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Beauty Finds its Way

The true power and wonder books create come from the unique use of words that allow readers to engage with the text in front of them. To allow this connection, writers use literary devices such as metaphors and similes to stimulate the five senses of the human body. This technique of writing can work because the reader is able to recall certain smells, sounds, visions, and even tastes that bring back experiences and thus create that connection to the writing. Frederic Prokosch is the author of one of the most intoxicating novels that intertwine far away lands that are being swallowed by death and despair with nothing but beauty and elegance in the tale of a narrator's journey through Asia. Themes such as love, death, sexuality, and sensation all ripple throughout the book and come alive through Prokosch's touch of literary writing.

War is a theme brought up in certain scenes, particularly with Antoine. At the end of chapter three, Antoine is filling the narrator in on his views of war, and the way in which Prokosch subtly moves from a harsh subject of war into the description of the landscape is creative:

War was inevitable, he said, if Europe behaved like that.

The road wound northward in and out among the rocks. Then we passed through the rolling hills spotted, rather surprisingly, with little orchards and groves of birch-trees, their snowy bark peeling in dark lines across the trunk, their canary-colored leaves fluttering from the twigs. Then the land grew wasted and flat and open again, great flocks pasturing among the stones, desolate walled villages with cone-shaped huts shivering in the sunlight.

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The narrator comes into contact with characters that focus on the suffering taking place around them. After a discussion of war, the narrator cannot help but notice the scenery around him. The hills that supply these tiny orchards in the distance do surprise him, giving the impression that through this land of desolation, fertility and life lives on. The exquisite description of the bark color, mixing black and white pieces falling off the trunks give a metaphor of the happiness being pulled back and inspected by the other characters, only to find that beneath it all is despair and darkness. The sharp colors continue with such a color as canary yellow, showing how vibrant the world can be. Towards the end of the passage despair creeps back in with words like *wasted*, *desolate*, and *walled*, all giving feelings of loneliness in these foreign lands. The huts are being bathed in the sunlight, and despite this warmth that the sun brings into life, the adjective shiver still draws the mood back to the despair of the villages around them. Coming in contact with different women in the novel causes the narrator to experience very sensual moments.

Hermonie is a young lady that makes a lasting impression on the narrator and her memory arises whenever he is in a time of great despair. When he is on a boat with her and her father, his vision of her is quite striking:

The wind blew her hair gently across her cheeks, and I could see the rise and fall of her breast and tremor in her white throat. My heart grew big, not precisely with desire nor precisely with affection-rather with the longing for something distant and unattainable.

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The way in which the narrator views Hermonie makes her out to look calm and sensuous, enjoying the wind the earth has to offer her. Noticing the complementing features of her hair,

cheeks, and breasts would push a man to become aroused and yearn to indulge in thoughts of having her. In this instance however, the narrator does not use the sensuality Hermonie gives him for sexual or desire, but in a more startling way. Hermonie is most likely flaunting herself to the narrator, and for him to not necessarily pick up on that and focus more on a broader aspect of his situation brings the thoughts of despair back into the picture. The narrator has no problem with becoming intimate with women he does not know more of than from a conversation, and instead of explicitly detailing his desirable thoughts about her, he is thinking more on what he does not have. The two words, *distant* and *unattainable*, drag the mood of the scene on the beach to a depressing halt. Distant, being far away and possibly giving the audience a view as to why he is going on this journey-do people need to go to foreign lands to find true love? -and the word unattainable almost makes it seem like the narrator is viewing the gain of a woman he could love as impossible. The beauty of the woman is taken away by the choice of words and the pull is for thoughts of loneliness instead of love. Even though despair comes through in many other passages that deal with love or happiness, Prokosch writes his scenes of complete desolateness with beauty.

Being in foreign land causes suspicion of him being a spy, and he is thrown into a Turkish jail. Despite the narrator's lack of attention to her body in the previous passage, it seems as though Hermonie helps him through the cold nights:

Of my lovely Hermonie, of the twilight on the little beach which looked as if a candle were forever being held next to it...I'd grow breathless thinking of what lay

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hidden under those silky folds, of the smooth skin, the soft curving hollows, the tender pink details, the slant of her hips upraised, the moist little curls. Sometimes I could almost feel her beside me, and I'd reach out my hand and run it along the cold stone, remembering and

hoping.

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The word twilight is one of the most, if not the most, striking words in this passage. It truly captures the light and dark imagery that the author is using in the jail scenes and referring it to happiness and despair. The narrator refers to Hermonie as twilight, an image that shows a small, faint light in the distance that is just out of reach. He is remembering this moment in time because it brings him thoughts of the outside world, of hope. Many people use candles to symbolize hope in times of despair, so the narrator is using Hermonie as well as his memory of the beach as a way to get through his rough time. The sensuality is at its peak in this passage too. With every mention of a body part, some type of soft imagery is used. The words like *silky*, *soft*, and *tender* that describe Hermonie's body are such precise words to describe the body of his memory. There is such a contrast however, with the shapes, folds, curves, and slants that can also resemble the actual stone the narrator is lying on while reminiscing. Once the moistness of the stone is realized not as Hermonie, but as the filth and disgust he is living in, this allows the narrator as well as the reader to be taken back to the disparaging cell these men are occupying. The most defining moment of death comes through when a corpse caravan passes the narrator in his travels.

