

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 19


Article 7

9-12-2017

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Recommended Citation

Barrett, Allison (2017) "The Identity In-Between: A Historical Close Reading of Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song"; *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 19 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol19/iss1/7>

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Keywords

Identity, Historical, Close, Morning Song

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A Historical Close Reading of Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song"

Sylvia Plath, one of the most celebrated poets of the twentieth century, has become one of the world's most well-known psychiatric patients. Her writing tends to be viewed less as commentary on history and culture and more often as a presentation symptomatic of her mental state. Dr. James Kaufman has even coined a term that links creativity and mental illness in female poets: the "Sylvia Plath Effect" (Bailey). A recent Google search on "Sylvia Plath mental illness" produces 1,010,000 results; a search on the same search engine with "Sylvia Plath historical significance" brings up around 593,000 results—a drastically reduced number.

It is no secret that Plath suffered from mental illness, but this kind of assessment limits the readings of her work. Annika Hagström claims that Sylvia Plath has become more legend than anything: Hagström goes through an exhaustive list of the different ways in which Plath's death is used to illustrate gender inequalities, but more so to depict the stereotypical life of a mentally-unstable, spiritually-tortured individual. Another scholar, Zsófia Székely, finds Plath's mental history significant and interesting in the context of her work, but only considering that facet "limits [the work's] power." She argues that Plath's poetry should be read in the context of history and human identity, rather than as Plath's attempt to exorcise her demons.

While these scholars look at Plath's work less as a pathology of the mind and more as a pathology of the time, we still need to explore its historical relevance. For example, the concept of motherhood appears in the first poem of Plath's posthumous *Ariel* (1965), "Morning Song." A reader may be inclined to view the poem as diagnostic of a mental illness such as post-partum depression, but this interpretation neglects the fact that this poem was written in a time of great tension for those experiencing motherhood. It is my intent to explore Plath's poem "Morning Song" through close reading as a lens into the historical context relevant to human identity, especially maternity. In

identifying the issues these mothers faced during this time period, Plath's poem represents the difficult transitions many mothers encountered in order to meet mid-twentieth century American cultural expectations.

On the surface, Plath's poem "Morning Song" details a moment in the life of a woman who wakes up early in the morning to attend to her crying child. Upon breaking down the figurative language, however, we see through the comparisons between seemingly arbitrary inhuman subjects and the speaker or her child that these associations point toward complex relationships, such as those indicating not only distance between mother and child, but also a disassociation of the speaker from herself. In addition, there are meanings located in the associations made through the speaker's perspective that communicate her perception of motherhood, involving the shift from being the "speaker" to also a "mother." These perceptions complicate the relationship between the mother and her child, and even reveal the loss of the speaker's identity as it existed before becoming a mother. This loss of identity speaks to the mid-twentieth century's concept of what constituted a mother, resulting in the loss of self that the speaker of the poem experiences as she loses who she once was and cannot become the woman American society demands.

This loss of identity is *not* just a symptom of private pathology; rather, it is suggestive of the struggles many mothers face when attempting to define themselves through the relationship with their children. For example, "Morning Song" begins with the speaker-mother detailing the birth of her baby, comparing the baby to a "New statue" (lines 4-5). By comparing her baby to a lifeless statue, Plath implies that the baby lacks a personality, a life, or even basic humanity—the infant is inanimate and removed from the speaker. The notion of a baby as a statue in a "drafty museum" (line 5) also reinforces the idea that the baby, like a statue, was created by an artist as something to be admired by others; however, the speaker reveals her distance from the infant by housing it in a "drafty" museum. In other words, an uncomfortable current of air flows between mother and baby: the baby is something to be looked at, but not held. This distance, illustrated early in the poem, shows the immediate trouble that the mother encounters when attempting to define her child as a living being, and demonstrates a kind of detachment within the mother-child relationship.

Even more evidence of this distance between the mother and her child in the poem can be seen not just in the descriptions of the baby itself, but also in the speaker's choice of phrasing when she describes herself as a mother in relation to the infant. A sense of space between the speaker and her baby demonstrates a gaping rift separating the mother and her child. The speaker begins the following stanza with the statement, "I'm no more your mother/ than" (lines 7-8). This phrasing already prepares the audience for an illustration of the distance between the mother and child. The use of "no more" inevitably followed by "than" implies not only a disconnection with the object of comparison, but also a seeming disavowal of ownership of the object. This disavowal can be clearly seen if one chooses to interpret the phrasing of "I'm no more your mother" as "I'm not your mother," perhaps serving as a commentary on a kind of interpersonal separation, but also possibly a statement on the physical separation that occurs between mother and child during birth. However, through Plath's choice not to use that direct phrasing, and to instead write, "I'm no more your mother," there lives a connection between the mother and child—albeit a considerably strained, distant connection. Plath uses this distance to further demonstrate the broken relationship between speaker and child.

