



Paston College A-Level English Literature

Pre-course Activity



Read the poems on the document called English Literature Summer Activity 2 (Poetry Texts).

One obvious connection between the poems is gardens.

Very quickly, write down things which you associate with gardens and then turn to the next slide.





Here are some thing you
might have put down:

Peace

Green

Trees

Beauty

Growth

Nature

Flowers

New life

Harmony

Paradise



Book of Genesis and the Eden myth

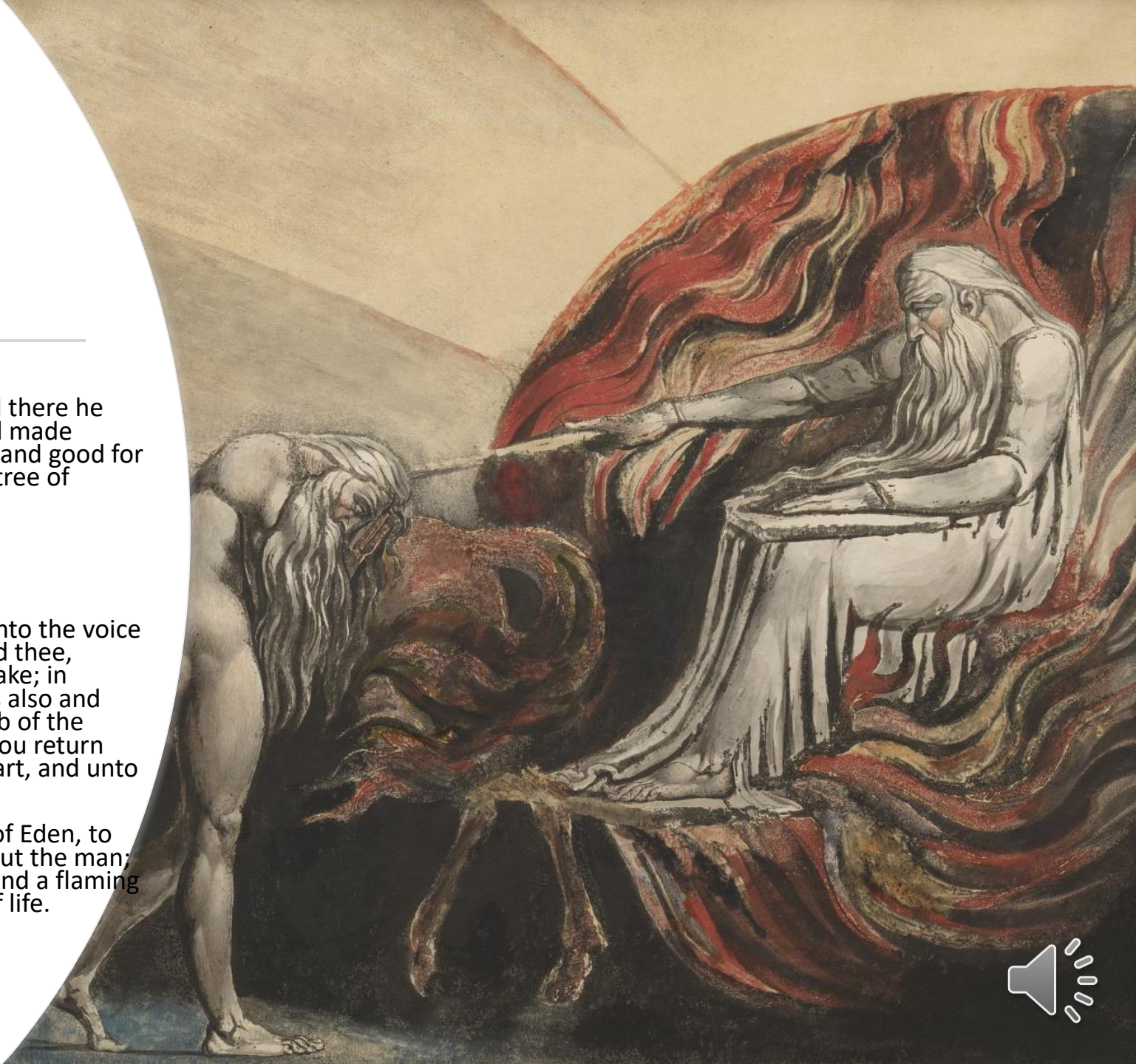
[8] And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. [9] And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Genesis 2:8-9

[17] And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; [18] Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; [19] In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

[23] Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. [24] So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

Genesis 3:17-19, 23-24





So it seems reasonable to connect both our poems with the book of Genesis and Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

Make a quick note of what the poems and the extracts from Genesis have in common.



