



Love, attachment and effacement: Romantic dimensions in Sylvia Plath's children poems

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ABSTRACT

This article examines seventeen children poems by Sylvia Plath written in the years 1960-63, in relation to the poetics of romantic love. Drawing on motherhood studies (Klein, 1975; O'Reilly, 2010; Rich, 1976; Winnicott, 1956, 1965, 1967), the maternal shift in psychoanalysis (see Bueskens, 2014: 3-6), and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1950, 1969, 1988), it reads love as a continuous human disposition, informed by one's attachment history, and realized at different stages of one's life (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). It specifically refers to Daniel Stern's and Anthony Giddens's largely overlapping concepts of maternal and romantic love to argue that Plath's children poems are significantly infused with a poetics of romantic love. This poetics, however, becomes gradually compromised by a poetics of ambivalence, withdrawal, and self-effacement.

KEYWORDS: Sylvia Plath, children poems, love, romantic love, maternal love, attachment, motherhood.

1. THEORIZING THE MATERNAL PLATH

This paper examines seventeen children poems written by Sylvia Plath, focusing on the ways in which she engages in the poetics of romantic love¹. Plath wrote the poems in a relatively short period of three years between 1960, when her daughter Frieda was born, and her own death in 1963. The earliest of the analyzed poems, "You're," was written three months before Frieda's birth. The following three, "Love Letter," "Magi," and "Morning Song," directly address Plath's early experience of mothering a daughter. The next two, "Heavy Women" and "Three Women," written after the poet's miscarried pregnancy in

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February 1961, are less autobiographically explicit. The latter, which is the longest of Plath's poems, introduces three maternal voices: that of a self-fulfilled mother, that of a woman suffering from infertility, and that of a mother of an unwanted child. The voices oscillate between delight and despair in what becomes a complex mosaic of maternal ruminations. Finally, the twelve poems written in the years 1962-63, most of which were originally published in the 1965 *Ariel*, recognize two significant events in the poet's life: the birth of her son in January 1962 and the departure of her husband in June of the same year. Among them are: three poems that address the little Nicholas: "For a Fatherless Son," "Nick and the Candlestick," and "The Night Dances"; the distressing "By Candlelight," "Stopped Dead," and "Lesbos"; the tender "Letter in November" and "Kindness"; the ambiguous "Medusa" and "Child"; and the final "Edge." This paper aims to demonstrate that Plath, who still tends to be perceived as tormented and dismal, in her children poems extensively engages in the poetics of joy, passion and romantic love. This poetics, however, especially in the post-1961 poems, is compromised by one of ambivalence and withdrawal.

The analysis of Plath's romantic poetics is supported by several theoretical lenses that acknowledge the convergences between maternal and romantic love. Among them, the works of two scholars are central: psychologist Daniel Stern and sociologist Anthony Giddens. At the 2003 conference *What Do Mothers Want?* Stern stated that the mother is "one who literally falls in love with her baby" (in Abram, 2008: 71). He compared maternal love to a metaphorical "plummeting into" the soul of the other, which involves an "enormous overvaluation" of the child, just like an early lover overvalues his or her partner (in Abram, 2008, 71). Concurrently, in his book *Transformations of Intimacy*, Giddens defines romantic love as involving a "temporary idealization of the other" (1992: 39), which "is incompatible with lust and with earthly sexuality" and presumes "a psychic communication, a meeting of souls which is reparative in character" (45)². Additionally, in Giddens' view, romantic love "presumes that a durable emotional tie can be established with the other on the basis of qualities intrinsic to that tie itself" (1992: 2). This statement corresponds to Stern's description of the mother-child bond, which involves a mutual creation of shared pleasure, joy, surprise, delight, peaceful moments and silences resolving distress (Stern, 1977). Finally, while Giddens writes of a "fusion of ideals of romantic love and motherhood" (1992: 43), Stern maintains that "the repertoire of a mother's actions toward her infant ... would be considered outright bizarre if performed toward anyone but an infant ... or perhaps a lover" (1977: 24). Clearly, both scholars produce strikingly similar accounts of maternal and romantic love, underscoring such qualities as emotional intensity, intimacy, mutuality and idealization.

