

MOONS DO NOT BLEED BUT STARE: A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO LARKIN'S "SAD STEPS" AND PLATH'S "EDGE"*

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Abstract: Succumbing to the moon's enchantment seems nothing out of the ordinary, however much the post-modern human mind wants to deny the fact. The present article shows the way art—particularly post-modern poetry—makes use of this ordinary romantic imaginative attraction in order to convey everlasting human stances towards real life. As an example we shall consider the moon from two different perspectives: Philip Larkin's "Sad Steps" helps the reader view it from a quasi-philosophical position, whereas Sylvia Plath's "Edge" uses it as an objective correlative for a woman's complexity. For the analysis of the poems we have adopted a cognitive poetic approach, based on the cognitive linguistic theories on mental spaces, cognitive-conceptual metaphor and sensing-conceptualising connection among others.

Keywords: Post-modern poetry, cognitive poetics, Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath, moon.

Resumen: Por mucho que las mentes de hombres y mujeres de la era post-moderna quieran negarlo, sucumbir al encanto de la luna forma parte de nuestra vida cotidiana. En este artículo queremos mostrar el modo en que el arte, y en particular la poesía post-moderna, emplea esta atracción de cariz romántico imaginativo para transmitir posturas siempre presentes ante la realidad vital del ser humano. De la mano de Philip Larkin y Sylvia Plath exploramos distintos modos de percibir la entidad lunar: con "Sad Steps" Larkin nos ayuda a observarla desde una perspectiva casi filosófica, y el poema "Edge" de Plath nos lleva a reconocerla como correlato objetivo de la complejidad femenina. Para el análisis de los poemas hemos adoptado un enfoque poético-cognitivo, basado en las teorías lingüístico-cognitivas sobre espacios mentales, sobre metáfora conceptual-cognitiva, y sobre las conexiones existentes entre experiencia sensorial y conceptualización, entre otras.

Palabras clave: Poesía post-moderna, poética cognitiva, Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath, luna.

'Moon!' you cry suddenly, 'Moon! 'Moon!'
The moon has stepped back like an artist gazing amazed at a work
That points at him amazed.

from "Full Moon and Little Frieda"

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1. ON WOLVES AND OTHER MOON CRIERS: INTRODUCTION

You can count to hundreds the times your students come up with answers such as ‘I like reading, cinema, music or sports’ when you ask in class about their likes and hobbies. But we guess you have never heard someone say ‘I like talking to the moon’. What kind of fresher would admit “talking to the moon” on their first college day? You could not even think moon singers such as Beethoven, Debussy, S.T. Coleridge or F. García Lorca would have had the courage. However incredible it may seem, that is what happened to us once during our first lesson to first-year students at college.

We are ignorant of whether that student ever wrote any music or poetry, but her declaration then and there made her deserve the status of visionary. A moon-speaker in the age of MP3s, multimedia phones and the internet! Yet she is not a lonely voice.

However much we may have learnt about the physics of the Earth’s natural satellite, the human mind often seems unwilling to resist the temptation of observing something magic or hidden coming from it. When the moon is at its fullest, it seems to be luring us from the distance, and out come lovers, werewolves and witches singing, howling or dancing to its enchantment¹. Post-modern poets such as Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath never hid their imaginative link with the moon, and even the down-to-earth, rational Philip Larkin at least once and for a moment gave in to lunar charms. The paper we are writing has to do with Larkin and Plath, but also with thousands of ordinary men and women who keep on writing and reading poetry, and talking to the moon.

The two poems that we shall discuss in this paper are Larkin’s “Sad Steps” (1979) and Plath’s “Edge”² (1981: 272-273). For the sake of clarity we find it convenient to reproduce them here in full, with each line sequentially numbered so that comments and allusions can be easily followed.

SAD STEPS

- 1 Groping back to bed after a piss
- 2 I part thick curtains, and I am startled by
- 3 The rapid clouds, the moon’s cleanliness.

