

The Ugly Qualities in Baudelaire's the Flowers of Evil

Yuxuan Gao

School of Literature, Journalism and Communication, Qingdao University, Qingdao, 266071,

Keywords: Baudelaire; *The Flower of Evil*; ugly imagery; aesthetic ugliness

Abstract: “Ugliness” is an aesthetic category for discordant things, and an important way to see the world. Poet Baudelaire turned his attention to the world of “ugliness”, depicting it, praising it and celebrating it, putting it on the same level as beauty, and daring readers to face it directly. In *The Flowers of Evil*, Baudelaire shows his exploration of ugliness from two dimensions: environment and image. He turns his attention to the crumbling Paris after the miserable life of the underclass and praises the “greatness” of Satan. Beggars, prostitutes, drunkards and gamblers, all of whom were previously reviled in literature, become the objects of Baudelaire's profound analysis. Baudelaire tries to excavate beauty from these ugly phenomena, opening the door of aesthetics to the examination of ugliness.

1. Introduction

Baudelaire was the most famous modernist poet in France in the nineteenth century and the pioneer of symbolist poetry. He was in a special era, when Romanticism had begun to ebb and flow, classicism was about to make a comeback, aestheticism had already made its debut, and realism had not yet dominated the world, so his thought was characterized by the complexity of the times, which also made Baudelaire's aesthetic thought have a profound impact on the later generations. His collection of poems *The Flowers of Evil* not only has an important position in the European and American poetry world, but also known as one of the most influential collections of poems in the nineteenth century. At the same time, as an aesthetic critic, Baudelaire's aesthetic thoughts and theories have played an important role in promoting the development of modern poetry and aesthetics. As a product of Baudelaire's aesthetic thought and practice, the most profound and influential feature of *The Flowers of Evil* is the imagery of “ugliness”. The poet finds beauty in ugliness and goodness in evil. Therefore, the imagery of “ugliness” has an aesthetic character after artistic processing, which makes Baudelaire open the door of “ugliness” for the world of poetry and aesthetics, and it is of great value.

Baudelaire, as a pioneer of symbolism, discovered “another world”. He did not deny the reality of “our world”, but he believed that behind “our world” there exists “another world”, which is more real. Baudelaire pointed out that the purpose of poetry is only itself: A whole crowd of people imagine that the aim of poetry is some sort of lesson, that its duty is to fortify conscience, or to perfect social behavior, or even briefly look into ourselves... poetry will be seen to have no other aim but itself[1]. Baudelaire depicted many ugly imagery in his poems, which not only broadened the field of imagery expression, but also pioneered the artistic creation and practice of ugliness, opening the door of aesthetic ugliness for the aesthetic world. By applying the imagery of ugliness to poetry, he opened up the field of aesthetics to the imagery of ugliness, decadence, horror, and

grotesque, etc., and used ugliness as beauty. This is not only an impact on people's traditional aesthetics, but also a deep reflection and in-depth excavation of the society and people's mental state at that time. It is with the change of the times and the increase of people's experience that they gradually realize that the ugliness in Baudelaire's poems reflects the ugliness of the society and human nature, which is the result of the change of aesthetic ugliness with the change of the times and the subject, as well as the result of the development of aesthetic value of the ugliness itself. Through the examination of the ugly images in Baudelaire's poem *The Flowers of Evil*, we will explore the meaning and value hidden in the depth of the images.

2. The ugliness of the environment in *The Flowers of Evil*

2.1 The Horrors of Hell

Hell is considered the final destination for sinful people in both the East and the West, and is synonymous with darkness and horror. Hell is the opposite of heaven, where the soul's ascension to heaven after death is seen as a reward for a person, whereas the soul's entry into hell after death represents a person's deepest sins. Therefore, hell is portrayed in any literature as an eerie and abusive place to persuade people in this world to be good and to remain under the control of the Church. In Christianity, those who do not listen to the teachings of the Church and who have sinned greatly will be burned in the unquenchable fires of hell, a place of no light, no joy, and eternal suffering. Dante described his own experience of traveling to hell in *The Divine Comedy*, and portrayed in detail the scenes of "sin and punishment", which systematically and completely showed hell to the world. However, the purpose of Dante's description of hell and purgatory is mainly to contrast with heaven, to emphasize the beauty and comfort of heaven, and to lead the readers to aspire to heaven so as to stay away from hell.

