

Wailing on Wanting:

The Traumatizing Influence of Parental Figures in Sylvia Plath's "I Want, I Want" and "The Colossus"

by Nicole Salama

On February 19, 1956, Sylvia Plath wrote in her journal about her desire for strong parental figures: "I need a father. I need a mother. I need some older, wiser being to cry to. I talk to God, but the sky is empty, and Orion walks by and doesn't speak" (Plath, 199). Even during her adult life, Plath clearly struggled with conceptions of parental relationships. The religious and mythological comparison between parents, God, and Orion suggests a perpetual failure of these relationships to be lasting and meaningful. This parallel between parents and divine figures appears regularly in Plath's poetry, often in conjunction with depictions of the development of youthful figures. "I Want, I Want" and "The Colossus" both present the parent-child relationship as fundamentally traumatizing. By exploring ancient or religious narratives of these relationships, Plath pivots from the autobiographical to depict a world in which the very state of childhood is, at root, a traumatic position. In Plath's poetry, parents, whether mortal or divine, at best fail to adequately fulfill the needs of their children, or at worst, abuse them during the developmental period when they are most vulnerable.

Both Plath's "I Want, I Want" and "The

Colossus" examine the traumatic impact of parental figures on youthful subjects. The poems appear in Plath's first collection of poetry also titled *The Colossus*, which was originally published in 1960 by Heinemann. Plath wrote "I Want, I Want" two years earlier in 1958, and "The Colossus" in 1959. In the overlooked "I Want, I Want," Plath transforms the Christian narrative of salvation into a quintessential example of extreme childhood trauma. She describes hallmark scenes of the narrative, specifically Christ's nativity, the creation of the world, and Christ's crucifixion to expose the traumatic existence of the Christ Child. Plath interweaves the baby, his mother, and his father, connecting them primarily through explicitly naming the parents in relation to the infant and through the limited wailing action of the child. While the mother's failure to create as an earth goddess deity figure traumatizes her child, the father's apathetic creation of predatory creatures displays his brutal intentions for his son. In contrast, "The Colossus" examines the attempt of an apparently adult daughter to reassemble a statue of her father despite the continuous futility of her labor. Plath describes both the perpetual work of the speaker and her evident

desire for communication with her father, whose absence traumatizes the speaker. However, by the conclusion of the poem, the speaker ultimately accomplishes neither of these goals, and Plath provides no evidence of any progress. Instead, Plath employs miniature imagery to portray the speaker as childlike. Additionally, the speaker's failure to adequately communicate with her father traumatically suspends her development. Plath ultimately creates an ever-youthful speaker frozen in the recurring experience of her failed relationship with her father.

In the world of Plath studies, critics have most often deployed trauma theory to analyze her literature through a biographical lens, viewing and presenting her poetry as primarily confessional. Lynda Bundtzen links Plath's fascination with psychoanalysis to the traumatic experience of her father's death during Plath's childhood, as well as the unique relationship Plath had with her mother, one fraught with both love and tension. Bundtzen analyzes Plath's "Daddy" to demonstrate both the overwhelming presence of trauma in Plath's poetry and her explicit use of psychoanalysis to shape her work. Her analysis also links the dissolution of Plath's marriage to Ted Hughes after she discovers his affair with the early passing of Plath's father, acknowledging that this death acts an instigating trauma during her childhood (47). Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick also delves into Plath's personal trauma as a means of identifying key moments in her later poetry in her article "Interpretations and Implications of Trauma and Narrative in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*." In *Ariel*, Plath struggles "to articulate a response to trauma, whether it is a personal, local, or global one in nature, and that may be due, in part, to Plath's sensitivity to trauma stories and to her own tragic past and outlook on life" (121). Goodspeed-Chadwick then conflates Plath's marital troubles and loss of her father with the trauma evident in her poetry, presenting a

gendered reading of trauma in Plath's *Ariel*, as is typical of Plath scholarship.¹