Here are some things you might have included:



- The garden is at the centre of all three texts.
- The garden is beautiful, an ideal.
- Exclusion from the garden.
- A powerful, oppressive (male) figure or figures.
- A sense of irrevocable loss.
- The speaker's connection to the garden is (or will be) in the past.
- The present is inferior to the past.



Let's look at the poems in a little more detail, starting with Blake. Have a go at the following questions. The next slide will give you some suggested answers but have a go on your own before looking at them.



1. The first stanza sets up a contrast between past and present. Which words imply this time difference?
2. Taking the poem as a whole, write down all the words associated with life, growth and happiness and all the words associated with death, sadness and prohibition. Think about time. Which time period is your first group of words connected with? Which time period is your second group of words connected with?
3. With what is the chapel contrasted in the first stanza?
4. In the second stanza, what two details suggest that the speaker in the poem dislikes the chapel?
5. The word 'and' occurs seven times in the poem. Where is the word placed on the line and what effect do you think it has?
6. What do you think the 'sweet flowers' in line 8 might symbolise?
7. How are the priests characterised in the poem?



Some possible answers (1-4):

1. 'never' and 'used'.
 2. Life and growth: 'garden', 'love', 'play', 'green', 'sweet flowers', 'joys', 'desires'; death, sadness and prohibition: 'graves', 'Thou shalt not', 'tombstones', 'priests in black gowns', 'binding with briars', 'shut' and, by implication, the chapel itself. The first set of words are connected to the past; the second set to the present.
 3. Play and green – so innocence.
 4. The gates are shut (implies rejection) and the words 'Thou shalt not' are written over the door. These words feature in the ten commandments but deal with what is wrong rather than what is right.
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Some possible answers (5-7):

5. It's always placed at the start of the line and interestingly its use doubles in each stanza. It's used once in Stanza 1, twice in Stanza 2 and four times in Stanza 3. Notice too that in the final stanza, the word 'and' gets a strong stress in the rhythmic pattern. All this suggests a powerful build-up of the oppressive forces that the speaker confronts and that crush his joys and desires.
6. Very probably sexual encounters; the word 'bore' points to the bearing of children.
7. As oppressors. They're wearing black, the colour of death, and bind the speaker's joys and desires with briars (thorns), probably a reference to Christ's crown of thorns. Notice too that lines 11 and 12 are longer than the previous 10 lines, suggesting that their repressive power goes on and on.



Here are some more specific questions on 'Shut Out'; the next slide will give you some suggested answers but have a go on your own first.

1. Write down the key words and phrases used to describe the garden in the first two stanzas.
2. How does the speaker evoke the 'shadowless spirit'? Get at least three things.
3. What – symbolically - is the wall built by the spirit?
4. In the last stanza, the speaker sees 'near' a 'budding violet bed' and a lark making a nest. These she describes as 'not the best'; why?
5. Why is the poem so regular in its form? Look at the rhyme scheme, rhythmic pattern and stanza structure.

