

”ode on the death of
a favourite cat,
drowned in a tub of
gold fishes” by
thomas ...

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Female writing during the 18th century became a popular method of expressing feminine mentality on issues that were previously considered forbidden. Writers such as Aphra Behn, Mary Leapor and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu published their works alongside many respected male poets such as Jonathan Swift and Thomas Gray. Women were gaining a sense of independence and emancipation from the traditional patriarchal rule, and this was occurring at an increasingly rapid pace. Many female poets of the time wrote works that dealt with the treatment of women by men, and how they are slaves to masculinity. At the same time, these women were degrading men to the role of an oppressing tyrant. Male poets, such as Jonathan Swift and Thomas Gray, began to react to the negative stigma placed on the male species by the quickly expanding realm of female poets. Thomas Gray was quite possibly evoked to write the " Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes" as a response to the attack on patriarchal ideals.

The production of " Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes" initiated from an occurrence of events that resulted in the untimely death of a much-loved house cat. Horace Walpole was the owner of a beloved tabby cat, named Selima, who drowned herself in a china vase after promiscuously attempting to catch her gold fish dinner. Distraught with emotional grief, Walpole requested friend Thomas Gray to write a poem commemorating the event. Walpole and Gray's relationship went beyond friendship, because occasionally they engaged in " homosexual tendencies" (www.wikipedia.com).

On the surface, Gray's poem describes the curious, comedic adventures of Walpole's cat that ultimately leads to her death. Yet, Gray's preference for the male gender and the growth of the unsuspected reign of female poets and their ideologies may prove that he illustrates diction that relates to the treatment of women during the time his poem was published in 1748. The poet proposes the notion that women could not survive in a world full of feminine ideologies. Thomas Gray negatively critiques women by portraying them as a commodity of trade, by stereotyping their needs and desires and by depicting them as unsophisticated, greedy, dependent beings all through the viewpoint of a common household cat.

Products and human services were the basic means of trade in the 18th century. Tools, sugar, fruits and vegetables, and even slaves were transported to and from various European countries frequently to support and enhance the economy. Thomas Gray, in his poem, indirectly through a house cat, turns woman into a commodity of trade. He asks the questions, "What female heart can gold despise? /What cat's adverse to fish?" (23-24), and by doing so, he parallels females to the cat and gold to the fish and to males. The destined cat, or woman, is "fair" (8) with "velvet [...] paws" (9), "emerald eyes" (10) and a luscious "coat" (4), making every characteristic of the female saleable in the marketplace. The female's description drips with expensive, valuable materials of that era that are in great demand and could be traded readily.

Another example where females are illustrated as being a commodity occurs when Selima drowns in a China vase, not a clear bowl, of gold fishes. The

purple color of the inner sidings of the vase reflected upon the surface of the fish giving them a " Tyrian hue" (16). Gray exemplifies nationality and trade here because vases were a highly demanded product and China was a booming marketplace for trade. The " Tyrian hue" (16) of the goldfish may have distorted the cat's/female's perception of the situation, allowing her to fall into the tub of deception, the tub symbolic of trade, making it easy for the female to become labeled and associated with commodities of trade. Therefore, Gray indicates that women would falter in a world full of feminine thoughts and mindsets, because women are only thought of to be traded and used as objects.

Females of all varying species are thought of to be vain in nature. Gray stereotypes females as being narcissistic individuals as well as having an unquenchable desire for material goods and power. Selima is at leisure when observing her inverted reflection in the smooth " lake" (6), which represents the water in the China vase. As she joyously gazes upon her image she " purred applause" (12) as she adored her view, and continued to gaze until " two angel forms were seen to glide" (14) in the vase. This section of the poem echoes Eve's character Milton's Paradise Lost:

As I bent down to look, just opposite

A shape within the watery gleam appeared,

Bending to look on me: I started back,

It started back; but pleased I soon returned,

Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks

Of sympathy and love: There I had fixed

Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire,

Had not a voice thus warned me; ' What thou seest,

What there thou seest, fair Creature, is thyself [.] (www. byrosons. net, Book IV, 460-468)

