



# English: Poetry and Revenge

## What if poetry made students think about anger and revenge?

Jane taught English, and wanted her students to see poetry as relevant to their lives and culture. She also wanted her students to see that poetry skills have a purpose beyond gaining knowledge just to get a good grade on a test.

“William Blake was one of the poets we studied, and I decided to choose ‘The Poison Tree’ to highlight how the skills we learn in order to understand a poem can help us think through important issues.

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 watered it in fears,  
Night and 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 veiled the pole;  
In the morning glad I see  
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

“I read the poem over a muted video clip about anger and revenge from a popular soap opera. I asked the students how the two related and noted down some of their ideas. We learned some basic skills around metaphorical language in poetry using ‘The Poison Tree’ as a case study. Blake uses gardening images (watering and sunning) to communicate the deliberate cultivating of resentment. Robert Burns used a different metaphor to describe

this process when he pictured a wife as 'nursing her anger to keep it warm.' Students created their own metaphors to capture this behavior. Then I showed the clip and read the poem again; this time, we discussed how they related to each other in light of what we had learned from the poem, and referred back to our original ideas. We explored the background of the poem and Blake's faith, including what the Bible says about destructive anger and revenge. We drew anger as a tree and wrote some of the 'fruits' that it might bear if not controlled. We finished by listening to the version of the poem by the band Blur, called 'Magpie' (B-side to the 1994 single *Girls & boy*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKxQh5LLKPA>) as a reflection. I asked students to think about another possibility as they listened: Is there a different sort of anger, anger at wrong and injustice? If channeled wisely, could this produce a different fruit, or is all anger wrong?"

## What's going on here?

Jane **saw** the issues raised in a study of poetry as helpful for engaging with questions about anger, bitterness, revenge, self-control, and forgiveness.

She **engaged** students in reflection through experiencing different ways of encountering a poem (alongside video, repeated readings), and encouraged them to connect the images in the poem to faith and to life.

She **reshaped her practice** by planning ways of relating poetry analysis to current issues and big questions, by using both images and words together and the dissonance between poetry and soap opera to provoke thought, by using a specific focus (metaphor and bitterness) to connect poetry and faith, and by creating a moment of reflection.

## What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Anger is not always wrong; anger at injustice can change situations if used wisely, but anger is a difficult emotion to handle. It's what we do with anger that matters. Most day-to-day anger arises when our will is crossed or our feelings are hurt in some way. Destructive anger is the opposite of **love**, forgiveness and mercy. Hatred is an intense feeling of hostility that can become a prolonged resentful feeling of bitterness. The two

can lead to wanting revenge. Love, in biblical terms, is a strong attachment to others and also a commitment to a way of behaving and thinking about others that does not depend on feelings alone. God's character is defined as love. Forgiveness and mercy hold out **hope** of reconciliation and change.

## What difference does it make?

Poetry can seem distant to some students, with little relevance to everyday life. Jane taught the usual poetry skills, but demonstrated that those skills can help us engage with words that offer insight into our own choices and behaviors. In this way, her poetry lesson became connected with faith-related questions about revenge and forgiveness.

## Where could we go from here?

Teachers could look for ways to demonstrate that skills have a range of purposes: for delight, for increasing access to material that can challenge and change us, and for service to enable us to use God-given gifts. We can learn a math skill to be better at math in order to delight in the mathematical nature of the world. Too often, skills become focused on narrow goals such as exams.

## Digging deeper

Jesus was angry when he threw the money changers out of the temple ([Matthew 21:12](#)) and when the disciples sent the children away ([Mark 10:14](#)). There is a right use of anger when it is a response to injustice, but it needs to be handled carefully. The Bible's advice is to deal with anger quickly ([Ephesians 4:26](#)). Anger can go underground and develop into resentment and bitterness, which cause trouble in relationships ([Ephesians 4:31-32](#)). Nurturing bitterness proverbially digs two graves, for it damages both parties involved.

*To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you. Lewis B. Smedes*

*He who cannot forgive others destroys the bridge over which he himself must pass. George Herbert*

The Bible describes God as slow to anger but quick to forgive ([Micah 7:18](#)). [Forgiveness](#) means ceasing to carry resentment, and mercy means ceasing to demand full punishment. Forgiveness does not mean, however, that evil is allowed to continue; sometimes justice still needs to happen and amends still need to be made. Forgiveness is often the first step toward reconciliation.

For Christians, forgiveness is a response to being forgiven by God; and it was modeled by Christ, who forgave his enemies. Various word pictures are used for forgiveness in the Bible: [Psalm 103:12](#) talks about God putting our sins as far away as the east is from the west. [Isaiah 1:18](#) compares forgiveness to removing a stain; one of the New Testament words for forgiveness refers to canceling a debt. Christ's death and resurrection secured forgiveness for all who come to him. Being forgiven should result in forgiving others ([Matthew 6:12](#)). Forgiveness is not just a feeling; it can be an act of will and is one of the most difficult aspects of Christian practice. It is not surprising that the poet Alexander Pope said, "To err is human; to forgive, divine." Forgiveness only happens with the help of God. Far from being a weakness, forgoing revenge is a sign of strength.



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