

Poetry on the Right-to-Life Issues of Abortion, Infanticide, and Euthanasia: Commentary from Scansion of the Poems

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines representative twentieth-century American poems concerned with the right-to-life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. After the poems are scanned, the author then demonstrates that life-affirming principles can be asserted. Commentary is also provided on poetry that is hostile to pro-life interests.

POETRY WRITTEN ON THE RIGHT-TO-LIFE ISSUES has a history worth examining as much as that history of American works on the life issues in other genres. One thinks of Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* as the exemplary American short story and drama on abortion. Infanticide and euthanasia fiction and dramatic works are receiving more attention now that the issues have obtained public attention for several decades. Extensive criticism can be found on many of these works, increasingly from the pro-life perspective. The exemplary American poems on the three life issues, however, still need to be discovered, and the accompanying pro-life criticism of them still needs to be generated.

A review of the scholarship shows that, curiously (after thirty years of abortion legal throughout the nine months of pregnancy and an even longer history of abortion agitation), discussing the right-to-life element of various works has not been a direct concern of most scholars. Thus, anyone who begins or continues a discussion of poetry from the pro-life perspective may feel as though he or she is

developing *ab ovo* research. Since it has not been a matter of scholarly concern, poems on the life issues themselves are often difficult to locate. They are “out there.” Once in a while, a newsletter will mention this or that poem about one of the life issues, typically abortion. Poems on the life issues have been written, continue to be written, and will be written for as long as the first civil right-to-life is still hanging in a judicial and legislative limbo, but where are they?

Unfortunately, for the scholar interested in discussing poems on these issues, no easy collection of primary material exists. Poems on the right-to-life issues surface intermittently, but, to continue the metaphor, they still lurk in the murky waters of the American canon, frightened like whales to surface lest they be harpooned by critics, both anti- and pro-life. Maybe these poems hide in the deepest Mariana Trench of literature where no light reaches them not because they are afraid, but because they themselves are aware of their fatal propensities.

The extended metaphor may be a cute idea for a future poem, but this study will attempt to meet that need for a pro-life perspective on contemporary poetry concerned with the life issues. I will use scansion, which is a traditional poetic tool used in formalist criticism, to explicate representative poems on each of the three life issues.¹ The art of scansion involves several general rules. First, determining where accents go in a line of poetry depends on regular speech. One would not accent monosyllabic prepositions or articles because in standard American English no one accents such a word. Second, demarcating metrical feet is often complicated, but a pattern can usually be established if sufficient attention is given to the length of the poetic line and the general intent of the poet.

Finally, after the metrical feet have been determined, certain emotional qualities of the meter can be discussed. For example, the use of the iambic foot, the standard metrical foot in English poetry, which consists of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one, indicates that the poet wishes to achieve a normal reading of a line. A trochaic foot, the reverse of the iambic, signifies that the poet wishes to place stress first in his or her line, thus bringing an alteration to the normal reading of a poetic line, perhaps suggesting

heaviness or seriousness to the meter. An anapestic foot, consisting of two unaccented syllables followed by an accented syllable, increases the speed of the line, usually indicating a happier metrical pattern.² The dactylic foot, the reverse of the anapestic, may convey more heaviness and seriousness than the trochaic foot, since the accent comes first followed by two unaccented syllables. A monosyllabic foot can occur, as well as a spondee, which consists of two accents in a row. The heaviness of the monosyllabic and spondaic feet can indicate a variety of emotions, but the general intent of these feet is to emphasize certain words or syllables for dramatic or profound seriousness. Finally, a pyrrhic foot, consisting of two unaccented syllables in a row, can occur, conveying a sense of emptiness or even a sense of speeding the line along.³

Once I selected scansion as the tool with which to consider the poems, deciding which presentation scheme would control this paper was difficult. Should the poems be presented in alphabetical order of the author's name, in alphabetical order of the life issue, in the historical order of the life issue, or some other scheme? I chose to order the poems for discussion in strict chronological order; doing so will move us from the easiest to the most difficult poem to scan and to discuss, followed by what I think should be a new addition to the canon of poetry on the first life issue. Thus, I will focus first on Madison Julius Cawein's "The Infanticide" (1909), then Dudley Randall's euthanasia poem "To The Mercy Killers" (1973), Marge Piercy's "Right to Life" (1980), and finally Jan Beatty's "An Abortion Attempt by My Mother" (1995).

MADISON JULIUS CAWEIN'S "THE INFANTICIDE" (1909)

It may be difficult to believe that one must reach early in the beginning of the twentieth century to find a representative American poem on one of the life issues, but that is what I have done in selecting Madison Julius Cawein's 1909 poem "The Infanticide." Several infanticide poems were worth considering. One can point to the anonymous "The Cruel Mother," but that is a traditional Scottish ballad, falling beyond the scope of this study of American poetry on the life issues. Similarly, Deborah A. Symonds's research into

infanticide ballads, such as the “Mary Hamilton” version transcribed in her work, must be removed from study here since it dates from eighteenth century Scotland. I could have used Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s 1848 poem “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point.” However, since Browning is not an American author, her work falls beyond the scope of this study, even though the poem, as a vehicle for expressing her opposition to slavery, rebukes Americans who boast freedom for whites yet enslave blacks. Searches for “infanticide” in databases such as *20th Century African-American Poetry*, *20th Century American Poetry*, and *American Poetry 1600- 1900* yield “three matching terms in two full texts,” “seven matching terms in seven full texts,” and “one matching [term] in one full text” respectively—all of which are casual references to the activity of killing a child. A search in the online *MLA International Bibliography* of “infanticide” and “poetry” yields six scholarly articles, but those are secondary sources.

