Symbol and Metaphor

The essential difference between a metaphor and a symbol is that a metaphor means something else than it really is; a literary symbol means something more than it is.

Now read the following complete poem:

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 they life destroy.

-William Blake

1. On the literal level, what could this poem mean?

2. Why is “Rose” capitalized?

3. Why is he worm “invisible”?

4. Why “of crimson joy”?

5. Why “dark secret love”?

6. Why is the rose addressed like a person; that is, personified?

7. Do you think this poem is mean to be literal, metaphorical or symbolic? Give reasons for your answer.

8. If it is a metaphor, what is the metaphor?

9. If it is symbolic, what does the rose and its experience stand for?

Now, after having answered the above questions, check your answers below.
Answer Key

1. A rose can be destroyed by an insect, like a cankerworm.

2. Possibly to suggest personification—that is, to give the “Rose” human qualities.

3. It could be something other than a literal insect.

4. Again, to personify the rose.

5. To personify the worm.

6. Possibly because it is something more than a literal rose.

7. It is symbolic because “Rose” is capitalized. The worm is said to be “invisible” (which would not be true of literal worm), because “dark secret love” and “crimson joy” do not fit the literal meaning given in 1 above.

8. It is not simply metaphor; it is symbolic.

9. Possible symbolic meanings (there are others):
   - a maiden and her secret lover
   - the destruction of joyous physical love by jealousy, deceit, concealment, or the possessive instinct
   - destruction of innocence by experience
   - destruction of humanity by Satan
   - destruction of imagination by analytic reasoning
   - destruction of life by death