Trompe l'Oeil Study Guide

Trompe l'Oeil by Mary Jo Salter

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Introduction

Mary Jo Salter's poem "Trompe l'Oeil," which provided the title for her 2003 collection *Open Shutters*, describes an artistic style found in Genoa, Italy, and throughout Europe: that of painting realistic murals on the outside walls of houses and buildings, so real that people passing by are fooled, at least briefly, into mistaking the painted images for the things they represent. Salter uses this particular style of painting to spark a meditation on the nature of reality and the arts in general, finding insincerity in both the fake shutters that stand beside a real window and the French word "*oeil*" itself, which can be considered deceptive or a lie because it presents a final "l" to the eye but not to the ear (it is not pronounced the way it is spelled if one assumes each letter stands for a specific sound).

This poem is representative of Salter's work as it has evolved over the course of five books of poetry in the past two decades. The two subjects□painting and foreign travel□are typical in Salter's writing. Stylistically, the poem shows the deft control of rhyme, off-rhyme, and rhythm that readers have come to expect of her words. Salter's technical elegance is balanced with a light sense of humor that makes the most of ordinary ironies, such as the contrast between laundry piled up inside the house and imitation clothes hung to dry on a painted clothesline on the wall outside. The poem manages, in just a few lines, to treat readers to a new way of looking at the world and of looking at how artists depict the reality that others simply experience.

Author Biography

Mary Jo Salter was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on August 15, 1954. Her father was an advertising executive, and her mother was a painter, an influence that can be seen in many of Salter's works. She was raised in Baltimore, Maryland and Detroit, Michigan and she then attended Harvard University where she studied under the poet Elizabeth Bishop (whose style Salter has been said to emulate). Salter graduated from Harvard in 1976. She then went to England to attend New Hall, Cambridge where she earned her master's degree with first-class honors in 1978. After that, Salter spent a year in France on an Amy Lowell Traveling Scholarship. She married poet and novelist Brad Leithauser whom she had met in 1980.

Since 1984, Salter has been intermittently affiliated with Mt. Holyoke, a liberal arts women's college in South Hadley, Massachusetts, mixing teaching with international travel. Salter has also served as the Emily Dickinson Lecturer in Humanities at Mt. Holyoke.

Salter has published five collections of poetry. She served as Poet in Residence at Robert Frost Place in 1981. She was awarded the Discovery Prize from the *Nation* in 1983 and a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship for 1983—1984. Her book *Unfinished Paintings: Poems* (1989) received the prestigious Lamont Prize in Poetry and also the James Laughlin Award. In 1989, she received the Witter Bynner Foundation Poetry Prize awarded by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1994, she was a nominee for the National Book Critics' Circle Award for her collection *Sunday Skaters*. Salter is a past vice president of the Poetry Society of America and was the poetry editor for the *New Republic* from 1992 until 1995. "Trompe l'Oeil" is included in her collection *Open Shutters*, which was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 2003.

Plot Summary

Lines 1—3

"Trompe l'Oeil" is set in Genoa, a city in northeast Italy, not far from the border of France. Genoa has a long history dating back before the third century b.c. when it was destroyed by the Carthaginians. It was rebuilt by the Romans and was a military base for the Roman Empire. It is common in Genoa to paint outside building walls to make them look as if they contain actual three dimensional objects, such as shutters, trellises, and flower pots. The French phrase "*trompe l'oeil*," used as the poem's title, refers to a style of painting that is so realistic that the eye is supposed to confuse painted objects for real ones: "*trompe*" is the French third person singular for "to deceive," and "oeil" is French for "eye."

Line 2 refers to shutters painted next to windows in such a realistic style that, on first seeing them, one can be fooled into thinking that they are actual shutters that can be moved. It is only after looking more closely at them that one can tell that the shutters are not really shutters at all. Having been deceived at first, the illusion is then shattered, as described in line 3.

Lines 4—6

This stanza begins by contradicting the end of the first stanza. The illusion of real shutters does not actually "shatter." On some level, the viewer may have been tricked into thinking that the painted shutters were real, but on a deeper level the artifice of them has been known all along. By the third line of this stanza, the speaker identifies the mental pattern that occurs when encountering such realistic art as the mind becomes conscious of the artifice involved "time and again," which implies that the illusion is just as often forgotten.

Lines 7—9

Stanza 3 consists of one long sentence that offers the same factual information that the poem has already established, saying, in essence, that the shutters are false. What this stanza has to offer is stylistic. It refers to the window as an open eye, which allows the play on words that the shutter, if it could close, would shut the eye. It implies that the artist who made this shutter look so realistic made a "claim" about its ability to move like a real shutter and, because the artificial shutter cannot in fact do that, the claim is judged to be a lie.

