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Thematization and Same-Sex Desire in “Song of the Ugly Maiden”

One of the questions that Eliza Cook raises in her poem “Song of the Ugly Maiden” concerns whether men should love and appreciate women for their physical beauty or the purity of their hearts. Throughout the poem, the Ugly Maiden cries about men avoiding her due to her appearance; she becomes a representative for ugly women desiring men who love them despite how they look. A closer inspection of the poem, however, reveals the use of thematization.

Thematization means making use of a poetic device like a trope, meter, or rhyme to present a theme that might not be evident from a surface-level reading of the poem. Cook extensively uses thematization through rhyme scheme deviations, use of alliterations, word choices, and having the Ugly Maiden sing her song as an interior monologue to portray her desire for women.

To interpret the poem as corresponding to not only a song about the lived experiences of ugly women and a condemnation of men appreciating women for their physical beauty, but also a song about Cook’s desire for women, it is necessary to show that the Ugly Maiden portrayed in the poem represents Cook and her thoughts when she sings her song. A surface-level reading of the poem depicts the Ugly Maiden as a representative for ugly women in general. Cook’s word choices, however, reveal that the Ugly Maiden represents a specific person whose identity is known. The poem’s title “Song of the Ugly Maiden” uses the singular form for the word “Maiden”, making the Ugly Maiden represent a single person and not ugly women in general. The title also uses the article “the”. Making use of the definite article “the” instead of the

indefinite article “an” indicates that the identity of the person being represented by the Ugly Maiden is known to the reader. Throughout the poem, the Ugly Maiden refers to herself as the “Ugly one” (16, 28). The phrase “Ugly one” is capitalized even though it appears in the middle of the two sentences, which implies that it is being used as a synecdoche for the Ugly Maiden. “Ugliness” has been made an attribute that only the Ugly Maiden possesses. If “Ugliness” were an attribute that many people possessed, then the Ugly Maiden could not have used the phrase “Ugly one” to refer only to herself. This reinforces the idea that the Ugly Maiden represents a single person. Such a use of synecdoche, however, means that “Ugliness” is something different from just physical lack of beauty because only the Ugly Maiden possesses it.

Cook’s appearance and the way the society during her time views her suggests that she is the specific person that the Ugly Maiden represents; she characterizes herself as the Ugly Maiden in the poem. When describing Cook’s appearance, Alexis Easley says, “[Cook]’s lack of conventional beauty was also referenced in many portraits published in popular periodicals or as frontispieces to her poetry collections” (67). He, then, mentions that “... a two-part review in the *Farthing Journal* began by critiquing [Cook]’s physical appearance, noting that she was ‘not particularly handsome’ ...” (75). People during Cook’s time thought that Cook did not possess the kind of physical beauty that women possessed. Cook was, in this sense, “ugly”. This similarity between the Ugly Maiden and Cook lets the reader identify the Ugly Maiden as a persona for Cook. Cook’s “ugliness”, however, does not relate to a lack of outward beauty but a lack of outward beauty that women possess. Easley says, “With her simple hairstyle and open collar, Cook resembles a young man; only her corseted waist reveals her feminine sex” (67). The Ugly Maiden represents Cook, and her “ugliness” corresponds to Cook’s lack of physical beauty that women possess because Cook resembles a man through her appearance.

Cook condemns men throughout her poem for ignoring her because of her “ugliness” and wishes that she could fall in love with women. When criticizing men for ignoring her presence, Cook, through the Ugly Maiden, says, “Man, just Man! I know thine eye / Delighteth to dwell on those / Whose tresses shade, with curl or braid, / Cheeks soft and round as the rose” (71-4). Cook addresses her criticism to men. She emphasizes this by using the phrase “just Man”. Men are looking for women who are beautiful on the outside—women who have soft and round cheeks and tresses with curls or braids; men are not interested in Cook because of her “ugliness”. Cook does not criticize women here. Women do not upset Cook. While it seems that Cook’s use of vivid descriptions for emphasizing women’s beauty implies that she desires that beauty so that men can admire her like they admire other women, there is some evidence involving the repeated usage of words symbolizing light and warmth in the poem that suggests that Cook actually desires women themselves and not their beauty. Cook, in the first two lines of the poem, exclaims, “Oh! The world gives little of love or light, / Though my spirit pants for much” (1-2). Here, the use of alliteration and coupling of the words “love” and “light” together could be interpreted as what Cook’s spirit pants for; Cook wants more of the alliteration that uses the “l” sound. Later in the poem, when describing women, Cook says, “She has a light and laughing eye” (35). Cook uses alliteration again by putting “light” and “laughing” together to represent beautiful women. The use of the same sound for alliteration in both places suggests that Cook has found what she is looking for in terms of love—Cook desires women.

Cook further portrays her desire for women through rhyme scheme deviations. The poem has a rhyme scheme of ABAB. There are, however, seven instances in the poem where the rhyme does not match this scheme (9-12, 57-60, 61-4, 71-4, 79-82, 89-92, 93-6). The rhyme scheme of ABAB can be interpreted as indicative of a heterosexual relationship due to the

presence of an alternating rhyme. Men represent one pair of rhyming lines, women represent the other pair of rhyming lines, and the interlocking of the two pairs represents men in a relationship with women and vice versa. During the Victorian era, a man was expected to fall in love with a woman, and a woman was expected to fall in love with a man; heterosexual relationships were the norm. The deviations in the rhyme scheme, then, imply that this expectation is not always fulfilled. Cook is challenging the conventional system of heterosexual relationships. Her response can be deduced from the internal rhymes within these deviations. Each of the seven non-rhyming instances have an internal rhyme contained within them. These internal rhymes are words within a line that rhyme with the word at the end of the line. Cook, through the internal rhymes, presents love that a man can have for a man and the love that a woman can have for a woman. She portrays the existence of same-sex desire in this way.

