The Sick Rose

POEM TEXT

O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

SUMMARY

Oh rose, you are sick. An unseen worm has flown under the cover of a dark and stormy night.

The worm has discovered your bed of deep red joy. Now, the worm's dark, hidden love is destroying your life.

THEMES

DEATH, DESTRUCTION, AND INNOCENCE

"The Sick Rose" is one of William Blake's most hotly contested poems—there are many theories out there as to what the poem means! What *is* clear, though, is that the poem features two main characters: a rose, and an "invisible worm" that has made the rose sick. If the rose is read as a symbol, as it often is, for the natural beauty and majesty of creation, then the poem becomes an allegory for such beauty's inevitable destruction—for the fact that nothing can last forever, and that death and decay come for all living things. The rose's fate may also represent the corruption of innocence by the harsh realities of the world.

Roses, with their complex network of colorful petals, often represent both love and loveliness in literature, and that seems to be what's happening in the poem as well. In its mention of the flower's "crimson joy," the poem associates the rose with vibrant, natural beauty. But this rose is also "sick," thanks to the "invisible worm" that's tracked the rose down.

Roses, like all plants, do literally face various dangers from worms, bugs, insects, and other pests. The beauty of the rose offers no protection against these kinds of external threats. On one level, then, the worm might represent the idea that death, destruction, and decay come for all living things. The worm—a creature of the dirt, burrowing deep in the dark muck of the earth—may also represent the way that earthly society inevitably corrupts even the purest and loveliest of beings.

The fact that the poem personifies the worm as a hardy and determined figure—one that flies at night of "howling storm" in order to have its way with the rose—further suggests that the forces of destruction and/or corruption will always get their way in the end, that, inevitably, the rose will lose its innocence and die.

It's worth remembering that this poem appears in Blake's *Songs of Experience*, which offers a kind of real-world take on the innocent perspectives and ideas presented in the poet's earlier *Songs of Innocence*. While the former book celebrates the majesty of creation, the *Songs of Experience* show how this creation is corrupted and destroyed—an idea that seems to line right up with the worm's destruction of the rose.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

SEX AND DESIRE

"The Sick Rose" is often interpreted as an allegory for the corrupting influence of sexual desire. That said, William Blake was actually an advocate for sexual *liberation* well ahead of his time. With this in mind, the poem seems to critique the way that sexual unions are so often shrouded in secrecy, darkness, and shame. The poem thus becomes an allegory not for the corrupting influence of sexual desire itself, but for the damage caused by the *suppression* of that desire.

A rose is a conventional symbol of love, romance, and femininity (often linked to the vagina itself). In this context, the worm can read as a phallic representation of the male sexual organ, which here seeks to penetrate the rose's bed (meaning both flower bed and the conventional type of bed). The poem certainly plays with these connotations, with the rose's "bed" offering up a kind of "crimson joy."

But though the worm represents strong desire, it can only act on this desire by remaining hidden. And despite the mention of "joy," the union between the rose and the worm is neither openly joyful nor celebratory. The worm's desire is "dark," "secret," and can only be fulfilled in the anonymity afforded by travelling during a "howling storm" at night. The worm's desire is literally and figuratively forced underground, perhaps gesturing towards societal ideas about sex that are based on shame, guilt, and sinfulness.

The nature of the worm's so-called love, then, is damaging and destructive. It seems that it's the "dark[ness]" and secrecy of the worm's love that "destroys" the rose's life—rather than the action of loving itself. While love is usually something positive and nourishing, here is a vision of love corrupted into a deadly force. While love is usually life-affirming, here it's a killer. And though the poem doesn't delve too deeply into what makes this love so corrupt, it's the worm's distinguishing feature of invisibility that makes this union so grotesque. The rose doesn't even necessarily know of the worm's existence, adding another unsettling layer of seediness and secrecy.

