Close Reading Analysis Rough Draft: “The Universe as Primal Scream”

In “The Universe as Primal Scream,” Tracy K. Smith develops a scene where two children, a boy and a girl, let loose cries into the evening, sometimes in unison, sometimes out of sync. They appear to be in a town home or apartment complex, living above the speaker in close proximity to her. The children continue to scream, and the speaker considers going up to see what the cause or purpose is of their cries. These thoughts lead her to ponder possible explanations, which lead to grander, more spiritual and philosophical topics, such as passing into space and the heavens, what the nature of the heavens are, and why our lives are so short and meaningless and irrelevant. In the end of the poem, Smith brings the focus back to her physical surroundings, stopping to relate them to her former considerations. And then she remembers the children who are still screaming above her. She uses colorful and vivid language to provide images of space and the heavens, the shallow commotion of all life on earth, and Biblical ideas of heaven, hell, the prophets and God as several different figures. How does Smith draw the comparisons and conclusions that she does from hearing two children screaming? Has she experienced this occurrence before? Why does such a strange and childish incident spur on such ambitious investigation of life?

The first stanza begins with a specific time, “5pm on the nose” (1). This is a declaration of the setting and occasion. Smith is letting us know that she's speaking about a very precise and specific time period, and “they” open their mouths as if right on cue. We don't yet know if the speaker is referring to people or animals, or how many, because either could have mouths. This is significant because throughout the poem, the speaker begins to discuss the tensions between the two primary theories of the origin of mankind; evolution and Biblical creationism. The poem is also pervaded by a sense of
uncertainty and ambiguity, and by the end of the poem, the speaker doesn't appear to come to a definite conclusion about which theory she believes.

In the next line, we come upon the scream, although she doesn't quite yet mention what it is, we know that it “rolls out: high, shrill and metallic” (2). This combination of words is very interesting, because the beginning of the line, “And it rolls out,” makes it sound as if it's something fluid or gentle. The word “roll” has the connotation of something that turns upon an axis, revolves and repeatedly turns over and over and also has an association with the shape of a ball or cylinder. Because we know we are dealing with something “primal,” which could mean first or primary, as well as archaic, the first thing that comes to mind is the earth, or specifically the origin of the earth. But the second part of this line, “high, shrill and metallic,” is very reminiscent of machinery. So right from the beginning the speaker is drawing a contrast between the two sides of a single event. Does the earth roll out naturally, or was it designed like a machine? Smith uses very few periods in the entire poem, but she uses one here on the second line to give it a sense of finality and singularity, rather than having it roll right into the next line, as it does from the first to the second.

Then the speaker moves on to reveal who is doing the screaming. “First the boy, then his sister” (3). This image of a male, then a female, at the generation of the world, connects with the various other Biblical images that Smith uses throughout the poem. This is the Christian idea of Adam being created, then Eve. But at the end of the line we get a sense of disorder and a lack of unison when the speaker adds “Occasionally” (3), which leads into the next line where the speaker reveals that what we thought was a single scream is not actually in unison at all, although once in a while, the two siblings do “let loose at once” (4). In this line, for the first time the speaker refers to herself, saying, “and I think” (4). This phrase seems to be a reference to another theme that is prevalent throughout the poem. It is the idea of scientific reasoning, which has an observational, questioning, and rational component to the very core of its nature. The poem functions in four parts, where the speaker observes the occurrence of the children screaming, she creates in her mind several possible explanations for why they might be
screaming, and then responds to those hypotheses.

What does the speaker think? She thinks “of putting on my shoes to go up and see” (5). There are several images here that are very important to the idea of evolution and scientific observation. First of all, the fact that the speaker is going to put on her shoes shows not only that she has a rational mind, but also that she is fully human. This seems to refer to the idea of humans beginning to walk upright. The fact that she is going to put on her shoes shows that she has the ability to stand on two feet and use tools. This shows the “evolutionary shift” from primate to human. The speaker can think, walk and use tools, and can also observe analytically. She is going to go up and see what is going on. She wants to know the cause or purpose and will most likely develop a theory or conclusion based on what she beholds.

