

## The City-Writing of Jonathan Swift's *A Description of a City Shower*

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### Abstract

Jonathan Swift's poems received little attention in the past, which are replete with realism and satire. From the perspective of City-Writing, this article will analyze how Swift logically shuffled the filthy side of London into the sanctuary of poetry by means of satire and realism. Through the minute description of London, Swift gave the readers a sense of surprise and disgust to stimulate them to perform good deeds and to realize their self-redemption.

**Key words:** Jonathan Swift; Poetry; Satire; City-Writing.

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Jonathan Swift's (1667-1745) brilliance in works such as *Gulliver's Travels* drowned out the uniqueness of his poetry, so few people paid attention to his poetry. Professor Liu Yiqing once appealed that "Swift wrote a lot of poetry in his life, and it was not until the latter part of this century that his poetry received the recognition it deserved, but the comprehensive discussion and identification of his poetry is still a task to be completed in the field of literary criticism" (Liu, p.93). Therefore, paying attention to and studying Swift's poems can help us get closer to his thoughts better and have a more comprehensive and profound understanding of this important essayist in the 18th century. Focusing on two of Swift's city poems, this paper accentuates his writing of the City of London and reveals the more profound thinking of the morality underlying the description of city.

### 1. CITY-WRITING

City is a concept that emerged recently, and the history of city is also a discipline of modern and contemporary times. There is an increasing number of people begin to pay attention to the development and formation of cities. However, as early as in Plato's *The Public* and Augustine's *City of God*, there were simple references to the concept of cities. Similarly, the history of cities was recorded in the texts of Renaissance and the nineteenth century, such as the description of London by John Stow (1525-1505) and Walter Besant (1836-1901) (Richard, p.7). Therefore, although the city is a modern concept, city-writing has begun since its formation of cities.

City, as the literati colony of upper class and refined scholars, is closely related to literary works. Therefore, the theme of city is vital in literature, or to some extent, literary works is the epitome of the society, "reading texts has become one of the ways to acquaint with the city" (Richard, p.9), because we can have a glimpse of the panorama of the city during a certain period, really or conjecturally. This is the significance of city writing in literary works.

However, the litterateurs' attention to the city is often reflected in the genre of the novel. In Richard Lehan's book, he mainly emphasizes the role of fiction in the construction of cities, but seldom touch upon the writing of cities in poetry. City poetry refers to the reflection of urban residents' psychological cognition of the surrounding environment and society in their daily life, expressing the humanistic care of the urban life. It is the poet's inspection and interpretation of the city. In fact, many English poets may have a description of cities, especially London. Both the romantic poets William Blake (1757-1827) and William Wordsworth (1770-1850) wrote a poem which is entitled "London", but the depictions of London are pole apart from each other. Wordsworth tended to praise of nature and cities, while

Blake interpreted the city symbolically, religiously and linguistically in combination with the conception of myth (Richard, p.5). Moreover, Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) has also wrote a poem entitled "London". He intolerantly wrote that the city "absorbs the dregs of every state of corruption" (Weitzman, p.473). In short, the poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries wrote about cities from a macro perspective but in different ways. Swift, however, uses means of realistic description to depict all the nooks of the city from a microscopic perspective. Swift is adept at details and he "brings the task of describing the mundane world focus eighteenth-century readers' attention sharply on what they might see and largely ignore every day" (Spacks, p.51). In this poem, he, by describing a London shower, directs readers' attention to the filthy and dirty environment and the true features of things, causing a serious reflection of them.

In addition to using the microscopic perspective of realism in his poems, Swift also exerts satire to ridicule all absurd things in life and stimulate readers to think in a critical way, so as to obtain the didactic achievement of morality. Swift is a prominent representative of the school of Menippean satire, which emphasizes the combination of parody and satire in one work (Michael, p.116). Frequently using the Menippean satire, Swift easily achieves the satirical effect what he wants by imitating the ancient works and exaggerating or changing the original meaning of it; or directly using the original text to his own works, producing more profound meanings or completely different meaning from the original text.

