# ARTICLE

## The poem as complex blend: conceptual mappings of metaphor in Sylvia Plath's 'The Applicant'

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### Abstract

This article aims to show that Fauconnier and Turner's conceptual integration network or 'blending' theory can provide an integrated and coherent account of the cognitive mechanisms by which poetry is constructed and construed. Taking as its example Sylvia Plath's poem 'The Applicant', a poem already analyzed by Elena Semino from the perspectives of discourse, possible worlds, and schema theories, this article shows how Fauconnier and Turner's optimality constraints interact to provide a complex blending of conceptual metaphors in the poem that reveal the poet's own conflicted attitudes about marriage and the empty promises of a consumer society just four months before her suicide. Far from providing a new critical reading of the poem, the article makes explicit the implicit mappings that readers adopt in drawing conclusions about the poem that are shared by many literary critics.

Keywords: *blending, cognitive poetics, conceptual metaphor, optimality constraints*

### Introduction

The purpose of this article is twofold. The first objective is to describe the strategies and procedures a reader implicitly adopts to interpret a poem. I hope to show that the process of 'mapping' as developed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002) in their conceptual integration network theory, or 'blending', as it is commonly known, is not only fundamental to conceptualizations common to everyday discourse but also basic to the cognitive processing that takes place in both the construction and construal of poetry.

My second objective is metatheoretical. I do not wish to argue that the principles and methodologies outlined in blending are new to the study of poetry; philosophers and linguists and literary critics, after all, have been employing them since Aristotle first published the *Poetics*. Rather, I should like to suggest that blending theory makes explicit the conceptual tools we use in creating and interpreting literary texts.

This article, then, explores the ways blending can illuminate the processing of literary texts by applying the theory to the analysis of one poem.[1] In my discussion of Sylvia Plath's 'The Applicant', reproduced below, I show how it is possible to avoid a relentless subjectivity of interpretation. By tracing the labyrinthine connections created by the association of words and phrases and by mapping the concepts that emerge from those connections, it is possible, I claim,

to capture, however fleetingly, some sense of the poet's thoughts in the process of composition.

The Applicant[2]

    First, are you our sort of person?
    Do you wear
    A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
    A brace or a hook,
5   Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

    Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then
    How can we give you a thing?
    Stop crying.
    Open your hand.
10  Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

    To fill it and willing
    To bring teacups and roll away headaches
    And do whatever you tell it.
    Will you marry it?
15  It is guaranteed

    To thumb shut your eyes at the end
    And dissolve of sorrow.
    We make new stock from the salt.
    I notice you are stark naked.
20  How about this suit–

    Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
    Will you marry it?
    It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
    Against fire, and bombs through the roof.
25  Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

    Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
    I have the ticket for that.
    Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
    Well, what do you think of that?
30  Naked as paper to start

    But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
    In fifty gold.
    A living doll, everywhere you look.
    It can sew, it can cook,
35  It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image.
My boy, it's your last resort.
40    Will you marry it, marry it, marry it?


## 1 Conceptual blending as metatheory

My choice of 'The Applicant' is not arbitrary. In Semino's (1997) lucid account of what happens when three different interpretive theories are applied to literature, she describes 'The Applicant' as:

> a) a situation of discourse involving a speaker, a hearer, and a number of third-person referents within a particular communicative context; b) a state of affairs that are [*sic*] partly impossible if compared with the 'real' world; c) a cognitive construct that arises in interaction between the text and the reader's previous knowledge. (1997: 4)

Semino notes that applying each of these discourse, possible worlds, and schema theories to the poem provides some insight but also reveals weaknesses in the theories themselves (1997: 251–4). None of them, singly or together, quite accounts for what the poem is doing.

The success of discourse theory in describing the complex and deviant situation of the poem lies in its ability to capture identities, roles, and relations. Under discourse theory, the identities of the poem's two main participants are problematic. The addressee is presumably male, but why then the 'rubber breasts' asks Semino? Is the speaker male or female? Plural or singular? The roles each plays shift in the course of the poem. The speaker, Semino notes, at first commands but then asks and offers. The addressee at first is an applicant but then seems to have the power to accept or refuse, shifting the balance of power relations between the two participants. Discourse theory is powerful in being able to 'see' these identity, role, and relation dynamics of the poem, but it has no theoretical mechanism to explain how or why these happen.

The strength of possible worlds theory, according to Semino, lies in the rigor of its descriptions and categorizations which compare the world of the text to the 'real' world. It provides a scale of deviance which can be empirically measured, and highlights the oddity of the world of the poem. As Semino shows, the poem's world violates the logical relations of not only the real but all possible worlds: people can't marry suits, suits can't be shatterproof, rubber crotches are anomalous, and so forth. However, as Semino points out, possible worlds theory fails to 'account for the fact that ... the poem is effective precisely because of the oddly "mixed" situation it projects' (1997: 241). With its dependence on an objectivist view of reality, possible worlds theory lives in the world of logical relations and truth values and not in the world of conceptual metaphor. It

mistakenly assumes access to a 'real' world unencumbered by any conceptual filter. It has no way to account for the role the imaginative processes have on 'real' world perceptions, what the complex interrelations are between real and imagined worlds.

Schema theory, for its part, enables Semino to identify three 'conceptual frames' operating in the poem, described as the Interview, Sales Pitch, and Marriage schemas. The poem reveals conflicts as well as connections between these schemas. In order to account for the unusual ways the poem's different schemas are connected, Semino has to modify Cook's (1990, 1994) theory of schema refreshment. She notes that the poem requires readers to 'stretch' their schemas in order to accommodate its disturbingly extreme situation. The problem is similar to that presented by possible worlds theory: there is still no reference to the role of metaphor in schema theory.

