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Title	Autoeroticism and Blake : O Rose Art Thou Sick!?
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Citation	北海道大學文學部紀要, 46(1), 85-109
Issue Date	1997-09-30
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/33690
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	46(1)_PL85-109.pdf

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北大文学部紀要 46-1 (1997)

Autoeroticism and Blake: O Rose Art Thou Sick !?

オートエロティシズムとブレイク：
おお薔薇よ、お前は病んでいるのか。

瀬名波 栄潤

I

William Blake's "The Sick Rose" in *Songs of Experience* has provoked various interpretations since its publication in 1794, but, when it comes to woman's pain and woman's pleasure, the poem still has plenty of room for further analysis. A woman is symbolically presented, as Rose, in the caged situation and, being unable to free herself, finds an alternative pleasure. In this article, I will closely examine the poem and its relation to the plate and verify that Blake's reference to a woman's masturbation produces multitudinous interpretations representing his ideas, society, man, and woman.

The poem has endured various interpretations due to its brief eight-line length (which makes the poem symbolic and suggestive), Blake's complicated ideas about the individual and society, and the relation of the poem to the plate. As Leopold Damrosch, Jr. says, "The poem can be read in at least four ways —naturalistic (roses do decay), psychosexual, sociopolitical, and metaphysical— and while one is not obliged to read it in all of these ways, the poem is richer and

more interesting (and certainly more Blakean) if one does so" (80). In the process of most interpretations, sexual analysis is inevitable due to such symbolic words as "rose" and "worm" and such lines as "crimson joy" and "secret love". Many Freudian critics have discussed the poem's sexual connotations and Blake's idea of male-and-female relationships. Indeed the poem is very sexual, but the critics have failed to notice that Blake deals with a woman's rejection of mutual love in favor of autoeroticism—masturbation: a barren deed.

Awareness of this unusual motif in both the poem and the plate broadens other possible interpretations. As Brenda S. Webster mentions, "Liberated sexuality seems a source of high value for Blake—he links it with vision and art" (205). After examining Blake's ideas on sexual love and showing that the poem is about his antipathy toward self-encapsulated love, I will introduce how, metaphorically, the poem entices various levels of interpretations.

II

The plate provides more reasonable explanation for the poem as Blake's reference to a woman's masturbation. Though most critics have examined the poem in terms of a heterosexual relationship, their interpretations are cogent only in the context of the poem itself, not so much in the plate. Pagliaro questions the plate:

> It [is] difficult to identify the characteristics of the three female figures, two of whom are located on the plant where rosebuds might be, and the third, at the center of a full-blown fallen rose, only flower in the picture. Both rosebud women seem unhappy with their state. Both conceal their faces under their hair, and neither of them seems

> securely placed on the stems they occupy. Not only are they implausibly located—Blake might have done something, if he had chosen, to make them little roses as well as little women... The [third] woman has her arms extended, as if ready for flight from the open flower, but her lower body is inside it, and so is a portion of the worm. (65-66)

The description of roses, women, and worms is confusing to those critics and, in many cases, ignored.

The plate is, in actuality, a carefully designed illustration of the female genitalia, delineated by the arched stalks. As Camille Paglia mentions in her "Sex Bound and Unbound: Blake," "Female genitals are traditionally symbolized by the Queen of flowers, from the medieval Mystic Rose of Mary to the rock classic 'Sally, Go Round the Roses'" (276). Although the coloring of the plate varies from one printing to another, its principal color is always violet. It is a combination of two colors, red and blue, and creates a dream-like atmosphere in the plate. Each color has its archetypical and psychological meanings, and, according to the *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* by Ad de Vries, "blue" is often associated with melancholy and "Red," the opposite of blue, with fire, blood, love, etc. Their combination, "violet," suggests mourning. The positions of the roses are intentionally placed according to the biological facts. Among the three roses, the one on the top corresponds to a part of the labia minora. The second one in the middle corresponds to the clitoris. The third rose at the bottom is the vagina. It is reasonable to say, therefore, that leaves and thorns around the genitals are the pubic hairs.

