 Resource 12

Poem guide - Sylvia Plath: ‘Nick and the Candlestick’

The creation of life and the masterful merging of metaphor and reality:

Article of Nick and the Candlestick by Katherine Robinson

Part 1

In ‘Nick and the Candlestick,’a woman walks through a dark house toward her sleeping infant, and this ordinary action becomes fused with a metaphoric descent into a ghostly otherworld. Addressed to Plath’s son, Nicholas, the poem belongs to the tradition of poems such as Coleridge’s ‘Frost at Midnight’ and Yeats’s ‘A Prayer for my Daughter’ that directly address a poet’s sleeping infant. ‘Nick and the Candlestick,’ however, teems with evocations of the speaker’s pregnancy and continually merges these images with descriptions of the baby himself. Like the poem’s opening fusion of metaphor and reality, this conflation collapses the boundaries between two things: past and present, memory and experience. In the poem, pregnancy is, itself, a time when two individuals are contained in one strangely altered body. As such, pregnancy, like metaphor itself, becomes emblematic of both the tenuousness of distinctions and of the inevitability of transformation.

As in many her poems, Plath borrows language and imagery from nursery rhymes, harnessing their peculiar mixture of menace and cheerful, linguistic playfulness—a juxtaposition that mirrors the poem’s insistence that seemingly disparate emotions or states of being are often closely entwined. This poem’s title recalls an old rhyme:

Jack be nimble,

Jack be quick,

Jack jump over

The candlestick.

If Jack is not nimble, after all, he risks setting himself on fire. Plath replaces the title character with Nick, her infant son, poetically blurring the divisions between literature and biography and between illusion and reality.

Part 2

The poem opens with a woman walking, in the small hours of the night, toward her child’s room. Holding a small candle, the speaker declares that she is a “miner,” descending into an unknown world—a journey into the eerie depths of earth or perhaps an equally unnerving psychic descent into the speaker’s own body. As winter approaches, the days become shorter, and darkness surrounds the house, but the child, safe and sleeping, embodies a new beginning and an attendant sense of redemption: a stay against the encroaching darkness and whatever ghostly threats come with it.

As she walks through the drafty house, long beards of wax drip from the guttering candle like stalactites hanging from a cave’s roof:

I am a miner. The light burns blue.

Waxy stalactites

Drip and thicken, tears

The earthen womb

Exudes from its dead boredom.

Although the poem is ultimately about a newborn baby, it initially evokes a womb inextricably linked to death. The ‘earthen womb’ Plath describes is as much an underground afterworld as a source of new life. Nicholas, Plath’s son, was born shortly before her marriage ended, and the poem begins by confronting ‘dead boredom.’ When Plath wrote the poem, she had recently separated from her husband, Ted Hughes, and was living alone with her two children at Court Green, a centuries-old house in Devon, England, that she had originally purchased with her husband. The house—and ultimately the child—is haunted by the specter and pain of a disintegrating marriage.

Part 3

Later in the poem, when the speaker finally addresses the child directly, she tells him, ‘The pain / You wake to is not yours.’ Like the house Plath describes, the metaphoric, psychological world of the poem seems haunted as well—teeming with swarming fish, bat-like drafts, and ghostly threats. In a symbolic sense, pregnancy too can be viewed as an experience of being inhabited—or even haunted—by a strange and mysterious being. Pregnancy makes the body strange and foreign; its normal workings change and become geared toward nourishing a new and completely unknown being.

Throughout the poem, images merge into one another: much of the poem’s momentum comes from its catapulting progression from metaphor to metaphor, and these rapid-fire transformations underscore the way one thing continually changes into another. The child was part of the mother’s body and now is not, though the boundary between the two selves remains thin. Likewise, the candle and the cave it illuminates merge and become inseparable: “waxy stalactites” are both the wax dripping from the candle and the stone formations the candlelight reveals. Plath then turns the stalactites to metaphoric tears: stalactites form from calcium deposits left behind when water drips from a cave’s ceiling. Plath’s well-honed knowledge of the natural world shaped her precise poetic images.

