

Baudelaire and *The Flowers of Evil*

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SUMMARY

This article examines Charles Baudelaire's life, works and his most important collection, *The Flowers of Evil*. Baudelaire is regarded as one of the most important 19th-century French poets. He revolutionised the content and subject matter of poetry and served as a model for later poets around the world. He continues to exert immense influence on writers. He contracted syphilis early in life, experienced episodes of depression, and had intense and complicated relationships with his mother and other women in his life.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None.

Charles-Pierre Baudelaire (1821–1867) was born in Paris to François and Caroline Baudelaire. His father, François, was a painter who later became a civil servant in the post of Assistant Commissioner for the selection of books from the libraries of convents, émigrés or condemned people. His mother, Caroline Dufays, was born in London and orphaned early in life. She was François Baudelaire's second wife, his first having died in 1814. When they married, François was 60 years old and Caroline 26. Charles was their only child. François Baudelaire died in 1827, when Caroline was only 34 and Charles 6 years old. Caroline remarried in 1828, barely 2 years after François' death. Her new husband, Major Aupick, was a soldier who later became Lieutenant-Colonel and then General. He was French Ambassador to Constantinople and then Madrid, following which he became a senator until his retirement. He died in 1857.

Baudelaire was educated at the Collège Royal de Charlemagne Paris, the Collège de Lyon and Louis-le-Grand in Paris from which he was expelled. He completed his education at Collège Saint-Louis, passing the baccalauréat in 1839. This was the same year that Baudelaire made the conscious decision to be a writer whose interests would lie in the psyche and who would plumb his own emotional interior for material on love, lust, death and evil. This decision would cause unresolved strain with his stepfather who had other, more prosaic ambitions for Baudelaire.

Mauritius

In 1841, Baudelaire set sail for India at the instigation of his family. However, he never arrived there. He left the boat at Mauritius, spending a few weeks there and on Île de Bourbon before returning to Paris in February 1842. The family had hoped that this trip would end what they regarded as Baudelaire's objectionable behaviour: his debts, his strained relationship with his stepfather, and his friendships with Parisian Bohemian society. On his return to Paris, however, Baudelaire did not change his lifestyle. At most, the experience afforded him access to exotic imagery in his poetry, and perhaps sharpened his imagination and poetic sensibility.

Syphilis

Baudelaire appears to have contracted syphilis very early in life. He wrote to his mother on 6 May 1861:

'I am in that horrible state of mind which I experienced in the fall of 1841. A resignation worse than rage. But, my physical health, which I need for your sake, for mine, and for my work, that is another question! I must tell you about that, although you pay very little attention. I do not intend to speak of the nervous afflictions which are slowly killing me and destroying my courage – nausea, insomnia, nightmares, fainting spells. I have spoken of them to you too often. But with you there is no need of false modesty. You know that when I was young I caught a venereal infection which I later thought was completely cured. After 1848, it broke out again in Dijon. Once again it was checked. Now it has returned and has assumed a new form, spots on the skin and an extraordinary fatigue in all my joints. You can believe me; I know what I am talking about. Perhaps, in the sadness in which I am plunged, my fright has aggravated the disease. But I need to follow a strict regimen and I cannot do so in the life that I am now leading' (Hyslop 1957: p. 173).

Relationship with his mother and other women

In the same letter as that quoted above, Baudelaire wrote of his love for his mother. This section of the letter has been much commented upon by critics as by psychoanalysts for what it reveals about Baudelaire's relationship with his mother:

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‘There was a time in my childhood when I loved you passionately; listen and do not be afraid to read on. I have never told you so much. I remember a ride in a cab.; you were leaving a nursing home where you had been sent and, to prove to me that you had thought of your son, you showed me some pen and ink sketches which you had made for me. Do you think I have a terrible memory? Later, the square of Saint André des Arts and Neuilly. Long walks, endless expressions of affection! I remember the quays which were so melancholy in the evening. Ah! Those were for me the happy years of motherly love and affection. Forgive me for calling happy those years which doubtless were unhappy for you. But I was still living in you; you were mine exclusively. You were both an idol and a comrade. You will perhaps be astonished that I can speak with such intense feeling of so distant a time. I myself am astonished. Perhaps the desire for death, which I have once more experienced, makes the past stand out more clearly in my mind’ (Hyslop 1957: pp. 173–174).

There is no doubting Baudelaire’s affection for his mother. He was an only child and he both doted and depended on his mother. The relationship was, however, complicated with periods of estrangement.