On a more general plane, the analysis of Plath's poetic output is framed with three bodies of scholarship: motherhood studies (Klein, 1975; O'Reilly, 2010; Rich, 1976; Winnicott, 1956, 1965, 1967), the maternal turn in psychoanalysis (see Bueskens, 2014: 3-6)

and John Bowlby's attachment theory³. All these frameworks centre on the lived mothering experience, and the latter additionally argues that "attachment behavior [characterizes] human beings from the cradle to the grave" (Bowlby, 1979: 129). Building on Bowlby's idea, in their 1987 article "Romantic Love Conceptualized as an Attachment Process," Cindy Hazan and Philip Shaver discuss love as an attachment process, which may be realized at various stages of life, yet is essentially informed by one's attachment history (1987: 511). Hazan and Shaver's conceptualization of love brings to limelight the commonalities between Giddens' and Stern's definitions of love, since it construes both romantic and maternal love as derivative of the same basic human need to attach. At the same time, the focus on the lived mothering experience that informs both motherhood studies and mother-oriented psychoanalysis allows one to explore the complexity of Plath's poetic voice in both its romantic and conflictual dimensions.

In fact, there is very little scholarship on the maternal Plath. Usually, scholars tend to focus on the tragic dimensions of the poet's life, exploring the premature death of her father, the troubled relationships with her mother and with her husband, and on her self-inflicted death (Axelrod, 1990; Butscher, 1976; Holbrook, 1968, 1976; Rose, 1991; Stevenson, 1990). If Plath's motherhood is at all discussed, the focus similarly tends to be on death-related themes and emotional hardships, which very often leads to psychoanalyzing Plath, mostly in relation to her parents and husband. Aneesh Barai notes: "While much criticism of Sylvia Plath has been devoted to her father, and more recently, to blaming her mother through *The Bell Jar* (1963) and her letters, very little has been said about her children's literature or Plath as a mother herself, though she had two children" (2015: 39). The scarcity of the scholarship on the maternal Plath is also partly due to the fact that lived mothering has been put under academic scrutiny only for several decades. This paper does not intend to eradicate the importance of Plath's relationships with her parents or husband, but rather propose a less reductionist reading of her poetic output, which may shed new light both on the poems and on the functioning of the maternal subject.

My unorthodox reading of Plath is backed by several authors who only recently have addressed the maternal dimensions of the poet's life. Susan Bassnett notes that Plath's children poems reflect a "passionate mother-love in the detailed beauty of imagery" and represent children with "love and tenderness" (2005: 95). Aneesh Barai describes Plath's pre-pregnancy children's books as a "playful and pleasurable fantasy of maternity" (2015: 39), while acknowledging the ambivalence that runs through her poems once she had children. He states that poems such as "Lesbos," "Stopped Dead," and "Child" express "both love and hatred for, boredom and fascination with her children" (2015: 51). *New Yorker's* Dan Chiasson argues that the posthumously published *Ariel*, "despite the tragedy that attends it, is a book with much joy between its covers" (Chiasson, 2013, para. 8). What is more, Chiasson finds the middle part of Plath's poem "Nick and the Candlestick" "the most compassionate

remarks ever made about a child” (2013, para. 7). All these authors underscore the vitality in Plath’s children poems, acknowledging at the same time the complexity of her maternal experience. My methodological choice is reinforced by Plath’s alliance with the confessional poets, who focused on the intensely subjective experience, producing personal accounts of life events (Cuddon, 1999). Barai overtly points to a two-fold character of Plath’s children poems. He maintains that, in her poems, Plath “sought a means to express herself as both a poet and a mother” (2015: 40) and wanted to “speak to the child in a voice that is distinctly hers – both maternal and poetic” (51). This claim is supported by the poet, who in a 1962 interview stated: “[my] poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have” (in Orr, 1962, para. 20). In fact, in the poems, Plath’s speaking voice either overtly addresses her children, or refers to her maternal experience in a more convoluted way. This paper assumes a similarly psychobiographical approach, linking the biography of the author with her creative output.

