Maternity Study Guide

Maternity by Anna Swir

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Introduction

"Maternity" by Anna Swir has appeared in two of the English translations of her works: *Talking to My Body* and *Happy as a Dog's Tail*. The title of the poem is appropriate to its content since the poem is about a woman facing her newborn child for the first time and trying to come to terms with this new situation. While the publication date of the poem is not mentioned in the English translations, it is known that Anna Swir had a daughter who is the likely subject of the poem. This daughter would have been born sometime in the 1930s or 1940s, but the poem was probably written a long time afterward. Its first appearance was in the 1970 Polish publication of a collection called *Wind*. *Happy as a Dog's Tail* was published in Poland in 1978 and published in the United States in 1985. *Talking to My Body* was published in the United States in 1996.

In the first publication of "Maternity," the poem had two additional stanzas that were removed for *Talking to My Body*. These two stanzas seem only to repeat the already established message and do little to add to the poem. Furthermore, the additional two stanzas spell out a conclusion rather than allowing the readers to figure it out on their own. Consequently, the shortened version seems to have a more dramatic ending and more impact on the reader's imagination. Perhaps for these reasons, the two stanzas were dropped in the second English collection of Swir's poems. "Maternity" fits into Swir's central theme in these two collections, which is referencing the body, but it also inludes themes of motherhood, love, and independence.

Author Biography

Anna Swir (actual name Swirszczyńska) was born in Warsaw, Poland, on February 7, 1909. Her father, an artist, was unable to keep his family out of dire poverty. Swir grew up doing her schoolwork and sleeping in her father's workshop. Nonetheless, in a group of poems that she wrote years later about her mother and father, she expressed a close bond and sincere gratitude. Swir managed to put herself through college where she studied medieval and baroque Polish literature. A poem of hers was published in a popular magazine in 1930 when she was only 21 years old. Swir's first book of poetry and drama was published in 1936, the same year she went to work for an association for teachers, where she stayed until 1939. At the same time, she was the chief editor of a very famous magazine that was read by most of the children of Poland during that period.

When the Nazis invaded in 1939, she became a member of the Polish Resistance, writing for underground publications as well as helping to maintain the intellectual life of Poles through secret poetry readings and other literary meetings. During the Warsaw uprising in 1944, she helped to nurse the soldiers at a makeshift military hospital. After the destruction of Warsaw, she moved to Krakow where she lived from 1945 until her death in 1984. Although the war was a pivotal point in Swir's life, she waited almost thirty years before she wrote about it. The result was a collection of poetry published in 1974 entitled *Building the Barricade*.

As her pre-war activities indicate, for a number of years Swir was best known for her many poems and stories for children. After the war, from 1946—1950, she was the director of a theatre for children. Her second book of poetry was published in 1958, followed by other collections in 1967 and 1970. Continuing her work as a playwright, too, Swir wrote an opera for young people in 1963, and a play in 1976 set in World War II that won a special award from the Polish Prime Minister.

In her sixties, Swir began to write about the female experience in love, desire, motherhood, fate, old age, disease, and rejection. In 1972, she published *I'm a Woman*, and in 1978 *Happy as a Dog's Tail*□both collections of poetry that emphasized feminism and eroticism. This was followed posthumously in 1985 by *Suffering and Joy*, a collection of poems about her parents. Perhaps because of her war experiences, Swir replaced her religious faith with a belief in only the realities of the flesh. Her prime devotion seems to have been to her country. However, when Swir died of cancer in 1984, her daughter reported that Swir had reconciled with the Catholic Church. In that same year, Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz and Leonard Nathan translated into English the poems in *Happy as a Dog's Tail*. In 1996, they would publish a revised collection of Swir's poetry in *Talking to My Body*. In both books, they provided a lengthy and excellent analysis of Swir's life's work.

Plot Summary

The Event

The first four lines of "Maternity" deal with the obvious topic of life. However, Swir looks at birth in terms of both a new life, the baby, and a sacrificed life, that of the mother. Using the first person, Swir says "I gave birth to life," not "I gave birth to a baby" or "a child" or anything yet connected to her as a human. Rather, Swir is focused on the product of birth as a living creature that not only has a birth, but also will have a death and a life in between. This perspective is extended in the second sentence (lines 2—4) with the use of what appears to be an odd word choice: "entrails." When discussing birth, one usually uses terms such as "womb" or "uterus" or even "belly." Entrails has the meaning of guts or intestines. Unless Swir's biology is faulty, she chose "entrails" to associate the product of her body with other eliminations to emphasize that what came out this time was something living. This unique turn of events demands something from her life in turn. Swir likens the demands of motherhood to the human sacrifice once made to the gods by the Aztecs, perhaps because the commitment is so total and all-consuming.