With this delineation, Blake also drew women and worms carefully and expressed his concerns about the woman's genital self-stimulating habit. The three women in the plate express crimson joy in

different ways. The women in the upper two roses are very exhausted, as if they have fallen prey to the worm. The worms are crawling more like fingers that stimulate her sensitive areas than a phallus; to say that the "design reveals to us that the worm is a human male" (Natoli 206) is not conclusive. Being satisfied with its (sexual) appetite, the worm (the finger) moves from one place to another and is now on the labia majora for more stimulation. The other woman at the bottom, who is half-emerging from the vagina, is expressing her joy with both hands fully extended, as if she had just reached orgasm. Two worms (fingers) are found around and in the genitals. One on the top is stimulating the area called labia majora, and another is half-slipping into the vagina. Meanwhile, wagging its tail, the half-crawling worm (another finger) stays inside the flower (the vagina). With these colors and the illustration of female genitals, the plate helps to elucidate Blake's obscure messages in the poem.

As a result of the graphic presentation of this anatomy, the plate may startle the reader, but, as Christopher Heppner remarks, "Blake began his life as [an] artist with a strong faith in the power of the human body to express meaning, a faith maintained in his theory virtually all his life" (234). As a poet, he also uses the human body to express his concerns, and the poem also fits the interpretation of the woman's masturbation scene and antipathetically presents Blake's ideas on sex. As Elizabeth Langland introduces Harold Bloom's analysis of the poem, "The rose is less innocent; she enjoys the self-enjoyings of self-denial, an enclosed bower of self-gratification, for her bed is already 'of crimson joy,' before it is found out" (229). The poem consists of two four-line stanzas and starts with the speaker's startling voice:

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. (23)

Though "That the rose's 'crimson joy' suggests masturbatory pleasure is well accepted by critics (Paglia 277), they have lacked a clue to determine that this poem is truly about masturbation. In the poem, "invisible" and "worm" are the key words to the whole poem. "Invisible" literally means that anything visible—such as a worm or a man—is not apparent to the senses, so seeing the "invisible" becomes a result of imagination; the worm is not a worm nor an actual person but a metaphor for something which only Blake and the woman can imaginatively see and describe.

"Worm" is another key word and has to do with a destructive sex in this poem. Ad de Vries defines the word as "the killing libidinal figure" and, in Blake's case, "the flesh" (508-9). These psycho-Freudian definitions reveal the worm as a self-destructive sexual medium. In *The Oxford English Dictionary*, it is also filled with many negative meanings: 1) the Biblical serpent, any animal that creeps or crawls; 2) a slender, creeping, naked, limbless animal; 3) any endoparasitic helminth breeding in the living body of men and other animals; 4) a maggot, grub, or caterpillar that feeds on and destroys flesh, and the like; 5) a maggot supposed to eat dead bodies in the grave, or a whim or a maggot in the brain; a perverse fancy or a

desire ; a streak of madness or insanity ; 6) a human being likened to a worm or reptile as an object of contempt, scorn, or pity ; and 7) an artificial or natural object resembling an earthworm. The first three definitions naturally lead to the image of the phallus, due to its snake-like shape, as Freud mentions, in "Dreams in Folklore," that the "symbolism of the penis by a *worm* is familiar from numerous obscene jokes" (183) to serious literary works. Referring to the fourth, fifth, and sixth definitions, Michael Srigley concludes that this "figurative worm is the embodiment of some powerful human feelings that play stealthily on the mind and causes a form of abnormality" (4). The image of "the worm" is, therefore, deeply associated with destruction, secrecy, abnormality, and the human flesh that resembles the worm, i.e., the phallus.

When these connotations are combined, the "invisible worm" reveals itself as an imaginative metaphor for something phallic which secretly brings Rose an abnormal "crimson joy." So it is possible to read this as the woman's creating her own "crimson joy" with her imaginary worm, or with a substitute for the phallus, and, therefore, for us to interpret the poem as Blake's reference to a woman's auto-eroticism. In the solitary woman's own imaginary lovemaking, the finger serves as a clandestine substitute for her imaginary lover's penis.

