The Motifs of Plants and Flowers in William Blake's Poetry

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Bachelor's Thesis

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Abstract

William Blake was a poet, artist, and engraver whose poetic, literary, and artistic work are deeply valued today and he is considered to be among the first and one of the greatest of the English Romantics. This versatile genius used motifs and imagery of flowers and plants in his poems to convey deep meanings in linguistically simple poetic works. The elements of nature have always inspired him, so it is no surprise that a simple rose, sunflower, or lily is endowed with unrivalled significance in his poems. Floriography, the language of flowers, is typical of Blake's poetry and the imaginative power of flora in his poems is evident. By using a few simple words, Blake had the power to take hold of the attention of his readers and motivate them to think deeply about a simple motif, like a blossom. The aim of this paper is to offer an insight into the motifs of flowers and plants in Blake's poems "Ah! Sun-flower," "A Poison Tree," "My Pretty Rose Tree," "The Sick Rose," "The Lily," and "The Blossom." The poems will be analysed individually, with a focus on the mentioned motifs. By providing multiple interpretations of Blake's poetry, readers can get a grasp of his ingenuity in conveying deep meaning, usually concerning human life, in seemingly simple, straightforward poems.

Keywords: William Blake, poetry, flower and plant motifs, floriography, Romantic period.

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Introduction

The first chapter of the paper will provide an overview of William Blake's biography. It will highlight the poet's major points of life and literary and artistic work. Then, theoretical framework of the Romantic period will be given with respect to social, political, and cultural context of the time. William Blake has always been inspired by natural objects which he links to an inner or spiritual world. Therefore, it is no surprise that he was keen on floriography, using flowers to communicate and convey meaning which is the topic of the third chapter. By not putting restrictions on simple floral photography, Blake was capable of creating marvellous works of poetry.

The power of flora in Blake's poetry will be illustrated in the subsequent six subchapters through the analysis of six of his poems: "Ah! Sun-flower," "A Poison Tree," "My Pretty Rose Tree," "The Sick Rose," "The Lily," and "The Blossom." Even though Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* may be seen as straightforward, they hold well-concealed ideas and implications concerning human life. The aim of this paper is to offer an insight into motifs of flowers and plants in the selected poems. By providing multiple interpretations of Blake's poetry, readers can get a grasp of his ingenuity in conveying deep meaning by means of linguistically simple poetic works.

In "Ah! Sun-flower" the sunflower is personified and can be understood as a symbol of spiritual longing. Just like the sunflower, "the youth" and "the virgin" are mortal and therefore longing for the immortality of the sun. As well as the mentioned analysis, the interpretation of society's shift toward women and opinion of their position will also be offered. In "A Poison Tree" Blake uses the motif of such a tree to discuss the consequences of negative emotions. "The wrath" will be analysed with the poison tree serving as a poetic vehicle.

"My Pretty Rose-Tree" will offer an insight into the complexity of a rose which is, at the same time, joyous and capable of becoming a source of misery. The interpretation of jealousy in the poem, as well as a feminist and a misogynist analysis of the poem, will be given. The motif of a rose also appears in Blake's "The Sick Rose." The poem will be analysed through the realm of morality and society. The aspect of natural love being thwarted before it reaches its physical consummation will be interpreted. The analysis of jealousy and social oppression of women will also be given.

The poem “The Lily” offers a comparison of a lily and a rose. The interpretation of pure love, different kinds of love, and feministic analysis of a fragile lily and a stable rose will be offered. Finally, three different interpretations of “The Blossom” will be given. Those being opinions of different groups of society, happiness reached via sexual love, and a mother’s love toward her child. This subchapter will be followed by concluding remarks.

1. William Blake and the Romantic Period

Poet, artist, and engraver, William Blake was born on 28 November 1757 in London. He was raised in his parents’ home above their hosier shop at Broad and Marshall Street, an area abounding with numerous tradesmen and merchants. His parents, Catherine and John Blake were Christian but did not always follow the dogma of Catholic Church. They held radical political views which manifested later on in some of Blake’s work. Although Blake’s relationship with his parents is obscure, he seemed to have loved his younger brother, Robert, very dearly (Bloom 12), and his parents appeared to have encouraged the young William Blake in his art: “His mother hung Blake’s drawings and verses in her chambers, and his father bought engravings and plaster casts for Blake to study” (Bloom 12). Nevertheless, Blake would later discount the influence of his parents on his work or life (Bloom 12).

