

Morality and Evil in Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*

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Abstract

Dandyism reflected the social reality and the rebellious spirit of resistance within 19th century Western Europe. As an aesthetic dandy, Baudelaire combined form, spirit and rebellion. He forever sought beauty with passion and sincerity. His work was about a decadent spirit and wild ideas, he displayed to his world the evil flowers of aestheticism, and thus fulfilled the last flash of light of an aesthetic heroism. The article investigates the dandyism of Baudelaire and his aesthetic revolt, and how his works represented rebellion towards the bourgeois authority.

Keywords: morality, evil, Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*

1. Introduction

The dandy sought refuge in the revolt and non-reproducible aesthetic attitude,

according to Moers, becoming “a pose for the intellectual in revolt” (Moers, 1960, p. 124): the figure of dandy depicts the aristocracy of the future and represents the pure intellectual or artist. Garelick agrees that the dandy is an artistic figure, which constantly aims at creating “a self-generated, independent, and tradition-free royalty of the self” (Garelick, 1998, p. 24). As a rebellious dandy and artist undergoing a spiritual crisis, Baudelaire has no faith in enlightenment or morals viewing the latter as contributing to mere mediocrity.

Aestheticism is essential to the dandy, and is always central to understanding dandyism. Regenia Gagnier succinctly argues that “the history of dandyism is inseparable from that of aestheticism.” (Gagnier, 1992, p. 3) The enhancement of beauty in the world and a lifestyle devoted to aesthetic performance is intrinsic to the dandy's persona. Gloria Ortiz, in her research into dandyism, points out: “The epitome of selfish irresponsibility, the dandy was ideally free of all human commitments that conflict with taste: passions, moralities, ambitions, politics or occupations.” (Ortiz, 1991, p. 119) However, what distinguishes the dandy from more conventional aesthetic displays and concerns is the fact that the dandy sees that evil and ugliness also provides an opportunity to enhance human aesthetic experience. The dandy sees that beauty also exists in evil and evil produces beauty. This is close to denying the relationship between art and morality, and it involves a radical re-appreciation of the aesthetic and meaning of evil. Again it is a stance which challenges traditional moral values and bourgeois standards. Camus's saying may summarize the dandies' situation, “Rebellion is the common ground on which every man bases his first values. I rebel—therefore we exist.” (Pine, 1988, p. 36)

Baudelaire's idea of the dandy is built upon his awareness of the spiritual crisis of modernity and his observations of urban social poverty and spiritual decay and squalor. In this respect he was opposed to the more pervasive bourgeois faith in Enlightenment rationality, social progress, and its opposition to religious authority, and tradition. As against bourgeois or Enlightenment rationality, Baudelaire depicted evil as bodily, as demonic presences. He knew that the Enlightenment view was that demons and succubae are products of superstition, but he saw that this way of treating evil was far closer to the inner workings of evil. Baudelaire writes in *The Sick Muse*: “Have they—green succubus and rosy imp—Poured on you fear and love out of their urns?” (Baudelaire, 2008, p. 25), “Which would make the dark angels swarm with delight, In the folds of the draperies” (Ibid, p. 231) in *A Martyr*, “Meanwhile, corrupting demons of the air slowly wake up like men of great affairs, And, flying, bump our shutters and our eaves” (Ibid, p. 193) in *Dusk*, “Or dance against their will, poor little bells that a remorseless demon rings!” (Ibid, p. 183) in *The Little Old Women*, All such representations of evil conform far more to folklore than the philosophy of the Enlightenment, but Baudelaire sees a metaphysical wisdom in such

folklore and that informs his own depiction and insights into evil.

2. The Morality in *The Flower of Evil*

Enlightened attitudes to morality and reason were largely dominated by the middle class in France which saw itself as providing the “moral” backbone of society. However, although rich, and educated, this class was perceived by Baudelaire as contributing little to art and culture, and also vulgar and conservative in its aesthetic and moral taste. Indeed, for Baudelaire, mediocrity was a constant of human history but he saw the bourgeoisie as particularly repellant in its mediocrity. He wrote: “true, mediocrity has always dominated the scene in every age, that is beyond dispute; but what is also as true as it is distressing is that the reign of mediocrity is stronger than ever, to the point of triumphant obtrusiveness” (Baudelaire, 1972, p. 287). For Baudelaire it was artists, largely social outcasts (Gaunt, 1945, p. 13), who provided genuine taste in arts and morality. 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.” (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 64). Unwilling to cater to the ruling class and public taste, Baudelaire chose the former and aimed to create a new, independent art world in his works.

