

Yi-ling Lin: On "The Paper Nautilus"

Joanne Feit Diehl thinks that this poem presents two antithetic aspects of maternal affection: it can be "both a refuge and a risk" (88). Since the paper nautilus is a cephalopod like the octopus whose embrace kills, Diehl suggests that the paper nautilus "will crush what she strives to protect" (86). However, I believe that this poem eulogizes maternal love; the arms of the paper nautilus are not a strangling force, but a protective power.

Through the depiction of a female-gendered paper nautilus and her hatching habits, the poet glorifies the selflessness of maternal affection. Her delicate shelled beauty is not meant as decoration for authorities "whose hopes / are shaped by mercenaries" (lines 1-2) or for writers who are "entrapped by / teatime fame and by / commuters' comforts" (3-5), but rather for the protection of her young. She is a watchful guard that never diverts her attention from her eggs; she "scarcely / eats until the eggs are hatched" (14-15).

The comparison of the paper nautilus to an octopus shows that she will exercise her defensive power to protect her eggs when being attacked. The poet's deliberate use of the term "devilfish," another name for the octopus, may lead to a terrifying image of the paper nautilus, but the sudden change of the paper nautilus' temperament merely indicates a mother's effort to protect her young. Her defensive power is directed at attackers rather than at her own young, so she will only protect her eggs instead of crushing them: ". . . her glass ram'shorn-cradled freight / is hid but is not crushed" (19-20). The oxymoronic combination of the fragile glass with the strong and defending ram'shorn best illustrates how greatly the paper nautilus would change in order to defend her eggs.

Although the poet's utilization of the story of Hercules to describe how strenuously the eggs free themselves from their creator may contribute to the impression that the paper nautilus' overwatchfulness hinders the eggs from liberating themselves, what cannot be ignored is that when the eggs are freed, they free the shell as well: the paper nautilus is relieved from her significant task of hatching. Nevertheless, her relief is temporary. As indicated in the last stanza, the poet's comparison of the young of the paper nautilus to the lines in the mane of a Parthenon horse "round which the arms had wound themselves" (32-33) suggests that the paper nautilus' care for her young is unending even after the eggs are hatched.

Works Cited

Diehl, Joanne Feit. *Women Poets and the American Sublime*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Moore, Marianne. "The Paper Nautilus." *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*. Ed. Cary Nelson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 273-74.

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