The Confrontation

In the next three lines, Swir starts to focus in on the baby, whom she calls "a little puppet." This mother seems still not to be sure of what she has gotten herself into. What is this little creature she has been given? It is too hard to believe that it is a real living human, so is it a toy? But the toy is looking at her just as she is looking at it. "With four eyes" is dropped into the next line to heighten the impact of the two staring at each other. One wonders if Swir wrote "four eyes" because the mother recognizes a similarity between her own eyes and that of the child.

The Defiant Statement

In a pique of independence, the mother tells the baby that she is not going to "defeat" her mother. The word choice indicates that the mother views the existence of this child as a conflict in her life and the baby as someone engaged in a power struggle with her. The mother wants to get it straight from the beginning that the mother was not just the shell to this egg, not just a vessel that carried the child only to be cast aside. The mother declares that she will defend herself from being used, from being walked on like "a footbridge," by the child. The message is made clear as Swir separates out "I will defend myself." The notion that a mother would need to defend herself against her child is contrary to the traditional picture of a mother willingly giving of herself in every possible way to provide for her child's needs.

The Realization

The mother's defiance ends in the third stanza as she once again leans over the "little puppet" and makes a discovery. Drawing the reader's attention to her revelation, Swir puts "I notice" by itself on the second line. What she notices is the "tiny movement of a tiny finger." This baby is becoming more real by the minute. That finger was just "a little while ago" still inside the mother, waiting to be born. The baby was just under her mother's skin, where the mother's own blood flows. Swir may have chosen this way to describe the previous physical relationship to connect to the universal saying about "my own flesh and blood." In fact, Swir uses "my own blood." These lines are a re-crafting of an old expression to explain the mother's steps toward the realization of the closeness and uniqueness of her relationship with this child.

The Surrender

When "suddenly" the light goes on and the connection is made in the mother's mind, she is "flooded" with emotion. Surprisingly, the emotion named is not that of love, but of "humility." Swir dramatizes her choice of humility over love by placing "of love" on a separate line. The reader knows that the mother has been overwhelmed with love for the child, but Swir probably chose "humility" as the descriptive word in order to emphasize her feelings as being the same as one experiences when in the awesome presence of a wonder of nature or a miracle of God. The final line, "Powerless, I drown," indicates a total surrender to motherly love. Consequently, the poem has moved from a first stanza that sets the scene and expresses assessment, to a second stanza that is a declaration of defiant independence, to the third and final stanza that is a capitulation to maternal instinct and attachment as natural and inevitable as an ocean wave or the life cycle itself.

Themes

Maternal Love

The title of the poem makes it obvious that maternity is the subject that Swir wishes to explore. Her description of that first private meeting between mother and child is one to which any mother could relate. This event is an important transition in a woman's life. She is no longer just herself because there is now an extension of herself. That extension may be very much like the mother, or very different. Either way, the new person is an enormous responsibility for the mother. Panic is a common reaction as the reality of the 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week, 18-years-or-longer commitment sinks in. The mother cannot help but wonder how she is going to keep this tiny creature alive and take care of it. There is also the very natural reaction of concern on the mother's part about what is going to happen to her own life in terms of personal time and space. How is she going to fit this child into her life? How will she be able to meet the demands of motherhood? The answer, for Swir, is to humbly submit to the power of maternal love and let its great force carry her through all that will come.

Independence

As a feminist, Swir advocated a woman's independence and a freedom from stereotypical roles. In the feminist debate, motherhood has sometimes been blamed for trapping women into a dependent housewife status. Feminism has worked to prove that having children does not mean that a woman cannot continue a career or continue to have roles other than solely that of mother. Therefore, the mother in "Maternity" is quick to try to set limits on her relationship with her child. She makes it clear that becoming a mother does not mean that she is now going to sacrifice her whole life for that of her child. The child may have already been given life by her mother, but she is not going to be allowed to suck the life out of her mother. The child must make her own way without using her mother as a vehicle on the path of life just as she was the vehicle of birth. By the end of the poem, though, the narrator realizes that providing sustenance and guidance is not something the child will take from the mother, but is something that the mother will lovingly give as a natural part of her life. Her independence as a woman is not being taken away; rather, a new dimension is being added to her humanity.

Flesh

Czeslaw Milosz, Swir's best-known critic, says that the central theme to all of Swir's later works is flesh. Certainly, in "Maternity" there are many references to the flesh of the human body. There is nothing more "flesh of my flesh" than giving birth. Swir includes "entrails" and "eyes" in her description of the contact that the mother and child have made. It is a body part, a tiny finger, that catches the mother's notice and causes her to remember that a short time before that finger was under her flesh, her skin. In the

end, just as her blood once flowed past the child in her womb, now a flow of emotion envelops her. Thus, the theme of flesh is continued in this poem about giving birth and all the non-physical elements that are involved in this physical process.