Using enjambment, as Smith does for the majority of the poem, the speaker's thought continues into the next phrase and extends the idea of scientific thought with, “whether it is merely an experiment” (6). This line again contrasts the idea of uncertainty and chaos with control and design. The first word, “whether,” reveals that the cause of the scream could be anything; the author doesn't know. She is only asking questions at this point. But the idea of an experiment has a double implication. Not only is it scientific, but it's also a test which is done under controlled conditions and usually done in order to demonstrate a known truth or examine the validity of a hypothesis. The experiment is both a reference to scientific deliberation as well as an allusion to a designer or some greater being who is controlling or guiding the creation of the world.

However, with this idea of an experiment, we get the first indication that the speaker considers something, whether life or death or some other aspect of being alive, to be cruel. We get a hint of this when she says “Their parents have been conducting” (7). At this point it sounds like the speaker thinks the parents are conducting an experiment on the children. My initial thought when I read this line was, “what kind of parents would experiment on their kids?” Obviously, the children are screaming in a jarring, piercing manner, so whatever the experiment is, it appears to be harming them. This image of
parents and family is a repeated theme throughout the poem as well. Again, we have the idea of control. The parents may be conducting the experiment. Things are under control. The children are being guided; there must be structure and a purpose. This relates to the idea of the purpose of human life being an intentional design by some higher being who holds authority over the world. Additionally, we have the image of two parents, who almost always come with a suggestion of tenderness and care. This is an intriguing contrast between loving parents and the twisted idea that they may be experimenting on their children.

But then we find that the speaker does not think they are doing such a thing. Instead, they might be experimenting “upon the good crystal” (8). Crystal has a crystalline structure, is a mineral and is usually a clear, colorless glass, often used as a vessel or an ornament. The image of glass is something that Smith incorporates later in the poem, and appears to be a symbol of the fragility of human lives. Good crystal is valuable, beautiful and something that we would expect to be protected. These are the same ideas that we commonly use to describe human life, especially within the context of Christianity. This raises the question, “why would the parents be experimenting on their precious, expensive crystal? Is there a purpose? Why are they fooling around with something so delicate rather than storing it away somewhere safe?” We hope the speaker reveals this to us later in the poem.

The speaker then elaborates slightly on the nature of the screaming, which must be so piercing that without out a doubt, the crystal must already “Lie shattered to dust on the floor” (9). Smith plays subtly on the structure of line 8 which reads, “Upon the good crystal, which must surely” (9). Which must surely what? Smith contrasts the idea of certainty and confidence with “must surely,” but we are left without a description of what it must surely be until the next line, causing us to guess or wonder what the crystal is.

In the final line, “Lie shattered to dust on the floor,” we discover the answer. The valuable and delicate crystal must inevitably be destroyed and decimated into little, insignificant piles of dust as a result of the screams. Again, Smith incorporates the Biblical image of man being created from dust, and
the idea that all of mankind will return to that state at the end of their lives. “Lie” and “dust” also both have implications of death because when people pass away, they can only lie down, and dust is often used to describe the substance of the grave. The word “shattered” is very poignant and decisive, and reveals how feeble our lives are. Dust is composed of fine particles of matter and is a word that is commonly used to denote a debased or despised condition or something that has no worth. It is no more than rubbish and ready to be discarded. It’s also associated with confusion and agitation, according to the dictionary. This image highlights the distinctive and destructive transformation from something valuable and treasured to something useless and despised. The first stanza begins with the birth of the world, which is accompanied by screams of pain or anger, and ends with the deafening crash of inescapable death.