Historically, schema theory represents early formulations that led to cognitive metaphor and conceptual integration theories. What it lacks is a theoretical mechanism to integrate the poem's main schemas. In contrast, blending provides a metalanguage by which the cognitive processing capabilities of mental space mappings can be described. As we run the various blends that make up the poem, what Fauconnier and Turner call 'optimality constraints' enable us to discover a coherence in the seemingly anomalous images presented, a coherence that emerges, not from an objective consistency in the real world, but as the result of processing the various metaphorical mappings that combine in the complex blend that is the poem.

## 2 Preliminaries: metaphor making meaning

We construct meaning by building what Fauconnier (1994) has termed 'mental spaces', temporary representations that recruit structure from many conceptual domains as well as local context. The 'meaning' that emerges from the mappings of these mental spaces should not be understood as a mental 'object' in the mind of the poet that is linguistically transmitted via the conduit metaphor (Reddy, 1978) to the mind of the reader. Rather, as Sinha (1999) has argued, meaning is an 'activity', the process of accomplishing an intersubjective, shared discourse by recruiting and integrating structures and relationships across multiple mental spaces. Meaning inheres neither in the reader nor in the text. Nor does it reside in the mind of the writer. Meaning is not a mental object that can 'reside' anywhere, but an ongoing, dynamic activity, constrained in its scope by the parameters of conceptualization and language. We are, however, trapped in our own metaphorical need to reify activity; thus, we invariably speak of meaning, as I do throughout this article, as though it were a static and permanent object, one that can be 'constructed' or 'construed'. Writing thus involves creating temporary and dynamic mental spaces or representations that 'construct' meaning through various processes of composing, identifying, integrating, unpacking,

conceptualizing, and so on. Reading involves the same conceptual tasks in 'construing' meaning from the text.

Using the same cognitive processes to interpret a poem does not mean that we are recreating the same thought processes of the poet who wrote it. It does mean that the underlying conceptual work is the same, as we recruit structure from many domains and contexts to build the mental spaces that enable meaning to occur. From the cognitive perspective, meaning is activated by mappings that are motivated by the focus of attention, the picking out of figure against the grounding of our embodied experience, the corroboration of different significatory systems, all of which are dependent on the particular contextual, cultural domains of the utterance, the utterer, and the receiver at a given point in time (Freeman, forthcoming). Blending theory gives us a language to describe what it is we do when we read a poem. It enables us to recognize how and why certain readings are possible, and it also provides a means by which we can reject impossible or implausible readings.

In like manner, the word 'metaphor', as used in this article, refers not to the linguistic figure but to the conceptualizing structure that underlies it. Whereas earlier metaphor theories introduced two cross-space mappings (variously called 'tenor and vehicle' or 'source and target'), conceptual integration networks involve at least four spaces (and sometimes more): two input spaces that contribute the elements for the metaphor, a generic space, which shares structure with the input spaces, and a blended space which has 'emergent structure', something that exists in none of the other spaces but which emerges from the blend. Although not all blends are metaphorical, all metaphors at some stage in their development involve blending.

The poem as a whole creates what I call a 'complex blend'. A complex blend refers to the process by which multiple blends create 'optimality crossovers' into each other's input spaces when 'running' the blend. A poem is also a complex blend in the sense that its possible interpretations are not always immediately apparent; the reader must actively work to understand the nature and relations of its cross-space connections. These connections are complicated by the ways in which blending principles compete with each other as blends are composed, completed, and elaborated. The greater the number of spaces that contribute to a blend, the more likely the principles involved will compete with each other. In their analysis of blend structures, Fauconnier and Turner have identified five optimality principles and five optimality pressures that may interact and compete with each other in running the blend.[3] These constraints are the conceptual tools with which the reader works to understand a poem. In brief, the five principles are:

   integration (several events manipulated into a single unit);
   topology (the relation of elements across spaces);
   web (the creation of appropriate connections among spaces);
   unpacking (the capability of reconstructing the network connections from the blend);

good reason (the pressure to find significance for any element that appears in the blend);

and the five pressures are:

nondisintegration (neutralize projections and topological relations);
nondisplacement (do not disconnect web connections);
noninterference (avoid projections that defeat each other);
nonambiguity (do not create ambiguity that interferes with computation);
backward projection (avoid reconstructing a projection to an input that would disrupt the integration inherent in that input).

In what follows, I use these definitions of meaning, metaphor, and complex blending to explore the ways in which optimality constraints contribute to the analysis of Plath's poem 'The Applicant'.

