



Reclaiming Rose Imagery: Feminine Identity and Symbolic Agency in Key Poems

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores feminine identity through the evolution of rose imagery in poems and its implied significance. Rose imagery naturally reflects feminine identity and agency. It is typically viewed as a metaphor for idealized female beauty and womanhood, but the rose also serves as an extended metaphor—or rather, a contested symbol. The study addresses the transformation of the rose from object to subject by closely analyzing key poems from different periods. The study highlights the objectification of women and their silent response to it in Waller’s “Go, Lovely Rose.” It also examines male control and how it is subverted through female resistance in Blake’s “My Pretty Rose Tree.” However, Blake redirected his intentions in “The Sick Rose”—the poem associates the rose with a sick female figure who has been affected by sexual corruption and the loss of innocence. While Rossetti’s and Dickinson’s use of rose imagery sets a rather subjective tone, distinct from Waller’s and Blake’s, Rossetti presents the woman as a figure of emotional and spiritual intensity. On the other hand, Dickinson highlights the symbolic resistance of femininity, emphasizing a quiet but powerful assertion of identity. This paper thus traces the complex and evolving symbolism of the rose to illuminate changing ideas of feminine identity and agency in poetry.

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Introduction

The imagery of the rose is one of the most used symbols in Western poetry, signifying feminine identity—beauty, purity, sensuality, and romanticism. As studied in this paper, male poets, for instance Edmund Waller and William Blake, portrayed the rose as an idealised, objectified and aesthetic focused image. In contrast, female poets such as Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson gave the rose an opportunity to have its own voice. In their poems, the rose undergoes a transformation from object to subject, speaking for itself and finding its own identity. By examining the use of rose imagery in the selected poems and viewing it through the lens of feminist theory, this study highlights how symbolic traditions can be challenged and rewritten.

Drawing on feminist literary theory, particularly the insights of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Luce Irigaray and as well as Hélène Cixous, this paper examines how Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson transform the traditional image of the rose. In their poems, the rose becomes a speaker, a witness, and sometimes a protestor. In doing so, both writers quietly but powerfully reclaim space in a world of words that so often muted female voices. Rather than presenting it as a passive or ornamental figure, they reframe the rose as a subject with voice, agency, and emotional depth. This act of symbolic redefinition forms part of a larger feminist poetics—one that speaks of resistance, self-expression, and the rewriting of womanhood itself.

Dissecting the Rose

1. Edmund Waller's "Go, Lovely Rose": Rose as a Silent Object

Edmund Waller's lyric poem "Go, Lovely Rose" is a 17th-century carpe diem poem in which the speaker sends a rose as a messenger to a shy lover. The poem gently suggests that, like the rose, the woman's youth and beauty will soon fade, so she should seize the moment and embrace love.

Go, lovely rose—
Tell her that wastes her time and me,
That now she knows,
When I resemble her to thee,
How sweet and fair she seems to be.



Tell her that's young,
And shuns to have her graces spied,
That hadst thou sprung
In deserts, where no men abide,
Thou must have uncommended died. ("Go, Lovely Rose", lines 1-10)

The rose becomes a symbol of how women are often viewed through the male gaze and reduced to objects. In the poem, the woman exists only through the speaker's perspective. His desire to "show" her beauty to others reflects a patriarchal impulse to control, display, and consume female beauty. Luce Irigaray emphasizes that feminine expression resists fixed meaning and linear logic—it is fluid, multiple, and often silent or indirect. In this poem, the woman's silence may not indicate passivity, but rather a refusal to participate in a system that objectifies her. Her lack of speech becomes a space of difference what Irigaray in her work, *This Sex Which Is Not One* calls "a language of the feminine" that subtly challenges the dominance of the male voice. She is turned into a metaphor, a passive object of longing, rather than an active participant in the conversation.

The rose itself becomes a victim of the male gaze and objectification. As Gilbert and Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, women in patriarchal literature are often reduced to either angelic ideals or monstrous transgressors. In this poem, the woman is voiceless and unnamed; her beauty becomes a public commodity that the speaker feels entitled to reveal and possess. His desire to "expose" her beauty to the world reflects the patriarchal tendency to objectify women and control their bodies.

Small is the worth
Of beauty from the light retired;
Bid her come forth,
Suffer herself to be desired,
And not blush so to be admired.

Then die—that she
The common fate of all things rare
May read in thee:
How small a part of time they share
That are so wondrous sweet and fair!



