# The Clod and the Pebble

## POEM TEXT

"Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair."

So sung a little Clod of Clay
Trodden with the cattle's feet,
But a Pebble of the brook
Warbled out these metres meet:

"Love seeketh only self to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite."

## SUMMARY

"Love doesn't try to make itself happy. It doesn't care about itself at all. Instead, it sacrifices its own comfort for others, and creates its own kind of Heaven even within the misery of Hell."

At least, that's according to a little lump of clay, who is often squashed by cow's walking overhead. But a pebble in a nearby stream sang out this tidy response:

"Love only wants to make itself happy, and to make others dependent on it. Love takes pleasure in other people's discomfort, and creates Hell even in the middle of Heaven."

## THEMES

### THE NATURE OF LOVE

"The Clod and the Pebble" offers two competing visions of love. The first kind of love is based on *selflessness*, as represented by the personified Clod, while the second is based on selfishness, as represented by the Pebble. The humble Clod thinks love is all about sacrifice and generosity in the name of making others happy, whereas the Pebble argues that it's all about a lover getting what they want—even if that means other people get hurt. The poem doesn't explicitly say which perspective is better or truer, and both have downsides. On one level, then, the poem implies that love is a combination of the two perspectives—a mixture of selflessness and selfishness. The poem could also be read as a kind of warning about the way that love can become a damaging force, by either making people too submissive or, alternatively, too self-interested.

The Clod believes that love is altruistic and all about generosity. Love requires nothing of others—its only need is fulfilled in the act of giving love. This idea doesn't need to be limited to romantic love, either; in fact, the Clod's definition of love is in line with certain Christian ideals. Love is its own reward, the Clod says, and people should seek to manifest their love by denying their own comfort in the service of others' "ease."

The Clod, for its part, lives out this denial of self-interest on a daily basis: it's constantly being squashed by the heavy tread of passing cows, yet feels no animosity about this at all. Even if the world around it is a kind of "Hell," the Clod believes that selfless love can create its own little "Heaven"—a paradise—in the midst of such miserable circumstances.

The Pebble in a nearby stream argues *against* the clod's point of view, however, suggesting instead that love is pure selfishness. Love only wants to please itself, the Pebble says, and to trap people through "bind[ing]" them to its "delight"—that is, by making other people fulfill the lover's own desires. Love, according to the Pebble, even revels in making people uncomfortable or distressed. Love thus doesn't create any sort of "Heaven," but rather builds its own "Hell."

Just as the Clod represents selflessness in its willingness to be trodden own, so too does the Pebble physically embody its own attitude towards love: it holds strong in the stream and refuses to be moved, making the water travel around it. In other words, it doesn't know what it's like to make selfless sacrifices (unlike the Clod).

The poem doesn't argue that either of these viewpoints is correct, and both have clear downsides. While at first the Clod's viewpoint might seem more morally sound, it also might be taken as overly naive and passive, turning lovers into downtrodden victims without a sense of self or backbone. The Pebble, meanwhile, comes across as perhaps more realistic but also cold and hard-hearted, unwilling to bend and thus forcing the stream to move around it—remaining strong but totally alone in the process. In the end, the poem perhaps suggests that genuine, lasting love is a combination of these two perspectives.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-12

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-2

*"Love seeketh not itself to please,*
*Nor for itself hath any care,*

The poem opens with the song of the Clod (a clod is a small clump of earth or clay). In this song, the clod presents its vision of love, which is characterized by a kind of extreme selflessness. Love doesn't require or desire anything, according to the humble Clod, nor does it even have "any care" for itself at all. In other words, love is all about generosity and sacrifice.

As is often the case with Blake's poems, the simple and sparse language here masks complex ideas. First, there are multiple layers of personification at work here: the Clod is personified—given a voice—and the Clod in turn personifies love.

Love itself is portrayed as capable of selflessness or selfishness. This "Love" might refer specifically to the way that *people* love each other, but it could also refer to love as a kind of force—the expression of God, perhaps.

It's important to keep in mind Blake's strong commitment to the Christian faith (though his views on Christianity were fiercely independent). To that end, the Clod's definition of love aligns closely with typical Christian ideas. God gave the world his son, Jesus, as a kind of loving sacrifice (who, in turn, sacrificed himself for humanity). As the Clod seems to express, people should show a similar willingness to love—and sacrifice—without the expectation of reward.

