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Achieving Visual Literacy: An Analysis of the Symbolization of Frida Kahlo's Agonized Poetry

增強視覺書寫能力：芙烈達・卡蘿「極苦詩篇」的象徵分析

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Abstract

It is argued that the present study is important to art education as it stresses the significance of art students' visual literacy and their ability to comprehend the deeper symbolic meanings within an image. This study provides art students with adequate prior knowledge of Frida Kahlo's artworks to help them form a stronger knowledge-base and to develop their interpretive skills of artworks. Accordingly, this study examines the *polysemic* symbolization of Frida Kahlo's "agonized poetry". The findings show that Kahlo attempted to avert chronic feelings of *fragmentation* by using *cohesive functions* in order to reduce the negative effects of personal tragedy and heartbreak. Kahlo's *motherhood* symbolization reveals her fragmented self as in her numerous depictions of miscarriages and abortions, and in her fears of infertility. Her *ethno-symbolization* underscores her role of a national motherhood figure. Kahlo adopts the role of the *Perfect Mother* in her maternal relationship with her infantile-like husband. Kahlo's preoccupation with mirrored self portraits reflects the separation phase with her mother and also underlines her self-affirmation to her existence. Moreover, her agonized symbolization of *womanhood* underscores her femininity, her desire to be loved, and as a woman betrayed by those whom she most loved. Kahlo's symbolization of flight underpins her desire to be released from her agonized reality.

Keywords: fragmentation, identity, motherhood, symbolism, womanhood, visual literacy

摘要

此論文說明「象徵」對藝術教育的重要性，探討藝術系學生視覺書寫能力以及他們是否具備了解畫作深層含義之能力。本文提供充足的芙烈達· 卡蘿（Frida Kahlo）畫作的先前知識，藉此幫助學生建構較好的知識基礎以及發展對藝術品的詮釋能力。因此，本文檢視芙烈達· 卡蘿「極苦詩篇」的多重意義象徵。研究結果發現，卡蘿爲減輕她個人之悲劇及極度哀傷的負作用，所以試圖借助凝聚作用來阻止長期分裂的感情。在多次描述小產以及不孕的憂慮中，卡蘿的母親身份象徵，顯露出殘缺不全的自我，她以種族象徵強調自己爲國母的角色。她以完美母親的角色，出現在婚姻關係中，而其丈夫的形象則是幼稚的。臥床期間，她從鏡中的自畫像反映出欲與母親建立親密關係，及證實自己之所以存在的價值。此外，卡蘿對女性身份的「極苦象徵」強調出女性的嬌柔、渴望被愛及被最愛所出賣等，並在飛翔的表徵中強烈表達出對解脫病痛的渴求。

關鍵詞：女性、分裂、母親、身分、視覺書寫能力、象徵

Introduction

1. Visual Literacy

This study is important for art education as it underpins the importance of art students' visual literacy and their ability to comprehend symbolism. It is argued that by having a deeper understanding of symbolism and a stronger knowledge base of an artist and artworks; art students should be able to develop their visual literacy. Visual literacy involves thinking critically and logically about visual information in order to assess both the meaning, and the intention of that information, as well as using these skills to create new forms of visual communication. As globalization comes more to the forefront of our society, and visually rich forms of information dominate our methods of communication; visual literacy becomes a crucial skill for all well-educated individuals, and especially art students, to possess (Avgerinou and Ericson, 1997; Kirrane, 1992; Oring, 2000). Being visually literate allows the viewers of images to grasp the larger social implications of an image (Plantinga, 1995). However, to be visually literate, all students must *speak* and *read* the visual language. As Oring (2000, 8) points out:

> For communication to take place there must be a common language between an artist and an audience. Some amount of effort on the part of both artist and audience is required…what is the sense in having a language-either visual or verbal-that we fail to understand?

In what way can this study help to develop an art student's visual literacy? One way is to provide art students with adequate prior knowledge of Frida Kahlo's artworks to help them form a stronger knowledge-base and to develop their interpretive skills of artworks. Vosnaidou and Brewer (1987) argue that the interaction between the knowledge-base, and knowledge-seeking strategies, explain why learning outcomes differ and provide a foundation for developing a more comprehensive approach for assessing student understandings of artworks. New experiences can be interpreted from prior knowledge. Significantly, Alvermann et al., (1985) underline that students often fail to transfer their existing knowledge to new information. Bransford and Johnson (1972) argue that learners activate and transfer prior knowledge; and this influences the degree to which new

