

The adaptation of sapphic aesthetics and themes in verlaine's "sappho ballad"



Several aspects of classical lesbian poet Sappho's work would come to be admired and built upon by the Decadent poets of the nearly two and a half millennia after her time. The mixing of gender aspects and themes of masculine power and feminine desire in "To Anaktoria" and "Seizure" nearly prefigured the radical combinations of worldly imagery and metaphysical meaning of Decadent works—in particular, Verlaine's explicit homage, "Sappho Ballad." In addition, Sappho's position as a classical lesbian poet made her an appealing ancestor to a genre so concerned with voiding social mores and finding unique ways to express a modern form of desire. "Sappho Ballad" heavily incorporated female homosexual love in its expression of male heterosexual love through its unique utilization of the language of lesbianism, a sexual orientation the Decadents felt was particularly appealing for its perceived purity and position outside the commonly accepted morality of society. Sappho's lyric poem "To Anaktoria" features many of the literary qualities that would come to define Decadent poetry. The work begins with a series of military images with a masculine aspect: "cavalry," "infantry," "fleet of long oars," "supreme sight," "black earth." Thematically, this stanza almost resembles an epic poem, and the romantic quality of the poem is briefly subdued. This misleading aspect is mirrored by several Decadent works. Early Decadent Baudelaire deliberately masked dark themes and abrupt, depressing climaxes with innocuous, sweet openings to great effect. For example, "A Carcass" begins, "Remember, my love, the object we saw / That beautiful morning in June," and then devolves into a long, explicit, and nearly surprising rumination of a rotting corpse.

Baudelaire's poem begins sweetly and ends gruesomely; "To Anaktoria"

works in a reverse fashion, beginning with war imagery and moving towards <https://assignbuster.com/the-adaptation-of-sapphic-aesthetics-and-themes-in-verlaines-sappho-ballad/>

a personal romantic message. Besides being an expression of Sappho's desire, the poem holds an implicit theme of the anticipation of the triumph of love over war. Military imagery is used as an artifice to build a strong statement of love. This is comparable to several Decadent poems that use the language of military or imperial strength without expressing a military or historical narrative; e. g., Verlaine's "Languor," a contemplation of art and ennui that places the speaker as "the Empire at the end of decadence." That Sappho as well fashioned love poems out of the language of masculinity and history indicates her concern for love above all things. The ultimate message of "To Anaktoria" is Sappho's willingness to forego the concreteness of "dazzling chariots and armored hoplites" for the less tangible "soft step" and "radiant face" of Anaktoria. Decadent literature at its base was also a repudiation of Realism and an escape into intangibles and the luxury of art — e. g., Verlaine's "lazy acrostics." "Seizure" runs through a series of disturbing physical metaphors. "Thin fire runs like a thief" through her body, and she is "paler than grass." She becomes "intimate with dying," yet she cannot die, and must "suffer everything." This convolution of metaphors is similar to the Symbolists' own "jungle of symbols." The dire hopelessness expressed by the final lines shares an emotion with Symbolists' fascination with death and other realms, as well as the immortality of the poet. The end of "Seizure" seems to even imply that Sappho must live because of her poetry. Throughout "Seizure," Sappho retains her control over language even while seeming to succumb to physical torment. Despite the poem's brevity, it runs at a frantic, powerful pace; as the Decadents would later be concerned with sensation, Sappho expressed it here. Much like the Decadent poets, Sappho also used appealing allusions to <https://assignbuster.com/the-adaptation-of-sapphic-aesthetics-and-themes-in-verlaines-sappho-ballad/>

express herself. She refers to the Iliad, yet focuses on the detail of the deleterious nature of Helen's love for a man in order to describe Anaktoria's own love, presumably also for a man. Interestingly, Sappho also seems to conflate Anaktoria with Anaktoria's love. First, it is the one Anaktoria loves that is contrasted with the "supreme sight" of an army. Yet the conclusion of the poem contrasts a "dazzling" force with Anaktoria herself. Sappho winds her way through the poem to the expected conclusion of her love for Anaktoria, yet gets there by starting with Anaktoria's beloved. A similar thing happens in "Seizure." "That man equals a god" only because of his closeness to and effect on Sappho's own beloved. Although Sappho still explicitly expresses female homosexuality, she uses the powerful norm of heterosexuality to get to that point. Essentially, heterosexual desire stands in the way of her lesbian desire, and she uses that as a starting point to create both serious conflict and a sense of understanding in her lyric poems as she peers into the window of woman-man love. The empathy implied by Sappho calling Anaktoria's heterosexual love "the supreme sight" in a love poem to Anaktoria herself is comparable to Decadent poets expressing heterosexual love through homosexual premises — e. g., Verlaine's "Sappho Ballad." Verlaine and other Decadent poets harbored a contempt for social mores and empathized with alienation from society on account of one's deviant artistic expression. Lesbians were forced to turn their backs to society, and their form of exile was particularly fascinating. Sappho in particular was both a lesbian writer and poetic innovator. She expressed the misery of unrequited longing and social ostracism through her art. Her desires were difficult to fulfill due to classical morality; consequently, her writing took a sort of furtive aspect, as seen in the apparent entanglement of <https://assignbuster.com/the-adaptation-of-sapphic-aesthetics-and-themes-in-verlaines-sappho-ballad/>