The basics of reading and writing Blake learned in school. At the age of ten, his parents sent him to study drawing at one of London’s best art schools at the time. In the following five years, Blake learned art history and acquired many other skills. At the time he eagerly read the Bible, Greek classics, Milton, and Shakespeare. In 1767 or 1768 he started writing what later became his *Poetical Sketches* (Bloom 12). His schooling in art became too costly for his parents to support, so, in 1771, he became an apprentice to the engraver James Basire of Lincoln’s Inn Fields. “Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion,” his first engraving, dates to 1773 and “The Body of Edward I in His Coffin” to 1774. In 1779 he got accepted into the Royal Academy of Arts as an engraver. His engravings “Edward and Eleanor,” “Penance of Jane Shore in St. Paul’s Church,” and “Lear and Cordelia in Prison” date to the year 1779 (Bloom 13). One year later, Blake completed his first project as a professional engraver and started to make a living in the trade business, working for a subversive literature purveyor.

At the age of 25, he married Catherine Boucher whom he taught how to read and write and who would later assist him in his work (Bloom 13). It was in this period that Blake started to associate himself with a circle of London intellectuals including Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, sculptor John Flaxman, William Godwin, Rev. Anthony Stephen Mathew, Harriet Mathew, and painters Thomas Stothard and Henri Fuseli. Mathew and Flaxman funded the publication of Blake's first poetry book in fifty copies. The book, *Poetical Sketches*, contained sixteen years of Blake's work and was published in 1783 (Bloom 13). In 1784, he wrote *An Island in the Moon,* in which he derided his progressive friends. In the same year, he opened a print shop that would eventually allow him to publish his poetry, together with a fellow apprentice James Parker (Bloom 13). At this point, "[h]e developed his technique of 'illuminated printing': he engraved words and artwork on copper plates and, having made the ink himself, printed his work onto paper" (Bloom 13). His wife would sew the covers onto the printed books, and each illustration was carefully painted by hand (Bloom 14).

In 1789 Blake entered the period of his prolific literary activity by writing *Songs of Innocence* (1789), *The Book of Thel* (1789), *Tiriel* (1789), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (the early 1790s), and *Songs of Experience* (1794) (Bloom 14). He claimed to only write when "commanded by the spirits . . . and the moment I have written I see the words fly about the room in all directions" (Bloom 14). Visions have been a big part of Blake's personal life and creative opus (Bloom 14). By the late 1780s, he was producing works with religious themes, and by the end of the century, his works were of Biblical themes (Bloom 15). Until the late 1790s, Blake had written some biographical and political works appropriate to the internationally turbulent times: *America: A Prophecy* (1793) and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), *The Song of Los* (1795), and *The Four Zoas* (1795) (Bloom 15). In 1804 he started one of his most famous works: the two-volume poem *Milton* based mostly on Milton's *Paradise Lost*. 1809 may mark the start of the end of Blake's creative era due to the poorly attended exhibition of his paintings (Bloom 15). He and his wife have been described as "still poor still dirty" in this period marked by his following literary works: *The Everlasting Gospel* (ca. 1818) and *Jerusalem* (1820), one of his most well-known works of art (Bloom 15-16). In his later years, he wrote *The Ghost of Abel* (1821) and illustrated Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Bloom 16). The Blakes received a sum of £25 in 1822 for their obvious poverty. William Blake continued to colour and engrave until the end, and died at the age of 69 on 12 August 1827, still poor and relatively unknown. Catherine Blake had to

borrow money for his burial one day before their 45th marriage anniversary (Bloom 16). "It would be nearly forty years before a biography would turn public attention back to Blake and a century before Blake would be appreciated and admired as an artist and poet. Now, he is considered the first, and among the greatest, of the English Romantics" (Bloom 16). In fact, as Damon and Eaves suggest, "[a]ll the principles of Romanticism are to be found in Blake's first book, the juvenile *Poetical Sketches*; by the time the Romantic poets were flourishing, he had already passed beyond them" (363).

Despite being by far the shortest period in British literary history, the Romantic era (1785-1830) is as complex and diverse as any other (Abrams 1). "For much of the twentieth century, scholars singled out five poets—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Percy Shelley, and Keats, adding Blake belatedly to make a sixth—and constructed notions of a unified Romanticism on the basis of their works" (Abrams 1). The term "Romantic period" is used to refer to period between 1785, when Samuel Johnson died, and William Blake, Burns, and Smith wrote their first poems, to 1830, by when the major writers of the past century had either died or were no longer prolific (Abrams 2). This was a difficult time in England's history, as the country transitioned from a predominantly agrarian civilization to a modern industrial nation, with wealth and power concentrated in the landholding aristocracy. And it happened in the midst of revolutions – first the American, then the more radical French – as well as wars, economic cycles of inflation and depression, and the continual threat of imported revolutionary doctrines to which the ruling classes responded by repressing traditional liberties (Abrams 2).

