Anecdote of the Jar

POEM TEXT

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

SUMMARY

The speaker put a round jar on top of a hill in Tennessee, where, the speaker says, the jar caused the messy wilderness to grow all around the hill.

That wilderness grew toward the jar, sprawling all over the hill—yet now that wilderness was tame and domesticated. The round jar on the ground on top of the hill was tall and empty.

The jar became king of everything. It was gray and empty. The jar wasn't part of nature like the birds and plants nearby, unlike everything else in the state.

THEMES

HUMANITY VS. NATURE

"Anecdote of the Jar" explores the relationship between humanity and the natural world, and in particular humanity's desire to impose order and structure on its environment. By placing a human-made object (one literally designed to contain things, no less) in the middle of the sprawling "wilderness," the poem contrasts two very different creations—that is, this rigid object and the "slovenly" natural world that grows all around it.

The jar clearly seems out of place, but what exactly its presence means is up for debate—and depends a lot on how readers interpret the symbolism of the jar itself. Maybe the poem is a commentary on the suffocating rigidity of modern life (which tames the wilderness—perhaps itself representative of creativity and spontaneity), or maybe it's a critique of the human desire to conquer the earth and a takedown of industrialization. In the end, the poem raises enigmatic *questions* about the relationship between humanity and nature, rather than making bold statements about that relationship itself.

The set-up of the poem is straightforward: the speaker places a jar in the middle of rural Tennessee. A jar is a simple object that reflects the way that people seek to categorize, contain, and control the world around them. Jars are solid, human-made containers than can be used to preserve food, for example. Jars also may evoke images of factories and mass production, perhaps suggesting that the jar here is meant to symbolize the stifling convenience and structure of modern life. Above all, the jar seems to represent civilization, and serves as a sort of emissary of the human world.

Nature, meanwhile, seems "slovenly"—messy and careless—in comparison. That the speaker deems it "wilderness" emphasizes the contrast between the neat, orderly jar and untamed world that surrounds it.

The speaker then says the jar is a kind of king that takes hold ("dominion") of the world. The presence of human order, even in the humble figure of a jar, apparently imposes a sense of pattern and purpose on its surroundings, which notably rise *toward* the jar until the wild is "no longer wild" at all.

The jar, then, essentially infects nature, taming or domesticating its wilderness. This might reflect the way that human society literally dominates so much of its environment. Read differently, the "dominion" of the jar perhaps symbolizes the way that modern life stifles the kind of loose creativity represented by nature.

In either interpretation, the orderly human world butts up against the comparative freedom of nature. And at the same time, the fact that the jar is empty might suggest that humanity's supposed orderly dominion over nature is hollow, or a kind of illusion.

To that end, though humankind can invent, design, and make its own objects, the poem suggests that nature is still the ultimate creator. Note how the jar remains "bare" (not even fulfilling its main purpose to contain things!) and indifferent to "bird or bush," both of which are evidence of nature's capacity for creation. Humanity's inventions are useless without their creators (a jar can't fill itself), whereas nature's "bird and bush" flourish all on their own. This might reflect the way that modern life, with all its rigid rules and expectations, is itself hollow, in that it robs life of the kind of genuine creativity and

spontaneity seen in nature.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

PERSPECTIVE AND MEANING

Not much really happens in "Anecdote of the Jar": the speaker places a jar on a hill, and nature continues to grow around it. Yet the way the poem *describes* this event changes everything—nature doesn't just "surround" the jar, it is "made" to do so by the jar itself.

This, of course, doesn't make literal sense; a jar can't make anyone do anything! The poem, then, seems to be as much about the way in which the jar is *perceived* by a human observer as it is about the jar itself. The poem can thus be read as a meditation on the human instinct for narrative and meaning—the desire to create an "anecdote," to make sense of the world through stories and art.

Though it's easy to miss, an important shift occurs early on in the poem. After the speaker puts the jar on the hill, the jar becomes the star of the show. But because the poem has already introduced the first-person, it has also subtly insisted that the poem *does* have a limited, human perspective. That is, the reader doesn't necessarily have to take what happens at face value; they're just seeing how the human speaker *perceives* the scene at hand.

With that in mind, it's fair to question whether the jar really does anything at all. Looking at the facts, the jar sits inanimate on the hill and nature, as might be expected, keeps on doing its thing (i.e., it grows). Yet the poem presents the jar as a kind of king, establishing "dominion everywhere" over the natural environment. Perhaps this says more about the *speaker's desire* to make the jar seem meaningful, as though it's not enough—or is too nonsensical—for a jar to merely sit on top of a hill.

Here, then, readers should pause to consider the fact that the speaker actually performs *two* actions in the poem: placing the jar on the hill, and then telling an anecdote about the jar (the poem *is* that anecdote). Consider how different the poem would be if the first line was "A jar was placed in Tennessee," thus removing the human perspective. The poem *itself* thus represents meaning-making in motion, the speaker constructing an almost mythical epic out of a pretty inconsequential event.