In addition to demonstrating distance in the mother-child relationship, the line "I'm no more your mother" could also reflect the speaker's internalization of her perceived failure to meet social expectations of motherhood. In her essay "Gender," Myra Jehlen makes the claim that gender "is not a category of human nature" but instead "cannot[es] history" (265). Therefore, it would be logical that Plath's historical and cultural context would influence the construction of her poem, as the feminine gender has become inseparably intertwined with the American cultural concept of motherhood. In the mid-twentieth century, particularly the 1950s and 60s, American women were relegated to certain roles. The men returned from World War II and women left the workplace where they had struggled to earn a position during the earlier era of the New Woman. They returned to the home, where they took care of the children and other domestic affairs. Betty Friedan, writer of the ground-breaking text *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), suggests that this return to the Victorian conceptualization of women as innocent creatures who were made for reproduction and submission (referred to as "Angels in the House" in a 1854 poem by Coventry Patmore) was likely influenced by the then-popular thought that

it was a female's "biological destiny" to be a mother (36-38). In turn, this theory was backed by many of the leading scientists, particularly Dr. Benjamin Spock, one of the leading theorists at the time on child development. While Spock later qualified some of his earlier work, much of his writing leans on the assumptions that all females are "natural" mothers, and that the mothering role is inherent. For example, in his book *Problems of Parents* (1962), he claims that while all parents should have a sense of devotion to a child, because the child is the mother's "forever," it is assumed that she in particular will be devoted to the child (4-5). In other words, the child is not entirely the mother's responsibility, but it's the mother's role always to serve the child, often in self-sacrificing ways. And, in fact, during this time period, there was an assumed "symbiosis" between mother and child (Friedan 289). Additionally, Diana Curtis mentions how, during the post-World War II period of Plath's writing, the concept of a mother rejecting her child was entirely taboo (185). Mothers of the WWII generation felt guilty for not connecting to their children as was expected. According to Diane Eyer's *Motherguilt* (1996), mothers of the 1950s and 60s followed the pronouncement of the "baby gurus" of the time like a religion—in particular, Spock's word was law (3-7). With this belief so pervasive within American culture, of course a woman with a child who did not live up to these expectations would feel some sense of estrangement from her role as a "mother," as Plath demonstrates in "Morning Song."

Following the implied distance in the poem is the comparison of the experience of motherhood to the different states of a cloud, which is representative of the speaker's changing role as a mother. The altered states of the cloud illustrate the loss of the identity of the speaker as she once knew herself. In the poem, we see that the speaker thinks, "I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow/ Effacement" (lines 7-9). With the set up for motherhood and distance already seen in the first line, the comparison to a cloud would lead one to think that the mother is the cloud and the events that affect the cloud are the effects of motherhood. The poem depicts the cloud as vapor that is "distilled," or, as the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines it, condensed into water droplets. This would lead the reader to believe that the cloud—the mother—goes through a change in state: the cloud becomes water droplets that fall to the ground. And through having the cloud "distil a mirror," Plath creates an image of a mass of visible vapor that disappears as droplets of rainwater pool

like a puddle to create a reflective surface, a “mirror” in which the speaker sees herself disappearing. By comparing the speaker to a cloud that dissolves into water droplets, Plath suggests that the role of motherhood forces an altered state upon the speaker, who slowly drains away until she is “effaced.” The OED also defines “efface” as an act that one does to “rub out” or “obliterate” something “so as to leave no distinct traces” of whatever existed before. (Interestingly, effacement is also the medical term used in the process of childbirth: OED defines it as the “obliteration of the cervical canal.”) As the mirror forms from the distilled water, the speaker’s reflection disappears. The speaker’s “effacement” then could be her identity prior to motherhood dissolving away until “no distinct traces” of who she was before remain. Instead, the shattered pieces of her—the droplets of the effaced identity—form the product of the process which erased her: the child. The mother and the child cannot exist simultaneously, so the mother’s identity leaks away as a result.

