

Unfortunately, the speaker is unable to discover the remembered scene, coming across instead a place filled with graves and tombstones. This change highlights a key tenet of Romantic thought: adults perceive the world differently than children, an observation that is explored in detail by Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey" (Williams xx). Since that mature perception is less innocent and more limited (a limitation probably foreshadowed in the opening line's reference to "mist"), the Romantics tended to privilege childhood perception. Usually, while this quality of perception cannot be recovered in Wordsworth, it can at least be reproduced in a related fashion through the power of the imagination. That option does not exist for Blake, however, who chooses instead to emphasize how organized religion cuts off all opportunity for personal growth. This fits in with his long-standing and well-documented opposition to the Church (Ross). Thus Blake uses the internal rhyme of the final line, linking "briars" and "desires" (12), to enact the "crucifixion" of individual pleasure in a world controlled

by oppressive, political organizations. Blake made this very clear in a late letter, when he explained that "this world has really tied me up" (qtd. in Trite, Take 76).

Blake's poem first seems to offer the classic meditation upon a natural setting that marks so much later Romantic poetry, like Shelley's great consideration of the place "Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river / Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves" (lines 10-11). Blake, though, employs that traditional setting only to set up a later contrast. That contrast juxtaposes the potential for freedom in a beautiful, natural world with those oppressive groups that would take away such freedom. Ultimately, in Blake we find a poet whose goals are primarily political and subversive, essentially a more radical version of England's future poet laureate. Thus Blake's poem suggests that if the subject is politics, then prepare to encounter the necessary pessimism that inevitably accompanies a journey into that topic.

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