The poem’s first seven stanzas weave an atmosphere of dread—a surreal fairytale world filled with bats, carnivorous fish, and images of death and danger:

Black bat airs

Wrap me, raggy shawls,

Cold homicides.

They weld to me like plums.

This dizzying collision between wildness and domesticity, between death and fertility, underscores the fear and promise both inherent in pregnancy—Plath’s use of assonance also creates a sonic sense of something winding itself around the speaker: the short a sound weaves from black to bat to wrap to raggy. These airs bind the speaker—an image of constriction—and the shuttling back and forth between metaphors likewise suggests that the speaker is ‘wrapped’ in ambivalence. Then wrap becomes weld, a word usually reserved for metalworking; here, it underscores the harshness and irrevocability of the world into which the speaker descends, a world that is simultaneously the dark house, the speaker’s own body, and a surreal underworld.

Part 4

In the poem, line breaks also sometimes hold two meanings in suspension. Here, Plath uses them to weld disparate spaces together into a single image:

Old cave of calcium

Icicles, old echoer.

Cave of calcium would be an apt metaphor for the interior of the speaker’s body: her pelvis is a kind of cave, its walls made of white, calcium-filled bones. As the sentence progresses, however, the syntax unfolds and reveals that calcium is, instead, an adjective that modifies icicles: Plath is describing calcium stalactites. The cave echoes, and the repetition of the word old within these two lines is, itself, a sonic echo. Likewise, a womb could be thought of as an ‘echoer’; it creates children who are, in many ways, echoes of their parents, small replicas.

The cave Plath evokes is filled with water, with ghostly swimming creatures, and this evocation further underscores the connection between the cave and the speaker’s womb, a fluid-filled world in which an embryo moves like a fish:

Even the newts are white,

Those holy Joes.

And the fish, the fish—

Christ! They are panes of ice

As the poet continues her psychic descent, everything becomes white—stalactites, newts—as though she is entering an icy afterworld. Cold as ice, fish swarm around her:

Christ! They are panes of ice,

A vice of knives,

A piranha

Religion, drinking

Its first communion out of my live toes.

These swirling knives darkly evoke the danger of death in utero and, perhaps, recall the thin boundary between life and death that persists throughout the precarious passage from conception to birth. ‘A vice of knives,’ set to tighten, also evokes the sheer pain endured during childbirth.

Part 6

‘Nick and the Candlestick’ chronicles a process of perilous excavation, and Plath continually mines words themselves to tease out their multiple resonances. What starts as a colloquial interjection—‘Christ!’—launches the poem into its first overtly religious metaphor. Piranhas attack the speaker’s toes and drink her blood, an act Plath compares to the sacrament of First Communion. In the Christian tradition, receiving communion entails drinking wine that symbolizes (or even becomes) Jesus’s blood: metaphor becomes reality. In this moment, the speaker becomes a martyred, Christ-like figure, and the randomness of this martyrdom (she seems to have no agency at all) increases the macabre sense of menace that pervades this archetypal descent into the underworld. Many of the poem’s double meanings—with their accompanying ambiguity—bind opposites together. This image also evokes the way nutrients are passed to an embryo through the mother’s bloodstream; it is emblematic of both life and death.

Finally, the candle flares up and reveals the sleeping baby. Plath’s description of the flame again blurs distinctions between the candle and what it illuminates, a distortion that echoes the ambiguous division between mother and child: the one formed the other, and the child still echoes, or replicates, the mother.

The candle

Gulps and recovers its small altitude,

Its yellows hearten.

O love, how did you get here?

O embryo

Remembering, even in sleep,

Your crossed position.

Part 7

Hearten evokes the child’s heartbeat, and, likewise, the verb gulps evokes a baby gulping milk. The candlestick illuminates Nick, but it also is Nick—a blaze of new life, something that changes the surrounding world from darkness to lucidity. In these lines, Plath creates a state of suspension between the unborn embryo and sleeping child. She addresses him as embryo, and, for a moment, this embryo seems to be yet one more aquatic creature populating the ghostly womb-like underworld. She describes the child ‘Remembering, even in sleep, / Your crossed position.” Inside the uterus, fetuses often cross their arms, and, presumably, the child is sleeping with his arms folded in this way.

