

The Language of Flowers in Selected Poems by William Blake: A Feminist Reading

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Abstract—The study aims at analyzing the meanings and symbolic implications of flowers in selected poems by William Blake (1757-1827) from a feminist perspective. This paper analyzes the themes and symbolism of different kinds of flowers to explain how William Blake tries to expose the situation of women in the patriarchal nineteenth-century society. The study discusses the language of flowers from a feminist perspective relying on three prominent feminists. First, the study relies on Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) who rejected the patriarchal role of women as submissive and weak. Second, the study applies Virginia Woolf's feminist perspective about rejecting the role of women as the angels of the house. Third, the study applies Simone de Beauvoir's rejection of categorizing women as subjective and inferior. William Blake is an early feminist who rejected the submission of women and used his poetry to comment on the situation of women in the nineteenth century. He expresses many issues related to women. He believed in women's ability to be independent and strong and he refutes the traditional social stereotyping of women as being inferior and weak and therefore they are in constant need of the support of men. Blake stresses the beauty and strength of women through describing women in floral imagery.

Index Terms—William Blake, flowers, romanticism, feminism, floriography

I. INTRODUCTION

Blake's works deal with various topics that are related to nature, society, religion, politics and human rights. Therefore, "reading Blake is a long process of interpretation" (Damrosch, 1980, p. 65). These topics are examined indirectly in a lot of Blake's poems by discussing natural elements in general and flowers in particular. Because the language of flowers is "as ancient and universal a one as the language of speech," (Ingram, 2014, p.36) interpretations of Blake's poems can be achieved through a close reading of flowers including their kinds and colors in his poetry. The study analyzes the meanings and symbolic implications of flowers in selected poems by William Blake from a feminist perspective. More specifically, this paper aims at discussing the language of flowers relying on Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) as a critical methodology to discuss how Blake represents women in his poetry. The study concentrates on Blake's "The Sick Rose," "The Lily," "My Pretty Rose Tree" and "Ah- Sun Flower."

A. William Blake

William Blake (1757-1827) is a prominent early Romantic poet, painter, thinker and engraver. His main two illustrated collections of poems, *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794), are seminal works that seem to be simple and direct, but contain impeded meanings and messages about human life. Blake's poetry in general examines themes of injustice, oppression and social ills in late eighteenth century Britain. Blake's works emphasize the role of the poet as a prophet, social critic, and reformer. This research aims at examining the way William Blake uses flowers to criticize the oppression of women and to emphasize women's rights.

B. Floriography

The language of flowers, sometimes called floriography, "has been used as a means of cryptological communication simply by the way flowers are arranged, their colour and variety" (Muff, 2019, par. 4). Therefore, flowers are used as a means of communication and meaning. Because floriography is a language, poets use it as medium of beauty and depth to comment on human life. So, the language of flowers is not simple and that "to say that their unique language is fascinating and deeply romantic is an understatement. Floriography has the innate ability to embody the most captivating of human emotions and leave nothing but warmth in its wake" (Muff, 2019, par. 3). In other words, flowers have to be read in connection with their historical, political, social and cultural contexts.

II. FLORIOGRAPHY IN BLAKE'S POETRY

Blake uses the language of flowers because it triggers the imagination of the reader and "he wanted them [readers] to imagine as he imagined, to see as he saw, even to recreate as he created ... to see the minor symbols as parts of a major

symbol" (Gleckner, 1975, p. 95). Blake uses the symbol of flowers to discuss women's problems and defend them indirectly in his poems. The study shows that women are closer to nature spiritually and emotionally than men and this is apparent in Blake's representation of women as flowers. Moreover, Blake's poems like "The Sick Rose" and *The Book of Thel*, are illustrated by Blake himself of women going out of flowers. Therefore, Blake emphasizes through words and illustrations of poems the connection between women and flowers.

The issue whether Blake's poetry is for women or against them is discussed by a lot of critics. Many critics like Susan Griffin and Alexander G. Williams read Blake as a feminist who defends women and seeks for them a better understanding from their husbands and societies. On the other hand, other critics like Anne Mellor and Susan Fox see him as an antifeminist who represents women as inactive and silent. This paper tends to support the first group by analyzing the symbolic meaning of flowers, their colors, perfumes and shape of flowers which is similar to the shape of these poems. All these opposing views will be discussed in the coming paragraphs.

