

The Fool

In Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, exaggerated and repeated diction, visual imagery, and shifting sentence structure conjure a tone of exaggeration, humor, and ignorant amusement, which helps characterize the sympathetic, yet somewhat shallow and silly Mr. Betteredge, the narrator.

Overstated and repeated diction, conveyed through the words of Mr. Betteredge, supplements this tone of exaggeration, humor, and ignorant amusement. Mr. Betteredge follows the "horrid walk" (4) to the "*most* horrible" (9) quicksand on the shores of Yorkshire to fetch Rosanna Spearman, a girl with a handkerchief "*very* inferior" (41) to his. Hyperbole is found throughout the passage, helping to express a humorous tone and characterize Mr. Betteredge as a funny, well-meaning, and perhaps not very intelligent old man. Aside from the quicksand in itself, Mr. Betteredge never explains why the walk up to the bay or the little bay are so horrible. Furthermore, he inserts random comments, such as that about his expensive-looking handkerchief, into his narrative. This hyperbole and further repetition of such words as "loneliest," "ugliest," "horrible," "most," "ever," "only," and "never" lend little credibility to what this old man says because he seems to ramble, rather than provide a succinct narrative of his encounter with Rosanna. Mr. Betteredge appears to be caught in the superstitious beliefs of "the people in *our* parts" (12), who call the quicksand "The Shivering Sand" (12), rather than someone who knows what he's talking about. The fact that that he uses words such as "our" (1, 4, 12) imply an excessive need to belong among society, perhaps even high society. "Head of the servants" (33), who mentions "our house [is] high up on the Yorkshire coast" (1), which lies in sharp contrast to the "ugliest *little* bay on all our coast" (4), and spends much attention on one of his "six beauties," his handkerchief, Mr. Betteredge appears to be a frivolous, shallow man, with

an exaggerated sense of self to cover up his superficiality. What he lacks in character, he seems to want to make up by belonging to a certain opinion shared by society or merely as a puppet in society itself. He demeans the little bay, and yet his judgment seems not to be based on the characteristics of the little bay or its actual appearance, but in how society reacts to it. The house does not belong to him, just because he's head of the servants doesn't mean it's really his business why Rosanna is crying, and most of his descriptions, such as of the bay and Rosanna, concentrate on words (as can be testified to the repetition and hyperbole) and the signs of wealth or status, such as appearances – either Rosanna's "plain" (29) gray cloak, her "cheap" (41) cambric handkerchief, his own handkerchief, or her "deformed shoulder" (30), which he feels she is trying to hide, though she might not be. Thus, an exaggerated and humorous tone help to characterize not so much what is going on in the passage, as the frivolous, silly character – trying hard to fit into society, perhaps as a man of rank and significance – who is narrating it.

Visual imagery, too, heightens this tone of exaggeration. The turn of the tide "sets the whole face of the quicksand shivering and trembling" (11) and the sea "seems to leave the waves behind it on the bank" (15) as it "covers the sand in silence" (16). Personification of the tide, sea, and quicksand, which shivers and trembles conjures the impression of a living monster in the bay. This visual imagery creates a tone of exaggerated mystery and superstition that an old, perhaps experienced, man should not succumb to; it emphasizes Mr. Betteredge's ignorance, naivety, and foolishness. As the old man finds the girl, first he describes her appearance, then that she is "all alone, looking out on the quicksand and the sea" (31). In other words, this is all he picks out from the scene to describe Rosanne – what she wears and the fact that she is alone. What to Rosanne is a preferred time of contemplation by herself, to him is loneliness in a horrid retreat. To him, it passes belief why Rosanna would prefer such solitude; in his ignorant

amusement, he fails to understand. Once again, Mr. Betteredge presents himself as a man who gives excessive attention to what others think. Because most of society shuns this place, he does as well. Visual imagery conveys this foolishness on his part.

The sentence structure of the passage also conveys the superficiality of Mr. Betteredge's character. Much of the passage is relayed through long, compound-complex and complex sentences, interjected with short exclamations, such as "I can tell you!" (17), "Come!" (21), and "But there!" (44). The effect is to create the impression of someone gossiping, or merely rambling, as stated earlier. Though the intent of the narrative is probably seriousness, it comes off as silly and humorous. The dominant use of polysyndeton, the deliberate overuse of conjunctions, particularly in lines 19-22, adds to this impression. The sentences used by Mr. Betteredge's to recount his narrative lie in contrast to those spoken by the young Rosanna. Hers are quick, witty, and to the point, as she declares, "But the place shows, Mr. Betteredge – the place shows" (56). This contrast in sentence structure emphasizes Mr. Betteredge's shallow character; what Rosanne says in about two sentences carries more weight than what Mr. Betteredge takes an entire page in saying because much of it seems to have been unnecessary.

Thus, exaggerated and repeated diction, selective visual imagery, and contrasting sentence structure help to create a mood of exaggeration and humor that characterizes Mr. Betteredge as superficial and unintelligent.