

'one flesh' essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

On the surface, 'One Flesh' is the poet's description of the relationship that exists between her elderly married parents, a relationship which, though full of 'passion' in the past, is now sterile and 'cold.' The main theme of the poem, however, is the mystery and indissolubility of the married state by which two, however 'separate' and 'apart' they may seem, are actually 'strangely close together' in that they have become 'One Flesh.' In marriage, 'oneness' grows through sexual passion and the conception of children; it then moves on to another kind of connectedness that exists even in silence and physical separation.

The poem thus addresses the different implications of 'one flesh,' the physical as well as the mysterious unknown aspects of a relationship. The title of the poem, 'One Flesh,' is drawn both from the Christian marriage service and from the Bible. In Genesis, it is written that 'a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.' Jesus also alludes to this in the New Testament, when he says of marriage 'The two shall become one - no longer two, but one.' Thus the title directly alludes to the mystery of marriage, which cannot be explained in logical or scientific terms: that two distinct beings can actually be so joined by a spiritual act that they become 'one.' The argument of the poem falls into three sections, demarcated by the three separate stanzas.

In stanza one, the poet describes the state of her parents 'now' in very literal, factual terms: they lie 'apart' and 'separate,' engaged in totally different activities, he 'with a book' and she 'dreaming of childhood.' Their situation does not seem a happy one, as he is not content with his book, which lies 'unread' as he seems to be brooding; she stares at the ceiling, '

Her eyes fixed on the shadows overhead.' The picture stanza one creates is a very bleak one, of isolation and discontent: the parents seem to be waiting for 'Some new event' that will break the monotony of their lives, but there is no sign that any such event will occur. The physical passion between them is clearly dead, as they sleep apart; it is also significant that the mother is dreaming of her childhood when 'All men' were 'elsewhere,' a world which contains no sexuality whatsoever. The fact that it is night in this stanza stresses the fact that this couple are near the end of their lives: they live now in a world of 'shadows' and there seems little that life has left for them.

In the second stanza, the poet focuses on the past sexual relationship of the parents' marriage, suggesting three phases: passion, coolness and chastity. The passion between them was obviously once very strong, because it has tossed them up like 'flotsam,' debris from a ship wrecked in a storm; but this passion is distant in time, as the word 'former' suggests. Now their passion has burned out, leaving them 'cool' and seemingly without energy as they 'hardly ever touch.' Sexual contact between the parents now is painful, 'a confession/Of having little feeling – or too much;' in other words, sex could only lead to disturbing revelations, either that they have no true love or feeling for each other any more, or that they deeply regret their lost youth and lost passion and so dread the coming of old age. Because such self-awareness would be extremely upsetting, the parents prefer to avoid it and so their sex life is virtually coming to an end.

Finally, as the last embers of passion are dying out, the poet looks to the future her parents face without any sexual contact whatsoever: 'Chastity...a destination/For which their whole lives were a preparation.' In other words,

the marriage has progressed from passion to coolness and thence to a total absence of sex, a situation which will endure for the rest of their lives. Again, the situation of the parents is made to seem a bleak one, made even bleaker by the fact that the death of passion and the acceptance of chastity seems unavoidable - this, the poet implies, is the pattern that all marriages must take.

Having created such a bleak situation in stanza one, however, and having made it even bleaker by generalizing it as a universal paradigm of marriage in stanza two, the poet now addresses the mystery of 'one flesh,' how two people, so utterly apart, are still conjoined in the mystery of 'one flesh.' At the beginning of stanza three, the poet uses the word 'strangely' twice in line one, saying that her parents are 'strangely' apart and yet 'strangely close together.' The poet explains this paradox by saying that her parents are linked even in their 'silence' by an invisible 'thread' that connects them; even though they do not 'wind in' the thread and become physically connected they still 'hold' the thread of connectedness. And this thread is held as they slowly age, gently touched by time's 'feather.' Finally, at the end of the stanza, the poet asks herself a question: do her parents actually know that they're 'old' now that the 'fire' of their passion has 'grown cold'? The point is here that we age imperceptibly, and are often not aware of the changes that are overtaking us; however, the poet seems also to want to suggest that because of the mysterious connectedness that exists between two married people the loss of physical passion may not be the whole story - though sex may have grown 'cold' they are bound together in other, more mysterious ways. Thus the argument of the poem moves from the

apparently bleak loss of closeness between the parents because of the death of passion to the realization that they are connected more subtly.