Thus, I am left with an early twentieth-century poem that illustrates infanticide as it has been understood since the seventeenth century and as we experience it with greater frequency in our society. The preceding two dependent clauses are necessary, for “infanticide” came into the English language relatively recently to refer to the growing practice, especially noted by British authors, of killing newborn children. Similarly, reading about mothers who kill their children is an increasing topic of concern today. One thinks of contemporary infanticidal mothers who kill their children because of mental illness, frustration with their lovers or husbands, or a sense of powerlessness. Perhaps Cawein’s poem is not so dated after all. Today’s mother who commits infanticide may find herself in just as helpless or as shameful a situation, that she feels or thinks that the only way out of her dilemma is to kill her child.

Here is the poem as published in Cawein’s collection *New Poems* with my scansion:

-/ -/ -/ -/ -/

She took her babe, the child of shame and sin,

-/ -/ -- -/ -/

And wrapped it warmly in her shawl and went

-/ -/ -/ -/ --/

From house to house for work. Propriety bent

-/ -/ -- // -/

A look of wonder on her; raised a din

-/ -/ // -/ -/

Of Christian outrage. None would take her in.

/- -/ -/ -/ //

All that she had was gone; had long been spent.

/-- -/ -- -/ -/

Penniless and hungry by the road she leant,

// -/ -- // -/

No friend to go to and no one of kin.

-/ -/ -/ -/ -/

The babe at last began to cry for food.

-/ -/ -/ // -/

Her breasts were dry; she had no milk to give.—

-/ // -/ // -/

She was so tired and cold.— What could she do?—

-/ /- -/ -/ -/

...The next day in a pool within a wood

-/ -/ // -/ -/

They found the babe. ... 'Twas hard enough to live,

-/ -/ -/ -- -/

She found, for one; impossible for two. (210)

Technically, this poem presents a stable scansion, and there is little debate concerning the designation of this dominantly iambic pentameter sonnet. One could argue that “Propriety” in the third line could be an amphibrach or just as easily an iamb followed by an anapest. There could be a good argument to justify such a deviation in the meter. The term follows a full stop with the terminal punctuation of the first sentence; moreover, the poet personified the term, showing that he wanted to emphasize it. It is, after all, the propriety of the people to whom the mother goes for help that ultimately leads to her death and the death of the child. Such speculation cannot be justified, though, since other deviations in the

meter make the poet's case more strongly.

Perhaps the most noticeable deviations in the regular meter of the poem are the pyrrhic feet, strategically placed to emphasize the powerlessness of the mother. A pyrrhic foot conveys a sense of wasted activity, two unaccented syllables that seem to go nowhere and that do not add to the drama in the poem. The five pyrrhic feet highlight events that lead to the infanticide. The first one, which immediately follows the first syllable of "warmly," should convey a positive connotation, but its position after this positive activity is negated by the nothingness of the pyrrhic foot. The second pyrrhic foot in line four functions similarly to negate the "wonder" and possible help that should attend the mother's condition. Instead, we are drawn to the condemnation that is "raised" against "her" in a spondee immediately following this pyrrhic foot.

The third instance of the pyrrhic foot in line seven is significant for at least two reasons. First, it is placed in a hyperbatonic sentence structure; the tortured syntax mimics the torture that the mother must feel. She has no money and, instead of merely saying that she has no money, when the poet uses the beginning word "Penniless," he conveys the sense that the money has already been spent by the accent of the opening dactyl. Second, I think that the pyrrhic foot in the middle of this line helps further to convey the result of the mother's poverty and hunger. What else can one do besides exist with the nothingness of one's poverty and hunger, expressed by the flat, unaccented syllables of the pyrrhic foot?

The next pyrrhic foot in line eight increases the urgency of the mother's situation especially because the pyrrhic foot is balanced (appropriately in the middle foot) in a line containing two spondees. The mother has on one side, almost literally, "No friend" and, on the other side, "no one of kin." It is interesting that the next line continues the regular iambic pentameter beat, as though the child him- or herself is unaware of the mother's dilemma graphed in the previous line.

The final pyrrhic foot in the last line of the poem increases the sense of hopelessness for the mother, but only after four spondees occur after the perfectly regular iambic line of the one act of the

newborn mentioned in the poem. (The five other spondees before the child's perfect line occur over a span of eight lines, while the four spondees heightening the mother's anguish are forced into five lines.) In fact, the last line's pyrrhic foot occurs over the syllables of the word that denotes what chances the mother and the child have of survival. "Impossible," meaning "not able to do," reinforces the idea that the ability "to live" is not possible for the mother and the child; the pyrrhic foot over "able" reinforces even this last portion of a word that already has a negative connotation.

