# Literary Elements in Tracy K. Smith’s Life on Mars: Sci-Fi and Solstice

Tracy Smith is, undeniably, one of the most phenomenal poets of the 21st century. The composer has bagged several awards in connection with her poetry. For instance, her earlier books *The Body Question* and *Duende* won the Cave Canem Poetry Prize (2002) and the James Laughlin Award (2007) respectively (Academy of American Poets). In 2012, her collection of poems *Life of Mars* won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for their unquestionable skill and brashness. In an interview with Mike Wall, the poet, Smith, acknowledged that the collection of poems was in homage to her late father, an engineer who had operated the Hubble Space Telescope. This may explain why the poems in *Life of Mars* are inclined towards astrophysics and outside worlds. This assemblage of short poems is characterized by striking symbolism, allegory, and overstatement which this essay intends to analyze.

In, *Life on Mars,* Smith uses different literary elements to appeal to the reader. Each of these elements is evident in each stanza and the author’s ability to capture and keep the reader’s attention is undeniable. Smith herself acknowledges that the use of space in the book was an intentional use of metaphor to represents some of the world’s problems (Smith *'Life on Mars': Q&A*). Specifically, this essay analyzes two poems; *Sci-Fi* and *Solstice.* In *Sci-Fi*, Smith uses symbolism, similes, and overstatements to express the impression of a world that is quite dominated by technology so that humanity no longer sustains itself without technical devices. In *Solstice*, Smith uses symbolism and makes many allusions which give the poem a more in-depth meaning.

## Literary elements in *Sci-Fi*

*Sci-Fi* is an Afrofuturistic poem. In the article ‘*The Afrofuturist Poetry of Tracie Morris and Tracy K. Smith’,* Ranft describes Afrofuturism as a framework through which to interpret the marriage between sci-fi, technology, and human identity. In *Sci-Fi,* Smith describes a future where technology has taken over the world, an aspect which qualifies this poem as an Afrofuturistic poem.

The author uses metaphors, hyperboles, and similes to describe a future world where everything is dependent on technology (Smith 7). Smith imagines a world taken over by technology to the point that human physical intimacy has lost its meaning (McElroy 26). The author sees a world where everything will be pointing forward, perhaps to express the idea that history will no longer be of importance. She describes a world where people will no longer reproduce and one where sex will only be a thing of the mind, having lost its reproductive purpose. Smith’s description of a world where humanity has outlived the threats to survival but at the cost of affable and communal nature of humankind can be considered hyperbolic. A rational reader may wonder how humanity can survive many years into the future without having to depend on each other. This exaggeration is perhaps meant as a way to warn humankind on the possible consequences of the little things we do that seem inconsequential.

The crudity of a world dominated by technology is further brought out in the assertion that “*But the word sun will have been re-assigned/To a Standard Uranium-Neutralizing Device*” (14-15). This statement implies that people will have forgotten nature and everything natural will have been replaced by technology. Technological developments are replacing the foundations of society. Only The oldest people will know what the sun was now that even history will have lost its meaning. The world has changed into a basic, simple, and place, with a disturbing controlled uniformity of the societal variations. Human spontaneity and fun have been drawn out of life because everything is controlled by technology. By stating that “*History, with its hard spine & dog-eared Corners, will be replaced with nuance”* (3-4)Smith implies that history will be forgotten and replaced with variations. In lines 5-6, she asserts that “Just like the dinosaurs gave way/To mounds and mounds of ice”, Smith uses simile and allusion to compare the replacement of history by variations to the replacement of dinosaurs by ice.

Smith also highlights how humanity has changed from something affable, simple, and where technology never existed to a place where the everything depends on technology, and where current youth only know of a manufactured, artificial existence. In this fictional world, Smith imagines that human beings will have lost their social nature. Smith explains that what previously used to be an affable environment, where people communicated through one-on-one communication has now changed into a lonelier place. In the statement “*For kicks, we’ll dance for ourselves/Before mirrors studded with golden bulbs”* (11-12), the author brings out the idea of people so concealed by technology that they have forgotten their social nature. Instead of socializing with each other, people will seek the pleasure of their own company.

“The poem ends with a satirical statement that, *“…we'll drift/In the haze of space, which will be, once/And for all, scrutable and safe”* (19-21).This statement expresses the idea of a ‘safe’ future life when people can live longer but no longer recognizing the value and essence of their humanity.

