

### **Hot Water Bottle: The Warmth of Human Nostalgia**

For generations, sensations of pain have occupied a central role in the human experience. Yet in the last few centuries, people have possessed a secret weapon to combat such aches: the hot water bottle. What makes the hot water bottle an interesting and strange object is its rather unassuming simplicity as a palliative tool for healing childhood fevers and pains. Worth more than its original purpose, the hot water bottle embodies an intriguing aspect of childhood, serving as a nostalgic symbol for youth for most (Tattoli). It also serves as a personal reminder for my childhood and the simpler times that it represented, from the times when I sought my mother's comfort in times of illness to when I needed comfort from mental exhaustion and respite from emotional pain. No matter how bad things were back then, the hot water bottle became a refuge from my conflicting emotions in times of stress as I could always rely on its soothing warmth to ease my troubles. Not unlike the iPod did for personal music (Bull 291), the bottle as an object allows us to explore the impact of the industrial age due to its widespread distribution and special significance to many. It also has a spiritual connotation that allows us to discover more about ourselves in terms of human social development, especially in the transitional period between childhood and adulthood. How could such a bland mass-produced object with countless identical copies transcend its limitations to become a cultural icon of the home?

As a mass-produced object, the hot water bottle comes in many different colors, ranging from bright blood red to cool aquamarine. It also features a series of grooves that are oriented diagonally and set millimeters apart from one top corner to its bottom opposite. These grooves serve to increase the surface area of the hot water bottle apparatus to more efficiently distribute heat from the water within, giving the tool a more uniform soothing effect. The general shape of the bottle is also streamlined, with rounded edges and corners that form the smooth curves which

make it resemble “a whoopee cushion with shoulder pads” (Tattoli). Meant to increase the heat efficiency, these contours are complemented by a flaring top that provides a wider opening for water to be poured cleanly through a funnel design that transitions into the main body. Even the stopper is designed to keep in heat for better warmth, taking on a snug form of a bottleneck to trap heat inside the container whether for general warmth or medical treatment.

Yet such a matter-of-fact description belies the hot water bottle’s colorful heritage. As early as the sixteenth century, the hot water bottle first evolved as a safer alternative for warming beds for slumber compared to the traditional methods of using stones or hot coals that carried the risk of scalding or fires. Fitted with lids to prevent spills, early hot water bottles were built out of hardened materials like copper, zinc, glass, or even stone (Murphy). But it was only with the invention of vulcanized rubber, which was flexible and capable of enduring high temperatures, that the rubber hot water bottle we know today came into its own at the start of the twentieth century. First patented in 1903 by Croatian inventor Eduard Penkala, who dubbed the substance “Termofor,” these new bottles were meant to be easier to use and store than the cumbersome earthenware models that were prone to shattering (Murphy). Since they were inexpensive and required no specialized equipment, rubber hot water bottles soon spread to private homes and hospitals unchallenged over the following decades (Murphy). But with increased availability of central heating in homes and the development of the electric blanket in the 1960s, they were perceived as outdated and unnecessary, especially in America and Europe.

Despite this decline, the hot water bottle would eventually take on a cultural meaning as an icon of the common household. Many notable figures, such as Florence Nightingale, Salvador Dali, and Sigmund Freud, have praised the hot water bottle for its effectiveness as a cure-all with remarkable healing properties (Tattoli). In cultural documents it is often viewed as a boringly

decent object, to the point that Marilyn Monroe's all-girl band "got away with using them as cocktail shakers" in the movie 'Some Like It Hot' (Tattoli). In this sense the hot water bottle has become both an iconic object and a "hidden" one. Although its ubiquitous presence helped make it a common fixture in most households, the hot water bottle ironically became a victim of its own success as it became easier to ignore and taken for granted as a background item of private home life. However, its resurgence in popularity in modern times serves as a testament to its flexibility as a timeless object deeply ingrained into the cultural consciousness.

Even if not everyone knows it by name, the hot water bottle has always transfixed most as a stabilizing source of comfort of childhood. Having grown up in an ordinary Asian-American household, I always associated it with traditional Eastern medicine and its emphasis on the idea of prevention as the best measure to achieve balance in health. Therefore, as a child I never truly understood the hot water bottle's significance as a fixture of Western culture. Nevertheless, the hot water bottle became a reliable source of comfort in times of pain and suffering in all my years. Whether it was to relieve a bruise after bumping my head or to have something close to hold onto after a stressful day, I turned to the hot water bottle. To me it was another source of familial love, tantamount to my parents' embrace whenever I felt low in spirit. As I experienced the soothing effect its warmth provided, I often got caught up fiddling my fingers along its many grooves, intrigued by the tingling sensations and the sound of rippling rubber. With it being easy as boiling the kettle and filling it up, the bottle offered a sense of wholeness that assuaged my pains, to the point of becoming a proxy guardian angel alive with compassion and a golden touch. Even in times of agony, I still recall how its oozing spread would calm my aching nerves.

Never failing to deliver its warm essence, the bottle possesses a restorative aura that owes its power as much to its weight as well as its latent heat. Not unlike the smooth feel of a massage,

its gentle embrace provides as much if not more satisfaction to one's pain, real or imagined. Such sublime associations of these feelings with the hot water bottle have helped cement its cultural reputation in the sphere of private home life. Though often overlooked as a rubber container "too unsexy and unfashionable to be advertised" (Tattoli), the hot water bottle emanates a certain kitschy, old-timey charm as a fixture of childhood. Shifting in form from brittle vessels to the rubber containers we know today, the bottle has undergone a tremendous evolution through the centuries that belies its toy-like appearance and design. Such endurance derives from its diverse applications from being a heat source for campers to a provider of energy efficient warmth (Murphy) for a good night's rest to an instrument of bowel relief. In modern times others have even become interested in the bottle's aesthetic value, as models with novel quirky shapes have boosted its cultural prevalence from the shores of Japan to American kitchens. Even a new market for bottle covers has popped up, with covers made from materials such as cotton, satin, wool, and fleece sporting innovative designs that have kept the hot water bottle afloat.

