

Incompatible imagery in byron's the destruction of semmacherib



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In *The Destruction of Semnacherib*, Byron uses different types of imagery to illustrate contradictory feelings about victory in war. In this poem, the complete demolition of the Assyrian people is described in both a horrific and peaceful way, demonstrating how success in war is always tainted with the atrocities of death on the other side. By striking the visual, auditory, and tactile senses with images of both destruction and peace, Byron captures the conflicting feelings of devastation at the destruction of the defeated side and contrasts it with the joy of triumph over the enemy. The interweaving of peaceful and devastating imagery in this poem conveys the bittersweet feeling of rejoicing in victory while experiencing the horror of death on the other side.

Visual imagery in this poem shows the atrocity of death in war but also uses simile as a reminder that after the war there is a bright future to look forward to. The haunting image of death is conveyed through "the rider distorted and pale/ With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail" (17-18). The image of a mangled and lifeless body on the ground shocks the visual sense and leaves one with a traumatic image of death, even if it is the enemy's body. The detail of the dew on the rider's brow conveys a strange stillness that feels cruel. However, this image is contrasted with a peaceful image of the enemy "melt[ing] like snow in the glance of the Lord" (24). Melting snow is a gradual process and a tranquil image, a reminder that even though they are all dead, there is now peace. Snow melting is also an indicator that the winter is over and spring, a time of renewal and fruitfulness, is on the horizon. The parallel of spring to the end of war gives one hope that even after this devastation and mass death, a new and better time lies ahead. The

clashing visual imagery of melting snow and a mangled dead body exemplifies feelings of peacefulness at the destruction of the enemy tainted with traumatic images of dead bodies. This contrast is confusing and evokes a strange mix of feelings about victory in war.

Auditory imagery in this poem adds to the mixed feelings, creating intense sounds of terror and contrasting it with peaceful silence to show happiness mingled with pain. As all the males of the Assyrian nation are killed, "the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail," and their screams pierce the auditory senses with horror (21). The immense loss of these women and their mournful cries is a tragic auditory image that serves as a reminder that even though they are the enemy, they, too, have families of their own who are left broken. This tragedy evokes feelings of extreme pity for the other side. Much like with visual imagery, there is auditory imagery representative of peace amidst the destruction as "the trumpet [is] unblown," signifying that there is no call to battle (20). The effect of mentioning the unblown trumpet emphasizes the absence of war and in turn the presence of peace. The clashing imagery of the wailing widows with the peaceful silence in the battlefield mirrors the bittersweetness of victory in war.

The contradictory visual and auditory imagery create an uneasy feeling about victory in war, which is intensified with tactile imagery that demonstrates the chilling feeling of death but simultaneously portrays a swift passing. The body of a dead horse lying on the ground is "cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf" (16). The feeling of cold ocean spray water runs chills down one's body and evokes the chilling feeling of death. This is the harsh part about the victory of war: the enemy is left cold and dead, tainting <https://assignbuster.com/incompatible-imagery-in-byrons-the-destruction-of-semnacherib/>

the success of the victor. Then, there is the gentle image of the Angel of Death “ breath[ing] in the face of the foe,” which serves as a reminder that now there is peace (10). The serene touch of the Angel’s breath brings upon a calm feeling amidst the devastation of the people, allowing the victor to rejoice in the peace that the death of the enemy brings. A direct contrast to this tranquil breathing, are the breathless men whose “ hearts but once heaved, forever [growing] still” (12). The breath of the Angel of Death takes away the breath of the Assyrian. This contrast perfectly reflects the problem with victory in war because the success is costly. The tactile imagery Byron uses proves a difficult conflict that is hard to reconcile. While one is grateful for the peace and success over the enemy, one is also surrounded by destruction. The interweaving of the imagery emphasizes this conflict.

The visual, auditory, and tactile imagery in this poem severely clash; this poem is a roller coaster of destruction and peacefulness. From one perspective, there are the visuals of mangled bodies, horrifying cries of mournful women, and the bitter feeling of a cold lifeless body. These images represent the grief of war as there must be death and devastation for one side to succeed. From the other perspective, this devastation is necessary to achieve peace and avoid more death. The imagery here is descriptive of tranquility, like the melting snow, the silence, and the Angel breathing. This juxtaposition demonstrates the complex issue with war as being sometimes necessary for peace while causing horrifying deaths on an immeasurable scale. Byron’s intertwining of the awfulness and the peacefulness through imagery presents an interesting problem: if victory over the enemy involves so much terror and destruction, is this then truly considered a victory?