

## **A DECONSTRUCTIVE READING OF WALLACE STEVENS' "ANECDOTE OF THE JAR"**

**Dr. F. Julian Xercies Rigley**

Assistant Professor of English Sacred Heart College Tirupattur

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### **Abstract:**

This article aims to analyse the poem "An Anecdote of the Jar" by Wallace Stevens from a Deconstructive perspective. The poem has been a rich source for various readings because of its multiple meanings. The poem deconstructs or reconstructs itself each time the reader tries to interpret it. It evades all satisfactory interpretations. The text floats as signs and signifiers that differ from the signified. Words oppose each other making it difficult for the reader to arrive at one possible interpretation. This article will focus on the conflicting themes within the text that has always been analysed from the perspective of art vs nature. Another opposition within the text is permanency vs temporality, animate vs inanimate. The unanswered question is whether nature becomes superior to art or art superior to nature. Other readings seem to suggest that the author intended to project art as superior. Therefore, this opens up the scope for deconstructing the text. Deconstruction being one of the important ideas of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, this article uses the strategies of deconstruction to show how the text goes against itself. Deconstruction doesn't dictate any particular strategy to deconstruct a text as it will be going against its philosophy of not having a fixed center. Therefore the researcher has made an attempt to reread the text from a deconstructive notion.

**Keywords:** Art, Nature, Deconstruction, Conflict, Theme, difference

### **Introduction:**

Deconstruction is a school of thought that originated during the 1960s. It is also known as post-structuralism to indicate that it came after structuralism. It aimed at decentring and destabilizing structures. Deconstruction emphasizes on the playfulness of language. The instability of language and the lack of a centre altered the perception in which language was considered as a stable entity. This view was propounded by the French Philosopher Jacques Derrida. The roots of this thought are deeply in its precursor structuralism, propounded by the twentieth century linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. "Deconstruction lays emphasis on textuality and its layered openness also induces a sense of never-ending and dizzying play of words- a characteristic not only of the deconstructive

mode of reading but of the deconstructive critic's style of writing itself' ( Nayar 30). Some notable names associated with this philosophy in the 1970s are Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Barbara Johnson. Deconstruction aims to bring out the paradoxes, ambiguities, and the ambivalence that are inherent in a text. The multiple meaning of words are challenged, where traces of the other can be traced, thus leading to collapse in the original idea. Deconstruction apart from literature has been applied to various other fields such as philosophy, politics, history, culture, religion and ethics.

### **Deconstruction in Practise:**

1. Meanings in text are produced through difference that is generated within them. A literary text relies on differences such as the semantic, phonological, syntactic and the structural levels.
2. Writing according to Derrida is,  
We know one phoneme or one word because each is different from another, there is no innate relationship between a signifier and its signified... It is this freeplay or undcidability in any system of communication that Derrida calls writing. (qtd.in. Hamad 16)

Derrida refers to the difference that the text generates within. There is no singular meaning for a text. Deconstruction breaks down the idea of a singular structure and that's why it becomes a postmodern critique. Every text or word can be understood only when there is absence of meaning and there is no fixed center. In deconstruction writing is preferred over speech. Writing is superior to speech because words lose its meaning once they leave the source from which it came and they become mere signs that float as signifiers.

Wallace Stevens is a twentieth century American poet. Stevens was born in 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania. He was a modern poet who experimented and varied his techniques for the enlightened readers. He was unique in his style that very few mastered. His technique is extraordinary. He is considered a difficult poet because of the abstract thoughts and complexity of language.

### **The Poem:**

I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.  
The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer wild.  
The jar was round upon the ground  
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.  
The jar was gray and bare.  
It did not give of bird or bush,  
Like nothing else in Tennessee. (Stevens)

### **Theme of the Poem:**

“Anecdote of the Jar” describes the story of a jar that is placed in the wilderness in Tennessee and the effects that the jar has on the wilderness. The jar becomes a symbol of civilization, art, modernity, culture and all that is man-made, contrasted with the natural world. Throughout the poem, the reader is not sure which side the speaker is on. Towards the end, one could see that, though the jar may overpower the wilderness in the speaker's point of view, the wilderness still has the power of growth and procreation, which the jar does not, and can never. The jar stands as a metaphor for art. The poet is also aware of the fact that nature is superior to art, but he weaves a story that is not interpretable, because he is not sure of what he wants to say and it is one of the techniques that the modernists make use of to make the text sound intelligible and to reflect on the present condition.

### **Summary of the poem:**

In the “Anecdote of the Jar” the narrator gives an account of a jar that stands as a metaphor for art. The poet places around jar upon a hill in Tennessee. The jar attracts the attention of the unruly wilderness a metaphor to represent the common people. Further, the wilderness rises up to it and nature becomes organized. Stevens restates that the jar was round to stress that art is complete by itself. The jar is consistent and has the ability to affect people with its grandeur. The jar that seemed to be passive took dominion everywhere with its inertness and transparency. Stevens reaffirms that, art is not useful to a bird or a bush, it was like nothing else in Tennessee. Stevens believed in the power of art and the ability of it to transform the society.

