

Addressing contemporary British problems: A thematic study of Stevie Smith's social poetry

ANWAR ABDEL KAREAM

Department of English, Damietta Faculty of Arts, Mansoura University, Damietta, Egypt
<anwar_kariem@yahoo.com>

Critics argue that Stevie Smith's poetry handles many recurrent motifs, such as death, alienation, love – often lost rather than fulfilled – agnosticism and blasphemy, cruelty of nature, war, misconceptions about religion, wrong practices of the church, the role of the poet in formulating culture, and metaphysical speculations about life, suicide and friendship. In his preface to *The Collected Poems of Stevie Smith*, James MacGibbon writes, "love and death are either the principal or strong underlying themes of nearly all her work" (10). Helen Small comments on Smith's obsession with suicide, "For [her], the choice for death at the end of a long life remains a possibility, a viable alternative to choiceless extinction" (147). Sanford Sternlicht suggests that her major subjects, particularly in the late works, are "disintegration and death" (1991, 71). Ruth Baumert contends, "many of the poems ... illustrate her constant preoccupation with religious, philosophical, and social problems – the nature of God, the state of the (Anglican) church, faith and sin, as well as the great imponderables love, life and death" (202). On the other hand, Suzanne Fox argues, "The sense of inhabiting an unfamiliar, even hostile domain; the necessity of remaining always wary; the feeling of being odd, incongruous, mysteriously misplaced: all are constants in her poetry" (462).¹ She adds, "Smith conducted a lifelong argument with Christianity, and many of her debates with it are voiced through her poems" (467). John L. Mahoney proposes, "All too often readers may find the voice and tone of the poems angry, rebellious, iconoclastic, indeed blasphemous" (319).

In spite of all such critical commentaries, Smith's poems, especially those addressing social problems, have not received deep analyses. Hence, it is the interest of this paper to focus on Smith's social poetry, hypothesizing that she is a social reformer of a special kind who exposes domestic social problems and diseases of her contemporary British society with the aim of reforming it, though she does not often suggest solutions. For example, she extensively handles social problems, such as child mortality, child illegitimacy, lack of parental care, violence against children and juvenile aggressiveness. She further investigates some social diseases that threaten the structure of British families: severance of family ties (father-son, husband-wife and intra-familial relations), the "abject" position of the British woman during the 1950's and early 1960's and the effeminateness of young

British men. Furthermore, she criticizes despotic practices of some English Lords against the poor and the needy and ridicules the militarists' attitude to establish national glory for their country by means of war.

The method followed throughout this study depends on reading groups of poems, belonging to different periods of her life, that have a shared stream of thought, since her poems do not usually display notable evolvement either technically or thematically. The study is limited to poems addressing Smith's criticism of social problems and diseases that were prevalent in Britain during the mid-Twentieth century.

Karen Schneider observes, "the literature of this decade [1930's] overwhelmingly inscribes an anxiety-fraught response to the contemporary sociopolitical crisis, a response that eventually became an obsession with what seemed impending apocalypse" (38). In fact, Smith is not dissociated from the domestic conditions of that society; on the contrary, she is deeply concerned with the social, economic and political welfare of her British society. To narrow the focus, her views of social problems, as Samuel Hynes remarks, are both fact-based, or what he calls "documentary," and "fictional" (228). Hence, Smith breaks the boundaries between the real and the imagined, trying "not to describe the world, but to change it" (Hynes 228). As a social reformer, she attacks and criticizes social diseases that spoil the social life in Britain with the aim of reforming it.

Janet McCann claims that Smith "seldom responded positively to children, though she claimed to be fond of them" (304); nevertheless, Smith remains one of the ardent defendants of children's rights, writing unrelentlessly about them and the problems they face in contemporary British life. In an interview with Kay Dick she said, "Why I admire children so much is that I think all the time, 'Thank heaven they aren't mine'" (73). Thus, she differentiates between her social obligations towards British children and her personal relation to them.

