

**Birdhouse (a collection of poetry),  
and  
The Daughter: the roles of the father,  
the speaker and the reader  
in the work of Sharon Olds**

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*This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
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## Abstract

The thesis comprises a collection of poems, a dissertation and a linking piece.

Birdhouse is a portfolio of poems concerned with themes of sex, the body and private and public loss. It also experiments with the first person voice of its own speaker. Birdhouse includes familial elegies, amatory poems and commissioned work.

The dissertation represents the first study of length of the father in the American poet Sharon Olds's work. Olds's oeuvre from 1980 to 2004 is examined through close-reading of the poems. It is argued that a reflective reading reveals the intentional subjectivity of the speaker, but should not discount the naïve reading the poems prompt which is part of their aesthetic experience. The centrality of the father is challenged, and it is argued that it is the daughter-speaker of the poems who is their hidden subject. The speaker asserts her happiness but uses ambiguity and suggestion to invite a reader to condemn the father. The father is an archetype, as are Olds's other familial characters, and a literary descendant of fathers in the poetry of confessional predecessors, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.

The lack of specificity surrounding the father's crimes is used to demonstrate his archetypal depiction, and the speaker's focus on her survival narrative. The dissertation contends that the latent subject of Olds's book of elegies The Father is the speaker's prolonging of her father's suffering in poems which enact a literary killing. The dissertation concludes that the poems present a version of a family history spoken by a daughter who survives her archetypal presentation and valorises the role of poetic speaker. It is argued the relationship between the speaker and the reader is more significant than the filial relationship depicted throughout.

The linking piece explores Olds's influence on my poetry, which prompted the research.

## **Acknowledgment**

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**Birdhouse (a collection of poetry)**

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## Birdhouse

You fiddle with the catch  
between my legs until my mouth  
springs open and I am  
crowing like an everyday bird that has  
entered the heights of an aviary. I am  
scaling the bars, wide-  
spreading my common or garden  
fan while your beady eye hangs  
over my body. My voice goes  
flying in our feathered bed from  
your forefinger and thumb, my next cry  
rests on the tip of your tongue.

## Epithalamium

I will stand at the foot of the umpteen steps  
to the church among the mucky doves,  
I will bring your letters, shredded into confetti,  
when the bells spill over with your joy, with your joy,  
I will wrap my arms around myself  
and dance: no one will mind me  
when your bride comes down the steps.  
The sky will fall in after her like a train.

## Trying

You are trying to be a father,  
rubbing my breast's beauty spot,  
I arch my back for a girl,  
baby-cries escape my mouth.

We are months, maybe years  
ahead of the midwife  
who will pull the child out  
of her sack like a rabbit.

All night you sleep foetal in my arms,  
your body just within reach, just  
out of reach.

I am beginning to dream

daily now, of a room full of globes  
lit up and spinning  
and a cot that can hardly contain  
its enormity. One morning

I will slip out of bed, into that room.  
Everything in the old world  
will have inched over slightly.  
Our child will be breathing.

## Two Up Two Down

In a terrace house in Murton,  
a bust of Beethoven is arranged  
in a living room window.  
Behind drawn curtains,  
Annie is letting down a mini-skirt,  
Jack is looking through the *Echo*:  
there are holes in Christine Keeler's story.

Upstairs, Pat kicks out at Moira  
as Annie uncovers a fresh row of daisies.  
Moira rolls over murmuring  
of her new skirt from Binns. It is nineteen-sixty-three.  
In Murton it is earlier. Annie checks the hem  
of her bairn's modesty. I will be born  
over her dead body.

## Desk

Dad raised his hand. The gavel fell.

The following week the delivery man  
left no stair uncursed

as he dragged the desk like a cross  
to my room. It was stuck

by the dressing table, catching my hip  
when I danced in the mirror.

It wasn't a dog or a TV,  
it was a leg-up with the La Sagesse entrance exam,  
a short step from there to university.

It was laden with trifles and pellucid jellies  
when I started to write. I saw myself  
crowned with leaves in the reflected glory  
of the bay that overlooked

all the fences. There was a room  
– a whole wing – of my parents' house  
that they hadn't discovered. I entered  
through the desk like a wardrobe,  
Mum sneaked in after me, cleaning up  
poems like snow from my floor.

## Take Two

"Let - me - row" he hissed.

Our loveboat was circling towards  
a waterfall, an iceberg, a plug but I couldn't  
lie like a lady in a Merchant Ivory film  
with my fingers wrinkling into queer fish in the water so  
we fought for command of the leaky Bonny Lassie  
while people steered  
clear with their well-balanced families.

Now we are not in the same boat: there is room  
for a dog, kids even  
and a different man has fallen into my lap.

I hold him like a sack of potatoes or  
a pinch of tobacco fit for a queen as  
we drift in our ferry. Ahead of us the sun  
shines like the gong the muscleman bangs  
at the beginning of the big picture.

## **Singing in the Bath**

I am wearing the bath water.  
My bare breasts are perfectly  
suited to my bare body. A flash  
of coarse hair is fitting  
between my thighs. Only my nails  
are polished on my nude  
figure which is drifting  
indecently into the morning. It is running  
late. I need to stop  
gazing into my navel. I need to start  
covering my back. On the other hand,  
which squeezes out a little soft soap,  
I am up to my neck in hot water already.  
How can I keep from singing?

## The Goldilocks Variable

Some fairytales say she jumped  
out of the window and ran home to her mother,  
never to stray ever after.

Some say she came round to the idea  
that her prince wouldn't come and settled  
for shared living with the bears.

An Internet site describes her turning  
into a glamour model called Goldie  
who likes a good hiding

or, maybe, she's not out of the woods yet  
and her hair went white,  
slim-picking through the neighbourhood bins.

In Prague, an astronomer saw a light in the sky  
and christened it for her  
– and his mystery blonde girlfriend –

The Goldilocks Variable. It is an elusive star.  
It isn't always shining. Sometimes it appears  
to have vanished from the night's curtain-call.

:

## **The Dead Are Always Looking Down On Us They Say**

Tonight Uncle Len's body bridges the river:  
his feet are planted in Newcastle,  
his hair mizzles in Gateshead,  
beneath the arch of his back  
boats have drifted like flowers. Now  
women with brailled legs and feather boas  
stream across his raised torso.

I have come from the Crown,  
the last old man's pub on the Quayside  
and am hanging on to a stranger's  
familiar arm when I stumble  
across Len's cast iron rainbow:  
this is the place where he threw himself into the sky.

## Recovery

After a bottle and a half of wine, my mother and my aunts  
are children again, reciting the poem their mother recited.  
A warning bell sounds in my head like the bell  
Sister Ancilla rang at communion when God entered  
the bread but it is not God, it is a lecturer whose name  
I can't remember, just his echoing laugh: "Mrs Hemans!" \*  
my old teacher's mocking almost drowns out the women

but my mother and my aunts are loud in their living-room,  
I can see Felicia among them perched in a pant suit,  
flushed to be summoned so out of her stays.  
And Annie McCabe is raised by her daughters' raised voices  
to hover like Mary or Marmie or Judith Shakespeare.  
Her head was full of stories that needed doing and her bairns  
are merry, nearly seventy, about to sing at her feet.

\*†**Felicia Hemans** (1793 - 1835) prolific poetess, popular in her day,  
remembered now for only one poem.

## Guernica

We wandered around the Spanish gallery  
which had been converted from a hospital  
after the war. Pictures occupied the space  
left by bodies. We weren't getting on,  
nothing was new under the sun.

I didn't see the horse coming.  
It charged down the wall and into my head,  
battling with the spear in its side,  
the stones of paint hurled at its body.

Back on home territory,  
I cut the picture to size and  
propped it above our dwindling fire  
(the landlord didn't allow us to  
hang up anything permanently).  
On the night you left,  
the horse's wound looked raw,  
I reached out to touch it as though the paint  
would come away wet beneath my fingers.

## Six Weeks

You swallowed the pills then walked as far as you could away down the hospital corridor. The nurse held your bed knowing sickness would overtake you.  
Soon you were a good girl throwing up into a cardboard dish. The same as all the other hidden women on the ward, contracting behind cubicle curtains.

It was six weeks since you'd fallen.  
You were in trouble when you told me about him on the morning after. Water was dripping through the holes in our living room ceiling.  
We gathered pans and bowls and cups and egg-cups trying to contain the flood before the ceiling fell in.

## Relic

You pulled back from the other girls  
and laid a hand on my arm,  
touching me utterly.

Though I was beyond my mother and teachers  
and the educational psychologist  
had referred me, you

lifted me out of the High Church Of My Misery  
and set me down among the other girls  
in shopping centres and cinemas:  
in the playground I had run away from too early.

I held on to your hand  
with its friendship bracelet  
and glittering nail polish  
long after you had gone.

I carried the loss  
of your hand in my heart  
when I should have been unbuttoning  
my body and running after you  
into the open air.

## Party Piece

My mother is taking a turn  
in my killer heels  
-they could topple her-  
the old idol of her body  
sways like a Madonna  
shouldered out of a Spanish cathedral.  
She breaks into a song,  
the crown of her voice  
slipped after wine and years  
at the centre of this living room:  
it is my brother's living room  
this new year and my mother  
is getting carried away. I raise a glass  
at her gathering. Now I can't hold her  
back or follow her.

## In Passing

Maybe it was a pet snapping  
at your heels or maybe a stray  
tailed you as you trampled  
over everything in your path  
to the river. Maybe God threw a  
curve ball and a dog appeared  
to accompany you as you took your last  
steps past the still lines of fishermen.  
Maybe you meant to make the leap  
out of your skin or maybe you  
slipped, leaving the river reeling.  
The fishermen see the dog sometimes  
that you couldn't shake off.  
Maybe they're just seeing things.

## Going Underground

Two generations ago she went to war  
with the Aunts in Bracknell and the girls at college,  
who would have sniggered at her with her uptight bun,  
joining forces with a Jewish Austrian.

Five foot of him, like the snapped  
branch of a family tree, scar exposed  
where he'd been torn from parents, cousins...  
(freighted away like so much dead wood)  
on different trains than the one which brought him to Nottingham, to her.

She unwrapped the rest of his life like a boiled sweet from her handbag,  
removed his name – the German name that meant he couldn't open doors for her -  
called him Richard, name for a man she might have married.

Between Buckhurst Hill and Roding Valley,  
she found their surname on the London Tube map -

Woodford - because she liked its sound. It was something  
to pass on to the baby with Slovak eyes,  
who didn't know his limbs had been broken,  
who didn't know how far he'd come  
- from the condemned line of men and women -  
via the Central Line.

## Darling

I was nobody's darling,  
everybody's pet,  
except when Gran came up,  
I was her duck.

Darling was for girls who weren't  
that special. They were the non-speaking angels  
in the nativity. Their sandwiches cut into right angles,  
their mothers ranging from affection to affection  
when they called them home  
across the playground: "Darling!"

Your mouth sums me up,  
moving silently down my stomach,  
singling out a thigh  
but when you call me darling,  
it's my mother's tongue in my head  
that hushes you. I know it's only a word.  
I knew as a back street driver at seven,  
my eyes screwing streetlights into stars,  
that when we passed the sign for Darlington,  
it wouldn't live up to its promise.

## Gran's Diary

All year December was coming  
in your diary but you were taking it  
one day at a time: an arboretum walk  
on 6 January, later that month it was  
Herbert's funeral. On 10 February:  
a talk on the crisis in music was followed  
by the gas-man after 12. All March,  
though December was becoming inevitable,  
you were making other plans: putting lunch with Marge  
before the nurse; seeing the doctor and  
The Gondoliers. It was 1999, people were talking  
about the end of the world but you were counting  
on another year: working out  
the church cleaning rota into the Millennium; working out  
your savings on three rainy days in April.  
A week's holiday, from 20 August, was ruled out  
by the consultant then, after a hospital scan,  
it was the end of Summer Time, the year's last quarter.  
Your remaining days are mainly blanks:  
the word 'mnemonic'  
underlined, a book reference and my name  
on 19 November with a question mark beside it.  
A couple of weeks later, my name is ringed,  
red-lettered but this time you didn't make it.  
Our arrangement then  
is to meet again. You would have laughed  
and said: "Go on with you." You were in heaven,  
I was in December where,  
according to your diary, death was no more scary  
than a visit to the dentist  
followed by the Clarendon Christmas Party.

## **Gran's Parting Shot**

The Eiffel Tower is raised  
in the photo like a tour guide's  
rolled umbrella. Beside it  
Gran is blinking. Her husband  
stepped back to compose  
his little woman. She was  
beyond his reach then. Her eyes  
are shuddering. The strands of her bun  
are unravelling like a sticky  
French pastry. He should have  
dropped his camera and held  
her hand for longer. I could live  
without this photo. It doesn't do  
Gran justice but the Eiffel Tower  
is still standing in her shadow.

## Gran's Death

Only the blessed die in church.  
You stumbled over your reading,  
lost your place,

slipped through the choir ladies' fingers  
and into God's hands.

I imagine you, on the other side,  
repositioning your reading glasses,  
talking over His answer.

Your husband is crying  
into the wilderness of my ear,  
but my sympathies (as they say  
on the cards) are with you

and the Lord is with you  
(as they say in the service) once  
Dot and Rita can find words.

All boxed off. You called,  
He answered.

And in front of the neighbours  
with his heart on his sleeve.

I love the way you didn't pause,  
dropped everything,  
and off.

### **Grandfather Once Removed**

My grandfather, or the man who replaced  
my grandfather, lugs home  
half a bag of shopping. He is touched  
by grief, or something that passes  
for grief. Loneliness seems  
closest to him as he hugs  
the curve of Sandringham Drive,  
past all the ways of saying home  
to their home, which is more than half empty.

My grandfather, or the man who replaced  
my grandfather, opens the door  
which opened for him late in life.  
Inside are photos of, not hot,  
but warm holidays, comfortable  
chairs, a thick book where love contains  
different definitions. Beyond the blinded window  
it is like a proverb, the way the rain  
that collects in the barrel will water the garden.

My grandfather, or the man who replaced  
my grandfather, moved in with  
my grandmother after she was widowed.  
He came after her husband,  
always,  
he came a close second. He provided  
a pension, what he knew of passion.  
Late in the day they took evening classes,  
they grew older together.

My grandmother, or the man who replaced  
my grandmother, finally  
sets down his shopping. He has been left  
until last. He has been left  
to spare her the unsparing pain  
of this ending. He tries not to wish her  
alive. He puts their house in order  
and waits for the future to stop  
lagging in front of him like an old woman.

## Bookcase

Introduction to Economics Introducing  
Sociology The Story of Art The Woolworth  
Gardener Social Origins of Dictatorship  
and Democracy Essential English  
for Foreign Students Pride  
and Prejudice How to Lie  
with Statistics Flower Gardening for  
Women A Concise History of  
Modern Painting A Shortened Illustrated History of  
The Bicycle Two's Company The Last Jews  
of Poland Captain Caution A Dictionary  
of Symptoms Sunshine Phrase Book Odd  
Jobs Household Encyclopaedia Wills  
and Probates The Mensa Puzzle Book Macroeconomics

## Violins

Overnight, violins appeared  
to surround your bed. You had heard  
about the prisoners forced to play  
through the liquidations, now you heard  
their fiddling and you saw when your eyelids  
dropped, a man straining to accompany  
his mother as she marched with  
the other bodies to the end of the line,  
everybody marching because  
they had nowhere to run; you were in hiding  
while this was going on.

You survived the war  
for forty years until your strung-out  
dying, then violins appeared  
to screech your name: "Ludwick!"  
Gran would shake you out of it:  
"You're having that dream again."

## Portrait Of The Magenheims

My tiny great grandfather and  
my tiny great grandmother are buried  
in this frame – faces without bodies  
or first names – Dad can't remember them.  
Her eye is an apple for her son.  
Her breast is furred. At her right hand, ready  
for war, is her decorated husband.  
They were shot - maybe they were captured  
in close-up first, their shorn heads raised  
for the camera's scrutiny.

In another time, in another country  
they are surrounded by children,  
we were born hanging on  
to their strong hair and cheekbones.  
I have an eye for my great grandmother –  
she sits in the finery of my lashes,  
and an eye for my great grandfather –  
his snatched medals shine. They have been dead  
so long; by now they would be long dead  
anyway. They lie behind my dark eyes.

## Gran's Pantry

After she died, everything in Gran's pantry turned to leftovers. The calendar on the back of the door stuck at December. The lightbulb popped, unable to take the darkness in the room. Her husband lived like a bird off the last of their food, he thought he might die when he came to the end tin. Nothing touched the grief gnawing at him for the second time in his life. The first time it was his mother who had gone.

Gran's pantry was the smallest part of their house. It was a lady's portion. It was a crumb brushed away under the stairs. Its sealed jars were full of war, they were up to their necks in dripping, RSVP-ing, stiff upper lipping. They had been left standing like the pillars of a toppled empire.

When she was alive, you could have eaten your dinner off the floor of the pantry. Now it was covered in eggshells, they cut his slippered feet when he walked into the space she had left behind her. It was huge. This room was the preserve of his wife and his mother.

After he died, following the will, we raided Gran's pantry and dug up the cake tin. Inside was the hem of a coarse skirt he could never let go. It was puffed up like pastry with diamonds. They were the remains of a fortune. The real jewels had brought his mother back from the camp a lifetime before, they had changed in the guards' greased hands to leftovers – a little bread, a precious little, some fruit.

## Naturalization

Ludwick named the new house 'Leopolis'.  
When he first moved in, the garden stretched endlessly  
towards home, across the sea.

The small rooms stood  
for the huge rooms he dreamed about  
going back to, taking his wife and his child.

The letter had arrived from his parents  
and lay beyond reach by the silver jug.  
He filled his son's head with Polish fairytales.

It was nineteen-forty one. The war was far  
from over. Later Ludwick dropped 'Leopolis'  
and settled for Horner Crescent.

On the eighth November nineteen-forty-seven  
he became a changed man.  
Albert J Peace of Bank Chambers, Batley

witnessed Mr Richard Woodford  
(formerly Ludwick Magenheim)  
guided by Gran, absolutely renounce his own name.

### **Memento Mori**

The flame stands  
for all your flown birthdays,  
gilding your cake  
with a fire the smallest  
breath could smother.  
Now it takes all your strength  
to blow your wish. The day loses  
some of its sparkle. I glimpse  
how much dark one candle  
can leave  
before the nurse  
clicks on the light.

## After You

Tomorrow and the next day,  
and the day after that, are early days,  
cut and dried on the chopping board  
into child-sized pieces. Picking a hymn,  
slotting you into the local 'and deaths',  
like a last supper you'd have helped to prepare  
if only you'd known.

Your blade cutting through the skin like a bit of common sense,  
"You have to get on with things, you have to eat," and  
passing round your chopping board: "After You."  
After You. After You.

### Trailer

Dad has always driven slowly  
as though he has always been  
dragging this trailer, full of loose ends  
from his childhood that he can't  
let go. The trailer follows the car  
at a jaunty angle, when Mum isn't looking  
over her shoulder, the trailer turns  
into Gran, hanging on  
to the bumper, her head down, her wings raised  
like a Rolls Royce angel's,  
when Mum looks back she will see  
just the trailer and the last of the boxes.

Dad sticks to the back lanes  
of his childhood, crawling along as though he is  
crawling through treacle. He is speeding  
in a bicycle lane when the police  
catch up. They don't see Gran  
or Dad or Mum, just an old couple  
with a trailer and hurry them on with the trailer  
rattling behind like bones or cans  
tied to a wedding car. Dad will stop dead eventually,  
when Mum follows, all the trailer's loose ends will spill  
over into my living room where Gran's clock is  
already losing time on the mantelpiece.

## My Legs

In tights, my legs remind me  
of my mother's. For years I wore  
her tights when mine had run out.  
My sister light-fingered them too  
so someone else's knees and bottom  
had usually bagged a pair first.  
The waistbands were nicked with nail scissors.  
Cat's hair pierced all of our soles.  
In tights, my legs could belong  
to my mother. They could uncurl  
from under me and go and do  
her bidding. They could be  
her legs that laddered while carrying  
me and my brother, pregnancy silver-  
lining the sheer denier inside each thigh.  
I take comfort like a child  
from my own woman's body and the  
intimate relationship it shares  
with my mother. In tights, my legs could  
go on for ever. Each right foot stretches  
in front of me.

## Grounded

I have drifted back into  
my body like a clipped  
angel, a slip of a girl  
got up in a nightie,  
my head has recalled  
its place on the pillow  
at an ungodly hour.  
Your body continues  
its long stretch  
of sleep but I am  
back in the real world  
without you. There is  
no point in dreaming.

## Sex Education

Sister Ancilla bangs a ruler  
at the trembling projector screen,  
where four naked girls stand up in themselves.  
They have come to walk us through puberty,  
beginning with the baby steps of the youngest,  
who trails behind a bigger sister.  
Next, a teenager takes our place in this line up,  
caught with her pants down, she doesn't giggle or fidget.  
Finally, the head girl is a fully rounded figure;  
she is ready to break into a run, to bump into a man.

Sister Ancilla holds her ruler  
and won't let it drop.  
She turns to look for a volunteer:  
"Which girl will tell me what's happening here?"

## La Donna

The church is not broad enough  
to accommodate your figure.  
You put your faith in God anyway,  
with a shrug of your covered shoulders,  
with a wave of your fan. You kneel  
before the statue of Our Lady and mutter  
a prayer. Behind your back,  
the flowers on your dress skim  
over your body, bloom  
on your arse, a priest  
should come running  
to take up your fanning. An altar boy  
should unfasten your Jesus sandals  
and bathe each clay foot. You are older  
than you look. You have come this far  
after centuries. You have reached this point  
with a prayer. I would raise you above  
the hollow of your idol. I would praise you  
above her shelf life of candles.

**Burden**

I sat in the rush hour  
cradling a box full of holes,

and sounds and sweet airs  
whenever the cab rattled.

The driver didn't ask or look round  
maybe it was God come for you, but

when we got to the vet,  
"I can't do anything with that" she said.

I dawdled home, wanting to hang out with birds  
a little longer, to be admitted to their fold.

## Arbour

I can see through the open roof  
and through the wrought bars  
that ring my body  
in this cage without doors where

I am free to come and coo  
to come and go  
to hang with the tumbler doves  
or take off

from this hoopla which  
unfolds all around me and  
lands like the landed skirts of the Duchy  
among rills and soft apples:

there is no ceiling  
on the arbour's head-space  
its enormity is cast like a poem  
out of thin air and metal.

## Bait Shed

He was a Whittle man  
now he collects logs and lights  
the treehouse fire each morning  
and cleans up rubbish and does odd jobs  
and learns a bit  
about gardening as part of a government scheme.

Had my Grandfather lived  
he would have taken his breaks  
with this man, sitting  
shoulder to shoulder in the pit  
of the bait shed  
which in the olden days was full of apples.

*Whittle, a former British Coal mine in Northumberland closed in 1997*

## Summer Cold

Today is so perfect, I am almost  
living in the present, at the same time  
I am noticing your face

has its history, separate  
from mine. Your forehead has nearly  
been crossed out by lines.

You are coughing in spite  
of the weather, you say it is just  
a summer cold. I want to catch

the things you are saying,  
I want to keep you  
with me in the heat

of this moment - as though  
we could sit out winter  
here in your garden, sipping

bitter lemon which will taste,  
after today, like this time  
with you, bottled. Our chairs are

temporary, they will fold at the  
first sign of bad weather.  
Already, a cold

is coming between you  
and the sun and  
the days that are coming

will get colder than  
this one but I can  
handle summer with you

under the harshest conditions.  
Forget about winter.  
Leave it to me.

## The Tree

When I raise my foot  
off the ground, in line  
with all the other women  
and the couple of men,  
I am expressing myself  
simply as a woman  
with a raised foot.  
When I raise my hands  
above my head, they are  
swept up in a movement  
of hands: of wrists and  
of fingers. I hold  
my position on an un  
equal footing in the yoga  
group. At the far  
corner of the room, shoes  
cool their heels, our coats  
are left hanging  
while we turn - in our minds'  
eyes - into trees. We are  
posturing as a forest  
together though December hard-  
hits the window, our right  
knees are unbending, our green  
fingers are budding. The odd  
rumble from a trunk, a  
tumbling foot reveals  
the beauty of this spot.  
We are only human, it is  
written all over our faces.  
As a tree, I make a  
good woman standing  
on one leg. I know  
what I must look like  
and I'm happy with that.

**The Daughter: the roles of the father,  
the speaker and the reader  
in the work of Sharon Olds**

**Abbreviations to Olds's collections used in the footnotes throughout the dissertation:**

<b>SS</b>	<b>Satan Says<sup>1</sup></b>
<b>DATL</b>	<b>The Dead And The Living<sup>2</sup></b>
<b>TGC</b>	<b>The Gold Cell<sup>3</sup></b>
<b>TSS</b>	<b>The Sign Of Saturn<sup>4</sup></b>
<b>TF</b>	<b>The Father<sup>5</sup></b>
<b>TW</b>	<b>The Wellspring<sup>6</sup></b>
<b>BTS</b>	<b>Blood, Tin, Straw<sup>7</sup></b>
<b>TUR</b>	<b>The Unswept Room<sup>8</sup></b>
<b>StS</b>	<b>Strike Sparks<sup>9</sup></b>

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<sup>1</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980) Satan Says. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

<sup>2</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984) The Dead And The Living. New York: Knopf.

<sup>3</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987) The Gold Cell. New York: Knopf.

<sup>4</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1991) The Sign Of Saturn Poems 1980-1987. London: Secker & Warburg.

<sup>5</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992) The Father. New York: Knopf.

<sup>6</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996) The Wellspring. London: Cape.

<sup>7</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000) Blood, Tin, Straw. London: Cape.

<sup>8</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003) The Unswept Room. London: Cape.

<sup>9</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2004) Strike Sparks. New York: Knopf.

## Introduction

The dissertation has one primary aim, to explore the portrayal of the father in the work of the contemporary American poet Sharon Olds. Throughout Olds's oeuvre, the female speaker of the poems, who is the sole narrator throughout Olds's work, portrays her problematic relationship with her father; she depicts his alcoholism and uses incest as a metaphor to suggest her childhood trauma at his hands.<sup>10</sup> The father is also the titular anti-hero of Olds's fourth collection The Father, a book of elegies devoted to his death from cancer. The dissertation focuses on the father because he is the key figure in Olds's familial narrative, and relatedly because the portrayal of fathers is of especial significance in American women's confessional poetry.<sup>11</sup> The dissertation will situate Olds within the confessional tradition through an examination of her filial portrait.

There is a well-established tradition in American women's poetry for problematic father-daughter relations.<sup>12</sup> If male poets have used the female body for their own literary ends, female poets have used the male corpse. Although the father is an abiding concern for many of Olds's male, and non-American contemporaries, the difficult father and his passing have proved a particularly rich seam for American women poets, with elegies such as Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy' seminal in the genre.<sup>13</sup> The British poet Barry MacSweeney echoes Plath's title to illustrate the gendered history of the filial elegy: 'Normally in recent literary history, daddy, it is women/ who write about their daddies, daddy. But now it's me'.<sup>14</sup>

Women poets have used the figure of the father to deconstruct the wider patriarchal social contract between the sexes. Popular female poets of America's nineteenth-century submissively mourned the father's loss in

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<sup>10</sup> Throughout the dissertation the term speaker is used to refer to Old's poetic narrator who is a consistent presence throughout the poems. See Chapter 1, p.67 of the dissertation for a discussion of the idea of the speaker. See Chapter 2, p.87 of the dissertation for a discussion of Olds's use of incest as a metaphor.

<sup>11</sup> The label 'confessional' was first applied to the poet Robert Lowell in 1959 then applied to a disparate group of American poets of the period including Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, WD Snodgrass and John Berryman. The term 'confessional' characteristically is applied to poetry which employs the first person 'I' to appear to talk about often taboo details of the poet's life. For a discussion of confessional poetry see Sontag, Kate & Graham, David, eds. (2002). After Confession: poetry as autobiography. Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press. See also Chapter 1, p.54 of the dissertation.

<sup>12</sup> Jahan Ramazani notes the prevalence of American women poets writing poems for dying fathers and traces a line from America's first woman poet Anne Bradstreet to contemporary poets, see Ramazani, Jahan. (1994) Poetry of Mourning: the modern elegy from Hardy to Heaney. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>13</sup> See Ramazani, Jahan. (1994). Poetry of Mourning. Contemporary American women poets who have written poems on the dying and death of a father include Rita Dove, Louise Glück, Jessica Hagedorn, Susan Howe, Jane Kenyon, Carolyn Kizer, Maxine Kumin, Mary Oliver, Ruth Stone, Mona Van Duyn as well as Sharon Olds.

<sup>14</sup> MacSweeney, Barry. (2003, p.225) 'Daddy Wants To Murder Me' Wolf Tongue. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe.

'Sentimentalist' elegies which covertly attest to their own lost opportunities within a patriarchal culture.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, poets became progressively less reverent to the dying father; female confessional poets of the nineteen-fifties and -sixties, such as Plath and Anne Sexton, produced seminal elegies which seized the opportunity to dance metaphorically on the father's grave, while exploring the emerging voice of his emboldened daughter. Although the filial portraits of the 'first wave' of confessional poets have proved a rich area of literary research, the dissertation represents the first study of length of the father's life and death in Sharon Olds's work.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, it situates Olds as a pioneer within the contemporary confessional tradition, and explores the implications of her work for the confessional model.

Olds distances herself from Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, commenting on the 'terrible pain' she associates with such poets.<sup>17</sup> However, such distancing has become a convention of the confessional genre, as Elizabeth Gregory has noted.<sup>18</sup> Olds's characterisation of her poetic speaker as a 'survivor', who forgives her father and celebrates the happiness she finds with her husband and children, can be seen as a negation of the suffering associated with the confessional school.<sup>19</sup> However, Olds subverts such stated happiness with her speaker's anxiety. Throughout her collections, she returns to the abusive childhood of her speaker at the hands of her warring parents: the alcoholic father, who leaves the family home when the speaker is thirteen; and the anorexic mother. The repetition of the familial plot - the speaker's move from the unhappy parental home to the happy spousal home – within each of Olds's collections, and thus across her oeuvre, reinforces the speaker's 'happy-ever-after' narrative.<sup>20</sup> However, despite the apparent

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of nineteenth-century female 'Sentimentalists' see Ramazani, Jahan. (1994, p.295) Poetry of Mourning; and Greer, Germaine (1995, p.36-64). Slip-Shod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection And The Woman Poet. London: Viking. For a selection of their 'recovered' work, see Bennett, Paula Bernat. ed. (1998) Nineteenth Century American Women Poets: An Anthology. Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell. See also Chapter 1, p.56 of the dissertation.

<sup>16</sup> 'First wave' is used to refer to the generation of American poets who were first labelled 'confessional' poets; these poets, writing during the 1950s and 1960s, include Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell and John Berryman. This research represents the first study of length of its kind; among smaller studies the most significant is Gale Swientkowski's book Imagining Incest where Olds is employed as one of four case studies in the examination of the poetic motif of incest, see Swientkowski, Gale. (2003) Imagining Incest: Sexton, Plath, Rich and Olds on Life With Daddy. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press; Olds is the joint subject of British poet Helen Farish's doctoral thesis, see Farish, Helen. (2004). Sex, God and Grief in the Poetry of Louise Gluck and Sharon Olds. Ph.D. Oxford Brookes University; essays in journals include Dillon, Brian (2003). "Never Having Had You, I Cannot Let You Go": Sharon Olds's Poems of a Father-Daughter Relationship" *Literary Review*, 37:1 <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>. [accessed 3 May 2004].

<sup>17</sup> See Blossom, Laurel. (1993) 'Sharon Olds' Poets & Writers Magazine cited on *Modern American Poetry* [Online]. Available at [http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/olds/excerpt.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/olds/excerpt.htm) [accessed 11 February 2007].

<sup>18</sup> Gregory notes a similar resistance to the label in the first wave of confessional poets; see Gregory, Elizabeth. 'Confessing the body Plath, Sexton, Berryman, Lowell, Ginsberg and the gendered poetics of the 'real' in Gill, Jo. (2006, p.35) Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays. London: Routledge.

<sup>19</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p. 62) 'Time-Travel' SS. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. See Chapter 1, p. 67 of the dissertation for a discussion of Olds's speaker.

<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 1, p. 71 of the dissertation for a discussion of the 'happy ever after' narrative.

continuity and reinforcing of this narrative it is interrupted: events from the childhood, often the same events, are re-examined across different collections in negotiation with an evolving present. Olds's latest collection The Unswept Room ends with the desertion of the husband but, long before the marital separation, poems are imbued with the speaker's prescient anxiety. Such anxiety interrupts and undermines the marital love story even as it is extolled.

The speaker's filial forgiveness is tempered by continual allusions to her unhappy childhood, and by her graphic and lingering depiction of the father's death in The Father. The speaker prolongs the father's suffering throughout the text while examining her own tendency towards guilt and sadism. These elements associate the speaker with the protracted mourning stage of Freudian melancholia. Freud distinguished the states of mourning and melancholia as follows:

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person... The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterances in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.<sup>21</sup>

Such aspects of melancholia are evident in the elegies of Olds's predecessors, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, and thus return a reader to the poems of the confessional school. The overt eulogising of Olds's speaker calls attention to itself as a response to the perceived pain of confessional poetry. Arguably, the influence of the confessional school is still evident in Olds's work through her attempts to negate it.

Although Olds perceives Plath, in common with many critics, as in 'pain', Plath saw herself as writing poems that overcame suffering, and at least one critic understands her depiction of motherhood as providing a consolatory familial alternative to the filial subjugation of her father elegies.<sup>22</sup> Olds's view of Plath suggests she is alluding to the mythology of Plath's life, what Ted Hughes called the 'fantasia'.<sup>23</sup> The blurring of Plath's life and her biography is not unique to the 'first wave' of confessional poets: Olds is herself commonly perceived as the speaker in her poems. Such a view is not necessarily pejorative, but it can lead to the poet's craft being overlooked and the poetry viewed as 'a diary with line-breaks'.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Freud, Sigmund. (2005, p.201-218) 'Mourning and Melancholia' in Sigmund Freud: on murder, mourning and melancholia. London: Penguin.

<sup>22</sup> Blossom, Laurel. (1993) 'Sharon Olds' *Poets & Writers Magazine*. For a positive analysis of the maternal role in Plath's poems see Scott, Jill. (2005, p.141-164) Electra After Freud: Myth and Culture. New York: Cornell University Press. In addition, it should be noted that Plath's collection Ariel was paginated by the poet to begin with the word 'Love' and end with the word 'Spring': Ted Hughes called the book a 'healing' volume.

<sup>23</sup> Reid, Christopher, ed. (2007, p.516) Letters of Ted Hughes. London: Faber.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, Kieley, David. (2005) 'Strike Sparks by Sharon Olds'. Reviewed in *Bookslut* [Online]. Available at [http://www.bookslut.com/poetry/2005\\_02\\_004306.php](http://www.bookslut.com/poetry/2005_02_004306.php) [accessed 7 March 2011].

To avoid such denigration, the dissertation employs the term 'speaker' to refer to the consistent narrator of Olds's poems.<sup>25</sup> Olds while encouraging an autobiographical view, simultaneously defends the autonomy of the 'I' voice across her oeuvre. In common with post-structuralist thinking, the dissertation explores and situates the confessional nature of Olds's work as existing within language: thus given 'facts' can change throughout the collections.<sup>26</sup> Olds does not seek to confess, but to highlight its impossibility. Her poetry is poetic, deliberately unsettling meaning and resisting definitive interpretation. Characteristically, a reader of Olds's poetry is required to draw a conclusion at odds to the speaker's testimony, but also engineered by her. Olds comments that she thought of The Father as a wholly positive book until the poet Galway Kinnell suggested that it provided a deeply ambiguous filial portrait, as she explains:

And he [Kinnell] saved my new book (*The Father*). I had wanted it to be a love book, but its soul was more complex than that. The poems often used the word *love* inaccurately – to stand for *hate*, or *fear* or *longing*. Galway would ask me about these words.<sup>27</sup>

Olds, like her speaker, leaves a reader [Kinnell] to make a judgement on her subject. Central to this dissertation is an exploration of the suggestion and implication integral to Olds's poetry which, it is argued, places a reflective reader in the position of detective.

