

## Images of Love, Womanhood and Childhood in the Poems by Anna Swir and Wisława Szymborska



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In the introduction to her anthology of contemporary Polish women's poetry Regina Grol, the editor and translator, refers to amber as symbolic of their beauty, strength, variety of shapes and luminous quality. Like amber, this poetry "captures life, encapsulates the past, while shedding light and radiance on the present." (Grol 1996: xxi) This, obviously, can be said about many poems, not only by contemporary Polish women, although it does bring attention to new and louder feminine voices heard in the Polish poetry of the second half of the twentieth century. In the poetry anthologized by Grol, just like in the best poetry written in any country by any author, irrespective of his/her sex, there is always a reference to, or sometimes an inspiration from the history of the country, its culture or literary tradition, and there is usually a link, reflection or illumination upon the present experience of the poet. The definitions of poetry, recalled in the same Introduction, also point to those characteristic aspects of poetry associated by Regina Grol with the eponymous 'ambers aglow' e.g., Julia Kristeva's description of poetry as "the deepest form of historical writing", or Helen Vendler's vision of poetry as a "history and science of feeling." (Grol 1996: xxiii). It is, first of all, that latter feature of poetry that lies behind the interest of the present paper – the paper that aims at presenting feminine poetic sensitivity at work. What makes it still possible to link that sensitivity with the image of amber, which in reality is hard stone, is its variety of colour, its opalescent quality shown in the selected poems which will be here material for analysis; these poems, written by two Polish women poets, are certainly 'feminine' in character, but dealing with the similar 'feminine' themes are, at the same time, very different.

The subject of the present paper dealing with the poetic 'images of love, childhood and womanhood' may seem to many readers as naturally 'feminine'. More than that: this theme is commonly included among the 'feminist topoi' (Stawowy 2004: 147-203). After all, love and children are traditionally considered to be the field which has been and still is particularly of women's concern and constitute an important part of woman's life. On the other hand, there is no doubt that, for ages, love and womanhood have been universal concerns of lyrical poetry. Often these concerns have included children, particularly since the times of Romantic interest in and idealization of the child, both as the subject of the earliest stage of human life, i.e. childhood, and as the relationship

between mothers (or parents) and their offspring. Still, the choice of the subject of this paper has had no 'ideological' motive behind it, no attempt to find out whether Szymborska and Swir could be called 'feminist', before that term became accepted in Polish literary studies. The aim of the paper is connected with the wonder and amazement a reader of lyrical poetry feels when he/she finds a great variety of perspectives upon apparently similar experiences. Besides – and this is where the amber symbolism in its opalescent quality comes in useful – the uppermost aim of the paper is to demonstrate how differently these universal (but also 'feminine') topics – womanhood, childhood, love – have been perceived by two outstanding women poets, separated in time by less than a generation (fourteen years), coming from similar backgrounds and living in the same country, even in the same city, active as poets in the second half of the twentieth century, exposed to the same Polish reality. Such differences in poetry mean richness, not weakness, since they testify to the never-ending varieties of poetic sensibility. They are also nourishing to those readers who, like Professor Helen Vendler of Harvard, quoted above, want to extend their knowledge about feeling and sharpen their own sensitivity as the citizens of this world.

The two poets mentioned in the title are Anna Świrszczyńska (1909-1984; 'Swir' was her pen-name, used in translations of her poetry into English and other foreign languages) and Wisława Szymborska (b.1923), the 1996 Nobel Prize Winner in Literature. Both women experienced the Second World War as grown-up persons (or almost grown-up: Szymborska was sixteen when the War started), both lived in Kraków after the War (Szymborska is still a resident of this city), both wrote predominantly lyrical poetry. The paper will focus on a selection of their poetic texts dealing first with the work of the younger poet. The reason for this arrangement is related to the fact that chronology here is not the issue: most poems to be discussed in the paper were written in the first three or four decades after the War, although in the case of Szymborska there are also references to her most recent poetry, published in the volume *Chwila* (*Moment* in English translation, 2003). Szymborska, as the Nobel Prize Winner, is better known abroad and her poetry, widely translated into foreign languages, is perceived mostly as philosophical and intellectual (Nyczek 2005: 8), avoiding the topics overtly named 'feminist' (unlike Anna Świrszczyńska who was seen, and criticized, as the first feminist poet in the 1970s, under the previous political system). Still, even though less prolific as far as the 'feminine' themes go, Szymborska has said unusual, enigmatic and moving things about love, women and children, worth presenting first, before the more straightforward views of Anna Świrszczyńska, powerful in a different way, are presented.