This loss of identity in assuming the role of the mother is unsurprising in Plath’s historical environment, as many women—despite popular culture’s depiction of them—experienced a loss of direction in terms of self-definition. Friedan writes that in the 1950s and 60s, a “woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be” (72). Like Plath’s speaker in the mirror, the woman Friedan describes becomes lost as her reflection, her understanding of herself, fades away. The mid-twentieth century woman as she was before motherhood is lost in an identity fog: the New Woman had an idea of who she was and what she wanted to do, but the Happy Housewife and Good Mom live only for feminine fulfillment (Friedan 33-68; Eyer 69-70). So, as we know, she looks to popular culture to “decide every detail of their lives” (Friedan 72). Therefore, those who dominate the culture dominate women’s personal images. If a woman fails to meet these images, she is offered no alternatives, and becomes lost: she is not the person she was before, and she could not be a mother, so she is nothing. This nothingness could be the effacement of Plath’s speaker—a removal of who she was and, because she feels this distance from her child and therefore does not meet the standard of “mother,” the placement of her into a nameless role.

We see in the following sections of the poem, however, that the loss of the mother’s previous identity leads to the formation of the child’s. This formation of the child’s identity, in contrast to the

earlier comparison with a statue, indicates an evolving relationship between the mother and child. For example, the speaker notes that the child breathes “moth breath” and that the baby’s mouth is “clean as a cat’s” (lines 10, 15). The associations in these instances illustrate how the child possesses characteristics that remind us of non-human attributes, which is reminiscent of the comparison to the museum statue, also a non-human object. However, there is a significant difference: where the statue is simply a cold slab of stone, both moths and cats are *living* objects. From statue to moth to cat, we see the speaker’s description of the child evolving from the “statue” that was presented earlier in the poem to organisms that possess sentience, a kind of consciousness. Additionally, the dehumanized metaphors are softening as they are brought to life, invoking images of the gentle brush and beat of whispering moth wings, as well as the plush fur of a cat. These softer images are more in line with how we conventionally picture babies: soft, delicate beings that require contact and warmth. This evolution of comparisons reflects the relationship between mother and child: as she grows accustomed to the baby, the offspring gains more of an identity both to her as a living being and as a historical subject.

It is only after the woman has been “effaced” that the child begins to become alive, but this birth of the child’s life arrives at the expense of both the child and mother’s human identities. Friedan explains how mothers who had lost their sense of purpose through motherhood began searching for one in their children: they would obsess over details of their children’s lives and begin to place the children in situations they themselves wished to experience (282-309). This kind of vicarious learning is what Friedan deems “dehumanizing” to the child, as he or she becomes a medium of living for the woman who, stuck in the identity fog, cannot see that she is still alive (282). Carol Hanisch defines “Mother love” as “[A] woman finding her identity through another person. That’s a terrible burden on the child and [...] also a paralysis of the woman’s human development” (79). In essence, the mother’s humanizing of her child after the loss of her own human identity leads to the dehumanization of both of them.

This formation of the child’s identity does not, however, eliminate the detachment of mother from baby. An illustration provided in the latter half of “Morning Song” demonstrates this relational gap: “I wake to listen:/A far sea moves in my ear” (lines 11-12). If, as popular wisdom has it, a person may “hear the sea” in a seashell when he or she holds it up to the ear, a reader might interpret this

line of the poem as the speaker listening to a shell to hear her baby. The fact that the speaker needs something like a seashell—i.e., a mediator—to hear her child implies a disconnection between mother and child. However, if we take into account Plath's transcontinental move from the United States to England, we may interpret the "sea" as that which separates her from who she was prior to becoming a mother. The drafting of this poem was done in England, a continent away from her home in New England, a place she had left as a single, career-driven woman. It was only after arriving in England that she met her husband and had children. In this context, perhaps the "sea" is the distance Plath feels between who she was before she became a mother. Either way, the mention of "a far sea" suggests a distance, a vast relational disparity between the mother and child as well as between the mother and her prior non-mother self. "Sea" also serves as a reminder of another word that appears earlier in the poem: "draft." Both "sea" and "draft" contain currents, and, as they are used in the poem, one can infer that the currents in both of these images work to carry the speaker farther away from the object she is trying to view and hear: her child.

Additionally, the line "Wake to listen" points toward the speaker's pre-maternal identity replaced by the "effaced" self. Earlier in the poem we saw how the speaker loses a sense of who she was before motherhood, and now we see a new sense of identity forming—one entirely devoted to serving the child. We not only see that the speaker lies awake to listen for her baby's cries, but also that "One cry" sends her "stumbl[ing] from bed, cow-heavy" (line 13). So the speaker listens attentively, waiting for that "one cry" that she will need to address. She also refers to herself as "cow-heavy," which compares the speaker to a domesticated animal that lives to feed others. The attention the speaker has and the way she perceives herself suggests that she takes on a new identity: one devoted to serving the baby. According to this interpretation of the speaker's choice of words, motherhood wipes away the speaker's previous ideas about herself and her role, and replaces it with a considerably restrained one: a mother expected to prioritize and devote herself entirely to her child. As a result, the mother's identity, too, is dehumanized: she perceives herself as livestock, a cow kept in an enclosure to serve only as a source of food for her child.