Although the dissertation maintains a distinction between the woman in the poems and Olds, it does not discount their relationship. The poetry encourages an autobiographical reading; the connection between the speaker's narrative and the poet's life is illustrated by the use of timelines, pet names such as 'Shar', and the dedication of The Father to Olds's father.<sup>28</sup> It is generic convention, and part of the aesthetic experience of confessional poetry, for the reader to enjoy an immediate or, what the dissertation posits as, a naïve reading of the poems. Such a naïve reading is characterised by an unqualified belief in the speaker as Olds. A reflective, critically-based reading also uncovers the construction of Olds's speaker, and exposes the fictive nature of the confession.

The dissertation examines the father's presentation through his chronology in the poetry, and ultimately rejects his centrality in favour of the

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2008]; Schneider, Dan. (2002 'Sharon Olds's orifices and the inculcation of tedium' *Plagiarist Poetry*. [Online]. Available at <http://www.plagiarist.com/articles/?artid=20> [accessed 11/2/08].

<sup>25</sup> See Chapter 1, p.67 of the dissertation for a discussion of Olds's speaker.

<sup>26</sup> For introductions to post-structuralism see Young, Robert. (1981) Untying The Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader Boston and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Wolfreys, Julian. (2007) Derrida: A Guide For the Perplexed London: continuum.

<sup>27</sup> Stewart, Sue. 'Sharon Olds' in Crawford, Robert, ed. (1995). *Talking Verse: Interviews with Poets*. St Andrews: Verse.

<sup>28</sup> The 'dedication reads 'For my father'. See Sharon Olds (1992,p.v) TE. New York: Knopf.

pre-eminence of the speaker.<sup>29</sup> Throughout her poetry Olds deliberately draws attention to the one-sided nature of the familial history by foregrounding her speaker's voice as doubtful, solipsistic and overtly inconsistent with facts. The father does not corroborate this story, this is how the speaker says it is - Olds consistently reminds the reader.

The speaker uses the father to negotiate and situate herself in a universe which is absorbed by paternal lack. The poetry's interweaving of direct articles with personal pronouns, demonstrated in the title of The Father, emphasises the father's generality: he is a symbolic as well as an autobiographical representation. If the father in the poetry is an archetype, so - the dissertation argues - are the other familial characters within the narrative. The speaker survives her family, not in her portrayal as a silent daughter, wife or lover within the action of the collections, but in her role as a speaker. The privileging of the speaker's position is poetic not familial. The role exists outside of the family set-up; it is conducted exclusively in negotiation with the projected reader who is conjured throughout by the intimacy of the speaker's tone.

The relationship between the speaker and the reader, it is argued, is the most significant one in Olds's oeuvre. In his study of sexuality Foucault comments: 'one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile'.<sup>30</sup> Foucault's observation, when applied to Olds's poetry, places the reader in the position of the speaker's childhood father, and confers his lost power upon them. It is the reader, not the father, the speaker looks to for approval.

Olds constructs the reader as a willing and sympathetic ear; such a reader could be understood, like the characters within the collections, as a fixed archetype. However, by overtly calling attention to the bias of her speaker, and by constructing poetry where the reader is given an active role in deciphering the meaning(s) of ambiguous open-ended lines, Olds arguably demands an active, independent reader. Throughout her poetry, Olds includes readers' reactions to earlier pieces and augments her poems in response to criticism.<sup>31</sup> The overt fluidity of her published work highlights the process of her writing, giving as much precedence to craft, and the reader's relationship with the poet, as the 'finished' poem.

<sup>29</sup> The father's centrality is challenged despite his prominence in the work and the assumption of his centrality by critics, for example Brian Dillon's analysis of TF which is cited in Chapter 2, p.109 of the dissertation.

<sup>30</sup> Foucault, Michel. (1990, p.61) The History of Sexuality: Vol 1, The Will To Knowledge. London: Penguin.

<sup>31</sup> See Olds, Sharon. (1987, p25) 'What If God' TGC; Olds, Sharon. (2003) 'What If God' The Pedestal magazine.com [Online] Available at <http://www.thepedestalmagazine.com/Secure/content/cb.asp?catid=113> [accessed 5 March 2005]. In the later version of the poem the lines 'she pried my thighs wide in the starry dark have been amended to 'she pried my spirit open in the starry dark'. In her poem 'The Window' Olds's speaker addresses her daughter's complaint about an earlier poem see Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.53) 'The Window' TUR. London: Cape. See Chapter 1, p.74 of the dissertation for a discussion of Olds's use of emendations.

It has been suggested there is a way of reading Olds's work that is not exactly as it appears on a first encounter with the poetry. The dissertation holds that it is possible and desirable for the naïve and the reflective reader to be simultaneously contained within one person. An example of such a reader is Billy Collins, a former US poet laureate, who explored his need to be a naïve reader of Olds in an experiment with his graduate creative writing students. Collins asked his students to consider how they would feel if, having read The Father, they learned that Olds's father was alive. In response - although the group upheld the concept of the fictive nature of confessional and textual distance - they admitted they would feel cheated.<sup>32</sup> The dissertation necessarily explores the reflective reading to examine Olds's craft, and her position within the confessional tradition. However, it experiences the naïve reading simultaneously, and delightfully, as its entry point.

### **The structure of the dissertation**

In the dissertation, I explore the role of the father in the poetry of Sharon Olds through textual analysis of the poems of her seven published collections, as well as uncollected poems published in magazines, webzines and anthologies. The poems discussed in the dissertation span a time-period from 1980 to 2004. The end-point of my analysis marks the publication of Strike Sparks, Olds's final book at the time of this research.

Chapter One situates Olds as a popular and critically acclaimed contemporary American poet and discusses the controversy her work has attracted. Following a discussion of the problematic history and legacy of the term 'confessional poetry', Olds is identified as a poet of the confessional school. Olds's entry into writing, her literary influences and the key features of her 'apparently personal' poetry are considered.

Chapter Two discusses the presentation of the living father in Olds's poetry, primarily concentrating on her first three books Satan Says, The Dead And The Living and The Gold Cell. The chapter begins with an exploration of the 'Saturn poems', the poems that use the myth of the Roman God Saturn to examine the genesis of the father's mistreatment of his daughter. The father's portrayal as a lover, which links Olds's poetry with that of the confessional school, is discussed. The explicit content of Olds's poetry and the sexual presentation of her daughter speaker has been called pornographic, and this charge is considered. The chapter examines the 'father torture' poems, those poems which most overtly describe the father's mistreatment of the speaker. The lack of evidence to damn the father, and the speaker's tendency to forgiveness is discussed. The chapter concludes by exploring how the father's torturous legacy manifests itself in future generations. It is argued this process challenges the father's centrality in Olds's oeuvre.

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<sup>32</sup> Collins, Billy. 'My Grandfather's Tackle Box' in Sontag, Kate & Graham, David, eds. (2002). After Confession; poetry as autobiography. Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press. For a discussion of Collins's experiment, see Chapter 1, p.68 of the dissertation.

Chapter Three is devoted to Olds's book-length sequence of elegies The Father. The chapter argues that Olds's use of archetypes, overt staging and device of a consistent speaker situate the collection as psychodrama. It is argued, the archetypal presentation of the characters, and the definite article used in the collection's title, widens the terrain of the book beyond its immediate players. The speaker's subtle condemnation of her father, even as she mourns him, is examined, and it is considered how the speaker's gaze both destabilizes and objectifies her father's body. The father's silence, which is a counterpart to the speaker's verbosity throughout Olds's oeuvre, is examined. Finally the treatment of religion in The Father, framed by the speaker's agnostic outlook, is investigated.

The posthumous father is considered in Chapter Four which focuses primarily on Olds's last three collections: The Wellspring, Blood, Tin, Straw and The Unswept Room. The chapter examines the role of other family members in conjuring the father. It begins by exploring the role of the speaker's mother, and argues she is presented as the father's polar opposite, reflecting the speaker's attempt to identify with the father through maternal rejection. While the mother is situated as a 'negatively portrayed opposite' of the father, the speaker's husband is positioned as a 'positively portrayed opposite'; the mother is contrasted with the father unfavourably, and the husband is compared to the father favorably but, it is argued, both portraits refer a reader back to the father and demonstrate the speaker's abiding filial preoccupation. Despite the father's absence throughout much of the speaker's life, his dominance in terms of the subject-matter of the poems is noted. The Unswept Room ends with the separation of the speaker and her husband. Following the husband's absence, the speaker mourns his loss in poems that situate him temporarily as the new father, returning a reader to the poems of the confessional school.<sup>33</sup>

Chapter Five presents a summative conclusion of the dissertation. It rejects the apparent centrality of the father in Olds's poetry, arguing he has been demonstrated as an archetype, and a literary descendant of fathers of the confessional school. The lack of characterization of the father and his absence throughout much of Olds's oeuvre allows for the showcasing of the daughter's story. The daughter, in her role as speaker, communicates exclusively with the reader. It is argued the relationship between the speaker and the reader is enduring, and it is this that is actually of paramount importance throughout Olds's poetry.

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<sup>33</sup> Sylvia Plath links the loss of her speaker's father and husband in her poem 'Daddy'. See Plath, Sylvia. 'Daddy' in Hughes, Ted, ed. (1981, p.222) Sylvia Plath Collected Poems. London, Boston: Faber.

## Chapter One: Introducing Sharon Olds

1. Olds and her readers
2. Olds and the confessional tradition
3. Olds and influence
4. Features of the 'apparently personal'
  - i) The real Sharon: Olds's 'apparently personal' speaker
  - ii) 'Happy-ever-after'
  - iii) Subject-matter and revision

The opening chapter of the dissertation provides an overview of Sharon Olds's place in the American literary establishment, discussing her readers and the controversy her work has attracted. The definition of confessional poetry is considered and Olds is situated within the genre, although her preference for the term 'apparently personal' is explored. The chapter discusses Olds's literary influences, arguing her invocation of multiple role-models functions as an anti-canonical gesture. Finally, the key features of Olds's 'apparently personal' poetry are identified.

### 1. Olds and her readers

Sharon Olds is one of those rare creatures: a popular poet with an audience stretching beyond her home country.<sup>34</sup> She has published seven poetry collections, two selected editions and is widely anthologised. A Professor of Poetry at New York University, her many awards include the New York State Poet Laureateship.<sup>35</sup> Such accolades testify to the respect of her literary and academic peers. In addition, Olds has a significant 'lay readership'; her first collection Satan Says has sold over thirty-two thousand copies worldwide, and is currently in its fifteenth edition.<sup>36</sup> All of Olds's books are still in print, and have undergone multiple re-printings, despite the publication of selected editions. Olds is much in demand on both sides of the Atlantic as a performer of her work, guest speaker and tutor.<sup>37</sup> Such is Olds's celebrity that in 2005 she received, and turned down, an invitation to the White House.<sup>38</sup> All this for a poet who didn't publish her first collection until the comparatively late age of thirty-seven; an age which according to Olds in 1999: 'sure seemed old then, and it sure seems young to me now.'<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Olds was born in San Francisco, in 1942, and currently lives in New York City.

<sup>35</sup> Olds was New York State Laureate from 1998-2000.

<sup>36</sup> Sales figures are from the University of Pittsburgh Press and are correct as of 13/4/06: SS was published simultaneously in hard and soft cover. The print run of 750 hardback copies sold out, and was declared out of print in 1999, the paperback edition has been reprinted 14 times.

<sup>37</sup> A 2006 UK tour included sell-out performances and creative writing workshops, see [www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk](http://www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk) [www.poetryschool.com?courses=1](http://www.poetryschool.com?courses=1) [online]. Accessed 3.4.07.

<sup>38</sup> See [www.thenation.com/doc/20051010/olds](http://www.thenation.com/doc/20051010/olds) [online]. Accessed 12/10/06.

<sup>39</sup> Garner, Dwight. (1996) 'The Salon Interview Sharon Olds'.

Olds's fourth book, The Father, evokes the death of a father in painstaking detail. The poems, which chronicle the physical manifestations of the eponymous father's lingering death by cancer, could be the ultimate literary example of a wronged daughter getting even rather than mad. The elegies for the father are the most numerous of Olds's familial elegies but there are also poems within her oeuvre describing a mother's dying body, and poems describing the dead and dying bodies of other relatives. In addition, Olds's collections include graphic poems describing the corpse of Marilyn Monroe, and the execution and lynching of anonymous historical public figures.<sup>40</sup> Beyond physical descriptions of death, Olds's speaker depicts the physical evolution and decay of her own body in life, during childbirth, menstruation, masturbation, sex and the menopause. Her evocations of her children's naked bodies include a depiction of her baby son urinating, and a meditation on her daughter losing her virginity.

Such controversial subject-matter is one factor in the polarisation of critical response to Olds's work. Those who have responded to her poetry positively include significant literary heavyweights such as Marilyn Hacker, Adrienne Rich, the late Muriel Rukeyser and, in the UK, Kate Clanchy, Helen Farish, Vicki Feaver, Jackie Kay, Glyn Maxwell and Michael Ondaatje. Ondaatje calls Olds's work: 'pure fire in the hands', and cheers its: 'roughness and humour and brag and tenderness and completion', while Rich acknowledges Olds's innovation commenting that her: 'erotic heterosexual poems...have only recently begun to be possible'.<sup>41</sup> Readers who enjoy Olds's work commonly celebrate its willingness to tackle taboo subject-matter, its risk and its accessibility. Technically, they point to her daring use of line-endings; writing mainly in free verse, Olds breaks rules of poetic enjambment which would traditionally prohibit a line from ending with a definite article or preposition. Olds has commented of this technique: 'Writing over the end of the line and having a noun starting each line - it had some psychological meaning to me, like I was protecting things by hiding them'.<sup>42</sup> The comment indicates the characteristically covert tendency of Olds's narrative which requires a reader to detect the 'hidden' elements of her work.

Negative reviews of Olds's work have come from Rae Armantrout, Helen Vendler, the late Denise Levertov, Louise Glück and Adam Kirsch, among others. Common criticisms are that her writing is pornographic, formally inept, narcissistic in its return to the preoccupations of the speaker and inherently 'unpoetic' in subject-matter and execution. Kirsch comments: 'The remarkable uniformity of Olds's poems through six books is not due to an uninterrupted intercourse with "reality," but to a narrow and fixed set of premises. Everything hinges on sex'.<sup>43</sup> Kirsch's criticism might refer to Olds's

<sup>40</sup> See Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.5,7,10.) 'Ideographs', 'Race Riot, Tulsa, 1921' and 'The Death of Marilyn Monroe' DATL. New York: Knopf. This theme is particularly prevalent in DATL but see also Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.12.) 'The Food Thief' TGC; Olds, Sharon. (p.53) 'The Window' TUR.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Ondaatje's quotation is carried on the back covers of TSS, StS, BTS, TUR and TW; Rich, Adrienne. (1995, p.158) What is found there; notebooks on poetry and politics London: Virago.

<sup>42</sup> Patterson, Christina. (2006). 'Sharon Olds: Blood, sweat and fears'.

<sup>43</sup> Kirsch, Adam. (2008, p.275) The Modern Element: Essays On Contemporary Poetry. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company.

return to her subject-matter, as much as the subject-matter itself, but arguably it is also based on grounds of personal taste. Louise Glück finds Olds constrained by: 'the felt obligation of the woman writer to give encouraging voice to the 'life force'.<sup>44</sup> However, Olds demonstrates her speaker's anxiety throughout the poetry, and exposes the cracks in her 'happy-ever-after' narrative.<sup>45</sup> Such is the controversy Olds's work attracts that it is incorporated into a contemporary encyclopaedia entry: 'The emotional power and psychological depth of Olds' poetic output are impressive, but the need for new perspectives and techniques is increasingly apparent.'<sup>46</sup>

Olds's characteristic style, subject-matter and prominence make her a favoured caricature. In 'The Watermelon' the Canadian poet Sharon Thesen writes: 'I suppose Sharon Olds has just finished another/ fabulous poem about her child's scalp.'<sup>47</sup> The line anticipates 'Frontis Nulla Fides', Olds's poem about a husband's scalp, which appeared in the literary magazine *Ploughshares* six years after the publication of 'The Watermelon'.<sup>48</sup> The English poet Hugo Williams in his poem 'Creative Writing', portrays a male tutor 'trying to persuade' his students to 'put more images' into their writing.<sup>49</sup> The tutor is challenged by one student:

*If you don't mind my saying so  
you seem to see everything  
from the man's point of view  
exactly like my husband.  
What happened to women's poetry  
in the last two thousand years?  
What about Sappho?  
What about Sharon Olds?<sup>50</sup>*

The opening lines invite a reader to snigger at the woman who is concerned with matters domestic rather than literary. However, the final four lines pose valid questions which, though negatively framed, are pertinent. The poem ends with the tutor fiddling with a condom in his pocket: 'my fingers found themselves/ rubbing together in a mess/ of spermicide and vaginal lubricant'.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Glück, Louise. 'The Forbidden' in Sontag, Kate & Graham, David, eds. (2002, p.253). After Confession.

<sup>45</sup> See Chapter 1, p.76 for a discussion of the 'happy-ever-after' narrative.

<sup>46</sup> The quotation is in the contemporary American Continuum encyclopaedia series and is carried on the prestigious Modern American Poetry website, see Dillingham, Thomas. 'Sharon Olds' in Serafin, Steven R., ed. (1999) Encyclopaedia of American Literature. Available at 'Modern American Poetry' [http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/olds/about.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/olds/about.htm) [online]. Accessed 15/2/08.

<sup>47</sup> Thesen, Sharon. (1995, p.37) 'The Watermelon' Aurora Poems. Canada: Coach House Press.

<sup>48</sup> It is also of course possible that Olds deliberately took Thesen at her suggestion and wrote the poem in response.

<sup>49</sup> Williams, Hugo. (1990, p39) 'Creative Writing' Self-Portrait With A Slide. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>50</sup> Williams, Hugo (1990) 'Creative Writing'.

<sup>51</sup> Williams, Hugo (1990) 'Creative Writing'.

The contemporary British poet Helen Farish has identified a misogynistic thread running throughout many reviews of Olds's poetry, citing pieces by Antony Libby and Adam Kirsch as examples.<sup>52</sup> An encyclopaedia entry backs up Farish's findings:

It seems likely that some, at least, of the offence is because of Olds' gender: many male poets have celebrated their sexuality and their fascination with women's bodies in explicit terms with little resulting condemnation<sup>53</sup>

A review of a reading by Olds appears on the internet with the male writer's comment to his editor delightfully, and no doubt unintentionally, in parenthesis: It seems she feels that the whole human race wants to be "fucked senseless," (please leave -- it is VERY relevant to the article -- she used this specific phrase several times --Peter).<sup>54</sup> Since the time of Farish's survey, a male critic has described Olds's line-breaks as 'unclean' and labelled the poet 'the intrepid forager among women's dirty little secrets'.<sup>55</sup> Such reviews are significant beyond individual preference, indicating socialized gender prejudice. The severity of the criticism Olds and her work has attracted is testimony to the nerve she has struck.

## 2. Olds and the confessional tradition

The American critic ML Rosenthal coined the term 'confessional poetry' in a review of Robert Lowell's collection Life Studies, which appeared in American magazine 'The Nation' in 1959. Olds, showing her own predilection for the personal, comments of her 'beloved, late colleague Mack Rosenthal': 'it was...because of Lowell's conversion to Catholicism and Mack's thinking that Lowell had started writing that way because of his experience in the confessional'.<sup>56</sup> Rosenthal, himself, a decade after writing the review called the confessional label: 'both helpful and too limited'.<sup>57</sup>

The exact definition of confessional poetry, which is characteristically applied to poetry that appears to make a confession about the poet's life, is the subject of much debate. It has been pointed out by many critics that poets pre-dating Lowell have used the details of their life in their work and that the first person 'I' is always a persona - even if the poet does not intend it in that way.<sup>58</sup> Plath and Sexton are the ultimate confessional poets, eclipsing their

<sup>52</sup> Farish, Helen. (2004). *Sex God and Grief in the Poetry of Louise Gluck and Sharon Olds*. Ph.D. Oxford Brookes University.

<sup>53</sup> Serafin, Steven R, ed. (1999) Encyclopaedia of American Literature. Available at 'Modern American Poetry' [http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/olds/about.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/olds/about.htm) [online]. Accessed 25 February 2008

<sup>54</sup> Kelman, Nic. (1990). 'Sharon Olds at media lab – love her or hate her' *The Tech*. Available at <http://www-tech.mit.edu/V110/N43/olds.43a.html> [accessed 11 February 2008].

<sup>55</sup> Shivani, Anis. 'The Sad Case of American Poetry'. *The London Magazine*. Dec/Jan 2005. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Patterson, Christina. 'Blood, sweat and fears'.

<sup>57</sup> Rosenthal, M.L. (1967, p.25) The New Poets; American and British Poetry Since World War II. New York: Open University Press.

<sup>58</sup> Post-structuralist critics such as Derrida, Lacan and Foucault argue that the text exists independently of the writer and its meanings are multiple and subject to interpretation by the reader. See for instance

former teacher Lowell's fame. Lowell has received less critical approbation than his former students for incorporating his life into his work and his biography has not been so mythologized, despite the fact that all three poets share histories of mental breakdown, suicide or suicidal ideation.<sup>59</sup> A contemporary encyclopaedia's entry on Lowell notes: 'breaking with the canons of modernism, he brought a new conversational style and innovative involvements with family and national life into his work'.<sup>60</sup> The same encyclopaedia assesses Plath's poetry in terms of her gender, observing that she 'rewrote the story that women writers could tell in poetry'.<sup>61</sup> The entry on Plath continues with a dissenting note that alludes to her autobiography: 'These poems enact loss and grief in such a devastating fashion that one wonders how the reader much less the author can survive them'.<sup>62</sup>

The encyclopaedia entry demonstrates a tendency to associate male poets with ideas, and the public realm, and women with the specific and private sphere. Due to this process, and the success of Plath's and Sexton's work, female poets have embraced confessional poetry; the genre appears to favour their experience. They have also been readily identified as confessional poets. However, as confessional poetry has become increasingly gendered, arguably it has suffered from an increasing critical perception as 'low art': Helen Farish notes, 'the use of the term [confessional] as shorthand for a lack of technical ability, an uncontrolled use of autobiographical material, poetry of dubious aesthetic value'.<sup>63</sup> Championing the poetry of Plath, Eavan Boland reveals a common prejudice: 'Far from being confessional, her [Plath's] lasting effect may be that she was compellingly intellectual in the actual crafting of a poem'.<sup>64</sup> To be confessional then, is to be anti-intellectual and non formalist.

Despite her reluctance to accept the confessional mantle, Olds has become known as the foremost confessional poet of her generation. 'This, surely, is the sound the confessional hordes have been trying to utter since Lowell', writes Glyn Maxwell in a review of Blood, Tin, Straw.<sup>65</sup> Even within a positive review, the use of the phrase 'confessional hordes' testifies to critical

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Young, Robert. (1981) Untying The Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader. Boston, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Wolfreys, Julian. (2007) Derrida: A Guide for the Perplexed New York: continuum.

<sup>59</sup> Plath and Sexton both committed suicide. Robert Lowell suffered severe episodes of manic depression throughout his life for which he was repeatedly hospitalised.

<sup>60</sup> Axelrod, Steven. (2001). 'Robert Lowell' *The Literary Encyclopaedia* [online]. Available at <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=2800> [Accessed 12 December 2007].

<sup>61</sup> Axelrod, Steven. (2001). 'Sylvia Plath' *The Literary Encyclopaedia*. See Preminger, Alex and Brogan, T.W.F. eds. (1993, p.61) The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. for a more measured description of Plath's poetry which notes: 'The strength of Plath's vehement attack in "Daddy", comes not from its specific address to her actual father...but from its conscious and careful manipulation of conflicting discursive modes...that form an "objective correlative" to her psychological condition'.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Farish, Helen. (2004). *Sex God and Grief in the Poetry of Louise Gluck and Sharon Olds*. Ph.D. Oxford Brookes University.

<sup>64</sup> Bertram, Vicki. (1996) 'Defining Circumstances: An Interview with Eavan Boland'. *P.N.R* 124. Manchester: Carcanet Press.

<sup>65</sup> The excerpt from the review is carried on the back of BTS.

disdain. Maxwell is unusual in comparing Olds to Lowell, more often Olds is compared to Plath because of the sex of both poets, their prominence, their use of a female speaker, their problematic elegies to fathers and their use of public material, most infamously the holocaust, in personal elegies. Before considering the differences between Olds's and Plath's work, an additional historical problem facing women who write elegies shall be examined.

The authoring of elegies was problematic for the 'first wave' of female confessional poets. Ramzani comments in reference to Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich:

The elegy is "masculine" as an elite literary form yet "feminine" as a popular culture form and simulation of mourning. A female poet who wrote elegies risked being tainted by the type of the "poetess" or "nightingale" at a time when securing literary credentials required that she shun it.<sup>66</sup>

The 'poetess or nightingale' is an allusion to the 'Sentimentalist' women poets of the nineteenth-century; vulture might be a more suitable sobriquet for them, such was their avid pursuit of elegiac matter. The high death rate of the time provided plenty of suitable subjects but the 'poetesses' zeal in producing commemorative poems was nevertheless a phenomenon, captured by Mark Twain in his satirical portrait of the fictional Emmeline Grangerford.<sup>67</sup>

Typically mourned subjects for the 'poetess' included: 'parents, children, siblings, husbands, grandparents and friends, as well as community leaders, clergymen, statesmen, soldiers, poets, writers, pets, and others.'<sup>68</sup> The nineteenth-century poet Lydia Sigourney describes in her memoir some of the subjects she was requested to write about including: 'a canary-bird which had accidentally been starved to death', and a child: 'drowned in a barrel of swine's food'.<sup>69</sup>

Sigourney's memoir demonstrates the market demand for a particular type of sentimental elegy by women. Germaine Greer has argued that the female authors of such elegies were encouraged to be populist, and not accorded the respect granted to their male peers or given the time and necessary conditions to write their best work.<sup>70</sup> Women were favoured for exhibiting femininity, fragility and modesty in their work. Popular biographies were those where the tragic content of the writer's subject-matter appeared to parallel her own life. Beyond mourning the particularities of subject-matter, the prevalence of such features in elegies of the period collectively mourns the lost voice and opportunities of the 'poetess'.

Despite their market popularity, female poets in the nineteenth-century were seldom accorded critical respect. Today they are not canonical figures;

<sup>66</sup> Ramazani, Jahan. (1994, p.21-22) Poetry of Mourning.

<sup>67</sup> Twain, Mark. (2001, p.140) Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. London: University of California Press.

<sup>68</sup> Ramazani, Jahan. (1994, p. 296).

<sup>69</sup> Bennett, Bernat Paula. (1998, p.3) Nineteenth Century American Women Poets.

<sup>70</sup> Greer, Germaine. (1995, pxxiii) Slip Shod Sibyls: recognition, rejection and the woman poet. London: Viking.

the exception is Emily Dickinson who was not part of the literary establishment during her lifetime. Despite being freed from market constraints, and having the time and necessary conditions to develop her work, Dickinson's poetry displays some characteristic features of the 'poetess' including self-abnegation and masochism.<sup>71</sup> Her speaker also refers, and defers, in her poetry to a 'Master' figure.<sup>72</sup>

The 'poetesses' mourned dead fathers, brothers and husbands in their poetry, and often bowed to male patrons in humble dedications, following the example of Anne Bradstreet who dedicated her book to her father asking him to accept: 'these ragged lines'.<sup>73</sup> The nineteenth-century poet Frances Sergeant-Locke Oswood's dedication to her book Poems is typical: 'To Rufus Wilmot Griswold, As a Souvenir of Admiration for his Genius, Of Regard for his Generous Character, And of Gratitude for his valuable Literary Counsels'.<sup>74</sup> Contemporary American poet Thomas Lux satirises the relationship between the 'poetess' Sarah Hale and Edgar Allan Poe, commenting:

Poe thought highly  
enough of Hale to write: "...a lady of fine genius  
and masculine energy and ability."  
Was he aware of being patronizing? Unlikely.<sup>75</sup>

The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics, the standard reference encyclopaedia in the field, asks: 'Do women have a muse? One theory is that for post-romantic women poets, the father-precursor and the Muse are the same powerful male figure, both enabling and inhibiting poetic creation'.<sup>76</sup> The patriarch is the opportunity for the birth of his daughter's voice; her opportunity to negotiate a world independent of her father's authority. 'Daddy' is instigator and barrier to Plath's creativity, as is Dickinson's 'master' or Anne Bradstreet's father.

Writing a century after the 'poetesses', Plath in 'The Colossus' satirises the relationship between the subjugated daughter speaker and the dead father: 'I crawl like an ant in mourning/ Over the weedy acres of your brow'.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>71</sup> 'I'm Nobody! Who are you?' announces Dickinson's speaker at the opening of poem 288, in poem 379 she comments 'We will not drop the Dirk-/Because We love the Wound'. See Johnston, Thomas H, ed. (1970, p.133, 180) '288', '379' The Complete Poems Of Emily Dickinson. London: Faber.

<sup>72</sup> Johnston, Thomas H, ed. (1970, p. 369) Poem '754' 'My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun'. The Complete Poems Of Emily Dickinson. London: Faber. Dickinson's use of the term 'master' in letters has also been noted, see Franklin, R. W, ed. (1986) The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

<sup>73</sup> Hensley, Jeannine, ed. (1981, p.14) The Works of Anne Bradstreet. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

<sup>74</sup> Osgood, Frances Sargent Locke. Poems (1850). *Literature Online*. Available at <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z000151559&divLevel=0&area=Poetry&DurUrl=Yes&forward=1&textsFT> [online]. Accessed 10 March 2008.

<sup>75</sup> Lux, Thomas. 'Edgar Allan Poe Meets Sarah Hale (Author of "Mary Had A Little Lamb")' *Virginia Quarterly Review* (68:2) Spring 1992, 298-299.

<sup>76</sup> Preminger, Alex & Brogan TVF, eds. (1993, p.406) The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>77</sup> Plath, Sylvia. 'The Colossus' in Hughes, Ted, ed. (1981, p.129) Sylvia Plath Collected Poems.

Beyond illustrating the particulars of a familial relationship, Plath appropriates the humble persona of the 'poetess' to highlight the wreck of the archetypal patriarch. As the 'poetesses' legacy was tainted for the female confessional poets, so the self harming 'I' speaker of the confessional elegy is problematic for Olds. Like Plath, Olds exposes the fallen father through the ostensibly grieving daughter, as is demonstrated by this extract from Olds's poem, 'The Request':

He lay like someone fallen from a high  
place, only his eyes could swivel,  
he cried out, we could hardly hear him,  
we bent low, over him,  
his wife and I<sup>78</sup>

However, Olds is less wary of sentimentality than the confessional poets and strives towards consolation. Like the 'poetesses', she writes elegies avidly: her elegiac subjects range from the speaker's father and family members to mice, gerbils and the passing of her menstrual cycle.<sup>79</sup> Olds quotes the 'poetess' Julia Ward Howe in her poem 'What It Meant' and in addition, in interviews occasionally veers towards the tone of the overtly modest disclaimers of the 'poetess', such as in this example: 'I think that my work is easy to understand because I am not a thinker'.<sup>80</sup> The speaker's anger in The Father is also notably more muted than that of the pioneering confessional elegies, Brian Dillon comments:

The speaker's refusal to damn the father and assert that the speaker herself emerged irreparably scarred from her seemingly traumatic childhood experiences, suggests Olds' intentional willingness to avoid the label "confessional" poet, her resistance to make poetry centred on anger and shame.<sup>81</sup>

Yet the speaker's refusal to criticise the father is noteworthy precisely because of the damning nature of her filial portrait. Olds's speaker shares with Plath's speaker some of the features of the confessional 'I'. However, Plath's legacy presents Olds with as problematic a role model as Ramzani identifies the 'poetesses' as once providing.

### 3. Olds and influence

Glyn Maxwell attempts to avoid the obvious comparison with women poets while others are not so circumspect; Dan Schneider comments of Olds: 'She is a very disingenuous poet - in dozens of interviews when asked of

<sup>78</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.28) 'The Request' TF.

<sup>79</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.75 & p.84) '35/10' & 'Mouse Elegy' DATL. Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.82) 'Gerbil Funeral' TGC.

<sup>80</sup> The first two lines of Olds's poem 'What It Meant' are taken from Julia Ward Howe's famous Civil War hymn 'Battle Hymn of The Republic'. See Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.41) 'What It Meant' TUR London: Cape. Garner, Dwight. (1996) 'The Salon Interview Sharon Olds'.

<sup>81</sup> Dillon, Brian. (1993) 'Never having had you, I cannot let you go': Sharon Olds's Poems of a Father-Daughter Relationship' *The Literary Review*, 37:1 (Fall 1993), pp. 108-118.

influences she cites bizarre & unrelated poets such as C.D. Wright while never once mentioning that glorious suicide on whose poetic tit she suckled.<sup>82</sup> *Salon* magazine hails Olds as: 'a natural heir to such melancholy talents as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath'.<sup>83</sup> Ian Hamilton notes that Olds is often seen as a 'shriller Sylvia Plath'.<sup>84</sup>

Olds is most often compared to Plath - or Plath and Sexton - but rarely Sexton on her own, despite the fact there are as many similarities between Olds's and Sexton's treatment of confessional subject-matter as there are between Olds's and Plath's. Such a phenomenon suggests Olds and Plath are commonly compared in terms of their fame, and as cultural commodities. However, there are some similarities between the poetry of Plath and Olds. Plath's influence may be detected in Olds's poem 'What If God', where the squirrel god's arm: 'in the yolk of my soul up to the elbow,/ stirring, stirring the gold' is reminiscent of the stirring doctors in Plath's 'Lady Lazarus'.<sup>85</sup> The opening line of 'Lady Lazarus' - 'I have done it again' - is reminiscent of an opening line of an Olds's poem, 'I have never done it again'.<sup>86</sup> Elsewhere in 'Lifelong' Olds's speaker comments:

there is your father, dead, curled on his side,  
mouth open, lips cracked,  
and my father, his jaw at the same grim  
angle of a salt-cod, and their seed  
is there too. I do not know  
where the mothers are, maybe the mothers  
are elsewhere and I can be the only  
woman for a while, and love the entire  
human in the man.<sup>87</sup>

The sea bed and the wreck of the father conjure Plath's poem 'Full Fathom Five', which in turns echoes Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The use of words such as 'cracked' are also reminiscent of a lexis associated with Plath, but the final five lines of 'Lifelong' are in their content and tone typically Oldsian. However, the phrase 'the only woman' - wonderfully describing the solipsism of Olds's speaker - also conjures the situation of a daughter in love with her father, which is a common theme in poems of Plath's and Sexton's and takes a reflective reader back to the confessional model.<sup>88</sup>

Olds and Plath both write dramatic poems that use taboo subject-matter, but Olds is more accessible and less allegorical than Plath. Olds's

<sup>82</sup> Schneider, Dan. (2002) 'Sharon Olds's orifices and the inculcation of tedium'.

<sup>83</sup> Garner, Dwight. (1996) 'The Salon Interview Sharon Olds'.

<sup>84</sup> Hamilton, Ian, ed. (1996, p.398) *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-century Poetry in English*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>85</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p25.) 'What If God' TGC; Plath, Sylvia. 'Lady Lazarus' in Hughes, Ted, ed. (1981, p.244) *Sylvia Plath Collected Poems*.

<sup>86</sup> Plath, Sylvia. 'Lady Lazarus' in Hughes, Ted, ed. (1981, p.244) *Sylvia Plath Collected Poems*; Olds, Sharon. (1980, p52) 'I Could Not Tell' SS.

<sup>87</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.84). 'Lifelong' TW.

<sup>88</sup> For a discussion of this aspect of Olds's work and the Electra Complex in relation to confessional poetry, see Chapter 2, p.83 of the dissertation.

speaker strives to move beyond the pain of her confessional foremothers towards forgiveness and acceptance. Her rejection of anger is marked and overtly hard-won: this is demonstrated by her speaker's struggle to come to terms with childhood across her oeuvre, and her undercutting of stated filial forgiveness with allusions to the father's misdeeds.<sup>89</sup> Despite consciously deviating from Plath's example, Olds arguably shows the earlier poet's influence through her attempts at negating it.

