

An Ancient Gesture

By Edna St. Vincent Millay

I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
Penelope did this too.
And more than once: you can't keep weaving all day
And undoing it all through the night;
Your arms get tired, and the back of your neck gets tight;
And along towards morning, when you think it will never be light,
And your husband has been gone, and you don't know where, for years.
Suddenly you burst into tears;
There is simply nothing else to do.

And I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
This is an ancient gesture, authentic, antique,
In the very best tradition, classic, Greek;
Ulysses did this too.
But only as a gesture,—a gesture which implied
To the assembled throng that he was much too moved to speak.
He learned it from Penelope...
Penelope, who really cried.

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950) was an American poet, born in Maine, best known for her sonnets. While Millay was one of the most well-known poets in her lifetime, earning immense public popularity, critical appreciation of her poetry has varied wildly: she was the first woman poet to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1923, but fell out of critical favour with the emergence of the modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, causing her work to be seen as rigid and outdated. In the 1990s, however, she was ‘rediscovered’ by feminist scholars who praised Millay’s strong independence voice, and many present scholars extol the subtle mesh of modern sensibilities with historic lyric poetry forms which can be found in her poems.

‘An Ancient Gesture’ was one of the last poems Millay wrote, first published in her posthumous collection *Mine The Harvest*. It uses the myth of Ulysses and Penelope to explore themes of grief and loneliness, among others. The woman’s grief is small and solitary, perhaps viewed as an annoyance, but by comparing it to Penelope it becomes the ‘ancient gesture’ of the title: suddenly gaining a long context, and in the illumination of history can be appreciated in a new light.

Millay chose a title, “An Ancient Gesture,” that would signal her intention of speaking about more than an emotional state, however powerful an emotion it might be. The title itself serves as a kind of gesture, indicating to the reader that the topic will be not the tears themselves but the act of wiping them away. Although gestures are often seen in a negative light, as in the common phrase “an empty gesture,” Millay never does other than emphasize the importance and positive value of the gesture: “There is simply nothing else to do.” The gesture is valid unto itself, a pure act arising out of social and cultural traditions. It is “authentic, antique,/ In the very best tradition, classic, Greek.” In recognizing this validity, Millay suggests that people need the gesture, because of those

times when “there is simply nothing else to do.” Being the only response to a situation, it becomes the necessary response.

In a real sense Millay is talking about the inheritance of culture in “An Ancient Gesture.” Evoking Penelope’s use of the loom, one of the most important tools in domestic culture from ancient times, signals that she is speaking of the gesture as being similarly central to social culture. By revealing that her speaker’s gesture is “in the very best tradition,” she reaffirms this. She then shows how the tradition came to be passed down: Ulysses learns it from “Penelope, who really cried”—from Penelope, who gave the gesture its meaning. While the speaker identifies first with Penelope’s use of the gesture, the reader is left with the impression that she also identifies with that of Ulysses. In this way Millay causes us to re-evaluate the more passive nature of Penelope’s heroism and not view the gesture of crying as a weakness or breakdown of proper composition, but instead an important aspect of the human condition which has lasted for millennia.

Combing

By Gladys Cardiff

Bending, I bow my head
and lay my hands upon
her hair, combing, and think
how women do this for
each other. My daughter’s hair
curls against the comb,
wet and fragrant— orange
parings. Her face, downcast,
is quiet for one so young.

I take her place. Beneath
my mother’s hands I feel
the braids drawn up tight
as piano wires and singing,
vinegar-rinsed. Sitting
before the oven I hear
the orange coils tick
the early hour before school.

She combed her grandmother
Mathilda’s hair using
a comb made out of bone.
Mathilda rocked her oak wood
chair, her face downcast,
intent on tearing rags
in strips to braid a cotton
rug from bits of orange

and brown. A simple act
Preparing hair. Something
women do for each other,
plaiting the generations.

Gladys Cardiff (b. 1942) is an American poet and writer of Irish, Welsh, and Cherokee descent. Her poetry tends to reflect her heritage. She has published two books of poems, *To Frighten a Storm* and *A Bare Unpainted Table*. She is an associate professor of poetry, American literature, and Native American literature at Oakland University.