The sound of the opening lines is very gentle, supporting the idea of love as self-sacrifice. The soft /th/ sounds in "seeketh" and "hath," combined with the sibilance running throughout the lines, grant the lines a hushed quiet—as though the poem itself is submitting to another authority.

These lines also establish the poem's meter of iambic tetrameter, four poetic feet per line in an ustressed-stressed syllable pattern:

"Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,

These lines aren't necessarily perfect in their meter—it's possible to stress the opening word "Love," for example, as we've done here—but they are relatively steady and familiar in their sound.

### LINES 3-4

*But for another gives its ease,*
*And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair."*

In the second half of the first stanza, the Clod completes its song. Having stated clearly that love has no interest in pleasing itself, the Clod insists that Love is all about giving. Love sacrifices its comforts—its "ease"—for something or someone other than itself. In behaving this way, love (or a person who loves) can make a bad situation into something positive through the simple act of selfless giving. This is what the speaker means by building "A Heaven in Hell's despair."

Of course, at this stage in the poem the jury is still out on whether the little Clod is correct in its take on love. Through this definition of love, the poem challenges the reader to think about how they themselves understand one of the concepts most fundamental to human existence.

Meanwhile, the alliteration between "Heaven" and "Hell" suggests that these places/concepts are closely linked. Indeed, the Clod implies that Heaven and Hell are in part a question of perspective; through the transformative power of selflessness, love can turn one into the other—"despair" into hope.

The stanza ends with the self-assured finality of an end-stop, closing the Clod's argument. The poem by now has also made its rhyme scheme clear, as this opening quatrain follows an ABAB pattern. The rhymes are clear and full, and this, combined with the relatively steady meter, makes the poem feel musical and relatively simple (on the surface, at least).

### LINES 5-6

*So sung a little Clod of Clay*
*Trodden with the cattle's feet,*

While we've been attributing the poem's opening lines to the Clod throughout this guide so far, it's only at the start of the second stanza that the poem itself makes clear that it's been "a little Clod of Clay" singing these lines all along. These lines are very musical themselves, with their alliteration in "So sung" and "Clod of Clay."

This first half of the second stanza then tells readers a bit more about the Clod's perspective—evidence to *explain* why the Clod thinks the way it does. The Clod, as a personified object, lives a life of literal submission. Cattle tread on it all the time, squashing its malleable shape flat against to the ground. The sounds of these lines evoke the image at hand, with the low assonance of /aw/ sounds and thick consonance of /l/ and /d/ sounds (plus the /tt/ sound, which may sound like /d/ depending on the reader) adding a sense of heaviness and insistence to the lines—suggesting the weight of a cow coming down on the helpless Clod:

So sung a little Clod of Clay
Trodden with the cattle's feet,

Perhaps, then, the Clod's view of love helps it make sense of the world, the idea of self-sacrifice explaining its purpose in life. Or, perhaps, the Clod's view of love is naive, goes too far; who, after all, would want to spend all day be walked all over by cows?

## LINES 7-8

*But a Pebble of the brook*
*Warbled out these metres meet:*

The Clod having made its case, the Pebble jumps in—exactly halfway through the poem—to give its own take on love. Lines 7-8 serve as readers' first introduction to the Pebble, which is personified just as the Clod was.

The two lines about the Pebble again contain clear alliterating and consonant sounds that add a sense of bouncy music to the lines:

But a Pebble of the brook
Warbled out these metres meet:

The bold /b/ sounds that define these in particular mark out the Pebble as a more assertive presence. The assonance of "these meters meet" adds to the line's confidence and musicality as well, making the Pebble seem as if it is keen to prove its own ability to sing a song about love.

As the second stanza comes to a close, readers may notice that this is the only stanza in the poem spoken neither from the Clod's nor the Pebble's perspective. The second stanza itself is also divided neatly in half, giving equal weight to the two opposing speakers (the Clod and the Pebble). The placement of this more detached voice directly in the middle of the two songs perhaps suggests that real love is a compromise between both perspectives.