2. THE POEMS OF DELIGHT AND ASTONISHMENT

One of the most prominent features of Plath’s poems for and about her children is her being in love with them. Titles such as “Love Letter,” “Morning Song” and “The Night Dances” indicate her romantic involvement, which is confirmed by the poems’ contents. An overvaluation of her children runs through her other poems. For example, one of the voices in “Three Women” confesses:

I shall meditate upon my little son.
 He does not walk. He does not speak a word.
 He is still swaddled in white bands.
 But he is pink and perfect. He smiles so frequently.
 I have papered his room with big roses,
 I have painted little hearts on everything⁴.

The children seduce the mother’s speaking voice, as it takes delight in their wisdom – “[You are t] rawling your dark as owls do” (“You’re”) – and linguistic skills: “And now you try / Your handful of notes; / The clear vowels rise like balloons” (“Morning Song”). Plath also echoes the poetics of romantic love in her astonishment at what is happening to her: “O love, how did you get here?” (“Nick and the Candlestick”) and her perceiving the love encounter as an undeserved gift; in “For a Fatherless Son,” she tells her son “your smiles are found money.” Like in the case of romantic love, Plath’s voice hopes for reciprocity: “I will him [...] to love me as I love him” (“Three Women”). The poet also engages in speculative

imagery (in "Child," she writes: "Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing. / I want to fill it with color and ducks"), which further enhances analogies between maternal and romantic love. Daniel Stern notes: "Mutual gaze is a potent interpersonal event which ... evokes strong feelings" and goes on to argue that, unless they are mother and infant, two people gaze into each other's eyes without speech only if they are making love or already have (1977: 34). The mother-child gaze and the lovers' gaze turn out the only instances in which the exchange is so intimate, durational and cathected. Plath's employment of the poetics of specularization, idealization, intimacy and romantic involvement threads the common tropes of Stern's and Giddens' definitions of love.

Another powerful feature of Plath's children poems is her focus on the affective stimulation of the body, which in her poems becomes a conduit for the metaphysical. Parallel to Giddens' claim that romantic love involves a "cluster of beliefs and ideals geared to transcendence" (1992: 45), Plath employs a poetics that endows the mother-child encounter with a metaphysical potential. For example, in "Magi," Plath reverses the traditional connotative vectors of the rational and the bodily, making the body a vehicle into metaphysics:

The abstracts hover like dull angels: [...]
 Their whiteness bears no relation to laundry,
 Snow, chalk or suchlike. They're
 The real thing, all right: the Good, the True [...]

Loveless as the multiplication table.
 While the child smiles into thin air. [...]

[To her] Love [is] the mother of milk, no theory.
 They mistake their star, these papery godfolk.

The poet rejects the disembodied tradition of Western philosophy – "They want the crib of some lamp-headed Plato" – to reveal its inherent deficiency: "What girl ever flourished in such company?". In "Love letter," the encounter with the child also brings the bodily and the transcendental together, as the poet explains to her daughter in an almost eschatological voice: "Not easy to state the change you made. / If I'm alive now, then I was dead [...] I started to bud like a March twig: / An arm and a leg, an arm, a leg. / From stone to cloud, so I ascended." In what follows, Plath overtly refers to the divine principle, thus illustrating Giddens' claim that love has "a quality of enchantment which can be religious in its fervor" (1992: 38). She goes on to write: "Now I resemble a sort of god / Floating through the air in my soul-shift / Pure as a pane of ice. It's a gift" ("Love Letter"). Plath's juxtaposition of "dull" Western rationality with the embodied yet metaphysical encounter with the child

echoes Giddens' assertion that love can circumvent rationality as a "medium of transcendence" (1992: 203).