In the poem, the speaker, a witness of the woman's masturbation, keeps distance from the scene and describes it with surprise and a warning. With her worm-like finger, which she imagines to belong to a certain male figure, she starts the genital self-stimulating habit at night, touching her rosy sensitive areas and inserting her finger into the vagina to fulfill her "crimson joy." The poet passionately proclaims ; thou art sick, as he finds her nymphomaniac habit that is sore-

ly sickening her genitalia. Since her habit is a " dark secret love " of autoeroticism, the speaker, who opposes this kind of narcissism, prophesies that her finger'sobsessive secret love will destroy her life, just as the pictures of the roses in the plate are literally worm-eaten to death.

Both poem and plate are the description of a woman's masturbation. William Blake demonstrates a woman's " secret love " in a way so that he could survive and, as a result, defy the late eighteenth-century sexual censorship, as Srigley mentions that " it was precisely such an investigation into the taboos surrounding sex in his own age that Blake undertook " (5). As an artist, Blake hid his message in the picture of roses and drew the woman's finger, a substitute for her imaginary man or his penis, as if it had merely been a rose-eating insect. As a poet, he wrote so that people would innocently appreciate the poem as a description of a naturalistic decay of the worm-eaten roses, or, probably, as that of a barely tolerable sexual scene.

Since its publication, many critics have challenged the poem and introduced various interpretations. Critics such as Nathan Cervo explain the poem from the Christian point of view, referring to its similarity to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and conclude that the poem is about the attack of " night-flying " Satan against the Rose who " signifies not beauty, or Love, or life's vulnerability, but the social crown of life, gallantly achieved by the blessed " (253). Cervo's application of the Christian analysis does explore a new insight on Blake's religious belief, as the critic hopes to " throw a new and profoundly stimulating light on the poem " (254) ; however, Cervo does not mention the plate, the one that is inseparable from the poem to fully understand Blake's message. Unfortunately, Cervo's reading does not

illuminate Blake's drawing but leaves it in the dusk of confusion.

Michael Srigley, in his detailed source study in "Sickness of Blake's Rose," also finds "the invisible worm" important and concludes that the poem is about "solitary sex":

> The sickness of the Rose has been caused by the fantasizing of a lonely young man as he conjures up an image of a woman and imagines making love to her. From ethereal sperm produced by this act of erotic imagination, an "invisible worm" is created which flies through the tempestuous night from the lover to the beloved. As an expression of his "dark secret love" it carries out an act of violation on the young woman. (6)

Srigley's analysis of the poem as "the telepathic sexual intercourse" resembles mine, but his misinterpretation arises from his failure to examine the plate which Blake carefully designed. Referring only to the poem and saying that "in Blake's mind the invisible worm could be of either sex" (4), Srigley hurriedly concluded that it is a man's masturbation. If the worm were an actual man or if it symbolized his penis and his "nocturnal worm-like spirits" (Srigley 4), the plate would not have needed such a detailed picture of the female genitalia.

Most critics, however, have regarded the scene as that of heterosexual lovemaking and the rose-and-worm relationship as that of actual man and woman. "Rose" is a traditional symbol for the female, or the one closely related to feminine symbolism, as three women are tied with three roses in Blake's plate for the poem. The interpretation of the rose as a woman and the worm as a man may suggest that the poet is witnessing a heterosexual lovemaking scene. According to S. Gardner, the worm is a metaphor for a phallus,

which enjoys " his dark secret love." The idea of " worm " as sexually destructive flesh, as well as the pronoun " his " that implies the worm is a man, may have led the critics to interpret the whole poem in terms of illicit sexual intercourse. In her bedroom, there is an " invisible worm " thath " bears the night and the storm into the sick heart of the rose " (Stanley Gardner 110) and destroys her life. For example, as Harold Pagliaro introduces the general view toward the poem in his *Selfhood and Redemption in Blake's Songs*, the man " comes as an uninvited rapist attracted by her. Or she guiltily attracts him and enjoys him " (65). Also, Brian Wilkie mentions that " the male worm is a spectral predator, the female rose is either a naive victim or (more sexually) an enticing, coquettish temptress, and both are exponents of a code of love as lubricous, secret, and shameful " (130).

