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## FROM INNOCENCE TO INFECTION: INTERPRETING “THE SICK ROSE” IN THE LIGHT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS

### Abstract

This paper examines the enduring relevance of William Blake’s poem “The Sick Rose” in the context of contemporary challenges, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite its pre-pandemic origin, the poem’s themes of hidden vulnerabilities, obscured intentions, and transient beauty resonate profoundly with current complexities. Through comprehensive analysis of symbolism, the study highlights literature’s adaptability in reflecting evolving human experiences. Slavoj Žižek’s book *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* offers a lens to understand these themes, as it explores hidden threats, shattered illusions, global chaos, gradual transformation, and human frailty caused by the pandemic. This analysis magnifies the poem’s resonance, demonstrating literature’s power to mirror shifting human narratives. Ultimately, the research underscores the unbreakable connection between art and life, presenting “The Sick Rose” as a testament to the enduring interplay between artistic expression and the evolving contours of existence.

**Keywords:** symbolism, relevance, resonance, COVID-19 era, contemporary interpretation

## 1. Introduction

Nestled within the tapestry of poetic expression, "The Sick Rose" emerges as a succinct, yet profoundly potent, creation, meticulously crafted by the artistic hand of William Blake, resplendent within the compilation of his opus *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Tracing its origins to the transformative epoch of 1794, this poetic gem adeptly wields an arsenal of rich symbolism and evocative lexicon to embark upon a profound exploration of thematic terrain saturated with the nuances of innocence, corruption, and the potent undercurrents of concealed desires that wield a malevolent agency. With a deft hand, Blake intertwines his words in a delicate dance, offering readers a mesmerizing interplay between a debilitated rose and an imperceptible worm, manifesting a unique poetic narrative. Within this allegorical dichotomy, the artist delves into the profound labyrinthine intricacies tethered to the realm of human sentimentality, where the latent potential for darkness emerges as an antithetical force, inexorably eroding the gossamer veneer of beauty and purity that enshrouds existence (Raine 32).

As the narrative unfurls, Blake's poetic craftsmanship becomes a veritable portal into the interstice of mysticism and astute sociocultural observation. With every carefully chosen word and artfully juxtaposed metaphor, he beckons the discerning reader to traverse an intellectual odyssey, inviting contemplation upon the very tapestry of human nature. This succinct yet profoundly resonant opus, in its mere brevity, stands as a testament to Blake's signature fusion of philosophical introspection and incisive commentary on the human condition. Here, the poem transcends its mere textual form, evolving into a sublime conduit that channels the enduring complexities and paradoxes that have long perplexed humanity. Thus, "The Sick Rose" stands as an indelible reminder of the remarkable capacity of poetry to encapsulate not only the enigmatic facets of existence but also the inexorable interplay between the seen and unseen forces that shape our understanding of reality (Rosheed and Ubeid 647).

The aim of this paper is to meticulously examine and elucidate the unexpected relevance and resonance of Blake's poem "The Sick Rose" within the contemporary context of the COVID-19 pandemic. By dissecting the poem's intricate symbolism and themes, the paper seeks to unveil the parallels between the poem's depiction of hidden vulnerabilities, obscured intentions, and the transient nature of beauty, and the nuanced dynamics that have emerged in the wake of

the pandemic. Through this investigation, the paper aims to showcase how literature, even from eras preceding our own, can poignantly mirror and shed light on the complex emotions, challenges, and transformations that have defined the modern world during the COVID-19 era.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably redefined the contours of human existence, ushering in a profound transformation across various dimensions of life. From altering daily routines and interactions to prompting remote work and virtual socializing, the pandemic's impact has been far-reaching. As lives were reshaped to accommodate the constraints of lockdowns and social distancing, the very fabric of human experience underwent a significant shift. This seismic disruption, in turn, left an indelible mark on literature. Authors and poets, sensitive to the evolving human condition, have sought to capture the collective emotions of isolation, uncertainty, and resilience brought about by the pandemic. Themes of solitude, existential introspection, and the interplay between humans and their environment have emerged as dominant motifs in contemporary literature (Žižek 22). Thus, the pandemic's effect on life itself has, inextricably, influenced the narratives and themes that permeate the literary landscape, serving as a testament to the intricate relationship between external circumstances and artistic expression.