(“Go, Lovely Rose,” lines 11–20)

The woman’s continued silence in the poem shows her lack of power and agency. Her beauty is treated as meaningful only when it is publicly seen and appreciated especially by men echoing patriarchal notions of female worth. As Gilbert and Gubar note, women in male-authored texts are often “spoken for” rather than allowed to speak for themselves. Here, the woman becomes a symbol of fleeting beauty and time and not a real person with her own voice or will.

Hélène Cixous, in her critique of phallogocentric discourse, explains how language and desire are often shaped and dominated by men. From this view, the woman’s modesty may not reflect weakness but could instead be a quiet form of resistance. Her silence is not mere absence but it might be a deliberate refusal to participate in a system that commodifies her. Even the rose, a traditional symbol of femininity is used by the speaker as a rhetorical tool to persuade and pressure the woman. Her modesty is dismissed, her voice ignored, and her beauty treated as public property—something to be displayed, consumed, and ultimately mourned as it fades.

2. William Blake’s “The Sick Rose” and “My Pretty Rose Tree”:

The above poems are taken from Blake’s collection *Songs of Experience* (1794). Through the use of rose imagery, both poems critically explore femininity either in a sympathetic or patriarchal tone. Blake’s poems reflect a phallogocentric structure where femininity is voiceless, male-influenced, or reduced to an object of male fear, desire, and control.

2.1. “The Sick Rose”: The Rose as Wounded Symbol

O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night

In the howling storm: (“The Sick Rose”, lines 1-4)

In “The Sick Rose,” the rose is portrayed as a silent, penetrated figure, whose sickness is caused by a “dark secret love” which can be interpreted as sexual trauma or male violation. On the contrary, Blake also has set an ambiguous and unsettling tone rather than sympathetic towards a female subjectivity. The title “The Sick Rose” itself signifies the rose’s vulnerability, fragility and corrupted state, as it is



intruded upon by the “invisible worm” from the very beginning which makes Blake’s tone mysterious, dark and haunting.

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy. (“The Sick Rose”, lines 5-8)

Blake’s rose is afflicted by an unseen “worm,” symbolising hidden corruption or sexual repression. The “invisible worm” is portrayed as a destructive force that acts secretly during the night; this metaphor can represent male desire and sexual transgression. The rose, while central to the poem, remains voiceless and vulnerable, embodying the male impact on female sexuality. This aligns with Irigaray’s critique of how patriarchal discourse often silences or objectifies the feminine.

2.2. “My Pretty Rose Tree”- Rose Thorns as a Female Resistance

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. (“My Pretty Rose Tree”, lines 1-4)

The poem “My Pretty Rose Tree” explores the theme of possessiveness, fidelity and jealousy. The rose is rather treated like a property or an object, highlighting the speaker’s possessive attitude and the underlying patriarchal dynamics of the relationship. The speaker addresses the rose tree as “my” showing possessiveness. The title itself introduces this idea, and the speaker repeats “my” multiple times. The rose is a traditional symbol of love and femininity but in this poem, its beauty is overshadowed by its thorns. The thorns can symbolize the female figure’s resistance, emotional anguish, or explicit rejection of the speaker’s affection.

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. (“My pretty rose tree”, lines 5-8)



“My Pretty Rose Tree” highlights subtle yet systemic male control, and it also presents female resistance in return. Her silence and thorns speak volumes, rejecting the speaker’s sense of entitled affection rooted in patriarchy. The rose tree, feeling entitled to the speaker’s attention, turned away and gave him only the discomfort of its thorns. This mirrors Irigaray’s idea that female subjectivity exists even when excluded from language and her call for the recognition of female subjectivity and autonomy.

3. Christina Rossetti’s “The Rose” – Rose as a Feminine Grace and Resilience

Rossetti reimagines the rose not just as a symbol of beauty and purity but also as a symbol of spiritual, religious and moral strength. In this poem, the rose represented a resilience which challenges the traditional notions of a submissive woman. Helene Cixous’ theory of *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) in her work “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975) celebrates female embodiment, multiplicity, complexity and resistance. Rossetti’s depiction of the rose as both beautiful and thorned aligns with Cixous’ concept of the female body and voice as powerful and paradoxical.