A transcendent potential of love can also be found in Plath's other children poems. In "Heavy Women," the physical state of being pregnant is described through the imagery of what is elusive and beyond cognition. One of the voices describes pregnant women in the following way:

Irrefutable, beautifully smug
As Venus, pedestaled on a half-shell [...]
Over each weighty stomach a face
Floats calm as a moon or a cloud. [...]

The dark still nurses its secret.
On the green hill, under the thorn trees,
They listen for the millennium
The knock of the small, new heart.

Plath's oxymoronic equation of "the millennium" with the beating of a "small, new heart" contains a clear transcendent quality. It brings together the concrete (yet unknown) body of a child with the indeterminate profoundness of a mutual future. This unsettling experience of carrying an unknown child inside one's body evades rational thinking by being both absolutely concrete (happening within one's body) and beyond cognitive grasp. The same sense of paradox is manifest in "Three Women," where a pregnant woman wonders: "The doctors move among us as if our bigness / Frightened the mind. They smile like fools. / [...] And what if they found themselves surprised, as I did? / They would go mad with it." Yet, while the doctors are confronted with the "surprise" only vicariously, the woman lives it with her own body. Another of the voices in the poem oscillates between alienation and clarity, wondering:

Who is he, this blue, furious boy,
Shiny and strange, as if he had hurtled from a star? [...]

What did my fingers do before they held him?
What did my heart do, with its love?
I have never seen a thing so clear. [...]
I shall not let go.

Similarly, in "Love Letter," the poet tells her new-born daughter: "I wasn't fooled. I knew you at once." These poetic images not only illustrate but amplify Giddens' account of the romantic "love at first sight" (1992: 40), which he defines as a moment of instant

recognition. According to Giddens, in romantic love, the “first glance” is a “communicative gesture, an intuitive grasp of qualities of the other” which translates into “a process of attraction to someone who can make one’s life ... ‘complete’” (1992: 40). The above passages from Plath echo Giddens’ words, while exposing the illusory nature of the epiphany: the child is both organically close and radically unknown.

The intimate physicality of the mother-child relationship introduces an array of more detailed parallels with romantic love. Among them are: employing a private language and expressing feelings *via* music (serenading/love songs and lullabies), inventing private rituals and day routines, calling the loved one by pet names and other words of endearment. For example, a lullaby rhythm is replicated throughout the poem “Nick and the Candlestick,” while its very title alludes to a classical nursery rhyme: “Jack be nimble, / Jack be quick, / Jack jump over / The candlestick.” Traces of a private language, the daughter’s baby talk, survive in the draft version of “Balloons” which contains the line: “Boons, you say, boons, boons” (in Christodoulides, 2001: 168). Private rituals and day routines are poetically addressed in “Letter in November,” where the thought of “babies’ hair” lovingly cushions Plath, making her “flushed,” “warm” and “stupidly happy,” with her wellingtons “squelching and squelching through the beautiful red” of the autumn. Plath’s words of endearment, which conjure up imagery of flowers, jewels and animals, further underscore the intimate character of the relationship, much like in adult romantic relationships. Plath multiplies similes, liking the children to a “bud,” “stalk without wrinkle,” “ruby,” “small love,” and “high-riser, my little loaf[.]” She also uses floral expressions, most notably roses and lilies⁵. In “Kindness,” she simply states: “You [Kindness] hand me two children, two roses.” In “The Night Dances,” she marvels at her son, praising “the gift / Of your small breath, the drenched grass / Smell of your sleeps, lilies, lilies,” while in “Child,” she compares her daughter to an April snowdrop⁶ and the unique Indian pipe. Indian pipes are native American flowers that “contain no chlorophyll [thus] have pure white stems and leaves” and “cannot be picked because they bruise and disintegrate if they are touched” (Tunstall, 2009: 235). Here, the children are imaged as vulnerable and precious to the point of becoming untouchable.