Along these lines, this poem is often related to another famous jar poem—Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." But while Keats's poem aims for a profound contemplation of an artwork of the past, here the jar is only "gray and bare." While Keats's jar seems to almost take on a life of its own, the behavior of Stevens's jar seems wholly dependent on the *perspective of the human who is there to see it*.

Perhaps this reflects the way people tend to want to make sense of the world, to reach a logical understanding of why things are the way they are even if no such understanding exists. The jar thus speaks to the human desire for narrative, for creating a story ("anecdote") out of the external world (and, of course, creating a thematic narrative out of this enigmatic poem about an empty jar speaks to that same desire!). The poem, then, might ultimately be less about the jar and more about the human need to impose a *framework* on the "wilderness."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.

"Anecdote of the Jar" is a typical Wallace Stevens poem in that what *happens* within the poem is easy enough to figure out, but how to *interpret* things is much more ambiguous. In fact, much of Stevens's poetry questions this need for interpretation in the first place—asking where it comes from, what role it plays in the human mind, and what purpose the insistent desire for meaning serves.

For the most part, the poem's tone and diction are strikingly simple. The first word is the first-person pronoun—"I"—but, after this, the speaker makes no more self-references. The speaker places a jar on a hill in Tennessee, and so ends the speaker's active role in the poem! The jar is placed on a hill, and, of course, the jar is round.

So far nothing seems out of the ordinary, but there's already a lot to unpack here:

- A jar is a human-made object, whereas a hill is of course a natural environment.
- In one small gesture, then, the speaker creates a kind of tension between something artificial and something natural: jar vs. hill, civilization vs. nature.
- Perhaps the jar is a kind of challenge to the natural world, beckoning Mother Nature to prove her power by reclaiming the jar from its human-made status.
- Or maybe the jar represents the speaker's desire to impose human will upon the natural environment. In truth, it's too early in the poem to say—and arguably such questions can never be fully answered!

Note that the poem itself is a human-made object too, and

these opening lines use perfect iambic tetrameter (a meter with four iambs per line—four feet with an unstressed-stressed, da-DUM, beat pattern):

> I placed a jar in Tennessee,
> And round it was, upon a hill.

This is a very common meter, and gives the opening—for want of a better phrase—a very poem-like feel. Things already are very rigid and constructed.

The speaker's statement of the obvious—that the jar was round—and the somewhat awkward caesura in line 2 perhaps further signal that the poem is also about the human desire to make order and art out of the surrounding world.

Most people would just *assume* the jar was round, but it's as though the speaker needs to state this in order to do justice to the fact that this is *artistic* writing. The grammatical inversion of "round it was," rather than "it was round," is also almost self-consciously *literary*. Perhaps, then, it's fair to think of the speaker as performing *two* actions—the placement of the jar on the hill, and the action of telling the reader about it through the medium of poetry.

LINES 3-4

> *It made the slovenly wilderness*
> *Surround that hill.*

Soon enough, the poem halts its momentum with an end-stop at the end of line 2, creating a pause that separates the jar from the reaction of the natural world around it.

Gone is the "I" of line 1, and in its place is "it"—the jar itself. Though it's an inanimate object, the poem grants the jar a kind of life of its own. Somehow, its presence seems to bring a weird sense of order to the overgrown Tennessee "wilderness." In other words, nature doesn't reclaim the jar—the jar claims nature.

The jar's strange power is reflected in the poem's choice of vocabulary in line 3, as the speaker describes the natural landscape of Tennessee as a "slovenly wilderness." To be "slovenly" is to be untidy, dirty, and disorderly. The word here contains a kind of accusation, that marks nature out as something chaotic and random.

Similarly, nature here is a "wilderness"—a location characterized by being overgrown and lacking in the signs of so-called civilization. Nature is thus the opposite of a jar, which, though small, is a designed, crafted object with a specific purpose—to contain. Put this way, nature and the jar are in a kind of conflict, one seeking to expand, the other to contain.

The meter reflects this idea that the Tennessee is landscape is unkempt and disordered. These lines break the iambic tetrameter of the first two lines, creating the poetic equivalent of slovenliness (which works because the meter of the first two lines was so clear):

> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill.

The enjambment between lines 3 and 4 makes the sentence itself grow beyond the confines of the line length. The sibilance of "slovenly," "wilderness," and "surround" further suggests the overgrown natural environment, with that sinister hiss of the /s/ also implying a subtle disapproval. Line 4 feels abrupt compared to the longer three lines that came before it, and then ends with "hill"—an exact repetition of line 2's ending that feels intentionally awkward.

LINES 5-6

> *The wilderness rose up to it,*
> *And sprawled around, no longer wild.*

The second stanza restates what happens in lines 3 and 4, adding more detail. Again, the focus is on the effect of the jar on its surrounding environment. According to the speaker, the Tennessee "wilderness" no longer grows randomly, but with a purpose. It doesn't grow over the jar, but rises "up to it," as though the jar is some kind of ruler sitting atop their throne (which is exactly how the jar is described in line 9). Or, perhaps, the jar is like a supernatural force, summoning the power of the surrounding environment.