Although it is often useful to understand Plath's biography, too extreme a dependence on the biographical details of her life can limit potential readings of her work. Scholarship on trauma in Plath's work tends to focus on confessional readings of her later poems, psychoanalyzing Plath through her poetry. However, these readings neglect other important concerns of the poetry while often limiting any understanding of Plath's speakers to a confessional, biographical representation of Plath herself. In the prologue to her biography on Plath, Heather Clark astutely notes, "Plath's poems now seem locked in a fixed context: 'confessional,' 'feminist.' Yet she wrote her poems before these terms entered the cultural imagination" (xxii). Plath's poetry brilliantly invites readers to explore a variety of themes and issues, of which her life is only a part. As such, the readings I propose here are not designed to usurp prior biographical readings but to supplement and, at times, complicate them by reading the infant subject of "I Want, I Want" and the speaker of "The Colossus" as distinct figures from Plath herself. These interpretations emphasize Plath's nuanced vision of childhood as an essentially traumatic state of being, not only for herself, but also as a marker of the human experience.

Cruelty and Indifference of the Christian Salvation Narrative in "I Want, I Want"

Very few critics examine "I Want, I Want" in

1 Kathleen Margaret Lant examines only the connotations of the female body as an adult in Plath's poetry, and Jooyoung Park focuses on images of a specifically maternal body. Meanwhile, though Jahan Ramazani departs from the norm by asserting that "Plath helped to free women poets from the prostrate role assigned by literary and gender codes to the female mourner," he also places her in a distinctly adult and gendered conversation (1,143).

their analysis of Plath. However, when scholars do include "I Want, I Want" in their research, they tend to only briefly interpret it to support a larger conclusion. These interpretations often emphasize the mother figure and Plath's own story rather than the highly symbolic features of the poem. Occasionally, these critics choose to focus on the mother in the poem rather than the child. This scholarship often arises from a tendency to force the poem to adhere to a confessional reading. For example, Pamela Smith deems "I Want, I Want" to be about Plath's "resentment of the tyrannical baby," suggesting that Frieda, Plath's daughter and eldest child, perhaps serves as the inspiration for such a figure (19). In drawing this conclusion to present a possible confessional reading of the poem, Smith overlooks that Plath wrote the poem more than a year prior to Frieda's birth in 1960. Nephie Christodoulides provides a more extensive reading of "I Want, I Want" in her book, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking: Motherhood in Sylvia Plath's Work*. However, her reading focuses solely on the abject relationship between mother and child that causes the child to turn to the father and ultimately relies on a confessional perspective. She describes the baby as the "daughter-persona" and conflates the child with Plath herself noting, "Like the baby god persona in the poem, Plath is hurled back and forth between two poles" (159; 163). Other scholars discuss infants in some of Plath's other work, again primarily to analyze motherhood. Nevertheless, this scholarship offers insights that can also be applied to "I Want, I Want." Maria Sanchez examines portrayals of culpable mothers in Plath's poetry, delineating failures of motherhood and the impact of those failures on children. Jooyoung Park explores the mother-daughter relationships in Plath's work. Of "I Want, I Want," Park argues that "deprived of a good mother, the narrator suffers complete and utter devastation" ("I Could Kill," 471). Park neglects to further consider the implications of this trauma, but her

article successfully presents the relationship of a mother with her child as one which continuously shapes both figures involved.

The distinct appearance of the baby in the first lines of "I Want, I Want" emphasizes the child's already traumatic life. Plath describes the infant subject of the poem as "the baby god / Immense, bald, though baby-headed" (ln. 1-2). The "immense" proportions of the baby's head portray it as uncharacteristically, extremely large for an infant. The phrase "bald, though baby-headed" establishes the physical traits of the child as an indicator of his trauma. The baby's baldness marks him as uncharacteristically old despite his evident youth. At this moment, he is also little more than a disembodied head. Plath's focus on the head of the child rather than the body as a whole provides the reader with a sense of decapitation as a physical manifestation of the child's trauma. The introduction of the baby figure, through its appearance at the start of the poem, mimics the infant's new introduction to the world after its emergence from the womb, clearly headfirst. By focusing on the baby himself at the beginning of the poem, Plath presents the very act of birthing as a kind of decapitation, the entrance of a wailing head into an indifferent world.