## LINES 9-10

*"Love seeketh only self to please,*
*To bind another to its delight,*

The Pebble believes strongly that love is *not* about selflessness, but rather is all about selfishness. The poem thus becomes a juxtaposition between these two opposing points of view, with the opening line of the Pebble's song structured in parallel to that of the Clod's in order to emphasize their differences:

"Love seeketh not itself to please,

Vs.:

"Love seeketh only self to please,

According to the Pebble, love aims to fulfil only its own desires, and even uses others to achieve this aim. Rather than making sacrifices for others, then, the Pebble thinks love is more like a kind of parasite seeking a host on which to feed—"another" body to which it can "bind." Perhaps here the poem refers to the way that love can drive people to madness or desperate acts, like murder or suicide. Essentially, love here is pure ego, and any apparent care for another is just its way of satisfying its own deep-rooted desires.

The actual form of the different voices in the poem becomes important here: a pebble, of course, is a hard object, whereas a Clod is malleable. The poem takes the Pebble to represent selfishness because of the way that it seems to hold firm in the stream, forcing the *water* to bend its course.

It's worth pointing out that there is a logical flaw in the Pebble's point of view, however, which may or may not have been intentional on Blake's part. The Pebble *thinks* it is a picture of independence and strength, but in reality it is smoothed and shaped by the passage of the water flows over and around it; it also essentially watches the world pass all alone. Perhaps this undermines the Pebble's point of view in the same way that the Clod's trampled existence might imply that its definition of love is too simplistic, naive, and extreme.

In this stanza, the Pebble uses vocabulary, syntax, and grammar that are almost identical to the Clod—indeed, elements of the first stanza are directly repeated in the third (e.g., "love seeketh"). The repetition between line 1 and line 9 at once manages to highlight the difference between the two points of view—selfishness and selflessness—and, somehow, to suggest that they might actually be two sides of the same coin. That is, maybe the poem strives to show that neither selfishness nor selflessness in pure form are really what love is about, that real love is a combination of the two.

## LINES 11-12

*Joys in another's loss of ease,*
*And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite."*

The poem's concluding lines are almost identical to lines 3 and 4—only seven words are different between them! And yet, they express completely opposite ideas. Whereas lines 3 and 4 expressed the idea (through the Clod) that love gives up its own comforts for someone (or something) else, here love is much more selfish. Indeed, there's even something sinister about this view of love—it actively "Joys" in destroying "another's loss of ease." This speaks to love as a potentially damaging force, bringing people pain rather than happiness.

So whereas love, in the Clod's mind, can bring joy and hope to any despair, the Pebble believes that love instead builds "Hell in Heaven's despite." While the act of selfless love creates something good out of bad situations in the first stanza, here the process is reversed.

The poem says very little about which of these definitions is true—if either of them *are* true—and leaves much to the reader's interpretation. It's quite possible to view both the Clod and the Pebble as unrealistic, only telling one side of the story. Both have only experienced the world from their own perspectives, meaning perhaps that they cannot conceive of definitions that are form through alternative experiences.

On the one hand, then, the poem seems to say that people's

understanding of love is colored by the lives that they lead. But perhaps the poem strikes deeper, placing these views of love together in order to force the reader to make up their own mind. Neither the Clod's nor the Pebble's song quite rings true, though both seem to have elements of truth to them. Maybe, then, the poem subtly argues that real love—or a happy love, at least—depends on a balance of selflessness and selfishness, and that neither in extreme is healthy.

## SYMBOLS

### THE CLOD

The personified Clod (which is a small lump of earth or clay) believes that love is a force for good, defined by humility and generosity. In turn, the humble Clod itself comes to symbolize those qualities; it stands (or, rather, lies down) for selflessness. The Clod is *used* to being trodden on—because cows are constantly walking over it—and thus knows what it's like to submit to someone else, to be made uncomfortable for someone else's benefit. The Clod is also less solid than the hard-hearted Pebble; it's soft and malleable, reflecting the way that its definition of love is all about doing whatever it takes to please others.