DUDLEY RANDALL'S "TO THE MERCY KILLERS" (1973)

Several other poems on the topic of euthanasia could have been selected for this study, all of which would lend themselves well to scansion, but three conveyed the nineteenth-century sense of the word, and the remaining one illustrates the twentieth century's break from the innocent etymological sense to the deadlier sense of active killing. I could have selected Willis Gaylord Clark's "Euthanasia," printed in the 1846 posthumous collection of his works. However, "euthanasia" had neither the denotation nor the connotation that it has today. In fact, the poem considers "euthanasia" in its etymological sense, that of a happiness in dying, knowing that death is only the gateway to eternal life.⁴ Similarly, I could have selected Frances Cornford's 1923 poem "The Watch," but the persona's alliterative and spondaic appeal for death is not euthanasia, an effort on the part of a human agent to procure death, as much as it could be construed as the wish of a speaker for what is traditionally called a plea (since it is not objectively a prayer) for a "happy death," a quick release from the pain of suffering. Moreover, her work must be excluded since this granddaughter of Charles Darwin is British and beyond the limit of this study.⁵

Linda Pastan's 1980 poem "Ethics" could also have been used since it poses a typical situation ethics question: would someone save "a Rembrandt painting / or an old woman who hadn't many / years left anyhow?" (1112). The persona's ambiguous answer indeed "eschews / the burdens of responsibility" and deflects the care for the elderly that the young should bestow (1112-13). Finally, I could also

have chosen David R. Slavitt's 1983 poem "Titanic." The idea promoted in this poem is that we would want to die as those who died in the Titanic disaster because at least we would never be alone in our dying moments; people would always talk about us and rehearse the disaster in tender affection. However, this poem does not concern euthanasia in the contemporary sense of actively killing someone; rather, Slavitt's poem offers us a late twentieth-century perspective of how we should recover the original etymological meaning of "euthanasia" as a "good death."

Dudley Randall's 1973 poem "To The Mercy Killers" on the third right-to-life issue, euthanasia, should be explored for three reasons: it directly confronts the issue of euthanasia *per se*, it offers for the reader's consideration the voice of the person on whom euthanasia would be performed, and the scansion of the poem has several interesting elements not evident in the other euthanasia poems.

Here is the poem as published in Randall's collection *After the Killing* with my scansion:⁶

-/ -/ -/ -/ -/
 If ever mercy move you murder me,
 // -/ -/ -/ -/
 I pray you, kindly killers, let me live.
 /- -/ -/ -/ -/
 Never conspire with death to set me free,
 -/ -/ // -/ -/
 but let me know such life as pain can give.
 /- /- /- / -/ -/
 Even though I be a clot, an aching clench,
 -/ -/ -/ -/ -/
 a stub, a stump, a butt, a scab, a knob,
 -/ -/ -/ -/ -/
 a screaming pain, a putrefying stench,
 // -/ -/ -/ -/
 still let me live, so long as life shall throb.
 /- /- // /- --/

Even though I turn such traitor to myself

-/ -/ // -/ -/

as beg to die, do not accomplice me.

/- /- // /-- //

Even though I seem not human, a mute shelf

-/ -/ -/ -/ --

of glucose, bottled blood, machinery

-/ -/ -/ -/ /- /

to swell the lungs and pump the heart—even so,

// // -/ /- //

do not put out my life. Let me still glow. (10)

Randall's consideration of euthanasia is presented in a strikingly regular iambic pentameter sonnet with deviation in the meter at crucial points. Spondees occur over the phrases "I pray," "such life," "still let," "turn such," "do not" (repeated in lines ten and fourteen), "seem not," "mute shelf," "put out," and "still glow." The combination of these spondees itself reads like a plea embodied in a fractured sentence that could be uttered by one in pain, perhaps even one who is afraid of being a victim of euthanasia. Trochees break the iambic pattern on the words "never," "traitor," and "even" (significantly, after four feet that are iambic and that mimic the beating of a regular circulatory and pulmonary function), and "Let me" (line fourteen). Moreover, trochees are significantly found over the subordinating conjunctions "even though" (used three times in the poem)—significantly, for this subordinating conjunction phrase signals a condition to be renounced by a subsequent independent clause affirming the opposite of what was stated in the dependent clause. As if to emphasize the object of the humanity being assaulted by a possible euthanasia, a dactyl occurs over the word "human" in line eleven.

Perhaps the item most worth considering in the poem is the variation of meter in two lines (five and thirteen) that are hexameter instead of pentameter. The persona introduces the first of the three conditional clauses in line five: "Even though I be a clot, an aching clench." If one thought negatively about the health situation of the

persona, then one would expect a negative outcome in the meter itself. However, the meter does not change dramatically. In fact, although the subordinating conjunctions in this fifth line begin the first of three trochees, the next three lines, which refer to usually disgusting items and effects of illness, are rhythmical iambic pentameter. It is almost as though the persona is celebrating his or her illness, building to a crescendo of terms ordinarily negative in connotation now transformed into positive things. I designate “clot” as a monosyllabic foot for this reason: the litany of terms with which the persona equates him- or herself is epideictic of praise, not terms of scorn.