The poem quickly frames this massive child as a Christ figure. Jeannine Dobbs notes that the description of the child in "Moonrise," another piece by Plath, depicts "a figure resembling Father Time or perhaps Father Death, rather than a child. Thus, the birth or the anticipations of that experience includes its antithesis" (14). The depiction of the baby figure in "I Want, I Want" operates similarly. However, in this instance, Plath's description of the infant as "the baby god" immediately connects the baby figure to the infant Christ (ln. 1). Markey recognizes that "the 'Baby god,'" is "synonymous with Christ" (58). However, Christodoulides believes there are alternative, more convincing interpretations. She argues,

"The 'baby god' in the poem might be Jesus Christ himself, but the word "god" (written in lower case 'g') might be used ironically to denote any baby whose many demands always are given priority and must be satisfied at the expense of the mother's" (160). By disregarding the importance of the religious allusion, Christodoulides inaccurately discounts the importance of the Christian narrative Plath uses as a foundation for the entire poem. Plath's presentation of the baby figure as Christ promptly alludes to the traumatic death Christ is destined for, even at his birth. Birth thus becomes intimately connected with death in "I Want, I Want," just as Dobbs suggests of "Moonrise." The narrative of "I Want, I Want" becomes a retelling of the Christian salvation story, portraying the story of Christ's life as a terrifying tale that exposes the trauma of childhood.

Plath uses the baby's inarticulate cries to illustrate his lack of agency and inability to defend against the traumatic actions of his parents. She presents the baby as the primary subject figure of the poem by defining the other figures in relation to the child: as "mother" and "father." Despite his status as the primary subject figure of the poem, Plath limits the baby's actions to crying: "Cried out for the mother's dug" (ln. 3). Not only does the fragmentation of the child's language indicate trauma, but also the baby is not yet old enough to possess a grasp of language at all. In fact, Plath's first description of the baby as "open-mouthed" both alludes to the hunger of the child and physically prepares the baby to emit his wail (ln. 1). The child's cry imparts his basic needs rather than acting as a direct expression of the infant himself. After his mother denies him the basic satisfaction he requires, the baby violently hungers for blood: "Cried then for the father's blood" (ln. 5). Plath transforms the child's wail from one which voices the hunger of the baby to a cry for revenge against the

father. The desire for blood directly blames the father-figure for his child's early trauma. Dobbs describes the crying as "terrible, insatiable demands" that the baby makes (13). However, this interpretation places the blame on the infant rather than on his parents. The vengeful desire of the infant's second cry emphasizes that it is not the cry of the baby that is "terrible" but rather the failure or inaction of his respective parents to satisfy his needs. The infant's inability to take any action other than crying, along with his absence from the poem following this second cry, highlights his lack of agency. It is also important to recognize that the baby is not the speaker of the poem. Apart from the title, which will be discussed later, there is no mention of an "I." Plath presents the baby as another figure, rather than the speaker, of the poem, cementing his position as powerless: subject to the whims of his parents and unable to even communicate his own narrative.

The crying action also serves to highlight the baby's traumatic lack of nourishment from both of his parental figures. The action of the first stanza of the poem refers to an unsuccessful attempt at breastfeeding: "Open mouthed, the baby god /... Cried out for the mother's dug. / The dry volcanoes cracked and split, // Sand abraded the milkless lip" (ln. 1-5). In this "dry," desert-like environment, the baby's need for milk is met with "sand." The milk and nourishment that the child seeks become a desperate need rather than a new and temporary hunger. The caesura in the first line places further emphasis on the hungry crying of the child to indicate the immediacy of the need for nourishment that the child experiences. The end-stopped third line of the poem then highlights the basic nature of the need, presenting the child's cry for milk as normal by concluding the thought without providing any additional justification. Additionally, the "sand" indicates a premature roughening of the child because of the trauma that results from a failure

to satisfy his hunger. Since the mother's breasts are also described as "dry," Plath offers little hope of future nourishment for the child and directly attributes this problem to the mother's inability to provide. In her article on maternal culpability in Plath's work, Sanchez also notes of another poem that the mother figure's "lack of multiplicity or abundance signifies her lack of motherhood" (132). Sanchez's reading allows for a new conception of the baby's need to address his father in the second stanza of the poem. Upon realizing his mother's failure to provide nourishment, the baby then seeks an alternate form of satisfaction from his father: "Cried then for the father's blood" (ln. 6). Plath transforms the desire for physical nourishment into a desire for retribution. The appetite of the "baby god" to drink blood also alludes to the Last Supper. Plath thus fuses images of the child's nativity with an immediate need for retribution for the trauma he experiences as a result of the crucifixion. This desire indicates that the trauma disrupts the child's life enough to overwhelm natural need. However, like the child's plea for his mother's milk, this cry also ultimately remains unsatisfied, indicating the longevity of the trauma and predicting future bereavement.