Lines 10—12

This stanza examines the unusual visual phenomenon of the stationary shadows. The latches that hold shutters in place stand out from the wall and would cast different shadows at different times of the day. In the case of painted shutters with painted latches, the shadows that are cast are stationary throughout the day. In line 12, the poem alludes to the way that a sundial uses the sun's changing location in the sky to tell time, implying that the stationary shadows are, like the stuck hands of a clock, incapable of showing the passage of time.

Lines 13—15

This stanza continues the relationship between the frozen shadow painted on the wall and the inability to measure time, a theme introduced in the previous stanza. Acknowledging that the painted shadow is like a sundial that continuously shows the same time all day long, the speaker determines that there is nothing wrong with that. The false shadow is correct once every day when the sun is positioned overhead in such a way that the latches would in fact cast a shadow in that direction, if they were real. This singular occurrence, when the sun corresponds with the angle of the painted shadows is adequate, the speaker says; there is no need to see the shadow constantly moving with the sun's position. Line 15 asserts that the painter's imagination, expressed here as "play," is more important than the scientific principles that rule real shadows.

Lines 16—18

Having raised the importance of play, the poem gives deeper psychological significance to the artificial shutters. It contrasts the life of imagination that created and appreciates such an illusion with the drab sameness of reality. Reality is depicted in lines 16 and 17 as an "endless / supply of clothes to wash." While laundry is never a welcome chore, Salter makes it even more daunting by pointing out the fact that it will always be there, an eternal burden. The inside of the house is oppressive. In line 18, a contrast is drawn when the outside of the house is described with the positive word "fresh." The last line of this stanza is unpunctuated, leaving readers to linger on that unresolved idea of freshness as they take the jump to the next stanza to see what is being described this way.

Lines 19—21

Line 19 makes a metaphorical connection between the laundry in the house and the paint that the artist has applied to the outside. Both are hung out to dry: the laundry is hung from a clothes line, and the paint is "hung" on the wall. Salter uses the word "frieze," which is literally a sculpted or decorated horizontal band near the top of a building but can be applied here in a more general sense as a decoration for the top of an outside wall. The use of this word allows the poem to remind readers of the

expression "flapping in the breeze" with its similar-sounding expression "flapping on a frieze." The poem further explores this relationship by pointing out that laundry painted on the wall might seem to be in motion even though the real breeze cannot touch it.

Lines 22—25

The relationship between reality and artifice that has been explored throughout the poem in terms of the realistic painting on the wall is applied to the relationship between spoken and written language. Line 22 describes the words of the poem as being "pinned" to the page, like the shirt tales that look like they are blowing in the breeze are immobilized on the wall by the painter. In line 23, the poem draws attention to the fact that its title, which has not been mentioned within the poem, comes from a French expression. Using both "foreign" and "lie" to describe the title connects the poet's work to the painter's work of, as described here, creating an artificial version of reality. The critique of reality comes down to a phonetic level as Salter points out that the final "l" in *oeil* is silent (the word is pronounced "loi"). Rather than just leaving it as an unpronounceable letter, the poem uses it to raise yet another question of reality versus artifice by saying that the final letter only "looks like an *I*," as if its absence from pronunciation might mean that it does not really exist on the page after all.

Themes

Imitation

The main focus of this poem is the distinction between what is real and what only seems to be real. The poem's primary symbol for explaining this distinction is the painting style known as *trompe l'oeil*, which is found on the outsides of houses in many European cities. This style emphasizes the illusion of reality in the artist's work, suppressing artistic style for a nearly photographic effect. In the examples that the poem says are found around Genoa, artists have not only rendered their subjects realistically, but they have placed them in locations where the actual objects depicted might occur. Window shutters are painted outside of windows, and shirts hanging on clothes lines are placed beside walls where clotheslines might actually be hung. In such real-life settings, as opposed to in museums or galleries, the paintings can actually fool viewers into thinking that the items depicted are real.

The poem extends its examination of reality in the eighth stanza by questioning the relationship between the poet's words and reality. The words are said to be "pinned" onto the poem, indicating a basic distinction between the words, which can be written, and the free-flowing thoughts they are supposed to represent. In addition, the spelling of the word "*l'oeil*" is said to be a faulty imitation of the spoken word, a "lie," because it contains a final "l" that is not present in the word's pronunciation.

Truth and Falsehood

It is almost certain that a work concerned with the ways in which art imitates life will address the relationship between truth and falsehood. Implicit in the idea of illusion is that the product made by the artist has some qualities in common with its original model but lacks others. The things that are lacking in the imitation can be considered lies.

