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## It Don't Mean a Thing, If It Ain't Got That Swing

by Joey Weslo

(English 2224)

*Phoebe is an English student who consults her older brother Richard Roma (character from David Mamet's play, 'Glengarry Glen Ross', portrayed in the film adaptation by Al Pacino), in a deserted dive-bar, for help understanding post-Civil War American literature.*

*As more and more liquor enters his bloodstream, Richard delves into the worlds of American Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Realism, Naturalism, and Modernism. While discussing the literary themes of each movement, he directly or indirectly references:*

*Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself", Henry James' 'Daisy Miller', Charles Chesnutt's "The Wife of His Youth", Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters, T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", Marcel Duchamp's 'Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)', Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Pablo Picasso, Willa Cather, Claude McKay's "The Harlem Dancer", Zora Neale Hurston, William Faulkner's 'As I Lay Dying', Ernest Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro", Tennessee Williams' 'A Streetcar Named Desire', and David Mamet's 'Glengarry Glen Ross'.*

*Phoebe gets more than she bargained for, listening attentively in stupefied silence to her brother's unhinged, yet erudite philosophical rhetoric.)*

**Richard Roma:** All right Phoebe. Tell me something right now that isn't instantly forgettable.

You must compete against the silence. Every image, every word must battle the blank space dominating the paper. Can you hear *it*? An emptiness pervasive through your every thought. Insidiously creeping into your sentences, drowning your words, asphyxiating your every breath. Who are you? And why should I give a damn what you have to say? "Oh, do not ask 'What is it?'" (Eliot, "Prufrock"). You may guess; but *it* is bullshit. *It* is bullshit unless you give *it* a voice. What voice, whose voice? Is it my voice? It's certainly not your voice. Time is precariously precious; who decides what I give my time to? You must grasp a moment; you must take time and collapse it upon its own gravity. You must dare to "disturb the universe." (Eliot).

You are the embodiment of a narrative, and you have the teeming voices resounding in your consciousness. What is your story? Fragments of a star-laden consciousness strewn out across a night-sky. Each star burning, consuming itself with magnificent passion. Listen to all the singing voices. All these perspectives, smoldering to a cinder within your curious head. Take these voices and give them life. If you define their perspectives, you define their reality. If you define their reality, you define your own reality. All wisps of smoke within your gifted hands.

All right Phoebe. Take this American literature class and hold it up to the light. Shatter the metaphysics, examining piece by piece; American literature is nothing but perspective. We are not Europeans; we are not the indentured servants to a parochial tradition. We manifest our own destiny, and we must define our own reality. American literature is a celebration of this pioneering perspective. "I celebrate myself. And what I assume you shall assume. For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." (Whitman, "Song of Myself"). Whitman Is The Godfather! Every verdant adventure, every leaf of grass in American literature history, rising to tell his or her story, emanates from his poetic breath. Take a dash of European romanticism, and take a flourish of

pantheist philosophy from Baruch Spinoza. Listen to America's barbaric yawp resounding across the countryside. Pick up any book, from any subsequent time, and you can still hear Whitman's primal echo dancing across the pages.

What is this life? Is it mine for the taking? Am I promised the glories of heaven and all its fire? Or is my destiny nothing more than to decompose in matter and supply food for the worms? Food for thought. Their shit feeding the grass. The American Dream. Everywhere you walk reeks of their shit. Ashes upon hollowed out ashes. "Do I contradict myself? Very well then... I contradict myself; I am large... I contain multitudes." (Whitman). Don't draw your breath upon a lie. The American dream was always shattered. Fragments of glass and shards of light. Every shard reflecting a different perspective. You are not one fragment, and I am not another solitary fragment. The metaphysics are quite arbitrary. We consist of different fragments at different times. Our individual make-up perpetually evolving, forever changing with the mercurial gales of our imagination. The dream is not without, it is within. There's a tempest howling in your subconscious. Crack open your skull and I'll follow you through, "certain half-deserted streets, the muttering retreats" of your bellowing mind (Eliot).

The study of the mind becomes the narrative. Ever-changing in the ascertainment of the truth. Do not trust your narrators, always take your malaria pills, and never place your story in the hands of a man named Winterbourne (James, *Daisy Miller*). Can you feel the miasma wafting in the air? It never left us, and it never will. The undying stench of rotting ambiguity. Take your subconscious and hold it as a prism to the light. Marvel at the refracted colours. American writers do not inscribe in black and white. We write with the full spectrum of life. You must capture the spectrum of perspectives. Tease them, flirt with them, berate them, sing them, make them grow out of the very graves the world tries to isolate them in. Desolation is artificial. Everything is psycho-analytical. Do not look without, look within. What questions have been dropped on your plate? Where is the doubt, the insecurities, the psychotic nervous twitch? So you take a powerful, independent woman representing modernity, and you debase her. You trivialize her existence. You allow Byron's parochial fangs to sink into her flesh. We are all sucking the corpse dry. The blood has long run cold. You must give it new life.

Find the blood's racial impurities and make them shine. Rebel against the coagulation of our plantation past. Do not kill to preserve. Do not archive. Miscegenate your gaze. Dialects and colloquialism are not an attempt to capture realism; they are an attempt to give a voice to the voiceless. Do not be ashamed of our past, nor turn your back to its shadows. You do not stand in front of the sun, with your aching presence casting shadows behind your frame. The sacred light emanates from every direction, luminous all at once. You are the shadow. You are your own ball and chain. You are the wife of your own youth. Do not embellish. Do not romanticize. I see the pretentious mirage. "Their history presented enough romantic circumstances to rob their servile origin of its grosser aspects" (Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth"). Embrace the grosser aspects, beauty marks, dimples, warts and all. This is realism, this is life. We are subjugated by our past and confined within our minds. We hear emancipation knocking, but we refuse to answer the door. There is no escaping this celebration, this is our song.

