

## The Secret Structure of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*)

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to find the hidden pattern and structure in Baudelaire's poetry collection *The Flowers of Evil*. The study is attempted through a close reading of the collection by using analytical and autobiographical methods for textual analysis. The first part of the paper analyses the collection in reference to Baudelaire's personal life. This reveals that the *Flowers of Evil* narrates a story and is a self-exploratory journey not just for Baudelaire but also for the reader. The story narrated through the structural beauty of the book is every individual's story. The second part of the paper moves to an analysis of visible patterns of binaries and ternaries in the collection. The poetry collection is a play of opposite and contradictory concepts beautifully woven together into a structure that reveals the realities of life. The third part of this paper seeks to find the order in disorder and looks at the criticism that the structural unity of the book has been subjected to. This part argues that the fragmented and disordered nature of the poems in the collection also contributes to the larger structure of the book. The paper concludes by examining Baudelaire's love for beauty and art.

**Keywords:** Baudelaire, French poetry, structure, pattern, Flowers of Evil, Les Fleurs du Mal.

### Introduction

*Les Fleurs du Mal* or *The Flowers of Evil*, a collection of French Poetry by Charles Baudelaire, contains virtually all of Baudelaire's poetry, which he wrote between 1840 and his death in August 1867. *Les Fleurs du Mal's* poetry typically defies convention, employing provocative imagery and unexpected structures. After Barbey d' Aurevilly's claim that *Les Fleurs du Mal* has a "secret architecture" and Baudelaire's appeal that his work should be read as a whole, a lot of analytical studies of *Les Fleurs du Mal* were focused on revealing this "secret". The book was first published in 1857 and was put on trial on the charges of "immorality". After a lot of court proceedings six poems were suppressed due to, as a judge claimed, their "crude realism offensive to decency." In the next edition Baudelaire added thirty five new poems. The structure of the book was saved. The book is composed of six

sections which are The Spleen and the Ideal, Parisian Scenes, Wine, The Flowers of Evil, Revolt and Death.

“The Spleen and the Ideal” is the first and the largest sections of all. It is made up of eighty five poems which start with a preface addressed ‘To the Reader’. The preface serves as an itinerary. This section is about the unachievable beauty of purity due to a constant pull from sins and evil. It starts with the poet’s visions of beauty and its aesthetic manifestation which can be seen in poems such as in “A Hymn to Beauty”. It moves towards the poet’s anxieties to attain spiritual purity but inability to let go of his flaws and vices which can be seen in the poems, “Elevation” and “The Spiritual Dawn”. In “Don Juan in Hell” he already has the knowledge that he might suffer. The end of the section is sorrowful and full of realization and want for a solution.

“Parisian Scenes” consists of thirty poems describing the landscape of Paris, its lanes and the bustling city which is rotting at the core. The poet compares his state to that of the city and thus this section becomes that of introspection of the self. The third section “Wine” consists of five poems which talk about wine as a temptation and a way to get away from reality. The fourth and the eponymous section, “The Flowers of Evil” consists of nine poems about love, homosexual love, lust and sexual deviations. In the fifth section named “Revolt”, the poet becomes a hero standing on the threshold of Good and Evil, fighting a mental battle with God and Satan on different sides and yearning for an end. He finally turns against God and finds solace in following Satan. This section contains twelve poems. The last section called “Death” consists of six poems. Here, Baudelaire realizes the ultimate fate of human beings, and he realizes that the silence in death is the ultimate solution and reality of life.

### **The Story behind the Structure**

In terms of the structural significance of the book, it can be considered as a critical autobiography of Baudelaire who here attains a certain universality making it the story of every human being. It traces a pattern of life. It shows Baudelaire’s inclination towards Satan and his acknowledgement of the beauty in evil in a quest to destroy it. History reveals that Baudelaire wrote this just after a suicide attempt, he lived away from his family, wasn’t on good terms with his step-father, was an embodiment of vices like debauchery and overspending, was constantly pressurized to return to his pure state, free of vices and remained in this perpetual anxiety and an antagonistic relationship with God. *The Flowers of Evil* is like a true embodiment of his life story from the beginning to the end.

It is not just about the poet but the whole mankind. This book as a whole narrates a story, takes the reader on the journey of self-exploration. The structure of the book progresses linearly into a deep exploration of the self and the other. It moves from birth to death. The birth is explored in terms of the birth of vices and evil inside the human and death serves as

the ultimate resolution which marks the end of this poetic exploration. Baudelaire's yearning for death is expressed in the poem "The Gladly Dead":

“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”  
(Matthews 88)

The structure goes from spleen and ideal to the depths of a nihilistic self. It is the story of every man and woman who falls a prey to the vices and temptations and is unable to break free and is finally torn apart. As a whole, the structure narrates a story but different sections also complete their full cycle serving like a structure within a structure. The book as a whole consists of different thematic cycles. The cycle of Exploration, The cycle of beauty, the cycle of love which contains excess of love that is temptation, forbidden love, lust and the love for Evil and The cycle of Spirituality which completes at Death.

