

## THE USE OF INFANTICIDE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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### Abstract

Infanticide seems to dominate literature from the beginning. It has been observed that it started since the use of the Bible. Why does it concern the writers so much? This has to be analyzed here. It refers to any kind of murder of a small infant, even if it is supported by the father and other kin. The use of new terms neonaticide and prolicide have generated throughout the history of infanticide. However murdering of an older child was much complex than the murder of a new born. The reasons behind this discussion are that the historians of England language have avoided using the clear language for the broader study of the infanticide. The historians who work in this field don't prefer to use the exact term "infanticide" as their work has been limited to a particular sphere of neonaticide. Myths seem to be recurrent in this study of infanticide. They are known to be collective and communal and they can be considered to be universal. Greek myths dominate this topic. There are images and patterns which occur in literature in spite of time and place and hence these are called archetypes or archetypal patterns. The use of scapegoat has also been used to describe infanticide.

**Keywords:** infanticide, neonaticide, myth, murder.

Infanticide has been one of the major concerns of authors from the writing of the Bible onwards to the twentieth century literature. The importance and the recurrence of this theme therefore has been justified for selecting five American and English writers in whose works child murder appears. The hideousness of this crime brings several thoughts to the mind. Why is the theme so recurrent? What made the authors exploit it? How does each one express it? What is the position of the different authors in relation to the theme? These are the questions that need to be answered here.

In legal terms, infanticide refers to the killing of a child mostly by its own mother during or after the delivery. According to *Black's Law Dictionary*, “the fact of the birth distinguishes this act from ‘feticide’ or ‘procuring abortion’, which terms denote the destruction of the fetus in the womb”. This division of the subject into feticide and infanticide is made only by jurists while the *Black's Law Dictionary* states that, “in medical jurisprudence the word prolicide (a synonym for infanticide) means the destruction of human offspring”.

Infanticide or prolicide as medical jurisprudence calls it, for the purpose of this research topic will be used to designate any kind of murder against the life of a small infant, even if it has been committed by the father, in order to give cohesion of a recurrent theme in literature. And when abortion of forced sterility appears, both will be considered as variants to the theme of child murder.

Newborn child murder may have been rare in modern England, but there is a little doubt that it happened. Evidence of it exists in the judicial records, as it was criminalized by the legal code. The murder of children also weighed heavily in the cultural imagination of the English, where it surfaced in sermons, ballads and pamphlets. Yet it is difficult to determine the details of why it happened because infanticide was taboo in England’s “legal minded” Christian society. According to Jim Sharpe in *Infanticide: Historical Perspectives on Child Murder and Concealment, 1550-2000*, “legal mindedness refers to the wide familiarity with and unusual respect for the law among the English. Historians can only surmise the motivations of the men and women who murdered infants. No suspected murderer left an honest, private appraisal of why he or she decided against it.” (41)

It may be instructive to consider briefly what the word “infanticide” has signified in scholarly discourse over the past several decades. Early researchers defined “infanticide” broadly, using it to indicate the murder of a child between birth and some necessary arbitrary “age of discretion”. Hoffer and Hull used this most general rubric in *Murdering Mothers*:

an examination of the legal history of infanticide from its first regulation by the state under Elizabeth through the repeal of early modern statutes concerning infanticide in 1803. They define “infant” as a child under the age of nine, following justice manuals from the early modern period. (13)

They used it to encompass the death of a child as the result of direct homicide or willful neglect committed for any purpose by a relative, friend or stranger. Medical doctors, anthropologists and historians studying child murder have observed that employing such a broad category obscures behavioral patterns varying systematically according to the specific age of the child and its relationship with its killer. Following anthropological observations of infanticide in a broad range of human cultures, most scholars now make a distinction between neonaticide, the swift murder of an infant immediately after the birth, up to twenty four hours after, but usually within minutes of, separation from the mother, and filicide or pedicide, the murder of a child older than twenty four hours but still of an age of helplessness and dependence. Hausfater and Hardy in an introduction and overview, *Infanticide: Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives* call murder, “immediately after birth “infanticide”. They want us to think of child murder as operating on a continuum of foeticide –infanticide-filicide/pedicide. They do acknowledge however that this usage is best suited for discussions of animal behavior where the avian or mammalian offspring are mostly independent entities shortly after the birth”. (15)

According to Dickinson and Sharpe in *Infanticide: Historical Perspectives on Child Murder and Concealment, 1550-2000*, “Neonaticide was and is always committed by the mother, sometimes aided by other relatives, such as her sister, mother or rarely infant’s father”. (42)