Style

Free Verse

Free verse does not use the fixed line lengths nor the strict metrical and rhyme patterns characteristic of formal poetry such as a sonnet or haiku. Instead, free verse varies line length to aid in achieving a desired impact. In "Maternity," Swir uses line length to feed the reader only one bite of thought at a time. She waits from one line to the next to drop the other shoe, so to speak. For example, the line "and asks for the sacrifice of my life" is stopped to let the reader wonder about or assume the meaning of "sacrifice." Then the next line "as does the Aztec deity" explains the kind of sacrifice with a comparison that is probably much more harsh than the reader expected.

Rhythm and sound patterns in free verse are created by the use of assonance, alliteration, internal rhyme, and the like. Swir uses short, choppy lines in the first stanza, perhaps as an indication of reticence. However, when the narrator talks to the child in the second stanza, the lines are longer to resemble speech. The third stanza is a mix of short and long lines as the narrator struggles with feelings of wonder and understanding. Rhythm is also created within lines by designing phrases of about equal length and by repeating phrases that have the same syntactical structure. The result is a cadence similar to the balance of phrases in a musical composition. In 1855, Walt Whitman was the first major poet to use free verse; today, it is the most popular form of poetry.

Narrative Poetry

Some poems, like prose, have a story, a setting of time and place, a specific point of view, and characters dramatizing the message. The main character, perhaps the only one, will be the "I" in the poem. The speaker may be the poet or a fictional character and may be speaking to another character, perhaps in a dialogue. Usually, however, the speaker in a narrative poem is a lone character speaking about a deep and personal concern. In "Maternity," Swir gives the reader the story of a new mother greeting her baby. The time is soon after the birth ("a little while ago was still in me"), but the place is not mentioned. One can imagine the place to be in a hospital. Swir opens with "I," thus immediately establishing the point of view. The speaker is the poet, but presented as if she were any new mother. The other character to whom she speaks is the baby. Undoubtedly, the speaker is talking about a deep and personal concern at a moment like this one between mother and child. Consequently, "Maternity" fits all the characteristics of a narrative poem.

Visual Imagery

Visual imagery, the most frequently used type of imagery in poetry, is a mental picture, or image, created by words. The image can be a symbolic interpretation or a metaphor

providing a description. In "Maternity," Swir brings to mind the Aztec practice of human sacrifice to express the totality of a child's demands on its mother. She compares the baby to a "little puppet" and uses the images of a cracked egg and a footbridge to describe the use a child might make of a parent. At the end of the poem, Swir creates a picture of a wave of water drowning the mother to express the overwhelming feeling of humility that consumes her as she is overawed by the miracle of life and accepts the inevitability of maternal love. All these images help to establish the complexity and conflict of the relationship between mother and child.

Historical Context

Anna Swir lived from 1909 to 1984, a time period that saw a multitude of changes in the country of Poland. The dominant power in eastern Europe from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, Poland did not even exist as a separate country when Swir was born. From 1772 to 1918, the Polish territory was divided among Russia, Austria, and Prussia. However, at the end of World War I, the state of Poland was restored as a consequence of the dissolution of the Russian, Austrian, and German empires. Heavily dependent on agriculture, the Polish economy was reformed and modernized in the 1920s, but suffered from the Great Depression of the 1930s along with the rest of the world. A leader of the Polish workers' movement, Jozef Pilsudski, gained control of the government in 1926 and stayed in power until his death in 1935. The military regime that followed was ineffectual and unable to defend itself against the invasion, in September of 1939, by Nazi Germany on the western border and the Soviet Union on the eastern border of Poland.

Nonetheless, the 20 years of independence between the wars had fostered a richness of intellectual, artistic, and scholarly life. By 1939, Swir was 30 years old, had published a book of poems, and was working as an editor. After the invasion, the Nazi suppression of most literary activities drove Swir and others to meet secretly. She helped with underground publications and the perpetuation of intellectual pursuits. This effort was diminished by the exodus and death of many of Poland's writers and artists whom the Nazis deported and executed in an attempt to destroy the intellectual culture of Poland.

The Germans virtually exterminated the Jewish population of Poland at Auschwitz and other camps, as well as in the infamous Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 that Swir witnessed and wrote about in a later collection of war poems. The Nazis killed three million ethnic Poles as well. Meanwhile, the Soviets forced two million Poles into eastern labor camps where many died. However, after Germany declared war on the Soviets in 1941, Stalin organized Polish armies to fight the Germans and both Poland and the U. S. S. R. raised flags over the German capitol when the Nazis were defeated.