In her description of the mother figure's difficulty breastfeeding her child, Plath illustrates that the traumatic experience of the mother in turn inflicts trauma on her child. Plath's description of "the mother's dug" is the only reference to the mother in the entirety of the poem (ln. 3). Plath thus positions her as an object instead of an actor. The description of the mother's breast as a "dug," or udder, portrays her in animalistic terms. Not only does this objectify the mother, but it also indicates that her primary purpose as a mother is to fulfill the physical needs of her child, which she ultimately does not accomplish. The next mention of the mother's breasts disconnects them from her: "The dry volcanoes cracked and split" (ln. 4). The mother devolves further here into an inanimate part

of nature. Her value then is diminished by her inability to perform her function. Though the volcanoes attempt to erupt, they are still "dry," and therefore unable to do so. Furthermore, the cracking and splitting of the mother's breasts describes the cutting and chafing the mother herself feels, producing blood as a result of her pain rather than milk. Interestingly, the baby rejects his mother's blood only to seek that of his father. The different requests the baby asks of his parents demonstrate that while the mother's inability to provide still hurts her child, the father's abuse is different because it is blatantly intentional. Unfortunately, the mother still inflicts trauma on the infant, though not as maliciously. Park argues that "the lack of boundaries between the m/other and the baby hint at a borderline state: There is no distinction between two bodies" ("Splitting Maternal Body," 94). However, as Sanchez notes of a different Plath poem, the failure to establish a bodily connection also proves traumatic: "The separation of mother and child result in injury: something has gone wrong with motherhood" (133). In the case of "I Want, I Want," as a result of the mother's inability to breastfeed the baby, the lack of bodily connection which the baby requires for nourishment conveys the trauma of the mother onto the infant.

Plath also emphasizes the traumatic impact of the mother figure by portraying her as an earth goddess who fails to create: "The dry volcanoes cracked and split" (ln. 4). Park believes that "the primordial mother in Plath's poems engenders the tremendous potential for creation" ("I Could Kill," 490). However, these "dry volcanoes" fail to emit magma and create no new land. Instead, all that remains of the failed eruption is the violent quaking and pressure which causes the volcanoes to "split." In his analysis of larger volcanic eruptions, S. Self argues that "huge explosive eruptions are one of the few natural phenomena that can produce global catastrophic effects" (2,074).

The cracking action of these volcanoes signifies this largescale catastrophic event. Though the description of the mother's breasts depicts her as a version of mother nature, the volcanic eruptions which serve as her method of creation do so through violent destruction. Additionally, the mother's inability to create in her role as earth goddess signifies the helplessness of the baby figure. Instead, nature is increasingly "dry" and dead rather than green and new as the presence of a typical earth goddess ought to engender. This dryness therefore transforms the baby and its connotations of newness into an already decrepit figure.

The father also clearly serves as a creator figure in the second stanza. Plath credits the father with the functionality of a variety of animals: "Who set wasp, wolf and shark to work, / Engineered the gannet's beak" (ln. 7-8). These lines portray the father figure as the creator God of the Bible in Genesis 1. Plath includes a variety of animals of air, land, and sea in reference to the fourth and fifth days of creation. Unlike the biblical account, Plath's use of the verbs "set" and "engineered" depict the creation process as mechanical, rather than one which exudes divine interest and care. The "work" which the father figure intends for these animals portrays them as tools. The father figure creates them specifically to accomplish work rather than to grant them life. Additionally, each of these animals are antagonistic, further creating an atmosphere of violence even in new creation. Nancy Hargrove notes that in Plath's poetry "God is associated with violent predatory animals" to portray his extreme brutality ("Christian Imagery," 12). Furthermore, by specifying the gannet, and particularly its beak, Plath draws attention to the bird's hunger and the hunting technique it uses to sate that hunger. In her overview of gannets and their characteristics, Katrina van Grouw describes the functionality of the beak and jaw of gannets: "A hinged upper mandible, special adaptations

in the articulation of the lower jaw, and flexible plates making up the bill's surface enable the large bill to open into an even larger gape, allowing the passage of all but the biggest fish" (143). Like the gannet, the father figure's creation of the child leaves the baby hungry. However, although the father creates the gannet's beak to enable the bird to feed itself adequately, he simultaneously allows his own child to starve.