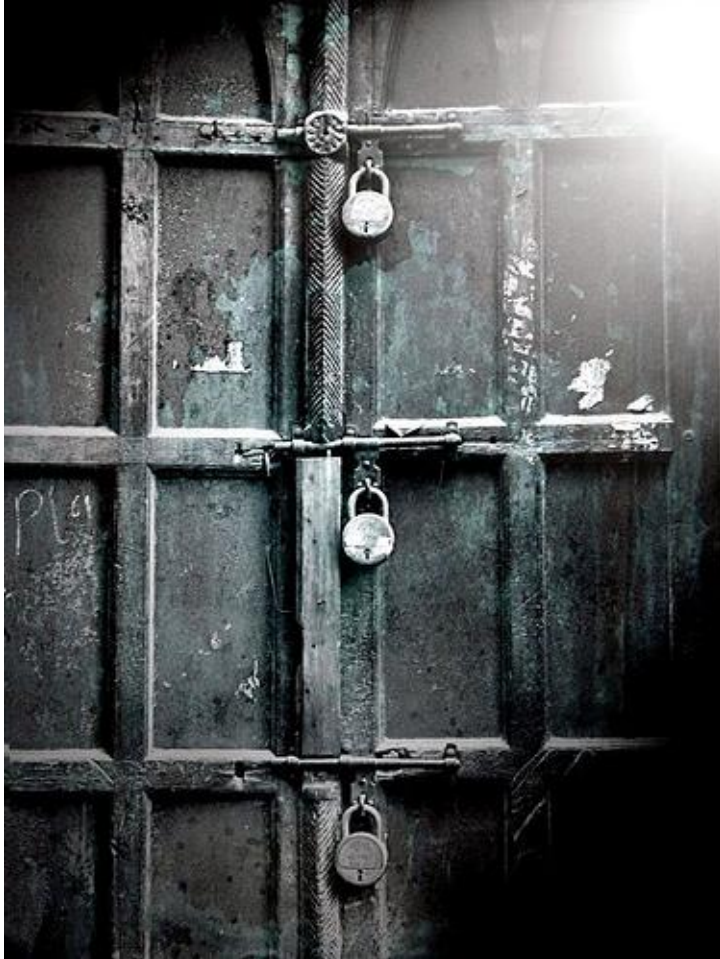


Some possible answers (1-3):

1. Most importantly as something beautiful: 'pied [of various colours] with all flowers'; full of life: 'song-birds', 'moths and bees', 'nests', 'stately trees'; associations of nature, growth and innocence: 'bedewed and green'. But also as something from which the speaker is excluded; she can see it only through the iron bars of a shut door and she states clearly 'I had been mine and it was lost.'
 2. As associated with death ('like the grave'); he refuses to engage with the speaker ('he answered not' and is 'silent'); most significantly, the spirit is male.
 3. The wall is both literally and metaphorically man-made so Rossetti seems to be talking here about patriarchal dominance and showing it to be something which isn't natural but a repressive construct. There's no negotiation with it as the spirit leaves 'no loophole great or small'.
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Some possible answers (4-5)



4. Because it's second best, nothing can ever be as good as her 'delightful land'. The world outside the wall is earthly reality; the garden inside is perfection, paradise, an image of heaven and the speaker has lost it forever. Interestingly, violets are flowers associated with death.
5. You will have noticed that the poem is written in four-line stanzas (quatrains), all of which have an ABBA rhyme scheme. Rossetti uses a rhythmic pattern called iambic tetrameter (eight syllables per line arranged weak/strong/weak/strong etc.) – there are a couple of variations ('Mortar' and 'Blinded' start lines 18 and 22 with strong stresses, for example). The regularity of the structure adds to the impression of inevitability. There can be no redemption for the speaker, as there was none for Adam and Eve; the 'unchanging' form implies that, once you've crossed God (or the authority of men), there can be no turning back.



Final thoughts



Blake's poem is an attack on the church (represented here by the chapel and the priests). 'As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on,' he once wrote, 'so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys.' Though a deeply religious man, Blake hated the narrow morality and sexual hypocrisy of organised religion and this disgust finds full expression in 'The Garden of Love'.

Rossetti's poem can best be understood as a version of the Eden story from Eve's point of view. Like Blake, Rossetti was devoutly religious but, unlike him, rarely, if ever, critical of the church. However, it's quite difficult to read this poem and not detect in it frustration with the patriarchal nature of Christianity and its condescending attitudes to women's spiritual strength.



Written work

If you fancy having a go at writing up your thoughts on 'Shut Out' and 'The Garden of Love', I'd be very interested to read them.

Think in terms of the following task:

Compare the ways Blake and Rossetti write about gardens and power in 'The Garden of Love' and 'Shut Out'. Try to pay detailed attention to language and poetic form in your answer.

Maximum number of words 1000.

Email your writing as an attachment to george.norton@ccn.ac.uk.