After World War II, Poland became a Soviet satellite country and a rigid police state. Particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, intellectuals were subject to government pressures. As a result, students demonstrated for intellectual freedom in 1968 but were met with harsh reprisals and the isolation of the intelligentsia. Finally, after Polish cardinal Karol Wojtyla became Pope John Paul II in 1978, and made an inspirational trip to Poland in 1979, the intelligentsia and the labor movement formed a coalition under the protection of the church, and began to build a countersociety.

In 1980, the Solidarity labor union, under the leadership of an electrician named Lech Walesa, initiated strikes in the shipyards of Gdansk. Thus began the first independent social and political movement in postwar eastern Europe. However, the government reaction to the strikes was to impose martial law and force Solidarity underground until 1989. With the liberalized policies of Mikhail Gorbachev in the U. S. S. R., Solidarity was able to force the Polish communists to grant concessions that eventually led to the

demise of communism in Poland and the establishment of a democratic society. Unfortunately, Swir died in 1984, five years before the new freedoms were established.

Critical Overview

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then perhaps being anthologized is the sincerest form of critical acclaim that an author can merit. While access to literary criticism concerning Anna Swir is limited in English, many of her works are available in anthologies. People who are experts in poetry know the craft well and know who the best poets are, wherever they are. Consequently, there are a number of English language anthologies containing poems by Swir, and amazingly, three of them were published in 2003.

Kiss Off: Poems to Set You Free, published in January of 2003 by Mary D. Esselman and Elizabeth Ash Velez, includes Swir's Poem "She Does Not Remember." Also in January of 2003, Roger Housden published *Ten Poems to Open Your Heart*. Although none of the ten poems chosen for this book is by Anna Swir, Housden uses an excerpt from Swir's poem "The Same Inside" as part of his discussion of poems that illustrate kindness. He calls "The Same Inside" "a remarkable love poem" that shows Swir capable of "the great beating heart of compassion that the Buddhists say exists naturally in all beings." Later in 2003, Roger Housden published another book about love. The description on the book flap says that *Risking Everything: 110 Poems of Love and Revelation* is an anthology that

brings together great poets from around the world whose work transcends culture and time. Their words reach past the outer division to the universal currents of love and revelation that move and inspire us all. These poems urge us to wake up and love. They also call on us to relinquish our grip on ideas and opinions that confine us and, instead, to risk moving forward into the life that is truly ours.

Since four of Swir's poems are included in this collection, this description then applies to her work as well. Furthermore, the biographical piece on Swir included in this book provides the following criticism:

A militant feminist and author of uninhibited love poems, her work conveys an erotic intensity and warmth, along with an empathy and compassion for those who suffer. Her poems on war and the Nazi occupation of Poland were among the finest of her generation.

Another form of flattery for an author is for a doctoral student to write about that person's work. In 2002, a dissertation was approved at the University of Michigan entitled: "Bodies in Search of Self: Body and Identity in the Poetic Works of Audre Lorde, Anna Swirszczynska and Marina Tsvetaeva." The author, Laura Ann Miller-Purrenhage, says that these authors are "well-known for their sometimes shocking use of the body in their poetry and prose." She adds that:

the confluence of historical and personal trauma, modernity and postmodernity and the strain of racist, sexist and heterosexist marginalization spurred these authors toward the

body as a site where they could explore their views of identity and, simultaneously, taught them that the body is an integral part of the self.

Miller-Purrenhage claims that Swir and the other two authors "create a poetics of identity that embraces the fragmentation, fluctuation, multiplicity and embodied nature of the self" and mirror the "poetics of identity" in their "stylistics."

There were English-language reviews of Swir's poetry collections when they were translated for publication. Writing for *Magill Book Reviews*, Eric Howard says that: "Swir's great excellence as a poet is that she communicates profound sentiments in language that, even in translation, is simple, direct, and unforced."

Seamus Heaney, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995 and one of Northern Ireland's most notable contemporary poets, refers to Swir in his writings about literature. *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971—2001* is a collection, not of Heaney's poetry, but of selected prose works that include memoirs, lecture transcripts, and literary criticism, among other topics. Heaney twice quotes Swir: once when discussing inspiration, and once when discussing the poetry of Robert Lowell.

Another Nobel laureate, Czeslaw Milosz, provides extensive insight into the creativity of Swir in his introduction to the two collections of her poetry that he translated and published in the United States: *Happy as a Dog's Tail* and *Talking to My Body*. In these two books, Milosz added a transcript of a conversation that he and his co-translator, Leonard Nathan, had about Swir that discusses her style, motivation, topics, and quality. Further, Milosz included several of Swir's poems in his anthology of poetry from around the world, *A Book of Luminous Things*. All of this attention from anthologists, students, and Nobel poets constitutes impressive critical acknowledgment of Swir's talent and insight.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kerschen is a freelance writer and part-time English instructor. In this essay, Kerschen discusses two of the most notable characteristics of Swir's poetry: the brevity of her style and the dualism of her subject matter, both of which are evident in "Maternity."

