

Gender rejection as a reaction to early sexual trauma and its partial expression in verse

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This paper is presented in an attempt to understand a poem written by a young girl as it reflects upon the contribution of significant events in her past history to the development of her sexual identity. She was admitted to a psychiatric hospital in January 1963, at the age of 19, after she had become pregnant and subsequently unmanageable at home, following desertion by her lover and the suggestion, unacceptable to her, that she place her child for adoption immediately after delivery. The resultant behaviour was that of considerable aggression directed toward members of her family, combined with increased sexual promiscuity.

The girl herself was an illegitimate child, her mother having been a burlesque dancer and her father a sailor, who abandoned the mother when he learned of her pregnancy. At delivery she was a full-term, normal infant weighing 6½ lb. and was bottle-fed for 9 months without obvious problems. She began talking at 1 yr., walked alone at 18 months, and was able to use sentences by 2 yr., at which time there was some question of a maternal uncle fondling her genitalia. He was later arrested for molesting other small children. Toilet training was described as 'difficult' and completed at the age of 3½ yr.

During her first 2½ yr. she was placed in 30 different boarding homes by her mother, who was continually 'on the road'. The last placement was in an unlicensed foster-home in Detroit, operated by a woman. At this time she was described as a 'pathetic, lonely child' and would incessantly ask strangers if they were her parents. When she was 3 yr. the owner of the home, who had been attracted to

her because of their similar early backgrounds, arranged for legal adoption, after which the child's mother disappeared, never to be heard from again, although it was felt that she had continued to work in the Detroit area as 'an entertainer'. Following the adoption, the patient was continually car-sick for about 1 yr., being anxious that each car ride might mean possible transfer to another home, and she became very outspoken about a horse and buggy being a superior means of transport.

The history of the adoptive mother is of considerable interest. She had been illegitimate and was adopted in early infancy by a wealthy couple in whose home she remained an only child. Her closest companion during her younger years was the family maid, who would confide to her intimate details about her private life, particularly her sexual escapades with various boy-friends, whom she would bring to the house while the parents were away. At 14, after several appearances in court because of delinquent behaviour, the patient's adoptive mother eloped with an older man; however, she and her husband returned to live in her parents' home for the duration of the marriage, which lasted 10 yr. and ended in divorce. Three children resulted from this marriage, a boy 8 yr. older than the patient, a girl 3 yr. older, and another boy 1 yr. younger. Shortly after the divorce she remarried and it was her second husband who became the patient's adoptive father.

This man was a rather primitive, alcoholic individual, who began making sexual advances to the patient when drunk, shortly after the adoption. She managed to evade him each time he would attempt to fondle her, but there was no doubt of her seductive involvement in this relationship. When she was 5 yr. old her

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adoptive mother gave birth to a son, the only child of the second marriage, and the patient has always been resentful of this boy. There were other children lodged in the home at all times, and the adoptive mother would always call them by her family name and enrol them in school as such. When the patient was 7 yr. old she began having intercourse with a 16-yr.-old boy, who was a boarder in the home. He threatened to harm her if she revealed the nature of the relationship to anyone, and it was not until she sustained a ruptured uterus following intercourse, and was hospitalized, that the mother became aware of her behaviour. The boy, who later became psychotic, was transferred from the home along with two girls aged 13 and 14, with whom the adoptive father had been having sexual relations. From that time, the patient became very promiscuous with boys, aged 12 to 16, and it soon became apparent that the adoptive mother covertly sanctioned and derived much gratification from her adopted daughter's sexual proclivities. She also forced the girl into the role of maid in the household, one she had continued to play until the time of her admission and which had allowed the mother to recapitulate her earlier relationship with the family maid. Concurrent with the promiscuous behaviour, the patient began to masturbate frequently, with much subsequent guilt. She had always been quite frigid and able to obtain sexual gratification only by autoerotic means.

