

Allena G. Berry
First-year student
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The Labor of Lust

Across a crowded room, someone mysteriously floats through a sea of people, wearing a little number that flatters in every way possible. All eyes lock on this figure. An impassioned longing emerges for this illusive beauty. And so ends the cliché portrayed by many a melodrama. The desire fades as novelty runs thin. However, Wallace Stevens saw the value of lust. The perspective of his poem, "Peter Quince at the Clavier" showcases desire as the product of work. Through his paralleled comparisons of sound and feeling, love and lust, Stevens looks at lust as an important attribute of life and just as valid as any other emotion. By using each section of the poem to create another vantage point on the issue of lust, the speaker presents a counterintuitive argument where lust is not merely the result of befuddled hormones. Lust is a feeling, but shown through the immense complexity of the poem, lust requires some effort. The true beauty of lust lies in its subtle intricacies that produce an overwhelming emotional response.

The first section of the poem takes a first-person point of view on the speaker's personal account of desire by asserting that the beauty of music lies in what is felt, not the actual notes articulated. The speaker takes this argument one step further by linking the feeling of music to desire – an inseparable bond that is the crux of the argument throughout the poem. As he sits at his piano, the speaker realizes that "Music is feeling, then, not sound;/ And thus it is that what I feel,/ Here in this room, desiring you," (lines 4-6). By making this comparison between the value of music and desire with some of the opening lines, the speaker connects desire to all the effort that one generally associates with creating a piece of music and the mastery of an instrument that is generally associated with performing a particular piece. The fact that the speaker is "desiring

[her]” becomes as important of an issue as the music he is playing, if not more so. Before the speaker alludes to anything, he sets up a similar scenario seen in the aforementioned fictional party scene: the starry-eyed lovers across a crowded room, and all the magic that thereafter ensues. The magic that emerges is quite like the feeling that ensues after hearing a breathtaking piece of music. Both of those feelings are the results of tireless work.

However, the speaker does not only seek to link music and lust together in this first section: he begins to demonstrate the complex nature of desire through the introduction of deterioration within language. The syntax moves from the straightforward end-stopped lines to an enjambment that seems to mimic someone falling over himself. After desire is introduced, the speaker in this section turns to a fumbling, hormonal pubescent, unable to express himself with the clarity he possessed only a few lines before. “And thus it is that what I feel,/Here in this room, desiring you,/Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,/Is music. It is like the strain/Waked in the elders by Susanna” (5-9). The shifting of ideas between the lines portrays a scene where something terribly beautiful has shocked the speaker in such a way that he cannot form a coherent thought. However, the speaker is only seemingly bewildered. This complexity is not the result of confusion, but rather the strategic result of the labor involved in evoking the feeling of desire. Specifically through stopping one metaphorical thought mid-line, as in line 8, the speaker is showing that desire springs from a more organic place. It develops without regard to the sentence prior to or the statement following. Much like beauty and the feelings that emerge from it, the natural flowing of the lines disregards conventional structure without being haphazardly thrown together. Although desire develops in a more organic sense, the work is still apparent through the elaborate enjambment.

As much as the first section was an ode to the speaker’s personal desires for an unknown

character, the second section serves to show the desire that was felt by the elders, while showing the complexity of that desire. The speaker moves from the disorientation of the first section to a calm, cool, and natural setting. The speaker takes an omniscient role as the master storyteller of Susanna's tale. Throughout this second section, and through the natural elements the speaker introduces, the internal rhyming lulls the reader into a state of relaxation. This relaxation parallels the relaxation of Susanna at a moment that most would find solace: a long bath. But this solace is abruptly interrupted by the speaker's mimicry of music, which represents the elders' lust. The story continues as Susanna feels "A breath upon her hand/Muted the night./She turned/A cymbal crashed,/And roaring horns" (36-40). These few lines reiterate the connection between desire and music, but also serve to cast some insight onto those that possessed the lust that is crucial to the speaker's argument. These lines may represent the surprise Susanna felt upon discovering the elders; however, another interpretation could be that the cacophony of sounds more appropriately describes the lust of the elders: controlled, timed correctly, and powerful. Though the power and timing could have been demonstrated in any number of ways, the controlled aspect of these instruments coming in on cue as the result of a master orchestration is the real accolade to the elders. Lust is not a mass of objects crashing about to produce sounds; rather, it is the regulated entrance of orchestral instruments.

