CLOSE READING ANALYSIS: “The Universe as Primal Scream”

In order to fully understand Tracy K. Smith’s apocalyptic poem, “The Universe as Primal Scream,” we must first acknowledge its basic narrative plot. As the poem’s title suggests, the narrative focuses on the screams of two young siblings. The screams of these children, however, are so disturbing that they peak the curiosity of the speaker, herself, and she begins to wonder at their immense, almost supernatural power. Finally, in the last stanza when the speaker completes her thoughts and reflections on this event, we again return to the image of screaming children, with “the kids upstairs still at it” (31). Thus, Smith creates a basic four-part shape to her poem, beginning with a specific incident (i.e. two children screaming in the first stanza), branching out to the relationship of the incident to a present observer (i.e. relating the event to humanity), and in the third stanza relating the effects of the incident to the entire universe, only to once again return, in the final stanza, to the original screams of the children. However, in addition to this narrative shape, Smith employs various other techniques such as, word choice and structure to expose the hidden philosophical and metaphysical complexities of an otherwise boring and rather ordinary episode.

In the first stanza, Smith not only gives us a sense of plot and setting, but also stays true to her apocalyptic theme in her subtle allusions to the phases of the universe. To clarify, where
the poem does indeed narrate the story of two screaming children and the insightful reflections of an observing speaker, it also, in a more indirect sense, refers to several end-of-the-world theories. Thus, the “primal screams” of the children are indicative of the first and final cosmic sounds of the universe. Taking into account this concept of apocalyptic allusion, Smith’s opening sentence, “5pm on the nose.” seems rather abrupt and unexpected (1). In the deliberate omission of the verb “to be,” which would have made a complete and more specific sentence, (i.e. “it was 5 pm on the nose,” “It is 5pm on the nose,” etc.) Smith achieves two purposes. First, this lack of an opening decreases the space between the first line and the title, allowing readers to immediately draw a connection between the title and narrative plot by providing a specific setting in which the universe becomes a “primal scream”. Secondly, the abruptness of the line, establishing setting before any other part of the story has even come into existence, speaks to the similarly abrupt and unforeseen birth of the universe. Then, of course, we hear the scream. Like babies being born, “they open their mouths / And it rolls out: high shrill and metallic.” (1-2).

The description of this ear-piercing sound, then, draws a parallel between the wails of a newborn and the loud cosmic boom or “primal scream” of the Big Bang. In addition, despite the poem’s free verse, we are able to hear the stressed syllables on the repeated “l” sounds (“rolls,” “shri,” “metallic”) which emphasize their preceding vowel sounds (“oh,” “ih,” “aah”). If these three vowels were to be drawn out, in an extremely loud voice, they might sound something like a scream.

In the next line, the screamers are identified, “First the boy, then his sister.” (3) Where this line adds clarity to the narrative in specifying a particular order, it also once again alludes to the concept of birth, or creation. Prior to this line, only time and sound existed. By introducing
the children, however, Smith also introduces humanity: “first the boy,” or first man (Adam), “then his sister,” then woman (Eve). In this way, Smith incorporates both Biblical and nonreligious creation theories. In the fourth line, the scream gives birth to a second concept—the cognitive self: “Occasionally, / They both let loose at once, and I think” (3-4). From the boy and girl, man and woman, descends “I,” the self-aware and consciously thinking, mature adult of the present, affirmed by use of the present tense (“I think”). Another aspect which separates the speaker from the children is her thought of first “putting on [her] shoes,” before she will “go up and see” the scene upstairs (5). This effort to dress herself properly before appearing in public may also refer to the Creation Story, (the necessity which descendants of Adam and Eve felt to clothe themselves) but overall, it undoubtedly promotes the idea of rationality and self-awareness, particularly among evolved humans. In fact, one might even note that the speaker’s position, at least mentally, has been elevated—“I think… / …to go up…” (4-5).

From this line, we observe a definite shift in the stanza. By use of the aforementioned cognitive self, Smith transitions from Biblical Creation allusions to a more scientific spectrum. The change from simple, narrative sentence structure, to longer, more complex sentences invoking a rational and logical thought process (“Whether…which must surely…”) also contribute to this shift (6-8). Even more evidence of the secular aspect of this second half may be seen in phrases such as “an experiment / Their parents have been conducting” (6-7). The idea of conducting an experiment places parents in the role of scientists, a concept even further emphasized by the reference to “the good crystal” which may even be a subtle allusion to beakers in a lab (8). Thus, within the brief nine lines of the first stanza, Smith has recreated the creation and evolution of man. Yet the inclusion of the last line makes the stanza somewhat
circular. That is, in suggesting that “the good crystal…must surely / Lie shattered to dust on the floor,” Smith recalls the familiar Genesis 3:19, “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (7-8). In this way, Smith communicates the ephemeral nature not only of life, but of all human existence. Therefore, the first stanza serves as a summary of the life of the universe, allowing Smith to discuss its death in even more depth.