During latency she remained alone much of the time, playing with dolls and preoccupied with phantasy. Her clothes were always untidy and she herself quite dirty, refusing to wash except when forced. She began stealing money and jewellery, continually lying to conceal her thefts and other unacceptable behaviour and often exaggerated her accounts of ordinary everyday events. She became very fond of pets, especially horses, feeling that these creatures were the only ones she could trust, and enjoyed reading animal stories. Her adjustment in school was very tenuous and her academic record poor, despite an over-all IQ of 136.

When 9 yr. old she had a severe bout of infectious hepatitis, requiring hospitalization. At 10 yr. she attacked a female classmate in the school yard, tore off her underpants, threw her to the ground, assumed the male position on top of her, and began to simulate intercourse. She was dragged away screaming by several teachers, and this incident led to her being ostracized almost totally by the community.

In 1955, at the age of 11, she was seen in a psychiatric out-patient clinic because of her promiscuity, at the same time that her adoptive mother obtained a divorce. Clinically, it was felt that she would benefit more from an in-patient setting, and she was therefore hospitalized for 1 yr. The diagnosis at that time was passive-aggressive character disorder, supported by psychological testing which emphasized overwhelming masturbatory guilt, and she was described as 'deriving most of her satisfaction from the sexualization of her human contacts'. During her stay in hospital she did make some progress in therapy but found it especially difficult to be critical of her adoptive parents. She was discharged to a girls' home, where she remained 18 months, being finally removed by the mother against medical advice. Upon return to her own home, she resumed her previous role of maid and her promiscuous behaviour, often propositioning her younger brothers' friends so aggressively in front of the family that they became frightened of her and refused to come to the house while she was there.

From 1958 to 1960 the father would return periodically, while intoxicated, and make passes at her. During this time her interest in animals increased; she became an avid horse-woman and would read only horse stories. As the family was living then on a farm, she managed to obtain an old riding horse, of which she became very fond but which she had to forfeit in a year, due to economic considerations. It should be noted that she had always been reminded by her adoptive mother of the financial burden which her care imposed on the family. In addition, she kept pet rats and

snakes about the house and often would go out in public with a rat on each shoulder and a snake wrapped around her wrist. Her language tended to be 'very coarse and salty'.

In the summer of 1962 she began dating a young sailor who was home on leave, and having rationalized that the only way she could keep a man was to force him into marriage, she soon became pregnant, after which he agreed to marry her. They obtained a licence and arranged the ceremony, but, on the wedding day, he failed to appear at the church, having returned to his base on the East coast. Very disappointed at this outcome, though having re-created entirely the circumstances surrounding her own conception, she developed a phantasy that he would some day return and marry her, despite the fact that he wrote to her stating that he had no intention of doing so and disclaiming his paternity. She sought help as an unmarried mother from a social service agency and, as previously mentioned, her response to the advice that she place the child for adoption was one of aggression and increased promiscuous behaviour, ultimately leading to her hospitalization. At the time of admission, she had an acute gonococcal infection.

Clinically, her diagnosis remained that of a character disorder, although psychological testing reflected her chaotic sexual identity and raised the question of 'an underlying schizophrenic process'. In addition to a 4-month pregnancy, medical examination revealed icteric sclerae but, despite an elevated serum bilirubin, her liver function tests were normal. She was determined to keep her child, and, at her request, arrangements were made for her to be confined in a general hospital by her family physician. The pregnancy was uneventful and she went to term, giving birth to a normal female child in June 1963. Following delivery, responsibility for the child's care was assumed by the patient's adoptive mother, the patient herself returning to the psychiatric hospital and showing little interest in the welfare of her child, as might have been predicted.

In the November 1963 edition of the

patients' newspaper she published the following poem, written about 1959-60:

THE HORSE

Oh horse, you are a wonderful thing.
 No horns to honk, no bells to ring;
 No licence-buying every year,
 With plate to screw on front and rear.
 Your inner tubes are all o.k.,
 And thank the Lord they stay that way.
 Your spark plugs never miss nor fuss,
 Your motor never makes us cuss.
 No spark plugs missing, no gears to strip.
 You start yourself, no clutch to slip;
 No gas bills mounting every day
 To steal the joy of life away.
 Your frame is good for many a mile,
 Your body never changes style,
 Your costs are few and easily met,
 You're something on the auto yet!