Slavoj Žižek's book *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World* unfolds across five overarching themes that intersect with the poem "The Sick Rose" by Blake. The book navigates the landscape of hidden threats and the unseen impact of the pandemic, delving into the virus's quiet transmission and gradual consequences. It explores how illusions of stability and control were shattered, revealing underlying vulnerabilities and disruptions within societies. Žižek's analysis mirrors the poem's imagery of global chaos and vulnerability, as both highlight the upheaval and unpredictability that accompanied the pandemic's global spread. The book meticulously examines the gradual transformation of norms, and the paradigm shifts that the pandemic instigated, mirroring the poem's portrayal of the gradual decay of beauty. Lastly, Žižek's exploration of human frailty resonates with the poem's underlying theme, as both expose the vulnerability and darker tendencies within human nature that impact our responses to unforeseen challenges. In essence, Žižek's themes align with the profound messages encapsulated within "The Sick Rose," offering a contemporary exploration of timeless human experiences in the face of crisis.

## 2. Analysis

Delving into a comprehensive analysis, drawing connections between "The Sick Rose" and Žižek's ideas in *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World*, one is inclined to follow the five features of the Pandemic that are mentioned in the book and present a parallel with the poem:

**1. Hidden Threats and Unseen Impact:** "The Sick Rose" embodies the concept of hidden threats through the "invisible worm." This worm operates covertly, infiltrating the rose's core before its effects become evident. This resonates with Žižek's exploration of the pandemic's hidden impacts, such as its asymptomatic spread and the gradual exposure of societal vulnerabilities. The virus's silent transmission through asymptomatic carriers mirrors the worm's concealed presence. Both the poem and Žižek's analysis demonstrate that seemingly minor or hidden elements can carry immense consequences that reshape the course of events (Gillham 166).

While closely examining the lines of "The Sick Rose," it becomes evident that the poem represents the concepts of hidden threats and unseen impact:

O Rose, thou art sick! (line 1)

The opening line introduces the central theme of hidden threats. The rose's sickness is not immediately apparent, signifying the presence of a concealed danger that is not immediately visible:

The invisible worm  
That flies in the night,  
In the howling storm, . . . (lines 2-4)

The "invisible worm" epitomizes a hidden threat. Its invisibility symbolizes the danger that exists beneath the surface, and it operates in darkness, emphasizing its concealed nature. The reference to the "howling storm" further reinforces the idea of a hidden menace amidst chaos:

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy; . . . (lines 5-6)

The worm's discovery of the rose's "bed of crimson joy" illustrates how the hidden threat has identified and targeted a source of beauty and innocence. This represents the unseen impact as the worm's presence leads to the rose's decline:

And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy. . . (lines 7–8)

The “dark secret love” of the worm represents the hidden intention or motive behind its actions. This love is dark and concealed, resulting in the rose’s destruction. This mirrors the unseen impact of a danger that gradually and subtly leads to a devastating outcome.

In summary, through its vivid imagery and symbolism, the lines of the poem depict the hidden threat and unseen impact. The invisible worm’s presence, intentions, and actions are concealed, leading to the rose’s sickness and eventual destruction. This concept resonates with the idea of hidden dangers and their gradual, often unnoticed, effects—a theme that is relevant to various contexts, including the current COVID-19 era (Schwartz 142):

**2. Illusions and Disruption:** Blake’s poem reveals the fragility of beauty, uncovering the hidden corruption beneath its surface. This notion aligns with Žižek’s examination of the pandemic’s disruption of the illusion of stability and control. The pandemic’s swift and extensive reach disrupted societies, economies, and norms, exposing the vulnerabilities that were previously obscured. Both the poem and Žižek’s analysis underscore the danger of relying on superficial appearances and the necessity of acknowledging underlying vulnerabilities.

