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&

TRANSFORMATIONS/METAMORPHOSES

Edited by:

Joanna Matyjaszczyk & Maciej Wiczorek

ISSN: 2353-6098

Analyses/Rereadings/Theories Journal 2 (2) 2014

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The present issue was edited by: Maciej Wieczorek and Joanna Matyjaszczyk.

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The present journal is published by the **Department of Studies in Drama and Pre-1800 English Literature** at the University of Łódź, and is available exclusively in electronic format.



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Maja Gwózdź

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*Phonaesthetic Phonological Iconicity in Literary Analysis Illustrated by Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"*¹

The article offers a phonosemantic analysis of Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber." The phonosemantic investigation has been based on the corpus of nineteen relevant sound-related descriptions of the sea. Although most excerpts identified contain aural metaphors and are not phonologically iconic *per se*, there seem to exist at least three fragments which are particularly interesting from a phonosemantic point of view. Most notably, phonaesthemes /gl/, /l/, /r/ have been found to carry substantial meaning contributing to the overall interpretation of the story in question. Accounting for the inevitable subjectivity concerning iconicity, and in this case phonological iconicity, a few theories are presented in order to support the author's reading of each phonaestheme's contextual significance. The paper briefly reviews the chronological development of the field of phonosemantics and then combines the aural images theory (proposed by Richard Rhodes) with the "aural semiotic process" theory (the term coined by the author). Each analysis is further supplemented with scholarly views on respective phonaesthemes. On the whole, the paper does not aim to polemicize with the well-established definition of a phoneme and its generally accepted arbitrariness. Nevertheless, it has been observed that a speculative phonosemantic analysis of a literary work may yield noteworthy results.

key words: Angela Carter, iconicity, phonaesthemes, phonosemantics, "The Bloody Chamber"

"The sound must seem an echo to the sense."

Alexander Pope (30)

Introduction

Sound symbolism, henceforth more accurately referred to as phonosemantics, seems to be a controversial, or at least troublesome, approach to studying literary phenomena. More specifically, the analyses of works abundant with references to sounds/music yield ambiguous results since, on the one hand, it is possible to unfold intricate patterns governing the author's deployment of specific phonemes and ascribe intratextual semantics to these units, but on the other, it may appear as a lay reasoning of non-academic value. Surely, treating phonosemantics as a valid tool for any kind of analysis may seem slightly far-fetched since it postulates that phonemes are inherently pregnant with meaning while ignoring their primary function of acting as *meaningless* minimal units capable of forming morphemes/lexemes. This crude definition of a

¹ I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Grzegorz Szpila for his invaluable help and insightful remarks regarding each version of this paper. Also, I would like to thank Dr Mateusz Urban for his comments concerning the non-rhotic interpretation. Usual disclaimers apply.

phoneme, accepted by most influential linguists, is the opposite of phonosemantics. Namely, the core postulates once proposed by the Prague Linguistic Circle do not present phonemes as meaningful in themselves, therefore the previously hypothesized notion of regarding phonemes as being less arbitrary than commonly agreed upon undoubtedly needs further clarification.

Paradoxically, by striving to strip phonemes of their arbitrariness² (cf. Nöth “Semiotic Foundations” 17), phonosemantics seems to be largely arbitrary itself. Nonetheless, it has become a fairly well-established branch of linguistics (see *Sound Symbolism* for interdisciplinary papers or Fischer for a concise theoretical introduction) investigated by such notable scholars as Roman Jakobson (viz. *Six Lectures*, cf. Jakobson’s theory of iconicity in De Cuypere 83-91; Nöth “Iconicity”) or Leonard Bloomfield (viz. “Semasiological Differentiation”).³ The hugely controversial nature of phonosemantics dates back to Plato’s *Cratylus* (esp. De Cuypere 7-30 *et passim*, 85-87 for Jakobson’s interpretation of the Cratylus vs. Hermogenes debate, 109-113; cf. Magnus 186-87), an invaluable source of the early linguistic debate on naturalism vs. conventionalism, in which Socrates argues in favour of “pre-phonosemantics”:

[a]ll names, Socrates claims, are ultimately derived from primary, or atomic, names which are composed of phonemes that imitate a certain characteristic or property. These sound-imitations of properties are then combined in various ways into names, which imitate the complex objects that combine the properties so imitated. (Smith 128)

Ostensibly, the scholarly debate has been prevalent throughout the centuries. For instance, in 1653, the mathematician John Wallis published his *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae* containing a vast compilation of phonaesthemes (Magnus 14). Shortly afterwards, Wallis’s hypothesis was refuted by John Locke in his *An Essay on Human Understanding* (1689), the main argument being that

[w]ords . . . come to be made use of by Men, as the Signs of their Ideas; not by any natural connexion, that there is between particular articulate Sounds and certain Ideas, for then there would be but one language amongst all Men[.] (qtd. in Magnus 14)

As opposed to “the solid empirical base” (ibid. 18) of phonosemantic literature in the 20th century, the iconicity-related works of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Maurice Bloomfield “[gave] a much better intuitive feel for the fundamental phonosemantic concepts” (ibid.). While studies in phonological iconicity are, especially nowadays, subject to many debates, academics exploring this field seem to be more inclined towards supporting their results with heuristic evidence than they used to be, say, a century ago.

This brief theoretical exposition of the field of phonosemantics serves as a basis for presenting how the analysis of phonaesthemes⁴ in literary works may contribute to obtaining an enriched interpretation of a given text. However, since phonosemantics is mostly perceived as an

² “True onomatopoeia,” defined as: “fairly direct mapping between the acoustic features of the sound itself and the phonological features of the word that labels the sound” (Rhodes 279), is not dealt with in this paper (cf. Elleström 91 for a reason that “the iconic motivation between the sound sequence . . . and the internal relations” of onomatopoeic words may be an instance of weak diagrammatic iconicity).

³ For a comprehensive list of literature on phonosemantics see Magnus 194-204.

⁴ The term was coined by John R. Firth in 1930. Hereby defined as: “form-meaning pairings that crucially are better attested in the lexicon of a language than would be predicted, all other things being equal” (Bergen 293). Cf. De Cuypere’s definition: “[a] phonaestheme is a submorphemic sound cluster which is related to a certain meaning based on association with similar sound-meaning clusters in other words” (113). Cf. Sadowski’s use of the term “synaesthetic sounds” (72).

impressionistic approach⁵ in certain scholarly circles (and rightly so), I will attempt to escape the perils of performing a purely subjective analysis by supporting subsequent phonaesthetic investigations with quotations from various scholarly works, therefore leaving the discussion open to further inquiries and other interpretations. The general stance taken by the author is that phonosemantics *might* shed some light on interesting aspects of sounds described in literary works. Nonetheless, strong statements, such as Dwight L. Bolinger's "[t]he sign is not arbitrary" (52 *et passim*), ought to be backed up by enough empirical evidence in order to make the domain of iconicity (or, in this case its sub-discipline, phonosemantics) a serious contender for undermining linguistic axioms. In the same vein, the semiotic metaphor applied to phonemes (Karl Bühler's comparison of phonemes to postage stamps and seals, qtd. in Jakobson 66) also attempts to subvert the inherent emptiness of the linguistic sign without much scholarly persuasiveness. At this point, it seems appropriate to cite a brief passage from Ludovic De Cuyper which aptly highlights Saussure's view on onomatopoeia and also confirms the subjectivity of iconic investigations:

according to Saussure similarity may sometimes be something which only the linguist – or, the language user *as* a linguist – observes, without it having any function in language. Of course, all iconicity starts in the eye (or better still, the ear) of the beholder, as iconicity necessarily depends on similarity which is recognised. (42; emphasis original)⁶

The most adamant proponents of phonosemantics would probably refute some of the skeptical remarks but these comments are meant to keep the overall analysis balanced and as scholarly as possible. Still, it is for the reader to decide whether or not the analyses below seem over-interpretative due to the practice of ascribing substantial meaning to minimal textual units. As Piotr Sadowski suggests: "sound symbolism is a kind of 'popular etymology' based on 'expressive' or 'impressive' phonetics, felt and *instinctively recognised* as valid by mass agreement within a given speech community" (70; emphasis added), therefore it does seem commonsensical to question the objectivity of phonosemantic analyses. Nevertheless, one ought not to disregard the intersubjectivity arising in the domain of phonosemantics.

In Angela Carter's "Bluebeard"-inspired story, "The Bloody Chamber," there is an abundance of music-related matters as well as those pertaining to the more general domain of sounds. A close-reading of the work in question, with the focus on form rather than content, has indicated that there are (at least) nineteen instances of metaphors/descriptions pertaining to the aural domain and not directly related to any particular musical compositions or composers.⁷ To my mind, conveying mental entities by means of sounds is a linguistic echo of Hector Berlioz's musicological argument presenting music as an art *sui generis* (9). It also conjures up his notion of "des images musicales" (16) introduced while discussing programme music (as opposed to pure music, it is characterized by the aim to communicate extramusical contents, e.g., expressing literary works by using evocative sound patterns).

⁵ Earl R. Anderson defines phonaesthesia as "synaesthesia extended to the affective domain: certain phonological patterns are correlated with *emotions or subjective feelings*" (qtd. in Elleström 92; emphasis added; cf. Hinton, Nichols and Ohala *passim*).

⁶ However, De Cuyper changes his view after having revisited Peirce's theory in detail: "[i]n contrast to present-day opponents of iconicity, I do not conclude from this that iconicity is merely in the eye of the beholder. I contend that language users may creatively deploy or *create* an iconic ground to iconically motivate an utterance or text." (78; emphasis original, cf. 79-81; Fischer and Nänny *passim*; White)

⁷ For a discussion on Carter's deployment of references or allusions to classical music (viz. Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, Debussy, Bach), see Manley *passim*. The role of classical music in Carter's story is not the focus of the present paper.

In the abovementioned corpus encompassing the nineteen metaphors/descriptions, three most notable aural images have been extracted. The selection was motivated by their significance concerning the descriptions of the sea in “The Bloody Chamber.” These three phonosemantic analyses will then serve as a basis for showing the phonological iconicity of the sea in Carter’s story. The remaining fragments have been divided into two sub-categories: non-phonaesthetic descriptions of the sea and examples of phonaesthemes for further analyses.⁸ First, the aural images are presented and analyzed with an aim to prove/disprove their phonaesthetic potential and this is followed by the scrutiny of obtained results. The latter part of the paper attempts to show that form does not necessarily shape content (as opposed to what a strict phonosemantic hypothesis would have us believe).

The claim put forth in this paper is that there do exist a few sound-related descriptions in “The Bloody Chamber” which display a certain phonaesthetic degree and also, that the depictions of the sea, albeit not always “phonologically meaningful,” constitute a relevant element in the overall interpretation of Angela Carter’s complex story. This particular work has been chosen due to its potential for aptly illustrating iconic contents: “the tale itself is unexpectedly told by the young bride in a *minutely descriptive, hauntingly visual* and soul-searching way” (Bacchilega 77; emphasis added). Also, Carter summarized her life in Japan as “[a]n involuntary apprenticeship of signs” (qtd. in Bacchilega 84), therefore one may speculate that her embrace of Japanese culture amplified her potential for constructing the plot using iconic concepts.

The theoretical frameworks

Richard Rhodes maintains that “aural images” are image schemata as they represent the mental entities labelled by specific phonaesthemes⁹ (Rhodes *passim*; cf. his definition concerning assonance 277). Herein, his theory is applied to classify the instances of phrases pertaining to the aural domain (both the phonaesthetic and non-phonaesthetic) extant in “The Bloody Chamber.” For example, “the murmuring of the waves” (27) is categorized as a phonaesthetic aural image (due to the presence of the phonaestheme /r/¹⁰), but “the sound of the sea” is treated here as the non-phonaesthetic aural image, since it lacks any potential meaning-bearing phonemes, i.e., the lexeme *sound* explicitly refers to the aural domain without conveying any extralinguistic contents.

Furthermore, from the semiotic standpoint, both the phonaesthetic and non-phonaesthetic elements are hereby understood as those constituting “aural semiotic processes,” i.e., aural stimuli which become “signs for the objects . . . by means of an interpretant [in a Peircean sense]” (De Cuypere 59). For the purposes of this study, the term “aural semiotic process” has been coined by adapting De Cuypere’s nomenclature “visual semiotic process” (58-59). Also, it ought to be mentioned that in the present paper phonaesthemes in literature are regarded as beta mode stimuli (Umberto Eco’s distinction), i.e., “mode in which, in order to perceive the expression plane of sign functions, it is necessary first to presume that we are in fact dealing with expressions, and the supposition that they are indeed expressions orients our perception” (Eco qtd. in De Cuypere 73). Another useful theoretical distinction is offered by Lars Elleström. By

⁸ See Appendix for a comprehensive list of excerpts containing all the categories. The two sub-categories are given as potential material for future studies and are not addressed in the paper. Instead, they present the story’s dense saturation with music-related images.