If the heterosexual interpretations were accurate, how could Blake blame the Rose, a rape victim, of being " sick," without accusing the worm of being a " rapist " (Pagliaro 5) or the " traveller who moved ' silently and invisibly ' on the winds of seduction " (S. Gardner 110) ? The worm might better be called sick because its action is obviously unethical. The Rose cannot be a temptress, either, unless she is willing to seduce the traveller whose " dark secret love/[she knows eventually] Does [her] life destroy."

The interpretation of " The Sick Rose " as Blake's reference to a woman's autoeroticism and as his condemnation of her barren deed is more consistent in both poem and plate than other interpretations and also conforms to Blake's ideas on sex.

III

Blake's antipathetic presentation of autoeroticism is a reflection of his strong belief in mutual creative love. Masturbation is a sexually barren deed, and, as Sigmund Freud says, "the way to attain important aims in an otiose manner, instead of by energetic effort" (95). Blake also holds the same position. Blake's early idea of sex is known for its liberalism, and, because of this belief, the poet opposed autoeroticism. Charles Gardner summarizes Blake's early idea:

> The passion of sex is, no doubt, the strongest of all. In the early prophetic books, when Blake was in a fever of rebellion, he affirmed that sex passion was holy and should be free. (147)

Sex is, for Blake, a device to express his idea of free love, which should not be restricted by any social obstacles such as marriage. Free love is his metaphoric expression of spiritual freedom. Making love with another, therefore, becomes a cooperative action of achieving the ideal freedom. In "The Clod & the Pebble," Blake says, "Love seeketh not itself to please/.../And builds a Heaven in Hells despair," but "love [which] seeketh only self to please/... builds a Hell in Heavens despite." This statement of "the paradox of love, in its selfless Innocence and selfish Experience" (Davis 55) reveals Blake's consistent belief in mutual love. He emphasizes the unselfish giving of love, which is necessary to mutual love.

Sex based on mutual love is an act of creation as well as psychological satisfaction. Blake's view is similar to the Jungian view—that is to say, that making love is a unification of a struggling persona and the persona's nursing anima for the ideal life; the sexual action of

the persona and the anima becomes a metaphor for the poet's psychological pursuit. In " William Bond, Blake appeals to the reader on the importance of mutual love:

> Seek Love in the Pity of others Woe
> In the gentle relief of anothers care
> In the Darkness of night & the winters snow
> In the naked & outcast Seek Love there. (498)

Sexual love is also an act of imagination. In *Fearful Symmetry*, Northrop Frye mentions:

> Sexual love... is the door through which most of us enter the imaginative world, and for many it affords the sole glimpse into that world. It is thus especially pathetic when a chance to love is thwarted or missed. (73)

Therefore, for Blake, the sexual action is more spiritual than physical, and the mutual love is a source from which to create the affirmative world of imagination. On the other hand, he disapproved of self-pity or self-love. The latter merely produces temporary physical pleasure and ends with nothing to cherish for the future: autoeroticism connotes narcissism, selfishness, indifference to others, and escape from the actual. In " The Sick Rose," Blake presents all these meanings in eight lines and accuses the woman of being self-enclosed, " O Rose thou art sick." In "Eternity," Blake mentions:

> He who binds to himself a joy
> Does the winged life destroy
> But he who kisses the joy as it flies
> Lives in eternity'ssun rise. (470)

