The Garden of Love

What do we understand from the title of the poem?
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.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,  
And ‘Thou shalt not.’ writ over the door;  
So I turned to the Garden of Love  
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,  
And tombstones where flowers should be;  
And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,  
And binding with briars my joys & desires.
AO3: Context
Blake was a painter, poet and printmaker. He was largely unrecognised during his lifetime but is now considered central to the art and poetry of the Romantic age.

His work embraced the imagination as ‘the body of God’. He was considered mad by many of his contemporaries and claimed to have seen angels and other divine beings. Blake was reverential towards the Bible but hostile to the Church of England and other forms of organised religion.

For him, politics and sexuality were intrinsically linked and he was sexually liberated for his time – some reports claim he tried to bring a concubine into his marital home but his wife refused.

One of his most famous works is ‘Jerusalem’ which mentions the ‘dark satanic mills’ of the industrial revolution – or perhaps of organised religion.
Romanticism was an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement that originated in Europe toward the end of the 18th century. It was characterised by its focus on emotion and individualism, and — in response to the industrial revolution — it celebrated nature and the past.

The six most famous Romantic poets are Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats. They tried to write a new sort of poetry that emphasised intuition over reason and the pastoral over the urban. They deliberately used more colloquial language to avoid elitism, speaking for the disenfranchised and poor, along with children, ‘fallen’ women, discharged soldiers and other marginalised groups.

The Romantics were concerned with emotion and spontaneity but also the composition of poems in order to capture this: metre and form are therefore important when looking at Romantic poetry. The Romantics believed their art could transform the world and regenerate people spiritually. Blake particularly was radical in his political and spiritual ideas, speaking out against the monarchy and the church.
The Garden of Eden is the biblical ‘Garden of God’. God created the first man, Adam, and placed him in the Garden of Eden, along with Eve, whom God created out of Adam’s rib to be a companion for Adam.

The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. [Genesis 2:9]

Adam and Eve were free to eat from any tree but the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The serpent (representing the Devil) seduced them into eating this forbidden fruit and they were expelled from the garden, to prevent them from eating from the tree of life and living forever.
The ‘Garden’ as symbol  

The other garden in the Bible is in the Old Testament poem ‘Song of Songs’, an erotic poem in which garden imagery is used as a metaphor for sexual enjoyment.

Awake, north wind,  
and come, south wind!  
Blow on my garden,  
that its fragrance may spread everywhere.  
Let my beloved come into his garden  
and taste its choice fruits.  

[Song of Songs 4:16]

The contemporary Christian reading reinterpreted the eroticism of the poem, to make it a symbol of a ‘purer’ spiritual love – e.g. between Christ and the soul, or the church.
The ‘Garden’ as symbol

When Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden, before what is known as ‘the fall of man’, they were able to love without shame or self-consciousness. The garden, therefore, was a place of innocent, uninhibited sexual expression.

The garden in this poem, then, is more like Eden after the fall. Sexuality is surrounded by shame, repression and prohibition. It is sinful. This is also reflected in the way that Song of Songs was reinterpreted: the religious system replaced a celebration of the goodness of sexuality with reasons for shame and repression.
William Blake’s ‘Songs of Innocence and Experience’

The ‘Innocence’ section is positive in tone and celebrates love, childhood and nature.

The ‘Experience’ section illustrates the negative side effects of modern life upon nature and people. It views the modern condition as dangerous and corrupt, promoting poverty, child labour and prostitution.

‘The Garden of Love’ is central to the ‘Songs of Experience’, as it marks the psychological passage from childhood innocence to adult experience. There are strong echoes of Adam and Eve’s passage from innocence to experience in the Garden of Eden: just as their tasting the apple has been interpreted as a sexual awakening, so too the speaker’s “joys and desires” – including physical pleasures – are denied to him by the church.
AO2: Language and Imagery
I went to the **Garden of Love**, 

Let’s think about the Garden of Love a little more... what have we learned that creates a context for this image?

The Garden holds great significance. As well as a sexual or romantic type of love, it could also be ‘Love’ (capital L), a first, primal love like that given to men from God.