The lines of “The Sick Rose” represent the concepts of illusions and disruption as follows:

O Rose, thou art sick! (line 1)

The initial proclamation of the rose’s sickness can be seen as the shattering of an illusion. The rose, often associated with beauty and purity, is revealed to be vulnerable and in a state of decay:

The invisible worm  
That flies in the night,  
In the howling storm, . . . (lines 2–4)

The description of the “invisible worm” flying in the night during a stormy environment evokes a sense of disruption. The storm disrupts the tranquility, much like the worm disrupts the perceived innocence of the rose:

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy; . . . (lines 5–6)

The discovery of the rose's "bed of crimson joy" highlights the illusion of beauty and happiness. The word *joy* contrasts with the subsequent revelation of the rose's sickness, showing that beneath the surface of joy and beauty, there is an underlying issue.

And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy. . . (lines 7–8)

The phrase "dark secret love" hints at an underlying, concealed motive that is destructive. This concept resonates with the idea of illusions being shattered. The illusion of a benevolent force or intention is dispelled, revealing the destructive outcome instead (Gillham 246).

Conclusively, the lines of the poem depict illusions and disruption through the contrast between surface appearances and underlying realities. The rose's sickness disrupts the illusion of its purity and beauty, and the hidden intentions of the worm challenge the initial perception of innocence (Abid 174). This theme aligns with the concept of disrupted illusions and the unveiling of underlying vulnerabilities, which are also explored in contexts such as the societal disruptions caused by events like the COVID-19 pandemic.

**3. Global Chaos and Vulnerability:** The "howling storm" in "The Sick Rose" parallels the chaos Žižek attributes to the pandemic's global impact. The storm's unpredictability mirrors the uncertainty that the pandemic introduced on a global scale. Žižek discusses how the pandemic exposed the fragility of interconnected global systems, resulting in unprecedented disruption. This mirrors the chaotic disruption implied by the storm in the poem. The alignment underscores how both works emphasize that the interconnectedness of the modern world can amplify chaos and vulnerability:

In the howling storm, . . . (line 4)

The reference to the "howling storm" introduces an element of chaos and turmoil. Storms often symbolize disorder and unpredictability, which can extend to a global scale. The storm signifies a larger environment of upheaval and disruption:

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy; . . .(lines 5–6)

The discovery of the rose’s “bed of crimson joy” amid the chaotic storm points to the vulnerability of beauty and innocence. The juxtaposition of vulnerability with chaos illustrates the precariousness of that which is considered beautiful and joyful:

And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy. . . (lines 7–8)

The notion of “dark secret love” implies a concealed, destructive force that disrupts the rose’s existence. This aligns with the concept of vulnerability to hidden threats. The rose, representative of beauty and purity, is susceptible to forces that remain unseen until they cause harm.

Finally, the lines of the poem depict global chaos and vulnerability through the storm imagery and the vulnerability of the rose. The storm represents a broader environment of chaos, and the rose’s vulnerability to the “dark secret love” of the worm underscores the concept of being susceptible to hidden dangers on a larger scale (Schwartz 160). This theme resonates with the global chaos and vulnerability that have been exposed during events like the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 4. Gradual Transformation and Paradigm Shifts:** “The Sick Rose” captures the gradual transformation of the rose from beauty to decay, echoing Žižek’s argument about the slow transformation of societies due to the pandemic. The poem’s depiction of the worm’s gradual destruction aligns with Žižek’s assertion that the pandemic’s impact will lead to long-term shifts in ideologies and practices. The parallel illustrates that both sudden disruptions and gradual shifts can alter societal paradigms, reshaping the fabric of human experience:

O Rose, thou art sick! (line 1)

The declaration of the rose’s sickness introduces the concept of transformation. The word *sick* implies a state of decline and change from a previous state of health or vitality:

The invisible worm  
That flies in the night,  
In the howling storm, . . . (lines 2–4)