### 3 Interpretation and analysis: running the blend

In 'The Applicant', marriage is portrayed as a packaged bill of goods for sale. Both these input spaces, sales and marriage, are themselves the result of blended spaces, the results of multiple metaphorical mappings. The strange quality of the poem arises from the different optimality constraints that operate in mapping the multiple blends. Because the poem includes multiple spaces which provide different topologies for the blend, some of which are integrated and some not, it is an example of an extremely complex conceptual blend, the result of multiple blendings that are projected from the two main schemas of sales and marriage and several additional spaces that draw their imagery from the stereotypical (or, in Lakoff's term, idealized), cultural Anglo-American model of the 1950s.[4]

After two world wars and a global depression, the 1950s regained an economic and political equilibrium that saw a rise in consumerism and social benefits, a belief in democratic institutions as a means for progress, and a faith in applied science and technology that could put men on the moon, create unlimited energy, and defend Western notions of democracy against communism and the Cold War. This idealized cultural model of Anglo-American institutions as benevolent, progressive, inherently good is the backdrop for Plath's satirical attack. By blending the promises held out by the institution of marriage with the empty promises of social benefits, civil defense, and commercialism, Plath exposes the false values of a consumer society. Although the poem 'has been read primarily as a blistering attack on modern advertising techniques' (Perloff, 1990: 187),[5] it is more globally a satirical attack on the idealized cultural model of the 1950s and an indictment of attitudes toward marriage that reduce women to objects that exist only to serve the various needs of men. It was written, according to Plath's biographers (Bassnett, 1987; Stevenson, 1989), only a few days after her decision to divorce Ted Hughes.

The poem as a whole (see above) has a five-part structure, both in the number of lines to each stanza and in its rhetorical shape which follows the pattern of the sales schema:

(1)  establishing a need (lines 1–10);
(2)  making an offer (lines 10–17);
(3)  accessorizing (lines 19–25);
(4)  examining the goods (lines 26–35); and
(5)  final pitch (lines 36–40).

Within this frame, the poem is also structured by a series of threes which invoke Anglican church banns, the language of the Anglican wedding ceremony, the institution of marriage, and, by extension, the biblical texts on which the idealized cultural model of Anglican marriage is based. The poem's overlapping triadic divisions are structurally complex. The question 'Will you marry it?' is asked in three places in the poem, in lines 14, 22, and 40. Its threefold repetition in the last line both resolves the poem's triadic structure and directly invokes the church banns, announced in the parish three times before a wedding to ask 'if there is any just cause why these two should not be joined in holy matrimony' (*Book of Common Prayer*). The question represents the three parts of the poem that introduce social benefits (lines 1–17), civil defense (lines 19–25), and consumerism (lines 26–35) as topological elements for blending. Each of these parts has its own three-part structure, ordered in each case by eligibility/need, promise, and guarantee, and representing the three references to hand, body, and head. The language of the prototypical marriage ceremony in the Anglican church asks the couple to take each other 'for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health … till death do us part' (*Book of Common Prayer*). These promises provide the elements for the mappings from the marriage space into the blend that is the poem.

Reading the poem involves running the blend. One input space provides the topological frame for the blend, projecting the need, promise, and guarantee structure of the sales routine. The other provides topological details which specify the values of roles in the organizing frame, importing the language of the marriage arrangement into the blend. For example, the sales question 'Will you buy it?' structures the frame for the blend, while the marriage space provides the topological element 'marry'. Each of the poem's three main scenarios – hand, suit, and doll – creates its own multiple blended spaces, in which the elements that are imported from the input spaces are brought together, but still preserve elements from their own spaces that conflict in the blends. This results in a feeling of dissonance in the reader and produces the ironies that give the poem its satirical tone.

When she read this poem for the BBC, Plath introduced its speaker as 'an executive, a sort of exacting super-salesman. He needs to be sure the applicant for his marvelous product really needs it and will treat it right' (Hughes, 1981: 293, n.182). The poem's opening line expresses this need: 'First, are you our sort

of person?'. As each of the three parts makes clear, the 'sort of person' the speaker is referring to is someone who lacks something, is empty-handed, naked, empty-headed. Both input spaces share generic structure with respect to need and eligibility. The inventory of inanimate appendages or 'false' parts for a human being in the opening lines both sets up the tone of the poem, in which people's needs will be supplied by material products and women will be seen as functional objects, and serves to introduce the first set of metaphorical mappings.

The introductory scenario (lines 1–7) sets up in a blend of its own the dominating relationships that will be elaborated through the three subsequent scenarios. The interview space recruits its structure from the institution of social welfare benefits, where the applicant for the benefit must show eligibility by virtue of need; in this instance, disability by virtue of artificial replacements, supports for human body parts, or evidence that 'something's missing'. The fragmentation of the human being that occurs in this section prepares for the subsequent metaphor of woman as possessed object, a product that can be given or sold. The fact that the applicant in question does not have any need for the items listed ironically underscores the victimization of consumers by a powerful society that artificially creates need for its products.

The theory of mental spaces provides a means by which the construing of meaning may be traced. The reader who first encounters Plath's poem is introduced, by means of the title, to a generalized contextual situation that involves someone applying for something. The opening line, 'First, are you our sort of person?', indicates the existence of a corporate 'we' in an interview situation, as if this might be a job interview.[6] Given this context, expectations are set up as to how the interview might proceed. In prototypical job interviews, questions to determine whether the applicant is the 'right' person would normally explore the applicant's qualifications for the position – can you type? take shorthand? use a computer? – and flexibility – are you prepared to take a cut in salary? work overtime? move to another city? – thus setting up positive epistemological spaces that anticipate 'yes' answers to determine a 'good fit' of applicant to position. This kind of hypothetical space is quite different from, say, that set up in the situation where the applicant is an immigrant applying for a US visa, where the questions asked – are you or were you ever a member of the Communist Party? Do you plan to practice prostitution? commit perjury? – set up negative epistemological spaces that anticipate 'no' answers. In Plath's poem, given these epistemological contexts for an 'applicant' mental space, lines 2–6 set up a counterfactual space, in which the presumption is that the interviewer is exploring disabilities that would impede the applicant's chances, since all the items mentioned are negative attributes. The applicant's answer 'no' thus confirms the counterfactual nature of the interview space, in that no such disabilities exist that would prevent a good fit. However, the response of the interviewer contradicts the counterfactual reading: 'No, no? Then / How can we give you a thing?' (lines 6–7) with the consequence that readers must retrace the conceptual garden path they have been led down and reorganize their mental

spaces into an alternative construal, from, possibly, job interview to welfare benefits. The effect of this disruption of conceptualizing meaning across possible spaces is to disorient the reader and upset the prototypical assumptions made in attempting to construe meaning, a disruption that reflects the disruption of social attitudes in the poem itself.

