

By Kyle Coan

Sarcastic Ode

In the poem, *Clam Ode*, Deon Young uses a sarcastic diction to convey his own sense of hopelessness, not only in himself, but also in his view of mankind and the world. Young chooses to use a sarcastic, downtrodden mood in his diction to convey his sense of ironic dissatisfaction in the world. He wants to make known the idea that the aspects of life we so confidently believe we have figured out, are not as they appear. Rather they are the complete opposite. So Dean uses a sense of upset, sarcastic irony in his diction as a type of mask to hide the underlying truth that the world is a cruel place. Often times though, in the poem, he displays the truth in a harsh, obvious way rather than covering up the truth. I believe he does this as a way of getting the point across that the ugliest truths do not deserve to be covered up, but rather laid out before our eyes so that we may learn about them. Dean's process of dealing with this ugly truth lies in his writing of *Clam Ode*. He is almost laughing at the world behind his bitter words at all the unfortunate shortcomings of life and coats his hopelessness with sarcastic words. He does this almost as if he were trying to laugh through the disappointment.

In the first place, a tone of sarcasm is not generally used as a literary or spoken device by someone who is particularly happy or content with their given situation. Rather, it is used by someone who has a more cynical, realistic outlook on life. We can understand from Dean Young's sarcastic diction that he is attempting to make us understand the underlying, unfortunate reality before our eyes and display it in a way that we can interpret his feelings and emotions. His sporadic, random-like stream of consciousness tells us something important about Dean Young. He did not think in a straight line, but rather in a twisted, curved, distorted one. So while his thoughts come off as jumbled and mixed together, they were also connected in a significant way. His thoughts came out depressingly twisted and distorted because they

reflected his image of the world: as a sick and twisted place. A connotation that he choose sarcasm and bitter words to convey to his readers.

Dean's mind was haunted by copious amounts of depressing life experiences and memories that continuously reminded him of the harsh truth about the world: the world is not a place where you win. The world is a place where you lose.

Even from the first three lines of the poem, Young appropriately uses specific wording to condone a grim, bitter mood that intensifies alongside his progress through the poem. "One attempts to be significant on a grand scale in the knock-down battle of life but settles" (Young, 863). Here Dean confronts his opinions of mankind head on by saying that in a world that relentlessly puts you down, you will be forced to settle with the present when achieving wide-scale acknowledgment becomes impossible to achieve. It almost goes without saying that these lines are not filled with words that hold a positive message. Basically, all your hard work throughout life to become a person that holds renounced meaning will be fruitless and unobtainable. When Dean uses the word "attempts" he is saying that an effort is being made to do something, but it doesn't mean that it is being accomplished. In fact, these perceived conceptions regarding self-worth will end in quite the opposite direction. As seen when Young uses the bitter phrase: "in the knock-down battle of life" he is essentially calling life a battle constantly being driven against you; a world against you. A world and a life where one "settles" when he ultimately fails to accomplish what can't be accomplished. His sarcastic, depressing word choice in these three lines alone displays perfectly how little Young believes in the world and the downward battle that is life.

Proceeding this declaration, in the next seven lines of the poem, Dean sets the stage that will act as the basis of his poem. "I love the expression 'happy as a clam,' how it imparts buoyant emotion to a rather, when you get down to it, nonexplosive creature:" (Young, 863).

Dean does not give us a second to catch our breath, he uses the word “love” to comically condone the fact that he does not actually feel that emotion, but rather the opposite. The sarcasm in the word “love” propels the mood of the next six lines. In the next few lines, Young disagrees with the statement of a commonly used phrase to such an extent that he bases most of his poem around disproving and making fun of this same phrase. “ 'Happy as a clam,' how it imparts buoyant emotion to a rather, when you get down to it, inexpressive creature:” Here Dean is making a complete mockery of a commonly used phrase while simultaneously poking a giant hole in its logic. He is trying to communicate with us that when you are as “happy” as a clam it does not, by any means, signify that someone is communicating an uplifting emotion. Young is telling us clams can express no emotion, so all this phrase is telling us is that humankind, when supposedly happy, is that same as a creature without feeling or emotion. “In piles of ice it awaits its doom pretty much the same as on the ocean's floor it awaits life's banquet and bouquet and sexual joys” (Young, 863). In both instances of good and bad, humankind, without emotion, accepts both the same way-wordlessly and without question. There is no happy moral or uplifting emotion rooted behind what Dean Young is saying to his readers. When he uses the sarcastic phrasing behind: “In piles of ice” and “the ocean's floor” he is all-out laughing at humankind alongside the fate a clam experiences mirroring it to the fate a human experiences.

