

Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden – Poetry Commentary

Keith Douglas's "The Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden" is a poem describing an extended metaphor comparing a beautiful woman (presumably in an Egyptian tea garden, as suggested by the title) to an attractive white stone and the men who see her to passing fish. The usage of extremely rich, provocative, and highly metaphoric language in this poem enhances the quality and affect of the poem.

The poem opens by setting the scene – it establishes the white stone on the seafloor, the woman in the afternoon who catches men's attentions. As fish are drawn to a white, luminescent stone, so are men attracted to this woman. It should be noted that the only instance in which a stanza does not end with a period is the first, and the second stanza is a continuation of the description of this woman. By combining provocative and marine terms and adjectives, Douglas simultaneously transmits the appeal of the woman while maintain the underwater-like impressions of the poem. Words like "red lip", "milky", "sink", and "carmined" have a connotation of luxurious femininity designed to appeal to men, and the image created by the "slyly red lip on the spoon" and pronounced by the new stanza which "slips in a morsel of ice cream" further serves to establish the woman's sexual appeal. However, Douglas maintains the constant connection to the sea by describing the woman's hand as a stone with submarine frond-like fingers.

The third stanza sets up the action in this poem; it describes a fish, the first man that is introduced – he "swims out" to watch. This particular "fish" has the least human characteristics of all the "fish" described in the poem. This further helps Douglas set him apart as an observer. The following stanzas describe other fish with human traits and actions, or men with fish-like actions and characteristics. The "crustacean old man" who is "clamped to his chair" like a clam or an oyster, the "captain on leave, a lean dark mackerel", the "flatelyed flatfish [who] sucks on a straw", and "gallants in shoals [that] swim up and lag...opening a conversation". Douglas describes all of these other fish with language that creates an active interaction between the woman (the stone) and the men (the fish). The old man sits next to her; the captain turns to look at her; the man sitting in his place is content to stay there sucking on his straw and staring at her; groups of brave young men try to interact with her, "circling and passing near the white attraction." The close descriptions of the men and the woman and the intertwinement of their descriptions, along with references to marine terms, serve to set up and maintain the aquatic atmosphere throughout the entirety of the poem.

The emphasis placed on the importance of the woman's action of eating ice-cream is further emphasized in the final stanza, when the ice-cream has been finished. While she is eating, she has a human-like quality which makes her approachable. However, once she has finished, she is more like the non-responsive and non-interactive white stone that is beautiful, but useless. The eating of the ice-cream

serves to humanize the woman and to allow the interaction (or attempts at such) between her and the men. Once she has finished the ice-cream, she returns to being a non-interactive, beautiful object that is “useless except to a collector, a rich man.”

It is interesting to see the combination of the appeal of the woman with the marine/aquatic atmosphere of the poem. While Douglas describes human actions, he does so using adjectives and terms used in marine terminology. This serves to have an overall effect of submerged passion, even an almost scientific look at love. The constant maintenance of the aquatic metaphor makes the reader’s ability to connect with and empathize with the characters and their interaction within the poem limited. However, perhaps this is the desired effect – a highly artistically way of presenting what might otherwise be considered a mundane situation in order to elevate the situation while at the same time preventing emotion attachment to or empathy with the characters in the poem.