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Children in the blood jet of poetry : Sylvia Plath's poetic tale of infanticide

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Abstract

The following article presents an analysis of Sylvia Plath's mature poetry (1959-1962) concerned with the themes of motherhood and children. The analysis rejects the biographical context and instead reads the individual poems through the prism of Plath's body of work. The poems concerned with motherhood and children are also treated as a chronologically structured poetic cycle, connected by the presence of recurring characters, plots, settings, and imagery. Moreover, it is argued that Plath's whole oeuvre is characterized by the constant re-employment of key plots and "dramatis personae" and as such, the poetic cycle in question is a mere installment in a greater tale of troubled family dynamics. Precisely speaking, they represent a mirror image of the (in)famous parent-child conflicts of Plath's writings, yet this time with the Plathian persona accepting the ambiguous role of a mother, rather than that of a struggling daughter.

Key words

Sylvia Plath; Plath studies; Ariel; American women poets; confessional poetry; motherhood in literature; childhood studies; feminist studies

1. Introduction: The literary and critical contexts

"For Frieda and Nicholas," reads the dedication Sylvia Plath included in the manuscript of her most famous book of poems, *Ariel*. At the time of her death, Plath's children were nearly three- and one-year-old respectively and for the last couple of months remained primarily in her care. After the breakup of her marriage, mother-child relations became Plath's main point of reference in everyday life. Quite unsurprisingly, child characters – both main and background – are a significant element in her late poetry. Throughout her study of Plath's work Susan Bassnett repeatedly praises what she calls the beauty and straightforwardness of the poems Plath addressed to her children. As she argues: "The only consistent love poems are those to and about her children, for here there seems to have been love freed from ambiguity" (1987: 119). Similarly, Eileen Aird – the author of an early study of Plath's works – claims that for the Plathian speaker, the mother-daughter relations are the only meaningful source of joy in her bleak world. As such, they are inevitably imbued with a redemptive quality:

It is in this series of poems inspired by her maternal feelings that Sylvia Plath reveals the cruel opposites of her world in their starkest opposition,

but they are not black poems because the darkness of the mother's world is subordinated to the light of the child's. The child is loved because of the unselfconscious demands he makes on his mother but also because, unlike an adult, he sees nothing of her growing depression, of the godawful 'hush' at the core of her existence. (1973: 68)

For Plath's audience though, the poems' redemptive strength proved to be not convincing enough as for years many would continue to repeat after Robert Lowell's excerpt from his introduction to the first edition of *Ariel* that: "This poetry and life are not a career; they tell that life, even when disciplined, is simply not worth it" (1965: viii-ix), propelling the longevity of Plath's caricature, the vocational suicide. Yet, it is hard to dismiss such interpretations as purely exaggerated, especially if one considers how *Ariel's* closing poem – "Edge" – in a disturbingly gentle manner describes the aftermath of a murder-suicide. Still, a contemporary commentary on *Ariel* cannot ignore the controversial circumstances leading to the book's original publication. Ted Hughes infamously reselected and rearranged the poems in his wife's manuscript offering a work whose climax was fundamentally negative – a work significantly different from the one Plath herself had envisioned. Her version of *Ariel* was eventually published in 2004 as *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, featuring an introduction by one of its dedicatees, Frieda Hughes. As Plath's daughter writes:

My mother had described her *Ariel* manuscript as beginning with the word 'Love' and ending with the word 'Spring,' and it was clearly geared to cover the ground from just before the breakup of the marriage to the resolution of a new life, with all the agonies and furies in between. (2004: xiv)

One may argue that the perception of Plath's late poems has been distorted as a result of her poetic material being self-righteously manipulated by an unwanted third party. Thus, even though the *Ariel* which saw the light of day in 1965 did retain the original dedication, it was a different collection, creating a false image of Plath and her intentions. For an exclusive *Ariel* analysis these extraliterary events should remain of considerable interest. Yet, this article assumes a broader perspective, as it is concerned with Plath's mature works included in the 1981 book *Collected Poems*, which features all the pieces from her two personally selected books of poems and many more. Plath's poetry for and about the children will be approached comprehensively, including all the available material and its ultimately distressing climax. Additionally, Plath's poems will also be read through the prism of the recurring patterns in her writings; selected pieces may and indeed do create different impression when analyzed independently than when "translated" through means of Plath's poetic language. Her vocabulary and metaphors should always be studied carefully as it is easy to underestimate their importance for the overall meaning of a poem. In her essay entitled "The World as Icon: On Sylvia Plath's Themes," Annette Lavers comments on the issue in the following way:

We shall see that even in those poems which at first sight appear untouched by menace or obsession of death, the choice of details and adjectives betrays an underlying defensiveness, and implicit contrast. And this can be said even with regard to the few poems on the subject of children, for all other positive themes contain possibilities of degeneration and disillusion. (1971: 123)

Plath's poetry for and about the children is indeed marked by ambivalence and tension which cannot always be explained as an expected result of maternal stress and difficult circumstances. The complexity of the Plathian mother-child relationships far exceeds the contexts often employed by feminist critics and not only. One may conclude that in the case of Plath's criticism, intense focus on the fate and perspective of a woman in a male-dominated society results in the lack of proper interest in the fates and perspectives of children remaining in her care. In her study devoted to Ariel poems, Susan R. Van Dyne notices that:

Plath's worst fear about producing babies or words, at least as she represents these activities in her poetry, seems to have been that their inevitable separateness questions rather than confirms her identity as their maker. For Plath maternity was both depletion and enlargement, a threat to her identity and the unexpected confirmation of it. (1993: 171)

Indeed, for the Plathian speaker the child seems to exist primarily to help her define and sustain her own fragile self. He or she is never an independent entity but a mirror reflecting the mother's gaze. As a result, the Plathian speaker often treats her children as nothing more than extensions or recreations of herself, ultimately reducing them to convenient poetic devices.

Commenting further on the relation between the children poems and the rest of Plath's poetry dealing with family dynamics, Bassnett claims that:

The terrible sexual conflict of the father poems and the communication struggle of the mother poems is absent from these child-centred poems. Writing about herself as mother, Sylvia Plath seems at peace, able to find a centre of balance in herself. (1987: 92)

Such a conclusion may only arise out of a superficial reading of Plath's writing. When one compares the children poems with the rest of Plath's poetry and prose, it becomes clear that they provide a direct – if less evident – continuation of the familial conflicts with which they were contrasted by Bassnett. Upon careful examination, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that in Plath's late poetry the Plathian persona re-enacts the drama of her own childhood and is on a slow but steady way towards its tragic conclusion. Ultimately, the children poems do not stand outside Plath's bleak universe but inherently, though implicitly, stem out of it.