The brevity of Anna Swir's poetry is deeply rooted in the history of the Polish language. The written form of the Polish vernacular originated in monasteries and religious chapters in the eleventh century, where the important historic and dynastic events were recorded according to their dates. These calendar notes were necessarily brief, using a minimum of words. In addition, the early secular literature of Poland from the Middle Ages could be intensely personal. Swir studied medieval literature in college and was, therefore, familiar with these elements from that period. As a poet, Swir achieves both this brevity and intensity of emotion in her work, thus creating a form that is as simple and direct as possible, as evidenced in "Maternity."

Medieval poetry included "miniatures" or very short poems that were highly stylized, but gave only a cameo expression to an idea. Swir took this miniature form, stripped it bare, and created a message bearer as quick as a lightning bolt. Her poems have more content than a haiku, and do not use a set form like a haiku, but the intent of a sharp point made quickly is the same. Swir believed that a poet should forego style and use only the most necessary and useful words. The result is uniquely intense poetry. Leonard Nathan, a co-translator with Milosz for Swir's books, notes that, in Swir's poetry, "the situations are filled out with a few strokes, the characters are nameless, the locale anywhere. It's almost geometrical, a matter of line more than color, of form more than substance." In "Maternity," it is true that the characters are nameless and the locale anywhere, even though we suspect that the scene described is autobiographical. However, the anonymity of characters and locale are what make the message universal.

There is also a history in European poetry of a dialogue between the body and the soul. Certainly, Swir continues this tradition of detachment in her book *Talking to My Body*, although Swir may not have considered the "self" that talks to the body to be a soul. In "Maternity," she is not talking to her own body, but to this strange product of her body that she attempts to keep separate from her self. Czeslaw Milosz, Swir's chief critic and translator, says that the theme of Swir's poetry is flesh: "Flesh in love and ecstasy, in pain, in terror, flesh afraid of loneliness, giving birth, [as in "Maternity"] resting, feeling the flow of time or reducing time to one instant." Bogdana Carpenter, a critic for *World Literature Today*, agrees that the body is the center of Swir's poetry. Further, it is the gate to knowledge of the self and the world. Carpenter adds, "In the dichotomy between the abstract and the physical, between philosophy and experience, ideas and sensations, Swir emphatically opts each time for the second term of the opposition."

But is the dichotomy not reconciled every time a poet puts pen to paper? Is not the expression of the abstract in printed, physical form, a meeting of these two opposites? Does the poet not bring her sensations, experience, ideas, and sensations all together in a poem? Swir certainly seems to do so, but perhaps that is why her poems are so

brief. Perhaps she believes that the chance to reconcile these opposites is so fleeting that it can be captured for only a moment in a poem. "Maternity" succeeds in capturing this fleeting connection: the physical aspect of giving birth leads to the abstract emotion of love; the experience of giving birth leads to the philosophy of humble acceptance; the sensation of giving birth leads to new concepts about motherhood.

Leonard Nathan says, in the dialogue between himself and Milosz about the Swir poems they translated, "The voice of these poems is that of a woman seemingly isolated from or indifferent to moral and social concerns." However, a woman who participated in the Polish resistance could not possibly be indifferent to moral and social concerns. It is possible, though, that she set those concerns aside for a while or gave them expression in a different reality. The trauma of the war most likely is the reason for her belief in the reality of the flesh to the exclusion of other realities. Carpenter suspects that it is because of Swir's war experiences with death, physical suffering, and wounds that she has such an interest in the flesh, "For the experience of war is not so much a spiritual as a physical and biological experience, and it most often brings a realization that very little matters beyond flesh."

Swir did not write about the war in her poetry until thirty years after the end of the conflict. Perhaps that part of her was hidden away. Such a reaction is fairly common among survivors of trauma□i.e., a separation of the bad experiences from the rest of one's life, as if the trauma were in another life, another world. Such a reaction allows the victim to feel that the same bad experiences could not happen in the present life because they belong to an old place and time that no longer exists. The memories are locked away in a trunk in the mind's attic and never allowed out again. Nonetheless, the person has been changed. Swir exchanged religious belief for a belief in the flesh, and proceeded to struggle with the conflict of body and soul through her poetry.

This struggle is discussed at length in the dialogue between Milosz and Nathan. They conclude that one of the results of her materialism is a mortality of human relationships. If every encounter is strictly physical, then a deeper relationship that is warm, ongoing and sympathetic does not seem possible. However, this theory does not hold true in "Maternity," because the initial distance that the mother tries to establish between herself and her child□a distance that is typical of Swir□is cast aside in the bonding that is too strong to resist.