However, Baudelaire seldom describes heaven in his poems, but often describes hell or the devil in hell. His purpose of describing hell is to truly explore the value of hell from the perspective of hell, not to give the value of hell in contrast to the beauty of heaven. In *Don Juan in Hell*, he describes in detail Don Juan's experience of entering hell: Don Juan lands on the river Styx, which leads to hell, and has to hand over the money for the ferry to the Styx ferryman, Kahlú, a gloomy beggar with a haughty look on his face, who receives the money for the ferry and then rows it with a strong and vengeful arm. The women here are like a bunch of sacrificial animals, twisting and screaming under the dark sky. Don Juan's servant, Scarnarai, is a money-grubber, always forgetting his own wages, and laughing at Don Juan's demands. Don Juan's father, Don Luis, with a trembling finger, lets the dead souls wandering on the riverbank watch Don Juan's ungrateful son who mocks his white-headed father. Don Juan's mistress, Elvira, stays at her lover's side in mourning, longing for him to smile again, to let his first vows shine. The stone statue that sent Don Juan to hell, clad in armor and armed with a wooden club, slices through the black waves. The subdued hero just looks at the track of the ship that sends Don Juan to hell, and disdains all else. Baudelaire uses Don Juan's descent into hell as the main theme of the poem, first writing about the greed and arrogance of the ferryman on the river Styx, and then about the greed and selfishness of Don Juan's servants, who do not think of their master, but only think of the money they are paid for their work. Later on, Don Juan meets his father and his old lover in hell, and the stone statue that makes Don Juan fall into hell, all of which are mistakes made by Don Juan during his lifetime. The poet unfolds in detail the process of Don Juan's descent into hell, and does not intentionally render the hell eerie, but in the plain narrative, the despair of Don Juan's being sent to hell is revealed. If you are like Don Juan who generally disobeyed his parents, deserted his lover, seduced a young girl, and killed an innocent person, you will also be judged like Don Juan, and be taken on the boat that swings to the river Styx.

When Baudelaire describes hell, he draws on the incident of Don Juan's descent into hell to link the river Styx, wandering souls, and the undead to form a horrifying picture, intending to warn people not to do what Don Juan did in general, and thus fall into hell. The hell here no longer appears as an accompaniment, but serves as an admonition. At the same time, the author also maps the filth of French society in the 19th century through hell. The ferryman who sends people to the River Styx is the church and the big capitalists who control people's hearts. They hold the oars in their hands and send the lower class people into the endless dark abyss of Parisian society, while the money-grubbing servant, the father and the son who oppose each other, and the couple who cheats on each other are all the products of the hypocritical society. It is under this social environment that the lower classes are gradually led to a miserable life and fall into the endless hell.

2.2 The Decaying City

The Flower of Evil, like Balzac's *The Human Comedy*, depicts the life of France in the mid-nineteenth century, and at the same time mercilessly criticizes the ugly phenomenon of that era. As Pierre Bourdieu observed, aesthetic and moral contempt for the bourgeoisie are intrinsically related; their lack of desire and failure to be incorporated into the bourgeois world meant that writers and artists were confronted with a dilemma: either degradation, the famous bohemian life, made up of material and moral misery, sterility and resentment; or a submission to the tastes of the dominants, just as degrading, through journalism the serial or the boulevard theatre[2].

Paris, an otherwise prosperous and desirable city, is actually filled with full of sin. In the poem *Dawn*, it describes the morning of Paris, where people's souls carry stubborn and heavy bodies; while pleasure-seeking sluts are still sleeping dead and stupid; poor women can only hang down their shriveled and cold breasts, and breathe into their fingers; and there are people in the depths of the shelters who are struggling for their lives. The morning of Paris is not bustling with activity, nor is it full of hope, but it is the exhausted struggle of the underclass. Nor is it full of hope; it is the exhausted struggle of the underclass. "Aurora, trembling in her gown of rose and green, Made her way slowly on the still-deserted Seine. Old Paris rubbed his eyes, woke to the day again, And gathered up his tools, that honest working man[3]." In this poem, Baudelaire compares Paris to the hard-working old man who grabs his tools, and although he works hard, the word old is no longer able to withstand decay and lateness.

