

The Uncomfortable Enjoyment

What makes people uncomfortable? Is it an awkward moment? An embarrassing sexual encounter? The fear of impotence? Maybe it's all three. The Earl of Rochester sought out to explore all of these elements of discomfort in his satirical poem *The Imperfect Enjoyment*. His main goal in the year 1680 was to shock the masses and envelop them in discomfort – and it worked. Even Charles II had a love-hate relationship with John Wilmot's disconcerted writing. Here, I will explore the elements that make readers uncomfortable when they read the Earl of Rochester's *The Imperfect Enjoyment* and the importance of discomfort.

The Imperfect Enjoyment is about a man cursed with an awkward ordeal – impotence. It begins by describing a male narrator who, in the fits of passion, ejaculates onto a woman later named Corinna. When it's time for the narrator to pleasure Corinna, he can't get another erection, thus becoming impotent. After this discovery, the man curses his own penis for not performing when needed. It's the story of many couples' nightmares

To begin analysis about the discomfort in this poem, I must dive into the setting of the story. "Naked she lay, clasped in my longing arms, / I filled with love, and she all over charms" (pg. 2205). The opening lines of this poem paint a serene sight – two lovers tangled together. Perhaps you picture a bed with white sheets and a down comforter in a room gently lit up by candles because electricity hasn't been discovered yet. Shortly after this introduction, things start to get hot and heavy: "She clips me to her breast, and sucks me to her face. / Her nimble tongue, Love's lesser lightning, played / within my mouth..." (pg. 2206). Clearly, this is an indication that sex is right around the corner. But if the reader isn't uncomfortable by the time they read this brief setting explanation, they will be soon.

When writing the climax of this poem, Wilmot took the term literally: “In liquid raptures I dissolve all o’er, / Melt into sperm, and spend at every pore” (pg. 2206). While the reader might be uncomfortable reading this description of ejaculation, the discomfort has only begun. Shortly after his climax, the narrator is posed with the question, “‘Is there then no more?’ ... ‘All this to love and rapture’s due; / Must we not pay a debt to pleasure too?’” (pg. 2206). Uh-oh. Perhaps the narrator didn’t expect to actually pleasure Corinna, but when he found out he couldn’t, he created an awkward moment. Imagine yourself in his position. Can you say that you wouldn’t feel the slightest bit of awkwardness or discomfort if you couldn’t pleasure your partner?

Before the narrator decides that impotence is his disease, he goes through what seems like an emotional checklist to diagnose himself. “Eager desires confound my first intent, / Succeeding shame foes more success prevent, / And rage at last confirms me impotent” (pg. 2206). His eagerness to perform is intense. The narrator really wants to pleasure Corinna, but he feels shame and rage because he cannot. His obvious discomfort from this embarrassing sexual encounter excels him into a rant about how horrible his impotence is.

How does an uncomfortable man react when he has discovered his own impotence? While I’m unsure what other men do, our narrator chose to curse at his own penis to shame it for not performing. “What oyster-cinder-beggar-common whore / Didst thou e’er fail in all thy life before?” (pg. 2206).

Surely the reader is uncomfortable by now – especially if the reader identifies as male. This is seen in the fact that Corinna is given a name while the narrator is nameless. With a nameless narrator, it is easy for men to project themselves onto this blank character canvas. The Earl of Rochester uses this technique to allow male readers to feel uncomfortable. Perhaps they

know what it's like to be impotent or to fear impotence. If this is the case for a reader, then the poem reads as a horror story. Taking into the consideration the egos of men in 1680, it is probably safe to say that many men who struggled with or feared impotence were uncomfortable reading this poem. It is noted that while Wilmot's writing is shocking, Charles II "entertained ... and endured his subsequent outrages and extravagances with notable, and occasionally scandalous, restraint" (The Poetry Foundation). Even Charles II was uncomfortable reading John Wilmot's writing, but read it anyways.