### 3.1 Licensing stories: Adam's rib

Metaphor interpretations are motivated by the reader's background cultural knowledge and ideological commitments (Eubanks, 1999). In this poem, the reader assumes that the speaker and applicant are both male, though only the applicant is identified as such at the end. There is no 'objective' reason in the opening stanzas for assuming male gender for the applicant or speaker. Women can and do also wear prosthetic attachments and show the stitches of surgery. They, like men, are consumers of products. The reader assumes from the outset that the applicant is male because of the prototypical attitudes in our culture toward male and female roles. In a marriage, it is women who prototypically make tea, cook, sew, and 'look after' their men. Similarly, in Anglo-American society salesmen are prototypically male, and it is the male who has the power and the authority to give the woman away in marriage. Both sales and marriage spaces thus recruit structure to the blend from conventional knowledge domains that interprets the applicant and speaker as male.

Applying the optimality constraint of 'good reason', and considering the subsequent emergence of biblical metaphors for marriage, the reader might even account for the phrase 'stitches to show something's missing' by invoking the story of Eve being fashioned from Adam's rib (Genesis 2:21–3). To do so, the reader construes the phrase according to a somewhat different set of mappings. Under one reading, the 'stitches' and 'something's missing' occupy the same hypothetical space, so that 'something's missing' if and only if 'stitches' are present. In the biblical reading, by contrast, 'something's missing' is part of Adam's original reality space, and the question projects a hypothetical space in which 'stitches' may or may not exist to show evidence of the missing thing (Eve). Resolution of such ambiguous expressions is motivated by the reader's need to seek poetic coherence. Such literary allusions as the biblical reference here are frequently part of the licensing stories literary critics use to motivate metaphorical mappings, and such stories are convincing only if the critic can show that in conforming to the optimality constraints of web, integration, unpacking, topology, and good reason, they contribute to the overall coherence of the interpretation.

In other words, the metaphorical mappings are possible, not because of what the language of the poem says in itself but because of what it triggers in our own conceptual mappings of the world as we know it and our own knowledge domains, mappings that are constrained by the optimality principles and

pressures of conceptual integration. These deeply entrenched notions are recruited for on-line projection as we interpret the poem's three scenarios of the hand, the suit, and the doll, to which I now turn.

### 3.2 The hand

In the United States in the 1950s, the dominant metaphors governing men's and women's relationships in the ceremonies and rites surrounding a prototypical marriage were generally taken for granted. 'Who giveth this women to be married to this man?' asks the priest.[7] A man asks (applies to, and is therefore an 'applicant') a father for his daughter's hand in marriage. 'Hand' synecdochically stands for the woman, perceived as an object owned by a man who can give her into the possession of another man. 'How can we give you a thing?' asks the speaker of the poem. Within these metaphors lie already the components of barter and exchange.

    The mappings for the first scenario of the hand are as follows:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| hand | ⟶ | woman |
| | synecdoche for | |
| | ⟶ | work |
| | metonymy for | |
| empty-handed | ⟶ | man |
| | synecdoche for | |
| | ⟶ | lacking something |
| | metaphor for | |
| joining hands | ⟶ | uniting two people as one |
| | synecdochic metaphor for | |
| thing | ⟶ | woman as product |
| | metaphor for | |

These mappings provide a series of spaces that contribute to the multiple blends that become the input spaces for the sales and marriage scenarios.

    In the interview/benefits space, where the applicant has no need for a physical false hand, 'a hook' (line 4), his hand is construed as an open, empty container, and a whole host of metaphorical meanings rush in. To be 'empty-handed' is to be without something, to have nothing to offer; to 'open [one's] hand' is to prepare to receive something; to present 'a hand' is not only a synecdoche for a woman but a metonymy for work or help as in the phrases 'to lend a hand', 'give me a hand', 'farm-hand'. In the marriage space, the hand of the woman that is offered to the man is not only herself as an object but also her work as provider ('bring teacups'), reliever/fixer ('roll away headaches'), and obedient servant ('do whatever you tell it'). The injunctions to the woman in the traditional

marriage service, to honor and obey, establish man as lord and master, woman as subject and servant. These are the promises of product and wife, and they come with a lifetime guarantee, until death. The physical and real image of the thumb used to close the lids of the dead man's eyes reinforces the idea of the hand/woman as physical object, one that can 'dissolve of sorrow' at the end.

In the complex blend created by lines 8–14, the organizing frame is recruited from four spaces which share the generic space relations of transfer of an object from owner to recipient. The topological elements of the sales space include a provider who has something, a receiver who wants something, and the product to be given. The elements of the betrothal (or asking-for-the-hand-in-marriage) space include a father, an applicant, and a daughter. The elements of the marriage rite (or giving the hand in marriage) space include a father, a daughter, and a groom. In addition, the sales and marriage rite spaces include the role of facilitator, with the values of salesman in the sales space and priest in the marriage rite space. A further mental space is created in lines 8–9, in which the applicant is infantilized into a child who will be offered a treat to 'Stop crying'.