"Combing" brings us into the mind and thoughts of the speaker as she is reflecting on the past, however, this person isn't dealing with a struggle. The speaker is very much at ease in this poem and is enjoying the moment as she reflects on this act and how it connects her with the past and future. The way the author speaks of the bond of an ordinary activity and how it connects one generation to the next creates a feeling of comfort. This poem expresses a feeling of affection, because of how it is linked between a family. Also, while reading this poem, the tone is very relaxed and calm. The poem relates to the speaker, the mother, who is sharing a memory of when her mother would comb and braid her hair. This shows the reoccurring activity of preparing hair and how it connects to the same experience of her daughter. The author is comparing the braid to be as strong and tight as piano wire and a symbol of how strong the bond is between women throughout the generations. This poem is more about the connections between those generations, with less feeling of resentment towards the idea. It talks about the same scene, but focuses more on how that scene changes over the years; and then it talks about how this act of combing hair for a daughter is the thread holding generations together, almost how it is an act of bonding.

It is a poem about how women helped each other at all times. In the first stanza the author grabs her daughter's hair ready to make a braid in her hair. Then, she describes how her daughter's hair curls against the comb. After that, she says that her daughter's face was down, and that was strange for a person so young. In the second stanza, it is as if the daughter is the one who wrote it. She says that she feels her mother braiding her hair and that the braids are really tight against her head. Also, she was seated near to the oven and she could hear it ticking before she went to school. In the third and last stanza, she says how she combed her grandmother's hair using a comb made out of bones while they were seated in rocking chairs made out of oak wood. She ends the poem by saying that it is one simple act that women do for each other that has gone through many generations.

Woman's Work

by Julia Alvarez

Who says a woman's work isn't high art?

She'd challenge as she scrubbed the bathroom tiles.

Keep house as if the address were your heart.

We'd clean the whole upstairs before we'd start
downstairs, I'd sigh, hearing my friends outside.

Doing her woman's work was a hard art.

to practice when the summer sun would bar
the floor I swept till she was satisfied.
She kept me prisoner in her housebound heart.
She's shine the tines of forks, the wheels of carts,
cut lacy lattices for all her pies.
Her woman's work was nothing less than art.
And I, her masterpiece since I was smart,
was primed, praised, polished, scolded and advised
to keep a house much better than my heart.
I did not want to be her counterpart!
I struck out...but became my mother's child:
a woman working at home on her art,
housekeeping paper as if it were her heart.

Julia Alvarez (born March 27, 1950) is a Dominican-American poet, novelist, and essayist. She rose to prominence with the novels *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), and *Yo!* (1997). Her publications as a poet include *Homecoming* (1984) and *The Woman I Kept to Myself* (2004), and as an essayist the autobiographical compilation *Something to Declare* (1998). Many literary critics regard her to be one of the most significant Latina writers and she has achieved critical and commercial success on an international scale. In addition to her successful writing career, Alvarez is the current writer-in-residence at Middlebury College.

"**Woman's work**" by Julia Alvarez opens the subject of the domestic role of women in family life. The author tells the story of her mother's obsessive housekeeping that influenced the speaker's future life. In this poem "Woman's Work", the mother is forced to do household cleaning which represents a domestic life and the impact of gender specific roles. This poem is written in the third person point of view. The speaker is the daughter of a mother who doesn't work outside, but only inside of the house, and is forced to do household cleaning with her as she hears her friends playing outside in the street. Author Julia Alvarez uses imagery, simile, and alliteration to portray the meaning of the poem that women work harder than men. The speaker depicts and criticizes her mother's active domestic role but admits it has influenced her becoming a "woman working at home" herself.

The daughter, the protagonist and the speaker of the poem, starts with a rhetoric question: "Who says a woman's work isn't high art?" This was probably one of her mother's favorite phrases while the latter performed her domestic chores:

*Who says a woman's work isn't high art?
She'd challenge as she scrubbed the bathroom tiles.
Keep house as if the address were your heart.*

The last line of the first stanza addresses the speaker's father or talks about the whole family, whose hearts embody the address of the house her mother cared for so much (emphasizing that the mother's care and love was embodied in the housekeeping chores).