Dealing with the manifest content, the poem expresses her admiration for the horse, which is compared very favourably with the automobile. It will be recalled that she experienced car-sickness following her adoption, and one of her fondest childhood wishes was to be able to travel exclusively by horse and buggy. Ironically, when she was admitted to the hospital in January 1963 she was not told beforehand about such arrangements but was invited to go for a drive in the country by her family, after which she was dropped at the hospital. The horse is a symbolic representation of her own masculine strivings, and her previous horsemanship, plus the continual reading of horse stories, can be seen as a means to attain these wishes. As mentioned before, during latency she had resorted to compulsive stealing and had assumed the male position in an attack on a peer at the age of 10. In later years, she became fond of snakes and rats, used very coarse language, and her tone of voice became quite husky and masculine. By identifying with the horse, she is attempting to master the trauma of her childhood sexual experiences, as the discrepancy in genitalia between a 16-yr.-old boy and a 7-yr.-old girl might correspond roughly to that between a

male horse and an adolescent female; and perhaps the fact that the stallion withdraws his phallus into a sheath might lend support to her own phantasy of having an internal penis. This manoeuvre is essentially an identification with the aggressor which, as defined by Anna Freud (1936), enables the child to move from helpless passivity to active aggression and is based primarily upon a partial identification with the parent or other adults.

Looking at the poem again with this in mind, there can be seen a definite, latent connotation. Line 2 is connected with her earlier experiences of being continually transferred from one foster-home to another—the car horn or the ringing of the doorbell signalling that she was to be moved. Line 3 then refers to her adopted home, which was unlicensed. Combining lines 3 and 4, the word ‘licence’ becomes a switch-word meaning also ‘licence: to take advantage of’; ‘plate’ becomes ‘place’ and ‘on’, ‘in’, which pertains to her earlier sexual experiences in this home and expresses a certain disdain for the passive feminine role in intercourse, both vaginal and anal, even though this became her primary mode of establishing object relations.

Lines 5 and 6 are relevant to her having sustained a ruptured uterus at the age of 7 and the infectious hepatitis later—the jaundice may have been explained to her in obstructive terms, that is, a blocking of the bile passages or tubes. She had an acute gonorrhoea at the time of admission to hospital and may have had earlier bouts or been warned of the secondary effects of venereal disease, such as salpingitis—the tubes again—in an attempt to control her promiscuity.

In line 7 she expresses her anxiety about masturbation and intercourse, ‘miss’ and ‘fuss’, with spark plugs corresponding to her own genitalia, because later, in line 9, she repeats ‘no spark plugs missing’, but here ‘missing’ has more the connotation of absence and is pertinent to her penis envy. In association with these feelings, her frigidity may be a denial of her castration. Line 7 could also refer to her fears of the menarche and

menstruation as further undeniable evidence that she is a female and therefore castrated. Line 8, substituting ‘mother’ for ‘motor’, conveys the hostility she feels but cannot express towards her adoptive mother because of the symbiotic, sadomasochistic tie to her and the latter’s subtle encouragement of her sexual activities, in order to gain vicarious gratification; and towards her real mother for originally having abandoned her to this fate. The latter half of line 9 becomes an allusion to her reluctance to undress, participate in the sexual act, and further confront the fact that she is a woman; and possibly to the loss of her virginity, stressing again the disparity in genitalia between a 7-yr.-old girl and a 16-yr.-old boy. In line 10 she is speaking of her own dependence and lack of autonomy, of her adoptive mother’s role in covertly sanctioning her promiscuity, and also of the earlier experiences with her uncle and adoptive father, where initially she was the passive-helpless participant. ‘No clutch to slip’ becomes an expression of her many abandonments and continued feelings of rejection in interpersonal relationships. Inserting ‘gas’ for ‘ass’, lines 11 and 12 deal with her guilt feelings in regard to sexual activity, especially masturbation, as shown by previous psychological testing.