## Literary Elements in *Solstice*

Like *Sci-Fi* and all other works in the *Life of Mars, Solstice* also boasts the rich use of literary elements to develop Smith’s ideas. To begin with, *Solstice* is a villanelle with the first line (*They're gassing geese outside of JFK*) and the third line (*The Times is getting smaller day by* *day*) getting repeated in different variations throughout the poem. The literary element here is repetition which Smith uses to emphasize the fact that geese were gassed at JFK and that she is not happy about it. Repetition of the third line also emphasizes the fact that human time is limited. In line 3, Smith asserts that “*The Times is getting smaller day by day*” (3) which she emphasizes in the last line when she says, “*Our time is brief. We dwindle by the day*” (19).

In *Solstice,* Smith makes use of allusions and symbolism to communicating awareness in the current events happening around her. Smith’s vision of geese getting gassed is somewhat prophetic considering how this has become common 7 years after the poem was published. In 2012, hundreds of geese were gassed at the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. In 2017, another large number of geese were killed in New York because of claims that they were a safety risk to planes. These are just some of the notable events where geese have been killed because, as Smith says, “*The geese were terrorizing JFK*” (12). The use of symbolism and allusion in *Solstice* focuses on everyday occurrences.

The title of the poem, *Solstice,* is also a symbol which refers to the two ends of the globe’s oval path around the sun. A solstice is that distance between the earth’s orbit and the Sun. In the poem, the lines, “*The Times is getting smaller day by day”* (3) and “*Our time is brief, We dwindle by the day”* (19) alludes to the winter solstice (December 22nd) where the length of the day is comparatively shorter than all other days in the year. The phrase “*Less and Less surprises us as odd”* (17) may also allude to the winter solstice. However, the phrase also refers to the fact that societal vices such as election rigging are becoming part of the norm.

Besides alluding to the summer solstice in the line, “*The Times is getting smaller day by day”* (3), Smith is also referring to the New York Times magazine and its growing irrelevance as a reliable source of news. Smith believes the media has been used to subdue people in a similar fashion as the geese. By asserting that, “*We've learned to back away from all we say/ And, more or less, agree with what we should”* (4-5), Smith alludes to the attempts by the press to feed people with information that is pleasant rather than truthful.

Smith also uses simile when she likens the gassing of geese at JFK to the Tehran situation. In line 1 and 2, the poem states that *“They're gassing geese outside of JFK/Tehran will likely fill up soon with blood”* (1-2). Here Smith deliberately likens the subduing of the opposition in Tehran to the subduing of geese at JFK (In 2011, there were reported battles between the police and the opposition in Tehran). Simile places geese at the same level as the opposition sprayed with tear gas in Tehran streets.

Smith also mentions prayer in a culturally-inclusive manner when she asserts that “*Remember how they taught you once to pray/Eyes closed, on your knees, to any god?”* (13-14). The lines make it clear that Smith is not addressing a particular group of people. She is talking to everyone irrespective of their religious affiliations. Prayer often addresses a higher power and Smith’s allusion here is as it to imply that at this point, only a higher power can intervene in current situations. However, this could also be a call to action relying on the religious reference that “*faith without action is dead.*” By asking readers to remember how they were taught to pray, Smith may be making an indirect request for people to take action and not accept everything they are told as the truth. The use of the word “god” may also be symbolic of the idolization and people’s reliance on the news media or people of power.

The use of rhyme also adds to the poem’s appeal. The use of the phrases *“…day by day”* (3), *“…all we say”* (4) *“…is to obey”* (7), “…*dead today”* (9) provide rhyme which gives the poem a good rhythm. Another rhyme pattern is in the words blood, should, could and wood at the end of lines 2, 5, 8 and 11 respectively. The alternation between different current events may also be symbolic of the media and how new items are presented. A news coverage, like Smith’s poem, covers different events which may have no relationship to each other but are significant all the same.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Smith’s *Life on Mars* is a collection of intriguing poems which are all relevant and somewhat prophetic of a world that could be. In the Afrofuturistically-themed *Sci-Fi,* Smith alludes to a future where everything is artificial and implicitly safe but where humanity has forgotten its foundations. *Solstice, on the other hand,* refers to the corruption of morals to a point where malevolence seems normal. The poets use of metaphors, exaggerations, and similes help her express serious issues in a way that captures and keeps the reader’s attention. Overall, Smith’s ability to infuse significance into simple seemingly insignificant things is well brought in both *Sci-Fi* and *Solstice.*

## Works Cited

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