"Tromp l'Oeil" raises this question early on when, at the start of the second stanza, it contradicts its own version of reality as being "not true." In this case, it is not the false shutters that are accused of falsehood, but the way they are described: the poem starts by saying that the viewer is fooled into thinking the shutters are real before abruptly realizing that they are painted, but then it says that the viewer knew they were painted all along. Beginning like this, Salter establishes an uneasy relationship between reality and intentional dishonesty not just between the viewer and the painter, but also between the reader and the poet who is examining the painting's dishonesty.

Instead of looking at deception as being somehow immoral, this poem describes it as a good thing. This can best be seen in stanza 6, when the real-life clothes waiting to be washed are contrasted with the clothes that are painted on the wall, already washed and perpetually hung to dry. Salter compares the drudgery of ordinary life with the fantasy of chores that are perpetually completed. The poem does in fact consider the

limitations in the artistic version of life when comparing the painted shadow on the wall to the frozen hands of a clock, but it dismisses such limitations as unimportant, noting, "Who needs to be correct / more often than once a day?"

The last stanza raises the question of truth and falsehood once again when calling the pronunciation of the word "*l'oeil*" a "lie." Rather than serving as an accusation against the French language, which has evolved to this pronunciation, the poem seems to make this distinction in order to soften the concept of "lying." In pointing out a coincidence and calling it a lie, the poem encourages readers to think less judgmentally about the ways in which reality and artistry differ.

Stillness

In this poem's view, the biggest difference between real life and the version of life presented in *trompe l'oeil* painting is that the painted version is frozen still. This is responsible for confounding the mind, which expects the shadows to move as the sun moves across the sky and the clothes on the line to flap in the breeze. As a result, anyone experiencing this kind of painting and thinking about it for any amount of time is led to contemplate the active world that we live in and what would happen if that activity came to an end. In this poem, Salter pays attention to those very issues. The conclusions reached indicate a kind of weariness with the activity of the real world, with play shadows being given just as much respect as real shadows. In stanza eight, Salter shows how the poet's job, like the painter's, is to bring the world to a stop, "pinning" words down on the page so that they are not free to move around.

Style

Consonance

Consonance is a form of rhyming. With traditional rhymes, the final vowel and the final consonant sounds appear in both rhymed words, as in "boat" and "goat" or in "lagoon" and "cartoon." When a poet uses consonance, the vowel sounds may be different, only the final consonant need be the same, as in "stuff" and "off" or "monk" and "sock." The repetition helps draw the poem together but not as tightly as a traditional rhyme might do.

Salter uses different forms of rhyme in "Tromp l'Oeil." There are traditional rhymes, such as "eye" and "lie" in stanza 3 or "day" and "play" in stanza 5. There are also off rhymes, or imperfect rhymes, as in the similarities between "shutters" and "shatters." More often than is common, though, the poem uses consonance. Through the use of pairings such as "on" with "again," "strike" with "clock," and "wash" with "fresh," the poem asserts the author's control without following a strict pattern that would lock it into a formal rhyming scheme.

Pun

Puns are a play on words that draw attention to the ways that similar-sounding words can be used, in the right circumstances, to mean similar things. The poem starts with a pun on the word "shutters," following it closely with "shatters" which is just one letter away. A pun is also made of the phrase "hung out to dry": it applies to laundry, which is pinned to a clothesline and hung in the sun after washing, but it also applies to paint, which is put on a wall wet and therefore "hung" to dry. The phrase "flapping in the breeze" is subverted, with the word "frieze" put in to substitute for "breeze," which then shows up in the following line. In the end, the poem engages in a complex play with words. The word "*l'oeil*" is called a "lie" because it has a letter that is not pronounced, but it is also a "lie" because the pronunciation of the French word "*l'oeil*" is close to "lie."

Historical Context

The artistic technique of *trompe l'oeil* has been used for centuries. There are examples of it found in the ruins of ancient Rome, including floor mosaics depicting what could be debris found scattered around after a feast but is actually crafted into the tiles by the skilled hand of an artist. There are several examples of such floor mosaics from the second or third centuries b.c. Pliny the Elder, a Roman writer from the first century a.d., tells a story about a competition between two Greek artists, Zeuxis and Parrhasios, who competed to show who could create the most realistic drawing. Zeuxis's painting of a cluster of grapes was so convincing that birds swooped down to peck at it, but he found himself bested when he tried to open the curtain to reveal Parrhasios's work only to find that the curtain that he was reaching for was itself painted on the wall.

