

Appearance is Not Always What it Appears to Be

by Alex Choi

There are many things in the world that makes life convenient and pleasant; yet, these would not exist without the process of production. The poem “Ice Palace”, written by Canadian poet Margaret Atwood, is a great example that shows the result and the process behind the finished result. The poem explores the front and back stage of a hotel. The “Ice Palace” may appear as a perfect place, but there are many behind-the-scene situations that oppose the first impression of the palace. Both poems, “Ice Palace” written by Margaret Atwood and “What Keeps Mankind Alive” by William S. Burroughs, show that the appearance is not always what it always appears to be.

The first look of the palace is flawless; the speaker paints a very pleasant and warm picture of the hotel. “[T]he heavenly bed” (12) sounds very restful. Instead of using other words that describe the feeling of restfulness, like comfortable, relaxing, or cozy, the speaker chooses the word ‘heavenly’ to emphasize the flawlessness of the bed. The poem also mentions “the all-/you-can-eat breakfast” (12-13). Food is one of the essentials of human life. The phrase ‘all-you-can-eat’ emphasizes the incessant amount of food that is being provided by the palace to the people. Yet, there are more to the palace than just a restful bed and abundant food. The heavenly bed and all-you-can-eat breakfast are just few of the luxuries people can enjoy at the paradise. During the stay at the palace, the “[i]nvisible hands” (13) “clean out the wad of hair/[people] left in the porcelain shower” (17-18). This quote portrays that no matter how much people mess up the room, it gets restored without effort. Everything gets perfected “when [people are] not there” (20). In other words, people only see the perfection, abundance, and cleanliness of the castle and nothing else. This place is where the visitors are treated like true kings and queens.

To the visitors, everything is perfect, but the palace is not paradise to everyone. The poem connotes that there are others in the castle than those enjoying the stay: “Where are the bodies that were once/attached to all those hands?” (23-24). The invisible hands that magically create this perfect paradise for the visitors of the palace are not magic themselves; the hands have bodies, which are the people behind the scene that puts in effort to perfect the castle. Moreover, the speaker shows that these people behind the scene do not stay in the paradise but stay somewhere else: “Do not look/in the last and

smallest room” (30-31). The speaker notes that the people behind the scene, or staff, stay in a small room where one must not ‘look’. The poem is telling not to look into the room because the sight is disturbing and will spoil people’s illusion of the palace: “Backstage it’s always carnage.” (25). The backstage is where all the filth from the heavenly rooms end up. Because of the perfection that the staff is trying to create, the backstage where the staff works depicts carnage. The hotel to the staff is neither pleasant nor restful. It is a place of battle and struggle for the staff; the carnage is for staff only.

There are two sides to the ice palace as discussed above. This existence of two sides, dualism, appears at the very beginning of the poem as well. The title “Ice Palace” hints about the dualism. On the one hand, palace connotes good, flawless, wealthy, and noble feelings. On the other hand, ice connotes cold, indifferent, apathetic, and wintery feelings. The speaker may have titled the poem differently: beautiful palace, heavenly palace, or ‘marzipan’ palace. However, by naming the poem “ice palace”, the poet shows that the palace is not what it appears to be. It is a castle but a castle with no warmth, only luxury. The poet also uses the word “demiparadise” (1) because ice palace is a paradise to those who visit the place but not for those who work there. In the ice palace, the invisible hands are doing all those heavenly work just because those are their jobs. They have no sympathy, love, or interest about the people who uses the room, and neither does the people, who use the room, have any sympathy, love, or interest about the invisible hands. This connects back to the idea that the palace is ice not gold or anything more pleasant. The poet finally shows that this ice castle is not the only place that has this contrast between front and back stage: “Another Ice Palace. Another demiparadise” (1). This explains that this hotel is not the only place that has this dualism but that dualism is everywhere. Where there is pleasantries and convenience, there are people who put in effort to create this.

Even in the second poem, “What Keeps Mankind Alive”, mentions the fact that the “[f]ood is the first thing” (9). The speaker suggests to “sort out the basic food position/Then start . . . preaching” (4-5). There are uncountable numbers of people around the world desperately needing food support. The speaker uses sarcasm to emphasize how the governments are not doing their jobs properly: “thanks to his aptitude/For keeping his humanity repressed” (16-17). The speaker ‘thanks’ the authorities for keeping the ‘humanity repressed’. Unlike what the authorities’ words, there are “millions . . . daily tortured/[s]tarved, silenced and oppressed” (14-15). On the one hand, the world seems as if everyone is living in a fine environment, where they have basic essentials for human life. However, in reality, millions of people are being ‘tortured’ because they do not have all the basic essentials for human life. Authorities use those millions of people to make other people’s life more convenient and pleasant: “Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts.” (19)

Even if something may seem like there is no price for it, there is always a price for everything. One must see behind the goods that one has and enjoys in life because the appearance can never be everything. The poet Margaret Atwood implores the readers of her poem "Ice Palace" of seeing the both sides of things. Margaret Atwood uses examples around the world to define her point of view, but William S. Burroughs speaks straight out to define his point of view. His poem "What Keeps Mankind Alive" shows how the authorities trick its citizens with false painted speeches which differ from reality. As both poems show, people should appreciate the depreciation in the backstage world that creates the beauty and perfection in the visible world.