The jar has a civilizing effect on the "wilderness," making it "no longer wild." The polyptoton here—that repetition of "wilderness" and "wild"—emphasizes the shift in nature, the fact that its "slovenly" freedom has been brought to heel by the jar; nature is now not "wild," but tame.

The sonic effects used in these lines mirror the way that the jar effects nature. Note the heavy consonance of /l/, /r/, and /d/ sounds, as well as the long, drawn out assonance of "sprawled" and "longer":

> The wilderness rose up to it,
> And sprawled around, no longer wild.

Both lines also return to the iambic tetrameter used in lines 1 and 2 (which was briefly disrupted by the "slovenly" disorder of lines 3 and 4). This return to a steady meter suggests the way that the jar imposes order and structure onto the natural world.

The end-stop after "wild" signals that this is a significant change, and one which will hold true as long as the jar looms over the hillside.

Of course, it's worth reiterating that this is just how the "anecdote" of the jar is being told—it doesn't necessarily correspond with reality! The speaker sees the jar as this powerful figure, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it really is one.

It's fair to say, though, that the jar really does stick out prominently amid the Tennessee overgrowth. Everything else nearby is natural—grass, vines, trees, insects, birds—and yet here is this human-made object sitting above it all. The mere presence of the jar is a symbol of containment, and, for the speaker, this symbol appears to make sense of the surrounding wilderness, giving it a kind of narrative that wasn't previously there.

LINES 7-8

The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

In lines 7 and 8, the speaker concentrates on the shape and presence of the jar itself, rather than the "no longer wild" wilderness that surrounds it. The poem restates that the jar is round, which it has already said in line 2. The reader also already knows that the jar is "upon the ground," but the poem says that again anyway. Line 7, then, offers no new information to the reader, and must serve a different purpose.

There is no one, correct way of interpreting this recycling of information. The internal rhyme of "round" and "ground" (which also chime with "around" in line 6) feels a bit like a nursery rhyme. The line also asserts the "jar-ness" of the jar—the fact that it really is a simple, plain old jar. Arguably, the slightly comic effect of this line supports the idea that the poem is really about the speaker's perspective of the jar rather than the jar itself, and the human ability to perceive narrative in the meaning in the world that may not actually be there.

In line 8, the jar is also describes as "tall and of a port in air." The use of polysyndeton in these two lines makes this into a kind of list of the jar's characteristics, while maintaining the poem's iambic tetrameter. This concentration on the jar's physical form helps draw out the way its shape differs from the natural growth around it.

Indeed, the only truly remarkable thing about the jar is how different it is from the grass, trees, and shrubbery that surround it. If it's a sealed jar, of course, then the inside will remain empty, carving out a kind of negative space that heightens this contrast with the Tennessee "wilderness."

The enjambment between these two lines signals this contained empty space by creating its own little visual emptiness after line 7.

LINES 9-10

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.

While the first two stanzas have already placed the jar front and center in the poem, the jar is fully transformed into a powerful figure in line 9: "It took dominion everywhere." In other words, the jar becomes the king of this Tennessee hill ("dominion" means "authority over a kingdom").

The jar is dramatically personified, ramping up the agency that it has been granted since line 3 ("It made [...]"). It's important to remember, though, that the poem started with the first-person pronoun, "I." The transformation of the jar into a king is enabled by the speaker's perspective—indeed, it *depends* on that perspective. The jar *does* transform the landscape, but only in truth through the eyes of a human observer. The end-stop at the end of this line seems to heighten this tension between what the speaker says and whether the reader takes it to be true.

In fact—though line 9 makes a bold claim on the jar's behalf—line 10 reiterates that the jar really is nothing special. This isn't a special artifact like the urn in John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (to which this poem is sometimes compared). The jar doesn't have any artistic design or special purpose—it's just an empty jar, "gray and bare."

"Bare" is an interesting word-choice here, suggesting barrenness and the way that the jar sticks out as an inanimate object in a landscape otherwise flourishing with life. Another full stop at the end of line 10 creates more silence in the poem, portraying the jar as a kind of vacuum or negative space.

The rhyme between "everywhere" and "bare" in lines 9 and 10 feels unexpected given that the poem doesn't have a steady rhyme scheme. It echoes the sing-song feel of "round upon the ground" in line 10, heightening the poem's strangely surreal comedy. There is a tension between the real-world humbleness of the jar—its insignificance—and the bold claims made by the speaker on its behalf. The speaker seeks to find meaning in the jar—and, in turn, a poem—and some of the more obvious poetic effects, like this sudden loud rhyme, seem to speak to this instinct.

LINES 11-12

It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

The poem ends as perplexingly as it begins. Here, the speaker provides a clear contrast between the jar and the "wilderness" that surrounds it. While literally everything else in Tennessee seems to showcase nature's ability to grow and flourish, the jar "give[s]" neither "bird or bush."

