"The Sick Rose"

When John Brenkman stated that "For Blake, poetry is the active imposing of imagination or fantasy in the struggles against dominant values and institutions" (Brenkman, 182), Blake's poem, "The Sick Rose" must not have been in the forefront of his mind. The overall meaning of the poem suggests that the innocent "rose" is being corrupted by the "worm", an idea that goes against Brenkman's argument that Blake was using poetry to show the struggle against dominant values. The dominant message in "The Sick Rose" is that innocence is almost always corrupted in some way, and that is a bad thing. Blake is talking about reality in this poem, and is not using imagination or fantasy in it at all.

"The Sick Rose" is a fairly short poem with simple language. There are only two quatrains, both with 17 words. It is important to note that almost all of the words are monosyllabic, with the exception of five words: "invisible", "howling", "crimson", "secret", and "destroy". Blake has done this with a very specific purpose, pointing out these words to accentuate them so that the reader pauses a little longer to interpret exactly what they each mean to the poem. The short words and two-beat lines give the poem a nursery rhyme-like feel, but the meaning is dark and foreboding, which is accentuated by the beats resting on key words like "night", "howling", "storm", "dark", and "secret".
The rhyme scheme of "The Sick Rose" is ABCB. In the first stanza, the rhyming lines show the reader the true intention of the worm, which is to make the life of the rose stormy and full of turmoil. The fact that they rhyme causes the reader to consider both lines together. The other two non-rhyming lines stand out as well, but separately from each other. The very first line of the poem, "O Rose thou art sick" (Blake, 300) seems like a bleak statement of fact, one that cannot be disputed. Blake uses this apostrophe to signal to the reader that this illness that the rose has is not something that can be mended. The third line of the first stanza points out that this worm works in darkness. This could signify that the worm is deceptive, cunning and sly; whatever damage the worm creates is done without the rose's knowledge.

The second stanza of the poem moves into a slightly different direction. Again, the rhyme scheme points out the second and fourth lines, especially the two rhyming words "joy" and "destroy". If one could sum up the entire poem in two words, it would be these. The worm essentially destroys the rose’s joy. In the first line of the second stanza, "Has found out thy bed" (Blake, 300), it is brought to the reader's attention that this poem has moved into a highly sexualized direction. The worm has found the rose's bed, and is harboring a "dark secret love". Nothing good can come of a dark love that destroys life and causes a howling storm. This is the reason why the rose is so sick: the worm's dark love has destroyed it.

"The Sick Rose" could have many different interpretations. The first interpretation is the most broad. The rose represents beauty, youthfulness and innocence, and the worm represents corruption, decay, and old age. It seems that Blake might be trying to say that all beauty is fleeting, like the rose whose bloom does not last for long. There is also the
very literal interpretation that the rose could be an actual rose bloom, which is eaten away by a worm and is ruined forever.

The religious interpretation of "The Sick Rose" is a slight stretch, but is worth noting because of the worm (snake) reference. The worm could represent the devil, while the rose could represent innocence of Eve, and the Garden of Eden. The devil corrupted Eve, and therefore ruined her life forever. She was cast away from God's perfect world because she sinned.

The final, and most convincing, interpretation is that the rose represents a woman, while the worm represents a man. The sexuality of the second stanza cannot be ignored, which is why this interpretation is the truest. The beautiful woman is sick because a man, whose love is dark and secret, is destroying her. The dark love could represent an unrequited love, or a tumultuous relationship. Whatever the case, the woman cannot see what the worm is doing to her because the love is blinding her. The lines, "Has found out thy bed / Of crimson joy" (Blake, 300) prove that this relationship is sexual, and that the woman is both joyful and shamed by this fact. The love is secret, which is shown by the words “dark secret love”. Maybe these two lovers were having some sort of affair, which can only end badly. Another interpretation could be that she was sexually assaulted against her will. The worm “flies in the night / in the howling storm” (Blake, 300), and that could very well mean that he acted against the woman’s will in his love for her. It is a dark, secret love, one that could be hidden from the woman’s knowledge. This proves Blake’s idea that love is not always a beautiful thing. The woman is slowly dying because of the dark love that the man has for her, and it seems that she will never realize it.
Blake wrote "The Sick Rose" to show that love is not always beautiful, not matter what society says about it. Innocence is almost always lost, and is never done without some sort of hurt. "The Sick Rose" is part of "Songs of Experience" for a reason. The poems in "Songs of Experience" all talk about innocence lost, or some sort of "reality check" for the protagonists. Love is never easy, and although many fantasize about what it should be like, love never meets expectations. When John Benkman said that "For Blake, poetry is the active imposing of imagination or fantasy in the struggles against dominate values and institutions" (Brenkman, 182), he clearly did not have "The Sick Rose" in mind. In fact, there is nothing imaginative or fantastical about the poem, for it is a very real account about how love can destroy a person.