“The lily has a smooth stalk,
Will never hurt your hand;
But the rose upon her brier
Is lady of the land.
There’s sweetness in an apple tree,
And profit in the corn;
But lady of all beauty
Is a rose upon a thorn.” (“The Rose”, lines 1-8)

This poem brings forth the themes of the complexity of femininity, nature and moral values, beauty and pain, and spiritual and religious truths. In this poem, the rose could also symbolize Christ’s suffering, implying that beauty and pain can coexist. The rose, in comparison with the lily, is not gentle. It brings a cautionary image, implying depth and mystery. Rossetti also compares the rose to the apple tree and corn—the apple tree offers sweetness, and corn produces profit. However, the rose, despite its complex nature, possesses beauty and emotional power. The rose is addressed as the “lady of the land,” showing her supremacy. The rose resists easy classification—she is not just sweet like the lily or productive like the corn; she embodies complexity, just as Cixous urges women to do in writing. The line “Is lady of the land” asserts female sovereignty, suggesting the rose is not merely symbolic, but a subject with agency.



The Victorian ideals of womanhood meant remaining passive and being expected to submit. Women were projected to stay quiet and remain silent unless spoken to. They were not allowed to voice bold opinions. Through religious and moral symbolism, Rossetti's rose asserts a form of feminine agency rooted in spiritual identity. Gilbert and Gubar, in their work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), introduced the theory of the "madwoman" archetype. They argue that women writers of the 19th century often used symbolism, metaphor, and nature to challenge these limited roles and express repressed rage or selfhood. The rose can be viewed as an embodiment of "madwoman" not because she is truly mad, but because she resists patriarchal expectations and asserts her own complexity. The contrast between the harmless lily and the thorned rose reflects the "duality" Victorian women were forced to navigate: softness vs. strength, compliance vs. independence.

4. Emily Dickinson's "Nobody knows this little rose" – The Rose as a Quiet Rebellion

Emily Dickinson mourns the unnoticed death of a small rose in her short poem "Nobody knows this little rose". The speaker suggests that no one might have known or missed this little delicate flower except perhaps a bee, a butterfly, a bird, or a breeze. The "little" rose, unnoticed by many, represents the quiet strength and inner life of the feminine.

Nobody knows this little rose —
It might a pilgrim be
Did I not take it from the ways
And lift it up to thee.

Only a bee will miss it —
Only a butterfly,
Hastening from far journey —
On its breast to lie.

Only a bird will wonder —
Only a breeze will sigh —
Ah Little Rose — how easy

For such as thee to die! ("Nobody knows this little rose", lines 1-12)



Emily Dickinson's minimalist poem "Nobody knows this little rose" delicately explores themes of obscurity and loss, nature and empathy, mourning and remembrance, anonymity, the fragility of life, and femininity at large. In this brief but evocative verse, the rose becomes a powerful metaphor for a life or identity that passes quietly and unnoticed. Often symbolic of femininity, the rose in Dickinson's hands may represent a woman or feminine existence lost too soon, whose significance is felt only by the natural world—bees, butterflies, birds, and breezes but not by human society. The flower's tenderness and anonymity reflect the way women's inner lives, especially emotional and spiritual dimensions, are frequently overlooked or erased in patriarchal culture. Through this subtle imagery, Dickinson presents the rose as a modest but potent symbol of feminine subjectivity and quiet resistance.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar argue that women in literature are often confined to restrictive archetypes either the passive, silent "angel" or the rebellious, vilified "madwoman." In this context, Dickinson's "little rose" can be read as a marginalized female figure—delicate, easily dismissed, and excluded from formal remembrance. Her unnoticed death mirrors the fate of the "madwoman": unseen, unmourned, and misunderstood, highlighting the emotional toll of societal neglect. However, Dickinson's speaker mourns the rose with tenderness and reverence. This act of remembrance becomes a form of what Hélène Cixous calls *écriture féminine*, or feminine writing—language that is emotional, embodied, and intuitive. Rather than asserting dominance, it derives power from empathy, memory, and care. The simple gesture of lifting the rose from obscurity and presenting it as worthy of attention is an act of reclamation, echoing Cixous's call for women to write their own experiences into existence and give voice to what has been forgotten. Dickinson's quiet poem thus becomes a radical act of remembrance, asserting that even the smallest, most overlooked lives deserve recognition and meaning.

Comparative Discussion

The poems examined in this study, though varied in tone and historical context, all utilize the rose as a powerful and recurring metaphor for femininity and female experience. Across each work, the rose becomes a site through which the poets explore themes such as gender dynamics, emotional complexity, autonomy, and societal invisibility, offering distinct sometimes conflicting representations of the feminine condition.