In the unhealthy union between worm and rose, then, sex and desire cease to be joyful, (re)productive, or creative. Though sex is the method by which the human race maintains its presence on this planet, here sex—or its suppression—is a destructive, evil force. The worm is invisible, both there and not there. That is, though sexual desire is ever-present, its natural fulfillment depends upon the prevailing attitudes towards sex. Arguably, then, the sickness of the rose stands in for the sickness of repressed sexuality in general. In other words, the poem suggests that society has lost perspective on the naturalness—and innocent joy—of sex.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

O Rose thou art sick.

"The Sick Rose" opens with apostrophe as the speaker addresses the rose itself. Though this line is simple and spare, it does a lot. The use of "O" makes the poem sound like a kind of lament, as though the speaker is mourning the rose's imminent death. The long /o/ assonance in the first two words—"O Rose"—heightens this effect. The third vowel sound in the poem, "thou," has similarly round, open feel. Together these vowels suggest weariness, but also the rose's beauty, grace, and elegance.

These /o/ vowels also make the sound of the line's final two words all the more pronounced. Both "art" and "sick" are very *different* sounds from "O," "Rose," and "thou," with two different vowel sounds at work alongside harsher consonants. The final hard /k/ sound of "sick" ends the line on a note of unpleasantness and disease.

The end-stop at the end of the line serves the same purpose, making "sick" visceral and loud. This sets-up the rest of the poem as a kind of explainer that will give the rose—and the reader—more information about why (and how) the rose is sick.

LINES 2-4

The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:

The poem sets out to explain what has caused the rose's sickness and introduces its other main character, the "invisible worm." This worm "flies," rather than crawls, under the cover of darkness and during the chaotic atmosphere of a storm. As with the poem itself, this section is enigmatic, offering no straightforward interpretation. The poem *feels* heavy with symbolism, but offers tantalizingly little to the reader in terms of what that symbolism *means*.

First, it's worth considering how this section departs from a more typical relationship between flower and pest in real life. Certain creepy crawlies may indeed attack the root of a plant and ultimately kill it. But just as often, regular old worms don't pose a threat to roses—nor to much else! Worms, of course, do live in the ground, and are associated with death and decay. This association stems from the human practice of burying the dead in the ground. Literature is full of references to death as a process which turns humans into food for worms.

But the worm in this poem is not a typical earthworm. First, it is "invisible" and has the ability to fly. Of course, "invisible" could mean simply "unseen," and "flies" could mean "moves quickly" as opposed to actual flight. Either way, everything in these three lines suggests secrecy, and maybe even shame. This is emphasized by the fact that even though the worm is invisible it still travels specifically during a stormy night. The rose cannot see nor hear the worm's invasion—nothing is out in the open. The reader, then, must ask *why* the worm has to hide his activity.

On the one hand, the worm doesn't want the rose to realize that it's under attack. But it's also helpful to map this idea of secrecy and shame onto Blake's wider worldview. Blake was deeply critical of organized Christianity for the way that it suppressed what he saw as humankind's natural sexuality. Such suppression, he believed, just made desire manifest in unhealthy, poisonous ways.

Perhaps, then, the rose's sickness represents society's own sickness created by its inability to embrace sexuality and desire. To that end, it's easy to read the worm as a kind of phallus (a representation of the male sex organ). The worm might also represent a kind of demon, specifically an incubus (a male demon who preys upon sleeping women for sexual gratification). The quick assonance in "invisible" represents the worm's thin, cylindrical body, while the /z/ sound chimes with "Rose" in line 1, linking the two characters together. Also note that the storm is "howling," a word that might be associated with both pain *and* pleasure.

LINES 5-6

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:

If lines 2-4 represent the worm's journey, lines 5-6 reveal the journey's *purpose*. The worm has been seeking the rose's "bed / of crimson joy," and now has found it.

Here, the poem makes its sexual symbolism more explicit. The word "bed" suggests both a flowerbed *and* a regular bed—that is, where lovers meet. The rose's bed is specifically "crimson," a deep red that connotes sexual appetite and vigor. This "bed / Of crimson joy" also might refer to the vagina itself (indeed, this association is behind the word "deflowering," which means to take someone's virginity).