After this colorful observation of the screaming incident, the speaker moves on to considering the possible explanations for this experiment. Line 10 begins, “Maybe the mother is still proud.” Smith returns to the image of a parent, this time specifically the mother. “Maybe” signifies the uncertainty, and the “mother” may be a reference to the historical view of the earth as a female or “mother earth.” This idea seems to touch on the ancient, Greek view that the world had a living soul and mind, which is why she could be proud. Many people today who do not believe in creationism also refer to the world symbolically as “mother nature.” The next line continues this thought with, “Of the four pink lungs she nursed” (11). This reinforces the idea that she did not create the world, but only nursed it's natural evolution along. The phrase, “she nursed / to such might,” could possibly be associated with the idea of survival of the fittest. The strongest or “most mighty” survives, often due to natural, evolutionary adaptations. But again in this line, we have uncertainty and doubt. The speaker says, “To such might. Perhaps, if they hit” (12). She doesn't know if this possibility is correct, but if it is, those strong lungs might hit “the magic decibel” (13). Here we encounter the word “hit,” which is often associated with violence, as well as with music or pitch. These things are combined in the unpleasant scream, which might also be a reference to the historical scientific idea of the “music of the spheres,” which causes the
earth to turn. Magic can be interpreted several different ways. Colloquially, the term can be used to describe something perfect or correct, like the “magic word.” It's also used to discuss literal magic, and idea that we encounter again later in the poem with “wizard” (25). The traditional definition of magic is that it is an art that seeks to control or forecast natural events or forces by invoking the supernatural, or to control events in nature by using spells or rituals. Magic also is considered to possess distinctive qualities that produce unaccountable or baffling effects. Thirdly, magic was historically used in science to refer to certain types of unexplainable occurrences in nature, the causes of which were attributed to God. Included in this category were earth, air, fire and water, culinary arts, and most importantly, alchemy. Within alchemy, the idea of the worship of God and the secrets of nature being revealed were linked very closely. Alchemy also led to significant development in medical experimentation in modern science. Experimentation is a theme in this poem, and even though we don't see any specific mention of water, the substances of earth, air and fire are all alluded to throughout the poem.

At this point in the poem, the speaker seems to go off into a mystical and impractical, almost silly strain of thought, which is consistent with the modern scientific view of “magic” or religion. Many atheists view religion or Christianity as being similar to and as irrelevant as magic. The speaker describes how the whole building might lift off like a rocket or missile if the children hit the magic decibel, possibly due to invoking the supernatural. Then the building might “ride to glory / like Elijah” (14-15). Once again, Smith uses the images of scientific knowledge and technology with the allusion to some kind of space-traveling mechanism, and contrasts them with Christianity, using the reference to Elijah. Elijah was a prophet, so we have the connotation of knowledge of the future, and he also was one of the few people in the Christian tradition who never died, but was taken to heaven in whirlwind or “spirit-storm” after being separated from Elisha with chariots of fire. Here we get the image of fire, as well as a religious form of traveling to [the] heaven[s] which contrasts to the human and scientific form of a rocket or space shuttle. The speaker also introduces the Christian perspective of what heaven or the afterlife will be like with the term “glory.” Christians view heaven as a paradise of eternal bliss
and unbroken communion with God, which is very different from the evolutionary perspective. The next 4 lines (15-18), reiterate the uncertainty of “life” after death. “If this is it – if this is what / their cries are cocked toward” (15-16). “It” is an ambiguous term, and “what” reveals the questioning nature of the unknown “it.” “Their cries are cocked toward” gives the image again of a rocket or missile. This is an angry, almost defiant image, rather than one of worship or adoration, which is interesting given the previous description of “glory.” Because of this contrast, there is a sense of sarcasm and bitterness within this line. The speaker goes on to once again contrast the two theories with the phrase, “let the sky / Pass from blue, to red, to molten gold, / To black” (16-18). This description of the sky changing in colors appears to comment on the “Doppler Shift” which deals with the expanding of the universe, where close objects (in this case, the sky) appear blue, while objects appear red if they are moving away (Wudka). The sky begins as blue, and then we see the movement or expansion of the sky or universe as it turns red, then “molten gold,” which has a reddish image, and finally to black. The blackness of the sky connotes nothingness or the end of life and the world. Rather than a glorious heaven, this theory imagines a great nothingness after death. The phrase, “Let the heaven we inherit approach” (18), reveals again that the speaker really has no idea what it is that approaches, but whether it be the Christian version of heaven or a great chasm of emptiness, her attitude is “bring it on.”