Blades of grass, each crooning out their sentimental dirges. I ponder our lamentation. "The wrongs and sufferings of this past generation, and all of them still felt, in their darker moments, the shadow hanging over them." (Chesnutt). A solemn silence echoes in the mind. It stirs up a mournful resonance. But progress thunders on in a cry of ambitious momentum. We are on the way up; but who do we absorb? Who do we leave behind? Who do we cast astray to the destitute abandons of a cannibalistic society?

Social evolution combusts its inevitable linearity. We must follow the path of progression. Modernity, lead the righteous path forwards. Bolt after bolt, mechanize our society. Churn those factories. It all makes perfect sense. It's all a shimmering epiphany. It all works magnificently, until

suddenly it doesn't. We all see the light, until suddenly that light turns a noxious gaseous green. The echoes from the small towns, the footsteps from the graves of rural Ohio, all the efforts to humanize the forgotten, become forgotten. All become asphyxiated by modernity's sulfur. Lost on the battlefield. Complete destruction. Reinvent, redefine, nothing is worth saving. Where is your progression? Where is your modernist utopia? Your saviour has been slow to save you because he limps with trench-foot. Take off his helmet and boots. Strip him of his gun and uniform, and push his nude body down the staircase (Duchamp). Did you see it? Did you capture the motion? Kinetic epiphanies rupturing and bursting simultaneously. New perspectives blooming from the ashes. The past is a burning effigy and we dance in its light.

If you try to materialize the abstract, you facilitate its destruction. Forget the dream, "the dream was gone" (Fitzgerald, 'Winter Dreams'). If it is not new, it is not worth doing. Shatter a blackbird against the rising wall (Stevens). Place an eye here, a lip there, and an ear wherever it will fit. It is not the same object if you look at it in a different way. It is not the same story if you tell it from a different perspective. You think life has only one perspective? You think if I ask the question, only one voice will answer in return? The subliminal question slips into the fabric of our collective conscious. We live life traversing one image to the next. Our lives are broken down into symbols. Living by associated metaphor. "The apparition of these faces in the crowd. Petals on a wet, black bough" (Pound, 'Station of Metro'). It is more powerful to create one lasting image in the mind, than to create a bogged down narrative full of numerous descriptive details. The psyche of the reader becomes a partner to the writer. Working in tandem, symbiotically catalyzing scenes into motion. Temporarily freezing the chaotic mind. A snapshot of our subconscious.

We open the inner-eye, focusing on the outward gaze. This most important lesson I can teach you is this gaze is malleable. Its omnipresence dictates everything that follows. It drips all over the map. You take all of history and dump it on an islander's lap. He will take your solidified notions and caustically and methodically corrode them. Modernity must delegitimize the colonizer's gaze. Oppression has an inherent feebleness as fickle as who controls the pen. You can only stare through the peephole for so long before the object balanced in the light stares back at you (Willa Cather). "The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls, devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze. But looking at her falsely-smiling face, I knew her self was not in that strange place" (McKay, "Harlem Dancer"). You must recognize the offensive gaze, the pretentious perspective, and dismantle its insidious intent. Take all the dynamism of perspective, lay it supine, and let the momentum carry it horizontal rather than upwards. Stretch your arms outwards towards the tantalizing unknown.

Resist the temptations to study the fringes of society in an attempt to better understand yourself. Don't look without, look within. Inside the labyrinthine confines of your mind *lay* seething perspectives bounding with disparate desires and resounding voices. Take the traditional narrative as you took the blackbird, and shatter it against the wall. Give impetus and importance to every fragment, every voice. The story is a composite of their severed unity. What unites them, what divides them? What dream *lays* torn asunder, demanding you reassemble it? What vengeful deity has been dictating their every action (Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*)? What crucible has been imposing a maleficent shadow? A tree is not a tree, and a chicken is not a chicken. They are symbolic allusions mirroring the turmoil of our inner angst. You must tie the symbols together to form an existential narrative. You must balance the story somewhere between universal and colloquial. If it is not balanced, you risk losing the omniscience of perspective.

The rocking gyrations of the balance, stir the blood. You have vibrant cultures colliding and atrophic institutions emaciating to death. The laws of entropy bought a ticket on a roaring streetcar. Can you hear it thundering past, shattering traditions, with new life basking in its blue glow (Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*)? This district is where affluence goes to hang itself. New life blooms from the oppressed manacles of our dysfunctional society. Perspective maintains the power

to destroy these manacles. Take perspective, and again hold it up to the light. The refraction burning on the wall is identity. Identity becomes a question. Play with race, play with identity. Who gets to define race? Who gets to define identity? It is a tool of perspective to craft an identity from the ashes of turmoil. We become our transgressions, we become our mistakes, and we become our desires. “Now he would never write the things that he had saved to write until he knew enough to write them well” (Hemingway, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro”).

Identity and perspective are not entrenched in solidification; they are an exploration of discovery. Perspective manifests itself where our deepest questions lie. Search for the confusion, search for the questions. Find the “it” and swallow it whole. Engulf a stick of dynamite and watch your imagination explode. “Your head is a living forest full of songbirds.” (e. e. cummings) No, rather, I’d like to contradict myself. It is a roaring wildfire scorching the rural hillside leaving nothing but shadows of ash in its wake.

*(Phoebe Roma takes a moment to capture her breath. Mystified by her brother’s inebriated sway, she watches him fall silent and lean exhaustively back into an empty booth. Her head spinning as well, and not from the drink, she turns to leave the dive-bar with more questions than she began with.)*

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#### Works Cited

Baym, Nina. Ed. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Vols. C, D, and E. 11<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.