

Marge piercy's "the  
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"those winter  
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[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



## **Marge Piercy's "The Secretary Chant" and Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" Essay Sample**

### 1. Introduction

The two poems written by Marge Piercy and Robert Hayden, "The Secretary Chant" and "Those Winter Sundays", respectively, are exemplary in the use of imagery; however, the images communicate a greater message for each, delving into the deeper meanings of emotion and purpose. For these are the exact themes behind the two poems—"The Secretary Chant" being a description of a woman's body through the various implements and duties used by an office secretary, yet conveying an emotion that asserts femininity and the fear of its loss; while "Those Winter Sundays" appropriate the purpose of weather-beaten hands, yet the underlying emotion is clearly about love and alienation.

The presentation of purpose and emotion, as well as their connections and permutations, is the basis for the discussion regarding the two poems.

### 1. Femininity, Motherhood, and Identity in "The Secretary Chant"

The direct tone and short lines written by Piercy are the first qualities one may note about the poem; there is no pretense, no long-winded allusion to a far-fetched concept. The imagery is startling, especially in the first line, "My hips are a desk" (Piercy, 1973, line 1), which is a clear metaphor; the persona in the poem refers to the prime child-bearing parts of her body as a desk, or the foundation on which all her office work is made. This at once reveals the perceived purpose of the persona: a woman whose function is to

give birth to children, and a secretary who is confined to the limited space of her desk.

Another metaphor that confirms this concept are the lines " My breasts are quills of mimeograph ink"(Piercy, 1973, line 5), which turns to the accompanying actions of pregnancy and motherhood, as well as the endless copying and duplicating of documents done by the secretary. Such a graphic image does not bode wonderfully to the mind's eye, for the black liquid makes it seem simultaneously impersonal and dirty—the opposite connotations of the symbols of life. In fact, the repetitive duties of the secretary are more pronounced in this image, as is the purpose of mimeographing and replicating. " My feet bear casters" (Piercy, 1973, line 7) and " My head is a switchboard" (Piercy, 1973, line 10) both refer to specific office equipment often associated with secretaries, such as filing cabinets and chairs with wheels to steer them wherever they are needed, and the switchboard is the main channel for receiving and transferring calls. But these could also depict the situation of the pregnant woman, as she is conventionally directed and pushed toward societal norms and expectations devoid of her own choices.

The poet also alludes to the challenges a secretary and a pregnant woman face, in the lines " My navel is a reject button,/From my mouth issue canceled reams" (Piercy, 1973, lines 16-17), and " File me under W/because I wonce/ was/ a woman" (Piercy, 1973, lines 22-25). Here the emotion shines through, the feelings of rejection and uselessness, particularly when

connecting the navel and the mouth; these represent the possibilities if a woman fails to give birth, and strips her of her womanhood.

### III. Labor, Distance, and Regret in "Those Winter Sundays"

If Piercy appropriated metaphors in creating the imagery in her poem, Robert Hayden made the best use of descriptions in conveying the mental pictures of his childhood with his father. Like the previous poem, this one begins with a specific painting of the scene he was most familiar with—"blueback cold", "cracked hands that ached", and "made banked fires ablaze" (Hayden, 1962, lines 2, 3, and 5), all of which provide the opposing feelings of cold and warmth as transformed by the manual work of his father. Purpose is literally shown in the poem, as the father apparently saw it as his duty to keep the home comfortable for his son despite the pains he had to go through to do it.

Soon after, the poem shifts to reveal several emotions felt by the persona, ranging from indifference, in "No one ever thanked him" (Hayden, 1962, line 5), trepidation, in "fearing the chronic angers of that house" (Hayden, 1962, line 9), which were in the past; the realization comes through in the last stanza, as he says, "What did I know, what did I know/of loves austere and lonely offices?" (Hayden, 1962, lines 13-14). The persona is obviously recalling his relationship with his father during his childhood, when he failed to acknowledge the love and care accorded to him; only in the end, which moves to the present, does the persona realize his shortcomings—that he failed to recognize the simple and honest gestures of fatherly love then, implying the troubled experiences and rebelliousness during his youth.

Regret is the operative concept in the last part of the poem, which is the answer to the established purpose of the father associated with labor and physical work.

### 1. Conclusion

The symbols and presentation of purpose and meaning vis-a-vis the corresponding emotion in the imagery of the two poems vary only in sequence and style. In the first, femininity and oppression are made contrapuntal, the images providing the emotional results of the woman's/secretary's purpose, while the second poem offers a causal relationship between labor and regret in a linear narrative. "The Secretary Chant" makes use of graphic imagery and shock value to communicate the theme of feminism, while "Those Winter Sundays", in its title alone, already prepares the reader for the images of cold, in 'winter', and warmth, in 'Sundays'; these are later developed to reveal the qualities in not just their physical meaning, but in the atmosphere that characterized the relationship between the father and the poem's persona.

### References

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