To contextualize the author and her work, a few words of biographical and bibliographical information seem useful. Wisława Szymborska was born in 1923 near Poznań (central Poland), but she studied after the War in Krakow (southern Poland) and since that time she has been living and working in that city. She also wrote for literary journals as a critic and essayist, experienced a short spell of enchantment with socialism, tried social realism as style of her poetry and even became a member of the Communist Party for two years, trying to follow the political expectations of the times to get

involved, as a poet, in the political and social life of the country. However, since the late 1950s, when she found her own individual voice and individual apolitical way, she has been recognized as one of the best modern Polish poets. Her poetry is characteristically witty, ironic, extremely resourceful, full of unanswered questions and intellectual puzzles, very often bitter, although never nihilistic. Her attitude to reality, her philosophical stance towards the world and humanity is often reflected even in the titles of the volumes of her poetry, e.g., *Calling out to Yeti* (1957), *Salt* (1962), *Could Have* (1972), *The People on the Bridge* (1986), *Moment* (2002), *Colon* (2005). Up till now she has published nineteen volumes of poetry (the last one in 2005). In 1996 she received the Nobel Prize in Literature; the Swedish committee in Stockholm justified its decision accurately describing the general qualities of the poet's oeuvre by pointing out that Szyborska had been granted the prize "for poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality." (<http://www.pan.net./szymborska>)

Szyborska's poems about love, women and children are not numerous and their opalescent quality makes it possible to see them as poems also about other problems or life in general. Love as such does not often appear in the titles of her poems, and when it does, it is accompanied by a qualifying adjective and then further, it is often treated apparently with ironic disbelief expressed in the text of the poem. Such is the case, for instance, in the poem 'True Love' (published in an English translation in *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems* pp.168-170; the meaning of the Polish original title 'happy love'). (1) The speaker in the poem analyzes the problem of the existence of true (i.e. happy) love, its frequency and probability, its usefulness to the world. The question asked at the beginning sets the tone of the poem as ironic, even sarcastic and doubtful as far as the problem of love is concerned:

*True love. Is it normal,  
is it serious, is it practical?  
What does the world get from two people  
who exist in the world of their own?*

*Placed on the same pedestal for no good reason,  
drawn randomly from millions, but convinced  
it had to happen this way – in reward for what? For nothing.* (p.168)

True love, as described further in the poem, is an unexplainable accident which defies justice and irritates many people for the reasons that are painfully ironical. It is also something suspicious as all uncommon things are, to some minds:

*Look at the happy couple.  
Couldn't they at least try to hide it,  
fake a little depression for their friends' sake!  
Listen to them laughing – it's an insult.*

*The language they use – deceptively clear:  
And their little celebrations, rituals,  
the elaborate mutual routines –  
it's obviously a plot behind the human race's back. (p. 168)*

Similarly to many other poems by Szymborska, the speaker sounds first like a tart gossip, envious and disapproving, as if she were quoting other people's accusations against true lovers. It does not mean, however, that happy love is rejected by the lyrical subject as an impossibility. On the contrary: although in the last lines of the poem the use of true love for life in this world is questioned again, its status called as something embarrassing and even scandalous, the ending turns the tables round: true love does exist, but since it does not happen to many people, it is better to be merciful and accept the denial of its existence, which – paradoxically and sadly – makes life easier for many people:

*True love. Is it really necessary?  
Tact and common sense tell us to pass over it in silence,  
like a scandal in Life's highest circles.  
Perfectly good children are born without its help.  
It couldn't populate the planet in a million years,  
it comes along so rarely.*

*Let the people who never find true love  
keep saying that there's no such thing.*

*Their faith will make it easier for them to live and die. (p. 170)*

The puzzling last line, which sounds almost commonplace when read in isolation, uses paradox in a very subtle way that illuminates the role of love in the world of the human beings: disbelief in true love in fact elevates the position of love and its importance to that of religious faith.

In Szymborska's later volume of poetry (*Chwila/ Moment*, Kraków 2003) love takes on an even more important epistemological meaning. In her poem "First Love" (pp. 43-45) the speaker again goes against the popular belief about love that holds that first love is the strongest and most important. She admits that it is

"... very romantic/ but not my experience." (p. 43) However, first love is important for the speaker, but in a different way. As the final passage of the poem suggests, first love, hardly remembered by the speaker, introduces the poet to the intensity of non-being and hence – to the question of death (Ostrowski 2006: 80):

*Other loves  
still breathe deep inside me.  
This one's too short of breath even to sigh.*

*Yet just exactly as it is,  
it does what the others still can't manage:  
unremembered,  
not even seen in dreams,  
it introduces me to death.*

(*Moment*, pp. 43-44)

Another way of interpreting this problem is that first love, although forgotten, has made the speaker grow up and become aware of her own existence, has introduced to her the question of life – its First Cause and its final point – Death.