Anthropological observers have noted that the decision to kill a neonate generally results from the infant's deformity, a culture's need to alter artificially the gender ratio, or the infant's threat to the future reproductive success of the mother. According to Hausfater in *Infanticide: Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives*, "The murder of children older than one day, on the other hand, may be committed by a relative (fidicide) but is usually perpetrated by a genetically unrelated person (pedicide); it is frequently the result of systematic neglect or overt abuse" (501). These patterns have been confirmed by the historical studies. Keith Wrightson in *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525-1700* noted a distinction in methods of English infanticide that varied according to the age of victim. "Neonates were strangled or suffocated by the mother; older infants perished as a result of neglect during nursing, often by the design of the father." (16)

One reason for this discussion of terms is that historians of England have largely eschewed using the more precise language that has developed in the broader study of child murder. Historians working in this field have preferred using the inexact term "infanticide" when their work has been almost exclusively limited to the exploration of neonaticide. However it was noted that neonaticide was the most commonly occurring form of child murder in early modern England. Popular pamphlets however did not necessarily confine their discussion of infanticide to the murder of newborns. This body of printed materials was more interested in demonizing deviant womanhood, and their rhetoric therefore did not require that the victims be very recently separated from their mother's bodies. Because of the confusion of the term, it has been tried to keep the term precise as possible in this thesis, reserving the word "infanticide" when meant in the broadest sense. Sometimes it has been used as a synonym for neonaticide or newborn child murder, but that is to avoid repetition only when the intended meaning is clear.

The central concern of this topic is the murder of the new born child, as it dominated the English experience of infanticide. It was the primary legal understanding of infanticide at least since passage of the 1624 "Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murdering of Bastard Children." Moreover, it was likely the most common form of child murder due to the relative use of committing it, especially if the pregnancy had been concealed. Because neonaticide was much harder to prove circumstantially in an era when it was not uncommon for women to miscarry late in pregnancy, to endure stillbirth, or to bear weak infants, there was much debate and concern about how to distinguish murder from death by natural causes.

Murdering older infants and children was a more complex scenario than killing a newborn. The cause of the abrupt, violent death for older infants and children was more obviously signaled on their bodies, as generally their greater size and strength required greater force to murder them. Neglect and malnourishment left observable indicators on the victim. Neighbours, servants or other children in the household, who would subsequently confirm the coroner's conclusion, also witnessed systematic withholding of food, clothing and other necessities from dependent children. According to Hausfater and Hardy in *Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives on Infanticide: Introduction and Overview*:

Although neonaticide is the present focus, the line between neonaticide and infanticide is at times blurry or nonexistent, especially in the popular print. It will be instructive to consider both the absence of this distinction, as well as the murder and execution of pregnant women. These lines drawn between the murder of a fetus, a neonate and an older infant as an arbitrary as they are useful. (15)

The historical interest in European infanticide grew out of several historiographic trends in the 1970's. Social science endeavors such as population reconstruction and the history of crime combined with contemporary enthusiasm for the history of childhood, the family and sexuality to encourage the investigation of infanticide. The point of departure for early studies of the phenomenon was the assumption that among ordinary pre-modern people life was cheap: children were a burden tolerated only for their eventual economic contribution to the household, and the short life expectancy of those who made it to adulthood encouraged the emotional distance, and neglect, of dependents. Pre-modern family life approximated a Hobbesian state of nature of Lawrence Stone, whose work *Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500* epitomizes this negative view of the relationship between parents and children in English historiography. Stone draws on a tradition of viewing the pre-modern European family as, “an institution characterized by infanticide and sexual abuse of children.”(22)

His questionable research and untenable conclusions about the typical peasant family were in part based on assumptions about the supposedly prevalent European practice of exposing, abandoning, or otherwise neglecting unwanted infants.

Many historians found the Stone's accounts of family life among the English poor in *Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500* lacked reliability. In particular, social historians studying demography and crime helped to correct some of these erroneous conclusions. The statistical data that they compiled from the careful study of parish and the court records gave a more accurate picture of the lives of the everyday people than the bourgeois voices in Stone's literary sources. Social historians reconstructed families and communities from such records, demonstrating that in fact family life and childhood had not been as negative portrayed by Stone. They have helped to create a more balanced picture of interpersonal relationships, from courtship and marriage to parenthood and other bonds within the community. More importantly for this discussion, they have demonstrated that infanticide was rare.

