

Lost Heritage as Dispossessed Reminiscence in Moore's Graveyard

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Abstract: *An attempt at reading Early American Dispossession through a feminist lens.*

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Marianne Moore's 'A Graveyard' typifies the American modernist anxiety of having to fashion out a life out of nothingness and exclusively vegetated lands. The poem shares the revisionist technique that Moore used throughout her poetic products and hence was subsequently named *A Graveyard* from the original title *A Grave* and published in both *Poems* (1921) and *Observations* (1924). The poem explores through minimalistic lines the philosophy of dispossession on a universal scale at the initial lines and gradually settles into the specificity of American life.

“taking the view from those who have as much right to it as you have it to yourself—”

The repetition of the 'human nature' to point at the usual tendency of humanity to stand in each other's ways is amplified by the imagery of a Grave. Moore uses the grave site to demarcate the cycle of life that excavates and re-excavates the same grave to give new life and to end the same and thus acknowledging the principle of nature.

“men lower nets, unconscious of the fact that they are desecrating a grave, and row quickly away”

The men in the literary image are the settlers who have come to the American continent and feel dispossessed taking in the vast tracts of American land. The fishing scene is an allegory for the journey overseas that the settlers undertook. Once they have landed on the new continent, the feeling of solitude and pure nostalgia haunts them as they push further north depicted in Moore's terms as 'desecrating a grave'. The land natively owned by the Indians is extensively mutilated to suit the needs of the white man. At certain instances, the nostalgic of the England that they left behind overpowers their senses and oppresses them, to the extent that they abandon the land. The grave thus also establishes a metonymic link with Americanism. John M. Stalin comments on Moore's history commissioned through her poems as being deepened Nostalgia, a circular process of loss that ultimately establishes the poet's relationship with that history. Thus, arguing that her poems rigorously carry out a sentimental account of American history (Stalin 276). The vast obsession of the New England culture to wipe out the native people and their culture is lamented by Moore when she says that to the man in the poem that no one has the right to take the view of the seascape from her. The poem endorses the equal rights paradigms and goes on to ground the humanitarian thought of resources being a collective entity, open to everyone.

The sea is metaphorized to the altruism of mankind. The word 'Collector' and 'Rapacious' signify the twin binaries of human nature. The Settlers in America were always conscious of the way in which the Old world treated them and the scars that it left on their lives. This fear of the past transformed their present reality to an everlasting dispossession as evident from Moore's choice of darkness in the initial stanzas of the poem. Divided into two eras of diction, the poem emerges into light and coherence through darkness of the universe, primarily issuing from the grey seascape incident. Kertzer calls the truth of darkness as a 'dismal fallacy' since the very conception of truth is through brilliance. Thought is processed and made sophisticated by the civilisation at the expense of 'darkening' the truth, figuring chiefly in poetic works as a metaphor for truth. Moore's Myth of Truth as explicated by Kertzer centers on this incapacity of truth to remain incandescent (Kertzer 68). Moore's agency of making darkness flow into the light is evident in the poem. The man obstructing the view of the narrator is darkness falling on the eyes of the beholder, in literal sense. The allegorical impact of the darkness is vast and is to be read in terms of the Settlers. It is the darkness that they felt first on arriving at the North American continent, the darkness of their hearts with mixed emotions of longing, relief and confusion. The absence of light simultaneously points at the evil deeds that the white man did to the natives. Moore's thoughts alluding to the grave image evoke the nature of lamentation at the loss of innocence and liberty that characterized the voyage across the seas. There is a growing sense of anxiety in the poem as found in "row quickly away" and the "networks of foam". This anxious streak is mainly reminiscent of the Settler's haste to tame the American wilderness.

The transition from the darkness of the diction to the beauty of nature is yet another trope found in the poem. Moore ingeniously pans in at the specificity of darkness to poke at the truth, that of the savage mind of men in conquering virgin lands and pans out to nature; the sea's inherent quality as a 'collector' of things. What the Settlers had failed to collect or bring from their native land or which they think lost forever is the 'thing' that the man in the poem is peering at from the shoreline. The usage of a 'dispossessed gaze' to admit into conversation the American nostalgia stands as the embedded meaning in the poem. The word 'stand' is used not as a pedestal to grasp onto but as a virtual medium of collective thoughts derived to confer a composite tradition on which the American society is built. "The Firs stand in procession" is a reminder to the social persecution of the old world that the settlers had to face, back in England or any other part of Europe.