- 4 Four o’clock: wedge-shadowed gardens lie
- 5 Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky.
- 6 There is something laughable about this,

- 7 The way the moon dashes through the clouds that blow
- 8 Loosely as cannon-smoke to stand apart
- 9 (Stone-coloured light sharpening the roofs below)

¹ Paul McCartney, Mike Oldfield, Van Morrison, Enya are only some of the many contemporary musicians who have at some time found inspiration in the moon. Under the title *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, Margot Adler (1986) works in the same direction, giving an interesting account of the new pagan era taking place in contemporary America.

² The poem was written by Plath in February 1963, just a few days before her death by her own hand.

10 High and preposterous and separate
 11 Lozenge of Love! Medallion of art!
 12 O wolves of memory!" Immensements! No,

 13 One shivers slightly, looking up there.
 14 The hardness and the brightness and the plain
 15 Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare

 16 Is a reminder of the strength and pain
 17 Of being young: that it can't come again,
 18 But is for others undiminished somewhere.

Philip Larkin

EDGE

1 The woman is perfected
 2 Her dead

 3 Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
 4 The illusion of a Greek necessity

 5 Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
 6 Her bare

 7 Feet seem to be saying:
 8 We have come so far, it is over.

 9 Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
 10 One at each little

 11 Pitcher of milk, now empty.
 12 She has folded

 13 Them back into her body as petals
 14 Of a rose close when the garden

 15 Stiffens and odors bleed
 16 From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

 17 The moon has nothing to be sad about,
 18 Staring from her hood of bone.

 19 She is used to this sort of thing.
 20 Her blacks crackle and drag

Sylvia Plath

1. Moons do not bleed but stare: *image metaphors*³

On this occasion we shall start nearly where the poems end, taking a first look at the moon.

The moon is constantly present in “Sad Steps”. The word “moon” is mentioned twice (ll.3, 7) just framing the imagistic stanza (ll.4-6) which depicts a moonlit landscape; but in fact this element is present all through the reading in the form of a multidimensional *mental space*⁴ (Fauconnier 1994, 1997) that is being completed with often conflicting information. Thus, whereas the moon is first envisioned as a hurting entity which “dashes through the clouds ...stone-coloured light *sharpening* the roofs below” (ll.7, 9, our italics) and then as “high and preposterous and separate” (l.10), it is soon afterwards addressed in romantic terms as “Lozenge of Love” and “Medallion of art” (l.11).

As we have said, the word “moon” is never mentioned again, yet lines 14-15 invoke new information which the reader will easily associate to this entity through *image mapping*⁵ (Lakoff & Turner 1989).

The hardness and the brightness and the plain
Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare

Whatever may be the role of the new element in the space suggested, the notions *brightness*, *far-reaching* and *singleness* will activate a process of mapping between the “moon” in previous spaces and this new element defined as “wide stare”, which incidentally suggests its role (“staring”). Equivalence in values between “moon” and “wide stare” incites their conceptual association in such a way that readers understand the two elements as just *one* entity. Now any information that completes the “wide stare” mental space will float back to the “moon” mental space they are creating –adding new structure to the *moon* notion, for instance the “staring” role.

It is interesting to notice that the image of the moon staring from the distance is not such an original one. The lines by Hughes introducing this paper also suggest the moon’s detached stare (“The moon has stepped back like an artist gazing”), and the last lines in Plath’s “Edge” are explicit about the moon’s stance towards the others: “the moon...

³ For the analysis of the poems we have adopted a cognitive-poetics perspective. Yet, it is not our aim to reflect on the possibilities of this approach but we credit it as the most appropriate one in order to account for the poetic effects occurring during the reading experience. Specific cognitive-linguistic concepts will be explained in the course of the article. For more details on the cognitive poetic perspective used here, see Calderón Quindós (2004, 2005).

⁴ Mental spaces can be described as multidimensional temporary conceptual structures which are construed in a person’s mind for operative purposes. The mental processes to construe mental spaces from linguistic discourse roughly function as follows: the discourse gives the clues to activate Long Term Memory conceptual information (arranged in multidimensional permanent conceptual structures, called Idealised Cognitive Models), then the LTM information suggested is arranged in specific relations following the guidelines given by the discourse so as to build up a new and temporary conceptual structure (a mental space).