In the next few lines, Dean Young unsurprisingly uses more sarcastic diction to portray a lack of hope in humanity. “The Chinese thought them capable of prolonging life while the clams doubtlessly considered the Chinese the opposite” (Young, 863). When Young uses the word “doubtlessly” he is sarcastically mocking the idea that mankind thinks and acts without first putting in the proper analysis and thought. While we as clams fail to do anything rather than accept both sides of fate without quarrel, so too do we as clams act without a brain of our own.

Following the tracks containing Young's scattered train of thought, we relate back to his past as he takes apart another disappointing flaw of humanity. "I remember the jawbreakers my dad would buy me on the wharf at Stone Harbor, every thirty seconds you'd take out the one you were working on to check what color it turned" (Young, 863). Here, Young is diving deeper into the familiar, arbitrary behavior of mankind, almost mocking the nature of his own actions that were no different from the actions of anyone else. "Every thirty seconds you'd take out the one you were working on to check what color it turned." Humans were fickle creatures who constantly and carefully took out their life to evaluate it. They constantly needed to hopelessly check on their progress, despite how little it was, always being consciously aware of their lives and how they were turning out.

In accordance to this, Young goes on further to ridicule and define yet another flaw of humanity. "A feeling. States of feeling, unlike the states of the upper Midwest, are difficult to name." (Young, 864). Having mentioned them several times before throughout the poem, Dean makes emotions to be a key aspect of *Clam Ode*. Here, he is defining them as "difficult to name" as if they are hard to make out and understand, unlike the Midwest states that are straight-forward and to the point. When he says that they "are difficult to name" I get this sense of longing from Young as if he has searched for the names of these emotions for a long period of time. This mocking remark in this phrase is said in a way as if Young wishes they were as easy to define as Kansas, Nebraska, or Colorado. Which is why he mocks the situation, almost as if he is doing it because he has exasperated himself trying to find the answer. He choose sarcasm because he is almost trying to make a joke out of something he is tired of searching for the answer to, but can not find.

As if matters weren't worse, Dean mocks the nature of music and how its existence on human emotions only made matters worse for everyone. "That is why music was invented,

which caused a whole new slue of feelings and is why ever since people have had more feelings than they know what to do with so you can see music sorta backfired” (Young, 864). His choice of the word “slue” is fitting for the sarcastic mood Young choose to write this poem in. To skip over the exact meaning of this word would be to completely miss the point of the line. Here, “slue” is referring to the violent, uncontrollable amount of emotions humans are being made aware of, and in Dean's eyes this is a problem. Now that music has caused this overabundance of human feeling, “people have had more feelings than they know what to do with.” Meaning that people are not handling their problems the right way because of music, and Young is painfully aware of this.

The next seven lines Young writes drip from almost every word insurmountable amounts of bitter resentment and utter sarcasm. Dean Young's lack of faith is visible in this passage more than almost any other passage throughout *Clam Ode*. “Like a fire extinguisher that turns out to be a flame thrower. They look somewhat alike, don't they?” (Young, 864). The flamethrower mistaken for a fire extinguisher is referring to the past few lines in the poem and the worsening effect music had on people's emotions. “They look somewhat alike, don't they?” Again, his sarcastic mood is subtly making fun of the fact that we, as humans, commonly mistake bad things for good based on appearances alone. Although we may not want to admit it, the fact that we are a culture that is based around good looks is a sad but true reality.

In the end, as we have seen throughout Dean Young's poem, *Clam Ode*, he frequently uses a sarcastic, depressing diction and specific word choice to convey his own outlook of hopelessness in the world. While I do not blame or even disagree with his outlook, it goes without saying that this poem followed a dismal, ironic, sad route. The diction Young choose wasn't done in a sarcastic tone to rant about the world and complain about how unfair it was, he wrote the poem this way to be brutally honest with us. He believed his worldview was important,

and decided to portray it in a way that caught our attention: sarcastically. While it is highly possible Dean used a sarcastic diction to make his poem stand out, I also believe it almost goes without saying that he also did it because that was how he really viewed the world. He saw life for what it truly was: a random, emotion-filled mess of uncertainty and irony ever pitted against you.

Works Cited

Young, Dean. "Clam Ode." *Making Literature Matter: An Anthology for Readers and Writers*. By John Schilb and John Clifford. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000. 863-64. Print.