The reference to the “invisible worm” that flies in the night during a storm introduces the idea of gradual transformation. The worm’s movement and presence are concealed, suggesting a process that unfolds over time. The storm also symbolizes an environment of change and disruption:

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy; . . . (lines 5–6)

The worm’s discovery of the rose’s “bed of crimson joy” signifies a shift from innocence to decay. The gradual change from a state of “joy” to sickness is indicative of a paradigm shift, where the rose’s previous state is transformed into something different (Raine 33):

And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy. . . (lines 7–8)

The concept of “dark secret love” alludes to a hidden, transformative force that alters the rose’s fate. This transformation is gradual and leads to the eventual destruction of the rose’s life. The implication of a slow, hidden process aligns with the notion of paradigm shifts occurring over time.

Lastly, the lines of the poem convey the gradual transformation and paradigm shifts through the progression from health to sickness and from innocence to decay. The concealed presence and actions of the worm, along with the gradual shift in the rose’s condition, illustrate the concept of gradual change and the transformation of established paradigms. This theme can be related to the gradual societal changes and shifts in perspectives that events like the COVID-19 pandemic have brought about.

- 5. Human Frailty:** The rose’s sickness in the poem epitomizes the fragility of beauty and life. This aligns with Žižek’s exploration of the pandemic’s impact, which exposed the limitations of human control over nature. The pandemic illustrated that humanity is not immune to external forces, reflecting the worm’s power over the rose. Both the poem and Žižek’s analysis underscore the inherent vulnerability of human beings and the limitations of their agency in the face of unforeseen events:



O Rose, thou art sick! (line 1)

The initial proclamation of the rose's sickness highlights vulnerability. The rose, often associated with beauty and vitality, is revealed to be susceptible to illness, underscoring the fragility of life.

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy; . . .(lines 5–6)

The worm's discovery of the rose's "bed of crimson joy" illustrates the vulnerability of human experiences. The word *joy* suggests a fleeting, vibrant emotion, but the worm's presence reveals the ephemeral nature of happiness and the fragility of human pleasures:

And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy. . . . (lines 7–8)

The idea of "dark secret love" implies an intention or motive that leads to destruction. This mirrors the concept of human frailty, where hidden desires or intentions can have profound consequences. The human capacity for destructive tendencies is depicted through the worm's destructive actions.

To conclude, the lines of the poem convey the concept of human frailty through the rose's vulnerability to sickness and decay. The worm's actions and hidden intentions serve as a metaphor for the darker aspects of human nature that can lead to destruction (Schwart 190). This theme resonates with the idea of human vulnerability and the potential for negative outcomes, which are also explored in contexts such as the impact of events like the COVID-19 pandemic on human systems and behaviors.

Summing up, a detailed analysis of "The Sick Rose" in light of Žižek's ideas in *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World* reveals a multitude of connections. The poem's themes of hidden threats, illusions, chaos, gradual transformation, and human vulnerability resonate with Žižek's exploration of the pandemic's impact (Rosheed and Ubeid 641). These parallels underline literature's capacity to encapsulate timeless human experiences while offering unique insights into contemporary challenges.

### 3. Conclusion

Under the purview of Žižek's sagacious insights expounded within the seminal treatise *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World*, the interpretive horizons surrounding "The Sick Rose" undergo a profound revitalization, acquiring enhanced depths of significance attuned to the exigencies of our contemporary milieu. Žižek's meticulous examination of latent perils, the fracturing of illusory constructs, the maelstrom of global disarray, the incremental metamorphosis of paradigms, and the inherent frailty of the human condition converge with eloquent resonance with the thematic underpinnings interwoven into the very fabric of the poem. In a fascinating symbiosis, the pandemic's unveiling of latent vulnerabilities finds a mirrored reflection in Žižek's analytical discourse, underscoring the latent repercussions of the inscrutable worm's concealed agency upon the essence of the rose. The disintegration of illusory facades precipitated by the pandemic resonates in parallel with the exposure of obscured vulnerabilities lurking beneath the veneer of aesthetic allure, forging an intriguing parallelism with the poem's intrinsic revelations.