The speaker's mother was most probably not employed, and focused all her attention to keeping a perfect house. The daughter was engaged in doing woman's work from an early age: she was frustrated to hear her friends play outside while she was obliged to clean the house:

*We'd clean the whole upstairs before we'd start
downstairs, I'd sigh, hearing my friends outside.*

Her mother calls a woman's work "high art", the author calls it "hard". Concentrating merely on domestic chores made the speaker unhappy and, becoming a grown-up, she complains about her mother's strictness and obsession with keeping the house clean:

*Doing her woman's work was a hard art
to practice when the summer sun would bar
the floor I swept till she was satisfied.
She kept me prisoner in her housebound heart.*

Despite disliking the routine of the housekeeping, the speaker admits her mother was an artful housewife:

*She'd shine the tines of forks, the wheels of carts,
cut lacy lattices for all her pies.
Her woman's work was nothing less than art.*

The speaker also admits that because of her wit, she was considered her mother's masterpiece. She felt her mother's love and care through all kinds of attention and her mother instructed her to keep the house better than her personal life:

*And I, her masterpiece since I was smart,
was primed, praised, polished, scolded and advised
to keep a house much better than my heart.*

Eventually, the daughter, tired of constant dutiful housekeeping ("I did not want to be her counterpart!"), "stroke out" but ended up working at home, writing, creating poems and loving her housebound creative work:

*I did not want to be her counterpart!
I struck out... but became my mother's child:
a woman working at home on her art,
housekeeping paper as if it were her heart.*

Julia Alvarez is very good at literary images: the reader's imagination immediately begins to draw pictures of a housewife who cares a great deal about keeping a perfect house. To depict the

artful but hard work her mother used to perform, the author uses the powerful descriptions: “*she scrubbed the bathroom tiles*”; “*she'd shine the tines of forks, the wheels of carts, cut lacy lattices for all her pies*”. From these descriptions the reader gets the notion of a scrupulous woman who cared for every inch of her house and meant it to be clean.

The author also addresses the theme of heart which stands for the symbol of love and relationships: in the first stanza the heart (the father's or her own) of the family is compared to the house her mother cared about, the following allusion talks about the speaker's private life, feelings and relationships; and the denouement talks about writing (housekeeping papers) as the poet's greatest love.

Poem

by Pratiba Nandakumar

Pratibha Nandakumar (25 January 1955) is an Indian poet, journalist, feminist, columnist and activist who works in [Kannada](#) and [English](#).^{[1][2]} She is considered as one of the pioneers of modern woman's poetry in Kannada literature.^[3] For her work *Kavadeyaata*, Praribha was awarded the [Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award for Poetry](#) in 1998.

When I was grouping for new poem
for the poetry festival,
poems danced all over the house:
in nooks and corners, in bed,
in boxes, in walls and curtains,
in windows and doors
poems beckoned with their hands.
They simmered on the stove
in the rasam pot, got flattened
under the rolling pins
on the chapati stone
and diced on the knife-stand
they boiled in the cooker
with salt and spices,
sautéed, smelling fragrant.

In the hall they were lying about begging to be picked up.
If I swept them, they asked to be
mopped; if I mopped them,
they wanted to be dressed,
stubborn pests, thorns
in my flesh.
Curtains where little hands
had wiped themselves,
torn books, sandal dropped,
chairs and tables pulled here and there,

cloths strewn on the floor
took on the shapes of poems
and dazzled my eyes.

When I cleared the mess
and sat down to rest,
one of them pestered me
asking me now to wash it,
now to give it a drink,
now to come play with it.

When at last I sat down to write
not one letter got written
and my brain was in a fog.
Late at night, when a sleepy hand
groped and hugged me
'to hell with the poem' I said
and fell asleep.
But it tickled me in a dream,
made me laugh and charmed me.