Plath’s acknowledgment of her children’s beauty and uniqueness, paired with their fragility and elusiveness, is underscored by the poet’s sense of insecurity when confronted with the unknown experience of mothering. For example, as Aneesh Barai notes, in “Poem for a Birthday,” “the line after ‘My belly moves,’ is ‘I must make more maps,’” which envisions Plath’s experiences of maternity as “the charting of new territories” (2015: 52). This anxiety echoes the anguish of an early romantic involvement when what is most precious is at the same time beyond one’s control and possibly beyond one’s cognition: it happens in and to one, yet is beyond one’s calculation. In the case of motherhood, this anxiety is both epistemological and existential, as it primarily happens within the maternal body. Julia Kristeva notes that “motherhood is the very embodiment of subjectivity in

process” as the “mother is never the absolute master of the whole experience [which] takes place at the level of the organism, not the subject” (Christodoulides, 2001: 76). Elsewhere, Kristeva describes pregnancy as a state in which: “It happens, but I’m not there,” and: “I cannot realize it, but it goes on” (Kristeva, 1982: 237). Plath’s poetic words faithfully echo Kristeva’s: “What happens in me will happen without attention / [...] I cannot help smiling at what it is I know. / Leaves and petals attend me. I am ready” (“Three Women”). In the case of maternal love, romantic love’s incalculability of the encounter becomes even more radical. It is both affective and physical: the child is both ultimately unknown and physically enclosed within one’s body.

Significantly – and this is possibly the strongest argument that allows me to discuss the romantic *jouissance* in the otherwise much tormented poems – Plath’s poetic voice draws tight connections between her being in love with her children and her being alive. Romantic love’s clichés (“you are my life,” “you make me feel alive”) find a more nuanced expression in Plath’s children poems, where life and love come together in the image of a protective haven built for the children to keep them immune to external dangers. Lucy Tunstall notes: “Many of the poems work to establish a protective sanctuary,” utilizing metaphors of caves, safe hiding places, and sanctuaries (2009: 240). For example, in “Three Women,” a poem set in a maternity ward, one of the voices vows: “I shall be a wall and a roof, protecting. / I shall be a sky and a hill of good.” In her analysis of the poem, Linda Fraser notes that, when confronted with the mechanic automatism of the maternity ward, the mother’s voice manages to “create a private, linguistic sanctuary” (1999: 561) as a defence mechanism against the hostile environment of the hospital. Further on, the critic notes that the mother becomes “‘a river of milk,’ [as] she continues to plan strategies to save [her child]” and will make use of “her body and her own language, her ‘little lullaby’ to be a wall, ‘a bandage to [the child’s] hurt’” (1999: 562). The mother, Fraser notes, will use all her bodily and psychic resources to protect her child from the mechanic, scientific environment of the hospital ward.

However, even though the poet conjures up metaphors of love and protection, they are offset by the poems’ sustained ambivalence towards a dyadic unification with the children. Already in 1956, Donald Winnicott equated the state of early motherhood, or what he termed “primary maternal occupation,” with “temporary illness” (in Abram, 2008: 22), which echoes an early romantic involvement. Both in romantic love and in the early mother-child bond, the sensation of mutual merging may be experienced as so powerful as to border on madness. In their analysis of early romantic involvements, psychologists Albert Wakin and Duyen Vo compare this state to a state of mental derangement which involves “intrusive and obsessive thoughts, feelings and behaviors from euphoria to despair, contingent on perceived emotional reciprocation” (2015: 1). A similar sensation may be experienced by a young mother who, even after birth, may suspend her subjectivity in the dyadic relationship. Within a psychoanalytical frame, a sense of merging with the loved one suggests Freud’s “oceanic

feeling.” According to Freud, we succumb to the oceanic feeling every time we are unable to distinguish our self from what we felt as infants at our mothers’ breasts (1962: 11)⁷. Building on Freud, Daniel Stern maintains that it is not only the child who is ignorant of its bodily boundaries, but also the mother who temporarily suspends her sense of separateness when forming a dyadic union with the child (in Abram, 2008: 71-72). Stern’s description: “when minds interpenetrate, I know what you know, I feel what you feel” (1977: 72) echoes an early romantic involvement (Giddens’ “a psychic communication” or “a meeting of souls”) when lovers experience themselves as a connecting vessel of mutual affect or even as “one organism.” However, in Plath’s children poems, the theme of merging marks a breakpoint with the poetics of romantic love, ushering in a poetics of ambivalence and withdrawal.