The worm's activity suggest a kind of invasion or violation, the worm sneaking up on the rose in order to satisfy his desires. It's not clear whether "joy" belongs to the rose or the worm in this situation, however—that is, whether the rose's bed is inherently joyful, or that it *becomes* joyful for the worm through its act of destruction.

Notice how the enjambment between lines 5 and 6 ("bed / Of") mirrors that between lines 3 and 4 ("night / In"). Both suggest a kind of journey or passage, the worm travelling through the night and then burrowing deeper and deeper into the rose's bed.

Certainly, the worm is the dominant character here. But it's worth noting how the poem's grammar suggests that this is an *ongoing* situation. The use of "Has" in line 5 sets up the present-tense verb "does" in the last line, implying that the rose is sick and dying—but not dead *yet*. If the poem is read as a kind of allegory for society's general sickness—its inability embrace sexuality in an open, healthy, and joyful way—then the way the poem handles its timeline of events shows that this is a *perpetual, ongoing* problem.

LINES 7-8

And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

In lines 7 and 8, the speaker states the consequences of the worm's invasion. The worm's "dark secret love" gradually "destroy[s]" the rose's "life." Taken literally, the burrowing pest kills the flower—something that indeed happens in nature. But this under-the-surface rot has more symbolic connotations as well.

Though the poem never *explicitly* states what the rose stands for, there's no doubt that it represents something positive—perhaps beauty, nature, love, or life itself (or a combination of all of these things). The worm, meanwhile, represents a mortal threat to the rose, destroying the flower in order to satisfy its own "dark secret love." The worm might stand in for dark and corrupting forces in the world, which seek to destroy things that are positive and good. Or, again, the poem could be suggesting how a "secret love"—suppressed desire—leads only to devastation.

Remember, Blake's poetry divides the world into oppositional forces or, in his own words, "contrary states." Thus though the poem doesn't make its symbolism explicit, it's fair to say that the rose and worm represent conflicting aspects of the world. The worm is clearly associated with "dark[ness]" and secrecy, while the natural beauty and vulnerability of the rose make it a symbol of goodness. In miniature, then, there is a kind of battle between good and evil, honesty and secrecy, going on in the poem that can be mapped onto any number of ideas.

In these two lines, the poem also presents its only examples of alliteration:

> And his dark secret love
> Does thy life destroy.

The /l/ sound links "love" to "life," reflecting their thematic connection in the poem. These /d/ sounds, meanwhile, are forceful and imposing, mirroring the way that the worm has taken its place in the rose's bed. In a poem that is relatively subdued and hushed, the /d/ stands out as a moment of violence.

Line 7 is also the only line in the poem that unambiguously has three stressed beats:

> And his dark secret love

The rest of the poem is a mixture of anapests and iambs, always resulting in just two stressed beats per line (more on this in the "Meter" section of this guide). The extra stress here makes the worm's penetrating action seem all the more present, as though it is happening *right now*. The threat the poem presents is an urgent one.

SYMBOLS

THE ROSE

Like the meaning of the poem more generally, the symbolism of the rose is up for debate. That said, it's definitely symbolic!

First, it's worth considering what roses traditionally represent. They are, of course, beautiful flowers, and thus often appear in literature as symbolic of beauty itself. They often represent a specifically *feminine* kind of beauty as well (think of how the phrase "an English rose" is sometimes used to describe a woman). Considering that this is a Blake poem, it's also possible to view the rose as a representation of innocence, which, in the real world, becomes corrupted (this is a common theme

throughout Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*). Altogether, the rose seems to represent unspoiled beauty and loveliness.

