

Phallogentrism And Sexual Politics In Wallace Stevens' 'Anecdote On The Jar'

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1. INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stevens was a well-known American modernist poet who lived from 1879 to 1955. His poetry needs entire focus and attention in order to capture the elusive message. His poems' abstractness stems from his desire to demonstrate the interplay between reality and imagination, as well as his use of imagination to interpret reality. His poetry is linguistic, metaphysical, and existential abstractions. Because of this prevalent perception of Stevens poetry, critics such as Stanley Burnshaw and Marjorie Perloff have concluded that Stevens poetry is socially unimportant, careless, and irresponsible. Stevens, according to Borgan, who wrote: "Stevens and Similies: A Theory of Language," was a poet "who was, in reality, highly attuned to his times and matured fast throughout World War II into one of the most compelling and ethical poets of the twentieth century". Stevens, she claims in her book, had a political, social, and ethical commitment. Stevens' poems, on the other hand, were rarely analyzed or commented on because of their concern for gender relations. Sexuality and gender issues are frequently overlooked and ignored in Stevens' poetry.

The anecdote on the Jar' is a poem in Stevens' first poetry collection titled Harmonium. The poem could be better understood if the gender aspect it reveals is grasped. The poem figuratively describes various themes related to a man-woman relationship like gender politics, gender parity, gender bias, and other gender-related issues. The attitude of the jar is at once a sexual and a quintessentially male exploit. The sexual context is though metaphorical, is quite evident and ubiquitous throughout the poem.

The anecdote is built around a jar that represents the phallus. A jar is an upright cylindrical structure connotative of the phallus, a celebrated and venerated male genital organ, especially in its erect form representing for aspect, power, superiority, and authority. It has its own significant position in various cults, religions, and cultures across the globe, from the distant past to the immediate use present. The phallus is also worshipped as a divine, mysterious life-giving force, a procreative tool, a seed producer and planter, an executive of the divine will of regeneration. In addition to its procreative and productive significance, it also signifies the power to maintain the world and sustain culture. It is symbolized in the arrow, the spear, the plough the lightning bolt. It is a totem carrying spiritual significance.

Phallicism, or Phallism, the worship of an erect penis, was prevalent in various cultures across the globe. The Priapus worship, Orphic and Dionysian cults, the Cybele and the Attic cult of Romans and Greeks, the Shiva lingam of the Indian subcontinent, Osiris worship of the Egyptians, the Shinto of the Japanese, the Mandan of the native Americans are evidence of the existence of phallicism in almost all the prominent early civilizations. It has also found its way into some Christian sects in the form of the Holy Prepuce, the foreskin of Jesus Christ, which is believed to possess the power of making the barren women fruitful. The female genitalia has not found an equally significant position in any of the ancient cultures. Though 'yoni' (female genitalia) is a part of the lingam worship, it is commonly referred to as Shiva Lingam.

Phallicism paved the way for privileging the masculine (the phallus) in understanding the world and its affairs, which Ernest Jones called 'phallogentrism. The symbolic nature of phallus is expressed in many forms like the arrow, the spear, the plough, the microphone, the lightning bolt, the guns, and other such items to represent power, authority, and dominion. 'All elongated objects' wrote Freud 'such as sticks, tree trunks and umbrellas (the opening of this) might stand for the male organ' (389). Sigmund Freud metaphorically equates high achievements and the acquisition of wealth to 'building monuments to our penises' () French sociologist Lefebvre believes that all structures that resemble the shape of an erect penis symbolize " force, male fertility and masculine violence" he also adds that the arrogant verticality of skyscrapers and especially of public and state buildings introduce a phallic or more precisely, a phallogentric element into the visual realm, the purpose of this display of this need to impress, is to convey an impression of authority to each spectator verticality and great height have ever been a spatial expression of potentially violent power (46)

Many buildings from around the world resemble a phallus – Ypsilanti water tower in Michigan, knob tower in Newcastle, sky tower in Poland, People's daily News building in China, NSA field station in Berlin, Aghar Tower in Spain, Hamilton Mausoleum in Scotland, Reunion Tower in Texas, Nation Stone of Little Flower in Michigan, the Gherkin in London –are to mention a few. The symbolic nature of phallic architecture has been pointed out by various anthropology, sociology, and feminism scholars, relating it to male dominating power and political authority. A feminine geographer Jane Darke has tweeted, " our cities are patriarchy written in stone, brick, glass, and concrete". Sexism is deep-rooted in the norms of societies. Hyden, an American poet and professor of architecture in his work *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth*, wrote that the "phallic monument in history including poles, obelisk, and watchtowers with their 'base, shaft and tip' seem to ejaculate light into the sky' (76). Louis Sullivan, an Irish American architect who was called the father of skyscrapers in his book *Kindergarten Chats*, writes about the social manifestation of the skyscrapers: "Once you learn to look upon architecture not merely as an art, more or less well, more or less badly done, but as a social manifestation the critical eye becomes clairvoyant and obscure and unnoticed phenomena becomes illuminated."(53)

The Jar is placed upon a hill. A hill is a seat of authority often associated with gods and kings from where clear pronouncements are made. The jar has been placed on a raised position, a position of advantage from where it can wield its authority over the wilderness. Wilderness usually alludes to the female and the feminine. Wilderness, according to Griffiths, is ...a self-willed land where we experience our most animalistic nature—often in a carnal rage against restrictions, a compulsion to be what we are at that time.... a creature of the darkest forest within, the undomesticated, unhousebound, unhusbanded woman, hungry for something beyond human society, restless, prowling, in thrall to a savage earth lust.

