



# Empathy Of Anna Akhmatova With Lot's Wife: A Study

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## ABSTRACT:

The poem *Lot's wife* written by Anna Akhmatova retells the story of the Biblical character from the perspective of Lot's Wife. The poet has empathised with poetic persona. The plight of Lot's wife is similar to that of the poet because she was also forced to leave her homeland and relocate to alien shores. The turmoil and confusion of a woman who leaves her home is explicitly shown in the poem. Unable to resist the temptation to have a last glance at her home, the poetic persona incurs the wrath of God and is turned into a transparent pillar of salt. The poet justifies the act of the Lot's wife.

**Keywords:** Retell, perspective, plight, relocate, turmoil etc.

## PAPER:

The poem *Lot's Wife* was written by Anna Akhmatova in Russian. It has been translated by many writers including Richard Wilbur. Anna Akhmatova was born on 23rd June in 1889 in present day Ukraine. Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) was a Russian poet, and regarded as one of the most reputed Russian modernist writers. She was a prolific poet of her times and she became a symbol of resistance during Stalin's strict reign. Anna Akhmatova published her first collection, *Evening*, in 1912.

Many of her earlier poems were well received and had quite a large female readership. They depicted the torturous realities of love from the excitement of clandestine visits to the heartbreak of a parting. One of her poems from *Evening*, shows her wit and is reminiscent of Wendy Cope's light hearted love lyrics. Eventually however, she was forgotten; becoming a poet overshadowed by fellow male Russian writers. There has been a slow revival of interest in her poetry since the 1990s. Her works have been translated in English several times now. Many of her poems express her anguish about fitting into roles of a mother and wife. They make a dig at

the misconception of hysteria as uniquely female. One way in which Akhmatova portrays the female point of view is through retelling of folklore, Biblical stories and literary anecdotes. She humanises Shakespeare's Cleopatra and Ophelia in her poems, Cleopatra and Reading Hamlet respectively. She also gives a humorous spin to the Cinderella tale when she ends a poem from her collection *Rosary* (1914) with Cinderella more worried about her shoe rather than the Prince's love for her.

Anna Akhmatova is revered in Russia as an incredible poet. Akhmatova lived through intense political persecution, totalitarian reign, and war. Akhmatova had a negative attitude towards emigrants. She considered leaving her homeland as callous. During the years of national disasters, Akhmatova mingles with the Russian people, considering the whole country as her homeland, perceiving the fate of Russia as her own. She criticized other Russians who fled Russia for their own safety. Instead, she chose to stay in Russia out of loyalty for her country. This insight reveals the ways in which Akhmatova sympathized with Lot's wife. Although she disagreed with the way in which her country was governed, she still loved her homeland. She is emotionally attached with her homeland. It is easy to see how she identifies with Lot's wife as she was also unwilling to leave her homeland, even for her own safety.

This captivating poem, *Lot's Wife*, by Anna Akhmatova, translated by Richard Wilbur, takes an age-old story that has been passed down from generation to generation and tells it from a new perspective, that of Lot's wife. The Genesis tells the story of Lot's family, without giving much insight into emotions or thoughts of the people involved. In fact, the account reads like a historical document more than a story. As the biblical story unfolds, readers are given the facts about what happened, but no insight into the feelings or thoughts of any of the



characters are revealed. Lot's wife is particularly overlooked in this story, as she turns into a pillar of salt for disobeying the command of the angel, and is never spoken of again.

From the title itself, the reader senses that this account is going to be different from the original story. In the biblical account, Abraham and his wife Sarah are the central focus. Lot and his wife seem nearly forgotten after their move to the city of Sodom. That is, until God tells Abraham that he is about to destroy Sodom, and Abraham begs God to save the righteous from the city. God honors that request, and Lot and his family are led to safety while the rest of the city burns. But God commands them not to look back upon the city, and Lot's wife disobeys that command and immediately turns into a pillar of salt.

The title of this poem lets the reader know immediately that the poem will sympathize with Lot's wife. Though she is simply a casualty in the original story, she is the central focus of this poem. The poem begins by aligning with the biblical account in that it calls Lot a "just man" and explains that he "followed...his angel guide". The speaker describes the angel as "hulking and bright". The use of the word "hulking" seems almost contradictory to the "bright" descriptions usually used for angels. It gives the reader the sense that the speaker does not necessarily support the angel, although the speaker never blatantly disregards him.

The speaker then identifies strongly with Lot's wife when she describes the "wild grief" in her "bosom". Many who have read the Biblical account may never have considered the sadness in the heart of Lot's wife as they left their home. But the speaker of this poem brings Lot's wife to life by allowing the reader into her thoughts. Italics are used for the very thoughts of Lot's wife, as the speaker portrays them, to allow the reader to feel her pain. The speaker imagines that Lot's wife was filled with thoughts of her early life as their home burnt behind them. Still engaged in the thoughts of Lot's wife, the poet empathizes with how she must have felt leaving behind the home where she "loved her husband" and where her "babes were born".