There is no doubt that to Szyborska love is something precious, but paradoxical, enigmatic and transitory. She is a believer in and a philosophical supporter of love, but has an equivocal attitude to that powerful human emotion. By questioning many traditional assumptions about love, sometimes apparently in a naïve way, she also doubts the possibility of instantly falling in love, of the meaningful recognition 'of the other half'. This is discussed in her poem "Lovē at First Sight" (pp. 358-60): in accordance with her philosophy of life, she claims that there must have been earlier contacts between the lovers, unrealized by the people themselves. Thus the speaker's image of that aspect of love is similar to her general vision of the human condition characterized by lack of any certainty and ruled by chance:

*They're both convinced  
that a sudden passion joined them.  
Such certainty is beautiful,  
but uncertainty is more beautiful still.  
....  
They'd be amazed to hear  
that Chance has been toying with them  
now for years.*

(p. 358)

In the world ruled by change and coincidence, love, in fact, makes people more vulnerable, particularly women who are more idealistic, more poetic, more sensitive to the moods of the others and who therefore realize the danger of losing love earlier than their partners. Again, paradox is an appropriate way of expressing the nature of love: lovers want to be united, want to be close to each other, love needs intimacy, but, when the distance disappears, love that is no longer nourished by a sense of wonder and dreams starts perishing. It is beautifully presented in the poem "I Am Too Close" (*Poems New and Collected 1957-1997*, pp. 55-56). The woman speaker of the poem movingly shows the difference between the feminine and masculine way of experiencing love, of feminine sensitivity to and masculine ignorance of barely perceptible threats to love:

*I am too close for him to dream of me.  
I don't flutter over him, don't flee him  
beneath the roots of trees. I am too close.*

...  
*I'll never die again so lightly,  
 so far beyond my body, so unknowingly  
 as I did once in his dream. I am too close,  
 too close. I hear the word hiss  
 and see its glistening scales as I lie motionless  
 in his embrace. He's sleeping,  
 more accessible at this moment to an usherette  
 he saw once in a traveling circus with one lion,  
 than to me, who lies at his side.*

(p. 244)

The closeness of the lovers, their familiarity with each other, kills the poetry of love that the woman needs to feel, kills the confidence that she is the only one, and gives rise to jealousy (of a girl – “a cashier of a wandering circus with one lion”).

The difference between men and women in experiencing emotions is very strongly felt by the speaker of Szymborska's poems on love. In her view it is partly the richness and unpredictability of the world of human emotions, but also – as she says in a moving and sadly witty poem “Portrait of a Woman” (*Poems New and Collected 1957-1997*, p.161) – it is connected with the social and cultural roles women have had to perform throughout the ages. Emancipation added to the variety of the things a woman is expected to know, provide, fulfill; stereotypes have a long life and men's expectations, although never directly spelt out in the poem, come out as ridiculous: their ideal woman is an impossibility. The speaker, apparently objective and emotionless, is female, but could also be male (which would intensify the ridiculous quality of some points made in the text).

The key word of the poem, mentioned in the first line, is ‘variety’ and the whole poem - like so many of Szymborska's verses – thrives on the sense of the absurd, the illogical, the impossible, evoking at the same time the sense of the uniqueness of the female being, her richness and flexibility bordering on magic and wonder.

*She must be a variety.  
 Change so that nothing will change.  
 It's easy, impossible, tough going, worth a shot.  
 Her eyes are, as required, deep blue, gray,  
 dark, merry, full of pointless tears.*

....  
*She'll bear him four children, no children, one.  
 Naïve, but gives the best advice.  
 Weak, but takes on anything.*

...  
*Holds in her hands a baby sparrow with a broken wing,  
 her own money for some trip far away,  
 a meat cleaver, a compress, a glass of vodka. (p. 161)*

The objects the woman “holds in her hand” are not really symbolic: they are proofs of her ‘variety’ in life, signifying the various things she is able to do when occasion demands it – commonplace domestic chores, resourceful pursuit of her dreams, expressing compassion and love, companionship with men. The end of the poem shows a mixture of a male and female point of view and, in the last line, provided in response to male assumptions or female dedication to her choice (“She must love him”), gives a witty and linguistically clever selection of appropriate set phrases which lead to an outlet of an ambiguous-sounding exasperation (she has probably been married in church so ‘heaven’ may also have here its reference to the religious ceremony):

*Where's she running, isn't she exhausted.  
Not a bit, a little, to death, it doesn't matter.  
She must love him, or she's just plain stubborn.  
For better, for worse, for heaven's sake. (p. 161)*

The theme of childhood does not occupy such a prominent place in Szymborska’s poetry as love and womanhood. Children do appear in her poems, but without a deeply emotional or sentimental touch characteristic of many modern verses that express unqualified admiration and affection particularly for little children (for instance, such will be the case in some of Swir’s poems). When Szymborska refers to children, she usually does it in the context of their simplicity and adventurous treatment of the reality. She does not idealize children, and -as one of the critics rightly points out - “she does not admire children as children” (Bauer 2004: 295). (2) For her, a child represents, first of all, the pure, unhampered human drive towards learning about things. This is shown, for instance, in her poem “A Little Girls Tugs at the Tablecloth” ( from the volume *Chwila/Moment*, 2003, pp. 35-37). The girl in the poem, a little over a year old, demonstrates a typically child-like, magical control over the reality. The child’s point of view is charmingly real: to her it seems that the things are there to be pushed around and they *wish* to be moved or destroyed:

*They need to be helped along,  
shoved, shifted,  
taken from their place and relocated. (Moment, p. 35)*

Some of these things – like a cupboard or a wall – do not want to be removed as they do not yield to the child’s push, but “glasses, plates,/creamers, spoons, bowl, /are fairly shaking with desire” and the tablecloth “on the stubborn table” also “manifests a willingness to travel.” The poem written from a ‘mixed’ point of view – a child’s and a grown-up’s - ends on a witty comment about the child’s amusing and determined testing of the theory of gravitation:

*Mr. Newton has no say in this.  
Let him look down from the heavens and wave his hands.*

*This experiment must be completed.  
And it will.*

(p.37)

The theme of childhood also plays other roles in Szymborska's poetry: it is sometimes evoked by the adult speaker of her poems, in the context of particular memories, not to express feelings of nostalgia for the past, but rather to make a comment about the present, often embarrassing or ironic. It is also used to stress the strangeness and irrevocability of the past which belongs to the dead (this point is often made when Szymborska speaks of the photographs of the family or friends, or of their letters e.g. in the poems from *Nothing Twice*- "Family Album", p. 69, "The Letters of the Dead", p. 127) Childhood is similarly represented here as a closed period, not accessible or even not welcome to the speaker in the present moment. This is the case, for instance, in the poem "Laughter" (*Poems New and Collected 1957-1997*, pp. 73-74) in which the internal context is the photo of the author as a young girl. The speaker recalls with a smile the short life of that little girl not much known now to the speaker ("I feel an amused pity/for a couple of her poems./I remember a few events."). The speaker particularly remembers the situation when the girl put a bandage on her head to draw the attention of a young college boy she was in love with., and tells the story of that fake wound on the head to her present lover. As the title of the poem suggests – they both laugh at the little girl, amused by what she felt and what she did.

In the second part of the poem the memory of this event from her childhood apparently makes the speaker not amused, but uneasy, or even angry: she feels as if in betraying the secret of the child, she has behaved shamefully. What strikes the reader is both the complete separation of the childhood of the speaker from her adult life, the treatment of that period as if it were a stranger's life ("Go away, I'm busy now./Can't you see/ the lights are out?") and also the fact that the speaker paradoxically does not notice, or does not admit she notices, that as a grown-up woman she is motivated by the same feeling as the little girl from the photograph: she wants to get more attention, more love from the boy (man) she cares for. The girl made up a story of her accident, and the speaker betrays that secret, like an attractive funny anecdote, to her partner. Thus 'laughter' from the title has more than one meaning: it is not only the laughter of the grown-ups at the trick of the little girl, but also the laughter of the reader at the similarity of the grown-up woman's and the girl's positions concerning men, and – with a more ominous undertone – the silent and invisible laughter of the dead at the living:

*It'd be better if you  
went back where you came from.  
I don't owe you anything,  
I'm just an ordinary woman  
who only knows  
when to betray  
another's secret.*



*Don't keep staring at us  
with those eyes of yours,  
open too wide  
like the eyes of the dead.*

(p. 74)

In comparison with Szyborska's life, Anna Swir's career as a poet was more complicated and her work more varied, as she wrote not only lyrical poetry, but prose, plays, tales for children, and for many years she edited a paper for young readers. Born in Warsaw, a daughter of a painter, she grew up in an artistic milieu, often experiencing poverty. She was brought up in the pre-War 'intelligentsia ethos', characteristic of that social group she came from, which put an emphasis on the need to be interested and involved in the education of the society, particularly the young and the poor. However, her debut in 1936, a volume of short prose-poems, demonstrated her aesthetic ambitions and interests in refined style and imagery drawn from fine arts. A great caesura in her life, both as a woman and an artist, was the War. Her life in the Nazi-occupied city, particularly a participation in the Uprising of 1944 as an unqualified nurse, loss of home in Warsaw and experience of starting a living 'from scratch' in Kraków after the War, marked her very deeply and her later poetry, which achieved its mature form in the 1970s, demonstrated a profound change both of the content and style of her poetry.

Unlike Szyborska's poetry, whose subsequent volumes, particularly after she received the Nobel Prize, were regularly translated into foreign languages, mainly English, Swir's poems, with a few exceptions

(e.g., the collection of lyrics about the Warsaw Uprising, *Building the Barricade*, translated by Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire, Kraków 1979), drew the interest of some English translators towards the end of her life. Therefore most of her poems were published in English after her death in 1984. The greatest contribution to making Swir's poetry known to English readers comes from Czesław Miłosz, a great admirer of her poetry, who, together with Leonard Nathan, translated the best lyrics by Świrszczyńska and published them in Copper Canyon Press in 1996, as a volume *Talking to My Body*. Miłosz also translated some of Swir's poems earlier and included them in his anthology of Polish poetry in English when he was still professor of literature at Harvard. The first substantial volume of Swir's lyrics to appear in England in 1986, in The Women's Press, was *Fat Like the Sun* (the translators were Margaret Marshment and Grazyna Baran). (3)