This phrase is ambiguous, but might mean that the jar differs dramatically from its natural environment not just because of its visual effect, but because it cannot create in the same way that nature can. It can't grow anything, nor have any young. The alliteration between "bird" and "bush" suggests nature's ability to thrive in its creation of abundant life.

Thus while the jar has "dominion" over its surroundings in the way that it looks, it doesn't really have the power that nature does. In fact, the jar itself is arguably made redundant by the fact that it doesn't fulfil its intended purpose—to act as a container (because, as the speaker has pointed out multiple

times, the jar is empty).

That said, to the speaker, the jar still exerts a strong aesthetic power over the Tennessee wilderness. By being at the top of the hill, and by being inanimate and human-made in a natural environment, the jar draws sticks out—and, in the speaker's estimation, changes the whole landscape.

At the same time, the jar really captures only human attention, not nature's. While the speaker perceives nature as growing towards the jar, in reality, nature doesn't work that way—it's oblivious to the meaning (or lack of) that the jar holds for a human observer.

It's worth noting how the last line ends with the same word as the first: "Tennessee." In the poem, Tennessee and nature are pretty much interchangeable concepts. Indeed, "Tennessee" is just the name given by humans to an arbitrary division of the earth. But given that the poem associates Tennessee with its climate and geography—and how these create a flourishing natural world—its placement at the end of the poem undermines the sense of the jar's "dominion." Perhaps the jar can only change the way the landscape looks, rather than actually affect it.

Also note how the sibilance in "else" and "Tennessee" reasserts the /s/ sound found it lines 3 and 4 ("slovenly wilderness / Surround"), which was strongly associated with the way that, left to its own devices, nature expands.

SYMBOLS

THE JAR

The jar is clearly important to the poem, but critics have long debated what, if anything, the jar represents. Perhaps most broadly, it seems to represent humanity—or, more specifically, human civilization.

The jar asserts a kind of strength over the "Tennessee" wilderness, forcing it to be "no longer wild." On one level, then, that the jar might represent the way humanity tries to civilize and/or dominate the natural world—such as by cutting down forests to build cities, or using natural resources to create tools.

The jar may also evoke imagery related to factories, industrialization, and commodification. In this reading, the jar—a rigid, standardized object that tames the sprawling growth that surrounds it—may also represent the way that modern society zaps life of its spontaneity and freedom.

The fact that jars are used to contain things reflects this idea as well. This jar is empty, without any substance, meaning, or creative power of its own. While nature can grow and breed, the jar needs a human hand to fill it (and to make sense of its presence in the poem!). It's also deemed "a port in air" in line 8. A port is a transportation hub, here reflecting the idea that this jar is merely a vessel of sorts—something that people may fill, or may ascribe meaning to, but which, unlike nature, has no creative power in its own right.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 5
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-10
- Line 11

NATURE

Nature is, like the jar, a literal presence in the poem. At the same time, nature seems to take on some symbolic resonance. In one interpretation, nature in the poem can be thought of as representing creativity and creative inspiration—two things that, the poem implies, the jar (and, by extension, humanity) lacks.

Where the jar is solid and motionless, nature in the poem is "slovenly wilderness." The word "slovenly" basically means messy, while wilderness is the opposite of civilization—something untamed, sprawling, loose. If nature represents creativity, then the jar's "dominion" represents humanity's attempt to capture that creativity (such as through the writing of this poem).

Yet the speaker implies that by capturing creativity, humanity inevitably tames it too; the wilderness is "no longer wild" once it's under the jar's dominion. Genuine creative freedom, then, is perhaps incompatible with the orderly, rigid confines of modern life (represented here by the jar).

This idea gets echoed in the final stanza of the poem, when the speaker points out that the jar can't create the way nature does—that it does "not give of bird or bush." The natural world can grow and breed in a way that human-made objects cannot. Nature, then, might also be a source of creative inspiration that humanity requires in order to fill its empty jars. The jar is merely a "port"—a kind of transportation hub that creativity may pass through.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "upon a hill"
- **Lines 3-4:** "the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill."
- **Lines 5-6:** "The wilderness rose up to it, / And sprawled around, no longer wild. "
- **Line 7:** "upon the ground "
- **Line 8:** "a port in air."
- **Line 11:** "It did not give of bird or bush, "

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears only two times in "Anecdote of the Jar," and in both cases it suggests nature's abundance. The first example occurs across lines 3 and 4, and is part of the broader sibilance in this section of the poem:

> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill.

The /s/ sound here helps build a picture of the Tennessee wilderness as flourishing and overflowing, as full of natural life. This sibilance also suggests something slightly sinister in the repeated hiss of that /s/ sound.

The other example of alliteration comes in the penultimate line, which says that the jar:

> [...] did not give of bird or bush,
> Like nothing else in Tennessee.