The fact that it is quite literally walked all over by lowly cattle, however, suggests that there is an element of naivety to the Clod's total humility—that it perhaps represents selflessness to the point of self-destruction.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-6:** ""Love seeketh not itself to please, / Nor for itself hath any care, / But for another gives its ease, / And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair." / So sung a little Clod of Clay / Trodden with the cattle's feet,"

### THE PEBBLE

The Pebble presents a definition of love that is far more cynical than that of the Clod. The Pebble believes that love is entirely selfish, a kind of destructive force that has only its own satisfaction in mind and doesn't care about hurting others. The Pebble, like the Clod, becomes a symbol of its own point of view: it represents selfishness.

Unlike the soft, malleable Clod, the Pebble is tough and rigid, its physical solidity suggesting hard-heartedness. The Pebble also makes water bend its course, forcing it to move *around* the Pebble; this suggests the way love exerts *control* over others (as opposed to making *sacrifices* for them). And while the Clod happily gets squashed flat by cattle's feet, the Pebble could potentially trip the cattle up, suggesting that with stubborn selfishness comes the potential it for danger and pain.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 7-12:** "But a Pebble of the brook / Warbled out these metres meet: / "Love seeketh only self to please, / To bind another to its delight, / Joys in another's loss of ease, / And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.""

## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

Alliteration is an important part of "The Clod and the Pebble" and occurs through the poem. Generally speaking, alliteration gives the poem a song-like quality. The poem appears in Blake's *Songs of Experience*, but the first and third stanzas are clearly marked out as songs in and of themselves—one by the Clod, and the other by the Pebble. It makes sense, then, that the poem uses such clear alliteration in phrases like "So sung," "Clod of Clay," and "metres meet." All this alliteration (combined with consonance, assonance, and the poem's simple rhythms) gives the poem a very musical sound, one which lends itself well to memorization. These sonic devices help the poem feel like a lesson being taught.

Alliteration also has more specific effects as well. For example, lines 4 and 12 use alliteration in "Heaven" and "Hell." The proximity of the words, combined with the shared sound, suggests that they are not all that far apart; love can make all the difference in turning Hell into Heaven—and vice versa!

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 4:** "Heaven," "Hell's"
- **Line 5:** "So sung," "Clod," "Clay"
- **Line 6:** "cattle's"
- **Line 7:** "But," "brook"
- **Line 8:** "metres meet"
- **Line 9:** "seeketh," "self"
- **Line 12:** "Hell," "Heaven's"

### ANTITHESIS

Antithesis is important to the form of "The Clod and the Pebble." The entire poem is divided into two parts—the Clod's song and the Pebble's, which present two very different definitions of love: one based on selflessness and one based on selfishness. The poem is also very symmetrical, with both "songs" using very similar language. This clear formal parallelism is part of what create the poem's antithesis, and is also what helps to highlight the *differences* between these two points of view.

For example, as the Clod arguing that love doesn't want to please itself, the Pebble insists love wants to please only itself; the Clod says that love sacrifices its own comfort on others'

behalf, whereas the Pebble says that love delights in making others uncomfortable. Notice how these lines—despite being spaced apart by a stanza—are clear responses to each other:

> "Love seeketh not itself to please,

And:

> "Love seeketh only self to please,

Line 3 says this:

> But for another gives its ease,

...which is countered by line 11:

> Joys in another's loss of ease,

By using such clear formal antithesis, the poem underscores the sharp difference between the two conceptions of love.

The most obvious example of antithesis is perhaps found in the final lines of the first and third stanzas, which use almost *entirely* the same words in different order: "And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair," and "And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite." This grammatical parallelism and repetition makes the antithesis here clear, underscoring how the different between Heaven and Hell may simply be a matter of perspective.

**Where Antithesis appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** ""Love seeketh not itself to please,"
- **Lines 3-4:** "But for another gives its ease, / And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair.""
- **Line 9:** ""Love seeketh only self to please,"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Joys in another's loss of ease, / And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.""

## ASSONANCE

Assonance is used subtly throughout "The Clod and the Pebble." The main function of assonance is to give the poem a song-like quality, which makes sense given that this appears in *Songs of Experience*. The poem, of course, has a clear rhyme scheme that relies on assonance, and which is discussed in the "Rhyme Scheme" section of this guide. Here, we're focusing on moments of assonance that aren't part of that scheme.