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Moore uses the 'invasive man' and her dispossessed vision (the narrator's voice) to assert the Modernist loss of poetic tradition, passed down through the Romantic age. Her lament is for the Great English poetics of the Old world. By problematizing the gaze, Moore envisages to direct the guilt of loss at the Male proponents of Modernism. The row of firs in procession evokes the Old-world persecution in new bottles, at the hands of the prominent men of Modernism, their military rule over the traditions that govern poetry and the subsequent colonization of this field, resulting in weakened voice for the women. The binary of Man and Woman and the gravity of poetic voices that they both flaunt is reversed to glorify the past, the erstwhile poetry of the Old world that her ancestors left behind and thus, in a way, Moore's idealism enables her to fashion out a 'New England' or more precisely an 'Americanism in Poetry'. The extremely sexist aspect of Modernism is subverted through the Graveyard analogy and is evident in the reiteration of Man in the poem. Jeredith Merrin comments on Moore's Grave as

"Moore unsettles our assumptions about the nature of Nature, while she deviously turns the Romantic poet's favorite tool against him. Asserting his Imagination through metaphor, the Romantic poet (ranging over mountains, lakes, antique lands) in a sense colonizes the world--appropriating "otherness" and subduing it to his own purposes. By metaphorically equipping her ocean (as armed Roman legion, as neglected temptress) and pitting it against Man, Moore turns the tables on the presumptuous male poet--subjecting him to his own "subject," and so subtly mocking his delusion of dominion, of imaginative sway."

The reversal of Romantic tradition's masculine monolith enables Moore to focus chiefly on the feminine voice, thereby foregrounding the transitory voyage of the settlers that took place. Escaping from a fundamentally masculine (patriarchal) socio-economic environment, the community constructing America were deeply affectionate towards the feminine voice, the feeble side of this as escape from England in its own right gave emphasis to the weak act, opposed to the chivalry of the Romantics. Moore by underlining the weak and working closely with the dispossessed voice was ushering in a sense of 'New England' as found in Jeredith's exposition of the Moore's vision "Moore thus reverses a convention of Romantic poetry by relegating Man (who becomes merely one of the "dropped things" in her ocean) to the characteristically feminine role of objectified and disempowered other (Jeredith Merrin)". By recycling and inverting the Masculine attributes of poetry, especially in the stylistics, Moore regains her lost past or the heritage that her ancestors brought with them to the continent. The altruistic sea is employed to lure in Men, tempt them to their own graves while simultaneously representing the common ground of humanity, death. The sea absorbs the violence wrought out by the men of poetry while throwing back 'a rapacious look' that objectifies their work, similar to the way femininity is looked down by the Modernist writers. Inverting this trope allows Moore's verses to find greater liberty of expression

and makes this subversion itself the effective 'subject' of poetic setting.

"But you cannot stand in the middle of this thing:"