Keith Wrightson in *Infanticide in European History* was the first to conclude that, “the rate of the newborn child murder was far too low in the seventeenth century England for historians to interpret it either as a form of socially sanctioned population control or as evidence of pre-modern parent's emotional distance from the young.” (15) Wrightson's data, drawn from the parish register of Terling, Essex, suggests that only two percent of bastards were the victims of infanticide. Effective management of premarital sexual relationships meant that the illegitimacy rate hovered around 2-3 percent of births in early modern England. Accordingly Wrightson's findings in *Infanticide in Earlier Seventeenth-Century England* suggests, “an infanticide rate of 40 per 100,000 births.” (18) If that figure is extrapolated to all of England, then it is estimated that fifty five infanticides occurred throughout the kingdom in 1600. According to Wrightson in *Infanticide in Earlier Seventeenth-Century England*, “from 1601 to 1665 in Essex, fourteen percent of parishes experienced prosecution for infanticide.” (11) Newborn child murder was clearly not unknown, even though it was a rare occurrence.

It is perhaps misleading to talk about “infanticide” indictments before 1624, although all of the studies of infanticide, and most of the studies of the crime, in England do so. Before 1624 Act carved out the “destroying and murdering of bastard children” as a separate crime, murder was murder regardless of the age of the victim, the marital status of the perpetrator, and the relationship between the victim and perpetrator. Nevertheless, historians have recognized that homicide and infanticide follow very different trends. They have also been interested in the impact of 1624 Act; to measure its impact requires distinguishing infanticide from homicide even before infanticide was constructed as a distinct crime in the law.

One of the most prominent scholars of crime in early modern England has examined the trends for homicide and infanticide. Jim Sharpe, in his monumental study of crime in early modern England in addition to confirming that infanticide was rare, verified the hypothesis that infanticide was an emphatically different action than homicide. In his work *Crime in Early Modern England* he remarks “Infanticide indictments steadily increased over the course of the seventeenth century, even as overall homicide indictments dramatically decreased.”(87) Further Sharpe remarks, “unlike homicide rates, infanticide rates did not seem to be responding to the cultural and social shifts away from violence, usually described as part of the “reformation of manners”, that were broadly evident in England by the end of the seventeenth century.” (88) Sharpe believes that, “in the Palatinate of Chester during the first decade of the seventeenth century, there were 45 indictments for homicide. On the other hand, there were fewer than 5 indictments for infanticide.” (87) Sharpe demonstrates that this ratio was not constant in the Chester Palatinate over the course of the seventeenth century. By 1700 the homicide and infanticide indictments had equalized. Homicides dropped steadily over the century, following Euro-wide trends toward less interpersonal violence; infanticides, however increased over the same period.

Jim Sharpe is also notable for proposing the existence of an “infanticide wave” during the seventeenth century that outpaced the more widely studied “witch craze.” His conclusion rests on increasing indictments for infanticide, the passage of 1624 statute that targeted infanticide for unusually severe punishment, and the exceptionally high execution rate for convicted infanticides that punctuated the seventeenth century. He directly compares the number of women executed for infanticide with the number executed for witchcraft. According to Sharpe in *Infanticide in Early Modern England*, “ in Cheshire between 1580 and 1709, thirty three women were hanged for infanticide, eleven were hanged witchcraft; in Essex between 1620 and 1680, thirty one women were hanged for infanticide, twenty for witchcraft.” (88)

Most recently, historians have been working to reconstruct the typical infanticide scenario in early modern England. They have examined indictments and other court records in order to determine the motives, methods, and consequences of newborn child murder. The resulting consensus established by James Sharpe, R. Malcolmson, Laura Gowing, and J.R. Dickinson confirms that most infanticides took place at birth. The murderer was nearly always neonate’s mother: usually an unmarried domestic servant in her early twenties. The murder itself took place in the course of a secret, solitary birth, which followed a concealed pregnancy. Dickinson and Sharpe in *Infanticide in Early Modern England* believe that, “unlike Trexler’s findings concerning infanticide in Florence, as well as patterns of infanticide documented in other cultures, in early modern England the sex of the child appears to have been irrelevant.”(49) The mother disposed of the body as she was able in a privy, a ditch, a pond, a shallow grave or because servant girls could find it difficult to get away from their domestic duties long enough to dispose of the corpse, hidden in a box, or even in her bed. The deed was exposed by the discovery of the infant’s corpse or the mother’s confession, usually upon interrogation regarding bloody clothes, an unexpected absence from work followed by unusual weakness, or a suddenly flattened belly. Sometimes members of the women’s household or community had suspected that she was pregnant, evidenced by their questions of and accusations towards her before the birth and by their ability, at times, to determine quickly whom to interrogate about suspicious circumstances. Other times, however weeks would pass between birth and discovery of the body, with no indication of who the mother might have been.