In the first stanza of the poem—the Clod's song—the gentleness of the assonance conveys the meek and submissive idea of love being presented. "[S]eeketh" and "please," "Nor" and "for," "gives" and "its," "Heaven" and "Hell"—all of these make quietly harmonious pairs. The /aw/ in "Clod" and "Trodden" is intentionally heavy, meanwhile, giving the reader a sense of the weight of the cattle that tread on the "little Clod of Clay."

In turn, the assonance during the Pebble section marks a change of voice. The pebble is bold and assertive, and believes love to be about self-satisfaction, desire, and perhaps even causing pain to others. The prominent long /ee/ sound in "these metres meet" makes the Pebble's counter-song assertive, as though it's trying to undermine the Clod and draw attention to itself. It's worth noting, too, that the Pebble has a little *more* assonance in its lines—also conveying its more individualistic definition of love (as though the Pebble is trying to grab the limelight by being sonically louder).

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "seeketh," "please"
- **Line 2:** "Nor for"
- **Line 3:** "gives its"
- **Line 4:** "builds," "Heaven," "Hell's"
- **Line 5:** "Clod," " of"
- **Line 6:** "Trodden," "cattle's"
- **Line 7:** "Pebble"
- **Line 8:** "Warbled," "these metres meet"
- **Line 9:** "seeketh," "self," "please"
- **Line 11:** "loss of"
- **Line 12:** "Hell," "Heaven's"

## CONSONANCE

Consonance courses through "The Clod and the Pebble." It works alongside assonance and alliteration (itself often a form of consonance) to make the poem sound like a song. Of course, the poem is taken from the *Songs of Experience*—but even among those poems, this one is more explicitly song-like in structure. The first and third stanzas are sung by the Clod and the Pebble respectively, and the musical chiming of consonants gives the poem a kind of pleasant tunefulness.

The first lines of both stanzas are particularly sibilant as well, filled not only with /s/ sounds but also /f/, /th/, and /l/ sounds—giving the lines a sense of gentleness. Take lines 1-2:

> "Love seeketh not itself to please,
> Nor for itself hath any care,

By contrast, note how, in the Pebble's stanza, the second line is filled with harsher /t/ sounds, subtly suggesting the Pebble's spikier personality:

> To bind another to its delight,

That said, though there are some subtle differences in the consonance used for the Clod and Pebble, the sounds are very similar for the most part. Both the first and third stanzas are full of /s/, /n/, and /d/ sounds. That's because the words are almost

identical, despite expressing polar opposite views about what love is (selflessness vs. selfishness).

The second stanza, which is spoken by an unnamed narrator (rather than the Pebble or the Clod), is the most consonant of all. These sounds often evoke the lines' content. For example, the /d/ and /t/ sounds in lines 5 and 6—"Clod" and "Trodden," and "little" with "cattle's feet"—give the reader a sense of the Clod's earthy existence, the dull /d/ sound suggesting the way it is constantly being trampled (note that the double ts in these words are often read as having a /d/ sound a well). By contrast, the /b/ and /l/ sounds in lines 7 and 8—"Pebble" and "Warbled"—somehow seem more, well, warbly, as though the Pebble's voice is colored by the fact that it is singing from the brook.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Love seeketh," "itself," "please"
- **Line 2:** "for itself hath"
- **Line 3:** "gives," "ease"
- **Line 4:** "Heaven," "Hell's"
- **Line 5:** "So sung," "little Clod," "Clay"
- **Line 6:** "Trodden," "cattle's," " feet"
- **Line 7:** "But," "Pebble"
- **Lines 7-8:** "brook / Warbled"
- **Line 8:** "metres meet"
- **Line 9:** "Love seeketh only self," "please"
- **Line 10:** "To bind another ," "to its delight"
- **Line 11:** "loss"
- **Line 12:** "builds," "Hell," "Heaven's"

## PERSONIFICATION

Personification is fundamental to "The Clod and the Pebble." In the poem, two opposing views of love are presented not by *people*, but by natural *objects*. The Clod and the Pebble are given voices with which to sing, and both have something to say. The Clod thinks love is about selfless sacrifice, while the Pebble thinks love is about self-satisfaction and desire.