One who binds a joy to himself and destroys the winged life is a man or a woman who is unable to share mutual love and escapes into the world of self-love. Blake's disapproval of self-love resulted in his con-

demnation of masturbation. His accusation of masturbation as a non-productive, barren deed may be a result not only of his strict ideology but also of his childless married life with his devoted wife Catherine Boucher.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the study of masturbation was publicly "stirred up by a pamphlet *Onania*, published in England in 1700. It was reinforced in 1760 by the dissertation of [Samuel Auguste David] Tissot, *L'Onanisme*, in which he alleged that masturbation was the cause of 'impotence, epilepsy, consumption, blindness...'" (Lukianowicz 143). As Roy Porter mentions in *Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, "The Enlightenment's toleration of sexuality was drawn to exclude two... groups.... From early in the century there was a growing torrent of medical and moral opposition to masturbation" (16); masturbation was totally rejected as was homosexuality. As Diana Hume George mentions in *Blake and Freud*, "masturbation is actually an anti-act for Blake, one accomplished in the dark, in silence, in the presence of an absence" (136). Masturbation does not produce anything except as "a substitute gratification" (George 135). Jean H. Hagstrum also points out that Blake "blames the self and a drive toward tyranny, a desire to become a one and only, to expel the other, to create a self-loving narcissistic isolation that is 'unprophetic,' 'closed,' and 'unknown'" (120). D. H. Lawrence holds an idea of masturbation similar to Blake's. In his *Sex, Love, and Censorship,* Lawrence states:

> The great danger of masturbation lies in its merely exhaustive nature. In sexual intercourse, there is a give and take... [but in masturbation] There is no reciprocity. There is merely the spending away of a certain force and no

> return. The body remains, in a sense, a corpse, after the act of self-abuse. There is no change, only deadening. There is what we call dead loss. (79)

While masturbation is only a self-destructive force, sex is an expression of love as well as an action of production. Blake's idea of sex is, in another sense, based on the idea of freedom of creation, or imagination. The imagination is a product of free thinking and should never be restricted by any binding forces. But its freedom does not allow selfishness because the " selfhood cannot love in the sense of establishing a kinship with the beloved : it can regard the latter only as a possession, something to complete in solitude " (Frye 72). Therefore, masturbation is used as a medium to express the poet's antipathy toward narcissism. Blake's liberal use of the sexual metaphor in " The Sick Rose " might trouble unsuspecting readers, but it is a crystallization of the poet's complex ideas.

IV

The poem as Blake's condemnation of autoeroticism reveals his idea of sex and, at the same time, becomes a motif for courtship, a satire, and his own struggle between the real and the ideal. In fact, the poem opens the door to such readings as a traditional love poem, a sociopolitical poem, and a poem of the poet's own psychological drama. The poem also represents woman's pain and pleasure and describes her as a victim as well as a villainness. As a result of these readings, the masturbation motif makes this short poem powerful and multiplies its quality.

Regarding " The Sick Rose " as a metaphysical poem is one way of reading into its meaning. Like Andrew Marvell's " To His

Coy Mistress," Blake's speaker urges his Rose to become his lover and to enjoy their life. Rose, however, does not listen to him, as if she were satisfied with being alone. Her indifference to the poet seems to him a sort of narcissism, the rejection of mutual love. The perplexed poet metaphysically compares her self-obsessed attitude to masturbation and insists on the idea of carpe diem: let's enjoy the present day with me, or your self-love eventually will thy life destroy."

Like the speaker in Blake's poem, Marvell also tells his lover that she should join him in seizing the day now and making the most of it:

> Worms shall try
> That long preserv'd Virginity,
> And your quaint Honour turn to dust. (ll. 27-29)

Although these lines are literally about the lover's after-death situation in her "marble vault" (l. 26) where worms will eat her body, they can also be a statement about her sexual habit. The "worms" indicate a substitute phallus that enjoys her virgin body, and, as Wilfred L. Guerin says, the "marble vault" is "a thinly disguised vaginal metaphor suggesting both rigor mortis and the fleshless pelvis of the skeleton" (149). Therefore, it is possible to say that Marvell can be alluding his mistress's indifference to her masturbatory action of narcissism, or at least her manless, self-destructive life in which "worms" will turn her "quaint honor" into dust. Marvell's use of "worm" as a sexually destructive being is identical to Blake's. Both poems resemble each other in terms of their love theme, awareness of death without mutual love, and sexual metaphors. Blake's "The Sick Rose" is as metaphysical a poem as Marvell's.