heterosexual and homosexual lust in some of her narratives, despite her clear desire for a female other. Furthermore, the erotic aspect of lesbian alienation was a serious point of interest to Decadent poets. Lesbians were seen as having sex solely for the sake of pleasure, a concept that both threatened the Christian morality and conventional male sexuality that Decadents disliked and, at the same time, mirrored the Decadent credo of art for the sake of art. Hence, Sapphic love was the purest form of the love and desire on which Decadent writers were fixated. In addition, lesbians were immune from male attraction. Lesbian Decadent writer Renee Vivien declared in that Sappho's songs enchanted "the Sirens themselves," and that, symbolically, lesbians were "eternally under the spell of the Past," i. e., Sapphic writings. The idea of this sort of lesbian immunity inspired a masochistic impulse among Decadent writers to find pleasure in denial. Verlaine's "Sappho Ballad" exemplifies this impulse. "Sappho Ballad" is a love poem imagining the eroticism between the speaker and the addressed female beloved. As in "To Anaktoria," masculine language crops up as a point of contrast. Indeed, there is a sort of androgynous aspect to the speaker. His hand is "gentle" and "a mistress's," yet he's like an animal whose "wild head" would "wander and burrow." His body is an "athlete's" and "victory and defeat" are knowing "in a battle fought by heart and head." Yet the speaker insists he's "like great Sappho." There is a subservient aspect to this. The speaker desires only to give pleasure to his beloved. She is complemented constantly throughout the poem: her skin is a "festival," her body is "splendour," she has a "secret glory" ripe with "flavours." He experiences pleasure in a basic level — i. e., pleasure for pleasure's sake. His pleasure is merely pleasure: "Such pleasure in your <https://assignbuster.com/the-adaptation-of-sapphic-aesthetics-and-themes-in-verlaines-sappho-ballad/>

pleasure.” His hand was “meant to serve” her. He wants to liberate her, even artistically: “Let the soul of your poet roam / Where it will, fields woods hills / As you wish and as I so much want.” Verlaine essentially tries to express his earnest desire to please a woman physically through the language of Sappho, whose lesbian love he considered to be the most truthful and equal to his own love. Through the poem, Verlaine insists that he is “like great Sappho”: that is, that he can please a woman with the purity of lesbian love, and that he can liberate a woman’s artistic soul through his “new art’s skillful strokes.” Yet the poem controverts this subtly with its references to masculinity. While Sappho used masculine language to draw a contrast between the ideal love of a woman and the more tangible love of a man, Verlaine seems to use it almost to remind the reader of his own masculinity and insist that a man can love a woman in the way that a woman can love a woman. The sensuality in “Sappho Ballad” is particularly tactile. His hand “glides” and is “meant to serve” her with “skillful strokes”; his “wild head” is sent to “wander and burrow” “among the flavours” of her “secret glory”; at last, his body is “hard and soft again” in “battle.” The poem moves with the frantic pace and emotion of “Seizure,” eliciting strong emotions with its fast, explicit language and powerful, erotic metaphors. Another way to read this is to note the apparently androgyny of the speaker, and how the decidedly masculine language used to describe the speaker intermingles with comparisons between the speaker and Sappho and the speaker’s explicit desire to service a woman physically as a woman would. The androgyny of Verlaine’s speaker in “Sappho Ballad” is similar to the playful bisexuality expressed in several of Sappho’s poems, including “To Anaktoria,” and “Seizure,” which begins with the misleading line, “To me,

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that man equals a god.” Of particular note is Verlaine’s line, “ To send it with a new art’s skillful strokes.” The heavy, Decadent sensuality of this poem is the art he mentions here, and he considers his own art — as well as his aesthetic of pleasure — to be that rapture-inducing “ new art.” The idea that art itself could or should cause such physical pleasure is a strong Decadent ideal, one that contributed to the Decadents’ admiration of Sappho. Sappho herself was an artist of a new form who tried to express sensuality, desire, and the pain caused by both through her poetry. Her purpose was not very distant from the purpose of the Decadents. Her own skillful strokes are being alluded to throughout Verlaine’s poem, just as her own lust is being used as a point of comparison for Verlaine’s male lust. By complementing the skill of his own new art and consequently comparing himself to Sappho, Verlaine syllogistically complements Sappho and praises her abilities to wield language as a force for luxury. Essentially, “ Sappho Ballad” is not merely a love ballad to an unnamed object of desire, but also a ballad to Sappho herself. This poem would have a significantly reduced meaning if the lines referring to Sappho were excised. The allusion to Sappho is the cornerstone of the piece, one that invokes the ideal of lesbian desire as the strongest, purest desire, one that perfectly meshes with the Decadent aesthetic. Verlaine has taken Sapphic love and turned it into a nearly androgynous male lust to play the role of a gentle, yet libertine female lover, one who takes pleasure from the act of pleasuring another. This is how Sappho was updated: the female speaker morphed into a speaker who seems to straddle two genders and two sexual identities. One identity is decidedly masculine, as represented by the masculine symbolic language of the poem, while the other is decidedly feminine — or more specifically, lesbian —, as represented

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by the pleasure-from-pleasure aesthetic. Verlaine has seemingly taken the two conflicting personalities of “ To Anaktoria” — that is, the masculine military force, and the contrasting gentle femininity — and morphed them into a new creature of Decadent literature.