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## Theme of Motherhood in Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt's Selected Poems

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### Abstract:

*The angels, whispering to one another,  
Can find, among their burning terms of love,  
None so devotional as that of "Mother"*  
– Edgar Allan Poe ("To My Mother")

Sarah Piatt has written great poems with innumerable variety of themes. Her poems focused on themes like the domestic nature, role of women, motherhood, civil war, slavery system, political issues, faith in God during adversities etc., and this study aims at her treatment of Motherhood in some of her selected poems. Motherhood is a universal quality and her representation and expression of it in the poems are very impressive and influencing factors. This article's focus is to substantiate this concept of motherhood leading towards social realism. Among the vast number of women writers of 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature, Sarah Piatt has been a forgotten poet and the critics and scholars have started studying her poems, and most of her poems have been in the recovery process, only a century back.

**Key Words:** American Poetry, Social Realism, Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt, Motherhood.

### Introduction: American Literature

American poetry is outcome 'of the process of self-discovery and self definition' says Richard Gray (1973) in his introduction to 'American verse of the Nineteenth Century'. Especially for the poetry, the influence from English literature could have been in every notable author. In the nineteenth century American Literature, writers' contribution to literature unanimously came to light, to enhance the essence of nationalism. It had been a burning-sense of 'being-American and 'be free' from the clutches of colonization of England and it could be one of the main reasons why American Literature has its own form and content which somehow or other differs from British Literature.

There were many writers who contributed much to the making of American literature. Among all, Emerson, Longfellow, Poe, Holmes, Thoreau, Russell and realists like Melville, Whitman and Taylor, Emily, Miller, Sarah Piatt and many more were the notable writers. Among the various themes of American literature like, conventionalism or the Victorianism, romanticism, or the aestheticism, realism, naturalism, modernism; realism had been in a period while most of the major writers had started contributing their best part to the growth and development of American literature. During that period, poetry had also achieved some notable achievement in portraying the events especially the social events. The nineteenth century was known for its feature of romanticism and its development. On its twilight, the

age of social realism emerged and paved ways to the famous writers like Whitman, James, Melville and Emily Dickinson.

During the evolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature, poetry was not much spoken and given importance for its nature. Rather, the fictions carried much reputation by the famous authors' contribution. Despite this fact, many poets like Walt Whitman and his contemporaries also had shown their interest in poetry as part of their writing fiction. There were some notable female major and minor poets contributing to their part for the growth of American poetry. Poetess like Anna Howard Shaw, Anne Douglas, Dorothy, Sarah Teasdale were some of the notable writers apart from Emily Dickinson and Sarah Piatt. Author like Mary Beard had much focused on the role of women through her writings in 'On Understanding Women'. In the array of Women Poets in America, next to Emily Dickinson, Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt, a poet who was also forgotten for a century like Emily and through the recent effort of the American Consciousness, is getting a revival. Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt was born on August 11, 1836 in Lexington, Kentucky to her parents namely Talbot Nelson Bryan and Mary Spiers and lived till December 22, 1919. On June 18, 1861 she married John James Piatt who was also a poet, as well as a federal employee, eventually serving as an American Consul in Ireland. During her career, she published some of 450 poems in fifteen volumes and in leading periodicals of the day.

The present study focuses on Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt's treatment of the theme of motherhood expressed the various aspects like mother's love and her grief-stricken heart for the loss of children, her faith in adversity, her conflicts, and her noble heart of guiding.

### **Sarah Piatt's Contribution To American Literature**

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the contribution of Sarah Piatt had been remarkably done through poems by publishing through periodicals and journals of America and Ireland. Through poetry, she represented her thought and expressions on various themes. Despite this fact, she had been forgotten until the wake of 21<sup>st</sup> century; especially at the emergence of feminists of America and their conscious effort in bringing out the contributions of the women writers to the limelight. In this article, Sarah Piatt's treatment of Motherhood is brought out as the vital theme among other prominent themes like, poems on Civil War, political issues and slavery, North and South consciousness, religious themes, roles of women, domestic issues, moral, on the death of martyrs etc.,

In the recovering process of Sarah Piatt's poems P.B Bennett played a much significant role and did a good service to the literary society. She said in her introduction part of 'The Palace Burner', that, "... because of the extra-ordinary circumstances of her like, and the long span of time over which her poems appeared, Piatt was able to reflect in her poetry the principal social, natural, and artistic concerns of over fifty years of American culture and American women's history. (Bennett (2001): xxvii).