3. THE POEMS OF AMBIVALENCE AND SELF-EFFACEMENT

Even though in her children poems Plath expresses intense fascination with the embodied intimacy of the relationship, she does not envision herself as merging with her children. The poetic voice remains ambivalent about experiencing the mother-child dyad as a potential locus of mutual affect rooted in secure attachment. For example, Aneesh Barai observes that many critics note “the double valency” of the last line of “Medusa”: “There is nothing between us.” Barai points to the inherent paradox that the line contains, as it can either “indicate a total severing of the connection with the mother,” or paradoxically, “inseparability from the mother” (2015: 48). This structural ambivalence allows, in Barai’s view, “only for extremes of rejection or identification, offering no middle ground” (2015: 48). In other poems, such tension is abundant, with the poetic voice being both seduced into the relationship and constantly on guard not to make the jump. Nephie Christodoulides close-reads “Morning Song” and “For a Fatherless Son” to observe that: “On one level, [Plath’s] mother-personae experience the kind of motherhood that takes place outside themselves and ‘stand round blankly as walls.’ On another level, they oscillate [...] between authentication in motherhood and effacement: [...] ‘I look in / And find no face but my own.’” (2001: 7). Another example of this intersubjective ambivalence can be found in the early version of “Nick and the Candlestick” where Plath comes close to merging with her son, yet remains distinct: “The mirror floats us at one candle power. We smile and stare. That’s you. That’s me” (in Christodoulides, 2001: 122). Carmen Birkle also points to such ambiguity, noting that very often in Plath’s children poems, “the relationship between mother and child is compared to the one between cloud and mirror. The mother gives birth to a child, and the cloud distills the mirror. These are two parallel actions whose common denominator is that the agent effaces herself through the action” (1996: 75). What is more, even though Plath employs watery metaphors to talk about her children (referring to them as “fish” and to

herself as “a river of milk)⁸, which is reminiscent of Freud’s oceanic feeling, the merging always comes to a halt. For example, in “Morning song” the poet writes: “I wake to listen: / A far sea moves in my ear. / One cry, and I stumble from bed.” On the one hand, the “far sea” that draws Plath to her child evokes oceanic dimensions; on the other hand, the serenity of the metaphor is disturbed by the displeasure of having to stumble from bed in the middle of the night and the divisive effect of “I” and “my.” In “Three Women,” one of the maternal voices wishes her child to be mediocre – that is not like her, – since it is the exception that “hurts his mother’s heart.” She thus distances herself from the son, hoping for him to be safe: “I shall meditate upon normality. / ... I do not want him to be exceptional. / It is the exception that interests the devil.” The above quotes may be informative of the poet’s visceral desire to mother without any inhibitions, while revealing her profound ambivalence towards being subsumed into her children.

The ambivalence of Plath’s maternal voice becomes even more pronounced in the poems written in the final months of her life, such as “Lesbos,” “Stopped Dead” and ‘By Candlelight.’ There, she employs a poetics of frenziness, despair, or even murder. In “Lesbos,” written three months after her husband had left, the speaking voice screams out the impossibility of solitary motherhood:

Viciousness in the kitchen!
 The potatoes hiss. [...]
 And my child – look at her, face down on the floor,
 Little unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear –
 Why she is schizophrenic,
 Her face red and white, a panic, [...]
 You say I should drown my girl.
 She’ll cut her throat at ten if she’s mad at two.