The sociopolitical theme can also apply to this poem. "The Sick

Rose" becomes a satire and a warning toward the city and individuals through the medium of the masturbation metaphor. During the Romantic period, loss of close relationships among individuals was a growing problem in the urban areas, as it is still a problem in our society. People in the city are so busy pursuing their individual, materialistic happiness that they have forgotten spiritual ties with others. Their loveless attitudes are the dominating theme in *Songs of Experience*, and Blake also satirizes people in this poem for their wrong attitudes.

The individual "who binds to himself a joy" ("Eternity" 461) and doesn't share the joy with others is what Blake thought destructive. More and more individuals in the period became self-concerned due to such things as the enclosure movement and urbanization. Many poets were pointing out the loss of community in rural areas and the absence of communication in urban areas, and some poets, such as Robert Burns and William Wordsworth, were disappointed with the city and withdrew to nature. But William Blake, who lived all of his life in London except the years 1800-1803, knew both good and bad in urban life and was ambivalent about city life. On the one hand, he had a dream of establishing an actual celestial city, but, on the other hand, he was also a desperate insider familiar with the harsh reality of the city life.

Blake's warning against the city echoes in the poem of masturbation. The rose is an image of the decaying city for the poet, and the worm symbolizes "materialism" (de Vries 509). He portrays the ills of the city in a woman called "the Sick Rose." The city's materialistic development is a false success which, Blake knows, will eventually destroy itself. People do not seem to know that its prosperity is only temporary, and the city's idolized fantasy is more like masturba-

tion, the pleasure of which lasts momentarily.

The people are also like "the sick rose"; they have lost, or deserted, their traditional neighborhood in the city and are concerned only about their individual lives. From upper-class people to the prostitute, they appear to be interested only in their own materialistic happiness. Their self-loving attitude and indifference to others are also like masturbation and do not create real happiness for the whole society. As a prophet who holds an ideal of the celestial city in actual London, Blake doesn t lose sight of the fact that only people can create a new, just, and harmonious social order (Thesing 4). Therefore, Blake calls the people's individual pursuit of happiness "dark secret love" and satirizes their mental corruption metaphorically: the self-destructive pursuit of happiness will eventually destroy their spiritual life.

This sociopolitical interpretation enables Blake to speak out and to present his concerns about the city and its people. In contrast to this reading, another interpretation enables him to talk inwardly: the psychological interpretation presents Blake's inner conflict.

As a psychological drama, the poem presents the poet's personal inner conflict toward the city. Making love in the poem leads the poet to a unification of a struggling persona and his nursing anima for the ideal life, and their successful sexual intercourse would indicate for the poet the achievement of his psychological pursuit of happiness. This reading is also about the city, but is totally different from the satire. From this point of view, Blake, the believer in the celestial city, becomes a great sufferer caught in the conflict between the actual and the ideal. The actual can be his life in London, and the ideal can be his belief in the celestial city. His struggle is whether he can unite the

latter with the former, as William B. Thesing explains :

> Although Blake viewed the city as " a place of infinite possibility," " a giant mythic entity," there is also a realistic understanding in his prophetic vision that the building of the new Order would require strenuous exercise of the creative power of imagination and would suffer many setbacks along the way. (12)

The poem metaphorically presents the poet's struggling relations between his conscious divided selves in the love story setting. Blake's psychological drama consists of two characters : a persona, Blake's suffering self, who struggles between the actual and the ideal, and an anima named Rose, his healing self, whose vital energy can help him find the solution.