Child mortality manifests itself as a central theme in many of her poems. In fact, this problem was a natural consequence of the lack of medical care before and during the great economic crash in the early 1930's. Linda Anderson observes that Smith's "pre-occupation with death, however, could be seen as having

a historical, as well as personal, resonance. Britain had to confront the vast scale of its death toll in the trenches after the First World War” (177). Poems like “*The Parklands*,” “*Nature Grieves for my Dead Brother*,” “*The Deathly Child*” and “*Upon a Grave*” closely handle this problem of child mortality. In “*The Parklands*,” a female speaker sympathizes with a seven-year-old child who lies in his “unfrequented place,” the grave. When she asks him questions about his race and “lineage,” the boy answers that his parents died a long time ago. She cannot find the cause of his death, and she wonders about the abandoned family house which is left to “the subtle spider / Busy at her spinning loom” (CP 44).² This imaginary dialogue, which is carried within the grave, shows the poet’s distance from her characters, a device that might dramatize and aggrandize the problem.

In “*Nature Grieves*,” a speaker identifies herself with a dead child, whom she calls a “lamb dead;” she further associates him with Christ, the innocent “dead lamb.” Having maternal feelings and social obligations towards him, she asks some rhetorical questions:

Can I see the lately dead
And not bend a sympathetic head?
Can I see lamb dead as mutton
And not care a solitary button? (CP 45)

Not only do the answers to such questions imply the speaker’s sympathy, but they also highlight her criticism of that society in which the rate of child mortality was soaring so high. Expressing her views in the form of questions aims at inviting readers and the officials concerned to react sympathetically and find suitable solutions to these problems.

In “*The Deathly Child*,” the speaker shows how a young child is sent from heaven to warn his young fellow children against the looming death awaiting them. By the end of the poem, this child appears as death itself which “walks delicately” and “leaves no mark at all;” it is there to harvest the souls of other children without telling them who it is “that must go” (CP 123). Likewise, “*Upon a Grave*” portrays death as an angel who comes from heaven to herald the death of the speaker’s young child. In these four poems, Smith distances herself from the speaking voices to sound objective and to attract the attention of the officials to the dangers of child mortality. She also tries to keep herself distant by not suggesting solutions to this problem. Commenting on Smith’s practice of distancing herself and using a variety of speaking voices, Jane Dowson writes, “Stevie Smith was ahead of her time in evading the simplistic assumption that the voice of the speaker is the voice of the author; her multivocal texts are often metalinguistic or subversively satirical (244).

The issue of illegitimate children, treated in many of Smith’s poems, forms another social problem that irks the consciousness of contemporary British society. Poems like “*Infant*” and “*Valuable*” handle this problem unsentimentally. In the former, a speaker describes an illegitimate baby as “a cynical baby” whose mother weeps and shows sorrow over the absence, or rather the escape, of the baby’s father. Born two months prematurely, this baby becomes a source of condemnation for his mother, who does not receive any sympathy from her society. However, it is the speaker who sympathizes with the mother and sees the father as a malevolent figure. The speaker of the latter poem describes illegitimate girls as “silly little cheap things” who are not educated to object to men’s illegal approach to them. Due to the malfunction of reformatory social institutions, the speaker who sees herself as an individual reformer pledges herself to foster in those girls strong feelings of self-esteem, self-value and self-pride, since “Nobody teaches anybody they are valuable” (CP 447). The speaker concludes the poem saying that if such illegitimate girls can truly appreciate and enhance such nurturing feelings, they will be satisfied and comforted.

In “*The Orphan Reformed*,” Smith exposes another social problem that jeopardizes the British society: the emotional deprivation from which orphans suffer:

The orphan is looking for parents
She roams the world over
Looking for parents and cover (CP 241).