At the same time in Baudelaire, in *Dusk*, another account is given of the streets of Paris in the evening, "Sweet evening comes, friend of the criminal, Like an accomplice with a light footfall; The sky shuts on itself as though a tomb, And man turns beast within his restless room[3]." The twilight soothes the spirit consumed by sharp pains; prostituted women are active in the streets and alleys, opening up the passages like ants to a secret path; gambling becomes a delicacy on the table, surrounded by harlots, swindlers, and thieves; the deep night takes men by the throat, and brings them to the end of their destinies and to the depths of the abyss. The poet here sees the enchanting twilight as a friend of sin, for underneath the twilight is all the clamor of sin. The poet concludes the poem with an indictment of the dreary darkness of Paris, which has left most of the people to never savor the sweetness of home, and to defile even their souls.

Paris is seen by outsiders as a mecca of prosperity and noise. But for the underclass living in it, it's mediocrity and ugliness. Paris exudes a sour smell from the inside out, the city is not depicted as so mesmerizing, but rather the lower class people in such a dirty and decaying corner of the city, struggling to put on a farce after a farce. By depicting the dark side of Paris, Baudelaire hoped to utilize the ugliness of the environment and the ugliness of the society to arouse people's concern for the lower class and their reflection on the living conditions at that time. The environment is the most direct source of molding people, but it seems that under the glamorous appearance of Paris, in

fact, part of the people have not even the sweetness of the family pale, which is contrary to the politicians proclaimed the good life.

3. The ugliness of the image in *Flowers of Evil*.

3.1 The Devil of Evil

The devil has always been a symbol of depravity and evil, dragging people from heaven to hell and into the dark abyss of eternal doom. Just as the devil, Satan, was once an angel, but was sent to hell and branded as a demon because of his rebellion against God. But in the poet's eyes, the devil has a different role. As an aesthete, the task is not refusing ugliness but to dig out the beauty from it, as the dark from which the radiant light is set off, as the marshy ground in which wonderfully bright and fragrant flowers flourish, or as the sinister power with which the good struggles. Still more important is the ability of the ugly to extract aesthetic values from itself[5].

The poet boldly glorifies Satan the devil with his own pen, and in the poem *Litanies of Satan*, Baudelaire praises Satan as “the most brilliant and most wise, A God betrayed by fate, deprived of praise, Satan, take pity on my misery[3]!” At this point, the evil devil became the savior of the world, the omniscient king of the underworld who cured mankind's anxiety and panic. Satan teaches the exiles to look askance at the small crowds of spectators around the guillotine, and also teaches the suffering weak to mix nitre and sulphur, these repressed poor people, who recognize Satan as their stepfather, to pity the endless suffering. At the end of the poem, Baudelaire writes prayers to Satan, praising him and attributing glory to him, even in the depths of hell, but still defeated. Baudelaire's praise of Satan reminds us of the turbulent social reality of France in the 19th century, where people did not realize a good life as they wished under God's protection, but were branded as “thugs” and “rebels”, just as Satan was branded as a symbol of evil. The psalmist, by praising Satan, actually symbolizes sin. By praising Satan, the poet is actually rebelling against the irrationality of existing life. The devil is not sinful, nor is God pure; everything is just a lie imposed on the people by the rulers. Even if he is guillotined, even if he is mistaken for a thug, even if he is in the depths of hell, his soul yearns to inhabit the new world. The author has discarded Satan's sinful garb and glorified him as the savior of the poor, and the image of the devil as evil has been transformed into a blow to the rich, who are ungrateful for their wealth.

In addition to praising Satan, the poet also focuses on other devils, and the image of the devil takes on a different meaning in Baudelaire's writing. The poet worships Beelzebub, the king of demons, and praises the devil for doing everything very well. The devil in the poem is not just a thing of evil and pleasure, leading people to fall, but is like a savior who saves people from suffering. Baudelaire's image of the devil is actually a kind of irony for the society at that time. Satan fell from heaven to hell and was regarded as a rebel sinner, and he himself was not disappointed with the society at that time and hoped to wake up the numbness of the world.

3.2 Corrupt Corpses

Baudelaire in addition to the bold strokes to Satan's prayer, he also used extremely detailed description of a rotting corpse, for the portrayal of the image of ugliness added an extremely colorful. People have always looked at corpses as symbols of filth, and have often stayed away from them, passing them by. But Baudelaire is the most famous one of the *A Carcass*, the description of the body of a carrion, repellent insects all over the body, this naked and bold description of the method is extremely shocking, is the most peculiar poems embodied in the collection is the most evil of a flower of immortality, is not a translation of the text can be expressed.