Lines 13 and 14 describe her reaction to puberty and the concomitant female anatomical and physiological changes; and line 15 relates to the fact that she was constantly reminded of the cost of her support by her adoptive parents. In the concluding line, the word ‘auto’ becomes a switch-word and is really the key to the understanding of the latent content of the poem, as it also denotes the self. Thus, she is describing her own unconscious, debased, feminine image, derived originally from her identification with her real mother, *the whore*, and reinforced by her adoptive mother, which, via preconscious or secondary elaboration, becomes the admired masculine image, the horse, which is sought after in order to escape the passive, helpless, feminine position (Kris, 1952; Kubie, 1950). In addition, the similarity of this poem to a

dream with its manifest and latent contents is quite striking and it is interesting that the rhythm of the poem simulates horseback-riding.

This same conflict was demonstrated by another female patient, aged 23, who had had a recurrent dream since the age of 12, wherein she was horseback-riding and, as the dream unfolded, the saddle would begin to slip gradually until she was completely under the horse. She would then stop, reset the saddle atop the horse, fasten the saddle-belt snugly, and remount; however, no matter how tightly she cinched the belt, she would ultimately find herself beneath the animal. She was the oldest of five children in a fatherless family. Her own father deserted shortly after her birth and another man, whom the mother married when the girl was an infant, was an alcoholic who was 'driven away'. She came to occupy the paternal role in the group and, as far back as she could remember, had resented being a female and had dressed in boys' clothing until she was 11, when she experienced her menarche traumatically without preparation and was forced to begin wearing feminine apparel. As she expressed it: 'I went from jeans to dresses and started dating older boys. I missed the awkward, girlish stage—I just never went through it.' At that time she was seduced by an older friend of the family, who was attracted to her by her physical precocity, and this experience was a terrifying one for her. The dream clearly reflects her chaotic sexual identity and masculine strivings. The fact that the dream was a repetitive one and that she tried continually to retie the saddle-belt so that she remained on top always denotes her frantic attempt to master the conflict, utilizing again primarily the mechanism of identification with the aggressor.

Wolfenstein (1956) describes this same bisexual identity crisis as it pertains to the poetry of A. E. Housman. He was the oldest of seven children and thus had an opportunity to witness his mother in labour not infrequently, as most deliveries were at home in the England of the 1860s. She died on his twelfth birthday, and he was never able to mourn her

successfully; this failure being reflected in his poems, where primal scene material occurs often and is seen classically as a sadistic attack upon the mother by the father, with possible death resulting for the former. In order to cope with his own anxieties, he therefore identifies with both parents in this situation.

One is left with the impression that poetry with its greater capacity for ambiguity (Kris, 1952, p. 243) and multiple imagery offers a superior means of dealing with the problem of object loss and mourning than does prose. The poetry of Keats is an example of this phenomenon as he lost both parents at an early age—his father when he was 8 yr. old and his mother when he was 14—and attempts repeatedly in his poems to master his trauma. His longer works such as 'Endymion' are based upon mythical legends; concern the pursuit of heavenly goddesses by brave, though innocent, young men; and are generally dedicated to older male acquaintances (Barron, 1963; Pederson-Krag, 1951; Ward, 1936). This theme will be developed further in another paper.

Before composing this poem, the patient had written three others; all tributes to horses, entitled, 'The Stallion', 'My Little White Mare', and 'My Friend', and all affirming the faithfulness, reliability and unswerving devotion of these animals. However, in these works, she is talking solely about masculine or feminine identity, with no attempt being made to synthesize the two. As this poem was composed at the time she was forced to give up her own horse, I would wonder if the writing of it is not an attempt to deal with this specific object loss, which may in turn be associated with the earlier loss of her adoptive father through divorce.

SUMMARY

The poetry of a young girl is found to reveal difficulties in the area of sexual identity. Her feminine self-image is essentially a negative one, derived from earlier traumatic experiences, the passivity and helplessness of which she tries to

avoid by striving for a semblance of masculinity via identification with the aggressor, utilizing the horse in her poems as a symbolic expression of this struggle.

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