They resist the need to adhere to patterns of disjoint or fragmentation that Modernist period demanded on poems and the above line cleanly addresses the issue. The Romanticized notions of history are resurrected through the equivocation of 'nobody being able to erase it/stand in the middle of it'. Nature's inseparable bond with Romantic poetry is evoked by the successive darting back and forth between the elation filled scene of 'wrinkles' on the foamy sea surface and the militarised march of Nature (firs in procession), the birds with their 'catcalls'. Evoking this romantic trope in the poem enables the poet to curate a wild sense of nostalgia that is a million glass shards of memory, plunging in and out of the depths of imagination. Instead of sticking frugally to the facts, the history that is re-imagined through this process tends to harbour an idealised or over-emphasised version of truth. The men are again used in this instance to affectively signpost the reminiscence of ages past, their agency is subverted to lend visibility to the intended meaning of the poem. The grave image overrides every expression of nature as Romantic convention, making the imagistic script non-descript and inconspicuous and thus demolishing the ego-centric nature of patriarchy. Moore's vacillatory scope of Nostalgia (reminiscence) establishes meaning through the paring down of the patriarchal and masculine ornaments that attach themselves inevitably to the poetic form. The grave symbolises the return to the past while metaphorically signaling the end of Masculine dominance, stripping it's vitality by replacing the tropes and prejudices commonly used to clothe it's 'subject matter' and ingeniously redirecting the current of words towards Man itself. The growing sense of consciousness and 'Feminine Volition' that powers a great many share of the stanzas is another innovative protest against the majoritarian claim of women verse being feeble and fragile. Charged volition is deployed to destroy the painting of Nature as described through the Male perspective and instead the disembodied anthropomorphised voice is extolled as the burial site speaking, making an edenic approach to solving the long drawn out battle between the minds of Men and Women.

The final clue to Moore's jigsaw puzzle of meanings is the long M-Dashes, strategically placed alongside words. A discursive pattern of words (sea, yourself, top, look, heretofore and sink) is left to dangle precarious on this punctuation and when read from the beginning to the end, these work syntactically to elicit meaning (Sea yourself at the top and look heretofore and sink- literal organisation of the words into coherence). The philosophical implication being to uplift the battered heart (in this case the poetic voice) and to look back into the past. The metaphorical 'Sink' which accompanies this re-interpreted sentence reiterates the reality of mortality that would curtail the persecution and preserve or conserve the memory of the past for the future. The sea as a collector is indirectly hinted at through objects that are sunk in it. They are never lost, instead collected and safeguarded from the temporal ailments that may try to erase them, down the march of time. A wave pattern is discerned in the stanzas which Jerrald

Ranta finds 'crucial to the poem', spelling out the principles on which Moore 'creates' and 'utilises' space (Ranta 8). The geometrical formal features of poem are expressed as a series of waves that tend to divide the poem into two rough halves, the former part being short and mostly associated with the stationary-standing aspect of man. The inherent quality of the masculinity to intervene and be in the middle of everything is foregrounded when syllabic prosody is probed. Ranta finds the words 'middle' and 'to stand' occupying the exact center of the syllabic structure, thus decentering the semantic quality of the lexicon (Ranta 9). They are standing in nothingness, suggests the succeeding lines "the sea has nothing to give...". Another crescendo of the syntactic wave takes places when the fishermen "row quickly away", instead of stasis, fast paced motion figures in the lines. The syntactical waves in the poem repeat a cyclic pattern, beginning from standstill kinetics, moving to energized motions and finally settling back into stasis through charged 'volition's' braking action. It is a repetitive pattern as the first and last lines complete a circle akin to memory that cycles itself in the mind of person. Beginning from a trigger of sense, memory floods in as wave from a standstill position, 'turns and twists' in the mind as does in the poem (Ranta 9) and finally recedes through the conscious effort of the person to erase or forget the swell. Memory is an allegory for the English heritage that Moore is trying to forget and embrace simultaneously, portrayed as geometrical swells in her verse and alluding severely to heartache at the loss of it.

Marianne Moore's poetry is thick with meaning and undoing them requires specialist perspectives. By reading against the grain of verse and syntactical formality, this project was able to unearth patterns of memory that hinted at Moore's heritage as a New England progeny and linked herself with the larger self of 'Americanism'. The Settler tropes that were employed through rich imagery and ingenious textures of 'Darkness' and 'Light' provided greater clarity at the reminiscence into her 'Lost Heritage'. Probing into the midlevel of her poetic soil allowed revelation of the Masculine subversion which was envisaged to regain the 'Romantic tradition' without the staunch adherence to Patriarchal forms and essentially fashioning out a New England twist on poetic form. The geometrical features of the poem further added meaning to the reminiscence, as a wave that swells from the present and crescendos to the past and completes the circle. The compounding effect of these stylistic and imagist reformation is a poem that evokes the lost Settle conscience of Americanism.

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