Though the challenge of looking beyond pain and heartache may seem entirely too difficult to overcome, beauty in the world exists still. In his large collection of poetry, Yusef Komunyakaa reveals the beauty in even the darkest of situations, from the deep affliction of war to the emotional strain of a heavy heart. With the use of expertly chosen diction and vivid concrete, as well as abstract, imagery and comparisons, Komunyakaa illustrates a beautiful picture in each poem. Beauty exists not necessarily synonymously with happiness, but his use of such images brings more attention to the emotion that Komunyakaa wants the reader to feel when reading. Each poem is meticulously assembled from the actual words on the page to the manner in which the words themselves are arranged.

Komunyakaa’s collection of poetry in *Pleasure Dome* includes a multitude of recurring themes, such as the pain of love and war among other things. “High on Sadness” explores the pain of leaving a loved one in the most gentle and beautiful way. The words on the page flow well together leaving a calm impression on the reader, regardless of their interpretation of the poem. He brings his poems to life with multiple overlapping images. Rather than simply stating his situation, Komunyakaa describes the woman and how he is feeling during this moment, and sets the final tone of the poem with the following:

“It’s always out

in the next city
of rooms filled with California
Spiritual Sunshine incense
I go, a sleepwalker
on a cliff” (Komunyakaa ln 16-21).

Komunyakaa shares his feelings about this bittersweet encounter. His imagery is more than just visual. In the previous lines, he appeals to the sense of smell of the incense rather than a physical picture. Through the tough time of being away from this woman he loves, he writes about everything in that moment in a way that makes the reader experience more than just the emotion Komunyakaa is expressing. The beauty of the “baroque ballerina” (Komunyakaa 12) is another interesting image he uses in this poem. Komunyakaa explains how he takes this woman into his arms for the very last time and her “metallic feelers / search the air” (Komunyakaa 14-15). These three lines show more than just a woman; they show how graceful yet lost she remains to be. Komunyakaa’s emotion in this poem is not complete enamor, hatred, or sorrow, but rather a feeling of melancholy expressed in a smooth-flowing manner leaving a lasting impression on the reader.

Some of Komunyakaa’s poems also explore the horrific encounters of war. After graduating high school, he entered the U. S. Army in 1968. Komunyakaa stood out due to his natural ability to write and, because of this, became an information specialist. During his tour of duty in Vietnam, Komunyakaa was sent to the front lines to witness and record the brutally harsh details of the war (Sutphen). War is a very common topic in Komunyakaa’s poetry. One poem discussing one of his many experiences, titled “Thanks”, presents war in a completely different way. Thanking a tree for saving his life, Komunyakaa writes “Thanks for deflecting the ricochet / against that anarchy of dusk” (Komunyakaa ln 9-10). Komunyakaa uses a very grateful tone in
this poem. Rather than expressing anger towards the one who tried to shoot him, he shows great thanks to the tree, or something greater, which saved his life from ending at that very second. The position he took when writing this poem really caught my attention. Komunyakaa does an excellent job of writing in a manner that draws the reader in. This poem does not start with any fluffy descriptive details that are not relevant to the meaning. Each word is placed in the specific location where Komunyakaa intended for it to be. There is a type of strategy to his poetry. He does not write to fill the page, but rather to fill the reader. Komunyakaa plays on his emotion as well as the reader’s emotional response to his words to create brilliant poetry. After thanking the tree, Komunyakaa writes “I was back in San Francisco / wrapped up in a woman’s wild colors,” (Komunyakaa 11-12) showing the joy he felt after this extremely close encounter with death.

Precise word choice is what sets Komunyakaa aside from other poets. In addition to setting the mood for the poem, Komunyakaa has a very elegant voice that allows his words to flow well. Smooth movement throughout a poem is important to keep the attention of a reader. With many words and symbols that are not necessarily relevant to the meaning of the poem, the author can lose the reader in translation. Komunyakaa writes with the audience in mind using all types of simple, relatable symbols and imagery, and by using such techniques he deepens the meaning of his poetry.

Poetry captures moments in ways that pictures cannot. Rather than a still image, poetry has motion; it is not static. Komunyakaa captures each and every moment in an elegant way, regardless of the situation. Each stanza more deeply draws in the reader. Another technique that Komunyakaa executes in his poetry is in the structure. Each poem begins by establishing a situation and towards the end of the poem presenting a twist. Whether the twist is in the situation or just his use of diction, this stands out in each and every poem. His use of this twist is truly
effective. It re-catches the attention of the reader, making him think about the poem once over again before he even finishes reading.

Komunyakaa does an excellent job of putting the reader into his poems to see what he sees and feel what he feels. Throughout his poetry, he presents many relatable images and symbols to help the reader better understand what is going on in the exact moment or moments he writes about. Aside from the interesting poetic techniques, Komunyakaa has a very individual style. Unlike some of the harsh poetry from poets like Charles Bukowski, Komunyakaa’s words flow very nicely and establish a soft, calm tone regardless of the poem’s actual context. In “High on Sadness” Komunyakaa writes, “Violin bows, ribs. / I think about you / till a great beetle / beams on six legs / of unreason” (Komunyakaa 7-11). Just in this one sentence over a few lines, he provides the reader with a multitude of images and presents an ambiguous meaning to the poem in a way that does not necessarily lose the reader.

Poetry is a wonderful form of art because it stands alone. It provides more than a long narrative description or brief explanation with very few details. Poetry is about every day little things that we as readers tend to look over in our own lives, but find in the poems we read. Komunyakaa’s poetry is, for the most part, universal and can be appreciated by a very large range of audiences due to the words on the page as well as the context they hold.
Works Cited