When it comes to natural objects in William Blake's poetry, Abrams suggests that they were significant because of the correspondences that linked them to an inner or spiritual world. A rose, a sunflower, a cloud, or a mountain is depicted in his poetry as an item endowed with a significance beyond itself, not as something to be observed and pictured (12). Therefore, the next chapter will focus somewhat more on the notion of floriography in general and on the role of flowers in specific poems by Blake.

2. Floriography and the Power of Flora in Blake's Poetry

The language of flowers is sometimes referred to as floriography. It "has been used as a means of cryptological communication simply by the way flowers are arranged, their color

and variety" (Muff qtd. in Alkayid and Kayed 784). As a result, flowers are used to communicate and convey meaning. For example, a bluebell can symbolize humility and faithfulness. Camellia often symbolizes longing, the edelweiss courage, while magnolia represents dignity (Lewis).

Poets adopt floriography, which is a language of flowers, as a medium of beauty and depth to comment on human life (Alkayid and Kayed 784). Flowers must be interpreted in light of their historical, political, social, and cultural contexts (Alkayid and Kayed 784) because poets, including Blake, have frequently relied on floral symbolism in their works, especially in cases when they did not want to be too direct in their expression.

Blake's works are concerned with various topics, some of them being related to nature, others to religion, society, politics, and human rights. In several of Blake's poetic works, these themes are explored indirectly by analysing natural components in general and flowers in particular (Alkayid and Kayed 784). Bakhodirovna suggests that "William Blake was the first English poet to work out the revolutionary structure of imagery that signifies through the romantic poetry" (8). Blake is admired by poetry lovers and connoisseurs for his subtle language and his unrivalled ability in creating metaphors that deliver intended meaning in his poetic works. An aspect of such a metaphor can be seen through examples and meanings of flowers in his verses (Bakhodirovna 8). Without putting restrictions on simple floral photography, Blake was capable of creating marvellous works of art: "In just a few powerful words, he is capable of grabbing his readers' attention, invigorating their senses, whisking them away to that endless flower field or basking in the sun with their hands in the garden. There is just something so intimate about letting imaginations run freely after diving into a poem" (Bakhodirovna 8).

Moreover, Blake was quite exceptional in his poetic vision. According to Malla, Blake's defiance of the academy manifests in the fact that he does not design after any recognized artistic symbols but his own (12). His capacity to create his own ideas with remarkable formal originality, not just in his famous engravings but also in his poems, distinguishes Blake as a unique figure (Malla 12). A close reading of flowers in Blake's poetry, considering their kinds and colours, reveals new meaning of the formally simple poems. As Alkayid and Kayed explain, although his two most well-known illustrated poetry collections, *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, may be seen as straightforward, they actually hold concealed thoughts and implications concerning human life (784). In the following chapters, the paper will focus on the analysis of the six chosen poems: "Ah! Sun-

flower," "A Poison Tree," "My Pretty Rose Tree," "The Sick Rose," "The Lily," and "The Blossom."

2.1. "Ah! Sun-flower"

Blake's "Ah! Sun-flower" is a short poem in which the sunflower is personified and seems to yearn to go to a distant, exotic place, a "sweet golden clime" (Blake 3), even though the flower is obviously immobile. According to Harper, in the first stanza of Blake's "Ah! Sun-flower," the flower can be understood as a symbol of spiritual longing (139): "Ah Sun-flower! weary of time, / Who countest the steps of the Sun: / Seeking after that sweet golden clime / Where the travellers journey is done" (Blake 1-4). Harper explains that "the sunflower is seeking for deliverance from the 'dark folds' of the earth through what Proclus calls the 'mutual sympathy of things'" (140). The second, and final, stanza extends the theme of longing to a human being who, ultimately, is set apart from the flower in degree, and not in nature (Harper 140): "Where the Youth pined away with desire, / And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow: / Arise from their graves and aspire, / Where my Sun-flower wishes to go" (Blake 5-8). The sunflower, the youth, and the virgin are all natural things limited in time of their existence, forever longing for the eternity of the mighty sun (Harper 140). The dying youth and the corpse-like virgin appear to be yearning for the "golden clime" as they leave their graves. They can be interpreted as spirits or flowers blooming on gravestones, keeping an eye on the sun's path (Antal 32).