A. Feminist Argument

Feminists, like Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), see that literature "historically tended to subordinate or marginalize the position of women" (Webster, 1996, 125) and they usually play less significant role in literature than men because of "the material conditions which women live under, having little or no financial dependence and generally expected to serve the needs of men" (*Ibid*). Woolf is an early feminist who emphasized the rights of women and their capacity of genius and creativity in many of her essays, short stories, novels and books such as *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) *A room of One's Own* (1929), *Three Guineas* (1938), *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* (1944) and "Professions of Women" (1931). In the latter work, Woolf argues that women are treated as inferior and submissive to men. For Woolf, women have only the roles of submissive mothers and wives without giving them the space to be creative and genius. She calls this woman "the Angel of the House". In "Professions of Women", Woolf describes the angel of the house: "She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it--in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all--I need not say it--she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty--her blushes, her great grace" (Professions of Women, 1931, p. 245).

Therefore, Woolf rejects this profession for women, and announces that she succeeded in "killing the angel of the house" (Professions of Women). She wants women to be independent, free and self-confident. Woolf's ideas along with Wollstonecraft's echo Blake's representation of women and his explanation of the situation of women in his poems through discussing different kinds of flowers.

B. Historical, Social and Political Context of Blake's Poems

During the Romantic period and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution writers start to call for freedom, education and equality like Thomas Paine in his "The Rights of Man" (1791) and Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft's essay "often recognized as feminism's 'manifesto,' is generally regarded as the text that defines and delimits the scope of Wollstonecraft's feminist project. Yet Wollstonecraft's didactic texts, although generally dismissed in feminist critical contexts, further define and elaborate on her feminist project by promoting resistance to 18th century discourses concerning women's proper sphere" (Hanley, 2007, p. iv). Women in the 19th century are oppressed groups and characterized as inferior and submissive to men. Blake understands the conditions of women and paves the way with Wollstonecraft and Paine to the rise of feminism. Blake knew about Wollstonecraft's ideas because "he was commissioned to design and engrave the illustrations for Wollstonecraft second edition of *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788)" (Williams, 2011, p. 35).

Blake, like many Romantic poets, reacts against the industrial revolution as it causes a lot of social and cultural ills like child labor, poor working conditions and huge gaps among social classes. Therefore, he describes these hard conditions in many poems. Moreover, he praises the French Revolution and American Revolution because they give voice to people and were a testimony of the celebration of democracy and the end of tyranny. Blake believed in democracy and freedom and that "despite the recognition of the oppression of female sex during industrialization, Blake depicts and puts emphasis on the new generation in relation to freedom" (Baigy and Zarrinjooee, 2014, p. 45). In simple words, Blake rejected any kind of authority or power that oppresses people, whether this related to monarchy, patriarchy or social classes. Many of Blake's poems talk about human rights, freedom and democracy.

C. Opposing Views

Anne K. Mellor in "Blake's Portrayal of Women" objects to Blake being presented "as an advocate of androgyny or sexual equality to whom contemporary feminists look for guidance" (Mellor, 1982, p. 152). She argues that Blake represents women as weak. Mellor claims that "the poetic and visual metaphors that Blake develops and uses throughout the corpus of his work typically depict women as either passively dependent on men, or as aggressive and evil" (Mellor, 1982, p. 153). Another critic, Susan Fox, claims in her "The Female as Metaphor in William Blake's Poetry" that Blake represents women "as inferior and dependent (or, in the case of Jerusalem, superior and dependent), or as unnaturally and disastrously dominant. Indeed, females are not only represented as weak or power-hungry, they

come to represent weakness" (Fox, 1977, p. 514). Fox also claims that Blake presents women as inferior and submissive and that he "admired women, but not enough to imagine them as autonomous human beings" (Fox, 1977, p. 515).