The blend involves a discourse scenario between a speaker and an addressee about an object. The object is the treat in the infantilizing space, product in the sales space, daughter in the betrothal space, and bride in the marriage rite space. The addressee is the child, customer, applicant, and groom in the four respective spaces. All these mappings are strongly integrated in the blend and thus preserve optimality constraints. The cross-space mappings are not, however, always integrated in the multiple blends. Although sharing organizing frame facilitates topological connections, and internal connections within a space can strengthen connections in the blend, not all the possible metonymic connections are projected into the blend created by lines 8–14. It is the speaker's identity in the various spaces that causes slippage in the blend. In the sales space, the speaker is the salesman who represents the company or owner of the product. In the marriage rite space, the speaker is the priest who represents the church or God. In the infantilizing space, the speaker is the adult who represents the provider. Both the marriage rite and infantilizing spaces may be understood to include the further metonymic projections of God the father and provider/father. Because marriage is represented as the transfer of ownership from one man to another, the owner in the sales space is connected to the father in the marriage space. According to the optimality principles, these connections should be strongly integrated in the blend. But they are not. The father in the infantilizing space is the father of the child, not of the product to be given, and is therefore not projected onto the speaker in the blend. Likewise, the 'father' represented by the priest in the marriage rite space is not the father of the bride. And it is not the father of the betrothal space that is projected onto the speaker in the blend, but rather the salesman/priest of the sales and marriage rite spaces. What is remarkable about lines 8–14 is that the father image in the input spaces is not projected into the blend. The absence of the father in the blend reinforces the sense of the couple at the mercy of an indifferent, inhuman society, where the

salesman/speaker becomes the personification of the empty promises of the 1950s. Underlying this blend are the conflicted attitudes of Plath about her own father, who died in 1940 when Plath was only eight. Plath's poem, like Plath's wedding, is marked by the absent father.[8]

Another complex example of optimality constraints occurs with the hand itself. There are actually two hands: the empty hand of the applicant and the hand of the woman. The sales space provides the blend with the image of a physical hand, open, empty, and waiting to receive the object. The marriage space also imports some topological structure into the blend by providing the image of two hands joined in marriage. But the hand from the marriage space synecdochically represents the woman herself, so that in the blend, the synecdoche compresses the image, and the woman becomes the object that will fill the hand.[9] At the same time, this hand also metonymically stands for work, as has been previously noted. In the blend, the hand that is open and empty remains as a literal, physical hand, whereas the other hand is perceived metaphorically. This provides the feeling of dissonance that will be increased in lines 16–17, when the metaphorical hand reverts to the physical thumb that literally closes the eyes in death, but then immediately becomes metonymic-metaphorical again as it 'dissolve[s] of sorrow'. These rapid and continuous juxtapositions of the literal and the metaphoric create a dynamic instability of image that serves to undermine the stolid presuppositions of the idealized cultural models that are being attacked in the poem.

### 3.3 The suit

Like any good salesman, having matched product to customer, the speaker turns to what the applicant needs in order to make good use of the product, what is known in the jargon of sales as accessorizing. It is as though the customer is considering a Harley-Davidson, and the salesman urges the need for a motorcycle outfit to go with, or the purchase involves scuba diving equipment, in which case a wetsuit would be an important accessory. In the poem, the suit, like the hand, takes on several levels of metaphorical mappings and is described in series of threes, in terms of both its appearance ('Black and stiff, but not a bad fit' [line 21]) and its function ('waterproof, shatterproof, proof / Against fire, and bombs through the roof' [lines 23–4]). As Semino notes, on the physical, most basic level, the suit represents the bridegroom's outfit which, ironically, becomes also associated with the death suit (and, through the observation of nakedness, related to the 'birthday suit', thus invoking the triad of birth, marriage, and death). But it also metaphorically maps onto other kinds of suits and other kinds of purposes. First, there is the protective function, as in a suit of armor, and the promise becomes hyperbolic, as if it could indeed be impervious to any outside forces, such as drowning, breaking, destroying, all images that can be projected metaphorically onto the condition of a failed marriage. The accidental

connections of a protective device and sexual relations invoked by the marriage space are opportunistically recruited to increase optimality in the blend. The suit thus becomes a covering, a protection, not only in the normal everyday meaning of *suit*, but in the metaphorical extension of the condom, which indeed must be waterproof, shatterproof, and 'bomb' (baby)-proof.

The mappings for the suit space are as follows:

suit               ——————————▶ protective device
              metaphor for
              ——————————▶ marriage
              metonymy for
              ——————————▶ woman
              metaphor for

The metaphors of MARRIAGE IS A SUIT and A SUIT IS A PROTECTIVE DEVICE are projected into a blended space to produce the idea that marriage is indestructible. The suit that is being offered in the sales space is imported into the blend with the topological values of protective armor. The suit in the marriage space is ostensibly the bridegroom's suit but, as we have seen, metaphorizes quickly into other possibilities. In the blend, dissonance is created by the fact that the suit projected from the sales space is supposed to protect one from death, whereas the suit projected from the marriage space becomes the one in which the man will be buried.