information and ideas are comprehended. For example, art students need to know something about Frida Kahlo before they understand Kahlo's symbolism. Art-specific prior knowledge activates and determines understanding (Koroscik, 1982). Stavropoulos (1992) and Forker (2002) use an art diagnostic profile to assess the use of students' knowledge-seeking strategies and score them within four dimensions. The *descriptive* dimension scores objects and subject matter; the *formal* dimension scores elements or principles of design, media and technique; the *interpretative* dimension scores meaning, emotion, feeling, and expression; whilst the *historical* dimension scores names, dates, and information regarding the artist. Forker and Chang (2007) examined the written responses of Taiwanese art students to Chagall's *The Birthday* and found that Taiwanese art students' scores within the interpretative dimension were higher than the other dimensions. Higher understandings within the interpretative dimension assess art students' comprehension of imagery through the student actively searching an artwork for interpretative understanding (compound sentences, complex thought structures, connection-making, comparisons, speculations, hypotheses, and/or conclusions). In addition, students' personal interpretation based on description of images, scenes, and/or symbols and interpretation agreement with the literature review where an art student cites conventional, feminist, or psychoanalytic perspectives. Additionally, an art student demonstrates higher understandings through interpretative questioning and extending and/or challenging historians' or critics' interpretation of an artwork. This study offers art students to form higher understandings within the four dimensions, and especially within the interpretative dimension through their awareness of symbolism.

2. Symbolism

What do we mean by symbolism? It has been argued that humans are symbolic (Scheffler, 1997, 4) rather than rational creatures (*animal symbolicum*) whose work is exhibited in several forms of thought comprising human culture (Cassirer, 1944). We live in symbolic worlds created by ourselves which mediate between nature and our minds (Langer, 1956). *Symbol* is a term used by Charles Sanders Pierce to describe the sign proper, wherein the relation between *signifier* (an acoustic image) and *signified* (a concept or meaning), is entirely arbitrary and conventional (Liszka, 1996). Important to the concept of symbolism is *structuralism*; a theory of literature which focuses on the codes and conventions that

underlie all discourse and on the system of language as a functioning totality. This system, de Saussure (1983) calls *langue*, the whole set of linguistic habits which allow an individual to understand and to be understood. Saussure claims that signs do not possess a fixed or essential meaning; what signifies is not *red* nor the essence of *redness*, but the difference between *red* and *green* (Hall, 1997, 31). Anti-causal and anti-philological structuralism deliberately ignores the historical origins of the various elements of language: the external context of linguistic acts, the agents who use language, and the individual speech acts themselves (*parole*). Barthes (1957) claims that literature is a language; a system of *signs*-its being is not in its message, but in its system. Similarly, it is not for criticism to reconstitute the message of a work, but only its system. Language and structures, not the consciousness of an author, generates *meaning*. As a consequence, the subject is dissolved into a series of systems, deprived of its role as a source of meaning, and is thereby decentred. As Barthes suggests, the operative concept is *intertextuality*. Levi-Strauss (1963) maintains that the language of myth is the thought-structure behind all culture. Thought-symbolists concentrate on the study of collective representations. According to Sperber (1975, 99), a symbol is an object or a piece of knowledge which is in quotes. Symbolic objects have been bracketed off from ordinary objects. They have been highlighted, elevated, put in quotation marks and so we look at them and know they are symbolic. Symbols, however, may not be taken lightly, since they bring both order and disorder. If they arise out of human creativity and spontaneity, they are also about power. One has to be respectful of symbols as we can take quite serious offence if the proper respect is not demonstrated. Symbols clarify some aspect of the world. A symbol draws attention either to the way the world is or to the way it should be, or perhaps to both. A symbol defines some segment of the world, so we can see that this strip of events (Buckley and Kenney, 1995; Goffman, 1975) and has a recognizable structure. Importantly, symbols are also used to clarify, to define and give structure to our identity. In fact, we all devote much energy to dramatizing who we are. The *rites of passage* (Van Gennep, 1960) are only the most obvious of these symbolic dramas. They allow us to step clearly from one status to another and permit us to move across some conceptualized social boundary. For example, ceremonies at birth, marriage and death, first communion, confirmation, baptism, and Masonic degree ceremonies all have this character. But on a more casual basis, we engage in symbolic social dramas (Burke, 1957; Turner, 1982)

constantly. Symbols resonate with meanings. According to Turner (1967), three properties of symbol are especially important: *condensation*, *multivocality* and *ambiguity*. *Condensation* refers to the way in which individual symbols represent and unify a rich diversity of meanings. *Multivocality* also suggests that the symbol may be understood in different ways. This feature is especially important in the use of ritual to build political solidarity in the absence of consensus. Thus, it seems that through our dreams, illusions, spontaneous activities, moments of reflection and in the general flow of our consciousness, we continually proliferate symbols and manipulate them. *Ambiguity* also has a creative dimension. For example, paintings, operas, dramas and sculptures were *polysemic* or *multivocal*. The concept of symbolism as 'quotes' is not always clear, especially what meaning the artist intends to convey; the possible meaning of any given work of art is limited but it also allows each person to discover his or her own meaning. It is akin to a mirror for the observer's own prejudices and fantasies. Turner (1967, 28-29) has emphasized the significance of *polysemy*, or *multivocality*, when one single dominant symbol represents many different things and actions. Referring to what he terms their "multivocality," Turner (1967) proposes that symbols condense within a single formulation a number of meanings and values significant to a people. Turner finds in each symbol a polarization of physiological referents and those which disclose a depth world of prophetic, half-glimpsed images.

