

Jonathan Swift is well known for his use of satire in his writings, and “The Lady’s Dressing Room” is no different. It could be argued that Swift’s imagery in “The Lady’s Dressing Room” is degrading to women. He uses very detailed imagery to show how disgusting and vile a woman can be before make-up and fine clothing can cover them up. In the text, the central character Strephon searches through, the woman character, Celia’s belongings. A very poor picture of Celia is painted for the reader, but this is not the purpose of the text. Although it is possible to read Swift’s writing as a misogynistic portrayal of women, it can be argued that his use of satire—such as irony and sarcasm—allusion to Greek goddesses, and use of imagery is trying to prove to the ignorance of men and that women are just as human as men are. Topic clear. Argument mostly clear, but weakly stated.

While Strephon is examining Celia’s dressing room, the speaker, who is to be Swift’s persona ✓, recounts what Strephon sees in a very detailed manner. Most of the poem is a list of what Strephon sees, and happens to be disgusted by. The speaker lists things such as her brush filled with dirt and loose hair, her towels with covered sweat and earwax, a handkerchief full of snot, tweezers with plucked eyebrows, etc. Perhaps give a summary reading of the poem to familiarize the reader – what happens, what’s the point, how does it end?

Swift’s use of imagery allows the reader to understand how disgusting the sight is for Strephon. Strephon’s disgust is shown in the following passage:

But oh! It turned poor Strephon’s bowels,
When he beheld and smelt the towels,

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Begummed, bemattered, and belimed,
With dirt, and sweat, and earwax grimed. (p. 2591, lines 43-46)

In this passage, Strephon is so disgusted by what he sees his bowels are turning, showing that he is sick from the imagery that Swift describes. Swift uses the alliteration of “begummed, bemattered, and belimed” to describe how the dirt, sweat and earwax have been smashed into the towel from being used constantly. Some analysis - good. Push further to show the impact of this passage on the work – its meaning, not just its existence.

This use of tearing down Celia’s beauty to gross items in her dressing room is strengthened when Swift constantly alludes to Greek goddesses. Allusions are always worth analyzing ✓ In the third line of the text, Swift calls Celia a goddess. This is to be Strephon’s view of Celia, but his view is changed after seeing inside of her dressing room. Because of the nature of the situation in which Strephon keeps digging through the dressing room, looking for something to remind him of Celia’s beauty, Swift alludes to the Greek Mythological story of Pandora:

As from within Pandora’s box,
When Epidmetheus oped the locks,
A sudden universal crew
Of human evils upward flew,
He still was comforted to find
That Hope at last remained behind;
So Strephon, lifting up the lid
To view what in the chest was hid,
The vapors flew from out the vent,
But Strephon cautious never meant
The bottom of the pan to grope,
And foul his hands in search of Hope. (p. 2592, lines 83-94)

While Strephon already believed Celia to be a goddess based off her beauty, which was destroyed by the sight of her items in her dressing room, Swift uses this allusion to show Strephon’s—and men’s in general—ignorance of women’s beauty. In the passage, Strephon is so

disgusted that he has to keep searching for one thing: Hope. He is looking for an item to prove that the rest of what he has seen is an anomaly. By alluding to Pandora, Swift has allowed Strephon to search for hope to keep his misperception of beauty intact, while also highlighting his ignorance as he compares women to goddesses. Strephon wants to keep his initial belief that women are as beautiful as goddesses, although the evidence he sees proves that women are just as human as men. But what is he finding instead of Hope? And how does that affect our reading? Keep analyzing the text beyond the surface.

While the text suggests that women are gross, and men believed that they were goddesses, Swift is trying to convey that women are human beings, just like men. The message of the text is the opposite of what is written. At the end of Strephon's search through Celia's dressing room, he realizes that women are not as beautiful as he once thought because he discovers the fact that Celia, much like men, also defecates.

Thus finishing his grand survey,
The swain disgusted slunk away,
Repeating in his amorous fits,
"Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!" (p. 2592, lines 115-118)

The fact that Strephon is shocked that women also pass bowel movements reiterates his ignorance of women. He believed them to be goddesses, but he realizes, behind the scenes, women and men are not much different. Strephon is surprised to find out that women use the same gross process of bowel movements, which is something he already knows men do. This shows that he is surprised that women and men are both disgusting in their own right, and are both equally human beings.

After this traumatizing experience for Strephon, he can no longer see women as the goddesses they were before. This is shown in the following passage:

But Vengeance, goddess never sleeping,
Soon punished Strephon for his peeping.
His foul imagination links
Each dame he sees with all her stinks,
And, if unsavory odors fly,
Conceives a lady stand by.
All women his description fits (p. 2592, lines 119-125)

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Comment [1]: Personification?

This passage strengthens Swift's point by connecting all women to what Strephon has witnessed.

Swift is showing that Celia is not just one instance but represents all women. But is it negative in that he notes that Vengeance causes this? This helps to lead into Swift's final point, and his position on the subject matter. The following passage shows Swift's purpose of the poem:

He soon would learn to think like me,
And bless his ravished eyes to see
Such order from confusion sprung,
Such gaudy tulips raised from dung. (p. 2593, lines 141-144)

This passage is the final four lines of the poem, and is the first time Swift speaks in the first person. ? Do you mean the first time he speaks of himself? ("me") In the passage, he claims that now Strephon has seen the items in the dressing room, and this allows him to think like him. He can now understand that the way men see women is that they are beautiful creatures compared to flowers, but in all actuality, they are more likely compared to feces that was made up to look like flowers. Swift is addressing men's ignorance, but shows that he is not a part of the men that make up this ignorance. By saying that he is not a part of the men that make up such ignorance, his argument is strengthened. He is showing that he understands that women are more than the make-up they wear, even if they are as ugly as the men that want to compare them to goddesses. ? But are they like "tulips raised from dung" – that is the tulips, not the dung? Is this image more complex?

In conclusion, Swift uses irony by meaning the opposite of what he is saying to show that women and men are more alike than men may believe. So he doesn't really believe that women are disgusting? But you also say that that's a fact above? So is there a contradiction/complication here? Swift makes a list of several disgusting actions by women that cover-up the truth of just how closely related men and women are. It is possible that the text can be read as degrading to women, as the text constantly makes a poor image of Celia, but this is the irony of the text. Swift shows the grossness of women with very detailed imagery and shows Strephon's disgust for the purpose to show that men are ignorant to the similarities of men and women and just how equal they really are. By alluding to Greek Mythology, Swift allows Strephon's perception of women to be so off base that he compares them to mythological goddesses. ← Is this so major of a part of your argument that it needs to be in the conclusion? But the fact is, women are not goddesses, and in turn, men are not gods. Both men and women are equally disgusting, and the idea of putting on make-up to allow women to hide their human qualities shows the ignorance of man.

– Overall, a plausible reading of the poem, but you need to be more assertive and argue for your readings, not just say that one “can argue” something (like Nike: Do it!). You have identified items for analysis past the literal level of the text, but I would encourage you to continue pressing onward to analyze the text itself more directly and then to sum up how our view of the poem/lines/characters/whatever changes once we contemplate the items you've identified. Also, don't forget to proofread to remove misspellings and infelicities of language.

B- (83)

Work Cited

Swift, Jonathon. "The Lady's Dressing Room." The Norton Anthology of English Literature. 8th ed. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt et al. Vol C. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006. 2590-2593.