Adriana Shen

Professor Bendall

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Shattered Dreams

The sonnet “The Dress” by Carrie Jerrell uses the familiar subject matter of a wedding dress over the course of one night’s wear. Throughout the course of the night, the pristine and magical dress is marred, symbolizing the effects of the progression of time and changing views of relationships on marriage. The poet uses imagery, assonance, and enjambment to present the theme of false illusions by juxtaposing the innocent dreams of a wedding and the happily-ever-after that it connotes with the negative reality of a sordid marriage from the view of a child. This alignment emphasizes the tone shift from dreamy to abandoning, which reflects the author’s changing attitude about marriage.

The poem begins with the portrayal of a young lady’s ideal dress, which is fit for “le beau monde,” or high society. It is described as Lhuillier, a bridal clothing designer, suggesting that the dream dress is for her wedding. The imagery presented in this stanza, including “crystal appliquéd French lace” and “beyond [her] Cinderella dreams” emphasize the exquisite beauty of the wedding dress, and altogether express a girl’s longing of a long-awaited wedding and marriage thereafter. Throughout the poem, the poet utilizes assonance to set the mood. In the first stanza, there is assonance of the short “i” sound in words such as “pink,” “crystal,” “appliquéd,” “satin,” “Cinderella, and “six.” “I” is a bright and cheerful vowel, which, scattered into the first stanza, translates to the stanza as a whole having a radiant, optimistic atmosphere. This optimism introduced over the bride’s wedding day is a symbol for our childhood confidence and positivity. It underlines similarities between the exhilaration over the dress and blissful, pure quality of childhood. The shortness of this vowel sound also represents childhood’s fleeting brevity—“i” is pronounced and quickly over, just as kids’ naïve confidence and false security dissipate as they gain more experience and knowledge. The girl’s tone at the start of the poem is dreamlike as she is consumed by her idealistic conceptions. The poet employs fluff words such as “corset,” “lace,” and “satin” to portray a surreal, elegant, and seemingly enlightened realm. One major contributing factor that sets this tone is the reference to Cinderella, who lives an impossible life as her fairy Godmother appears magically to transform her into a beautiful maiden who marries a prince. The examples presented and the dreamlike tone used illustrate the girl’s initial view of marriage, communicated through the discussion of a flawless gown. At this point in the poem, the child is under the delusion that reality is a utopia.

The next stanza chronicles the events of the wedding reception that ultimately turned the precious dress hideous. The condition of the dress is antipodal to the pristine dress described in the preceding stanza. Vivid imagery describes various chocolate and Lambrusco wine stains, punctured holes in the hemline, and prime rib grease that all degrade the quality and elegance of the once-gorgeous dress. It conjures up images of an ordinary life with familiar and everyday encounters: children with dirty hands, spills of food and wine, eating greasy meat, and tearing of clothes from careless actions. It is wholly plebian, not fairytale with Godmother and glass slippers. The transformation takes place during the course of the wedding day. In the end, a beautiful, ethereal dress becomes something ravaged and worthless. On the surface, the wear and tear of a wedding dress on the wedding day is expected. However, because the previous setup is flawless and fantastical, the effect is akin to the shattering of a once soaring dream. The series of frivolous accidents, while seemingly inconsequential, signify how fragile her illusion of the perfect dress is. Each stain represents an unfortunate event that, altogether, catapults the girl into the harsh reality that also foreshadows the eventual downfall of her marriage. As the poem develops, there is a dramatic tone shift. It suddenly turns sordid, underscored by the use of awful and disgusting diction including “trash,” “holes,” “smear,” and “grease” to convey a horrific truth. The tone is reinforced with an abundance of such words that the vileness seems to pervade the wedding reception where people wrinkle their noses and avert their glances. Since the poet uses the wedding dress and its various states of condition to convey the state of the girl's marriage, this tone also signifies the gradual downfall of her marriage. As the tone intensifies with each word, the marriage deteriorates with each incidence. The change in the dress’s appearance during the night parallels the shift in the child’s perspective on relationships, from idealistic to disastrous. The tone has progressed to sordid, as the girl slowly comes to realize the falsity of her previous conceptions.

The first of the two periods appears at the end of the second stanza. Between the first two stanzas, enjambment connects the last and first lines. Similarly, it is present between the third stanza and the last couplet. Whereas enjambment creates a sense of flow between the first and second and third and last stanzas, the period sets up a prominent break before the third stanza, placing emphasis on the first line of that stanza. Further, the only other period in the poem marks the end, implying that the first period marks a clear divide in subjects. The third stanza begins with the statement “Real life has no respect for fairytales,” written to sound like an axiom, denoting that the poem has switched to a broader view. Whereas the first part of the poem discusses an almost utopian life, it goes on to reveal that no such flawless lifestyle exists. It generalizes this fact to apply to all readers, not exclusively the bride on her wedding night. The enjambment in some stanzas and lack thereof in others create a contrast that parallels the sudden switch from the child’s wild imaginations to a mature woman’s experience of a failed marriage.

The third stanza conveys to the reader that reality is nothing like childhood daydreams. Over time, people will slowly realize the “wicked truths” that come with life, and abandon their lurid fantasies. The last couplet draws a comparison between the lady’s marriage and her wedding dress over the course of that night—it degenerates and dies away. There is assonance in long “o” sounds, short “o” sounds, and “u” sounds in the third stanza and last couplet. The long “o” is heard in words like “no,” “photo,” “couture,” and “yellow.” The short “o” appears in “ops,” “your,” “frocks,” and “rotting,” and the “u” sound is in “you’ll,” “soon,” and “too.” These sounds are stretched out, bringing a heavy, mournful feeling to this stanza. The transition from the abundance of bright “i” sounds in the previous stanzas to the plethora of despondent “o” and “u” sounds stresses an alteration in mood from bouncy to weighted. Unlike the second stanza, the third stanza has a tone of acquiescence, delivered with words like “truth,” “time,” “unveils,” and “forget.” The tone is one of wisdom; it talks down to someone junior, nascent, and hopeful. Lastly, the girl goes through an awakening leading to the tone of abandonment in the last couplet. Diction of “cast-off” and “rotting” suggest that the girl feels disheartened and depressed. The girl’s acceptance of her shattered dreams once more manifests the stark contrast between her hopes and actual experiences.

In the sonnet “The Dress,” assonance, enjambment, and imagery contrast the silly fantasies of a child and the melancholy truth she discovers as she matures. The tone transitions from dreamy to depressed, enhancing the poet’s shifting mood and views on marriage. She is left in the midst of broken shards, feeling bitter. This concept of false illusions dissolving over time can be easily applied to other aspects of life, broader than just marriage.