Apart from his mother, there were three other significant women in Baudelaire’s life: Jeanne Duval, Mademoiselle Sabatier and Marie Dubrun. Of these, Jeanne Duval was the most important. She has been variously described as coming from Santo Domingo or Capetown, as a ‘negress’, ‘a beautiful black girl’ or ‘a quadroon’. She entered his life in 1842. Baudelaire wrote about her to his mother on 27 March 1852:

‘To live with a creature who shows no gratitude for your labours, who frustrates every effort with her continual negligence or malevolence, who sees you only as her servant and her piece of property, with whom it is impossible to talk politics or literature, a creature who wishes to learn nothing, though you yourself have offered to teach her, a creature who does not admire me, who even shows no interest in my studies, who would throw my manuscripts on the fire if that would bring her more money than allowing them to be published[...].’ (Pichois 1989: p. 199).

Despite these protestations, the relationship continued and in 4 November 1856 Baudelaire wrote to his mother:

‘My affair with Jeanne, an affair that lasted fourteen years, has ended. I did all that was humanly possible to prevent this separation[...]. Jeanne kept telling me[...] that one day I’d thank her for this decision. That’s the guileless, bourgeois wisdom of women for you[...]. I put my every last hope on her, like a gambler. That woman was my only distraction, my only pleasure, my only friend, and despite all the anguish of a stormy relationship, the idea of breaking up altogether never really occurred to me. Even now, though I’m quite calm, when I see some beautiful thing, a beautiful landscape or anything

pleasing to the eye, I catch myself thinking, “Why is she not here to admire it with me, or buy with me?” You can see I’m not trying to hide my wounds’ (Pichois 1989: p. 214).

Melancholia

Baudelaire’s episodes of melancholia are well documented in his letters. It is unclear, though, how these episodes related to his syphilis. In an undated letter in 1845, he wrote to his mother:

‘I have fallen into a frightful mood of depression and apathy and I need a long period of solitude to recover and regain my strength’ (Hyslop 1957: p. 32).

And again on 9 July 1857, he wrote:

‘As for my silence, don’t ascribe it to anything but one of those periods of lassitude which, to my shame, sometimes overpower me and prevent me not only from doing any work, but even from carrying out the simplest duties’ (Hyslop 1957: p. 123).

The depressive phase appears to have continued for the rest of the year, such that Baudelaire wrote to his mother on 30 December 1857:

‘I certainly have much to complain about in myself and I am quite surprised and alarmed by my state. Do I need a change? I have no idea. Is it physical illness that weakens my mind and will, or is it spiritual sloth that fatigues the body? I have no idea. What I feel is an immense discouragement, an unbearable sensation of loneliness, a perpetual fear of some vague misfortune, a complete lack of confidence in my powers, a total absence of desires, the impossibility of finding anything to distract my mind’ (Hyslop 1957: p. 134).

On 1 April 1861, Baudelaire wrote once again to his mother about death and dying and of his mental state:

‘In that horrible mental state of hypochondria and powerlessness, the thought of suicide returned... I have been in rather poor health; but one of the things that is particularly unbearable for me is that when falling asleep, and even in my sleep, I distinctly hear voices, complete sentences, which are very trite and commonplace and which have nothing to do with my affairs’ (Hyslop 1957: p. 169).

The extent and effects of depression on his functioning is further highlighted in this letter of 31 December 1863:

‘I am afflicted by a frightful malady which has never ravaged me as much as this year, I mean dreaming, depression, discouragement, and indecision. Most emphatically, I consider the man who succeeds in curing himself of a vice as infinitely more brave than the soldier or the man who goes out to fight a duel. But how can one cure himself? How does one make hope from despair or will power from inertia? Is this illness imaginary or real? Has it become real after having been imaginary? Could it be the result of physical debility or of an incurable melancholy resulting from many years filled with

torment and spent without consolation in solitude and indigence? I have no idea; what I do know is that I feel complete disgust for everything, and especially for all pleasure (that is just as well), and that the only feeling which gives me a sense of living is a vague desire for fame, for vengeance, and for fortune' (Hyslop 1957: p. 196).

The Flowers of Evil

Baudelaire came to attention with the publication of his literary reviews *Salon de 1845*, followed by *Salon de 1846*. But it was the publication of *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) in 1857 that sealed his reputation as an important poet. From 1852 to 1865 he worked on translating the complete works of Edgar Allan Poe into French and he later translated Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*.

The Flowers of Evil brought within the territory of poetry much that had previously been excluded as profane, vulgar, unedifying or prosaic. Baudelaire wrote of death, of disease, of prostitution, of the ordinary street life of Paris, of everything that shed light or spoke to humanity however stunted or decadent it appeared. In his preface(s) to the book, he wrote:

"This book will be a stain on your whole life", one of my friends, a great poet, predicted from the beginning. And indeed all my misadventures have so far justified him. But I have one of those happy natures that enjoy hatred and feel glorified by contempt' (Mathews 1955: p. xxix).