⁵ Image mapping involves the identification of conceptual equivalence between the topology of two concepts. The “moon-eye” mapping is specifically a case of *one-shot image mapping*, which means that the visual image of the concepts (the roundness of both moon and eye iris) map onto each other.

staring from her hood of bone” (ll.17-18). The reader will also appreciate the counterpart relation that can be established between other values appearing in both poems, especially the one which Larkin names “hardness” and which Plath points at with the visual-tactile image “hood of bone”. This will deserve a second look at the moon further in the paper. First, let us discover the different backgrounds that lead the speakers into their considerations of the moon in these terms.

2. Groping back to the ordinary: ordinary grounds

“Groping back to bed after a piss” is not the typical line anyone would expect to run into when reading a poem addressed to the moon. This everyday situation which Larkin reflects in “Sad Steps” is ordinary enough for any reader to perceive a high degree of closeness between the speaker and themselves. There follows the also ordinary parting of the curtains and looking out, and a no less ordinary inspection of the night sky.

Groping back to bed after a piss
I part thick curtains, and I am startled by
The clouds, the moons’ cleanliness.

Even the way the nightly landscape is perceived may seem familiar to the reader, regardless of the compounds and the Latin vocabulary used:

Four o’clock: wedge-shadowed gardens lie
Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky.

What does not seem so ordinary is precisely the emotion this perception provokes in the speaker: “There is something laughable about this.” (l.6). At this point the reader is unable to identify what it is that makes the situation laughable. For the moment we shall consider this reaction of amusement as the most salient *figure*⁶ in Larkin’s poem.

On the contrary, there is nothing ordinary in the line introducing Plath’s “Edge”: “The woman is perfected”. Once meaning has been construed, this line should function as *ground* for the following one: but in fact it is not till we read lines 2-3 that we understand the situation, and what “perfected” (l.1) might suggest: “Her dead / Body wears the smile of accomplishment”. From this moment on, to line 8, the information suggested by the discourse adds up conceptual structure to the “woman” mental space. This happens in a dynamic fashion, through the suggestion of negative and positive counterparts opposing, while complementing, each other:

⁶ The distinction *figure/ground* is approximately equivalent to the conventional distinction between foreground and background. In a literary context, a *figure* can be defined as an element producing cognitive impact in the reader. For a more complete explanation of the figure/ground distinction see Ungerer and Schmid (1996: 31-37). For an example of the figure/ground distinction applied to poetry, see Peter Stockwell’s chapters in Stockwell (2002: 13-25) and Gavins and Steen (2003: 13-25).

Her *dead* (-)

Body wears the *smile* (+) of *accomplishment* (+),
The *illusion* (+) of a Greek *necessity* (-)⁷

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her *bare* (-?)

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far (+), *it is over* (-?).

There is nothing ordinary in the way the speaker presents the woman, who seems closer to a Greek goddess; in fact, each new line and each new detail added will stand out as *figure* against the previous information. Nevertheless, the *death* concept is familiar enough to the human being for any reader to detect parallelisms between the “end” dimensions included in both the *death* and *perfect* notions. The *end* dimension comes to the front as the *figure* for the eight first lines, especially in line 8 preceding a final stop mark (“it is over.”). And from line 8 on, the *death* concept –together with the *goddess* image the reader has construed– becomes the *ground* on which the following discourse ideas will build up.

Thus, whereas Plath’s poem presents information in an exquisite manner –due to the choice of unusual visual imagery and vocabulary–, the discourse also calls for the conceptual arousal of daily life experience (death and completeness) which is not so distant from Larkin’s prosaic first stanza in “Sad Steps”.

