

Redefining the symbol of the infant: works by coleridge and strickland



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The infant has always been a versatile and powerful symbol for a variety of themes; themes such as new life, innocence, potential, and even loss. While in both Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "To a Friend, Who Asked How I Felt, When the Nurse First Presented My Infant to Me" and Agnes Strickland's "The Infant" the titular newborns are utilized in order to convey themes of innocence and beatitude, their contrasting circumstances lead to starkly different inferences in terms of overall meaning. Coleridge deals with the acceptance of life and realization of potential, while Strickland copes with the loss of both, leading to the possible redefinition of the symbolic entity that is the infant.

Coleridge's ecstatic response to the birth of his child is apparent even before reading the sonnet itself, with the superfluous title of the poem and its prideful, self-centered diction revealing his irrepressible joy on the occasion. By using words such as "I," "my," and "me," Coleridge discloses the personal pride and fondness he feels towards his newborn son. However, at the beginning of the sonnet Coleridge also expresses his concern for his child's future considering his own past, noting that that "For dimly on my thoughtful spirit burst/ All I had been, and all my babe might be!". By conveying this matter, Coleridge reveals the misgivings and regrets he holds concerning his personal history, and the fact that he fears the same for his child in terms of its potential to repeat his own mistakes. And yet, as the sonnet progresses, its focus shifts towards the infant itself, and subsequently towards its mother, where Coleridge's fears are allayed. Stating that he was "thrilled and melted," and "all beguiled/ Of dark remembrance, and presageful fear," when he saw the beatific scene of the infant "on its

mother's arm,/ And hanging at her bosom (she the while/ Bent o'er its features with a tearful smile)", it is apparent that the sacred bond between the mother and the infant has reassured Coleridge in terms of the child's well being. Further expounding on the relationship between the mother and the infant, Coleridge also states that, " So for the mother's sake the child was dear,/ And dearer was the mother for the child." This observation on the reliance between the two explores the physical needs of the child and the emotional requirements of the mother; a symbiotic relationship rooted in the powerful, hallowed symbol that is the infant.

In the same manner that the sentiment of Coleridge's sonnet is apparent even in its title, so it is in Strickland's " The Infant," with its solemn brevity portending the dark nature of poem ahead. By being so brief, Strickland emotionally distances herself from the infant in question, hoping to fend off the vulnerability she faces when the child is lost. Contrary to Coleridge's healthy, promising infant, the one Strickland observes is deathly ill, upon which " the withering blight/ Of pale disease had fallen." Lamenting that " stern Death was nigh,/ And Life's young wings were fluttering for their flight," Strickland creates a powerful image of the infant's final struggles to remain alive, despite impending demise. Furthermore, while using the formidable symbols of Life and Death to illustrate the child's battle, she simultaneously has their transition represent the theme of loss. Describing the infant on its deathbed " Like a fair flower untimely snatched away," Strickland uses the innocent simile of a flower being picked to contrast the grim nature of the child's reality, with that disparity making the sonnet's macabre nature all the more apparent. Additionally, the mother of the infant comes to play a role

much unlike the mother in Coleridge's sonnet, with each of their tears representing starkly different circumstances. Whereas Coleridge's wife's "tearful smile" represents extreme joy on the occasion of new life, the mother in Strickland's sonnet and her "tear,/ Which on its (infant) placid cheek unheeded lay," represent deep sorrow on the occasion of personal loss. Furthermore, the central image of the infant is emphasized by Strickland's three separate observations of it; when a healthy newborn, when of poor health, and when finally passed away. In the final encounter, rather than saying she "saw" the infant, she instead remarks that she "beheld" it. This detail, in conjunction with the fact that she describes the infant's smile in death as "unearthly" and deems it "early blessed," indicates that Strickland regards the infant as an almost holy symbol of lost innocence and life, a notion that correlates directly to the role of the infant in the sonnet.

In spite of the vast number of noted differences between the infant-themed sonnets of Coleridge and Strickland, there exist numerous constancies allying the two as definitively homologous. Both poems align firstly on the topic of potential, with Coleridge commenting that, "For dimly on my thoughtful spirit burst/ All I had been, and all my babe might be!", while Strickland remarks on how the infant's "fond mother stood delighted by, to see its morn of being dawn so bright." While Coleridge may be expressing fear that his child will end up making mistakes as he did, while the mother of the baby in Strickland's sonnet merely looks forward to all the baby may bring to her her life, the idea that the infant is a symbol of new hope and potential is one that is indisputable. Furthermore, both sonnets share the theme of mother-infant bonds, with Coleridge noting that "I saw it on its

mother's arm/ And hanging at her bosom (she the while/ Bent o'er its features with a tearful smile)," while Strickland remarks how " the withering blight/ Of pale disease had fallen, moaning lie/ On that sad mother's breast." Though clearly within different circumstances, both sonnets explore the deep attraction that exists between a mother and her child. Both also use the image of the " bosom" or " breast" to reinforce the biological aspect of infantile dependence on the mother, and the subsequently strong bond created between the two. Finally, both sonnets utilize the symbol of a smile to relate peace, though Coleridge sees it in the peace a mother finds with her child in her arms, while Strickland finds an " unearthly smile," that represents the beatitude associated with a blissful death.

While Samuel Taylor Coleridge's " To a Friend, Who Asked How I Felt, When the Nurse First Presented My Infant to Me" and Agnes Strickland's " The Infant" may differ vastly in terms of their ultimate meaning, they share many of the the same themes often associated with the involvement of their titular characters. And yet simultaneously, rather than merely exploring commonplace representations of the infant, both poets chose to push the boundaries of what is commonly considered to correspond with the infant symbol. By providing novel representation ideas such as doubtful potential and impactful loss, Coleridge and Strickland effectively learn to deal with the challenges presented by their respective infant situations, while also redefining the prospective meaning of a well-known and respected symbol.