The same strategy occurs in line eleven, where, although the meter is mostly pentameter, the rhetorical effect of the words “a mute shelf / of glucose, bottled blood, machinery” expand the idea that, “Even though I seem not human,” the persona holds to his or her humanity. Interestingly, the last foot of this twelfth line is a pyrrhic foot, matched with the last two syllables of “machinery,” as if the persona him- or herself recognizes that the equipment around a person is not as important as the person him- or herself.

MARGE PIERCY’S “RIGHT TO LIFE” (1980)

Marge Piercy’s 1980 poem “Right to Life” is an interesting venture into a poetic exploration of the entire pro-life worldview. The fifth stanza does talk about “a *partera*” who “is performing a table top abortion on an / unwed mother” (96), but that is the only explicit reference to abortion *per se*. The poem reads more as an exercise in negation (“A woman is not” begins the first and second stanzas). The poem then asserts women’s rights to control their bodies. Why discuss this poem then? In fact, since Piercy’s poem addresses the milieu of abortion from the anti-life perspective more than the abortion procedure, I could also have considered Jean Blackwood’s 1982 poem “Generation,” which addresses the abortion milieu from a pro-life perspective. I think, however, that it would be worthwhile to determine whether there is any poetic merit in this poem, especially since it reads like an excessive political manifesto of the anti-life philosophy.

Little critical attention has been given to this poem, and I hope that the following will increase our appreciation of one of the most politically activist poems that distorts the positions of those who support the first civil right, the right-to-life. Unfortunately, critics can sometimes get carried away by terminology in their respective literary theory, and commentary on this poem is no exception.⁷ However, before getting into a politically charged interpretation of the poem, before determining whether there is anything in the poem that, to use deconstructionist terminology, helps us understand how it implodes itself, or before we investigate the oppressive nature of patriarchy (a concern of some categories of an anti-life feminist literary criticism), I think it is necessary to examine the words of the poem itself, and to do so is an objective of formalism criticism.

Naomi Guttman has isolated only two of the poem's eight stanzas (stanzas three and four) for discussion.⁸ At least two major problems present themselves immediately in the scansion of the poem. One could attack the propriety of using scansion at all, and one could also pose a technical matter that affects the rhetorical value of an interpretation of the poem. First, why even bother to scan a poem that apparently is written in free verse—especially a feminist poem which would no doubt adhere to the conviction that free verse is a form that poets like Adrienne Rich “saw as less patriarchal and more in tune with her true voice” in which she could express her political views (*American Pas-sages* 723)? There is no rhyme scheme and no easy designation of the lines as strictly one meter. In fact, the extreme variation from three lines that are trimeter to one that is hexameter could argue against the application of the traditional scansion technique completely. Second, does one accent all instances of the pronoun “you”? Normally, one need not do so since the pronoun is viewed as relatively less important than a proper noun. Here, however, the pronoun must be accented since the intention of the poem is dominantly accusatory.⁹

Despite these concerns, I think that scanning this poem can help us to evaluate its message in a more substantial way than merely using it as a tool to advance a particular ideology as Guttman has done. There are two aspects unveiled by scansion worth considering.

The first aspect that scanning the poem makes evident is the significant number of spondees, especially when the second person pronoun is immediately followed by a present tense verb. Spondees are meant to convey not so much merely heaviness in poetry (the traditional understanding of the function of the dactyl), but a heaviness and a more serious purpose in the language used. This intentional seriousness can be shown in the second and fourth lines in each stanza, where “You put” and “You slice” in the third stanza and “You lay” and “You value” (the first syllable of the polysyllabic verb being accented) in the fourth stanza, illustrate this pronoun and present tense verb combination.¹⁰

The second aspect is a corollary of the first. The use of the second- person pronoun is particularly striking not only because it works to create spondaic feet, but also because in several instances the pronoun is a monosyllabic foot, drawing attention in two directions: not only towards the person to whom the persona in the poem is speaking, but also away from the persona him- or herself. Thus, the persona attempts to divert attention away from his or her responsibility (or, perhaps, from his or her own promotion or involvement in the killing of unborn children) to an entity outside the poem who is constantly being accused of having committed some moral wrongs. The first foot of the third stanza is the monosyllabic foot “You” that sets the accusatory tone for the rest of the poem; it is someone (or it could be a second person plural use of the pronoun) designated as “You” who does the planting.¹¹

Moreover, the two instances where the second-person possessive pronoun “your” is used should be noted. The eighth lines of both stanzas contain some form of the possessive pronoun “your” and “yours.” In the third stanza “yours” is not immediately juxtaposed with its corresponding noun, further isolating the persona from the person or persons being addressed. Similarly, although the use of “your” in the fourth stanza does have the noun it describes immediately following it, the line is a run-on, and the noun that the “your” describes is removed from the reader’s vision if not his or her immediate intellectual understanding by being placed on the next line.

The above discussion may help to balance the ideological

blathering of critics like Guttman, but I think that more interesting commentary on the poem can be made of another stanza. The sixth and seventh stanzas of the poem summarize the political intent of the poem, and, although the final, seventh stanza stresses the power that a woman should have, the sixth stanza is fascinating since it views the unborn child not as a potential force for good in the world, but as the (not the indefinite article, but the definite article) cause of evil in the world.