Of course, taken at a literal level, the reader might wonder what either of these would know about love! But the personification allows these two definitions of love to combine with the symbolic properties of both objects in support of their respective arguments. So the Clod, which is used to being "trodden" on, sings the song of selflessness (because it literally gives way to others). The hard Pebble presents a more individualistic view, because it forces water to change its course.

It's reasonable to assume that the poem uses these natural objects to represent different types of love that are actually practiced and experienced in the real world by people—so, on the one hand, the personification makes clear that the poem is talking about humanity. That said, the use of personified nature might also suggest that the love being discussed is more than mere romantic love, and perhaps a kind of force. It could be the expression of God's will in the word, for example.

The personification doesn't end there, though—there is another layer. Both the Clod and the Pebble sing of love as a kind of thinking, feeling, desiring creature in and of itself. That is, they don't explicitly attach their definitions of love to people. The poem doesn't offer much explanation as to why, but this second personification certainly makes love seem more mysterious and, perhaps, even, ultimately unknowable.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-12
- Lines 5-8

## REPETITION

"The Clod and the Pebble" is an almost perfectly symmetrical poem, and this formal effect is achieved in large part through repetition. Compare the first stanza with the third. Remarkably, though they express completely opposing views about love, they are almost identical in terms of structure, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax (their arrangement of words).

The two songs—which could be called "the song of selfless love" and "the song of selfish love" respectively—work by mirroring one another. Just like a photograph has its negative image, the two songs are simultaneously different and interlinked.

Lines 1 and 9, for example, change only two words (and one of these, "itself," is only changed to "self" in order to aid the meter), but express completely opposite ideas. Lines 2 and 10 do not repeat words, but line 10 does repeat the *subject* of line 2 (how love feels towards itself). Lines 3 and 11 repeat "another" and "ease," again expressing antithetical views. Finally, lines 4 and 12 are almost identical, but one is the reverse of the other:

> [Love] builds a Heaven in Hell's despair.
> [...]
> [Love] builds a Hell in Heaven's despite."

Only "despair" and "despite" are different here (apart from the word order), and even these words are very close in terms of their sound. Ultimately, the effect of this repetition is quite paradoxical, highlighting both the chasm of difference between the two definitions and the way that, ultimately, they may be two sides of the same coin. That is, perhaps love is *both* of these definitions—and real love is a combination of the two.

**Where Repetition appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 9-12

## VOCABULARY

**Seeketh** (Line 1, Line 9) - Archaic form of "seeks."

**Hath** (Line 2) - Archaic form of "has."

**Ease** (Line 3, Line 11) - Comfort.

**Clod** (Line 5) - A small clump of earth and/or clay.

**Trodden** (Line 6) - Walked upon.

**Brook** (Line 7) - A small stream.

**Warbled** (Line 8) - To warble is to sing in a quavering voice (perhaps relating to the Pebble being in a watery environment).

**Metres** (Line 8) - Lines of a song or poem.

**Meet** (Line 8) - Timely and/or appropriate. Also possibly meaning "put together well."

**Self** (Line 9) - Itself.

**Bind** (Line 10) - To fasten or secure, with the suggestion of this being permanent.

**Joys** (Line 11) - A verb, meaning "takes pleasure/happiness."

**Despite** (Line 12) - Disdain/hatred.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The Clod and the Pebble" has a very simple form in keeping with most of the other poems in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. But also typically of Blake, simplicity of form masks the complexity of the ideas contained within. That is, this isn't a simple poem—it's a poem of opposites, or "contrary states" as Blake liked to call them.

The poem consists of12 lines broken up into three quatrains. But it can also be divided into two equal parts, with each one representing a different character and viewpoint. The poem neatly splits in two at the end of line 6, with the first half of the poem dealing with the Clod and the second with the Pebble.

Each of these personified objects expresses, through song, an opinion on the nature of love, and they could hardly be more different. The Clod takes the idealistic yet perhaps naive view that love is about a kind of radical self-sacrifice. This viewpoint opens the poem, and the second stanza attributes it to the Clod, while also adding the detail about the Clod being "Trodden" on by cattle. The second half expresses the alternative view, put forward by the Pebble. Love is selfish, hard-hearted, and destructive. The poem, then, is purely antithetical, laying two opposites side-by-side and providing very little commentary on which is correct.