When I read that
in the poetry festival,
it ran out, refused to come back,
went inside the listeners and sat there.

I let it sit there
and returned home alone.

(Translated from the original Kannada into English by A K Ramanujan)

UNIT- II

Simone De Beauvoir- Introduction to The Second Sex

Simone Lucie Ernestine Marie Bertrand de Beauvoir (9 January 1908 – 14 April 1986) was a French writer, intellectual, existentialist philosopher, political activist, feminist and social theorist. She had a significant influence on both feminist existentialism and feminist theory.^[5]

Beauvoir wrote novels, essays, biographies, autobiography and monographs on philosophy, politics, and social issues. She was known for her 1949 treatise *The Second Sex*, a detailed analysis of women's oppression and a foundational tract of contemporary feminism; and for her novels, including *She Came to Stay* and *The Mandarins*.

The Second Sex presents Simone de Beauvoir's historical account of women's disadvantaged position in society. The text explains current theories that de Beauvoir disputes, summarizes her account of women's place in history, and provides alternatives for how women should be treated. The work contains two volumes: one on "Facts and Myths" that de Beauvoir attempts to

deconstruct, and the second on “Lived Experience,” in which she explains her own take on how women actually experience sexism day to day.

Within the first volume, de Beauvoir first focuses on biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism as three different, flawed theories for explaining the female condition. She explains that none of these theories fully explain every aspect of a woman’s situation. Biology cannot account for the ways in which society conditions people to treat one another. Psychoanalysis ignores the question of why people are driven by certain motivations to begin with. And historical materialism is too fixated on economic theories to recognize how sexuality and other factors play into men’s treatment of women, as well. This first part allows de Beauvoir to establish what kinds of explanations she will be working against when she provides her own theories in the following sections.

de Beauvoir then uses the second section of this volume to describe a history of women’s treatment in society. She begins by tracing the ways in which primitive societies already mistreated women and regarded them as inferior to men. She then explains how the advent of private property pushed men to institutionalize their oppression of women, who became regarded as property as well. de Beauvoir then acknowledges that religion also shaped men’s treatment of women by giving them moral excuses to limit women. In her fifth chapter, she considers more recent periods in which women’s situation in society was slightly improved by the granting of greater rights. However, she concludes by pointing out that traditional systems of oppression continue to this day in the spheres of reproduction, sexuality, and labor.

In the last part of this first volume, de Beauvoir discusses the ways in which women are depicted in myths and understood in literary texts. She begins by broadly summarizing how women used to be thought of as idols who represented nature and motherhood. However, she notes that even in this adulation women were feared and objectified by men. In her second chapter, she analyzes the work of several authors and philosophers who mythologized women in different, negative ways. She ends this part by considering how these myths and literary representations affect women in their day-to-day lives.

In her second volume, in which she considers women’s lived experiences, de Beauvoir summarizes a woman’s formative years, her different roles in society, the ways in which different women react to their positions, and how the modern woman is beginning to reclaim a certain kind of independence. Her section on a woman’s formative years summarizes how a girl passes through childhood, into girlhood, and through sexual initiation in ways that are more traumatic and limiting than a male’s experience of these phases. de Beauvoir also, more problematically, considers homosexuality as a phenomenon affecting women who reject the masculine sphere.

The second part of the second volume is the longest section of the book and summarizes the many different roles a woman can play in society. It is in this section that de Beauvoir presents her main ideas: women are limited in every role they can play in society, and are thus forced to adopt certain traits and coping mechanisms that have made them even more inferior in society. Because woman cannot be productive or creative, she gives herself up completely to serving men and children. As a result, however, most women are left miserable, unfulfilled, and temperamental. This leads de Beauvoir into the third part of this volume, in which she discusses how different women react to this situation either by becoming obsessed with themselves, giving themselves up completely to their lovers, or devoting themselves to mysticism.

Finally, de Beauvoir concludes her text by arguing that genuine equality between the sexes has not yet been achieved in her society, but would be beneficial for both genders. She describes how the independent woman of her day still faces greater challenges than men do because traditional values regarding marriage, reproduction, and femininity continue into her day. However, she also ends on the more optimistic note that if women are given equal opportunities, they can achieve just as much as men can.