John Carpenter, in a review for the *Kenyon Review*, connects the poems about the Warsaw Uprising with powerful statements about the defense of life, "about the life-affirming instincts and reactions of the human body when it finds itself menaced by danger. She [Swir] describes these reactions as having a power that often took her by surprise." Another explanation for the duality in Swir's poetry is offered by Eric Howard, in an article for Magill Book Reviews. He says that the mixture of fleshly realism and ecstasy is one of frailty and power. "A key to Swir's poetic technique is to move from the mundane to the transcendent, often by paying proper attention to the human, specifically the woman's, body." This latter idea seems to fit "Maternity" in that Swir moves from the physical experience of giving birth, an everyday occurrence in the world, to the transcendent epiphany of maternal love.

Howard also says that in Swir's poem "What is a Pineal Gland" the poet muses on how much, if at all, one person can belong to another. Swir concludes in this poem that the bodies of the two lovers are apart, with the implication, Howard says, that they are apart even from those who live in them. In "Maternity," Swir answers that question differently: a mother and child belong to each other, with the emphasis it seems on the mother being possessed by the child. Although Swir tries to explain to the child that they are separate bodies, the fact that the child's body came out of her own is too overwhelming a connection to win the argument. She has to concede to their bond.

Swir's feminism also contributes to her duality, at least in the expectations of others. She writes about a woman's life in the twentieth century when the perceptions of a woman's role are so much in flux that emancipation sometimes means loneliness. For Swir, the isolation extends to her separation from her religion and her alienation from her own body. It does not, however, separate her from her country. It might be expected that someone as skeptical and removed from idealism as Swir would not be patriotic, but the Polish experience has resulted in a country where patriotism is in the very marrow of the culture and even Swir could not escape from that. On the contrary, she embraced her loyalty with a devotion as religious as any faith. She may have been a liberated woman, but she yearned for the liberation of her country as well. Once again, the expectation that Swir was too hedonistic to care about politics is as misplaced as the mother's expectation in "Maternity" that she can escape her loyalties to her child.

A review of "Maternity" shows that this poem is indeed another of Swir's poems that approaches a subject from the viewpoint of flesh. This poem also continues the dialogue between body and soul, but for once the soul looks back at her with a baby's eyes. Whereas Felicity Rosslyn, a critic for the *PN Review* found that Swir's poetry describes an involvement with the flesh that removes the person from consciousness, responsibility, and memory, in this poem, the mother can no longer escape reality through physical ecstasy. Her body has produced something else physical that has sufficient power to "flood" and "drown" her defiant detachment, making her submit to the "wave" of emotion that will make her answer to and be responsible for this child. As a result, the poet known for shockingly erotic poetry, her worship of the flesh, her independence, has created a mother's poem that is a traditional sentiment written in Swir's unique brevity and style.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on "Maternity," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Carter is currently employed as a freelance writer. In this essay, Carter examines the role of both flesh and feminism plays in shaping the poet's work.

Swir's "Maternity" is part of a poetry collection that mirrors the poet's feminist leanings and her attempts to come to terms with eroticism. Critic and poet Czeslaw Milosz, in the introduction to *Talking to My Body*, writes of the central theme of Swir's poetry: flesh. Milosz describes her work as an expression of the flesh, "flesh in love□ecstasy, flesh in terror, flesh afraid of loneliness, exuberant, running, lazy, flesh of a woman giving birth, resting . . . feeling the flow of time or reducing time to one instant." Maternity relies on this theme, working as one of the many of the poetic snapshots of Swir's that delve into the human condition, that of the flesh.

Characteristic of Swir's poetry is a marked separation of the speaker from her body. The poem opens with the speaker having given birth to new life, a life that "came out of [her] entrails." Instead of being a cause for celebration, the birth is equated to an expulsion from the body, followed by "viscera," or internal organs. The words give a somewhat gruesome depiction, equally sterile and scientific in their assessment. Moving on to the next line, the poem speaks of the baby not as joy anticipated, but rather as the "sacrifice of" the speaker's life.

Rather than relief after the birth, a psychic struggle ensues. As the work moves forward, the speaker defies the new life, exclaiming "You are not going to defeat me." The speaker is not an egg waiting to be cracked; she will not be taken off guard. She is not someone to be walked over. Instead of pulling the baby to her or shielding it in her nurturing arms, she is poised and ready to defend herself against this alien entity whom minutes ago emerged from her very flesh. The speaker's reaction is very hostile, which is not at all what one might expect from a new mother.

There is a shifting at the end of the poem when "the little puppet" becomes the flesh of her flesh. Tiny movements, the wave of a tiny finger, give way to a flood of humility, and the speaker drowns in emotion. The defiance and bravado the speaker displays earlier in the work betrays her own vulnerability. The image of the cracked shell is really a metaphor for her emotional vulnerability. She is more fragile and sensitive than she lets on. She acknowledges this life as a part of herself. Realizing the ramifications of motherhood, the responsibility is almost too much for the speaker to bear. She is overcome by the connection. The sacrifice of the speaker's life, the reader concludes, is really her heart.