The second stanza begins with humanity’s false sense of security. The sentence, “Maybe the mother is still proud / Of the four pink lungs she nursed / To such might.” directly asserts that man (or woman, in this case) has taken pride in and credit for what was originally God’s creation, and therefore, falsely considers himself (or herself) a powerful and mighty creator (10-12). However, the next few lines present a rather paradoxical situation, in that the woman’s pride (i.e. her children) will prove to be humanity’s ultimate downfall. Thus, the speaker’s religious voice returns: “Perhaps, if they hit / The magic decibel, the whole building will take off, and we’ll ride to glory like Elijah.” (12-15). Yet, the following line, “if this is it—if this is what / Their cries are cocked toward,” is almost suggestive of war. The phrase, “cocked toward” causes us to immediately envision images of guns or missiles aimed at an enemy target (15-16). The last two lines inform of us of the opposing sides of this war. That is, by directly juxtaposing scientific theory—“let the sky / Pass from blue, to red, to molten gold, / To black,” a reference to Doppler Effect of the Big Bang theory—with religious belief—“Let the heaven we inherit approach,” referring to our divine inheritance from God—Smith creates a vicious war scenario of opinionated differences (16-18).
The fourth stanza plays with this concept of opposing viewpoints even more so. In fact, the first four lines emulate the dialogue of argument by alternating between religious and secular predictions of the Apocalypse. For example “our dead in Old Testament robes,” is countered by “a door opening onto the roiling infinity of space,” or in simpler terms, a black hole (19-20). And again, “it will bend down to meet us like a father,” is answered with “or swallow us like a furnace,” underscoring the differences between the two beliefs (21-22). Nevertheless, the speaker volunteers to challenge this threatening unnamed force, “I’m ready / To meet what refuses to let us keep anything / For long.” (22-24) speaking, again, to the ephemeral nature of human life. Smith calls upon humanity to unite against “what teases us with blessings, / Bends us with grief” (24-25). Names such as the “Wizard, thief, the great / Wind,” describe the untrustworthy, unpredictable nature of humanity’s new opponent who rushes to “knock [their] mirrors to the floor,” and so eliminate their conscious and self-reflective minds. The image of broken glass even recalls the destructive image of the shattered crystal, seen earlier in the first stanza (25-26). The ending of this stanza, however, is unique in that it appears to be the only final line without an end stop. Rather, the last thought of the third stanza carries on into the first of the final stanza. In this way, the final word functions as a double entendre. Alone, the last line reads, “To sweep our short lives clean. How mean” (27). In this case, “mean” could quite possibly refer to the violent acts of the “wizard, thief, [or] the great wind”. However, when read with the beginning of the fourth stanza, the sentence becomes “How mean / Our racket seems beside it,” referring to how small we are in comparison to the great force described in stanza three (27-28).
Thus, the fourth and final stanza, similarly to the circular nature of the first, returns from the overwhelming image of the world-ending, universal force, to the initial concept of familiar human life. Smith lists mundane scenarios to acknowledge how soft the sounds of our own lives become against the loud screams of the universe. “[Her] stereo on shuffle / The neighbor chopping onions through a wall,” become just “a hiccough against what may never / Come for us” (28-31). Still, even though the speaker, and now the audience, is aware that the screams and cries and other noises of human lives are little or nothing in comparison to universal force, children will always be “upstairs still at it, / Screaming like the Dawn of Man,” just as man has screamed since he was first granted life (28-29). The final lines of the stanza, and the poem, leave the reader with an unsettling, even unsatisfying, foreshadowing. The suggestion that “something / They have no name for has begun to insist / Upon being born,” presents the rather daunting idea of inevitable, yet unpredictable death (32-34). Thus, Smith asserts that children will continue to scream upon being born, because like the universe itself, if they live, they must also die.

Lastly, the poem’s theme is supported by its overall structure. For example, as we read and our perspective widens from the small, subjective view of human existence, (i.e. children’s screams) so the poem physically widens as well. Stanza one, focusing on only a few people is the smallest, followed by stanza two, increasing in size as it acknowledges all humanity, succeeded by stanza three, again increasing through its description of universal forces, and finally closing with stanza four, once again decreasing in size as its subject matter refocuses on the human role. Also fascinating in this poem, is Smith’s repetitive use of the number four. There are four stanzas, with nine lines, (except for the last one with seven) each divided by a
transitional fifth line into equal, four-line halves. The number four, most likely alludes to the four horsemen of the apocalypse, presented in Revelation. Finally, the free, unrhymed verse of the poem emulates the unpredictable nature of the apocalypse. While we are aware of the structural pattern of the poem, there is no guiding rhythm to hint at what we should expect in the next line. Thus, the structure of the poem, itself, paints a picture of the subject it describes.

Clearly, Tracy K. Smith exhibits incredible skill in her ability to manipulate words. Through complex structure and specific word choices and arrangements, Smith expresses a philosophical concept grasped only by the careful reader. In this way, Smith invites her audience to use their imagination and think, taking on an active, participating role in her work. Thus, it is this very element of reader activity captured by Smith, which makes her poetry so effective.