What is noticeable about this sixth stanza, besides the invective, is that, when scanned, it is largely pentameter, the normal measure for poetry in English. Unlike the other stanzas discussed above (three and four), where fourteen spondees are scattered across the two stanzas, this diatribe against the unborn child to be transformed into some kind of born criminal or monster politician contains only three spondees in the largely iambic meter (twenty-two feet). Can anything significant be said of spondees over the phrases “all born,” “downstream,” and “world burns”—except that the responsibility for the crimes of the unwanted child once born is deflected from his or her condition to what he or she has done? Can anything significant be made of the seven anapests or the six pyrrhic feet, the anapest being the metrical foot that accelerates the poem and the pyrrhic foot being that measure that expresses a literary waste? Joining the words or syllables over which the anapests and pyrrhic feet hover would create a forced interpretation. Still, the beginning of the poem reads rather normally; that is, its reading is consistent with the pronunciation pattern of standard American English. How to account for the relative normalcy of this stanza, which expresses such a vicious view of the child to be born?

One possible interpretation can focus on the caesura in the fourth line. The first three and a half lines read almost happily, probably due to the six of seven anapests that can be found in these lines. A noticeable change occurs at the caesura, though. Ten of the eleven trochees in the poem occur after this point in the stanza, and, since the purpose of the trochee is to place the stress first in the reader’s mind literally, which thus emphasizes the stress of the term uttered figuratively, the heaviness that the balance of the poem suggests can

thus be attributed to the meter. What is frightening, though, is that the speaker who communicates the safety of the womb can so suddenly and dramatically transform into one who myopically sees only an evil—not a “bad,” but an evil—outcome of a pregnancy that some would label “unloved, unwanted.” In this poetic and fictive world, it is as though an anti-lifer in contemporary culture has the image of a destructive outcome of an untimely pregnancy ingrained in his or her thinking. Perhaps pro-lifers in society can help him or her see that an alternative reality exists. The child perceived as “unloved, unwanted” need not ineluctably transform him- or herself into a monster; he or she can not only be loved, but also can become a loving member of society.

JAN BEATTY’S “AN ABORTION ATTEMPT BY MY MOTHER” (1995)

I could have selected other abortion poems that contain perspectives of other agents or victims in the abortion decision. For example, I could have selected Gwendolyn Brooks’ famous 1945 poem “The Mother,” perhaps the first poetic literary evidence of post-abortion syndrome, whose refrain “Abortions will not let you forget” reflects the mother’s anguish (430). I could have selected Anne Sexton’s “The Abortion,” first printed in the 1962 anthology *All My Pretty Ones*, whose refrain is now as famous as that of Brooks’s poem: “*Somebody who should have been born / is gone*” (20; italics in original).¹² Finally, I could have chosen Ai’s 1999 poem “Abortion” written from the perspective of the father of the aborted child who, despite the fact that the mother of his son has aborted his child, loves her “no matter what you do” (4).¹³ I would like to focus on Beatty’s poem, however, since it is recent and, in my estimation, should be a new addition to the canon of poetry on the first life issue of abortion.

Here is the poem, as published in Beatty’s collection *Mad River*, with my scansion:¹⁴

/- /- /- -/ /-

Rolling side to side in my warm mother,

-/ --/ /- /- //

the juices of life pulsing through my veined skin,

// -- // -/

wild juices of calves' tongues and loose

/- // -/ //

stretchy kid skin like young gray wrens.

// /- /- -- /- //

I drink unborn water in the Garfield back room

--/ /- /- /

in the dark while my mother cries.

-/ -- //

The prodding of wolves' teeth,

// -/ -- /-

eyes red and ailing, the shaking

-/ /- // -/ --

of orange clay and cracked slate, the loosening,

-/ -- /-- /-- //

exposing the underground creatures to full sky,

-/ /- /-- // //

the greased worms are screaming, the dead moles stay dead.

/-- /-

This is the feeling. (29)

If the initial stress of the trochee signifies heaviness, and if the title were not enough to signify this emotion, then the seriousness of the situation becomes obvious with the six trochaic feet within the first two trochaic pentameter lines. The next two lines, however, convey heaviness, not because of more trochees, but because the lines have been shortened by two feet and have become burdened with the heavy accents of spondees. Thus, even though the lines are now tetrameter, the spondees continue the heaviness, the tension, originally indicated in the first two lines. The fifth line of the first stanza, still dominantly trochaic meter, is extended by one foot. I am uncertain which feet need to be emphasized in this line: is it the pyrrhic foot in the middle of the line or the spondees at the beginning and end? As if to restore the balance that was disturbed by this hexameter line, the last line of the first stanza falls to tetrameter. The scansion of this last line can be designated in a different way than I

have done here, but I hold that the last verb of the stanza, “cries,” should be its own monosyllabic foot to emphasize the one action of the mother in the poem (the other actions denote the unborn child’s activities and those of the abortionist, “disguised” in the metaphor of a wolf).¹⁵

Several technical devices build the drama of the poem’s second stanza, the actual attempt of the abortion. First, the stanza moves from trimeter to tetrameter to three pentameter lines, falling to dimeter at the stanza’s conclusion, ambiguous outcome though it is. Four trochees are evident in this stanza, and thirteen other feet accentuate, expand, and increase their heaviness. The three pyrrhic feet accentuate the drama for, being essentially nothing in terms of meter, the pyrrhic feet draw our attention when reading the poem, either verbally or mentally, to those feet with accented syllables. The four dactyls expand, all within the last three lines, the power of the three words thus highlighted. “Underground creatures” is a metaphoric substitute for unborn children in danger of being attacked by abortionists as viciously as the “worms” and “moles” would be attacked by wolves. That a dactyl alights over “screaming” helps to draw out the pronunciation of the term, especially poignant since it is followed by two spondees over four alliterative monosyllabic words (“dead moles stay dead”).

