Ironic and Betrayal

Historical Background

As read in the text, *A History of the Modern World*, the style of most paintings during the 19th century focused on everyday scenes, with the objective to capture momentary sensations and fleeting spontaneity as well as the constant motion of life: impressionism (Palmer). During this short-lived era of impressionism (1870s), French watercolor painter James Tissot painted many works, and according to Dr. Petra Chu, professor at Seton Hall University, they were mostly of “dazzling scenes of fashionable Parisian and London life” (Chu). However, at the turn of the decade, his focus changed.

Painter and professor, Hall Groat II, explained that after the death of Tissot’s beloved mistress, Kathleen Newman, in 1882, he began a religious course in his life (Groat). Simultaneously, impressionism for the most part ended and ushered in the post-impressionist era consisting of both formalistic and expressionistic styles. Tissot’s careful painting of details embodies the formalistic style of painting. In combination with his new religious life, Tissot also embraced expressionistic style – selecting to paint particularly intense emotional scenes from the scriptures. This biblical series is now well known as *The Life Of Christ* (including many scenes from the Passion of Christ).

The Passion as portrayed by Tissot stresses the cruelty which Jesus had to endure. Specifically in *Could Ye Not Watch With Me One Hour*, Tissot effectively portrays the emotional intensity of the worst form of cruelty which Christ had to endure—betrayal of friends.

Critical Analysis

In order to fully convey the cruelty of betrayal in *Could Ye Not Watch With Me One Hour*, Tissot predominantly utilizes physical and contextual irony.
The first and most noticeable irony that Tissot incorporated lies in Jesus’ eyes. Jesus, the Son of God, a holy being and one being filled with the light of heaven, has blackened holes instead of eyes. Tissot’s focus to this sort of detail emphasizes what Jesus had just gone through. Elder James E. Talmage stated, “It was not physical pain, nor mental anguish alone . . . but a spiritual agony of soul such as only God was capable of experiencing. . . . In that hour of anguish Christ met and overcame all horrors that Satan . . . could inflict” (Talmage). On this earth, people experience the anguish of being separated from God and His spirit. Thus, Christ must have endured this agony as well. Considering that Jesus had never been apart from His Father’s spirit, this pain must have been more severe than we could imagine. From the Tissot portrayal, it appears he was intending to communicate that Christ had lost the light of heaven because he had experienced sin and was therefore unworthy of the full light of heaven. For the Son of God to have lost the light of heaven while performing the most paramount act of mercy is a bitter irony which Tissot effectively displays through the blackening of Christ’s eyes.

Another contextual irony lies in the title of the piece. Jesus was determined to fulfill his Father’s will thus he chose to not invoke the power of heaven to stop his crucifixion. This powerlessness (of not using the powers of heaven to protect himself) is ironic because Christ says to Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, “What, could ye not watch with me one hour?” or in an alternate Greek translation, “are you so powerless that you could not stay awake with me?” (St. Matthew 26:40). Jesus Christ was subjecting Himself to the power of the world and He asks Peter if he was powerless to stay awake when they both knew that Peter could have stayed awake had he followed Jesus’ counsel. The irony is that Peter did have the power and chose not to use it, just as Christ had power to be saved, and chose not to use it. The difference is that Peter’s choice betrayed his friendship, while Christ’s choice solidified their friendship for “Greater love
hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” (St. John 15:13). As Christ was opening the gates of heaven for Peter, Peter failed to use his power to stay awake to support Christ. The bitterness of this irony attributes the most to the poignancy of this painting since it is this precise moment preceding a more fatal betrayal by another apostle—Judas.

A third contextual irony represented in this piece is the location of Peter’s physical weapons. His weapons lie in between two of the sleeping men as harmless pieces of workmanship. Previous to his first prayer in Gethsemane, Christ tells Peter to watch with Him. According to the New Testament Gospels, this watching was to be done so that Peter would not fall to the temptation of the devil (St. Mark 14:38). Tissot seems to symbolize the figurative weapons against Satan’s power (prayer) with the real weapons. Clearly visible are Peter’s weapons on the ground of no use, symbolizing that the spiritual weapons had also been cast aside. In the fight against temptation Peter chose to be weaponless (just as he chose to remove his physical weapons), and thus disappointed and betrayed Jesus’ trust and friendship. The irony comes from the contrast of adamant loyalty which Peter displays verbally, yet how easily he forfeits his weapons (physical and spiritual) when the battle rages.

The physical irony of this piece also displays Tissot’s most recognizable trait—the attention to detail. In the darkened, left, bottom corner there is a vague mob forming which appears to come towards Jesus and the sleeping men. The irony lies not in the fact that Jesus has his back turned to the looming mob, but that Peter who had previously sworn his loyalty to Christ, was asleep to the real and present danger. As Tissot positioned the characters in this scene, had Peter been awake and sitting up, “watching” as Christ had urged him to, he would have seen the mob coming. This adds to the cruelty of the Passion because Jesus knows full well that He had been betrayed by those he could see (Peter and the sons of Zebedee), and those he
could not (the mob coming behind his back). Peter didn’t foresee that he would betray Christ, and couldn’t see the mob who was betraying Christ. Had Peter been praying, as Christ had admonished, he would have prevented his own betrayal, as well as seen the mob coming upon Jesus’ unprotected back.

All of this attention to detail for which Tissot was well known is effectively used to emphasize the irony, revealing the true cruelty behind the Passion.

**Personal Response**

One of the things that I love about this picture is that it brings this part of the Passion to life. However, when I first saw it I was disturbed by the fact that Christ’s eyes were blacked out. I felt uncomfortable because it appeared as though Tissot had drawn Jesus in a possessed form—that thought did not harmonize with my knowledge of Him. It was also this disturbing feature that drew me to this picture; I had to find out why I didn’t like that image.

After I read the title, I began to think why Tissot would have pictured Christ in such an abysmal state. As I came to the realization that Christ had fallen, in a sense, from grace, I understood that He himself probably felt similarly uncomfortable, to say the least. After studying this picture I understand that Christ was human and He did get tired and His body was mortal. I understand that He suffered greatly. Usually when I read about this event in the scriptures I didn’t see the people who were a part of this situation—the sleeping men, or the angry mob, or the disappointed Christ. But this depiction really set the entire scene, giving me the insight I needed to understand Christ’s position better.

Although some of Tissot’s art makes me uncomfortable, after much study and thought, they can influence my understanding immensely and I look forward to viewing more works which force me to think and improve my perspective.
Works Cited