### **The Play of Binaries and Ternaries**

The book is structured in a way that it works on binaries. There is a certain duality to the structure. Baudelaire works on a Manichean world view which is characterized by a dualistic cosmology moving between good and evil and light and darkness. Many binaries can be seen in Baudelaire's structure of *The Flowers of Evil*. The binary of good and evil, light and dark, heaven and hell, inside and the outside and how a man like a pendulum keeps moving to and fro between these opposites. He is torn between the bright blue sky and the darkness of the evil. Every course of action leads towards either of the two. Temptations like wine and lust take the man to the dark bottomless pit of evil and self-exploration, the expanse of nature takes him to the abode of goodness in the bright blue sky. The structure is thus a set of binaries starting from the binary of the Spleen and Ideal, then the inside and the outside or the self and the world in the “Parisian Scenes”, then the binary of temptation and persistence followed by the binary of God and Satan in the “Revolt”, ultimately followed by the binary of end and a new beginning in “Death”.

The structure also follows a ternary pattern. The whole structure can be seen as a story in three parts which are Observation or Realization, Finding Solutions and The final Resolution. The first two sections are that of realization of a torn self between the good and the evil. The first section is a realization through the material world and the second through connecting the material and the self and exploring the self. The second part in this three part structure is that of Finding Solutions which involves turning to temptations such as wine and lust and revolting against God and turning to Satan. The ultimate section is that of finding resolution in Death.

Another observable ternary pattern is the structure encompassing three worlds which are the material, spiritual and the self. The material world is that of vices and temptations, the

spiritual world is that of God and Satan or good and evil and world of the self is the inner world, the mind and the soul. The poem is spread across three biblical spaces if read in those terms, which are the heaven, hell and the earth. The story presented by the structure of the book is relevant for any human at any point of time, so it transcends time and spreads across the past, present and the future. Thus the pattern is well constructed and has a mathematical unity.

### **Criticism and Order in Disorder**

The argument of the collection having a secret structure is seen by some as a legal argument to protect the “whole” when it was being disintegrated on the grounds of immorality. Another argument that goes against the collection having a particular order or a structure is that the subject matter of the collection is full of disorder and instability. Having a larger meaning, pattern and structure seems absurd for such a poetry collection. But an important thing to consider before going forward with such claims is that Baudelaire’s poems embody a disordered and chaotic reality. The poet’s persona is itself fragmented. In a letter to his mother, Baudelaire wrote, “You can see I’m not trying to hide my wounds” (Pichois214). This is exactly what he did in his poems, rather than hiding his wounds, the broken nature of reality and the disorder, he portrays a part of it through every individual poem. Each poem carries a larger meaning, an order of life in disorder.

Another criticism to the “secret architecture” of the book is that it somewhat moves the locus away from the individual poems. It shows a lack in the individual poems to capture any meaning within themselves. This shows that the collection as a whole along with the preface is externally intelligible and the internal meaning loses a lot of its importance. But it is not true that a larger structure implies no individual meaning. Every individual poem embodies a different aspect of a disordered reality, which when brought together create the full picture. Without the depth of meaning in the individual poems, the “secret architecture” can never work on its own. Whichever way the book is read, with a structural frame in mind or without that, it still remains a literary masterpiece with only a difference of interpretations.

### **Conclusion**

For Baudelaire, beauty surpassed morality. The structural artistry of his poetry collection can be attributed to his passion for style and beauty. Through *Flowers of Evil*, Baudelaire’s main goal was to create a work of art that can match up to the beauty of classics. Thus, for him even the structure of the book was not random and contained depths of meaning and beauty. He paid attention to detail, to weave a story that is both aesthetically pleasing and relatable. Baudelaire was not afraid to confront the criticism that his poetry collection was subjected to. 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 xxvi).

Baudelaire, through his poetry collection, wanted to create a classic work of art. He wanted to preserve “the whole” because it carried some meaning, not at all implying that the individual poems are meaningless but to show that the real beauty lies in the amalgamation of the two. Baudelaire himself sums up his thought process in writing poetry:

‘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 unfavorable 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 123)

This beautifully sums up what *Flowers of Evil* stands for. It moves above the considerations of good and bad, right and wrong and unapologetically establishes itself as a literary marvel whose structure and themes fall into a beautiful pattern and are infused with passion and energy by their creator Baudelaire who believed that art is beauty and beauty is art.

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