

Girl powdering her
neck woodblock print
by kitagawa utamaro
+ the poem with the
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The paper " Girl Powdering Her Neck Woodblock Print by Cathy Song" is an inspiring example of a book review on performing arts. Kitagawa Utamaro's Girl Powdering Her Neck is a wood print from the eighteenth century, which is the image of a girl or young woman staring in the mirror and gently touching her neck (Utamaro). The reflection reveals her face. Cathy Song's poem is a contemplation of the image. She describes the girl in the image and sees the objectification of women depicted by the image. The poem reflects the wood prints' message. Poetry and painting are forms of art that operate at a point between reality and imagination where substance turns to subtlety; hence, becomes challenging to interpret the art (Denham). Art is not a reality but a mere representation. However, the subtlety of a piece of art makes it difficult to interpret or analyze. A painting or poem of a bed is not a bed but a representation. Alternatively, it can be a metaphor for something else (Conte). Cathy Songs' poem makes Utamaro's woodblock print easy to interpret. It sheds light on the subtlety in the print. On its own, the print appears to be a young woman staring in the mirror. Every woman is concerned about beauty. Therefore, it is challenging to deduce the meaning of Utamaro's art as it is substantially subtle that it could be anything. The woman may be experiencing pain in her neck or simply rubbing powder as seen in the print. Song's poem is an ekphrasis, which interprets the print for the audience. Her interpretation breaks the subtlety of the print.

She confirms the suspicion of the audience that the woman is a geisha and that she is preparing for her work. The last line in the first stanza " moisture from a bath (Song 4)" indicates that she has just taken a shower. The two lines in the fourth stanza " Morning begins the ritual, wheel of the body

further indicate the fact that she is preparing herself (Song). An image that previously appeared to be a woman staring at her image in the mirror is confirmed to be a woman preparing herself for something. The fourth line in the fourth stanza also confirms that the woman is a geisha because it states, “ She practices in pleasure (Song 4)”. Consequently, Song’s poem enriches the meaning and interpretation of the print (Preskitt). Furthermore, the painting painted in the 18th century will live on for a long time. In the absence of Song’s poem future generations will be unable to realize the distinct and profound meaning of the print. Alongside the poem, the print carries on themes like culture, unfair treatment of women, and silent suffering. Consequently, Song’s poem is considerably meaningful to Utamaro’s print and vice versa.

Song is empathetic with the girl in the print. In the poem, she ascertains that the woman is beautiful in many instances. She describes her hair and the shoulder she likens to “ the slope of a hill set deep in snow in a country of huge white solemn birds (Song 9, 10)”. However, she also portrays her as a passive recipient of society’s conditions. From the print, the girl does not look sad. However, she does not look happy either. She wears a plain facial expression that one can only assume is simplicity. She seems to be going about her usual routine with a certain level of unconsciousness. The poem does not indicate any different. However, her passiveness is described in the sixth stanza from the fourth line onwards. “ She is about to paint herself, the eyes narrow in a moment of self-scrutiny (Song 4)”. Song describes it as a moment of realization. It is as if for the first time she realizes that she is staring at her reflection in the mirror. It is as if she sees the translucent skins

hiding her skin for the first time. She stares at herself and attempts to say something but she is unable (Song 5) “ But the berry-stained lips stenciled into the mask of beauty do not speak (Song 6)”. She is beautiful and she has achieved what she wanted in front of the mirror. Her mask of beauty is in accordance with the standards of her work and her culture. Remarkably, she fails to recognize whether she is happy with putting on the mask or unhappy. She fails to understand if the mask of beauty also covers her persona. Her inability to say anything about the situation makes her seem passive to her life and factors surrounding her. However, Song does not pity or condemn her.

She understands her situation and implies that the girl has two personas. This is further implied in the three lines of her last stanza, which describes two chrysanthemums (Song 7). In Japanese culture, chrysanthemums represent the beauty of the sun. Therefore, Song uses the two chrysanthemums to represent the woman’s beautiful faces; the mask of beauty and the face it is hiding. While both faces are beautiful, they live in different worlds as depicted by the separation of the flowers in the lake’s middles. In one world, she provides pleasure and puts on her mask of beauty and a smile. In the next, she is silent and lonely.

Conclusion

Song’s poem is an interpretation of the wood print. In her own words, she explains what she sees when she stares at the image. She unravels the simplicity and the message hidden in the wood print. Additionally, she is able to express the beauty of the woman in words with ease. Song’s ability to see the woman’s two personas adds a lot of value to the wood print.