Fathers and other men related to the accused women were not, however, absent from suspicion. They were indicted, although rarely. In the surviving records of the Home Circuit Assizes, 1559-1625, only 9 out of 93 infanticide indictments were for men. Just two of these indictments specify that the indicted male was the father of the murdered child. According to Cockburn in *Calendar of Assize Records: Kent Indictments, Charles II*, “In Bromley, Kent, in 1669 John Hunt was indicted for strangling his daughter at birth. This married yeoman was indicted as the principal (with no accomplice) in his crime. He was found not guilty; unfortunately no other details of the crime were given.”(76)

According to Guerin in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, “by textual approach we mean a concentration on the work itself, on the text, and examine it as an aesthetic creation, that is, as art” (2). The textual approach will lead to investigation into the mythical patterns which lie behind each author’s view of child murder. For, as we know myth according to Guerin, “is concerned with the motives underlying human behavior” (116). But in order to understand this quotation better, it becomes necessary to define myth. According to Mark Schorer:

Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend. (117)

Myth are said to be collective and communal and even though they take specific shapes in different literatures, they can be considered universal. There are certain images and patterns which recur in literature regardless of time or place and, because of this, these images are called archetypes or archetypal patterns. As a consequence, they are seen as universal symbols in literature. These universal symbols will be of primary importance to interpret the plays, to establish the main affinities within them and also to give consistency to this work. Some of these symbols are recurrent in all these works such as the sacrificial scapegoat motif or pattern. This motif is one of the most directly related to infanticide in the works that are to be examined. W. Guerin has explained the function of the scapegoat in a chapter dedicated to Mythological and Archetypal approaches:

by transferring the corruptions of the tribe to a sacred animal or man, then by killing (and in some instances eating) this scapegoat, the tribe could achieve the cleansing and atonement thought necessary for natural and spiritual rebirth.(124)

Purification rites and customs, based on the customs of purity and pollution, are found in all known cultures and religions, both ancient and modern, according to Sherry B. Ortner:

Closely connected with the practice of drawing pollution from a defiled person or object is the notion that pollution may be transferred from a person or community to another object that is either immune to pollution itself or that can be discard or destroyed. The most dramatic rites embodying this principle are scapegoat ceremonies in which pollution is transferred to an animal or person by either touching, bathing with, or simply pronouncing the pollution transferred to the scapegoat. The scapegoat is then run out of town or killed, actually or symbolically. The victim may further be made into an offering or sacrifice to the gods on the general ritual principle of keeping the gods satisfied. In-the classic scapegoat ceremony of the Old Testament, as noted in Leviticus, Chapter

16, the animal — called Azazel.(a desert demon) —was simply released to wander the wilderness. (301)

The use of scapegoat has a long history which leads us to ancient rites including animals as well as human beings. The scapegoat motif is found in Christianity and reflects upon the notion of an innocent person who takes upon himself the price of a guilty person, in the belief that Jesus Christ was the saint who died in atonement for his sins for the mankind.

Minor symbols can also be found in some of the plays such as the indigenous myth called the American dream or the mythic figure of the American Adam. As they are subordinated to the scapegoat motif, they will be given a definition in each particular work.

A complimentary view of the myth is still given by Levi Strauss. He says that, “in every myth system we will find a persistent sequence of binary discriminations as between the human and superhuman, mortal and immortal, male and female followed by a meditation of the paired categories thus distinguished” (51). J.D. Crossan in his work *The Dark Interval*; towards a theology of story, further discusses this saying that the myth has its opposite in a parable:

Parable is a story which is the polar, or binary, opposite of myth. Parable brings out not peace but the sword, and parable casts fire upon the earth which receives it. Myth has a double function; the reconciliation of an individual contradiction and more important, the creation of belief in the permanent possibility of reconciliation. Parable has also a double function which opposes that double function of the myth. The surface function of parable is to create contradiction within a given situation of complacent security but, even more unnervingly, to challenge the fundamental principle of reconciliation by making us aware of the fact that we made up the reconciliation. Parable is intrinsically negative. (55)

While dealing with myth in different works the other side of the myth should not be forgotten. Hence the opposite of myth is known to be parable.