The rose also relates to sexuality. Roses are sometimes associated with the vagina, and this idea seems at play in lines 5 to 6. Here, the speaker states that the worm has found the rose's "bed / of crimson joy." The "crimson joy" provided by the rose relates to sexual satisfaction, while the "bed" itself plays on the twin definition of conventional bed and flowerbed. A bed, of course, is a typical location of sexual activity, and its mention thus heightens the sexual symbolism of the rose at the heart of this poem.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "O Rose thou art sick."
- **Lines 5-6:** "thy bed / Of crimson joy:"
- **Line 8:** "thy life"

THE WORM

As with the rest of the poem, the symbolism of the worm is open to interpretation. It's certainly no ordinary worm, described in line 2 as "invisible," and in line 3 as capable of flight. While these lines can easily be taken as being figurative—as simply saying that the worm moves very quickly and without being spotted since it's underground—they also help readers recognize that the worm is more than a literal worm in the poem.

On that note, worms carry a long history of symbolism in poetry, religion, and mythology. They're usually linked with death and decay (think about the macabre description of a corpse as "worm food"), and that association is certainly in play here. They often connote sneakiness and might be used to describe a conniving person (who "worms" their way into a group, for instance). Broadly speaking, it's fair to say the worm in the poem is a symbol of dark, destructive forces. Perhaps these forces relate to dishonest, slimy members of society or the basest impulses of society itself.

The worm also has a "dark secret" desire to consume the rose, suggesting that the worm can be read as a symbol of repressed sexuality. Indeed, it seems that it's the specifically secretive nature of the worm's desire—not desire *itself*—that the poem portrays as damaging and deadly. Perhaps, then, the worm further symbolizes the *consequences* of unhealthy societal attitudes towards sex, particularly, in this case, those imposed by the institutions of the Christian religion (a common target for Blake's poetry).

And of course, if the rose represents a woman, then the worm can be thought of as representing the male sexual organ. The worm is a *phallus* (a penis-like shape) that seeks to penetrate the rose. Again, it would be wrong to view the poem as a general criticism of sexuality. Instead, the reader is asked to consider what it is about the worm that makes its desire so grotesque and unnatural.

It's also worth considering that "worm" hasn't always meant the typical earthworm (and this worm is certainly not one of those!). Over the centuries the word has denoted serpents, snakes, dragons, and others too. Given that Blake's poetry is steeped in Christianity, it's possible that the worm here also relates to the serpent in the biblical Book of Genesis, who tempts Eve to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree—and thus causes the Fall of mankind. That same devilish desire for destruction is on show in this poem here.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-8

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears in the poem's final two lines:

> And his dark secret love
> Does thy life destroy.

Here, alliteration links different words together: "love" with "life" and "dark" with "does" and "destroy." This is no coincidence. In fact, these words essentially tell the poem in miniature. The sonic connection between "love" and "life" reflects how "love" has a major effect on "life" in the poem—in fact, "love," when "secret," can end "life" itself. The "dark" adjective, meanwhile, relates to the "invisible worm," with "does" relating to his action, and "destroy" describing the consequences of his actions. Darkness, the worm's illicit activities, and destruction, are all part of the same package.

The particular quality of the /d/ consonant is important too. In general, the poem sounds soft, its gentle, hushed tones creating a quiet atmosphere. The /d/ sound, by contrast, is a loud, voiced consonant. Here, the sudden alliteration gives the poem an air of violence. The heavy, thudding sound reflects the catastrophic effect that the worm's actions will have on the rose.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "dark," "love"
- **Line 8:** "Does," "life," "destroy"

APOSTROPHE

"The Sick Rose" uses apostrophe from start to finish. The poem is not addressed to the reader, but rather to the "Rose" itself.

The speaker tries to tell this rose that it is sick, and explains how the worm has infiltrated its "bed / of crimson joy."

The use of apostrophe gives the poem a feel of weary desperation, as though this is a kind of warning that comes too late. The rose is *already* sick, and its life will soon be "destroy[ed]." Apostrophe gives the impression that the rose is helpless, unaware of its own violation. The device subtly heightens the poem's sense of despair and tragedy—as though the speaker is shouting into an unresponsive void.