The aim of this article is to reveal how, once the Plathian persona – the central character and focalizer of Plath's poetry and prose – becomes a mother

herself, the core roles of the Plathian universe are re-cast. Namely, the persona is often depicted as the firstborn daughter of a beloved yet authoritarian father who “abandoned” her, and of a toxic mother with whom she could not form an emotionally satisfying relationship. The most striking examples of each narrative are here the (in)famous “Daddy” and “Medusa” respectively – twin poems which both “[present] the exorcism of an oppressive parent” (Kroll 1976: 126). Additionally, the persona also has a younger brother who is the mother’s ally. While the mother-son dyad emanates love, peacefulness and gentleness, being at times compared to the relationship of Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus, the daughter character is denied such an affinity, viewing it with a mixture of revulsion and fascination. In “Among the Bumblebees,” Alice, a young Plathian protagonist, witnesses an emblematic, Plathian mother-son interaction:

Her mother’s face was tender and soft like the Madonna pictures in Sunday school, and she got up and gathered Warren into the circle of her arms where he lay curled, warm and secure, sniffing, his face turned away from Alice and the father. The light made a luminous halo of his soft hair. Mother murmured little crooning noises to quiet him and said: ‘There, there, angel, it is all right now. It is all right. (Plath 1998: 260, italics added)

Willingly or not, little Alice is excluded from the warmth and security of the peaceful mother-son dyad, while her relationship with her father cannot provide similar comfort. In this respect, her story foreshadows the drama of the Plathian persona’s adult life as ultimately, the Plathian persona’s deceitful though beloved father is gone, her mother is her widely-understood rival, and her relationship with her brother is practically non-existent. She is “The Electra figure ... unhappy, marginalized outsider, doomed neither to share the confidence of her mother, nor to enjoy the fruits of her loyalties to her father” (Bassnett 198: 85). For her there is no consolation, no shelter.

Interestingly, in the late poems the Plathian persona *also* becomes an abandoned wife and a mother of a firstborn daughter and a younger son, the latter being her beloved baby. For some time she is engaged in these two conflicts simultaneously, but soon the setting of the mature life becomes primary. When the persona starts freeing herself from the influences of her parents and her husband, her identity transforms and “In ‘Purdah’ we hear the darker voice of ambition, the will-to-power of an Electra turned Clytemnestra” (McClave 1980: 456). With this transformation, the Plathian persona renounces her previous identity to assume the identity of her resented mother, inevitably pushing her small daughter towards the role of Electra, the tormented outsider. This article will attempt to show how Plath’s mother-child poems enact this drama, again placing the daughter character on the least favorable position. In contrast with the previous scenario though, this time – with the mother-adversary as the focalizer – the daughter character is most conspicuous by her absence, her plight most prominent for the silence surrounding it.

2. A child as a metaphor

Before this article will focus on the core analysis, it is important to distinguish between Plath's poems in which children appear as characters – both main or background – and are thus the Plathian speaker's children, and the poems in which images and metaphors related to generic children are used solely as poetic devices. Plath was fond of the latter and metaphors and similes she created by these means were often used in dark and disquieting passages of her poetry, i.e. the ones concerned with stagnation, death and decay. One of her most favorite images is that of dead fetuses preserved in formalin. Predictably, it connotes stunted development, stasis and detachment (“She lives quietly/With no attachments, like a foetus in a bottle” [Plath 2002: 150]), as well as ever-presence and inevitability of death. At the same time, not unlike the living ones, dead fetuses are often described in an uncanny way, making them seem connected more with objects and animals than with humans. In “Two Views of a Cadaver Room” Plath writes that, “In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow” (2002: 114). Apart from being a manifestation of death, the corpses of the unborn are also associated with the recurring character of the Moon who is – as Judith Kroll argues convincingly in her seminal work on Plath's poetry – the dark force behind both the Plathian speaker's creativity as well as her self-destruction (1976). Unsurprisingly, the infants who never had a chance to live outside the womb sometimes also stand for obstructed, misrealized creativity, and so in “Stillborn” Plath compares unsatisfactory poems to stillborn babies (2002).

Born children, both dead and living, are at times also associated with death or widely-understood decay. In “Death & Co.,” written in the fall of 1962 – roughly around the same time as some of the poems about the speaker's children – a personified death “tell[s] [...] how sweet /The babies look in their hospital/Icebox” (2002: 254), presenting one aspect of the Plathian concept of demise: death as peaceful and beautiful in its morbidity. Even though live infants often do symbolize renewal and potential, these features can be twisted when framed by a gloomy or a satirical context, which Plath undoubtedly favored. For instance, in “Face Lift” a woman who has just undergone a plastic surgery in order to improve her deteriorating appearance triumphantly concludes that “Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze/Pink and smooth as a baby” (2002: 156). The poem's speaker is presented in a clearly sardonic way, as a shallow woman preoccupied with superficial beauty. Her regained youthful look is a fraud, and the intended regeneration of the body leads to the actual degeneration of the spirit.

One of Plath's late poems, “Getting There,” ends with a very similar metaphor: “And I, stepping from this skin/Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces/Step to you from the black car of Lethe/Pure as a baby” (2002: 249). Aird claims that the poem's climactic point is death *as* a rebirth (1973), while Kroll argues that it ends with a rebirth *following* a spiritual death (1976). Considering the ambiguity of the Plathian concepts of death and rebirth, it is safe to conclude that the poem can be interpreted in (at least) two different ways. Death as a renewal and the ultimate triumph is a recurring Plathian theme, and thus a paradoxical interweaving of images associated with both the beginning and the end of life is common in Plath's works.

3. Motherhood and children in “Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices”

Such a strange interconnectedness of birth and death, distress and joy is also prominent in Plath’s only verse play, a short work titled “Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices”. The stories of the eponymous three women – or three voices, as they are referred to – present three different outcomes of reproduction: a birth of a son, a birth of a daughter, and a miscarriage. Since not only do the voices sound similar, but also each event described was experienced by Plath herself, one can speculate that the three characters may in fact be three facets of one person or a generic woman. Taking into account that these three scenarios also recur in Plath’s poems devoted to the speaker’s children, “Three Women” is a perfect introduction to this poetic cycle. The verse play begins with the three characters united by their setting – a maternity ward in which they actually never meet face to face – and their common apprehension leading each of them toward a different climax. As such, even though their stories are connected at the core, there is also a lot that separates the three women when it comes to their experiences and their identities. The circumstances of the First Voice are the vaguest, as neither her marital status nor her profession are disclosed. Still, it appears that she is mentally and financially prepared for motherhood. The situation of her two counterparts is much clearer: the Second Voice is a married and professionally active woman, and the Third Voice is an unmarried college student.