At an even more abstract level, the 'suit' represents the applicant's courtship (specifically, 'the solicitation for a woman's hand' in its *OED* definition). Whereas the hand and the head are perceived as containers, and in the poem iconically surround the suit in the center, the suit becomes the container that the body fills. Here, the suit as woman represents both the biblical notion that, in marriage, a man 'shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh' (Genesis 2:24) and the sexual notion of the woman's body being a container for the man's. As in the first section of the poem, the lifetime guarantee is given, with the introduction, this time, not of death itself, but of burial.

The multiple spaces form both symmetric and asymmetric networks, with some spaces contributing elements of an organizing frame as well as topological features to the blend, and some contributing organizing frame and some not. Line 25, for example, 'Believe me, they'll bury you in it', takes from the sales space the fact that men when they die are dressed for burial in a suit, and from the marriage space the idea that marriage is until 'death do us part'. It takes its rhetorical force from the schema of the sales space with its lifetime guarantee, but becomes ironic in its juxtaposition with the promise that it will protect against death, a promise opportunistically reinforced by the protective armor space. In line 25, since married partners are not buried with their spouses at death, and protective armor is supposed to protect against death not cause it, the organizing frame for the blend is clearly being projected from the sales space of suit-buying for an occasion. This raises optimality questions of what topological

features of the input spaces get projected to the blend, and whether these are integrated or not when they are. In lines 20–5, the idea that the applicant is invited to consider the married state as one in which he will be provided with an invincible shield, even to the grave, arises from the emergent structure of the blend and not from any of the input spaces.

### 3.4 The doll

At this point most salesmen would think their job done, but not Plath's. Her salesman wants to be sure not only that the product is needed and will be used well by the applicant, but also that they fit each other. The speaker/salesman observes even more closely the type of applicant/customer he is dealing with, one who is empty-headed.[10] Anticipating, as any good salesman would, the desires of an empty-headed customer, the speaker transforms the obedient servant of the first section into the living doll of the last, a good match, given the cultural prejudice that women, like dolls, have no brains.[11] The eye imagery in the poem, which has been surreptitiously recurring throughout the poem ('A glass eye' in line 3, 'your eyes' in line 16) now surfaces as the applicant is invited to 'look' (line 33) at the offered product. In particular, the woman as doll metaphor refers to the woman's appearance, her physical attraction, that an empty-headed male would go for. The nakedness, as she steps out of her closet, maps to the previous biblical reference, that 'they were both naked, the man and his wife' (Genesis 2: 25), and is related by contiguous suggestion to the suit, since items of clothing are stored in closets. These are accidental connections that are exploited opportunistically in the blend.

The empty head of the third scenario, though ostensibly paralleling the empty hand of the first, is not operating in the same way as a simple container metaphor. Rather, it functions as a metaphor for the man who thinks looks are everything, who values the physical and material acquisitions of a lifetime. The salesman's 'ticket' is thus offered as the means by which the applicant will receive the advantages accrued, the increasing value of an investment in the marriage arrangement.[12]

The mappings are as follows:

empty head → man
synecdochic metaphor for

doll → woman
metaphor for

paper → first year of marriage
metaphor for

silver → 25th wedding anniversary
metaphor for

gold        ———————————————————→  50th wedding anniversary

              metaphor for

The promise of this product, this toy, represents the three milestones of marriage. Ironically, the only reference to the woman's gender in the poem does not refer to the doll (who is an 'it') but to the wedding anniversaries, like the reference a man makes to his car, as 'she', or to some tool, as in 'she'll do'. The mapping is to the material accrual of interest, of paper (first year), silver (25th year), and gold (50th year), as this product rises in value with age. Like its previous representation as a hand, this living doll will likewise be provider ('cook'), fixer ('sew'), and communicator (the doing 'whatever you tell it' becoming the 'talk' of the doll at the end). The threefold repetition of 'talk, talk, talk' brings closure to this part of the poem, as well as setting up the irony of whether this is what the applicant really wants, and foreshadows the threefold repetition of the closing lines.

The poem's concluding stanza brings together all the thematic mappings of the previous three sections. In three lines (36–8), the speaker sums up the advantages of his product. The hand and the doll both work; there is nothing wrong with the suit; the 'hole' reflects the empty containers of hand and head; the 'poultice' (of which more later) represents both the suit and the tears; the 'eye' is the applicant's, and the 'image' is the hand, the suit, the doll. Line 39 provides the guarantee of the previous sections, with the pun on 'last resort', meaning the last place of residence, death, and also the offer of the final opportunity for the applicant to answer the question, 'will you marry it?'.

### 3.5 Good reason: 'mak[ing] new stock from the salt'

So far, the blends seem clear enough. However, there remains the as yet unanalyzed line that sticks out like a sore thumb, 'We make new stock from the salt'. The line is sore-thumbed on several counts.[13] First is its placement at the center of the main part of the poem.[14] Second, the line is an anomalous intrusion into the poem's mapping scenarios, since it is the only line in which the salesman/speaker says something about himself and what his company, the owner of the product, does. The salesman/speaker of the poem represents a company/corporation which is the actual owner of the product and thus by metaphorical mapping the father of the bride. The line creates its own multiple blend with three different mappings. One mapping plays on the association of the word 'salt' with money, and as a medium of exchange, thus introducing the other meaning of 'stock' as commodity (as in the phrase 'stock exchange').[15] Another mapping is directly associated with the sales scenario, with 'stock' referring to the accumulation of products available. The most incongruous mapping is, of course, the gruesome image that results from the blend of the metaphorical expression to 'dissolve in tears' (associated with the image of eyes in the previous lines) with the literal image of rendering the woman's bones into (soup)

stock, a sideways, perhaps subliminal, reference to Plath's descriptions of her father as Nazi fascist and the events of the Holocaust.[16]

Third, the sound patterns of the line serve to draw all the separate parts of the poem together in what I can only describe as synaptic leaps.[17] For example, the sound in 'stock' echoes that in 'stark', and 'salt' is placed in rhyming position with 'suit', thus drawing together the transition from the offer of the hand which, made into new stock, becomes the suit of the second scenario. Furthermore, the word 'sort' begins the poem in the opening eligibility question, and ends it in line 39, before the final thrice repeated question of marriage, in the repetition of the word 're-sort', which, as previously noted, puns on last chance and death.