Finally, the thirteen spondees increase the metaphoric heaviness of these stanzas in two ways. Three of the thirteen spondees (“back room,” “wolves’ teeth,” and “eyes red”) pertain to the abortionist. Six of the thirteen spondees (“veined skin,” “wild juices,” “calves’ tongues,” “kid skin,” “gray wrens,” and “I drink”) pertain to the unborn child him- or herself.¹⁶ Two would pertain to the unborn child (“dead moles” and “stay dead”) if the wolf/abortionist succeeds in getting through the “cracked slate,” thus “exposing the underground creatures to” the remaining spondee, the “full sky.”

Does the abortion occur? The argument can be made that the abortion does not proceed. Although the unborn child expresses what the feeling of being aborted is like, the poem is titled an “attempt.” However, that the last line contains only two feet may signify either that the abortion process has been itself aborted or that the child has

been killed.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Some critics have noted that feminist poetry that concerns the life issues lacks a narrative line. For example, when she notes specifically that the speaker in Mina Loy's *Love Songs to Joannes* suggests a "traumatic loss of a child through abortion—a crisis that I will argue is the epicenter of this romance gone wrong" (146), Maera Shreiber concludes that the sequence lacks "a coherent narrative line" (148) and that the "inability to speak coherently is both a symptom and a cause of a chronic inability to sustain an image of a coherent self, the same inability that informs the fear of procreation" (156). Similarly, when he discusses the abortion poetry of Anne Sexton from a feminist literary perspective, Philip McGowan suggests that "Sexton is seeking to reverse generations of female texts structured by conceit and overpowered by male domination" (130). An even bolder and feminist reductionist claim that McGowan asserts is that "Sexton's text transgresses against the male world of reason and its versions of patriarchy and phallogocentrism" (131) because she wants "to liberate the female writer from the constraints of the tight, masculine surfaces of textualisation" (139).

Despite the tendency to veer towards implausible literary theoretical babble, I would elaborate on the sentences in the above paragraph by incorporating the formalist concern for unity in a literary work, expressed in the usual exposition, crisis, climax, and denouement tiers of plot development. I believe that considering these elements of plot development can help us to appreciate the poems on the life issues discussed here even more. Certainly Cawein's infanticide poem meets all four tiers of formalist plot development. The exposition in the poem shows the mother and child, abandoned by proper society. The several crises occur as the mother seeks work, shelter, friends, and family. The climax results from a combination of factors: she and her child are hungry, cold, and tired. The denouement is the death of both mother and child, followed by a narrator's summary pronouncement of the moral that the mother found it "hard enough to live / ...for one; impossible for

two.”

Similarly, Randall’s euthanasia poem follows a narrative line. The exposition shows a person who urges either the reader or another group of persons beyond the reader that he or she does not want to be euthanized. The crises in the poem are potential; the persona anticipates what may happen to him or her if his or her health would deteriorate. The climax is another potentiality: if he or she “seem[s] less human,” then, despite this conditional clause, the persona urges the persons addressed not to kill him or her, but to “Let me still glow.” The denouement is not evident, of course, since we do not know whether the “kindly killers” would obey the speaker’s request or not. This poem may be one of those examples of a problem in unity in a plot structure that formalist critics seek to resolve.

Beatty’s poem, too, follows a plot sequence. The exposition is evident in the title certainly and is expanded in the first stanza. The crises occur in the first stanza when it is apparent that the mother is in the abortionist’s room and in the second stanza when the tools for the abortion and the abortionist him- or herself are compared to wolves. A climax is apparent in that it seems as though the abortionist has reached the goal of burrowing into the mother as wolves burrow into the ground hunting for smaller prey. The denouement, though, is uncertain. As discussed above, whether the abortion is successful or not depends on one’s interpretation of the last line. Further study of the metrics of the poem may be necessary to discover how the author intended to resolve this climax.

Piercy’s poem, significantly, does not follow the four tiers of plot development. First, of course, the grammar of the poem frustrates an attempt to identify the traditional elements of plot development; the verb tenses are all present. Even the exceptions to this rule do not help to identify the four elements. The verbs infinitive “to fatten” and “to butcher” in the third stanza could be construed as future activities once the “you” has “put the lamb / in the pasture” and “haul[ed] it in,” but these verbs infinitive do not detract from the present tenses of all actions in the poem. This is the case also with “to tend” in the fourth stanza. “Wished” is the only verb that is past tense in form, but the meaning of the clause indicates that

the speaker suggests an action in the past continuing in the present. With all this present action, then, it is impossible to determine the exposition and some crises in the poem, both of which categories include past actions. Apparently, then, this poem is all present crisis or present climax. There is no denouement, since we don't know how the person addressed responds to the accusations hurled against him or her. (The person addressed could be female. Who is to say that men are necessarily the only ones who commit the actions that the persona vilifies?) More importantly, what can the reader do, then, with a poem like Piercy's that breaks narratological order and merely engages in the anti-life activity of accusation instead of the pro-life one of affirming life?