For example, in the poem "A Description of a City Shower" (1710), Swift cites the story of the Trojan horse by Virgil's *Aeneid*. He describes several foppish nonentities living in the City of London with the technique of heroic epic, in order to get the effect of satire and the goals of moralization, which obtains the effect of humor in the meanwhile. Moreover, the Menippean satire includes such poetic features as "authenticity", "fantasy", "mockery", and "carnivalization". The description of "filth" and "stench" in Swift's poem "Shower" is, to some extent, a kind of "carnival" anger. He exposes the dirty side of the prosperous city, and in his extreme description, he strongly criticizes the urban civilization, which may spur on further reflection of readers. In short, different from the style of metaphysical school and classicism, Swift incorporates the satire in his plain language to show every nook and cranny of the eighteenth-century London with striking authenticity, presenting the unknown side of it. He denotes a continuation of the urban poetry, but produces a special kind of aesthetic pleasure, moralization.

## 2. THE EMBODIMENT OF CITY-WRITING IN THE POEM

### 2.1 Filthy Street of London

Alexander Pope (1668-1744) once used the Roman name "Augustus" for London in his work *Windsor Forest*. To some apologists, Glover among them, London was greater even than ancient Rome at its height (Ellis, p.1). At the dawn of the eighteenth century, London not only was the most grand and prosperous city in commerce and trade, but also seemed to many regained supreme in knowledge and arts. Yet such a prosperous metropolis has its dirty and unsavoury side with appalling living conditions of its inhabitants. For example, animal entrails and excrement are thrown randomly into the streets, and the city's sanitation facilities are inadequate. "There are hundreds of houses in this metropolis which have no drainage whatsoever, and the greater part of them having filthy stinking overflowing cesspools" (Picard, 44). Sewage flew cross on the street wantonly with various discarded carcass and human excrement, converging in puddles. Even a chamber pot was directly emptied from an upstairs window and the continuous rain of London exacerbate this terrible situation, forming a kind of stink flow and giving out an unbearable smell. The Thames is not only the source of drinking water for London residents, but also a source of sewage where raw sewage flowing directly into the open trenches of the city, causing serious water pollution. In the dawn of the eighteenth century, a huge gin craze swept London because of the severe pollution. And the gin brought great harm to public health. William Hogarth (1697-1764) showed gin's destructive impact on people's lives in his painting "Gin Lane": due to excessive drinking, people were light-headed and shallow-minded and were irritated to do many appalling things, such as infanticide and suicide. And because of the addition to gin, people shelled out a fortune for purchasing this wine, which leads to poverty and hunger. The filthy and degenerated life of London residents was vividly depicted in Hogarth's painting.

This scene is also captured in the description of London street in Swift's poem, which is so vividly described that readers seems to be capable of smelling the stench of the sewer. On the eve of the shower, some dark elements are lurking, "Returning home at night, you'll find the sink/ Strike your offended sense with double stink" (lines 5-6)<sup>1</sup>. The phrase "Double stink" in these verses has two meanings. First of all, literally, it exacerbates the degree of stink, which means "more stink"; Second, apart from the sensory feeling, it also alludes to the moral degeneration of this city. Obviously, Swift satirize and criticize the ethos of the urban society between lines.

<sup>1</sup> All verses are quoted from Harold Williams' *The Poems of Jonathan Swift* (1958).

Besides, the streets are suffused with sundry garbage and the shower of London stirs up a mess of these garbage. What's worse is that "dust cemented by the rain/ Erects the nap, and leaves a mingled stain" (lines 29-30) because of the barreled carriages. It is no wonder that the "daggled females" crowd in the shop who "pretend to cheapen goods, but nothing buy" (line 34) with their dress stained. After the rain, the odor of flumes is stomach-churning. In London, there's nothing more abominable than butchers' stalls, "Sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts, and blood,/ Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all drenched in mud,/ Dead cats, and turnip tops, come tumbling down the flood" (lines 61-63). Even though these lines do not mention the odour of the ditches, readers can easily imagine the disgust from those filthy things, olfactorily and visually.