III. BLAKE AS A PROTO-FEMINIST

This paper responds to the previous criticism and shows that Blake is "a proto-feminist who embodied in his poetry the ideals and spirit of revolution in gender definitions and dynamics" (Williams, p. 10). The study relies on analyzing flowers because in Blake's poetry "flowers are taken metaphorically as flowers of rhetoric, referring to someone's youth, beauty and virginity" (Antal, 2008, p. 25). Because there is, according to Susan Griffen, "a profound connection between the social construction of nature and the social construction of woman" (Griffen, 1978, p. 66), In other words, women and nature are deeply connected with each other. Blake presents in "The Sick Rose" the social oppression of women through the symbol of the sick rose:

"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, 1970, p. 26)

"The invisible worm" symbolizes the male who secretly "flies in the night" implying unhappy sexual experience and chooses "to work furtively, partly in shame, perhaps, but also partly in the self-gratification of a "dark secret love" that delights in destruction" (Gilham, 1973, p. 39). N. Babamiri argues that "the poet goes in to the depth character of worm as a cunning man which slyly creates a world of darkness to attack the rose without her knowledge" (Babamiri, 2016, p. 2). This malignant worm symbolizes both man and the patriarchal society that "feeds on" or mistreats women. So, the worm represents the man who moves and sneaks to harm the innocent rose or woman. The man is evil and destructive to the woman who is pure and peaceful. Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* argues: "women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, just termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for at least, twenty years of their lives" (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 244).

If Blake presents women as weak, it is because they are made weak by society. They are taught by their mothers to be submissive and silent. Blake is not criticizing women, he is criticizing the patriarchal society that makes this woman, like all women at that time, weak and "sick". Blake says in the poem that the 'worm' or the male "has found out thy bed" and he does not use another word like "meet" to imply that this "dark secret love" is not a mutual love, but it is a one-sided love, or even it is not love at all, because it "does thy life destroy". Love cannot be destructive unless it is only by a man who lusts for a woman and does not care about her feelings. Moreover, this society is careless and passive towards women because it does not help or cure the "sick" woman. She is abandoned by the man and the whole society because she is the one to be blamed.

This feminist reading of Blake also relies on the fact that Blake has read Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* and that he has written "The Sick Rose" in 1794, two years after Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*. Furthermore, "Blake revises Wollstonecraft's feminist program and adapts it to his own visionary system of gender relations and the politics of liberation" (Williams, 2011, p. 20) using the language of flowers. Blake also presents the suffering of women in his illustration of the poem "The Sick Rose" where there are two women lying on the thorns of the branches of the rose tree and another woman emerging from the crimson rose. The image of the three women illustrates that the suffering of women is not that of a single woman, but it is the suffering of all women. Women are born innocent and beautiful like roses and this is illustrated by Blake with a woman emerging from the rose. However, when this woman grows older, she will have thorns in her way. The thorns of the rose tree on which two women lie on represent the hardships that most women face in that patriarchal society.

Moreover, the "crimson" color of the rose "has a religious connotation connected to the story of Cain and Abel. When Abel was slain by his brother (Cain), some of his blood got on the white rosebush that grew around his altar. His dripping blood stained the white roses and from then on red colored roses came about" (Flower Dictionary). Likewise, Blake uses the crimson color to symbolize the pain and destructiveness of patriarchal society towards women. Man not woman is the center of the world in that society whose "traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing and submissive" (Tyson, 2006, p. 148).

Women in Blake's "Ah Sun-Flower" start to understand the need to have a new goal in their lives. It is clear that Blake's Sunflower is inseparable from its time and that Blake is aware that to change society's notion of women needs a very long time and effort from both men and women. He uses the sun flower as a symbol of the female that searches for her independence and recognition. Her roots are in the ground (patriarchal society) but she keeps growing towards the sky or freedom. The sunflower and the sun are connected because the flower keeps following the sun and likewise

women should follow their dreams and ambitions. "The Sun-Flower", "the sun", and "golden clime" have the bright yellow color which symbolizes hope, strength and better future.

"Ah, sunflower, weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the sun;
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveler's journey is done;
Where the Youth pined away with desire,
And the pale virgin shrouded in snow,
Arise from their graves, and aspire
Where my Sunflower wishes to go!" (Blake, 1970, p. 42)

These hopes for women need to be studied or "countest" carefully in order to be achieved. "Youth", "Virgin" and many other women die before achieving their dreams, but this is no more the case because the submission of women is over and "the traveler's journey is done" as the woman starts to make decisions and the "Sunflower wishes to go." In addition, the use of the sunflower does not only symbolize women at that time, but it also symbolizes the next generations of women because the sunflower contains seeds on the flower's surface. These seeds, one day, will fall on the ground to grow. Women's lives, likewise, will grow and prosper when they recreate their understanding of themselves and the world around them.

In "Ah Sun-Flower", women hope for change and start to "go" and start to free themselves from the constraints of man. Blake more clearly encourages women to stand by themselves and defend their rights in "My Pretty Rose Tree". The woman rejects the assumed role that man tries to impose on her:

"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, 1970, p. 35)

The man talks about his wife/lover as something he owns when he repeats "my", "I" and "me" for eight times. The woman reacts to this and she "turned away". Although the man tells the story, readers can feel that he deserves her rejection and they become compassionate with the woman because "of his lack of real affection for anyone at all and his mean-minded selfishness" (Gillham, 1973, p. 41). The speaker keeps watching his woman like one in prison and "tend[s] her by day and by night." Moreover, the man is very arrogant towards the other woman who is offered to him because he "passed the sweet flower o'er . . . rather as he might pass over goods that he decides not to buy" (*Ibid*). 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.

In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft criticizes Milton in his *Paradise Lost* because he "tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace [...] and insinuate that we were being only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience" (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 244). Accordingly, women are supposed to be obedient and dependent on men. The man in this poem leaves the woman that is offered to him not because he is loyal to his woman, but because his woman is "pretty" and more beautiful than the woman offered to him. In short, this man and many other men look at their women as only "alluring objects" (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 245) and property.

Blake's poem "The Lilly" encourages women to be autonomous human beings. The critic D. Gillham reads the lily as a female that "enjoys the delights of love . . . unlike the Rose or the Sheep which advance their defences prematurely, presumably to invite an attack. The Rose and the Sheep insist that harm is intended on them, the Lily invites love" (Gillham, 1973, p. 48). However, this study reads the poem differently. Blake compares between the lily which is weak and damageable and the rose which is a stronger and steadier plant:

"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, 1970, p. 32)

The lily which is a symbol of the weak woman who does what man orders her to do without complaint can be eaten by the sheep. This woman is the same woman that J. J. Rousseau considers to be the best woman. Wollstonecraft criticizes him because he "had written in *Emile*: 'What is most wanted in a woman is gentleness; formed to obey a creature so imperfect as man, a creature often vicious and always faulty, she should early learn to submit to injustice and to suffer the wrongs inflicted on her by her husband without complaint'" (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 244). However, 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.

Lois Tyson in her book *Critical Theory Today* asserts that "women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so" (Tyson,

2006, p. 120). Accordingly, women should use their minds to express what they want and never be blindly submissive. This woman is like the poem's rose that uses her thorns to protect itself from the sheep and other attacks. Women according to Blake should refute the tradition that man is above and woman is below. Women are strong and independent and can protect themselves. Therefore, Blake tries to question or even destroy the hierarchal order of patriarchal society which the feminist Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) explains in "The Second Sex", saying: "thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... she is defined and differentiated with reference to men and not he with reference to her; she is the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- She is the Other" (Beauvoir, 2007, p. 81).

Flowers and women are strongly connected with each other through the shape of the poems. The discussed poems, except "The Lily", contain two stanzas with four lines in each one of them. This shape resembles the shape of flowers and the shape of women. The first four-line stanza resembles the petals of flowers and these petals are similar to the head and hair of a woman. While the second four-line stanza resembles the leaves of the flower and at the same time resembles the body (legs and arms) of a woman. Therefore, Blake's poetry focuses on women in content and shape. He also illustrates his poems with flowers and women.

IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the study rejects the argument that "the women of the Songs lack agency, power, and effectiveness" (Comorau, 2001, p. 32). These women react to their situation and try to improve their lives but this improvement according to Blake takes time and effort from both man and woman. Blake asserts that in his *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* "to create a little flower is the labour of ages." He uses the verb "create" because people need to rethink about women issues and change their understanding of women as merely beautiful objects. Blake "designs his poems making the words on the line seem to grow like flower heads out of a thicket" (Malla, 2014, p. 15). Blake uses a simple language full of floral imagery but it is rich with ideas. Blake talks about women symbolically using different kinds of flowers to be titles of these poems and subjects to be discussed in society not only in his time, but also in every time. Blake says in flowers what Wollstonecraft says in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

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