The [s] and [t] sounds are reversed in the word 'poultice', which, as Norton (1996) notes, 'is continued from "Berck-Plage", where "the sun's poultice draws" on a wound and the sky "pours into a hole like plasma", connoting an emptiness that must be filled – through natural processes in "Berck-Plage"; through consumerism in "the Applicant"'. Reversal of [t] and [s] also occurs and surrounds [k] in the phrase 'It works', and the stanza both begins and ends with the word 'it', which in its reference to the woman/wife reinforces the metaphor of woman as product. These associations of sounds repeat elsewhere to link the otherwise incongruous parts of the poem together and to highlight the grotesqueness of line 18.[18] To 'make new stock from the salt' is both the exploitation of commodity and person and an expression of the callousness of a culture focused only on material profit. The line is the 'eye of the poem' or central pivot on which the poem turns.[19] In the end, both man and woman in Plath's poem are the victims of Plath's 'super-salesman' who, in the ultimate blend of the poem, represents the absent father and the patriarchy of 1950s Anglo-American society.

Four months to the day after she wrote 'The Applicant', Plath committed suicide. Whatever the immediate cause, her poem reveals her recognition of and refusal to accept the empty promises of the society in which she lived, her inability to compromise. Sadly, the only 'lifetime' guarantee of such a society is death for both purchaser and product, man and woman.

The poem's anomalous character arises from the complex multiple blends that demand a great deal of conceptual work from the reader. In this article, I have merely sketched the kinds of conceptual integration networks that occur in the poem. As the reader runs the many blends, the biases of background presuppositions such as that of giving a woman in marriage or the promises and guarantees that accompany a sale provide seepage into the blends that are then opportunistically elaborated through cross-space connections, fusion or non-integration of elements, and backward projections. The process is dynamic, with optimality constraints motivating the reader to create coherence from the many dissonant elements that intermingle in the poem's fabric.

Further exploration of the synaptic connections in this poem are beyond the scope of this article but may very well illuminate the conceptual processes of Plath's own thoughts and emotions. In her poem 'Berck-Plage', for example,

which, as already noted, contains the image of the poultice, Plath relates other images that recur in 'The Applicant':

Things, things–
Tubular steel wheelchairs, aluminum crutches,
Such salt-sweetness.

In an illuminating essay on 'Berck-Plage', Folsom argues for

the power of [Plath's] images to re-fashion her sense of self by ridding her mind of self-destructive garbage. It is the act of image-making – horrific as well as beatific images – that liberates the troubled mind of the modern artist and enables him or her to go on living. (1991: 00)

It may be stretching too much to claim that the anomalous character of Plath's recurring images in her late poems directly reflects her losing struggle to hold onto life through the creative imagination, but the mappings traced in this essay indicate an attempt to exercise some control over her conflicting attitudes about her father and the emotional effects of the experience of marriage and divorce.

Although we can never capture the actual thoughts and feelings that the poet was experiencing when writing a poem, exploring the structure and content of complex multiple blending may provide us with access to a mode of poetical construction that 'emphasizes the blend as a real-time simulation, less a structure than the trapeze artist's fleeting linkage of hands'.[20]

## Notes

1   An earlier version of this essay was presented in the Literature and Cognition Forum at MLA, 27–31 December 1998. I am grateful to Holly Norton and Jack Folsom for information relating to Plath, and to Donald C. Freeman, Jack Folsom, Norman Holland, Reuven Tsur, and Svitlana Zhabotynska for their helpful comments and suggestions. I should note that many of the interpretations offered in this article are commonplace to Plath criticism; my objective is not to produce a new reading but to show the cognitive mechanisms at work. Another approach, beyond the scope of this article, would be to analyze existing critical readings to reveal their mapping strategies (Freeman, 2002).

2   The original manuscripts of the poem are housed in the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Neilson Library, at Smith College. The text of the poem in this article is taken from the typescript of the double-spaced carbon copy of the version that may have been the one sent for publication to the *New Yorker* (which rejected it). The text reflects faithfully Plath's original typescripts of the first line 'First, are you our sort of person?'. Both English and American publications of *Ariel* insert an 'a' before 'person', an error that may have been inadvertently introduced by whoever transcribed the poem for the *Ariel* collection. In the original handwritten (holograph) manuscript Plath starts the first stanza with multiple changes and then draws a line beneath the stanza and starts the poem again, with several changes and crossings out which indicate her thought processes at the time of composition. The three typescripts are clean copies with changes in punctuation and format. The poem was first published in the *London Magazine* on 17 January 1963. It correctly transcribes the first line without the 'a', but includes the exclamation point after line 25, "Believe me, they'll bury you in it!", which occurs in all the previous manuscripts except the double-spaced carbon copy. In Plath's own reading of the poem for the BBC in 1962, she reads the first line as she wrote it (without the 'a') and her inflection at the end of line 25 is

not exclamatory. I am grateful to Associate Curator Karen V. Kukil for drawing my attention to the existence of the manuscripts, and helping me track down the history of the 'a' insertion and the exclamation point.

