

## Notes on Swift's "A Description of a City Shower"

Consists of heroic rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter  
Neoclassic text: subtle allusions to Greek & Roman figures  
Some biblical references (like the Flood)  
Reason: elite society education was comprised of Greek & Roman texts  
Commentary on conditions of London  
Slums pushed to outskirts  
Washes the slum stuff into middle of city from the outskirts and into the Thames  
No sanitation  
Eventually need a good rainstorm to wash all the waste into the river  
Thames stunk for centuries  
London has since been cleaned up: part of the reason it's famous  
It rains and Swift tells what's going down the river  
"People-watching" in a sense  
Natural events are a great equalizer  
Everyone gets wet in the rain: let down political defenses  
Biblical overtones with raining on just and unjust alike  
Parliament will never do anything about it

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"Shower" is a 63-line poem written in 31 end-rhymed iambic pentameter couplets known as "heroic couplets," with the final line of iambic hexameter creating a closing triplet. The heroic couplet was the most popular verse form of Swift's day and takes its name from its frequent use in English translations of classical epic—or, as it was then termed, "heroic"—poetry.

Swift's title is somewhat ironically misleading: Although he certainly provides a vivid enough description of a turbulent rain shower rolling through the streets of early 18<sup>th</sup>-century London, the poem's central concern is with the city's inhabitants who are caught by Swift in a series of comic vignettes as they scurry to avoid the impending "flood."

At the time of the poem's initial publication, London was the center of English commerce and culture as well as Europe's leading trade center—a bustling, rapidly expanding metropolis that progressive Englishmen could regard with great pride. The Great Fire of 1666 had destroyed huge stretches of the city, and much of the newly rebuilt London, including the Christopher Wren-designed St. Paul's Cathedral, struck resident Londoners and visitors alike as a dazzling achievement.

However, if the lofty prospect of Wren's cathedral could dazzle a viewer, only a slight shift in perspective—downward, to eye or ground level—was likely to elicit an entirely different set of responses. Swift's London, like any great city, was a place of dramatic contrasts. Much of the landscape was admittedly new, but parts of the old city remained, replete with dark, claustrophobic streets and badly overcrowded tenements in which poverty and disease were the rule. Plumbing was primitive, even nonexistent, making waste disposal an enormous and constant problem. The poem's final three lines, which might strike a modern reader as purposefully disgusting, are exaggerated only in a technical sense; many a Londoner no doubt witnessed worse. Even in London's better areas, open drains ("kennels") ran down the sides of dirt streets; in the early morning, when the contents of morning chamber pots were routinely tossed out of second-floor windows, pedestrians were well-advised to keep to the inside of the sidewalks. This is the London of Swift's poem. It is a city packed with perfectly ordinary people doing perfectly ordinary things. Yet the poem's language—ornate, elevated, and rich with classical allusions—suggests that this seemingly everyday event is anything but ordinary.

The time during which Swift lived and wrote has often been termed the neoclassical age because the period witnessed a sweeping revival of classical literature. The works of Greek and Roman writers were studied, praised, and frequently imitated, and most educated English readers of Swift's day would have been familiar with the poetic genres of the ancient world. One very popular and often imitated classical genre was pastoral poetry (from *pastor*, the Latin word for shepherd), which celebrated rural life and often contrasted the supposedly simple, unspoiled life of herdsmen and farmers with the hectic, corrupt, and overly civilized life of city dwellers.

While Swift had no objections to the pastoral poems of such classical writers as the great Roman poet Vergil, he had little patience with the shallowness and artificiality of much 18<sup>th</sup>-century pastoral poetry, which used highly ornate language to describe the lives of its rural subjects in lavish, unrealistic detail. For Swift, this not only made for bad poetry but also made for poetry that was aesthetically dishonest and morally irresponsible. The primary purpose of art, according to neoclassical literary theory, was to provide moral instruction, and moral instruction could hardly proceed from what was essentially a lie. To demonstrate how empty pastoral poetry had become as a form in the hands of most 18<sup>th</sup>-century imitators, Swift and several of his contemporaries wrote a number of poems such as "A Description of a City Shower" that employ the elevated language and classical allusions of pastoral poetry to describe seemingly ordinary scenes of urban life. This form lies somewhere between satire and parody and is known as "mock pastoral." The results of such compoundings of realism with romance vary in complexity, but the most obvious common effect is an ironic—and intentionally comic, if dark—sense of incongruity created by the discrepancy between the poem's "high" language and its "low" subject matter.

In "A Description of a City Shower," the incongruity first arises from the degree of seriousness assigned to an event as commonplace as a rain shower. In addition to the grandiose language found in the poem's first 12 lines, the scene seems charged with a nearly epic sense of anticipation. Prophecies and oracles often play important roles in both classical epics and tragedies, and here Swift provides a bevy of signs and omens ("prognosticks")—from the behavior of the "pensive cat" to various physical aches and pains—that seem to portend something much grander and more ominous than a simple shower. It is in the poem's second verse paragraph, however, that Swift's design becomes strikingly clear. Word choice, allusion, and imagery combine to create the comic incongruity characteristic of the mock pastoral form. The personified south wind rises in the sky ("the welkin") on "dabbled [dirty] wings" and brings with it a dark cloud heavy with rain. While Swift's comparison of the rain cloud to a "drunkard" that, having "swill'd more liquor than it could contain," is preparing to give "it up again" may strike modern readers as rather crude, it would hardly have offended the 18<sup>th</sup>-century sensibility, which would have delighted in Swift's clever spin on the extended simile so typical of epic poetry.

As the rain begins in earnest, the language of the third and fourth verse paragraphs continues to stress the ironic gap between classical literature and everyday behavior, even going so far as to suggest that the coming "deluge" will rival the biblical flood of Noah. As Londoners dart about in search of shelter, old enmities are forgotten. "Triumphant Tories, and desponding Whigs" (members of opposing political parties) put aside their differences "and join to save their wigs." In the poem's most elaborate "epic" simile, a "beau" (a young man-about-town) who is nervously waiting out the rain within a sedan chair is compared to the Greeks hiding within the Trojan horse, bringing to mind Aeneas's account of the fall of Troy in Vergil's *Aeneid*. The final image of the "huge confluent" coursing uncontrollably through London seems nearly apocalyptic, threatening to engulf the entire city—until one realizes that the distance between Smithfield Market and Holborn Bridge is little more than a stone's throw.

Swift remains the premier satirist in the English language. Besides a powerful intelligence and an essential dissatisfaction with the human condition, the satirist must possess an eye keen enough to discern the follies that so often arise from confusing appearance and reality—which is precisely what 18<sup>th</sup>-century pastoral poetry routinely did. The facts of 18<sup>th</sup>-century rural life were cold and hard.

Farmers and rural workers lived lives at the other end of the spectrum from the hazily romantic imaginings of pastoral poetry. Like their lower-class counterparts in the city, they worked long, backbreaking hours, usually for little more than a subsistence wage. No amount of flowery language or elaborate, classical imagery could improve their lot or effectively substitute fantasy for reality.

It would be wrong, however, to imagine a savagely indignant Swift behind “A Description of a City Shower.” The tone, in fact, is much more one of wry amusement than anger, and even the poem’s array of frankly repellent images—from the poet’s filthy coat to the “drowned puppies,” decaying fish, and “dead cats” of the concluding lines—in the end seem more comically grotesque than offensive.

(Adapted from an essay by Michael Stuprich)