

Sarah Mook Contest 2016, Grades 9-12, Second Place Winner, “Satisfaction for the Soul”

The second place poem in this age group, “Satisfaction for the Soul,” uses irony, understatement, and an easy rhyme and meter to disclose the temptation and risk of using drugs to assuage one’s problems. What makes this poem work is its lighthearted tone, which, paradoxically, serves to illustrate the seriousness of the poem’s subject matter.

At first, the poem’s nine rhyming quatrains—with their unassuming rhythm and cajoling tone—soothe the reader. In the first stanza, an omniscient narrator handles the description:

They call him the dream dealer,
they say you find him in your sleep.
He wheels his wares though worried minds
to relieve them when they weep.

The reader might think that this poem concerns something innocuous; its rhythm and rhyme are appealing. Half of the poem’s lines are written in iambic tetrameter, consisting of four metered feet of iambs, that is, eight syllables in an unstressed, stressed pattern: “they SAY you FIND him IN your SLEEP.” The poem presents us with a “dream dealer” whose “wares” “relieve” “worried minds” and help them “sleep.” Because many of us look for aids and methods to enable sleep, we may see the poem as offering a helpful solution.

The second stanza exposes the purpose of the “dream dealer” whose “wares” service all ages. Both the “weary elder” and the “desperate youth” may “glimpse” this “golden paradise” and “escape from the blackened truth.” Thus, what he sells to those who are “weary” or “desperate” is something that provides an escape, not a solution.

The “dream dealer” speaks directly to the customer in the third to fifth stanzas advertising his wares with all of the comforting and yet evasive skill of the carnival huckster:

*Come and see my stock my bottled bliss,
come taste a glass of glee.
He swirls a daydream in a jar,
uncorks a flask of ecstasy.*

*Here have I these dreams for sale,
happiness—at an easy price.
The cost is just a sliver of self,
a bit of essence, cut clean and nice.*

*Now, now don’t fret young sleeper,
don’t twist away in fright!
What harm is there in paying this
to make your dull life bright?*

Note in the stanzas above (and throughout the poem), that the second and fourth lines rhyme, giving the poem an appealing rhythm. Most if the lines are written in iambic trimeter—iambic stresses with six syllables in the line, such as “*Come TASTE a GLASS of GLEE,*” which is used by many poets. This meter is most often used in alternating lines with iambic tetrameter, as it is here. ([See Emily Dickinson’s poem #511, “If You Were Coming in the Fall” for the use of rhyme and these two meters.](#))

The seller’s voice in “Satisfaction for the Soul” appeals with its talk of “swirling” this “bottled bliss” and “flask of ecstasy.” The price of this “glee” seems minimal: *Here have I these dreams for sale, / happiness—at an easy price.* This enticement escalates in order to convince the buyer that there is nothing to worry about: “*What harm is there in paying this / to make your dull life bright?*” The “dream

dealer” advertises his stock as tempting, harmless, inexpensive, and a pleasurable solution to personal troubles, or the “blackened truth.”

It is in the seventh section that we hear of the cost of this purchase. When one buys what the “dream dealer” sells, the “dealer” will “*pluck away a tiny fragment, / snip away the smallest thread*” of the buyer—and something of that person is lost forever. And even if small, in time, the accumulation could be tragic.

The next two sections of the poem show the misleading nature of the “dream dealer” and the cost of his salesmanship. He hides the reality of what he sells behind “kind eyes” that “sparkle warmly,” teeth that “gleam,” and a smile that “lingers” as he “dangles a dream before your eyes / twists a promise between his fingers.” When someone completes the deceptive purchase, hope and freedom seem near, but “euphoric, addictive Eden” becomes the reality. The word, “addiction” reveals the real aim of the “dream dealer”; it might be “euphoric,” but even Eden would become odious in its addiction.

The narrator’s omniscient voice in the last stanza resurfaces. Those who are “weary” and “desperate” “seek out the dream dealer / who in return asks a simple toll.” Although the price may sound cheap, it comes at the cost of “a slice of spirit and soul”—a very high price indeed

The diction of this poem demonstrates the writer’s skill with language; many words have meanings that vary by degree and thus import. The phrase “dream dealer,” is an attempt to set our fears aside; but, remove the word “dream” and we have what this entrepreneur is—a dealer. Phrases such as “bottled bliss” and “flask of ecstasy” can refer to alcohol (also an addictive drug), but the inclusion of the word “ecstasy” evokes a relationship to drugs. In the line, “You shake his hand and then succumb,” the verb “succumb” not only denotes surrendering or yielding to something stronger but also to be fatally overwhelmed.

And what is the cost of this purchase? Again, the writer is nuanced: a “*sliver of self, / a bit of essence, cut clean and nice.*” The “dream dealer” will also “pluck away a tiny fragment / snip away the smallest thread,” and take a “simple toll.” The word “toll” has meanings that vary by degree: one is a small fee for services, and the other is to have an adverse effect causing suffering or death. The author’s word choice is highly astute.

In addition to successful rhyme and meter, the poet uses assonance, alliteration, metaphor, and personification to increase the pleasure when reading the poem aloud, and to provide vivid images. Assonance occurs in the first line of the last stanza with the long ‘e’ sound in the words “seek,” “dream,” and “dealer.” Two examples of alliteration—the repeated ‘w’ sound in the line “He wheels his wares through worried minds,” and the ‘s’ sound in “snip away the smallest thread”—add to the music of this poem that belies its serious intention. The use of metaphor and personification in the line “so you grasp the fragile neck of hope” alludes to the neck of a person or a bottle; it also references hope’s fragility and breakability in this transaction, and alludes to another risk of any exchange with this “dream dealer.”

This intelligent writer employs these musical and sound elements in the poem so that this nefarious “dream dealer” can trick customers to ignore their fears and purchase the “wears” he offers. By using an ironic tone and multi-layered diction, the writer masterfully demonstrates the dangers of this sale—giving up a “slice of spirit” and offering “satisfaction for the soul” every time the dream dealer shakes a hand to complete a trade.

Bravo! I encourage this writer to continue to write poems of such force and purpose as “Satisfaction for the Soul.”

Thank you for the privilege of reading your work!