Trompe l'oeil manifests itself in many different ways in different artistic styles. In addition to the floor mosaics already mentioned, the practice of painting murals on outside walls of buildings to depict reality has been popular since the Renaissance, when artistic theories about linear perspective allowed painters to challenge themselves with larger, grander scenes. There are also canvas paintings that capture visions of reality, a practice much more common before the advent of photography in the nineteenth century. Recently, sculptors working with ceramic and plastics and other malleable materials have been able to simulate realty with great results, creating sculptures of people in public places that look convincing until the eye uncomfortably notes their lack of motion.

The *trompe l'oeil* technique relies on this element of surprise. Many types of visual artistry try to imitate reality, but most do it with the tacit agreement between the artist and viewer that what is being presented is an artist's view of the world. With *trompe l'oeil*, the viewer is not supposed to think of the artist's intent, at least not at first. The first impression should be of viewing something that is actual, an impression that naturally fades after a few moments. After the initial shock, the viewer can step back from the situation and consider what aspects of the picture led to the illusion. One aspect of this trick is the matter of proportion: the object cannot be too obviously large or small for the setting in which it is displayed. Another aspect is the setting itself; usually, a *trompe l'oeil* work will not be displayed in a place where the artistic object would not naturally fit in, although many artists have in fact worked magic by putting images where viewers least expect them: a train tunnel on the side of a building, for instance, or a person seated in a fountain. One aspect that is fairly common in *trompe l'oeil* works is that the objects depicted are often old and worn. A reason the picture or sculpture is able to fool the eye is that viewers have traditionally been used to idealized subjects in artistic works and are caught unaware when they see things that reflect the strains of everyday life. In general, artists working in *trompe l'oeil* have tended to be less well known than other artists because of the emphasis placed on reproducing reality over personal expression.

Critical Overview

From the very start of her career, Mary Jo Salter has been considered an important American poet. Her first book of poetry, *Henry Purcell in Japan: Poems* (1985), was reviewed in several national publications, including the *New Republic*, where Alfred Corn gave it a grade of "A," commenting particularly on the poetry's "achieved tone and fine-grained diction."

Phoebe Pettingell also gave Salter an "A" when reviewing her second book, *Unfinished Painting*, for the *New Leader*. The book, Pettingell wrote, "deftly embodies the imperfect, the dilemma of loss, the fragility of accomplishment." She noted that she saw in it slight improvement over weaknesses in Salter's first book.

Not all reviewers have been glowing in their praise of Salter, though those that are reluctant about her have been few. One such reviewer is William Logan of the *New Criterion*. Logan's review of *A Kiss in Space* (1999) found Salter to be too timid of a writer. "The good poems are few enough," he wrote. "Salter doesn't take chances, and settles too easily for well-mannered, well-manicured poems."

The praise for *Open Shutters*, the volume that contains the poem "Trompe l'Oeil," has been almost universally positive. For instance, Donna Seaman explained in her review for *Booklist* that "Salter's moves are so precise and gravity-defying, so astonishingly eloquent, the exhilarated reader feels as though she's watching a gymnast perform intricate, risky, and unpredictable sequences, nailing each one perfectly." Reviewing *Open Shutters* in the *Antioch Review*, John Taylor noted that Salter's poetry is like the painted-on shutters and drying clothes mentioned in "Trompe l'Oeil" in that they "display subtle surface effects: rhymes, half-rhymes, deft meters, carefully counted syllables, playful homages to traditional poetic forms. But like *trompe l'oeil*, her best craftsmanship ultimately guides our eyes behind the illusion, or beyond, or inside□and leaves us with wonder, with unanswerable questions."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, Kelly examines ways in which the layers of verbal complexity in this poem actually diminish readers' confidence in its meaning.

Throughout her illustrious career, Salter's poetry has been lavished with recognition and awards, and rightly so. Her work offers a sense of formalism and a lightheartedness that has been missing from a great deal of poetry in the last fifty years□a time that has seen a shift in sensibilities. Academic poetry (as opposed to the kind of poetry flourishing in music and in poetry slam-type readings) has distanced itself from common readers by becoming more and more difficult to understand, or to even want to understand. Salter has always, to her credit, been accessible to readers at any level.

What she has earned for it, in addition to numerous awards, visiting professorships, and editorial positions, is the charge that her work, from the beginning, has come up short of the intellectual and emotional content that poems of her level of accomplishment ought to have. Salter plays with words so well that critics have found themselves asking if there should not be more substance behind the play. This is not an unreasonable assumption; it is, after all, very conceivable that a writer could rise to prominence just on the strength of technical elegance, with nothing to offer except clever word manipulation and literary critics should be expected to be on the lookout for that, to make sure that a knack for skilled verbal mechanics does not allow emotional vacancy to pass as serious poetry. It would be just as unconscionable to praise skill without heart as it would to praise raw emotion without skill, though it is easier to see how critics might easily fall into doing the former.