Although the second section presents desire as the product of some degree of control, the tone of the third section is so unbearably tight and restrictive that it stifles creativity and beauty, forcing the speaker to revert back to simple rhyme and even simpler actions. Still with an omniscient speaker, the view changes from the serene Susanna to the bustling Byzantines. In its neat couplets of elementary rhyme, the tableau is the anti-lust. The third section is a laundry list of actions, and foolhardy actions at best. In the most efficient way, the Byzantines "Came" (42),

“wondered” (43), “whispered” (45), “Revealed” (48), and “Fled” (50), quickly assessing the situation but coming to all the wrong conclusions. And after all their work (for *actions* are generally associated with *work*), all that the Byzantines really accomplished was falsely accusing a woman of being a temptress. The Byzantines, so concerned with the work to be done, are without passion, without emotion, and altogether unappreciative of the beautiful lust the speaker has worked to achieve. By criticizing the third perspective of the Byzantines as those only concerned with doing, and not with the feeling, the speaker shows the downfall of anti-lust, which is predictable, ignorant, and so obsessed with the work that it misses the point. This is not to say that the speaker does not appreciate the labors of life, but he does claim that when those labors become the focus at the exclusion of emotions, beauty is lost.

Cleverly juxtaposed, the third and fourth sections serve as polar opposites of one another: one embodying purely misconceived notions of the dark side of desire and the other serving as an elegiac accolade to all things beautiful. The point of view in this final section puts the embodiment of lust (the body) on a pedestal. Comparing the beauty of the body to the immortal Holy Grail of all things sacred, the speaker asserts that:

Beauty is momentary in the mind--/The fitful tracing of a portal;/But in
the flesh it is immortal./The body dies; the body's beauty lives./So evenings
dies, in their green going,/A wave interminably flowing (51-56)

At first glance, the context seems surreal: it is peculiar to think of the flesh as immortal since it is generally the first to go as old age stealthily creeps in. However, the speaker is not referring to one particular body. These lines transcend the “you” mentioned in the first section and even Susanna, the body to whom this poem is unofficially dedicated. The body serves as the embodiment of lust. As “the body dies”, or one lusty encounter fades, “the body's beauty lives”,

just as the beauty of desire continues. The speaker transcends from an individual perspective of one moment of lust to collective feeling of desire that will continue through the course of human history. The reason beauty is immortal in the flesh is because lust is of the flesh; and as the speaker has shown in previous sections, one of the things that allows the beauty of lust to prove so powerful is the amount of work put into evoking such a response.

Through the different perspectives of each section, the speaker creates a circuitous argument where the beauty of lust is discovered in its emotional response, and the reason for the emotional response lies in the work done to produce it, but the work must not be the focus or the beauty of lust is lost. According to the speaker, lust is natural; lust is inevitable; and lust is just as valuable as things laboriously constructed by those who would rather write off lust than embrace it. The fact remains to be seen about the ill effects (or positive ones) of leaving the object of lust out of the equation. Perhaps, in the speaker's point of view, the importance of desire lies not in whom you desire but in what it feels like to desire, just as the importance of music is not in the sounds played but in the feelings evoked. This, and not a misogynistic outlook, could explain why the speaker treats Susanna as more of an object and less of a human. The speaker's overall goal is not to discuss the equity between men and women; nor is it to discuss the beauty of a woman's form as an attribute of the woman. The speaker's intention is to put lust on a proverbial pedestal, something he accomplishes with seeming grace and ease. However, in a poem with as many subtle nuances as "Peter Quince," it is also clear that the speaker believed in the necessity of work to elicit feeling: in other words, the labor of lust. The idea that lust is everlasting is a foreign one at best, but in the story of Susanna, and from the perspective of our speaker, the everlasting lust is an oft-overlooked aspect of what is beautiful and subsequently timeless.