### **Meaning and Difference in Anecdote of the Jar:**

The poem is made up of multiple meanings. The title itself suggests that the poem is about the jar. But the difference is that, whether the jar belongs to art or nature. So the absence of meaning in the title has led to this ambiguity of the text. The ambiguity raises two questions; one is which superior art is or nature, the second question is art and nature compared?

The reader finds it difficult because of the binary oppositions within the text that keeps the reader oscillating from one view to the other. The Poet begins saying that he placed a jar in Tennessee. The reader would immediately question why Tennessee and not any other place. The next question that arises is, why did the slovenly wilderness surround that jar? Later in the second stanza, the poet says the wilderness was no longer wild. Here

wild could be contrasted with its opposite tame, so did art perfect nature, or nature perfect art? The last stanza begins with "It" as the subject which once again creates an ambiguity as to which is superior, nature or art? Because it can refer to both nature and the jar and this ambiguity is what has made the poem difficult to interpret.

### **Conflicting Themes: Art or Nature?**

Which is Superior: Art or Nature? The answer is unsolved, if art is not superior why should the poet compare art to nature, and why should he be writing this? The end line of the poem says that it was like nothing else in Tennessee. This furthers the conflict because from the very first line of the poem, the reader has to contrast Tennessee with city - man made or Nature God's Creation. So the conflict continues throughout the poem, the tension between God's creation and man-made creation.

### **Analysis:**

Analyzing the title of the poem "Anecdote of the Jar" the reader gets to know from the title that, anecdote which according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is a short story about an interesting or funny event or occurrence. Therefore, the title suggests that the poem is going to be the story of a jar. The problem encountered here is, what the word jar could mean? As a noun it refers to an object that could be of different shapes and sizes, as a verb it could mean to have a harsh or unpleasant effect on someone or something, also it could mean to hit or shake something forcefully, which is also a noun.

The poet also consciously uses the definite article in front of Jar to signify it as an object. So the reader comes to the conclusion that the poem is about a particular jar (an object). Questions arise to the reader as to why the poet is choosing a jar; does it allude to the urn of Keats' poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"? He consciously chooses not to use the word 'ode' and uses the word anecdote instead. Keats chose to say art is permanent. Time cannot alter it. But what is Stevens trying to convey by placing a simple jar, there are no further clues to confirm whether it is a glass jar or earthen ware, the only clue given is, it is round, which could mean that art fulfills itself. Further, why does the poet place a jar in Tennessee and not somewhere else? The reason could be Tennessee is rich in art, culture and nature. Is the author intending to say that amidst both nature and the artistic beauty of Tennessee, the jar was outstanding? Now there is a problem in the first two lines, I placed a jar in Tennessee, and round it was, upon a hill (Stevens). The reader assumes that the jar was placed in Tennessee upon a hill, and the jar was round. So the artistically crafted object is contrasted with the irregular form of nature. It could also be questioned, whether the 'it' represents the object or hill.

The poet says after placing the jar, the slovenly nature that is messy, surrounded the hill and not the jar. Slovenly could be understood in terms of its opposite that is neatly or orderly. So the poet suggests that nature that is wild becomes tame with the perfection of art.

Culture/nature is reformed, civilized through art. Now the object being inanimate, gives life to the animate. This could be ridiculous, because, nature has its own way of organizing itself, but man who is animate creates an inanimate object and tries to claim superiority over nature, which takes the reader to question whether art is misleading. One of the important tenets of modernism being superiority, enlightenment, and here we get a hint that the poet is forcefully trying to say that art is superior. Art gets life because of the resemblance and not nature gets life because of the object, but the poet suggests that the inanimate object gives life to the already living; which needs attention. Stevens himself says that “the wilderness rose up to it and sprawled around no longer wild.” This signifies that nature has power to transform things and not the other way. Nature can take different forms, unlike the jar that is inanimate.

Stevens further confirms that, the jar was round upon the ground, but initially the poet stated that it was round upon a hill. Art that claimed it to be superior upon a hill, now becomes nothing and is placed on the ground. The next line “and tall and of a port in air” should be understood with its previous line where the jar was on the ground but still tall, what made it look tall, art or nature (hill)? The object gains importance because of its surrounding, (and of a port in air). In the last stanza, the readers get puzzled, as to which took dominion nature or art, “It took dominion everywhere”, initially the jar which made the slovenly wilderness beautiful, now has become gray and bare. The jar was not artistic, and gray which signifies unhappiness or sad, for an inanimate object it could refer to the loss of colour. Art loses its value with the passing of time, whereas nature is productive like the bird or the bush. Art is not useful to nature, man made things don't contribute to the making of nature; nature has its own course.

### **Conclusion:**

The poet narrates his experiences of his challenging career as an artist in Tennessee. Art is of value only to those who understand the value of it, as the last lines of the poem confirms it. The poet's attachment to art and also his challenging life career has made him oscillate between the two poles God's Creation and Man-made creation and as a result the text unconsciously reflects the author's two-sided personality.

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