The revolutionary atmosphere of the 19th century also provided a further context for Baudelaire to express his contempt for the bourgeoisie. Baudelaire was an enthusiastic supporter and participant in armed worker uprisings, publishing numerous political articles during the 1848 revolt. However, after the failure of the 1848 revolution and the 1851 revolt against Louis Bonaparte, Baudelaire’s passion for revolution vanished. From then on, he took a very pessimistic view of revolution and his dislike of hypocritical bourgeois morality grew with each passing day. His hostility to bourgeois morality became uncompromising after that, and his animosity toward the use of art for moral instruction not only increased but made him completely rethink the relationship between evil and morality and art.

In part, Baudelaire’s antithesis to the use of moral instruction in art stems from the fact that he did not see the bourgeois worthy of providing moral instruction or of talking about art. Regarding the relationship between the French middle classes and art, Baudelaire expressed his position succinctly in *Théophile Gautier*. He noted that “the French... are not artistic, naturally artistic; that public is interested in philosophy, ethics, engineering, enjoys stories and anecdotes, is anything you like, but never spontaneously artistic” and “where we ought to see only beauty, our public seeks only truth.” (Baudelaire, 1972, p. 279). To correct this, 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.” (Ibid, p. 267). Poetry should not seek so-called truth, or morality, because this lessens the artistic effects of poetry and can even lead to the death of art.

In contrast to the bourgeoisie who set the social rules (even for literature and art), the works of Baudelaire ran completely contrary to production that served authority and market demand—the real sources of bourgeois morality, according to Baudelaire. As Bourdieu says he was “making a break with the dominants over the principle of the existence of the artist as artist, institute it as a rule of operation of the field in the process of formation.” (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 62). Thus Bourdieu rightly sees that challenge to tradition in Baudelaire’s work reflects “the most extreme position of the avant-garde, that of revolt against all authorities and all institutions, beginning with literary institutions.” (Ibid, p. 64).

Another part of Baudelaire’s aesthetic and one which brings him into confrontation with the more traditional and, indeed, “borrowed” aesthetic of the bourgeoisies was Baudelaire’s insight into the nature of the fragmentary and accelerated nature of modernity. As he says in one of his most well known quotes about the modern soul and modernity: “And so, walking or quickening his pace, he goes his way, for ever in search. ...He is looking for that indefinable something we may be allowed to call “modernity”...Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable.” (Baudelaire, 1972, p. 403). Baudelaire found a new creativity by viewing modernity as a transient way of life, pursuing the negative and critical, and emphasizing the unique aesthetic experience of the individual. For Baudelaire, modern life was like a vast dictionary from which he was in search of the vocabulary for creativity and a steady stream of verbal nutrients. For Baudelaire, the aim of an artist when confronted with the reality of modernity itself and the modern soul who was the real source of modernity was “to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory.” (Ibid, p. 402) For Baudelaire, beauty has not disappeared from modernity, but its shapes are unique to itself. In modern times, beauty appears in the least

expected places—though he says “beauty always has an element of strangeness. But I do mean that it always contains a certain degree of strangeness, of simple, unintended, unconscious strangeness, and that this form of strangeness is what gives it the right to be called beauty.” (Ibid, p. 119)

In *The Salon of 1846*, Baudelaire posited that:

all forms of beauty, like all possible phenomena, have within them something eternal and something transitory—an absolute and a particular element. Absolute and eternal beauty does not exist, or rather it is nothing but an abstract notion, creamed off from the general surface of different types of beauty. The specific element of each type of beauty comes from the passions, and just as we each have our particular passions, so we have our own type of beauty. (Ibid, p. 104)

This passage is an apt summary of the dandy’s special attitude toward beauty. He maintains that absolute and eternal beauty does not exist—only changing beauty with a particular form. This particularity of beauty is associated closely with transitivity and modernity. Second, beauty comes from subjective passion, residing in subjective feelings and not external objects; thus, it does not matter whether objects are beautiful or ugly.

Baudelaire therefore takes modernity as a basic starting point of his aesthetic. As an artist he is interested in the beauty that he finds in his world. But his world is an urban world, with all its squalor, decadence and fragmentation.

Therefore Baudelaire extolled the notion of the beauty of decadence, an appreciation of hideousness, which establishes the third rule of Baudelaire’s aestheticism (the first and second rule being formalism and correspondence). For Baudelaire, an aesthetic appreciation of decadence is a more mature form of art consistent with the experience of modern life. It therefore essential to distinguish between different historical stages of aesthetic experience: “The phrase “a literature of decadence” implies that there is a scale of literatures, a literature in infancy, a literature in childhood, in adolescence, etc. That the term presupposed an inevitable and providential process, like some inescapable decree; and what then could be more unjust than to reproach us for accomplishing the mysterious law?” (Ibid, p. 188).