This idea of antithesis as a kind of symmetry plays out in other ways too. For example, the similar vocabulary and sentence structure used in the first and third stanzas, or the pairs of alliterative sounds (e.g., "Clod" with "Clay"). Formally speaking, then, miniature elements of the poem represent the overall structure as a kind of pair—its the Clod *and* the Pebble, not the Clod *or* the Pebble. Accordingly, perhaps it's reasonable to see the poem as a subtle argument that love is a *combination* of selflessness and selfishness—neither fully one nor the other.

### METER

As with most of Blake's poetry, "The Clod and the Pebble" has a simple rhythm. The poem flows easily from start to finish, for the most part conforming to iambic tetrameter. This means there are four feet per line, each of which has an unstressed-stressed beat pattern (da-DUM). Line 5 provides a clear example:

> So sung | a lit- | tle Clod | of Clay

Generally speaking, the regularity of the meter gives the poem a song-like quality, almost like a hymn. It gives the Clod and the Pebble the space to sing their respective songs of love, which, though markedly different in their philosophies, *sound* remarkably similar (perhaps suggesting that they have more in common that they realize, or that love is really a combination between their two opposing points of view).

But also typically of Blake, there are important variations in the meter as well. The most significant of these occur in lines 6 and 8, both of which trim the first unstressed syllable of the first foot (technically known as *catalexis*):

> Trod- | den with | the cat- | tle's feet,
> [...]
> Warb- | led out | these met- | res meet:

The rest of the line conforms to the typical iambic meter. Some readers may break up the line differently—marking the feet here as trochees (stressed-unstressed) with a missing beat at the end of the line—but the result is the same: a heavy emphasis falls on "Trodden" and "Warbled." With the first word, this conveys the heaviness of the cattle's weight as their feet land down on the Clod. With "Warbled," the dramatic shift in stress signals that it is the Pebble's turn to sing—that it is taking over and turning up the volume of its own voice.

### RHYME SCHEME

"The Clod and the Pebble" has a relatively simple rhyme scheme:

> ABAB CDED AFAF

The first and last stanza have the same pattern, while second stanza has unrhymed first and third lines (C and E in the scheme above). The first and third stanza also both repeat the A rhyme words exactly ("please" and "ease"). This is just one of many similarities between these stanzas, which, though nearly

identical in language and grammar, express completely opposing ideas about love (selflessness vs. selfishness). The fact that the second stanza is a bit different in its pattern of rhyme helps mark it out as separate from the other two—a third-person interjection between the arguments.

The most important overall function of the rhyme scheme is to give the poem a song-like quality. This makes sense, considering that the poem is taken from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) and explicitly mentions singing in the second stanza ("So sung" and "Warbled").

The rhyming pair in the second stanza also contains a small pun. Line 8's "meet" plays on the meaning of "feet" in line 6. While "feet" refers to the cattle that tread on little Clod, it also gestures towards the word's meaning in relation to poetry/song. "Feet" are the different segments of a metrical line of poetry (this poem, for example, has four feet in each line). There's also a contrast at work here between the heaviness of the cattle's feet and the lightness of the Pebble's warbling "metres meet."

## SPEAKER

"The Clod and the Pebble" has three speakers. The two main speakers are the titular characters, the Clod (a little clump of earth/clay) and the Pebble. They form the poem's two opposing voices, which express antithetical views about the nature of love.

The Clod, speaking in the first stanza, represents the view that love depends on altruism, generosity, and selflessness. In its opinion, love—which both voices personify—cares only for others. This is an idealistic and somewhat naive conception of love that nonetheless gestures towards Christian ideas of charity and sacrifice. According to the Clod, this kind of love can create a "Heaven" even out of the worst situations. The Clod's physical properties match up with its point of view—its soft, malleable form, trodden on by passing cattle, representing its belief that love is about sacrifice for others.

The second main speaker, the Pebble, takes up the third stanza and believes that love is not selfless. On the contrary, it's purely selfish, seeking on to "please" itself. Furthermore, it has the power to dominate others, to "bind" them to itself like some kind of parasitic host. The Pebble even goes so far as to say that love actively enjoys the pain it can cause, hinting at the way love can drive people to desperate acts. Like the Clod, the Pebble's physical properties mirror its beliefs. Its tough, stony exterior represents a cynical hard-heartedness.