The theme of infanticide has troubled people since the coming of the Christ relates in two different passages in the Old Testament. Firstly in the first book of the kings, Chapter 4 and chapter 19, “and this women’s child died in the night; because she overlaid it.” The prostitute to whom which the Bible has referred has committed to an involuntary infanticide, yet the crime exists. Secondly in the book of kings, chapter 6 and 28-29, “and the king said unto her, what aileth thee? And she answered, this woman said to me, give thy son, that we may eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow. So we boiled my son, and did eat him, and she hath hid her son.” Here quite a different situation appears. It is due to starvation and murdering their own children was something people did in order to survive.

In The New Testament too, as Jesus is born, King Herod tries to kill the recently-born Messiah for he sees his kingdom threatened by the birth of the newborn king of the Jews. In Chapters, 2 and 13, "And when they were departed, behold the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him". Hence King Herod decides to kill all the children that were in Bethlehem, so that Jesus would be killed. Further in the Chapters 2 and 13, “then Herod, when he saw he was mocked by the wise men, was exceeding worth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men”. In this way Herod, due to desperation for power and threat of the arrival of the new Messiah, decides to kill all the innocent children.

Since the most remote periods, then infanticide for different reasons which motivated the crime has existed. Even Jesus Christ as mentioned above was under the risk of being killed by Herod as he was born.

With concern to the theme of infanticide in Anglo – American literature, it is noteworthy mentioning that even theatre has its roots in ritual. For even though no one really knows how the theatre began, the theory most widely followed today is that it evolved from ritual. According to O.G. Brockett in an introduction in *The Theatre*:

In the beginning, man viewed the natural forces of the world, even the seasonal changes, as unpredictable, and sought, through various means, to control these unknown and feared powers. Those measures which appeared to bring the desired results were then retained and repeated until they hardened into fixed rituals. Eventually stories arose, which explained or veiled the rites' mysteries. As man progressed in knowledge, some rituals, such as those involving human sacrifice, were abandoned, but the stories, later called myths, persisted and provided material for art and drama. (65)

Within this context of ritual and myth it is possible to assure that drama, as it is known in the Western World has its roots in the Ancient Greece; therefore, ritual and myth can be considered as the originators of drama. It is therefore important to be concerned with the rituals which date back to the beginning of human history, more particularly when the civilization of Egypt and the Near East entered an advanced stage, and also with Ancient Greek Mythology.

Egyptian myths were usually related to the recurrent cycle of life and of the seasons which seem to have been used in various rituals, but in terms of theatre, the most important of all these rituals is the *Abydos Passion Play*, which is concerned with the death and resurrection of the God Osiris. According to Brockett *The Theatre* there are some other rituals which are concerned with the seasonal pattern of birth, growth, maturity, death and rebirth:

much of our information about the Egyptians is derived from hieroglyphics and artifacts preserved in the pyramids built as tombs for the pharaohs. Many of these remains relate to the Egyptian Myths concerning the recurrent cycle of life and the seasons. In addition to Egyptian rituals, records of others (dating from the fifteenth-to the thirteenth centuries B.C.) in the Near East have been discovered on clay tablets. For the most part, they are concerned with the seasonal pattern of birth, growth, maturity, death and rebirth. (68)

The same idea of death and rebirth or resurrection is also found in many rituals of many savage tribes, especially those who are known to practice totetism. In such tribes the boy in the stage of puberty used to go through certain initial rites. The most common was pretence of killing the boy and bringing him back to life. This rite has to be seen as a means of transferring the youth's soul to the totem.

J. G Frazer, in his book *The Golden Bough*, a study in magic and religion, gives many examples which illustrate the idea of resurrection in such tribes

In the Binbinga tribe, on the Western coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, the women and children believe that the noise of the bull-roarer at initiation is made by a spirit named Katajalina, who lives in an ant-hill and comes out and eats up the boy, afterwards restoring him to life. Similarly among their neighbour the Anula the women imagine that the droning sound of a bull-



roarer is produced by a spirit called Gnabaia, who swallows the lads at initiation and afterwards disgorges them in the form of initiated men. (907)

Another example is found in an island which is called Rock, and it is situated between New Guinea and New Britain. There people:

hold festivals at which one or two disguised men, their heads covered with wooden masks, go dancing through the village, followed by all the other men. They demand that the circumcised boys who have not yet been swallowed by Marsaba (the devil) shall be given up to them. The boys, trembling and shrieking, are delivered to them, and must creep between the legs of the disguised men. Then the procession moves through the village again, and announces that Marsaba has eaten up the boys, and will not disgorge them till he receives a present of pigs, taro, and so forth. So all the villagers, according to their means, contribute provisions, which are then consumed in the name of Marsaba. (910)