3. The Evil in *The Flower of Evil*

It is in light of this more “mature” aesthetic that Baudelaire looked upon ugly social phenomena, unpleasant natural images, and human evil, from the perspective of aesthetics and vividly described the darkness and poor conditions of modern Paris in the 19th century. The evils that Dante depicts in *Purgatorio*, there are eight deadly sins: anger, hatred, jealousy, greed, deception, killing, laziness and alcoholism (Alighieri, 1961), all are fully and thoroughly expressed in Baudelaire’s work. The two words “hell” and “evil” are frequently used to describe this city. They are, in turn, closely entangled with men’s inherent evil. It is from these evils—crimes, poverty, raggedness and decay—that Baudelaire draws on for materials to build his imaginary world to develop the themes of his poems. In this way, Baudelaire’s innovative efforts in *The Flower of Evil* opened up the themes of modern poetry: ugliness and evil appeared in modern literature and artistic works with increasing frequency. His observations of the darkness and ugliness of Paris of the poor, the blind, and prostitutes, indeed all who are at the bottom of the social ladder, and are abandoned by the modern city. Furthermore, nature, in Baudelaire’s eyes, is also filled with ugly images, such as graves, carcasses, skeletons, maggots, evil, death and ghosts. All these things are true in his portrayal. In this respect, Baudelaire can be seen as a dissector of society, a close observer of social tumors.

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.” (Dessoir, 1970, p. 169)

Baudelaire also often used ugly and evil image to depict the spiritual situation of a person. Taking *Spleen (IV)* as an example, all the images in this poem are ugly: a sweaty cell, a frantic bat, the rotting beams, the heavy prison bars, the disgusting spiders, the lost and homeless souls, the long corteges and the black flag, and so on. Those inauspicious images come in a continuous stream, they are disgusting and ugly, and cause spiritual disturbance. Ugly and evil images in *The Flower of Evil* render a unique aesthetic beauty within a terrifying and oppressive atmosphere. The close connection Baudelaire established between ugliness and evil and beauty also led him to see the beauty in hell, the devil, death, carcasses.

Baudelaire also saw vice as something true. In *Of Virtuous Plays and Novels*, he argues that “vice is alluring; then show it as alluring; but brings in its train peculiar moral maladies and suffering; then describe them. Study all the sores, like a doctor in the course of his hospital duties, and the good-sense school, the school dedicated

exclusively to morality, will find nothing to bite on. Is crime always punished, virtue rewarded? No.” (Ibid, p. 112) One can easily discern Baudelaire’s belief that, compared with virtue, vice is more tempting and has more aesthetic value, reflecting the real aspects of human morality. In Baudelaire’s poems, “evil” figures like drunkards, opium addicts, gamblers, and whores appear everywhere. People in his works are addicted to vice. Baudelaire appreciates vice because it can reveal the reality of society. Likewise he prefers these “evil” outsiders of bourgeois morality to the so called moral citizen. To Baudelaire, good and bad are not absolute either in morally or an aesthetically absolute terms; context is what determines their value in an artistic work.

Baudelaire created a fantastic and splendid world, conveying his eagerness for health, power and beauty—at times intermingled with evil. This is evident in his treatment of Satan. In traditional literary works, Satan is the incarnation of evil, but also he possesses power and courage to bear pain. Baudelaire greatly compliments Satan in the *Litanies of Satan*, granting readers a brand new aesthetic experience, a kind of great, aggressive strength of will as well as emotional shock and release. Baudelaire once recorded in his journals that “it may be supposed that I have difficulty in not concluding from them that the most perfect type of manly beauty is Satan—as Milton saw him.” (Auden, 1957, p. 44) Therefore, *The Flower of Evil* often presents evil as exquisite, and Baudelaire uses imperfect, inharmonious, fragmentary and destructive language to disclose the true ugliness and absurdity of reality. This awakens people from traditional paralysis, so that they realize clearly the falsity that tradition has spread, reject the fantasy of perfection and integrity pursued by tradition, and destroy the exquisite: the unification of the truth, virtue and beauty. In traditional significance, the exquisite is the basic characteristic of cosmogony. The world is God’s art work. Traditional art protects the existence and dignity of the world. From *The Flower of Evil* onwards, modern art humanizes, becoming an independent power of creation. This humanity defies God.