Critical approval was not unanimous. By July 1857 there were rumours that copies of the book were to be seized by the authorities as it was regarded as an attack on public morality. On 20 August 1857, Baudelaire appeared before the Sixth Criminal Court. The Court concluded that:

'with respect to the offence against religious morality an insufficient case had been made out; but with respect to public morality and accepted standards, [...] there were grounds for conviction as the book contained "obscene and immoral passages or expressions"' (Pichois 1989: p. 232).

Baudelaire was fined and the Court ordered that six poems be deleted from the book.

Despite this inauspicious start, the reputation of *The Flowers of Evil* has continued to grow. Baudelaire's own estimation of its importance sums up the compelling qualities of the writing:

'You know that I have never thought of literature and the arts as pursuing any moral end and that for me beauty of conception and style are sufficient. But this book, whose title *Fleurs du Mal* says everything, is clothed, as you will see, with a cold and sinister beauty; it was created with passion and deliberation. Moreover, all the unfavourable things said about it are proof of its positive value [...] I know that the book with its faults and merits will

take its place in the memory of the literary public beside the best poems of V. Hugo, of Th. Gautier and even of Byron' (Hyslop 1957: p. 123).

The poem 'The Gladly Dead' speaks to Baudelaire's melancholic nature and his desire for death:

In a soil thick with snails and rich as grease
I've longed to dig myself a good deep grave,
There to stretch my old bones at ease
And sleep in oblivion, like a shark in a wave
(Mathews 1955: p. 88)

In 'Comes the Charming Evening', the poetic charm of the evening is actually a symbol for 'tarts and crooks':

Comes the charming evening, the criminal's friend,
Comes conspirator-like on soft wolf tread.
Like a large alcove the sky slowly closes,
And man approaches his bestial metamorphosis.

To arms that have laboured, evening is kind enough,
Easing the strain of sinews that have borne their
rough

Share of the burden; it is evening that relents
To those whom an angry obsession daily haunts.
The solitary student now raises a burdened head
And the back that bent daylong sinks into its bed.
Meanwhile darkness dawns, filled with demon
familiars

Who rouse, reluctant as business-men, to their
affairs,

Their ponderous flight rattling the shutters and
blinds.

Against the lamplight, whose shivering is the wind's,
Prostitution spreads its light and life in the streets.

(Mathews 1955: p. 120)

In 'The Metamorphoses of a Vampire', Baudelaire once again turns to prostitution and the power of women, as he saw it, over men:

Meanwhile the woman, from her strawberry lips,
(Like a snake on redhot coals, writhing her hips
And working her breasts against the stays of her
busk)

Let flow these words, with a heavy scent of musk;
My mouth is wet; and I know deep in my bed
How to bury deep conscience till he's dead.
On these proud breasts I wipe all tears away
And old men laugh like children at their play.

For the man who sees me naked, I replace
The moon, the sun, and all the stars of space!

And I am so expert in voluptuous charms
That when I hush a man in my terrible arms
Yielding my bosom to his biting lust,
(Shy but provocative, frail yet robust)

The mattress swoons in commotion under me,
And the helpless angels would be damned for me!

(Mathews 1955: pp. 160–161)

These examples of Baudelaire's poems from *The Flowers of Evil* only very briefly hint at the subtlety and richness of his art. Even today very few poets dare to confront the subject matter that Baudelaire made his own. He wrote:

‘Some have told me that these poems might do harm; I have not rejoiced at that. Other good souls, that they might do some good; and that has given me no regret. I was equally surprised at what the former feared and what the latter hoped, which only served to prove once again that this age has lost all sense of the classical notions of literature’ (Mathews 1955: p. xxvi).

The end

Baudelaire died in the arms of his mother on 31 August 1867. At the end, he was unable to use language. This was a tragic end to the life of a man whose whole existence was fashioned upon and depended on the use of words. His life and works were so intertwined that it remains impossible, even today, to consider the merits of the art apart from the tumultuous life. Baudelaire led the Bohemian life; he was constantly in debt, he was poor, he led a decadent life, mixed with the low and the high, but the focus and driving force of his life was literature. Asselineau, a close friend, described his last days:

‘It was obvious that Baudelaire had relinquished all hope and abandoned every illusion. He was yielding to the foe he had struggled with so valiantly and for so long. Soon, he lost all desire to leave his bed. There he spent his days, watched over by his mother. His will was broken; but the mind was still awake. He never ceased to welcome his friends or to stretch out his free hand to the visitor. Until his final days, he continued to take an interest in the conversations that went on at the foot of his bed, and took part in them only by making small signs with his head or his eyelids. Whenever you looked his way, you found his eye intelligent and attentive, though darkened by an expression of infinite sadness, which those who glimpsed it will never forget. These last months must have been for him the most painful of all. He had outlived himself, and was living now only to sense all that he had lost’ (Pichois 1989: p. 361).

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