

Beauty in vulgarity



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Beauty In Vulgarity During his life, Jonathan Swift wrote about a number of different topics and often utilized the concept of imagery. Two of his poems, "Description of a City Shower" and "The Lady's Dressing Room" are just some examples from his extensive body of work. Although they both differ in their subject matter, both are alike in their vivid descriptions and ability to connect with the reader's senses. Many poets in Swift's time used their writing skills to paint an aesthetically pleasing picture in the reader's minds. In "Description of a City Shower" and "The Lady's Dressing Room", however, Swift uses revolting and graphic imagery that can leave a reader feeling disgusted. In "Description of a City Shower", this imagery seems to reveal Swift's negative view of both the city and the people living there. "The Lady's Dressing Room" describes many gross items a young man finds, but it ultimately serves to satirize society's views of women at the time. Swift's imagery is extremely important in conveying an overall message and aiding the audience in interpreting what he was trying to say, as well as the reaction he was trying to provoke. In "Description of a City Shower", Swift uses imagery by providing the reader with clear details on an approaching storm, and the way it affects both the rich and poor citizens of London. Despite the fact that a rainstorm does not seem that serious, Swift's use of the word "dread" (line 2) evokes an ominous tone and indicates a more severe event. He begins the poem by describing the city before it starts to rain: a cat sensing the danger stops the enjoyable activity of playing with her tail; sewers emit a rancid smell; aches start to throb; and a dull man walks into a coffeehouse complaining about the weather and his depression (lines 3-12). The descriptions of pain, disgusting smells, and the general melancholic mood of the townspeople appeal to the reader's different senses

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and produce a gloomy atmosphere. This atmosphere carries into the description of the storm itself: Meanwhile the South, rising with dabbled wings, A sable cloud athwart the welkin flings, That swilled more liquor than it could contain, And, like a drunkard, gives it up again (lines 13-16). In this vulgar metaphor, Swift depicts the clouds as a person who has had too much to drink, subsequently turning the rain to vomit. Despite the fact this would most likely disgust a reader, it does create a clear image in their mind. Although Swift could have described the storm as a beautiful scene, he chose to make it repulsive. Much of the second stanza discusses a wench shaking out her mop, showering a passerby with dust, and staining a needy poet's coat (lines 19-30). Again, Swift uses a dirty image for the rain falling on London, portraying it as a filthy and disgusting place to live. More importantly, the rain falling on the people of London would make them filthy and disgusting as well. Swift continues to utilize imagery by examining people's reactions once it starts to rain: women covered in mud run into the store for shelter and bargain, but do not buy anything; a law student calls for a coach; and a seamstress attempts to walk quickly as she can while water streams down her umbrella (lines 33-38). Perhaps one of the most interesting scenes in the poem is the joining together of Tories and Whigs: Here various kinds, by various fortunes led, Commence acquaintance underneath a shed Triumphant Tories and desponding Whigs Forget their feuds, and join to save their wigs (lines 39-42). Because the Whigs and Tories had different political views, one might initially see them coming together as a positive aspect. However, it is important to note why they are coming together in the first place. They do not put aside their differences in order to make political advancements or discuss their views; instead, they

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join together strictly because they are worried about their appearance.

Following this scene, there is a description of a man sitting in his sedan chair growing steadily fearful of the rain. The fact that he is sitting in a sedan chair indicates that he is most likely an affluent member of society. Swift alludes to the story of Troy and the wooden horse, equating the man to the “bully Greek” warriors waiting inside and fearing being discovered (lines 43- 50); this allusion gives the reader a clearer mental picture of what is happening. The comparison is so extreme that it is somewhat comical and ultimately makes the man look weak for fearing something as trivial as rain. In both stories, the characters come off as superficial and further emphasizes Swift’s negative views of the people living in London. The last stanza contains the most vulgar imagery, and it truly shows Swift’s distaste for the city and its inhabitants. The first lines discuss the overflowing gutters, which contain “trophies”. Their sight and smell indicate where they have come from around the city; eventually, they all end up together at Snow Hill ridge and make their way to Holborn Bridge (lines 53-60). The last three lines are perhaps the most disgusting in the poem: Sweepings from butcher’s stalls, dung, guts, and blood, Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all drenched in mud, Dead cats, and turnip tops, come tumbling down the flood (lines 63-66). The ending of this poem is just as bleak as its beginning. It is intriguing that those lines make up the only heroic triplet and that they are the longest in the poem; Swift wants to make sure that the reader notices these lines in particular. It is clear that this specific image shows that London is a filthy place to live. However, it also serves as a commentary on the people that live there. Just as the rainstorm brought these ugly items onto the street, it brought out the ugliness in the people of London. Throughout the poem,

many different members of society are discussed: a wench, a seamstress, Tories and Whigs, and the wealthy. They all have to deal with the rain in some way or another, making the storm an equalizer for the city dwellers. Swift most likely does not view one social class more negatively than the other, but rather has a dislike for the people of London in general. This point is further emphasized by the “ trophies” joining together in the streets on the way to their final destination—although they might come from different places, they still end up on the same filthy journey. Earlier in the poem, Swift says that the flood threatens this “ devoted” town (line 32). In this case, however, devoted actually means doomed. Flooding can be looked at in a biblical sense, as God flooded the earth because of their sinfulness. The use of the word devoted is also ironic, as the people are not devoted to God at all; they are sinful and superficial, and are doomed to filthy lives unless they change their ways. Another popular Swift poem, “ The Lady’s Dressing Room”, also manages to convey Swift’s opinions on aspects of society through satire. “ The Lady’s Dressing Room” tells the story of Strephon, a man who ventures into a dressing room previously occupied by a woman named Celia. In doing so, he discovers many unpleasant and disgusting items, entirely changing his view on women. The poem begins by addressing the fact that Celia has spent five hours dressing, and asks if anyone else could do it in less time (lines 1-2). These lines have a somewhat ironic tone—it would seem that five hours is an outrageous amount of time to get ready, but it is a normal occurrence for women to take that long. Much of the poem follows in this ironic and satirical tone, ultimately commenting on the lengths women will go to in order to achieve perfection based on society’s expectations. Celia is referred to as a “ goddess” dressed in laces and

lightweight fabrics (lines 3-4). The word goddess reveals the way men viewed women, and their belief that a beautiful woman was perfect. When Strephon finds the dressing room empty, his curiosity causes him to look inside and immediately discovers that Celia is far from a goddess. A good portion of the poem is dedicated to the speaker conducting a meticulous list of Strephon's findings. Swift uses extensive imagery, allowing the reader can get a clear sense of everything Strephon sees. Every element of Celia, in terms of appearance, is available for analysis. He picks up a dirty smock that had sweat stained armpits and "displays it wide" while he looks at it from different angles (lines 11-14). This image emphasizes Strephon's child-like curiosity and highlights the fact that he knows so little about the "real" Celia. He also finds combs so clumped with dirt it could not brush through sweaty and dandruff-filled hair, and an oil-covered forehead cloth used to smooth wrinkles on her brow (lines 20-26). Perhaps the most disturbing image is Celia pulling a worm out of her nose by squeezing it from head to tail (lines 64-67). All of these descriptions make it immediately obvious that, in direct opposition with Strephon's belief that Celia is "sweet and cleanly" (line 18), she is an extremely dirty person and does not have good personal hygiene. Not only does Swift give a great amount of details about what Strephon sees, but what he smells as well. An extremely disgusting example is when he writes "But oh! it turned poor Strephon's bowels/When he beheld and smelled the towels" that were "begummed, bemattered, and beslimed" with dirt, sweat and earwax (lines 43-46). He also discusses Celia's stinking toes and ill-smelling petticoats that are thrown about carelessly (lines 48 and 52). Strephon has an intense reaction when he lifts the lid to Celia's commode and smells its contents. Swift alludes to Pandora's box, which,

when opened, releases all of the human ills into the world. Like the allusion to Troy in "Description of a City Shower", this comparison is so extreme that it is somewhat funny; it highlights the overblown reaction that men have when they find out that women are not perfect creatures. Upon this discovery, Strephon runs from the dressing room crying, "Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!" (line 118). Although Celia is human just like Strephon, he is used to viewing her as a goddess, and is shocked to find out that she is like him in some way. After peering into Celia's dressing room, Strephon's beliefs and views on women are forever changed. Any time he sees a woman, his imagination pictures her "with all her stinks" (line 123). The narrator goes on to say that they pity Strephon's blindness to the charms of women, and that if he would "stop his nose", he would appreciate Celia when she looks her best (lines 129-136). Strephon should not turn away from love simply based on the fact that women are not always perfect and "rose from stinking ooze" (line 132). Swift uses another image that includes both beauty and filth to wrap up the poem: He soon would learn to think like me And bless his ravished sight to see Such order from confusion sprung, Such gaudy tulips raised from dung (lines 141-144). It is extremely important that the narrator thinks Strephon should "bless his ravished sight" and be thankful that he has seen this side of Celia; despite what he believes, it is not a punishment inflicted by Vengeance. When Celia looks attractive, he will find her more beautiful knowing that she might not be incredibly attractive to begin with. He will see the perfections in her imperfections. Although these lines describe the narrator's opinion of Strephon's discovery, it can also describe Swift's view of this poem. A satire serves as a criticism about society, and aims to improve its negative aspects. In Swift's time, blazons, or <https://assignbuster.com/beauty-in-vulgarity/>

poems dedicated to discussing a woman's beauty, were extremely popular. This poem is somewhat of a contra blazon—though it doesn't specifically address Celia's looks, it does describe aspects that indicate her unattractiveness underneath the beauty the public sees. Swift is poking fun at the poems that only discuss a woman for how she looks and commenting on the the expectations men had for women to constantly look their best. This causes women like Celia to take outrageous amounts of time and use many different products to cover their flaws. The only way women could be considered attractive is through the means of a lie, and only if that lie can be completely hidden. Perhaps these lines are Swift's way of saying that his audience should feel blessed to have read this poem, for they can now see women for who they truly are and not hold them to such high standards. If Swift can achieve this, then that is the beauty that will come out of this vulgar poem. While "Description of a City Shower" evokes a more serious tone than "The Lady's Dressing Room", they both ultimately convey serious messages. Although their gross imagery may initially shock the reader, it makes them pay closer attention and discover what the author was attempting to say. Swift's poems might not have painted a conventionally beautiful picture, but they do succeed in commenting on adverse characteristics of society. This aspect of Swift's poems makes them beautiful in their own way; like the tulip coming up from the dung, there is beauty that emerges from these vulgar images. One simply needs to learn to appreciate it.

Works Cited Swift, Jonathan. "Description of a City Shower". Trans. Array The Norton Anthology of Poetry. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy. Shorter Fifth Edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005. 442. Print. Swift, Jonathan. "The Lady's Dressing Room". Trans.

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