Plath also describes the father figure's creation of man in ghastly terms. Even as they begin to inhabit their bodies, the new men have gaunt bodily forms: "Dry-eyed, the inveterate patriarch / raised his men of skin and bone" (ln. 9-10). Plath structures the first line of the third stanza in the same manner as the first line of the poem. The parallel syntax of the two lines emphasizes the father's apathy to the plight of both his son and his creation of man. In her brief mention of "I Want, I Want," Hargrove suggests that the poem "uses references to the crucified Christ to suggest that the world was created by a harsh and violent god as a place of anguish and suffering for its inhabitants" ("Christian Imagery," 14). While Hargrove's analysis accurately describes Plath's depiction of God, she fails to acknowledge that this violence in creation is evident even before Plath's description of Christ's crucifixion. The gaunt description of the men's bodies suggests the torture of the Holocaust, once again fusing images of new life with macabre, painful deaths. The "skin and bone" characterization of the men's bodies also suggests a similar hunger to that the baby continuously experiences throughout the poem. Plath thus twists the biblical sixth day of creation, which God deems "very good" in the Bible, into a horrific event (Genesis 1:29). Furthermore, by labeling the father figure as "dry-eyed" and "inveterate," Plath portrays him as rigid and unsympathetic in his violence.² The father's dryness also mimics

² Hargrove finds that the structure and rhyme scheme, or lack thereof, of the poem emphasizes the stri-

the mother's inability to breastfeed, reaffirming that the father is unable to nourish both his child and the men he creates. Through the father figure's creation of man, Plath emphasizes that he lacks empathy for his son.

Plath's version of the creation of man also serves to introduce the crucifixion scene of the poem. She begins the third and final stanza of the poem with the father figure's creation of his human subjects: "Dry-eyed, the inveterate patriarch / raised his men of skin and bone" (ln. 9-10). The separation of the creation of man from the rest of the Genesis 1 scene connects the creation of man more explicitly with the crucifixion of Christ. Plath then rearranges the order of events in the salvation narrative from creation, nativity, and crucifixion to nativity, then creation, and crucifixion. In doing so, she alters the causal need for Christ's death on the cross. In her analysis of Plath's spirituality, Jennifer Holden-Kirwan observes that in Plath's "Brasilia," "God's history of destruction is exposed in Mary's request to spare Jesus and prevent him from becoming the redeemer of humanity" (303). Although the mother figure is silent in "I Want, I Want," the same destructive tendency is evident in the father figure as there is no need for a redeemer at the time of the child's birth. Janice Markey identifies the crucifixion as unnecessary in the context of the poem: "Christ's death on the cross appears not as a sacrifice for the salvation of humanity, but rather as an egocentric act, for which the human community and not Christ will have to suffer" (58). However, she blatantly ignores the additional trauma which the Christ Child suffers as a result of the father's intent to torture all his creations. Rather than sending his son to redeem a preexisting creation, the father figure creates the necessity for his son's

dent content of the poem: "The complex syllabic pattern with an aberration in the third stanza (7-8-7-8, 8-7-8-7, 10-7-8-8) along with the absence of a set rhyme scheme reinforces the harshness of the content" (*Journey toward Ariel*, 205)

impending crucifixion. The men are therefore not only tortured by their birth themselves, but also become a tool of the father figure meant to torture the baby. Furthermore, by officially recognizing the father figure as a "patriarch," Plath not only references the patriarchal establishment of traditional Christian churches, but she also specifically alludes to the three biblical patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In doing so, Plath presents another gruesome biblical depiction of childhood trauma in Abraham's willingness to literally sacrifice his son Isaac at God's behest.³ Plath thus demonstrates a habitual tendency of the Christian God to demand inhumane sacrifice of children while also indicating multiple examples of fathers' apathy concerning their respective sons' lives. Additionally, by characterizing him as "inveterate," she presents this habit as essentially immutable, negating the possibility of hope for the cessation of the infant's trauma.

