

Denise levertov



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Bouchikhi Camil “ Denise Levertov and Water” Denise Levertov was born was born in 1923 in Ilford, United Kingdom, part Welsh, English, German and Jewish. She played Piano, studied Literature and French and at the same time “[sold] the Daily Worker house-to-house in the working class streets of Ilford Lane” 1. Her mother came from a mining village and her father was a professor. She traveled and studied literature all over Europe, analyzing classic French literature as well as German texts. After publishing her first book *The Double Image*, she moved to the United States and was naturalized citizen of the United-States.

Her life in America affected her writing as she abandoned her traditional academic style for a postmodernist one influenced by the Black Mountain Poets, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. Her extensive knowledge and her various influences have enabled her to always analyze things objectively and critically. In her poems, Denise Levertov uses water both as a positive and negative force through people and objects made of and in contact with water. In “ The earthwoman and the waterwoman”, she explains how being rich does not necessarily rhyme with happiness.

A third person limited narrator describes and compares the prosperous earthwoman’s routine and the waterwoman’s misery in this free verse poem. It resembles very much a fairytale or a fable. The poem starts by presenting the wealthy earthwoman. In the first two verses, she stands by her oven “ tending her cakes of good grain. ” She has access to superior products such as “ good grain” which she can afford in lavish quantities as she is not baking one but many “ cakes” as the plural indicates. However, she lives in a “ hut”.

The reader can therefore identify her as part of the middle class. At the beginning of what seems to be the second stanza, the narrator gives us an indication about her health: "The earthwoman/ has oaktree arms." The earthwoman is healthy and strong as her arms are made of the extremely solid oak wood. Her children too are in good shape, as "has oaktree arms" and "Her children" are isolated on the same verse. Being wealthy, they are well fed, "full of blood and milk" and are free to enjoy their childhood and play "stamp[ing] through the woods shouting. Unlike the earthchildren, the waterwoman's children "are spindle thin". The speaker narrates, "The waterwoman/ sings gay songs in a sad voice/ with her moonshine children." Instead of playing like the earthchildren, they prefer singing melancholically with their mother. They are very mature for children, having been forced into adulthood at an early age by poverty. However, her children are simply moonshine, a beverage with important concentrations of alcohol. She has no actual children. In fact, she is so lonely that she considers alcohol as her only family in this poem.

Her isolation on the ninth verse is further proof of her solitude. The earthwoman suddenly reappears in the poem when she "has had her fill of the good day" and "curls to sleep in her warm hut/ a dark fruitcake sleep". At this moment, the situation seems to reverse. There is no mention of the earthchildren or of any husband of the earthwoman. She simply goes to sleep in her cozy hut, alone. Have her children not come home? Here, the earthwoman replaces the waterwoman as the lonely figure. In opposition to this with the word "but", the waterwoman's situation seems to progress.

She “ goes dancing in the misty lit-up town”, pulling her away from her meaningless and solitary existence and into the misty lights coming from the town that guide her safely like a lighthouse. Some negativity remains as mist symbolizing confusion surrounds the town. However, the light comes out victorious and the waterwoman is led into the last verse “ in dragon fly dresses and blue shoes. ” The dragonflies follow her so closely that they shape out dresses: the waterwoman has finally found true companions. The plural “ dresses” also implies her newfound wealth, just like with the earthwoman and her many cakes in the beginning of the poem.

The sad and drunk waterwoman changes into a graceful and dancing beauty just like Cendrillon in Perrault’s tales who just like the waterwoman ends happy, wealthy and wearing a beautiful pair of shoes. Furthermore, when looking closely one can see that earthwoman’s happiness is but a material illusion. “ has had her fill of the good day” implies that her life is commanded by routine: she wakes up, bakes and cares for her children, and goes to sleep every single day. It is also clear that she has no authority over her children, whom she devotes her life to.

They “ stamp through the woods shouting”, disturbing the forest and therefore their “ oaktree” mother. She can do nothing about this though, as she is perfectly immobile and rooted in the ground. Then, “ the good day” takes an ironic tone, as the earthwoman’s day is tiring. The word “ fill” proves that her life is extenuating, as “ she has had enough of this ‘ good day’”. Sleep is the only rest she gets in the entire poem, a sleep she enjoys so much that it is to her a “ dark fruitcake. ” It is also interesting to look at the waterwoman with this inverted perspective.

While the earthchildren prefer being away from their mother when they play, the waterchildren enjoy their mother's company. They are not to be seen any more as an illusion alcohol creates, but as the companions she has gained in the first end of the poem: the dragonflies. They are now "spindle thin" 1 because they are dragonflies, and not because they do not eat enough food. The waterwoman still has enough energy at the end of the day, not having to cope with agitated children, and is free to go dancing in town while the earthwoman is too tired to enjoy life.

In this poem, Denise Levertov criticizes our preconception of wealth being better than poverty. She defies this principle by showing how children in wealthy families often behave like disrespectful brats. In opposition, children from humble families are often mature, respectful and close to their parents. This poem is also a message to young women. Denise Levertov admonishes them of the prison that housewife life can be with the earthwoman's tiring routine. In both cases, she explains that wealth is only satisfying on a material level by bringing poverty into a more perspective light.

In "A silence", she explores a more metaphysical question: the meaning of death. This poem paints the picture of a crime scene. The reader identifies the criminal as rain, because "the rose/still holds/ a few tears of the morning rain that/ broke it from its stem." Water here symbolizes death. The rose's death was violent and sorrowful as the destructive verb "broke" is employed after a dry line break, separating the sentence in two incompatible verses that cannot be stitched back together.

