

Analysing poetry: The process

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On reading the poem “Offspring” by Naomi Long Madgett, one of the most common first reactions that can be elicited from any reader or individual, is that of the perception of a very loving bond between a mother and her child, where the mother only wants the best for her offspring, and wishes that it would grow and reach new heights. The poem is overflowing with emotion, and this is indeed a very optimistic poem, as the mother here hopes for the best and for the child’s happiness even after she is taken away from her. Similarly, the poem “On Children” by Kahlil Gibran states that children are not the exclusive belongings of their parents, but are rather the off-springs of Life itself. The poet tries to evoke within the reader, that although they are born through us, they are like arrows shot freely from bows, and should thus be allowed to live freely according to their will.

As far as the literal meaning is concerned, Madgett’s poem draws a parallelism between motherhood and the growth of a tree. The poem has been written like as if a tree had grown a new sapling, and was urging it to grow higher and stronger, and to bend its twigs till it reached the sun and was higher than the mother herself. However, the twig broke, and even though it was taken on a completely different path than intended, the mother tree was content, as the twig appeared content and free. Gibran, too, illustrates this sense of freedom by stating that children were born not for the people but because Life itself longed for company, love and freedom. These children were free beings, and could therefore not be caged and should therefore be loved and cared for, and given the necessary freedom.

Madgett’s “Offspring” illustrates “mother” as being one who wishes the best for her child, and strives for the growth and betterment of the young one. The expression, “born of my trunk and strengthened by my roots” implies that the mother feels that the child is a part of herself, and thus she wants her to reach new heights, something that perhaps she herself could not. Furthermore, the phrase “face slanted upward toward a threatening sky” implies that her child was not afraid of the unknown or of new things as she herself might have been, which gave her the solace that her off-spring was courageous, free, and extremely strong. On the other hand, Kahlil Gibran paints a picture, which portrays the parent as the bow that shoots arrows, which are in fact, the children. The poet puts forth the narration that parents must be happy that they get the opportunity to guide and help their children, and should therefore be like happy archers bending their bows, only to allow the arrows to take their own course as they are not owned by anybody.

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In terms of symbolism, Madgett uses metaphors as well as imagery to indicate the departure of the child into a world of her own that is different from that of the footsteps followed by the mother. The broken twig further symbolises that the mother has lost track or sight of her daughter, while the threatening sky means an ominous future, or perhaps a new direction in life that the mother might have been afraid to take. Gibran's "On Children" houses the symbolism of a bow and arrow, where the bow is the parent, and the arrows are their children. It is Life who lovingly shoots the arrows from the bows like an archer, and watches them propel forward and meet their destiny. The poet also states that Life rewards those parents who are trusting and stable towards their children.

It can thus be said, that both the poets have written this poem with the goal to make the readers understand, that children are not someone whom they can control, and they need to be left to themselves so that they can roam freely, and explore the world around them.

The poets for both the poems accomplish that goal by repeatedly emphasising on the fact, that even though children may be a part of the parent, and even though they may be born through them, they are the only ones with the right to make decisions for themselves, and the parents should not exert their control over them.

As far as prosody is concerned, "Offspring" is iambic, and there are irregularities throughout the poem in terms of its rhythm. The poem has extensive use of metaphors to convey the meaning to the readers. "On Children" is dactylic, and uses detailed words and metaphors as well to bring out the meaning that the poet wishes to convey

In "Offspring," Madgett identifies the crisis as being that the child had taken a path that was different from what her mother had intended, but this crisis gets resolved as the mother is essentially at peace with this decision, mostly due to the encouraging smile on her daughter's face. Similarly, in "On Children," although there has been no crisis that has been explicitly identified, the poet has time and again stated that parents should feel proud and must encourage their children in whatever direction they choose to go.