In reading Salter's poetry, readers have to be particularly careful about drawing conclusions. So polished is her work, so harmonious to the ear, that skeptics are inclined to jump to the conclusion that inside of all of that verbal grandeur must be a hollow core, as if there would be no reason for anyone to write the kind of luxurious poetry that Salter writes unless they had something to hide. Fans, on the other hand, tend to assume that the kind of intellect that can produce the ornate formal poetry that she deals in must, as a matter of course, have something substantial to say about what it is to be human. Though critics generally admit to having seen Salter open up over the decades that she has been a published poet, this question of the soul of her works is the one lingering doubt.

In her recent poetry, this tension becomes evident most clearly in a poem like "Trompe l'Oeil" (*trompe l'oeil* is a kind of painting that tricks the eye, is an illusion). The starting piece in her 2003 collection *Open Shutters* gives the collection its title in the second line. The expression is, of course, an oxymoron: "shutters" are meant to be, by their nature, "shut" and are at odds with their nature when "open." As with any oxymoron, alert readers have to stop for a moment to think of how the contradictory ideas can fit together, if they can in fact at all. The question that arises when a writer captures

language acting funny is whether the incongruities that are brought to light are significant, or if they are just amusing but inconsequential flukes.

"Trompe l'Oeil" is rich with linguistic coincidences. Words pair off with others on the basis of sounds rather than meanings; they suggest that ideas are more a matter of verbal arrangement than any intrinsic value. They rebel against the notion of reality. At its heart, this is not really such groundbreaking theory; it just tells readers that the words that represent reality are, like trompe l'oeil painting, not actual reality. The poem gives this basic lesson in such an entertaining way, though, that it is difficult to feel that reading it has been time wasted.

The most superficial level on which this poem works is sound. Sound is in itself basic to poetry and is frequently the point of a poem itself. The most obvious example of this would be something like Poe's "The Bells," or Coleridge's or Baudelaire's ramblings, which justify themselves entirely with their music. What renders sound "superficial" in a poem like "Trompe l'Oeil" is the fact that it is handled too sketchily to be considered a main concern as it could be in other, more passionate works. For example, look at the first stanza: the second line ends with "shutters" and the third line ends with "shatters." This can be no coincidence. These are similar-sounding words, identical but for one letter, but what of it? The relationship does not extend beyond the superficial level to one of greater meaning.

Rhyme is a pattern of repeated sounds. The purpose of rhyming is usually to give readers overt or subliminal assurance that there is order in the poem's universe, that truths are either being revealed or satirized. "Trompe l'Oeil" uses just enough rhyme to not be ignored, but it does not offer a consistent enough pattern to make a statement about order or chaos. The last two of three lines in stanzas 3, 5, and 7 end with exact rhymes, and the lines ending stanzas 1, 2, 6, and 8 have approximate rhymes. The point seems to be that this poem offers a view of the universe where logic just sort of reigns, where the underlying sense is sporadic. There can be times where poems are stifled by adhering too strictly to a formal pattern, and there are times when poems are too free-floating and formless, failing to provide readers with enough assurance that there is in fact an author in charge. "Trompe l'Oeil" falls into neither of these categories, but aspects of each undesirable effect linger around it.

In this poem, as in others, Salter draws on another level of the relationships of sounds between words, substituting one word for a similar one in a way that, like trompe l'oeil painting itself, operates as a kind of optical illusion. The mind expects to read that the laundry on a clothesline is "flapping in the breeze"; the poem does not provide that familiar phrasing, but what it does say, "flapping on a frieze," sounds so much like the expected phrase that it can cause a reader to stop and do a double take. It is fun to be misled briefly with this kind of trick, and impressive that the author has such a strong command of the language that she can find a phrase that fits the situation so perfectly while echoing the sound of the expected phrase so well. What such a trick does to forward the poem's message, though, is unclear. It tells readers to not be complacent with their understanding, with the simple message that reality is more complex than it

seems. What it says is less about the relationship between reality and art as it is about the relationship between art and illusion.

A final level on which "Trompe l'Oeil" works with verbal coincidences is that of extended metaphor. For instance, it draws a comparison between a window and an eye. In itself this is a fair enough metaphor, not exactly original but appropriate enough to be mentioned in passing. But Salter is too brimming with ideas to leave this simple comparison alone, referring to the inability of the imitation shutter to shut the eye. Readers can see the verbal connection□eyes are shut, shutters are shut□without being drawn to any deeper level of thought by adding a new layer. What would happen if the window *could* be shut like an eye? What does it mean that the window left unguarded forever is like an eye unguarded forever? There are ideas that could be explored here, but the poem leaves them for the reader to think about, to provide them with meaning or not. More is being implied than explained, raising the question of whether this poem really does have a message, or if its significance is just an illusion that each reader projects onto it.

