

Explication of "Memories of West Street and Lepke" by Robert Lowell

CONFESSIONAL MODE

The "I" in Lowell's poem, "Memories of West Street and Lepke," is a speaker who is self-critical and self-deprecating. Instead of *living* in a house, he "hog(s) a whole house" which is on a street that possesses an identity and power—it is not just any street, it is Boston's *Marlborough Street*. Although he obviously lives in an exclusive area, the speaker undercuts the desirability of living there by saying it's "hardly passionate." There is a sense almost of decadence from his description of the scavenger who raids the "filth in the back-alley trash cans." This man is hardly to be pitied since he and his family appear to have the comfortable lifestyle of an average income family. So, within the first few lines, we see a man who seems to feel guilt for a privileged way of life.

By the end of stanza 1, we learn that the speaker is experiencing middle-age panic, and its accompanying concerns about age and loss of youth. He remarks of his nine-month old daughter that she is young enough to be his granddaughter. Phrasing the comment in this manner shows a concern of having lost that time in his life he should have been a father. Also, the baby is mentioned, not in a proud and fatherly way, but in a way that reflects a kind of shamefulness. Further, he says she rises "like the sun" in her "flame-flamingo infants' wear." There are at least two images evoked by this line. One of the images is regarding the "flame-flamingo infants' wear." Most babies wear "baby clothes." "Infants' wear" is an almost cynical phrase. It is a formal title given to the section in a store that sells baby clothes. Like the neighborhood he lives in, his daughter is above wearing mere "baby clothes." The same analysis applies to the color the baby wears. The name "flame-flamingo" sounds like a marketing gimmick akin to signature clothes. Also, babies usually wear soft, pastel colors. The bold, bright color this child wears shows that her clothing is special. Her mother certainly doesn't shop in a common department store, rather, expensive boutiques. The comment, then, about the baby's clothes, continues the image of snobbery created so far. A second image becomes clearer after reading stanza 2.

The second stanza accentuates the age theme. Here we learn the speaker is forty. This information recalls the comment made in stanza 1 that the baby rises "like the sun." The image of her rising is in direct contrast to someone 40 who is at the midpoint of his life; thus, whose sun is descending. Asking whether he should regret his "seedtime" makes clear the source of his self-examination: his reproduction years, his youth. In other words, did he waste those fertile years? This illuminates the comment of having a daughter "young enough" to be his granddaughter. Note, too, that he didn't say he was "old enough" to be her grandfather, but that she was "young enough" etc. The method seems a Freudian avoidance or denial of age by reversing the image to "young" by not saying "old enough."

But, the speaker doesn't seem to be just asking about the way he spent his fertile years, but he questions whether his youth was squandered. He begins to recall an incident from his past in stanza 2. Curiously, of the approximately twenty years of his reproductive life now spent, he reflects on just one year. In some way, this year must have a special convergence with his present life. When recounting who he was then, he uses the same self-deprecating tone he used before. He was a "fire-breathing Catholic C.O." He made his "manic statement, *telling off* the state and president." Instead of his actions providing a change or having some kind of positive effect, he merely spends a year in jail. His efforts were unproductive because his feelings and actions were excessive and fanatical. His beliefs weren't the result of strong conviction, rather precipitated by something beyond his control. He tells us that he "was so out of things, [he] never heard/of the Jehovah's Witnesses." The phrase "so out of things" provides a clue that his mind may not have been stable then, which was responsible for his mania and "fire-breathing" Catholicism. When the fire went out of his Catholicism and the mania subsided, what convictions was he left with then?

The comment, "yammer[ing] metaphysics with Abramowitz," indicates he was searching to explain existence then, just as he is now. He appears to feel no closer to answers now than he was then. He questions now, "What's to be in the future? Will it be more of the same?" If his seedtime wasn't productive, can he expect his declining years to be any better? The memory of the lobotomized Lepke, the Czar of "Murder Incorporated," now looms over him.

Lepke's image, at this point in the speaker's life, takes on new meaning. At the time the speaker met Lepke, the speaker's future, no doubt, appeared rosier than Lepke's. After all, Lepke was on his way to the electric chair. The speaker was young then with his life ahead of him. Lepke had nothing but death ahead of him. Worse yet, there was a specific time, place, and method. Lepke's lobotomy, though, allowed him to live his remaining days calm and placid, without the ability to look back on his life and make painful appraisals. The description of Lepke makes this clear. He "drift[s] in a sheepish calm" and "dawdl[es] off to his little segregated cell full/of things forbidden the common man." Now the memory evokes an envious quality about Lepke's fate that he couldn't see then: that Lepke is incapable of "agonizing" over painful reappraisals. "The electric chair---/hang[s] like an oasis in his air/of lost connections. . . ." It's the uncertainty of the future and the unstable past which makes the speaker uneasy. We learn now how this particular part of his past converges with his present.

By the end of the poem, the speaker has exposed the most painful part of his inner self to the reader. Questioning the value of one's life is a serious and intensely personal matter. It confirms our assessment earlier of his sincerity. He presents himself to the reader in all his "un"glory, in candor and honesty. Many other clues in this poem lie yet unexplicated in this paper. But, I hope to show, at least, the predominate sentiments, revealing enough examples to substantiate my view.

There's no doubt that this poem is confessional, and the voice of the speaker is the voice of the poet. Even without the biographical information available to confirm this, a close reading will reveal it. Lowell writes the poem in a free form, conversational style, using simple and clear language without symbolism. The specific dates and places Lowell includes in the poem leaves little room to doubt that he's talking about his own life. The self-deprecating "I" in this poem is the "I" of the public Lowell.