In a feminist reading of Blake's selected poems, Alkayid and Kayed suggest that women symbolized by the flower in "Ah! Sun-flower" begin to understand the necessity of having new goals in life (786). Alkayid and Kayed also point out that Blake's Sunflower is inextricably linked to its era, and that Blake recognizes that changing society's perception of women will take a long time and work on the part of both men and women (786). Alkayid and Kayed state that Blake depicts the sunflower as a symbol of a woman seeking independence and acknowledgment. Her roots are in the earth, which is the patriarchal system, but she continues to grow upwards, towards liberation. The sun and the sunflower are linked because the flower follows the sun, just as women should follow their desires and ambitions. The vivid yellow colour of "The Sun-Flower," "the sun," and "golden clime" represents hope, strength, and a brighter future (787). According to Alkayid and Kayed, to be realized, these women's hopes must be properly interpreted. "Youth," "Virgin," and countless other women have died

before fulfilling their ambitions, but this is no longer the case because women's subordination has ended, and "the traveller's journey is done," as the woman begins to make decisions and the "Sunflower wishes to go" (787). Furthermore, because the sunflower has seeds on its surface, it not only represents women at that time but also future generations of women. These seeds will eventually fall to the ground and bloom. Women's lives will also flourish and prosper as they recreate the comprehension of themselves and the world around them (Alkayid and Kayed 787).

"Ah, Sunflower!" focuses on the flower's desire, which is "weary of time." The Youth and Virgin of lines 5-6 have accomplished their longing, have risen from the cold earth, and are free to love. Nonetheless, the poem still has a sense of unfulfilled yearning, because it is the Sunflower's poem, and the Sunflower's aim has not yet been accomplished (Stevenson 484). The poem "Ah! Sun-flower" was published in Blake's *Songs of Experience*. Therefore, it is no surprise that the poem expresses unfulfilled lust. By using the language of flowers, Blake comments on a common state concerning human life, the state of longing.

2.2. "A Poison Tree"

"A Poison Tree" is a poem which uses the motif of the tree to discuss negative human emotions and their consequences. It begins with the following lines: "I was angry with my friend; / I told my wrath, my wrath did end. / I was angry with my foe: I told it not, my wrath did grow" (Blake 1-4). Because the name of the poem refers to a tree, it comes as a surprise that the first stanza is actually about tales of anger (Gallagher 238). In "A Poison Tree," according to Stevenson, Blake's repulsion at the concept of suppressed malice's destructiveness swells into a nightmare shape, the horrifying vision of a mindless, silent creature that creeps and grabs in the night. The design, which depicts the prone victim beneath the naked tree's overhanging claws, reinforces the symbol (448). The speaker's opening statement, which is deliberately abstract and parabolic and concerned with a "typical" human situation, repressed anger, may thus encourage the reader to reconsider his expectations of the poem. The reader may now anticipate an allegorical analysis of wrath in which a poison tree serves as a poetic vehicle (Gallagher 238).

The poet's treatment of the tree, the wrath, is also expressed in the second stanza: "And I waterd it in fears, / Night & morning with my tears: / And I sunned it with smiles, / And with soft deceitful wiles" (Blake 5-8). The hatred is expressed at the beginning of the third stanza as well: "And it (wrath) grew both day and night, / Till it bore an apple bright" (Blake 9-10). In the mentioned lines Blake shows us how hate sows hate (Bender-Slack 72). Eventually, Gallagher explains, the tremendous nurturing of wrath comes to fruition in the form of literal manifestation. To be sure, the antecedent of "I" in line nine is unmistakable "wrath," and the content of the line resembles a portion of line four ("my wrath did grow"). However, verse two has intervened, and the narrator's rage, which has been steadily increasing "both day and night," has now transformed into a poison tree: "it bore an apple bright" (240).

The conclusion of the poem is expressed in the following lines: "And my foe beheld it shine, / And he knew that it was mine. / And into my garden stole, / When the night had veild the pole; / In the morning glad I see; / My foe outstretched beneath the tree" (Blake 11-16). The idea of a poisonous apple implies a biblical reading and a religious connotation. According to Gallagher, "A Poison Tree" is a counter-myth which exposes the biblical narrative of the Fall as a fraud by giving the "true etiology of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" (237-238). As a result, "A Poison Tree" reveals what is possibly the Bible's most "poisonous" doctrine: Blake sees the hereditary curses of Genesis as nothing more or less than contagious, unmotivated rage writ large (Gallagher 248).