⁹ Rhodes’s disclaimer: these image schemata are not images in the Peircean sense (277).

¹⁰ Highlighting /r/ as a phonaestheme is based on Rhodes’s and Magnus’s studies.

closely examining the table and taking Peircean postulates into consideration, the formal characteristics of the abovementioned aural images becomes clear:

TYPE OF 'HYPOICON'→	Metaphor
ONTOLOGY OF THE SIGN↓	A <i>parallel</i> icon; the sign and the object are related by means of single common traits.
<i>Visual material signs</i> The 'representamen' is a subject perceptible, visual object or occurrence; it is basically <i>visual form</i> .	Visual form miming auditory form Details in both figurative and non-figurative visual art and literature having latent similarities with auditory phenomena
<i>Auditory material signs</i> The 'representamen' is a perceptible, auditory phenomenon; it is basically <i>auditory form</i> .	Auditory form miming visual form Certain vowel sounds standing for proximity/distance or small/large size; low notes miming obscurity
	Auditory form miming meaning Tone qualities miming emotions; phonaesthesia

Tab 1. Visual form vs. auditory form (extract from Elleström's table 84 f.; emphasis original).

The analyses in the next section are solely concerned with phonaesthetic phonological iconicity.¹¹ The discussion will encompass the following phonaesthemes:

- /gl/ (initial position)
- /l/ (initial and medial position)
- /r/ (initial and medial position)¹²

/gl/

The first two phonaesthemes (/gl/ and /l/) have been identified in the following quotation:

His library seemed the source of his habitual odour of Russian leather. Row upon row of calf-bound volumes, brown and olive, with gilt lettering on their spines, the octavo in brilliant scarlet morocco. A deep-buttoned leather sofa to recline on. A lectern, carved like a spread eagle, that held open upon it an edition of Huysman's *Là-bas*, from some over-exquisite private press; it had been bound like a missal, in brass, with gems of coloured glass. The rugs on the floor, deep, pulsing blues of heaven and red of the heart's dearest blood, came from Isfahan and Bokhara; the dark panelling gleamed; there was the lulling music of the sea and a fire of apple logs. (16; emphasis added)

Curiously, the polyphonemic phonaestheme /gl/ is, to the best of my knowledge, one of the most oft-cited cases in literature with the verb *to gleam* given as an example (see especially Miller 168 and Sadowski; cf. Bergen 290, 308; Bloomfield 262; Magnus 27; 43f.; Rhodes and Lawler 22;

¹¹ Keiko Masuda's classification employed by De Cuypere 107 ff. Cf. De Cuypere's remark: "[t]he decision to treat phonaesthemes as a subtype of phonological iconicity is somewhat arbitrary. Phonaesthetic iconicity is in essence related to iconicity in the lexicon. Accordingly, it could also be analyzed as a subtype of morphological iconicity" (113; emphasis added).

¹² Cf. Gerard Genette's remark regarding the iconicity of English initial consonant clusters as quoted in De Cuypere 87. In this paper initial, medial, and final positions refer to consonant clusters.

Sadowski *passim*; Waugh 64). Despite being semantically unrelated to the lexeme *sea*, it does offer a valuable insight into the overall atmosphere permeating the scene. Additionally, it seems to strengthen the effect of the sea's tranquility, therefore its inclusion here is quite justifiable. Due to its popularity in various scholarly sources, it seems appropriate to offer a few quotations regarding the phonosemantic view on *to gleam*. Sadowski and Magnus propose that:

the combination of an abrupt beginning with a light, smooth movement, present in the phonetic features of *gl-* cluster, is ideally suited as a sound-symbolic, or analogical representation of, for example, *immaterial light shining away from its source*. (Sadowski 75; emphasis added)

[i]n the case of light . . . the sounds in . . . “gleam” do not relate synesthetically to the *referent* associated with the Natural Class “light,” but to what the light is *like* – to the various specific inflections of light implied by [this word]. (Magnus 177; emphasis original)

The above remark may be useful in the analysis since they emphasize the visual aspect of light, i.e., it makes the analyst wonder what kind of light is being described. In the story, it might be a dimmed light rendering the setting quite mysterious and opaque. Taking the story's context into consideration, one can easily notice that this seemingly tranquil image is, in fact, the virgin's awaiting her first sexual intercourse with the newly-married husband (who turns out to be a serial wife-killer). The following fragment aptly identifies the particular kind of light accompanying the girl's anxiety: “what should I do now, how shall I pass the long, sea-lit hours until my husband beds me?” (16; emphasis added; cf. esp. Sadowski's comment above). To boot: “it is observed that /gl/ is frequently associated with reflected light” (Magnus 27).

Another phonosemantic postulate concerning *to gleam* (albeit not regarding /gl/) is that “[t]he labials quite generally appear in words concerning beginnings, and the dentals quite generally occur in words concerning linearity and ongoing processes” (Magnus 44, cf. her classification of /g/ and /l/ 60, 64, respectively). Therefore, *to gleam*, containing the bilabial nasal /m/, would somehow signal a beginning. To my mind, the above claim cannot be successfully employed in the analysis, as it would seem too far-fetched a statement to infer that the presence of labials (form) influences the plot (content). The aim of presenting this rather controversial opinion was merely to offer an alternative view and introduce an instance of a “hard” phonosemantic analysis which appears to be strikingly groundless.

A careful reader will observe that the relevant, however brief, fragment (page 5) enumerating the husband's luxury items aims to stress the ostensible peacefulness permeating the scene, while concealing the real, horrific atmosphere behind the mellow-sounding vocabulary. Although phonosemantic analysis is not indispensable to arrive at the above conclusion, it does offer a multi-angled view on the matter and additional arguments backed by textual support.

/l/

The single-phoneme phonaestheme /l/ identified in the present participle *lulling* (“the lulling music of the sea”) follows the previously discussed consonant cluster /gl/. As regards the literary analysis, this phonaesthetic description serves more as a complement to the above summary rather than a separate investigation. In order to avoid ascribing any extralinguistic qualities to the phoneme /l/ by the author, a few concise quotations from scholarly works are offered instead. Controversially, Magnus postulates that “[t]he phoneme /l/ conveys elements of linearity, light, laziness and loving” (93). Supposedly, her statement is supported by the classification of lexemes with the phoneme /l/ in the initial position (cf. the list of qualities

expressed by /l/ 64; for her categorization of other consonantal phonaesthemes consult 59-65). According to Magnus, /l/ in the initial position is supposed to evoke “general calming” and “discontinuation” in the final position (118).¹³ While the former postulate neatly fits the literary analysis, the latter’s significance for the discussion is dubious. Magnus further elaborates on this notion: “[i]f the liquid is /l/, [the word] is passive and conforms to the environment”; “[v]ery informally it can be helpful . . . [to think of] the effect of /l/ as similar to that of water” (119, cf. *ibid.* for the additional properties of /l/ depending on its position in a word).

In the same vein, Sadowski describes /l/ as “‘tame,’ ‘peaceful,’ ‘smooth,’ ‘light-weight,’ ‘clear,’ ‘weak’” (72) and possessing the “light, smooth, buoyant quality” (75), which confirms the above hypotheses regarding the extralinguistic features of the phonaestheme in question. Employing these ideas in the analysis of “The Bloody Chamber,” one arrives at the obvious conclusion that the entire scene seems to have been meticulously “designed” to evoke the impression of serenity which does not correspond to the actual psychological state of the girl.

/r/¹⁴

The final excerpt analyzed in this paper describes the bride’s decision to disobey her husband and enter the forbidden chamber during his absence. Unaware of the dire consequences, she decides to break the only rule imposed on her and explore the mysterious room. Her behaviour is caused not only by sheer curiosity, boredom, lack of fear and “intimation of dread” (27), but also by the profound desire to find out about her husband’s real nature. Ultimately, she discovers the horrific truth: “having opened the door to his bloody chamber, she finally realizes that death, more than sex, is the ritual over which he wishes to preside and for which she too apparently is fated” (Bacchilega 77). In the excerpt describing the moments preceding the terrifying discovery of the mutilated bodies of the husband’s previous wives, the atmosphere is not as serene as in the fragments cited above. Instead, it is disturbingly uncanny:

it was imperative that I should find him, should know him; and I was too deluded by his apparent taste for me to think my disobedience might truly offend him. I took the forbidden key from the heap and left the others flying there. It was now very late and the castle was adrift, as far as it could go from the land, in the middle of the silent ocean where, at my orders, it floated, like a garland of light. And all silent, all still, but for the **murmuring**¹⁵ of the waves. (27; emphasis added)

In what follows, several scholarly views on /r/ are offered, which will then be analyzed in the wider context of the story. For instance, Jakobson presents Edgar Allan Poe’s reflection on /r/ (and its significance in “The Raven”) in the following words: “Poe insists on including the final *r* which is, he says, ‘the most producible consonant.’ It is able to project us into the future, or even into eternity” (1). While Poe’s impression is, undoubtedly, very poetic and highly abstract, it does

¹³ Hans Marchand also assumes that “/l/ at the end of a word symbolizes prolongation, continuation” (qtd. in Magnus 27).

¹⁴ An important note has to be made before proceeding, viz. the analysis of /r/ largely depends on whether one adopts a rhotic or non-rhotic interpretation. In this section, I will include a reading based on rhotic dialect for the sake of following a standard phonosemantic analysis of /r/. However, it is indispensable to mention that a non-rhotic interpretation would yield dramatically different results, i.e., the entire set of features ascribed to the phonaestheme in question would seem completely invalid, therefore undermining the phonosemantic theory in this case. If one takes into account the role of the author, the non-rhotic analysis might prevail since Carter spoke with a non-rhotic British dialect (the inference has been made on the basis of the interviews in “Angela Carter’s Curious Room”).

¹⁵ Cf. the phonaesthetic role of *murmuring* in Lord Tennyson’s “The Princess” (qtd. in De Cuypere 103).

offer an insight into the potentially iconic value of /r/ (here, it would be applicable to the infinitive form, *to murmur*). Magnus suggests that: “/r/ occurs proportionally more frequently than any other consonant in words associated with ‘intensity’ in every natural semantic domain” (43). While this interpretation of /r/ (if any) may seem rather plausible contextually, her other claim that “[t]he phoneme /r/ quite generally has a ‘tearing’ or ‘ripping’ quality. It frequently occurs in words in which the integrity of form is violated” (43) does not, to my mind, fit the cogent interpretation of the story’s excerpt. More generally, Magnus argues that /r/ expresses notions contrary to those of /l/ (118-19; cf. above). Similarly, Sadowski writes that “the liquid /r/ [is] described in sound-symbolic experiments as ‘rough,’ ‘strong,’ ‘heavy,’ ‘bitter’ etc.” (72).

In this case, /r/ (found in the initial and medial position in *murmuring*) may subtly mirror the girl’s transformation from being a passive participant to an active, disobedient person. Of course, such an analysis is only a speculation, not a definite statement. Interestingly, Richard Rhodes, while discussing the aural image *murmur* in his seminal essay “Aural Images,” offers a simple, yet very functional, self-explanatory dichotomy concerning this example, i.e., the image may either be “simple” or “transferred.” More importantly, he proposes the following example labelled a “transferred” aural image of *murmur*: “the murmur of the waves” (278). As regards its meaning in the present analysis, the “transferred” aspect of the aural image in question, and Rhodes’s example, confirm the stylistic sophistication of this literary unit. Interestingly, the proximity of *murmuring* to the words *orders* and *garland*, both containing /r/, may produce an amplified effect in terms of the alleged qualities conveyed by this phonaestheme. Even though the above quotations seem to support the “active” qualities of the phonaestheme /r/, one ought to be careful not to rely solely on such claims and approach literary investigations from different angles, and take other possibilities into consideration.

Conclusions

This section is primarily concerned with identifying the major limitations of such an approach and speculating about possible solutions, summarizing the obtained results, and finally, suggesting what may be scrutinized in future studies focusing on phonosemantics in literature (cf. esp. Colapietro 41-42. for the role of the reader in “performing” the text). The above interpretations have been intended to demonstrate the experimental application of phonosemantics in literary studies. The problematic issue of subjectivity needs to be addressed again in order to re-examine the validity of the phonaesthetic analyses. For instance, Linda R. Waugh offers a thought-provoking analogy:

[t]he phonetic elements of a language are like the keys of a piano. They have been played so often and in so many combinations that even a random cord, struck by an object accidentally falling on them, will have some vague semblance of meaning. (56)

Without delving too far into aesthetics – is a scholarly analysis of randomly composed music intellectual or is it simply sophisticated reasoning? Perhaps phonosemantic investigations are, indeed, only impressionistic collages depicting random phonemes as deeply meaningful. Undoubtedly, this is one of the strongest arguments against phonological iconicity – a field of study perceived as a rather radical and controversial one. The main limitation of this study was the inevitable inclusion of subjective opinions – literary interpretation is highly individualistic itself but using phonosemantics as an analytical tool doubles the chances of arriving at subjective conclusions.

