

## Literary Response Journals on “Manhole Covers” by Karl Shapiro

Karl Shapiro explores the theme of beauty in his poem “Manhole Covers.”

“The beauty of manhole covers – What of that?”

Beauty? How can a manhole be beautiful? It is an annoying bump in the road. It is “notched and whelked and pocked and smashed with the great company names.” It was made to serve as a portal to the dark, dank underground abyss that houses creepy, crawly things. With time, it rusts. It is outdated and ugly. Then again, it was made by a *man* for a *man*. Now if it would have been made by a *woman*, it would have been tucked, plucked and polished. It would lead to an underground of chocolate candies and champagne and have been made of diamonds and would shine for all eternity.

Yeah, *that* would be beauty.

--Rachel Bays

In Karl Shapiro’s “Manhole Covers,” the manhole covers symbolize an American era. Shapiro speaks of their “dated beauty” and compares them to “Mayan calendar stones.” Both images imply the fleeting importance and short-lived usefulness in our modern-day American society. The manhole cover, like everything in history, will become nothing more than a “rustproof artifact” of an era.

--Crystal Byers

I hate “Manhole Covers” by Karl Shapiro. This poem is terrible, and I would never make my class read it. It’s atrocious because it’s detailing the mundane details which deserve no detail to begin with (sorry to end a sentence with a preposition). Why should we waste time reading about the “iron-old world” when we could be out exploring the flowery new one that has since covered the ugliness with beauty? The author’s attempt to touch on the “indecipherable” elements of life is thwarted by his outmoded, depressing allusions. Give me Whitman and his “One [mere] hour to madness and joy” rather than Shapiro’s lifetimes of “rustproof artifacts” any day.

--Suzanne Dulaney

“Manhole Covers” by Karl Shapiro takes a seemingly insignificant item in our world that we never probably even consider and brings it to the reader’s attention. In my experience, manhole covers are something I never notice. Ever. They are everywhere and “long after roads are melted away” and everyone is gone, the steel manhole covers will still be around. After reading this poem, is there beauty in manhole covers? Probably not. Will I consider something interesting about them? Absolutely.

– Kim Floyd

In “Manhole Covers,” Karl Shapiro describes the manhole cover as a “rustproof artifact of my street.” He also mentions “its cryptic American beauty,” which conveys his vision of the manhole cover as a permanent fixture that almost seems to comfort him. I picture Shapiro’s neighborhood as a scene straight out of *The Wonder Years* or the song “Pleasant Valley Sunday” -- families barbecuing, neighbors chatting, children bicycling, everyone with smiling faces...then I imagine it “long after roads are melted away,” as an abandoned void in which only the manhole cover remains.

--Jill Harlan

“Manhole Covers” by Karl Shapiro highlights, ironically the future “rustproof artifacts” of the American culture. Like Khan and the Mayans, we as Americans believe we will dwell forever on this planet. But just like them, we will fade away and what will be leftover are the relics of our iron manhole covers. They will be pitted and worn with time much like an old coin. They will be covered with the script of a long extinct civilization. Oh “the beauty of manhole covers”! Is this what we are to leave behind?

--Nate Holt

“Manhole Covers” by Karl Shapiro seems to be symbolic of the power of big corporations. Steel companies “notched and whelked and pocked and smashed” these covers. Oddly enough, these “medals” cover up *manholes*. Is Shapiro commenting on the negative influences of big business? After all, long after “roads are melted away,” these covers remain -- after man is gone. America certainly is full of large corporations at the expense of many mom-and-pop (man) stores or businesses.

- Amy Hon

In Karl Shapiro’s “Manhole Covers,” the speaker envisions manhole covers as “rustproof artifact[s] of [his] street,” encouraging the reader to consider what permanence will remain at the end of our civilization. By comparing the covers to “Mayan calendar stones,” the author begins to establish the foundation of this vision. He continues to build the association by establishing the imagery of what will remain: “Gentle Bethlehem, smiling United States” conjuring to the mind the indelible mottoes etched on the surface of the covers as a future artifact throughout the poem. The author elevates the common object to a new important role.

- Emily Maier

In the short poem “Manhole Covers,” the poet Karl Shapiro begins with two similes which clearly explain the “beauty” of manhole covers. With “Like medals” and “Like Mayan calendar stones,” Shapiro illustrates the enduring value of the covers and the beauty that stems from such endurance. The common appearance of such covers produces value and beauty because so few human creations have such power.

- Glynda McBride

While studying a manhole cover - you know - “this rustproof artifact of my street,” - I couldn’t help but think about what it represents to my country that I love. It was produced in “gentle Bethlehem [in the] smiling United States [country that I love]” and covers the unbeautiful but necessary things. Things like waste and refuse. But it also houses power sources that keep the country running. And though others may not see this manhole cover as holding such awesome power, I know “this rustproof artifact of my street” keeps my country alive - like Karl Shapiro’s “Manhole Covers.”

-- Meredith McIntosh

“Manhole Covers” by Karl Shapiro flies off the tongue when read aloud. Shapiro’s diction dances along, daring to celebrate the mundane and everyday as if it were pure gold: manhole covers look so good - don’t they? Those well-rounded shields of heavy metal are forever immortalized by Shapiro’s specific word choice. For example, “whelked and pocked and smashed” seems to be what brave Achilles famed aegis might have endured during the siege of Troy. Or, take for example, the curved text “United Steel.” It is almost the physical manifestation of the strong and diehard spirit from the Industrial Revolution itself. The poem *sounds* like a solemn salute to the time served by these countless servants of the municipal duty who, without a word, have competently covered the utilitarian chasms that dot our great cities’ myriad roadways.

--Benjamin Moore

Karl Shapiro’s “Manhole Covers” describes an archaic symbol of American culture as he uncovers the “beauty of manhole covers” and then asks the reader “what of that?” as if discarding the notion. He continues the poem with powerful, strong images and strong diction that has an onomatopoeia feel to them making the reader envision the hard, strong, “pocked” metal forever stamped with emblems that embody our culture.

-Briana Neal

In Karl Shapiro's "Manhole Covers," the poet delves into the artistic value of the titular objects. He speaks of them being not "chased and scored" but "whelked and pocked and smashed." These markings came from the classic, American company names that speak to the history of the nation. Shapiro claims they will remain "long after roads are melted." The beauty he sees in them seems to be their significance as cultural artifacts. They are round metal graphics of this past, that will remain to remind future generations of the America that was.

- Richard Orloff

Finding awe and beauty in the mundane world around us is a gift - one that as Thornton Wilder said only "saints and poets" understand - "mainly." In Karl Shapiro's poem "Manhole Covers," he captures the wonder of a workingman's stamp - the manhole cover that will outlive us all with "its cryptic American, Its dated beauty." This reminds me that we can find art in the ordinary and pleasure in our everyday paths. And, I wonder what my stamp will be - will it be "bitten at the edges," too?

--Gina Parker

In "Manhole Covers," the author Karl Shapiro suggests the longing within *man* to be remembered long after his death. Shapiro makes global reverences to "a great savage Khan" and "Mayan calendar stones" to emphasize the universality of wanting to be remembered. His captures the cultural unconsciousness buried in each culture.

--Cheryl Pumphrey

In his poem, "Manhole Covers," Karl Shapiro comments on what makes America (and perhaps Americans) distinctively beautiful. He describes manhole covers as being "notched and whelked and pocked and smashed" and yet "strong...[with] dated beauty." What is perhaps most valued in American society is one's resilience. How much whelking and smashing can one withstand while still maintaining one's dignity and mystic beauty? Americans most value this kind of strength.

- Diana Volpe