The 'motherhood' is a universal quality of women. There need not be much explanation for its meaning and belief of it. There are some distinguished writers of nineteenth century like Emily Dickinson, Phoebe Cary, for having themes and issues related to woman's quality and characterization. Yet, Sarah Piatt deserves a superior hold of honor for the treatment of motherhood through her genteel voices with conventional priority to express it.

**Aim of the Article:**

Sarah Piatt's 'motherhood' has been dissolved in her love, compassion, consciousness over children's future, piousness, and the grief over the frequent losses of her children. In most of her poems 'motherhood' and 'womanhood' were the means of expression on the subjectivity of the middle class and bourgeois women's nature of social and domestic gothic.

**Marks of Loss and Love of Mother**

Bennett (2001) in her opinion about the dreary feeling over the loss in poems related to children and faith in God on adversities, she says that, 'in 1884, Piatt's mother died, the first of a number of deaths that would send their shock waves through her poetry, including three children lost in infancy of childhood, in 1873, 1874 and 1884 respectively' (BP xxiii). Thus, the first loss began at her childhood stage through the death of her mother; and it has been articulated in the form of conversational verse between two playmates. Probably, they are between the two play-mates. One is considered to be Sarah Piatt and she let flow the agony as expressed in 'A Child's Party':

"Before my cheeks were fairly dry,  
I heard my dusky play mate say:  
"Well, now your mother's in the sky,  
And you can always have your way."

(Bennet 114).

The reading of the Holy Bible for getting consolation for the loss, and her black playmate's friendly move towards her to change her mood of loss, and the advice of her neighboring woman to be out of the home rather than to be always looking at the mirror for witnessing the marks on her face; are some of the imageries used to enhance the portrayal of the child who was at the loss of her mother. It is denoted by Lucy Frank (2002) that, having in the mind about the relationship of Piatt with her African-nurse and the way in which in adulthood gives additional, supporting ideas to get highest sense of admiration from this poem (Lucy 6). In this poetry, the childhood relationship of Sarah Piatt is given in the conventional clues towards her play-mate such as;

"A party would be fine, and yet –  
There's no one her I can invite."  
"Me and the children." "You forget-"  
"Oh, please pretend that I am white."

I said, and think of it with shame,  
"Well. When it's over, you'll go back  
There to the cabin all the same,  
And just remember you are black.

(Bennet 114).

Like Sarah Piatt, Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard (1823–1902) was also Poet, (and, fiction writer, and essayist). Like in Sarah Piatt's poems the effects of the loss of her children haunts her writings. There are some likeness' between Sarah Piatt and Elizabeth D.B. Stoddard, it would be better enhanced with a comparative conclusion with these two poets. In Elizabeth's "A Thought" the following lines show the admiration of a socially responsible mother's expectation, as lover of nature, children, and nation with a patriotic love, which could be found in Sarah's writings too.

Leaves will come upon the trees;  
Spring will show the happy race;  
Mothers will give birth to sons—  
Loyal souls to fill our place.

Wherefore should we rest and rush?  
 Soldiers, we must fight and save  
 Freedom now, and give our foes  
 All their country should—a grave! (Words for the Hour)

Her 'One morn I left him in his bed' is an absolute example for the motherhood on loss of the dearly loved child;

The wild sea moaned, the black clouds spread  
 Moving shadows on its bed,  
 But one of us lay midship dead.

I saw his coffin sliding down  
 The yellow sand in yonder town,  
 Where I put on my sorrow's crown.