The poem "A Poison Tree" was published in *Songs of Experience*. Unlike those in the collection *Songs of Innocence*, which focuses on the more positive aspects of both life and religion, it highlights the power of unexpressed negative emotions and consequences it may bring about. A toxic environment could never bear rich fruit.

2.3. "My Pretty Rose Tree"

Blake's poem "My Pretty Rose Tree" describes flowers as both beautiful and animated or personified as they have feelings:

A flower was offered to me,

Such a flower as May never bore;

But I said “I’ve a pretty rose tree,”

And I passed the sweet flower o’er.

Then I went to my pretty rose tree,

To tend her by day and by night;

But my rose turned away with jealousy,

And her thorns were my only delight. (Blake 1-8)

Durrant suggests that it is possible that Blake utilizes flower imagery in his poems to signify states of mind or soul rather than as representations of humans. The rose represents fruition, fulfilment, and human joy. However, it is susceptible to corruption and can produce thorns, making it a source of misery (2). Durrant wonders what brings corruption and pain in a place where all should be innocence and happiness (2). In this case, the other flower has to be considered, “such a flower as May never bore,” a bloom that is not a natural growth yet appears to be more valuable than any rose. The man who chooses the “pretty Rose-tree” over this unique blossom will discover the Rose itself merely offers him its thorns. This unusual blossom could be interpreted as the mind’s ability for delight, the fundamental imaginative and creative power without which all particular joy searches are doomed to fail (Durrant 2). According to Durrant, possessive fear is committed by an individual who links himself to, and strives to maintain, a joy, who speaks of “My pretty Rose-tree” and says “I’ve a pretty Rose-tree.” “By night and day,” he “tends” the Rose-tree. The “Rose-tree,” on the other hand, will not be possessed; she will turn away and only offer her thorns. The true blossom of joy grows in the mind and not in the objects of pleasure; the speaker in the poem has turned down the sole flower of true worth (3).

According to Thompson, the message of the poem could be that jealousy naturally arises in any situation, as illustrated by the second woman’s rejection of her devoted lover. The first woman’s resemblance to a flower signifies that she was delicate and lovely, full of life and vitality. The metaphor also ascribes to her an unblemished virginal nature. Even though she offers herself to him, she is not a “harlot” (33). The reference to May supports these feelings, implying that she is in the prime, if not the bloom, of young womanhood when she provides the most “pleasure.” The stark contrast between a May flower and a perennial rose-tree suggests that his relationship with the former woman would, for some reason, have been a brief one. But, he and his “rose-tree” are probably married or acknowledged lovers

(Thompson 33). It also implies that he imagines a romance with the May flower to be entirely wonderful. They would not be obligated to one other, so they would probably only stay together as long as they wanted to. The rose-tree's everlasting character, on the other hand, connotes both the hardship of winter and the pleasure of May. However, the speaker ignores the rose-tree's thorns when making his decision (Thompson 34).

The prettiness of the rose tree, as well as its necessary thorns, are what gives it the virtue of complexity no May flower could ever achieve. The flower and the rose tree represent a feminine figure in "My Pretty Rose Tree." The poetic voice might be seen as a man who is in presence of a flower "as may never bore," yet he rejects her since he already has a "pretty rose tree," which is assumed to be adored beyond all else (Bakhodirovna 8).

Alkayid and Kayed's feminist reading of Blake's poetry suggests that Blake in "My Pretty Rose Tree" encourages women to defend their rights. In the poem, the woman has rejected the imposed role that man tries to force on her. When he repeats "my," "I," and "me" eight times, the man refers to his wife or lover as being something he owns. The woman "turned away" in her response to this. Even though the story is told by a man, readers might sense that he deserves her rejection and sympathize with the woman. The speaker watches his woman like a caged bird while being arrogant toward the other woman who is "offered to him" (787). Ultimately, the woman leaves her man and defends herself by showing "her thorns" because he has no affection for her and treats her only as property. Blake uses "flower" and "rose" six times to affirm that the woman is an autonomous human being" (Alkayid and Kayed 787).

Contrary, according to McQuail, "My Pretty Rose Tree" is misogynistic in its tendency to implicitly blame the jealous woman symbolized by the rose tree who decides to reject and torment her "faithful lover" (123). Abdulhussin states that the speaker's noble soul is perversely rewarded in the last two lines. The speaker is implying that if one is committed to a principle, one should stick to it even if it causes suffering. From another perspective, the speaker, though he never expresses it, wishes to avoid the responsibilities of loyalty and fidelity. The initial words of the lyric may imply that the speaker is becoming more enamoured with the new flower (87).