Žižek's portrayal of a world plunged into global tumult, resonant with the tempestuous iconography of Blake's creation, serves to underscore the intrinsic fragility of societal frameworks—analogue to the susceptible nature of the rose to extraneous forces. Concurrently, the seismic shifts in societal paradigms instigated by the pandemic evoke a symphonic resonance with the poem's delineation of gradual transmutation and decay. Furthermore, Žižek's rigorous exploration of the human condition's susceptibility harmonizes in parallel with the poem's substratal motif of vulnerability, illuminating the profound interplay between external circumstances and the intricate narratives that shape the human experience. This confluence of insights serves to amplify the enduring reverberations encapsulated within Blake's poesy, effectively underscoring the inseparable symbiosis between literary sagacity and critical scrutiny—a potent confluence that seamlessly unravels the complex tapestry of human existence spanning a continuum of epochs and crises alike.

Thus, Blake's poem "The Sick Rose" and Žižek's book *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* deal with different topics and belong to different genres and time periods. Still, it is possible to connect them through an analytical reading that explores central themes such as illness, decay, and invisible forces that affect reality, which was precisely the intention of this paper.

“The Sick Rose” symbolically depicts a rose suffering from a mysterious illness, relies on a rich symbolic language, and is often interpreted as a critique of darkness, destruction, and hidden threats within society or human nature. These frequent interpretations were also taken into consideration in this paper. On the other hand, in his *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*, Žižek considers philosophical, sociopolitical, and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. He explores how the pandemic reveals problems within modern society, such as inequality, the weakness of state systems, and the challenges of globalization, and this analysis is succinctly represented in the paper as well.

In Blake’s poem, illness can also be understood symbolically, while in Žižek’s work the pandemic is real. Nevertheless, the paper warns that it is possible to expand the concept of disease in both texts to include the “infections” of a society, such as the systemic injustices that the pandemic singles out in Žižek’s analysis.

Blake’s poem is, namely, permeated by a theme of decadence and decay, and in the context of Žižek’s book, a notion of decadence can be applied to the crises which the pandemic has stimulated or revealed in the social and political order. In this sense, Blake’s poem and Žižek’s book may be analyzed while processing the aspects of a disguised moral decadence (Blake) or of a political and social reaction (Žižek). In any case, such a comparative analysis of Blake’s poem “The Sick Rose” and Žižek’s *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* proves that the classics are always ready for a reinterpretation according to the current events.

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## OD NEVINOSTI DO ZARAZE: TUMAČENJE „BOLESNE RUŽE” U SVJETLU KRIZE COVID-19

### Abstract

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Rad proučava trajnu relevantnost pjesme „Bolesna ruža“ Williama Blakea u svjetlu suvremenih izazova, posebice pandemije COVID-19. Premda nastala prije pandemije, pjesma se svojim temama skrivenih ranjivosti, tajnih namjera i prolazne ljepote snažno podudara s postojećim izazovima. Iscrpnom analizom simbolizma rad naglašava prilagodljivost književnosti u odražavanju evoluirajućih ljudskih iskustava. Knjiga Slavoj Žižeka *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World (Pandemija!: COVID-19 trese svijet)* pruža okvir za razumijevanje tih tema s obzirom na to da istražuje skrivene prijetnje, srušene iluzije, globalni kaos, postupnu transformaciju i ljudsku slabost izazvanu pandemijom. Ova analiza osnažuje odjek pjesme, ističući moć književnosti da prati razvoj ljudskih iskustava. Naposljetku, rad naglašava neraskidiv odnos umjetnosti i života, predstavljajući „Bolesnu ružu“ kao svjedočanstvo trajne međugre umjetničkog izražavanja i promjenjivih obrisa postojanja.

**Ključne riječi:** simbolizam, relevantnost, podudarnost, COVID-19, suvremeno tumačenje