

# Carrión: undying love in the face of vile death



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Charles Baudelaire uses his works to describe his idea of the spleen, or “ the restless malaise affecting modern life” (Bedford 414). The spleen is an organ that removes toxins from the human body, but to Baudelaire it is also a symbol of melancholy, moral degradation, and the destruction of the human spirit, brought on by the constraints of modern life. Baudelaire uses shocking and grotesque imagery to assault the readers sensibilities, in an effort to expose the beauty inherent in even the most reviled aspects of life.

Baudelaire brings to light the toxins, that are purified by the spleen, so that society can accept and move beyond them. In Carrion, the author uses his shocking style to impress upon the reader the beautiful and undying nature of love.

Carrion is a recollection, from one lover to another, of a day that the lovers happened upon a rotting carcass. The speaker, of the poem, relates, in grisly detail, the purification of the the carcass. Baudelaire’s vivid description of decay is his way to express the spleen. As he recounts the corpse having “ a belly slick with lethal sweat/and swollen with foul gas” (*ll* 7-8), the image mirrors the toxins, from which the spleen purifies the body. Through the vivid imagery of decay, Baudelaire draws the reader’s attention to the repugnant nature of Death. The image of the dog “ waiting for the chance to resume/her interrupted feast” (*ll* 35-36), alerts the reader to the looming presence of Death, and its duty to claim the life that is so precious. In reminding the reader of his impermanence, and the grim reality of death, Baudelaire also has the dual purpose of showing the beauty that hides below the surface of humanity’s fate.

The speaker tries to relay the beautiful side to the grotesque mechanics of death. All living things must die, but that death leads to the continuation of life. Baudelaire illustrates this circle of life in the lines: "The tide of trembling vermin sank,/then bubbled up afresh/as if the carcass, drawing breath,/by their lives lived again" (ll 21-24). Using the image of the carcass' imitation of breathing is the author's way to show the reader that life goes on through the aftermath of death. Although this life-in-death is a macabre display, the imagery of "the sun lit up that rottenness" (ll 9), "like a flower open wide" (ll 14), and "made a curious music there-/like running water, or wind" (ll 25-26) alludes to the beauty that Baudelaire is trying to convey. Only through one creature's death may other life thrive. The image of the body's life-in-death is the author's preface to the undying beauty of love, and its transcendence of death itself.

The lover's remembrance, provided by the author, may be disgusting in its graphic nature, but Baudelaire uses it to illustrate that love can survive even the decay of death. The author is writing this poem to a love, he considers his "soul," so it is understandable that the poem has not been written to shock that love, but to frame a deeper meaning. The author goes as far to point out "Yet you will come to this offence,/this horrible decay" (ll 37-38), to lend the weight of inevitable death to the message for his love.

Baudelaire's message of the undying nature of love is summed up in the lover's final statement: "But as their kisses eat you up,/my Beauty, tell the worms/I've kept the sacred essence, saved/the form of my rotted loves!" (ll 45-48). This final stanza shows the true meaning of Baudelaire's lover's

gruesome recollection. Love is an undying beauty, that makes up for the grim reality of death.

Baudelaire's expression of the spleen, or what is most horrible in life, is used with such graphic nature that it might offend the reader. If the morbid imagery is looked beyond, Baudelaire's message will become clear. There are many horrors in life, but they are no more than the dark side of the beauty that life provides. Where many authors would hide the darkness by focusing on the light, Baudelaire chooses to dwell on the vile aspects of life. Death and the putrefaction of the flesh are only as horrible as the viewer allows. Although this grisly tableau is used to shock the reader, it is also used as a preface to his contemplation of the idea of undying love.

## **Works Cited**

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