**English Romantic Verse** One-Page Guides

**Poem & Poet - The Sick Rose, William Blake**

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| Context (biographical, Romantic attitudes, social/historical etc) | The poem is found in the Blake's collection of poems titled "Songs of Experience", which differed from "Songs of Innocence" as its themes were of a darker nature that comes with the experience of adulthood, whilst the latter focused more on the innocence of childhood (a key attitude of the Romantics). "Sick Rose" continues this darker theme due to its possible connotations of sexual desire, something which organised religions such as Christianity were dismissive of unless it was in a marital setting for procreation. Blake himself was anti-organised religion as well as the tradition of marriage, despite being married himself. He was a follower of a form of Christianity put forward by Swedenborg; at one point he suggested a more sexually open relationship to his wife (which she rejected!) |
| A poem about… (Interpretations, key Romantic themes, nature, mortality) | The meaning of this poem is much debated.  One interpretation of the poem sees the rose as female and the corruption of the worm as phallic. Perhaps it implies a literal disease of some kind. This in with the Romantic idea of experience (the worm) corrupting the innocence (the rose) of children as they grow up, with the poem focusing on the corruption of girls especially.  However, we know that Blake was a supporter of a freely expressed love (mostly in theory!). If we take the rose as a symbol of love in its most perfect form (a traditional symbol) the poem could be suggesting that any secretive (‘dark secret love’, ‘invisible’, ‘flies in the night’) element to love, particularly if it is sexual, is insidious and destructive. (This could include sneaking around having affairs perhaps, which society at the time, with strict marriage laws and views of sex, would have generated perhaps even more than our society). Love should be open and freely expressed and if not, the rose of love will sicken and die. This, therefore, is suggesting human corruption. Both readings could overlap, to a degree and fit with the idea of evil arriving in the garden of Eden in the form of a serpent, and the word ‘worm’ also meant serpent at one time. In the image that Blake drew a caterpillar eating a leaf – the caterpillar is often used by Blake to symbolise corruption. |
| Speaker (who? talking to whom? attitude to subject- ironic, reverent etc) | Omniscient speaker talking directly to the rose ("O Rose, thou art sick!"), in a form of poetic apostrophe (the rose can’t answer back). Tone of voice could be interpreted to be more of a warning to the rose as to what the worm will do to it ("Does thy life destroy"). Metaphorically, it could be a message from Blake to readers about the corruption sex can bring to people who were once innocent or the corruption that will come from love which is constrained and secretive. |
| Form (sonnet, ballad, verse form, rhyme and rhythm) | Contains a half rhyme ("worm" and "storm") which perhaps is designed to pinpoint the disharmony inherent in this once beautiful thing that has been destroyed. The short length of the poem makes the rhythm seem rather quick, and we move from ‘sick’ to ‘destroy’ very quickly. The meter is difficult to pinpoint but has elements of anapestic dimeter (two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable, "The in**vis**ible **worm**") – a kind of light, musical, child-like rhythm that works contrapuntally with the ominous message. |
| Overall structure (shifts, changes, climax of narrative etc) | The poem is one of Blake's shortest, having only two stanzas, made up of eight lines and is in the form of just two sentences. The poem's mood only fluctuates once to a more positive one with the line "Of crimson joy", otherwise it remains pessimistic to reflect Blake's negative attitude towards taboo (or closed, secretive) sexual relationships. The narrative climaxes with the final line "Does thy life destroy", as it is implied that the rose is literally devoured by the worm, whilst metaphorically it loses its innocence through the experience of death. |
| Language (vocabulary - heightened or demotic; rhetorical features etc) | "Worm" is paired with "storm" to possibly symbolise the dangerous nature of the worm as a poetic figure, whilst "joy" and "destroy" contrast each other despite rhyming. Blake's language frequently has negative connotations of turmoil, such as with "flies", "howling storm" and "dark", as the worm closes in on the rose. The vocabulary is not demotic despite being relatively simple, with Blake using Old English words such as "O", "thou", "art" and "thy" - interesting to note that Blake uses the informal "thou" when referring to the rose, possibly showing a lack of respect for the rose as a metaphorical woman due to her corruption. It could equally show a fondness for the rose, which should be growing freely and has been brought low by this ‘infection’. |
| Sound effects (harsh and soft, onomatopoeia etc) | Most of the sounds in the poem are harsh, especially in the first and last lines of the poem ("sick!" and "destroy") due to the use of exclamation to make a point. Reflects the reality of life, especially adulthood when innocence ends, and how everything must come to an end. |
| Imagery (metaphor, simile, images etc) | The colour red - the use of a rose, which are stereotypically red, as well as the word "crimson" to describe joy, could symbolise the desire present between the rose and the worm, even though the worm is going to destroy the rose. Red can also be used to symbolise death when combined with the dark nature of the poem. However it could be that love, including sexual love, freely expressed is, like the rose, a ‘bed of crimson joy’ – making the image positive - and, when corrupted by secrecy etc, is then destroyed. |
| Patterns of language (semantic fields, repetitions, oppositions) | Semantic fields - words associated with corruption, darkness ("dark", "sick", "night", "howling storm", "secret", "destroy"), as well as a semantic field of desire ("love", "joy", "crimson", "bed"). The two semantic fields oppose each other in nature, whilst Blake also links them in the form of corrupt desire between the rose and the worm. If you link ‘invisible’, ‘night’ and ‘dark secret’, however, you get the notion of love in its purest form being corrupted by a form of hidden, pernicious form of ‘secret love’. |
| Punctuation and grammar (sentence length, end-stopping, caesura, verb mood - imperative, declarative, interrogative, exclamatory) | Exclamation mark in first line of the poem ("O Rose, thou art sick!") - starts poem with an exclamation that is sudden, highlighting how suddenly innocence/love can be lost/attacked. Commas used for listing ("That flies in the night, in the howling storm, has found out thy bed") - speeds up the reading pace of the poem. This is contrasted with the use of a colon towards the poem's end ("Of crimson joy: And his dark secret love") which brings the poem to a temporary stop before the final couplet, where we learn what the ‘worm’ will do. Poem ends with a full stop ("Does thy life destroy.") to show a deathly finality. |
| Links to other poems | Poems about love and loss: ‘Fare Thee Well’, ‘We’ll Go No More a Roving’, ‘The Cold Earth Slept Below’. Poem about love and mortality, ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. Can also be linked to poems such as ‘Tintern Abbey’ and ‘Ode To A Nightingale’ when looking at the theme of nature. Where TA is about a response to nature, OTAN is using natural thing, a bird, to explore mortality and the power of the imagination to escape the real world. Nature in TSR is likewise symbolic. |