The poem concludes with the speaker looking out the window at the morning sky, and the way

in which she views the world around her in this moment reflects the loss of her previous identity—the major cost of motherhood for the speaker. The speaker comments, “The window square/ Whitens and swallows its dull stars” (lines 15-16). This language conjures a series of images: that outside the “window square” the night sky is filled with stars. When morning comes, the dawn “swallows” the “dull stars.” The shift from night to morning indicates a major change in the perception of the surroundings and time. The morning that the speaker perceives—this shift in environment and time, from night to day—results in the “swallowing” of the stars. With the mention of “swallowing” one cannot help but think back to the “cat’s mouth” that appeared earlier in the poem. The cat, as we have seen, is representative of how the mother understands her child. Therefore, it is possible for one to hypothesize that the “cat’s mouth,” that is, the *child’s* mouth, is the one doing the “swallowing.” So the star, an object known to shine brightly in the night sky, is swallowed—possibly by the child—and dulled by the shift to morning. Like the cloud, this change in surroundings/time and personification of the sky is an implicit comparison to the effects of motherhood on the mother. “Morning” also drastically differs from the “night” before, as it is a dawning of a new day that swallows the night before it. In other words, the identity of the speaker before she became “mother” is lost to the introduction of a child and the great shift that accompanies motherhood. As the stars that once shined brightly are now swallowed and dimmed by morning, the speaker, who once knew herself as someone else, undergoes an alteration as a result of motherhood. Motherhood results in the speaker’s loss of her prior identity, and confusion about who she is now because she does not meet American society’s expectations of who she should be.

With this interpretation of the effects of the impending morning, we can finally begin to understand the title of the poem. Assuming that the words “Morning Song” replicates the morning that the speaker depicts near the end of the poem, the title potentially holds within it the loss of identity that morning’s end inevitably brings as a result of the child’s existence and the experience of motherhood. Furthermore, “morning” is a homophone of “mourning,” the act of grieving over a loved one. So the title “Morning Song,” as it details the loss of the speaker’s previous identity before it was “effaced” or dehumanized by motherhood, is also a “mourning” song.

Székely’s article “Giving Birth to Ourselves” makes the interesting suggestion that a number

of Plath's poems that focus on birth-giving can, in fact, be interpreted as a kind of giving birth to a mother's new self. Specifically, in relation to poetry in general, she states, "Birth-giving is a kind of resurrection—losing an old self and a body, receiving a new one." I believe that this approach can easily be applied to "Morning Song": the narrator is struggling to find a new identity, the previous one presumably lost after having given birth to her child. However, Székely later comments that, although birth-giving often functions as a symbol of resurrection, she suspects that the various birth-giving moments in Plath's poetry are very much affected by the oppressive time in which they were written, resulting in poems that contain birth-giving that is not resuscitative of the mother's self, but instead produces experiences associated with "aggression and distance" as the speaker becomes "swallowed" by motherhood. Because of her status as a woman and mother, the speaker lives in a society that does not offer any alternative paths for her; she is trapped in this identity in-between, a being that is stuck in a moment that is neither night or day, but instead is white-washed like the fog that effaces those it swallows.

We see now that in Plath's "Morning Song" a series of intricate comparisons which reveal the complicated difficulties of the mother-child relationship, especially the loss of the speaker's previous identity and the formation of a new one as a consequence of motherhood. While such "distance" and "loss" of motherhood may sometimes bring negative connotations, perhaps it was Plath's intention to break the mold into which society has forced mothers and to construct new expectations of the life-changing role. Whether it was Plath's intention or not, with these redefined boundaries, today's readers can gain a deeper understanding of and hopefully empathize with young mothers who are confused, depressed, or feeling a general disconnect with what is expected of them based on predefined roles. Understanding the spectrum of emotions that accompany birth may lead to greater acceptance of the evolutions and changes women experience with motherhood. Unfortunately, Plath died before this identity in-between could be exposed in the rise of second-wave feminism. Fortunately, however, for today's readers, "Morning Song" provides a text of solace, an opportunity for those mothers who feel inadequate or otherwise unable to meet certain social standards to feel validated in a way that Plath might not have had the chance to know.

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