Blake expects the persona to make love with his lover anima, because sex between the persona and the anima symbolically can bring to Blake the birth of a positive solution. The persona, however, witnesses the anima enjoying herself and cries, " O Rose thou art sick." She is not interested in him, and her love is for herself. The anima's masturbation, a self-satisfying as well as a self-consuming sex, is an infertile action which will produce nothing but vanity after all. The disappointed persona cannot help telling her that her dark secret love will destroy her life. This is also Blake's own voice, who expected from them a fruitful result although he knew that the goal could hardly be attained. The poem is Blake's self-produced scenario about the city, featuring his divided selves, and reveals his ambivalence about the possibility of achieving his ideal. Blake's own psycho-drama, therefore, only results in another disappointment, while the anima's masturbation becomes an excellent motif to show the difficulty, rejection, or inability of Blake's pursuit of the goal, the unification of the

actual and the ideal. Blake can find nowhere to go and stays in his psychological labyrinth. This version of the poem's interpretation, however, discloses the poet's psychology very explicitly and, as Joseph Natoli applies his phenomenological psychology to the poem from the Judaic-Christian standpoint, presents "the speaker's own internal tragedy" (208).

However, these readings are still limited. They only look at the poem and its plate in relation to the poet and his society, and the woman is interpreted as a medium of his expressions rather than as a real woman. Nevertheless, the woman in the poem does claim her condition, which is filled with her pleasure and pain. In the following section, I will examine the woman in the poem as a representation of woman during the period and explore other elements of this multifarious poem.

V

The woman illustrated in the poem represents more articulate pictures of the woman in the period. The poem, which describes a woman's unproductive autoeroticism, is read in the context of a caged-bird image, as the image was often used by many poets of the period in order to demonstrate the condition of woman who was metaphorically confined by the oppression of patriarchal society. In the poem, the woman called Rose is physically caged in the house and seems to know only one method of relieving herself from mental and possibly physical pains; i. e., masturbation. Although Blake is against masturbation, his attitude toward this woman is not necessarily antipathetic. Some critics, who read the poem not as a masturbation scene but as an adultery scene, discuss the speaker's anger and jealousy toward the

woman whose concern is just pleasure hunting. The woman in the poem is, for them, a villainness who rejects the persona's love and enjoys sex with others. On the other hand, the woman is also a victim who cannot free herself from the cage and painfully finds a temporary escape by masturbating. These two opposing views coexist when the poem is regarded as a masturbation scene and represent woman's pleasure more painfully.

The woman can be no more than a villainness for those who view her as a sexual target and demand from her nothing but sex. In the metaphysical interpretation of the poem, Rose rejects the suitor's courtship mainly because of her narcissism. She ignores his (dis) honest proposal and becomes a pleasure hunter on her own, in a sense that " masturbation was considered to be a sexual perversion because it did not lead to procreation, and all nonprocreative sex acts were considered to be 'unnatural'" (Ellis 224). This way of observing the woman, as the one who willingly enjoys autoeroticism and is not at all interested in the opposite sex, makes her selfish and unnatural.

Also in the sociopolitical interpretation, when transformed to the corrupted city and the self-concerned people in the city, she shows the face of a villainness. She is a city woman who rejects communication with others, cages herself in the room, and entertains herself as if she knew that that is the way to enjoy egocentric city life. The speaker's disappointment and anger against her derives from the gap between what he expects of her and what she really is, or between his romanticization and actualization of the reality. The speaker doesn't really understand nor does he try to understand why she is so malicious.

These views consist of the traditional masculine belief that a

woman is a possession of man, should be obedient to man, and accept his request. For those who agree with this idea, she is definitely a "sick" villainess whose pleasure is kept only for herself. The contemporary idea on masturbation as an unnatural deed parallels the contemporary antipathy against the woman who rejects traditional relationships between the sexes.