"My Pretty Rose Tree" is a part of *Songs of Experience*, which explains its negative connotations. The poem illustrates the state of jealousy. Blake, once again, uses the language of flowers to comment on a state well-known to all humans and to suggest that jealousy is

toxic, as it ruins human life. The poem also refers to the superficiality of romantic relationships.

2.4. "The Sick Rose"

The rose appears again in the poem "The Sick Rose," but this time the focus is neither on the rose's beauty nor on its power. This time, Blake ventures into the realm of society and morality:

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. (Blake 1-8)

Perrine suggests that in the poem, the rose and the worm refuse to remain a rose and a worm since the poem is so well-organized (398). Namely, "[a]lmost immediately the Rose suggests a maiden and the worm her secret lover; but these meanings in turn suggest still broader meanings as the cone of light broad" (Perrine 398). Perrine also claims that the phrase "dark secret love" is just too powerful to be limited to the worm feeding on the rose, as well. "Thy bed of crimson joy" implies far more than the rose bed it technically refers to. The intense implications of these terms, when combined with the connotations of "sick," "invisible," "night," and "howling storm," as well as the capitalization of "Rose" and the personification of the flower, push the reader to seek more meaning (398).

Different readers have interpreted the poem as referring to the destruction of joyful physical love by jealousy, deceit, concealment, or the possessive impulse of innocence by the experience, of humanity by Satan, of imagination and joy by analytic reason, and of life by death. Some of these interpretations are based only on the poem, while others need knowledge

of Blake's earlier works (Perrine 398). According to Perrine, the rose has to always represent something desirable, beautiful, or good, the same way the worm has to be a corrupting agent. Both symbols define a semantic space, and a legitimate interpretation must be contained inside that space. Any proper interpretation must satisfactorily clarify the contents of the poem without being contradicted by any element (398). Therefore, the finest interpretations will rely on the fewest assumptions which are not grounded in the poem itself (Perrine 398). "A rose is a rose, and is more than a rose" concludes Perrine (398).

In *Songs of Innocence*, "The Sick Rose" is typically put in contrast with "The Blossom." Berwick suggests that if we accept that "The Blossom" celebrates the physical consummation of love, we should also not be surprised to learn that its equivalent in *Songs of Experience* depicts natural love being thwarted before it reaches its physical consummation. This is the interpretation that follows if the speaker, rather than the reportedly "sick Rose," is the true subject of the poem (78). According to Berwick, who offers an interpretation of both poem and its design, which is a necessary element of Blakean criticism in his opinion, the speakers of "The Sick Rose" are her sisters, who are writhing in jealousy on the branches over her. They could be compared to frustrated heliotropes, relishing in the sun while languishing on their thorny bed and burying their faces (80). "As such they invite comparison with the frustrated Youth and pale Virgin of 'Ah! Sun-Flower'. Their sister has freed herself from the limbo of airy disengagement and the environment of thorny moralism; she has bent low to the earth and found the fulfillment of her desires" (Berwick 80). The rose's bliss is even hinted through the speaker's envy: ". . . thy bed / Of crimson joy" (Blake 5-6) states Berwick (80). It is a joy that both the worm and the flower share, and bliss from which the sisters are barred by their sterile self-love (Berwick 80).

Alkayid and Kayed's feminist reading of Blake's poems suggests that women and nature share a deep connection. Therefore, "The Sick Rose" represents the social oppression of women through the symbolism of the sick rose (786). The fatal worm represents both man and patriarchal society, which "feeds on" or mistreats women. As a result, the worm depicts a man who creeps and sneaks to hurt an innocent flower or woman. To the pure and serene woman, the man is evil and destructive (Alkayid and Kayed 786). Women are rendered weak by society and are instructed to be obedient and quiet. Thus, Blake portrays them as helpless. Blake does not attack women, but rather criticizes the patriarchal system that has made this woman, and all women at the time, weak or "sick." The "worm," or man, "has found thy bed," and Blake does not use another term like "meet" to emphasize that this "dark secret

love" is not a shared love but rather a one-sided love, or even not love at all, since it "does thy life destroy." Love can only be damaging if it is perpetrated by a man who is enamoured with a woman and is unconcerned about her feelings (Alkayid and Kayed 786).