The fact the poem addresses the rose in this way, as though it is capable of listening to the speaker's words, also heightens the sense that the rose is more than rose—that it stands in for some more profound insight into society, love, and sexuality. Indeed, the illustration of the poem (which can be found in the "Resources" section of this guide), shows a female figure helplessly entwined with a worm in the petals of a rose. Her arms are thrown up, showing that she—and what she represents—is beyond the reach anyone or anything that could help her.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears throughout "The Sick Rose," intensifying the poem's imagery and, at times, granting the poem a rather unsettling feeling of seductiveness. The device appears first in the poem's opening two words:

> O Rose thou art sick.

These long, round /o/ sounds instantly mark the rose as a pitiable figure, signalling to the reader that it is already too late for the rose to avoid its fate. The /o/ sounds like a moan, and relates to the way that the rose's death is a product of both pleasure and pain. Though the /ow/ in "thou" is not itself assonant, it's a similarly round sound that contributes to this woeful effect.

The next example of assonance is self-contained within a single word in line 2:

> The invisible worm,

Perhaps because the poem is so short, and uses such short lines, the internal assonance of this word sticks out prominently. Think about the narrowness of the sound compared to the open /o/ vowel above. The sound might subtly represent the worm's own shape—thin, and phallus-like (even the "i" letter looks a bit like a worm!). The sound seems to wriggle through the line, pre-empting the worm's invasion of the rose's bed.

In line 3, the assonance between "flies" and "night" makes the worm seem purposeful and determined, as though solely fixated on finding the rose and indulging his "dark secret love." The assonant vowels link the act of flight with the time-window in which it takes place, giving the worm's mission the air of evil and secrecy.

Assonance then occurs across lines 4 and 5, spanning the stanza break:

> In the howling storm:
> Has found out thy bed

Though these /o/ sounds are different from "O Rose," they are similar enough to be a kind of echo. They thus also relate to the sound of moaning, coinciding with the sexually suggestive pun on "bed" (which could be either a flowerbed or the kind found in a bedroom). The loudness of these vowel sounds (combined with the /o/ in storm) also relate to the noise of the storm itself. The storm is important because it provides the chaotic noise that hides the activity of the worm.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "O Rose"
- **Line 2:** "invisible"
- **Line 3:** "flies," "night"
- **Line 4:** "In," "howling"
- **Line 5:** "found out"
- **Line 8:** "thy life"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used subtly throughout "The Sick Rose." The first example is in the /z/ sound of "Rose" and "invisible" (lines 1 and 2). This links the poem's two main characters—the rose and the worm—together, showing that the fate of the former is dictated by the actions of the latter ("the invisible worm"). This buzzing sound also has a kind of seductive quality that speaks to the poem's uneasy combination of desire and sickness. The poem echoes the same sound in "flies" (line 3) and "crimson" (line 6, though this word isn't very close to the others).

Elsewhere in the first stanza, the poem uses a dull /n/ sound in words like "invisible," "in," and "night" (lines 2 and 3). This has an insistent quality, mirroring the worm's determination to "destroy" the rose.

The main example of consonance in the second stanza is in the hard /k/ sound in line 7:

> And his dark secret love

These are harsh consonants, reflecting the damage that the worm's violating presence causes to the rose's life-force. They are a kind of echo, too, of the other prominent /k/ in the poem,

found in the "sick" of line 1 and the title. Darkness, secrecy, and sickness are all linked together. If the poem is taken as an allegory about sexual repression—particularly the way that institutional Christianity marks sexual desire as sinful—then the /k/ sound serves to draw a link between that repression and the rose's sickness itself. The last stanza also features prominent /d/ and /l/ sounds in lines 7-8, which we discuss in the alliteration section of this guide.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Rose"
- **Line 2:** "invisible"
- **Line 3:** "flies," "in," "night"
- **Line 4:** "In"
- **Line 7:** "And," "dark," " secret," "love"
- **Line 8:** "Does," "life," "destroy"

END-STOPPED LINE

"The Sick Rose" only uses a few end-stops, the strongest and most important of which appears at the end of the first line:

> O Rose thou art sick.