And,

Mothers, who mourn with me today,  
 Oh, understand me, when I say,  
 I cannot weep, I cannot pray;

I gaze upon a hidden store,  
 His books, his toys, the clothes he wore,  
 And cry, 'Once more, to me, *once* more!' (She Wields a Pen)

And it is followed in the next two stanzas. Later, her nursing woman's comforting for the loss of her mother comes as;

"I'm pretty anyhow, you know.  
 I say this morning, that I way."  
 "Old mistress says it's wicked, though,  
 To keep on looking in the glass."

### **Mother: Caretaker of Child**

In the nineteenth century American society was industrial in Northern part and rich in South through plantation and cultivation of land which were depending on owning of slaves in hundreds. These reasons had been the causes for the emergence of Civil War with an aim to eradicate slavery system and to level the nature of North and South in relation to sharing, the growth and development equally. Before and after the Civil War, there was a lot of imbalance among people. The young used to be wandering in the streets with no job. In 'The Witch in the Glass', the mother worried that one such wanderer may get her daughter by offering simply a rose as only the symbol of his love and at the end, the life of her daughter may come under a question of happiness. Before such situations would arise to affect her daughter, the mother wanted her child to be away from such events. So, the mother played a role of a caretaker of her child from every aspect. She started instructing her child not to look at the mirror when she was growing and attaining the youth. Like in many of Piatt's poems, she let many voices to be involved in. She also allowed her dual-role personality of the personae of the poem to play the role of a mother and her child to depict the events, taking place in the domestic sphere as;

"My mother says I must not pass  
 Too near that glass;  
 She is afraid that I will see  
 A little witch that looks like me,

With a red, red mouth, to whisper low  
The very thing I should not know!"

The mother instructs her child to be aware of the forthcoming problems hence the total caring of mother is needed to save from spoiling of her daughter's life at the hands of a hapless boy by denoting as;

"A lack from your entire mother's care!  
A bird of the air,  
A wistful mind, or (I Suppose  
Sent by some hapless boy) a rose,  
With breath too sweet, will whisper low,  
The very thing you should not know!

(Bennett 104).

The use of first person singular 'I' in the first stanza and the second person pronoun 'you' are the indications of the speaker through which it is understood that the voices of her in different tones used to have a dramatic touch.

### **Mother: The Instructor**

Mary Wearn (2006) puts forth the view of Lydia Hunley on sentimental maternity that, "... the ideology that governs women's lives in nineteenth century is sentimental maternity. That was based on belief that care of children was an exclusively feminine province, stemming from essential qualities of womanhood" (pp 78). In 'If I had made the world' the mother's responses to her child in her instructions of various aspects including the role as instructor to teach her daughter to pronounce the naming word 'Shakespeare', Piatt's mother plays a role as creator too;

'I would have made one Poet too---  
Has god made more?---Yes, I forgot,  
There is no need of asking you;  
You know as little as I do  
  
And yet a poet is, my dear  
A man who writes a book like this,  
(There never was but one, I hear;)  
..... Yet, it is hard to spell S-h-a-k-e-s-p-e-a-r-e.  
So, now Good-night, --- and here's a kiss.

(Bennett 104).

The conversation of child sometimes seems a challenging one to her mother to self-examine the mother's status as found in 'The Palace Burner' and the mother's philosophical responses to her child seems hard to be inherited by her child too;

"Would I? Go your play would I, Indeed?  
I? Does the boy not know my soul to be!  
Languid and worldly, with a dainty need  
For light and music? Yet he questions me  
(Piatt (1874): 120)

And as found in 'A Voyage to Fortunate Isles':

"We all will drawn but Baby. He  
Is in his pretty grave so far.  
He has to sleep till judgment – we  
Must sink where all the sailors are,  
Who used to die, when storms would come,



Away from their home.

(Piatt (1894): 6-7).