Wiltshire assumes the following:

> Most readers will agree that the worm is felt as an awesome force, coming out of the night's darkness, and that the destructive intimacy which is the poem's subject, though destructive, is also strangely thrilling. The thrill is partly the discovery that the rose and the worm are each necessary to the other and we are led to feel the poem's power, not as a light thrown outwards (the 'howling storm' is a primitive chaos antecedent to the discovery, not changed by it), but as an irreducible darkness. What is discovered is some truly essential conflict, a conflict in essence, and it defines (it does no more) some essential truth of the poet's inner life. (220)

According to Malla, the worm, which could be viewed as a metaphor for innocent sexual love, is here interpreted as an emblem of corruption. It is an "invisible" worm impregnated with "dark secret love," both elements being held accountable for the destructive lust that ruins true love rather than sustaining it, as the rose's life is ultimately destroyed (14).

The rose can be viewed from various perspectives, despite the poem being brief. It refers to sexuality and impermanence, expressing an opinion against corrupted sexuality, but it might also be read as referring to the actuality of beauty's destiny through the fate of the rose from a basic point of view. Someone might read the poem and think it is about political, social, or religious oppression. However, it is clear that the universe of innocence that the rose inhabits is ruthlessly assailed by brutality (Abdulhussin 85). In summation, "The Sick Rose," which is also a part of Blake's *Songs of Experience*, could be interpreted through the realm of toxic relationships in which one side unfairly prospers at the expense of the other.

2.5. "The Lily"

The next poem to be analysed in this paper is "The Lily," which contrasts the rose and the lily:

The modest Rose puts forth a thorn,

The humble sheep a threat'ning horn:

While the Lily white shall in love delight,

Nor a thorn nor a threat stain her beauty bright. (Blake 1-4)

In "The Lilly" the flower signifies pure love's freedom, as opposed to the "modest" Rose with her thorn. Lilies and roses were frequently associated by Blake with an ideal state (Damon and Eaves 270). The protective thorn is created by the "modest" rose, in opposition to the lily's pure innocence (Damon and Eaves 314). According to Shareef, the Lily is the superior flower since it does not injure or defend itself from someone who would adore it. The rose's thorns are contrasted with the sheep's protecting horns. In its simplicity and honesty, the Lily is offered as a symbol of pure love (1).

"The Lilly," according to Alkayid and Kayed, encourages women to be self-sufficient human beings. Blake compares the lily, which is fragile and easily damaged, to the rose, which is a sturdier and more stable plant. Blake implies that if she does not express herself and rejects things that she does not believe in, man will destroy her identity and will "feed on her" like the sheep that feeds on the lily (Alkayid and Kyed 787).

The poet uses personification and figurative meaning to explain three types of "love": romantic and passionate love, loyal and obedient love, and pure and strong love. These ideas are represented by objects, and Blake unveils his hidden meaning by analysing these objects in basic terms (Shareef 1). "Just as 'the Lily' is superior to the 'Rose' and 'Sheep,' the 'love' that is pure and strong can endure beyond the other options" (Shareef 1). Blake utilizes the image of a lily to reflect on the nature of true, unrepressed love in the poem. The rose is a lovely flower that has an appealing scent. However, its thorns are seen as a flaw. Therefore, they serve as a sign of resistance to the all-pervading emotion of love. The poet, on the other hand, considers Lily to be superior because of its pure white color and lack of thorns. Blake celebrates the lily for her open and honest embrace of love, which makes her more beautiful and joyful in the long run (Shareef 3). The poem vividly compares dangerous and pure love: "Love often accompanies danger and treachery. Much like a lovely rose plant that is covered with thorns and a sheep with a threatening horn; both of them threaten their lovers who dream of owning them. 'The Lily' on the contrary is the embodiment of true and pure love. The poet emphasizes on the fact that purity does not involve rejection or refusal to the warmth of love" (Shareef 3).

"The Lily," a poem that is also a part of *Songs of Experience*, is often interpreted as pure love. However, the pure flower that is a lily could also be understood as a child, innocent in comparison to experienced roses and sheep, adults marked by the world's hardships.

2.6. "The Blossom"

The poem "The Blossom" contains cheerful images of life: "Merry, merry sparrow! / Under leaves so green / A happy blossom / Sees you, swift as arrow" (Blake 1-4). In addition to the flower (blossom), two separate birds, a sparrow, and a robin are also featured in the poem. As Dallilar suggests, the former is content with its presence, whereas the latter is distressed by it, resulting in a second stanza filled with negative, dismal images. This could be an attempt by Blake to portray the opinions of different groups of society - with one class assumed to be the ruling class content with the status quo, and the other class unjustified with the changes required - as Robins traditionally appear during the Winter, one could assume that it is upset at missing the exciting, lively critiques that occur during the summer - such as Blossoms (33):

Pretty, pretty robin!