There is a palpable sense of coercion and helplessness, both in the mother and the child, which triggers images of annihilation: the daughter, face-down on the floor is kicking to disappear, and the mother, “doped and thick” from her sleeping pill is considering infanticide to protect her child from a future suicide. In the next stanza, the poet painfully compares the “smog of cooking” to the “smog of hell.” Similarly, in “Stopped Dead,” the speaking voice proclaims: “There is always a bloody baby in the air,” and asks the child: “Who do you think I am, / Uncle, uncle? / Sad Hamlet, with a knife? / Where do you stash your life?” In both poems, the mother’s inability to soothe the child and herself translates into a sense of despair and murderous fantasies.

In other poems written around that time the mother is equally helpless, yet searches for alternative agents to provide her children with care and protection. Like “Lesbos” and “Stopped Dead,” the poem “By Candlelight” features a mother who fails to comfort her

child: "You clutch your bars. / My singing makes you roar." The child, described as a "balled hedgehog," is both vulnerable and self-defensive against its mother. Resigned, the mother imagines a sculpture of a small, brassy Atlas to protect the child in her place. This Atlas:

Kneels, back bent, as best he can

Hefting his white pillar with the light
That keeps the sky at bay,
The sack of black! It is everywhere, tight, tight!
He is yours, the little brassy Atlas –
Poor heirloom, all you have [...]

Described as "poor heirloom," the small Atlas is a miserable ersatz of maternal care, yet seems the only thing the mother has to offer.

The apocalyptic "Nick and the Candlestick" also narrates the mother's efforts to protect the child despite her being helpless. Plath employs Messianic tropes and refers to her son as to "the baby in the barn," treating him as a harbinger of salvation and new hope in a land of darkness and death. Dan Chiasson argues that in the poem, "[Plath] redoes the birth of little Nicholas Hughes as the birth of Christ, an event that resets time" (2013, para. 7). Plath's own contextualization of the poem, which she voiced on the BBC radio in 1962, confirms Chiasson's claim. On the program, she recalled the image that had inspired her to write the poem: "[A] mother nurses her baby son by candlelight and finds in him a beauty which, while it may not ward off the world's ill, does redeem her share of it" (in *Collected Poems*, 1992: 294). Like Jesus, the child is rendered a source of redemption: it is his beauty that allows the mother to, even temporarily, make amends with the world. On the one hand, then, the quote echoes Giddens' claim that through love "the flawed individual is made whole" (1992: 45) and that love is reparative in character. On the other hand, it reverses the mother-child roles: the son is imbued with protective powers that redeem the mother's share of the world's ills. The poem itself suggests a similar interpretation; the maternal voice explains to baby Nicholas: "The blood blooms clean / In you, ruby. / The pain / You wake to is not yours." In light of the BBC radio quote, this passage begs questions concerning the origin of the pain. If the pain is not the child's, whose is it? Is it the pain of "the world's ill"? Or is it the mother's pain that the baby Jesus-Nicholas is to redeem? I would suggest that if the latter is true, then both "By Candlelight" and "Nick and the Candlestick" employ different strategies to protect the children, while effacing the mother.

And yet, Plath's final poem "Edge," written six days before the poet's self-inflicted death, contradicts the narrative of maternal withdrawal. Instead, it offers a deeply unsettling image of a mother united with her children in mutual death. When dead, the mother fantasizes her children coiled "One at each little / Pitcher of milk, now empty." Dying, she

takes them with her, and there is much tenderness in this otherwise shattering image. The poet writes:

She has folded
Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

This merging of subjectivities indexes a halt in Plath's poetic imaginary. The poet does not transition from a poetics of the early infatuation with her children into one of a sustained relationship of secure attachment. Instead, she offers a horrifying image of a post-mortem unification which dismally enacts Freud's oceanic feeling. Thus, I would contend that in Plath's final children poems ("By Candlelight," "Nick and the Candlestick" and "Edge"), the poetics of romantic love gravitates into one of despair and self-effacement, as the poems oscillate between an imagery of protective separation and that of deadly unification.