However, in order to solve this conundrum, an uncomplicated (albeit partial) solution may be offered, viz. investigating phonemes as units which are iconic to a certain degree. Of course, this suggestion requires an additional clarification, i.e., how shall one classify phonemes by using an artificial (and still subjective) measure? A few scholars have already proposed the above method: for instance, Waugh postulates that “[l]exical iconicity is a matter of degrees: a given lexical item (or subparts of that lexical item) may be more or less iconic” (56) and also notes that:

[f]or a majority of the English lexicon, there are cues for the meaning of a word in the specific sounds used to form that word. But these cues are only partial ones, since the nature of lexical meaning – in particular the tendency toward polysemy within and across lexemes – is a major constraint on diagrammatic/isomorphic iconicity. (67; emphasis added)

Andreas Fischer expresses a strikingly similar view: “[i]conicity, in brief, is a matter of degree, and all cases of phonological iconicity are also conventional to some extent” (125).¹⁶ On the basis of the above quotations, it may be inferred that phonological iconicity *may* be deemed valid to a limited degree.

Finally, it could be carefully stated that the potential significance of phonosemantics in literary analysis ought not to be overlooked as it highlights certain interesting patterns in prose/poetry. It seems rather logical that phonosemantic techniques would be employed more often in poems than other literary forms (cf. Miller 169-71). Nevertheless, by extracting very brief fragments (as seen in the above analyses), certain minor details may suddenly seem relevant in the overall interpretation. Winfred Nöth’s opinion succinctly summarizes the discussed notion:

[a]s far as literature is concerned, exophoric iconicity has been studied as a feature of literary texts or a characteristic literary device, but the much stronger thesis has also been put forward that iconicity is the very essence of literature. (“Semiotic Foundations” 22)

To summarize the discussion, it seems that a phonosemantic analysis, be it a linguistic or literary investigation, cannot be entirely objective and scholarly enough, viz. no theory, as elaborate as it may be, will ever provide enough incontestable evidence to solve the never-ending Hermogenes vs. Cratylus debate or, the more recent, Saussure’s “the sign is arbitrary” vs. Bolinger’s “the sign is not arbitrary.” Nonetheless, phonological iconicity (and the notion of iconicity in general) does seem an immensely productive subject for further inquiries and challenging debates. Generally, phonological iconicity is stylistically predominant in poetry rather than prose due to the highly expressionistic nature of poetry and the focus on the form (cf. Ivan Fónagy even “correlates phonemes with metaphors” Magnus 26). Studies on iconicity in literature seem to confirm this hypothesis since the vast majority of papers deal with poetry, especially the works of e.e. cummings (see Anderson, Bernhart, Webster, cf. Alderson or Ljungberg for iconicity in prose).

As regards the experimental use of phonosemantic analysis in literary interpretations, herein illustrated by a concise scrutiny restricted to excerpts containing the descriptions of the sea in Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber,” it is still unclear whether results obtained from such investigations are considerably significant or plainly disappointing. The enigma of iconicity will undoubtedly continue to puzzle scholars but, at least for now, it is quite safe to end with Elleström’s remark, thus leaving the final verdict to the reader: “[i]t is not very controversial to

¹⁶ Cf. Magnus: “When semantic domain S is associated disproportionately frequently with phoneme X, then people will be inclined to associate semantic domain S with phoneme X productively” (34).

say that there is a close connection between form and meaning, although the nature of the relation is far from self-evident” (73).

Appendix

- Excerpts containing the most phonosemantically notable structures (the phonaesthemes in bold):

1)“The rugs on the floor, deep pulsing blues of heaven and red of the heart’s dearest blood, came from Isfahan and Bokhara; the dark panelling **gleamed**” (16).

2)“[T]here was the **lulling** music of the sea and a fire of apple logs” (16).¹⁷

3)“And all silent, all still, but for the **murmuring** of the waves” (27).

- Excerpts containing non-phonaesthetic descriptions/mentions of the sea (these quotations serve as indispensable complements of the phonosemantic analyses; important parts in bold):

1)“No room, no corridor that did not rustle with **the sound of the sea** and all the ceilings, the walls on which his ancestors in the stern regalia of rank lined up with their dark eyes and white faces, were stippled with refracted light from **waves which were always in motion**; that luminous, murmurous castle of which I was the châtelaine, I, the little music student . . .” (13).

2)“And, ah! his castle. The faery solitude of the place; with its turrets of misty blue, its courtyard, its spiked gate, his castle that lay **on the very bosom of the sea** with seabirds mewing about its attics . . . evanescent departures of **the ocean**, cut off by **the tide** from land for half a day...that castle, at home neither on the land nor **on the water**, a mysterious, **amphibious** place, contravening the materiality of both earth and **the waves**, with the melancholy of a **mermaiden** who perches on her rock and waits, endlessly, for a lover who had **drowned** far away, long ago. That lovely, sad, **sea-siren** of a place!” (13).

3)“In the turret suite he had given me for my very own, I could gaze out over **the tumultuous Atlantic** and imagine myself **the Queen of the Sea**” (14).

4)“[He] told me the agent from New York had called with such urgent business that he must leave as soon as **the tide** was low enough” (18).

5)“Outside our firelit privacy, I could hear **the sound of the tide** drawing back from the pebbles of the foreshore; it was nearly time for him to leave me” (21).

6)“[A]s though he wanted to turn his back on **the siren sea**” (25).

7)“I could no longer hear **the sound of the sea**” (27).

8)“My mind was in a tumult; schemes for flight jostled with one another...as soon as **the tide** receded from the causeway, I would make for the mainland” (30).

9)“My reason told me I had nothing to fear; **the tide** that would take him to the New World would let me out of the imprisonment of the castle” (30).

10)“His speech had the rhythms of the countryside, **the rhythms of the tides**” (32).

11)“‘Hark!’ said my friend suddenly. **‘The sea has changed key**; it must be near morning, **the**

¹⁷ This example may also belong to the next category, however for the sake of clarity it has been omitted. Cf. Miller’s remark concerning the examples in this category (and *roar* in the third group): “Apart from borrowed forms, such as *Barbara*, *murmur* (from Latin), or monosyllabics (*roar* [OE], *lull* [Ch.]), English echoic words generally observe the dissimilatory constraint against identical liquids; cf. *grumble* (**grumber*, **glumble*); *rattle* (**ratter*, **lattle*)” (156).

tide is going down” (33).

12) “The last little chambermaid had trotted along the causeway long ago and now **the tide**, fated as I, came tumbling in, **the crisp wavelets splashing**¹⁸ on the old stones” (37).

13) “[S]ome internal urgency told her that she must reach me before **the incoming tide** sealed me away from her for ever” (40).

- Excerpts containing phonaesthemes for further analysis with references to sources discussing them at length:

1) “Above the syncopated **roar** of the train, I could hear his even, steady breathing” (8).¹⁹

2) “Then threw the keys in a **jingling** heap in my lap” (21).

3) “When I came back into the bedroom carrying the bunch of keys that **jangled** at every step like a curious musical instrument” (35).

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¹⁸ A clear example of phonaesthesia and onomatopoeia. However, it is not as contextually relevant as the phonaesthemes selected for the present analysis.

¹⁹ See esp. Rhodes 278: *roar* as a transferred aural image, cf. his example; see above for certain views on /r/.

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The Power of Music in the Tale of Beren and Lúthien by J.R.R. Tolkien

Tolkien valued music in his private life, and this is mirrored in his works about Middle-Earth, which owes its very existence to music. It is born out of the song of the Ainur. But the role of music does not end with this creative act, rather, it continues to influence the history of Middle-Earth. The paper aims to analyze the role of music in the tale of Beren and Lúthien in the published *Silmarillion*. The tale of Beren and Lúthien was of personal significance to Tolkien himself. It also includes numerous allusions to music. It is the language of love for both Beren and Lúthien, who make their own songs. Lúthien's music has power which allows her to overcome Sauron and Morgoth and to win a second life for Beren from Mandos, while Finrod uses music in his duel with Sauron. Music affects both positive and negative characters, including Sauron and Morgoth. Its importance is also emphasized by the existence of professional musicians, such as Daeron, Thingol's minstrel. The story „Of Beren and Lúthien” demonstrates the power of music, which has a huge impact on the entire history of Middle-Earth. Without it, many events would never have happened.

key words: Beren, Lúthien, Middle-Earth, music, Tolkien

Music played an important role in the life of J.R.R. Tolkien. He himself came from a musical family: his grandfather produced pianos and his mother was also musically talented. Even though he did not inherit his mother's talent for music, it continued to be present in Tolkien's life, as his wife, Edith Bratt, was strongly connected with it: she played the piano and even wanted to work as a professional piano player (Eden, “Music in Middle-Earth” 444). So Tolkien was surrounded by music all his life. He respected it and admired musicians, and, as his daughter Priscilla put it, “the power of music [in his writings] may represent the feeling of unsatisfied longing in my father”¹ (qtd. in Scull & Hammond 615). Bradford Lee Eden remarked that “he [i.e. Tolkien] so thoroughly and at some level of substance, incorporated so many allusions to music and its power in his writings” (“Music in Middle-Earth” 444). Eden believes that Tolkien's Catholic upbringing inspired him to choose it as the means of creation of Arda, since Tolkien was familiar with the idea of ‘music of the spheres’ which was popular in the Middle Ages. This concept originated from ancient philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, and in the Middle Ages it was discussed by Boethius in *De institutione musica* (Eden, “The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 183-84; 187-88).

Taking into account the biographical background of the author, as well as the fact that the most important women in his life, namely, his mother and his wife, were strongly connected with music, it is hardly surprising that musical motifs frequently appear in his fiction. Though he did not make music himself, Tolkien introduced both music as such and musicians into Middle-Earth *legendarium*. The best example of this tendency is the genesis story of his fantastical universe, Arda, in which the world is created out of music. Under the guidance of the creator, called Eru

¹The square bracket “[in his writings]” is present in the quote published in Scull and Hammond, 615.

Ilúvatar, angelic spirits named the Ainur sing the Great Music, which is later brought into existence by Ilúvatar, and the world of Arda comes into being. In the world which was literally sung into existence, music should be of great significance. Indeed, the role of music in the *legendarium* does not end with the creation of Arda, as in the stories of *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a plethora of characters who enjoy music, sing traditional songs or compose their own tunes. In the article, the significance of music in the tale of Beren and Lúthien, as it is told in the chapter “Of Beren and Lúthien” in the published version of *The Silmarillion*, will be analyzed.

The story of Beren and Lúthien was particularly important to Tolkien, as can be seen from the fact of inscribing the names of these lovers on Tolkien’s family grave, as well as the existence of many versions, both in prose and in verse, of this tale. The character of Lúthien was directly inspired by the sight of his wife Edith dancing in the woods. This is why “Lúthien is the character about whom Tolkien cared most deeply and personally” (Seaman 396). Richard C. West believes that the tale of Beren and Lúthien was “probably the favourite of his [i.e. Tolkien’s] stories of Middle-Earth” (259). This story, due to its personal importance to the author, also played a significant role in the history of the entire Middle-Earth, affecting not only the events in the First Age, but also extending its influence to the Third Age. According to Seaman, it was “a fundamental link in the story cycle that begins with *The Silmarillion* and concludes with *The Lord of the Rings*” (396). Verlyn Flieger considers Beren and Lúthien “probably the single most important story in the corpus, apart from *The Lord of the Rings*” (38). The tale of Beren and Lúthien reappears several times in Tolkien’s fiction. It is present in *The Lord of the Rings*, where it is sung by Aragorn to hobbits on Weathertop and in “The Appendices,” during his first meeting with Arwen. Beren and Lúthien also feature in a rejected version of *The Hobbit* (Rateliff). All versions of Beren and Lúthien story are listed by Richard C. West, who states that it is the only tale which appears or is mentioned in all volumes of *The History of Middle-Earth*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (260).

As far as music is concerned, it is a fundamental chapter of *The Silmarillion*, as Eden pointed out “Tolkien’s scholarly and religious conviction regarding the power of music to affect and indeed engender drama in mythology and in real life comes to the fore in the Beren and Lúthien story” (“The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 188). According to Eden, music in Middle-Earth “follows an interesting decay and descent in the uses and appearances of music that closely follow Boethius’s model regarding the three types of music in medieval cosmological theory” (“The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 184). These three types, according to Boethius, as referred to by Eden, are as follows: the most important one is celestial music, which in the case of Tolkien is depicted in “The Ainulindalë,” while the lower tiers are occupied by vocal and instrumental music, the examples of which can be found in “Of Beren and Lúthien” (Eden, “The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 184; 187-88). Eden states that as the history of Middle-Earth progresses, and the further from the moment of creation we are, the less of cosmological music there is, while vocal and instrumental music dominates and is almost exclusively present (“The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 190). This can be observed in the tale “Of Beren and Lúthien,” where only vocal and instrumental music is depicted. Finally, in the Third Age, “the third and lower type of music” (Eden “The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 190) dominates.

At the beginning of the chapter “Of Beren and Lúthien,” it is stated that this story itself gave rise to a song called “Lay of Leithian.”² This statement, put at the very beginning of the story, foreshadows its importance as well as its connection to music, since it is a tale which

² This version in verse was actually published in the third volume of *The History of Middle-Earth: Lays of Beleriand*.

became a song. It is also named “most fair still in the ears of the Elves” (Tolkien 194), so it raises the readers’ expectations of the story even before they begin reading it.

Unsurprisingly for a story which is turned into a song, “Of Beren and Lúthien” is full of references to music. Both Lúthien and Beren (though he to a lesser extent) are musicians and can make their own songs. Also minor characters, such as Finrod Felagund, are connected with music. Additionally, the story features a professional musician, Thingol’s minstrel Daeron. From the existence of such a job at Thingol’s court, it can be inferred that Elvish society in Middle-Earth attached a lot of importance to music. Though only two Elvish minstrels are named, Maglor, and Daeron, there must have been more of them, as Eden believes, “given that there would have had to have been many minstrels for one to have been given the title of greatest along with the idea of wandering from place to place” (Eden, “The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 190). From a later part of the story, it is clear that the tradition of minstrelsy is not restricted to the positive protagonists, since both Sauron and Morgoth are familiar with it; what is more, both Dark Lords can appreciate beautiful music, as can be seen from Sauron’s reaction to the meeting with Lúthien, when he wants to bring her captive to Morgoth as a boon. In her confrontation with Morgoth, Lúthien tempts the Vala, offering him her services as a minstrel. While appreciation of her song seems to contradict Morgoth’s hateful attitude to the world, it is also a testament to the power of music. In fact, the entire story can be interpreted as a tale of the power of music, since the protagonists, particularly Lúthien, use music to solve problems arising during the quest, often quite successfully. Moreover, music accompanies Beren and Lúthien at every stage of their relationship, cementing it further and bringing the lovers close together after temporary partings. Let us look at the progression of the relationship between Beren and Lúthien and the role music plays in it. It can be noticed that there is a certain kind of gradation in the importance of music, as at the beginning Lúthien enchants Beren by it, then she puts Morgoth to sleep by the means of a song, and finally, she uses her musical talents to win a second life for her beloved as she sings before Mandos, which is her final and greatest musical achievement.

The love between Beren and Lúthien starts with music, as when Beren sees Lúthien for the first time, she is dancing, that is, doing something strictly connected with music. It is not stated directly in the story, but from what transpires later on, it can be inferred that Lúthien dances to the music played by Daeron the minstrel. Also, though at first he does not hear her singing, Beren gives Lúthien a nickname which is related to music, calling her “Tinúviel, that signifies Nightingale, daughter of twilight, in the Grey-Elven tongue” (Tolkien 198). Nightingale is a well-known songbird, moreover, in Tolkien’s Middle-Earth, a creature connected to Lúthien’s mother, Melian, who “taught them [i.e. the nightingales] their song” (Tolkien 64). However, Eden contrasts Melian’s song with that of her daughter Lúthien, in spite of her being named “Nightingale” by Beren, associating her song with another bird and calls it “the song of the lark and of springtime regeneration” (“The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 186). According to West, by giving Lúthien the nickname *Tinúviel*, Beren “recognize[s] her mythic ‘true name’” (263).

It is later in the story that Lúthien is depicted as a singer for the first time. After Beren sees her dancing, he yearns to meet her again, but she never comes close. However, as winter ends and spring begins, he can hear Lúthien’s song. Her singing is the most beautiful music ever heard; not only does it awaken love in Beren and enables him to call out to his beloved: “the spell of silence fell from Beren” (Tolkien 198), but it also makes spring appear. It seems that Lúthien can control nature itself with her song, and in comparison to other Elvish characters, her song possesses a great power, which can be described as magical. However, it should be borne in mind that Lúthien is not just an ordinary Elf-princess: her mother Melian is a Maia, so Lúthien inherited part of her mother’s divine nature. Her superpowers, which she displays in the tale, can

be traced down to her nature as a daughter of a Maia. Lúthien's special power resting in music relates to her ancestry, too, as Melian not only "taught them [i.e. the nightingales] their song" (Tolkien 64), but also enchanted Thingol, Lúthien's father, with her music. When Thingol was in the woods of Nan Elmoth, "an enchantment fell on him, and he stood still; and afar off beyond the voices of the *lómelindi* he heard the voice of Melian, and it filled all his heart with wonder and desire" (Tolkien 64). When Melian is still living in Valinor, she is as renowned for her song as Lúthien is for hers in Middle-Earth: "the Valar would leave their works, and the birds of Valinor their mirth, that the bells of Valmar were silent and the fountains ceased to flow, when at the mingling of the lights Melian sang in Lórien" (Tolkien 64). By using music as a means of manifesting her power, Lúthien is thus truly her mother's daughter. What is more, she is, in fact "one of the most powerful singers of any age in Tolkien's world" (West 263).

For Lúthien, music and especially singing is the language of her love for Beren. When the man leaves Menegroth to do Thingol's bidding, Lúthien stops singing and "from that hour she sang not again in Doriath" (Tolkien 202). This sentence foreshadows what is to happen: Lúthien never sings in Doriath, since she leaves it to save Beren, and when they go back to Thingol, there is no mood for singing, as the country is under attack by Carcharoth.

Music as an expression of love for Beren also has saving power, since it is thanks to the song she sings in front of Sauron's prison that Lúthien can find Beren and ascertain that he is alive. The song sung by Beren in reply enables Lúthien to locate her beloved and rescue him. This is not the last time when music reunites the lovers. When Beren decides to leave Lúthien in the safety of her homeland Doriath and go for the quest alone, he composes a song about her, which Lúthien hears and answers from afar. It is also Lúthien's singing that Beren hears as the first thing when he recovers from his sickness, caused by Carcharoth's venomous fangs. So it can be seen that music is present every time when the lovers overcome trouble and meet again.

Her love for Beren motivates Lúthien to use music in her confrontations with the two Valar: Morgoth and Mandos. As Eden put it, through her music, Lúthien can control "even the emotions of Valar themselves" ("The 'Music of the Spheres'" 188). These confrontations are prefigured and foreshadowed by the music she performs in front of Sauron; like in the later part of the story, Lúthien uses her musical talent as a weapon, which allows her to overcome the enemy. Her song can pass through stone and thus reach the incarcerated Beren: "she sang a song that no stone could hinder" (Tolkien 209). This is an example of music being used as "a manifestation of power" (Scull and Hammond 618). Lúthien's might is made apparent by her music and song; she frees her beloved Beren and commands Sauron to surrender the island to her. Her song is the emanation of her mastery, greater than that of other characters' in the tale due to her Maia ancestry. The first song in front of Sauron's isle is meant only to help contact Beren, yet it is already very powerful; and the second one, after Beren's reply, is even "of greater power" (Tolkien 209). This fragment is an excellent example of the range of Lúthien's prowess, since here she succeeds in what Finrod Felagund fails: she subdues and defeats Sauron. This helps to further emphasize her special, exceptional nature as a daughter of a Maia: she is victorious over Sauron, which is not possible for Felagund, even though he is the King of Nargothrond. Lúthien is not a mere Elf, rather, she is a half-Maia, which makes her musical exploits possible in the first place.

In her meeting with Morgoth, Lúthien again uses her musical talent as a weapon against the might of the evil Vala. Unlike Beren, who continues to don his werewolf disguise, Lúthien reveals her identity to the Dark Lord and "offer[s] her service to sing before him, after the manner of a minstrel" (Tolkien 217). She was already known far and wide not only for her beauty, but also for her talent as a singer, as it is explained in her meeting with Sauron, who plans

to give her to his overlord. Because of her renown, Morgoth readily agrees to her suggestion. Her courageous and risky decision turns out to be the right one, since Lúthien puts Morgoth's entire court and the Vala himself to sleep with her song. Lúthien's music is both exquisitely beautiful and extremely powerful: "a song of such surpassing loveliness and of such blinding power, that he listened perforce" (Tolkien 217). With the help of her sleep-inducing robe, Lúthien makes Morgoth fall into slumber, which enables Beren to cut off the Silmaril from the Iron Crown. Without Lúthien, Beren would not be able to complete his quest. And Lúthien enchants Morgoth with her music, which emphasizes the central role of music in this story. What is also noteworthy is that the Silmarils give light in answer to Lúthien's song, as if to support and legitimize her actions.

Lúthien's greatest musical achievement is her song in front of Mandos. Here, Beren's life is at stake, and it is the most important and daunting task which Lúthien has to face. Yet, thanks to her love for Beren, and with the use of her musical talent, Lúthien achieves what might have seemed impossible: she wins a second span of life for Beren and herself, "and Mandos was moved to pity, who never before was so moved, nor has since been" (Tolkien 224-25). Mandos is moved by her song's beauty and sadness, and the song itself is considered "the song most fair that ever in words was woven, and the song most sorrowful that ever the world shall hear" (Tolkien 224). Furthermore, it is preserved in Valinor "[u]nchanged, imperishable" (Tolkien 224), and constantly performed there, saddening the Valar. What is special about this song is also the fact that in some way it resembles the Music of the Ainur in that it unites different themes: that of Elves and of Men: "for Lúthien wove two themes of words, of the sorrows of the Eldar and the grief of Men, of the Two Kindreds that were made by Ilúvatar to dwell in Arda" (Tolkien 224). Eden believes that Lúthien's song before Mandos expresses something even more potent, namely, "the power of her music even over death" ("The 'Music of the Spheres'" 189). The story of Lúthien ends again with the reminder that she will die and herself become a subject of a song, which serves as a sort of a bracket closing the tale which begins with the information that Beren and Lúthien's story is turned into a song. Here, it has a slightly negative overtone, since it serves to emphasize the Elves' feeling of loss, as Lúthien is no longer alive and with them, but rather "only a memory in song" (Tolkien 225).

Beren, Lúthien's beloved, is a mortal man, though he is just any man, but the son of the important leader of Men, Barahir, who is befriended by Finrod Felagund. One could expect huge cultural differences between the Man and the Elvish princess, but this is not the case. Here again, music fulfils a unifying function. Beren is sensitive to music, a characteristic which he shares with Lúthien. Not only does he love listening to Lúthien's singing, but he also makes his own songs. He is thus a musically talented person, not only a passive recipient of music sung by Lúthien, but also a creative participant. His exchange of songs with Lúthien forms a musical dialogue between the lovers.

The Silmarillion mentions two songs written by Beren. The first one is sung during his imprisonment by Sauron, and it is with this song that he answers Lúthien's singing when she is looking for him. Lúthien's song is described as one with great power, which can pierce the stone fortress. Beren's song is not about love, but rather about stars created by the Valar, namely, "the Seven Stars, the Sickle of the Valar that Varda hung above the North as a sign for the fall of Morgoth" (Tolkien 209). Thus, in effect, the song he sings is about the victory of good over evil and eventual defeat of Morgoth, and, by extension, also his lieutenant Sauron. Unlike Lúthien's song, this composition does not possess any magical power, nevertheless, it can be considered Beren's own challenge to Sauron. Singing such a song while imprisoned by Sauron proves not only Beren's musical skills, but also his great courage. In this way, Beren shows how much he

has in common with his beloved Lúthien and proves himself to be a worthy partner for her. The song also indicates Beren's familiarity with the stories about the Valar and the creation of the stars, which are an important part of the Elvish tradition.

What is noteworthy is the fact that nothing in particular is told about Lúthien's songs; we know only that they are beautiful and have power over their listeners, but no information is given concerning their lyrics or content. The only thing akin to a summary of a song is told in connection with Lúthien's song to Mandos, where it is described as a tale of the sorrows of both Elves and Men. But as to other songs, their text or message is unknown. It is different with Beren's songs. The first song of Beren is summarized, but the second one is quoted in the text of *The Silmarillion*, so that the reader knows not only the content of the song, but its exact wording, while the entire text of the song is published in "Lay of Leithian" in the third volume of *The History of Middle-Earth: Lays of Beleriand*. It is entitled "the Song of Parting" (Tolkien 214), because Beren sings it after he leaves Lúthien in Doriath to go on his quest alone, and he believes that they would never meet again. The song praises Lúthien's beauty and gives thanks to the world in which her existence is possible, even if only for a while: "yet were its making good, for this - / the dusk, the dawn, the earth, the sea - / that Lúthien for a time should be" (Tolkien 214). Though at the time of his composing and singing Beren believes the parting with Lúthien to be final, he is nevertheless grateful for having met and loved her. This song, much more than the previous one, is a proof of his love for Lúthien. Though it does not have any magical power in itself, the song brings the lovers together when Lúthien hears it.

The eponymous protagonists of "Of Beren and Lúthien" are not the only characters who perform music. Finrod Felagund uses music in a way similar to Lúthien's; for him, music possesses magical power, a fact to which he refers in his confrontation with Sauron. The Elf and the Dark Lord duel, but it is a duel that is carried out with music, not with weapons; the music is called "the songs of power" (Tolkien 205). Though finally Sauron wins the duel, Finrod is capable of resisting him for some time, which proves his musical abilities. The musical confrontation is also a clash of ideologies: Sauron's song is full of aggression and negativity, subjects such as black magic, betrayal. The last subject matter turns out to be Finrod's undoing. The Elf sings about the bliss and beauty of Valinor, but it is in Valinor where the first treachery and spilling of Elvish blood occurs. Reminded of the Kinslaying at Alqualondë, Finrod is aware that the Elves' moral advantage over Sauron is not so great, and this realization allows his opponent to achieve victory.

This fragment establishes Sauron as yet another character using music to achieve his aims. Though there are no details about the kind of music Sauron makes, only hints as to the subject matter, it is supposedly very different from Lúthien's song or music performed by positive characters. Sauron's music is for him one of the forms or expressions of his magic, and like it, this music is used to subdue and enslave. Yet, Sauron's attitude to music is another proof of the power of music and of the importance it has in Middle-Earth, since its crucial role transcends the boundaries between good and evil characters. Sauron can perform powerful music, and knows that Lúthien, famous for her beautiful singing, would be a great gift for his master. Morgoth is familiar with the notion of a courtly minstrel and is interested in the prospect of hearing Lúthien's songs.

Daeron, Thingol's court minstrel, is the only professional musician in the story. Eden considers him a representative of instrumental music, rarely depicted by Tolkien, who focused on vocal music. According to the scholar, the use of instruments is implied by Daeron's status as a minstrel (Eden, "The 'Music of the Spheres'" 190). He is first introduced into the story as yet another person who wants to win Lúthien's heart: "Daeron the minstrel also loved Lúthien"

(Tolkien 199). Thus, being a minstrel and loving Lúthien are his two defining qualities. However, his love for Lúthien prompts him to betray her and reveal her relationship with Beren to Thingol. This results in Beren being sent on the hopeless quest to get a Silmaril. Thus, initially Daeron is depicted negatively, as a force trying to sever the lovers. He is yet another obstacle that Beren and Lúthien must overcome on their road to happiness. Daeron betrays Lúthien for the second time when he informs Thingol about her planned escape from Doriath. However, it is implied that Lúthien trusts him, since he is the person she shares her plans with: “she sought the help of Daeron” (Tolkien 206). This deed of Daeron’s also has disastrous effects, since it leads directly to Lúthien’s imprisonment in the treehouse on Hírilorn.

Later in the story, the depth of Daeron’s love for Lúthien is revealed, and he is no longer depicted as a hindrance to the protagonists. Rather, it is emphasized that his devotion to her is genuine. He is the only person who goes in search of Lúthien when she manages to escape from Doriath. Daeron cannot accept life without her and is determined to find his beloved. Though he fails, his love inspires him to create great music, music that is dedicated to Lúthien and praises her beauty. This music, which sprung from true but unrequited love, makes Daeron the best musician among the Elves, even better than Maglor: “[h]e became the greatest of all the minstrels of the Elves east of the Sea, named even before Maglor, son of Fëanor” (Tolkien 220). In this way, music-loving Lúthien not only makes music herself, but is also a source of inspiration for other talented characters.

The story of Beren and Lúthien, as told in the published version of *The Silmarillion*, is full of music. Both main protagonists are singers, Finrod Felagund’s song demonstrates the use of music for magical purposes, while at the same time it proves that even the embodiments of evil, such as Sauron and Morgoth, can react to music. The existence of such a person as a court minstrel shows the importance of music in the everyday life of the Elves. The fact of listing Daeron as the best minstrel further emphasizes the importance of music in the Elvish culture: music is appreciated and treasured and the most talented musicians honoured long after they are gone.

Music also plays a crucial role in the story, since it is present during almost all significant events, beginning with the first meeting of Beren and Lúthien, their reunion and liberating Beren from Sauron’s prison, through the winning of a Silmaril from Morgoth, ending with Lúthien gaining a second life for Beren from Mandos. The most renowned deed of Beren and Lúthien could not have been possible without music. Without music, and so without Lúthien, Beren would never have completed his quest. Also, without her performance before Mandos, her union with Beren would have ended quickly with his death, and their marriage would not have given birth to the new generations of mixed Elvish and Mannish ancestry, which, in turn, would have influenced the entire history of Middle-Earth. Also, the Silmaril they win from Morgoth is the one which lights Eärendil’s way to Valinor and later becomes a beacon of hope in the sky. Without Beren and Lúthien’s achievement, which they owe to music, the history of Middle-Earth would have looked totally different.

Finally, Beren and Lúthien’s lives become a material for a song, “Lay of Leithian,” one of the most beloved songs among the Elves. Their lives, so full of music, provide inspiration for further musical compositions which survive generations and generations of Elves and Men, giving new hope and strength to those who sing them. In Middle-Earth, music does not end with the creation of Arda, but is a constant presence, resonating around Middle-Earth and shaping characters’ lives. It is a power to be reckoned with. As Bradford Lee Eden put it, “music is the ultimate power in the cosmological history of Middle-Earth” (“The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 188)

whose “sorrows and triumphs emanate from music” (Eden, “The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 188). The story of Beren and Lúthien is a perfect example of the power of music in Middle-Earth.

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***The Transformation of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Amy Tan's
The Joy Luck Club and The Bonesetter's Daughter***

The mother/daughter bond is the central subject of Amy Tan's two powerful books, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Tensions that arise in the novels between a Chinese mother and her Chinese-American daughter are often described by the critics as being the result of two important factors. One is based on the misunderstandings caused by the generational gap, while the other comes from the cultural gap. For a Chinese-born mother the American reality instigates various confusions, as she still views her life with the eyes of her traditional Chinese upbringing. On the other hand, her daughter lacks any profound knowledge about her Chinese ethnicity, which makes her unable to recognize the influences of her mother's Chinese past over their relationship. But in her novels Tan portrays also the relationship between the Chinese immigrant mother and *her* mother in China. Their relationship, which grew up exclusively on the grounds of the Chinese culture, is characterized by empathy and appreciation. In this paper I am going to discuss the change that occurred to the mother-daughter relationship after it has been replanted into a different cultural context. The line of argument will reveal in what ways the mother-daughter relationship underwent a significant transformation.

key words: Chinese American, Tan, mother, daughter

Amy Tan is a prolific Asian-American author, born and raised in Oakland, California. She belongs to the group of the few American writers of Chinese descent who appear in the American literary canon. Thanks to her contribution, readers may be acquainted with the diverse aspects concerning the Chinese-American identity. All of Tan's novels are written in a subtly personal style. They are a source of many insights, especially ones concerning "the intergenerational relationships" (Adams 80), that is, family matters. What may be of particular note to the reader is that the relationship between a Chinese mother and her Chinese-American daughter resembles nothing but a clash of a volcano with a tornado. However, in her writings Tan portrays also the bond between the Chinese immigrant mother and *her* mother in China, which is far more symbiotic in nature. The change that occurred to the mother-daughter bond after it has been replanted into a different cultural context deserves closer examination, on account of its significant influence on the Chinese-American identity. Moreover, what Xiaomei Chen describes as "cross-cultural and multicultural discourses . . . illuminated by an analysis of mother/daughter discourse," offers readers from other cultures a noteworthy interpretative strategy, poses new questions, and delineates a new methodology both for literary and cultural studies (112). The study enclosed in this paper is based on two novels written by Amy Tan: *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. These two books are collections of stories told by the characters in their struggle for building a bridge of understanding between two generations.

Frictions and tensions that arise between the Chinese mother and her Chinese-American daughter are often described by some critics as being the result of two specific factors. One is based on the misunderstandings caused by the generational gap – growing up in different times. Yet, one should not fail to notice that conflicts between parents and children are older even than the Chinese civilization itself, and are, therefore, nothing extraordinary. The other factor is far more interesting, as it originates from the cultural gap, meaning, growing up in different cultural environments. Marina Heung argues that “in Tan’s novel, the maternal experience of generational conflict and differentiation takes into account the realities of cultural difference” (604). In the case of the characters appearing in Tan’s novels, the mothers were raised in China and later emigrated to the United States. The daughters, however, were born and bred on the American land and have never even been to Asia. Walter Shear defines this conflict as a double communication barrier: “that between generations and that created by the waning influence of an older culture and the burgeoning presence of another” (2). For a Chinese-born mother the American reality instigates various confusions, as she still views her life through the prism of her traditional Chinese upbringing. On the other hand, her daughter lacks any profound knowledge about her Chinese ethnicity, which makes her unable to recognize the influences of her mother’s Chinese past over their relationship.

Taking into account the abovementioned conflict, both analyzed texts clearly illustrate that the void between the Chinese and the American culture is immense. It was Edward T. Hall’s high and low-context culture theory that inspired me to believe that, in fact, no actual communication between the two separate cultures is possible. At least, not as long as they lack any thorough knowledge about each other. In his book entitled *Beyond Culture*, Hall distinguishes between two groups of cultures: the high-context and the low-context ones. The Chinese culture belongs to the group of the high-context cultures. In order to fully understand its messages, one needs to place it in the appropriate cultural context. The knowledge about the Chinese tradition enables the recipient to decode the message properly, together with its implied meaning (Hall 94). The examples from Tan’s novels, which will appear later in this paper, show that in highly contextual societies, even the simplest sentence uttered under certain circumstances can be misinterpreted. Conversely, the American culture belongs to the low-context group, which sends messages that are far less dependable on the cultural context. The well-known American openness and their frank attitude allows little inaccuracy in this matter. Hence, if the low-context American culture is not familiar with the intricacies represented by the Chinese high-context culture, their communication is unsuccessful. This is what Lisa M. S. Dunick defines as “a faulty translation.” In her understanding, “[t]hese failed attempts at communication are in part produced by a tension between persons who have different understandings of how stories, culture, and language are supposed to work” (6-7). Likewise, the Chinese senders may overanalyze low-context messages, being oblivious to the fact that there are no “cultural strings” attached to what is actually being said.

Tan’s novels are a good illustration of this point, as the members of the high-context culture (the Chinese mothers) have a great difficulty in reaching an understanding with the representatives of the American low-context culture (the American-born daughters). For instance, one of the daughters, Jing-mei Woo, says: “My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other’s meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more” (*The Joy Luck Club* 37). The daughters fail to decipher the concealed meaning of their mothers’ personal narratives, because they are not aware of the weight of the Chinese cultural heritage that is present in the stories. In contrast, in the relationship between the Chinese immigrant mother and *her* mother back in China there is no sign of such

misinterpretation, as the bond grew up exclusively on the grounds of the Chinese culture. Both the mother and the child are familiar with the rules and regulations that are being imposed on them by the Chinese tradition. Sharing the same cultural context works in favour of the bond, making it deeply emphatic, harmonious, and emotional.

It is my conviction that the knowledge concerning family relations in China will be of essential help in approaching the two novels and explaining the magnetism of the Chinese motherly bond. Moreover, it will later shed light on the transformation which occurred to the relationship after the mother's emigration to America.

Leonid Wasiliew in his book entitled *Kulty, religie i tradycje Chin*, describes the vital role of a Chinese clan in creating the Chinese identity:

The cult of family provided China with a great pulling force. Wherever a Chinese has found himself, wherever his fate sent him, he always remembered about his family, felt a connection with it, tried to head home, or at least to be buried in the family grounds. As some of the scholars say, the cult of family played an important role in the decrease of importance of other feelings felt by an ordinary Chinese citizen. (145-46, *own translation*)

According to Wasiliew, a Chinese person is almost non-existent outside his/her clan. Family matters are always a central concern for a Chinese heart, to the point of neglecting all of the personal desires. The feeling of responsibility for the clan is deeply rooted in Chinese thinking, which contributes to the formation of the Eastern collective identity. Furthermore, this approach was carefully cultivated for centuries by the Chinese government, which believed that a strong clan is an indispensable component of a strong country.

A complementary aspect shaping the Chinese identity is the cult of parents (called *hiao*), which originates from the Confucian Five Relationships. According to the rules of *hiao*, a child was obliged to pay the highest respect to his/her parents, humbly listen to their wishes, and take care of them in their old age. Absolute obedience was expected at all times and at all costs. The most horrible crimes could be officially pardoned if the motive behind them was *hiao*. As Wasiliew observes, for some critics the cult of parents is considered the most fundamental ethical rule in the whole China (139). Therefore, my view is that this exceptional relationship between a Chinese parent and a child should be particularly emphasized in the cultural interpretation of Amy Tan's novels. It explains not only the nature of the relationship itself, but also helps in the reinvestigation of a new Chinese-American identity.

Signs of the cult of parents are clearly visible in the personal narratives of the Chinese mothers from Amy Tan's novels. For instance, in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* the reader may observe how desperately LuLing tries to connect with her mother's ghost in order to ask for her forgiveness. LuLing gives her daughter Ruth a sand tray, with the intention of teaching her some of the Chinese characters. But one day, a trivial misunderstanding causes LuLing to think that her daughter became a medium who can transfer messages from LuLing's dead mother (called Precious Auntie) via the sand tray. In this scene, her reaction is extremely emotional:

But then her mother began to whimper . . . in Chinese. She jumped up and her chest heaved. "Precious Auntie," LuLing cried, "you've come back. . . . Do you forgive me?" Ruth put down the chopstick. LuLing was now sobbing. "Precious Auntie, oh Precious Auntie! I wish you never died! It was all my fault. If I could change fate, I would rather kill myself than suffer without you. . . ." (Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* 72)

The mother's expressive behaviour after she supposedly got reconnected with her parent shows how deep their bond was. The expressiveness is even more striking when the reader takes into

account the reserved Chinese nature. Usually reticent and reluctant to express emotions, LuLing bursts outright when a sign of Precious Auntie appears on the sand tray.

Correspondingly, *hiao* can be easily detected in *The Joy Luck Club*, where An-mei Hsu frequently recalls the hardships of her mother's life in China. As a dishonoured fourth wife, her figure serves as a heartbreaking portrait of a burdened Chinese woman (her unforgivable sin was that she remarried, instead of taking care of her late husband's parents). Despite the clan's resentment, An-mei feels deeply attached to her mother, which can be best seen in a passage where An-mei meets her for the first time: "My mother . . . looked up. And when she did, I saw my own face looking back at me" (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 45). The striking physical resemblance between the mother and the child intends to show that the relation between them is so tight that it is as if they were one body. Similarly, another character from the book shares comparable experiences. While remembering her mother's familiar face, Lindo Jong says:

even though she said we looked the same, I wanted to look more the same. If her eye went up and looked surprised, I wanted my eye to do the same. If her mouth fell down and was unhappy, I too wanted to feel unhappy. I was so much like my mother. (257)

In all those cases, the women adore their mothers with an almost sacred devotion. Emotional attachment is reflected in the physical resemblance. The mother and the child look alike in physical sense, which is further translated into a deep psychological bond. Michelle Gaffner Wood argues that this mutual understanding is possible due to the shared geographical landscape and the ability to place the mother-daughter relationship within a larger social context (Wood 85). Because both sides belong to the same group of the high-context culture, it is easier for them to enter each other's worlds and decode their messages.

Unfortunately, the mother-daughter relationship in America changes and it stands in a sharp contrast with the one in China. Even if the daughters still feel strong psychological attachment to their mothers, they struggle to escape from their power. They fall out over numerous issues and each fight ends without any sign of reconciliation. For example, in the chapter "Two Kinds," Jing-mei Woo describes how she battles with her mother over the piano lessons. After another confrontation, she remarks bitterly, "I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China" (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 141). Living in the context of the American culture, the daughters want to lead separate, individual lives and do not understand the collective nature of the Eastern identity. There is no place for mutuality in their understanding of the mother-daughter bond. Empathy is replaced with strained relations, best described by one of the daughters as "a shock, exactly as an electric jolt, that grounds itself permanently in my memory" (170). Just as the Chinese daughters try to find themselves in the figures of their mothers, the American-born daughters want to do exactly the opposite. Instead of admiration and respect, they feel embarrassed by their mothers' strange, "un-American" behaviour. The daughters "grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese," or "think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English" (40-41).¹ LuLing's actions are so inexplicable for her daughter that she is being suspected of falling into dementia. Her invincible belief in the existence of vengeful ghosts of the ancestors and Ruth being a medium for Precious Auntie is far beyond comprehension for the American daughter. Lindo Jong says about her daughter: "I know her meaning. She's

¹ The term "fractured English" appears also in the essay "Mother Tongue" published by Tan. She comments there on the implications imposed on her mother by speaking a specific kind of English, which was often belittled by the native speakers who called it also "broken" and "limited" (21). In her essay, Tan describes how this experience influenced her relationship with her mother.

ashamed of my looks. What will her husband's parents and his important lawyer friends think of this backward old Chinese woman?" (254-55). The separating cultural void hinders the process of successful communication. Moreover, this polarity between traditional Chinese and modern American values is also the crucial source of mother-daughter conflict set in the two novels.

Zeng Li addresses this issue in the essay entitled "Diasporic Self, Cultural Other: Negotiating Ethnicity Through Transformation in the Fiction of Tan and Kingston," adding an insight of his own:

The ethnic malaise manifested in the relationship between the Chinese mothers and American daughters is the dilemma which many immigrants, especially their descendants, are faced with, that is, living "between worlds." The young generation is often split by two different cultures. . . . Structurally, the novel [*The Joy Luck Club*] devotes equally two chapters to each of the mothers and daughters who tell their stories. . . . In this multiple first-person narration, both the influence of traditional Chinese ideologies and presence of contemporary American culture within the family are equally strong. (3-4)

A Chinese home in America is a place where the East meets the West. Amy Tan wants to introduce the reader to the mysteries of such an encounter "[b]y giving equal weight on both sides of the hyphenated Chinese-American" (Li 4). It is important to note that, in my understanding, Tan does not put any of the cultural contexts in favour. Every character is given an equal opportunity to tell her story, everyone gets a voice; the author uses the values of both traditions to define the meaning of this mysterious hyphen in the expression: "a Chinese-American."

The transformation of the motherly bond in Tan's writings is only seemingly solely unfortunate. It is worth to highlight that the troubled relationship pushes the mothers to reinvestigate their past, which further on provides a good basis for future reconciliation. "Memory is not just a narrative, even though it does have to take a narrative form; it is more importantly an experimental relation between the past and the present, projecting a future as well," claims Ben Xu (8). His statement is particularly visible in one of the chapters of *The Joy Luck Club*, when a hairdresser observes a striking resemblance between Lindo Jong's and her daughter Weaverly's Asian face. This makes Lindo think about the "double face" she possesses, the American and the Chinese one. She goes back to the times of her childhood and remembers her deep desire to bear a strong resemblance to her all-Chinese mother. Then, she compares this memory with what she experienced with Weaverly, who "is the product of two cultures" (Heung 603). While relating to those two different situations, Lindo says: "I think about our two faces. I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other" (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 266). Her awareness of this "double vision," inspired by her family story, contributes to the discovery of her ethnic identity and provides an example of how she is able to make a connection between different times and cultures (Heung 600). What is more, this connection produces a fruitful result, as Lindo adds at the end "I will ask my daughter what she thinks" (266). The reinvestigation of Lindo's past linked with her present experiences of her double identity resulted in the reconsideration of the relationship Lindo has with her daughter (Heung 603). By deciding to ask about Weaverly's opinion, Lindo abandons the face of an autocratic Chinese mother and opens up to a dialogue. A dialogue, which may possibly be an onset of a new Chinese-American consciousness, since the topic it addresses is strictly connected with "the double face."

The issue of possessing two faces has yet another interesting connotation that is worth considering in the context of the ethnic self-discovery. The English expression "to be double-

faced” or “two-faced” implies both duplicity and deceit. A person manifesting such a feature may be perceived as a manipulator who intentionally adjusts his/her attitude, perhaps for some personal gain. In Lindo’s case one may also notice the problem of betrayal, yet the undertone is considerably different. It seems that she tries to learn how to manage her two faces, knowing that choosing one means losing the other, “Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other” (Tan 266). This opens up an entirely new set of questions for her to answer. For example, if she chooses the American face, is she at the same time betraying her Chinese face and, therefore, her Chinese heritage? This matter is of substantial importance, especially if one recalls one more English expression “to lose face,” (“to dishonour yourself”) and connects it with another fragment from *The Joy Luck Club*, which addresses the alarming consequences connected with betraying your family culture. One of the Chinese grandmothers appearing in the story preaches, “When you lose your face . . . it is like dropping your necklace down the well. The only way to get it back is to fall in after it” (Tan 44). In the Chinese tradition, dishonouring your family and neglecting your ancestry calls for a severe punishment. Lindo’s thoughts about her two faces may be circling around the possible costs of sacrificing one of them. Here, again, the decision of discussing the matter with her daughter may happen to be beneficial, principally because Weaverly also finds herself torn between two cultural backgrounds.

After all, the immigrant experiences, although slightly different in nature, are to some extent shared both by the mother and the daughter. The issue of sharing is especially embodied in one character from *The Joy Luck Club*. Jing-mei Woo is a Chinese-American, whose mother, Suyuan, recently passed away. The daughter is supposed to fill in her place at the ritual mah-jong table, which makes her wonder about their relationship and the responsibility which she owes to Suyuan. In the novel, Jing-mei narrates both the sections about her experiences and the parts where her mother’s past is being recalled. Thus, Jing-mei possesses a double voice, which speaks in the name of two cultures, two sides of the conflict. It is in her where the reader can observe the early stages of the emerging Chinese-American consciousness. Even though at the end of the book most of the conflicts are just beginning to clear out, Jing-mei’s final travel to China invites the reader to believe in a happy ending: “And now I see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go” (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 288). If it was not for the mother-daughter conflict, Jing-mei may not have focused so intensely on her ethnic heritage. In the end her struggles contributed to the emergence of the new identity.

Talking about seeking a new ethnic awareness, it is worth mentioning how this process situates itself within the context of a Chinese sense of the collective identity. In defining their new Chinese-American self, Tan’s characters do not only face the choice between the East and the West, but also have to delineate a new level of individualism. Before their emigration, the characters were living in a world where individualism is of no importance. Therefore, there was no clear reason for any strong redefinition of the self, as the only face that mattered was the one belonging to the clan. This state of matters changed after the emigration to a different cultural context. The origin of the very need for defining yourself was expressed by Ben Xu in his essay entitled “Memory and The Ethnic Self”:

Only when a Chinese person is uprooted from his or her own culture and transplanted into an alien one does he or she become aware of the fluidity, proteanness, and insecurity of his or her self. It is not until then that he or she feels the need to define himself or herself.” (9)

Perhaps the statement about defining the self in contradiction to the surrounding environment could be analogous for the immigrant experiences of all ethnicities, as evidenced in the work of, for instance, Jhumpa Lahiri (a representative of the Indian culture) and Sandra Cisneros (a Mexican American author). Although, with what has already been said about the Asian clan-oriented mentality and the depreciation of the personal desires, I would argue the particular importance of this aspect in interpreting Tan's novels. The characters have to bridge a huge void between the implications created by two different cultural contexts, which also involves taking a big jump from one kind of mentality to the other, from the Chinese traditional collective responsibility to the American devotion to the unbreakable rights of individualism.

While discussing the common issue of defining yourself with regard to your ancestors, the reader tends to take into consideration only the characters of the daughters, since it is they who are chiefly on the road of self-discovery. Nonetheless, in the process of negotiating their ethnic past, the mothers try to reconstitute their own identity as well. According to Yuan Yuan, the mothers' American experiences leave them feeling isolated, which results in treating China as "a repository for reproduction." From their marginal existence the characters of the mothers travel to China in order to assess their present (Yuan 3-4). By revising the narratives of their Asian past in the context of the American present, they attempt to find their own place within their immigrant experience. Of course, one may argue that such actions do not need to have their source purely in the conflict between generations. Still, bearing in mind the distinctive role of the Chinese collective identity, it is my contention that the mother/daughter bond plays a crucial part in defining the Chinese-American identities of Tan's characters. "All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way," (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 215) affirms An-mei Hsu. To my belief, the shared experiences of the mothers and the daughters bring them closer to delineating the new Chinese-American self.

One may wonder, how much can be interpreted from a fiery conflict, where both sides have nothing in their hands but a bunch of confused messages and a whole freight of hurt feelings. Amy Tan managed to illustrate in her novels a great change in the relations between a mother and a child, which occurs after their translocation into a different cultural context. "I raised a daughter, watching her from another shore," (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 251) admits Ying-Ying St. Clair. In the interpretative process, the contrast that is visible in the transformation of the mother-daughter relationship acts as an inspiration for observing the onset of a new Chinese-American consciousness. By arming the interpretative strategy with the knowledge of cultural contexts, the reader may observe how the battle between two generations and two cultures initiates the journey into the ethnic past and enables a process named by the critics as "cultural healing" (Shear 6, Li 3). In an attempt to reach an understanding, Amy Tan's characters discover the great influence of the mother's Asian past over their relationship and, therefore, succeed in building a bridge over the generational and cultural gap that has been keeping them apart.

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Approaching Transhumanism: On How Human Beings Transform in the 21st Century

The following article is to introduce the reader into a cultural and intellectual movement whose aim is to identify the need for improvement in human life in the sphere of physicality as well as mentality with the aid of modern technologies – transhumanism. With the dramatic change in the perception of technology, transhumanist welcome the opportunity to improve cognitive skills, help to perpetuate human happiness, or increase longevity. Although the opponents of the transhumanist thought dismiss it as “the world’s most dangerous idea,” the adversaries advocate that the alternation of human form is both practical and reasonable. With the use of modern technology, enthusiasts of transhumanism try to prove that the human body needs to be re-invented in order to transcend the natural limitations. In my work I will try to tackle the problem of human body being currently subject to gradual transition from *Homo Sapiens* to *Robo Sapiens*, the process of ‘becoming’ a cyborg. By incorporating bodily augmentation, contemporary artists such as Stelarc or Neil Harbisson cast a light on the change of physical form, as well as the definition of being human. Evoking much controversy, transhumanism brings a completely new dimension to the understanding of the current human condition.

key words: transhumanism, posthumanism, Stelarc, transformation, Neil Harbisson

*O, wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is!
O brave new world,
That has such people in't!*

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

One of my most disturbing, and vivid at the same time, childhood memories is that of me watching for the first time a genuine cult classic – *Robocop*. Although the film does seem a bit banal for my taste right now, I perfectly remember the initial scene of Alex Murphy’s assassination: his limbs being shot off, his body lying motionless on the concrete, the feeling of utter horror creeping over me and resulting in watery eyes. But then, after getting through this perturbing scene, I was able to witness the birth of Robocop itself; dreadfulness was supplanted by astonishment at the creation of a human-resembling machine which cannot be affected by the process of ageing nor any disease. For me back then, the alternation of human body to such an extreme appeared so surprising and futuristic that it nearly bordered on scientific, yet unattainable, miracle. Years passed by and I have kept a watchful eye on curious and at the same time awe-inspiring instances of employing high technology in order to improve the human

condition – either people handicapped due to tragic accidents, like an individual with an electric arm in place of his lost limb; or affected by minor misfortunes, for example an eccentric with prosthetic finger fitted with USB. By the same token, one may conclude that man is subject to transformation which, by affecting our body, influences the meaning of being human and has a bearing on the relation between mankind and its surroundings. The aim of this article is to briefly introduce the reader into transhumanism, as well as to illustrate the ways in which the human body is currently being subject to the gradual transition from *Homo Sapiens* into “*Robo Sapiens*,” or cyborgs; more importantly, I would like to highlight that the alternation does not only affect physical features, but also the mere definition of being human. In order to demonstrate how the idea of *transhumanism* is internalized, I will reflect on two artists who decided to augment their body to advocate the need of transcending the natural limitations.

Living in the age of nanotechnology and genetic engineering, we cannot deny the fact that the meaning of being human changed significantly over the period of centuries. Since the use of new technologies allows for the augmentation of the human body, we have now entered the age in which man is able to enhance his physical capacities, combat diseases, slow down the process of ageing or redesign future generations. For numerous scholars, this significant change involves the dusk of humanism and at the same time the dawn of what comes after humanism; bearing in mind how man’s capacities can be boosted nowadays, it seems a right statement to make that one will not simply remain human, but rather will eventually evolve into something more – he or she will become *posthuman*. Enthusiasts of posthumanism – *transhumanists* – who believe that the 21st century should not constitute the endpoint of evolution, welcome the possibility of using science and technology for humankind to gain greater capacities than we have at present and to achieve the posthuman condition (Bostrom). Tirosch-Samuelsen observes that in the age of posthumanism, man will not be controlled by nature any longer, but will become the one who exerts control over nature (20).

The term *transhumanism* was coined by Julian Huxley in 1957 and first appeared in his essays *New Bottles for New Wine*. Huxley advocated the emergence of a fulfilled society, entirely committed to the development of human species through planning and controlling the evolution. Max More, who formalized the doctrine in 1980s, accounts for transhumanism in the following words:

Transhumanism is a class of philosophies that seek to guide us towards a *posthuman* condition. *Transhumanism* shares many elements of humanism, including a respect for reason and science, a commitment to progress, and a valuing of human (or transhuman) existence in this life rather than in some supernatural “afterlife.” *Transhumanism* differs from humanism in recognizing and anticipating the radical alterations in the nature and possibilities of our lives resulting from various sciences and technologies such as neuroscience and neuropharmacology, life extension, nanotechnology, artificial ultraintelligence, and space habitation, combined with a rational philosophy and value system.

Bearing in mind the essence of the term “transhumanism,” the movement has to be recognized as a multidisciplinary study that draws on academic subjects considered by many traditional disciplines like philosophy, cultural studies; as well as modern fields of study concerned with technology such as biotechnology, information technology, etc. By the look of it, the combination of liberal arts and hi-tech appears to constitute a truly extraordinary novelty in a world of well-established conventions. Attaching high importance to the human condition, the transhumanist thought has for the last two decades been developing to become a paradigm for thinking about the future of human beings.

Idealistic as it seems, transhumanism identifies the need for improvement in human life in the sphere of physicality as well as mentality with the aid of modern technologies. Huxley's call for mankind to "transcend itself – not just sporadically . . . but in its entirety, as humanity" resulting in "man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature" (qtd. in Tirosh-Samuelson 17) ceases to be just an utopian dream the moment one realizes that transhumanism helps us to comprehend the surrounding world in a more complete way, to grasp the dimensions which were impossible to explore in the past. It seems that one of the ways to discover the capacities of our body and senses may be through entertaining new technologies and transforming into a cyborg.

Although the transhumanist doctrine was formulated only in the 20th century, it is hard to state at what exact point in the history of human thought the idea of a cybernetic organism was formed: was it in ancient myths and stories emphasizing the improvement of appearance, strength and mental competences? Or maybe it was the influence of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the Romantic version of the myth of technology? The transhumanist interest in human body is not merely a contemporary trend; through centuries the human being has been a predominant theme in the arts: ancient Greeks marked their search for perfect physical proportions in their solemn statuesque sculptures, great masters of Renaissance expressed their predilection for classic symmetry in paintings, pop culture artists promoted portraits of idealized icons such as Marilyn Monroe. The fact that the topic reappears throughout the ages implies that the fascination for improving human body and brain is deeply rooted in one's (sub)consciousness. Contemporary transhumanist artists perceive human nature as capable of being remoulded, they explore the ways in which electronic devices (among other things) may be incorporated into human body not only to redefine the definition of being human, but also to examine new ways of comprehending the world.

The vast majority of people associate the concept of cyborg solely with the science fiction genre; in countless books and films cyborgs constitute a product of certain merger, a combination of machine and human body parts, usually deprived of feelings and emotions. The cyborg is a creature that fills common people with awe, as they do not understand its functioning and otherness. Currently, some artists aim at breaking the negative stereotype, spreading awareness of cyborgs through various artistic media and exhorting others to transform into cyborgs; they ask the question of what it means to be normal, to be "us" as opposed to "them," which seems crucial in the 21st century.

In her "Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway blurs the traditional distinctions between humans and machines as well as humans and animals, defining a cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (291). Combining the living and the mechanical, the binaries of human vs. nonhuman, technology vs. biology, divine vs. man-made, subject vs. object are broken. For Haraway cyborgs are "disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (302); being in the continuous state of transgression between the human and the mechanical, they escape gender difference. The omnipresence of electronic devices in our life forces us to form a question regarding the exact moment of becoming a cybernetic organism: is it a transformation we are still waiting for? or maybe we have already incorporated the transhumanist doctrine without even acknowledging it? For Andy Clark, a philosopher and a cognitive scientist at the University of Edinburgh, the transformation into a cyborg is not solely achieved through bodily augmentation:

My body is an electronic virgin. I incorporate no silicon chips, no retinal or cochlear implants, no pacemaker. I don't even wear glasses (though I do wear clothes). But I am slowly becoming more and more a Cyborg. So are you. . . . Perhaps we already are. For we shall be Cyborgs not

in the merely superficial sense of combining flesh and wires, but in the more profound sense of being human-technology symbionts: thinking and reasoning systems whose minds and selves are spread across biological brain and non-biological circuitry. (3)

Clark's statement constitutes a powerful comment on the contemporary society, a statement difficult to argue with. The ubiquity of technology in our lives results in gradual addiction to both gadgets and applications, which involuntarily become a part of our cybernetic identity.

One of the artists who follow the idea of transhumanism is the Australian performer Stelarc. Born as Stalios Arcadiou in 1946 in Cyprus, he focuses mainly on the ways the abilities of human body can be extended through the use of technology. Considering human body obsolete both in form and function for its lack of efficiency and durability, Stelarc appeals for it to "transcend" its evolutionary limitations" (qtd. in van Zyl 22). The artist however rejects the idea of designing a blueprint for a utopian body; instead, he speculates on "ways that individuals are not forced to, but may want to, redesign their bodies – given that the body has become profoundly obsolete in the intense information environment it has created" (Stelarc, "Extended-Body"). What must be highlighted at this point is that Stelarc's statement concerning the body's obsolescence is not a proclamation of its death, but rather a call for its improvement and exploiting its potential. As Massumi puts it, "the body obsolescence is the condition of change" (109), and is not the change necessary for the evolutionary progress to take place.

In his performances, the artist objectifies his own body referring to it as "the body" instead of "my body," which is often criticized by feminists (qtd. in Jones and Sofia 59); however, the usage of third person singular seems to be essential, as it distances Stelarc from his physicality and simultaneously transforms him into both an artist and an artistic creation. As he claims:

the body is an impersonal, evolutionary, objective structure. Having spent two thousand years prodding and poking the human psyche without any real discernible changes in our historical and human outlook, we perhaps need to take a more fundamental physiological and structural approach, and consider the fact that it's only through radically redesigning the body that we will end up having significantly different thoughts and philosophies. I think our philosophies are fundamentally bounded by our physiology; our peculiar kind of aesthetic orientation in the world; our peculiar five sensory modes of processing the world; and our particular kinds of technology that enhance these perceptions. (Stelarc)

Being an obsolete form which needs to be altered, extended and redesigned in order to align itself to technological environment in which it finds itself, the body constitutes the main topic of Stelarc's, to many shocking, performances. His artistic activity concentrates on the process of "becoming," the integral part of the natural cycle of human development – "the ever-transforming, the ever-recontextualizing what has been done so that it can be done differently" (Grosz 193). In order to improve the imperfect body, Stelarc employs modern technology and robotics establishing the connection between the human and non-human. One of Stelarc's most famous projects involves the attachment of the robotic Third Hand. Positioned to his right arm, the Third Hand was capable of independent motion through signals sent via electrodes placed on Stelarc's abdomen and thigh muscles; the robotic hand could pinch, grasp, release and rotate. The Third Hand was used during performances taking place between 1980 and 1998 in Japan, the USA, Europe as well as Australia and became one of the best-known performance objects used by the artist. Initially, it was designed as a semi-permanent extension of the body, however due to skin irritation and considerable weight of the equipment, it was used only during performances. As we can learn from Stelarc's numerous comments, the Third Hand performances explored the

intimate interface of technology and augmentation; it stands for an addition to the body rather than a replacement for a missing limb: “[a] prosthesis is not a sign of lack, but rather a symptom of excess,” we can read on the artist’s official website. Thus, the robotic arm was not meant to replace, but to transcend the limits imposed by the organic, mortal body with only two arms, and add to body’s functionality; by combining organism and machine, Stelarc contributes to cyborg discourse in terms of exploring the complex relations between body, machine, self and agency (Clark 117).

In *Fractal Flesh*, a performance from 1995 at Telepolis art and technology festival organized in Luxemburg, Stelarc plugged the body to a muscle-stimulator connected to the Internet. Participants at Centre Pompidou in Paris, Media Lab in Helsinki, and Doors of Perception conference in Amsterdam were able to access Stelarc’s body with the use of touchscreens and through gestures cause Stelarc’s both arms and one leg to move involuntarily; the artist himself was able to control only a part of his body. The artist explained that in this performance he speculates about

the idea of the cyborg not simply being a cyborg individual body . . . the cyborg becomes a sort of cyborg-system of a multiplicity of bodies spatially separated but electronically connected – the Internet perhaps as an external nervous system that connects these operating nodes, and allows for an extended operational system to come into being. (qtd. in Kreps 78)

Remotely accessed and activated, the body becomes possessed by somebody else. Through his performance, Stelarc extends his own nervous system into the non-biological space, exploring new possible collaboration and intimacy provided by the cyborg technology; Clark calls Stelarc’s vision positive and liberating as self-exploration with the use of hi-tech enhances the sense of our own presence and the awareness of others (118). Stelarc himself highlights the importance of technology in human life, explaining that:

Technology has always been coupled with the evolutionary development of the body. Technology is what defines being human. It’s not an antagonistic alien sort of object, it’s part of our human nature. It constructs our human nature. (Stelarc)

As he explains on his homepage, his projects and performances explore the body as an alternative anatomic architecture; he further pinpoints that:

With gene mapping, gender reassignment, prosthetic limbs and neural implants, what a body is and how a body operates becomes problematic . . . It is time to question whether a bipedal, breathing body with binocular vision and a 1400cc brain is an adequate biological form. It cannot cope with the quantity, complexity and quality of information it has accumulated; it is intimidated by the precision, speed and power of technology and it is biologically ill-equipped to cope with its new extraterrestrial environment. (“Stelarc Early Texts”)

Stating that the biological body lacks organization, Stelarc seeks alternative anatomical architecture. In his *The Ear On Arm* project, which required two surgeries, the artist permanently reshaped his body by implanting a cell-cultivated ear onto his left forearm. This prosthetic attachment fused with his organic arm and by developing its own blood supply become an independent entity. Stelarc’s project included also positioning a microphone inside the ear, however due to subsequent infection, it had to be removed. The next step of *The Ear on Arm* project is to reinsert the microphone and connect it to the wireless transmitter so that it becomes Internet enabled; as a result, the audience visiting Stelarc’s website will be able to hear everything that he hears. For Stelarc, the ear will transform into an engineered Internet structure,

“an available, accessible and mobile organ for other bodies in other places, enabling people to locate and listen in to another body elsewhere” (“Ear on Arm”). The overall goal of this particular project is to draw attention to the importance of body’s connectivity as opposed to its identity, interface or location.

The artist seeks to free the body from gravity and extend it beyond the constraints of skin or physical space. Experimenting with alternative exhibition spaces, Stelarc’s work from 1993 centres around a sculpture made of titanium, steel, silver and gold which was situated in his stomach. To make it more challenging, the sculpture – a domed capsule of fist size – extends and retracts emitting light and sound. The act of introducing the sculpture to Stelarc’s organism, documented with the use of endoscopy equipment, was, according to the artist, the most dangerous performance he has ever done with his internal organs being at risk of rupture during the insertion of the piece. With the artwork inside the body, it “becomes hollow with no meaningful distinction between public, private and physiological spaces. The hollow body becomes a host, not for a self or a soul, but simply for a sculpture” (Stelarc). With the invasion of the human body, considered to be the sacred habitat of the spirit, Stelarc deprives the body of the essence of humanity – the soul. Perhaps, however, blurring the distinction between the external and the internal, the sacred and the profane, may be read as a modern critique of the humanists’ establishing themselves in an antagonistic relation with their surroundings; the posthuman / transhuman body is not considered opposed to the world, but, rather, recognizes its immersion in the technological world.

Amelia Jones, art historian and art critic, insists that claims made by Stelarc constitute merely masculine denials and desires to simply escape the body (Fisher 184), however one may disagree with this statement. Taking into consideration that the transhumanist belief in the technology is based on the idea of transcending the biological givens, including sex and gender, Stelarc’s work cannot be simply treated in terms of feminine or masculine ideology. Above all, his performances ought to be regarded as avant-garde manifestos which taken literally lose their poetic meaning. Additionally, distancing from “the body” and transcending its boundaries does not destitute a purely masculine domain as some female artists, including the icon of French contemporary art, Orlan, are in agreement with Stelarc arguing that human body is indeed obsolete. Stelarc’s moving beyond skin as a barrier and rupturing the surface of his body is to prove that skin is no longer a closure, but rather an entity surrounding the empty spaces of human body, a body which needs to be recolonized.

While Stelarc’s exploration of flesh and machine is purely artistic, the second artist I am willing to discuss in this article began his interest in incorporating electronic devices into his body for more practical reasons. Born with achromatopsia – a visual disorder characterized by the inability to perceive colours other than black, white and shades of grey – the British-Catalan artist Neil Harbisson has lived most of his life in a grayscale-world. Fascinated by the very concept of colour, Harbisson studied fine arts and was given a special permission to paint with black and white exclusively. Under the impression of Newton’s idea of colours corresponding to the musical scale, Harbisson came up with the idea of “translating” colour frequencies into sound frequencies. With the help of Adam Montandon they commenced the “eyeborg project,” which aimed at creating a cybernetic device able to pick up colours and transform them into sounds. The initial outcome of the project was a camera installed on Harbisson’s head connected with headphones in which he could hear the emitted sounds, and a laptop-sized computer set that Harbisson had to carry in a backpack at all times. Seeking further improvements, the artist decided to collaborate with a software engineer. The result of their co-operation was a chip subsequently installed inside Harbisson’s skull; by pressing against his head, it produces audible

sounds noise Harbisson is able to hear through the bone conduction. The device is currently being charged with the use of USB cable attached to the back of Harbisson's head; however, the next goal is to substitute the source of energy:

One of the next stages is to find a way of charging the chip with my own body energy, so I might be using blood circulation or my kinetic energy – or maybe the energy of my brain could charge the chip in the future. That's one of the next things; to be able to charge the chip without depending on any external energy. (Harbisson "Cyborg")

Similarly to Stelarc's *Ear* which transformed into an independent entity, Harbisson attempts for his eyborg to become completely autonomous; eliminating the need to supply the eyborg with electricity would allow Harbisson to unite with the device to a yet higher extent.

Harbisson describes himself as a cyborg due to the augmentation of his body with a cybernetic device; interestingly, he does not perceive the eyborg as an artificial prosthesis, but rather as an integral part of his body that helps him to comprehend the surrounding world in a more accurate way. Nonetheless, he is far from claiming that the process of becoming a cyborg was a straightforward, sudden transformation:

Feeling like a cyborg was a gradual process. First, I felt that the eyborg was giving me information, afterwards I felt it was giving me perception, and after a while it gave me feelings. It was when I started to feel colour and started to dream in colour that I felt the extension was part of my organism. (Harbisson "Cyborg")

As he admits, it is rather the union of brain and software than of electronic eye and his head that made him feel cyborg. With eyborg being his lifetime project, Harbisson confesses that he does not even remove the device for sleep or shower. In 2004, faced with the necessity of renewing his UK passport, Harbisson was met with firm refusal to do so for his passport photo presented him wearing his eyborg antenna, an electronic device not allowed on a passport photo. After a tedious battle with UK officials and many letters from his doctor, friends and himself, in which they insisted that the eyborg should be considered an integral part of his body, Harbisson was finally allowed to have this particular photo of him wearing eyborg in his passport. By the same token, he became the first person in the world being a government-recognized cyborg – he accomplished something that seemed almost impossible. The acknowledgement of Harbisson's being a cyborg changes the position of other people using cybernetic equipment as an augmentation of their senses; being previously denied access to certain public spaces for security reasons, cyborgs may now exercise their legal rights to use their devices on a daily basis.

Similarly to Stelarc, Harbisson employs modern technology in performances and uses his state create art. However, whereas the former artist is mainly interested in removing limitations imposed by the skin and extending his body through elaborated prostheses, the latter focuses on extending senses with only minimal interference in body's architecture. Intending to merge vision and hearing, his projects include transforming colours into sounds and vice versa as well as exhibiting colours of music; by connecting eyborg to loudspeakers he is capable of producing sound portraits from audience or creating paintings from sounds:

I've created Martin Luther King and Hitler in colour from their speeches and I've showed the result to people and asked them to guess which one's which. And people usually get them wrong. Hitler's appears very colourful because he used a wide range of frequencies in his speeches whereas Martin Luther King's speeches have dominant colours such as different shades of blue and purple. ("Neil Harbisson")

By the look of it, this particular experiment involving vision and sound may constitute a solid proof of the fallibility of our perceptive skills and, at the same time, a tentative call for improving our cognitive faculty; if senses are the primary source of knowledge, convergence of technology and information science in order to extend senses would in consequence extend our knowledge.

The optimistic vision of transhumanism as a remedy against human imperfections represented by Harbisson is rashly criticized by some of the critics in terms of ethics. In his book titled “Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution,” Francis Fukuyama – a political scientist and political economist – questions both social and moral consequences of transhumanism. To Fukuyama, transhumanism is likely to result in humanity’s alternation out of all recognition – incorporating machines into body foreshadows the creation of a monstrous hybrid as well as the rise of new social hierarchies. If one starts to transform oneself into something superior, what social rights will augmented individuals claim compared to those who were left behind? Fukuyama calls transhumanism “the world’s most dangerous idea”; however, what he does not realize is the fact that the desire to transcend the limitations of human body is not uniquely a 20th century trend, but rather a pan-cultural and pan-historical phenomenon; as Andy Clark points, humans have always tried to enhance themselves not only through basic tools, but also language (qtd in. Devlin 25). Bearing that in mind, we cannot inhibit that deeply rooted drive to improve the human condition. Yet, some opponents of transhumanism hold even more radical opinions. Bill McKibben, an American environmentalist, strongly protests against any activity that would result in unethical human enhancement: “We need to do an unlikely thing: we need to survey the world we now inhabit and proclaim it good. Good enough...Enough intelligence. Enough capability. Enough” (qtd. in Devlin 19); however, he fails to notice that transhumanism and the idea of improving the human condition cannot be proved unethical in their nature. While McKibben dismisses transhumanism as unnecessary, Harbisson in his TED Talk encourages people to make use of technological innovations in order to improve their perception:

I think that life will be much more exciting if we stop creating applications for mobile phones and start creating application for our own body. I think that it will be a big change that we will see during this century. (Harbisson “I Listen to Color”)

His endeavours to change the world are not merely an idle platitude. In 2010 Harbisson established the “Cyborg Foundation” whose objective is to help individuals in becoming cyborgs as well as to protect their rights. Believing that cybernetic extensions should be treated as body parts, “Cyborg Foundation” supports projects that aim to enhance perception; one of them involves adding sensors to the back of person’s head, so that it vibrates when someone approaches them from behind.

Harbisson’s dream is for mankind to cease creating technology and to become technology and with the trend of bodily intervention being quite popular these days, it does not seem extremely far-fetched. With rapid scientific progress, will the 21st century see the rise of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*? For Vita-More, a transhumanist artist, individuals improving their body obtain beneficial results, which in turn proves that altering human form is practicable; she asserts that the opponents of the idea must reconcile with the forthcoming era of *robo sapiens* substituting *homo sapiens* for the fact that duplicating the mind seems now probable, and that extending life needs to be considered feasible (Vita-More 70).

Transhumanism, although currently a marginal movement, through its interdisciplinary nature constitutes a fertile ground for the discussion of current limitations and future liberation of

human form. Evoking much controversy, it does bring a completely new dimension to the understanding of the current human condition, which is considered by Max More merely a transitional stage between our animal heritage and posthuman future (qtd. in Tirosh-Samuels 23). The use of biotechnological enhancements which are to improve cognitive skills helps to perpetuate human happiness, increases longevity, triggers dramatic change in the perception of technology which ceases to constitute a lethal weapon against mankind and starts to stand for improvement. The incorporation of scientific thought into our lives is unavoidable and the idea of experiencing life through technology, entertaining and repulsive at the same time, does not appear completely outlandish. To quote Bostrom, human nature is “a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remould in desirable ways.” Whether we like it or not, the transition is taking place right now, because of the extensive use of social media, the Internet, we are currently experiencing live through the screens of our laptops – going one step further and incorporating it into our bodies, terrifying as it may seem, appears to be the next step in our evolution as human beings. The real question is whether this evolution would lead to the eventual loss of humanity? Or would we share with Shakespeare’s Miranda the awe and joy at the new world and its possibilities?

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