Unlike the baby figure, the new beings, whom the father-figure creates, do not seek revenge from the father for the traumatized bodies which they possess. Instead, they turn to the child. These men become "barbs on the crown of gilded wire, / Thorns on the bloody rose-stem" (ln. 11-12). Considering the "work" which the father creates animals to do, the work of these men, as the father-figure envisions it, becomes the torture that Christ experiences on the cross. Dobbs argues that these lines "vaguely suggest the crucifixion and set up a parallel between it and childbirth" (14). However, while Plath obviously depicts elements of the crucifixion, she does not compare it with childbirth. Instead, the crucifixion becomes the father's response to the baby's wailing. By making "barbs" and "thorns" the primary subjects of the final

³ Genesis 22:9-10 records a similar narrative of a father sacrificing a son: "Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son."

two lines of the poem, Plath emphasizes the traumatic torture of the incident rather than the majestic or salvific Christian implications. These “barbs” also evoke the image of barbed wire, once again dragging Christ into the more recent historical horrors of the Holocaust and inventing new methods of torture for the baby. Additionally, in the final line, only the thorns and the stem of the rose exist, without a blossom. While the baby in the first stanza is only a head, the rose head is loped off in the final stanza. The “bloody rose-stem” takes the place of the baby figure’s body, imprinting the trauma of the crucifixion upon him. However, the baby himself remains unmentioned in the latter portion of the poem. Plath reshapes the child’s body and omits further mention of him to indicate that the trauma of both birth and death on the cross severs the baby from potential possession of a human identity, reducing him to the pain he suffers. Luke Ferretter asserts that Plath identifies suffering with Christianity: “One of the ways in which Christian ideas and images are true, for Plath, is as representations of the complex psychological suffering of her poems’ speakers” (109). Although Ferretter does not mention the poem specifically, his analysis applies to “I Want, I Want.” Plath precludes the potential for Christ’s resurrection by ending the poem with the blood of his crucifixion. She thus strips the biblical salvation narrative of its redemptive nature, exposing the violence of both the nativity and the crucifixion for which it allows. The combination of these two events during the period of the baby’s infancy adds an extra layer of horror to the already gruesome events of the crucifixion of an adult.

The baby figure’s vague presence amidst his own crucifixion necessitates a deeper examination of the poem’s title, “I Want, I Want.” While there is no speaker for the poem, the baby claims the closest role to a speaker. The title reveals the meaning of the baby’s cries throughout the poem. The trauma of the child

indicates, however, that his “want” is a necessity rather than the implied desire. Although the word “want” appears as a verb, it also appropriates the definition of its noun version, evoking an atmosphere of deficiency and need, which the poem delineates. The presence of an “I” subject in the title but not in the content of the poem itself suggests the baby’s traumatic dissociation of self. Additionally, the repetition of the simple syntax “I want” twice in the title indicates the baby’s difficulty processing his own needs, then voicing them, and receiving a beneficial response. The title thus prefigures the structure of the entire poem as the baby’s cries shape it. The comma in the title also highlights the fragmentation of the child’s language. Plath’s use of a comma in the title rather than periods further emphasizes that the infant remains in a perpetual state of need, traumatizing him to the point at which both his development and his language fail. Finally, the title echoes Christ’s words on the cross as he cries: “I thirst” (John 19:28). Thus, Plath uses the title to foreshadow both the baby’s permanent “want” or lack of nourishment and the ending of his life at the conclusion of the poem.

Images of Size and Speech in “The Colossus”

Although the speaker of “The Colossus” appears as an adult, her labor, which centers completely around the reconstruction of an absent father figure, demonstrates that she occupies a traumatized mental state comparable to that of the infant in “I Want, I Want.” Through the speaker’s labor, Plath portrays the passing of time as meaningless in “The Colossus.” The beginning of the poem indicates a futility in work: “I shall never get you put together entirely / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed” (ln. 1-2). While Plath presents the speaker immediately, this introduction illustrates the reliance of the speaker’s identity on the work that occupies her. Plath uses the adverbs “never” and