The ‘Garden’, then, could be a place within ourselves where we store this primal emotion – our own, internal, Garden of Eden.

This is not a physical, but a spiritual, place. Our place of ‘innocence’.

**AO3:** Remember that Blake, though hostile to the Church, was a Christian.
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.

What is the poet saying here?

What has changed, the garden itself or the way he sees it? Could it be both?
What difference does it make to our interpretation?

Link this vision to Blake’s idea of ‘innocence’. Here, he enters the world of ‘experience’ for the first time and is shocked at how his previous freedoms have literally been blocked by the church.
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.

What is the poet saying here?

What connotations does ‘play’ hold?

How do the simple bi and mono-syllabic words contribute to the idea of innocence?

1. The colour green is associated with growth, fertility and spring
2. Village greens were places of freedom and play, representing the importance of the imagination in human life
3. Village greens were not owned by anyone, so represented freedom from the rules or demands of an authority figure
4. Blake wrote an opposite poem in ‘Innocence’ called ‘The Echoing Green’

Capital ‘C’ means this stands for the institution of the Church, rather than an individual place.

Past tense – he is no longer a child who plays

What does this context add to our reading?
And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And ‘Thou shalt not.’ writ over the door;
So I turned to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore.

What is the poet saying here?

What is the effect of ‘Thou shalt not’? Consider the structure and pace of the poem as well as the words themselves.
And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tombstones where flowers should be;
And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys & desires.

Colour/growth/life is replaced with grey/death.

Dark, bleak and unimaginative

A mechanical ritual or routine; they methodically ‘bind’ desire and joy

What is the poet saying here?

What is the effect of the internal rhyme of the third and fourth lines?

Contrast this vision of death with the ‘sweet flowers’ in the previous stanza. What is the effect of this?
And binding with *briars* my joys & desires.

This image links to the ‘crown of thorns’ worn by Jesus and therefore symbolises pain and humiliation.

**Why do you think Blake has used it here? What is he suggesting?**

Blake is suggesting that he suffers, as Christ suffered – but his suffering serves no higher purpose. Those subject to the tyranny of the Church are controlled externally (as by the priests who patrol) but also internally through having been made to accept its teachings and modes of thought.

Cf. ‘mind forged manacles’ (London) and ‘dark satanic mills’ (Jerusalem).
The Chapel

1. It is bounded by ‘gates’ that are ‘shut’
2. It is a place where people are not free to act (‘Thou shalt not’)
3. It is associate with the loss of life (‘graves’)
4. Its priests wear ‘black’ uniforms and patrol the grounds

AO3: Blake attended a church over which the opposite sign was displayed: “Now everything is allowable.”
AO2: Form / Structure
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.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And ‘Thou shalt not.’ writ over the door;
So I turned to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tombstones where flowers should be;
And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys & desires.
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.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And 'Thou shalt not.' writ over the door;
So I turned to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tombstones where flowers should be;
And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys & desires.
And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tombstones where flowers should be;
And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys & desires.

This stanza disrupts any sense of predictability. The internal rhyme slows the pace of the final two lines and echoes the speaker’s sense of confusion at what he has found in the garden: just as his/our expectations are confounded, so are our expectations of the rhyme scheme.

The double rhymes of the closing couplet reinforce how totally the speaker’s hopes have been crushed.

Would it have made a difference if Blake had ended with four short rhyming couplets instead?
AO4/5: Links and Interpretations
“The effectiveness of this poem lies in the skill of the author to take us with him, and to allow us to experience his emotions. Not to just explain what happened to us, but to have it happen to us. To allow the reader to experience it first hand. In ‘The Garden of Love’ we enter with the same expectations as the speaker, deceived by the title and relaxed with the positive images. But his horror becomes our horror, we are repulsed with him, and despair with him.”

(John R. Mabry)

Do you agree?
Think about:
• The characteristics of love
• The representation of the people involved
• The feelings of the speaker
• Any imagery or language used
• The way the structure and form reflects this

You can either:
Write a side of A4 to explain your answer.
Write a detailed plan of your answer.

Make sure you include and analyse quotations from the text.
Fill in your CLIFS sheet for this poem. Remember, this will be a revision aid!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>