Despite Piercy's problems, hopefully, one can see how the other poems discussed here can be used to advance a life-affirming perspective. Some critics are keenly aware of the political implications of poems on abortion, particularly. In her study of several women who have written on abortion, Barbara Johnson notes that "The world that has created conditions under which the loss of a baby becomes desirable must be resisted, not joined" (36). If this is the case, then the responsibility to resist the "loss of a baby" becomes a poetic marching order to fight against not only abortion, but also other activities that destroy life.

Cawein's indictment of the social conditions that led the mother in his infanticide poem to kill herself and her child not only impresses on the contemporary reader the universal conditions of the poor, but it can also encourage us to act on their behalf. The persona in Randall's euthanasia poem can safely allow us to overhear a monologue from someone who fears that he or she is in danger of being euthanized. We hear too many voices from one side only: that euthanasia is a right, that it is the answer to medical problems, and that others know what is best for us. Perhaps that is a benefit of literature—to enable us to read or to hear different voices on controversial issues. The voice of the unborn heard in Beatty's poem offers a perspective rarely discussed in the culture. We hear certain anti-life feminists who claim that abortion is necessary for sexual empowerment of women.¹⁷ We hear few men who stand up for their rights as men, let

alone their paternity. Perhaps the voice we hear in Beatty's work will help us to see abortion from a different perspective, for the animalistic violence that it is.

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NOTES

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1. I would like to thank fellow University Faculty for Life members who first heard this paper presentation at the annual conference held in Minneapolis in 2004 who recommended that we should also attend to figures of speech, such as metonymy, metaphor, and irony, which reinforce what the meter suggests in these poems. Investigating the effects of these figures would be a significant contribution to the canon of pro-life literature, requiring extensive future research.
 2. Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson, editors of *Perrine's Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, caution that "[w]e should avoid, however, the notion that there is any mystical correspondence between certain meters or rhythms and certain emotions. There are no 'happy' meters and no 'melancholy' meters.... Poets' choice of meter is probably less important than how they handle it after they have chosen it" (209). Despite this admonition, I think that even these editors would feel comfortable claiming, as I do, that there may be no such thing as a sad limerick, attributable to the meter used in that poem, just as it is impossible to dance a Polish or Slovenian polka in anything but a lively manner because of the fast tempo—tempo being poetry and poetic scansion set to music.
 3. John Ciardi writes in his summary of the various metrical feet that "[t]he

fundamental basis of all metrical acceleration should be apparent: *the more unstressed syllables are brought together between accents, the faster the line will tend to move*" (927; italics in original).

4. The introduction to the work by Clark's twin brother conveys this idea even further: "So imperceptibly and gently did his happy spirit flee away, that it was some time before we could ascertain that he had gone. I never saw a gentler death. There was no pain, no distress, no shuddering, no violent disruption of the ties of life. Both as to the mind's peace and the body's composure, it was a beautiful instance of *euthanasia*" (20-21). Significantly, as if to reinforce its etymology, the last word is written in Greek.

5. Researching poetry on the life issues in international literature would be a massive future research project. One could begin, however, with the authors cited in this paragraph and Piotr Wilczek's comparative literary study on the premiere national poet of Poland Adam Mickiewicz and Lord Byron.

6. From *After the Killing* (c) 1973 by Dudley Randall; reprinted by permission of Third World Press, Inc., Chicago, Illinois.

7. One particularly egregious example where criticism has overtaken logic (in that the criticism has turned from criticism *per se* to *ad hominem* attacks against pro-lifers) is a 1998 article by Naomi Guttman. After discussing in general terms the importance of gardening as "a necessary enterprise and often one relegated to women by virtue of being a quasi-domestic activity" (10), Guttman hits on many of the major buzzwords in ecofeminist and feminist theory to demean pro-lifers: "In this pro-choice poem, Piercy turns around the rhetoric of the so-called 'right-to-lifers,' arguing that women should not be treated as though they are fruit trees or breeding animals and that men's wish to control women's bodies is only part of their wish to control and dominate all of nature. Piercy attacks the sophistry that permits the Right Wing to act on behalf of 'life' in the case of the unborn human fetus but neglects to agitate on behalf of the environment—the healthy life of the planet.... The 'Right to Life' that Piercy is most concerned with is the continuing life of the planet that sustains us, and it is that right to own—to be responsible for—the quality of life on earth that she champions rather than a view of life that privileges the 'rights' of the unborn, and possibly unwanted child" (12; internal quotes in original).

8. Unfortunately, unlike the other poets who granted permission for their work to be reprinted, according to the permissions editor who handles her material, Piercy would not grant permission for certain stanzas of her poem to be reprinted here. However, although her poem is difficult to locate, readers may be able to search college or university catalogs for an available

copy.

9. There is an exception to this rule. The second foot of the last line of the third stanza may be a spondee instead of a monosyllabic foot if one consistently accents all cases of the pronoun. One could, however, designate the foot an iamb, presuming that the use of “you” here could refer not only to the person being addressed, but to the common use of “you” as anybody.