In the end, the greatest weakness of a poem like "Trompe l'Oeil" is that it sounds like it should be more important than it really is and in that way makes false promises. The last stanza, for instance, draws attention to its own seriousness by breaking the three-line pattern that has been established in all previous stanzas. In tone, this sends a message that the poem's lightheartedness has come to an end, that the comfortable has given way to a time for frank, direct talk. But all that it really says is that the last letter in the word "*l'oeil*" is silent. The poem calls this a "lie," as it earlier calls the painted shutters a lie. It does not, however, go on to examine the difference between lie, deception, art, and coincidence. Linguists may have a word for the way evolution has made written forms divert from their pronunciations, but "lie" certainly is not it. The only way to understand this loose use of the word "lie" is to accept that the poem does not really want one to think of this circumstance as a lie, but is trying to make readers broaden their understanding of the word. The problem is that it is not clear enough about what exactly the reader is supposed to understand "lie" to mean in this context. This is the final line, the poem's last chance to send a message, and, once again, it offers no more than it had determined by the second stanza: that things are not always what they seem.

There has never been any question about Salter's skill as a poet, only about her relevance. As her career has progressed, critics have come to trust her more, to approach her poetry expecting more than just an impressive display in linguistics. In most of her mature works she is able to tap into the true currents of contemporary life, particularly the poems that she wrote as a response to the terrorist assaults on September 11, 2001. Sometimes, as in a poem like "Trompe l'Oeil," Salter's poetry just does not go for depth, but instead exercises its right to have fun with words for their own sake. The problem is that such an impressive command of the language makes an implicit promise, and readers rightfully believe that such talent should be used to take them deeper into the nature of reality. Like the art style that it discusses, this poem is good for providing some adroit tricks and then admitting those tricks, but it does Salter's gift an injustice by saying nothing new.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "Trompe l'Oeil," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Hart is a published writer who focuses on literary themes. In the following essay, Hart examines the psychological implications behind Salter's use of visual images and word play in her poem.

Salter's poem "Trompe l'Oeil," is not, as its title suggests, only filled with illusions. It also contains beautiful visual images that take the reader to a warm and colorful Mediterranean climate and transport the reader inside and outside of the speaker's world□both the physical and the psychological. Enhancing these images are playful word games that the poet uses to add dimension. These word plays come to the reader in the form of sound and also in the structure of oppositional pairs. With these devices, the short and seemingly simple poem lives up to its title, providing not only a description of various visual imaginings but becoming a bit of an illusion in itself as the poet exposes glimpses of her emotional reactions to things around her by hiding herself within the images.

The overall illusion that Salter presents in her poem is that of the imagined shutters. They are painted on the walls on either side of windows rather than being workable shutters made of wood and constructed to open or close, depending on the need for light or protection from a storm. In the second line of her poem, Salter first presents these painted shutters as if they are real, merely describing them as she sees them: "windows with open shutters." With this statement, the poet conveys, along with her opening stanza, that she is visiting Genoa, and it can be assumed that at first sight of the houses, she feels welcomed. The shutters are open, as if the owners of the houses are greeting her, their arms wide open, mirroring the openness of the shutters.

By the third line in the first stanza, the speaker makes an abrupt turn. Whereas her first impressions were the welcoming, openly stretched arms of her presumed hosts, she quickly learns that this is only an illusion. The expressions of openness are false. The open shutters do not mean that the people are inviting the visitor inside their houses, which are filled with sunshine that is pouring into their shutter-less windows. Neither do they mean that storms are completely out of the forecast. All the false shutters signify is the craftiness of some artisan, who loves colorful adornment and, maybe more importantly, loves the grand art of illusion.

Coupled with the visual images of the first stanza are various psychological implications, which begin with the sense that the speaker feels taken, maybe even a little used, by the illusion of the painted shutters. The mood the poet paints is one filled with a sense of rejection. What was once an open feeling becomes one that is closed. In other words, if the open shutters are merely an illusion, then too might be her own feelings of openness. Another possible interpretation might be found in turning that image on its head. Maybe the speaker herself feels shuttered, as in having bars running across her line of vision, allowing her only a partial view of life. Maybe she is shuttered and only allows a portion of herself to show through. Although she might present an openness to the world, maybe that too is an illusion.

