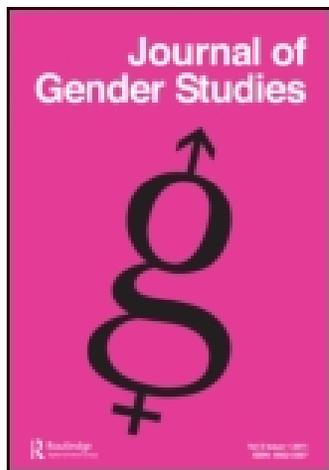


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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pen-is-envy: psychoanalysis, feminism, and the woman writer in May Sinclair's *Mary Olivier*

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May Sinclair took the risk of using psychoanalysis and the modernist technique of 'stream of consciousness' to revise and explore the Victorian world that had shaped her childhood and early youth. This article examines psychoanalysis as Sinclair's instrument to achieve self-realization: in writing her female self through fiction, Sinclair came to terms with the conflicts of her childhood, while redefining herself as a writer and as a woman.

The act of writing as a form of sublimation as presented in Sinclair's novel *Mary Olivier* (1919) will be explored along with Sinclair's own development of the ideas of Freud and Jung. Although it might seem anachronistic to look at the novel in the light of scholars such as Luce Irigaray or Julia Kristeva, this essay would be incomplete if feminist psychoanalytic theory and more recent feminist criticism were not also taken into account. In view of this methodological approach, this paper will attempt to illustrate how Sinclair's inner quest towards adulthood challenged (and succeeded in escaping) domestic imprisonment without actually leaving the home.

Keywords: May Sinclair; psychoanalysis; feminism; repression; sublimation; literary creativity

Introduction

Sinclair was preoccupied with the storms of the 'inner life' . . . She wrote novel after novel about women's struggles with their sexual desires, the demands of creativity, and the friction of family relationships. When she discovered psychoanalysis in the years before the First World War, she embraced it immediately as a language for the busy intensity of even the most unassuming existence. (Raitt 2000, p. 2)

Mary Amelia Sinclair (1863–1946) used the name 'May' for the first time when she published *Essays in Verse* (1892) since, as biographer Suzanne Raitt contends (2000, p. 43), Mary sounded too Christian. Re-christening (and un-christening) herself at 29, Sinclair was perhaps stating her need to construct an identity of her own and detach from the one she had been allotted. She took the risk of using psychoanalysis and the modernist narrative technique of 'stream of consciousness' (a term which she pioneered in using¹) to revise her past and explore the Victorian world that had shaped her childhood and early youth.² Although the relevance of her work has sometimes been overlooked by critics, Sinclair's work is to my mind crucial to understand the move from Victorian to modernist fiction. Her

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questioning of religious values and her quest for alternative forms of spirituality, her interest in experimental narrative techniques, her commitment to feminism, her involvement with the suffrage movement, and her enthusiasm for psychoanalysis testify to her value as an avant-garde modernist who pre-empted the work of much younger and more famous artists like Woolf or Pound.

Raitt (2000, p. 213) argues that, in *Mary Olivier*, Sinclair wrote her 'spiritual and intellectual autobiography'. In writing her female self through fiction, Sinclair tried to come to terms with the conflicts of her childhood, while redefining herself as a writer and as a woman. This essay is concerned with the ways in which psychoanalysis became Sinclair's instrument to achieve self-realization, while it also voiced the oppression that women of her time experienced if they attempted to transgress the boundaries of the domestic. I will place a special emphasis on the act of writing as a means of sublimation as it is presented in Sinclair's novel. For this purpose I will not only draw on the ideas of Freud and Jung, but also Sinclair's own development of these. *Mary Olivier* was written in 1919, and it might therefore seem anachronistic to look at the novel in the light of scholars such as Luce Irigaray or Julia Kristeva, since French feminist theorists did not publish their works until well after the Second World War. However, I believe this essay would be incomplete if feminist psychoanalytic theory was not taken into account. In turn, more recent feminist criticism on Sinclair has also proved enlightening for my analysis of the text.

The events in Sinclair's childhood, as her biographer describes them, are almost identical with those detailed in *Mary Olivier*. She was a lonely girl with an intense imagination who 'relied on books for instruction and solace' and whose 'conscious life was dominated by her passion for intellectual enquiry and writing' (Raitt 2000, pp. 15–16). Like the fictional little Mary who was mortally afraid of tombstones, Mary Amelia St. Clair Sinclair, born on 24 August 1863, was the only daughter in a family of six children. Again, as in the novel, her father William seems to have been 'jealous and resentful of the attention his wife gave to her sons, particularly Frank' (Raitt 2000, pp. 19, 23). After the failure of William Sinclair's shipping business in the late 1860s, he seems not to have worked again, and Raitt's research (2000, p. 22) points to the assumption that the Sinclairs separated at some point during the 1870s. Her father's (and possibly one or more of her brothers') alcoholism is also described in *Mary Olivier*: both Mary's father and her brother Dan become alcoholics. The novel's detailed descriptions of such episodes seem to reveal that Sinclair had first-hand knowledge of witnessing the behaviour of an alcoholic. William Sinclair died of cirrhosis in November 1881.

Further parallels between the novel and Sinclair's real life seem to reinforce the view that the author was trying to come to terms with those aspects of her childhood and early youth that she could not be reconciled with. According to the data provided in Raitt's biography (2000, pp. 29, 44, 65), her brother Harold died in 1886 of kidney disease and of a congenital heart defect. Her favourite brother Frank, who had entered the Royal Military Academy, died in India in 1889 in exactly the same circumstances as Mary's brother Mark does in the novel: he was at a party and suddenly collapsed with heart failure, due to the same irregularity in the mitral valve that had killed Harold three years before. In 1891, Reginald followed. In 1896, her eldest brother William died of the same heart condition that affected the rest of the family, including Sinclair herself.

Howard Finn aptly remarks that Sinclair's novels 'deal with the breakdown of Victorian social and moral certainties – reflected in issues such as the New Woman, religious doubt and family tensions' (2007, p. 196). By the time her father died, Mary had become increasingly unsure of her religious beliefs: while she faced this crisis with the

constant disapproval of her mother, she learnt languages, read philosophy, and studied the classics. The loss of her brothers and her increasing agnosticism led her to trust books as her only comfort. *Nakiketas and Other Poems* (1886), written as Julian Sinclair, is concerned with Sinclair's philosophical questions in the context of familial conflict: in poems such as 'Nakiketas' or 'Apollodorus' philosophy is described as the means to overcome religious crises. As suggested by Raitt (2000, p. 30), Sinclair read philosophy in order to find 'some kind of reconciliation between theology and philosophy, between the emotions and the intellect, the body and the mind'. The idealist philosophy of T.H. Green seemed to provide an answer — at least temporarily — to her wish to reconcile transcendence and reason: 'No desire which forms part of our moral experience would be what it is, if it were not a desire of a subject which also understands: no act of our intelligence would be what it is, if it were not the act of a subject who also desires' (Green 1883, p. 135). Green's agnosticism points to a creative intelligence that does not necessarily have to be identified with a Christian God, an idea that offered Sinclair a valid alternative to believe in transcendence when orthodox religion is left out of the equation. Mary Olivier's religious crisis and her new understanding of God through her reading of philosophy echo young Sinclair's intellectual and spiritual evolution:

God was not three incomprehensible persons rolled into one, not Jesus, not Jehovah, not the Father creating the world in six days out of nothing, and muddling it, and coming down from heaven into it as his own son to make the best of a bad job The God of Baruch Spinoza was the God you had wanted, the only sort of God you cared to think about. Thinking about him — after the Christian God — was like coming out of a small dark room into an immense open space filled with happy light. (Sinclair 1980, pp. 99–100 [hereafter cited parenthetically as *MO*])

Mary soon learns to equate orthodox religion with the suffocating oppression of Victorian patriarchal strictures and its strict separation of gender roles: 'the room was full of wool; wool flying about; hanging in the air and choking you. Clogging your mind. Old grey wool out of pew cushions that people had sat on for centuries, full of dirt' (*MO*, p. 113). In comparing her father with God, she associates him both with religious dogma and patriarchal power:

Somehow you couldn't help thinking of God as a silly person; he was always flying into tempers, and he was jealous. He was like Papa Papa walked in the garden in the cool of evening, like the lord God. And he was always alone. When you thought of him you thought of Jehovah. (*MO*, pp. 43, 61)

Thus Sinclair pictures her father as the representative of what Jacques Lacan would define as the symbolic order, and which Julia Kristeva would later on re-assess from a feminist point of view. As explained by Robbins (2000, pp. 103–18), Lacan argues that the unconscious is structured like a language: while the pre-Oedipal child knows no distinction between self and other, during the mirror stage the child learns to identify images and see her/himself as a separate individual. Later on, language is learnt both to formulate demands and to express lacks. Lacan's symbolic order stands for 'the Law of the Father': consciousness, authority, logic, intelligence, language, rules, power. In contrast, the semiotic is that which is experienced and known, but which nevertheless lacks coherence and resists rational analysis. The chora is the borderline that blurs the boundaries between these two.

As the following paragraphs illustrate, Emilius Olivier acts as a powerful element of authority and repression for Mary and her brothers, but his character is not really central in the novel. Although the father-figure is crucial in Freud's Oedipal displacement of the little girl's desire for the mother, the novel centres precisely upon Mary's difficulty in

overcoming the pre-Oedipal stage. In her sociological and psychoanalytical study *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow attests to the importance of the pre-Oedipal mother–daughter relationship in perpetuating the mothering function (1978, p. 127). The first image of Mary and her mother Sinclair provides already illustrates the main conflict in the novel: in the light of Kristeva's work, the image seems to be a reproduction of the womb.³ While Papa stands for the symbolic order, his absence allows the protective chora of the veil to enclose both Mary and her mother into the undifferentiated oneness-within-the-Other of the semiotic: 'When Papa was away the lifted curtain spread like a tent over Mary's cot, shutting her in with Mamma. When he was there the drawn curtain hung straight down from the head of the bed' (*MO*, p. 8).⁴

As a little girl, Mary manifests a desire for her mother and a sense of rivalry towards her father that her brothers also share. As Saguaro quotes from Freud's 1931 essay 'Female sexuality' (1931 cited Saguaro 2000, p. 22), she thus exhibits the pre-Oedipal stage in which 'a little girl's father is not much else for her than a troublesome rival'. In the imaginary world of the blue house, Mary strangely admits her brothers (although they also compete for Mamma's affection) but wishes to exclude her father:

When you had run a thousand times round the table you came to the blue house . . . Mamma was always there dressed in a blue gown; and Jenny was there, all in blue, with a blue cap; and Mark and Dank and Roddy were there, all in blue. But Papa was not allowed in the blue house. (*MO*, p. 8)

As Philips notices (1996, p. 130), there is a scene in the novel in which Mary repeatedly asks her mother 'for a confession of love . . . which Mamma deliberately withholds', reprimanding her daughter in a way that compares the situation to that between two lovers: 'You're going to be like your father, tease, tease, tease, all day long, till I'm worn out' (*MO*, p. 69). Philips (1996, p. 133) further argues that Mrs Olivier's transfer of affection and her consequent neglect of her husband in favour of Mark prevent Mary from regarding her father as an object of desire, thus paralysing her development in terms of Freud's Oedipal pattern. In turn, and as a reaction to his wife's attention to their sons, Emilius Olivier becomes estranged from them and turns to Mary as 'his own child' (*MO*, p. 62). Mary rejects her father's attentions, since she has learnt to regard her father's jealous mistreatment of her brothers (especially Mark) as directly proportional to her mother's love for them:

'Have I ever bullied you?'
She looked at him steadily.
'No. You would have done if Mamma had loved me as much as she loves Mark. I wish you had. I wish you'd bullied the life out of me. I shouldn't have cared. I wish you'd hated me. Then I should have known she loved me.'
He looked at her in silence, with round, startled eyes. He understood. (*MO*, p. 117)

Once her brothers are gone, Mary's mother centres all her energy and effort in providing a 'proper' upbringing for her adolescent daughter. Mrs Olivier clearly disapproves of Mary's 'masculine' self-assertion, since she must be socialized into being inferior to her brothers. In that sense, *Mary Olivier* is also a feminist *Bildungsroman* in which the protagonist struggles to overcome her mother's attempts at socialization into the domestic role she is supposed to fulfil. There is a scene in which Mary compares her muscles with those of Jimmy Ponsonby, sadly realizing that 'mine . . . will never be as good as his' (*MO*, p. 84). Besides making a direct reference to penis-envy, Raitt (2000, p. 19) suggests that the scene can be regarded as evidence that 'Mary Sinclair too must have felt rivalry with these older boys whose opportunities and achievements were always

so far ahead of anything she could hope for'. Mary's Oedipal process is then merged with her intellectual craving and the cultural constraints that patriarchy places upon women.

Philips (1996, pp. 129–34) contends that *Mary Olivier* 'narrates the experience of being mothered as crippling and destructive' (1996, p. 129), since her mother has accepted the ideology of patriarchy (with its adjoining separation of spheres), and 'uses all her considerable power to persuade her daughter to accept it' (1996, p. 134). The author's mother Amelia Sinclair (born Amelia Hind to a Northern Irish Protestant family) was an inflexible and unsympathetic woman who bitterly resented her daughter's reluctance to remain obedient and demure (Raitt 2000, p. 19). Sinclair, like Mary, also grew up struggling for the right to think for herself against the coercion and emotional blackmail of a demanding mother. As Howard Finn contends, 'self-realization... becomes synonymous with a move towards separation and independence from the family and assigned social roles. And, most of all, this necessitates a struggle to free herself from the need to love and be loved by her mother' (2007, p. 197).

In Saguaro's view, Mary's resentment towards her mother at that stage is parallel to that which Freud would describe in the female child's Oedipal process:

When she comes to understand the general nature of this characteristic [her lack of a penis], it follows that femaleness – and with it, of course, her mother – suffers a great depreciation in her eyes... At the end of this first phase of attachment to the mother, there emerges, as the girl's strongest motive for turning away from her, the reproach that her mother did not give her a proper penis – that is to say, brought her into the world as a female. (1931 cited Saguaro 2000, pp. 26–7)

The crucial experience of menstruation brings Mary a sudden awareness of her feminine condition, and the restrictions that her inferior position implies are accompanied by a strong resentment towards her mother for enforcing those restrictions. As Freud states in 'Female Sexuality' (1931 cited Saguaro 2000, p. 22), in this relation of dependence on the mother 'we have the surprising, yet regular, fear of being killed (?devoured) by the mother... It is plausible to assume that this fear corresponds to a hostility which develops in the child towards the mother in consequence of the manifold restrictions imposed by the latter'. As characterized in the novel:

Mamma was not helpless. She was not gentle... She was powerful and rather cruel. You could only appease her with piles of hemmed sheets and darned stockings. If you didn't take care she would get hold of you and never rest till she had broken you, or turned and twisted you to her own will. She would say it was God's will. She would think it was God's will. They might at least have told you about the pain. The knaves of pain. You had to clench your fists till the fingernails bit into the palms. Over the ear of the sofa cushions she could feel her hot eyes looking at her mother with resentment. She thought: 'You had no business to have me. You had no business to have me'. (*MO*, p. 124)

This passage refers to an earlier scene in the novel which describes Mary sitting to sew with her mother, pricking her fingers and 'making a thin trail of blood all along the hem' (*MO*, p. 70). Apart from the clear sexual image Philips notices,⁵ Mamma is compared here with some terrible goddess whose rage can only be appeased with sacrifice. According to the definition provided by Carl Jung (1956, p. 236), the infantile longing for the mother makes her appear 'as the supreme goal' and 'as the most frightful danger – the "Terrible Mother"' whose power can be both creative and regenerating, while at the same time terrifying and death-dealing:

'If you could only manage to forget yourself.'
Your self? Your self? Why should you forget it? You had to remember. They would kill it if you let them....

'Self-will has been your besetting sin ever since you were a little baby crying for something you couldn't have. You kicked before you could talk. Goodness knows I've done everything I could to break you of it.'

She remembered . . . You knelt in her lap and played with the gold tassel while Mamma asked you to give up your will. (*MO*, pp. 167–9)

As Philips (1996) points out, Mrs Olivier 'is adept at manipulation, often employing the surface charm of the Angel' (1996, p. 131) and justifying her control with religious or moral conventions, thus 'exhibiting the very vices which she seems so anxiously to extirpate from her daughter: wilfulness and selfishness' (1996, p. 133). Suzanne Raitt (2000, p. 55) validates Philips's view of her by commenting on Sinclair's difficulty in differentiating between a 'gesture of love' and a 'gesture of mastery' from her own mother. As she poses, 'Sinclair had wondered often enough whether her mother's expressions of love betrayed a desire to control her daughter, rather than (or as much as) to cherish her'. In Mrs Olivier's attempts at forcing an artificial self in Mary that replicates her own (also artificial) self, Sinclair seems to be offering a pioneering image of what Luce Irigaray would many years later define as 'the nightmare of repetition':

I've had to fight for every single thing I've ever wanted. It's awful fighting her, when she's so sweet and gentle. But it's either that or go under . . . She'd loved me now if I stayed little, so that she could do what she liked with me; if I'd sit in a corner and think as she thinks, and feel as she feels and do what she does. (*MO*, p. 249)

Gerardine Meaney's reflections on motherhood, which she quotes partly from the French feminist theoretician Luce Irigaray (1985 cited Meaney 1993, pp. 21–6), identify the figures of mother and daughter as almost interchangeable. In Irigaray's words, the daughter is the mother's 'non-identical double', mirroring her experience as discriminated and 'lacking'.⁶

A further instance in the novel illustrates the interaction between Mary's Oedipal mixture of desire and resentment towards her mother, and the sense of otherness and inferiority patriarchy imposes upon women. Here 'darling little Mamma' appears again as a powerful castrating figure, being instrumental in the perpetuation of patriarchal ideals of femininity. The scene somehow reminds the reader of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the powerful Aunts act as important instruments for the perpetuation of oppression in the fundamentalist republic of Gilead. They strictly forbid the Handmaids to write, reminding them that 'Pen Is Envy' (Atwood 1986, p. 186). In both novels, the message is essentially the same: both the penis and the pen are restricted to the privileged male sex. Women's desire to learn, like their desire for the mother, is equated with the phallus/power they will never have, since these are exclusively male prerogatives:

'Mark's books are to be kept where Mark put them,' she said.

'But Mamma, I want them.'

Never in her life had she wanted anything so much as those books.

'When will you learn not to want what isn't yours? . . . Just because Mark learnt Greek, you think *you* must try.' . . .

The person sitting on the yellow painted bedroom chair was a stranger . . . She had an odd feeling that this person had no right to wear her mother's dress and her chain. (*MO*, pp. 126–7)

As Philips (1996, p. 128) states, Sinclair was interested in portraying 'the psychological elements of women in families and the conflict between their ascribed family roles and the development of their individual consciousness'. Sinclair joined the Women's Freedom League in 1908, and she participated in her first suffrage march on 18 June 1910. Much before she wrote her book *Feminism* (1912),⁷ written for and published by the Women's Suffrage League, evidence for Sinclair's concern for the woman question

can be found as early as 1897. Her novel *Audrey Craven* explores (albeit with some reserve and even suspicion towards the figure of the New Woman) the conflicts and ambivalences of a fin-de-siècle woman who – allowing for the pun on words – craves for an intellectual life, thereby testifying to the feminist consciousness she would unequivocally show in later novels such as *Kitty Tailleux* (1908a) and *The Judgement of Eve* (1908b).

Sinclair's concern for women's situation in the novel is also made patent in the portrait of Mary's aunts, both victims of repressed desires. Here Sinclair shows her adherence to Jung's conception of the libido which, unlike Freud's, is not an exclusively sexual impulse but also a desire for learning and creativity. In her article 'Clinical Lecture on Symbolism and Sublimation. I', Sinclair (1916a, p. 119fn5) states that she uses the term 'libido' as defined by Jung, that is, as creative energy. For Mary's Aunt Charlotte, sexual assertiveness is freedom, self-assertion, and the exercise of free will, but her frustrated desires drive her to delusions about marriage and motherhood. Aunt Charlotte's subversive attempts are also described through the symbolic use of dolls. Charlotte's dolls signify the complete opposite of the stiffness of Mamma's Victorian dolls, with their complete set of clothes and even underwear:

Inside the paper wrapper there was a match-box, and inside the match-box there was a doll no bigger than your finger. It had blue eyes and black hair and no clothes on. Aunt Charlotte held it in her hand and smiled at it.

'That's Aunt Charlotte's little baby,' she said. 'I'm going to be married and I shan't want it any more. There – take it, and cover it up, quick!'

Mamma had come out of the dining-room. She shut the door behind her.

'What have you given to Mary?' she said.

'Butter-Scotch,' said Aunt Charlotte. (*MO*, p. 37)

While Aunt Charlotte stands for sexual desire, Charlotte's sister Lavinia mirrors Mary's repressed desires for learning and creativity. Lavinia relinquished her marriage to a Unitarian to take care of her sister, but refuses to give up her opinions even for the sake of her family. According to Raitt (2000, pp. 226–8), Mary identifies with her aunt Charlotte as an unloved person, while she mimics Lavinia in refusing to abandon her writing or her agnosticism despite her mother's disapproval: 'even as a child Mary, like Lavinia, is suspicious of God . . . her increasingly atheistic leanings are also an implicit condemnation of the ways of patriarchy itself'.

Despite the fact that Sinclair was born and educated within the Victorian tradition, Raitt (2000, p. 43) defines her as a 'thoroughly modern woman'. As she contends, *Mary Olivier* evidences Sinclair's awareness that her philosophy of life was impossible to reconcile with the role of wife and mother, at least as defined by the society of her time. Her complete rejection of orthodox beliefs damaged her relationship with two acquaintances that were influential to her during her youth: curate Anthony Deane and Henry Melville Gwatkin, Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Cambridge. Both men attempted to help Sinclair regain her lost faith, and both men ended their relationship with her when she refused to satisfy their demands. Her relationship with Gwatkin was of a complex nature: according to Raitt (2000, pp. 68–72), Gwatkin called her 'my child' and acted as a strange mixture of mentor, father, and lover. Sinclair qualified their conversations as having a 'hypnotic quality', but as her interest drifted from philosophy towards literature, Gwatkin gradually distanced himself from her. As she reflects in *Mary Olivier*, Sinclair's 'heterodox faith' and her intellectual and analytic frame of mind worried her, since they might 'make it difficult for her to love wholeheartedly, or to be loved' (Raitt 2000, p. 50). In the novel, one of her lovers (Maurice Jourdain) complains that

she is too preoccupied with philosophy for a conventional sweetheart. As Philips (1996, p. 132) notices, the inherent contradiction in Victorian standards of femininity condemned learning as inappropriate while women were expected to be responsible for the upbringing of children. At the same time, it repressed sexuality in those who were supposed to be purely sexual and emotional beings:

‘You’d no business to touch those baby-clothes,’ Mamma said.

The baby-clothes were real. Every evening she took them from the drawer in the linen cupboard; and when she had sung the children to sleep she shook out the little frocks and petticoats and folded them in a neat pile at the foot of the bed . . . Shame burned through her body like fire. Hot tears scalded her eyelids. She thought: ‘How was I to know you mustn’t have babies?’ (*MO*, p. 86)

According to Luce Irigaray (1985, p. 134) and as this passage evidences, Sinclair makes it clear that ‘normal femininity’ as advocated by the Victorian ideal not only involved repression but was itself a form of neurosis. In turn, Irigaray argues that to be a ‘normal’ woman in Freud’s terms, a woman has to enter a ‘masquerade’ of femininity and a system of values that does not belong to women but which answers male desires.⁸

Mary defines desire as ‘restlessness. It ached. It gnawed, stopping a minute, beginning again, only to be appeased by reverie, by the running tap. Restlessness. That was desire. It must be’ (*MO*, p. 228). Although Sinclair always made it clear that her concept of desire was not exclusively sexual, she compares it with ‘the feeling you had when you thought of babies: painful and at the same time delicious’ (*MO*, p. 263). Indeed Mary seems to be worried about repressed desires and fears that, if unfulfilled (as happened to Charlotte), might lead to mental breakdown, as the following passage from the novel seems to illustrate:

If only you didn’t keep on wanting somebody – somebody who wasn’t there . . . She envied her youth its capacity for day-dreaming, for imagining interminable communions. Brilliant hallucinations of a mental hunger. Better than nothing . . . If this went on the breaking-point must come. Suddenly you would go smash. Smash. Your mind would die in a delirium of hunger. (*MO*, p. 314)

After Mark’s death, Mary starts having dreams about her childhood, in which she looks for him in the schoolroom. According to Raitt (2000, p. 20), the death of Sinclair’s sister Gertrude haunted her imagination, and the fear that her mother compared her unfavourably to her lost daughter might account for the presence of dead children in *Mary Olivier*. However, and given Sinclair’s own ideas about the significance of dreams, we could suggest the possibility that those dreams also cater for a frustrated desire of sexual and/or maternal fulfilment. As she states in ‘Clinical Lecture I’ (Sinclair 1916a, p. 118), ‘the dream – which Freud defines as “the disguised fulfilment of a repressed wish” . . . stands for the sexual libido, and their ritualistic intention represents man’s primitive and incomplete effort at sublimation’. The fact that Mary looks for Mark in the schoolroom again puts sexual desire along with the desire for knowledge, since Mary views both as forbidden male privileges:

She would know that Mark was in the schoolroom. But she could never find it. She never saw Mark. The passages led through empty, grey-lit rooms to the bottom of the stairs, and she would find a dead baby lying among the boots and shoes in the cat’s cupboard. (*MO*, pp. 310–1)

Sinclair was aware (possibly through her reading of Freud and Breuer) that sexual abstinence could be mentally and emotionally unhealthy. Raitt (2000, pp. 140–2) suggests that Sinclair’s novel *The Three Sisters* (1914), in which she fictionalizes her fascination for the Brontës’ secluded but intense life, could have helped to popularize the over-simplistic

version of Freud that feminism has since repeatedly attacked in works such as Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1986). In my view, however, this identification with the Brontës could have led her to view celibacy as an advantage to the woman writer and a benefit to her literary creativity (Raitt 2000, pp. 109–5). In her analysis of *The Three Sisters* (1914), Raitt similarly argues that 'Sinclair stresses that the [Brontë] sisters and their heroines were pioneers of modern femininity . . . The "modern heroine" is associated in Sinclair's mind with a rebelliously analytic spirit who refuses to submit to masculine control' (2000, p. 117).

As has been mentioned, and although *Mary Olivier* is perhaps the best example, Sinclair's novels as a whole are inspired by her childhood memories and women's efforts to conciliate their creative impulses, their sexual desires, and family demands (Raitt 2000, p. 2). Her involvement with the Medico-Psychological Clinic in 1913 clearly responds to her interest in psychoanalysis and in the relationship between sexuality and artistic creativity. Sinclair's friend and fellow suffragist Dr Jessie Murray and her companion Julia Turner opened their clinic in Brunswick Square, London, the first British institution to offer psychotherapy. Sinclair was one of the 12 founding members of the clinic and, according to Theophilus M. Boll (1962, pp. 311, 318), she wrote its periodical reports. Although Dr Murray had attended the lectures of Professor Pierre Janet at the Collège de France, she had no formal training in psychoanalysis. In Diana Wallace's view (2000, p. 79), Murray and Turner practised an eclectic and idiosyncratic method which sometimes included feminist strategies. They stressed the importance of anxiety rather than sexuality in the development of mental disorders, and their pioneering work helped Sinclair to develop her own ideas of repression and sublimation. Raitt (2000, p. 138–9) similarly contends that the informality and eclecticism of Murray and Turner probably encouraged Sinclair to adapt Freudian and Jungian terms such as repression and sublimation to suit her own experience and philosophy. It was actually Sinclair who coined the term 'orthopsychics', which the organization used to define its programme in psychotherapy. According to Diana Wallace, Sinclair's financial support (a donation of £500) as well as her writings 'demonstrate commitment to a feminist use of psychoanalysis' (2000, p. 79).

Jung (1956, p. 224) stated that 'the incest prohibition . . . makes the creative fantasy inventive': the attempt at canalization of the incest taboo is therefore 'to stimulate the creative imagination'. In that respect, the following two passages illustrate Mary's discovery of poetry as a way of articulating her thoughts and expressing her rejection of patriarchal norms without actually being explicit about that rejection. Mary experiences a shock of recognition and remembrance while writing a poem, which brilliantly illustrates how sublimation of desire works in the novel and how Mary's process of self-realization is derived from it:

She would make poems. They couldn't hear you making poems. They couldn't see your thoughts falling into sound patterns. Only part of the pattern would appear at once while the rest of it went on sounding from somewhere a long way off. When all the parts came together the poem was made. You felt as if you had made it long ago, and had forgotten it and remembered. (*MO*, p. 184)

'The pale pearl-purple evening –' The words rushed together. She couldn't tell whether they were her own or somebody else's. There was the queer shock of recognition that came with your own real things. It wasn't remembering though it felt like it. Shelley – 'The pale purple even.' . . . The poem was coming by bits at a time. She could feel the rest throbbing behind it, an unreleased, impatient energy. (*MO*, p. 234)

Mary Olivier is, according to Raitt (2000, p. 229), ‘Sinclair’s testimony to psychoanalysis as a description of the evolution of the self’. For her, sublimation is an ‘evolutionary process’ that helps her transcend ‘not only her own instincts but those of her ancestors as well’. Sinclair understood libido as Jung’s creative energy and saw ‘all religion, all art, all literature, all science’ as ‘sublimations in various stages of perfection. Civilisation is one vast system of sublimations’ (Sinclair 1916a, p. 119). In Raitt’s view (2000, p. 231), sublimation was an escape from ‘both the constraints of desire and the tightening net of heredity’. Similarly, Sinclair stated that ‘the neurotic, without knowing it, is bound hand and foot in the prison of the past, his own and his ancestors’, and there is no future for him until he is delivered’ (1916a, p. 120).

Sinclair probably drew her ideas from Jung’s *Psychology of the Unconscious*, but her ideas about sublimation and repression differ from his. Jung describes repression as ‘a diversion of the sexual libido from the sexual territory into associated functions... Where this operation succeeds without injury to the adaptation of the individual it is called *sublimation*. Where the attempt does not succeed it is called *repression*’ (1956, p. 150). Jung (1956, pp. 232–3) always refused the assumption that patients could intentionally canalize sexual energy into a form of sublimation, but Sinclair saw psychoanalysis as the help to a deliberate effort of redirecting the libido, ‘a self-conscious liberation from the forces that confine the self in the past’ (1916a, p. 118). In ‘Clinical Lecture I’, she describes sublimation as ‘the conscious direction of the libido into higher channels... Sublimation itself is the striving of the libido towards manifestation in higher and higher forms. The history of evolution is its history’ (Sinclair 1916a, pp. 118–9).

Wallace (2000, pp. 88–93) argues that single women writers ‘have moments of heightened awareness’ in exchange for relinquishing their sexual impulses, and that ‘Sinclair makes it clear that spinsterhood does not necessitate neurosis’. Wallace’s view is that Mary is not simply a spinster who uses writing as an outlet for her sexual frustration, but that hers is ‘a positive choice to maximise her potential for creative endeavour’ (Wallace 2000, pp. 88–93). Having sublimated her sexual desire into her writing, Mary gains a knowledge of ‘reality’ which is the ‘ultimate passion’ (*MO*, p. 379). The integrity of self which comes from sublimation is thus placed, according to Wallace, ‘above sexual fulfilment’. Again in a pre-Lacanian formulation, as Raitt aptly notes (2000, p. 238), Sinclair seems to suggest that sublimation of women’s sexual energy into artistic creativity can be equated to the mystical experience.⁹

Mary’s process of adaptation comes to its final success at the end of the novel. By ‘talking away’ the conflict in a psychoanalytic fashion, Mary and her mother at last become reconciled in the last pages of the novel:

‘You were different,’ she said. ‘You weren’t like any of the others. I was afraid of you... I suppose I – I didn’t like your being clever. It was the boys I wanted to do things. Not you... I was jealous of you, Mary. And I was afraid for my life you’d find it out’. (*MO*, p. 375)

Furthermore, she ‘comes to full consciousness of herself’, as Raitt (2000, p. 235) puts it, ‘through attaining consciousness of a will beyond her own, a will both secular and divine’. Sinclair (1916a, p. 122) attested to the importance of the libido and its successful redirection into higher channels in order to achieve ‘the harmony and union that come with complete recovery’. This superior will Sinclair talks about is an amalgamation of philosophy, religion, and science (it includes bits and pieces of Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Darwin, Plato, the Buddhist Sutras, and the Upanishads), which Mary describes as ‘It’, the ‘Absolute Truth about God’, or the ‘Thing-in-Itself’ (*MO*, p. 375). Sinclair also

held issue with Jung in matters of religion and mysticism. While Jung would have probably regarded these expressions as charged with unsublimated libido, Sinclair believed that religion and philosophy consisted of ‘material already highly sublimated, with concepts that have passed not once, but many times through the crucible of the human intellect’ (1916b, p. 143).

Everything went still. She had a sense of happiness and peace suddenly there with her in the room. Not so much her own as the happiness and peace of an immense, invisible, intangible being of whose life she was thus aware. She knew, somehow through It, that there was no need to get away; she was out of it all now, this minute. There was always a point where she could get out of it and into this enduring happiness and peace. (*MO*, p. 375)

Sinclair (1916b, p. 142) defined neuroses as ‘the heroic efforts of a humiliated ego to assert himself, to redress the balance of his insufficiency’ and regarded sublimation as ‘the only effectual form of self-assertion and redress’. As I believe this essay has illustrated, Sinclair’s idiosyncratic beliefs in sublimation represented a conscious effort of the female writer to channel repressed desire and achieve self-realization. Wallace (2000, p. 80) contends that *Mary Olivier* allowed Sinclair to show ‘female sexual energy being redirected into artistic creation or philosophical thought, rather than necessarily producing neurosis’. In Sinclair’s experimental stream of consciousness, Mary’s narration shifts from first to second to third person and sometimes blurs the boundaries between narrator and reader. However, hers is not a free flow of ideas or sensations: Sinclair’s narrative is a conscious and controlled effort to explore the boundaries of the ‘I’ and ask crucial questions about the female subjectivity trapped within patriarchal discourse.

As Wallace (2000, p. 75) gathers, Sinclair’s novel sprang from ‘her concern to find formal methods which could represent the “reality” of female consciousness’. Besides her individual need to find a language to define her personal and artistic self, Sinclair’s commitment to psychoanalysis and feminism proved to my mind essential in her move towards modernism. Wallace notices the obvious links between Mary Olivier’s (and May Sinclair’s) life and the case studies mentioned by Freud and Breuer (1956, p. 140) in *Studies on Hysteria*: their female patients were often highly gifted women whose ambitions and desires (sexual and intellectual) were restricted by husbands or parents. They mention that hysteria was common among intelligent girls who often woke up at night to study or read, since these activities were disapproved by their husbands or parents. For example, Fräulein Elisabeth von R. ‘was in fact greatly discontented with being a girl. She was full of ambitious plans. She wanted to study or to have a musical training, and she was indignant at the idea of having to sacrifice her inclinations and her freedom of judgement by marriage’ (Freud and Breuer 1956, p. 140).

Sinclair’s reading of Freud’s works and her later adaptation of Jung’s ideas on sublimation presumably provided her with the alternative discourse she needed to voice ‘repression of female desire and its eruption in the form of hysteria’ as well as a way out of it (Wallace 2000, p. 83). Her formula for a successful life for the single female writer through channelling repressed desire into artistic creation advocates for a retreat into inner life, rather than an adventurous voyage far from the home, so typical of the male *Bildungsroman*. Sinclair’s inner quest towards adulthood and self-realization challenges (and succeeds in escaping) patriarchal structures without actually leaving the domestic space. As Hapgood and Paxton (2000, p. 115) aptly phrase it, Sinclair’s ‘mystical experience becomes the means by which she flees the nets without leaving the nest’.

Notes

1. According to various sources (see, for instance, Finn 2007, p. 196, and Raitt 2000, p. 218), Sinclair seems to have inspired in William James' *The Principles of Psychology*: 'consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as "chain" or "train" do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A "river" or a "stream" are the metaphors by which it is more naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective thought' (James 1890, p. 239, cited Friedman 1955, p. 2).
2. Katherine Mansfield's review of the novel, especially her opinion about Sinclair's experimental technique, was far from flattering: 'Why should writers exist any longer as a class apart if their task ends with a minute description of a big or a little thing? If this is the be-all and end-all of literature why should not every man, woman and child write an autobiography and so provide reading matter for the ages?... [A]s B's papa's whiskers and B's mama's funny little nose are bound to be different again, and their effect upon B again different – why there is high entertainment forever! It is too late in the day for this new form, and Miss Sinclair's skilful handling of it serves but to make its failure more apparent' (Mansfield 1930, p. 41).
3. The French theoretician Julia Kristeva elaborates on Lacan's theories of the symbolic and the semiotic by arguing that they are not binary opposites but flow into each other as part of a continuum in the process of constructing meaning. The body of the pregnant woman and the communication between the mother and the foetus is regarded by Kristeva as an example of a semiotic space of 'otherness within the self' which resists the symbolic: a pregnant woman has bodily experiences that she cannot understand but which she nevertheless knows. For further references on Kristeva's work, see Robbins (2000, pp. 120–33).
4. For further references on this topic, see Robbins (2000, pp. 103–85) and Weedon (1999, pp. 77–99).
5. Philips (1996, p. 133) posits that 'indeed sexual elements in the desire for the mother may be suggested by the trail of blood on the hem of the sheet. The immediate cause of the little girl's willingness to drag the heavy sheet and to prick her fingers is the reward of the dolls' tiny clothes. Dolls have a special significance in the mother-daughter relationship. Often given as a mark of affection by mother to daughter, they might as a gift be seen as parallel to a new-born child, the gift in one sense of man to woman, and implying a pre-oedipal affinity between mother and daughter.' Philips's interpretation coincides with Freud's account for the symbolic meaning of dolls in 'Female Sexuality' (1931 cited in Philips 1996, p. 29): 'the little girl's preference for dolls is probably evidence of the exclusiveness of her attachment to her mother, with complete neglect of her father-object'.
6. The French feminist theoretician Luce Irigaray elaborates on the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and celebrates women's difference, thus revaluing the label of 'otherness' assigned to women by psychoanalysis. She argues there is a repressed female psychosexual economy that disrupts phallogentrism, which she calls *écriture féminine*. For a brief introduction to Irigaray's theory, see, for example, Belsey and Moore (1997, pp. 1–15). For further references see Irigaray (1985).
7. As Raitt (2000, p. 120) states in Sinclair's biography, Sir Almroth Wright was Professor of Experimental Pathology at the University of London. In March 1912, he wrote a three-column letter to *The Times* arguing against the suffrage movement, dismissing suffragettes as frustrated spinsters releasing their sexual energies. Wright's argument was based in women's natural inferiority and their proneness to 'phases of hypersensitiveness' and 'serious and long-continued mental disorders'. In the same month, Sinclair wrote her work *Feminism* discrediting Wright, although, according to Laurel Forster, she showed a certain level of complicity with his views. See Forster (2003).
8. For further discussion on the term 'masquerade' to which Irigaray (1985) refers, see Riviere, (2000). Irigaray's and other feminist arguments against Freud, however, are thoroughly discussed in Juliet Mitchell's (1986) ground-breaking work *Psychoanalysis and feminism: a radical reassessment of Freudian psychoanalysis*.
9. Lacan (1982). Lacan argues that women experience a '*jouissance* which goes beyond', which can be regarded as analogous to the *jouissance* of the mystic (1982, p. 147).

Notes on contributor

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