Swir's poetry is informed by her life experience as a woman but also as a survivor of the Nazi occupation of Poland during World War II. In the introduction to *Talking to My Body*, Milosz quotes the poet who once waited an hour to be executed. She was radically changed by the experience. To this end, Swir claims "War made me another person. Only then did my own life and the life of my contemporaries enter my poems." But, according to Milosz, Swir had an equally difficult time finding the proper form for

what she had seen and lived through. "Maternity" is a reflection of this deeper struggle, one Milosz says is rooted in what he coins a "paradoxical duality." The personae of Swir's poems is "trapped by their flesh, but also distinct from it." He concludes that Swir's poetry "is about not being identical with one's body, about sharing its joys and pains and still rebelling against its laws."

In "Maternity" there is a huge shift in voice, from one of complete disconnect to the reality or deeper consciousness of a tie that cannot be broken. The line "I lean over a little puppet" is repeated twice, part of a distinct movement of the flesh. The birth of the baby is recounted as if a vital part of her body has been lost. There is an alienation of the flesh after exiting the speaker's body. Four eyes meet, yet there is no soulful connection. The form the baby's flesh has taken is different; it is not recognized by the speaker. Then, suddenly, eyes meet once more, the biological connection is recognized, and there is a uniting of the flesh once again, between mother and child. The puppet is an appropriate metaphor; it mirrors the same duality of which Milosz speaks. At one point, it is a lifeless form; at another, an impressionable life force.

A violent shift in imagery mirrors a violence of shifting emotions, from one of detached observation, to one of defiance, and finally complete surrender. There is a rebellion occurring against what the speaker should feel. She is distinct from her own flesh, yet hopelessly trapped in it. The speaker has become engulfed by the natural bond that occurs between mother and child, as the tiny life in front of her tugs at her heartstrings. Sweet release does not come with the speaker's acceptance; rather, she is drowning rather than languishing in love. These final words mirror doubt, incredible fear, and a sense of loss, reasonably shaped by the poet's own life experiences. Swir's rebellion within involved justifying the atrocities, or the seeming inhumanity of the war with the realities of the flesh, of all that is human, of joy, of passion, and particularly, of love. It is quite possible that in the hope of the flesh, she saw an inevitable hopelessness in the human condition, a vulnerability in being human.

During the 1950s and 1960s, women in ever-increasing numbers began to question their roles in society. According to Ruth Rosen, author of *The World Split Open*, women saw their role models, their mothers, "thwarted in their efforts toward self-realization and expression." For many, it was "a deep and bitter lesson." There was a strong resolve by many not to let this happen again. In a discussion of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Rosen mentions the educated women whose interviews formed the basis of Friedan's work. "Many of these educated women, Friedan discovered, had nurtured dreams that were never realized, but also never forgotten." Rosen then concludes that the postwar conviction that women should limit their lives to the role of wife and homemaker "had tied them to the family, closed opportunities, and crushed many spirits."

There is no male figure in Swir's poem; the events are described from the perspective of someone who is completely and utterly alone, isolated in her motherhood, and, as the poem reaches its ultimate conclusion, her overwhelming passion. The initial description of the birth process is taken from a feminist perspective and opens the poem up to a slightly different interpretation. The baby of Swir's work becomes the speaker's undoing.

In the beginning, the speaker mentions the birth of her child as if it were a human sacrifice. She looks into her own child's eyes without feeling. The poem then moves forward in protest rather than appreciation. This new relationship is a threat, marked by defiant declaration: "I won't be / a footbridge that you would take on the way to your life / I will defend myself." Within the passage, the speaker initially likens herself to a cracked egg, a metaphor for her own vulnerability. The fear of motherhood is not necessarily one of responsibility a new parent faces in shaping the future of a child, but of the speaker's own future, evoking her strong battle cry.

The depiction of motherhood in Swir's "Maternity" mirrors the author's amazing ability to speak to the unspoken, of capturing the true essence of an event riddled with feeling. Moving in and out of the realms of the flesh, Swir captures with complete candor and intensity the anticipation of motherhood and all that it implies. Swir's raw, honest assessment is a bridge to understanding fears and emotions lurking within the maternal conscience. Her impressions of motherhood affirm its undeniable role in defining and shaping the lives of women.

Source: Laura Carter, Critical Essay on "Maternity," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Explore the relationship between Czeslaw Milosz and Anna Swir. How has Milosz been important to the development of an American audience for Swir?

Consult some of the English-language anthologies that contain poems by Swir and comment on the anthologist's reasons for choosing to include this Polish poet.