The Second Voice repeatedly tries to carry a pregnancy to term, but each attempt results in a miscarriage, and her current one is not an exception. As she sits in an office surrounded by her colleagues (who appear to her alien and threatening in their maleness and “flatness”) she notices the bleeding. Once she is admitted to the hospital her unborn child has already died and she needs to confront the numb grief of such a loss once again:

... the faces of my children [are bald and impossible],
 Those little sick ones that elude my arms.
 Other children do not touch me: they are terrible.
 They have too many colors, too much life. They are not quiet,
 Quiet, like the little emptiness I carry. (Plath 2002: 178)

The Second Voice’s plight represents the complexity of mourning that women tend to face after a miscarriage. Even though the embryo/fetus once resided in her body, after it dies a woman may not even have a chance to touch it to substitute for the unrealized physical relationship or just to confirm the lost child’s existence. The short life of the unborn offspring appears elusive, but its memory leaves her behind with a real sorrow. Struggling with grief, the Second Voice becomes vulnerable to the sight of children as their beaming liveliness stands in a painful contrast to the stillness of death represented by dead fetuses. Interestingly, as Elena Ciobanu notices in her study of Plath’s poetry, the fetuses miscarried by the Second Voice actually appear to “embrace” death, becoming another manifestation of the famous Plathian motif of “perfection by death” (2009: 198): “The face of the unborn one that loved its perfections,/The face of the dead one

that could only be perfect/In its easy peace, could only keep holy so” (Plath 2002: 178). Not unlike the fetuses preserved in formalin, these are also a disquieting image, appearing to have been created by and for the cold, “easy peace” of death. Even though they were once alive, it is hard to believe so.

In contrast, the pregnancies of the First and the Third Voice both end in live births, and yet – following the physical separation from her child – each woman arrives at a different decision regarding her role as a mother. Initially, The First Voice appears peaceful (“I cannot help smiling at what it is I know./Leaves and petals attend me. I am ready” [2002: 176–177]), but she soon realizes that “It is the calm before something awful” (2002: 179). Indeed, her labor turns out to be agonizing. Once her son is finally born, she at first perceives him as a disquieting, alien presence. Yet, when the baby’s colors return to normal she concludes that “He is human after all” (2002: 181), and having taken him in her arms she finds herself overwhelmed with love and tenderness: “What did my fingers do before they held him?/What did my heart do, with its love?” (2002: 181). She instantly forgets her painful labor and becomes unwaveringly devoted to her son, the new centre of her universe: “One cry. It is the hook I hang on./And I am a river of milk./I am a warm hill” (2002: 183).

Soon the First Voice starts to notice her baby’s vulnerability. “How long can I be/... Intercepting the blue bolts of a cold moon?” (2002: 185), she wonders, juxtaposing her child and herself with the villainous “mother” of the Plathian universe. Her relationship with her son seems to be founded on tender love and peacefulness, at times being compared to the relationship the Virgin Mary had with Baby Jesus. Interestingly, just as Jesus, the First Voice’s baby appears not to have a father, as it is never revealed whether the First Voice has a husband or who fathered her child. She does not give an impression of being bothered by her single parenthood though, implying the completeness of their dyad. Still, the comparison to Mary and Jesus makes the First Voice apprehensive – she does not want her son to share Christ’s fate since it would burden her with Mary’s sorrow:

I do not will him to be exceptional.
It is the exception that interests the devil.
It is the exception that climbs the sorrowful hill
Or sits in the desert *and hurts his mother’s heart.* (2002: 186, italics added)

She wishes her son to be an average man but still devoted to their relationship.

I will him to be common,
To love me as I love him,
And to marry *what* he wants and where he will. (2002: 186, italics added)

At first glance, it may appear that out of sheer love the First Voice blesses her son’s future unions with other women, but her choice of interrogative pronoun indicates different intentions. “What” refers strictly to objects and thus when she wishes her son “to marry *what* he wants and where he will” (2002: 186, italics added) the First Voice either has a lesser known meaning of “to marry” in

mind (according to Oxford Dictionaries: “join together; combine harmoniously” [n.pag.]), thus probably speaking of her son’s autonomous shaping of his own identity, or she in fact depreciates his future female companion, disclosing her distress at the thought of their dyad being disrupted by an intrusion of another woman, a rival for her son’s affection. Owing to the absence of the boy’s father, the First Voice bestows on the infant son a dangerous combination of maternal and romantic love, and even the nursery room she has prepared for the baby is filled with images connoting erotic relationship, making it reminiscent of a love chamber instead: “I have papered his room with big roses,/I have painted little hearts on everything” (2002: 186).

These incestuous undertones are in line with the general impression that the First Voice’s maternal affection is unsettlingly possessive. For example, when lamenting her inability to fully protect the baby, the First Voice wonders: “How long can I be a wall around my green *property*?” (2002: 185, italics added). Such a strange metaphor for motherhood implies that for his mother the son is only a valuable but fragile object. Arguably, even when the First Voice wishes her son never to come to any harm it is only because it would make her upset as an owner of a damaged possession. The boy is precious to her only as an extension of herself and as a part of their dyad. This troubling relationship clearly foreshadows the twin dyad from Plath’s poetry – the one the Plathian speaker shares with her infant son, eventually leading him to a dreadful end.

The gentle manner in which the mother-son dyad is presented in the verse play may provide a guise for its dysfunctionality, but the sorrow inscribed in the play’s mother-daughter relationship is explicit. The Third Voice is a student mentally unprepared for motherhood and dealing with a clearly unwanted pregnancy. To make things worse, her baby’s conception was a result of either cruel seduction or rape, as implied by the comparison to the mythological story of Leda and Zeus in the form of a swan. Violated and abandoned, the Third Voice confesses: “I wasn’t ready [...] /I thought I could deny the consequence – /But it was too late” (2002: 178). Awaiting the birth in the hospital, she directs her hostility at the male doctors who surround her: “They are to blame for what I am, and they know it./They hug their flatness as a kind of health” (2002: 180). Resenting her pregnancy, she – unlike the First Voice – admits not being ready to give birth and regretting not having had an abortion instead: “I should have murdered this, that murders me” (2002: 180).

The Third Voice eventually gives birth to a daughter but, since she decided on offering the child for adoption beforehand, the two are instantly separated. The little girl’s cries for love and attention are nonetheless still haunting her mother:

I see her in my sleep, my red, *terrible* girl.
 She is crying through the glass that separates us.
 She is crying, and she is *furios*.
Her cries are hooks that catch and grate like cats.
It is by these hooks she climbs to my notice.
 She is crying at the dark, or at the stars
 That at such a distance from us shine and whirl. (2002: 182, italic added)

The existence of the baby she has chosen to abandon distresses the Third Voice so much that even her daughter's vulnerability is presented as a threat, her neediness as a violent intrusion. The Third Voice does, however, name the child her girl, her daughter, thus admitting their inalienable affinity. In spite of the ever-present vocabulary implying fear and hostility, some signs of budding affection toward the child are also noticeable, but, in the end, her mother decides to repress it: "She is a small island, asleep and peaceful,/And I am a white ship hooting: Goodbye, goodbye./The day is blazing. It is very mournful" (2002: 184). Nonetheless, having abandoned her baby, the Third Voice is eventually stricken by grief:

... There is an emptiness.
I am so vulnerable suddenly.
I am a wound walking out of hospital.
I am a wound that they are letting go.
I leave my health behind. I leave someone
Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like bandages: I go. (2002: 184)

Just as she has repressed her tenderness, she now represses her mourning, wishing to pretend her unplanned baby never existed: "I had an old wound once, but it is healing./I had a dream of an island, red with cries./It was a dream, and did not mean a thing" (2002: 185). Thinking about her decision after some time has passed, on the surface she is glad she did not have to take care of her daughter as it would restrict her freedom: "It is so beautiful to have no attachments! I am solitary as grass" (2002: 186). Eventually though, she cannot deny her grief, even if she tries to convince herself that she does not know its cause: "What is it I miss?/Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?" (2002: 186). As it seems, the Third Voice is destined to struggle with melancholia, as she is unwilling to confront the nature of her loss.