The simplest statement concerning Swir's vision of love has to emphasize the fact that in her perception love is much more physical than in Szyborska's view. As has been demonstrated above, the younger poet is hardly ever explicitly sensual in her love poems. In his Introduction to *Talking to my Body*, Czesław Miłosz rightly points out that the central theme of most of Swir's lyrics is flesh: "Flesh in love ecstasy, flesh in pain, flesh in terror, flesh afraid of loneliness, exuberant, running, lazy, flesh of a woman giving birth, resting, snoring, doing her morning calisthenics, feeling the flow of time or reducing time to one instant." (Swir 1996: ix). It is no wonder, then, that in many poems devoted to the theme of love, it is first of all physical love, the love which brings

unquestionable pleasure that is extolled by the poet. Swir's speaker often talks of her own body as a source of pleasurable emotions. For instance, the love poem "Woman Speaks to her Thigh" reads like a hymn in praise of the female body:

*It's due entirely to your beauty  
that I can take part  
in the rites of love.*

...

*The souls of lovers open before me  
in the moment of love  
and I have them in my power.*

...

*Oh, so many riches,  
so many priceless truths,  
growing ever greater in metaphysical echo,  
so much secret knowledge,  
subtle and awesome,  
do I owe to you, my thigh. (pp.3-4)*

Similar bold and erotic notes sound in "The Song of a Happy Woman":

*A song of excess,  
strength, potent sensitivity,  
supple ecstasy.  
Splendour  
dancing tenderly.*

...

*In me are gifts  
of efflorescence and profusion,  
ringlets of light sobbing,  
fire forming, with its ethereal  
ripeness ripening.*

...

*I'm up to my eyes  
in amazement, I snort.  
A snorting universe  
of amazement engulfs me.  
I gulp down excess,  
I choke on a plenitude  
as impossible  
as reality. (p. 56)*

Such explicit erotic boldness in woman's poetry embarrassed the critics at the time

and therefore Swir's poetry evoked mixed feelings in critical reception, earning her a then negative label of 'a feminist'. It was obvious that – unlike Szymborska - Swir did not place her image of love in a philosophical context. On the other hand, in many of her poems she alluded to the traditional duality of body and soul underlying the concept of human love. Swir often wittily referred to the indifference of the body, or even its superiority to the spiritual qualities of love. Even the sensual poem "Woman Speaks to Her Thigh" ends in such an ironic comment:

*The most perfect beauty of the soul  
would give me no such treasures  
were it not for your bright smooth charm;  
you amoral little animal.* (p. 4)

"A Genius" can serve as another example of the poetic text which wittily characterizes the power of the speaker's body and her helplessness in her attempts to influence it :

*I'm bored with my body,  
For years I've tried  
to train it.  
I've starved it, poured icy water on it,  
whipped it assiduously  
with iron.  
To no purpose.*

*It's dull,  
it has no ambition.  
It'll never be a genius,  
like a yogi's body.* (p.65)

Still, the end of this little poem places it meaningfully in the context of love:

*One of these nights  
I'll leave it in your arms  
and go away.*

*I need a break.* (p. 65)

The last line of the poem introduces another aspect of Swir's vision of love, namely her attitude to the men she loved. Although in several of her love poems men are presented, directly or indirectly, as desirable and wonderful partners in love ( e.g., "You Are Warm" p. 9, "Three Bodies" p. 7), in most of her lyrics they are – somewhat like in the case of Szymborska's men – withdrawn from her vision or even presented as

inadequate, cumbersome additions whose presence brings more pain than joy to a woman's life. In such poems Swir's speaker, who has known passionate love, seems to desire independence of men, as if she experienced disillusionment or even suffering in her relationships with her lovers. One of such lyrics, which ingeniously draws on the imagery of fire to convey the main message, is "My Fireproof Smile":

*I've discovered strength in myself,  
and no one can take it from me.  
No man  
is irreplaceable.  
I've paid the price for this knowledge.*

*I've passed through a bath of fire,  
and how perfectly  
fire fortifies.  
I've salvaged from it  
my fireproof smile.  
I'll never again ask anyone  
to lay their hand on my brow.*

....

(p.23)

Although the sentence "No man/is irreplaceable" sounds fairly assertive, Swir does dream, in another poem from the volume *Fat Like the Sun*, of an ideal lover, who, however, as the title indicates, does not exist:

*Where are you, lover,  
as pure as a plant,  
more faithful  
than my own body?  
The earth gives birth to millions of people,  
but not to you.*

...