3    Fauconnier and Turner's optimality constraints and pressures share features but also differ in certain respects from other analytical methods of meaning construal. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the relationship and differences between blending and other theories of meaning. See, in particular, Fauconnier and Turner (2002) and the blending website for explication and articles on blending: http://www.blending.stanford.edu.

4    The term 'idealized cultural model' is related to Lakoff's (1987) 'idealized cognitive model'. Here, it refers to the taken-for-granted cultural knowledge domain conventionally held about the 1950s.

5    When the poem appeared in the *Ariel* poems in Ted Hughes's edited posthumous edition, it followed a poem ('Sheep in Fog') which was not on Plath's own prepared list for the volume (see Hughes, 1981: 295), thus, according to Perloff, encouraging an interpretation that emphasizes advertising.

6    In the holograph, Plath began the first line, 'First, are you that sort of person', and then struck out the 'that' and wrote 'our' above it. When she started over again, she wrote 'First, are you the sort of person', and then wrote 'our' over 'the'. Along with the absence of 'a' (see note 2), the change to 'our' draws the applicant (and indirectly the reader) more closely into relationship with the speaker (Haiman, 1985; Freeman, 1996).

7    Even today, this notion is still pretty much entrenched in the rites of the Protestant marriage ceremony. In 1999, the Methodist Church became the first mainstream church in Britain to adopt an alternate liturgy for the marriage service, which 'allows both bride and groom to be "presented for marriage" by a friend or relative, enabling brides to opt out of being "given away"' (*Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 28 February 1999, 10).

8    Literary critics have noted the conflation of Plath's feelings of having been abandoned by her father (through death) and her husband (through unfaithfulness and separation), both of which are reflected in the absent father and absent husband in the poem's blending. Axelrod (1990: 31) quotes Plath's note in her journal that "Ted … is a substitute for my father."

9    Fauconnier and Turner discuss metonymic compression. I am using the term synecdoche here as being the more accurate terminology for the traditional rhetorical figure. However, both synecdoche and metonymy work in the same way in examples like these.

10   In Plath's original holograph, she first wrote the lines, "Say, maybe you're too shy to say it / Maybe you're too shy to say it / But I see," and then crossed them out. They reinforce the idea that Plath was conceiving a particularly solicitous salesman.

11   The image of woman as doll is traced by the *OED* as far back as 1778 with Fanny Burney's comment in *Evelina*: 'As to the women, why they are mere dolls'. It is not likely that Plath also had an obsolete meaning for the term in mind, but it is fascinating to note (*OED*) that 'doll' once meant 'the palm of the hand'.

12   The line, 'I have the ticket for that' invokes the slang expression, 'that's just the ticket', which refers to the appropriateness and benefit of what is wanted, and is often used in sales exchanges (D. C. Freeman, personal communication). The word 'ticket' also may invoke eligibility as an entitlement for some service or privilege, the association of goods received on credit, or the rights claimed in a stock exchange (*OED*), all compatible within the poem's world.

13   'Sore-thumbing' is Ross's (n. d.) term for phrases or lines that stick out, for a poetic reason, from a poem's textual and conceptual interplays.

14   The sentence occurs in line 18 of the poem, the exact center of the first 35 lines, which end in the thrice repeated verb, 'talk, talk, talk'. It divides these lines evenly into two 17-line parts, which themselves divide into 7 and 10. In the first part, line 7 asks the question 'How can we give you a thing?', which sets up the entire scenario of the poem and introduces the first set of mappings. Line 17 ends this section with the guarantee of the wife dissolving in sorrow at her husband's death. The second part begins the second set of mappings in line 19 which ends after seven lines with the guarantee that 'they'll bury you in it', followed by the 10 lines of the third set of mappings.

15   See Toolan's (1993) discussion of the etymology of salt as related to salary in his analysis of Graham Hill's poem, 'Of Commerce and Society'.

16   Plath wrote the poem 'Daddy', in which she says 'I have had to kill you' (line 6) and which includes images of the Holocaust as well as body parts, the day after she wrote 'The Applicant'.

Many critics read 'Daddy' as a not so disguised reference to Plath's husband, Ted Hughes, who is considered to have deceived, betrayed, and finally abandoned the poet (see note 8). Plath makes similar references to the plundering of bodies in other poems. See, in particular, 'Lady Lazarus', written later the same month, which is a contemplation of her earlier attempts at suicide.

17  Another kind of synaptic leap may be occurring with the mention of 'rubber' in line 5, echoing via routine knowledge the reading of 'suit' as 'condom', called a 'rubber' in American English slang, and the rubber dolls familiar to English children in the 1950s.

18  A full analysis of the sound patterns of the poem are beyond the scope of this article, but note, for example, the [k] and [t] association repeating in the word 'closet' and the [s] and [t] in the word 'sweetie' of the third scenario, thus drawing together the references to the suit and the doll.

19  The 'eye of the poem' is Bai Jinpen's term for Ross's 'sore-thumbing'.

20  These words, from my abstract for the 1998 MLA Literature and Cognition Forum, were provided by Francis Steen. I am grateful to him for revising my original wording.

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