‘The blood blooms clean / / In you, ruby,’ the speaker tells him. Earlier, carnivorous fish drank the speaker’s blood. Now, blood has been transformed into something generative—the blood of bloodlines and of genetic inheritance. Wounds have turned into birth. The marriage that created the child had, by this time, unraveled into animosity and alienation, and this line is particularly poignant for the way it suggests that the child has arisen from his parents’ bloodlines and, in so doing, has turned the past into something new and clean. The image of a ruby recalls the poem’s beginning—the miner descending into the dangerous earth in search of gems.

The child’s crossed position subtly evokes the poem’s Christ metaphor; the image of a cross suggests Jesus’s suffering. Though Nick himself is new, untainted by anything that came before, memories of his parents’ dissolving marriage still fill the house, and Plath writes,

The pain

You wake to is not yours.

Part 8

Although the child has no obligation to shoulder his parents’ grief, he will, inescapably, wake to the pain of losses he had no part in creating. The waking Plath refers to is both literal and metaphoric—the lines poignantly encapsulate the experience of any child becoming aware of his parents’ pain—grief he can neither fully own nor fully escape inheriting.

As the poem continues, Plath again creates a state of suspension between embryo and child, between past and present, between metaphor and reality:

Love, love,

I have hung our cave with roses,

With soft rugs—

The last of Victoriana.

The child’s rose-filled room echoes the cave-like womb that contained the embryo. The poem’s endless nimbleness—as well as its startling vision of redemption—springs from the connections Plath forges between objects and their surroundings: nothing is wholly singular. Patterns repeat and replicate, and the act of replication creates new, clean beginnings without ever wholly jettisoning the past. The child both replicates his parents and is entirely new—a chance for a bloodline to bloom clean.

Part 9

Victoriana refers to objects from the Victorian period, which ended in 1901. The speaker looks backward to an era that, filled with fine rugs and fairytales, seems simpler than her own. For better or worse, there were no soon-to-be divorced women in the Victorian era, no children of divorce. The phrase the last of Victoriana also suggests the end of an era, and this child is the last remnant of Plath’s marriage.

The word Victoriana also contains the idea of victory, and the poem concludes with tender defiance:

Let the stars

Plummet to their dark address,

Let the mercuric

Atoms that cripple drip

Into the terrible well,

You are the one

Solid the spaces lean on, envious.

You are the baby in the barn.

Many folk songs include promises to be faithful to a beloved until ‘the stars fall from the sky.’ And, indeed, references to folk songs, nursery rhymes, and the Bible abound in this poem—old literary forms that lend Plath’s writing a sense of timelessness; these references again collapse the boundary between present and past and provide a sense of solidity. These are the forms that have endured. Plath takes this hyperbolic folk song adage and laces it with ambiguity: ‘stars / Plummet[ing] to their dark address’ could be a description of early morning when stars seem to slip down to the horizon. Though, as the poem has shown, waking is sometimes neither wholly desirable nor wholly uncomplicated. The stars will fall, and nothing will stop the coming of the cold; the mercury in the thermometer will keep falling, but the child will remain. When she calls him “the one / Solid the spaces lean on,” Plath evokes an image of a whirling planet, an orb of solidity traveling through empty space. This evocation underscores his vulnerability but does so while celebrating his completeness; he is a small world unto himself. Unlike either mercury (quicksilver slipping through a thermometer) or falling stars (orbs of blazing helium and hydrogen) or a marriage (a promise and covenant), the baby is entirely solid. He is the intangible made tangible.

The poem’s earlier Christ metaphor evoked crucifixion—the baby’s “crossed position” and the piranhas who drank communion blood out of the speaker’s toes—but when Plath writes “You are the baby in the barn,” she evokes Christ’s nativity. After all, Christ was born in a stable because there was no room in the inn. In the realm of metaphor, time has turned around and gone backward. The child’s birth inverts time, allows a return to something clean, undamaged, and full of promise. Throughout much of the poem, death has been life’s ghostly counterpart; at the end, death transforms into life.

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Other resources: [Poem reading](http://www.favoritepoem.org/poem_NickandtheCandleStick.html)