Though such an orphan girl is in dire need of emotional sustenance from surrogate parents, she gets nothing and keeps moving from one house to another and looking for nurturing love. Failing to find any source of assurance, she calls those sham parents “hearts of stone.” Unfortunately, she further discovers that “she is better alone” because she is badly treated and abused by those who are supposed to provide her with care, love and attention. She asks, “Must I be alone forever?” Another speaking voice answers ironically, “Yes you must. Oh wicked orphan, oh rebellion” (CP 241). In fact, this sarcastic answer does not make a felon out of the orphan as much as it satirizes that society wherein an orphan cannot find safe shelters and true loving people. The concluding lines bear the most sardonic commentary on that society: “At last the orphan is reformed. Now quite / Alone she goes; now she is right” (241). Of course, the word “reformed” is ironic because it implies that the girl has learned the bitterest lesson – that it is better for her to lead her life alone without waiting for any help from others.

Smith notes that lack of parental care or violence practiced against British children unconsciously breeds aggressiveness in them. Hence, parental violence and juvenile aggression are

two striking social problems which are highlighted in her canon of poetry. Poems like “*She Said*,” “*But Murderous*” and others handle parental violence against children. In the first poem, the speaking voice of a mother harshly talks to her baby:

There, little baby, go sink or swim,
I brought you into the world, what more should I do?
Do you expect me always to be responsible for you? (CP
182)

This mother relinquishes her responsibility towards her baby; she does not even care whether it dies or survives. The speaker does not reveal the secret behind such a strange behavior towards her offspring: is it because she is a single mother; is it because she is forsaken by her husband; is it because of poverty? Answers to such questions are not provided or even hinted at in this brief poem. Moreover, the poem does not suggest any solutions to such social problems. What is only sure, as suggested by the ironic tone of the poem, is that such a baby will develop negative attitudes not only against his family, but also against his entire society.

In “*But Murderous*,” Smith shows a flagrant example of parental violence against children:

A mother slew her unborn babe
In a day of recent date
Because she did not wish him to be born in a world
Of murder and war and hate
‘Oh why should I bear a babe from my womb
To be broke in pieces by the hydrogen bomb?’ (CP 337)

Though the stated reasons of killing the baby may sound logical from the mother’s point of view, they do not, however, give her the right to kill her own baby. That is why the speaker describes her as “a fool and a murderess” and asks a rhetorical question: “Is a child’s destiny to be contained by a mind / That signals only a lady in distress? (CP 337) The answer is “no” since the child has the very right of life just like any grown-up. Frequently ironic, Smith, through the mouth of the speaker, asks: “And why should human infancy be so superior / As to be too good to be born in this world? (CP 337) Of course, she means the opposite: children need to be born in a rich soil where love prevails and war does not exist. Thus, in a double stroke, the poet/speaker criticizes both the mother’s abnormal behavior and attacks war as a force that breeds universal hatred.

“*One of Many*” handles juvenile aggressiveness, a behavior Smith conceives as an inevitable consequence of parental or even societal violence against children. In this poem, a speaker addresses a young child whose aggressiveness leads him to perpetrate a crime “in the first degree:”

You are only one of many
And of small account if any,
You think about yourself too much.
This touched the child with a quick touch
And worked his mind to such a pitch.
He threw his fellows in a ditch.
This little child
That was so mild
Is grown too wild (CP 101).

From the speaker’s point of view, this child’s aggressiveness is not an individual problem but a public one. Meanwhile, instead of finding the real causes behind the child’s aggressiveness, society, the speaker adds, sets the gallows for him and actually executes him. This undue punishment causes the speaker to express sorrow for the child and associate his death and pains at the gallows with those of Christ at the crucifixion:

Christ died for sinners, intoned the Prison Chaplain from
his miscellany
Weeping bitterly the little child cries: I die one of many
(CP 101).

As a close observer of the social problems of families around her, Smith notes that many British families have suffered from severed social ties among their members: parents and children, husbands and wives and relatives of the same family. There are fathers who abandon their houses and never come back again, children who let their parents down, husbands who leave their needy wives forever, lovers who jilt their beloveds and kins who neglect their commitments towards their aging relatives. Smith sees such infected relations as social problems that threaten the stability of her British society. Meanwhile, she calls attention to her society’s need for sustaining and strengthening cozy family relationships so that her country can thrive and achieve social welfare.