Though these are the two main speakers, there is also a third. The second stanza is spoken by neither the Clod nor the Pebble, but by a detached narrator. It's from this narrator that the reader learns who is singing, and a brief sketch of the environment in which the poem is set.

## SETTING

"The Clod and the Pebble" is set in a rural environment, a place with "cattle" (perhaps a farm) near a "brook," or small stream. The reader doesn't learn this until the second stanza, in which it's made clear that the two speakers, who each have bold statements to make about the nature of love, are not people, but rather a clump of earth and a small rock. The poem opts for this setting because it creates a platform from which the Clod and the Pebble can sing their respective songs. Of course, both are rather small, insignificant parts of a greater landscape, suggesting that there may be something incomplete about their grand theories about love.

The poem's setting also ties in with the symbolism of the Clod and the Pebble. Both define themselves in relationship with their environment. The Clod, which is used to being trampled on by passing cows, views love as a kind of radical self-sacrifice. Conversely, the Pebble rests firm in the brook, forcing water to travel around it, and thus believes that love is about taking advantage of others.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Clod and the Pebble" appears in Blake's famous work, *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), and is drawn from the *Experience* section of the book (the *Innocence* section was first published five years earlier). In these *Songs*, Blake sought to show what he called the two "contrary states of the human soul." This "contrary states" idea plays out here in the poem's two opposing definitions of love.

Throughout this collection, the "innocent" perspectives tend to express ideals that are beautiful and appealing, but which are also at times naive and unrealistic. That's because they aren't based on *experience* of the real world (with which, it's fair to say, Blake was deeply dissatisfied). The innocent perspective here is the Clod's, and so warrants comparisons with other similar perspectives in the first book: "Infant Joy," "The Shepherd," "Laughing Song," and so on.

As with some other characters in *Songs of Innocence*, the Clod believes in something that is probably unattainable: pure selflessness. The Pebble appears to be the more experienced perspective, but comes across as too cynical. For the Pebble, love is selfish—and such selfishness is on display in other *Experience* poems like "The Garden of Love" and "London."

In terms of subject, of course, the interrogation of the nature of love is practically as old as poetry itself. From Sappho of the classical era to the contemporary poets, love has puzzled, fascinated, and obsessed poets for centuries.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

On the surface at least, little of Blake's historical context seems to find its way into this poem. As with many of the other poems in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, "The Clod and the Pebble" takes place in what is a kind of timeless zone, as if the truths that it claims to speak have always been true and always will be. The reference to cattle suggests, at least, that the poem is set in a time of agricultural labor—though this hardly narrows it down.

Blake was writing during a time of considerable societal upheaval. The Industrial Revolution caused significant changes in the fabric of daily life, and Blake saw this shift as a kind of biblical Fall. Blake was consistently disappointed in the world around him, and perhaps something of the selfishness that he saw in late 18th century finds its way into the Pebble's perspective. Conversely, the Clod seems to speak of a more essential, instinctive, and innocent kind of love.

Religion is, of course, an important aspect of the poem as well. Blake was a Christian, but was highly critical of the Church of England institutions that dominated the British religious landscape at the time. For Blake, something fundamental to man's relationship with God had been lost. And if the "love"in this poem is taken to mean something more than romantic love, then perhaps implicitly criticizes the way that organized religion was failing to embody the true spirit of the Christian faith. The Bible is full of references to charity and selflessness—think about the Good Samaritan, for example—but the Pebble's perspective shows that, in the real world, this kind of love is not guaranteed.

# MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Songs of Innocence and Experience — Various formats for the full collection in which this poem appears. (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1934/1934-h/1934-h.htm)
- Blake's Visions — An excerpt from a documentary in which writer Iain Sinclair discusses Blake's religious visions. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8hcQ_jPIZA)
- The Poem Out Loud — A reading by the Youtube channel Tom O'Bedlam. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCiki7Wte3o)
- Blake's Radicalism — An interesting article that provides insight into Blake's political views. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/william-blake-radical-politics)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- A Poison Tree
- London
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Innocence)
- The Garden of Love
- The Lamb
- The Little Black Boy
- The Tyger

# HOW TO CITE

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## CHICAGO MANUAL

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