

Deakin University

A764 Master of Arts Writing and Literature

ALL727 - Sex, the Body and American Poetry

Tutor/Lecturer – Dr. Eva Birch

Summative Assessment 1 – 1500 Words

Due: 8pm AEST Wednesday 17th August 2022 (Extension approved)

Primary Text Author: Mina Loy

Close Reading Title: “Parturition” (1914)

Close Reading Author: Ajanta Judd 22035468

Assessment 1: Analysis of set poem or poem/s from Week 1-4 responding to a set topic question:

Question 4. How does Mina Loy represent free love OR motherhood?

This close reading of Mina Loy's "Parturition" (1997) will focus on specific stanzas within the poem. It will interpret and examine Loy's creative use of raw, graphic, and esoteric narrative, as she experiences the travails of childbirth and imminent motherhood. Although first published in 1914, "Parturition" (ibid) was written in response to the difficult birth of her first child, Oda, in 1904 (Rolle, 2010). It was the first poem ever written about the physical experience of giving birth from the parturient woman's point of view (Sánchez Calle, 2007) and it bears significance in the history of modern poetry as well as in the literature of modern sexuality (Koudis, 1980).

Informing Loy's poetry was her somewhat introjected response to the tribulations of her life; especially her often adverse relationships with men and subsequently, motherhood; the sum of which created a plethora of sadness, trauma, and loss. As Koudis suggests, much of the reasoning behind Loy's motivations is conjecture (ibid). However, it is known that she had experienced a failed marriage; an unplanned pregnancy: '*Of unpredicted maternity*' (as noted in the twelfth stanza of "Parturition"); the death of a child; the illness, kidnapping (by her ex-husband) and subsequent death of another child; the disappearance and mysterious death of her lover and, possibly other interrelationship sufferings. These occurrences influenced her disillusionment with gender role imbalances within western culture and engendered a critique of feminine/masculine dynamics which suffused much of her written work and through which she came to advocate impersonal/unemotional sex over the trappings of romantic love. These dissatisfactions culminated in Loy writing "The Feminist Manifesto" (1997), in the same year as she wrote "Parturition" (ibid), although the former remained unpublished in her lifetime (Koudis, 1980).

In the first stanza of "Parturition" (1997), the narrator places herself at the centre of her existence; as woman at the centre of a circle of pain. Loy's first labour was difficult and the circumstances surrounding Oda's conception suggest that a rape occurred (Rolle 2010). It is likely that these circumstances would have negatively impacted her attitude to pregnancy and labour.

*'I am the centre
Of a circle of pain
Exceeding its boundaries in every direction'*

Here, she situates herself in the centre of a circle, experiencing the sensation of a pain, which is all encompassing and extends out beyond the limitations of the circle. This depicts the act of labour – the loosening and stretching of muscles and the dilation of the cervix in readiness for birth. The emphasis on *'I am'* places woman at centre stage, as a powerful force – creatively responding to intense contractions and orchestrating her way through the birthing process. The statement *'I am'*, has historical significance in Christianity and Loy, (whose mother was overbearingly evangelical) was known to have sought spiritual refuge after the death of Oda from meningitis at twelve months of age. *'I am'*, appears numerous times in the Greek text of John's gospel wherein Jesus repeatedly states his title *'I Am'* with seven different metaphors which reveal his 'saving' relationship to his followers: *'I am the way; I am the truth and the life'* (Wiersbe, 2011). This resonates with the author's first line in which she is expressing: *'I am the way; my body is the way; I contain and give birth to the truth of life'*. She is alone in her creation; consumed by a uniquely feminine experience in which she is pure potentiality.

In enduring what was known to be a difficult labour, Loy becomes self-existent. She assumes the role of (God)dess creator and takes centre stage within and without the poem. With the emphasis on: *'I am the centre'* – she is the centre of her experience, a powerful primordial and archetypal force, where nothing else exists except her struggle and a striving to derive comfort from the wider cosmos. The toil of labour brings her to: *'the nucleus of being'* (end of second stanza) and closer to such with each contraction: *'On infinitely prolonged nerve-vibrations; or in contraction'*. With each dilation of the cervical muscle, the pain increases. In the sense that she is enveloped by a *'a circle of pain'* - that pain fuses her being and the body/mind separation no longer exists. Intense pain brings full attention to the body and to counteract or ameliorate that pain, she reaches toward the centre of being – in an altered consciousness - where she seeks spiritual solace. Loy uses the words cosmic and cosmos three times throughout the poem and in the third line of the second

stanza: *'In my congested cosmos of agony'*, she declares that the pain is so immense that it is of cosmic proportions; but unlike the cosmos as a 'well-ordered whole', she is fragmenting and grappling with intellectual subservience to her body. Of interest is that Loy uses cosmos both to depict immensity of size and as a system of thought as in the: *'new gender free intellectual cosmos'* (Stevenson, 2010).