Both Eve and the female cat narcissistically become fascinated with their own reflections, allowing themselves to become blinded from their unfortunate destinies, which lead them to their own demise and self destruction. Another stereotypical assumption of women is that they contain an unappeasable desire for material goods. Since women are also exuding a newfound sense of control and power in the literary world, Gray also illustrates that, stereotypically, women do not have any control or power over the situations they place themselves in. The goldfish, which represent the male figures, are the " genii of the stream" (15), guardians that represent power and prestige, for they are controlling Selima's actions. Selima is devoured by her need for power and control, which exists within the tub of water, not in the external world that she inhabits.

She lusts for the gold trophy that lies within the stream of water as she irrationally " stretched in vain to reach the prize" (22). This represents female's unquenchable desire for material goods. Selima sacrificed all nine of her lives, for " Eight times [she] emerg[ed] from the flood" (31), at the

thought of owning a piece of gold. Selima is consumed by her craving for what she considers being of importance, and she impulsively acted upon her greed. Gray parallels this to women of the era, implying that women only went after and pined for material goods that males had to offer, allowing men to control women with their superficial possessions and allure. Clearly, Gray states that women would not succeed in a matriarchal society, for the main goal of that type of society would be focused on vanity and the need for material goods. This would end with the destruction of society, just as Selima and Eve caused destruction within their own lives.

Gray makes the assumption that women, as portrayed by Selima, are unsophisticated, greedy and dependant beings. Selima illustrates her unsophisticated demeanor by not being aware of the "gulf between" (29) herself and the vase, as she "tumbled headlong" (30) into her watery grave. Even though Selima was perched upon the vase for a period of time, staring at her image, she was still unaware and unknowledgeable of the surroundings she placed herself in. Nor did she ponder the consequences of attempting to catch the gold fish. Gray implies that women are not to be blamed for their accidental actions, for they did not know any better to begin with. When "Malignant Fate sat back and smiled" (28) at Selima while she slipped to her death, Gray illustrated that woman would not survive in society because fate is mocking woman's status, for it knows the destiny and role of women in society, and does nothing to intervene. Selima is so overcome by her greed to reach her beloved gold prize that she has entitled herself to become "a favourite [that] has no friend" (36), for her greedy

nature has turned her " friend[s]" (36) against her, preventing them from saving her life.

Excessive consumption is also evident in this poem, for Selima, who seems to be decorated with lavish characteristics such as " emerald eyes" (11), still yearns for the unnecessary luxuries in life. Woman's need for her dependence on man is exemplified through out the entirety of the poem. If left on her own, just as Selima was, woman would not be able to survive the situation she was placed in. Gray portrays the idea that woman needs the presence of an impossible, fantastical figure such as a sea nymph, or a heroic figure such as a dolphin to save her from her tragic fate, whether it be regarding a fish bowl, or 18th century living. Therefore, due to the unsophisticated, greedy, dependent nature that female's encompass, Gray implies that woman would falter under her own characteristics.

Woman's literary roles in the 18th century were like the " azure flowers" (3) in Gray's poem, they blossomed. Yet, Gray wished to convey the message that women can be objectified and commoditized, women could be stereotyped as being narcissistic and superficial and women contain an unsophisticated, greedy, dependent status. His comparison of a cat to a female in an epitaph written for Horace Walpole cleverly disguised the misogynistic undertones Gray intended to suggest. He believed that woman could not be left alone, otherwise she would not be able to survive the circumstances that existed around her. He believed that woman could not see beyond the superficial, narcissistic image of her beauty and he believed that woman could be just as easily replaced and compared with a product of

trade. Fate in this poem "sat by and smiled" (28) at the supposedly inevitable misfortunes of the female, but female writers only grew more knowledgeable and gained their much earned respect in the 18th century, continuing on into today's modern era. In "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes", curiosity did kill the cat, but it only mad her stronger.

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