The poem has just gotten started, but five words in its moment is already stopped abruptly. This plays out in miniature what is happening to the rose. The rose is dying, and the seriousness of its sickness is portrayed by the way that the poem is stopped in its tracks. This also adds particular emphasis to the word "sick," signalling that this is the rose's final state before death.

The end-stop also divides the poem into two unbalanced parts. Line 1 is its own individual sentence, a matter-of-fact statement of the rose's plight. Lines 2-8 focus on the worm, the source of the rose's sickness. This paints the rose as helpless, as though the presence of the worm violates both the poem and the rose itself.

There is also a softer end-stop in line 6, after the word "joy." Here, the brief pause offers a breath, a moment of reflection, before the poem moves forward to describe the consequences of the worm's discovery. The end-stop makes it feel, for just a moment, that perhaps the worm's discovery of this "bed" won't be such a bad thing, letting the reader hover on the word "joy" before moving towards the reveal that such joy will be the rose's downfall.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sick."
- **Line 6:** "joy:"
- **Line 8:** "destroy."

ENJAMBMENT

Technically speaking, "The Sick Rose" is made out of two separate sentences: line 1 and lines 2-8. The lines are very short, however, meaning the poem relies on frequent enjambment as its phrases sprawl down the page. This enjambment pulls the reader forward through the poem, creating a kind of momentum that mirrors the swift flight of the invisible worm. This enjambment also makes the poem's outcome feel inevitable.

Note that punctuation or a lack thereof isn't the most reliable way to determine whether a line is enjambed, especially when dealing with older poems such as this one; instead, readers should look toward the grammar, syntax, and sense of a line to find moments of enjambment and end-stop (which is why some lines we've marked as enjambed here contain punctuation; their sense is nevertheless spliced in half, pushing readers over the line breaks).

Lines 2-6 are all enjambed as they describe the journey undertaken by the "invisible worm" in his hunt for the rose. The enjambment shows the worm's purposefulness and singular determination, suggesting an uninterrupted flight from start-point to destination. The specific enjambment between lines 5 and 6 has a similar effect, implying that the worm has no problem finding his prey and thus the satisfaction of his desires.

The final enjambment, between lines 7 and 8, is done for metrical effect:

> And his dark secret love
> Does thy life destroy.

Breaking the line after "love" means lines 7 and 8 end and start respectively on a stressed syllable. This emphasizes both words—"love" and "does"—highlighting the ongoing destructiveness of the worm's desire. The combination of both stresses also suggests the worm's power, which is in the process of overwhelming the rose's life-force.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "worm, / That"
- **Lines 3-4:** "night / In"
- **Lines 4-5:** "storm: / Has"
- **Lines 5-6:** "bed / Of"
- **Lines 7-8:** "love / Does"

PERSONIFICATION

"The Sick Rose" has three examples of personification, with the two main examples are linked together. Both the rose and its foe, the "invisible worm," are given human characteristics.

Personification dramatizes the relationship between the rose and the worm by making both seem like human figures. The

personification implies to the reader that the poem is a commentary on some aspect of humanity itself—most likely on attitudes towards sexuality and desire (though the poem doesn't make this explicit).

Let's start with the rose. Roses are often linked with feminine beauty and sexuality, and, though the poem doesn't attribute a gender to flower, the illustration that accompanies the poem portrays a female figure. Flowers are sometimes said to be diseased, but not usually described as "sick." This again points the reader towards a deeper symbolic meaning, which has been interpreted widely over the centuries since the poem was written. The personification of the rose also turns "bed" in line 5 into a kind of pun, referencing both the conventional bed (in which people indulge their desires) and the more literal flower bed. The personification of the rose means it is more easily read as a symbol for human sexuality rather than, say, the natural world at large.

The poem *does* specify that the worm is male (though, interestingly, an earlier draft of the poem had the worm as female). The poem grants the worm human characteristics like determination and desire, again hinting that what's being discussed has little to do with literal worms. The worm possesses a "dark secret love" which finds its "joy" by violating the rose, and, ultimately, by destroying it.