Swir was involved in the Polish underground during World War II. Research the Polish underground and describe the work that she and other notables, such as Pope John Paul II and Czeslaw Milosz, did to resist Nazi occupation.

Swir is considered a feminist poet. Who are some other feminist writers and what traits do they have in common?

Do a search for poems about motherhood from other writers in other eras. How does the attitude toward motherhood change or stay the same through the years? How do the poems differ if the author is male instead of female?

Compare and Contrast

1930s and 1940s: Between the World Wars, literature in independent Poland flourishes. After the Nazi invasion, cultural and intellectual pursuits are forbidden, thus forcing the literary community to work underground.

1980: Anna Swir copyrights the poems published in 1978 as *Happy as a Dog's Tail*, including the poem "Maternity." 1980 is the last year that Polish writers enjoy a freedom unknown in other Eastern bloc countries. In 1981, the government ends its liberal publication policy. As a result, a large underground press develops.

Today: After the 1989 defeat of communism, censorship ends. Polish literature again becomes a vital part of the culture and is now available to the rest of the world.

1930s and 1940s: The spectre of Hitler looms over all of Europe, especially in neighboring Poland. During the invasion of Poland, millions of Poles die in the effort to defeat Germany. Poland is then enslaved after World War I by a Soviet takeover.

1980: Because of the Gdansk shipyard strike, the government is forced to reach an accord with the 10-million member trade union Solidarity.

Today: Poland is no longer a Soviet satellite state but a vibrant independent democracy whose gross national product is the highest in Europe by the mid-1990s.

1930s and 1940s: In 1933, Czeslaw Milosz's first book of verse, *Poem of Frozen Time*, expresses fears of an impending war and worldwide disaster. During the war, he publishes three anti-Nazi books through the underground literary community. After the war, Milosz works in the diplomatic service.

1980: Milosz wins the Nobel Prize for Literature for his body of work in poetry and essays. He retires from his job as a professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of California at Berkeley.

Today: Milosz, an American citizen since 1970, remains in the United States and translates two books of Swir's poetry.

What Do I Read Next?

Happy as a Dog's Tail is another translation of Swir's poetry by Czeslaw Milosz and Leonard Nathan. It was published in the United States in 1985. It contains virtually the same Introduction and Dialogue as *Talking to My Body* and has many of the same poems.

New and Collected Poems: 1931—2001 is a collection of poetry by Czeslaw Milosz, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1980 and translator of Swir's poetry. Received with rave reviews, the poetry reflects his realm of worldly experience from his twentieth to his ninetieth birthday.

A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry (1998) is a collection that was personally chosen by Czeslaw Milosz. Prefaces to most of the poems, written by Milosz, greatly enhance the reader's understanding and enjoyment. The collection, which includes Chinese, American and European poetry, includes several selections from Swir's works.

Risking Everything: 110 Poems of Love and Revelation (2003), by Roger Housden, is an anthology of poems that urges us to wake up and risk moving forward into life and love. Four of the poems are by Anna Swir: "The Greatest Love," "Dithyramb of a Happy Woman," "The Same Inside," and "Thank You, My Fate."

Czeslaw Milosz is one of Swir's biggest fans, yet she is not included in his anthology *Postwar Polish Poetry*. The reason is probably that this book was published in 1965 and Swir did not begin publishing the feminist and erotic poetry for which she gained attention until a few years later. Nonetheless, this book is a good look at her peers.

Further Study

Kridl, Manfred, *A Survey of Polish Literature and Culture*, Columbia University Press, 1967.

This book presents a general picture of the development of Polish literature from the Middle Ages to 1945. Included is information about the cultural background and social movements of the literary works. The section on pre—World War II Polish literature gives a good backdrop to the time when Swir was beginning her career.

Krzyzanowski, Julian, *A History of Polish Literature*, translated by Doris Ronowicz, rev. and enl. by Maria Bokszczanin and Halina Geber, Polish Scientific Publishers, 1978.

This book is a translation of a famous work by Krzyzanowski, who is considered one of the greatest historians of Polish literature. While multiple editions of this book have made it familiar to the Polish reader, it was actually written with foreign readers in mind so that they might have a guide to Polish literature along with its historical and cultural background.

Milosz, Czeslaw, *The History of Polish Literature*, Macmillan, 1969.

Considered the standard in English for information about the literary tradition in Poland, this volume is written by a Nobel prize—winning Polish author who lives in the United States and is responsible for a number of translations of Polish literature, including Swir's *Talking to My Body*.

Spearing, A. C., *Readings in Medieval Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Anna Swir was greatly interested in and influenced by the poetry of medieval times. This book is a collection of essays on some of the most famous poems of that period.

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Rosen, Ruth, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, Penguin, 2000, pp. 3—15.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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