

Metal and Time in Robert Lowell's "The Drinker"

In Robert Lowell's "The Drinker," language surrounding time and metal is used throughout. The importance of the topic of time is demonstrated by the poem's structure, as it is bookended in the beginning lines of the first and last stanzas by references to "killing time." References to metal and other metallic objects are also found in half of the stanzas in the poem. Lowell is able to use these references to time passing, references to metal, and the effects of time on metal, to demonstrate the isolating and damaging effects of alcohol.

The poem's begins by introducing "The Drinker"-- "The man is killing time—there is nothing else." Time is isolated in this first line as the one thing that is still in existence. The next two stanzas describe items which also seemed to have died at the hands of the drinker. The "fifth of bourbon" has been discarded haphazardly in the river. The disposal, or murder of the bourbon bottle, is so extreme that even its cork, a normally buoyant material, has been "sucked under." The next victims of the drinker were the "before-breakfast" cigarettes. These have been "stubbed" indicating both that they have been literally put out, but also stubbed in that they have perhaps been arrested in their development. An ominous sort of violence is also communicated through the repetitive use of the letter "b" in the first two lines of the second stanza—"Stubbed before-breakfast cigarettes/burn bull's eyes on the bedside table." The forceful pronunciation of the "b" sound which occurs towards the front of the mouth indicates a sort of violence through

their quick and forceful sound. After damaging and destroying these inanimate objects the drinker has moved onto time, the intangible, because there is “nothing else” left to kill.

Though the man’s next sort of victim is “time,” time is proving to be a formidable competitor. In the sixth stanza time itself seems to have a motive to inspire violence against the drinker. The calendar, a mode for tracking time, holds a list of “indictments” against the man. The phone book has been “thumbed” through time and is now a weapon—“A quiver full of arrows.” Time has demonstrated it holds a list of wrongdoings the drinker has committed and has also demonstrated its power. As time passes and wear occurs from use, a sort of weapon is created. Although the man is said to be “killing time,” time itself seems to have motive and means to fight back.

The final stanza of the poem questions the reality that is laid out in the first stanza—“Is he killing time?” As the poem progresses and time demonstrates its power, the power of the man is questioned. Furthermore, time has protectors and enforcers who are described in the last stanza. While the man is isolated, time has “two cops” to ensure that individuals have not taken too much time or that they have been sure to pay for their time—“two cops on horseback clop through the April rain/to check the parking meter violations.” To violate your parking meter is to disregard your accountability to time. The power of time and the individuals time has to guard him prove to be strong and lead to a questioning of the drinker’s actual ability to “kill time.”

Throughout the poem the drinker is described as having metallic qualities. The man's despair has "the galvanized color/of the mop and water in the galvanized bucket". This is a despair that, like a metal, has been preserved in a way to prevent rust. In these two lines the strength of the "despair" is further emphasized by the repetition of the word "galvanized." In this way, his is a despair that is enduring and long lasting.

It is not only the drinker's emotional state that is similar to metal. His relation to the woman in the poem describes the man as a piece of metal—"Once she was close to him/As water to the dead metal." The simile in that second line is presented in such a way that it seems figurative language ends with "water" and reality begins with "the dead metal." Through the use of the word "the" in "the metal," the association seems to be more direct and literal. If the line had been presented as "As water to dead metal" or "As water to a dead metal" the comparison of the man to a piece of metal would have been communicated much more figuratively. Instead, it is almost as though he really is metal. Metal which is cold and lifeless and furthermore this metal is "dead."

The use of the adjective "dead" in relation to metal in the fifth stanza also brings to question what the relationship between the man and woman was. It is clear that they were spatially close-- "as water to the dead metal"—but what does this description say about their emotional relationship? Water can be almost an enemy to metal. Water can corrode, rust and even eat away metal. In this description though, the water's ability to have effect on the man is brought into question the word "dead." Can water have any effect on metal that has no life, and no capabilities? Furthermore, the repetitive use of

galvanized in the previous stanza leaves that association in the reader's mind as metallic comparisons are made again. Not only is the man a "dead metal" and perhaps unable to be effected, but also his being, like his despair, may be protected in such away as to reject outside forces.

The comparison of the man to metal and the woman to water continues in the seventh stanza. "Her absence hisses like steam,/the pipes sing.../even corroded metal somehow functions./He snores in his iron lung," In this stanza the reader is clearly aware that time has passed from when she was close to him and now she is absent. This is reinforced through the use of the comparison to steam which seems to follow the earlier comparison to water. At this point in the poem the woman has entered a new stage in being "water." As she has changed to steam she has become pressurized water and her absence hisses like steam as a result of this pressure.

In the seventh stanza the continuation of the comparison of the man to metal seems to answer the question posed by the description of the man as "dead metal" --could "dead metal" be affected by water or anything else? The reader is told "the pipes sing...even corroded metal somehow functions." In this way, the reader is informed that the man may have been affected by the "water" and may even be corroded, like the pipes, but, "even corroded metal somehow functions." The reader is given an example of how the man functions in the next line, "He snores in his iron lung." Although the man is functioning he is not simply sleeping, but instead is snoring which is caused by an obstruction—possibly some sort of corrosion. Additionally, snoring is indicative of

additional health problems and is not a symbol of health. The man, although he functions, has been corroded.

In the line “He snores in his iron lung” metallic language is again associated with the man. The use of the term “iron lung” references back to other points made previously in the poem. An iron lung assists an individual in breathing through changes in air pressure. This is further indication that the man, although having undergone damage like a corroded metal, he still “somehow functions.” At this point in the poem both the woman, as water, and the man, as metal, are associated in ways with pressure. The woman as steam is a pressurized water vapor and the man in his iron lung relies on changes in air pressure to force breathing. By the seventh stanza the man who was once dead metal and the woman who was once simply water are both now under pressure.

In “The Drinker,” without making explicit judgment statements and simply through descriptive language, Robert Lowell is able to acutely communicate to the reader the cold and isolating effects the use of alcohol can have on an individual. Through the set up of the struggle between the drinker and time, and the comparison of the drinker to metal, and the woman to water, Lowell shows the reader the cold, emptiness, and loss of productivity that occurs with alcohol use. The drinker is situated in the poem surrounded by the victims of his drinking; cigarettes, bourbon bottles, and alka seltzer tumblers. But the drinker becomes a victim himself as calendars and phone books become armed enemies and a persist hiss of the woman’s absence fills his room. It is the construction of

time as a powerful sort of being and the man as a sort of metal that drive the poem's emotional effect.