By virtue of the intensity of childbirth, external considerations drop away. The intellect, political leanings, and artistic milieus, fade into nothingness. The narrator, a woman of high intellect, rich vocabulary, and radical creativity, must confront the limitations of her existence. She is traversing empowerment through creation and, also submission to her body'. She becomes an entity unto herself - self existent – and conjoined with the cosmic divinity.

'locate an irritation without
it is within
Within
It is without'
is identical with the extensity
Of intension'.

In this third stanza, *'extensity'* becomes an attribute of sensation whereby space or size is perceived. It alludes to the extension of the birth canal and the sensitisation of nerves, of sensibilities - and the synchronised efforts of cervix, vaginal walls and perinium to externalise the child. *'Intension'* in the last line of this stanza, exemplifies the internal content of the experience. It hints at the phenomenological ineffability of childbirth wherein everything becomes internalised: physically, biologically, and psychically. Yet simultaneously, there is a striving to produce an outcome; something carried inside must become external. To bear the force of bodily processes, the parturient must succumb to an all-consuming mind/body imperative which takes her *'to the pinpoint nucleus of being'*.

Loy writes in the fourth stanza: *'I am the false quantity'*, alluding to her being disassociated with harmony and struggling to reconcile with her circumstances; the intense pain, and the autonomic forces of her body. This phrase is also indicative of her being placed unwittingly into a pregnancy/childbirth role. Here again, she is at odds with her experience – due to physical and psychological pain – has lost her locus of control and struggles to find equanimity. *'in the harmony of physiological potentiality'* to which she strives in the second line, she then writes of *'gaining self-control'* (as she feels out of control); and *'I should be consonant'*. In other words: 'I should be in agreeance with' – 'I should be in harmony'. I am not, therefore, *'I am a false quantity'*. Further to this interpretation, *'I am a false quantity'* also indicates a certain victimhood as though what she is undergoing, was forced upon her and she was afforded no personal agency.

In her attempts to reconcile her disharmony, she gravitates toward the goddess-like divine in which she seeks to derive comfort – expanding out toward the greater universe in juxtaposition to her internalised agony – again, *'In my congested cosmos of agony'* (First stanza).

'Have I not

Somewhere

Scrutinised

A dead white feathered moth

Laying eggs?'

In this evocative twelfth stanza, the image of a plump mother moth is conjured. Certain species of moths have been observed to be so heavily laden with eggs that they can no longer fly. Her body, massive, in comparison to her trembling wings, the mother moth lays stricken – as though dead – until the slow release of a multitude of eggs lightens her load and she can then fly again. These phenomena, (personally witnessed), provide a powerful metaphor for the reproductive burden carried by woman – the responsibility of carrying new life – of giving birth – of being weighed down – and in Loy's case, laden with the ambivalence caused by unpredicted maternity, as evidenced in these lines of the twelfth stanza:

*'Agglomeration of activities
Of a life
LIFE
A leap with nature
Into essence
Of unpredicted maternity'*

In the second last stanza, the baby arrives from amidst the narrator's nebulous sensibilities, from *'Warmth moisture'*, the baby is expelled by *'The contents of the universe'* (thirteenth stanza) and *'The was – is – ever – shall -be Of Cosmic reproductivity'*. In her delirium, Loy envisages the *'Impression of a cat – With blind kittens – Among her legs*. She becomes the cat as her daughter Oda is born:

*'Impression of a small animal carcass
covered with blue bottles
Epicurean.'*

With a justifiable self-indulgence, the narrator, disassociated through the pain and exhaustion of a hard labour, witnesses the *'Unfolding'*. The new mother, Mina Loy, overwhelmed and stretched to the limitations of her being, has succeeded in *'Uniting the opposing and resisting forces'* (tenth stanza) and has made her contribution to humankind *'Through the subliminal deposits of evolutionary processes'. And through the insects'*, (the laws of nature, the reproductive imperative, the survival of the species). She has taken *'A leap with nature; into the essence'* - of motherhood.

*'Death
Life
I am knowing
All about.'*

Here Loy discovers (in the second last stanza), the eternal rite of passage, through which only woman can pass, and she embodies the archetype of all women who have given birth before her. Childbirth becomes the means for self-comprehension and releases her from dependence on male influence. By giving birth to her first born, Oda, she also gives birth to the poem. Loy voices a powerful new feminine consciousness in her birthing role and as such she gives birth to a unique work which is an acknowledgement of female creative potential. Until "Parturition" (1997), the experiences of women had, in the main, been disregarded by the male dominated literary movement (Kouidis, 1980) and Mina Loy's wonderful treatise to childbirth gave voice to a new female perspective (ibid).

Bibliography

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