

An analysis of robert frost's 'the silken tent'



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Throughout "The Silken Tent," Robert Frost employs an extended metaphor in comparing a woman to a delicate tent surrounded by nature. This device explores the idea of freedom possessed by a woman in 1940s America, but also confronts the restrictions and responsibilities of family and society.

Frost explores the importance of setting, focusing on scenes of nature to evoke connotations of an ethereal and light atmosphere surrounding the tent: 'She is as in a field a silken tent At midday when a sunny summer breeze...' [1] The 'silken tent' suggests softness and sensuality, which are juxtaposed against the extremely mundane surroundings: 'a field', presenting a mixture of practicality and openness. The time of day is also significant: 'Midday', a time when the sun would be highest in the sky. Naturally, this time-frame bestows a warm and comforting feeling on not only the character but the reader also. Additionally, the alliteration of 'sunny summer' accentuates a song-like rhythm that contributes to the light atmosphere, a mood continued in 'sureness of the soul'. The theme of location brings forward a further message as to the position of women in society: 'And its supporting central cedar pole, That is its pinnacle to heavenward' [2] The suggestion of a 'pinnacle to heavenward' presents the idea that a woman has an ethereal, almost angel-like status; the entirety of Frost's description focuses on positive aspects of women, perhaps displaying the idealistic image society has. Also, such descriptions can further suggest that while a woman may not necessarily be reaching to God, women are expected to seek guidance from an authoritative figure, perhaps a father or husband. Frost's use of natural imagery continues: 'central cedar pole' to

suggest that this woman is strong-willed or in a more literal sense could support the branches of society as a tree trunk would support its boughs.

A sense of freedom informs the entire poem, as reflected in the structure and form: ' But strictly held by none, is loosely bound By countless silken ties of love and thought.' [1] The lack of restraint: ' strictly held by none' suggests that this entity cannot be fully controlled in marriage or life; rather, such an entity remains a free spirit and in turn chooses to give ' love and thought' to others. The adverb ' loosely' proposes that although ties restrain her, they are a gentle reminder and have no restrictive element. This freedom is reflected in the enjambment and the lack of full stops, giving unending, free movement to the poem. Literary scholar Mordecai Marcus has argued that ' The tautening represents tensions in relationships, and the slightness of the bondage shows that the woman's tender dutifulness responds not to compulsion but to loving necessity.' [2] This is seen through the ending, when the slight lack of freedom becomes apparent: ' bondage' evokes images of imprisonment and slavery, even though the extremity is lessened through the adjective ' slight'. Additionally, the repetition of ' silken ties' gives the sonnet a circular structure, reflecting that a woman's duties are never over. However, the role of a woman is still portrayed positively through the metaphysical aspect ' ties of love and thought', suggesting the qualities a woman can bestow on others and her connections to family, a husband, or even ' To everything on earth'. Furthermore, the sense of freedom is amplified by the simple sequence of rhyming couplets that make up the rhyme scheme; just as the silken ties are wrapped around the woman, " The Silken Tent" is tied together with this gentle rhyme. Freedom is similarly a

central theme in Frost's poem Birches: ' I'd like to get away from earth for a while.. And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk Toward heaven'[3] The reaching for perhaps spiritual satisfaction or to a figure of authority is echoed in " The Silken Tent," as is the urge to achieve true freedom while simultaneously being connected to reality on earth.

As Frost critic Robert Faggen comments: "' The Silken Tent" and " All Revelation" are impersonal pronouncements that propose universal or mythic, revelatory disclosures.'[1] This can be seen through the ambiguity Frost presents us with over the exact identification of the woman. He outlines her duties to the world rather than her physical aspects; perhaps this is purposeful, to suggest a universal idea rather than a specific individual. While the subject of the poem is inanimate, the nature of the tent conveys information about the woman: '...all its ropes relent, So that in guys it gently sways at ease'[2] Her identity is generalized to simply ' She'; this label leaves room for interpretation as to who this woman could be and is therefore apparently relevant to many people, helping to establish an emotional connection between the reader and the poet. The pun on ' guys' presents the ' guise' this woman is under through the tent metaphor, as well as linking the physical aspects of a tent to the masculine influence on a woman's life. However, even though very gentle misogyny is present, the sense that this woman may have duties but will never be fully controlled is reflected through the vocabulary: ' relents' and ' gently sways at ease'. The subject's more promiscuous side is shown through pathetic fallacy: ' In the capriciousness of summer air Is of the slightest bondage made aware.'[3] Through the noun ' capriciousness', Frost suggests sudden impulsiveness

and a sense of wildness, of freedom. It is only when this wildness needs to be curbed that restraints are 'made aware', a reminder that a traditional woman's soul must still be kept restricted if she is to fulfill her duties.

With "The Silken Tent," Frost presents his appreciation for women through the traditional sonnet form. He focuses, just as William Carlos Williams often does, very closely on one image to present the human and the metaphysical relationships a woman has not only with those around her but also with the entire world.