The jar stands out in the Tennessee "wilderness" because it isn't part of nature—it isn't alive. The alliteration of "bird" and "bush" suggests nature's creative abundance, how the landscape that surrounds the jar is full of birds, insects, bushes, trees, and so on. The jar, by contrast, is an empty space devoid of life.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "slovenly"
- **Line 4:** "Surround"
- **Line 11:** "bird," "bush"

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears throughout "Anecdote of the Jar," often combining with consonance to create end rhymes and internal rhymes. These shared sounds make the poem feel constructed and, well, poetic—reminding readers that what they're looking at is something that's been *crafted* by a person (like the jar itself).

For example, note the shared /ow/ sounds of "around" in line 6 and "round upon the ground" in line 7. This sound itself is round, and its repetition subtly evokes the shape of the jar. This might remind the reader that the poem is in large part about aesthetic experience (that is, about the way things look or appear). The speaker's seeming obsession with the roundness of the jar is also a bit strange; all (or at least the vast majority of) jars are round, so it's odd that the speaker keeps returning to this seemingly mundane detail!

Line 6 also contains assonance of the /aw/ sound in "sprawled [...] longer," later picked up by "tall" in line 8. Again, this adds a sense of music and melody to the poem, the long vowel sound itself suggestive of that "sprawling" wilderness. (And again, consonance reinforces the sonic connection between these words).

The ends of lines 8, 9, and 10 are again both assonant and consonant, creating a string of three rhymes in a row—something unexpected in a power without a rhyme scheme, and which might suggest the speaker getting a bit carried away with crafting this poem. Finally, line 11 creates assonance with "It did not give," once again inserting some rhythm and melody into the poem—and, indeed, making it sound like a well-worn "anecdote."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "sprawled," "around," "longer"
- **Line 7:** "round," "ground"
- **Line 8:** "tall," "air"
- **Line 9:** "everywhere"
- **Line 10:** "bare"
- **Line 11:** "It did," "give"
- **Line 12:** "else," "Tennessee"

CAESURA

Caesura appears just twice in "Anecdote of the Jar." It's not a major feature of the poem, but it does have a noticeable effect. The first example is in line 2, in which the speaker describes placing a "jar in Tennessee":

> And round it was, upon a hill.

The caesura works with the somewhat awkward, formal grammatical inversion of "And round it was" (as opposed to "And it was round"). This creates a tension between the poem's tone, which is quite lofty and poetic at times, and the ordinariness of what actually happens (i.e., someone puts a jar on a hill). The caesura also helps slow the poem's momentum down before it has even begun.

Line 6's caesura achieves a similar effect, also slowing the pace of the poem:

> And sprawled around, no longer wild.

This line describes the jar's effect on the wilderness, which is apparently "no longer wild." The slowing down of the line indicates the taming of the natural environment.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "was, upon"
- **Line 6:** "around, no"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears throughout "Anecdote of the Jar." As previously noted in this guide, the poem's consonance often works alongside its assonance to make the poem feel constructed—like something crafted and shaped (like the jar itself) rather than something that sprang organically from the speaker's mind. Consonance also helps bring the poem's images to life.

The first six lines are dominated by one sound in particular—the sibilant /s/:

> I placed a jar in Tennessee,
> [...]
> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill.
> The wilderness rose up to it,
> And sprawled [...]

All those hissing /s/ sounds suggest the "slovenly" wildness of the natural world, which spills out all over the place. Sibilance can feel somewhat threatening too, and here perhaps adds a bit of menacing tension to the poem.

The poem uses other forms of consonance as well. For example, note the /l/ sounds in "slovenly wilderness" in line 3 and the /l/ and /r/ sounds in "sprawled around no longer wild" in line 6. This consonance creates a sense of abundance, as though the lines themselves are bursting with life (like leaves on a branch).

Another key example of consonance is in lines 9 and 10, which describe the jar and its effect on its surroundings:

> [...] everywhere.
> The jar was gray and bare.

The jar is portrayed as a kind of king of the landscape, but it's also just a plain old jar. The growling /r/ sound perhaps emphasizes how ordinary this jar is, drawing readers' attention to its drab color and emptiness.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "placed," "Tennessee"
- **Line 3:** "slovenly wilderness "
- **Line 4:** "Surround"
- **Line 5:** "wilderness"
- **Line 6:** "And sprawled around," "longer wild"
- **Line 7:** "jar," "round," "ground"
- **Line 8:** "tall," "port," "air"
- **Line 9:** "took," "everywhere"
- **Line 10:** "jar," "gray," "bare"
- **Line 11:** "bird," "bush"
- **Line 12:** "else," "Tennessee"

END-STOPPED LINE

"Anecdote of the Jar" is mostly end-stopped, creating a steady, controlled cadence throughout the poem. This sense of control reflects the rigidity of the jar itself; each end-stopped line feels self-contained and planned, rather than spontaneous or wild.

In the first stanza, every line apart from the third is end-stopped—and lines 2 and 4 ("And round it was [...]" and "Surround that hill") are in fact full stopped. There's something deliberately awkward and clumsy about these full stops, which prevent the poem from gaining any real rhythmic momentum.

Combined with the stiff, inverted phrasing of line 2 ("And round it was" rather than "And it was round") and the metrical disruption in lines 3 and 4 (which suddenly abandon the perfect iambic tetrameter of lines 1 and 2), the end-stopping here seems to gently mock the speaker's attempt to create meaning out of the presence of a jar on a hill. It's as though the speaker is trying to sound deep and poetic but can't quite get started.

There's another full stop at the end of line 6 ("And sprawled [...]"), after the word "wild." Here, the speaker describes how the jar exerts a hold over the surrounding natural environment, making it seem structured and organized. The full-stop makes this transformation seem dramatic and final. A similar effect is achieved by the end-stop after "air," seemingly stopping that air from flowing.

The final stanza is then entirely end-stopped. This is also the stanza where the speaker essentially deems the jar king of the world. The slow pace created by the end-stops give this stanza an atmosphere of stiff reverence, as though the jar is exerting its authority over the lines themselves. Of course, the stiffness here also reflects the fact that the jar is an inanimate object, while Tennessee flourishes with natural growth.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Tennessee, "
- **Line 2:** "hill."
- **Line 4:** "hill."
- **Line 5:** "it,"
- **Line 6:** "wild."
- **Line 8:** "air."
- **Line 9:** "everywhere."
- **Line 10:** "bare."
- **Line 11:** "bush, "
- **Line 12:** "Tennessee."

ENJAMBMENT

Because the poem is mostly end-stopped, the brief moments of enjambment are all the more striking. There are arguably two such moments in "Anecdote of the Jar," the first of which appears between lines 3 and 4:

> It made the slovenly wilderness

Surround that hill.

These lines introduce the jar's effect on the wilderness around the hill—or, at least, the effect that the speaker *perceives* the jar to have. The enjambment stretches the sentence across two lines, allowing it to grow to match the behavior of the wilderness.

The enjambment works with the disrupted meter in these lines (elsewhere, the poem generally conforms to iambic tetrameter) to suggest disorderliness and chaos, which contrasts with the sense of neatness and containment suggested by the jar.

The other arguable moment of enjambment example also extends a sentence over two lines:

The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

There is no punctuation at the end of line 7, pushing the reader to move across the line break without pause. That said, line 7 is also a complete sentence on its own—creating an awkward tension, as there's no indication to pause where the reader expects one. Some readers may interpret this line as end-stopped; either way, the speaker attempts to describe the way that the jar seems to retain its own space even as the wilderness grows around it. This space is conveyed by the empty space after "ground."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "wilderness / Surround"
- **Lines 7-8:** "ground / And"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is a major feature of the poem and says a lot about how the speaker views the jar. The jar is personified starting with line 3, when the jar "ma[k]e[s] the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill." A jar can't make anyone do anything, but here the speaker imbues it with agency and power over the surrounding landscape.

The wilderness itself is subtly personified here too, treated as a singular being that can follow orders—that can be "made" to "[s]urround that hill."

The strongest example of personification, however, comes in line 9:

It took dominion everywhere.

According to the speaker, the jar brings order to the surrounding wilderness, culminating in it taking "dominion everywhere." In other words, the jar becomes the king of the Tennessee wilderness, sitting atop its hill like a monarch on a throne.

Of course, this isn't literally true—but the jar does stick out among all that lush greenery. By being "[l]ike nothing else in Tennessee," the jar exerts a kind of visual power over its surroundings (in the speaker's mind, at least).

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "It made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill."
- **Line 9:** "It took dominion everywhere."

POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton appears once in "Anecdote of the Jar," in line 8. The speaker is again describing the jar on the hill, saying:

The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

Technically, that first "and" isn't entirely necessary (the speaker could have just put a comma after the word "ground"). Yet it is necessary to preserve the poem's meter (iambic tetrameter, or four da-DUMs).

Also recall that the reader already knows that the jar is "round" and on the "ground" at this point in the poem, yet the speaker feels the need to say so again.

Altogether, there is something deliberately, perhaps self-consciously, poetic going on here. This makes sense when considering that the poem is as much about the speaker's perspective as it is about the jar itself, meaning that the word-choice and rhythms offer a clue to how the speaker interprets the scene. The use of "and" makes these lines read like a list of the jar's characteristics, a list that in truth isn't all that long—in reality, it's just a plan old jar!

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "The jar was round upon the ground / And tall and of a port in air."

REPETITION

There are a few instances of repetition in the poem. The speaker repeats the word "jar" often, which makes sense given that the poem is called "Anecdote of the Jar." But it takes this repetition a step further, also reiterating twice that the jar is "round." Most jars are round, so it feels a bit odd that the speaker returns to this detail. Perhaps the speaker thinks there is something especially meaningful to or pleasant about the jar's shape, or maybe the speaker just doesn't have much more to say about this very mundane object and thus returns to the same adjective.

Another word the speaker repeats is "wilderness," which appears in lines 3 and 5:

It made the slovenly **wilderness**
[...]
The **wilderness** rose up to it,

This diacope treats the natural environment surrounding the jar as a kind of singular entity and also reasserts the presence of nature in the poem. The polyptoton that follows in line 6 with "no longer **wild**" then emphasizes the sudden shift that nature undergoes upon rising up towards the jar. It loses its wilderness, specifically, becoming tame or domesticated.

The speaker also repeats the word "hill" at the end of lines 2 and 4, creating a rather awkward identical rhyme that subtly draws attention to the poem as a constructed object (something written by someone), and also underscores that the "wilderness" now surrounds the *same* "hill" on which the jar sits.

Finally, the speaker repeats the state name "Tennessee" at the end of the poem's first and last lines. This creates a sense of circularity, of returning to the beginning of things at the end of the poem. The poem goes "round" and "round," reflecting the shape of the jar itself.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "jar," "Tennessee"
- **Line 2:** "round," "hill"
- **Line 3:** "wilderness"
- **Line 5:** "wilderness"
- **Line 6:** "wild"
- **Line 7:** "The jar," "round"
- **Line 10:** "The jar"
- **Line 12:** "Tennessee"

VOCABULARY

Slovenly (Line 3) - Disordered, untidy, and/or careless.

Wilderness (Line 3, Line 5) - A wild and uncultivated area of land.

Sprawled (Line 6) - Spread out over a large area.

Of a port (Line 8) - A port is a transportation hub, typically where harbor ships dock. A "port of air" suggests that the jar is in some way a kind of harbor in the air. This might be because it's empty (and thus air only air fills it).

Dominion (Line 9) - Control or power.

Give of (Line 11) - An ambiguous moment in the poem that probably means either "create" or "care for."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Anecdote of the Jar" has 12 lines split up into three quatrains. This steady, straightforward form feels disarmingly simple considering the ambiguous events the poem describes. That's part of the point: things here are all about perspective, and there may be more contained within these short lines than meets the eye.

The poem's title offers a clue for how to interpret what happens here. This is specifically an anecdote, a short, often amusing story usually told in a casual, conversational tone. Anecdotes are often used to illustrate a point about something, though what that point is here is up for debate.

Referring to the poem as a casual anecdote also comically contrasts this poem with more highbrow poetic forms like the ode (famously used in John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," a poem to which "Anecdote of the Jar" is often compared). The poem's form, then, is as slippery as its content. On the one hand, it pushes readers to ascribe deeper meaning to what happens, while at the same time presenting itself as something simple and straightforward.

METER

For the most part, "Anecdote of the Jar" uses iambic tetrameter. This means there are four iambs per line, or four poetic feet with an unstressed-**stressed**, da-**DUM**, syllable pattern. For example, here are lines 1 and 2:

I **placed** | a **jar** | in **Ten-** | nes**see**,
And **round** | it **was**, | u**pon** | a **hill**.

These lines feature perfect iambic tetrameter, which gives the poem a very poem-like feel, to put it simply—it *sounds like* poetry, like something carefully crafted by the speaker. The poem, like the jar, is a human-made object of sorts. There's something gently comic about this aspect of the poem too. The speaker here seems caught between the inconsequential act of placing a jar on the hill and the need to say something profound—or poetic—about it.

There are three lines in which the poem deviates from iambic tetrameter. Two of these variations come in lines 3 and 4:

It **made** | the **slov-** | enly **wil-** | der**ness**
Sur**round** | that **hill**.

It's also possible to scan "wilderness" as "**wil**derness"; either way, the poem clearly loses the rhythmic regularity that it established in lines 1 and 2. Here, the speaker describes the way that the wilderness surrounds the hill on which the jar sits, and the disruption in the poem's steady meter reflects the

disorderly chaos (as the speaker sees it) of the Tennessee landscape. In other words, the poem loses temporary control of its meter to signal the unpredictability of nature. The shortness of line 4 (which uses iambic dimeter, since there are just two iambs in this line) serves a similar purpose, abruptly bringing the stanza to an end.

The other variation occurs in line 10, which describes the jar:

> The jar | was gray | and bare.

This line is one foot short, meaning it's a line of iambic trimeter. This suggests the emptiness of the jar, contrasting its barren negative space with the flourishing natural life all around it.

RHYME SCHEME

"Anecdote of the Jar" doesn't have a steady rhyme scheme, but it does have some rhymes throughout. In line 7, for example, there's an internal rhyme between "round" and "ground." The rhyme sticks out in the poem, much like the jar sticks out in the Tennessee wilderness.

Towards the end of the poem, there's also a string of three end rhymes in a row in lines 8, 9, and 10—"air," "everywhere," and "bare." This sudden rush of rhyme builds up the poem's momentum, perhaps suggesting excitement on the part of the speaker as the end of the "anecdote" approaches.