In the third line of the first stanza, the word play begins, and this mood of being tricked is intensified. Here the poet changes one letter in the word "shutters" to create the word "shatters." It is with this small exchange of letters that the poet deepens the sense of gloom. She has been deceived and feels she may have been made a fool of. She believed in something that turned out to be an untruth. The question that the reader must decide might be: is the speaker the one who is taken by the illusion or is she the one who has created it? If readers probe this question a little deeper, they might find that the answer to this question might be an ambiguous "both." They might discover that the speaker is both the creator of the illusion and the one who is duped by it.

A hint that the speaker supplies for the answer to this question might be found in the second stanza. It is here that she remembers a moment before the illusion had set in. It was during that moment, however brief, that she thought the shutters might have been merely painted on the wall. Then she concedes, reminding herself that she has been taken, "time and again." She believes the shutters are real when she forgets the illusion. She suddenly remembers that they are painted, and she scoffs at the fantasy. She must want to believe in the illusion. Time and again, she says, she falls for the fake reproductions. The speaker admits to her own folly in the fifth stanza by writing: "Who needs to be correct / more often than once a day?" It is as if the speaker is questioning her own sanity or maybe her intelligence. How can the illusion of the painted shutters constantly lure her back into believing in them? At least once a day, she consoles herself, she remembers. At least once a day, she calls the illusion for what it really is.

There are more clues provided in the third stanza, in which Salter plays with opposition in the use of the words "shut" and "open." She first mentions the "painted shutter" and how it claims to be able to shut "the eye / of the window." Immediately following this statement, she uses the word "open" in the phrase: "is an open lie." So what is meant here? First, what is an "open lie"? How can a lie be either open or shut? Could the speaker be referring to something else? The word "open" harkens back to the image discussed earlier, that of the assumed open shutters. If they are real, shutters can be either shut or opened. But these painted shutters are not real. Not only can they not be closed, or shut, they also cannot truly be open. They are merely painted to look open. So not only are the shutters an illusion, the openness of the shutters is also a lie. This reinforces the earlier sense of the speaker possibly wanting to hide behind slatted shutters. She may be saying that she offers people a glimpse of herself through the shutters. These people may think they are really seeing her, think they really understand her, think that she is truly being open with them, but that too may be an illusion. She may not be as open as she appears, and therefore her presentation of herself may also be an "open lie."

It is not until the sixth stanza that the poet takes the reader from the outside world, the more public view, into the interior, or more personal view. "Inside the house," she writes, "an endless / supply of clothes to wash." This appears to be an abrupt change of pace. From walking along the street in the sun and shadow of a bright day, examining the artwork of painted shutters on city houses, the reader is not only abruptly pulled inside but also the reader is pulled away from the sense of vacation and detachment. The beginning of the poem reads as if the speaker were visiting a place that is wholly new to

her. It is a foreign vista, and she encounters images she has never seen before, and she becomes fascinated with them. Then she is lost in the drudgery of washing clothes. This chore is "endless," she writes. With this change from a leisure tour to household chores, where has the speaker taken the reader, and why? By bringing the reader into a house, could the speaker now be referring to a more intimate part of herself? Is the drudgery of washing clothes a metaphor for the chore of creating the illusions of her false self? Clothes are the things one wears to keep warm, but also they are objects that are worn to conform to and to portray a certain public image. Clothes hide the more personal elements of the body, just as illusions are capable of hiding the more personal features of one's psychology. Like caring for the endless supply of clothes, the speaker seems to be tired of the hard work of having to continually watch over the illusions in which she psychologically dresses herself.

She does, however, present an image that contrasts with the never-ending transformations presented in the metaphor of washing clothes. She offers a more permanent vision of clothing at the end of stanza 6 and in the entire seventh stanza. Here she offers a picture of clothes that are painted on a wall. These clothes, in contrast to the ones that must be continually washed, are "fresh" and "unruffled." It is important to note that these clothes do not belong in the interior quarters of the house. They are located on an "outer wall." With this image, the poem takes the reader back to the element of illusion. While the speaker may be feeling tormented by the continual examination (or washing) of her interior life, her outer clothing, the mask that she wears□the "fresh / paint"□is unflappable. Adding to this image is the interjection of another word play in this seventh stanza. The poet uses the word "frieze," as in a wall painting. The word works in two different ways. First, it appears to describe the so-called painting of "shirttails flapping." It also provides another oppositional structure. The word play comes in the form of sound. The word "frieze" sounds like the word "freeze." In fact, the "shirttails flapping" are frozen in time and in space. The public clothing of the speaker, likewise, is frozen. Unlike her emotional interior life, which is in a constant flux, saturated with insecurities and uncertainties, her public appearance is set. It might not be real, just as the painted shutters are not real, but she can at least count on it. She knows it well. She has practiced it often. She has painted it on so many times that the illusion, one can assume, fools those around her just as the painted shutters have, so many times, fooled her. The problem with this public image, however□no matter how clean and unruffled it might be□is that it is not real.

It is at this point, that the speaker takes readers back to the concept of untruth. Like the shirt, the shutters, and even the words in this poem, all of them are illusions. Finally, even the foreign word in the title of the poem is a lie, because even though you see the letter "l," it does not stand, as most letters do, for a particular sound. The "l" in the French word for "eye" is placed there for some forgotten reason and now has lost most of its worth. It is used for show, much like the shutters are used and much like the public masks that the speaker uses to present herself to the public world are used.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "Trompe l'Oeil," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Find some pictures of *trompe l'oeil* outdoor murals and write descriptions about what elements you think make each one convincing.

Stanza 7 is a play on the old adage, "Even a stopped clock is right twice a day." Make a list of other things that are eventually right even if they do not move.

Make your own *trompe l'oeil* with a computer photo processing program, editing an image into a picture that readers will not immediately notice should not be there. Be sure to match the color and texture as much as possible.

The speaker of this poem realizes that the painted shutters are not real because the shadows from the latches fall in the wrong place. Find examples in films or television shows where shadows at the wrong angles ruin the illusion of reality and bring them to your class for discussion.

Search for examples where the *trompe l'oeil* concept is used in music, making listeners think they are hearing things that they are not, and explain how a trained ear can tell the difference between reality and simulation.

What Do I Read Next?

Salter's *Unfinished Painting* (1989) is a collection of poems that take a rather fearless look at the passage of time and such vital experiences as impermanence, family, friends, love, death, and memory. This collection won the Lamont prize in poetry.

The poem "Trompe l'Oeil" comes from Salter's collection *Open Shutters* (2003) and served as the inspiration for the book's title. Many of the poems in that book are reminiscent of ideas presented in "Trompe l'Oeil." In particular, the final poem, "An Open Book," reminds one of the central theme that things are not always what they seem: the title refers to Muslims praying at a funeral, with palms turned up as if an invisible book were present.

Salter studied at Harvard under Elizabeth Bishop and her writing has been compared to Bishop's. *Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems, 1927—1979*, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1984, contains the complete oeuvre (work) of a woman who is widely considered to be one of the best American poets of the twentieth century.

Salter's poetry has been compared to that of Lucie Brock-Brodio, who directs the poetry program at the Columbia School of Arts, in its verbal dexterity and sly humor. Brock-Brodio's collection *Trouble in Mind: Poems* (2004), published by Albert A. Knopf, provides ample evidence of ways in which her sensibilities and Salter's correspond.

Poet Louise Glück started her poetry career about a decade earlier than Salter did. She is praised for her ability to work simply and honestly in a looser form than what Salter uses. Glück's evolution as a poet can be traced in *First Four Books of Poems*, published in 1990 by Ecco Press.

For more than twenty years, Salter has been married to poet Brad Leithauser. His book of poems *The Odd Last Thing She Did* (2000) shows a style similar to hers but with different concerns.

Caroline Cass's book *Grand Illusion*, published by Phaidon Press in 1988, presents pictures of contemporary murals, with over twenty pages of beautiful prints of trompe l'oeil murals.

Further Study

Ebert-Schifferer, S., *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'Oeil Painting*, National Gallery of Art, 2002.

This book explores the art style described in the poem with ample illustrations of past and present examples.

Hoffman, Daniel, "Wings of a Phoenix? Rebellion and Resuscitation in Postmodern American Poetry," in *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative and Tradition*, edited by Annie Finch, Story Line Press, 1999, pp. 18—24.

Salter is often associated with New Formalism. Hoffman's essay informs readers about the background of the artistic movement.

Pritchard, William, Review of *A Kiss in Space*, in *Commonweal*, Vol. 126, No. 21, December 1999, p. 22.

Pritchard, one of the most respected names in poetry criticism, examines Salter's previous collection and is impressed with her technical expertise and frequent humor.

Whited, Stephen, Review of *Open Shutters*, in *Book*, Issue 30, September—October 2003, p. 89.

Whited compares Salter's work to that of novelists George Eliot and Anne Tyler in its fine eye for domestic detail.

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Salter, Mary Jo, "Trompe l'Oeil," in *Open Shutters*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2003, pp. 3—4.

Seaman, Donna, Review of *Open Shutters*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 99, No. 17, May 1, 2003, p. 1567.

Taylor, John, Review of *Open Shutters*, in *Antioch Review*, Vol. 62, No. 1, Winter 2004, p. 177.