This defiance of what has become tradition is behind Baudelaire’s use of paradox to unsettle that tradition. Baudelaire’s *The Flowers of Evil*. Beginning with the title itself, is a confrontation through an apparent contradiction, as it juxtaposes flowers and evil, generally considered to belong to completely different worlds. The confrontation continues through the titles of many of the poems, such as *The Happy Corpse*, *The Sick Muse*, and *The Sorrows of the Moon*, as in the following poetic verses contained within the poems: “That can make heroes cold and children warm” (Baudelaire *The Flowers of Evil*, 2008, p. 45) in *Hymn to Beauty*; “Within the sleepy brute, an angel wakes” (Ibid, p. 95) in *The Spiritual Dawn*; “Yes, it is She! Though black, yet full of light” in *A Phantom—the Blackness*; “Well of Verity, limpid and black” (Ibid, p. 161) in *The Irremediable*; “Like other exiles, both ridiculous and sublime” (Ibid, p. 177) in *The Swan*; and “With strong melancholy, the poem thought himself, “I might as well be king of rainy lands—wealthy and young, but impotent and old.”” Such kinds of untraditional expressions confusing right and wrong shocked readers, but intrigued them as well.

A Carcass begins with the stanza, “Remember, my love, the object we saw / That beautiful morning in June.” (Ibid, p. 59) The words “love” and “remember” indicate that the poem is about the memory of lovers. However, after creating a romantic atmosphere, Baudelaire continues, “By a bend in the path a carcass reclined.” (Ibid) The sharp contrast between love and death and between the ugly carcass and the beautiful morning create a great contradiction and an intensive conflict. “And the sky cast an eye on this marvelous meat / As over the flowers in bloom.” (Ibid, p. 61). He then used the phrases “marvelous” and “flowers in bloom” to describe the corrupted corpse and “a musical sound like babbling brooks and the breeze” to describe the nauseating sound of flies and the maggots eating the meat; he even compares the corpse to an “angel” and a “regent of grace.” A series of exaggerated and satirical paradoxes create a humorous impression.

Humorous as the language is, readers are caught between tears and laughter. The carcass itself becomes fascinating and vivid, bright in color, like a painting and comparable in its beautiful imagery to a flower blossoming in the sun. However, once the gilt is off, the carcass suddenly again becomes hideous and disgusting. “One could say that this carcass, blown with vague breath, / Lived in increasing itself.” (Ibid). The imagery of fecundity is the sign of life, a symbol of the flourishing of all existence, which, traditionally, is inevitably associated with high and passionate spirit. However, it is used by Baudelaire to depict the picture of a carcass, devoured, left only in tatters, and filled with faint breath. To depict ugliness with beauty strikes the eyes and rouses the mind.

According to Baudelaire, art can uniquely use “in-depth rhetoric” to explain the motives hidden deep in nature. Baudelaire’s poetry is built on the dandy’s psychological understanding of the world, which creates a meaningful combination of spiritual areas and psychological space. The traditional logic of space-time and physical law are violated, as the dandy’s final goal has nothing to do with “physics”, but with “the mind”, which is not limited by space and time. Moreover, the natural combination of poetic language and traditional structure disappear in the dandy’s eyes, and the structure of language is no longer established by usage but controlled by the poet’s

subjective feelings. According to Baudelaire, “Handling a language with skill is to practice a kind of evocative witchcraft.” (Baudelaire, 1972, p. 272) Baudelaire loves to depict the beauty of misery and melancholy in his poems, sometimes even to a morbid degree. He would rather write about melancholy than pleasure, regret rather than repentance, and morbid love rather than happy love, because he cannot find the latter in his real life.

The dandy does not view such natural ugliness with scorn and resentment and he does not scold the wicked world. There is no traditional moral appeal here. Instead, for example, when Baudelaire describes the carcass, he does so in an apathetic and indifferent manner, a nonchalant tone that nevertheless enables him to depict the rotten carcass with ghoulish fascination. Such an appalling and abnormal image or event provides an opportunity for the dandy to show his artistic excellence. It is not that amorality is a symptom of disinterest, or of emotional indifference. On the contrary, the more detailed and vivid the depiction is, the more the dandy’s emotions break the surface of the coldness, nonchalance and cynicism built by words. In other words, the dandy does not directly show his indignation and condemnation, and neither does he directly interrogate the reader about their humanity.