Dan Schneider's reductive description of Plath as a 'glorious suicide' is illustrative of Olds's reasons for explicitly not choosing to identify with her; Olds has said of Plath and Sexton: 'their steps were not steps I wanted to put my feet in.'<sup>90</sup> The autobiographies of male confessional poets also feature suffering but Germaine Greer has noted how specific to a woman qua poet is the perceived link between writing and suffering, similarly Eavan Boland comments: 'I know now that I began writing in a country where the word woman and the word poet were almost magnetically opposed'.<sup>91</sup>

While not wishing to align herself with the suffering of confessional poets, Olds also felt excluded from the male-dominated canon she was exposed to throughout her education. In an interview she explains why, following doctorate study at Columbia University, she vowed to give up everything she had learnt in order to write her poetry:

it had something to do with almost all my teachers having been and many of the writers that I had read as a child having been men... I was sort of drenched in experience that wasn't in many of the books I had read while I was coming up.<sup>92</sup>

Olds had a difficult time at Columbia and had to resubmit her dissertation on Ralph Waldo Emerson. 'The Defence' in Blood, Tin, Straw, which Olds has described in an interview as based on her own experience, describes a pregnant doctoral candidate's humiliation in front of an almost exclusively male panel:

They wanted (Rip) a dissertation  
absolutely new, without one  
word (Rip) of this one – except  
'the' was all right and 'and'. How much  
time shall we give her, gentleman? How about

<sup>89</sup> See for instance Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.71) 'I Wanted to Be There When My Father Died' TF where the speaker comments: 'I wanted to watch my father die/ because I hated him. Oh, I loved him,/ my hands cherished him, laying him out,/ but I had feared him so,/ his lying as if dead on the/ flowered couch had pummelled me'; see also Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.36) 'The Chute' TGC; in this poem the speaker observes of her father's cruelty: 'We hung there in the dark' and yet, you know, he never dropped us/ or meant to, he only liked to say that he would,/ so although it's a story with some cruelty in it,/ finally it's a story of love'.

<sup>90</sup> Patterson, Christina. 'Blood, sweat and fears'.

<sup>91</sup> Greer, Germaine. Slip Shod Sibyls; Boland, Eavan. (2006, pxi). Object Lessons: the Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Manchester: Carcanet.

<sup>92</sup> .Sharon Olds Afternoon Seminar January 29 1998' *Writers Online* Volume 2 No 3 Summer 1998 Available at <http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/olv2n3.html> [online]. Accessed 11 February 2008.

-nine months?! *Har, har, har.* My cervix bent for a moment, with intimate, private hurt.<sup>93</sup>

The parentheses suggest this is psychodrama and the 'rip' evokes internal damage. The ripped up dissertation in 'The Defence' is 'woman's work', and the speaker feels its debasement as an assault on her (very) female body. Janet Montefiore suggests the action in 'The Defence' is reminiscent of the scene in Charlotte Bronte's *Villette* where Lucy Snowe's humiliation at the hands of two male professors spurs her on to greater academic achievement.<sup>94</sup> 'The Defence' summons a gothic scholastic atmosphere suggestive of *Villette* but, unlike Snowe, Olds's speaker rejects success on the examiners' terms.

In real life Olds resubmitted a dissertation 'with a footnote on every page' and then vowed she would give up everything she had learnt in order to write her poetry.<sup>95</sup> Far from providing role models, the mainly male canonical influences of her postgraduate education had to be renounced before she could pursue her own writing. Despite currently holding an academic post at New York University, Olds is decidedly non academic when discussing her own work.<sup>96</sup> Such reticence is part of the evasion central to her poetry; a journalist from the *New York Times* comments: 'for all the autobiographical flavour of her work, to interview Sharon Olds is to play a wispy kind of cat and mouse game'.<sup>97</sup>

'The Defence' anticipates Olds's later poem 'The Language of the Brag', where the speaker recalls: 'I have stood by the sandlot and watched the boys play', before going on to challenge two male poets: 'I have done what you wanted to do Walt Whitman/ Allen Ginsburg'.<sup>98</sup> In 'The Language of the Brag' the speaker's claim to greatness is giving birth to a child, but also giving birth to a poem that celebrates female experience, her brag is a literary assault. The nod to Whitman is gendered; the brag is concerned with childbirth. Whitman's and Ginsberg's physical curiosity and inclusiveness suggest they may well have wanted to experience the state.<sup>99</sup> Olds's speaker in 'The Language of the Brag' has experienced a physical process Whitman and Ginsberg are unable to experience and, beyond that she has written about it. By using two iconic male writers Olds extends the claim of her brag.

<sup>93</sup> 'Sharon Olds Afternoon Seminar January 29 1998'; Olds, Sharon.(2000,p.7) 'The Defence'. BTS.

<sup>94</sup> Montefiore, Janet. (2001) 'The Doctoral Defence [Review of Blood, Tin, Straw]' *Times Literary Supplement* 2 March, p24.

<sup>95</sup> 'Sharon Olds Afternoon Seminar January 29 1998'.

<sup>96</sup> See for instance Olds's answer to a question regarding how her poems are formed: 'They're [the poems] not in the front part of the brain. They're more in the body.', see Hempel, Amy. (1996) 'Sharon Olds' *Bomb: A quarterly arts & culture magazine since 1981* Issue 54. Available at <http://www.bombsite.com/issues/54/articles/1927> [online]. Accessed 10 April 2008.

<sup>97</sup> Smith, Dinita. (1999) 'The Creative Mind; the Examined Life, without Punctuation' *New York Times*. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/090999olds-profile.html> [online]. Accessed 29 February 2008.

<sup>98</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.44) 'The Language Of The Brag' SS.

<sup>99</sup> Whitman writes in *Leaves Of Grass* 'And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men'. See Whitman, Walt. (1986, p.44) *Leaves Of Grass: the first (1855) edition*. New York: Penguin.

In 'Nurse Whitman' Olds's speaker also addresses Whitman using a birthing conceit: 'we conceive Walt with the men we love, thus, now,/ we bring to fruit'.<sup>100</sup> Olds stresses Whitman's gender, approaching and augmenting his influence from a female stance. Ezra Pound struggled under the influence of Whitman, commenting in 'A Pact': 'I come to you as a grown child/ Who has had a pig-headed father', but Olds negotiates Whitman's influence by indicating that as a woman writer she can add something opposite and, at least, equal to the canon.<sup>101</sup> Such a literary assault was part of Olds's pact with Satan which she describes when talking of the subject-matter she would tackle post Columbia:

The half generation before me--Muriel Rukeyser, Galway Kinnell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, who am I forgetting--had written about children and a little about the birth room. So it was clear to me that those subjects were a part of poetry.<sup>102</sup>

The comment indicates that Olds felt the subject-matter she would explore in her work was underwritten. However, she celebrates some poets; the first of these, Muriel Rukeyser, is Olds's most consistently acknowledged role model and provides the image of the fulfilled and alive female poet that was missing throughout her education at Columbia.

Nearly two decades older than either Plath or Sexton, and outliving both of them, Rukeyser literally survived the confessional generation: Sexton called the poet: 'the mother of everyone'.<sup>103</sup> Rukeyser's famous lines: 'Breathe-in experience // Breathe-out poetry', have come to symbolise, according to the poet Deryn Rees-Jones, 'writing emerging from the women's movement which emphasises a relational connection between experience, politics and aesthetics'.<sup>104</sup> In 'Käthe Kollwitz' Rukeyser writes: 'What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?/ The world would split open'.<sup>105</sup> The words were adapted for the title of an anthology which recovers four centuries of women's poetry.<sup>106</sup> Rukeyser is an inspirational figure for many women writers because, as Marilyn Hacker has commented in reference to the comparatively little critical attention that is devoted to Rukeyser, she was neither a 'sexless, reclusive eccentric, with nothing to say

<sup>100</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.13) 'Nurse Whitman' SS.

<sup>101</sup> Pound, Ezra. (1973, p.98) 'A Pact' Collected Shorter Poems, by Ezra Pound. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Faber.

<sup>102</sup> See Chapter 2, p.85 of the dissertation for a discussion of Olds's pact with Satan; 'Sharon Olds Afternoon Seminar January 29 1998'.

<sup>103</sup> Sexton wrote in a letter to Rukeyser 'I just want to tell you again, beautiful Muriel, mother of everyone, how I cherish your words as much as the memory of your good face'. See Sexton, Linda Gray and Ames, Lois, eds. (1977, p322) Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

<sup>104</sup> 'Breathe-in experience, breathe out poetry' is the opening line of Rukeyer's 'Poem out of Childhood'. See Rukeyser, Muriel. (1982, p.3) The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser. 2nd edition. New York: McGraw-Hill; Rees-Jones, Deryn. (2007) 'Tilt by Jean Sprackland' Reviewed in The Guardian. Available at <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,2194984,00.html> [online]. Accessed 1 November 2007.

<sup>105</sup> Rukeyser, Muriel. (1982, p.482). 'Käthe Kollowitz' The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser.

<sup>106</sup> Bernikow, Louise, ed. (1974) The World Split Open; Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552-1950. New York: Vintage.

specifically to women, or a brilliant, tragic, tortured suicide'.<sup>107</sup> Hacker is referring to Marianne Moore (the 'eccentric') and Sylvia Plath ('the suicide').

In 'The Power of Suicide', a poem published in 1963 which is also the year Plath took her own life, Rukeyser writes:

The potflower on the window says to me  
In words that are green edged red leaves:  
Flower flower flower flower flower  
Today for the sake of all the dead Burst into flower.<sup>108</sup>

The poem states a necessary imperative for women poets to not only reject the masochism that has become associated with confessional poets, but to react against it by 'flowering'; to become a living memorial for dead women poets. Rukeyser also has a more specific poem alluding to Plath, 'Not To Be Printed, Not To Be Said, Not To Be Thought'. The piece, which is in a form that mirrors an epitaph, reads in its entirety: '*I'd rather be Muriel/ Than be dead and be Ariel.*'<sup>109</sup> Olds has said of the poem: 'Muriel had tremendous knowledge of depression and tremendous humor. She knew how to cock a snook at the destructive powers in others and in herself. I loved that!'<sup>110</sup>

Olds attended a poetry class with Rukeyser, post Columbia. She has described seeing the poet read for the first time:

The poets who most opened things up for me were the poets at the first anti-Vietnam war reading in New York City that I went to. I think the year was 1974. Muriel Rukeyser was the first reader. Then came Adrienne Rich, Galway Kinnell, Etheridge Knight, Robert Bly, and others.

I was in the front row. I was at toe-of-shoe level. If I had had the guts to be happy, I would have been happy that I had found something that night. I had been writing poems all my life, but that's when I heard poets who were writing about family, writing about birth, poets who were writing and were alive.<sup>111</sup>

Olds's poem 'Absent One', in The Dead And The Living, is dedicated to Rukeyser, as is Olds's debut collection Satan Says and a poem 'Solitary' contained within it. Olds's poem 'Solitary' comments on Rukeyser's poem 'The Gates':

<sup>107</sup> See Herzog, Anne F. and Kaufman, Janet E, eds. (2001). How Shall We Tell Each Other Of The Poet: The Life And Writing of Muriel Rukeyser. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Rukeyser's quotation is cited in Russ, Joanna. (1983, p60) How to Suppress Women's Writing. Austin: University of Texas Press.

<sup>108</sup> Rukeyser, Muriel. (1982, p.451)'The Power of Suicide' The Collected Poems.

<sup>109</sup> Rukeyser, Muriel. (1982, p.558) 'Not To Be Printed, Not To Be Said, Not To Be Thought' The Collected Poems.

<sup>110</sup> Blossom, Laurel. Sharon Olds Poets & Writers Magazine.

<sup>111</sup> Blossom, Laurel. 'Sharon Olds' Poets & Writers Magazine.

This is not that poem.  
 This is another – there may be details  
 wrong, the way variations come in  
 when you pass on a story. This is a poem  
 about a woman, a poet, standing in a courtyard,  
 feeling she is probably doing no good.  
 Pass it on: a poet, a woman,  
 a witness<sup>112</sup>

The 'solitary' of the title is in contrast with the solidarity of the poem; the heroine is initially a woman first, a poet second, but, with the repetition of the words, the terms become interchangeable. The poem's subtext is about the act of writing as a woman. The poem 'Absent One' in The Dead And The Living is a pre-elegy for Rukeyser and shows the kinship Olds feels with her: 'you are always with me, a flowering/ branch suspended over my life'.<sup>113</sup> There is perhaps an echo, in the use of 'flowering', of Rukeyer's poem 'Not To Be Printed, Not To Be Said, Not To Be Thought'. Olds has said of Rukeyser: 'I think of what Muriel Rukeyser said, write about what they tell you to forget; write about what they tell you to forget, write about what they tell you to forget. Those are three lines from her poem.'<sup>114</sup> The lines are from Rukeyser's filial elegy 'Double Ode': 'Pay attention to what they tell you to forget/ pay attention to what they tell you to forget/ pay attention to what they tell you to forget'.<sup>115</sup> Whether she has adapted the phrase purposefully or not, it is interesting to note Olds's Bloomian 'misprision'.<sup>116</sup> In her hands, Rukeyser's words become an imperative for writing and for ignoring those who would inhibit the poet – for Olds, the educators at Columbia who schooled her in a poetry that she perceived as excluding her experience.

There are some parallels between the work of Rukeyser and Olds, but much of Rukeyser's work is concerned with political events in a way that Olds's work, with notable exceptions, is not. It is likely that Rukeyser is a positive poetic role model for Olds in her life, as much as her work. Aside from Rukeyser, Olds cites a variety of other names when asked about her influences, from Emily Dickinson to Philip Levine to Ruth Stone to Jane Saw Puff. Often her reasons for such admiration privilege the personal over the literary. She studied Emerson because of hearing a reading of his poem 'Give All To Love', but also because 'he just seemed like a fun person'.<sup>117</sup> Four of Olds's collections are dedicated to, or carry epigraphs from the work of, contemporary poets and the informal nature of such dedications is

<sup>112</sup> The title poem of Rukeyser's last book The Gates is based on her unsuccessful attempt to visit Korean poet Kim Chi Ha on death row in South Korea; Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.77) 'Solitary' SS.

<sup>113</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.28) 'Absent One' DATL.

<sup>114</sup> 'Sharon Olds Afternoon Seminar January 29 1998'.

<sup>115</sup> Rukeyser, Muriel. (1982, p.540) 'Double Ode'. The Collected Poems.

<sup>116</sup> Harold Bloom defines Clinamen or Poetic Misprision as a necessary misreading of a poetic influence arguing that 'A poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a clinamen in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves'. See Bloom, Harold. (1997, p.14, p.19-45) The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory Of Poetry. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>117</sup> 'Sharon Olds Afternoon Seminar January 29 1998'.

stressed. Blood, Tin, Straw is 'for Bobbie and Galway', referring to the poet Galway Kinnell, Olds's colleague at New York University, and his partner: the inversion of the names (a reader might have expected the poet to be placed first) underlines Kinnell's role as husband, rather than colleague or mentor. Similarly The Dead And The Living is dedicated to two poets George and Mary Oppen, their appearance together emphasises Olds's personal, rather than literary, connection with them. Within Olds's collections there are dedications for poets including Hugh Seidman, Yusef Komunyakaa and Toi Dericotte, and Jane Kenyon and Donald Hall (the dual dedication for Komunyakaa and Dericotte, and Kenyon and Hall gives precedence to their informal relationship with each other, and with Olds). Olds commonly reads a wide range of other poets' work at public appearances, often drawing attention to rising stars rather than antecedents. The only book she dedicates to a family member is The Father - other dedicatees are mainly literary figures. In an extension of Bloom's theory of filial relations between poets or of Freud's filial romance, Olds has literary mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and friends; she has found herself a more interesting literary family.<sup>118</sup> Olds also has literary children - particularly, daughters: she is identified by many female poets on both sides of the Atlantic as a role model.<sup>119</sup> In addition in 'The Language of the Brag', as has been noted, Olds invokes a male literary model, and substitutes it with a female familial model through the motif of childbirth.

In 2004, the New York Times asked prominent poets to talk about their influences; Olds cited Stanley Kunitz, Yusef Komunyakaa and Deborah Digges. Of Komunyakka, Olds commented:

The (second) book makes me wonder, with delight, how such exactness and such mysteriousness can be so deeply present together. Reading Yusef Komunyakaa's MAGIC CITY (Wesleyan University, 1992) has been for me like the early days of rock dancing -- joy and music and trying to figure out how the other person is doing what he's doing!

*All the bees in the world  
Live in little white houses  
Except the ones in these flowers.  
All sticky & sweet inside.  
I wonder what death tastes like.*

<sup>118</sup> Bloom discusses a filial relationship between male poets, commenting on 'sonship': see Bloom, Harold. (1997, p.16) The Anxiety of Influence. Freud argued that children early in their development see their parents as 'divine' beings, a view which undergoes repression as development continues but unconsciously the child still retains an attachment to the idealized parents and sees the actual parents as imitators, see Badcock, Christopher. (1992, p.154) Essential Freud. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford, Massachusetts: Blackwell.

<sup>119</sup> Contemporary British women poets who are on record as citing Olds's influence include Colette Bryce, Melanie Challenger, Kate Clanchy, Helen Farish, Vicki Feaver, Jen Hadfield, Jackie Kay and Jean Sprackland. American women poets who acknowledge Olds's influence include Kim Addonizo, Dorianne Laux, Alicia Ostriker and Joyce Peseroff.

*Sometimes I toss the butterflies  
Back into the air.<sup>120</sup>*

The influence of this piece can be seen in Olds's poem 'First Thanksgiving' which appears in her collection Blood, Tin, Straw seven years after the publication of Komunyakaa's book:

As I child, I caught  
bees, by the wings, and held them, some seconds,  
looked into their wild faces,  
listened to them sing, then tossed them back  
into the air<sup>121</sup>

The title and theme of Olds's poem 'Little Things' pays homage to Richard Wilbur's poem 'Love Calls Us To The Things Of The World'. Olds's poem 'The Rising Daughter' ends: 'I would be/ for myself, then, an enemy/ to all who did not wish me to rise', a reader might hear an echo of Maya Angelou's poem 'Still I Rise' which uses the refrain 'I rise' throughout.<sup>122</sup>

Other critics have detected various influences in Olds's work. A reviewer for the *New York Times* observes: 'Like Whitman, Ms Olds sings the body in celebration of a power stronger than political oppression.'<sup>123</sup> Olds's foregrounding and glorification of the body is certainly Whitmanesque. In 'The Language of the Brag', as has been discussed, Olds invokes Whitman and Ginsberg. The final line of 'The Language of the Brag': 'I am putting my proud American boast right here', is reminiscent of the final line of Ginsberg's poem 'America' which ends: 'America, I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel'.<sup>124</sup> Olds has also acknowledged the influence of church hymns in her work, and the effects of listening to them as a child on the rhythm of her poetry.<sup>125</sup>

Olds's poetry supports her testimony that she has been influenced by a variety of poets. However, the invocation of multiple influences may also be seen as an attempt to distance herself from the critical, and biographical, legacy of Plath and Sexton – with whom she is often critically bracketed. Her tendency to name eclectic role models arguably negates the importance of any one influence, functioning as an anti-canonical gesture. Sandra Gilbert

<sup>120</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2004) 'The Poetry Symposium' *The New York Times*. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/21/books/review/21SYMPOSI.html?pagewanted=5&fta=y> [online]. Accessed 11 February 2008.

<sup>121</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.110) 'First Thanksgiving' BTS.

<sup>122</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.19) 'The Rising Daughter' SS; Angelou, Maya. (1978) 'Still I Rise'. *Poets.org*. Available at <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15623> [online]. Accessed 22 April 2008.

<sup>123</sup> Barclay, Stephen. (2007). 'Sharon Olds' Available at [http://www.barclayagency.com/olds\\_print.html](http://www.barclayagency.com/olds_print.html) [online]. Accessed 10 April 2007.

<sup>124</sup> Ginsberg, Alan. 'America' in Hoover, Paul, ed. (1994, p.136) Postmodern American Poetry: a Norton Anthology. New York, London: W W Norton & Company.

<sup>125</sup> See Lehman, David. (2002) 'Best American Poetry On The Air'. *Cortlandreview.com* Available <http://www.cortlandreview.com/features/02/07/index.html> [online]. Accessed 7 March 2007.

and Susan Gubar identified the 'female affiliation complex' which deters women writers from acknowledging each other's influence for fear of exclusion from the mainstream literary canon, and a consequent devaluation in their contemporary critical status.<sup>126</sup> Olds's choice of subject-matter, which was outside of her education at Columbia, and overtly emphasises her experience as a woman, might be seen to negate her adherence to the female affiliation complex. However, her choice of subject-matter also aligns her with the contemporary canon of the 'first wave' of confessional poets - particularly Anne Sexton, who explored sex, motherhood, menstruation and ageing in her work. As Plath, Sexton and Rich had to negotiate the taint of the nineteenth-century 'poetess', Olds might be seen to be deliberately distancing herself from her confessional foremothers: this process would support the female affiliation complex. However, Olds also consistently acknowledges Rukeyser as a positive and enduring influence, and embraces female-centred subject-matter which explicitly positions her speaker as a woman survivor. In doing so, she both deviates from and adheres to the female affiliation complex, and the influence of her confessional foremothers.

#### **4. Features of the 'apparently personal'**

Olds's poetry shall now be examined in terms of three of its most identifiable features: the speaker of the poems and her autobiographical relation to Olds; the 'happy-ever-after' narrative which frames the speaker's presentation of her family history; and, the poetry's often controversial subject-matter. As part of this final category, Olds's characteristic use of revision shall be explored throughout her work.

##### **i) The 'real Sharon': Olds's 'apparently personal' speaker**

The speaker in Olds's work is a survivor: her survival is partly a reaction to the victimhood Olds perceived in the poetry of the confessional school. Olds distinguishes her work from confessional poetry by referring to it as 'apparently personal'; she comments in an interview:

I say 'apparently personal' as much for the sake of the writers that I'm working with at Goldwater and at NYU or the places where I go and do intensive weekend teaching so that we will all feel as free as possible to write the poems that come to us.<sup>127</sup>

Olds's early poetry is less 'apparently personal' than her later work, and she has taken out her children's names where they first appeared in her poems. She has coined the phrase 'the spectrum of loyalty and betrayal' to describe this process:

Ten years ago I made a vow not to talk about my life [in interviews]. Obviously, the apparently very personal nature of my writing made this

<sup>126</sup> Gilbert, Sandra M and Gubar, Susan. 'Forward Into the Past: The Complex Female Affiliation Complex' in McGann, Jerome J, ed (1985, p.240) *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

<sup>127</sup> 'Sharon Olds. Afternoon Seminar, January 29, 1998'.

seem to me like maybe a good idea, for both sides of the equation – both for the muses and for the writer... I've worked out this thing I've called "the spectrum of loyalty and betrayal"<sup>128</sup>

However, amending a published text draws attention to the original version but does not obliterate it. Arguably Olds purposefully draws attention to her text, as text. Her overt attempts to revise her work encourage the view that it is personal, as does her explanation of the label 'apparently personal'.

Beyond the use of autobiographical detail, Olds's device of a consistent speaker and her intimate tone appear to invite a reader into her confidence. Few sophisticated readers would admit to interrogating Olds's speaker for the story on Olds, but they might feel cheated if they discovered the work was entirely fictional. Billy Collins demonstrated, in his discussion of the 'apparently personal' with a group of advanced writing students, that even the most reflective reader of The Father expects some level of autobiography in Olds's poems:

They had agreed that Olds's poems would be just as powerful if invention were their only mother but they were now forced to admit that they also wanted the poems to be true in some reliable and ingenuous sense... They wanted to believe in a real Sharon<sup>129</sup>

Olds's awareness of the reader's need to believe in a 'real Sharon' is demonstrated by her response to a comment from a young writer who tells her he will be angry if he finds out that she had 'made it up'. Olds tells him that there are no rules that poetry can't be made up, but then says: 'I winked to let him know he was right about me'.<sup>130</sup> Olds undercuts her explanation by inviting the young writer's belief in the 'real Sharon', even as she dispels it. However, as has been discussed, the dissertation employs the term 'speaker' because there is a gap between Olds and her narrator, although they are necessarily on winking terms.

The speaker is the poems' central preoccupation, and events are told from her viewpoint. Throughout the poetry, Olds exposes her narrative manipulation, highlighting the particularity of her account. Olds exposes the speaker's partiality in 'The Chute':

so although it's a story with some cruelty in it,  
finally it's a story of love  
and release, the way the father pulls you out of nothing  
and stands there foolishly grinning.<sup>131</sup>

The poem begins with a story of the father's abuse but, due to the speaker's summation, the reader is invited to form a conclusion other than the one to which they have been led. Despite the confessional tone, the real concern of

<sup>128</sup> Garner, Dwight. (1996) 'The Salon Interview Sharon Olds'.

<sup>129</sup> Collins, Billy. (2002, p.81-91). 'My Grandfather's Tackle Box'. In After Confession.

<sup>130</sup> Lehman, David. (2002) 'Best American Poetry On The Air'.

<sup>131</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.36) 'The Chute' TGC.

this poem is not abuse, but the speaker's survival and magnanimity.<sup>132</sup> Similarly in 'The Ferryer' the speaker comments:

someone  
I want to get rid of who makes me feel  
ugly and afraid. I do not say  
the way you did.<sup>133</sup>

The speaker does not accuse her father to his face, but she accuses him to the reader within 'The Ferryer' and undercuts her filial deference.

The speaker's preoccupation with the past is illustrated by her tendency to revisit the same incident across different poems where she reinvents this past according to the evolving present. In 'I Go Back To May 1937' she (re)stages the speaker's conception:

I  
take them up like the male and female  
paper dolls and bang them together  
at the hips like chips of flint as if to  
strike sparks from them, I say  
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.<sup>134</sup>

'I Go Back To May 1937' is signposted as an *ars poetica*. The extract quoted above is used as the epigraph to Olds's collected edition Strike Sparks – the title of the book also comes from a phrase in the poem. The poet Aaron Smith offers a convincing analysis as to why 'I Go Back To May 1937' is so significant in Olds's oeuvre:

the narrator is not only participating in making her very "physical" body by initiating (furiously) a sexual act between her parents, but she is also constructing a "body" of poetics. The narrator in that moment refuses the role of disembodied observer and chooses, instead, to be an active agent in sculpting her own story.<sup>135</sup>

The speaker's situation of herself as the agent of her own creation story is authentic in the context of the poems. The account is fabulous, highlighted by the unborn speaker's active narration. The disproportionate interest in self signals to the reflective reader that the 'I' is somewhat of an unreliable narrator. The speaker's parents are reduced to mere props in her hands, the dolls of psychodrama.

<sup>132</sup> See Chapter 2, p.95 of the dissertation for a discussion of the lack of evidence of the father's wrong-doings.

<sup>133</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.67) 'The Ferryer' TF.

<sup>134</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.23) 'I Go Back To May 1937' TGC.

<sup>135</sup> Smith, Aaron. (2005) 'The Very Act of Telling: Sharon Olds and Writing Narrative Poetry' Poets.org. Available at <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5892> [online]. Accessed 6 May 2006.

The presentation of the speaker's parents as puppets in 'I Go Back To May 1937' is characteristic throughout Olds's work. Despite their seeming exposure in sex, death and birth, Olds's characters' lack of individuality is emphasised by the speaker's use of general pronouns to describe their bodies; James Sutherland Smith draws attention to this important feature of Olds's work:

In 'Bathing the New Born' there is an oddness in the use of determiners as in the line, 'the scrotum wrinkled as a waved whelk shell'. Why 'the' when elsewhere her son's body parts are marked by 'his'? There is exactly the same inconsistency in a crucial poem, 'The Source' in the second part of the book. Olds describes herself making love and imagines herself entering her father as a glass of whisky; 'I slide all the way down to the beginnings, the / curved chamber of *the balls* (my italics). Once again 'the' precedes a part of the body not 'his'. It is as if Olds sheers away from normal collocation into impersonal description having been stopped cold by the taboo against incest.<sup>136</sup>

However, the ownership of the bodies is only questioned, not negated, by the poet's use of the definite article. Determiners are used to call attention to the body's generic status. The reader is invited to contemplate the iconography of a penis that is also, always, *the* penis. Olds uses the definite article consistently to tighten and widen her focus. The bodies in her poetry are archetypal, despite the 'apparently personal' nature of the speaker's story.

A definition of poetic truth, as opposed to literal truth, might be one where two opposing views or versions of events are able to be held simultaneously. The non-literal nature of Olds's truth is demonstrated throughout Olds's poetry. In 'I Go Back To May 1937' the speaker travels back in time, even before her own time while in 'Time Travel' she revisits the scene of her adolescence.<sup>137</sup> The speaker is able to speak for other characters, and dip in and out of their heads to offer a reading of their thoughts.<sup>138</sup> 'The One Girl at the Boy's Party' begins: 'When I take my girl to the swimming party/ I set her down among the boys', the speaker goes on to comment:

they'll plunge in the deep end, she'll subtract  
her height from ten feet, divide it into  
hundreds of gallons of water, the numbers  
bouncing in her mind like molecules of chlorine  
in the bright blue pool.<sup>139</sup>

<sup>136</sup> Sutherland – Smith, James. (1998) 'Death and the Unmaidenly: an exploration of Sharon Olds' *The Wellspring* with reference to Georges Bataille' *PN Review* 24:4 (March/April 1998) pp. 42-46.

<sup>137</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.23) 'I Go Back To May 1937' TGC; Olds, Sharon. (1980,p.61) 'Time-Travel' SS.

<sup>138</sup> See Chapter 3, p.118 of the dissertation for a discussion of 'When the Dead Ask My Father About Me' and 'My Father Speaks to Me From the Dead' – two poems which both overtly employ this technique.

<sup>139</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.79) 'The One Girl At the Boy's Party' DATL.

The poet and critic Rae Armantrout takes exception to Olds's presentation of the daughter in this poem: 'When Olds claims to know what is in her daughter's mind, claims there are "numbers bouncing in her mind like molecules of chlorine," I am repelled as by a presumptuous intrusion. This little girl is only a prop.'<sup>140</sup> Armantrout's argument, as her strong rebuttal implies, is based on taste. A reader is expected to discern that the 'The One Girl at the Boy's Party' is not concerned primarily with the daughter, but the speaker's pride and anxiety as her child stands on the literal brink of womanhood. The account is given in the future tense which emphasises it is an imagined version of an event. Had 'The One Girl at the Boy's Party' been presented from the point of view of the speaker's daughter, it would have been no more or less of an intrusion. If Armantrout's criticism was taken to its conclusion, the only legitimate subject for a poet would be their self and, as David Graham points out: 'personas, third person, and various dramatic devices are no warrant against egotism and self-enclosure; nor is the first person invariably a limiting or solipsistic option'.<sup>141</sup>

In 'Take the I Out' – a title which takes a sideswipe at the advice given in many a writing workshop – Olds's speaker declares: 'But I love the I, steel I-beam/ that my father sold. They poured the pig iron/ into the mold, and it fed out slowly'.<sup>142</sup> The narrative 'I', as this poem makes clear, is always a construction. Olds's first person persona may be seen as just as much a creation as a second or third person speaker despite the tendency of critics to reduce her work to 'testimony'. However, none of this stops a reader - nor should it - from naively and simultaneously believing that the story the speaker tells us is true, believing in, as Billy Collins terms her, a 'real Sharon'.<sup>143</sup>

## ii) 'Happy-ever-after'

Olds's speaker pursues a 'happy-ever-after' narrative throughout the poems, taking a reader from her unhappy childhood to her happy adulthood. In order to achieve her happy ending, the speaker is more often than not in conciliatory mood. She doesn't judge the father but, by characteristically alluding to her unhappy upbringing, invites the reader to do so on her behalf. Her preoccupation is not the sins of the father, but the showcasing of her own survival. Louise Glück finds this survival story constricting:

Because the character of the voice, in each case, is intended to be expansive, non-judgemental, rooted in the physical, intended to be the heroic voice of the survivor, one doesn't automatically associate its production with constriction. But to the poet, all obligation of this kind is constriction, and ought to be questioned or fought.<sup>144</sup>

<sup>140</sup> Armantrout, Rae. 'Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity' in Beach, Christopher, ed. (1998, p.290) An Anthology of New Poetics. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

<sup>141</sup> Graham, David. (2001, p.95) 'Voluminous Underwear; or, Why I Write Self-Portraits' in After Confession.

<sup>142</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.40) 'Take The I Out' BTS.

<sup>143</sup> See the discussion of 'the real Sharon' in Chapter 1, p.67 of the dissertation.

<sup>144</sup> Glück, Louise. (1992, p253) 'The Forbidden' in After Confession.

However, Glück is confusing Olds with her speaker. The story of the poems is the confession and showcasing of the active constriction of the 'I' voice. Poems question the speaker's ongoing struggle, and present her survival in a voice that is occasionally non-heroic and judgmental. The end of the struggle is destined never to arrive as it would signal the end of the poems.

Olds's speaker's comparison of her adult self with her siblings shows her actively struggling, occasionally judgementally, with the constriction of her past. In 'Time-Travel', the speaker reminds us she is 'the one survivor'.<sup>145</sup> Her brother, like the father, becomes an alcoholic; the process is described in poems such as 'Late Speech with My Brother' and 'The Derelict' where the speaker comments of a homeless man: 'I smell the waste of his/ piss, I see the ingot of his beard, and think of my younger brother'.<sup>146</sup>

In 'Indictment Of Senior Officers' a reader learns that the lives of the adult speaker and her sister have taken contrasting paths. The poem describes the sister's drug-taking and her marks 'from the latest husband's beatings'.<sup>147</sup> This poem blames the parents for the cycle of abuse, but in a later poem 'The Pact', the sister is held culpable: 'I/ have not been able to forgive you for giving your/ daughter away'.<sup>148</sup> In 'Barometer' the speaker comments: 'Being a woman whose elder sister/ abandoned a child - dropped her mid-journey,/ left her like a husband - I am not like other mothers'.<sup>149</sup> In 'The Elder Sister' the sister is her scapegoat: 'I made my escape, with my sister's/ body held in front of me'.<sup>150</sup>

The speaker's siblings live out the unhappy ending that the speaker (all but) escaped. The portrait of her sister reflects the speaker's need for distance, but this separation is only partly achieved. In 'The Clasp' the speaker brutally squeezes her daughter's hand. In 'I Could Not Tell', a poem which appears after the account of the sister's abandonment of her child in 'Barometer', the speaker describes jumping off a bus with her daughter in her arms:

I have kept an eye on that nice young mother  
who suddenly threw herself  
off the moving vehicle  
onto the stopped street, her life  
in her hands, her life's life in her hands<sup>151</sup>

There is a gap, in the paradoxically titled poem, between the 'nice young mother' and the speaker; the speaker shows how far, literally, she falls from the ideal. The speaker's struggle with the social construction, and constriction, of the 'nice young mother' is the genesis of the poem. Although the poem's

<sup>145</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.61) 'Time-Travel' SS.

<sup>146</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.46, 47) 'Late Speech with My Brother', 'The Derelict' DATL.

<sup>147</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980,p.18) 'Indictment of Senior Officers' SS.

<sup>148</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984,p.45) 'The Pact' DATL.

<sup>149</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980,p.52) 'Barometer' SS.

<sup>150</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984,p.48) 'The Elder Sister' DATL.

<sup>151</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980,p.52) 'I Could Not Tell' SS.

proximity to 'Barometer' suggests the speaker connects the incident with her childhood abuse, the poem is general enough to speak for the situation of motherhood: it reflects a mother's 'bad' desires rather than a bad mother's desires.

The construction of the maternal role is also the subject of 'The Other Life' where the speaker comments: 'I never thought I would become the mother, the other and I have not'.<sup>152</sup> A sequence of poems in Satan Says reveal maternal ambivalence, in 'Late' the speaker comments: 'I am tired of the children,/ I am tired of the laundry, I want to be great', while in 'Young Mothers II', a woman: 'cooks little things in hot fat'.<sup>153</sup> Far from the voice of the survivor not being associated with constriction, as Glück writes, the poems actively reflect the constriction the speaker is under, both through her particular and general circumstance.

Struggling to transcend her past, the speaker fears biological determinism; poems comment on the husband's braveness in loving 'her father's daughter', and on her daughter's likeness to her abusive grandfather.<sup>154</sup> There are two consistent threads within the narrative - the unhappy childhood and the happy adulthood - but the plot is not linear. The former story haunts the latter, and the speaker is ever mindful that her past might subsume her present.

A section on sex in The Wellspring ends with the speaker's pregnancy in 'May 1968' where she comments: 'I will give this child the rest of my life'.<sup>155</sup> James Sutherland-Smith observes:

*The Wellspring* is divided into four parts: the first part corresponds to Olds' conception and childhood, the second part of her sex life up to the conception of her daughter, the third part the growth of her children until they go to college and the fourth part Olds' sex life after her children have left home. The divisions are an occasion for a surface decorum.<sup>156</sup>

The general arc to the book is as Sutherland-Smith describes but the telling of the narrative is more fluid. The second part of The Wellspring is interrupted by the children and the husband and father while the 'children' section contains references to the speaker's parents. The 'surface decorum' is the speaker's exposed attempt to narrate a linear story. However, she shows the past intruding on the present. In doing so, Olds's poetry examines the shifting nature of time and the emergence of trauma in the ever-evolving relation of the past to the present.

<sup>152</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.39) 'The Other Life' DATL.

<sup>153</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.41, p.30) 'Young Mothers II' & 'Late' SS.

<sup>154</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.40, p.56) 'Fate' and 'Poem to My Husband from My Father's Daughter' DATL.

<sup>155</sup> Olds, Sharon (1996, p.39) 'May 1968' TW.

<sup>156</sup> Sutherland - Smith, James. (2008) 'Death and the unmaidenly'.

Beneath the speaker's eulogising of her story lies anxiety which subverts the happiness of her speaker's survival. It is simultaneously, possible to experience the speaker's narrative as part of a wider literary response to the confessional model: Olds starts off trying to subvert the suffering associated with the model but returns to it. In 'Miscarriage' an unhappy event is powerfully depicted:

A month later  
 our son was conceived, and I never went back  
 to mourn the one who came as far as the  
 sill with its information: that we could  
 botch something, you and I. All wrapped in  
 purple it floated away, like a messenger  
 put to death for bearing bad news.<sup>157</sup>

The messenger is simultaneously rejected and included. The speaker has experienced a positive upturn in her fortunes but, in this contemporary fairy-story, such happiness is hard-won and tempered. The speaker employs contradiction and irony to enable a reflective reader to deconstruct the stated narrative.

### iii) Subject-matter and revision

Olds's subject-matter is often graphic. Throughout her oeuvre, her treatment of such subject-matter contains many emendations. Her focus is arguably towards a discussion of revision. She signals her intention towards amending the original text, but it is the intention she highlights and the instability of her text. Olds's subject-matter and her treatment of revision throughout her work shall now be examined.

Olds's speaker describes her own body, as well as the bodies of her parents, husband, lovers and children, throughout her poetry. The latter category has proved particularly controversial with critics divided on whether or not the poetry exploits its subjects, Denise Levertov is in no doubt:

adults can object and defend themselves... children cannot. Yet there are many poems in which a parent... most often a mother - writes of a child in ways liable to cause acute, even traumatic embarrassment... These are poems - or images in poems - which focus on the child's body, and in particular its genitalia. Imagine a shy adolescent finding in print a graphic description of his little penis at age five, its color and shape! Worse, imagine his schoolmates reading the poem and teasing him about it! Was the description vital to the poem? Often I would say it was not.<sup>158</sup>

<sup>157</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.25) 'Miscarriage' DATL.

<sup>158</sup> Levertov, Denise. (1992, p.182) New & Selected Essays. New York: New Directions.

Later in the piece, Levertov notes: 'the egoism of writers who assume the reader wants to know that... a sibling once deliberately pissed on them'. Levertov isn't naming names, but as Belle Randall notes:

The only poet I know who has written about *both* her little son's penis and getting pissed on by her sister is Sharon Olds, and Levertov's tact in not naming a poet whose identity she nevertheless makes obvious seemed to me...sheer cattiness.<sup>159</sup>

It seems likely that Levertov is referring, with all the indirect directness of the 'apparently personal', to Olds's poems 'The Takers', and 'Five Year Old Boy'.<sup>160</sup> Levertov's assertion that adults can: 'object and defend themselves', is questionable. A poem is not expected to provide objective journalistic truths: post-structuralism would argue that there are no such truths. Adults such as Yasmin Kureishi have spoken out against their portrayal in literature, but succeed in drawing attention to their representation.<sup>161</sup> Such attempts at self-defence, like Olds's employment of the 'spectrum of loyalty and betrayal', advertise a piece as a 'true story'.<sup>162</sup> Ultimately, it is the readers' sensibilities that are challenged, and it is they who will make up their mind about exploitation of subject-matter.

Levertov's sentence - 'Imagine a shy adolescent finding in print a graphic description of his little penis at age five, its colour and shape!' - is itself arguably exploitative. The adjectives and use of punctuation are sensationalist, and the supposition presumptuous; would a child be more embarrassed at finding a literary representation of their penis than the obligatory bare-bottomed photo in the family album? An equally imaginable response might be pride or humour. Levertov assumes a relationship between the nakedness of the subject-matter, and the level of felt exploitation, but it is the level of public, rather than physical, exposure that is most likely to cause offence: Christopher Robin Milne, unlike Olds's children, expressed his weariness at being fictionalised in the Winnie-the-Pooh stories although his portrait appeared forever fully clothed in smocks, short pants and wellies.<sup>163</sup>

However, Levertov's specific unease with children's graphic portrayal as subject-matter is understandable. Although to be portrayed in literature might be seen as one of the hazards of associating with a writer, children

<sup>159</sup> Randall, Belle. (2004) 'Defining Circumstances: An Interview with Eavan Boland' *PNR* 157.

<sup>160</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.44) 'The Takers'. DATL; Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.56) 'Five Year Old Boy' SS.

<sup>161</sup> Yasmin Kureishi commented of her brother's, the novelist Hanif Kureishi's, portrayal of their father: 'Hanif's book presents my father as a dismal failure, a pathetic, sickly man who sat around in his pyjamas all day... My memory of my dad was of a loving family man with oodles of warmth, charm, wit and energy, despite being often ill... In most instances where family characters are depicted in Hanif's work, they tend to appear rather pathetic and ridiculous, stripped of their dignity. How much should one have to tolerate in the name of 'art'?'. See Lister, David (2004). 'The Week in Arts: Here's a novel way of creating a family feud'. *The Independent*. Available at [http://comment.independent.co.uk/columnists/david\\_lister/article31610.ece](http://comment.independent.co.uk/columnists/david_lister/article31610.ece) [online]. Accessed 1 November 07.

<sup>162</sup> See Chapter 1, p.67 of the dissertation for a discussion of the 'spectrum of loyalty and betrayal'.

<sup>163</sup> See Milne, Christopher. (1994) The Enchanted Places. London: Mandarin.

have no choice in such exposure. Mindful of this, Olds has responded to her growing fame by employing her 'spectrum of loyalty and betrayal' in poems that feature the speaker's children. The poem 'Boy Out in the World' in The Gold Cell begins: 'Gabriel at ten does not believe in evil', but in the selected The Sign Of Saturn the line appears as: 'My son at ten does not believe in evil'. The name Gabriel conjures an angelic child - the staple of every school nativity, in a white sheet and tinsel - in the amended version, the fitting connotations of the boy's name, with its juxtaposition against the word 'evil', is lost.<sup>164</sup>

In the original version of 'Boy Out in the World' the speaker's son is subsequently referred to as 'Gabey', then 'Gabe'. The name-shortening invites the reader into an increasing intimacy with him as a sinister narrative unfolds:

the man says You know what cock means?  
Gabe answers politely and keeps walking,  
he feels sorry for a man so dumb he has to ask a  
question like that.<sup>165</sup>

Gabe is a particular face in the crowd as well as the archetypal 'boy' of the title. The speaker's maternal tone is juxtaposed against shocking contemporary material, as she borrows her son's nonchalance in the telling of her tale. Characteristically, she claims an inside knowledge of Gabe which she continues to expand upon until the end of the piece:

he knows it wasn't a bad man,  
he wasn't dressed like a bum or talking like a wino,  
and anyway Gabey knows what's what, he can  
look deep into his own heart  
and tell you the nature of the human – kindness,  
courtesy, force.<sup>166</sup>

A reader might question whether a boy out in the world would be so guileless, and his mother so blasé. The interaction upon which this piece might be based would surely have involved the son being questioned by the mother and disabused of his innocence for his own protection. The reportage of the boy's voice by the end of the piece has been overtly replaced by the speaker's paraphrasing.

'Boy Out in the World' is not an exact replica of a real life event; it is a reflection on the temporal nature of the son's childhood and the strength of the mother-son relationship. The child's appropriate name, the narrative voice and the surreal nature of the event support the poem as a kind of fiction. This fiction is undercut by the employment of Olds's 'spectrum of loyalty and betrayal' which damages the poem's subtlety. If the 'I' is an invention, as Olds

<sup>164</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.87) 'Boy Out In The World' TGC; Olds, Sharon. (1991, p.91) 'Boy Out In The World' TSS.

<sup>165</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.87) 'Boy Out In The World' TGC.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

simultaneously maintains and subverts, then arguably it follows so are the supporting characters; the removal of the name acts in the same way as Olds's earlier deployed wink, undermining the poetry as fiction.<sup>167</sup>

The bodies of famous people from Marilyn Monroe to the Pope are also unveiled in Olds's work.<sup>168</sup> In addition, bodily activities - from masturbation to menstruation - are discussed in situations which exacerbate their shock value; the prelude to the speaker's masturbation in Olds's poem 'The Babysitter' is trying to persuade her charge to suck on her breast. In the poem 'The End' menstruation follows a decision to have a pregnancy terminated and is accompanied by a car crash outside the window.<sup>169</sup> Olds has commented that she is interested in pushing the boundaries of accepted poetic subject-matter: 'is there anything we can't write about in a poem?' she muses.<sup>170</sup> Following the confessional tradition, Olds uses the poetic 'I' to challenge cultural and literary norms. The poet's choice of subject-matter is underpinned by accessible, traditionally 'unpoetic', language with a heavy smattering of taboo words. This has led some critics to call her work pornographic, as shall be examined in the following chapter.

Like Plath, Olds infamously uses mass public death as a metaphor for personal suffering. These poems, while breaking her familial narrative, also become metaphors for it: in 'Mrs. Krikorian' a teacher's escape from occupied Armenia becomes part of the speaker's ongoing survival story.<sup>171</sup> The poem 'The Window' starts with a discussion of an earlier poem by Olds. Here, the speaker describes and concurs with her daughter's evaluation of the piece:

*I am mad at you, she whispers.  
You said in a poem that you're a survivor,  
that's O.K., but you said that you are  
a Jew, when you're not, that's so cheap. You're right,  
I say, you're so right.<sup>172</sup>*

The daughter, as becomes clear in the poem, wishes to talk to her mother following a visit to Auschwitz. However, 'The Window' proceeds to focus, in painstaking detail, on the visit without returning to the daughter's original criticism. The poem rejects the speaker's early appropriation of suffering, before going on to describe such suffering through the new filter of guilt. Olds may be wise in 'The Window' not to defend herself against her daughter's criticism, save with a good poem. The elegy is a guilty genre: as Adrienne Rich writes in her long elegy 'Sources', which also comments on the

<sup>167</sup> See Chapter 1, p.68 of the dissertation.

<sup>168</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.10) 'The Death of Marilyn Monroe' DATL; Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.19) 'The Pope's Penis' TGC.

<sup>169</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.15) 'The Babysitter' BTS; Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.26) 'The End' DATL.

<sup>170</sup> Garner, Dwight. (1996) 'The Salon Interview Sharon Olds'.

<sup>171</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.20) 'Mrs. Krikorian' TW.

<sup>172</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.53) 'The Window' TUR. The poem under discussion must be 'That Year' in SS, see Chapter 2, p.95 for a discussion of the piece.

Holocaust: 'The living,/ writers especially, are terrible projectionists. I hate the way they/ use the dead.'<sup>173</sup>

Olds's use of emendations is demonstrated by her poem 'On the Subway' in The Gold Cell which begins:

He has the  
casual cold look of a mugger,  
alert under hooded lids.<sup>174</sup>

In Strike Sparks, Olds's selected poems, the lines become:

He has  
or my white eye imagines he has  
the casual cold look of a mugger,  
alert under lowered eyelids.<sup>175</sup>

A reader could be trusted to visualise the speaker's imaginative white eye without such politically correct interjections. Olds has commented in an interview:

Reading some of my earlier work, I get that sense of the need for too big a head of steam to be built up. It seems extreme to me at times, some of the imagery. That's part of why I'm not so sorry I'm a little behind in putting books together, because some of those rather crude images I can now maybe correct...I just really love now the possibility of getting it right.<sup>176</sup>

Her willingness to rewrite is visible across her work; a by-product of such revision is that it can be used to deflect but not answer criticism. An example of this tendency is 'What If God', the original poem contains these lines where the 'He' is God and the 'she' is the speaker's mother: 'was He a/ man entering me up to the hilt while she/ pried my thighs wide in the starry dark'. The lines were later amended to: 'or was He a man/ entering me while she pried my spirit/ open in the starry dark'.<sup>177</sup> The poem, one of Olds's strongest, does not appear in her latest selected edition, an example of the ultimate edit. Later Olds wrote 'To One Who Wrote Me, "I, Too, Am an Incest Survivor"' which is, at the time of writing uncollected in any volume. In the poem the speaker refers to the emendations to 'What If God' commenting: 'How could I have said that my mother pried/ my thighs apart and think you would know/ it was the thighs of my spirit?'.<sup>178</sup>

<sup>173</sup> Rich, Adrienne. (1993, p.25) 'Sources' Your Native Land, Your Life. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York, London: WW Norton & Company.

<sup>174</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.5) 'On The Subway' TGC.

<sup>175</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2004, p.37) 'On The Subway' StS.

<sup>176</sup> Garner, Dwight. (1996) 'The Salon Interview Sharon Olds'.

<sup>177</sup> See Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.25) 'What If God' TGC and, the revised version of this poem, Olds, Sharon. (2003) 'What If God' The Pedestal magazine.com.

<sup>178</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003). To One Who Wrote Me I Too Am An Incest Survivor The Pedestal magazine.com.

Gale Swientkowski has argued convincingly that incest can be used as a metaphor for father/daughter relationships, but the cult of, what has been termed, 'incest lit' is unpleasant to some, Denise Levertov comments:

I'm certainly very tired of the me, me, me kind of poem, the Sharon Olds "Find the dirt and dig it up" poem, which has influenced people to find gruesome episodes in their life, whether they actually happened or not. Back when Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton were the models for neophytes, you had to have spent some time in a mental hospital to qualify as a poet. Now you have to have been abused.<sup>179</sup>

However, Levertov does not fully acknowledge the fictive nature of the 'apparently personal' narrator; you do not have to have spent time anywhere but at your desk to write a poem, whatever your subject-matter. Olds through her emendations to 'What If God' appears to assent to criticism such as Levertov's. Yet her emendations draw attention to the original text. In addition, the later poem "To One Who Wrote Me "I Too Am an Incest Survivor" appears to assert Olds's right to use incest as a metaphor, as shall be discussed in the following chapter.

## Conclusion

This chapter situated Olds within the contemporary confessional tradition, through an exploration of her poetic influences and some characteristic features of her 'apparently personal' style. The observations of chapter one will now be applied, given the dissertation's central focus, to a study of the role of the father in Olds's early collections.

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<sup>179</sup> Swientkowski, Gale. (2003) Imagining Incest: Sexton, Plath, Rich and Olds on Life With Daddy. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press; O'Connell, Nicholas. (1998) 'At the Field's End: Interviews with 22 Pacific Northwest Writers' Seattle: University of Washington Press. Available at [http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g\\_l/levertov\\_oconnell.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/levertov_oconnell.htm) [online]. Accessed 17 April 2008.

## Chapter Two: The Living Father

1. **Satan/Saturn**
2. **Sexualising the father**
3. **The pornographic daughter**
4. **The father's crimes**
  - i) **The sketchy case against the father**
  - ii) **The 'father torture' poems**

This chapter considers the living father, primarily concentrating on Olds's first three collections: Satan Says, The Dead and The Living and The Gold Cell. It begins with an exploration of Olds's use of the Roman God Saturn to illustrate the speaker's relationship with the father. The chapter continues with an investigation of the sexualisation of the father through the examination of such elements as an orality motif in the work, the invocation of the Electra story, the speaker's predatory gaze and the use of incest as a metaphor. The critical charge of pornography, levelled against Olds's poetry, is also considered. Finally, the father's crimes are explored. It is noted that there is little evidence provided of the father's actual misdeeds, but the reader is invited, by implication, to condemn the father on the speaker's behalf. As part of this final category, Olds's 'father torture' poems – those poems which most explicitly detail the father's ill-treatment of the speaker – are examined, as is the manifestation of the father's cruelty in future generations. The perpetuation of the narrative of torture, it is argued, challenges the father's centrality in the poems while also reminding the reader of the father's own victimhood, and his dual role in a cycle of apparent abuse.

### 1. Satan/Saturn

Olds describes making a pact with Satan following the completion of her formal education:

I made a vow to Satan on the steps of Columbia University, probably not the first or the last person to have done that. I had finished my doctorate degree which had taken me many, many years and a lot of near misses... I thought it was Satan who I was making this vow to, that's just what came into my mind. One reason it was so hard for me to get through graduate school is illustrated by the fact that I couldn't think of Faust... I said, I will give up all I have learned here if I can just write my own poems.<sup>180</sup>

A Satanic pact is the subject of the first and eponymous poem of Olds's debut collection 'Satan Says', the piece begins: 'Say shit, say death, say fuck the father/ Satan says, down my ear'.<sup>181</sup> The imperative is threatening and intimate, transgressive and directionless, that of an adolescent initiation rite.

<sup>180</sup> Sharon Olds. Afternoon Seminar, January 29, 1998'.

<sup>181</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.3) 'Satan Says' SS.

'*Shit*' and 'fuck', part of a taboo lexis, are shocking in the context of a poetry collection, but banal in themselves. 'Fuck the father' dominates the hierarchy of the line, and subverts the standard 'motherfucker'. 'Say' modifies the final clause to suggestion: here, to speak out about transgressions - rather than the transgressions themselves - is the ultimate taboo, stressed an incantatory three times and acted upon throughout Satan Says and Olds's subsequent collections. Though incest is suggested, the real transgression is the verbal act, enacted through the medium of the poem.

The second line of the extract: 'Satan says, down my ear' attributes the dialogue to Satan. However, the tone and lexis are that of a teenager, and the command is reported speech. The reflective reader deduces that Satan is the speaker's whipping boy: the speaker orchestrates the temptation scene while positioning herself as its victim.

The presence of Satan in 'Satan Says' situates the reader within a text that is not concerned with literal truth. The naïve reader's response to the presence of Satan would be that the speaker is either mad or lying. The speaker overtly exposes her own fiction, and aligns her voice with the father of lies, the devil. As Satan whispers down the speaker's ear, so the speaker whispers down the reader's ear. From the first poem of the first collection, the speaker initiates an intimate relationship where the reader is expected to read between the lines of what is explicitly being stated. The choice of preposition in the phrase 'down my ear' is an interesting one; 'in' would be the more obvious choice, but 'down' draws attention to the deepness of the ear as an orifice in a surreal sexual way. It implies the ear as a tunnel or chasm, linking it with an orality motif that shall be examined later in the chapter.

Although Satan opens Olds's first collection, Saturn is a more enduring presence in her work. Saturn and Satan are linked beyond lexical similarity, as Colin Jackson observes: 'The god Saturn...may occasionally be confused, deliberately or accidentally, with Satan.'<sup>182</sup> Olds uses the misprision to connote a devil; to readers more versed in Satan than Saturn (and Satan is the more familiar figure) the title of Olds's first selected poems The Sign of Saturn conjures images of 666 brandings and Satanic rituals.<sup>183</sup> The title also has its own coinage: to be born under the 'sign of Saturn', as Jennifer Radden observes, is to be marked out by melancholia.<sup>184</sup> Olds uses the fatalism implied by the astrological allusion in poems such as 'The Sign of Saturn', to illustrate the continuation of a familial narrative that is beyond the speaker's control.

Saturn the god, and the planet named for the god, is invoked throughout Olds's poetry.<sup>185</sup> Saturn is the Roman name for the Greek god

<sup>182</sup> Jackson, Colin M. 'Saturn' *Cinema Structure, Myth and Metaphor*. Available from <http://www.colinmj.com/cinema/saturn.html> [online]. Accessed 3 July 2005.

<sup>183</sup> See Chapter 1, f.n. 116 for a definition of the Bloomian concept of misprision.

<sup>184</sup> Radden, Jennifer, ed. (2002, p.9) The Nature of Melancholy: from Aristotle to Kristeva. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>185</sup> Saturn the god features in the poems 'The Sign of Saturn' (DATL, p.73) and 'Saturn' (TGC, p.24). The Saturn myth of digestion is used in 'Waste Sonata' (TF, p. 77). The planet Saturn is invoked in 'It'

Kronos. Olds's use of the popular name is perhaps consistent with her anti-academic tendency. The first mention of Kronos occurs in the Theogony where Hesiod describes the god swallowing his children:

Kronos swallowed, as each of them reached their mother's knees from her holy womb. His purpose was that none but he of the lordly Celestials should have the royal station among the immortals. For he learned from Earth and starry Heaven that it was fated for him to be defeated by his own child<sup>186</sup>

Hesiod proceeds to tell of Kronos being duped by his son Zeus into regurgitating the children: 'the great crooked-schemer Kronos, tricked by the cunning counsel of Earth, defeated by his son's strength and stratagem, brought his brood back up'.<sup>187</sup>

In 'Saturn', Olds updates the Saturnian myth to illustrate the alcoholism of the speaker's father:

He lay on the couch night after night,  
mouth open, the darkness of the room  
filling his mouth and no one knew  
my father was eating his children. He seemed to  
rest so quietly, vast body  
inert on the sofa, big hand  
fallen away from the glass.<sup>188</sup>

The poem moves to a discussion of the father's responsibility for his actions, ending:

he could not  
stop himself like orgasm, his  
boy's feet crackling like two raw fish  
between his teeth. This is what he wanted,  
to take that life into his mouth  
and show what a man could do – show his son  
what a man's life was.<sup>189</sup>

Olds presents the speaker's struggle to atone for the sins of her father, and the despair that she will live out such sins. The father 'could not stop himself', but the analogy with orgasm suggests incestuous pleasure: 'This is what he wanted', the speaker insists but the father's desire is reductive and stems from self-hatred. The father is in the grip of alcoholism, and a cycle of violence, just as the son is literally in his grip. This familial process is

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(TGC, p. 57), 'Adolescence' (TW, p.29), 'The Last Birthday At Home' (TW, p.64) and 'The Try-Outs' (BTS, p. 63).

<sup>186</sup> Hesiod. (1988, p.16-17) 'Theogony' in Theogony and Works and Days. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>187</sup> Hesiod. (1988, p.17-18) 'Theogony'.

<sup>188</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.24) 'Saturn' TGC.

<sup>189</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.24) 'Saturn' TGC.

emphasised at the end of 'Saturn' where the son and the father are generalised into archetypes showing their lack of individual agency.

'The Sign of Saturn' shows the re-emergence of a grandfather. Here, the speaker sees her father in her daughter:

As I talk to her,  
trying to persuade her towards the human, her little  
clear face tilts as if she can  
not hear me, as if she were listening  
to the blood in her own ear, instead,  
her grandfather's voice.<sup>190</sup>

The voice of the speaker unfixes gender; she portrays her daughter as a channel for the (grand)father whose posthumous presence threatens the 'happy-ever-after' narrative.<sup>191</sup> The speaker in this poem also demonstrates the Saturnian trait of fear of one's own child. 'The Sign of Saturn' shows a belief in the genetics of evil but, by depicting three generations of the family, the narrative focuses on the regeneration of abuse, and not the grandfather's or daughter's nature. The speaker is attempting to break the chain by persuading her daughter 'towards the human'.

'Saturn' and 'The Sign Of Saturn' present the speaker's struggle to atone for the sins of her father(s), and the despair that she will live out such sins.<sup>192</sup> History has proved that her father is unable to escape from his own mistreatment (and in the Saturn myth swallowing of children recurs in subsequent generations), but the speaker stresses her individual vigilance in the face of such determinism.<sup>193</sup> The orality narrative of the Saturn poems and their suggestion of sexual transgression are central to Olds's portrayal of the father as a lover, and continued in those poems which don't use the mythical God. The sexualised presentation of the father shall now be examined.

## 2. Sexualising the father

The presentation of the father as a lover is sustained throughout Olds's poetry. This presentation is achieved through an orality narrative, an invocation of the Electra Complex, the depiction of the speaker's predatory gaze and the use of incest as a metaphor. These factors, which link Olds's poetry with that of the confessional school, shall now be considered.

<sup>190</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.73) 'The Sign of Saturn' DATL.

<sup>191</sup> See Chapter 3, p. 118 of the dissertation for a discussion of the father persona poems.

<sup>192</sup> Other poems which invoke the Saturn narrative, without referring to it explicitly, include 'Waste Sonata'. 'Of All the Dead That Have Come to Me, This Once' explores the family cycle of violence between the father and the grandfather. See Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.76) 'Waste Sonata' IE; Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.21) 'Of All the Dead That Have Come to Me, This Once'. DATL.

<sup>193</sup> Zeus's son Tantalus offered his son to the gods as food. Olds's preoccupation with the perpetuation of the family from generation to generation can be observed in many poems, including 'The Headline' where the speaker comments: 'his father/ went before him, and his father's father, and his father's father's father, and his father's/ father's father's father's father'. See Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.76) TUR.

The speaker of the poems is explicitly constructed as an oral presence: one who will 'tell' the reader.<sup>194</sup> The orality narrative in 'Saturn' is overt. Elsewhere in Olds's oeuvre there are many other descriptions of oral acts including oral sex, alcoholism, anorexia, force-feeding and the father's struggle with throat cancer.<sup>195</sup> Poems show a Freudian desire to consume the lost love object: in 'The Urn' the speaker describes wanting to consume the father's ashes, and in 'Psalm' she fantasises about devouring the husband after death.<sup>196</sup> The poems are full of open and sated mouths: a favourite description is that of the speaker sitting post-coitally, open-mouthed with wonder.<sup>197</sup> Here, the wordless pose is ironically undercut by the poet's telling of it. The lack of boundaries between the speaker and family members, described in the previous chapter, contributes to this narrative of orality.<sup>198</sup>

Jill Scott, noting Plath's interest in Freud's theories, suggests the poet deliberately incorporates her father into poems like 'Daddy' and then expels him. Scott alludes to Freud's work in 'Mourning and Melancholia' where he suggests that incorporation is an important part of grieving, with the ego wanting to 'devour' the lost love object.<sup>199</sup> Olds's poem 'Waste Renewal' is similarly reminiscent of Freud's theories of mourning. In this poem, which extends the Saturn narrative, the speaker, her siblings and mother orbit like 'shits' within their father's digestive tract.<sup>200</sup> Another Freudian idea emerges in Olds's poem 'These Days' where the adult speaker comments: 'I want to suck sweet, lacteal heat'; Freud and his followers suggested that loss in adulthood reminds its subject of the primary loss of the mother and the breast.<sup>201</sup> However, Olds's invocation of psychoanalytical ideas into her work is more playful and irreverent than Plath's. Such invocation, in keeping with Olds's anti-academic tendency, gives the appearance of originating from the populist perception of Freud's theories rather than the theories themselves, as

<sup>194</sup> See Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.23) 'I Go Back to May 1937' TGC. See Chapter 1, p.69 of the dissertation for a discussion of 'I Go Back to May 1937'.

<sup>195</sup> For examples of incorporation in Olds's poetry see 'Satan Says', 'Love Fossil', 'That Year', 'The Rising Daughter', 'The Sisters of Sexual Treasure', 'Barometer' in SS (p. 3, 5,6,19,24,52). See 'The Eye', 'Fate', 'The Pact' in DATL (p. 19, 40, 45). See 'Saturn', 'The Meal', 'Looking at My father', 'June 24' in TGC (p. 24, 27, 31,41). See 'The Waiting' 'The Glass', 'The Picture I Want', 'The Urn', 'One Year', 'The Pull', 'Waste Sonata' in TF (p. 3, 7, 10, 49, 54, 65, 76). See 'First', 'Early Images of Heaven', 'The Source' in TW (p. 27, 30, 33). See 'Aspic and Buttermilk', 'The Day They Tied Me Up', 'The Remedy', 'My Mother's Pansies' in BTS (p. 16, 38, 52, 59). See 'First Hour', 'Virginal Orgy' 'The Music' in TUR (p. 5, 23, 94).

<sup>196</sup> Freud described the desire to assimilate the lost love object into the mourner's ego, in refusal of its absence, a return to the cannibalistic stage of infant development. See Freud, Sigmund. (2005, p.201-218) Sigmund Freud: on murder, mourning and melancholia. Olds, Sharon (1992, p.49) 'The Urn' TF. Olds, Sharon. (2003, p. 107) 'Psalm' TUR.

<sup>197</sup> In 'It' the speaker comments 'Always I am stunned to remember it,/as if I have been to Saturn or the bottom of a trench in the sea floor, I/ sit on the bed the next day with my mouth open and think of it.' See Olds, Sharon. (1987, p57) 'It' TGC.

<sup>198</sup> See the discussion of 'Boy Out In The World', Chapter 1, p. 76 of the dissertation.

<sup>199</sup> See Freud, Sigmund. (2005, p. 201-218) 'Mourning and Melancholia' in Sigmund Freud: on murder, mourning and melancholia. Scott, Jill. (2005, p.150) Electra After Freud.

<sup>200</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p. 76) 'Waste Sonata' TF.

<sup>201</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.102) 'These Days' BTS; See Phillips, Adam, ed. (2005) On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia London: Penguin; Klein, Melanie. (1988,p.359) Love, Guilt and Reparation and other works 1921-1945: Melanie Klein. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. London: Virago; Kristeva, Julia. (1989, p.9) Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia New York: Columbia University Press.

may be seen by this wry quotation from Olds's speaker: 'I am the shrink's wife...the original/ mother walking around'.<sup>202</sup>

Olds's use of Saturn is an echo of, and deviation from, Plath who uses Electra, a descendant of Saturn, to illustrate her poems of filial mourning. Plath's poem 'Electra on Azalea Path' describes a daughter's visit to a father's grave, while Plath also famously introduced her poem 'Daddy' as spoken by a girl with an 'Electra Complex'.<sup>203</sup> The term 'Electra Complex' was used by Jung, and developed by Freud, to describe a female infant's exchange of the original love object of the mother, for the father; the process is accompanied, in Freud's findings, by jealousy towards the mother.<sup>204</sup> Electra, in Greek myth, is the daughter of Agamemnon who mourned her father after he was killed by her mother and lover.<sup>205</sup> There are many elements of Electra's story, and the Electra Complex, in Olds's narrative including the speaker's anger at her mother, and the way she implicates her in her father's disappearance. In the poem 'That Year' Olds's speaker describes how her mother: 'hid us so we would not be there'.<sup>206</sup> Olds's speaker's self-indulgence in mourning is also a feature of the Electra story; in Sophocles's play, Electra cries: 'I only, father, mourn your death' although, like Olds's speaker, Electra has grieving siblings.<sup>207</sup> By invoking Saturn, Olds links her narrative to the cursed House of Atreus, but consciously circumnavigates Plath's legacy.<sup>208</sup>

The sexualisation of the father is also reminiscent of the popular understanding of the Electra Complex - a daughter who is in love with her father - and links Olds's poetry with that of the 'first wave' of confessional poets. Sex and the father are associated throughout the Olds canon. In 'Poem to My Husband from My Father's Daughter' the speaker becomes her father during love-making, addressing her husband: 'You are fearless, you/ enter him as a woman', In 'First Boyfriend' the speaker returns to her lover: 'as if to the breast of my father', and in 'Love in Blood Time', in such a sensitized climate, the paternal presence may be detected through a

<sup>202</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p. 25) 'I Am The Shrink's Wife' SS.

<sup>203</sup> Plath, Sylvia. 'Electra on Azalea Path' in Hughes, Ted, ed. (1981, p.116) Sylvia Plath Collected Poems; Plath introduced 'Daddy' as follows: 'Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it', see Hughes, Ted, ed. (1981, p.293) Sylvia Plath Collected Poems.

<sup>204</sup> Freud, Sigmund. (1986, p367-392) 'Female Sexuality' in Freud 7. On Sexuality. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. London: Penguin.

<sup>205</sup> The story is told in Aeschylus's 'Oresteia', and in later accounts by Sophocles and Euripides. Electra is a character who has been of particular use to female poets in the twentieth century such as HD and Sylvia Plath; for a discussion of Electra's influence on twentieth century literature see Scott, Jill. (2005) Electra After Freud: Myth and Culture. New York: Cornell University Press.

<sup>206</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.6) 'That Year' SS.

<sup>207</sup> Sophocles. (1998, p. 106) Antigone, Oedipus The King, Electra. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>208</sup> The House of Atreus is the name for the line descended from Tantalus, the son of Zeus, whose cannibalistic actions towards his child wreaked a curse upon his descendants: their story is told in the Oresteia.

homonym: 'The large hard bud of your sex in my mouth,/ the dark petals of my sex in your mouth,/ I could feel death going farther and farther away.'<sup>209</sup>

In 'The Sisters of Sexual Treasure' the speaker describes flying the nest and into the arms of her father, or men very like him: 'The men's bodies/ were like our father's body!' Here, the childlike tone and coy use of the exclamation mark conjure a contradictory persona somewhere between an unworldly Shakespearean Miranda and a porn star.<sup>210</sup> The casual throwaway plural of the bodies demonstrates how interchangeable, and many, are the lovers who all wear the father's face. 'The Sisters of Sexual Treasure' continues to discuss the men's bodies in detail:

The massive  
hocks, flanks, thighs, elegant  
knees, long tapered calves –  
we could have him there, the steep forbidden  
buttocks, backs of the knees, the cock  
in our mouth, ah, the cock in our mouth<sup>211</sup>

The polite use of 'buttocks', and the notion of them being forbidden, is comic when juxtaposed to 'cock'. The flux of register demonstrated by the demure use of the word 'buttocks' is also an off-stress rhyme, and a technical device which contributes to the poem's alliteration.<sup>212</sup> The bawdy note continues with the nostalgic (cock) crowing of 'ah'. The poem reverses the usual power basis between the sexes, as Vicki Feaver notes of the speaker and her sister: 'it is they who perform the active sexual function, who take 'the cock in our mouth', not the men who penetrate them, they who undress the men almost like dolls'.<sup>213</sup>

In 'Looking At My Father' the speaker: 'could look at my father all day/ and not get enough'.<sup>214</sup> She describes staring at her father slumped on the couch: 'my eyes sliding down the/ long amber roots of his teeth,/ right in there where mother hated'.<sup>215</sup> Her lingering portrait is amoral:

What I know I know, what my  
body knows it knows, it likes to  
slip the leash of my mind and go and  
look at him, like an animal  
looking at water, then going to it and  
drinking until it has had its fill and can

<sup>209</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.56) 'Poem to My Husband from My Father's Daughter' DATL; Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.48, 62). 'First Boyfriend', 'Love in Blood Time' TGC.

<sup>210</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p. 24) 'The Sisters Of Sexual Treasure' SS.

<sup>211</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p. 24) 'The Sisters Of Sexual Treasure' SS.

<sup>212</sup> Olds has a fondness for the word 'buttocks' which is used in 'The Source' as well as other poems in her oeuvre, suggesting the word is also part of a personal lexis.

<sup>213</sup> Feaver, Vicki. 'Body and Soul: The Power of Sharon Olds' in Mark, Alison and Rees-Jones, Deryn. eds. (2000, p.148) Contemporary Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing Practice London: Macmillan.

<sup>214</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.31) 'Looking At My Father' TGC.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

lie down and sleep.<sup>216</sup>

'Looking At My Father', in The Gold Cell, prefigures the poems of Olds's subsequent collection, The Father, where the speaker draws comfort from being close to her father's dying and dead body. The death in 'Looking At My Father' is a literal little sleep although, as with the actual death, it brings the speaker an opportunity to be closer to her father through the medium of his body.

The father in 'Looking At My Father' is the object of the gaze, and the daughter is predatory. Such a distribution of power, like that in 'The Sisters Of Sexual Treasure', disturbs traditional gender relations, and breaks family taboos. The age of the speaker is not stated, but the depiction of her watching her sleeping father on the couch situates her as a child. A reader may question whether the presentation of a physically desirous daughter reinforces prejudice which would make a child complicit in father-daughter abuse. However, the situation is a conceit; the tone of the opening lines of the poem situate the speaker as a woman in a child's body: 'I do not think I am deceived about him./ I know about the drinking, I know he's a tease'.<sup>217</sup> The physical desire for the father is an uncanny metaphor, reflecting the speaker's unfulfilled childhood need for paternal closeness. It is in line with the persona of a sexual partner that is adopted in the poem, and the subversion of traditional sexual power relations which is characteristic to Olds's amatory poetry.

The evocation of the father as lover, instigated by the daughter, is a startling conceit and has prompted speculation about incest in the speaker's childhood.<sup>218</sup> Some poems appear to support such a reading. In 'The Elder Sister' the speaker comments suggestively:

when the hair  
rose on the white mound of her flesh, like  
threads of water out of the ground, it was the  
first time, but when mine came  
they knew about it.<sup>219</sup>

In 'Late Poem To My Father' the speaker implies a familial transgression *may* have happened to her father, but not to her; she states, in relation to her abusive grandparents: 'what they did to you,/ you did not do to me'.<sup>220</sup> It is likely the speaker would not know, any more than the reader, the sins of the grandparents; the vagueness of the statement evokes the mystery that shrouds family secrets. In 'The Guild' the speaker comments: 'you surpassed

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.31) 'Looking At My Father' TGC.

<sup>218</sup> This may be seen by Olds's poem 'To One Who Wrote Me I Too Am An Incest Survivor' which details a reader's response to her poem 'What If God'; see Olds, Sharon. (2003) 'To One Who Wrote Me I Too Am An Incest Survivor' *The Pedestal magazine.com*.

<sup>219</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.38, p48) 'The Ideal Father', 'The Elder Sister' DATL.

<sup>220</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.40) 'Late Poem To My Father' TGC.

'the master', comparing her father to her grandfather.<sup>221</sup> How could one surpass an incestuous parent without incest a reader might ask? If there was no incest between the grandparent and father, is incest the method by which the father surpassed his father? A reader is invited to make links between the poems, and note the inconsistency of the speaker's story. The speaker employs different accounts which function as subterfuge and demonstrate the narrative as psychodrama. The reader has no way of knowing which version of the confession is accurate, but should deduce that the truth of the confession therefore lies in the poem rather than its relation to outer events. However, as with the appearance of Satan in 'Satan Says', each version of events is poetically true. A reflective reader notes that the truth of the poem is separate from the literal truth, and need not be consistent from poem to poem or bear a relation to objective facts.

'What If God', which has been discussed in relation to Olds's emendations, overtly uses incest as a metaphor.<sup>222</sup> The poem describes an assault on the child speaker in her bed. In reference to this event, the speaker directs a series of accusatory questions to the absent God, the 'He' in the following extract:

was He a  
kid in Biology, dissecting me while she  
held my split carapace apart so He could  
firk out my oblong eggs one by one, was He a  
man entering me up to the hilt while she  
pried my thighs wide in the starry dark –  
she said that all we did was done in His sight so  
what was He doing as He saw her weep in my  
hair and slip my soul from between my  
ribs like a tiny hotel soap<sup>223</sup>

Although the father is not physically present in the poem – most likely down the corridor in the mother's abandoned bed - the speaker brings a man into the room by use of the resonant religious phrase, 'was He a man'. The speaker is referring to, what might be termed, non-sexual incest: a lack of appropriate boundaries that the child-speaker experienced physically. The device demonstrates the speaker's sense of invasion and premature catapulting into an adult realm by an instantly understandable, and easily misunderstood, metaphor.

In 2003 Olds published 'To One Who Wrote Me "I Too Am An Incest Survivor"' which refers back to 'What If God'. In 'To One Who Wrote Me "I Too Am An Incest Survivor"' the speaker comments: 'How could I have said that my mother pried/ my thighs apart and think you would know/ it was the

<sup>221</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.17) 'The Guild' DATL.

<sup>222</sup> See Chapter 1, p.78 of the dissertation.

<sup>223</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.25) 'What If God' TGC. See Chapter 3, p.122 of the dissertation for a discussion of religion in TE.

thighs of my spirit'.<sup>224</sup> The speaker appears to acknowledge that the naïve reader's misunderstanding is encouraged by the poet's metaphor, but the lines also contain a note of admonition. Just as the doubleness of the speaker's voice enables her to express deference towards the father while simultaneously subverting such deference; she undermines her deference to the reader who has misunderstood her.

The concern of 'To One Who Wrote Me "I Too Am An Incest Survivor"' is the speaker's discomfort at receiving a letter - presumably one of praise not approbation - from a literal victim of incest. She does not address those readers who misunderstand the metaphor in 'What If God', and are not victims of incest. She does not address those who have made reflective readings. Although the speaker is addressing the poem to the 'one', she is also addressing the many: Olds is constructing her audience on different levels, overtly showing her awareness of the naïve and the reflective reader. Ultimately, 'To One Who Wrote Me "I Too Am An Incest Survivor"' draws a reader's attention back to the poem, 'What If God'. It should not be understood as an apologia for the earlier piece but as a depiction of the poet's guilt. In addition letter-writing itself is common in confessional poetry, and the poem can be understood as part of that oeuvre: the letter is a literary device.<sup>225</sup>

Incest is a taboo: a reader might expect the speaker to imply, rather than explicitly state, its presence. However, viewed in the context of Olds's body of work, 'What If God' shows the speaker's consistent tendency to suggestion. Additionally throughout her work Olds shows familial roles in flux: in The Father the speaker is in a state of flux, giddily delving in the family dressing-up box to alternately become the father's mother and lover as well as daughter.<sup>226</sup> The boundary-shifting between family members is present in the depiction of the daughter, as a lover, and is part of the orality motif. It is also reflected in the fluidity of form detectable in Olds's published poems.<sup>227</sup> Julia Kristeva used the idea of the semiotic to define a theory of poetic language: the semiotic refers to a drive-based realm which is uncertain, unstable and pre-language. The semiotic propels a speaker to the symbolic realm which is verbal and governed by logic and laws.<sup>228</sup> Kristeva argued that, in poetry, the symbolic realm was constantly invaded by the semiotic realm. Olds's poetry may be seen as a negotiation between the realm of the Kristevan semiotic and symbolic. The poet invokes the symbol of the father, but, through her characteristic demonstration of the fluid boundaries between family members, shows him in flux which is an anti-symbolic gesture. As the father is in flux so is the speaker who expresses herself as a woman through

<sup>224</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003) 'To One Who Wrote Me I Too Am An Incest Survivor' *The Pedestal magazine.com*.

<sup>225</sup> Letters are a common device among confessional poets: Anne Sexton used the form of a letter in poems such as 'Love Letter Written In A Burning Building', Robert Lowell's collection The Dolphin included extracts from letters from his ex-wife while Ted Hughes also used the conceit of letters in his confessional collection Birthday Letters.

<sup>226</sup> See, for instance, Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.5, 9) 'Nullipara', 'Death and Morality' IE.

<sup>227</sup> See the discussion on Olds's emendations in Chapter 1, p.74 of the dissertation.

<sup>228</sup> For a discussion of the semiotic see Lechte, John and Zournazi, Mary, eds. (2003) The Kristeva Critical Reader. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

the mouthpiece of her childhood self in many poems. Before looking at the father's crimes, the presentation of the speaker as a sexually knowing innocent which has led to charges, along with Olds's graphic subject-matter, that the poetry is pornographic is now examined.

### 3. The pornographic daughter

To understand the role of the father in Olds's poetry a reader must look at the daughter's relationship to him; a key feature of which is an overtly sexual approach. This subject-matter extends to other familial relationships as shall be explored.

Part testifying adult and part recollected child, the speaker is an uncanny hybrid who can only tell her story of lost innocence knowingly. Kenneth Lincoln describes Olds's speaker daughter as follows:

Imagine a contemporary Pocahontas, just graduated from Bluebirds, off to YWCA camp tomorrow, standing naked before a cracked mirror, with a doorway shadow behind her. Think of Plath's outrage low-spoken by Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz; unsettling mixtures, shifts in attention, surprises, kinks, quirks.<sup>229</sup>

The speaker is, to borrow a phrase from James Joyce, 'daddad's lottiest daughterpearl'. Such a figure is a staple in popular culture where Nabokovian 'nymphets' abound, from the 'high art' of the literary *Lolita* to the 'low art' of her reincarnation in pornographic media. The poems detail the speaker's desire for her father, as in this extract from 'My Father's Breasts':

when I think of my father  
I think of his breasts, my head resting  
on his fragrant chest, as if I had spent  
hours, years, in that smell of black pepper and  
turned earth.<sup>230</sup>

As is characteristic throughout Olds's poetry, the speaker assumes the authority of the gaze. The critic Helen Vendler has called Olds's poetry 'typically pornographic'.<sup>231</sup> Pornography is a difficult genre to define by subject-matter. In an interview, Olds concentrates on intent:

I have been told that there are critics who have called my work pornographic... When I first heard that I was shocked and then I was just too shocked to even think about it. I didn't think about it for a year. Then I thought I should at least think what is pornography? So I thought pornography is stuff written about sex, or whatever, that's meant to be arousing, that's it... And I thought, oh, well this is just not pornography. But then I thought well, maybe it is for some people and

<sup>229</sup> Lincoln, Kenneth. (2000, p.333) Sing with the Heart of a Bear: Fusions of Native and American Poetry 1890-1999. Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

<sup>230</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.43) 'My Father's Breasts' DATL.

<sup>231</sup> Vendler, Helen. (1990) 'Feminism and Literature' *The New York Review of Books*. 37, 9.

not for others...when you're writing pornography, are you thinking about the stranger having their experience of what you're writing? Well, in that case no. It's not even an erotic experience for me to write love poems that are sexual love poems. Is that safe to say?<sup>232</sup>

The playful tone of this account - 'I was too shocked to even think about it' – is in line with the wink Olds deployed in the previous chapter.<sup>233</sup> The speaker conjures the wide-eyed incredulity of an ingénue, even as she rejects her. Throughout her work Olds presents graphically described sexual scenes in cinematic close up. These scenes are fleshed out into situations far less predictable than the stuff of mainstream pornography: a young mother 'stands outside a window and watches a childless couple/ fucking in the resinous light of a fire/ without interruption'; the speaker's sister urinates on the speaker whose 'small vagina' is 'wet'; a man's disbelieving response to the young speaker who has told him she is a virgin is recorded.<sup>234</sup>

The bodies in Olds's poetry are less conventionally beautiful, and more various than their traditional mainstream pornographic counterparts. They are also three dimensional or, in Kristevan terms, 'messy': the speaker has a womb, periods and a menopause. As Tamma F Berg comments:

By writing with and about that which was once unmentionable – menstrual blood, breast milk, wombs, vaginas, the kops of the clitoris – woman's language writes the body. The woman's body, no longer idealized, conventionalized, as in men's writing, is apprehended in all its physical difference and is able to disrupt discourse as we know it.<sup>235</sup>

The breasts in the poetry are less pert than in mainstream pornography: in 'Young Mothers I' they are 'hard bags of rock salt'; they 'ooze mucus' in 'The Language of the Brag'; and are described as 'collapsible silver travel cups' in 'This'.<sup>236</sup> The speaker's body ages and changes: skin shows its 'dry pitting' in '35/10', and 'The Gift' describes the 'bruised/ celestial wattles' that descend from the labia after childbirth.<sup>237</sup> What might be termed 'silver sex' is celebrated, and even silver S&M in 'A Time of Passion'.<sup>238</sup>

A sexually empowered female is portrayed as daughter, lover and mother throughout the poetry. The Wellspring in particular celebrates the speaker's ebullient adolescence: titles of poems within the book include 'Necking', 'Adolescence', 'Early Images of Heaven', 'Celibacy at 20', 'The Source', 'Making Love' and 'I Love it When'. 'The Source' opens:

<sup>232</sup> Garner, Dwight. (1996) 'The Salon Interview Sharon Olds'.

<sup>233</sup> See Chapter 1, p.73 of the dissertation.

<sup>234</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p. 41) 'Young Mothers II' SS; Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.44) 'The Takers'. DATL; Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.27). 'First' TW; Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.15) 'The Babysitter' BTS.

<sup>235</sup> Berg, Tamma F. (1990, p.9) Engendering the Word: Feminist Essays in Psychosexual Poetics. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

<sup>236</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p. 40, 44) 'Young Mothers I', 'The Language of the Brag' SS; Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.63) 'This' TGC.

<sup>237</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.75) '35/10' DATL; Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.4) 'The Gift' BTS.

<sup>238</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.96) 'A Time Of Passion' TUR.

It became the deep spring of my life,  
 I didn't know if it was a sickness or a gift.  
 To reach around both sides of a man,  
 one palm to one buttock,  
 the other palm to the other, the way we are split,  
 to grasp that band of muscle on the male  
 haunch and help guide the massed  
 heavy nerve down my throat until it  
 stoppers the hole behind the breastbone that is always hungry  
 then I feel complete<sup>239</sup>

David Lehman, in an interview with Olds, comments that he is not sure 'The Source' is 'politically correct'.<sup>240</sup> It is easy to understand his reservations: the woman in the poem might be understood as incomplete without a man. A voracious female sex object, designed for male pleasure, is at the heart (or another bodily part) of mainstream pornography, and this poem comes perilously close to reproducing her. However, the poem looks to a merging rather than polarising of genders continuing:

I had dreamed, to meet men  
 fully, as a woman twin, unborn,  
 half-gelled, clasped, nothing between us  
 but our bodies, naked, and when those dissolve,  
 nothing between us<sup>241</sup>

In addition, the male partner in this poem is shown in as much physical detail as the female speaker; a balance traditionally skewed towards the female in mainstream pornography. Men in Olds's poems, subversively viewed through a female gaze, are givers and receivers of pleasure. The penis is endowed with qualities beyond mere physiology in her work which may be seen as a pornographic device but idealisation of the body is part of Olds's poetry.<sup>242</sup>

Sex in Olds's poetry, unlike that in pornography, characteristically goes hand in hand with love. There are a few exceptions. Most obviously, the poem 'Sex Without Love' describes the speaker's lack of comprehension at those who, 'can make love without love', but concludes by declaring them, 'the true religious,/ the purists, the pros'.<sup>243</sup> Here, a reflective reader will note the use of the word 'pros' is a possible contraction of 'prostitutes'; the juxtaposition of sex-workers next to the word 'purists' lends power and wit to the speaker's subversive line of reasoning. Elsewhere in the early collections, the speaker describes her own largely joyful forays into casual sex. However, the speaker follows a well trodden monogamous trajectory: casual sex poems segue into poems that celebrate relationships. The speaker then meets and poetically celebrates her husband. Sex is part of the 'happy-ever-

<sup>239</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.33) 'The Source' TW.

<sup>240</sup> Lehman, David. (2002) 'Best American Poetry On The Air'.

<sup>241</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.33) 'The Source' TW.

<sup>242</sup> See Chapter 3, p.127 of the dissertation for a discussion of the idealisation of the body in Olds's poetry.

<sup>243</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.57) 'Sex Without Love' DATL.

'after' narrative, and the ebullience with which it is described is in the context of the speaker's love for her husband, and eschewing of her repressed childhood. Such a telling might be seen as conservative, but one of the poems' most innovative factors is that their detailed enjoyment of sex is the testimony of a mother and a wife.

A significant difference between the poetry and mainstream pornography is that it is authored by, and told from the perspective of, a woman.<sup>244</sup> A reader might be reminded of Helene Cixous's words:

a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter.<sup>245</sup>

By using a female speaker, Olds give a voice to a presence that has been silent in poetry and silenced by mainstream pornography. Throughout her work Olds insists on the primacy of the body. A reader is reminded of Anne Sexton's speaker's lines to her daughter: "What I want to say Linda,/ is that there is nothing in your body that lies".<sup>246</sup> However, Olds's enjoyment of her body is less measured than Sexton's, and unlike the earlier poet she celebrates other topics such as menstruation and marital relations.

In relation to the issue of pornography, the rise of the naked female self-portrait is an increasing feature of contemporary women's poetry, especially American poetry as Alicia Ostriker has noted.<sup>247</sup> The body has become a moral guide as can be seen by this much quoted extract from Mary Oliver's poem 'Wild Geese':

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.

<sup>244</sup> While some authors have argued there is a market for mainstream pornographic magazines aimed specifically at women, see Smith, Clarissa (2006). One For The Girls!: the pleasures and practices of reading women's porn. Bristol: Intellect, such magazines have not lasted. A list of fifty mainstream pornographic titles sold in the UK and USA does not show any current title aimed at women only, see [newsstand.co.uk/102-General-Top-Shelf/MagazineSubscription.aspx](http://newsstand.co.uk/102-General-Top-Shelf/MagazineSubscription.aspx). [online] Accessed 12 August 2008.

<sup>245</sup> Cixous, Helene. 'The Laugh of the Medusa' in Warhol, Robyn R and Herndl, Diane Price, eds. (1997, p. 347) Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>246</sup> The lines are from Anne Sexton's poem 'Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman' in Middlebrook, Diane Wood and George, Diane Hume, eds. (1998, p. 100) Selected Poems of Anne Sexton. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

<sup>247</sup> Ostriker, Alicia Suskin. (1986, p.92) Stealing The Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America. Boston: Beacon Press.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.<sup>248</sup>

The deification of a female body is not unproblematic. Privileging a woman's physicality, even granting it special powers of insight, may imply a denigration of her intellect. The phenomenon comes perilously close to repeating ideology that led to the traditional appearance of women in literature as symbols. Olds's speaker comments in 'Know-Nothing': 'Maybe to know sex fully/ one has to risk being destroyed by it.'<sup>249</sup> This quotation could be adapted, using my own misprision, to: 'Maybe to write about sex fully/ one has to risk their writing being destroyed by it'.<sup>250</sup> The reflective reader might question how politically correct, to return to David Lehman's observation, a poem about sex or a body can be. Women are not exempt from repeating the dominant ideology about their sex - nor should they be - and many female self portraits reflect the anxiety and ambiguity of the shifting times in which they are created. In 'Frosted Elfin' the speaker muses on her vagina:

But my love says  
it is a wing, a pair of wings wherein  
we fly to paradise, and through it,  
and to what lies beyond it. I want  
to be able to look with my own eyes  
and see what he sees. I will have to put my mother down a moment.  
Just for one moment, Mom.<sup>251</sup>

Helen Farish comments of the phrase 'my love' in 'Frosted Elfin' which is repeated throughout the poem: 'Whilst it of course refers to the male beloved, its 'nether visage' is love of the self.'<sup>252</sup> The poem evaluates the speaker's body through the male other's eyes while struggling to shed the internalised female self-hatred that has been passed down from mother to daughter. The speaker's struggle to negotiate a female body image is reflected, literally, in the poems about sex which use a mirror. In 'The Stranger' the speaker describes encountering the following image of her vagina:

Whom had I found who had been lost to me? I  
could not think—and then, I remembered  
the round, plump, woven-silver  
mirror, which I had held, this bright  
morning, between my legs, I had seen,  
for the first time, myself, face to feral face.<sup>253</sup>

<sup>248</sup> Oliver, Mary. (1993) 'Wild Geese' *Modern American Poetry*. Available at [http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/oliver/online\\_poems.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/oliver/online_poems.htm) [online] Accessed 21 April 2008.

<sup>249</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.27) 'Know-Nothing'. BTS.

<sup>250</sup> See Chapter 1, f.n. 131 for a definition of misprision.

<sup>251</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.47) 'Frosted Elfin' TUR.

<sup>252</sup> Farish, Helen. (2004, p.60) *Sex God and Grief in the Poetry of Louise Gluck and Sharon Olds*.

<sup>253</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.48) 'The Stranger' TUR.

The struggle to negotiate and explore her female body fetches up other poignant moments of awareness for the speaker; 'Pansy Glossary' describes the discovery of masturbation in middle age: 'I was forty before I could bear the slow touching down there'.<sup>254</sup> To write, as a woman, about a woman's body is a risky business, and puts a writer at risk of repeating pornographic, social and literary stereotypes. The speaker's anxiety and duality, and her moments of joy, reflect the flux of the times in which she is speaking. They are consciously exposed, and remain unresolved which emphasises the tentative nature of her happiness.

#### 4. The father's crimes

##### i) The sketchy case against the father

Olds's speaker deliberately does not reveal details of her father's abuse but builds a sketchy case based on implication and little evidence to showcase the truth of the poems as non-literal, and expose the presentation of incest as a conceit, as is now explored. The 'father torture' poems, which contain most evidence of the father's misdeeds, shall then be considered.

Olds's poems clear the father of incest while simultaneously suggesting that the speaker grew up in an incestuous environment. The reader is given some concrete glimpses of the father's bad behaviour but, characteristically, the speaker uses implication and comparison to suggest her childhood suffering. The poems demur from detailing much of the father's misdeeds despite the speaker's revealing tone.

From the outset of Olds's debut collection, a reader might infer that the speaker had an abusive childhood; the opening poem's highly charged sexual atmosphere contains a command to 'fuck the father'. The second poem in Satan Says 'Love Fossil' shows the speaker's physical desire for her father, and his disinterest:

I did not understand his doom or my taste for the big  
dangerous body.

I flashed my animal sides, and he was  
vegetarian to the end.<sup>255</sup>

Both 'Satan Says' and 'Love Fossil' use personification to hint at something awry in the speaker's family background. The third poem in Satan Says, 'That Year', appears to be less surreal:

my mother took us  
and hid us so we would not be there  
when she told him to leave; so there wasn't another  
tying by the wrist to the chair,  
or denial of food, not another  
forcing of food, the head held back,

<sup>254</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.75) 'Pansy Glossary' TUR.

<sup>255</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.3 and 5) 'Satan Says' and 'Love Fossil' SS.

down the throat at the restaurant,  
 the shame of vomited buttermilk  
 down the sweater with its shame of new breasts<sup>256</sup>

However, 'That Year' is an amalgam of events, including force-feeding and 'denial of food'. There is public shaming at a restaurant, but also 'tying by the wrist to the chair' which conjures a family table. The speaker's vivid description and use of the word 'another' suggests such experiences are authentic. However, they are not contextualised, and a reader is unaware whether they happened to the speaker or a sibling - indeed they might be the mother's accusations repeated to her children. In 'The Blue Dress', a poem in a later collection, the speaker describes an argument with her mother:

A year later, during a fight about  
 just how awful my father had been,  
 my mother said he had not picked out the dress,  
 just told her to get something not too expensive, and then  
 had not even sent a check for it,  
 that's the kind of man he was.<sup>257</sup>

A reflective reader recognises that the last quoted line is the mother's viewpoint, repeated as equivocal fact to the speaker. The device at once invites the reader to condemn the father and mother on the speaker's behalf, and visits the sins of the father on the mother.<sup>258</sup> The mother draws her daughter into her marital battles in 'The Blue Dress' and 'What if God'. In 'The Victims' the speaker comments of her mother: 'She had taught us to take it, to hate you and take it/ until we pricked with her for your annihilation, Father'.<sup>259</sup> In 'That Year', 'The Blue Dress' and 'The Victims' the speaker uses her mother's voice to damn her father. The device reflects the polarised nature of the parents' relationship, and allows the speaker to stop short of condemning her father more fully.<sup>260</sup>

Elsewhere in Olds's poetry, the speaker alludes to her suffering provocatively, but without specificity. In 'I Go Back to May 1937' the speaker travels back in time to comment of her pre-wed parents vaguely that they 'are going to do bad things to children'.<sup>261</sup> In 'Things That Are Worse Than Death' the speaker comments: 'nothing I experienced was worse than death/ life was beautiful as our blood on the stone floor'.<sup>262</sup> The startlingly violent closing image, and the title of the poem appear to contradict the penultimate line, pointing to the sadomasochism of the speaker. The device obscures events for a reader, making it difficult to judge the father's misdeeds. The speaker draws attention to her own obfuscation and the unfixity of her account.

<sup>256</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.6) 'That Year' SS.

<sup>257</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.38) 'The Blue Dress' TGC.

<sup>258</sup> This tendency also links back to the motif of Electra discussed earlier in the chapter.

<sup>259</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.34) 'The Victims' DATL.

<sup>260</sup> See Chapter 4, p.134 of the dissertation for a discussion of the speaker's mother.

<sup>261</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.23) 'I Go Back To May 1937' TGC.

<sup>262</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.13) 'Things That Are Worse Than Death' DATL.

Some poems allude specifically to the speaker's selective retelling: In 'The Indispensability Of The Eyes' the speaker comments: 'what went on at home/ I couldn't bear to see', and ends with a distancing metaphor: 'I'd open my eyes on another day of/ living with blinded animals/ under the threat of fire'.<sup>263</sup> The poem suggests that a selective memory is essential to the speaker's childhood survival, and it allows her to move forward less problematically as an adult. The first stanza of 'The Opening' describes, from a child's point of view, being driven home through a storm; the second stanza analyses the incident from an adult standpoint:

the night we left Gram's  
so late, Daddy driving, drunk,  
baskets of McIntoshes in the back. The young man  
suddenly appearing in front of the car as if  
cut out of the night<sup>264</sup>

'The Opening' mimetically reproduces the memory process as a series of pieced together impressions which, in the reflective second stanza, take on meaning. The pain of the speaker's recovered memories, and her unwillingness to damn her father, requires this lateral retelling. The subject of the poems is the reconstruction of memory, not memory itself. The replaying of events throughout the poetry testifies to their traumatic unresolved nature, and also shows the subjectivity and absorption of the speaker. It situates the confession in the poems, and not outside of them in any reliable version of events.

## ii. The 'father torture' poems

There is little hard evidence in Satan Says and The Dead And The Living of the father's cruelty: the speaker's memory is selective and her tendency is to damn her father laterally by use of tone and inference. However, among the speaker's allusions to the father's misdeeds there are some specific charges. Within Olds's oeuvre, there is a small category of 'father torture poems': poems which refer explicitly to a single incident and stay focused on that incident throughout the narrative. Even in these poems the speaker's presentation of her father's misdeeds is ambiguous, and requires a reader to make a judgment, as is now discussed.

The two most obvious examples of 'father torture' poems are both in The Gold Cell; 'San Francisco' and 'The Chute'. Other poems which adhere to this category to a greater or lesser degree are: 'The Lisp', 'Aspic and Buttermilk' and 'Sunday Night'.<sup>265</sup> 'After Punishment Was Done With Me' and 'The Day They Tied Me Up' in Blood, Tin, Straw also have elements of 'father torture' poems although, as is clear from the latter title, the father is not the sole torturer – the tendency to implicate the mother is more evident in the books after The Father as shall be examined later in the section.

<sup>263</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.8) 'The Indispensability Of The Eyes' SS.

<sup>264</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.9) 'The Opening' SS.

<sup>265</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.11) 'The Lisp' TW; Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.16) 'Aspic and Buttermilk' BTS; Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.12) 'Sunday Night' TUR.

'San Francisco' describes the father driving recklessly: in this poem, unlike in 'The Opening', the father is not obviously drunk and appears to be deliberately terrifying his children:

what was life when the  
man who had made my body liked to  
dangle it over empty space and  
tease me with death. He sat there sparkling, a  
refuse dump, I could smell his heat,  
the wheel loose in his hands now, the  
reins of my life held slack.  
We'd climb out, my knees shaking and I  
stank, to look at the world spread out at our  
feet as if we owned it,  
as if we had power over our lives,  
as if my father had control of himself<sup>266</sup>

In 'The Chute' the father dangles his children down a hole into the cellar; 'he'd pretend to let go – he loved to hear/ passionate screaming in a narrow space'.<sup>267</sup> Both poems are leisurely ('San Francisco' is forty-seven lines, 'The Chute' is sixty lines) in their damning description of the father's actions, but end by abnegating him of responsibility. The father's intent is also ambiguous: in 'San Francisco' he could be seen as simply trying to give his children a dangerous thrill, in 'The Chute' he is enlisting the help of his children in performing a household task.

Similarly in 'Aspic and Buttermilk' the father asks the speaker to repeat words that make her lisp: an action which might conceivably be construed as a fond joke. However, the foods in the title of 'Aspic and Buttermilk' build on the images of 'force-feeding' already invoked in 'That Year', and earlier poems such as 'The Departure' which creates an uneasy catalogue of misdeeds in the reader's mind.<sup>268</sup> Ultimately, the reader is left to decide to what extent the father is a sympathetic character. Olds's poems are contradictory in that they forgive the father, but also draw attention to his behaviour.

'Sunday Night' is less ambiguous than the other 'father torture' poems. The poem begins by describing a weekly visit to a restaurant: 'When the family would go to a restaurant/ my father would put his hand up a waitress's / skirt'.<sup>269</sup> Unusually, the speaker goes on to interpret the father's actions: 'It was always the right arm, he wasn't/ fooling'. Unlike the action in the earlier 'father torture' poems this is definitely *not* a joke, 'he wasn't fooling'. The speaker proceeds to emphasise her point: 'Woop! he would go, as if we were having/ fun together'.<sup>270</sup> The poem describes the speaker's fury: 'I wish

<sup>266</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.29) 'San Francisco' TGC.

<sup>267</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.37) 'The Chute' TGC.

<sup>268</sup> See p.106 of the dissertation for a discussion of 'The Departure'.

<sup>269</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.12) 'Sunday Night' TUR.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*

I had stuck/ a fork in that arm, driven the tines/ deep'.<sup>271</sup> The reflective adult speaker continues to identify with the assaulted waitresses, granting no forgiveness to the father:

I imagine my way back into the skirts  
of the women my father hurt, those bells of  
twilight, those sacred tented woods.  
I want to sweep, tidy, stack-  
whatever I can do, clean the stable  
of my father's mind. Maybe undirty  
my own, come to see the whole body  
as blameless and lovely.<sup>272</sup>

The speaker is able to be more damning in this later poem because she is ostensibly speaking out on behalf of another victim. However, although the sexual assault in 'Sunday Night' is distanced from the speaker, the father makes an assault on the body of his daughter through the puppet of the waitress(es). In addition, it is an assault for the child speaker to have witnessed the assault on the waitress. The distancing of the father's attack on the speaker is a similar displacement to the heavenly displacement employed in 'What If God', where God becomes a potential abuser. The legacy of this assault is the speaker's guilt and self-loathing of her own female body; a loathing that she wishes to revoke at the end of the poem.

The poems of Olds's last three collections show the continuation of the torture narrative. Here, poems describing the father's mistreatment of the speaker make him less culpable: he is relegated to one half of the shared parental pronoun 'they'. The first contender for a 'father torture' poem in The Wellspring demonstrates this tendency:

my father made up a sentence  
for me to say at Sunday breakfast-  
Sharon swallows sausages – I would  
say it and they'd laugh<sup>273</sup>

The use of 'they', a reader will observe, lets the father partially off the hook. The father is also only jointly culpable in other poems in the later collections with an element of torture including 'The Day They Tied Me Up' and 'Aspic and Buttermilk'. In these poems the parents are less polarised, and more united than previously - in a kind of gothic romance. The speaker indicates that her parents are each other's nemesis, and neutralises the blame: it is both at fault, therefore it is neither.

'The Swimming Race', a more obvious candidate for a 'father torture' poem, also features the input of an additional familial member. The speaker describes herself taking part in a swimming gala, and illustrates an exchange between her sister and her father:

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.11) 'The Lisp' TW.

My sister sneered, she said  
*Why did you lift Shary's fist*  
*when she was last?* and he smiled, a smile almost  
 without meanness, one of the last  
 times we saw him smile, he said  
*I thought she was the winner of the next race, and his*  
*face flushed with pleasure and the shade of the yardarm.*<sup>274</sup>

The father's smile is 'almost without meanness': his pleasure stems from his own witticism but also, a reader deduces, from his daughter's subjugation. The speaker is the butt of this joke, and she is sensible to this, but appears to give the father the benefit of the doubt, while alerting the reader to what she is doing. The father's pleasure in the scene is ambiguous: he enjoys his wit but also snubs the sneering sister.

'The Swimming Race' appears in The Wellspring immediately after 'Killing My Sister's Fish', where the speaker commits the killing of the title. The poem ends: 'something set in motion/ long before I had been conceived/ had been accomplished.'<sup>275</sup> The act of murdering pets ups the ante on more mundane sibling wars and the speaker links it with the cycle of family cruelty which has been discussed in relation to the Saturn poems. The fish killing is evoked later in The Wellspring in 'Dirty Memories', where the child speaker asks her peer:

Do you want  
 orange juice? Well, there isn't any-  
 to see his face small as my brother's  
 crumple, like the thinnest paper  
 cup. I'm talking about the power of putting  
 poison into the bowl with my sister's  
 fish.<sup>276</sup>

The father may be seen as implicitly present in 'Dirty Memories' and 'Killing My Sister's Fish', as he is explicitly present in 'The Swimming Race'. The appearance of the father in the siblings can be seen as the father's continuation.

The speaker's sadistic tendency is shown in 'The Fear of Oneself' where the husband grants her an unusual compliment: 'you say you believe I would hold up under torture/ for the sake of our children.'<sup>277</sup> The poem ends with the speaker adopting an ambiguous perspective:

I lean against the huge carved  
 cold door, my face glittering with  
 glare ice like a dangerous road,

<sup>274</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.16) 'The Swimming Race' TW.

<sup>275</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.15) 'Killing My Sister's Fish' TW.

<sup>276</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.18) 'Dirty Memories' TW.

<sup>277</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.55) 'The Fear Of Oneself' DATL.

and think about hot pokers, and goads,  
 and the skin of my children, the delicate, tight,  
 thin top layer of it  
 covering their whole bodies, softly  
 glimmering.<sup>278</sup>

The speaker appears, through her leisurely musings, to also be part torturer.

As the father's torture narrative continues, albeit mutedly, in the occasional cruelty of the speaker and her siblings, so the speaker's daughter also becomes a potential torturer. In 'The Sign of Saturn' the speaker comments: 'Sometimes my daughter looks at me with an/ amber black look like my father'.<sup>279</sup> However, a reader is aware that the propensity towards torture in the speaker and her own family will not be realised. Unlike her siblings, the speaker has broken a chain of abuse by speaking out. Her awareness of her own, and her daughter's, propensity to torture is a reflection of her past. Such awareness affords its own protection.

A subsection of 'father torture' poems are those which suggest the father's similarity with historical dictators. These audacious distancing metaphors enable the speaker to be more critical of the father, and also threaten his centrality as an abuser within the poetry. The most overt example is 'The Ideal Father':

'When I dream you, Dad, you come into the dream  
 clean, *farouche*, *gesundheit*, feral  
 fresh face, physically exact –  
 the ideal, the schemata, the blueprint, no mark of  
 pain.'<sup>280</sup>

The poem continues:

Where is the one who threw up?  
 The one who passed out, the one who would not  
 speak for a week, slapped the glasses off a  
 small girl's face, bloodied his head and  
 sank through the water? I think he is dead.  
 I think the ideal father would hardly  
 let such a man live. After all he has  
 daughters to protect, laying his perfect  
 body over their sleep all night long.<sup>281</sup>

The images of the father's suffering are almost as prominent as his abuse of the speaker. The poem is not about the father, but with characteristic distancing, a dream of the father constructed by the speaker. In 'The Departure' the speaker comments:

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.73) 'The Sign Of Saturn' DATL.

<sup>280</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.38) 'The Ideal Father' DATL.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

Did you weep like the Shah when you left? Did you forget  
 the way you had tied me to a chair, as  
 he forgot the ones strapped to the grille  
 in his name? You knew us no more than he knew them,  
 his lowest subjects, his servants, and we were  
 silent before you like that, bowing  
 backwards, not speaking, not eating unless we were  
 told to eat, the glass jammed to our  
 teeth and tilted like a brass funnel in the  
 soundproof cells of Teheran.<sup>282</sup>

However, the father is not the only familial figure compared to a dictator; in 'The Forms' the mother's behaviour is evoked against a background of genocide:

I am a student of war,  
 of gas ovens, smothering, knives,  
 drowning, burning, all the forms  
 in which I have experienced her love.<sup>283</sup>

Olds's adult speaker is tenaciously 'a survivor', but her treatment as a powerless child is contrasted both explicitly and covertly with familial and historical victims. The device places the narrative in a certain historical period and frames the speaker's childhood as gloomy and fearful. In 'The Takers' the speaker comments, 'Hitler entered Paris the way my sister entered my room at night'. Here, the evocation of Hitler is undercut by the extravagance of the metaphor.<sup>284</sup> The poem is not concerned with the sister's likeness to Hitler but the speaker's feeling of powerlessness, juxtaposed against the stories she would have heard as a child about public suffering. For the speaker, as for generations of children growing up in the early 1940s, Hitler et al were the bogeymen of childhood.<sup>285</sup> The presence of the dictators conflates a personal and public history. The poems show the innocence of the childhood and lack of comparative suffering, rather than the tyranny of the father, and other members of the speaker's family.

Seeking to identify with victims of atrocity is a feature of contemporary women's confessional poetry, Judith Harris writes:

Burdened by the gravity of history and its succession of endless atrocities, it is inevitable that the female confessional poet, seeking a

<sup>282</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.36) 'The Departure' [DATL](#).

<sup>283</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.35) 'The Forms' [DATL](#).

<sup>284</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.44) 'The Takers' [DATL](#).

<sup>285</sup> Sherman and Weisskopf note the following rhyme from the 1940s in their study of the subversive folklore of American childhood: 'Whistle while you work/Mussolini bought a shirt Hitler wore it Britain tore it/Whistle while you work' and observe that 'Children who are far too young to have experienced any major war are still singing rhymes dealing with places and events in World War II...[the children] emphatically know who were the villains'. See Sherman, Joseph and Weisskopf, T.K.E. (1995, p. 130-133) [Greasy Grimey Gopher Guts: the subversive folklore of childhood](#). Arkansas: August House.

symbol to express the deepest tragedy of her own sense of victimization, would choose a constructed identity of the political martyr, the victim those in power must silence or censor for her views, beliefs, or genetic origins, which can only be extinguished along with personhood.<sup>286</sup>

Olds's identification with the victim is complex: she eschews the victimhood of earlier confessional poets, but is fascinated by victims in her work. She observes the tendency for the victim to take on the guilt of the perpetrator – evident in a poem such as 'Sunday Night' – but embraces the role of survivor. She appears to apologise for her earlier poems invoking genocide in 'The Window', but continues to revel in detail and survivor's guilt.<sup>287</sup>

Olds's interest in the Holocaust, and identification with Jewish people, has led to her wrongly being described as Jewish in webzines and anthology entries.<sup>288</sup> Such a phenomenon suggests the presence of an exclusively naïve reader. However, the unspoken disparity between the speaker and a holocaust victim should be obvious to a reflective reader. Olds's poetry can be viewed as a response to the invocation of the holocaust in literature rather than a response to the holocaust itself.

## Conclusion

The chapter began with a consideration of the 'Saturn' poems which demonstrate the father's and speaker's position in a familial cycle of abuse which predates both of them. The speaker's awareness of this cycle lessens the father's centrality as a main abuser, and demonstrates her attempts at filial understanding. The depiction of the father as a lover reflects the speaker's psychodrama, and the archetypal nature of the father, linking Olds's poetry with the 'first wave' of confessional poets. Despite charges of pornography, it is demonstrated how Olds's speaker subverts pornographic norms by taking control of her own presentation and assuming the authority of the sexual gaze in her relationship with her father and others. It is demonstrated that there is little evidence to condemn the father, even in the 'father torture' poems, signposting the truth of Olds's confession as non-literal. Finally it is demonstrated how the continuation of the torture narrative in the speaker and subsequent generations is less acute than the continuation of the torture narrative from father to daughter, demonstrating the tempered consolation of the 'happy-ever-after' narrative. Having examined the presentation of the living father in Olds's early work, the following chapter shall look at his dying and death in the pivotal collection The Father.

<sup>286</sup> Harris, Judith. (1992, p.257) 'Breaking the Code of Silence: Ideology and Women's Confessional Poetry' in After Confession.

<sup>287</sup> See Chapter 1, p.82 of the dissertation for a discussion of 'The Window'.

<sup>288</sup> See 'Sharon Olds' *PoemHunter.com*. Available at <http://www.poemhunter.com/sharon-olds/> [online]. Accessed 3 April 2008.

## Chapter Three: The Dying Father

1. The father: the daughter
2. Looking at the father
3. The daughter torturer
4. The father, the final word(s)
5. The father, our father

This chapter considers Olds's fourth collection The Father. It challenges the centrality of the father, suggested by the book's title, and posits The Daughter as an alternative name for the collection. It is argued that the true concern of The Father is the speaker's emancipation from the suffering of her childhood, and that the death in the collection has a metaphorical context and level of meaning. The speaker's condemnation of her father, through inference, is discussed and her gaze is identified as objectifying the father and undermining his authority. Chapter two posited the idea of 'father torture' poems, and the idea is continued here where the poems of The Father are considered as the speaker's revenge: the speaker is shown to reverse the torture process of her childhood by extending the father's textual suffering. The father's silence is examined which, it is argued, further emphasises the book as the speaker's psychodrama. Finally the deification of the body in The Father is presented as providing an alternative to traditional religious consolation. The comfort the father's body offers the speaker provides her with a tempered happiness and resolution to her mourning; a departure from the suffering associated with confessional poetry.

### 1. The father: the daughter

Olds' fourth collection of poetry The Father has been called; 'one of the most successful adaptations of the confessional mode'.<sup>289</sup> The book of fifty-two poems forms a collective elegy for a father dying of cancer. Despite the prominence given to the father in the collection's title, he is an elusive figure – as, it shall be argued, are the other familial characters in the book. The father diminishes in size then dies on page thirty-five of a seventy-nine page book. The remainder of the collection is concerned with the speaker's grieving. Throughout The Father the eponymous figure is whittled down literally, through illness, and figuratively to show the daughter's increasing understanding and acceptance of the basis of their relationship. The father's actual dying and death may be seen as a metaphor to illustrate the distance between him and the speaker.

'June 24' in The Gold Cell, the collection which precedes The Father, describes the father's metaphorical death, and resurrection before the physical death of the following collection:

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<sup>289</sup> Beach, Christopher. (2003, p.155) The Cambridge Introduction To Twentieth-Century American Poetry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

You died night after night in the years of my childhood,  
 sinking down into speechless torpor,  
 and then you were told to leave for good  
 and you left, for better, for worse, for a long  
 time I did not see you or touch you-  
 and then, as if to disprove the ascendancy of darkness,  
 little by little you came back to me  
 until now I have you a living father<sup>290</sup>

The father's stated 'long time' in the wilderness is unrecorded: he is brought back at the end of one collection to die in the next. The casual appearance and disappearance of the father suggests time has been telescoped for the narrative purposes of the speaker. The father's dispensability in The Father is shared by other members of the speaker's family: as he appears they recede, as is now examined.

At the outset of The Father, the father appears to be a changed man. In the opening poem, 'Nullipara', father and daughter sit side by side: 'The last morning of my visit, we sit/ in our bathrobes, cronies, we cross and re-cross/ our legs'.<sup>291</sup> The speaker is spending a last morning, perhaps the ultimate last morning, with her dying father. The fragile happiness of the briefly re-united Lear and Cordelia is evoked, with gender positions characteristically subverted.

The title 'Nullipara', a medical term for a woman who has not given birth, alerts a reader to something uncanny in the scene beyond the fact of the father's dying. The poem ends: 'He knows he will live in me/ after he is dead, I will carry him like a mother./ I do not know if I will ever deliver'.<sup>292</sup> Grieving requires assimilation, not gestation and delivery. Beyond serving the conceit of the poem, the title denies the speaker her biological children. Such a gesture inverts the filial relationship in The Father, and calls into question the speaker's adult existence outside of her father.

The speaker's children are peripheral to the world of The Father. Her son and daughter are not mentioned in the collection until after the father has died, and then only fleetingly in four poems.<sup>293</sup> The speaker's husband is also notably absent from The Father; he features in just two poems, which are uncharacteristically muted in their spousal praise.<sup>294</sup>

The lack of acknowledgement of the speaker's family, throughout much of The Father, indicates the all-consuming nature of the father-daughter role to the exclusion of other familial ties. The speaker also indicates the transitory

<sup>290</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.41) 'June 24' TGC.

<sup>291</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.5) 'Nullipara' TF.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>293</sup> The children appear, or are invoked, in Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.46, 52, 62, 78) 'What Shocked Me When My Father Died', 'The Underlife', 'Parent Visiting Day' and 'My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead' TF.

<sup>294</sup> The poems are 'The Feelings' and 'What Shocked Me When My Father Died'. See Chapter 4, p.134 of the dissertation for a discussion of the speaker's husband.

nature of her adult happiness that can disappear at her father's reinstatement. The disposable nature of the husband and children illustrates their function as the speaker's props: their role in the narrative of The Father is to reinforce the 'happy-ever-after' narrative. The near-separateness of the two realms of the speaker's childhood family, and her adult family in The Father shows the control the speaker wields over the telling of her story, which supports the narrative as psychodrama.

The speaker's husband and children may not have been physically present at the father's deathbed. However, the speaker's stepmother - who would surely have been a constant presence - is similarly elusive. In 'The Want' the speaker learns that the father has told her stepmother: 'I want to devote/ the rest of my life to you'.<sup>295</sup> The significance of 'The Want' is not to primarily demonstrate the father's love for his partner, but the covetousness of that love by the speaker. The title indicates less the father's desire of his wife, and more the speaker's desire of the tribute he gives so easily to her stepmother. Beyond 'The Want', the stepmother appears in nine poems and is mainly presented as a bit character.<sup>296</sup> The reader learns in a later collection that the relationship between the speaker and stepmother was cordial.<sup>297</sup> There is evidence within The Father to back this up: in 'What Shocked Me When My Father Died' the stepmother is shown to be staying at the speaker's house, while her stepdaughter's constant presence at the father's deathbed also suggests the two women were not at war. However, the speaker in The Father seeks to explore the filial relationship in a sealed bubble of would-be-togetherness. 'The Want' shows the explosion of that bubble, but more intervention from the stepmother would lessen the dramatic impact of the speaker's wishful psychodrama. A reflective reader infers that the poems of The Father do not reject the stepmother but simply do not seek to include her.

The Father gives the impression that the daughter is the primary carer in her father's life. Although the actual deathbed scenes of the father and daughter may not have been exclusive, they are presented as such. Alicia Ostriker has commented of Olds's work: 'the self in Olds is never represented in isolation but always in relation, penetrated and penetrating, glued by memory and gaze to others'.<sup>298</sup> This is true, but the characters that interact with the speaker are not shown to interact independently with each other. While questioning the autonomy of figures in The Father, a reflective reader must also have reservations about their substance. Such characters are deliberately underdeveloped to signpost The Father as psychodrama.

Throughout The Father every character is defined in relation to the father: 'his daughter'; 'his wife'.<sup>299</sup> The daughter within The Father is as much a

<sup>295</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.14) 'The Want' TF.

<sup>296</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.3, 9, 14, 23, 25, 28, 31, 32, 44, 46) 'The Waiting', 'Death and Morality', 'The Want', 'Last Words', 'Wonder', 'The Request', 'My Father's Eyes', 'The Last Day', 'After Death', 'What Shocked Me When My Father Died' TF.

<sup>297</sup> See Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.57) 'The Bed' BTS.

<sup>298</sup> Ostriker, Alicia Suskin. (2003, p.49) Dancing At The Devil's Party: Essays on Poetry, Politics, and the Frotic. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

<sup>299</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.3,14) 'The Waiting', 'The Want' TF.

familial archetype as the other characters in the collection; 'a good daughter'. In 'The Feelings', the speaker comments: 'everyone else in the room believed in the Christian god'.<sup>300</sup> It is not clear who 'everyone else' is, but the group is likely to include the stepmother, and stand more generally for the rest of the family. However, the daughter's role as a speaker situates her within and outside of the circle. Her narration, and control of the action of The Father, means she assumes a shared identity with a larger group - the community of readers who must share her perspective. It is in this role as a poetic speaker that the daughter finds kin and survives her father and her childhood family.

The lack of the speaker's children and husband in the opening of the collection, and the presence of her long-absent father, situates the reader of Olds's previous collections in changed territory. The catalyst for the togetherness of the father and daughter is clearly the father's impending death. However, the reflective reader must wonder why the speaker is ministering so absolutely to her old tormentor, and if - given the absence of her own family - she is still the survivor of previous collections. The naïve reader believes the speaker is still unambiguously the survivor of previous collections because of the apparent continuity in Olds's narrative.

However, although the speaker's filial deference is marked at the outset of The Father, she continues to make reference to her troubled childhood in a characteristically covert manner throughout the collection. 'The Glass', a poem describing the father coughing up phlegm, begs for a flashback to the alcoholism depicted in Olds's earlier books. Although there is no such meditation, the most naïve of readers would detect the speaker's latent satisfaction in these lines:

my father the old earth that used to  
lie at the center of the universe, now  
turning with the rest of us  
around his death<sup>301</sup>

In 'The Want' the speaker insists: 'I had stopped/ longing for him to address me from his heart/ before he died'.<sup>302</sup> The criticism is hidden beneath a surface acceptance. In 'Wonder' the speaker muses:

If I had dared to imagine  
trading I might have wished to trade  
places with anyone raised on love,  
but how would anyone raised on love  
bear this death?<sup>303</sup>

A reader would be justified in thinking, with more ease than anyone who was raised on hate. The traditional elegiac consolation is cold comfort, and 'dared'

<sup>300</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.42) 'The Feelings' TF.

<sup>301</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.7) 'The Glass' TF.

<sup>302</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.14) 'The Want' TF.

<sup>303</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.25) 'Wonder' TF.

indicates the breakthrough the speaker has made to achieve her present awareness.

In 'Waste Sonata' the speaker insists: 'My father was not a shit. He was a man/ failing at life'.<sup>304</sup> The need for this rueful defence leads a reflective reader to suspect that the father was indeed a shit, especially readers familiar with the 'father torture' poems of previous collections.<sup>305</sup> In 'I Wanted to Be There When My Father Died' the speaker mediates between the father's deathbed and the deathbed-couch – his preserve as a passed-out alcoholic during the speaker's childhood:

I wanted to watch my father die  
because I hated him. Oh, I loved him,  
my hands cherished him, laying him out,  
but I had feared him so, his lying as if dead on the  
flowered couch had pummelled me<sup>306</sup>

In 'Letter to My Father from 40,000 Feet' the speaker unleashes her tentative textual anger upon a 'toper' - or drunk - who is her father's double:

I guess I am saying  
I hate you, too, there's a way I want  
to take that first-class toper and throw him  
down on the ground.<sup>307</sup>

The speaker deflects her filial anger to the whipping-boy of the toper. She indicates that alcohol is the root of her father's transgressions, although The Father indicates that the sober father is not much more forthcoming with his love than the alcoholic one.

'Beyond Harm' and 'Natural History' are the closest to 'father-torture' poems in The Father, but the father's sadism is even more muted here than in previous collections. In 'Natural History' the father threatens to drop his daughter into a tank of eels. It is not clear whether the speaker views this incident as abuse – a threat the father intends to action – or whether she is just describing a little horseplay. In 'His Terror', the speaker describes a childhood toy:

the ballerina who un-  
bent, when I opened my jewelry box, she  
rose and twirled like the dead. Then the lid  
folded her down, bowing, in the dark,  
the way I would wait, under my bed,  
for morning. My father has forgotten that<sup>308</sup>

<sup>304</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.76) 'Waste Sonata' TF.

<sup>305</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 102 of the dissertation for a discussion of the 'father torture' poems.

<sup>306</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.71) 'I Wanted to Be There When My Father Died' TF.

<sup>307</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.63) 'Letter to My Father from 40,000 Feet' TF.

<sup>308</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.12) 'His Terror' TF.

The same jewellery box is mentioned in 'Satan Says'.<sup>309</sup> In the earlier poem the speaker is literally boxed in by her past. In 'His Terror' the speaker acknowledges her father has forgotten this past, either through the current illness of cancer or through the earlier illness of alcoholism. He is beyond reproach due to the unwritten reconciliation and due to his illness. However, a reader might question if the father was aware that the daughter slept under her bed and - if not - how he can remember something that the speaker has not told him.

The speaker longs for communication with the father throughout The Father, but her silence - as much as his - prevents this happening. She reserves her poetical confession for the reader. Her characteristically ambiguous method of conveying her father's misdeeds indicates the impulsive and secretive nature of her claims, and invites the reader to make a decision on the father's behaviour. There is an implicit threat in the speaker's signified remembrance that is not realised in the text, Brian Dillon comments:

the reader who wonders whether the speaker extracts an apology from the father and if the pains of the past are smoothed over in a final emotionally-charged dialogue, misses the point of this book. It is precisely the silence of the father that creates an enormous emptiness that these poems try to fill, silence that provokes multiple conjectures as to who the father is and why his dying and death so confound the speaker.<sup>310</sup>

Dillon's 'multiple conjectures' as to the father's identity presume his centrality, although a reader may conjecture more usefully as to the centrality of the speaker. The speaker's dutiful position at her father's bedside allows her to bear witness in subverted poems of filial deference which describe her suffering and survival to the reader. If the father was to jump off his deathbed or to beg his daughter for forgiveness, he would be making a bid for an active role in the collection. The speaker's story depends on the father's silence, his inevitable death and subsequent absence through the remainder of the collection.

## 2. Looking at the father

The images of the dying father in The Father are graphic. Poems describe him coughing up phlegm, exposing himself, struggling to move, and show the speaker lingering over his corpse. The metaphors employed in the collection are audacious, and include the comparison of the father's body with a sculpture, a lizard and a baby.<sup>311</sup>

The speaker's use of imagery is essential to her poetic arsenal: she deploys visual description and metaphor, just as she uses implication and suggestion, to undercut her filial kindness. The primary agent of the father's

<sup>309</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.3) 'Satan Says' SS.

<sup>310</sup> Dillon, Brian. (1993). Never having had you.

<sup>311</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.3, 41, 78) 'The Waiting', 'Death' 'My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead'

TF.

demise is his illness, but it is the speaker's description of his naked suffering which sustains his pain within the text.

However, as with the ambiguity of her tone, the speaker's use of imagery is double-edged. It casts her father as a poignant figure, inspires sympathy in the reader, and reflects her own grief and suffering. It also gothically highlights the absence of the father: the speaker pulls back the bedcovers and there, in the father's stead, is a lizard or a baby.

The opening poems of The Father objectify the father's body but also show his agency in this portrayal. In the first poem 'The Waiting' the speaker describes her father as a work of art:

he had

a way of holding still to be looked at,  
as if a piece of sculpture could sense  
the gaze which was running over it-  
he would wait with that burnished, looked-at look until  
the hem of my nightgown came into view,  
then slew his eyes up at me, without  
moving his head, and wait, the kiss  
came to him, he did not go to it.<sup>312</sup>

The phrase 'looked-at-look' is reminiscent of a phrase in Laura Mulvey's essay on presentations of women in cinema; Mulvey argues: 'women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote-to-be-looked-at-ness.'<sup>313</sup> Olds subverts such a contract in 'The Waiting' where the father has become a literal love-object connoting 'looked-at-ness'. His power is based in the traditionally feminine role of granting favours. However, his apparent indifference to the speaker's affection is a continuation of his patriarchal dominance. The poem suggests a shift of power between father and daughter, where both enjoy some agency.

'The Waiting' anticipates 'Last Words', a later poem in The Father, where the speaker is erotic instigator and kisses the father until he finally issues a 'command for mercy'.<sup>314</sup> The speaker's mercilessness demonstrates the latent anger of her embrace. Although the nature of the father's command is ironically paradoxical, he retains his authority over the speaker by not embracing, literally, her need for love. Mulvey notes that, according to principles of the ruling ideology, men in cinema cannot bear 'the burden of sexual objectification'.<sup>315</sup> In 'Last Words' the father cannot bear being the daughter's love object. However, in 'The Waiting' he participates in the objectification, as he is also shown to do in these lines from a later poem 'The Lifting': 'Suddenly my father lifted up his nightie, I/ turned my head away but

<sup>312</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.3) 'The Waiting' TF.

<sup>313</sup> Mulvey, Laura. (1989, p.19). 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in Visual and other pleasures.

Hampshire: Macmillan.

<sup>314</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.23) 'Last Words' TF.

<sup>315</sup> Mulvey, Laura. (1989, p.20) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'.

he cried out/ *Shar!*, my nickname, so I turned and looked'.<sup>316</sup> Conversely, the father's agency in turning himself into a spectacle relieves him from some of the burden of being looked at. This subverted portrait of scopophilia, the pleasure of looking, threatens the father's traditional masculinity - underlined by his arraignment in that most feminine of garments, a 'nightie'. However, the speaker also demonstrates the father's absolute courage, and allows him to intervene both in his presentation and his illness.

Throughout The Father the speaker looks on her father's naked body and, as Chris Leary notes, breaks taboos 'ranging from the Old Testament taboo against 'uncovering thy father's nakedness' to the Victorian tendency in literature to euphemise death'.<sup>317</sup> A reflective reader might also detect the vaguest evocation of necrophilia, observing the speaker's proximity to the corpse in The Father. However, although Olds does shatter Victorian custom, she adheres to a convention in the contemporary elegiac tradition where many poets treat the father irreverently.<sup>318</sup> She is not the first within this tradition to uncover her father's nakedness: in contemporary elegies a reader can safely assume mention of a breast or brow refers to the actual body part, and not a metaphorical co-ordinate. In 'The Lifting' the speaker follows the father's instruction to look at his naked body:

I looked  
 where his solid ruddy stomach had been  
 and I saw the skin fallen into loose  
 soft hairy rippled folds  
 lying in a pool of folds  
 down at the base of his abdomen,  
 the gaunt torso of a big man  
 who will die soon. Right away  
 I saw how much his hips are like mine,  
 the long, white angles, and then  
 how much his pelvis is shaped like my daughter's,  
 a chambered whelk-shell hollowed out,  
 I saw the folds of skin like something  
 poured, a thick batter, I saw  
 his rueful smile, the cast-up eyes as he  
 shows me his old body, he knows  
 I will be interested, he knows I will find him  
 appealing. If anyone had ever told me  
 I would sit by him and he would pull up his nightie  
 and I would look at him, at his naked body,  
 at the thick bud of his penis in all that  
 dark hair, look at him

<sup>316</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.15) 'The Lifting' TF.

<sup>317</sup> Leary, Chris. (2004) 'The Textual Force of the Cancerous Body in Sharon Olds's *The Father*' Available at <http://www.english.ufl.edu/pnm/leary.html> [online] Accessed 15 January 2005. The uncovering of the father's nakedness occurs in Leviticus: Verse 20: the father is not the only family member who is (un)covered by the passage, the entire family is discussed in reference to the paternal line. Olds's misprision is to show the incest from daughter to father rather than vice versa.

<sup>318</sup> See the Introduction, p.44 of the dissertation.

in affection and uneasy wonder  
I would not have believed it.<sup>319</sup>

Laura Tanner comments on 'The Lifting': 'The marks of disease overwhelm the signs of sexuality written on her father's body...her [the speaker's] gaze moves first not to the penis but to the signs of disease written on her father's sagging belly.'<sup>320</sup> However, by leaving the penis until last, the speaker shows that it is not overwhelmed by the marks of disease. It provides an elegiac consolation: its 'thick bud' - the essence of the paternal body – is undiminished by illness. The portrait of the penis is reminiscent of a nude in an earlier poem, 'Portrait of a Child', from The Dead And The Living:

across one leg delicately rests  
his penis. Pale and lovely there  
at the center of the picture, it lies, the source  
of the children he would have had, this child  
dead of hunger  
in Yerevan.<sup>321</sup>

The penis here remains 'pale and lovely', as the penis in 'The Lifting' prompts 'wonder'. The portrait of the father in 'The Lifting' is not that of a dying man, as Tanner indicates, but of a man, dying. The body is intended to provide elegiac consolation.

The undiminished glory of his penis notwithstanding, the ill father in 'The Lifting', and other poems in The Father, is ghosted by the father who has been portrayed - even in the thrall of alcoholism - as big and healthy-looking. In 'Death' the speaker draws a parallel between the dying father, and James Cagney's portrayal of the American silent film actor Lon Chaney:

Last night I saw James Cagney die  
as Lon Chaney, he spelled out *I love you*  
with his hands. His eyes were wry, narrowed,  
as if savouring a cigar and brandy, he spelled out  
*Forgive me* with that keen savouring look,  
then his head fell to his side. My father  
was a reptile lifting its skull, his shoulders  
rose up steadily, he was a lizard<sup>322</sup>

The poem's title exposes the theme the film glamorizes. Cagney is given the props of Olds' father - brandy and a cigar - which makes the parallel between the two figures explicit before the portrait is undercut with the anti portrait. The speaker's father is not the hero, but neither is Cagney; he is only playing Lon

<sup>319</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.15) 'The Lifting' TF.

<sup>320</sup> Tanner, Laura E. (1996) 'Death-Watch: Terminal illness and the gaze in Sharon Olds's *The Father*' *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*. 29: 1 (March 1996) pp 103-121.

<sup>321</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.8) 'Portrait of a Child' DATL.

<sup>322</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.41) 'Death' TF.

Chaney who was himself 'the man of a thousand faces'.<sup>323</sup> The filmed death is a fiction. The father has shown more courage in death than Cagney does in 'Death'.

'The Picture I Want', like 'Death', employs a daring metaphor. The poem begins with a description of the imaginary photograph of the title:

It is black and white, square, thickly  
glossed like a snapshot from a Baby Brownie.  
He is sitting up, on the long couch,  
a large man gone small with cancer.<sup>324</sup>

The speaker is explicitly positioned as architect of the gaze. She is also a subject of the image, embracing the father's status as object:

His head is leaning over far to one side,  
resting on the top of my head, and my head  
is leaning on his shoulder, my face as near  
to the primary tumour as a dozing baby's  
lips to the mother's breast<sup>325</sup>

Alluding to the final image of this embrace, Chris Leary comments: 'Olds's poetry indicates that the infantilising cancerous changes cause the father to depart the social, patriarchal world and become realigned with the feminised pre-Oedipal space of the mother/child bond.'<sup>326</sup> Like Dillon, Leary assumes the father's centrality. However, the tenor of the image is more threatening than Leary allows for: the adult daughter seeks nurture not from a breast but a cancerous tumour. Mulvey and Jimenez write:

The spectacle is vulnerable. However intricately planned it is, a handful of people can disrupt it and cause chaos in a seemingly impenetrable organisation. The spectacle isn't prepared for anything other than passive spectators.<sup>327</sup>

Throughout The Father the speaker disassembles the spectacle of the father's dying with her gaze. The cross-gendered imagery in 'The Picture I Want' might be graffiti she has doodled idly on his body.

The photo in 'The Picture I Want' is dynamic, emphasising the flux of its subject. The father is impermanent: throughout The Father his presence becomes less substantial and is called into question by the deployment of startling imagery. However, the pejorative image of a lizard, for example, is counterbalanced with the speaker's gentler comparison of the father to her own

<sup>323</sup> See 'lonchaney.com: the official Chaney website' (1999). Available at <http://www.lonchaney.com/> [online] Accessed 4 April 2008.

<sup>324</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p. 10) 'Death' TF.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Leary, Chris. (2004) 'The Textual Force of the Cancerous Body.'

<sup>327</sup> Jiminez, Margarita and Mulvey, Laura. 'The Spectacle is Vulnerable: Miss World 1970' in Mulvey, Laura. (1989, p5) Visual and Other Pleasures. Hampshire: Macmillan.

body.<sup>328</sup> The speaker's use of metaphor undercuts the father's patriarchal authority, but is also part of a quest to transform him into something else: to carry him forward into the future in another form once his body has expired. The poems of The Father might be seen as such a vehicle.

### 3. The daughter torturer

The use of the definite article in The Father is in line with medical protocol: body parts are referred to in general terms among healthcare personnel. The impersonal form of address is considered professional, and facilitates detachment. Elaine Scarry writes of the necessary distance between the ill body and the healthy body:

Physical pain happens, of course, not several miles below our feet or many miles above our heads but within the bodies of persons who inhabit the world through which we every day make our way, and who may at any moment be separated from us by only a space of several inches. The very temptation to invoke analogies to remote cosmologies (and there is a long tradition of such analogies) is itself a sign of pain's triumph, for it achieves its aversiveness in part by bringing about, even within the radius of several feet, this absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons.<sup>329</sup>

The poems of The Father highlight this 'absolute split'. Through her personal tone and sharing of intimate information, the speaker assumes a close affinity with her reader who takes up her vantage point throughout. The father is not an equal protagonist in the drama. He is distanced from the reader - even should the reader be an ill old man - by his increasing objectification, and by his lack of voice in the speaker's narrative. The father's pain is beyond the speaker's understanding, and is of concern in The Father only in its effect on the speaker.

The inability to interact successfully is one of the themes of The Father. The physical closeness of the characters contrasts sharply with their emotional distance. The maintenance of such distance, aside from being medical protocol, is a prerequisite of torture - Leigh Gilmore writes:

Torture marks a crucial shift in the status of the person being abused by rendering him or her abject not only through threat, entreaty or bribe but, crucially, force. It also marks a loss of the subject's self constitution and institutional identity in relation to that person and within the context that binds them together in an unequal power relation.<sup>330</sup>

<sup>328</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.78) 'My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead' TF.

<sup>329</sup> Scarry, Elaine. (1985, p.4) The Body in Pain: The Making and Remaking of the Word. Berkshire: Open University Press.

<sup>330</sup> Gilmore, Leigh. 'How we confess now: Reading the Abu Ghraib Archive' in Gill, Jo, ed. (2006, p.185) Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays. London: Routledge.

The father is 'you', to the 'we' of the speaker and reader. The speaker is not the primary reason for the father's pain but, throughout The Father, she alludes to her childhood suffering and implicitly draws a comparison between the changed positions she and the father now occupy. She hints at taking pleasure in his pain in 'Close to Death' where she casts herself in the role of torturer, in a reversal of the childhood filial relationship: 'I will go to him/ and give to him, what he gave me I will give him,/ the earth, night, sleep, beauty, fear'.<sup>331</sup> The final lingering abstract upstages the earlier words in the line. The title 'Close to Death' is word-play, referring to the father's state, but also to the speaker's voyeurism - she is the real subject of the poem. Arguably, by maintaining his textual suffering, the speaker does give the father fear or extend a state of fearfulness in The Father. In addition, her stance at the end of 'Close to Death' is characteristically ambiguous. Through giving her father fear, she also gives him humility and the chance to become fully human. In 'The Struggle' the father is evoked in painstaking detail:

Later the doctor would pay a call and as  
soon as my father saw that white coat  
he would start to labor up, desperate  
to honor the coat, at a glimpse of it he would  
start to stir like a dog who could not  
not obey.<sup>332</sup>

The line-break on 'not' embeds the struggle, and its futility, in the form of the poem. It is significant that it is the doctor, not the speaker, who takes on the role of the father torturer. The doctor is the patriarch, demanding painful devotion, while the speaker is an observer of the scene and allied with the father in his role of (under)dog. The speaker subtly subverts the patriarchal power, and her father's devotion to it, by reducing it to the emblem of 'a coat'.

In 'The Request' the speaker reminds us: 'He lay like one fallen from a high/ place'.<sup>333</sup> Like Milton's Lucifer, the father is fallen from a 'high place' which, in the context of The Father, refers to his patriarchal power; high in status but morally low in that it was accorded by the speaker's fear.<sup>334</sup> The speaker may be seen to be gloating at the father's downfall, or celebrating it. The fall also refers to the withdrawal of the speaker's childish worship which relegates the father to this position in the collection. He is fallen from the former seat of the speaker's affections or fear.

The Schadenfreude latent in the speaker's death-watch is occasionally more overt; the speaker flirts with patricide in 'The Cigars', musing on her annual birthday gift to her father: 'the cancer/ came from smoking and drinking. So I killed him'.<sup>335</sup> In 'Letter to My Father from 40,000 Feet', the speaker fantasises about hurting a father figure, and the title of another poem 'Death

<sup>331</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.24) 'Close to Death' TF.

<sup>332</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p. 18) 'The Struggle' TF.

<sup>333</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.28) 'The Request' TF.

<sup>334</sup> See Chapter 2, p.102 of the dissertation for a discussion of the 'father torture' poems.

<sup>335</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.60) 'The Cigars' TF.

and Murder' makes the link explicit.<sup>336</sup> After her father's death, the speaker comments in 'Beyond Harm': 'I suddenly thought, with amazement, he will always/ love me now, and I laughed-he was dead, dead!'<sup>337</sup>

After his death, the speaker lingers over the father's corpse: eight poems in The Father are direct descriptions of his dead body.<sup>338</sup> Writing on the impotence of the torturer's power, Scarry notes:

In his desperate insistence that his questions be answered, the torturer luxuriates in the privilege or absurdity of having a world that the other has ceased to have. Nowhere does language come so close to being the concrete agent of physical pain as here where it not only occurs in such close proximity to the raising of the rod or the turning on of the electricity, but also parallels and thereby doubles the display of distance.<sup>339</sup>

Language, the modus operandi of the torturer, is the speaker's prerogative in The Father, and throughout Olds's oeuvre. The speaker revels in her voice, which is contrasted against the father's and other characters' lack of voice. However, as the speaker has been tortured throughout Olds's oeuvre, she is also tortured in The Father by her own textual accounts of her father's suffering - as well as his unbroken silence. The depiction of his dying accords her pain, and heralds the death of any possibility of a reciprocal filial relationship.

The speaker's assumption of agency in the physical death of the father - her gift of 'fear' in 'Close to Death' - is as poignant as the father's 'command for mercy' in 'The Kiss'. She exposes her impotency by trying to control the uncontrollable: the physical death in the narrative of The Father. The masochistic pain she inflicts on herself, with her use of language, is evident in her descriptions of her father's death which she describes as something that she, rather than he, will have to bear.<sup>340</sup> In 'Waste Sonata' she informs the reader: 'I have learned/ to get pleasure from speaking of pain'.<sup>341</sup>

In sharing the father's burden of torture, even as she inflicts it, the speaker reflects a wish to commune with him, and to participate in his suffering. Yet the speaker needs to separate from the father in order to continue as a survivor within her narrative. Poems which describe the speaker lingering over her father's corpse show a certain vampiristic tendency, reminiscent of the speaker of Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy' whose father dies with a stake in his 'fat black heart'.<sup>342</sup> Throughout the collection, as the father weakens – his body prefiguring the dead body that is to come - Olds's speaker gains strength from the death-watch; she is a vampire and he is her victim. The poems where she

<sup>336</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.63, 47) 'Letter to My Father from 40,000 Feet', 'Death and Murder' TF.

<sup>337</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.52) 'Beyond Harm' TF.

<sup>338</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.31, 32, 35, 37, 39, 41, 42, 44) 'My Father's Eyes', 'The Last Day', 'The Exact Moment of His Death', 'His Smell', 'The Dead Body', 'Death', 'The Feelings', 'After Death' TF.

<sup>339</sup> Scarry, Elaine. (1985, p.46). The Body in Pain.

<sup>340</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.52) 'Wonder' TF.

<sup>341</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.76) 'Waste Sonata' TF.

<sup>342</sup> Plath, Sylvia. 'Daddy' in Hughes, Ted, ed. (1981, p.222) Sylvia Plath Collected Poems.

speaks using his voice, which will be discussed later in the chapter, also position a vampiric relationship: the speaker animates a corpse. Paul Barber has demonstrated how the phenomenon of the vampire originated from the fear of death, and its signifier the corpse, in pre-literate cultures:

Our sources, in Europe, as elsewhere, show a remarkable unanimity on this point: the dead may bring us death. To prevent this we must lay them to rest properly, propitiate them, and, when all else fails, kill them a second time'.<sup>343</sup>

The second death may be seen as the art of the elegist. The speaker's recording of the father's suffering makes her its textual agent. Elegies prolong a subject's suffering indefinitely, especially elegies where the theme is such suffering. However, as has been discussed, the speaker is also masochistically tortured in and by these accounts. In an essay on female-authored vampires Kathy Davis comments:

These vampires are driven by more than just a lust for blood or power – they are driven by love, by empathy, by a desire for communion with humans, with each other, and with their own unwritten history. Fundamentally, all these drives are pointed towards one goal: survival.<sup>344</sup>

Olds's speaker is recognisable in this description. She is clearly motivated by survival, as she comments in 'Waste Sonata': 'I could not live with hating him./ I did not see that I had to'.<sup>345</sup> Olds's speaker does not share the 'undead' fate of the speakers of her confessional foremothers; in 'The Ferryer' she and her father become the far more positive 'unborn': 'we will/ embrace like two who were never born,/ naked, not breathing, then up to our chins we will/ pull the dark blanket of earth'.<sup>346</sup> The speaker in The Father exhibits some of the symptoms of Freudian melancholia, but finally accepts and assimilates the death indicating a successful mourning period.<sup>347</sup> As the speaker resignedly comments in 'Death and Murder':

We tried to keep him alive, cut him and  
piped him, tubed him, reamed him, practically  
keelhauled him and it could not be done,  
death took him<sup>348</sup>

<sup>343</sup> Barber, Paul. (1988, p.3) Vampires, Burial and Death: folklore and reality. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>344</sup> Davis, Kathy S. (2002) Beauty in the Beast: The 'feminization' of Weyland in The Vampire Tapestry Available at <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>. [online] Accessed 13 May 2006.

<sup>345</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.76) 'Waste Sonata' TE.

<sup>346</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.67) 'The Ferryer' TE.

<sup>347</sup> Freud, Sigmund. (2005, p.201-218) 'Mourning and Melancholia' Sigmund Freud: on murder, mourning and melancholia.

<sup>348</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.47) 'Death and Murder' TE.

#### 4. The father's silence, the final word(s)

If the speaker is eloquently silent in her refusal to condemn the father of her childhood, or to seek explanations; the father is also (almost) silent throughout. His presentation is largely depicted through gestures; as can be seen by the raising of his shirt in 'The Lifting'. He speaks only thirty-five words throughout the collection; ten of them are not direct speech but recalled by the speaker from her childhood. His speech - usually consisting of one or two word commands for a 'back rub' or for the bed to be altered 'Up! Up!' - finally breaks down in 'The Request': 'Rass-ih-AA, rass-ih-AA.../ Rass-ih-BAA.../...Frass-ih-BAA "Frances back!"'<sup>349</sup> Significantly, it is the speaker who interprets the final non-italicized quotation.

The narrative of the The Father, it has been argued, depends on the father's silence. His silence does not speak his guilt, neither is it guiltless, but it allows the speaker to project her unvoiced desires onto him and enables her uninterrupted discourse with the reader. The father's silence is ostensibly the reason for the speaker's desire to commune with him. However, his is not the only almost silent voice in The Father - other characters such as the speaker's husband and children are also largely silent, as is the speaker herself. Their discretion allows for the presentation of the speaker's inner life: the psychodrama of The Daughter which is the ghost text of The Father.

The father's unbroken silence in life prefigures the absolute silence of his death. In 'His Stillness' when the father learns his illness is terminal he thanks the doctor for his honesty, and relapses into silence. His composure, as is traditional in the torture equation, earns the speaker's respect: 'My father had dignity' she comments.<sup>350</sup> In 'To My Father' the speaker asks the dead father a rhetorical question, and his posthumous silence causes frustration:

What have I worshipped?  
I ask you this so seriously,  
you who almost never spoke.  
I have idolized the mouth of the silent man.<sup>351</sup>

The speaker's question is only marginally less likely to be answered after death than in life. She shows her awareness of the flawed filial relationship in 'To My Father', but continues the process of trying to commune with him even as she analyses it.

Two poems at the end of The Father are presented in the father's voice. 'When the Dead Ask My Father about Me' and 'My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead' are exposed to the reflective reader as persona poems by the surreal titles, the situation described within the poems, and the longevity of the father's silence preceding their appearance in the collection. The reader is not asked to believe in the persona of the father, but to collude in the fantasy of the father's speech. The poems demonstrate how the speaker fills the gaps of the father's

<sup>349</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.28) 'The Request' TF.

<sup>350</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.13) 'His Stillness' TF.

<sup>351</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.75) 'To My Father' TF.

silence: the father is notably more loquacious than in life and at points sounds remarkably like the speaker, as shall be examined.

'When the Dead Ask My Father about Me' describes the father addressing his fellow dead. He tells them about his pride in his daughter, commenting:

she was a little  
afraid of me, she was a smart girl.  
I was only in New York City once, in the  
smallest room at the Waldorf, above  
the furnace room – 100 degrees-<sup>352</sup>

The father reminisces about an earthly furnace - a mischievous clue perhaps as to his present location. At the outset of the poem, the tone is comic: the father and his comrades might readily be imagined as characters in a musical, perhaps dressed in arrow-adorned prison outfits. The speaker asks the reader to suspend their belief, and enjoy the imagined situation. However, at the end of the poem, the tone changes:

She could  
speak, you see. As if my own  
jaws, throat, and larynx had come  
alive in her. But all she wanted  
was that dirt from my tongue, umber lump you could  
pass, mouth-to-mouth, she wanted us to  
lie down, in a birth-room, and me  
to labor it out, lever it into her  
mouth I am audible, listen! this is *my* song.<sup>353</sup>

As the piece continues the lexis and tone overtly suggests the speaker. The urgent 'listen!' of the final line indicates the speaker taking off her mask. By adopting the father's persona, the speaker demonstrates that the only remaining trace of the father's voice is her voice. The end of the poem might suggest the merging of two voices but, the reader has no informed way of knowing whether this is the father's voice, as he has said so little in The Father. The resurrection of the father is exposed as a fantasy, but it is the nearest the speaker will come to assimilating the father's speech.

'My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead', the final poem of the collection, gives the father persona the final word. The piece starts:

I seem to have woken up in a pot-shed,  
on clay, on shards, the bright paths  
of slugs kiss-crossing my body. I don't know  
where to start, with this grime on me,  
I take the spider glue-net, plug

<sup>352</sup> Oldis, Sharon. (1992, p. 73) 'When the Dead Ask My Father about Me' TE.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

of the dead, out of my mouth<sup>354</sup>

The image of the father removing the spider plug from his mouth can readily be imagined as an illustration from a children's book. The blustering tone of 'I seem to have woken up' and 'I don't know where to start', and the baby word-play 'kiss-crossing' add to the childlike quality of this opening image. The father in the pot-shed has woken up healthy, years younger, and much more benevolent than the father whose death the reader has recently witnessed. He settles down to weave the speaker – who is the 'you' in the poem – a fantastic bedtime story: 'let's see/ if where I have been I can do this'.<sup>355</sup>

The father's reported speech, as is common in reported paranormal exchanges, offers little detail of his after-life. His subject-matter instead suggests the speaker's preoccupations, indicating to the reflective reader that it is she who is dictating this poem. The poem goes into a thorough and celebratory inventory of the speaker's body:

I love your feet. I love your knees,  
 I love your our my legs, they are so  
 long because they are yours and mine  
 both. I love your – what can I call it,  
 between your legs, we never named it, the  
 glint and purity of its curls. I love  
 your rear end, I changed you once<sup>356</sup>

Although the legs are long, the tone continues to suggest a father sweet-talking to a baby daughter. The unnamed body part between the legs (particularly coy in a poem that later mentions 'labia') also indicates a father playing with a child. However, naming of body parts may equally conjure a lover. The clause 'the/ glint and purity of its curls' makes it evident the father is addressing a woman, or also a woman. The addressee of the poem is an amalgam of the adult and child speaker. 'My Father Speaks To Me From The Dead' at once infantilises and sexualises the daughter. The speaker – through the mouthpiece of the father - demonstrates her unfulfilled childlike need for love and reassurance from the patriarch.

The speaker's muted anger is also suggested by 'My Father Speaks To Me From The Dead'. She suggests the humanity and fallibility of the father. He is absent now through death but has been absent throughout the speaker's childhood, indicated by the sly 'I changed you once'.<sup>357</sup> Additionally there is little personal description in the father's portrait of his daughter. The difference between this woman and another woman are cosmetic: 'thick' hair, 'bony' shoulders and 'long' legs. The speaker's brain is aesthetically evaluated: 'I love your brain, its halves and silvery/ folds like a woman's labia'.<sup>358</sup> Of the

<sup>354</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.78) 'My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead' TF.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

fifteen body parts the inventory contains, the father has most difficulty in expressing love for the ones that are feminine, or associated with the feminine:

I love in you  
even what comes  
from deep in your mother – your heart, that hard worker,  
and your womb, it is a heaven to me.<sup>359</sup>

The father loves the daughter in spite, not because of her physical heritage. His bitterness with the speaker's mother, and refusal to apologise for his misdemeanours, is undiminished by death: 'I never hated your shit that was your mother... 'I never hated your face, / I hated its eruptions', he comments.<sup>360</sup> A face cannot be separated from its eruptions, as a daughter cannot separate out her physical heritage from one parent or another. In striving to align herself with the father, the speaker ends up with a portrait that is more like an autopsy. To be her father's daughter; she must reject her mother, who is physically most like her.

The speaker illustrates her anxiety at relating to her father as an adult. The particularity of their situation means that the father hasn't acknowledged her survival of her childhood; her key identity to the reflective reader of The Father. The adult speaker can only envision herself having a relationship with her father as a baby, a lover or carer. The relationship between the adult father and daughter in 'My Father Speaks To Me From The Dead' is fraught with the speaker's anxiety, and defined by archetypes which obfuscate the personal relationship. However, the use of the fluid pronoun and cross-gendered imagery such as 'your our my legs' provides an opportunity to transcend gender differences.<sup>361</sup> The effaced body portrait is consistent with the presentation of the body in flux throughout The Father which is echoed by the use of archetypes throughout.

The raising of every body part from the navel to the shoulders is also celebratory: testimony to the glorification of matter in The Father. The description of the brain as just another body part suggests there is no hierarchy in the poem's list of physical components. The portrait is reminiscent of the primacy of flesh in the work of contemporary visual artists such as Lucien Freud who memorably describes the face as 'just another limb'.<sup>362</sup> Olds demonstrates the continuation of the physical beyond the individual. The emphasis on the womb which is 'heaven' to the father suggests regeneration and new life. The father finishes his physical round-up, the poem and the collection with the following advice:

<sup>359</sup> The list of body parts the poem references are as follows: Feet/ knees between your legs, we never named it/ bottom/ anus/ navel/ breasts/ face/ shoulders/ hair/ brain/ labia/ heart/ womb/ hand. Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid. See also the discussion of cross-gendered imagery in Chapter 2, p.89 and p.92 of the dissertation.

<sup>362</sup> Cited by Conrad, Peter. (2002) 'The naked and the living' *The Observer Review*. Available at <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,729793,00.html> [online] Accessed 24 April 2008.

I understand this life, I am matter,  
 your father, I made you, when I say now that I love you  
 I mean look down at your hand, move it,  
 that action is matter's love, for human  
 love go elsewhere<sup>363</sup>

This physical matter is the elegiac consolation in The Father: heaven is located in the womb. The conclusion of the chapter will examine the glorification of the corporeal in relation to religion in the collection.

### 5. The father, our father

The contemporary elegy is a largely secular realm: a well versed reader of current poetry does not expect too much in the way of divine consolation.<sup>364</sup> Reading some of Olds's critics might suggest Olds's work conforms to this view, Dillon comments: 'Religion is rarely referred to in *The Father*: in 'His Terror', only a ritual act - eating the Eucharist, symbolically, the body of the divine Father - is accounted for, an act drained of spiritual significance.'<sup>365</sup> However, religion is referred to throughout The Father, and is an abiding preoccupation of the collection as shall be examined. It is argued that the presentation of religion in The Father contributes to the speaker's 'happy-ever-after' narrative and challenges the centrality of the father in the poems.

Despite Dillon's comment, the act of communion in 'His Terror' is not 'drained of spiritual significance', indeed the speaker underpins the scenario with a familiar biblical allusion:

he opens his mouth for the porous disc  
 to be laid on his tongue, he loves to call the Minister *Father*.  
 And yet, somewhere in his body, is there terror?  
 The lumps of the cancer are everywhere now,  
 he can lay his palm where they swell his skin, he can  
 finger the holes where the surgeon has been in him.  
 He asks me to touch them.<sup>366</sup>

The speaker portrays the father as a Christ figure asking her – the 'Doubting Thomas' - to finger his stigmata. The giving of the 'porous disc' of the sacrament is reported in the same clinical tone as are the medical procedures in the book. This suggests the speaker regards communion as providing purely palliative comfort. However, comfort in the father's situation is a precious commodity. The speaker is covetous, and curious of the minister's relationship with the father. Similarly, in 'The Struggle', she chronicles her father's subjugation to the minister and demonstrates the reassurance it provides, ironically expressed in the language of religious fervour: 'He was alive!' <sup>367</sup>

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

<sup>364</sup> See Ramazani, Jahan. (1994) Poetry of Mourning for a history of the contemporary elegy.

<sup>365</sup> Dillon, Brian. 'Never having had you, I cannot let you go'.

<sup>366</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.12) 'His Terror' TE.

<sup>367</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.18) 'The Struggle' TE.

The tone of the speaker's voice is religiose. A reader is required to have faith in her. In addition, she makes multiples references to religion throughout the collection. In 'Wonder' the speaker says the father is, 'not like Christ but like one of his saints', and, later in the poem, comments, 'I feel like one of the shepherd children when the star came down on the roof'.<sup>368</sup> Titles of poems such as 'Purgatory', 'Eden' and 'Psalm' continue the biblical allusions while the title of the collection The Father itself connotes a God. The tone and the lexis of 'The Race' echoes the New Testament where the speaker comments: 'Like the one who is not/ too rich, I turned sideways and/ slipped through the needle's eye'.<sup>369</sup> The sexually charged relationship between the father and daughter is reminiscent of the Old Testament presentation of Lot and his daughters, where in both cases the daughter is portrayed as the sexual aggressor.<sup>370</sup>

Many poems chronicle the speaker's struggle to reject the Christian afterlife - the notion of heaven with which she was raised. In 'The Feelings' she shows herself at odds with the company around her father's deathbed: 'they called my father *the shell on the bed*, I was the/ only one there who knew/ he was entirely gone'.<sup>371</sup> She demonstrates her belief that the father has not had his earthly beliefs confirmed: his body is her body of evidence. However, the qualifier 'Christian' shows she is rejecting only a version of God. In 'I Wanted to Be There When My Father Died' the speaker comments:

I wanted to see him die  
not just to see no soul come  
free of his body, no mucal genie of  
spirit jump  
forth from his mouth,  
proving the body on earth is all we have got<sup>372</sup>

To require proof is to allow some degree of doubt, stemming not from the speaker's childhood faith in the immortality of her heavenly father, but her childlike belief in the infallibility of her earthly father. In 'Close to Death' the speaker says of her father that she has 'no heaven to catch him'.<sup>373</sup> In 'The Exam' she sounds wistful:

I wish I could say I saw a long  
shapely leg pull free from the chrysalis, a  
wet wing, a creature unfold and  
fly out through the window, but he died down  
into his body, sank and sank

<sup>368</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.25) 'Wonder' TF.

<sup>369</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.26) 'The Race' TF.

<sup>370</sup> The story of Lot and his daughters in the book of Genesis describes the daughters drinking wine and lying with their father in order to preserve his seed, see Genesis 19: 32-36, King James Version of the Bible. Carroll, Robert and Prickett, Stephen. eds. (1997, p21) The Bible: Authorized King James Version. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>371</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.42) 'The Feelings' TF.

<sup>372</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.71) 'I Wanted to Be There When My Father Died' TF.

<sup>373</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.24) 'Close To Death' TF.

until he was completely gone<sup>374</sup>

The suggestions of the afterlife that there are in The Father tend towards the hellish. The title of the poem 'Underlife' implies that the father has gone to a land of cockroaches and rats – this also might be understood as literally true. 'To My Father' describes the speaker raising her father: 'I am with you/ sir, as if I have called you up/ from the other world'.<sup>375</sup> The tone of 'To My Father' suggests the speaker's ongoing struggle to commune with her father. The poem shows the speaker projecting her desire for her father to get in touch, rather than asking a reader to believe in the actuality of the afterlife it depicts.

Without God or heaven the speaker is left, literally, holding the body. In 'Psalm' she uses a line-break - 'There is no good in this, there is/no good' - to contradict herself:

*The Lord shall preserve  
thy going out, and thy coming in,  
from this time forth forevermore,  
Amen, Goddamnit. I sat down  
and held his foot again, cold  
foot of the nearly dead – his feet that had  
walked with the weight of me slung on his shoulder,  
I breathed small breaths on them, and between each  
puff I said my own psalm,  
There is no good in this, there is  
no good in this. And yet I had never  
held his feet before, we had hardly  
touched since the nights he had walked the floor at my arrival.<sup>376</sup>*

However, the speaker finds some good in this version of the religious ritual which gives her the opportunity to commune with the father's forbidden body. In 'The Race' she rushes to catch a plane to be present at her father's deathbed:

I ran to Gate 17 and they were  
just lifting the thick white  
lozenge of the door to fit it into  
the socket of the plane. Like the one who is not  
too rich, I turned sideways and  
slipped through the needle's eye, and then  
I walked down the aisle towards my father. The jet  
was full, and people's hair was shining, they were  
smiling, the interior of the plane was filled with a  
mist of gold endorphin light,  
I wept as people weep when they enter heaven<sup>377</sup>

<sup>374</sup>Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.57) 'The Exam' TF.

<sup>375</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.75) 'To My Father' TF.

<sup>376</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.29) 'Psalm' TF.

<sup>377</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.26) 'The Race' TF.

The speaker echoes near-death accounts, although it is her father's death she is approaching rather than her own. She catches the plane and reaches her father in time to find him still breathing. Her heaven is to be in her father's physical presence.

Julia Kristeva comments 'The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected.'<sup>378</sup> However, the corpse in The Father viewed outside of God is far from abject. It is embraced throughout the collection. In 'Death and Morality' the speaker claims:

This  
is the world where sex lives, the world  
of the nerves, the world without church,  
we kiss him in it, we stroke back his gummed  
hair.<sup>379</sup>

The dying and dead body provides the mourner with a profound opportunity to commune with the loved one: an opportunity denied the speaker in life. Susan Bordo demonstrates a similar experience in an elegiac account of her father:

What I was not prepared for was the deep comfort – perhaps it could even be called pleasure – that I got from simply being alone with him, close to his body, from holding his hand or touching his shoulder as long as I wanted to, from looking at him with such an obstructed intimacy of gaze, from lingering with him and over him<sup>380</sup>

Throughout The Father the body and physical matter provide comfort and consolation. In 'My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead' the father crosses wires with God when he touches his baby daughter's anus. This final poem of The Father ends with the speaker's own psalm to the physical: 'look down at your hand, move it,/ that action is matter's love'.<sup>381</sup> The penultimate poem of The Father, 'Waste Sonata', examines the body's final taboo of defecation. The word 'shit' appears in the poem seven times – the lines in which it occurs, isolated in order, run as follows:

I think at some point I looked at my father  
and thought *He's full of shit.*

he was a shit  
but I felt he hated being a shit

He was the god of love  
and I was a shit

<sup>378</sup> Kristeva, Julia. (1982, p.4) Powers Of Horror: an Essay on Abjection. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>379</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.9) 'Death and Morality' TE.

<sup>380</sup> Bordo, Susan. (2001, p.11) The Male Body A new look at men in public and in private. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux.

<sup>381</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.78) 'My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead' TE.

My father was not a shit. He was a man failing at life. He had little shits travelling through him while he lay there unconscious-

I almost love those shits that move through him, shapely, those waste foetuses, my mother, my sister, my brother, and me in that purgatory.<sup>382</sup>

The anaphora shows the speaker's relentless embracing of faecal matter. In his elegiac novel Patrimony the American novelist Philip Roth describes cleaning up after his incontinent father:

I carried the bag out to the car and dumped it in the trunk to take to the laundry. And *why* this was right and as it should be couldn't have been plainer to me, now that the job was done. So *that* was the patrimony. And not because cleaning it up was symbolic of something else because it wasn't, because it was nothing more or less than the lived reality it was. There was my patrimony: not the money, not the tefillin, not the shaving mug, but the shit.<sup>383</sup>

Roth's theme in this extract, like Olds throughout The Father, is the honesty and purity and democracy of the body's matter: the cleanliness of shit. Olds's role model Muriel Rukeyser has also written stunningly on such a topic in her poem 'Despisals':

In the body's ghetto

never to go despising the asshole  
nor the useful shit that is our clean cue  
to what we need. Never to despise  
the clitoris in her least speech.<sup>384</sup>

'Waste Sonata' ends with the father's family caught in 'purgatory'. Although the secular meaning of purgatory is to be trapped in something interminable, in religious terms purgatory is a period of absolution before the subject enters heaven. The word - which derives from the Latin verb *purgare*, to cleanse - is a fitting end to 'Waste Sonata' heralding cleansing and renewal.<sup>385</sup>

Beyond providing comfort, the father's disintegrating body and corpse are the physical link to an afterlife the speaker can believe in. The continuation of his body is evidenced by the continuation of the speaker and

<sup>382</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.76) 'Waste Sonata' TF.

<sup>383</sup> Roth, Philip. (1999, p.176) Patrimony: A True Story. London: Vintage.

<sup>384</sup> Rukeyser, Muriel. (1982, p.492) 'Despisals' The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser. New York: McGraw Hill.

<sup>385</sup> The primary definition of purgatory in the OED is 'A condition or place of spiritual cleansing and purification', see See Oxford English Dictionary, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (1989) Available at [http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50192851?query\\_type=word&queryword=purgatory&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&search\\_id=Lxfa-0D611w-2338&result\\_place=1](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50192851?query_type=word&queryword=purgatory&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&search_id=Lxfa-0D611w-2338&result_place=1) [online]. Accessed 3 June 2008.

her children. In 'My Father Speaks To Me from The Dead' the father looks up from the face of the speaker's nursing child. Elsewhere in Olds's oeuvre he reappears through his grandchildren in the 'Saturn poems'.<sup>386</sup>

In 'The Lifting' the speaker comments of her father: I see how much his hips are like mine,/ the long, white angles, and then/ how much his pelvis is shaped like my daughter's'.<sup>387</sup> Tanner comments: 'what remains is not the stark sign of essential sexual difference but the long angles of hips that the speaker compares to her own and the shared curve of a pelvis'.<sup>388</sup> Ultimately what is left of the father is the daughter, in her guise as a speaker.

## Conclusion

The speaker provides the afterlife of The Father. The physical universe of the collection is a heaven of sorts and is a deeply moral and spiritual realm. As Vicki Feaver comments: 'she [Olds] moves towards a radical version of God which draws on Christian concepts of goodness but, in a reversal of conventional Christian theology, locates this goodness in the human body'.<sup>389</sup> The speaker's belief in her 'happy-ever-after' narrative - despite her anxiety about its temporality- display her faith that rewards come from good deeds. The father is shown to have a relatively peaceful death, and the speaker has the opportunity to provide him with comfort. There is time for the speaker to grieve and for life to continue, which provides the reader of The Father, and the speaker, with a tempered positive outcome. However, the reincarnation of the father in the speaker is also problematic in that it signals a continuation of the abuse and suffering he represents. This legacy of the father shall be examined in relation to the presentation of the speaker's husband and mother in the following chapter, in order to discern how the speaker illustrates her preoccupation with her father through other characters, and to demonstrate the father's continuing – although declining – hold on the speaker's survival story.

<sup>386</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.78) 'My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead' TF; see Chapter 2, p.85 of the dissertation for a discussion of the 'Saturn poems'.

<sup>387</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.15) 'The Lifting' TF.

<sup>388</sup> Tanner, Laura E. (1996) 'Death-Watch: Terminal illness and the gaze.'

<sup>389</sup> Feaver, Vicki. (2000, p.150) 'Body and Soul: The Power of Sharon Olds'.

## Chapter Four: The Posthumous Father

1. The father, post The Father
2. The negatively portrayed opposite: the mother
3. The positively portrayed opposite: the husband

The chapter focuses on the presentation of the father in Olds's last three collections: The Wellspring, Blood, Tin, Straw and The Unswept Room. It is posited that the speaker presents her mother as a negative opposite of the father, demonstrating her abiding paternal preoccupation. In order to identify with the father, the speaker must necessarily reject the mother. The husband is also overtly contrasted with the father but, it is argued, he is presented – in contrast to the mother – as a positive opposite. The husband's good qualities are juxtaposed against the father's bad ones. However, the comparison of the husband with the father arguably returns the reflective reader to the speaker's childhood suffering, undermining the depicted happiness of the narrative and emphasising the apparent dominance of the father. Ultimately her presentation of other familial characters indicates to the reflective reader the speaker's manipulation of the narrative which is overtly presented as psychodrama. Finally, the chapter discusses the separation of the speaker and her husband which situates the husband temporarily – through his physical loss – as the new father.

### 1. The father, post The Father

The narrative in Olds's poetry, as has been discussed, is not chronological.<sup>390</sup> The speaker returns to the overt preoccupations of her childhood throughout her collections. Yet the poet writes chronologically despite the historically non-linear nature of the speaker's narrative: the death of Olds's father influences the speaker's view of the past in collections following The Father. In addition, although the father features in significant poems in the collections following The Father, generally he makes fewer appearances and these are more cameo in nature than in Olds's earlier books. However, although the father's presence in the later collections is diminished, his influence remains significant as will be examined.

The poems which are directly concerned with the father continue to hint at the unresolved problematic nature of the filial relationship: 'the harm my father did us is receding', the speaker claims in 'Directly'.<sup>391</sup> However, her stated independence, and assertive tone is tempered with the use of the word 'receding' which may be seen to illustrate a reluctance to completely relinquish the father's hold. The poem features a change in address when the speaker moves from the third person to the second across a stanza break: 'I think he would be glad to hear it/ directly from me,// so I come to where you are'.<sup>392</sup> The switch to a more intimate tone and the gap such a tone has to bridge – illustrated by the space of the stanza break – suggests the speaker's

<sup>390</sup> See the introduction, p.45 of the dissertation.

<sup>391</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.46) 'Directly' TUR.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*

awareness of her forlorn longing to commune with her dead father; the 'you' in the poem.

'I don't know why I loved him so much' the speaker comments of her father in 'Even Now'.<sup>393</sup> The poem was written a decade after the publication of The Father; and the title alludes to the longevity of the father's hold on the speaker. The present tense of the title is juxtaposed with the past tense of the first line to reinforce the father's influence over the speaker. The speaker looks back at the love she held for her father but cannot fathom its roots, indicating her knowledge that she is still in filial thrall. The speaker's inability to let go of her past allows for its re-emergence throughout the poetry.

## 2. The negatively portrayed opposite: the mother

The changed landscape of The Wellspring, the collection which follows The Father, is demonstrated immediately by a change of subject. The Wellspring opens with poems that focus on the speaker's mother. In addition, the book is concerned with birth not death: the opening section comprises poems that address the parents' meeting, marriage and the speaker's conception.

Notable by her physical absence in The Father, the mother is foregrounded in The Wellspring in poems including 'Visiting My Mother's College' and 'For My Mother'.<sup>394</sup> The change of focus to the mother may be said to highlight covertly the father's loss in the previous collection. However, although The Wellspring opens with poems that focus on the mother, the father intrudes throughout: his presence is referred to in five out of eight poems which mention the mother in The Wellspring, whereas the mother is referenced in only three of the fifty-two poems in The Father.

Olds joked at a poetry reading in 2006 that her latest book's working title was: 'the collection that is not going to be called The Mother'.<sup>395</sup> There are parallels between the portrayal of Olds's speaker's mother and father: both are the victims of childhood abuse and both ill-treat their child, the speaker. The father's alcoholism is mirrored by the mother's eating disorder; illnesses which ravage their former good looks. Their ill-suited marriage makes them the cause of each other's downfall and, although they are forgiven by the speaker for their parenting, both the father's and mother's deaths are chronicled in lingering detail. In addition, the speaker's problematic father-love is mirrored in the ambiguous feelings she describes for her mother: 'I want to/ love her when she has not hurt anyone', she comments.<sup>396</sup>

<sup>393</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2002) 'Even Now'. *American Poetry Review*, Mar/Apr.

<sup>394</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.3, 10) 'Visiting My Mother's College' 'For My Mother' TW.

<sup>395</sup> Olds made the remark at Durham Literature Festival 2006, see

<http://www.literaturefestival.co.uk/2006/programme.html> [online] Accessed 5 March 2007.

<sup>396</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.3) 'Visiting My Mother's College' TW.

Despite these similarities, the mother - like the husband - is the embodiment of everything the father is not. The parents are polarised in terms of size, sexuality and religious preference. It shall be argued the mother is a device to emphasise the speaker's difference from her, and thus the speaker's consequent similarity with the father.

The speaker's portrayal of the parents is founded on a key difference: the father is an absent figure in the speaker's life but a present figure in the poems. He disappears from the speaker's life twice - once when he is banished from the family home and, again, when he dies. Although he is physically missing for much of the speaker's life, he is discussed in the poems in his absence. When the father is physically present in the poems, he is presented as a remote figure. However, the mother who was in attendance throughout the speaker's childhood does not feature nearly as often as the father in the poems. When the mother is depicted, she is often portrayed as an all too present force. In 'What if God' she enters the speaker's bed and cries into her hair.<sup>397</sup> In 'The Borders' the speaker promises her own daughter 'I will not ever swim in you/ the way my mother swam in me'.<sup>398</sup> The mother's invasive voice which is parodied in song, argument and shown under the effects of medication is the opposite of the father's silence.<sup>399</sup> Although the speaker associates her own voice as founded on her father's silence, the mother's verbosity must also be considered, by the reflective reader, as the familial precursor to the speaker's omnipresent narrative. Just as the mother vocally invades the speaker so the speaker drowns out her child's voice in 'Boy Out In The World'.<sup>400</sup> Both the speaker's and the mother's voice may be considered as a response to the father's silence.

The portrayal of the maternal presence in the speaker's childhood is used to highlight the father's absence. In 'Tricks' the mother performs a vanishing act: 'she draws my father/ slowly out of her cunt and puts him/ in a tall silk hat/ and he disappears'.<sup>401</sup> In 'That Year' the mother hides the children from the father.<sup>402</sup> A reader is left in no doubt that the parents are at war; in 'The Victims' the speaker takes sides:

When mother divorced you, we were glad. She took it and  
took it, in silence, all those years and then  
kicked you out, suddenly, and her  
kids loved it.<sup>403</sup>

The speaker is one of *her* kids, the father is obliterated. The spousal dislike is mutual: the father describes how he had the speaker with a woman he did not love, the reader learns, in 'When The Dead Ask My Father about Me'.<sup>404</sup>

<sup>397</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.25) 'What If God' DATL. See Chapter 2, p.88 of the dissertation for a discussion of 'What If God'.

<sup>398</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.33) 'The Borders' TUR.

<sup>399</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.91, 94) '7am' 'The Music' TUR.

<sup>400</sup> See Chapter 1, p.81 of the dissertation for a discussion of 'Boy Out In The World'.

<sup>401</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.14) 'Tricks' SS.

<sup>402</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.6) 'That Year' SS.

<sup>403</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.34) 'The Victims' DATL.

<sup>404</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p. 73) 'When the Dead Ask My Father about Me' TE.

The parents are mutually exclusive: while pursing her quest for the absent father, the speaker must necessarily reject the mother. The poems reflect the speaker's longing to commune with the father, and her maternal eschewal.

One of the most obvious physical differences between the parents is their size: the mother is as small as the father is big. Her daintiness is emphasized throughout the text, and juxtaposed against the speaker's pubescent awkwardness in '7am':

This is the one who took me shopping  
for clothes in vertical stripes, for the – uh,  
size problem; we'd come back with a nice jail  
shirt for me, and some ruffled outfits like a  
baby layette for her.<sup>405</sup>

The speaker's growing physical difference from the mother is also emphasised in 'The Lisp':

I would lie across her legs in silence,  
as I grew bigger and bigger over the years  
I began to hang over the ends of her lap  
in massive shame.<sup>406</sup>

The reader is led to see the source of the speaker's negative body image in this feminine pieta as the mother. In 'Parents' Day' the speaker comments of her mother:

sometimes I thought she could  
sense a few genes of hers  
dotted here and there in my body  
like bits of undissolved sugar  
in a recipe that did not quite work out.<sup>407</sup>

However, the growing speaker does not desire the mother's body, it is connected with cruelty and weakness in poems such as 'The Lisp', '7am' and 'The Pact' where the mother 'wept at/ noon into her one ounce of/ cottage cheese'.<sup>408</sup> The mother's smallness is part caricature – magnifying the largeness of the speaker and her likeness to her father. The device is so effective that naïve readers, who understand the poems as completely biographical, describe their shock when they realise how diminutive Olds is.<sup>409</sup> This playfulness with scale is represented semiotically in the jacket photograph on the back of Satan Says which is arguably a representation of

<sup>405</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.91) '7am' TUR.

<sup>406</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.11) 'The Lisp' TW.

<sup>407</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.17) 'Parents' Day' TW.

<sup>408</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.11) 'The Lisp' TW; Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.91) '7am' TUR; Olds, Sharon (1984, p.45) 'The Pact' DATL.

<sup>409</sup> 'Sharon Olds, who is here in the country for a punishing schedule of readings, may be going grey, but her figure remains slender and strangely childlike'. See Patterson, Christina. (2006) 'Sharon Olds: Blood, sweat and fears.'

the speaker of the poems. The image presents Olds as big, strong and forceful; as many of the poems portray her. However, the poet herself is much smaller than her publicity photograph appears to show. The disparity illustrates that the speaker is a fictional version of Olds, a presentation of her psyche rather than her body. The poet's physicality in real life is perhaps closer to that of the speaker's mother.

In 'This' the speaker comments 'maybe if I did not have this I would call myself my mother's daughter'; 'this' is sex.<sup>410</sup> The mother abhors sex, specifically spousal sex, unlike the speaker whose adult happiness is founded on it. In 'Waste Sonata' the speaker comments of her parents: 'Whatever he poured into my mother/ she hated, her face rippled like a thin/ wing, sometimes, when she happened to be near him'.<sup>411</sup> The mother's passion is reserved for God, another factor which distances her from her daughter.<sup>412</sup> The speaker hints at the sexual frustration of her mother in 'Poem to the Reader', where she comments: 'even her milk she may have craved to/ give me to get her poor breast sucked'.<sup>413</sup> Occasional poems celebrate the mother, but in a characteristically ambiguous way: in 'Boulder Creek' she is described somewhat ironically as a 'relative of God's'.<sup>414</sup> In 'The Meal' the speaker acknowledges that the mother raised her children single-handedly: 'you would not die and leave us without a mother as you were left without a mother'.<sup>415</sup> However, this comment satirizes the reported and oft-repeated speech of a mother-martyr who knows her duty.<sup>416</sup>

Throughout the poems the speaker's sex life takes her away from her mother, bringing her closer to her father.<sup>417</sup> In 'The Sisters Of Sexual Treasure' it specifically represents an escape from her 'mother's house', and into the arms of men who are like her father.<sup>418</sup> In 'Looking at My Father' the speaker covets her father in her mother's stead:

I even like to  
look in his mouth, stained brown with  
cigars and bourbon, my eyes sliding down the  
long amber roots of his teeth,  
right in there where Mother hated<sup>419</sup>

Poems in the later collections describe the speaker's rejection of her mother's influence: in 'Frosted Elfin' the speaker is described as putting the mother aside in order to appreciate the husband's positive view of her body.<sup>420</sup> In

<sup>410</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.63) 'This' TGC.

<sup>411</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p. 76) 'Waste Sonata' TE.

<sup>412</sup> See Chapter 3, p.122 of the dissertation for a discussion of Olds's treatment of religion in TE.

<sup>413</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.20) 'Poem to the Reader' BTS.

<sup>414</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.18) 'Boulder Creek' TW.

<sup>415</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.27) 'The Meal' TGC.

<sup>416</sup> See also the discussion of the mother's speech in 'The Blue Dress' in Chapter 2, p.96 of the dissertation.

<sup>417</sup> See Chapter 2, p.83 of the dissertation for a discussion of the father as a lover in Olds's poetry.

<sup>418</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.24) 'The Sisters Of Sexual Treasure' SS.

<sup>419</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.31) 'Looking at My Father' TGC.

<sup>420</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.47) 'Frosted Elfin' TUR.

'Pansy Glossary' the speaker muses 'I was forty before I could bear the slow/touching, there'.<sup>421</sup> Within 'Pansy Glossary' the speaker implies that it was the mother's hand in her upbringing that made her unable to bear anyone else's hand, and such 'slow touching', until middle age.

The poems in The Wellspring which chronicle the speaker's birth are celebratory in spite, not because, of the maternal presence: in 'First Hour' the speaker comments ominously 'I lay/ like a god, for an hour, then they came for me,/ and took me to my mother'.<sup>422</sup> While the father is aligned to the ultimate absence – death; the mother is connected with the ultimate arrival – birth. However, the mother represents the prelapsarian fall that follows birth, rather than the event itself. The mother is happiest, the reader must conclude, in 'Visiting My Mother's College' when her body is 'sealed', her daughter is happiest when her body is unsealed in 'The Language of the Brag'.<sup>423</sup> Motherhood is the speaker's way out as it was her own mother's downfall.

The speaker differentiates her parenting skills from those of her mother. She promises her daughter in 'The Borders': 'I will not ever swim in you/ the way my mother swam in me'.<sup>424</sup> However, the speaker does appear to metaphorically 'swim' in her children in some of the poems. In 'Physics' she comments:

I have not grown up  
yet, I have lived as my daughter's mother  
the way I had lived as my mother's daughter  
inside her life.<sup>425</sup>

The poem 'History of Medicine' shows the speaker absorbed in tending to her sick children: her relish in the role is reminiscent of her embracing of the role of carer in The Father.<sup>426</sup> She draws a certain vampiric strength from the children's sickness which feeds her healthy image of herself as a care-giver and survivor just as she drew strength from her father's deathbed in The Father.<sup>427</sup> A sequence of elegiac poems in The Wellspring records the loss of the children into adolescence and portrays the speaker's subsequent grief. Yet the speaker's awareness of her tendency to smother her children separates her from her mother. A reader is left with the impression that she kept her promise to her daughter and did not 'swim' in her, except in the medium of the poem. In addition, the speaker's smothering stems - unlike her mother's - from a relish of motherhood. Her anxiety at its transitory joys is part of a wider anxiety at the tentative nature of her happiness.

<sup>421</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.75) 'Pansy Glossary' TUR.

<sup>422</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p. 5) 'First Hour' TUR.

<sup>423</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.3) 'Visiting My Mother's College' TW; Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.44) 'The Language Of The Brag' SS.

<sup>424</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.33) 'The Borders' TUR.

<sup>425</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.66) 'Physics' TW.

<sup>426</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.46) 'History of Medicine' TW.

<sup>427</sup> See Chapter 3, p.122 of the dissertation for a discussion of the vampire in TF.

A sequence of mother elegies in the later collections show many of the same features that have been identified in the father elegies including the torture element and the sexual tendency, as can be seen by this extract from '7am':

I saw my mother's  
winter nightie ripple like a witch's.  
For a long time she was hidden behind  
the wide door, then she glided out,  
hunched, miniature, eighty-nine pounds, in  
creamy bluish flannel, on her fingers  
the sapphires she forgot to take off for bed.  
She came over to me and puckered up her mouth  
to be kissed good morning. This is the woman who  
hit me – she was always a great kisser<sup>428</sup>

There is perhaps an echo here of the use of 'kisser' as a noun in boxing slang which reinforces the slightly threatening nature of the mother's kiss.<sup>429</sup> The poem's last line 'there is/ music and the moon, and birds, and poetry, and my mother' also echoes the ambiguous final line of 'Close to Death' from The Father, 'I will give him, the earth, night, sleep, beauty, fear.'<sup>430</sup> However, the mother elegies are less in number than the poems of The Father and arguably return the reader to the father elegies rather than signalling a new maternal preoccupation.

### 3. The positively portrayed opposite: the husband

The husband is the speaker's ultimate lover. Sex is her redemption throughout the collections, but it is specifically marital sex that consolidates her adult happiness and provides her with her children. Although some erotic poems include dedications with epigrams featuring initials, and others are dedicated to the speaker's college boyfriend, Henry 'Ave' Gerry; the husband is easily the most significant other in the collections.

Many of the dedications in the front of the collections privilege a dedicatee's marital status.<sup>431</sup> When the father's happy ending finally comes it is also through marriage, as the reader learns in 'The Bed' where the speaker comments: 'This was the woman my father loved./ My father was in love! She fed me something'.<sup>432</sup>

In 'Know-Nothing', a poem which echoes 'Sex Without Love', the speaker reflects on a promiscuous alter ego: 'she knows fucking with a stranger. I

<sup>428</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.91) '7am' TUR.

<sup>429</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary cites the secondary meaning of 'kisser' as 'The mouth; the face. orig. *Boxing slang*' and notes its use by the American writer Raymond Chandler. See Oxford English Dictionary. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (1989) Available at [http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50127013?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=kisser&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50127013?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=kisser&first=1&max_to_show=10). [online] Accessed 11 May 2008.

<sup>430</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.91) '7am' TUR; Olds, Sharon (1992, p. 24) 'Close to Death' TF.

<sup>431</sup> See Chapter 1, p.65 of the dissertation.

<sup>432</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.57) 'The Bed' BTS.

feel/ in awe of that'.<sup>433</sup> The speaker's curiosity about the woman's way of life - who could so easily have been her - implies the narrowest of cracks in the 'happy-ever-after' narrative.

In 'The Source' the speaker reflects on her own sexual activity, previous to meeting her husband:

as if I have been trying  
to disappear, into them,  
to be myself the glass of sourmash  
my father lifted to his mouth.<sup>434</sup>

In 'Warrior: 5<sup>th</sup> Grade' the speaker arrives at a realisation: 'it came to me that I thought my lover was too/ gentle – I was twenty – I realised that I wanted to be/ fucked blind, pummelled half dead with it'.<sup>435</sup> The poem hints at the road not taken; the unhappy ending of the speaker's scapegoat sister who is subject to 'the latest husband's beatings'.<sup>436</sup>

In 'To My Husband' the speaker similarly tries to imagine life without her husband, she comments on seeing him with his former girlfriend:

Then, I understood – if it had been  
half a generation later  
you would have been lovers, you would have married,  
and it seems to me I might be dead by now,  
dead long since, not married, or married  
badly.<sup>437</sup>

While implying the random nature of fate – the husband could have married his former girlfriend – the poem also implies a belief in fate, indicating the husband was the only possible marital choice for the speaker: to not have married him would have been to marry badly.

To not marry in 'To My Husband' is equated with death, but so is to 'marry badly'. The speaker does not raise the state of all marriages unequivocally in her work despite the significance of her own marriage to the narrative. She is aware of the consequences of making a bad marriage: in 'I Go Back To May 1937' her parents' bad marriage is presented as the reason for their own, and her, unhappiness.<sup>438</sup> In addition, the spectre of her parents' marriage is an uninvited guest at her own wedding, the speaker comments in 'The Wedding Vow': 'I felt/ the silent, dry, crying ghost of my/ parents' marriage there'.<sup>439</sup>

<sup>433</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 92 of the dissertation for a discussion of 'Sex Without Love'; Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.27) 'Know-Nothing' BTS.

<sup>434</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.33) 'The Source' TW.

<sup>435</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.72) 'Warrior: 5<sup>th</sup> Grade' BTS.

<sup>436</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.18) 'Indictment Of Senior Officers' SS.

<sup>437</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.87) 'To My Husband' BTS.

<sup>438</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1987, p.23) 'I Go Back To May 1937' TGC.

<sup>439</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.25) 'The Wedding Vow' TUR.

The husband is the speaker's only possible Prince Charming, whisking her away from the possible promiscuity described in 'Know-Nothing' towards marital bliss. Beyond the familiar arc of the 'happy-ever-after' narrative, many poems include fairytale elements.<sup>440</sup> The fairytale icon of a mirror is present in 'The Spouses Waking Up in the Hotel Mirror', where the speaker comments: 'A full life - I saw her living it,/ then I saw her think of someone who/ ignores her rather as her father ignored her'.<sup>441</sup> The fairytale element is also present in 'Chamber Thicket':

and then toward this place, like a wandering herdsman  
or lamb, my husband. And I almost wanted  
to warn him away, to call out to him  
to go back whence he came, into some easier life<sup>442</sup>

In both examples, the speaker's happy ending is threatened by her unhappy beginning: as the husband represents the ending, the father represents the beginning. In 'The Native', a poem which describes sexual love with the husband, the speaker recalls her father:

I did not want to be conceived,  
I held to nothing, to its dense parental  
Fur....when I touch him,  
wander on him, hold to him, and move  
on and hold to him, I feel I am home again.<sup>443</sup>

The 'dense parental fur' connotes a fairytale beast. Marina Warner has argued that the 'Beauty and the Beast' fairytale demonstrates how daughters must leave their fathers behind to enter sexual love; the beast embodies sexual desire:

At a fundamental level, 'Beauty and the Beast' in numerous variations forms a group of tales which work out this basic plot, moving from the terrifying encounter with otherness to its acceptance, or, in some versions of the story, its annihilation. In either case, the menace of the Other has been met, dealt with and exorcised by the end of the fairy tale.<sup>444</sup>

However, in the speaker's narrative it is the father who is the beast and sex throughout the collections is associated with him.

As the speaker's chief sexual partner throughout the collections, the husband in many poems conjures the father-lover.<sup>445</sup> In 'This Hour' the

<sup>440</sup> See Chapter 1, p.71 of the dissertation for a discussion of the 'happy-ever-after' narrative.

<sup>441</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.88) 'The Spouses Waking Up in the Hotel Mirror' BTS.

<sup>442</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.93) 'Chamber Thicket' TUR.

<sup>443</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.112) 'The Native' BTS.

<sup>444</sup> Warner, Marina. (1996, p.276). From the beast to the blonde : on fairy tales and their tellers. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

<sup>445</sup> See Chapter 2, p.83 of the dissertation for a discussion of the father as a lover in Olds's poetry.

speaker explicitly revisits the landscape of The Father. The poem describes a lazy early evening drinking wine with her husband: 'I think of the sweat I sipped from my father's/ forehead the hour before his death. We talk about/ those last days – that I was waiting for him to die.'<sup>446</sup> This conversation is presented as a monologue: the 'we' lost among the relentless 'I's' of the speaker's own experience. As the poem continues, the reader learns that it is the ill father-in-law who has prompted the memory of the father. The speaker describes her husband in 'This Hour' as follows:

You are lying on the couch, your underpants  
a luminous white, your hand resting  
relaxed, alongside your penis,  
we talk about your father's illness,  
your nipple like a pure circle of  
something risen to the surface of your chest.<sup>447</sup>

The spousal talk is not the subject of the poem: the speaker indicates to the reader that she is only partially engaged with the conversation and her attention is drifting on to her husband's body. The reader is left in no doubt as to which man the husband's body conjures:

I love  
to drink and cry with you, and end up  
sobbing to a sleeping man, your  
long body filling the couch and  
draped slightly over the ends, the  
untrained soft singing of your snore, it cannot be given.<sup>448</sup>

The couch, the sleeping man and the long body all indicate the childhood father of the speaker. 'This Hour' is a continuation of the narrative of The Father where the only two poems that feature the husband show the speaker attempting to make love with him in the shadow of her father's death. Both of the poems are uncharacteristically ambiguous in their expression of the speaker's affection. In 'What Shocked Me When My Father Died' the speaker describes her husband silencing her:

and my husband laid his weight on me and the  
tears covered my face hair ears as  
if my head were underwater and I  
sobbed and he quieted me-the children just  
outside the door and my father's wife  
through a thin wall - when he shushed my sobbing  
by gently laying his palm over my  
mouth almost as if thinking my sobbing  
could sound as if I were coming, *that shocked me.*<sup>449</sup>

<sup>446</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.79) 'This Hour' TW.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

<sup>449</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p. 46) 'What Shocked Me When My Father Died' TE.

The speaker construes that her husband is stifling her cries in case they are mistaken for the sounds of orgasm by her children and stepmother. What shocks the speaker is not her husband's action but the fact that her sobbing could be identified as pleasure. The poem shows a lack of connection between the husband and the speaker: it is clear, despite their physical closeness, her mind is on communing with her father.

'What Shocked Me When My Father Died' appears to highlight the primacy of the speaker's interpretation: her lack of interest in clarifying with her husband the actual reason for his gesture might be what is most shocking to a reflective reader. However, the speaker leaves the analysis of the husband's gesture to the reader, foregrounding its ambiguity and her own lack of clarity with words such as 'almost' and 'as if'.

In 'The Feelings', the other poem in The Father that features the husband, the speaker comments 'I felt my husband's body on me/ crushing me sweetly like a weight laid heavy on some/ soft thing'.<sup>450</sup> The use of 'sweetly' is a word in line with the loving lexis that describes the husband throughout Olds's poetry but - sweetly or not - the metaphor leaves the speaker crushed. The reflective reader perhaps relates this sweet yet violent presentation of sex with the description in 'Warrior: 5<sup>th</sup> Grade' of being 'pummelled half dead' by a lover.<sup>451</sup> The speaker's description of her sexual husband in 'The Feelings' is an idealised portrait, nonetheless containing ambiguous violence. In 'A Time Of Passion', a poem that comes from the collection that heralds the couple's separation, the speaker and her husband engage in masochistic sex with the speaker commenting: 'Now/ we were two people, playing each other,/ as if there had been no sacred'.<sup>452</sup> The poem demonstrates how, towards the end of the marital relationship, the balance shifts back towards the less mutedly violent, unidealized portrait of sex.

The husband is portrayed in Olds's poetry as 'kind' and 'gentle': characteristically his good qualities are defined in terms of a lack of bad qualities, as in this description in 'Animal Music':

And then I looked at him,  
Then I would not look away from him,  
The bristled, salt cheer of his face,  
its absence of unkindness<sup>453</sup>

The speaker repeats the phrase 'absence of unkindness', with regard to her husband, in the aptly named 'You Kindly'.<sup>454</sup> In 'The Knowing' the speaker comments of her husband: 'I don't know where he got/ his kindness without self-regard,/ almost without self'.<sup>455</sup> The use of 'absence of' and 'without' define the husband in terms of lacking something. The father can only be

<sup>450</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p. 43) 'The Feelings' TF.

<sup>451</sup> See p. 135 of the dissertation.

<sup>452</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.96) 'A Time Of Passion' TUR.

<sup>453</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.5) 'Animal Music' BTS.

<sup>454</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.92) 'You Kindly' BTS.

<sup>455</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.115) 'The Knowing' BTS.

described, at best, as *almost* without negative qualities: in 'The Swimming Race' the father's smile is 'almost without meanness'.<sup>456</sup> The husband is an antidote to the father's meanness, but is dependent on the earlier figure for his definition. Despite the frequency of his appearances in bed, the husband is a less sexual figure than the father. He is the bland fairytale prince to the arguably more exciting and desirable father beast.

It is tempting in the wake of the husband's abandonment to characterise him as the new father; such a process would return a reflective reader to the confessional model. In 'Daddy' Sylvia Plath's speaker explicitly links the problematic loss of the husband and the father commenting:

If I've killed one man, I've killed two--  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,  
Seven years<sup>457</sup>

However, Olds's speaker is less overtly angry than Plath's. Although the presence of the husband conjures the father in the poems, the absent husband does not return the speaker to the loss of the father. In 'To Our Miscarried One, Age Thirty Now' the speaker contrasts the loss of a separation with that of miscarriage: 'That he left me is a small thing/ to your leaving the earth'.<sup>458</sup> In 'A Week Later' the absence of the husband impels the speaker to think of her mother's death:

And it came to me,  
for moments at a time, moment after moment,  
to be glad for him that he is with the one  
he feels was meant for him. And I thought of my  
mother, minutes from her death, eighty-five  
years from her birth, the almost warbler  
bones of her shoulder under my hand, the  
eggshell skull, as she lay in some peace<sup>459</sup>

Here, the comparison with death brings the speaker peace and a sense of perspective rather than torment. In 'Attempted Banquet' the speaker acknowledges the separation is not a result of anyone's misconduct: 'I see it almost without guilt,/ or with a pure, shared guilt,/ or a shared cause, without fault'.<sup>460</sup> Despite the tentativeness of the statement, the reflective reader does not sense there is an underlying anger towards the husband, as there is with the father. Following the husband's departure, the poems move forward

<sup>456</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.16) 'The Swimming Race' TW.

<sup>457</sup> Plath, Sylvia. 'Daddy' in Hughes, Ted, ed. (1981, p.222) Sylvia Plath Collected Poems.

<sup>458</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2002) 'To Our Miscarried One, Age Thirty Now' *TriQuarterly*. Oct 2002: 143(2). Available at <http://find.galegroup.com/itx/start.do?prodId=AONE> [online]. Accessed 17 April 2008.

<sup>459</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2002) 'A Week Later' *The Atlantic*. Available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/poetry/antholog/olds/weeklater.htm> [online]. Accessed 3 April 2008.

<sup>460</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2002) 'Attempted Banquet' *TriQuarterly*. Oct 2002: 141(3). Available at <http://find.galegroup.com/itx/start.do?prodId=AONE> [online]. Accessed 17 April 2008.

through their expression of loss and pursue their elusive 'happy-ever-after' narrative.

The speaker's adult 'I' is founded on a sense of coupledom with her husband. Throughout the poems the speaker and her husband are most often resembled as coupling. In 'The Untangling' the speaker comments:

I love  
to not know  
what is my beloved  
and what is I  
I love for my I to die.<sup>461</sup>

In the poem 'Psalm' the couple make a pact to eat each other in the event of a plane crash.<sup>462</sup> The husband also commonly shares a pronoun with the speaker: 'our child', 'our daughter', 'that we should botch something'.<sup>463</sup> Their separation is experienced as a loss of the shared pronoun - in 'The Shyness' the speaker observes: 'I did not know I was separate/ from this man', and in 'A Time Of Passion' she comments: 'we had left the realm of love'.<sup>464</sup> The speaker at the close of The Unswept Room is returned overtly to her narrative 'I' – the single body alone in the universe, which in 'Sex Without Love' is the truth behind all union.

### Conclusion

The presentation of the mother and husband in Olds's collections also reflect the speaker's preoccupation with her father. The posthumous father remains a powerful presence in Olds's final three collections. However, as has been argued throughout the dissertation, the father is not the central figure in Olds's narrative. The manipulation of the familial plot, and characters within, reminds a reflective reader of the speaker's pre-eminence in this story, which is her psychodrama.

<sup>461</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.81) 'The Untangling' TUR.

<sup>462</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p. 107) 'Psalm' TUR; see Chapter 2, p.83 of the dissertation for a discussion of the orality narrative in Olds's poetry.

<sup>463</sup> See, for example, Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.56) 'Poem to Our Son After a High Fever' TW; Olds, Sharon. (2003, p.49) 'Grown Children' TUR.

<sup>464</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2003, p. 77, 96) 'The Shyness' 'A Time Of Passion' TUR.

## Chapter Five: The End Of The Father, A Conclusion

The dissertation primarily explores the portrayal of the father in the poetry of Sharon Olds. By examining the depiction of the father-daughter relationship, it situates Olds within the confessional school and provides the first study of length of the father's life and death in her work. Despite his apparent prominence in the poetry of Olds, the dissertation rejects the father's centrality. The paucity of detail to describe him, and the use of the definite article in the title of the collection *The Father* suggests his major significance is as an archetype, in common with other characters in Olds's collections. Olds's poetic speaker interacts with familial characters as an archetypal daughter, mother and wife; reserving her disquiet with her father and the expression of her status as a survivor almost entirely for the reader. The dissertation finds that the relationship between the speaker and the reader is the central concern of Olds's poetry.

Chapter one of the dissertation linked the father's pivotal absence in Olds's poetry with (fore)fathers described in the poetry of confessional predecessors, especially Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy'. Olds describes her poetry as 'apparently personal', intentionally distinguishing her poems from those of the confessional school. It is argued Olds's invocation of multiple literary influences is authentic but also serves a purpose in distancing her from the confessional school and acts as an anti-canonical gesture. The label 'apparently personal' entices a reader and acts as a disclaimer to enable Olds to write about herself and her family, using existing material as a starting point. The label also, more integrally, describes the lack of detail and individual specificity which is at the heart of the familial relationships she depicts.

Olds's portrayal of the adult speaker situates a woman's domestic experience as poetic material. The speaker's reaching for happiness may be seen as a reaction to the pain expressed in the poetry of female confessional predecessors. However, the speaker's focus on being a 'survivor' is subsumed with anxiety, which is intended to be perceived by a reflective reader and links the poetry with that of the confessional school.

Close-reading of the poems in chapters two, three and four of the dissertation explored how the near-silence of the father highlights the singularity and subjectivity of the speaker's voice. The speaker's dialogue with the reader is the main verbal event of the collections. The speaker's psychodrama is signalled through the use of ambiguous language, characteristically supported by enjambment, which is intended to be detected by a reflective reader. The reader is constructed as the speaker's confidante through the deployment of an intimate tone. Within this forced intimacy, the reader has the freedom to take a position on the speaker's veracity.

The reflective reading, it is maintained, is one which takes a leap of faith and at once believes and disbelieves the speaker's narrative. This process is made overt in the first poem of Olds's debut collection, 'Satan Says', discussed in chapter two of the dissertation, where the appearance of

Satan indicates to naïve and reflective readers alike that the confession should not be taken as literal truth.<sup>465</sup> However, the presence of Satan in the poem is real. The naïve reader realises Satan is a fiction, but the reflective reader realises that the fiction is simultaneously a poetic truth. A reader might not be exclusively naïve, but should flit between a knowing combination of naïveté and reflection. Neither is a naïve reading the preserve of those who enjoy Olds's work or those readers who are outside academe: the poets and critics Adam Kirsch and Rae Armantrout, it is argued, make unreflective naïve readings.<sup>466</sup>

The evocation of the father as the speaker's lover, discussed in chapter two of the dissertation, further links the poetry with that of the confessional school. The erotic portrait of the father, and the lack of specificity to describe his crimes, is understood by a naïve reader as indicating incest and by a reflective reader as metaphorical. Olds's emendations to 'What If God', and her later poem 'To One Who Wrote Me "I Too Am An Incest Survivor"', make clear the incest suggested in 'What If God' should not be read as literal. The evocation of the incestuous father, like the evocation of Satan, is a device to illustrate the speaker's psychodrama. The presentation of the predatory daughter speaker subverts a traditionally pornographic presence, and further demonstrates the speaker's manipulation of her poetic material. The lack of detail to describe the father's crimes emphasises the archetypal nature of his portrait. The speaker focuses on the process of an abusive family history and its effect on a daughter. The manifestation of the father's torturous legacy in future generations blurs the lines between victims and perpetrators and challenges the father's centrality, indicating that the speaker's happy ending is not absolute.

Chapter three suggests that the death of the father can also be considered as metaphorical and need not be related exactly to a literal death. The only death a reflective reader can engage with is that which is described by the speaker within The Father. This death is a catalyst for the speaker's evolution: the diminishing of a patriarchal set of conditions by which she uncovers and asserts her dominant identity. Despite the titular subject-matter, the speaker is the central subject in The Father and throughout Olds's oeuvre: the father does not directly feature in much of the collection The Father and the book is concerned with his physical absence.

Chapter four demonstrates how the speaker's presentation of her mother and husband apparently reflect her abiding filial preoccupation. The anxiety inherent in the speaker's presentation of the husband anticipates their separation. This loss, which temporarily reinforces the speaker's primary loss of her father, returns a reflective reader to the poems of the confessional school. However, the presentation of the characters demonstrates the speaker's manipulation of her family history and positions her, not the father, at the centre of the text.

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<sup>465</sup> See Chapter 2, p.80 of the dissertation for a discussion of 'Satan Says'.

<sup>466</sup> See Chapter 1, p.52 and 71 of the dissertation.

Ultimately then Olds demonstrates the Bloomian misprision inherent in the process of writing and reading, emphasising the unfixed nature of confession.<sup>467</sup> In addition, Olds reveals herself as both a reflective and a naïve writer: one who takes an anti-academic stance but is also a Professor of Poetry.<sup>468</sup> In interviews Olds indicates that she needs to be anti-academic to be a professor: that one position requires her to encompass the other.<sup>469</sup>

Among the meanings commonly understood for 'confessor' is one who confesses and one who listens, arguably, therefore, the confessor can be contained within the same person. Confessional poetry represents a ritual: it is more than a purging, as a naïve reader might understand it, but is also a process and a justification by the confessor poet. Olds is the first reader of her own work and her speaker speaks aloud to her too. Similarly the reader's ultimate authority in deciphering the poems constructs them also as a writer. This is a relationship that is inherent in any poetry, but in Olds's work it becomes overt.

Olds's poems hold onto and do not attempt to resolve their contradictions: one meaning is possible and so is another. The poems examine the shifting nature of time and the relationship of the speaker's past to the speaker's present – and the reader's present. The flux of the story in the poems is emphasised by their formal processes where the ambiguous enjambment, and many emendations, suggest their lack of narrative fixity.

The speaker mourns not only the loss of the father but the loss of self such a loss brings - and the inevitable loss of youth, loss of identity and ultimately loss of life it presages. Freudian psychoanalytical theorists note how the loss of a loved one harks back to the infant's loss of the mother, but loss also propels an individual forward to a time when they themselves will be lost.<sup>470</sup> The making of the poem provides a stay against the anxiety of loss. The poem may not be definitive but the process of reading and writing is. Olds's speaker is less concerned with the death of the father than her own rebirth: in this she triumphs, she is born again and again through the reader's discovery and response to her poetry.

<sup>467</sup> See Chapter 1, f.n. 116 of the dissertation for a definition of misprision.

<sup>468</sup> In an insightful review of *StS*, Brenda Wineapple notes Olds's naïvete and reflection, writing of the poet: 'She's one of the female roughs and proud of it (though she studied at Stanford and Columbia)', see Wineapple, Brenda 'I Have Done This Thing [review of *StS*]' *Poetry* Vol 185: 3 pp. 232-236.

<sup>469</sup> Olds comments on working with writers: 'I say 'apparently personal' as much for the sake of the writers that I'm working with at Goldwater and at NYU...so that we will all feel as free as possible'. The statement aims to liberate academics and makes no distinction between teaching in a university [NYU] and teaching in a hospital [Goldwater]. It also makes no distinction between Olds and her students. See 'Sharon Olds. Afternoon Seminar, January 29, 1998'.

<sup>470</sup> For Freudian views on mourning and the return to the mother, see Phillips, Adam, ed. (2005) On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia; Klein, Melanie. (1988, p.359) Love, Guilt and Reparation and other works; Kristeva, Julia. (1989, p.9) Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia.

## 'Sharon Says': Sharon Olds's influence on my poetry

In this linking piece, I examine the influence of Sharon Olds on my work in terms of subject-matter, process and form. It thus provides a bridging piece connecting the key elements of my creative portfolio Birdhouse in the context of Olds's work.

Before studying Olds I considered the effect of her poetry on mine, primarily, in terms of subject-matter. Having written the dissertation, and reached a more reflective understanding of Olds's craft, I also appreciate her influence in terms of tone, and of her intimate positioning of the poetic speaker of her poems in relation to the reader. The process of doctoral research has enabled me to unpack why I admire Olds's work, and to acknowledge and employ her influence more knowingly while reflecting on my own craft.

I first discovered the writing of Olds nearly two decades ago in a copy of *The New Yorker* magazine. My introduction was Olds's poem 'The Promise', which describes a man and a woman at a candlelit dinner table making a euthanasia pact. In the poem, the female speaker whispers dark sweet nothings into her lover's ear: 'I tell you you do not/ know me if you think I will not/ kill you'.<sup>471</sup> I photocopied 'The Promise', and those lines stayed with me long after the photocopy was lost.

If I was to write that first encounter as an Oldsian poem, I would describe Olds as Satan whispering into my sixteen year old ear. My poem would knowingly echo Olds's poem 'Satan Says', which describes the poet's entry into writing.<sup>472</sup> 'Sharon Says' as my poem might be called, would be a fictive presentation of a memory mediated by my current experience of doctoral research. It would be concerned with an overtly subjective memory of history as, it is argued in the dissertation, is Olds's poetry.

When I first read 'The Promise' I made a literal reading of Olds's poem. I did not think of the speaker of the poems as separate from Olds. I did not consider that the poem's narrative might not be literally true, or that the 'you' of the poem addressed me, the reader, as well as the male diner: that I was a third party pulling my chair up to the marital table.

At sixteen, I was a naïve reader and, more than sixteen years later, I still am - the dissertation maintains that a naïve reading is part of the aesthetic experience of Olds's work. However, the naïve reading is incomplete: the reflective reader of Olds's poetry, it is posited, shifts between naiveté and

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<sup>471</sup> Olds, Sharon. (2000, p.3) 'The Promise' BTS. London: Cape.

<sup>472</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1980, p.3) 'Satan Says' SS. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

reflection, and should paradoxically question the word of Olds's poetry while taking its word at face-value.

Olds's choice of subject-matter has, since my first encounter with her poetry, been an enduring influence on my own writing. As death and love were mixed in my first reading of Olds so I discovered they were throughout Olds's poetry collections. The poems of Olds's fourth book The Father are a series of elegies. My interest in these poems, and the contemporary elegiac genre, significantly influenced the central subject-matter of my portfolio Birdhouse which includes an elegiac sequence of sixteen poems concerning the death of a grandmother. If poetic influence worked more directly the collective title of my elegies would be The Grandmother. However, although Olds's The Father has had a significant impact on my poems, they have also been influenced by other poetry and necessarily have an independent existence - the poems were published under the title Trailer.<sup>473</sup> Like my unwritten poem 'Sharon Says', my unwritten collection The Grandmother would be too transparent and knowing a piece of work, and would not have travelled sufficiently far from its poetic origins, to survive autonomously.

Aside from her book-length sequence The Father, Olds writes elegies for other family members and public figures throughout her oeuvre. Influenced by her range of elegiac subject-matter, my portfolio Birdhouse includes occasional elegies for other relatives, as well as the extended sequence for a grandmother. Olds's earlier elegies contribute to my understanding of her later poems; arguably the familial deaths in The Dead And The Living predict the central filial loss in The Father. As a writer, my experience of reading elegies across Olds's oeuvre has led me to address consciously future familial death in my own elegies. My poem 'Trailer' is concerned with the death of a grandmother but looks ahead overtly to the loss of a father. Olds's concern with a wide range of living family members in her work positions a woman's familial and personal life as poetic subject-matter, and has had an enormous influence on my own choice of theme. Correspondingly, my portfolio Birdhouse includes poems concerned with their female speaker's relationship with a living mother, father, aunties, a grandfather and the male other.

Olds's amatory poetry is often joyful in its depiction of female pleasure. She describes promiscuous and monogamous sex, as well as revealing and revelling in the detail of her speaker's and lovers' unclothed bodies. Olds has described how her, specifically female, experience was neglected in the poetry of her formal education, impelling her to include the events of her own life in her writing.<sup>474</sup> Olds's positioning of a naked woman in a love poem as a speaker, her depiction of female pleasure and her treatment of, what are for some, taboo topics including menstruation, childbirth, masturbation, abortion, miscarriage, ageing and the menopause has supplied many contemporary female poets with the role model that Olds herself lacked.<sup>475</sup> Bodies abound throughout Olds's poems; in my poetry a naked woman is also much in

<sup>473</sup> Woodford, Anna. (2007) Trailer Nottingham: Five Leaves.

<sup>474</sup> See Chapter 1, p.60 of the dissertation.

<sup>475</sup> See Chapter 1, f.n. 119 for a list of women poets who have acknowledged Olds's influence.

evidence in 'Singing In The Bath', 'Sex Education', 'Darling', 'Grounded' and 'Birdhouse'. Reading Olds has encouraged me to address female sexuality in my work such as in my portfolio's title poem, and to explore related controversial subject-matter in poems such as 'Six Weeks'.

In my poem 'Trying' I echo a line of Olds directly. I was not consciously aware of this until I read with Olds at Durham Literature Festival in 2006. Following my reading, Olds read a set which included her poem 'The Race'.<sup>476</sup> After reading the poem, Olds commented that she had noticed my poem 'Trying' ended, like 'The Race', with the image of someone breathing. Olds then touched her heart, and paid tribute to 'the community of poets'. Sixteen years on from my first encounter with Olds, she was a reflective reader of my work, and I was a naïve writer of my own poetry, using Olds's influence unknowingly.

Olds's influence on the process of my poetry has become more evident to me as I have examined her practice during doctoral research. Olds describes her poems as 'apparently personal'; the label describes the fictive nature of her confession.<sup>477</sup> In my poetry I also employ a consistent female narrator, an 'I' who is me and not me. Olds portrays events in her work that belong to psychodrama as if they were literal, adding to her 'apparently personal' narrative. An obvious example of this process is the appearance of Satan in Olds's poem 'Satan Says'. A more covert illustration is the narrative of The Father, which reads like the chronology of a death. However, the poems of The Father show the father dying more than once; their latent subject is the mourning of the speaker.

Olds wrote The Father over a number of years, as she comments in an interview: 'Half of "The Father" [published in 1992] was written in '83 and '84. The second half was composed of one or two poems each from 1984, '85, '86, '87, '88, '89'.<sup>478</sup> Such a process illustrates Olds's continuing engagement with her subject, and shows how the father's death is mediated by the shifting present of the poet. It also demonstrates that the poems are not necessarily conceived of as a collection at the time of writing, but that their order is superimposed in retrospect.

Although most poetry collections are ordered in this way, Olds uses the retrospective structure overtly to lend authenticity to her 'apparently personal' narrative: to suggest to a naïve reader that events are happening as they are recorded. However, a reflective reading reveals that Olds shows the same events happening more than once across the collections, demonstrating her subjective manipulation of time. I imposed a narrative on the elegies in Birdhouse that does not reflect the order in which poems are written, but is

<sup>476</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.27) 'The Race' TF. New York: Knopf.

<sup>477</sup> Olds's preference for this term is well documented, see Patterson, Christina. (2006). 'Sharon Olds: Blood, sweat and fears'. *The Independent*. Available at <http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/books/features/article1930750.ece> [online]. Accessed 19 January 2007.

<sup>478</sup> See Garner, Dwight. (1996). 'The Salon Interview Sharon Olds' *The Salon*. Available at <http://www.salon1999.com/weekly/interview.html> [online]. Accessed 5 March 2005.

edited to look as though it reflects outer events chronologically. Time is an agent acting upon the work.

The formal influence of Olds's poetry upon my own is generally less significant than that of her subject-matter and process. However, her use of line-breaks has had a considerable impact upon my work. Olds writes in free verse and uses line-breaks to surprise a reader and shift her meaning, such as: 'Three years after my father's death/ he goes back to work'.<sup>479</sup> In my own work, which is also written in free verse, I locate meaning across line-breaks, as in my poem 'Violins' where the instruments of the title change from concrete to abstract across the opening lines of the poem: 'Overnight, violins appeared/ to surround your bed'.

In 'Bathing the New Born' Olds extends her stated meaning through enjambment, emphasising the emphatic statement of her first line: 'I love with an almost fearful love/ to remember'.<sup>480</sup> In my poem 'Birdhouse' the speaker's two cries of 'I am' are positioned at the end of the line in order to highlight the assertion of their cry, which is intended as a mimesis of orgasm: 'I am/ crowing like an everyday bird that has/ entered the heights of an aviary. I am'.<sup>481</sup> Olds also has such an orgasmic mimesis in 'Sex Without Love' where repetition and a typographical use of ellipsis convey the speaker's pleasure: 'How do they come to the/ come to the    come to the'.<sup>482</sup> Like Olds, I employ enjambment to defy a reader's expectations, and also write mainly in free verse.

Having outlined points of comparison between my work and Olds's, I would close by outlining some distinctions. The look of my poems is less uniform on the page than Olds's poems, which often find the same shape - one reviewer describes them as 'vertically tilted chocolate bars'.<sup>483</sup> Like Olds's poetry, my work requires an active interpretative reader and its meaning is determined by the analysis of enjambment and puns. However, my tone is more formal than Olds and my lexis does not feature slang or taboo words. My poems also use a different decorum of address. This might partly be explained by a difference in taste, based on geography. It is hard to see a contemporary British women poet addressing Olds in the same sanctified tone as one American counterpart: Kim Addonizio's poem 'On Knocking Over My Glass While Reading Sharon Olds' refers to Olds as 'the Holy Mother' and ends with the speaker going to: 'refill my glass/ with her wild and holy blood'.<sup>484</sup>

If my speaker is me and not me, there is also a touch of 'me,me,me' about my narrative 'I': I note in my dissertation the egoism of Olds's speaker.

<sup>479</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1992, p.67) 'The Ferryer' TF. New York: Knopf.

<sup>480</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1996, p.45) 'Bathing the New Born' TW.London: Cape.

<sup>481</sup> See p. 4 of Birdhouse, the creative portolio element of the thesis.

<sup>482</sup> Olds, Sharon. (1984, p.57) 'Sex Without Love' TDATL. New York: Knopf.

<sup>483</sup> Tucker, Ken. (1999). 'Family Ties' [Review of Blood, Tin, Straw] *New York Times Book Review*. Vol. 149 (14 Nov 1999) p29.

<sup>484</sup> Addonizio, Kim. (2004, p.111) 'On Knocking Over My Glass While Reading Sharon Olds' what is this thing called love New York: W W Norton & Co.

If I was to write 'Sharon Says' it would ultimately explore why my speaker was not where she should have been, at school, that day she first read 'The Promise', and how she was touched by poetry. Whatever my subject-matter in Birdhouse, the subject is also always the biographical and fictive speaker who is separate from the poet and, in this autonomy, communicates with her, as well as the reader.

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