

# Sick Rose by William Blake

Literature / 1<sup>st</sup> year classes

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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.

Nathan Cervo describes the poem as "One of the most baffling and enigmatic in the English language"<sup>[3]</sup> The rose and worm have been considered by critics as "figures of humanity",<sup>[4]</sup> although Michael Riffaterre doubts the direct equivalence of Man as a worm; when Blake makes this comparison in other places, Riffaterre notes, he is explicit about it. Nevertheless, the "lesson of the worm may be applicable to human experience".<sup>[4]</sup>

The rhyme scheme is ABCB. The scansion is difficult to place, due to a lack of pattern; the stanzas are asymmetrical: the first has syllables of 5,6,5,5, and the second of 5,4,6,5. Punctuation is also irregular: there is no [,] after "O Rose", and yet there is a [,] after "worm".<sup>[5]</sup>

The poem was set to music by Benjamin Britten in his 1943 *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*, where it forms the movement "Elegy". More recently, British rock band Amplifier set the poem to music on their 2011 album "The Octopus".

Verses of the poem also comprise and inspire the 1991 song "Love's Secret Domain" by the band Coil.

1. Do you think simple poems like "The Sick Rose," which resembles a nursery rhyme, are more effective in communicating a "message" than longer, more wordy poems?
2. Why do you think Blake chose to use a rose and a worm to get his point across?
3. Do you think poems should always come with pictures? Take a look at the illustration that accompanies "The Sick Rose" (view the image here). Does it add anything to your understanding of the poem?

THANK YOU