The same violent paradox that Baudelaire deploys to explore death and beauty can be found in his cynical attitude toward society and sympathy for the poor of Paris—this too is but another part of the rebellious performance of the dandy. In *Les Sept Vieillards (The Seven Old Men)* he again shocks through the reversal of emotions. Literally, the language in this poem is full of persiflage, ridiculousness, disrespect and disgust. Almost all the words are derogatory: “Judas”, “monsters”, “evil glitter”, “Trick Phoenix”, “hatred”, “parade from Hell”, etc. When encountering many vagrants, the dandy asks “To what conspiracy was I exposed, / What wicked chance humiliated me?” (Baudelaire, 2008, p. 179) On the surface, we cannot feel Baudelaire’s sympathy for these broken vagrants in tattered clothes who are resentful and hostile to life. However, if we think and apprehend it rationally, we can feel his anger and indignation as well as the deep sympathy for those living at the foot of the social ladder. The poet speaks ironically and hides his true emotions. And that intensity is conveyed through the brutality of the bestial conditions and types he depicts.

In *To a Girl of Malabar*, he asks, “O happy child, why do you want to see / Our France, a country reaped by misery.” In *Duellum* he laments, “This pit is Hell, its denizens our friends! / Amazon, let us roll there guiltlessly / In spiteful fervour, for eternity!” (Ibid, p. 71) Baudelaire is not uncritical of the economic system and a social situation in which there is great divide between classes. But what makes his position untypical and keeps it removed from a more conventional left wing position of the time is that the basis of his sympathy for the poor is not their lack of material comfort as such, but the limbo of their existence, their marginality which removes them from the bourgeois ethos with all its comfort and conventional moral certainties. Therefore Baudelaire does not “speak for the poor” in a political sense. Baudelaire’s humanism was reflected in his description of spiritual agony. In the second part of *Parisian Scenes in The Flowers of Evil*, he described the groans, pain, and despair of ragged old men, beggars, prostitutes, the blind, thieves, and the poor in the crowded streets in Paris. In *The Death of the Poor*, he expresses his belief that the life of the poor is so miserable that they even welcome death: “It is death that consoles and allow us to live. / Alas! That life’s end should be all of our hope.” (Ibid, p. 277). After comparing death with an angel and heaven, he writes, “[Death is] the glory of gods, it’s the mystical loft, / It’s the purse of the poor and their true native land, / It’s the porch looking out on mysterious skies!” (Ibid, p. 279). For the poor, the only way to heaven is through death, as only death can free them from a miserable world. Reflecting Baudelaire’s view of Paris as a black hell filled with evil and hostility, *Parisian Scenes* presents a cold industrialized world in which ugly characters dwell. In *Dusk*, he evokes cruel diseases, demons, thieves, hospitals, and gambling, as well as “the scholar who is bowed with heavy head, the broken worker falling into bed” while “old prostitution blazes in the streets.” (Ibid, p. 193) Comparing the different corners of the city to wild beasts and anthills, Baudelaire’s Paris becomes a threatening circus of danger and death where no one is safe except the ruling class and the upper ranks. In *Dawn*, he describes a cold morning as the laboring people begin their work with neither hope nor sunlight.

Baudelaire also explores the ugliness of humanity. He notes people’s pursuit of sensory enjoyment, abnormal murders, and homosexuality, in his literary works. Baudelaire celebrates the sexually transgressive—the intimacy between gays or lesbians, etc. All this is grist in the mill for the dandy’s desire to overthrow tradition and totally transform the idealized aesthetic standards of traditional morality. In *The Flower of Evil*, the depiction of horrible reality, ugly images, and the description of abnormal humanity, indicate his revolt against traditional aesthetics. Replaced by special and abnormal beauty, the earlier beauty of permanence and transcendence in literary and artistic work has all gone.

In relation to beauty as a completely independent and pure ideal realm, Baudelaire’s effort to explore the beauty of evil eschewed the narrow social characteristic of beauty, and enriched literary art. Confronting ugliness and evil in reality, Baudelaire created a man-made heaven in art for himself. His appreciation of ugliness and

creativity reflected the dandy's search for the condition and meaning in people's life in modern society and displayed modern tragic color and a rebellious world view. Besides the influence of his own unpleasant experience in life, Baudelaire's unique aesthetic thought was also the inevitable fruit of western spiritual development towards freedom, which also contributes to the dandy's unique point of view in art and morality. However, *The Flower of Evil* does not defy art; rather, it saves and sublimates art, and gives art a new life. Modern art is constituted differently from traditional harmonious unification, and implies opposition to society.

Baudelaire's appreciation of ugliness pioneered the notion of valuing ugliness in modern art, which breaks the traditional aesthetic principle of the inseparability of truth, goodness and beauty, and reflects modern aesthetics and artistic discipline. He not only made a great theoretical contribution to western literature by providing evil materials and special aesthetic theory, but also asserted profound influence on the entire Aestheticism Movement.

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