The personification of the worm is creepy and unsettling, and the secrecy with which it must commit its desirous acts perhaps draws a link between the poem and Blake's criticism of institutionalized religion. Blake felt that the Church suppressed sex in an unhealthy and damaging way, and the same can be said of the effects of the worm's penetration of the rose.

The other personification is the "howling storm" in line 4. This is a common description for storms, but here seems to relate to the poem's focus on unhealthy desire and sexual repression. Howls can, of course, express pain, but "howling" can also relate to the sounds of sexual gratification. After all, the worm succeeds in satisfying "his dark secret love."

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

VOCABULARY

Thou (Line 1) - Archaic form of "you."

Art (Line 1) - Archaic form of "are."

Howling (Line 4) - Making a loud, long, wailing sound.

Found out (Line 5) - Discovered.

Thy (Line 5, Line 8) - Archaic form of "your."

Crimson (Line 6) - A deep red color.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Sick Rose" is a small, compact poem consisting of two quatrains. The simple form makes the poem feel all the more like an allegory, a short tale with a hidden message.

The poem can also be divided into two sentences—one short, and one long. Line 1 states the facts: the rose is sick. The rest of the poem (lines 2-8) then seems to wriggle down the page, mimicking the movement of the worm that has infiltrated the rose's bed.

The stanza break serves an important function here. It's not until line 5 that the long sentence comes to its main verb phrase, "has found." This creates a kind of lasting tension and final release that mirrors the worm's quest to satisfy his "dark secret love."

METER

"The Sick Rose" has a very loose meter that could be called anapestic dimeter—meaning that there are two anapests, feet with a da-da-DUM rhythm, per line. Again, though, the meter is very rough; while most lines do indeed have two feet, these are often a combination of anapests and iambs (da-DUM). Take the first stanza. The only true line of anapestic dimeter here is line 2; lines 1 and 3 open with iambs, while line 4 closes with an iamb:

O Rose | thou art sick.
The invis- | ible worm,
That flies | in the night
In the howl- | ing storm:

Things get even more ambiguous when considering that a foot like "O Rose" could *possibly* be read as a spondee (stressed-stressed, "O Rose"). For the most part though, every line has just two stressed beats. This lends the meter a feeling of rhythm and consistency, while the varying number of unstressed beats keeps things a bit unsettling.

Line 7 is the only line in the poem that unambiguously has three stressed beats:

And his dark secret love

Here the poem clusters stresses together to suggest the violence of the worm's desires; as he forces his way into the rose's bed, his presence on the poetic line becomes harder to escape.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Sick Rose" has a regular rhyme scheme, with the second and fourth lines of both stanzas rhyming together. The poem,

then, follows a pattern of:

ABCB DEFE

This pattern is fairly typical of Blake's poetry, and in particular of the poems in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, the collection from which this poem is taken. It's also the rhyme scheme of a ballad stanza.

The rhyme words effectively tell the poem in miniature: worm / storm / joy / destroy. The steadiness of the rhyme scheme, combined with the poem's short lines, quatrain stanzas, and highly symbolic imagery, makes the poem feel like an allegory, a simple story with a hidden meaning.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "The Sick Rose" never refers to themselves directly. This is in keeping with the poem being a sort of allegory, less about any specific perspective and more about the message at hand.

This type of vantage point is also typical for the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, from which this poem is taken. Here, the speaker addresses the rose through apostrophe (the rose is personified, but it doesn't answer the speaker). The speaker has a kind of omniscient knowledge, able to perceive things that the rose can't. Ultimately, the speaker is a kind of messenger arriving too late. Though the speaker delivers a warning to the rose about its fate, nothing can be done about it. The speaker also delivers this message to the reader, who is implicitly asked to consider what the rose's sickness represents.