Swift cuts loose from the old fashion of plain, romantic, refined, and elegant style of rain-description, but depicts the real scenes of the city after raining, combining his verses with the notions of "filth" and "stench". It is a kind of carnivalesque anger, an anti-aesthetic style, which Swift was quite fascinated by. In his poem "A Panegyric of the Dean", he describes a toilet near the farm with a kind of jocose religious language in the voice of Lady Acheson. There are many unsightly and nasty words used in this poem, such as "Cloaca", "Sirmaster", "Pluckingmaster" and so on, for in his view, "fine ideas Vanish fast, While all the gross and filthy last" (Rogers, p.462). He describes the dark side of life with a mocking tone and an almost accusatory tone. He regards "vulgar and filth" as an eternal and good quality, which is bitter and profound, arousing certain moral reflection. Belinsky, a famous Russian critic, once said, "The authenticity of realistic poetry lies in its frankness without any pretension. Life is naked to the point of shyness, exposing all the pernicious habits and all the majesty together, as if being dissected with a scalpel" (Zhang, p.455). The description of Swift is so unembellished that authentically presents the ugly and filthy side of London streets after the rain.

Yet residents of the city sit by such squalor, or in other words, it is the indifference and fudge of them that give rise to the dirty situation of this prosperous city. After the Great Fire of London in 1666 destroyed most of the city center, it was rebuilt in a hurried and haphazard way. Subsequently, the rapid growth of urban population brought great pressure to urban planning.

The underground pipeline construction is barely satisfactory. Elm pipes were leaking in rapid succession, for "elm trees do not grow on straight lengths like pine trees, so the average length of each pipe would perhaps not exceed 7 feet or so. A leaking was waiting to happen at each point" (Picard, p.53), thus those pipes often squirt into the streets, mixing all of the garbage and forming a flowing stench. In addition, at that time, most people were

selfish. Without the awareness of pollution prevention and environmental protection, they always blew off polluted water and other wastes into the underground pipelines, which led to severe water pollution and disgusting smell. Tobias Smollet, in his book *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), described London water in detail: "if I would drink water, I must quaff the mawkish contents of an aqueduct, exposed to all manner of defilement; or swallow that which comes from the river Thames, impregnated with all the filth of London and Westminster—human excrement is the least offensive part of the concrete, which is composed of all the drugs, minerals and poisons used in mechanics and manufacture, enriched with the putrefying carcasses of beasts and men, and mixed with the scourings of all the washtubs, kennels and common sewers within the bills of morality..." (Picard, p.54).

When people are fed up with the idealized pastoral poetry prevailing at that time and the praise to the prosperity of London, they will find everything fresh and new in Swift's descriptions of fetor and sordidness of London streets. In shock, people will have the shame of the rugged environment and further reflection of pollution prevention and environmental protection. From this perspective, Swift's style of "filthy" city-writing has unique moral significance and aesthetic pleasure.

## 2.2 Depraved Inhabitants of London Streets

"In the eighteen lines of *A Description of a Morning* (1709), Jonathan Swift suggests that various forms of corruption and laziness belong as inevitably as the rising sun to the urban scene" (Spacks, p.50). Swift's city poems not only depict the urban natural environment, but also focalize on people from all walks of life living on the streets of London, such as Betty, the bedmate of master, the slip-shod prentice, the floor-sweeping maiden and duns at his lordship's gate, showing a various and vivid picture of city life, which increases the vitality of Swift's city writing. Swift's London, noisy and blatant, is the epitome of the whole British society with all kinds of social problems.

Swift portrays a frivolous "queen" in the third stanza (lines 13-30) of his poem "Shower". In this poem, however, "queen" is not the prostitutes in general sense, but a dissolute and wanton female who was openly flirting with others with the mop in her hands. Here Swift deliberately portrays an image of slatternly and fallen London female with such a pejorative word "queen". It is self-evident that Swift's satire is pungent and bitter, for in the eighteenth century, London was a prosperous city as well as a sexually corruptible city. Horgarth, in serious painting "A Harlot's Progress", describes the harlotry popularized in eighteenth-century London, satirizing the profligate and depraved ethos at that time. In another poem "Morning" he also depicts a dissolute female Betty,

"Now Betty from her master's bed had flown, / And softly stole to discompose here own" (Lines 3-4). Betty is the incarnation of "Aurora"<sup>2</sup>, goddess of the dawn in Roman mythology and Latin poetry. "And now Aurora, Harbinger of Day, / Rose from the Bed, where aged Tithon lay;/ Unbarr'd the Doors of Heav'n, and overspread/ The Path of Phoebus with a blishing Red" (Savage, p.129). Using an Aurora-type figure, Betty, Swift eulogizes the undying affection that was lacking between man and women at the time. The indulgence of Betty's life was a typical characteristic of women in the eighteenth century. By parodying myth and epic, Swift wrote with classical and elegant form of literature to serve as a foil to the depraved moral life in the City of London, achieving a strong effect of satire and thought-provoking.