It is not the description of what the dead look like, but more how the narrator perceives death:

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The stench was very bad indeed; it fluttered and licked at the sunlight like a cat's tongue. Long after we'd passed the caravan we could still detect the smell. The dreadful inglorious dead, it was, making their animal presence known across the land, still weeping tears of disgust and shaking a tremulous finger of warning.

Once again, choice of words in this passage is remarkable. A cat's tongue is course, rough, and very odd the first time one experiences it. The smell of death cannot be put into words; it is an abnormal experience that one must go through to be able to claim they have done so, just as being licked by a cat. Something fluttering by is quick, but is not missed. Also, the image of a cat licking something makes the reader imagine how the stench would come and go, just like the swipes of a cat's tongue, and the realization of when it would return could not be mistaken either. Both words bring a different way of thinking to the description of the smell. Many of the descriptive words do not refer to beauty, but in fact try distinctly hard to retract any beauty in the scene. There is no respect shown for any of the corpses, referring to them as *dreadful*, *inglorious*, and *animals*. The fear of death plays into these words of the narrator, looking at the corpses as less than him in their state. He does not want to end up like them, potentially becoming one of the many in a pile of bodies that to those around them seem meaningless. The *shaking of a tremulous finger* is like scolding him, warning him not to waste life and become in a state such as this. It is not just the expressions of the dead that the narrator comments on during his travels.

In many instances, the appearances of some cause the narrator to notice the death that is in those that are still living;

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They were looking, watching, gazing. A regular tribe of gazers. Their faces were like the staring faces of flowers, already wilting, turning very slowly first one way and then another. No life except that of watching constantly the secret doings of others, no emotions except those that entered through the eyes. Their eyes were big and shining, dreamy, beautiful, oddly intimate.

The awe that the inhabitants from Peshawar hold for the unknown outside world is showing through the different uses of the word watching. A gaze is studying something intently, having wonder behind that stare. Instead of taking this gaze as a positive wonder, the narrator sees them as drowning in their surroundings. Using the metaphor of a wilting flower gives an image of being blank, since flowers have no real expression to begin with, and the wilting aspect of that brings back the death theme. The wind pushing the heads of the flowers without their control makes the heads of the people seem almost zombie like, being dead but also alive at the same time. With all the time these peoples spend *watching constantly*, one would naturally pick up aspects of other people's lives and try to live. But the author makes it a point to show they only watch, and do not learn from what they see. The only real expression that the dead show is through their eyes, many faces are left expressionless. Again, the feeling of death is showing on the people's faces with nothing but sadness showing through their eyes and a blank canvas on the rest. Some of the individuals he comes in contact with are content with being trapped in these despairing places, feeling that to try for more could cause even more harm and damage than if they were to stay. The last sentence however, shows a hint of beauty in these lost souls, still

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having some wonder left when being seen as *dreamy*, *beautiful*, and *intimate*. One of the most sensual scenes in the novel is when the narrator comes in counter with the Tamil girl.

With an ox-cart ride full of tantalizing looks, the narrator finally gets a taste of the young girl:

...her hands on my belly, and the electrical touch of her hair hanging over my

breast...there was a wonderful young smell coming from her; I felt dizzy, my hands trembled. Then I felt the mosquito net falling softly back into place. And then the warm, sweet, the unexplainable touch, the damp caresses, the ripe plum smell, the marvelous suspense. Everything was very quiet, there wasn't a word or a sigh, nothing, no language at all except that of a hand and lip and limb.

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The intimacy from the girl and narrator creates the scene right from the beginning with her touches simply from her hair feeling electric. The word electric is a fine choice, relating both electric impulses he is thinks he is probably experiencing whenever her hair touches him, and the natural impulses his body is giving off as well from simple touches such as her hair and hands. Her youth and vitality further excites him, causing him to be so excited he is about to jump out of his skin for her. Despite the humidity surrounding him that he complains about sentences before, he still can not get enough of the touch of her hands, explaining them as *warm* and *sweet*, like he is trying to savor them. Regardless of every other woman he has been with thus far, her touches are a bringing him to a new height, so high that even the smells of her are intoxicating. The scent of a plum is just as exotic as the girl he is with, especially her being ripe and at her peak of being young. The sexual urges override the language in this passage, making it that more erotic. The

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way in which Prokosch shows movements as the language in this scene brings out the suspense the narrator is feeling during this time.

It takes a great deal of talent to be able to write in beautiful and melodic passages that bring together images in which one would not think of writing. In many times, death is almost always present in the places the narrator visits, and through those times, the slight glimpse of something

lovely is brought out, not by what is being seen, but how the narrator chooses to see and explain it. Without these moments of beauty, life would be extremely tough to see. Prokosch is pushing this idea, saying that if one focuses on primarily the death and sadness around, then living the life given will turnout much more difficult than expected. Beauty comes in all shapes and forms; one just has to be willing to see it.

Word count with quotes: 2,397
Word count without quotes: 1,984

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Works Cited

Prokosch, Frederic. *The Asiatics*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2005.