Edmund Waller's "Go, Lovely Rose" is more than a romantic poem. It reflects how women are expected to be visible, desirable, and available. The rose is used as a tool of persuasion, and both the rose and the woman are treated as objects meant to satisfy male desire. Waller reinforces the idea that women are valued mainly for their beauty and for fitting into male expectations. However, the woman's silence can be seen not as weakness, but as quiet resistance, a refusal to follow the role assigned to her. In that silence, we begin to sense a subtle push against control—a hidden voice that challenges being reduced to an object.

In William Blake's "The Sick Rose," the rose is portrayed as a victim of an "invisible worm," a figure often read as a metaphor for sexual violation, repressed desire, or the corrupting force of patriarchal intrusion. The rose, traditionally a symbol of beauty and innocence, is rendered voiceless and wounded—passive in the face of unseen harm. The ominous tone and cryptic imagery underscore a sense of emotional and physical vulnerability. Feminist scholars, notably Gilbert and Gubar, interpret the rose as emblematic of the silenced female subject, afflicted by forces beyond her control, trapped within a system that denies her agency.

Conversely, Blake's "My Pretty Rose Tree" interrogates themes of ownership, emotional entitlement, and feminine resistance. The male speaker declines another flower to remain faithful to his own rose tree, only to be met not with gratitude, but with "thorns." This subtle rejection suggests that while the rose is viewed as a possession, she subverts this role through emotional withdrawal and aloofness. The poem reflects the possessive logic of patriarchy, while simultaneously presenting the female figure as capable of subtle defiance and emotional autonomy.

In contrast to Blake's portrayals, Christina Rossetti's "The Rose" offers a more empowered vision of the feminine. Unlike the sweet lily, fruitful apple tree, or profitable corn, the rose is celebrated for her beauty, mystery, and inner strength. Declared the "lady of the land," she embodies dignity, sovereignty, and self-possession. This portrayal echoes Hélène Cixous's vision of feminine complexity and multiplicity, where a woman is not reduced to conventional roles of gentleness or utility but is revered for her depth and contradictions. The thorns, far from symbolizing rejection, signal strength, protection, and uncompromising identity.

Emily Dickinson's "Nobody knows this little rose" presents the most delicate yet radical image. The rose here is unseen, uncelebrated, and mourned only by nature, symbolizing a feminine life lost or



forgotten. Yet the speaker's act of quiet remembrance transforms this anonymity into a moment of resistance. This tender gesture aligns with Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine*, where emotional truth and intuitive care become powerful tools of expression. In a Gilbert and Gubar framework, the rose may be read as the overlooked woman writer, whose absence speaks volumes about systemic erasure—and whose memory is reclaimed through poetic recognition.

Conclusion

In studying the symbolic evolution of the rose across the poems of Edmund Waller, William Blake, Christina Rossetti, and Emily Dickinson, this research reimagines the rose not as a mere decorative emblem of romantic love or feminine beauty, but as a multifaceted symbol that articulates feminine complexity, resistance, and autonomy. Each poet employs the image of the rose to engage with deeper questions surrounding female identity, emotional experience, societal expectation, and personal agency. Traditionally associated with delicacy, beauty, and passivity, the rose in these poems challenges that narrow symbolism. Instead, it emerges as a dynamic metaphor capable of embodying emotional vulnerability, spiritual depth, and quiet strength.

The rose is portrayed as both an object and a subject: initially idealized and possessed, it gradually asserts its own voice and presence, reflecting the journey from objectification to subjectivity. Waller's rose is sent as a messenger for a romantic purpose, but it frames the woman's worth through the lens of visibility, desirability, and male validation. In Blake's poems, the rose suffers silently or withdraws in resistance, revealing the emotional consequences of patriarchal control. Rossetti's rose, by contrast, is proud, sovereign, and self-contained neither sweet nor yielding, but powerful in her thorned beauty. Dickinson's "little rose" may be small and unnoticed, but in her death, she elicits a mournful tenderness that reclaims forgotten feminine presence. These representations resist simplification, inviting readers to see the rose not as a fixed symbol, but as an evolving embodiment of feminine existence in its many forms.

By drawing on the insights of feminist theorists such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous, this study further explores how these poetic images of the rose challenge patriarchal narratives and affirm female subjectivity. Gilbert and Gubar's notion of the silenced or "madwoman" is reflected in roses that wither unseen or resist expected roles. Irigaray's call for feminine difference and Cixous's advocacy of *écriture féminine* resonate in the ways these poems give space to intuitive,



emotional, and embodied expressions of femininity. Ultimately, the rose in these selected works is no longer confined to visual admiration—it is a symbol that demands to be heard, remembered, and redefined, reclaiming its place not only in literature but in the broader discourse of gender, identity, and agency.

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