Even though the rose is dead as a whole, the speaker emphasizes the fact that “ a speck” of life “ shines” in the petals separated from the stem. The shine here represents vitality. With “ In each” occupying a whole verse and “ darker even than the rose”, the poet emphasizes the fact that a petal, all by itself, demonstrates greater fire than it would when confounded with other petals in the rose. However, the petals are dead and will never come back to life as they depend on the stem and may never be tied back to it.

Surprisingly, the rose, as a whole, will resurrect as it shares a verse with “ Phoenix-tailed” which then qualifies it. The rose, just like the phoenix, will always spring back from its ashes or here from the “ porous clay vase, dark from/ the water in it”, darkened by death. It will grow new petals just like the phoenix developing new feathers. It seems irrational that mortal petals have more vitality than an eternal rose. The narrator explains that it is the rose’s immortality that deprives her from the fire of life. The “ Phoenix-tailed/ slateblue martins pursue one another, spaced out/in hopeless hope, circling the porous clay vase”.

Each martin represents one of the rose’s resurrections. They are “ spaced out” and “ circling”. Their movement is circular, repetitive, determined and anticipated. They are “ spaced-out”, the spaces representing intervals in between resurrections. The birds try to catch up with one another to fill that space and eliminate death, even though they know they will never succeed. The martins still persist with “ hopeless hope”. Represented by these dark birds, the rose despises resurrection as it knows it is always followed by a painful death.

The rain too suffers, doomed to kill what it helps grow. It pours “tears” which will come down to kill the rose once again, this vicious circle going on and on for both flower and rain. This poem points out that our lives are better fragile and ephemeral. Life is a balance of pleasure and pain, of sun and of rain. As seen with the immortal rose, when one lives too long he starts anticipating the rain while the sun shines and life becomes only dread and pain for him. In “Five-Day Rain”, she proves that pain and mistakes are great and necessary for our happiness.

In this poem, a woman not wanting to be an “empty dress” hangs from the lemon tree jubilates when the rain falls to tell us why. The poem starts with a peaceful image of “the washing hanging from the lemon tree”. The first verse summons this image of the white, immaculate clothing hanging in the sun here invoked by the lemon tree representative of sunny regions. Then, an enjambment leads quickly the reader to “in the rain”, disturbing completely the vision he had from the scene. Some of the “washing hanging from the lemon tree” also touches “the grass long and coarse”.

The description of the coarse grass creates an atmosphere of discomfort. She continues playing with destructive figures in the second stanza. She repeats two times broken in the same short sentence “Sequence broken, tension/ of sunlight broken”. She “breaks” at the same time sunlight from the sentence and then breaks it again in two playing with it, transforming “sunlight” into “So light”. She emphasizes this. The rain appears as a disturbing and destructive force, like in “A silence”. Despite this negative presentation of rain, the speaker is enthralled by it.

The use of “ So”, “ light” and the space in between “ So light a rain” and “ fine shreds” make it positive, beautiful and ecstatic. “ fine” and “ pending” are moderate and suave words that serve to describe the positive evolution of the rain. However, this calm atmosphere turns into a storm all too soon in the next stanza. “ Wear scarlet! Tear the green lemons/off the tree! ” The speaker breaks into rage, exclaiming imperatives to the rain. She wants the rain to “ wear scarlet”, “ scarlet” being a metonymy for blood. She orders the rain to “ Tear the green lemons/ off the tree! With the enjambment, the rain does so, separating “ lemons” and “ tree” from the same verse. She then pauses during a long space in between “ tree! ” and “ I don’t” and settles down, the rain having followed her injunction. She explains her anger: “ I don’t want/ to forget who I am, what has burned in me/ and hang limp and clean, and empty dress-”. This part makes the reader realize that the speaker is not a real woman, but a personified dress who doesn’t want to be washed and lose all the stains and sweat it had acquired when wore that enabled her to know who she was and what she had done.

Without them, she is an empty dress, no different than another clean dress. She says, “ I don’t want to forget who I am, what has burned in me”. The dress forgets who she is when cleaned from what her wearer that “ has burned” in her has left. Therefore, experience and memory here appears as sweat and filth, which we can also associate to mistakes, an echo to Oscar Wilde’s famous words: “ Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes”. The dress prefers being filthy in her own unique way than be like just any other immaculate dress. In “ The Five-Day Rain”, water appears as an alternative force.

At first, it is a disturbing force, destroying the hard work someone has accomplished by cleaning and hanging his washing in a tree. It becomes positive and beautiful in the second and third stanza though, and suddenly, in the last stanza, turns into a violent and destructive force that brings blood and filth. We learn that this violence is good, as it preserves the dress's memory. It is negative for the one having cleaned the washing, but helpful towards the dress. Here, water conserving sweat and muck is neither negative nor positive. All depends on whose side we take. We either endorse the dress or the one having cleaned it.

The quality of a thing is not universal; an event terrible for many may benefit others and vice-versa. Water has taken two forms in these poems, those of a woman and of rain and tears. Although the element appears differently and invokes different moods such as sadness in "A Silence" and rage in "Five-Day Rain", it always behaves the same way in every poem. It always becomes the exact opposite of what it has been at one point or another. This bipolarity and instability of the water throughout the poems enables Denise Levertov to show how good and bad depend on perspective. This project has been an interesting experience.

I had never before looked so closely at words and never has anyone persuaded me so easily that my own beliefs were somehow false or incorrect. Indirectly, Denise Levertov has also taught me to look at the world from different perspectives: my own and even a dress's. These poems have also made me reminisce the philosophy of the "just middle" and have proven it to be right as all extremes such as wealth and immortality hide great flaws. I now feel some attraction to a humble and moderate lifestyle,

but that will fade away sooner or later. Literature can be convincing, but even the greatest, wisest messages are easily forgotten.