The patterns of figurative language in the poem also reflect this juxtaposition between the cold, hard fact of the literal death of passion and the mysterious, paradoxical state of still being 'one flesh' despite this. In the first stanza, which sets out the relationship of the parents in terms of simple observation, no metaphoric language occurs: it is as if the current barren state of the marriage allows for no beauty, no metaphor, no rich or allusive language. In stanza two, figurative language begins to appear. The earlier state of the marriage when there was 'passion' and fire and romance, is described using a highly evocative metaphor to express the glamour and excitement of that phase of life: it is suggested that the parents had a dramatic and adventurous relationship, like that of a ship on the high seas, a relationship of intensity and heat, a relationship from which they are now washed up like 'flotsam,' lying 'cool' in their beds.

In contrast, the current state of the marriage is almost a penitential one, one of suffering, since it is connected to 'confession;' and the future state of the marriage is imaged as the 'destination' of 'Chastity,' a cold and passionless port to which the ship of their lives must come in. So while the passionate state of the early marriage is connected to highly evocative language, the present and future states of the marriage are imaged using a rather sterile, non-visualisable simile and metaphor. Finally, in stanza three, the mysterious 'spiritual' connectedness of the two couples is presented using a rich simile and metaphor analogous to that used to describe the 'former passion:' the bond of 'Silence' between them is described as 'like a thread to hold/And

not wind in,' and time is described as ' a feather/Touching them gently.'

Here, the image of the thread has complex intertextual associations related to Greek mythology: it evokes memories of the thread of Fate that measures out each human life, a thread cut by the goddess Atropos to signify the end of that life; it also conjures up the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur, in which Ariadne gave Theseus a thread to ' wind in' to escape from the Minotaur's maze. In the poem, the fact that the thread is not wound in could suggest a counter-juxtaposition to this myth: by winding in the thread Theseus and Ariadne were united; by not winding in the thread this couple are left physically apart. Analogously, the reference to the feather alludes to the idiomatic expression ' as light as a feather' in reference to weight and balance: here, this could subtly suggest the fact that the marriage is a balance between the two, who are touched by the feather equally – that, though they are aging, they remain subtly the same, united as one.

So the pattern of figurative language in the poem is very interesting: the physical connectedness of the stage of ' passion' is marked by very evocative imagery, as is the mysterious state of spiritual connectedness that binds the two even when the literal, observable condition of the marriage is metaphorically rather sterile and cold. Phonologically, the poem has no regular rhythm, perhaps alluding to the physical severance between the two, for whom physical harmony no longer exists; however, it does have a regular rhyme scheme of ababaa, cdcdcc, efefef. The pattern here is an interesting one: in the first two stanzas it seems as though the separateness of the couple is imaged in the first four lines of each stanza, where two conjoined lines do not rhyme; their subtle connectedness could be alluded to in the

rhyming couplets that close the stanza. In the last stanza, however, the rhyme scheme changes so that no two lines rhyme together. Could this allude to the uncertainty that ends the last stanza, as the poet asks herself a question she cannot answer, the question as to the actual nature of the relationship between her parents? This lack of closure in the rhyme scheme in the last stanza thus works to suggest the 'mysterious' nature of marriage, which does pose questions we cannot logically answer, especially the question of how 'two' can become 'one' so indissolubly.

The fact of two becoming one is also suggested in the poet's use of parallelisms. In stanza one, even though the two people are lying 'apart' their activities are described in parallel clauses: 'He with a book, keeping the light on late,/She like a girl dreaming of childhood;' 'the book he holds unread,/Her eyes fixed on the shadows overhead.' Parallelism also occurs in stanza two in the line 'Of having little feeling – or too much,' and in the first line of stanza three, 'Strangely apart, yet strangely close together.' These parallelisms subtly stresses the fact that in marriage 'two shall become one – no longer two but one.' So, in conclusion, this poem addresses the mystery of the sacrament of marriage and explores the paradox of how two distinct beings can be joined into 'One Flesh.'