3. We have come so far: the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor

When cognitive linguists talk about “ordinary thought” they do not exclude literary imaginative thought, quite the contrary. In fact, what they assert is that there is no human way of expression that does not conform to some universal strategies such as schematisation, categorisation, prototype identification, sequence or mapping (among others). Thanks to the fact that all human minds seem to function by using the same mental processes or strategies, it is possible for a person to work out meaning from a poem –however different the results may be, and actually are. These basic strategies which seem to be common to every single person in the human species is what they (and we) call “ordinary thought”. Among the strategies linguists have identified is that of *conceptual metaphor*. A conceptual metaphor is understood as a thought unit that involves the counterpart relation between

⁷ This is a very complex line as regards deciding what notions are positive and what negative. On the one hand, “illusion” may be perceived here as a positive stance (such as hope), matching the positiveness of the immediately previous nouns (“smile”, “accomplishment”). Nevertheless there is a negative feature also suggested by the word: that of “false or unreliable belief”. On the other hand, “necessity” implies “lack of something”, which is perceived as negative. As a whole the structure “illusion of a... necessity” suggests something like “it is false that she needs” and therefore “she does not need”, which in turn may be perceived as positive. Whatever the decision we take, this line makes it difficult for the readers to make up their minds about the perspective through which they must interpret the poem.

the structure of two concepts (a *source* and a *target*) that work together for the same purpose. Through this mapping, the *target* –which is usually more abstract– is seen in terms of the *source*. Many of the conceptual metaphors are universal, since they originate from primary experience (like MORE IS UP), but there are others which could function as concepts only in particular societies (like GOD IS UP). One of these conceptual metaphors that seem to be universal is at work in both poems playing a determinant role in both moons' constructions: the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor.

The title of Larkin's poem "Sad Steps" is a good example of how conceptual metaphor and metonymy function together during the meaning construction process. The reader will not find it necessary to read the whole poem in order to work out consistent meaning. When our students were asked about what they would expect from the poem once they had read just the title, they provided answers such as 'the poet is melancholic –perhaps because he is alone or because he is getting old'. Of course they were explained that lyrical subjects should be distinguished from poets themselves, anyway their responses gave evidence of the readers' consciousness of the presence of an anthropomorphic speaker (Cámara Arenas 2004) who intends to express him/herself about something. When asked to justify their answers they gave a rough cognitive linguistic-based explanation: 'Only a person can be sad and the word "steps" refers to the person walking'. Their intuitions concerning the reasons why the speaker was sad were reinforced by lines 11-12.

Lozenge of Love! Medallion of art!
O wolves of memory!" Immensements! No,

which some of them took to imply the speaker had loved and suffered during his⁸ youth; and then by lines 17-18:

Is a reminder of the strength and pain
Of being young: that it can't come again,

Their personal interpretation of the poem supported their consideration of the title at a second glance: 'The man is walking sad as if he were *approaching* death'. Cognitive Linguistics could explain their reaction through the identification of metaphor-metonymy interaction, activated by *source-in-target* metonymies (Ruiz de Mendoza 2000) and the grammatical links. First, "steps" metonymically activates WALKING, which in turn metonymically activates JOURNEY. Second, a term from the emotions domain ("sad") metonymically activates PEOPLE, and thus LIFE. Finally, this "incongruous" combination of a term from the journey domain with a term from the emotions domain, automatically invokes the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor. Thus, the stage at which a *person* is during the action of walking along LIFE –together with the *sadness* emotion suggested– easily maps onto what are typically considered the most negative dimensions of life: becoming old or being about to die.

⁸ Throughout this paper we will use *he* for Larkin's speaker. Nevertheless it is not our intention to reduce the reading possibilities of the poem, and we would like this pronoun to be understood just as a device used for the sake of clarity.

The woman's "bare feet" in Plath's "Edge" can also be read in this light. The *motion* dimension suggesting the *journey* domain is clearly invoked through lines 6-8: "Her bare / Feet seem to be saying: / *We have come so far,*" (our italics); and the *life* dimension is suggested through the counterpart relation established between the expression "it's over" (l.8) and the terms "dead" (l.2) and "accomplishment" (l.3) invoking and reinforcing the *end-death* notion. The *completeness* notion associated to *death* in lines 1-8 is, however, counter forced by the *emptiness* notion suggested in line 11, this time mightily associated to the *death* notion in lines 9-11, especially since lack of nourishment means starving and dying:

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.

This dynamic counterpart relation between opposites is a constant in Plath's "Edge", a poem which could be described (in the terms used by Larkin) as "a reminder of the strength and pain" of life itself.

4. Stone light and bleeding roses: sensing images

Sensory images in "Sad Steps" are openly linked to the moonlight reflection on the landscape and the sky picture it creates (ll.3-9) as well as to the moon's shape itself (ll.10-11, 14-15). Some of the first visual images are not wholly unexpected, being in consonance with the ordinary space the speaker evokes at the beginning of the poem: "I part thick curtains, and I am startled by / The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness." (ll.2-3); but the stanzas below suggest a wholly imaginative scenery created by the speaker through the influence of moonlight.

The speaker's experience under the moon is suggested in lines 4-5 through the interaction of visual images and the choice of uncommon vocabulary. Thus, visual imagery is mainly invoked by the compounds and the Latin origin term, which provoke at the same time motor-sensory and conceptual experience of insecurity and instability: "Four o'clock: *wedge-shadowed* gardens lie / Under a *cavernous*, a *wind-picked* sky" (ll.4-5, our italics). On the one hand, the concepts suggested by "wedge" and "wind-picked" include dimensions associated to the necessity of tightly fixing something that is moving. On the other hand, the concepts suggested by "shadow" and "cavernous" include the *darkness* dimension, which at the same time is bound to activate the conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING/ NOT KNOWING IS NOT SEEING.

Again lines 7-9 provide –together with visual imagery– other kinds motor-sensory information serving to create this sort of dangerous space:

The way the moon dashes through the clouds that blow
Loosely as cannon-smoke to stand apart
(Stone-coloured light sharpening the roofs below)

First the multidimensional term “dashes” forces the reader to make a choice between the manifold notions it suggests. As “moving quickly” is the basic meaning, the text could suggest the moon runs through the clouds; but since the clouds are themselves moving, it might be interesting to consider a second option: that the verb form “dashes” originates from the noun “dash” associated to the *elegance* notion (as in the idiom “cut a dash”). Thus both ideas, namely “speed” and “elegance”, could be integrated in the moon sending rapid stylish light rays through the clouds: “The way the moon dashes through the clouds that blow” (l.7).

Further on, lines 8-9 make readers reconsider the mental space they have been creating from line 7, since there is new information that modifies the terms in which the sky must be perceived.

Loosely as cannon-smoke to stand apart
(Stone-coloured light sharpening the roofs below)

Here visual image mapping will make *clouds* and *smoke* counterparts to each other by means of comparison, and this counterpart relation will initiate a sequence of related ideas provoking an aggressive scene (reinforced by the presence of tactile impressions): first, smoke is produced by a cannon; then the *cannon* notion is linked to the *sharpening* tactile impression because they both belong to the *aggression* domain; finally “stone-colour light sharpening” is perceived as counterpart to “the moon dashing”. The line “stone-colour light sharpening the roofs below” suggests tactile dimensions of *hardness* (“stone”) and *pointedness* (“sharpening”) in the way the moon acts onto the landscape. This way the moon is not exactly perceived as an attractive entity but as a dangerous one.

Visual imagery is also salient in “Edge”. Considering just the colours it suggests, the white colour predominates from the beginning of the discourse as we see in lines 4-5, 9-11:

The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
...
Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each pitcher of milk, now empty.

Surrounded by the *whiteness* of a prototypical Greek toga, of two white serpents (to which the children are compared), of the milk which has run to an end, and of the moon (“staring from her hood of *bone*”, l.18 our italics), there is a *red* blot in the middle of Plath’s poem. The red colour is not explicitly mentioned but is suggested through the invocation of a rose (prototypically associated with the red colour) and blood in lines 13-16:

...as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The red and white colours are also accompanied by some darkness haze linked to the night environment –specifically in the last line, as we shall see.

But visual imagery plays relevant roles especially when in conjunction with other sensory information stimulating synaesthetic effects. This is what happens when reading lines 13-16. Here the five sensory domains work together for a unified effect: the effect obtained thanks to *visual* imagery (“rose”, “bleed”) is amplified through *smell* (“odors”), taste (“sweet”), touch (“stiffens”, “bleed” suggesting body pain), *ear* (due to the invocation of the *speech* ICM through the term “throat”) and also *orientational* information (“deep”). The mental space these lines suggest can be described as a mixture of positive and negative dimensions: a stiff (negative) rose (positive) with a sweet (posit.) deep throat (?) bleeding (neg.) odours (?). These lines are actually working in the same direction as the previous ones, which suggest a dead empty (neg.) woman of Greek perfection (posit.). Yet in the rose fragment the negative elements seem to make a stronger effect on the reader. “Death” and “emptiness” are *intellectual* notions suggesting abstract conceptual information (it is difficult to know what it is like for oneself to be “dead” or “empty”). On the contrary the ideas of “stiffness” and “bleeding-physical suffering” are based on sensory experience, which makes the rose image more connected with *emotions*.⁹

Interestingly there is hardly any *sound* image in the whole poem. Lines describing the woman (ll.1-11) are basically based on *conceptual* vocabulary (“perfected,” “accomplishment,” “illusion,” “necessity”) and *visual* imagery (“the scrolls of her toga,” “Her bare feet,” “a white serpent,” “a pitcher of milk”). *Sound* is rejected with the exception of the dumb feet which “seem to be saying” (l.7) but do not really say –it is only the speaker’s mind making up. Later on, sound is suggested, though not very explicitly, through the “throat” element:

...as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

In fact, the prototypical element that comes out of one’s throat is speech. Therefore, a throat bleeding may suggest *speech* and *suffering* at the same time, and it will invoke the idea of *crying*. Nevertheless the reader is the one who creates this meaning, since the artist masterfully manages to veil the idea through an intricate net of non-auditory sensory images.

5. Amazed at a work that points at him amazed: counterparts and frame shifts

As we have said, the amusement emotion suggested by the word “laughable” (l.6) seems to stand out as the *figure* in Larkin’s poem. There are two explanations for that. First,

⁹ In fact the notions of “stiffness” and “harm” are associated with the sense of *touch*. According to Sweetser (1990: 37-44) lower sensory domains are conceptually associated with emotions whereas higher sensory domains are associated with intellect. For more information on this matter see also Santos and Espinosa (1996: 123-148) and Ibarretxe Antuñano (1997).

the word appears after the description of a landscape that has been perceived as intriguing or even dangerous by the reader: “wedge-shadowed gardens lie / Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky.” (ll.4-5). Second, the reason for that merriment is constantly deferred:

- The whole stanza (ll.7-9) taking place after the appearance of the word “laughable” (l.6) gives no information about the amusing element that produces the feeling. It is difficult to recognise laugh in the situation –especially because of the imagery used. The contrast of light and darkness maps both with the visual image of pure white brightness disturbed by the presence of cannon-smoke (l.8), and with the tactile impression invoked by the word “sharpening” connected with the moonlight rays (l.9). Both visual and tactile imagery work here together for the invocation of gloomy and painful emotions which come to the front.
- After the description of the picture in terms of danger, the poem tells again (l.10) about how “ridiculous” the moon appears up there (“high and *preposterous* and separate”, our italics). Therefore the readers will keep on reading in search for hints that help them discover what produces amusement. The merriment emotion becomes thus the *ground* to which the following information should respond. In turn, line 10 is followed not exactly by a reason for that emotion, but by what seems a *romantic* hymn to the moon (ll.11-12):

Lozenge of Love! Medallion of art!
O wolves of memory! Immensements!...

This alternation of expectance and frustration involves constant *frame shifting*¹⁰ (Coulson 2001) and provokes uncertainty effects on the reader. This is especially noticeable with the appearance of that “No,” (l.12) closing the romantic biased stanza and rejecting all the previous values credited to the moon (“O wolves of memory! Immensements! No,”). In fact “No” introduces a new sentence which goes through the pause and continues to the following line in a new stanza (“No, / One shivers lightly looking up there.” ll.12-13). But the strategic position the word occupies –closing the stanza and just after the hymn– suggests a *frame shift*, a change of attitude in the speaker’s approach to the moon: his rejection of a romantic stance and perhaps a return to the amusement emotion for which the reader is trying to find explanation.

Plath’s “Edge” also includes a negative in the final lines: “The moon has nothing to be sad about” (l.17). “Nothing” is semantically connected with the *sadness* notion (through syntactical devices). In fact, the moon cannot be sad in the physical world; thus negating the moon’s sadness suggests the importance of the feeling somewhere else. Invoking the *sadness* notion implies there must be another mental space with a counterpart for the

¹⁰ Mental Space Theory assumes that linguistic stimuli provoke the activation of manifold ICMs from which the reader/speaker gathers the specific information needed to work out meaning. These LTM information items are arranged in the shape of a temporary conceptual structure (a mental space). The structure –that is, the connections established between the concepts in a mental space– makes up the *frame* for that space. It is also possible to identify frames which support inter-space relations. Frame shift involves the modification of the base structure of the mental space in focus or of a whole mental space dynamics.

“moon” that will have the capability of “being sad” as well as reasons for being sad – prototypically a person. Perhaps the reader will already have an intuitive idea of which of those elements integrating the preciously construed mental space net is the moon’s counterpart. And, as we shall see, their intuitions will be confirmed, since the rest of the discourse just gives clues only in order to complete the “moon” mental space and not to create a new one. The appearance of the moon at the end of the poem, when no mention has been made to it before, provokes a *frame shift* –especially since it is accompanied by the word “nothing”. “Nothing” activates rejection reactions that could float back to previous information, as this is a constant in the poem:

- First, terms suggesting negative and positive ideas have been constantly superposed (perfected/accomplishment vs. dead; illusion vs. necessity?; child vs. serpent; pitcher of milk vs. empty...).
- Second, each two-line stanza suggests new unexpected mental spaces which provoke *frame shifting* and accommodation of the new information to the previous one. This happens most of the times through multiple *metaphoric mappings*¹¹, as in lines 9-16, which suggest a long chain of mappings:

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent (each dead child IS a white serpent)
One at each little

Pitcher of milk (each breast of the woman IS a pitcher of milk)
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals (each dead child IS a petal)
Of a rose close when the garden (the woman IS a rose)

Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower
(the rose at night IS the night flower bleeding...)

The consequence of this multiple mapping is that the reader identifies the whole mental space net (from line 9 on) as equivalent (or counterpart) to the “woman” element, and therefore each new idea contributing to this net will automatically be applied to the woman.

But then, there appears the moon (l.17) with the negative “nothing” which could float back as a conceptual barrier separating this new space from the previous ones. Those previous spaces have acquired values of beauty and pain, yet the moon space includes “nothing to be sad about”, this means the pain element must be removed from the “moon” mental space, since beauty is not a reason for sadness. For the moment it seems fairly clear that this new space opposes the very complex “woman” space we have previously built up, especially when certain *distance* is suggested straightforwardly by the word “staring” in line 18:

¹¹ A metaphor is understood as cognitive mapping between the generic structures of two ICMs or mental spaces which results in conceptual equivalence: such as the basic conventional metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY or the idiosyncratic metaphor A WOMAN IS A ROSE.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

6. Moons do not bleed but crackle: a final look at the moon.

Let's end now where our paper began, looking at the moon through the eyes of the speakers in "Sad Steps" and "Edge". A white and hard moon (it seems) staring from the distance: "the hardness and the brightness and the plain / Far reaching singleness of that wide stare" (SS, ll.14-15) "staring from her hood of bone" (E, l.18). It is interesting that such different attitudes towards their own environments converge in such similar ideas:

- The speaker in Larkin's "Sad Steps" is looking at the nightly landscape from an *everyman* position "groping back to bed after a piss" (l.1) adopting an *amused* stance (towards the moonlighted scenery) for which the reader has not still found a reason. To the speaker the moon is "high and preposterous and separate" (l.10). Yet, for a moment he gave in to its romantic spell presenting itself as "Lozenge of Love!" and "Medallion of Art!" (l.11), and though he rejected that momentary idea ("No", l.12), still he "shivers slightly, looking up there" (l.13).
- The speaker in Plath's "Edge" observes the image of a dead woman and ascribes to her opposing attributes often connected with pain and beautifulness. The mental space net the reader has created includes internal conflict towards the image: a terrible beautiful image which has been credited a rose's delicacy and a bleeding throat's pain. This complex image is balanced against the moon's: there seems to be no pain under the moon's hard shell ("her hood of bone," l.18), "nothing to be sad about" (l.17), bones do not bleed.

Thus, Larkin's speaker lives conflict in his own flesh. He experiences conflict between two very different responses to the moon he observes: a *romantic* inclination against which he fights (but which he cannot help suffering) on the one hand, and a *detached* stance from which he considers the moon on the other. But on the contrary Plath's speaker observes conflict in another human being, and compares it to the moon's apparently balanced state.

In "Sad Steps" conflict is solved through choice. The speaker clearly rejects any romantic inclination by that "No" (l.12). And although the moon is still perceived as "a reminder of the strength and pain / Of being young" (ll.16-17) the speaker is fully conscious of the passing of time, that youth and romance are just transitory and that this is something impossible to perceive from the moon's cyclic returning: "that it can't come again" (l.17). This is perhaps what the speaker finds amusing in the moon: the fact that it is a deceiving entity leading people to believe in some mysterious link connecting their aims, desires and strengths to its presence –whereas indeed the moon's endurance remains while a person's inevitably must fade away. The line at the very end (l.18) includes the word "undiminished", which suggests the *negation of some fading away* that can be both credited to the moon or to youth and strength as perceived by others. All this together (14-18) accounts for the two of the most salient conflicting values attributed to the speaker: his *amused* stance and his *sad* steps.

Conflict in “Edge” (ll.1-16) is first counterbalanced by the appearance of the moon with “nothing to be sad about, / Staring from her hood of bone.” (ll.17-18). But then the reader discovers that this absence of sadness originates from familiarity with what provoked sadness in the now dead woman (“She is used to this sort of thing”, l.19). This means then that the moon element also manifests conflict –she is not sad but she has some reason for which she should feel sad. The moon can perhaps hide her suffering (her dark side) covering herself with a “hood of bone” and bones do not bleed, so pain will not be perceived by the onlooker. The values credited to the moon¹² can be also perceived as counterparts to those credited to the woman, since the moon not only possesses beauty but also some kind of hidden suffering.

But bones break and when this happens they crackle. Plath’s moon crackles (l.20), just like bones do. However, it is the moon’s dark/black side that makes the noise, giving away her hidden fragility through *sound*. The suffering experience is also suggested by tactile¹³ imagery following the crackle: “Her blacks crackle and *drag*” (l.20, our italics). Thus the moon, as well as the rose, is involved in a new metaphor (the WOMAN IS MOON metaphor) for it addresses the woman’s beauty and suffering, through equivalence.

The moon becoming a metaphor for the woman implies the following: whatever the speaker may say about the moon (the *source*) will be perceived by the reader as information added to the woman (the *target*), provided that this new conceptual structure can be accommodated into the complex “woman-pitcher-rose” mental space. This way the sensory imagery credited to the moon will contribute to the reader’s perception of the woman: the moon’s crackle gives her a *voice* and the drag a *burden*. An so, the woman –firstly appearing to the reader as a Greek goddess (ll.1-8)– will now be seen in a new light (a moon light), burdened with the weight of hidden suffering for which she finally finds a crackling voice.

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¹² Notice also the use of the feminine (*she*) when referring to the moon.

¹³ See footnote 10.

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