In “*Correspondence between Mr Harrison in Newcastle and Mr Sholto Peach Harrison in Hull*,” Smith introduces us to an abnormal relationship between a father and his son. The title itself is very significant. First, the fact that correspondence is the means of communication between them indicates the wide gap engulfing them. Second, the use of names preceded by titles – “Mr Harrison” and “Mr Sholto Peach Harrison” – among the same family members refers to the dry and formal relationship between them. Third, the residence of the father in Newcastle and the son in Hull implies a spatial as well as emotional distance between them. The first speaking voice is that of a father who feels embittered by his son’s “life of shame” away from him. The father further pleads his son to come back home to comfort his parents and marry a rich lady who has her shares in an oil company. However, the reply of the son sheds light on the true character of the father:

You are an old and evil man my father
 I tell you frankly Sholto had much rather
 Travel in glue unrecompensed unwed
 Than go to church with oily Sue and afterwards to bed
 (CP 41).

The son shows his father's hypocrisy and moral corruption, since the latter has an extramarital relationship with another lady (oily Sue) though he tries to show people that he is a regular church-attendant. Frank to himself, however, the son prefers to lead an "unwed" life away from home than to follow the bad example of that "old and evil man."

Nevertheless, Smith sees marriage as a great social institution that sustains social stability, though she personally never got married. In the early 1930s she wrote, "I thought [marrying] was the right thing to do, one ought to know that it was the natural thing to do. . . but I wasn't very keen on it" (quoted in Barbera and McBrien 58). In "*The Hostage*," for example, she clearly expresses her personal aversion to marriage:

Of course I never dared form any acquaintance.
 Marriage? Out of the question. Well for instance
 It might be infectious, this malaise of mine (an excuse)
 Spread
 That? I'd rather be dead (CP 326).

Smith does not want British people to take her personal aversion to marriage as a general case; on the contrary, she encourages them to adopt marriage as a solution to many social and moral problems. She even characterizes her own aversion to it as "too selfish" and unnatural. That it is why in many of her poems she values friendship over marriage. Schneider supports this idea of Smith's personal aversion to marriage: "Smith's art often gives voice to her ambivalence about marriage, and more often she depicts unhappy and even bitter husband-wife relations. Love is war, marriage protracted warfare, and the home a battleground" (59). Poems like "*Dirge*" and "*The Pleasures of Friendship*" appreciate friendship over love and marriage since, according to her, a friend's love is much greater than a lover's or a husband's love:

The pleasures of friendship are exquisite,
 How pleasant to go to a friend on a visit!
 I go to my friend, we walk on the grass,
 And the hours and moments like minutes pass (CP 208).

As a social reformer who exposes social problems with the aim of reforming them, Smith satirizes the inanities of militarist English people, whom she calls "suburban classes" and "asses," because they menace "the greatness of our beloved England" (CP 26). Commenting on the idea of "Englishness" rather than "Nationalism," Anderson states:

When Smith began to write in the 1930s, Britain had largely retreated from that assertive rhetoric of national and imperial destiny which had carried it into war in 1914. Nationalism had been replaced by an idea of Englishness . . . which was quieter, more introspective and private, and which found its embodiment in the suburban 'little Englander', who cultivated a love of 'home and hobbies', and who nostalgically extolled the beauty of rural England (175).

Such militarists, Smith thinks, propagate false patriotic ethos by claiming that war is their means to achieve national glory and political hegemony for their country. She sees this as deceptive propaganda leading to British imperialism abroad and domestic social problems at home. In this context, Petra Rau writes, "Stevie Smith is . . . deeply suspicious of the kind of 'national ethos' that enables imperialism" (180). It is not surprising that she reacts angrily against them in her poem "*The Suburban Classes*:"

They lie
 Propagating their kind in an eightroomed sty.
 Now I have a plan which I will enfold
 (There's this to be said for them, they do as they are told)
 Then tell them their country's in mortal peril (CP 26).

As seen, Smith is distrustful of those people's militarist tendencies which threaten the country's stability and cause it to live in a "mortal peril." Hence, she ends her poem wishing them "to be dead and won't hurt" (CP 26).