Despite its apparent banality, the hot water bottle is quite revealing about consumerist society. The durability of the hot water bottle not only attests to our society's value on quality for its products but also on the pursuit of uniformity or conformity, as demonstrated by its practical use. As a common pain reliever of plain form, the bottle suggests how our world establishes a clear divide between objects meant for everyday use and what are considered fragile, artistic pieces. The differing degree of respect given to the hot water bottle compared to that of objects with more "aesthetic value" is a point of contention that underscores the hidden potential of the hot water bottle through its obscurity. Through its minimalist design, this object also provides commentary on how humans turn toward replication and simplicity in their efforts to represent the abstractions of our complex world. Not unlike how the iPod creates a "zone of immunity and

security”, the hot water bottle has helped develop an “ordered space in which [people] could feel secure” (Bull 293) through all types of pain. People have not only held onto these hot pouches for fevers but also stomach aches, muscle cramps, medicinal side effects, and even sport injuries. On a practical level, the hot water bottle also exemplifies the capabilities of our highly-advanced society. As a “domesticated icon” (Bull 291), it offers “unfettered...freedom of movement” (292) to users by granting them the experience of home comfort wherever they go. Yet it also reveals our hidden dedication as human beings to capturing warmth, to the extent that we would commit our time and energy to extract the cream white latex sap used to create the humble hot water bottle from even the most far-flung jungles.

As a symbol of our childhood nostalgia and warmth, the hot water bottle shows us how much as humans we have desired to seek constant warmth in the backdrop of an unforgiving, dark world throughout much of our history. As a social instrument, it becomes a representation of cherished human relationships and appreciation for enjoying the simple things in life. Through the struggles that it has come to tackle as a transitional object, the bottle embodies what Klass describes as the human need for compassion and “specific attachment to particular people”. Such sentiments are grounded by noting how hot water bottles can even serve a purpose in healing emotional and mental pains that go beyond an ache from a physical point on the body, whether it be heartbreak, self-doubt, or midlife crises (Tattoli). No matter the exact nature of the pain, hot water bottles have a way to soothe them all to some degree. This reveals that as much as we need medicine or treatments to heal our wounds, having something warm to hold on to also plays a role. Whether with our inner strength or the compassion of others, the act of caring is just as important in helping us recover from ailments or suffering, as shown by the hot water bottle’s marvelous potential for healing the human soul by offering peace of mind.

As a timeless object of contradictory tendencies, the hot water bottle embodies a bridge between the realms of childhood and adulthood. Not only does it remind us of times of physical illness, but it also represents the soothing refuge we seek in times of trouble and emotional stress (Klass). Most importantly, the association of the hot water bottle with memories of childhood and nurturing attests to the power of everyday objects to evoke powerful emotional responses that are reminiscent of nostalgia (Tattoli). Owing to the parallels between the physical warmth of the hot water bottle and the emotional warmth of parental care in childhood, the bottle could be considered a symbol of the warmth of parental love. For most this just involves the warmth of motherhood (Klass), since it is often our mothers who we remember as the ones who helped our pains go away in periods of illness and suffering. Acting as a “comforter”, the hot water bottle is a transitional object with potential as a source of attachment even beyond the transition from childhood to adulthood. It suggests that “issues of separation” are not “developmentally confined to the first years of life” (Klass). While it helps provide comfort to us in our youth, it also teaches us indirectly how to return the love back to our own children by serving as an inanimate role model with a living soul. Whether it warms the body by being pressed up against it, or warms the bed and other pieces of furniture, the hot water bottle has become intertwined with private home life as a source of palliative care for children and adults alike.

Beyond its ordinary visage, the hot water bottle’s associated history has also contributed to the image of the American household. Similar to how the iPod reshaped the modern audio sphere such that we now have the “auditory world in the palm of our hands” (Bull 291), the hot water bottle has not only influenced the whims of private home life but also evolved alongside the changing social landscape of the family home over the past two hundred years. Lying at the center of the hot water bottle’s codependence with the private world is the conflict between the

primal desire for warmth and the limited space of the home and its connotations of privacy. The hot water bottle also stands at the crossroads between the past times and the future of domestic life. Amid the speed of technological innovations coupled with the clash between our concerns for privacy and the desire for intimacy, the hot water bottle is in danger of becoming obsolete. Though it has survived such challenges to its relevance through the decades, whether the hot water bottle will be replaced by new innovations will be reflected in our attitudes.

Although it is a standardized rubber object not unique to any home at all, the hot water bottle has cemented itself into the sphere of private life with its deceptively simple uses. Though by nature it is not particular to a certain time and place like quilt blankets or other emblems of coziness, it has garnered an aura of comfort that earned it an iconic place in the consciousness of private life. Yet it still faces serious threats to its continued existence as a household icon. With the acceleration of technology, new devices such as wheat bags and heating pads have threatened the viability of the hot water bottle for warmth and treating pain. The risks of hot water bottles have also complicated its reputation, as poorly made rubber designs that are prone to failure via bursting have put countless people in danger of injuries from scalding and burns. Despite these challenges, the hot water bottle continues to captivate our nostalgia as a cherished reminder of the innocence of childhood around the world. Though time will tell whether the hot water bottle with all its rich history and cultural past will endure in future years, as a cultural object the hot water bottle will always have a special place in our hearts and minds.

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