In addition to the satire and criticism of prostitutes or fallen females, Swift also portrays the eighteenth-century British "Fop" or "Rake" in a playful tone. "'Fop' or 'Rake' usually refers to a group of people who are extravagant, lavish, peacockish and depraved, and people who harass others, including women" (Wang, p.47). In "Shower" (lines 1-12), Swift depicts the "Dulman" wandering in the London streets. It is a unique word formation of Swift. "Dulman" is a compound word combining "Dull" and "man", which refers to the British people who living in the City of London, bored and slothful. They hang out in coffee houses and speak with fervor and assurance, but what they talk about is just the weather in London. It can be easily seen from here that how boring a London debauchee's life is. Moreover, "The Templar"<sup>3</sup> spruce, while every spout's abroach, / Stay till 'tis fair, yet seems to call a coach" (Lines 35-36). They are so vain that even short of money<sup>4</sup> they still pretend to call a coach. Then Swift graphically portrays "the beau", "Boxed in a chair the beau impatient sits" (Line 43). Here Swift cites the

story of Virgil's *Aeneid*, describing the image of "the beau" sitting in the sedan chair with the epic, grand and sublime pattern of narratology. Swift compares the voice of sword thrusts the Trojan horse to the sound of drain dripping on the sedan, and the beau sitting in the sedan chair to the Greek heroes hidden in the Trojan horse, pungently satirizing and criticizing the faineant playboy. In this scene, we may certainly find "in the comparison of beau to Greek a dark warning of London's imminent peril, a repressed cry that the enemy is already within the gate. On the other hand, the enemy is no invader but London's own wicked progeny" (Fischer, p.107). Parodying Virgil's *Aeneid*, Swift sounds a warning to the degenerating city, and hoping to wake up the London residents to be good.

In the meanwhile, Swift also exposes corrupted and chaotic social order. People gradually lose trust in the corrupted government, for public officers bend the law for their personal gains. And ubiquitous fog, hanging over the dark roundabout alleys and gloomy edifices, makes London the paradise of criminals where murder, rob and assault are commonly seen. At that time, however, the City of London did not have an integrated law enforcement agency. "London has neither troop, patrol nor any sort of regular Watch and it is guarded during nights only by old men chosen from the dregs of people who have no arms but a lantern and a pole" (Picard, p.43). It is no wonder that the burglaries happened in the night were beyond count. The Bailiffs in the eighteenth century, not the law enforcement personnel in anything like the modern sense, were incompetent, inefficient and were not responsible for their position. By far the most important issue for them is tax collection, for the convict who was released or acquitted must paid certain "turnky fees". Swift jokingly suggests that these prisoners have been allowed out by the turnkey so that they can steal the money which they need to pay in. Just as described in the "Morning", "The turnkey now his flock returning sees, / Duly let out a-nights to steal for fees" (Lines 15-16) (Williams, pp.124-125). The "returning flock" is the prisoners who steal money in the night, and then again is taken into prison. It can be easily seen that this kind of social phenomenon was a common occurrence at that time only from the use of the word "Duly". The indirection of Swift's parody is a telling indictment of Londoners' inability to recognize their own sin. "The watchful bailiffs take their silent stands" (line 17) and they are doing the same job as the "duns" of line 13. Those administrative officials live in a corrupted and meaningless way, not attending to their proper duties. In the third stanza of the "Shower", for example, "Triumphant Tories and desponding Whigs/ Forget their feuds, and join to save their wigs" (lines 41-42). Being political rivals and having experienced fierce competition<sup>5</sup> which

<sup>2</sup> Aurora is the noble goddess of the dawn, symbolizing hope and light. Aurora falls in love with the mortal man Tithonus. As time goes by, Tithonus is getting old, while Aurora still stays young. This couple is doomed to be separated and their affection is not everlasting.