*Non-existent,  
come to me.* ("Non-existent", *Fat Like the Sun*, p. 45)

Much more than in Szyborska's poetry, in Swir's poems the themes of love and womanhood are very closely linked. The beautiful experience of passionate love, of which a woman is capable, is eventually not enough for her. In a different way than Szyborska in her "Portrait of a Woman," Anna Swir stresses the strength and uniqueness of her women who – in their sensitivity, flexibility and openness to every experience life brings – are generally superior to men. In her beautiful lyric – a companion poem to that of "Woman Speaks to Her Thigh" – entitled "Woman Speaks of Her Life," she presents the ideal of mature womanhood, characterized, among others,

by openness to change, independence, courage, a gift for happiness and indomitable spiritual strength. The old metaphor of life as a journey acquires here new dimensions:

*The wind drives me along the roads,  
the wind, the god of change,  
with its puffed-out cheeks.  
I love this wind.  
I'm happy  
with change.*

*I travel through the world  
in a couple  
or on my own.  
Equally happy with desire or with the death of desire,  
which is called fulfillment.*

...  
*I go on, never stopping,  
at times joined by a man.  
Then we go along together.  
He says it will be for ever,  
then gets lost in the dusk  
like some inconsequential thing.*

...  
*I go on, never stopping.  
the wind drives me along the roads.  
On the roads I travel  
there's always wind blowing.* (p. 83)

The above poem gives voice to a mature, experienced woman, proud of her sex. However, many of Swir's women that are subjects of her poems are not so happy. Frequently in her short lyrics, in a deceptively simple and non-assertive way, Swir writes about other women who have been deeply scarred by life. The poet does not only feel sympathy and great pity for them, but expresses profound solidarity with them all. The most explicit of her lyrics on that subject is "Sisters in the Gutter":

*I have friends in the park,  
old beggarwomen, madwomen.  
In their eyes are rings  
from which the jewels have fallen out.*

...  
*Sisters in the gutter,  
we are fluent in the language of suffering.  
We touch hands,  
it helps us.*

*As I leave I kiss them on the cheek,  
as delicate as water.* (p. 103)

Often, in an almost imperceptible way, such poems of the feminine, or generally human solidarity are connected with the theme of love, expressing the mature speaker's negative opinion about the passionate feeling for the wrong men. Such is the situation, for instance, shown in the poem entitled "In the Railway Station" :

*There are mad old women  
who carry all their property  
in the little bundle on their backs.*

*Vagrants who curl up  
at night in the railway station.  
Sick people waiting in hospital  
for what will be  
their last operation.*

*And I have wasted all this time  
on you.* (p. 41)

The solidarity with all suffering women is one of the 'feminist topoi' that Swir shows great interest in, describing, in miniature poems, again recalling a comparison with little amber stones, scenes from women's lives. The reality that these poems are grounded in is, ironically, that of post-war socialist Poland, in which emancipation of women was written into the law of the country. That reality, unknown or rather uninteresting to Szymborska, showing the brutality of the society still deeply patriarchal in character, particularly among the peasants and working class people, was something shocking to many readers of Swir's lyrics and evoked a considerable degree of uneasiness among the contemporary critics. In many poems there are scenes of women abused by their drunkard husbands, by the men who are proud of their power over 'the weaker sex'. For instance, the dramatic poem "The Husband's Homecoming" shows, in meaningfully chosen detail, the helplessness of a wife who cannot count on any help, even from her neighbours:

*Step by step  
she retreats.*

*The table won't protect her,  
the child's cot won't protect her,  
the wall won't conceal her.*

*The people on the other side  
of the wall won't defend her*

*against the man standing  
in the doorway.*

(p. 119)

In a few poems from the same English volume, touching upon a similar theme, there are added other dimensions to the desperate situation of the women whose husbands are addicted to alcohol: poverty facing the family (“Pay-day”), irresponsibility, callousness or even cruelty of the husbands towards their pregnant wives, and, on the other hand – the silent endurance and strength the women demonstrate in such situations (“God’s Gift to Women”, “She Washed the Floor”). All these poems are shattering in their content, expressed in the simplest form: minimal choice of words and practical absence of poetic imagery. As one of the critics has aptly put it, many of Swir’s mature lyrics (and the poems under discussion no doubt belong to these) have a short-cut cinematic quality, which might make them good training material for future film-directors (Stawowy 2004: 269). Following the critic’s observation, one may say that, for instance, “Pay-day”, which does not use any adjectives, sounds like an excerpt from a film script describing a touching scene:

*She puts her hands  
in his jacket pocket  
when he’s asleep.*

*She counts the money.  
She cries.*

(p. 120)

“God’s Gift to Women” could also make a good film shot, but the speaker’s comment makes it possible to see it as well as a feminist view of an odious patriarchal attitude:

*She went to the pub to look for him.  
He came swaggering out,  
hands in his pockets,  
a young buck, God’s gift to women,  
better looking than before he was married.*

*He glanced with a laugh  
at her belly,  
swollen with its fourth pregnancy.*

(p.117)