SETTING

"The Sick Rose" takes place in a garden, or another place where a red rose might grow. On a dark and stormy night, the wind "howling," a worm moves undetected through the dirt to reach and penetrate the rose's "bed / Of crimson joy"—the flowerbed, on one level, but also symbolically a regular old bed where people would partake in "crimson joy" (i.e., have sex). This "bed" also might be taken as an allusion to female genitalia.

The poem is written in the present tense—the rose is sick, but isn't dead yet. The nighttime setting and the noise of the storm heighten the sense that this is an illicit union, one that the rose doesn't want and probably isn't aware of yet. This fits in with the idea that the poem, at least in part, is about the shame and secrecy that surround sex and desire. Desire *is* fulfilled in the poem, but in a way that is hidden and grotesque. The sense of both time and place in the poem contribute to this unease.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Sick Rose" first appeared in Blake's 1794 publication *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The first sequence of poems from this book had appeared a few years earlier as *Songs of Innocence*. "The Sick Rose" is taken from the later *Experience* sequence of poems, and thus is part of an overall effort to show what happens to innocence, happiness, joy, love—all the things that are positive and good about life—when they encounter the real world.

Other poems in *Experience* similarly depict nature in a state of corruption, usually at the hands of humankind. Poems worth comparing to this one include "A Poison Tree," "Ah! Sunflower," and "The Garden of Love." In poems like "The Blossom," meanwhile, nature exerts a loving influence on the world, expressing God's love and care for his creation.

Worms also appear elsewhere in Blake's poetry, though it's important to remember that the word could also relate to other mythical creatures—like serpents and dragons. Indeed, this "invisible" worm does not seem like a typical earthworm at all. In *The Four Zoas*, Blake states plainly that "man is a worm." With that in mind, it's tempting to view the corrupting desire of the worm in the poem with the terrible reality that man has constructed within God's creation—which, in Blake's view, has totally lost touch with how humankind is meant to live. It's also possible to view the worm as an echo of the serpent in the Bible who tempts Eve to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In terms of what's actually on the page, "The Sick Rose" is devoid of historical context. As with many of Blake's poems, this one seems to exist both in ancient history, the present, and the future—indeed, it's this quality that often gives Blake's poetry a prophetic quality. That's not to say, of course, that Blake wasn't intensely aware—and critical—of his own historical situation. He was a fierce critic of the Industrial Revolution, the beginning of which saw the growth of factories in England and a rapid increase in machine-based labor. Blake felt that humankind was losing touch with what made it human: joy, communion with nature, desire, and love. It's tempting, then, to read some of that perceived societal sickness in the ill health of the rose.

The poem is often related more specifically to attitudes towards sex during the 18th century. Blake was highly critical of the dominant church institution—the Church of England—for the way in which it portrayed sex as something to be ashamed of, and desire as something that ought to be repressed. The poem has clear sexual undertones, but the union between rose and worm is not a healthy one. The worm desires the rose, but can only fulfil this desire through secrecy.

Blake believed in a spirit world, including invisible “larvae”

spirits which are similar to demons, and are capable of travel from one person's mind to another (these spirits are discussed in the works of the influential fourth-century theologian, Saint Augustine). Crucially, Blake also believed that sexuality should be embraced, not suppressed. In Blake's view, the denial of sexual desire could have damaging and destructive consequences for both the individual and society more generally.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Blake's Radicalism — A clip in which author Iain Sinclair discusses Blake's political views. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl0yBrI24XM)
- The Poem Illustrated — See the poem as it originally appeared, complete with Blake's own artwork. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sick_Rose#/media/File:Songs_of_innocence_and_of_experience,_page_39,_The_Sick_Rose_(Fitzwilliam_copy).png)
- Songs of Innocence and Experience — Check out the full text of the book in which "The Sick Rose" appears. (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1934/1934-h/1934-h.htm)
- Britten's Blake — A musical setting of the poem by composer Benjamin Britten. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPFdDxySqXQ)
- Invisible Worms — An interesting article that hunts for the inspiration behind the destructive worm in this poem. (http://bq.blakearchive.org/26.1.srigley)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

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

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