Sarah Piatt, being very close to the maternal-livelihood with children, sometimes gets a feeling of her child as found it in her 'Questions of the Hour' (1869), below this poem additional information was given in the e-text as "Marian, six years old" (ebooksread). Sarah Piatt had left some of twenty questions till the end of the poem and the final couplet acts again as doubt of a child to ascertain that her mother would be acting as the step-mother of Cinderella. But, if this incident is to be taken as personalized one with the life events of Sarah Piatt, the voice of the child could be the author's since such a mature question may not be possible for a child of six years, if the child is considered to be the daughter of Sarah Piatt, namely Marian. The theme of mother's bedtime story on Cinderella to her child, induces her young daughter to ask her mother 'Mamma, are you---my stepmother?'. From this bond between mother and child, Mary Wearn (2006) adds that 'The narrator admits guilty, "The innocent reproof crept to my heart"'. The expression of deeply conflicted motherhood in 'A Dream's Awakening' (1864) is given through the lines such as;

"SHUT in a close and dreary sleep,  
Lonely and frightened and oppressed  
I felt a dreadful serpent creep,  
Writhing and crushing, o'er my breast"

(Piatt Vol. II).

The crushing and oppression of motherhood in poems like 'To Marian Asleep' (1864),

Of what it costs to climb or fall  
Of Death's great Shadow ending all  
But, baby Marian, do I string  
The dark with darker rhymes for you,  
Forgetting that you came in Spring,  
The child of sun and bloom and dew,  
And that I kissed, still fresh to-day,  
The rosiest bud of last year's May?  
Forgive me, pretty one: I know,  
Whatever sufferings onward lie,

And, in 'Offers for the Child' (1871);

In the dim spaces of a dream, you see –  
Somewhere, perhaps, or else not anywhere,  
(Remember, in a dream what things may be) –  
I met a stranger with the whitest hair.  
For his wide, wandering beard the snow-flakes  
whirled –  
(His face when young, no doubt, was much admired.)  
His name was Atlas, and he held the world;  
I held a child – and both of us were tired.

(Piatt, (1877): 49-50)

Are the juxtaposing the troubled maternal experiences in it.

### Expression of Grief

In 'Double Quatrain' subtitled as 'For Another's Sake' Sarah Piatt's motherhood allows her personae of the poem to be the Pro-mother for the loss of child. The comforting lines are;

"Sweet, sweet? My child, some Sweeter word that sweet,

Some lovelier word than love, I want for you.  
 Who says the world is bitter, while your feet  
 Are left among the lilies and the dew?

It was the description of the loss of children at the infancy stage itself, made Sarah's motherhood poetry always to be the grief stricken one.

...Ah? So same other has, this night, to fold  
 Such hands as his, and drop some previous head  
 From off her breast as full of baby-gold?  
 I, for her grief, will not be comforted.

(Piatt (1894): 121).

Piatt brings out the heaviness and the grievous broken hearts of a mother empathetically who had lost her child, who had been in the breast.

In 'The Palace Burner' and 'Beatrice Cenci', Sarah Piatt discusses the political issues of the nineteenth century. Especially, in 'The Place Burner' the motherhood experience has indirectly been expressed as the prominence of woman's moral authority and cultural prestige to bring up the children to the social causes.

### **Faith in Adversity**

The death of the child in 'No Help' makes the mother to have some commotion in faith of God. The mother starts questioning as;

"Is he not with his Father? So I trust.  
 Is he not His? Was he not also mine?  
 His mother's empty arms yearn towards the dust.  
 Heaven lies too high, the soul is too divine.  
 I wake at night and miss him from my breast  
 And, - human words can never say the rest.

(Bennett 84).

### **Conclusion**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century social events centered on the domestic situations, most of the female writers let their writings to be revolving around the domestic happenings especially on the children and love towards their beloved Masters. Large number of poets had been in their exposures to the social causes like Sarah Piatt, Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard and other denotable women poets; it is made brief on Sarah Piatt's treatment of motherhood and her vital role in bringing out the social and domestic-gothic events of her contemporary era. From this study it is found that the Motherhood of Piatt has not only put on view of the genteel qualities of mother but also identified the socially responsible roles of a mother through her characterizations of women in her poems. Motherhood also serves to exhibit the 19<sup>th</sup> century social realism through the portrayal of Victorian sensibility and the life events of bourgeois women of her contemporary era.

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