For those who oppose the idea, on the contrary, she represents many other women who try to free themselves knowing that their freedom is only temporary. Masturbation is used as a motif for women's temporary escape which only women can experience, and the whole poem illustrates the tragedy of woman whose obsession becomes almost dis-ease. She is isolated from the community and is imprisoned in her world, or she is isolating herself knowing what is out there. In either case, she is unable to communicate any more and finds self-love is the only way she can get rid of her mental and possibly physical imprisonment. One of the causes can be individualism in the city, where she finds no spiritual ties but sees only competition for the individual pursuit of happiness. Another cause is a patriarchal social system, which does not allow her to express her own love but forces her to accept man's demand. Finally, she fantasizes herself playing with her imaginary lover who can provide her with free love. This interpretation of woman as a victim of the social system enables the poem to represent woman more realistically.

In the psychodrama interpretation, when re-examined from a feminist point of view, the anima may not merely be rejecting a cooperation with the persona, but may also be showing her hopeless solution to survival: nihilism of self-love in a desperate society. The anima knows that there is no way to unite the actual and the ideal

(celestial city), so she suggests that the persona also find individual pleasure. Though the persona calls her "sick," the woman as a victim of society changes the persona's voice more sympathetically to her than hopelessly. Understanding her answer, the persona finds that the present and the future would be more fearful for society. The anima, who is supposed to bring an answer to the persona, according to Jungian theory, does so by the "unprophetic" prophecy.

The reader's perception of the woman in the poem changes depending on how the individual sees her social background. The woman described in this poem is only one, but she represents many other women, like the women in the plate, whose sufferings and solutions are symbolized in Blake's use of masturbation. When understood, her rejection of heterosexual relationships and self-encapsulation substantiates the dilemma of the woman whether to be a winged nymphomaniac or a submissive angel in the house.

Blake's masturbation motif goes beyond the sexual and brings deeper understanding of the woman as both villainess and victim. The motif can be, in general, used to express the individual's selfishness, narcissism, indifference, escapism, and isolation, as well as society's false urbanization, materialism, and prosperity. It should also be noted that the woman's masturbation provides the reader with reconfirmation on the condition of woman in the period as it has been pointed out and discussed by other women's studies. Owing to this motif, the poem, in spite of its brevity, opens the door to various readings. Metaphysical, sociopolitical, and psychological readings may be only a part of more possible interpretations of the motif. Blake's unique masturbation motif makes this short poem more "Blakean".

VI

William Blake's "The Sick Rose" may remind us of our innocent days when we felt sad and pitiful to see flowers being eaten by vermin, and this may still hold true for modern-day children. But, for us, the experienced, the poem delivers the same sadness and pitifulness on different levels. Though this study was first intended merely to review recent sexual interpretations, it has given me a great opportunity to reconsider the power of metaphor. Although conventional approaches to the poem as a lovemaking scene are striking and sexual enough, this reading as Blake's presentation of a woman's masturbation scene is more powerful and even more successfully fits his ideas: the ideas of not only naturalistic decay of the flower, but also of city, man, and woman. The key to this reading is the interpretation of "invisible" and "worm." The former reveals that the worm is an imaginary entity, and the latter reveals, in its shape, the finger of the woman. Another key to finding this motif is owed greatly to the plate. His poetry and plates are inseparable and, by word and image, provide Blake's ideas and his society for us.

Is masturbation "sick"? Yes, in the sense that referring to masturbation in public is still a taboo, and also in the metaphoric sense that what it suggests is the negative elements of the individual and of society. At the same time, more strongly, I would say, "No," because the power of masturbation as a literary motif is so great as to bring further significant interpretations: masturbation is not a sick word to be avoided, but a very powerful one to be discussed openly for possible uses as a metaphor. "The Sick Rose" is a good example to

show the energy of the motif. Therefore, the reason the poet composed the eight lines not as a fragment but as a full poem, and drew one plate carefully, is that the poem was long enough and condensed enough to control the power. As a result, Blake manages to present his belief in mutual love and his antipathy toward self-love. The motif broadens its meanings to reveal his view of society and his inner conflict. William Blake, a sexual liberal of the period, found literary values and succeeded in presenting various meanings in the motif of masturbation.

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