Not only does Smith attack war as an institution leading to British political tyranny, but she also criticizes it as a means of subjecting women under the control of men. Hence, she breaks the boundaries between the political and the personal. In her view, she believes that waging a war is a masculine expression of the male's need for imposing his hegemony over the other gender, the female. Schneider explains, "[Smith's] trenchant analysis maps widespread connections between the personal tyranny of men over women and political tyranny in the broadest sense" (40).

On the other extreme, Smith ridicules English young men's "effeminate" attitude to life, confirming that this is against the law of nature:

What has happened to the young men of Eng.?
 Why are they so lovely-dovey so sad and so domesticated
 So sad and so philoprogenitive
 So sad and without sensuality?
 They love with a ci-devant feminine affection
 They see in their dreams a little home
 And *kiddies*

Ah the *kiddies*
 They would not mind *having* babies:
 It is unkind
 Of Nature to lag behind (“*Eng.*” CP 45).

She believes that such young men have missed true fatherly guidance during the stage of initiation; that is why they feel sad, isolated, effeminate, “domesticated” and soft. The problem with such young men, Smith thinks, is due to their upbringing at the sole hands of mothers and female teachers. Sharon Doubiago comments, “The contemporary male is “soft” because he hasn’t cut his adult soul from his mother-bound soul,” because in the remoteness of the father he hasn’t had a male role model” (82). Here, Smith uses a satiric language to ridicule the effeminate attitude of such young English men. First, she calls them “lovely dovey,” a phrase used to describe delicate young women. Then, she mockingly uses the French word “*ci-devant*” to describe their femininity, just as cultured women use French words and expressions in their daily language. Moreover, she uses feminine dreams and language to describe those young men’s dreams: “They see in their dreams a little home / And kiddies.” The word “*kiddies*” in particular – originally italicized in the text – is very satiric, since it belongs to the vocabulary of young women. To make her satire more sardonic, she makes such young men of England dream of “*having* babies” like young women who dream of bearing and giving birth to babies. The coda of the poem, however, carries the bitterest irony: Nature has to reverse its course so that such young men could bear children; otherwise, it will lag behind the new trend of development in the modern social life of England. The message which the poet tries to convey is that fathers should shoulder their responsibilities by getting closer to their sons, help them pass the stage of initiation successfully and educate them in the values of men. She also wishes to regain the true masculine dignity, energy and values which are lost in the sweeping upsurge of feminism and urbanization.

Smith also criticizes socially unacceptable practices of English Lords who exercise unfair dealings against their fellow citizens. She often makes individual cases appear as public phenomena by exaggerating their effects and consequences; her aim is to attract the attention of those who exercise such socially unacceptable acts to their misconduct, so that they may ameliorate their behavior. In “*Lord Barrenstock*,” she satirizes such lords who seduce “a hundred little boys,” wrong widows, usurp orphans’ rights and cause the poor to starve by putting “a fence about the land, / And [making] the people’s cattle graze on sand” (CP 69). However, what exasperate her more than such “unsocial acts” are those people’s nonchalance and indifference to the suffering and the poor conditions of others. In fact, the title of this poem is very suggestive. First, the title “Lord” is ironic because a lord is expected to behave gentlemanly and fairly. Second, the name “Barrenstock” is

significant, as nothing socially fruitful will grow out of this “barren” way of dealing.

In other poems, Smith attacks high class people’s thrifty spending more on dogs and cats than on the poor and the needy. Hence, in a poem like “*O Happy Dogs of England*,” she resents the spoiled and thrifty life of dogs in a pet-oriented society:

O Happy Dogs of England
 Bark well as well as you may
 If you lived anywhere else
 You would not be so gay (CP 94).

Beside its literal meaning, the word “dog” could also refer to socially intruding parasites who feed themselves on the victuals of other people. And in “*Our Office Cat*,” Smith satirizes English people’s cherishing of cats and preferring them to family members:

Our Office cat is a happy cat
 She has had two hundred kittens
 And every one has been adopted into happy homes
 By our cat-loving Britons (CP 279).