10. An interesting variation is that the first foot of the first line of the fourth stanza is a spondee consisting of the adverb first and then the pronoun. This opening foot functions as a transition from the impersonal situation described in the third stanza to the oppressive situation described in the fourth. Moreover, the mere presence of the spondees—five in the third stanza and nine in the fourth stanza--show that the aggression or at least the anger of the persona is increasing as the poem progresses.

11. Of course, if the opening foot really consists of the spondaic “You plant,” then what I said in the previous paragraph is reinforced with the addition of one more spondee to the four that I discuss.

Another minor consideration is that I consider the second foot in the ninth line of the third stanza a monosyllabic foot because it sounds as though the dependent clause is a casual response to the independent clause that precedes it. It is not so much that fish are not called as one’s own possessions as much as that it depends on whether the “you” being addressed is an individual who chooses to consume them. The “you” here could be the colloquial reference to people in general.

12. There is some confusion among scholars about whether Sexton had an abortion at all. Lawrence Jay Dessner notes in an interview that Sexton once said, “I’ll often confess to things that never happened” (136). One of his footnotes for discussion of another poem as the basis for the abortion includes a quote in a 1960 letter in which Sexton says “I have written a new longish poem called ‘The Operation’ which is (damn it as I really don’t *want* to write any more of them) a personal narration about my experiences this fall” (146; italics in original).

Earlier, I commented on Guttman, whose ideological bent not only manifests itself in her critique of Piercy’s work, but which most likely affected an adequate interpretation of the poem. Another critic who may have let an anti-life feminist literary criticism distort an appreciation of Brooks’ and Sexton’s poems is Irene Dash, who writes: “And although the legitimacy of abortion is recognized, Sexton and Brooks imply that this is not the answer, the anguish in their poems betraying the dilemma of the speakers. For we have not yet moved beyond the primitive first stages in our attitudes towards mother-child relationship” (12). Whether it is unfortunate that mothers “have not yet moved beyond the primitive first stages” of love

for their children is a claim that may not be a concern for a literary critic *per se*, especially if the critic chooses to ignore the strong pro-life messages in both works.

13. Many scholars suggested other abortion poems in response to an email query. Besides mentioning Brooks' poem, which received the most mention, I was urged to consider Lucille Clifton's "the lost baby poem" (1972), Rita Dove's "Motherhood" (1986), and Adrienne Rich's "To a Poet" (1974). While Rich's poem only casually references abortion, examining the others from a pro-life perspective can be the object of future research.

I would also like to recognize the work of Cynthia Hallen, whose "Saddest Hymn of the Republic" is "a parison of the 'Battle Hymn of the Republic,'" only one verse of which has been published in online journals. I would like to thank Hallen for granting permission for me to print the entire work in this paper:

Mine eyes have seen the gory pictures
of dismembered babes;
They have pulled them from their mothers,
and then harvested their brains;
They have burned them in incinerators,
dumped them without graves,
While Right goes marching on.
[CHORUS] Little children are the kingdom;
Little children have a mission;
Little children bring us vision,
And Life goes marching on.
From the beauty of the body,
they are suctioned into bits;
Or they're sliced in ragged pieces
to a mass of broken limbs;
Or the saline poison stops their hearts
and broils their fragile skin,
But Right goes marching on. [CHORUS]
In the name of human freedom,
they tear babies from the womb;
They have labeled life sub-human
and made liberty a tomb;
They use violence for solutions,
and their clinic profits boom,
But Right goes marching on. [CHORUS]

14. "An Abortion Attempt by My Mother" from *Mad River* by Jan Beatty, (c) 1995. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.

15. I find it interesting that the image of the wolf operates in other poetry concerning motherhood. For example, Rita Dove's "Motherhood" uses this symbol strikingly. The persona of the poem discusses a female character who dreams about "misplacing" her child. In the second stanza, "the wolf breaks free" from "three men" who had tormented it. In the third stanza the woman "toss[es] the baby behind her" and "straddles / the wolf" (185). Whatever archetypal interpretation can be made of this poem, it is certainly evident that the object of the mother's affections is abandoned in favor of a wilder force personified by the wolf.

Perhaps this connection with a wolf is mere coincidence. Perhaps, though, Beatty and Dove are writing about the darker forces in American society that corrupt the natural ancient view of respect and love between mothers and the children that enable women to be granted that title. Another poem by Dove, "Mother Love," shows this corruption even more dramatically. Again, while an archetypal critic would find great symbolism in the poem, the literal presentation is strikingly grotesque. The persona speaks of a "male child" whom she has been asked to nurse. Instead of sitting comfortably by a fire, nursing him, the persona treats us to the following image:

Each night
I laid him on the smoldering embers,
sealing his juices in slowly so he might
be cured to perfection. Oh, I know it
looked damning: at the hearth a muttering crone
bent over a baby sizzling on a spit
as neat as a Virginia ham. (17)

16. I am aware that the pronoun is neither normally nor necessarily accented. I can argue that a dramatic reading of the poem, though, does bring attention to the self-performing action of the verb.

17. See, for example, Ellen Willis, who concludes that "Opposing abortion, then, means accepting that women must suffer sexual disempowerment and a radical loss of autonomy relative to men" (466).