Introduction- Summary

The Second Sex opens with the question, "What is a woman?" and defines a problem especially "irritating" to its female author. It is not simply a matter that man has always been the One, but that woman, as the Other, has always been complicit in this hierarchical ranking. *The Second Sex* examines how women's reality has been constituted and what the consequences of women as Other are from the man's point of view and from the woman's.

First and foremost, the reader is reminded that the binarism—man/woman—is oppositional as a linguistic convenience only. *Alterity*, the relation of male to female, provides for difference in specifically individual terms, and yet it is this very individuality that is denied to the woman. Man, as subject, is an individual, but for women, difference from men is biological fact—only beginning with anatomy, the bedrock of a collective identity. Woman is a sexual object, a reproductive body, while man, as subject, is anything he declares himself to be, everything within the range of his ambition and imagination.

In search of answers—or at the very least the right questions—the balance of the introduction explores questions of alterity with respect to historical situations of dominance and subordination. Whether it is the situation of "American blacks" (her term in 1949) or Jews, Beauvoir observes that alterity gives way to relativity. That is, the oppressed group finds its particular identity in its recognition of radical difference rather than in the binarism implied by anti-Semitic or anti-Black prejudice. Moreover, Jews and blacks—or for that matter, minority groups—each in their own communities, come to say *we*, thus assuming subjectivity. Those who refuse to be objectified value community identity as the one thing that sets them apart. The shift from oppressed Other—or object—to individualized self and subject, is constituted by assuming specific aspects of difference (belief, habits, skin color, and other physical differences, food preferences, goals, sympathies, etc.).

Beauvoir argues that for women, unlike minorities, alterity is a given, an absolute "because it falls outside ... of historical fact." Rather than a specific moment in the history of humanity, the division of the sexes is a biological given. Furthermore, women live dispersed among men, not in isolated communities. Biological need, sexual desire, and the wish for posterity have not liberated women socially. Like master and slave, man and woman are linked by an economic need in which the slave is not freed. For women, the link insures no disruption of protection and economic freedom. Woman is sometimes complicit in her Otherness because her dependence is comfortable, and she can derive satisfaction in that role. There would be little need for this book if this were the definitive answer.

Finally, the book attempts to answer these questions: how did it get this way? Why has the world always belonged to men? Only today this is beginning to change. Is it a good thing? Will it give rise to greater equality?

Beauvoir defines *alterity* as "the fundamental category of human thought." She cites German philosopher Hegel, who said, "a fundamental hostility to any other consciousness is found

in consciousness itself." Hegel goes on to claim that the subject positions itself in opposition, and asserts itself as essential, while the object (the Other) is non-essential. What he can know is essential; what he cannot fathom is inessential.

For the Other, the woman, in contrast to the man's oppositional hostility, the matter of alterity is one of relativity and reciprocity in relation. That is, the woman has configured her world differently from the man. The moment people think socially, an opposition in cognitive processes between men and women begins to take shape. This opens the key question: Why do women submit to male sovereignty, to themselves as Other, defined in alterity—when, in fact, they know better?

Beauvoir argues that historically, men sought to make "the fact of their supremacy a right," creating laws they turned into principles. Simone de Beauvoir's short list of history's sympathizers includes Christian theologian Saint Augustine, who concedes that the unmarried woman is perfectly adept at managing her personal affairs; French philosopher Denis Diderot, who sees man and woman as human beings; and English philosopher John Stuart Mill, whose ardent defense of women is a matter of record. Beauvoir also observes that for men, fear of competition, threats to morality, economic competition, and concerns over their own virility perpetuate the oppositions. In sum, change can only occur when vague notions of inferiority, superiority, and equality are abandoned. "There is no public good other than one that assures the citizens' private good," she concludes. Women's struggle is between the fundamental claim of every subject to posit herself as essential, while the demands of her culture deem her inessential. Individual possibility—different from individual happiness—is the measure of freedom.