It is also a place where Nature swells with sex, cooing, licking, flirting, courting, hinting, mating, and intimating: carnal knowledge, knowing, kenning, cunning. Every dragonfly is glued end to end to another. To every monkey an erection: to every insect, sackful of eggs, flowers bloom in smirking shapes of visual innuendo; leaves are protuberant; mushrooms conjugally fungal; every parrot on the squaw for it; every peccary rutting for it; every tendril internally sprung for it. Nothing unthrust. Nothing unfecund. Ripeness lusts till it rots, and its very rottenness makes a dank, warm bed for the next tight tip to poke through (47-48).

In Gary Snyder's words, Wilderness is "where the wild potential is fully expressed, a diversity of living and non-living beings flourishing according to their own sorts of order" (56). The jar, the wilderness, and Tennessee could be related to the biblical myth of creation. The garden of Eden, the 'original sin' (the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life) committed by the first woman, the Fall of Man, the resulting curse of subordination to

man (Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you) are tactically implied in this poem.

The jar established itself “ round upon the hill”. “It made the slovenly wilderness/ surround it”. The use of the definite article gives the jar a distinct Identity. It is not inanimate; it is alive and in action. The gender is muted using the third person pronoun 'it' to enliven the imagery, or it is used to represent its animalistic nature. The use of the verb 'made' refers to the use of force. The patriarchal constructs built around religious tradition, culture, and gender enforced upon women make them powerless, curtail their social, political, and personal freedom, and give them a subordinate position. Crimes against women like sexual assault, insult to modesty, abduction, cruelty, trafficking, and persecution perpetrated by men or their female agents against women destabilize the victims and act as deterrents and fear factors for the aspirations of women.

Gender constructs and gender stereotyping were quite common in the male-oriented literary canon. Texts were used to shape women according to the expectations of men. Women were deified or demonized according to their devotion or rebellion to men. Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* presents the chauvinist attitude of men who cannot tolerate a dominant self-willed female partner. Petruchio marries the headstrong self-reliant, arrogant Katherine for money. He and his servants (under his instructions) maltreat her by denying her food, sleep, new clothes, or a hat until she submits herself to their will. Such taming methods are commonly used on wild animals. They are trapped and left to be emaciated until they favorably respond to the command of their captivators. This affects her physically and mentally to make her accept the Sun as the moon and an older man as a beautiful maiden. This is totally uncouth, vulgar, malignant, offensive, and inhumane. Self will, anger, domination, arrogance are not tolerated in women. The script of the play is obviously chauvinistic and breathes the vile stench of sexism and gender intolerance. Ankita Shukla, in her blog titled 'Depiction of Women in Literature through Ages' quotes Anita Nair:

Literature has always been ambivalent in its representation of women. Good women as in ones who accepted societal norms with happily ever after. Even feisty heroines eventually go onto find content and life's purpose in a good man's arms. Be it Elizabeth Bennett (*Pride and Prejudice*) or Jane Eyre (*Jane Eyre*). Alternatively, they are left to rue their lot with an act of contrived courage as with Scarlett O'Hara. (*Gone with the Wind*) Alternatively, have to take their lives like Anna Karenina or Karuthamma (*Chemmeen*) or Emma Bovary (*Madame Bovary*).

Laura Malvey writes about men as the beholder and woman as the subject in her article titled 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema':

The woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier of the male other; bound by a symbolic order in which man can live at his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.(589)

Women are represented and judged by the sexual functions of their bodies alone, ignoring their personality and subjectivity. The slovenly wilderness is implicitly feminized and sexualized. . The verbs or the actions – 'made', 'took', 'did not give', -- associated with the jar are authoritative, dominant or forceful in tone and meaning and the verbs – 'rose up' and 'sprawled around' are 'mild' and gender informative giving stereotypical information of women being used as sex objects. These verbs give a cognitive representation of actions with a mention of them infer that the verbs' referent is a woman and that too in a sexually receptive state. The phrasal verb 'rose up' reminds of the readiness for sexual union of the female. It also reminds of King Solomon's Shulamite who 'rose up to receive her lover into her

chamber for a sexual union: "My beloved put his hands by the hole of the door, and my bowels were moved for him.

I rose up to open to my beloved". (Song of Songs Canto 5: 4,5)

The wilderness rose up to the jar and 'sprawled around' it. The verb 'sprawled around' is intentionally employed to suggest a surrender to the male will and readiness for copulation with arms and legs wide open erased of its inherent wild nature. The jar stands tumescent and erect, declaring its triumph over wilderness: ' The jar was round upon the ground/ And tall and a port in the air". The subsequent stanza declares the result of the willing submission of identity. The jar took 'dominion everywhere'. Women have lost their space (domestic, social, political, and personal). Men have trespassed into the female territory and have destroyed it, making it 'grey and bare'. Women's life is handcuffed and shackled by patriarchal jealousy, hatred, codes of conduct and expectations. The jar 'did not give of birds or bush'. A few lines from Browning's 'My Last Duchess' would best sum up the article: ' I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together/ There she stands/ As if alive.'(45 -47)

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