Under leaves so green

A happy blossom

Hears you sobbing, sobbing,

Pretty, pretty robin,

Near my bosom. (Blake 7-12)

Another interpretation is offered by Dallilar, namely, that the poem reflects the happiness that can be reached via innocent sexual love. The sparrow, "swift as an arrow" in search of his cradle, has been understood to have a phallic meaning and symbolizes the innocence and joy of free love. In this case, the "happy blossom" refers to the female sexual organs, which are delighted to see the sparrow arrive. The robin's "sobbing, sobbing" has been interpreted in a variety of ways. It is either the polar opposite of the sparrow's open love, a species that has been hurt or possibly violated by love, or it's another creature revelling in the pleasures of physical intimacy, in which case its sobbing might be orgasmic (Dallilar 33). While this may appear to be an unusual interpretation of a verse from *The Songs of Innocence*,

Blake himself believed strongly in the power of free love. Many of his poems, like “The Little Girl Lost and Found,” “The Lilly,” and “The Angel,” are about giving in to wants and sexual love (Dallilar 33). Berwick agrees that “The Blossom” celebrates the physical consummation of love (78).

As shown above, “The Blossom,” published in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*, has been subjected to a sexual interpretation for many years. Many readers believe the poem depicts a sexual intercourse allegory, going into significant depth in describing the sexual act and the genital components. However, according to Baine and Baine, such an interpretation diminishes the scope of Blake’s vision (22). In “The Blossom,” the speaker may easily be a mother with her child. A Madonna-like mother holds her kid in the foliage design, and he is nursing at her breast in some versions. She has wings and a halo in at least one copy. In such an interpretation of the poem, the “Blossom” has to be the child (Baine and Baine 23). The sparrow and the robin are the other actors in the poem, both of which are addressed by the mother. It was customary to include birds in paintings of the Madonna and Child (Baine and Baine 23). Furthermore, the nursery rhyme employs these two birds in an emblematic manner that has been well-known for ages. The sparrow had traditionally been carefree, and the robin had been considered friendly and especially empathetic to suffering. Blake was following precedents lately popularized in children’s novels when he chose birds as the objects for the child's first experience in sympathy (Baine and Baine 24-25).

This poem, like most of Blake’s poems from the collections *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, illustrates that the power of a seemingly simple word, such as the title “The Blossom,” lies in its unique ability to symbolize a vast number of concepts, ideas, and things. This poem is a part of Blake’s collection *Songs of Innocence* and connotes mostly positive meanings, unlike the poems of *Experience*. The poetic pictures of the poem refer to cheerful aspects of human life and different kinds of love or delight.

Conclusion

William Blake, a poet, engraver, and artist, was an extraordinary mind whose artistic opus is still incredibly respected and cherished today. Though he differs from his literary contemporaries, he is considered to be the first English poet to develop revolutionary imagery

in his poems typical of the Romantic period. In both of his poetry collections, *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, Blake used flower imagery to comment on the beauty and depth of human life, and unveil the historical, social, and political contexts of the period. He was capable of producing great works of art without putting limitations on simple floral imagery, whereby one and the same image (of a flower) may bear a plethora of meanings.

Specifically, in “Ah! Sun-flower” the flower can be interpreted as a symbol of spiritual longing or a woman starting to understand the need of setting new goals in her life. Sunflower’s colour represents hope, a brighter future, and strength. “A Poison Tree” could symbolize repressed human anger or the biblical narrative of the Fall as a fraud. In “My Pretty Rose Tree” the deep meaning of a rose flower is illustrated. Though the rose represents fruition, human joy, because of its thorns it can become a source of misery. The poem shows the nature of human jealousy. “The Sick Rose” suggests the rose as a destructive element of jealousy, concealment, or a state of natural love before reaching physical consummation. “The Lily” signifies purity, innocence, true love, and honest embrace. “The Blossom,” like any other poem by Blake, also has multiple interpretations. Some of them include opinions of opposing groups of society, the happiness reached through physical love, or a mother nursing her child. By interpreting different meanings of Blake’s poems, the readers can gain insight into the Romantic world and art of William Blake. The motifs of plants and flowers in Blake’s poetry will eternally carry artistic depth and be a part of his incredible poetic legacy.

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