“entirely” to illustrate the immensity and impossibility of the task the speaker undertakes to recreate her father’s image cohesively. In his analysis of a collection of Plath’s father poems as elegies, Jahan Ramazani argues that these lines indicate a departure from the successful processing of grief which elegies typically represent: “If traditional elegies represent therapeutic mourning, Plath’s elegy represents its breakdown” (1,147). Ramazani adequately identifies the traumatic connotations of speaker’s unfinished work. The staccato punctuation of the second line heightens the fragmented depiction of the father’s form and even suggests that a complete “pieced” work would be evidently imperfect. The worthlessness of the labor also impacts the growth of the speaker: “Thirty years now I have labored / To dredge the silt from your throat. / I am none the wiser” (ln. 8-10). Plath quantifies the speaker’s work in terms of time by specifying the “thirty years” she spends on the task. However, she then equates that progression of time with the speaker’s assertion that she is “none the wiser.” This connection negates the understanding that the speaker progresses as she technically ages. Additionally, the continuous “labor” of the speaker suggests a reverse childbirth, likening the work of the speaker to an effort to mother her own father. As a result, time and causal relationships lose further definition as Plath creates a world for her speaker absent these linear limitations. Michelle Balaev describes this phenomenon in her overview of trauma theory: “The traumatic experience remains frozen in a timeless, haunting state” (366). Ultimately, while the speaker inhabits an adult position as both a sculptor and a grown woman mourning her father, this sense of forestalled time also keeps her in a traumatized childlike state. The portrayal of time as lacking significant influence remains even in the last stanza of the poem: “My hours are married to shadow / No longer do I listen” (ln. 28-29). Plath once again fuses

the concept of time in the form of “hours” with the vague portrayal of “shadow.”⁴ This connection emphasizes that time remains ephemeral. Robert Mollinger describes the speaker’s intimacy with shadow as evidence of the lasting impact of her father: “She cannot eliminate her father from her mind and from her life” (47). This psychological haunting permanently impacts the speaker, freezing her development as a result of her traumatic relationship with her father. Furthermore, by relating time to “shadow” through marriage, Plath illustrates that the speaker is unable to properly progress beyond her relationship with her father. Instead, she remains “married” to the traumatic parental relationship of her childhood. Her work on her father’s statue even after thirty years emphasizes this stagnancy. From the first lines to the last stanza, the continuous efforts of the speaker remain futile, highlighting Plath’s portrayal of time and its effect on the speaker as impotent.

The small physical dimensions of the speaker reaffirm her position as youthful in the poem. Plath utilizes miniature objects and insects to portray the speaker as a child: “Scaling little ladders with glue pots and pails of lysol / I crawl like an ant in mourning” (ln. 11-12). Morris describes these implements as “ludicrously inadequate,” attributing the dimensions to the impossibility of the task which the speaker attempts to accomplish (37). However, these tools are not too “little” for the speaker, who compares herself to an “ant.” Rather, Plath indicates that the speaker is “little” like the ladders. Deryn Rees-Jones argues that the

4 Scholarship on the function of “shadow” in the final stanza abounds. Most criticism asserts that the shadow reaffirms a negative ending or attitude for the speaker. Christopher Morris connects the shadow to Hades and the underworld, likening the speaker to Persephone (35). John Rietz reads the shadow as a representation of “the past, the memory of her father” (421). Mollinger also indicates that the shadow could imply “that the father is reborn in the child and this resurrection can be symbolized by the shadow” (47).

poem “deals with the loss of the literally small, pre-adolescent self” (285). However, the speaker is psychologically still a child. Her crawling action suggests that the speaker has yet to properly mature into adulthood and remains unable to walk, especially on her own. Plath attributes the littleness of the speaker to her father through her emphasis that this antlike condition reflects an attitude of “mourning.” Gabriele Rippl asserts: “The overwhelming monumentality of the historical (Egyptian, Babylonian and Roman) fragments becomes obvious in the reduction of the human figure to the shape of an insect” (65). While history’s influence on both the poem and the speaker is evident, Rippl overlooks the more personal influence of the speaker’s father. The memory of her father, one that the speaker remains unable to process properly, literally forces her back into the size and actions of her childhood self.