“Remember, my love, the object we saw / That beautiful morning in June:By a bend in the path a

carcass reclined On a bed sown with pebbles and stones; Her legs were spread out like a lecherous whore, Sweating out poisonous fumes, Who opened in slick invitational style / Her stinking and festering womb[3].” The poet begins by inquiring as if in conversation, dear, think of what we have seen, and the start is very soft, telling first how mild the summer mornings are, and then the pen turns to an ugly rotting corpse lying on a bed of gravel at the bend of the path. The poet opens with such a stark contrast, as if the ugly corpse were a commonplace thing, no different from a mild morning. Immediately afterward Baudelaire carefully depicts the rotting corpse as if it were a lewd woman, lazily opening its stinking belly, and the sun shines down on the rotting mass as if it were to bake it, and as if it were to return it a hundredfold to nature. The poet praises the overwhelming beauty of this corpse, opening like a flower, but then says that its stench is so strong that it will make you feel like you are about to faint in the grass.

Later the poet describes how flies gather and maggots are all over the rotting corpse, crawling up and down like waves and rushing around like bright lights. The poet's use of wave formation, bright flash to describe maggots, can be said to be bold to the extreme. At the same time, the poet says that the corpse seems to be still reproducing, and there is also a reverence for life in the corpse. Later the poet also boldly wrote that in the future, you will also be like such garbage generally become stinking horrible and frightening, facing the death of people, but also reveals that even if people have received the sacrament of the dying, but also in the end in the white bones between the decay. The maggots seem to kiss and devour the beauty, but the poet concludes by suggesting that even if love has been dismembered, the form and divine essence will live on.

“All such representations of evil conform far more to folklore than the philosophy of the Enlightenment, but Baudelaire sees a metaphysical wisdom in such[4].” In this poem the rotting corpse is contrasted with the beauty, the ugly corpse is contrasted with the prosperous world, and what the corpse presents is only the original appearance after the decline of life, and the most unforgiving part of nature. No matter how marvelous you once were, you can't avoid it one day. Death is a destiny that we cannot escape, and although we cannot avoid the passing of our physical bodies, our own spirit can remain forever.

3.3 Ugly Characters

Literary works, both Western and Eastern, coincide in portraying beautiful characters and disparaging ugly ones in their works. But Baudelaire keenly from the fleeting modern life to find a unique, accidental beauty, this beauty comes from the passion of modern man, it is novel, mysterious, eccentric, and even “contains the unfortunate”, he not only did not avoid the portrayal of ugly characters, but also in-depth excavation of beggars, prostitutes, drunkards, gamblers and so on, a series of characters, trying to show that in the powerlessness of the ugly characters. Instead of avoiding the depiction of ugly characters, he deeply explores a series of characters such as beggars, prostitutes, drunkards, gamblers, etc. He tries to show the miserable living conditions of the grassroots people in the dark society which is powerless to fight against, so as to transform the ugly characters into another kind of pursuit of special beauty.

“Pale girl with russet hair, Tatters in what you wear / Show us your poverty / And your beauty[3],” This is Baudelaire's thoughts when he meets a red-haired female beggar. When common people see the beggar, they will always loathe his filth and shabby, ragged clothes is a symbol of its lowly, but Baudelaire went further to see the beauty of his rags under the clothes of the holes. He thought the beggar woman's heavy clogs, than the queen's velvet boots with thick soles, too short rags, holes in the stockings, loose knots, can not hide your beauty, slaves fell under your shoes, princes and nobles want to go to your humble abode for pleasure, but in spite of all this, you chose to be a beggar, in front of the restaurant, asking for scraps of leftovers. Poet in the mouth of the

female beggar, beautiful and fragrant, nowhere exudes a moving light, the poet to the gorgeous dress compared to her tattered short shirt, still highlighting her own value. Even a beggar with a sickly body, have extraordinary beauty, other ugly image, whether there is still moving. The poet takes the opportunity to describe the beggar, but also to show the reader the beauty behind those seemingly lowly characters.