The speaker expounds on this mindset even more in the next stanza, again referring to the ambiguous “it,” she states, “Whether it is our dead in Old Testament robes, / Or a door opening onto the roiling infinity of space” (19-20). Is “it” the unknown heaven? The speaker doesn't know, so we don’t get to find out either. Again, we see the vivid contrast between the traditional Christian understanding of death and resurrection, where the “dead” are clothed in brilliant robes of white demonstrating their purity and righteousness. These white garments are starkly different than the “roiling infinity of space.” We already view space as dark and cold, but Smith adds the word “roiling,” which she uses to describe space as muddy, swirling with sediment, and in a state of turbulence or agitation. This is similar to the image of the crystal, which is clear, transparent and pure, which is
shattered into miniscule particles of dust, which are dirty, and which has the connotation of agitation as well. This turbulent existence is inescapable because it goes on for infinity, just like the Christian idea of heaven or eternal life. It is intriguing that Smith chooses to put an end stop at this line. This has the effect of being in contrast with the idea of infinity. Life, unlike endless space, is finite and short, and must always come to an abrupt end.

The speaker goes on to question the nature of this “it.” “Whether it will bend down to greet us like a father, / Or swallow us like a furnace” (21-22). Will death be gentle like an embrace, similar to the way Christians view God the Father welcoming his children home? Or will it be cruel and painful, almost like the Christian idea of hell. This is also the first instance where the speaker contrasts two sides of the same theory. For almost all of the poem, she is discussing creationism/Christianity versus evolution/atheism, but here the phrase “swallow us like a furnace” could refer to either a painful, enveloping “evolutionary” death, or that of someone who enters the punishment of hell upon passing away. Whichever it turns out to be, the speaker reiterates her attitude with “I'm ready.”

Moving into the next line we learn specifically what her opinion is about this thing she's ready to meet. The phrase “ready / To meet (22-23)” has the sense of something that is already approaching and coming ever closer. This “it” or “what” “refuses to let us keep anything/for long” (23). The speaker views this ending of life as being cruel, almost like a harsh master, who refuses to let it’s stewards keep any of the things (people, bodies, possessions) that they have come to cherish. We get the sense that she is resentful of this. Not only is it cruel because it won't let us keep anything, it also insultingly teases us with these “blessings,” making us think we get to keep them because we have them all our lives, but taking them away so quickly, as well as bending us with unbearable grief in the process. Not only do we receive artificial blessings, but to add injury to insult, we're burdened with sorrows so heavy that we cannot stand upright beneath them. This is an allusion to the idea of evolution again, where we are progressing backwards when we die, because we are losing the qualities of our humanity, one of which is standing upright. It also gets at the idea of our dignity and worth. The image of bending is similar to
that of a slave or servant, bending under a brutal task. Whether it is a wizard controlling us with mystical powers, or a selfish thief, who cares only for its own desires, or simply a cruel product of nature, it violently and quickly takes from us our cognitive and conscious, intellectual reasoning, as well as our value and ultimately, the beauty of life (25-26). In these last few lines, Smith uses internal rhyme to create the effect of something hard and striking, with the hard “e” sounds recurring in words like “grief,” “thief,” “mirrors,” “teases,” “sweep,” “clean,” and “mean.” And what is the purpose? What is the point behind all of this, as the speaker investigates in the first stanza? According to line 27, our lives are shattered like glass “To sweep our short lives clean.” Human lives, which people, especially Christians, tend to think of as having high value, are swept clean as if they are somehow a blemish or a blotch on the universe. The idea that we can simply be swept away like dust or shattered glass shows how meaningless and insignificant our lives must be compared to the whole, endless universe.