The speaker is also notably small in comparison to the colossal embodiment of her father: “Nights, I squat in the cornucopia / Of your left ear, out of the wind” (ln. 24-25). Her ability to confine herself within her father’s ear emphasizes her miniature size.⁵ By depicting this habitation as nightly, Plath depicts the child curled up in the cradle of her father’s ear. In this way, the father becomes important to the protection and comfort of the childlike speaker by keeping her “out of the wind.” His absence results in the traumatic need for the speaker to shelter herself, but she can only do so with what remains of him. Ramazani identifies habitation of this enclosure as traumatic: “Trapped within his ruins, she is condemned to a world defined by his catastrophic death: she must ever lament a father she detests too much to allow him a rebirth” (1148). The speaker’s size ultimately emphasizes that, as a result of her damaging relationship with her father, like an infant, she is unable to live a life without him. The ruins she

⁵ Morris also connects the “squat” of the speaker with “the ugliness of both birth and the poetic process” (42).

cannot fix ensnare her, trapping her in a womb-like enclosure which keeps her perpetually too young and undeveloped for independent life.

The speaker’s desire for communication further emphasizes her childlike reliance on her father. Her position in her father’s ear suggests a wish to be heard: “Nights, I squat in the cornucopia / Of your left ear” (ln. 24-25). Plath contrasts the speaker’s intentional proximity to her father’s ear with her lack of speech. Morris claims: “The speaker in Plath’s poem has the problem of ultimately finding the right word, the right speech” (35). The fragmentation of her speech further highlights the trauma which the speaker associates with her father and remains unable to overcome. Her inability to voice her thoughts to her father contradicts the image of plenty Plath alludes to with the “cornucopia.” Instead, this contrast highlights the speaker’s solitude and need. Uta Gosmann views the speaker’s position as indicative of her limited exposure to the world beyond her father: “Her contemplation and experience of the outside world are entirely determined by her position within the skull of the ‘colossus’” (39). The speaker knows nothing of the world and cannot surpass childhood innocence because communication between her and her father fails. Just as the speaker longs for her father to hear her, she also works in order to listen to her father: “I have labored / To dredge the silt from your throat. / I am none the wiser” (ln. 8-10). The speaker indicates that the effect of her father’s inability to speak hinders her mental development by admitting that she is “none the wiser.” Through her identification of this specific task while narrating her history of labor, the speaker acknowledges communication with her father as her ultimate goal. However, as long as her labor is ineffective and communication remains impossible, Plath’s speaker cannot overcome her trauma and escape her stalled childlike state. Bundtzen discusses Plath’s use of poetry as a therapeutic attempt at enacting the psychoanalytic “talking

cure," which allows patients to process trauma through discussion (38-39). This method of therapy also plays a role for the speaker of "The Colossus," albeit one that is unsuccessful, pointing instead to childlike failures of speech.

The communication which Plath does record in the poem ultimately fails to diminish the impact of the speaker's trauma. The animal noises which the speaker hears from her father in fact only further torment her: "Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles / Proceed from your great lips. / It's worse than a barnyard" (ln. 3-5). Rippl identifies these sounds as "incomprehensible" (65). This overly simplistic conclusion overlooks the speaker's extensive attempt to describe the exact sounds which her father emits. The speaker purposefully listens to her father's sounds and picks up the two distinct registers of "mule-bray" and "pig-grunt." The differentiation between the two meaningless noises proves that the speaker participates in an ongoing act of listening for meaning in the sounds her father makes. She acknowledges them as "worse than a barnyard," but that conclusion does not stop her from actively listening. This comparison emphasizes that even the noises the speaker does encounter are out of place and therefore devastatingly and completely useless to her. Nevertheless, she traumatically continues to strain to encounter a voice that is meaningful to her where none exists. This effort, like the speaker's artistic labor, also proves futile. The act of listening and communication remains unnaturally one-sided, automatically making it unsuccessful. Ultimately, the speaker fails to achieve any sort of successful communication. Instead, she stops searching for words by the end of the poem: "No longer do I listen" (ln. 29). This resignation suggests a perpetual lack of resolution for the speaker, indicating her inability to progress beyond her childlike state in the future.

The prominence of traumatic portrayals of youth and parental relationships in both of these

earlier poems highlights Plath's burgeoning exploration of disquieting childhoods. Though it is often overlooked, analysis of "I Want, I Want" creates new avenues of exploration for Plath's more iconic poems, such as "The Colossus." Furthermore, Plath's focus on childhood utilizing religious allusions in "I Want, I Want" acts similarly to her later poem, "Nick and the Candlestick." While criticism tends to categorize all but Plath's best-known poems by the time period in which she wrote them, the similarity between these two poems suggests an ongoing development of themes of youth throughout Plath's poetry.

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