<sup>3</sup> In the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Alexander Pope, in his poem Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot (p. 2554 line 211), annotated "Templar" as law students. I agree with his annotation, because in the 18th century, the lawyer's position is relatively high, and their students need to pay high tuition fees to them. So, it is obvious that the economic situation of these law students was in bad condition, which is a sharp contrast to their extravagant expense in the following lines. Besides, Templar enjoys a reputation as playboy in eighteenth century. (See Jain, *Eighteenth-Century English Poetry: The Annotated Anthology*, 1994.)

<sup>4</sup> Because of the openness of the English aristocracy in the 18th century, even a poor man who was gifted and willing to work hard for his dream could enter the aristocracy by a number of means, one of which was to become a lawyer. The "law student" (Templar), who had not yet become an aristocrat and was struggling financially because of high tuition fees, was vain and extravagant in the aristocratic way of living, travelling by carriage to show off his noble status. The fees of coaches in 18th-century London were so expensive that an ordinary law student could not afford them. (Ibid.)

<sup>5</sup> The Tories and Whigs had different moods after the Tories' landslide election victory in 1710.

just happened, Tories and Whigs “forget their feuds”, what they concerned about is “saving their wigs” when the shower poured down. In fact, here is the idiomatic satire of Swift. He declares that both Tories and Whigs are essentially alike, for what they do in their political career is such trifles like “saving their wigs”, which is insignificant and meaningless.

The life and spiritual state of Londoners were degrading, and the ethos of the society went downhill at that time. By the description of street landscape and the morning Swift denounces the social mores of London and implies the miserable fate of the City of London that is being destined to be “devoted”. The first two stanzas of the poem “Shower” depict various presages of the shower and sundry activities of Londoners, from which portray the characteristics of them, hypocrisy, idleness, boredom and so on. And the flood elicited by continuous drops and the devastated and filthy streets provide strong evidence for environmental disruption, moral degeneration and worsening social conduct. Both the prediction of showers and the activities of London residents are depraved, for “the flood come down, threatening with deluge this devoted town” (Lines 31-32); therefore, the City of London was doomed. But is the fate of “being doomed” the original intention of Swift’s poems? Obviously, the answer is no. Swift has mixed feelings about London. On the one hand, he loves the City of London; but on the other hand, he worries about the future of this depraved and nasty city and hope that London will be finally redeemed. The frequently mention of the “Flood” in his poems suggests the destruction of this city. And Swift’s interpretation of the “Noah Flood” was influenced by John Milton “for whom this was not so and who could consequently see both the horror and the grace of the legend of Noah and grasp their connection” (Fischer, pp.102-103). And thus, in Swift’s poems, it also contains the “grace of God”. “Not yet the dust had shunned the unequal strife, / But, aided by the wind, fought still for life” (“Shower”, Lines 23-24). The “dust” refers to the clay which God made the body of man. The dust still struggles for life even with the unequal strife, namely, there are some people who strive to survive in life, against all the obstructions of morality and social conducts of this fallen city. Therefore, London still boasts a promising future. Swift, starting with the description of the City of London, aspires to reveal the universal truth that cities are more prone to be degenerated because of the rapid development of economy and urbanization, with the symptoms of filth, corruption and moral depravity, which will eventually lead to destruction. However, the unyielding struggle of people provides a hint of possibility for a promising future of London.

### 3. DESTRUCTION OR REDEMPTION?

In the poems “Shower” and “Morning”, Swift, cutting

loose from the creation features of traditional poetry, treating the ugliness of daily life as creation objects and fetching fragment in real life, represents the seamy side of the surroundings where people live in (Zhang, 2017). He reveals the street filth and moral depravity with the ploy of true-life. Furthermore, Swift’s city-writing is supplemented by satire, combing criticism, and humor together. He attacks and reveals pernicious habits and hypocrisy of the eighteenth-century London in a pungent and profound way and strives to discover the underlying morality and thus achieve the aim of correcting or deterring crimes, amending the world as far as possible. Swift’s city-writing serves three aims: namely, denouncement, reformation, and redemption. “He sought to make the British see the actuality of their lives in order that they might be impelled to improve them” (Spacks, p.52). Swift depicts the unbeknown side of London in a vitally authentically way, denouncing the social ethos of the city. And he spurs, with the lousy and vulgar language, the Londoners to improve their lives and to do good turns, so as to save the City of London.

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