The language of the third of the mentioned poems touching on the similar theme, entitled “She Washed the Floor”, is also dominated by the presence of verbs, without qualifying adjectives or adverbs. However, apart from a scene telling of the typical brutal behaviour of a drunkard, it skillfully conveys both the enormity of the woman’s humiliation and suffering, and – in the last line which throws a new light on all the

common things the woman has done – the tribute to her endurance, her sense of responsibility for her home and a movingly refreshing presence of mind:

*He came back after midnight,  
and collapsed in the doorway.  
She heaved him  
into the house.*

*He tumbled into bed  
with his boots on, vomiting,  
he made a grab for her, she wouldn't have it,  
he punched her in the stomach,  
and started to snore.*

*She washed the floor,  
changed the cover on the eiderdown,  
and knocked on her neighbour's door.*

*She's about to give birth.*

(p. 118)

As has been mentioned before, the label 'feminist' was attached to Swir's poetry with negative implications in the mid-1970s, when her volume entitled *Jestem baba* was published (it was translated into English and published privately by Margaret Marshment as *I Am the Old Woman*, 1981). Many critics looked upon those poems as feminist propaganda, ignoring their authentic quality; Czesław Miłosz diagnoses this almost hostile reception as due to an uncomfortable feeling of the critics who did not like to see women presented as 'exploited proletariat' (Miłosz 1996:78). However, as Miłosz himself rightly points out, Swir's feminism was not 'ideological', not 'taken from books', but was a sincere expression of Świrszczyńska's solidarity with all who suffer, and in her experience of the Polish social reality it was women who were mostly the victims. Her women suffer not only because of drunken and cruel husbands, insensitive lovers, callous and parasitic men; often the suffering is caused by the members of the society irrespective of the sex, by the relatives, even by the women's adult children. She stresses the fact that grown-up children can be very insensitive and cruel to their mothers. In the poem "The Cow Loves Her" bitter irony, hidden behind a simple truth, highlights such a situation:

*Her children  
have long since ceased to write to her.  
Now  
only the cow loves her.*

*It's only natural,  
after all she's cared for it  
since it was born.*

(p. 124)



More explicit about the cruelty and even imminent violence is the poem “Mother and Son” which demonstrates, in the characteristic ‘cinematic’ technique, a scene full of pain and despair:

*The young fist  
is raised above the grey head.*

*The young fist  
smashes open the door with a bang.*

*The grey head  
drops into her hands* (p. 125)

A less shocking but still painful example of the children’s cruel insensitivity is provided in the poem “Her Greatest Love”:

*At sixty she’s experiencing  
the greatest love of her life.*

*She walks arm in arm with her lover,  
the wind ruffles their grey hairs.*

*Her lover says:  
- You have hair like pearls.*

*Her children say:  
- You silly old fool.* (p. 132)

For Swir’s speaker any suffering human being deserves sympathy, pity and help; the reasons for the cruel behaviour, like in the poem “Mother and Son,” are not important and it is certain that in the poet’s view the attitude to those who are weak, old and helpless in the face of life is simply the test of our humanity. The poem “She Doesn’t Remember” is a comment on such situations when justice is shameful; it sounds almost commonplace, and this quality makes it movingly authentic:

*She was a bad stepmother.  
In her old age she’s dying  
in a deserted shack.*

*She’s shivering  
like a handful of burnt paper.  
She doesn’t remember now that she was bad.  
But she knows  
that she’s cold.* (p. 126)

Whereas in Swir's poetry grown-up children often cause pain to their mothers, little children always bring joy, hope and strength to live. The theme of childhood in her poems is closely connected with that of motherhood, which adds up to the image of Swir's woman as a person giving and supporting life. For instance,

in one of her short lyrics ("Mother-to-be in the Milk Bar") giving a glimpse into the tiring life of a pregnant working woman ("puffy legs"), a little touching detail ("the little bib") brings in a note of joy the girl feels thinking of her baby:

*The very young mother-to-be  
pours milk into a mug.  
After eight hours on her feet  
her legs are puffy.*

*But in her heart there flies about  
on little rose-coloured wings  
the little bib  
she bought the day before.*

(p. 133)

Swir's poems about little children and their mothers are numerous; a particular place is given to the relationship of mothers and daughters (she herself was an only child and also she gave birth to one daughter), bringing in themes of womanhood and its difficult role in life (e.g., "My Daughter", whose last line sounds very sad: "In giving her life, I sentenced her", p. 97). There are also moving autobiographical poems about her own mother, also marked by profound sadness caused by her mother's death. (e.g., "Her Hand", p. 87, "A Dream of My Dead Mother", p. 88, "She and I", p. 90). The dominating note, however, in the poems about children is immense, disarming joy and overpowering love which are the cure against the pains of life. One of such poems is a brief lyric "Stop Dancing":

*My darling girl,  
whose birth caused me such pain,  
stop dancing for a moment.*

*Throw your warm arms around my neck.  
Save me  
from pain.*

(p. 98)

There are many aspects to the theme of childhood in Swir's poetry – aspects related to love and womanhood, suffering and human solidarity, life and death, which go beyond the scope of the present paper (cf. Stawowy 2004: 190-202). To conclude this section it might be appropriate to recall perhaps the most eloquent of Swir's longer poems dealing with the theme of children and their place in women's life entitled "Motherhood" (p. 93) The poem has a form of a one-sided conversation between the

mother and a new-born baby, which she calls “the small doll” .