Arguably, the future of the little girl is also bleak. In her essay entitled "The Space for Motherhood," Lisa Katz draws attention to the fact that having been violated by Zeus, Leda gave birth to Helen of Troy, the woman traditionally blamed for the downfall of her homeland. Indeed, Helen is another victim of a society which objectifies women and resorts to violence as a means of solving problems (2002: 119). Possibly then, the fate of the Third Voice's daughter in a male-dominated world may be even worse than that of her mother's. The two cannot help each other in their common plight though, and they are left with a sense of emptiness following the abrupt end of their relationship-to-be. Considering the recurring patterns in Plath's writings, it is not surprising that depicting the two scenarios – one of an overly intense maternal love and the other one of a repressed maternal affection – Plath chose a daughter as the object of the latter, once again making a female character lament her unfulfilled need for motherly tenderness.

4. Child characters in Plath's late poetry

In the realm of literary criticism, "Three Women" had an advantage over Plath's other poetic texts for being mostly treated as a work of fiction, possibly only inspired by its author's experience. In contrast, the interpretation of Plath's poems about children is prone to being shaped by the biographical information instead of the recurring patterns in Plath's poetry. But can this extraliterary context be avoided completely? It is a well-known fact that Plath had two children: first a daughter, later a son, and between these two births she also suffered a miscarriage. What is most important in regards to the narrative of her life is that, in contrast to her real-life rival, Assia Wevill, when taking her own life Plath spared her children, and the siblings slept through her death in an adjacent room. This knowledge had a significant influence on the critical as well as common perception of Plath's poetry about children. The impact of Plath's biography results in a common critical practice of trying to ascribe a particular poem to a particular child based on the information available. For example, "The Night Dances" is often considered to be addressed to baby Nicholas even though, as Plath's first biographer, Edward Butscher, rightly notices, had it not been for the additional information provided by Ted Hughes, the poem would have to be treated as a purely surreal text, with its addressee never specified (2003: 354). Similarly, "Morning Song" is usually read as a poem commemorating the birth of Plath's daughter, but it is never explicitly stated in the poem itself that the infant is a first-born or a female. This study will try to avoid drawing conclusions through such means. In order to establish the scenario and the "dramatis personae," the poems will be read through their own prism on the one hand, and the recurring motifs and imagery of Plath's body of poetic work on the other. The texts themselves provide enough information for one to conclude that the number of children in question most likely does not exceed a pair (with the older child being a female and the younger one a male), as well as that in between these two births the speaker suffered a miscarriage. Therefore, if in one of the poems two children appear simultaneously and are explicitly or implicitly referred to as the speaker's offspring, then it will be concluded that these are always the same children.

In order to make this analysis more systematic, it is convenient to categorize the texts in question in line with each child's gender. The first section is thus concerned with the poems addressed to a fetus (always genderless), and includes: "The Manor Garden," "You're," and "Parliament Hill Fields." There are no poems explicitly addressed to a female child but by association and elimination "Morning Song" and "Balloons" can be classified as implicitly addressed to her. "Magi" and "Candles" also feature a female child as an important character while "Parliament Hill Fields" briefly mentions her. Two poems – "Nick and the Candlestick" and "For a Fatherless Son" – are explicitly addressed to the son. Two more – "By Candlelight" and "The Night Dances" – can be classified as implicitly addressed to him, although the latter is a contentious example, and this article does not present its analysis. The male child is also featured in "Event" and, most importantly, in "Balloons." Additionally, a late poem entitled "Child" is addressed to a child whose gender is not specified, and it will be analyzed near the

end. Several late poems: “The Detective,” “Mystic,” “Kindness” and finally “Edge” also feature both children as an inseparable, genderless collective, and these will be subjected to analysis as well.

5. A fetus and a newborn as addressees

The first poem in the fetus trio – “The Manor Garden” – is also featured as an opening piece of *The Colossus*, and it indeed fits well with the book’s atmosphere marked by apprehension and a sense of a lurking threat. Here, the setting is a garden in a state of autumnal decay, and images relating to death and danger dominate throughout the text. The addressee, a fetus, is described in an emotionally detached manner, being compared to a fish and a pig on the basis of its appearance during different stages of prenatal development. Its upcoming birth destined to take place amidst this death-filled landscape is something the speaker states matter-of-factly: “The fountains are dry and the roses over./Incense of death. Your day approaches” (Plath 2002: 125). As Jeannine Dobbs concludes in her article: “The poem’s prophecy is for ‘a difficult birthing’” (1977: 13). The poem’s cold, grim tone is partially counterbalanced by “You’re” in which the speaker’s attitude toward the fetus is definitely warmer and more personal, turning the apprehension present in “The Manor Garden” into a cautious excitement. The child is still a mysterious other but, as Van Dyne argues, the final lines reveal the Plathian speaker’s expectation that the child’s otherness will in the end reassure rather than threaten the self (1993). Still, throughout the poem the fetus is mostly compared to objects and occasionally to non-mammal animals, i.e. sea creatures or birds, making its affinity with the human speaker distant. Interestingly, the fetus is also described as “moon-skulled” and is said to resemble “a sprat in a pickle jug” (2002: 141). Such metaphors bring to mind the disquieting images of the dead fetuses in formalin which are one of the vehicles through which the Moon manifests her power. The reference once again proves the accuracy of Lavers’s observation that even in the ostensibly joyful poems there is an implicit apprehension and threat (1971: 123).

The last poem in the trio – “Parliament Hill Fields” – is addressed to a dead fetus whom the speaker has miscarried. The speaker’s feelings for her unborn child are ambiguous to the point that Helen Vendler initially named the poem: “an elegy spoken by a mother who has lost a child” which “[...] emanates a tenderness [she] was wary of exhibiting to adults” to later rightly conclude that: “On the other hand, the speaker of the poem is in some way glad, relieved, that she will not have to bear this child” (2003: 136). Still, the perceived connection between the two is undeniable. It may seem curious that it is the dead fetus – and not the living ones – whom the Plathian speaker finds most relatable. In truth, the unborn is named “Ghost of a leaf, ghost of a bird” (Plath 2002: 153), which highlights its elusiveness, but it is also compared to a doll (2002: 152), thus acquiring some distant affinity with its human mother. Considering Plath’s oeuvre in general, this implied detachment may be interpreted as a symptom of distress at the thought that the baby might be born severely disabled and “inhuman” in

appearance. Possibly, the slight change of attitude occurring in “Parliament Hill Fields” is the result of the speaker already having had one child, a daughter (as the mention of “your [the unborn infants’] sister’s birthday picture” [2002: 152] indicates), and being able to convince herself that she is capable of giving life to healthy, “unambiguously human” offspring.

The First Voice of “Three Women...” and the speaker of “Thalidomide” reveal a similar mode of thinking when they juxtapose their healthy babies with dreadful images of deformed infants. Yet, the fear of severe fetal abnormalities becomes merely camouflaged and does not actually cease to bother them. This anxiety is revealed in the First Voice’s remark: “I do not believe in those terrible children/*they injure my sleep* with their white eyes, their fingerless hands./They are not mine. They do not belong to me” (2002: 185, italics added). The speaker of “Thalidomide” is also haunted by images of malformed babies and nervously wonders why she was spared bearing such a child. The presence of her healthy baby eventually helps her diffuse her fear: “The dark fruits revolve and fall./The glass cracks across,/The image/Flees and aborts like dropped mercury” (2002: 252). However, owing to the evident emotional detachment, the speaker’s description of her healthy infant also comes across as perplexing (“All night I carpenter/A space for *the thing I am given*,/A love/Of two wet eyes and a screech./White spit/Of indifference! [2002: 252, italics added]). She blatantly refers to the infant as if it were a new object in her possession and not a person, let alone her own baby, which serves as another testimony to the emotional complexity inscribed in the Plathian speaker’s attitude toward her children.

The transformation of a newborn from an object-like, animal-like creature to a human being can be observed in “Morning Song,” a poem concerned with childbirth. The first line reads: “Love set you going like a fat gold watch” (2002: 156). On the one hand, its tone may be interpreted as warm and affirming, as it implies that the child was conceived in an act of love and is herself wanted. On the other hand though, the comparison between an infant and a “fat gold watch” may be surprising, as it suggests that for the mother the baby is merely a valuable possession and not an autonomous being. The apprehensive atmosphere intensifies when the child’s first cry is described as “bald.” Baldness is one of the core features of the Moon and in Plath’s poetry its connotations are mostly negative. In Eileen Aird’s words: “it carries the sense of bare, plain, unadorned [...] The consistency with which the world is used in bleak, terrifying and oppressive situations lends it sinister connotations” (1973: 105).

The following stanza only strengthens the sense of threat and uncertainty: “Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue./In a drafty museum, your nakedness/ Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls” (Plath 2002: 157). The scene of being born into Plath’s universe is indeed far from the stereotypical, largely optimistic depictions of a new infant’s arrival. Katz praises Plath for presenting how complex such an experience can be for the mother as well as for the entire community in which the child will live, as accommodating a new, defenseless yet needy human being into a collective is not an easy process, neither from a pragmatic nor emotional perspective (2002: 116). Still, it can be argued that the speaker’s failure to recognize the child not only as her own

offspring but also as a member of her own kind prevails for an unusually long time. Even though the comparison to a statue still connotes a valuable object, a statue – contrary to a watch – is also a representation of animate beings, including people. Apparently then, in the speaker's view the baby has already acquired a human shape, even if not yet a human character. Nonetheless, the speaker continues not to see any particular affinity between herself and the newborn, as the following lines reveal: 'I'm no more your mother/Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow/Effacement at the wind's hand' (2002: 157). This comparison may also imply instrumental and narcissistic treatment of the infant who is reduced to a mere reflection of her mother's gradually disintegrating self. Such an interpretation would then foreshadow the ultimate morbid climax of Plath's poetry.

The speaker's progressing recognition of the infant as her fellow human is further signaled when she associates the child first with a moth, then with a cat (2002). The former is a living being, but as an insect it is only distantly related to humans. The subsequent image of a cat is here an indication that the speaker's perception of her baby has evolved past the point of a troubling mystery, as not only is a cat a mammal, and thus more closely related to humans, but it is also one of people's favorite pets. Still, cats are commonly seen as cold, unaffectionate and mischievous, which may suggest that trust cannot yet enter the unfolding relationship between a mother and a child. In the end though, when the speaker approaches the baby in her crib, she hears a "handful of notes" and "The clear vowels rise like balloons" (2002: 157, italics added). The newborn obviously does not yet produce speech, which would stand for communication between the baby and the mother, but she is able to produce vowels which anticipate language – the basic tool for creating and maintaining human relations.

It may be argued that the poem's climax is positive, but its overall imagery and metaphors are so unsettling that it is hard to shake their impression. Heather McClave sums the poem up starkly but aptly when she says that the newborn, "comes into a world of museums, morgues, hospitals, and stillborn poems as a 'new statue to solidify 'among the elements,' naked and alone. The stiff figures attending the baby resemble 'The Disquieting Muses' that Plath envisioned around her own crib" (1980: 461). The last remark concerning "The Disquieting Muses" (a 1957 poem) is particularly interesting, as it implies that the re-enactment of the Plathian drama has begun. The newborn baby, possibly a daughter (which is suggested by the poem's similarities to "The Disquieting Muses" and "Candles"), arrives to inherit her mother's plight, as the speaker is to assume her own mother's ineptitude in the light of her female child's struggles. The communicative and emotional barrier between the two is portended already at the girl's birth.

6. The female child as an addressee/protagonist

The motif of disquieting muses holding vigil by the crib of a baby girl resurfaces in "Magi" and "Candles" – twin poems both written on the same day. In the former the speaker dwells on the simplicity of the baby's worldview, as in the

infant's mind only present physical needs and tangible spaces are relevant: "For her, the heavy notion of Evil/Attending her cost less than a bellyache,/And Love the mother of milk, no theory" (Plath 2002: 148). Yet, as the very first line reveals, "the abstracts hover like dull angels" (2002: 148), already foreshadowing the girl's approaching immersion into the complex and difficult world her mother knows too well. Interestingly, there is no indication that the mother will help her child deal with the awaiting problems. If anything, it seems that the Plathian speaker assumes her own mother's destructive strategy of denial. The final lines read: "They mistake their star, these papery godfolk./They want the crib of some lamp-headed *Plato*./Let them astound *his* heart with their merit./What *girl* ever flourished in such company?" (2002: 148, italics added). Most importantly, the poem's title refers to the biblical narrative of Baby Jesus being visited by magi who brought him gifts and paid respect. Famously, Christ's life was destined to be of great importance yet also filled with great suffering, but in the poem the mysterious forces accompanying the girl appear to be bad omens rather than indications of the baby's valuable uniqueness.

It appears most curious though that the little girl's mother comes across as less concerned about the anticipated difficulties in her daughter's life than with her daughter's election by the troubling forces of wisdom and creativity in light of her gender. "What *girl* ever flourished in such company?" (2002: 148, italics added), she asks at the very end, implying that only men can flourish when devoting themselves to intellectual development. Thus, seemingly expressing concern for her daughter's future, the speaker actually undermines the girl's abilities, just as Esther's mother did in *The Bell Jar*. If her inept attitude prevails, the re-enactment of the subsequent events from "The Disquieting Muses" is also more than likely to take place.

A very similar mother-daughter scene unfolds in "Candles." Here, the eponymous "nun-souled" candles are presented as "[mollifying] *the bald moon*" (2002: 149, italics added), which implies that this dark force of the Plathian universe is now illuminating the infant girl's world as well. The candles are said to be soothing the Moon's influence, which portrays them as allies *against* the Moon. Still, in Plath's oeuvre the relationship between these two symbols is complex as they both often appear simultaneously, and the eponymous character of "Mirror" (a 1961 poem) – a metaphor for truthfulness – calls them both liars (2002: 174). Thus, the suggestion that the candles' nature is benevolent should be regarded with suspicion, especially as it is the light of the candles which reveals the presence of the "disquieting muses": "Tonight, like a shawl, the mild light enfolds her,/The shadows stoop over like guests at a christening" (2002: 149, italics added). The final line refers explicitly to the story of Sleeping Beauty and, by extension, to "Disquieting Muses." Unlike in "Magi," the implications of their appearance are not fully explained, but the general sense of apprehension caused by their presence is dominant throughout the poem. The two preceding lines ("How shall I tell anything at all/To this infant still in a birth-drowse?" [Plath 2002: 149]) expose the speaker's sense of ineptitude and uncertainty, which suggests that the muses may be a threat against which her daughter remains defenseless. While the juxtaposition of an innocent infant and a cruel, dangerous world around recurs

in Plath's poetry, the gender of the child in question constitutes an important factor shaping the Plathian speaker's attitude. Considering the plethora of Plath's writing concerned with the plight of women in a male-dominated society, it may be surprising how gender stereotypes influence the Plathian speaker's view of her daughter and son. As infants they are both fragile and defenseless, but the femininity and masculinity the speaker ascribes to each of them taints her perception. If the girl's predisposition for intellectual and artistic achievements is seen by her mother as a cosmic failure and a burden, then her belief in the boy's election for greatness appears in contrast overestimated.

7. The male child as an addressee/protagonist

The male infant is first mentioned in "Event," a 1962 poem which foreshadows the breakup of the Plathian speaker's marriage. Accompanied by the ominous presence of the Moon, the divided couple lie in bed at night in a tense and awkward atmosphere. Nearby, their son cries anxiously in his crib: "The child in the white crib revolves and sighs./Opens its mouth now, demanding./His little face is carved in pained, red wood" (2002: 194). Although the infant is intellectually oblivious to the situation, he does seem to sense its gravity emotionally. His suffering appears to be an extension of his mother's pain, and thus she cannot alleviate his ache just as she cannot soothe her own. His cry is a cry of a child whose family is about to be broken.

In "Event" the speaker's son remains merely a background character as the poem is addressed to his father. It is only when the speaker's husband abandons his family that the speaker's attention and love gradually change the target. Quite unsurprisingly, a significant number of the poems addressed to the son is concerned with the boy's sudden and undeserved fatherlessness, as well as its expected grim effect on his future life. The first piece in this group of poems is explicitly entitled "For a Fatherless Son." It begins, "You will be aware of an absence, presently,/Growing beside you, like a tree/*a death tree*" (2002: 205, italics added). It is noteworthy that the speaker compares her son's future sense of emptiness and pain after the loss of the father to a tree "growing beside him," as a tree, particularly a yew tree, is often metaphorically linked to the speaker's own lost father. "Little Fugue," opening with the line: "The yew's black fingers wag" (2002: 187), and featuring such lines as: "Death opened, like a black tree, blackly" (2002: 188), is here the best example, although in the (in)famous "Daddy" the eponymous' character's foot is also compared to a root (2002: 223), and the speaker's final release from his posthumous influence is compared to the "up-rooting" of a telephone line ("The black telephone's off at the root" [2002: 224]). Moreover, as claimed by Kroll, Plath was very likely influenced by Robert Graves' writings on the mythical importance of a yew tree, which is sometimes referred to as a "death tree" (1976). A death tree which the speaker assumes will haunt her son's future is said to be an Australian gum tree, but its function appears analogical to that of the yew tree associated with the speaker's fatherlessness. For the time being, the ignorance of infancy shelters the speaker's son from

grasping how ruthlessly he has been abandoned, which allows his mother to find temporary comfort in his oblivion (“But right now you are dumb./And I love your stupidity” [Plath 2002: 205]). The baby is still satisfied with having only the mother, but the speaker believes his contentment will not last (“One day you may touch what’s wrong” [2002: 205]). Currently, she tries to find consolation in the short-lived completeness of their relationship, but the threat of her child’s future sorrow is imminent.

“By Candlelight” implicitly continues the theme of a fatherless son, re-employing the nighttime setting in which the mother is tending her infant by the light of the candles. The poem begins with the line: “This is winter, this is night, small love –” (2002: 236), again incorporating the motif of a fragile infant contrasted with a dangerous environment. The child’s defenselessness is conveyed most acutely through the comparison to a pathetic image of a “balled hedgehog” (2002: 236), although just a few lines later he is playfully described as “roaring” (2002: 237), which may simultaneously signify his budding strength. It may be argued that yet again the Plathian speaker reaches for a dehumanizing language to describe her own child, but this time the poem’s main focus appears to be growing tenderness and protectiveness that the speaker feels towards her baby.

Nonetheless, it needs to be emphasized that the child’s existence seems to be conditioned by his mother’s awareness and further confirmation of his presence. In a way, the baby appears to be coming to life only when approached by the mother: “One match scratch makes you real [...] I hold my breath until you creak to life” (2002: 236). It is hard to escape the conclusion that the speaker still views her child as a somewhat alien yet useful extension of her own self, especially as her own dissatisfaction at being abandoned by her husband is repeatedly projected onto the child. In “By Candlelight” the baby’s father is symbolized by the brass figure of Atlas adorning a candlestick, which the speaker reveals as her son’s pathetic heritage:

He is all yours, the little brassy Atlas –
 Poor heirloom, all you have
 At his heels a pile of five brass cannonballs,
 No child, no wife.
 Five balls! Five bright brass balls!
 To juggle with, my love when the sky falls. (2002: 237)

The speaker’s husband has abandoned his family to pursue egoistic pleasures, and his irresponsibility and ruthlessness provoke the speaker’s sardonic tone. Even more so than in “For a Fatherless Son,” the speaker seems to be taking advantage of their baby’s presence to speak of her own suffering.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of the piece’s twin poem – “Nick and the Candlesticks.” Jo Gill – the author of *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* – rightly notes that one of the poem’s most conspicuous features is its malevolent imagery (2008), similar to that found in “By Candlelight.” Here, the threat seems more imminent and greater though. The innocent baby appears out of place in the room compared to a cold mine or a cave filled with bats and

piranha, and hence his mother's question: "O love, how did you get here?" (Plath 2002: 241). His fragility and oblivion contrast not only with the gloomy environment but also with his mother's suffering: "The pain/You wake to is not yours" (2002: 241). The child's purity makes his mother sentimental, and she grows enchanted with the infant who, as Marjorie Perloff observes, is now her only love object (1984: 14). When addressing him, the speaker reveals: "*Love, love, / I have hung our cave with roses, / With soft rugs -*" (Plath 2002: 241, italics added). Gill concludes that in order to reduce the impact of the threatening environment the speaker "attempts to construct a soft, warm, red, womb-like space" (2008: 55). However, it is hard to shake the impression that the space she creates is more romantic in nature than it is maternal. These incestuous undertones bring to mind the analogous attitude that the First Voice from "Three Women..." manifested towards her own fatherless son, proving once again the existence of recurring relational patterns in Plath's writings.

Still, "Nick and the Candlesticks" is most prominent for its closing stanza in which the speaker makes an exaggerated comparison between her infant son and Baby Jesus. "You are the one/Solid the spaces lean on, envious./You are the baby in the barn" (Plath 2002: 242). Interestingly, when the speaker's daughter was implicitly compared to Baby Jesus in "Magi," her mother interpreted her child's uniqueness as a burden, but in "Nick and the Candlesticks" she appears to rejoice in her son's election to the role of a savior. The speaker's growing attachment to the son seems particularly noteworthy when contrasted with the daughter's nearly complete absence from Plath's late poetry, as, indeed, the little girl is actually never mentioned individually in the follow-up to her father's disappearance. One might expect that, having been so profoundly shaken by her father's "abandonment," the Plathian persona would find an ally in her daughter with a similar biography, but this never happens. Although the daughter is already at least a toddler (she turned one before her brother was even conceived, as the information included in "Parliament Hill Fields" reveal), and as such is bound to notice and *feel* her father's absence, her individual pain is never even hinted at in the poems.

This disparity in the amount of attention devoted to each child was already noticed by Edward Butscher – the author of Plath's first book-length biography – but his explanation for such a state of affairs seems unsatisfactory. As he briefly concludes: "[w]hat is somewhat surprising at least in light of Sylvia's growing anti-male obsession is [the poems'] concentration upon Nick rather than Frieda. He was the baby, of course" (2003: 354). What Butscher probably means is that since a defenseless baby – as opposed to an older child – needs to be a constant object of its mother's attention, it is not surprising that this preoccupation with an infant found its way into Plath's poetry. For someone concerned with Plath's whole body of work such reasoning seems to present an oversimplified view of her writings, though. The question of gender and the social consequences of femininity and masculinity are here of primary importance. What actually happens in Plath's poetry is that the speaker instantly relegates her daughter to the socially underprivileged sphere of femininity, even though the child clearly bears similarity to her mother both in her abilities and biography. Having silenced her

female child, the speaker chooses her infant son as an ally and the primary object of her love, clearly finding pleasure in the boy's future masculinity, and thus treating him as a substitute for his absent father.

8. The children as a collective protagonist

Apart from the poems which are explicitly or implicitly addressed to either the son or the daughter, Plath also wrote one poem addressed to a child whose gender is not revealed – “Child”. As such, it can be read as a message to both children separately and collectively at the same time. Just as Plath's previous poems concerned with children, “Child” is driven by a juxtaposition of the eponymous character's fragility with a dangerous world around. The conclusions that may be drawn from the poem regarding the resolution of this conflict are intriguing, if debatable. The poem begins as if it was an ode, or indeed – as Bassnett would put it – a love poem to the child: “Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing” (Plath 2002: 265). Concerned about her child's exposure to evil in the world, the speaker proceeds to enumerate a random set of “grand and classical” (2002: 265) images which, as she believes, should be the only reflection in this beautiful eye. She mentions such playful and heart-warming images as ducks or “April snowdrop” (2002: 265), but one particular image – that of an Indian pipe – appears out of place. As Encyclopedia Britannica informs, Indian pipe is also known as a corpse plant, possibly due to its deathly white color. It grows by parasitizing on fungi and requires moisture and shadow to thrive (n. pag.). Why would the speaker find such imagery associated with death and decay a desirable sight for her child, especially if it seems that she wants to protect him/her from the destructiveness and hopelessness of suffering, wishing the child not to experience “this troublous/Wringing of hands, this dark/Ceiling without a star” (Plath: 2002: 265)? Gill calls the poem an “ambivalent blessing” (2008: 70), and it appears to be quite an accurate way to describe this short, ambiguous piece. The speaker's tenderness and concern about her child is clear, but – in the light of the whole poetic cycle – it is the solution she eventually opts for that matters most. When the poem is treated individually it may be concluded that the mother remains largely helpless when confronted with the vision of her child's future suffering. Arguably though, the inclusion of the ghastly image among the playful ones foreshadows the cycle's climax, indicating that for the child it will be better to die than to share his/her mother's pain. Thus, the speaker implicitly portends her “merciful killing” of the children.

In the three poems following “Child” (i.e. “Mystic,” “Kindness,” and “Edge”) the children not only remain genderless, but they are also presented as a collective. (“Balloons” – one of Plath's two last poems – is here an exception.) The first poem anticipating this group is a 1962 piece titled “The Detective.” Here, following her husband's abandonment, a woman character has gradually disappeared, most probably leading the couple's starving children to share her fate: “The milk came yellow, then blue and sweet as water./There was no absence of lips, there were two children,/But their bones showed, and the moon smiles”

(Plath 2002: 209). In Plath's last poems such overtly grim scenarios intertwine with the more ambiguous ones. In "Mystic" (written four days after "Child") the speaker laments the bleakness of existence succeeding a lost moment of ultimate beauty, i.e. the broken contact with the Divine. "Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?" she wonders (2002: 268). Considering Plath's attitude towards religion manifested in her other writings, the mystic scenario should be treated as a metaphor symbolizing a great pain and confusion one feels when forced to lead a mundane life following a loss of great happiness. The future seems hopeless, but the poem ends with a series of ambiguous images: "Meaning leaks from the molecules./The chimneys of the city breathe, the window sweats./The children leap in their cots./The sun blooms, it is a geranium./The heart has not stopped" (2002: 269). Bassnett believes the metaphors to be life-affirming and thus signaling the speaker's approaching healing (1987). After all, the images indeed connote growth and energy. Kroll is more cautious here as she concludes that the poem's climax can be read in various ways (1976). Indeed, the most problematic line - "Meaning leaks from the molecules" (Plath 2002: 269) - directly precedes the allegedly positive images. Its ominous implication seems to be the overall loss of the life's meaning: the sun may be rising, the children may still be lively, and the speaker's heart may still be beating, but none of these really matter. In such a case, protecting the children is no longer essential to the speaker as their lives have lost their meanings as well.

"Kindness," - written on the same day as "Mystic" - goes a step further in dehumanizing the children. Although the second stanza opens with the line: "What is so real as the cry of a child?" (2002: 269), implying the children's importance in the speaker's life, the poem's last stanza presents them as mere objects: "The blood jet is poetry./There is no stopping it./You hand me two children, two roses" (2002: 270). As Kroll points out, the children are "mythically transformed" when handed to the speaker (1976: 38). The implication seems to be that, ultimately, for the Plathian speaker everything matters only in relation to poetry. The pain is its great inspiration which can stop only once the speaker dies "bleeding" to death, and thus her children are also nothing more than poetic devices.

Before the children's lives are climactically ended in "Edge," they both temporarily regain their individuality in "Balloons." The poem presents a seemingly innocuous scene of a mother and her children admiring colorful balloons which remain in their house after Christmas celebration. The poem appears to be addressed to the speaker's daughter, but its main character is actually the son. The girl's presence is only hinted in the lines: "Your small/Brother is making/His balloon squeak like a cat" (Plath 2002: 271). The eponymous balloons are described in a contradictory and ambiguous manner. On the one hand, they are compared to playful, animate beings and are said to be "guileless and clear," "Delighting/The heart" (2002: 271-72). On the other hand though, they are also called "queer moons" (2002: 271), which lends them sinister connotations of despair and destruction. When the little boy looks through the balloons he sees everything tinged in pink ("A funny pink world he might eat on the other side" [2002: 272]). This beautiful world is so attractive that he attempts to bite it, but the balloon breaks instantly leaving the child startled, with the remains of the toy still in his

hand. Bassnett calls the poem beautiful, claiming that it celebrates “the mobility of life,” thus contrasting with the grim “Edge” written on the same day (1987: 146). Although she concedes that the poem is filled with ambivalent – if not downright threatening – imagery, Van Dyne also claims that “[the baby] reigns supreme at the end of the poem, a complacent, if startled, Buddha” (1993: 167). Such interpretations seem selective though, especially once the poem’s ending is analyzed more attentively. Dobbs’s comment is much more accurate here, as she concludes that even though there are some positive images in the poem indeed, they are evened out by the negative climax (1977: 18). Indeed, what the poem’s climax implies is an impending loss of innocence and childhood’s naïve contentment with life. When the boy, having unintentionally destroyed the balloon, “sits/Back, fat jug/Contemplating a world clear as water” (Plath 2002: 272) what he finally sees is the world of his mother, clear in its bleakness. The “funky pink world,” the naïve perspective of an ignorant child, is now gone. The comparison to a fat jug connotes stasis, stunted growth and – contrary to what Bassnett believes – immobility which foreshadows “Edge.”

“Edge” presents the aftermath of a triple tragedy – having killed her children, the Plathian persona took her own life. As she no longer lives, she ceases to be a speaker, but although dead and silenced, she is now “perfected” with “[e]ach dead child coiled, a white serpent [...] folded [...] back into her body as [a petal]” (2002: 272–273). The sensuous garden metaphors create a disquieting effect as their gentleness appears to undermine the atrocity of a double infanticide followed by a suicide. Some critics also tend to downplay the gravity of the situation. Vendler concedes that the children’s deaths are presented in a euphemistic manner, but she partly excuses the speaker by noting that she killed them out of love and concern, to spare them suffering which had been tormenting her for so long (2003: 146). Somewhat enigmatically, Vendler also claims that: “[w]e are to infer from ‘Edge’ nothing about the desirability of the murder of the children” (2003: 147). What she most probably means is that the Plathian persona did not kill the children sadistically and in cold blood, like psychopaths do. Instead, Vendler notices that the poem is imbued with sadness at the death of her “gentle rose-children,” as well as the whole garden’s approaching annihilation (2003: 146). Aird is even more evasive as she concludes that: “[t]he dead children in ‘Edge’ have been folded back into the mother’s body protectively, as the ultimate loving gesture, similar to the natural folding of the rose around itself in the face of oncoming night in the garden” (1973: 86).

Again, both interpretations are selective, as they ignore the other type of imagery present in the poems. After all, the speaker’s demise is a performance as she clearly is concerned not only with ending the painful lives of her children as well as her own, but also with the aftermath of their deaths. Critics often point out that the poem brings to mind the suicide of Cleopatra. Famously, the death of this last pharaoh of Egypt was meant to manifest her triumph rather than despair. Similarly, the woman’s “dead/Body wears the smile of accomplishment” (Plath 2002: 272). Her death may be tragic, but it is also presented as a victory. The lines: “*The illusion of a Greek necessity*/Flows in the scrolls of her toga” (2002: 272, italics added) imply that by committing infanticide and suicide

she has managed to avert a grim destiny supposedly awaiting the three of them. Thus, in death she may now exult. The dead children compared to serpents are now adorning their victorious mother. As Van Dyne rightly suggests, unlike in other poems, here the children's perspective is ignored as what matters is their mother's "smile of accomplishment." Therefore, "We can uncover no regret, no guilt at the now empty pitchers of her maternal nurturance" (1993: 172). In the end, the mother's treatment of her offspring appears largely narcissistic. As in her mind they are only extensions of herself, then if she dies, the children must die as well, completing the spectacle of her life.

9. Conclusions

Concluding the findings of this article, it is hard not to stand in opposition to the critical voices who praise the speaker's "loving" attitude toward her children, simultaneously explaining the ambiguous or downright negative imagery recurring in the poems as a result of difficult circumstances. Clearly, not only is the speaker's perception of her children ambivalent, but also the fate she eventually bestows upon them disturbing. Her actions may not be devoid of love, but in the end it is a case of a twisted and destructive affection. From the alien, threatening beings the child characters are gradually transformed into the speaker's own offspring whom she loves but mostly narcissistically. Therefore, dysfunctionality is inevitably inscribed in the relationship the Plathian speaker forms with her daughter and son.

Nonetheless, most curious here is the treatment of the female child. Silenced and relegated to the socially underprivileged sphere of femininity, she appears to be the ultimate victim in the familial structure once again. Even if the speaker does see her own reflection in both of the children, it is the male child with whom she *decides* to identify, and whom she consequently favors. The speaker's anti-female bias prevents her from forming an emotionally deep, tender relationship with her daughter, thus making her repeat the mistakes of her own resented mother. The emotional burden of this failed relationship is now implicitly placed on the little girl's shoulders. After all, it is not a surprising state of affairs in the Plathian universe, as here "there is no [female] loyalty, even between mother and daughter" as "Both fight for the father, for the son, for the bed of mind and body" (Plath qtd. in Stevenson 1990: 71).

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