4. CONCLUSION

In her children poems, Sylvia Plath extensively engages in the poetics of romantic love. Expressions of being alive and overwhelmed, of uniqueness and intimacy, and of idealizing the love objects— all these romantic tropes are to be found in her poems. On the one hand, this profusion of romantic tropes allows one for a less reductionist approach to Plath, both as a poet and as a mother, and for a revision of the customary separation of children love and romantic love, as exemplified in the writings of Giddens and Stern. On the other hand, the poetics of maternal ambivalence that is present in the poems welcomes a reading of maternal love along the lines of deficiency and vulnerability. Specifically, Plath's ambivalence towards a poetics of merging with her children, paired with her strife to protect them, opens a gate that allows us to "rethink identification along the lines of imperfection or partialities" (Barai, 2015: 48) when it comes to attachment and love. Once we adopt this lens, Plath's articulations of maternal love and vulnerability become useful in thinking about all other subjects who were once children and in their adult life engage in various love relationships, always already driven by their attachment history.

NOTES

- 1 I use the term “children poems” to differentiate them from “children’s poems,” that is, poems written by or for children. I understand this term as poems written by Plath that feature maternity and children as their main topic. I want to thank my two anonymous reviewers for pointing this ambivalence to me and other insightful comments.
- 2 In my comparative reading of Stern’s and Giddens’ ideas, Giddens’ downplaying of eroticism is crucial, as in Western culture, the possible eroticism of the mother-child relationship is vastly tabooed (Hazan & Shaver, 1987: 522; Heffernan, Fraley, Stern, 1977; Vicary & Brumbaugh, 2012: 690). In Giddens’ words: “attraction is part of romantic love, however, it has to be separated quite sharply from the sexual/erotic compulsions” and that “[i]n romantic love attachments, the element of sublime love tends to predominate over that of sexual ardour” (1992: 40). I thus evade treading the risky ground of eroticism by following Giddens’ and attachment theory’s interest in the non-erotic.
- 3 Throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, evacuating from Freud’s emphasis on the centrality of the paternal function, Melanie Klein, John Bowlby and Donald Winnicott focused on the primacy of one’s relationship with the mother, generating a new potential for academic interest (Bowlby, 1969; Klein, 1975; Winnicott 1956, 1965, 1967). This shift inspired the emergence of motherhood studies in the 2000s (O’Reilly 2010), which was anticipated and inspired by the publication of Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1976). In her book, Rich makes the now classical distinction between motherhood understood as institution and motherhood understood as lived experience. Ann Abram notes: “It is only in the latter half of the twentieth century that we have begun to recognize the mother’s subjectivity – that she has needs, desire, and agency of her own, separate from and simultaneously connected to those she loves” (2008: 11). Like the post-maternal turn psychoanalysis (with which it overlaps), motherhood studies theorizes the formation of subjectivity within a predominantly relational paradigm and not merely as one’s successful or unsuccessful grappling with the Oedipal complex.
- 4 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Plath’s poetry come from *The Collected Poems*, edited by Ted Hughes. New York: Harper Perennial, 1992.
- 5 In her paper on the pastoral in Sylvia Plath’s poetry, Lucy Tunstall discusses the connotative associations of lilies: beauty, purity, fragility and, possibly, mortality (2009: 233).
- 6 Frieda was born on the 1st of April.
- 7 I owe this idea to Janet S. Zehr, who discusses it in connection to Walt Whitman’s poem “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”, the phrase Nephie Christodoulides uses as the title of her analysis of Plath’s poetry.
- 8 In her analysis of Plath’s poetry, Nephie Christodoulides discusses the centrality of ocean-related metaphors in Plath’s children writing (e.g. submarine bed) linking it to Plath’s claim that the ocean was an absolutely central metaphor in her childhood (2001: 25-26).

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