SPEAKER

The poem doesn't give much away about its speaker—no name, age, gender, job, etc. There is, however, a distinct speaker in the poem, indicated by that "I" in line 1:

> I placed a jar in Tennessee,

Though the reader doesn't learn anything about this "I," the fact that there is an "I" in the first place is important. This means that this "anecdote" is being told from a *single person's perspective*. Think how different the poem would feel if it began simply, "There was a jar in Tennessee." The presence of that "I" means that the reader is getting one person's impression of events—something subjective, rather than an objective take on what happened with the jar.

The title has also already announced that this poem as anecdote, a brief story usually told in conversation. The speaker, then, casts a long shadow over what happens in the poem, even though the reader learns nothing definite about this individual. All readers know is that the speaker thinks the presence of the jar totally changed the natural landscape of Tennessee. The poem is, in part, about the human desire to impose order and meaning onto the world, and the speaker is perhaps doing just that.

SETTING

As its first and last lines make clear, the poem is set on a hill in rural Tennessee, a state in the southeastern U.S. The natural world here is unruly and flourishing, wild and unkempt as it grows all around "that hill." There's a definite contrast, then, between the empty, gray, and defined space of the jar and the flurry of growth and activity all around it.

The fact that the poem takes place in a specific state is interesting as well. The U.S. is the land of the "American Dream," a place traditionally defined by an ethos of hard work and innovation. The jar itself might evoke factories or industrialization, as well as the conveniences of modern life in the U.S.—things that, the poem subtly suggests, are at odds with the creativity and freedom of the natural world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wallace Stevens first published "Anecdote of the Jar" in 1919. The poem was later included in the poet's Stevens's first collection, *Harmonium*, which remains one of the most influential works in American poetry since its publication in 1923. Stevens is considered part of the Modernist tradition alongside figures like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, though, in truth, his work is distinctly original.

Harmonium contains other poems with "Anecdote" in the title, namely "Earthy Anecdote," "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand," and "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks," though this poem is by far the most well-known. Stevens uses "Anecdote" in its title as a kind of announcement of the poem's form. Generally speaking, an anecdote is a short story told in a conversational and casual way. They're often amusing and somewhat humorous, playing with the reader's expectation of poetry as something serious and high art. In fact, this kind of tension between the profound and the throwaway is a common thread in Stevens's poems, who famously wrote that "the poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully."

"Anecdote of the Jar" embodies this approach, puzzling critics ever since its publication. For some, the poem is a critique of humankind's lust for dominance over nature, while for others it represents the power of the imagination and the mind's capacity to perceive meaning and narrative in the world. Other poems in the same collection work with similar themes; check out "The Snow Man," "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

In its contemplation of an inanimate object, "Anecdote of the Jar" fits in with a long line of poetic tradition. However, the *choice* of object here—a humble jar—and the poem's subtle sense of humor create the impression that this is an ironic take

on that poetic form: *ekphrasis* (the literary response to an artwork).

Helen Vendler, one of the 20th century's foremost literary critics, suggests that the poem only makes sense as a parodic response to a poem by 19th-century British romantic poet John Keats—"Ode on a Grecian Urn." While Keats's jar—or urn—is decorated and seems to momentarily come alive, Stevens's jar is barren and gray, though it nevertheless exerts a cold and strange power over the landscape (according to the speaker).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem was written in the early 20th century, and the changing nature of manufacturing and labor form part of its atmosphere. Innovations by entrepreneurs like Henry Ford were changing the way that products were designed, put together, and taken to market. The perfect storm of violence and technological innovation that was WWI had also cast doubt on old Victorian notions of humankind's onward march of progress over the centuries. Generally speaking, the Modernist movement in literature—of which Stevens is a key poet—is viewed as a response to a world undergoing wide-reaching and rapid change.

Wallace Stevens also travelled frequently for work as an insurance company executive, and it is thought that he may have composed this poem on a trip to Tennessee in 1918. In a letter home to his wife, Stevens describes how the "Tennessee River makes a great bend through woods and cliffs and hills and on the horizon run the blue ranges of the Appalachian Mountains," a line that echoes the poem's focus on the "wilderness" of the state. He also notes a number of the trees he encountered (Tennessee has more species of trees than any other in America).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life and Work — A bountiful resource from the Poetry Foundation, including podcasts, essays, and more of Stevens's poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wallace-stevens)
- Critical Perspectives on the Poem — A selection of analyses, demonstrating the wide range of interpretations available to this ambiguous poem. (https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/anecdote-jar)
- Harmonium in Full — Check out the 1923 poetry collection in which "Anecdote of the Jar" appears. (http://wallacestevens.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/HARMONIUM-1923-WALLACE-STEVENS.pdf)
- "The Thrilling Mind of Wallace Stevens" — An interesting New Yorker article about Stevens's life and work. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/02/the-thrilling-mind-of-wallace-stevens)
- Harold Bloom on Stevens — Audio of a fascinating lecture on Stevens by Harold Bloom, one of the most influential literary critics of the 20th century. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUJXWgOOZOM)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALLACE STEVENS POEMS

- The Emperor of Ice-Cream
- Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

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