Reading Smith’s poetry reveals that she is not against the adoption/good treatment of animals; she rather thinks that it could be better if part of the money spent on adopting cats and dogs could be spent on poverty-stricken people. For her, the social welfare of British people should count as a first priority on the list of the interests of the British government.

As a woman-poet, Smith defends woman’s “abject” position in the British society during the 1950’s and early 1960’s. In “*How Cruel Is the Story of Eve*,” for example, she shows man’s cruel subjection of woman. The speaker describes Eve’s story as “cruel,” showing that woman’s most vulnerable part is her emotionality – since her main desire is to get children – though it should be considered her strongest part. The speaker adds that woman’s bad lot is to “Buy her a husband to rule her / Fool her to marry a master” (CP 481); she thus associates the husband with ruling and mastering and the woman with subjection and surrender. This attitude of the speaker recapitulates the British society’s view of the superiority of men and the inferiority of women: “He must make women lower than / So he can be higher than” (CP 481). The speaker’s response to such a form of wrong is: “Oh what cruelty, / In history what misery” (CP 481). Not only does the speaker bemoan such a social injustice between the two genders, but she also mocks man’s work and engagement in wars, since these are the two things that confirm his manhood and superiority. Moreover, the speaker, trying to appease the tension and war between the two genders, proposes the following:

Yet there is this to be said still:
 Life would be over long ago
 If men and women had not loved each other
 Naturally, naturally,
 Forgetting their mythology
 They would have died of it else
 Long ago, long ago,
 And all would be emptiness now
 And silence (CP 483).

This is one of the few times in which Smith suggests solutions. She proposes that a successful social life must be founded on mutual love and equivalent co-operation. Man has to forget the “mythology” of superiority-inferiority relationship. She adds that life must have come to an end long time ago if it were not for the integration between the two genders. So, she just reminds man of his responsibilities towards the other half of his soul, woman.

In “*Major Macroo*,” she discusses another social problem: an unsound husband-wife relationship in a male-dominated society. The man is described as selfish, narcissist and self-centered, while the woman is presented as “a wife with a heart of gold / That never beat for a soul but him / Himself and his slightest whim” (CP 72). This man does not care about her; nor does he think of her as a human being. The speaker provides examples of how this man mistreats his wife:

He left her alone for months at a time
 When he had to have a change
 Just had to
 And his pension wouldn't stretch to a fare for two
 And he didn't want it to

 And because it was cheaper they lived abroad
 And did he care if she might be unhappy or bored?
 He did not.
 He'd other things to think of – a lot (CP 72).

Such negligence on the part of the man towards his wife reflects that patriarchal society's assumptions of male superiority and female subordination, a view which is met by satire by the speaker who mocks that man's unwillingness to buy an extra ticket for his wife to accompany him. What the man really cares about, the speaker adds, is to please his “slightest whim;” meanwhile, the woman has to be patient for his self-absorption and bear up with his absence from home. Moreover, accepting her traditional female roles, the wife meets her husband's daily needs by cleaning his room, washing and ironing his clothes and hosting his friends at home. The speaker concludes the poem attacking men's cruel dealings with women and proposing some basic foundations for a successful marital life:

Such men as these, such selfish cruel men
 Hurting what most they love what most loves them,
 Never make a mistake when it comes to choosing a woman
 To cherish them and be neglected and not think it inhuman
 (CP 73).

The choice of the appropriate wife and the good treatment of her, according to the speaker, are warranties of a socially prosperous life.

In “*Childe Rolandine*,” Smith discusses how many British women were depreciated in their society during the mid-Twentieth century. Though Rolandine is an artist, she is obliged to work as a “secretary typist;” she sings a “song / Against oppression and the rule of wrong” (CP 331). The song tells the story of how she is victimized by her rapist employer who leaves her to suffer alone with a “fruit in secret” (an illegitimate baby). Both the fruit and “the parent tree,” the song goes, grow up to be sources of hatred not only against the oppressor/rapist but against the entire society which does not denounce such forms of social wrongs practiced against women. Nevertheless, Rolandine does not lay the whole blame on the employer, as she says: “Is it his fault I must work at a work that is tedious?” (331) She continues to divulge such wrongs, so that her society could amend them: “Silence is vanity, speak for the whole truth's sake” (331). The poet/speaker implies that such wrongs against women would breed negative influences on the social life of the British society.