Similarly, prostitutes are the embodiment of desire and depravity in previous literature. Literature has always portrayed the image of a lady of good conduct, and the prostitute as a typical ugly image, and even many literary works for the image of prostitutes to be taboo, avoided. However, in the book of poems *The Flowers of Evil*, the poet Baudelaire traveled on a cruise ship and met a prostitute during the trip. In the poet's eyes, she exudes exotic beauty, wanders barefoot, is agile and natural, and is as gorgeous and enchanting as a hummingbird. Although she "sells" herself, her beauty is real and natural and unforgettable.

In addition to the young and beautiful prostitutes forced by life, Baudelaire also depicted a lot of aged prostitutes. Their muscles withered, shriveled breasts, wrinkles all over, does not have the slightest sense of beauty, but this is the bottom of the people's real life portrayal, is the life of long-term destruction of the evidence. Prostitutes this imagery in the eyes of vulgar people, is dirty, but Baudelaire moved his eyes from the superficial surface into the deep, and thus see the prostitutes on the outstanding, to see the prostitute on the tragic fate. He uses the words "proud" and "divine" to describe the prostitute, realizing that the prostitute has the clearest of figures, only to be tainted by the ugliness of the city. He used the truest words to describe the miserable life of prostitutes, who suffered from both mental and physical oppression and struggled hard in the materialistic society. He used the most rhythmic language to express the eternal beauty hidden in prostitutes, and awakened the world's compassion for the people at the bottom of the ladder.

Baudelaire in *The Flower of Evil* has a special chapter to write "wine", there are drunken souls, drunken scavengers, drunken murderers, drunken loners and drunken lovers, these characters are all related to wine. All these characters are related to wine. Wine can bring excitement to people, and it can also temporarily suppress the bitterness of the heart and eliminate the temporary pain of the heart. In the poet's opinion, in order to have a relieved state of mind, it is necessary to fight against alcohol, which can intoxicate and thus expose the nature of man, and which deprives him of his dreams of revenge and glory in the future. In *The Ragman's Wine*, the poet sees a scavenger crashing eastward against the wall, who once had great ambitions and ideals, but was crushed to powder by the troubles of life, and the great Paris pressed him so hard that he could not straighten up, and therefore could only enjoy a short-lived glory in the world of drunkenness. And in *The Murderer's Wine*, the poet portrays a drunken man who kills his wife, taking advantage of his drunkenness to go crazy, who loves her so much that he throws away her life's. The drunken murderer is free and alone, and the wine drives him into madness and corrupts him. These two poems portray very different images of the drunkard, one who is disillusioned with his life and derives his dignity from alcohol, and the other who falls into madness and loses his humanity because of alcohol. Despite the different characters portrayed, they actually epitomize the struggles of the lower class people. One of them is depressed under the pressure of life and uses wine to relieve his sorrows, while the other one is crushed by the sick society and gets drunk. The different images of the drunkard are Baudelaire's indictment of the sick society, and the underclass can only borrow deep bottles of wine to soothe their burnt hearts as well as to enter into the paradise of the dream of the non-fei.

Gamblers have always been synonymous with madness and the face of evil. In the poem "Gambling" of the collection *The Flower of Evil*, Baudelaire shows the readers a shocking picture: the dry and thin ears, the face without lips, the bloodless lips, the toothless dental beds, all of them show the morbidity and wreckage of being eroded by the gambling in between their hands and

feet. They have been seized by the mechanism that gamblers believe in and have become creatures like the walking dead. But it is precisely in this way that the gamblers' fervor for gambling is a silent resistance to capitalism. Baudelaire envied these poor people, because their endless desire to gamble is like an open abyss, and in the end, they can only feed on their own blood, they are like moths to the flame, running into the abyss, and they would rather go to hell than to live a life of nothingness, which is a kind of fear for the boring life and boredom for the spiritual wilderness. In the era of highly functioning capitalism, people were as endless as machines, but the gamblers in Baudelaire's book were teasing the soul-consuming material world. While modern society creates huge material wealth, it also brings the emptiness of the spiritual world. Baudelaire saw the spiritual wilderness of the people, so he used the imagery of the gambler to let people reflect on the meaning of their own lives.

References

- [1] Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists* (trans. by P. E. Charvet), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 267, 1972.
- [2] Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art* (trans. by S. Emanuel). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, p. 64, 1992.
- [3] Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil* (trans. by J. McGowan). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- [4] Beibei Guan; Jian Xie, "Morality and Evil in Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*". *English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 73-78, 2017.
- [5] Dessoir, *Aesthetics and Theory of Art*. Wayne: Wayne State University Press, p. 169, 1970.