In the first part of the poem the speaker mentions the pain of the birth and suspects that the baby girl , “like an Aztec deity” will demand the sacrifice of her life. The mother does not want that : “You won’t get the better of me, I say,” [I won’t be] “the footbridge you cross to get to your own life./I’ll defend myself”. But in the second part of the poem the attitude of the speaker changes. When she bends “over the small doll” and notices “a tiny movement in a tiny finger”, she remembers that under this delicate skin flows her own blood, and gives in to powerful feeling:

*And that’s it – I’m submerged  
by towering bright wave  
of humility.  
Helpless, I drown.*

The speaker realizes that she will never resist the love she feels for her baby daughter, whose little finger has, paradoxically, a lot of strength and generates oceans of love in the mother. The final confession of spontaneous, willing love seals the bond of motherhood for ever:

*The small doll needs me as much as she needs air.  
I submit willingly to being swallowed by love,  
I submit to being swallowed like air  
by her tiny greedy lungs of life.* (p. 93)

The poems of the two Polish women poets, near contemporaries, dealing with the themes of love, women and children have been shown in this paper as illustrations of their different perception of the reality which they experienced in post-War Poland. In many instances their texts show opposite directions of their interests, even if they refer, eventually, to similar problems. They also show a different kind of sensitivity both poets demonstrate.

Szyborska appears to attempt to undermine most accepted opinions concerning women, love and children., asking apparently ‘naïve questions’. As her translator, Stanisław Barańczak notices in his “Afterword” to *Nothing Twice*, she sees the role of a poet as a ‘spoilsport’ (Szyborska 1997: 393) defying all dogmatism, all assertiveness and enlarging the scope of his/her attention to things apparently distant to the initial problem posed in the poem. Therefore, in her poetry related to womanhood, love and childhood, there are many other aspects involved: there is overt or implied philosophical speculation, enigmatic answers to the questions posed, wit and irony with which she touches even simple everyday matters providing them with universal and sometimes even metaphysical dimensions. To apply once more Regina Grol’s comparison, Szyborska’s poems are like carefully chiseled amber stones, beautiful feminine ornaments that shine with mysterious light.

Anna Swir’s poems seem much more down to earth, much more involved with the

urgent painful problems she notices in the world around her. The themes of womanhood, love and childhood, so frequent in her poetry, are seen in the context of suffering, testifying to her empathy with the victims. On the other hand, the poet always finds and celebrates the elements of joy present in love, in motherhood and woman's ability to cope with life, against all odds. The almost 'naked' style of her poems and its cinematic technique that highlight the dramatic quality of many realistic scenes she presents do not exclude wit and paradox she often employs, although in a different way than Szymborska. Her poems are like hard stones of amber glowing with the light of passion, so characteristic of her treatment of all the subjects she deals with

### Notes:

1. (1997) All quotations from Szymborska's poetry, unless otherwise specified in the text, come from this dual-language selection of her poems: *Nic dwa razy/Nothing Twice*, selected and translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
2. All quotations from Polish critical sources are in my translation (T.B.)
3. (1986) All quotations from Swir's poetry come from the English volume *Fat Like the Sun*, translated from the Polish by Grazyna Baran and Margaret Marshment, London : The Women's Press.

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6. Swir, A. (1986) *Fat Like the Sun*. Selected and translated from Polish by Grazyna Baran and Margaret Marshment. London: The Women's Press.
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8. Stawowy, R. (2004) *Gdzie jestem ja sama: O poezji Anny Świrszczyńskiej*. Kraków: Universitas.
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10. Szymborska, W. (1998) *Poems New and Selected 1957-1997*. Translated by S. Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh. London: Faber and Faber.
11. Szymborska, W. (2003) *Chwila / Moment*. Translated by Clare Cavanagh and S. Barańczak. Kraków: Znak.

**Սիրո, կանացիության և մանկության կերպավորումը  
Աննա Սվիրի և Վիսլավա Շիմբորսկայի բանաստեղծություններում**

Սույն հոդվածում համեմատության և հակադրության միջոցով վեր է հանվում երկու լեհ կին գրողների՝ Ա. Սվիրի և Վ. Շիմբորսկայի միևնույն թեմայով գրված վերջին շրջանի բանաստեղծությունների անգլերեն թարգմանությունների նմանություններն ու տարբերությունները: Երկու բանաստեղծուհիներն էլ անդրադարձել են Լեհաստանի ետպատերազմյան շրջանի իրականությանը, որը նրանք նկարագրել են տարբեր ձևերով, տարբեր բանաստեղծական կերպավորումներով՝ տարբեր վերաբերմունք ցուցաբերելով կանանց խնդիրների նկատմամբ: