"My Pretty Rose Tree"

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.

Initially, William Blake's "My Pretty Rose Tree" reads as uncomplicated verse, but in reality the poem operates on many levels. Close examination of Blake's use of objects, familiar yet profoundly symbolic, thwarts expectations of light romance. Superficially the poem speaks of flowers, love, and jealousy but beneath the surface lurk deeper messages of rejection, resistance to change, and faith.

On the surface, the poem is about a pretty flower being offered to one who passes it over in favor of the rose tree he already has. He tends the rose tree by night and day, but is rewarded only with thorns. The repetition of flower in the first stanza points to its importance as a symbol; operating on many layers, the flower can represent love, experiences, and faith. Because Blake uses flower, not rose, something new and different is implied. This new flower is described in superlative language, "Such a flower as May never bore" (2).

The rose, taken to epitomize love, casts the poem on a romantic level. Another flower, or woman, offers love to the speaker. The word offered connotes unsolicited giving, as well as the implied choice of acceptance or rejection. May alludes to springtime hinting at romantic love. Although the flower's advances are rejected and the speaker continues in faithfulness to the rose, the rose reacts with jealousy. For all the careful and constant tending, he is rewarded with painful thorns. "And her thorns were my only delight" (8) suggests that the speaker may not be altogether unhappy with the rose's response of jealousy; the thorns may be the price he is willing to pay for their continued relationship. Delight may also be an oxymoron, thorns being rarely linked to delight. Another dynamic in the jealousy and resulting thorns is that the rose has become possessive and seeks to guard her lover from others. In this case he truly delights in her thorns as a symbol of her love for him.

On another level, the offered flower may be experiences or knowledge. Like the fruit of knowledge in the story of Adam and Eve, the flower is appealing; unlike the Edenic fruit, however, the flower is rejected despite its tempting description. Rejecting the experience keeps the speaker in the same garden with his rose tree or in the same state as before. No growth is possible without experience. A safe haven becomes stale without the benefit of diverse experiences to enliven it. Lavishing care in maintenance instead of growth, he
ends up with thorns being his only delight; he must embrace his harvest since he was the one who rejected growth. Indeed, for the speaker, the pain of the thorns may be infinitely preferable to his fear of the unknown.

The rose, as a symbol of faith in God, illustrates an all-encompassing faith that is broader than the than the speaker already possesses. In this case, the one who offers the flower is God. The word offered alludes to sacrifice as well as gift. Both are elements of faith; while God endows us with the ability to have faith, we must sacrifice our ideas and habits inconsistent with that faith. This deep relationship with God is a frightening loss of personal power, and, for many, it is too great a sacrifice to make. The speaker would rather preserve his superficial faith. The rose, as the church, produces thorns, which are the fruit of zealously tending the outward trappings of religion without inner spiritual communion with God. In this poem Blake suggests it is preferable to enjoy the thorns rather than to grow in faith.

On the most universal level, this poem is about the inherent nature of human beings to resist change of any type, even changes for the better. Changes incorporated into our beings make us different than we were before; our response to that change determines whether we grow or are diminished by that change. So, paradoxically, by choosing not to change, we are changed by that very decision. If change is opposed successfully, we are unhappy with our lot and long for the greener grass on the other side of the fence.

Blake has created a poem of depth with brevity of space and a frugality of words. On the surface, the tone of the poem is light, the images are pleasant, and the mood is comforting. The only word with negative connotations, thorns, is not surprising, as they are an expected and accepted part of the rose. The poem is neither abrupt nor laborious; the length of the lines and the rhyme scheme produce a soothing rhythm, which belies the deeper, discomfiting message. What initially appears to be limpid verse is dense with meaning; through close reading and reflection, the reader is able to peel away the many layers of the poem.