

III B.A English

Semester-V

Subject & Code: Women's Writings in English (17UENC52)

Unit –I – Poetry

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The Wanderer

- Stevie Smith

Stevie Smith whose real name was Florence Margaret Smith (1902 – 1971) was an English poet and novelist. She published three novels as well as numerous prose works and articles. However she is principally known as a poet. Poetry was her preferred medium. She was awarded the Cholmondeley Award for Poets and she also won the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. Having been raised by her aunt Madge Spear usually addressed as "The Lion Aunt", Stevie became a staunch feminist in spite of the Victorian atmosphere around her. She spent three years from the age of five struggling with tubercular peritonitis and hence began to be preoccupied with death. In many of her poems, the reader comes across the theme of saying goodbye to life and welcoming death. She implies death as the only god who must come when he is called, in several poems of hers. Stevie Smith's verse is pitched to a particular frequency and therefore Sylvia Plath described herself as "a desperate Smith – addict".

Stevie Smith's short poem *The Wanderer* is a pastiche of Isaac Watts' moral song for children called *The Sluggard*. However it is also a reworking of Bronte's trope. Emily Bronte's poem *The Visionary* begins with the sentence "Silent is the House" where a figure called the wanderer is guided by a lamp in the window. Although gendered male, the wanderer is not described in human or material terms and the speaker vows constancy to him. In Smith's version, the wanderer is a ghostly and unseen female presence who wanders in the streets at night, tapping

each window as she passes, and sighing, "You have weaned me too soon, you must nurse me again". Yet the ghost "taps in vain" as her voice is ignored and she is not admitted:

Her voice flies away on the midnight wind,

But would she be happier if she were within?

She is happier far where the night – winds fall

And there are no doors and no windows at all.

The above lines state that she is unknowingly happier in death. Her search for rebirth leading to another life is therefore pointless because, "She is happier far where ... there are no doors and no windows at all". It is of greater significance as the ghost asks to be nursed again. The desire to be nursed is associated with a search for a return to the experience that may be the source of a feminine relationship to language. *The Wanderer* could be associated with poetic inspiration, but rather than bringing language to the passive female poet, Smith's feminized wanderer desires to acquire it for herself.

The voice of the wanderer tells the reader that to retreat into infancy is to delve into the pre – Oedipal relationship which is derived from the voice and presence of the mother. However the wanderer is a ghost, and therefore she not only asks to be nursed again, but to be reborn in order to be nursed to return to the semiotic source. In this way death enables language acquisition.

Smith's source for the feminine source of poetry, manifested in the poem reveals a wish to find the mother, to nurse, or to be reborn in order to nurse. Similarly *The Wanderer*, then, could be seen as a lover who also functions as a spiritual force. Her style is unique in its combination of seemingly prosaic statements, variety of voices, playful meter and deep sense of irony.

According to Philip Larkin's reviews of her poem, Smith's work is spontaneous, uttered thoughtlessly and 'artlessly' rather than crafted, and therefore neither seriously conceived nor considered. Larkin considers her to be "a writer of individuality and integrity, who had perfected a way of writing that, could deal with any subject and a tone of voice that could not be copied". So Stevie Smith has been

rightly described as “one of the most musical British poets of the century”.