However, Smith's defense of women may sometimes appear inconsistent and vague. In a short poem entitled “*Dear Female Heart*,” a speaker sympathizes with the suffering of other females, but s/he later gloats over their pains:

Dear female Heart, I am sorry for you,
 You must suffer, that is all that you can do.
 But if you like, in common with the rest of the human race,
 You may also look most absurd with a miserable face (CP 130).

The general impression the reader gets here is a conflict of disparate voices, confused masks and inconsistent views. The speaker's gender cannot be identified; it can be a sympathetic female or a sadistic male, a serious or a ridiculing voice. Anderson finds an analogy between Smith and Sylvia Plath in so far as inconsistent identifications with gender are concerned:

Neither Smith nor Plath speak simply and directly from a female or feminist perspective. Both, whilst aware of the constrictions placed on them as women, used different identifications – used the mobility and power of voice

and performance – to move between masculine and feminine positions, destabilising the unity and coherence of the poetic ‘I’, and escaping [their] fixing in the muted or deathly place of the feminine (188).

In fact, “*Can It Be?*” better exemplifies Smith’s retrogressive attitude towards the gains which some British women could partially achieve on the way to self-autonomy. The speaker wonders about the rare bravery of such women who, like brave leaping cats, could jump a wide leap:

She jumped. And what a jump that was!
Quite twice as long
And high
As it need be,
Now why
Did this cat jump at all, so force herself?
There was a path around the tank
She could have walked (CP 364).

The idea is that woman’s wide leap might make her do without man, something which Smith does not like or accept, because she thinks that a successful social life should be built on mutual co-operation between the two genders.

Many critics have dealt with Smith as a poet who handles some reiterated themes, such as death, suicide, love, friendship, war and agnosticism. However, this paper has tried to verify the hypothesis that Smith is a social reformer who exposes many contemporary British social problems with the aim of reforming them. This paper has shown that Smith expresses a deep concern for the British children and the social problems they face, such as child mortality, child illegitimacy, lack of parental care, violence against children and juvenile aggressiveness. By this she tries to attract the attention of the British officials, or even individuals, to the dangers of such social problems, asking them to find solutions to them, though she sometimes suggests personal ones.

This paper has also shown how Smith handles other social problems threatening the sound structure of British families; she observes and laments the severance of family ties (father-son, husband-wife and intra-familial relations), as well as the phenomenon of the effeminateness of young British men. She argues that if such problems continue to exist, they are likely to destabilize the social stability of the British society. She further criticizes the despotic practices of some English Lords against the poor and the needy. Moreover, she ridicules the militarists’ attitude to establish national glory for their country by means of war, proposing an ethos of “Englishness” instead of “Nationalism.”

As a woman-poet, Smith pledges herself to defend the “abject” position of the British woman in her society during the 1950’s

and early 1960’s. She refuses British men’s subjection of women and their feeling of superiority over them. She argues that such a lofty outlook will badly affect the relationship between the two genders and may lead to an unhealed clash between them. Hence, she proposes a kind of marriage based on social integration, mutual understanding and equivalent gender roles, though she often expresses a personal aversion to marriage.

Notes

1. In this context, Barbera and McBrien confirm that “[Smith’s] conscience and her temperament lead her to insist on the “emptiness of an indifferent universe” (218-219). On the other hand, Spalding notes, “Stevie’s attitude to the Christian religion, like that of Emily Dickinson, was that of an agnostic who could not entirely abandon belief in a God of Love” (233-34).
2. Any other reference to the texts is taken from *The Collected Poems of Stevie Smith*. James MacGibbon (edit). The abbreviation (CP) refers to this edition.

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