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The Superficial Gleaming of Conformity: A New Critical Reading of Doty's "A Display of Mackerel"

On the surface, Mark Doty's "A Display of Mackerel" seems somewhat simple. Fish, presumably for sale, are lying out in rows, together and shining. The poem asks what we would choose if we could shine like the mackerel, and then goes back to describing the mackerels' condition. Upon closer examination, however, the poem reveals a larger social commentary. The poem describes the gleaming sameness of mackerel on ice, which is beautiful, but by the end of the poem, it becomes apparent that there is something sinister beneath the superficial shining. It becomes clear that the poem argues that conformity (or the absence of individuality), forced on a population by an institution, is "gleaming," beautiful, and outwardly beneficial, but underneath it immobilizes and stifles the individual participants.

The first part of the poem describes the display of mackerel itself. The first word of the poem is "they," (1) which collectively refers, we later find out, to the mackerel. The fish are arranged regularly and neatly, and each is the same size, which makes them naturally fit for this arrangement. The fish are also "barred with black bands," (4) which is an early clue that their situation is negative: the bars indicate that they have no freedom. For the first five stanzas, however, the fish are described in terms of light, shining, and iridescence. Through this repetition, it is strongly suggested that the mackerel and their situation are beautiful. This description comes in part by several similes and metaphors for the iridescent shining of the fish: they are compared both to art in the form of "a Tiffany window," (8) and to "sun on gasoline," (13) a possibly dirty connotation. However, the metaphor used in the lines, "the wildly

rainbowed / mirror of a soapbubble sphere,” (11-12) contradicts the idea of regular, restrained fish. There is something frenetic about the tension between the description of something wild for something restrained. This frenetic energy picks up again later in the poem. The fish are also described as iridescent, which involves a change in color, but it would denote a uniform changing across the fish, rather than a wild one. The fish are finally described forcefully as being “not a one in any way / distinguished from the other / —nothing about them / of individuality,” (15-18). I say “forcefully” because the poem takes four lines to describe a situation that could be expressed in a few words, and the lines use phrases that are absolute. The repetition in these lines and the various descriptions for the shining mackerel sound like propaganda, or like a message that is intended to be persuasive, but is instead suspiciously demanding. This heavy-handed persuasion is in conflict with the light, pretty, sometimes whimsical descriptions of the fish. In the context of this persuasive language, the light becomes blinding rather than being illuminating and pleasant.

The poem goes on to describe the condition of each of the mackerel as being “a perfect fulfillment / of heaven’s template,” (21-22). This language suggests a spiritual connection, and possibly references the Church as an institution. If the phrase, “heaven’s template,” however, references the creation of the mackerel by God, there may be a contradiction in the next lines because the mackerel’s perfect state has come “after a lifetime arriving / at this enameling,” (24-25) suggesting evolution of some kind. It makes more sense that the evolution the poem refers to is not an evolution of the mackerel in the physical world, but a metaphor for the state of the Church. Each member of the Church may have gone through a transformation, so that each soul matches heaven’s template: Jesus (see lines 19-22). As the poem reveals later, this would seem

to be a critique on the Church. The next question then would ask if the poem critiques Christianity or only what the institution has become under the direction of Church leaders.

The poem turns from description to pondering what would happen if humans could choose to iridesce like the mackerel. To make the choice to iridesce would mean we would “lose ourselves,” (31) but the idea of being an individual is presented as being fragile and “doomed,” (35). To be unique is to be eventually, inevitably, lost. To be like everyone else is to gain immortality, since what the individual brought to the world is preserved in the others who remain. This thinking, however, completely ignores the disturbing notion that this would also make an individual expendable. The choice between shining and individuality comes down to a choice of how the individual wants to become lost, and these lines portray becoming lost “in the universe / of shimmer,” (32-33) as being better.

In less than seven lines, however, the poem seems to return to the mackerel: “They’d prefer, / plainly,” (36-37) to be shiny. At this point, the poem feels bitter and snobbish, and rather than describe objectively, the poem starts to use language that brings in uncertainty and conjecture, for example, “they seem,” (39) “presumably” (43), and again “they seem,” (49). This word choice casts doubt on the positive argument for gleaming conformity. The frenetic energy seen earlier in the poem picks up again with the lines, “Even now / they seem to be bolting / forward, heedless of stasis,” (38-40). It is a contradiction that they would be bolting forward when they are lying out on ice. In addition, stasis can mean not only inactivity, but, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, civil strife. At this point, the poem’s positive tone about conformity finally breaks open: “They don’t care they’re dead / and nearly frozen, / just as, presumably, / they didn’t care that they were living,” (41-44). There is something deeply wrong

about this situation. “How happy they seem,” (49) but the mackerel are frozen and dead inside, and that “is the price of gleaming,” (51) and conformity.

The poem, however, seems to be making a larger statement about conformity in society, specifically about the conformity that is forced upon society by institutions. As I noted earlier, the poem mentions heaven, which could imply a link to the Church as an institution, but the end of the poem also implies a strong tie to educational institutions. In a phrase that is a pun on the term *schools of fish*, the poem describes “the rainbowed school / and its acres of brilliant classrooms, / in which no verb is singular, / or every one is,” (46-49). The word school could be interpreted on its own as only referring to fish, but the link to education is solidified by the reference to classrooms. The scholarly institution is brilliant, like the condition of conformity among mackerel, and in this the poem argues that education, in the name of the greater good, (“all for all” [45]) confers conformity and brilliance, but also restricts freedom and perhaps even the will to live.

Institutions, however, would attempt to mask such negative arguments by saying that giving up individuality is a good thing. The poem matches the language that it believes the scholarly institution would use to try to persuade, but undermines the institution’s supposed message at every turn. The benefit of conformity is, as I have mentioned, the “greater good.” To make the people as a whole “happy,” (49) the individuals will have to become “selfless,” (50) which has the double meaning that the individuals will selflessly give themselves up for the good of the group, and also become self-less in giving up their individuality. The loss of individuality is to gain immortality through sameness with others, as I noted above, but it is to “die” personally. This is only fit for mackerel, who “didn’t care that they were living,” when they were living (44). Overall, then, the poem exposes what is beneath the shining veneer of conformity,

specifically conformity imposed by society's institutions. While unity is a beautiful thing, the poem argues that the loss of individuality is a deeply serious issue that cannot be glossed over. Humans are not unthinking mackerel and therefore warrant a more nuanced mode of living: one that allows them to make choices, perhaps even still to make the choice to pay "the price of gleaming," (51).