Frazer goes on to explain his theory of life and resurrection further:

and whenever totetism is found of killing and bringing to life again the novice at initiation, there may exist or have existed not only a belief in the possibility of permanently depositing the soul in some external object — animal, plant, or what not — but an actual intention of so doing. (916)

Some more examples can be taken from Greek Mythology in order to see the close relationship with the writers we are dealing with. According to Lindoln in *Mythology*, “although the worst crime of which the Greek could conceive was the murder of kin” (103). Some Greek myths also show death as related to the archetypal pattern of life, death, rebirth, and therefore connected with immortality of soul. This connection will be seen with the works this thesis will deal with. An example from Greek Mythology, the legend of King Cronus can be taken. His wife Rhea gave birth to some Gods and Goddesses, and he swallowed them shortly after each was born, fearing to be supplanted by a son. But, given an emetic potion, he vomited the Gods leaving them alive and unhurt. Another Greek Myth is about Procne who killed her son Itys and served his flesh to her husband Tereus to avenge her sister’s rape.

Another example of Greek Mythology is Medea which has been converted into drama. In this work a mother kills her sons, in order to avenge her husband. As there seems to be an instinctive necessity to see the parents perpetuated into their sons, she decides to kill her children so that her husband cannot reach rebirth through the coming generation.

The text from Euripides *Alcestis*, *The Medea*, *The Heracleidae et alii* shows Medea first speaking to women in the chorus and then to her husband.

MEDEA: Women, my task is fixed: as quickly as I may  
To kill my children, and start away from this  
land, And not, by wasting time, to suffer my children  
To be slain by another hand less kindly to them.  
Force every way will have it they must die, and  
since  
This must be so, then I, their mother, shall  
kill them.  
Oh, arm yourself in steel, my heart! Do not  
hang back

From doing this fearful and necessary wrong.  
 MEDEA: Yes, and my grief is gain when you cannot mock it.  
 JASON: I tell you it was not by hand that destroyed them.  
 MEDEA: But it was your insolence, and your virgin  
 wedding.  
 JASON: And just for the sake of that you chose to kill  
 them.  
 MEDEA: Is love so small a pain, do you think, for a  
 woman?  
 JASON: For a wise one, certainly. But you are  
 wholly evil.  
 MEDEA: The children are dead. I say this to make  
 you suffer. (115)

Greek Mythology also presented the tragic dynasties such as the House of Arctus. King Arctus, feeling he had been cuckolded by his own brother Thyestes, invited him to a banquet and served his brother's own sons, who had been butchered and boiled.

The King of Troy's wife, Hecuba, had a nightmare in which she gave birth to a troublemaker. As she was told by the seers that her unborn child would destroy Troy, Hecuba exposed her child on Mount Ida, but it survived.

Looking back in the Old Testament again, specifically in the First Book of the Moses, Genesis, we find in Chapter 22 that the sacrifice of the son was also known from the Bible. It was considered a religious offering as we can see when God tempted Abraham, "And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burn offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of". Also regarding the theme of child murder, it has been known that the king of Sweden, Aun sacrificed his nine children to Odin at Upsala in order to spare his own life.

This barbarous custom of taking lives of human beings as victims from a family was also relevant in Ancient Greece where they used to sacrifice the King's son. According to Frazer "There seems to have been at least one kingly house of great antiquity of which the eldest sons were always liable to be sacrificed in room of their royal sires". (382)

Thus the theme of infanticide develops throughout Greek Mythology showing the atrocities Gods and Goddesses committed when their children did not satisfy them. The flaws of these mythical deities were similar to the common human beings and they therefore killed their children due to pride, lust, selfishness etc. Sometimes, the myths that arose were also related to the lifecycle of birth, growth, decay, death and rebirth. The myths related to the life cycle can be seen since the beginning of the drama. According to A.G Brockett:

for several centuries Greek drama was presented exclusively at festivals honoring Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility supposedly the son of Zeus (the greatest of Greek gods) and Semeie (a mortal). Dionysus was killed, dismembered and then resurrected. The myths that arose about him were closely related to the life cycle and to seasonal changes: birth, growth, decay, death, and rebirth; spring, summer, fall, and winter. (68)

After Greek drama there is a progressive evolution in literature in which many kinds of dramas and novels developed gradually. But the theme of infanticide, with variants notwithstanding, seems to have flourished along almost all the periods. In Roman Tragedies which seem to be based on Greek themes we find Seneca's *Thyestes* in which the flesh of the

children as served at a banquet. The importance of Greek themes is pointed out by O. G Brockett:

The only Roman tragedies that now exist are based on Greek themes and are the work of Lucius Annaeus Seneca. Nine of his tragedies are extant, of which five are adapted plays by Euripides. Seneca was not a professional dramatist and his plays probably were not staged. Nevertheless, he was a major influence on Renaissance tragedy, and therefore the characteristics of his work are important. (110)

The aim of this research is to discuss infanticide in Anglo-American literature; only a few references will be made to infanticide in relation to other literatures, before dealing specifically with George Eliot, Eugene O Neill, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard and Toni Morrison.

Looking backwards to the eighteenth century, we find Johan Wolfgang Von Goethe, universally known for *Faust*, written in 1790. It is exactly in this play that infanticide is present.

Faust aided by Mephistopheles, seduces the innocent and pure Margarete who being aware of the misfortune which surrounds her, feels evil as part of her. As she gives birth to a child by Faust, she is unable to see any escape other than killing her own child. Nevertheless she is conscious of the crime she has committed and seems to ready to expiate her sin. Likewise, Faust leaves the play showing repentance for what he has caused.

In this play infanticide does not lead to anything positive, as it will be noticed in most of these works which are going to be analyzed; on the contrary, the child which has been conceived in a sinful atmosphere is the personification of evil and the only way Margarete sees to eliminate evil is to commit the infanticide. The consequence of both the characters is negative. She is taken to prison while Faust fails to reach all his ideals in life.

Another German playwright who also seems to introduce the same theme is Frank Wedekind, an expressionist dramatist who, by the end of the nineteenth century, in 1891, wrote *Spring's Awakening*. In this play, the author shows the theme of sexuality in adolescents. One of the real conflicts which this theme reflects is the problem which the character Wendla has to face. At the age of fourteen, she is seduced by Melchior and gets pregnant. But as a consequence of the pressures of nineteenth century society, she aborts her child and dies.

Nine years after *Spring's Awakening*, in the twentieth century, a Swedish playwright, August Strindberg, also deals with the same theme. In *Brottoch Brot*, he shows a dramatist Maurice, who lives with Jeanne and their daughter Marion. One night he meets Henriette, a friend's lover and spends night with her. Afterwards his daughter dies and he accuses Henriette of having killed her. Driven by love, they reveal to each other that the only obstacle in their love is Maurice's daughter. At the same time both say that they wished she did not exist. But their dialogues have been heard and he is accused for murder. By the end of the play it has been found that the girl died naturally, yet the father feels guilty for he had wished her death. He "has committed" an infanticide even though it had been only accomplished in his mind. While Henriette spends the rest of her life alone, he feels the necessity of expiating the crime. Here the crime leads both Maurice and Henriette to a complete negative consequence in their lives. It is after the death of the girl that their love is condemned for the characters have to face either loneliness or expiation.

Contemporary drama continues to be concerned with the same theme. Jean Paul Sartre, the French philosopher and playwright, wrote *Huis Clos*, a year before the end of the Second World War. It involves three characters: Garcin, a man of letters, Ines, a lesbian functionary and Estelle, a woman who belongs to high society. These three characters are all confined in a cloister and

there, their relationships become unbearable. Estelle, a bourgeois, has ascended in life through marriage, and in the name of convention, she killed a child she had given birth to by her lover. But she affirms that destiny was responsible for the infanticide and in this way, she gets rid of her guilt.

Edward Bond, apparently the most controversial of England's contemporary playwrights, achieved notoriety with his work *Saved*. According to A. P. Hingcliffe in *British Theatre*:

Bond is interested in the aimless life of the young couple, a life that accepts sex and violence as part of living. The same theme of obsessively gloomy family life and narrow opportunities are taken up in *Saved*. It was the stoning of a baby (invisible) that caused all the fuss: the mother had reduced the baby to an object because she cannot picture him as a human being and because he is treated as an object the gang can kill him. (154)

In this play, a baby is stoned to death by its father and his friends. Because none of the characters see the baby as a human being, they think they can rightfully kill it. Despite all the horror and decadence, everything seems to be accepted as normal.

PETE: Give it a punch.

MIKE: Yeh less!

COLIN: There's no one about.'

Pete punches it.

COLIN: Ugh.' Mind yer don't 'urt it.

MIKE: Yer can't.

BARRY: Not at that age.

MIKE: Course yer can't, no feelin's.

PETE: Like animals.

MIKE: ' It it again.

COLIN: I can 't see!

BARRY: 'Arder.

PETE: Yeh

BARRY: Like that.' (He hits it)

COLIN: An' that! (He also hits it)

MIKE: What a giggle.

PETE: Cloutin's good for 'im. I read it.

BARRY: (to Fred) Why don't you clout it? (55)

And thus the characters move on describing a whole process in which the baby is aimlessly destroyed by the aggressive attitudes and actions performed by the baby's father and his gang. All this violence and cruelty culminate with the baby's death.

In the contemporary Brazilian drama, the theme reappears in Chico Buarque's *Gota d'Agua*. It is basically a modern reconstruction of the Greek tragedy *Medea*. Chico Buarque and Paulo Pontes modify the ancient tragedy inserting it into a Brazilian universe, but basically the theme of infanticide remains the same.

Psychoanalytic criticism adopts the methods of "reading" employed by Freud and later theorists to interpret texts. It argues that literary texts, like dreams, express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author, that a literary work is a manifestation of the author's own neuroses. One may psychoanalyze a particular character within a literary work, but it is usually assumed that all such characters are projections of the author's psyche.

One interesting facet of this approach is that it validates the importance of literature, as it is built on a literary key for the decoding. Freud himself wrote, “The dream-thoughts which we first come across as we proceed with our analysis often strike us by the unusual form in which they are expressed; they are not clothed in the prosaic language usually employed by our thoughts, but are on the contrary represented symbolically by means of similes and metaphors, in images resembling those of poetic speech” (26).

Like psychoanalysis itself, this critical endeavor seeks evidence of unresolved emotions, psychological conflicts, guilts, ambivalences, and so forth within what may well be a disunities in the literary work. The author's own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, fixations, and such will be traceable within the behavior of the characters in the literary work. But psychological material will be expressed indirectly, disguised, or encoded (as in dreams) through principles such as “symbolism” (the repressed object represented in disguise), “condensation” (several thoughts or persons represented in a single image), and “displacement”(anxiety located onto another image by means of association).

Despite the importance of the author here, psychoanalytic criticism is similar to New Criticism in not concerning itself with “what the author intended”. But what the author *never* intended (that is, repressed) is sought. The unconscious material has been distorted by the censoring conscious mind.

Jacques Lacan, a twentieth century psychoanalyst and literary critic, believed that a true understanding of the relationship between mothers and children could be discerned by investigating what he termed the “existential break” between the child and the mother in the early life of the child. Although Lacan based his many thoughts and ideas on Freud, he differed from Freud in this way: at birth, a child experiences psychologically traumatic break with the mother that transcends the physiological break with the mother.

As explained by Stephen A. Mitchell and Margaret J. Black in *A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought*, in the beginning stages of autonomy of the child, she undergoes a “powerful transformative experience when she notices and then becomes captivated by her own image in the mirror”(196). This mirrored image is the beginning of the building of an idealized version of the child’s self. In this way, “the ego is built around illusions, images which then become the basis for this imaginery”(196).

The second grounding for the child’s ego is human desire, the “wellspring of passion,” which is ultimately unable to be gratified a desire which is built on the child’s wish to be “totally captivating, to be everything for the mother”(196). According to Lacan, the child wishes to be “the completing object of the mother’s desire” (196).

Language is of the utmost importance to Lacan. He suggests that language predates and shapes the individual’s experience: “The child is born into language” (197). It is the father, however, not the mother, who introduces language to the child.

The father’s presence introduces the world of the symbolic order, the world of language, which destroys the imaginary union between the mother and the child. The imaginary also enables the child (or adult) to deal with the world of the Unconscious, or the “Other”, in contemporary psychological parlance, the father’s introduction to the symbolic other, or language, allows the child to perform the necessary task of separation from the mother and the construction of a uniquely individualized self.

## Conclusion:

These few references to works from different countries and belonging to different periods have been made to illustrate the idea that infanticide and its variants have been explored extensively in literature. Some texts leading to destruction and pessimism; others pointing to the idea of rebirth. But in order to study child murder and its relationship with the recurrent cycle of life, it is necessary to look back to the beginning of the human history and see the important role of rituals in relation to the cycle of life, death and rebirth. Some of these rituals, as seen, became fixed stories for they appeared to bring the desired results. These fixed stories were later called myths. Some of the important myths concerning our theme have been taken from the Greek Mythology. It has been said that it is in Ancient Greece, precisely from Greek drama that our western drama and fiction has evolved. Thus, a movement back towards Greek tragedies specifically, continues to be among the major influences on Anglo- American literature.

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