The speaker guides the reader outside of the thoughts of Lot's wife by changing from italics back to regular font. The speaker is, again, a third-person outside perspective as is the reader. At this point, however, the reader experiences a newfound sympathy for Lot's wife. The poet continues to engage the reader in empathy for Lot's wife when she describes her decision to turn and look back as one that resulted in a "bitter view". She describes her eyes as being "welded shut by mortal pain"

which again, allows the reader to feel the pain she must have felt as she turned and looked at her old home, burning, knowing that was the last sight she would ever see. That was also the last step she ever took. The speaker describes her feeling as being "rooted in the plain" when her "body grew" into "transparent salt".

In the final stanza, the speaker takes a step back and asks a question. "Who would waste tears upon her? Is she not the least of our losses, this unhappy wife?" The speaker is aware that most who have read the biblical account of this story would feel no compassion for Lot's wife since she disobeyed the commands of the angel. This speaker, however, sets herself apart from the rest by claiming that even if everyone else looked on Lot's wife with scorn, she would not. The speaker continues to think of Lot's wife with compassion in her heart. She remembers her fondly when she thinks of this story because Lot's wife "for a single glance, gave up her life". With this line, the poet implies that Lot's wife was not foolish and unable to control herself, but that she made a conscious decision to give up her life for one final glance at the place, she once called home.

This power of this poem is all contained in the last stanza. Lot's wife, who has not even a name in the Biblical account, is suddenly humanized and we gain a new understanding of her motives. Akhmatova's *slifere* reflects the tension between nostalgia and trying to keep a clear mind about the objective facts of the present. Looking closely at the description of the city by Lot's wife, the only accurate detail in it is the red towers. Everything else: houses, streets, trees - seem to be invisible to her. She recalls the square - "where she sang", her native courtyard - "where she spun", and she wants to see the house itself because there she "gave birth to children for her dearest husband". This attachment is to the native hearth, family, to the last detail familiar to the house. The poem *Lot's Wife* is not only civil in content: with its hidden passion, it gravitates towards the love lyrics of the poet.

The poem is interesting and paradoxical approach to the disclosure of the topic. Biblical Sodom in world culture has been synonymous with sin for many centuries. But the imagination of the poetess turned it into a living city with streets, houses and courtyards where people lived an ordinary life. Due to this, the namelessness of the heroine and the absence of specific details of the city, except, as already mentioned, the red towers, become important. This allows for a generalization: the city of Sodom becomes just a dying city, and



Lot's wife is just one of the women devoted to her house.

The red towers lead many researchers to the idea that Akhmatova wanted not so much to generalize as to draw a parallel with another city - Moscow. This version is opposed by the fact that Petersburg was still native to Akhmatova, and the revolution with subsequent events first of all touched it, and her friends left before her eyes not Moscow, but the city on the Neva. One thing is obvious: Akhmatova brings her fate closer to the fate of Lot's wife, who did not want to leave her native city even when God's punishment befell her homeland. The epithet "native" referring to Sodom is very accurate. There are a few epithets and explicit metaphors in the poem, since the plot itself is a metaphor. Another of the metaphors is the adjective "transparent": the salt into which the heroine's body has turned is precisely transparent. "Transparent salt" is associated with tears, transparent and salty.

The epithet "transparent" (salt), like the epithet "light coloured" in relation to the "righteous" reflects the state of mind of the heroine and conveys its assessment by the author. Lot's wife violated the prohibition of God, transmitted by Him through the messenger, that is, she committed a sin and was destroyed for this, like other sinners of Sodom, but transparency symbolizes absolute purity, the absence of sinfulness. Perhaps because she has already been severely punished, and also, in comparison with the righteous, there is transparency here.

The heroine is at the centre of the plot. "But anxiety spoke loudly to my wife" - the inner voice of the poetic persona sounds in full force. And this is not a warning about the danger of dying, on the contrary - an irresistible desire to take one last look back, while "it's not too late." The chronotope of the poetic persona is more complicated than that of her companion, because physically she is next to her husband, walking "along the black mountain", where later "her legs grew to the ground", and in soul where her whole life went and where she wanted to watch one last time.

In the second part of the poem, in the last four lines, the empathy of the author to the poetic persona and her act is expressed. In this case, "author" is a conditional definition. Formally, the subject of speech, that is, the speaker, appears only in the penultimate line with the possessive pronoun "my" ("my heart"). The wife of the "righteous man" is perceived not as a biblical character, but as a real woman, whose tragic fate is not mourned by anyone. In the penultimate line, the word "only" expresses the opposition of the poet's point of view

to the generally accepted view. A woman who did not want and could not change her memory will forever remain in the heart of another woman, the creator of this poem, and in the memory of readers.

The size of the poem is a three-syllable amphibrach, which gives the narrative song, the features of an epic. Every second line ends with a stressed syllable, therefore, despite the fact that the first twelve lines are not divided into stanzas, there is an unobtrusive splitting of two lines into intonational complete phrases. This feature is typical for many of Anna Akhmatova's poems.

Akhmatova, manages to reveal in her works the features of the female soul. Her rich spiritual world and sensitive nature responds to the human grief of her contemporaries. She is able to penetrate deep into the centuries and revive the Biblical heroine before us. The readers feel her suffering. In short, Akhmatova has immortalized the character of Lot's wife as an epitome of sacrifice and suffering. This has been possible due to her absolute empathy with Lot's wife.

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