The speaker comments on this sense of futility with her next phrase which leads into the final stanza, “How mean/Our racket seems beside it” (27-28). All the noise and commotion of our lives are average or meager compared to the deafening greatness of the ever-expanding universe, or the eternal, majestic Christian God. Which she is referring to is again ambiguous and confusing by her simple use of “it.” This continues to lend to the feeling of chaos, confusion and inconclusiveness of the poem as a whole.

To people living on earth, the sounds we make and the things we do sound so loud as to be a racket. But again, as readers we get the feeling that these sounds are insignificant because they only produce a disorderly and cluttered racket, rather than a beautiful, carefully crafted melody. Even the speaker’s stereo is on shuffle, and the chopping of onions heard through the wall from the adjacent room has no direct impact on the speaker at all, other than its unmeasured rhythmic din. Not only are human lives cut short, but they are so detached from each other even during life, as seen by the speaker, who is separated by a wall from the onion-chopping neighbor, and by at least one floor and several walls from the children screaming. The speaker considers humanity to be a briefly sharp and
inconsequential hiccough, which is unpleasant yet ultimately meaningless. Her conclusion to her observations and hypotheses, is that we don't know, and are completely unable to. “What may never come” (30-31), reveals the possibility that the ambiguous “it” may come, and whether or not that is good is unknown, and it also may not come, which also could be good or bad.

Yet while all of this is approaching swiftly towards all human beings, these two individual people, only children, are “still at it” (31). Life goes on, and the pain of living does not discriminate between genders or the young and old. The “kids” are grouped together to show that despite being individuals (as shown earlier in the poem), they share the common burden of the trials of life and the inevitability of death. “Screaming like the Dawn of Man” (32) refers to the figurative point in evolution when primates became homo-sapiens. This dawn of humanity is only the contractions or birth pains of the death that is sure to swiftly follow. This end of life, and whatever may happen to follow it, which is “something / They have no name for” (32-33), is the only thing that is certain amidst the vast uncertainty of all the rest of life. Smith ends the poem with the conclusion that we can't truly know the answers to the questions raised in the poem, except that life is insignificant and meaningless.

Whatever comes after life, whether it's a Christian heaven or an evolutionary idea of non-existence, it doesn't really matter, because it's coming for all of us anyway, and it “has begun to insist / Upon being born” (33-34). Even though the people who hold these contrasting theories are separated by their opposing beliefs, they are nevertheless united in the death that awaits all of mankind. The final image is ironic because the poem ends with the idea of birth, despite the fact that what is insisting on being born is the end of life. The poem begins with the birth of the world and with children who are screaming. Screaming is typically the first thing that babies do when they are born. At the end of the poem, the kids are still screaming through life, but when there is birth, death follows quickly.

Smith uses the structure of her poem to emphasize her content. The poem is broken down into four stanzas, each which have 9 lines, except for the last stanza, which has 7. All the lines appear to have the same length, but there is no structured rhyme scheme or rhythm. Smith does weave internal
rhyme throughout the poem, but even this is sporadic. These aspects of the structure show how we often feel like there is order to the world, as we organize our lives using precise years, days, hours, minutes and seconds, as we see in the very first line of the poem. However, in reality, Smith is saying that life is chaotic and disorderly, and these structures are really meaningless. The last stanza is cut short, which connotes the brevity of life and the abruptness of death. The fact that the poem ends on a seventh line also represents the Biblical idea of completeness, but ironically, the line is incomplete, revealing that to the very end, the speaker is still in doubt. In the last line, where it ends only half as long as all the other lines, it also shows that the birth is in process or may have already occurred, and we are just waiting for “the end” or death to arrive.