Even though Cook writes about the existence of same-sex desire, she tries to hide it using internal rhymes which are not easy to identify. An internal rhyme has rhyming words that are spaced out; this space makes it difficult for the reader to identify it. Moreover, the Ugly Maiden sings her song as an interior monologue. The first word of the poem is an exclamation: "Oh!" (1). There are several other places where the Ugly Maiden uses exclamations (13, 15, 55, 71, 79, 81, 83, 91, 97). Exclamations are used to portray emotions and thoughts. Multiple incorporations of exclamations throughout the poem suggest that the entire poem is about the Ugly Maiden presenting her thoughts. The exclamations are not directed toward an audience because there is none. When the Ugly Maiden asks if men will worship women if women do not possess physical beauty, instead of embodying the audience's response in her discourse, she gives an answer herself: "No! ah, no! 'tis little they prize / Crookbacked forms and rayless eyes" (13-4). If there were an audience present, then the Ugly Maiden would not have had to respond to her own

question. Towards the end of the poem, the Ugly Maiden starts complaining about why men ignore her due to her appearance:

Oh! why shouldst thou trace my shrinking face

With coarse, deriding jest?

Oh! why forget that a charmless brow

May abide with a gentle breast?

Oh! why forget that gold is found

Hidden beneath the roughest ground? (79-84)

The inclusion of exclamations before each sentence converts them from rhetorical questions to a portrayal of the Ugly Maiden's thoughts. Again, there is no evidence of the presence of a silent audience who is trying to influence the Ugly Maiden's discourse. Like the usage of internal rhymes, Cook uses interior monologue to hide the theme of same-sex desire that she is portraying in the poem by not having an audience listen to the Ugly Maiden's song.

Whether the discussion above is a valid reading of the poem can be identified by considering the history of the Victorian period and Cook's background. Cook trying to hide the theme of same-sex desire through thematization aligns with the fact that heterosexual relationships were the norm and anyone trying to go against this norm was frowned upon. Also, the poem "Song of the Ugly Maiden" is published in the year 1845. Easley says about Cook, "At the same time that Cook's masculine portraits were circulating in popular print culture, she was involved in a romantic partnership with American actress Charlotte Cushman (1816-76). The two women met in 1845 ..." (71). Cook falls in love with Cushman, and her homosexual relationship makes the poem being read as portraying the theme of same-sex desire valid. This reading, furthermore, aligns with Cook publishing other romantic poems to Cushman: "... Cook

was publishing thinly disguised romantic poems to Cushman in the *Weekly Dispatch*, including ‘Stanzas Addressed to C*** C***’ (14 June 1846), which alluded to their ‘friendship’ but declared, ‘I love thee with a free-born will ...’ (73). Cook publishes other homosexual poems which are “thinly disguised”. Cook’s use of thematization to hide the theme of same-sex desire in “Song of the Ugly Maiden” aligns with what she does in her later works. Cook explores homosexuality when writing “Song of the Ugly Maiden” because she herself desires women.

Even though Cook tries to hide the theme of homosexuality in the poem, she has hope that there will come a time when society accepts it. Every stanza in the poem ends with rhyming couplets (13-4, 27-8, 41-2, 55-6, 69-70, 83-4, 97-8). These rhyming couplets are easy to identify because none of the lines in the couplets are indented, as opposed to other lines in the same stanza which are alternately indented. Rhyming couplets are found at the end of each stanza—not at the beginning or the middle of the stanzas. Cook, through rhyming couplets, shows that homosexuality can very much exist, and the placement of the couplets at the end of the stanzas suggest that there will come a time when people desiring homosexuality will not have to hide it. Also, while the seven lines exhibiting rhyme scheme deviations each contain an internal rhyme, there is one other instance where the lines maintain the rhyme scheme while also containing an internal rhyme: “I know full well I have naught of grace / That maketh woman “divine;” / The wooer's praise and doting gaze / Have never yet been mine” (23-6). These lines, along with the seven other lines exhibiting rhyme scheme deviations are the only lines that contain internal rhymes in the entire poem. This makes the lines presented above important because they contain an internal rhyme and follow the rhyme scheme of the poem. The words “grace”, “praise”, and “gaze” rhyme with each other. The presence of both an internal and terminal rhyme suggests that heterosexuality and homosexuality can coexist in society. They do not oppose each other.

In conclusion, Cook makes use of thematization to present the theme of same-sex desire in her poem “Song of the Ugly Maiden”. She uses a combination of poetic devices like rhyme scheme deviations, internal rhymes, apostrophe, alliterations, and word choices to highlight this theme. In a society where heterosexuality is the norm, challenging it through writing and by openly demonstrating one’s affection and love for someone else of the same sex is difficult, but Cook skillfully incorporates her ideas into her poems for her readers to understand if they attempt to do a close reading of the poems.

Works Cited

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