

The Imagery of Coldness in *The Mother Of Us All*

The Mother Of Us All is a dramatic collection of fictional and non-fictional characters from different periods of the American history written by Gertrude Stein. Significant historical figures like Susan B. Anthony, Anna Howard Shaw, Daniel Webster, John Adams, and Ulysses S. Grant all show up in the play. The play attempts to portray the struggles of women's suffrage in the early nineteenth century. Particularly, women strive for their independence against the patriarchal society. Throughout the play, the images of "sickness" on Susan B. Anthony are repeated. Like the Madwoman in the attic in *Jane Eyre*, feminists would question whether Bertha is really crazy. In fact, madwomen and sick women are supposedly to be a sign of the emancipation of feminist ideas.

The first impression we have about Susan B. Anthony is best described by Angel More who says, "Susan B. is cold in wet weather" (1.2.788). Her line gives a rundown of Susan B. Anthony fighting alone for women's suffrage in a wet weather, where nobody would shelter her or give her a hand to support her; she was left alone fighting and struggling. Under a patriarchal authority, Susan B. Anthony (the social reformer) finds difficulties in making men to listen to her. The following dialogue between Daniel Webster and Susan B. Anthony indicates that Daniel Webster brings up "sleep" as a metaphor to show that he wants to keep his eyes and ears shut to ignore Susan B. Anthony's speech.

DANIEL WEBSTER: The honorable member complained that I had slept on his speech.

SUSAN B. ANTHONY: The right to sleep is given to no woman.

DANIEL WEBSTER: I did sleep on the gentlemen's speech; and slept soundly.
SUSAN B. ANTHONY: I too have slept soundly when I have slept, yes when
I have slept I too have slept soundly. (1.3.789)¹

Daniel Webster says in an oratorical language implying that he completely ignores what comes from the honorable member's (Susan B. Anthony) mouth. However, Susan B. is not feeble; she rebuts by stating that even if men do not want to listen to women, women can also sleep soundly, that is, to share the equal rights with men. On the other hand, to sleep soundly may also imply that Susan B. Anthony is currently taking a lot of rest because she is sick and tired of fighting and arguing against men.

Then Susan B. Anthony declares her position against the authoritative men, saying, "I have declared that patience is never more than patient. I too have declared, that I who am not patient am patient" (1.3.789). She makes herself clear that she is not mentally ill. A second interpretation to this phrase is that Susan B. Anthony is not going to be patient anymore. In other words, women no longer need to stay home and do their house chores; they should get their right to control property and wages, to coeducation, and to vote. She will "fight for the right, be a martyr and live" (1.3.789).

Throughout Act two scene one, cold and winter are repeated three times between the dialogue between Andrew Johnson and Henrietta M.

ANDREW J: It is cold weather.
HENRIETTA M: In winter. (2.1.790-791)

These lines remind the audience that Susan B. Anthony is still struggling through the cold weather. The cold weather and winter is a metaphor of Susan B. Anthony's

¹ All quotations from this play are from the text reprinted in Sylvan Barnet et al., Types of Drama, 8th ed. (New York: Longman, 2001). Further references to the play will be given parenthetically, within the text of the essay.

hardship on fighting for women's suffrage. Susan B. finally feels so tired that she questioned:

SUSAN B: I do not know whether I am asleep or awake, awake or asleep, asleep or awake. Do I know.

JO THE LOITERER: I know, you are awake Susan B.

(A snowy landscape. A Negro man and a negro woman.)

SUSAN B: Negro man would you vote if you only can and not she.

NEGRO MAN: You bet.

SUSAN B: *(moving down in the snow)*. If I believe that I am right and I am right if they believe that they are right and they are not in the right, might, might, might there be what might be.

NEGRO MAN AND WOMAN: *(following her)*. All right Susan B. all right.

SUSAN B: How then can we entertain a hope that they will act differently, we may pretend to go in good faith but there will be no faith in us.

(2.3.792)

Again, in a cold snowy weather, Susan B. is experiencing hesitations toward her feminist movement because she often speaks "to those below who are not there who are not there" (2.4. 794). Although black men got their voting rights before women, Susan B. starts to feel pretty puzzled as she moves down in the snow. The snow represents the external pressure by the society and her internal stress. She is so stressed out that she does not even know whether she is asleep or awake, sick or healthy. Susan B. says, "there is always a clause, there is always a pause, they won't vote my laws" (2.7.796). She finds herself even weaker, powerless, and could not see hope for women's future. In a more convincing matter, the play indicates the helplessness of Susan B. Anthony in the following:

SUSAN B: Very well is it snowing.

CHORUS: Not just now.

SUSAN B: It is cold.

CHORUS: A little.

SUSAN B: I am not well.

(2.6.796)

The image of weakness and sickness of Susan B. Anthony becomes more obvious. In the last scene of the play, Henry B. questions, "Does it really mean that women are as

white and cold as marble does it really mean that” (2.8.798). The color white signals the paleness of Susan B’s face where white and coldness are indicators of the state of poor health of Susan B.

In fact, the signs of white, cold, and snow are not the only indication of illness. These signs of illness have brought the play another meaning when the statue of Susan B. Anthony appears by the end:

(The Congressional Hall, the replica of the statue of Susan B. Anthony and her comrades in the suffrage fight.)

ANNA HOWARD: *(alone in front of the statuary)* The Vote. Women have the vote. They have it each and every one, it is glorious glorious glorious.

(2.8.798)

The meaning of “coldness” has altered when the statue appears in the play because the real reason for women to be cold is not a sign of weakness but rather an indication of power and strength. The statue of Susan B. Anthony implies that in order for women to gain power, they must look cold and military-like.

Although the play gives us a strong impression that cold refers to being sick throughout the play, nevertheless, it might turn out to be the opposite of what we think of the character. Susan B. Anthony is neither sick nor weak, but actually a courageous woman who was willing to stand up and speak for all women in the United States of America. Susan B. concludes that “we do not retrace our steps, all my long life, and here; here we are here, in marble and gold, did I say gold, yes I said gold, in marble and gold” (2.8.799). It is her coldness that makes her strong, that makes her white marble gold.

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