3. Frida Kahlo's Polysemic Symbolization

Frida Kahlo' visage has attained international iconic status (See Figure 1). Although she always denied being a Surrealist painter, her imagery brings together the supposedly different realms of fantasy and reality, mythology and rationality, native Mexican votive art, and European art. Frida Kahlo has been described as "a one-person show-a Dadaist collection of contradictions" (Souter, 2007, 8).[1] Frida Kahlo's oeuvre suggests that her art in some way reflects and reproduces a reality which is individual and national. It was also a painful reality-a reality that produced an art of "agonized poetry." As stated earlier, it is argued that the present study offers art students an opportunity to develop their higher

[1] In a letter to Alejandro Gomez Arias, Frida displayed a vehement distain for the movement and its members who were variously described as a "bunch of coocoo lunatic sons of bitches…so damn 'intellectual' and rotten that I can't stand them anymore" (Herrera, 1983a, 242-245).

understandings particularly within the interpretative dimension by analyzing the symbolism of Frida Kahlo's "agonized poetry."[2] Frida used a *polysemic* symbolization to express her art of "agonized poetry": fetal iconography, beds, hair, Judas dolls, trees, butterflies, the moon and sun, Aztec deities, feet, and hearts. It is apparent that the dominant symbol which Frida used in much of her image production was her broken body. Her symbolization can also be understood in terms of binary oppositions: male/female (sex), masculine/feminine (gender), heterosexual/homosexual (sexuality), non-Mexican/Mexican (race), and inside/outside (Cixous, 1986). The concept of *difference* (Woodward, 1997) is omnipresent in Frida's imagery. Derrida (1982) argues that *differ* shades into *defer*-the idea that *meaning* is always deferred; meaning is never complete but keeps on moving to encompass additional or supplementary meanings (Norris, 1982). Without relations of difference, no representation can occur. Thus, identities are constructed and formed in relation to identities in terms of the *Other*; that is, in relation to what they are not. In terms of the *Other*, Frida's identity changed from being a schoolgirl to a defiant bohemian, from an invalid to an artist, from a private person to a wife of a well-known artist, and from a wife to a woman betrayed. Moreover, through conscious use of ancient and contemporary cultural symbols, she developed her symbolism into an ethno-symbolism.

Figure 1 Nickolas Muray (1939), *Frida kahlo with Magenta Rebozo*, Nickolas Muray collection.

4. Frida Kahlo's Early Childhood

Frida Kahlo was a *liminal* figure sitting on the threshold "betwixt and between" (Van Gennep, 1960). "Her identity and her relations with nonconformity embody a questioning of

[2] Diego Rivera commented that Frida produced a series of masterpieces which had exalted the feminine quality of truth, reality, cruelty and suffering. Never before had a woman put such agonized poetry on canvas as Frida did at this time in Detroit.

reality which she adopted and disseminated as both an ardent advocate of ambiguity and an artist 'in between'" (Haynes, 2006, 2). The sources of Kahlo's hybrid identity are multiple. Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo Calderon was born on July 6, 1907 and lived in a house called *Casa Azul* (Blue House) in Coyaocan, then a quiet suburb of Mexico City. Her father, Guillermo (William) Kahlo, was born in Germany in 1872. He was Jewish by birth, atheist by persuasion, an epileptic, and also a professional photographer (See Figures 2, 3, 4 for examples of his family portraiture). In 1891, following his mother's death and his father's re-marriage, Guillermo immigrated to Mexico. Three years later he married Maria Cardena who bore him two daughters, Maria Luisa and Margarita. Maria Cardena died during childbirth and very shortly afterwards on 21 February 1898; Guillermo married Matilde Calderon (See Figure 5). When Matilde married Guillermo, she was not prepared to assume the responsibility of becoming a stepmother, so she made it clear to him that she did not want the two daughters from his previous marriage to live with them. Accordingly, he deferred to her wishes and his daughters were placed in a convent. Her relationship with her own four daughters was strained. Her two oldest daughters left home at very young ages. When her eldest and favorite daughter, Matita (named after her) eloped, she refused to have any contact with her until twelve years later when she finally forgave her defiance. When Frida was conceived, Matilde was still mourning the death of a son who had died shortly after birth. Incapable to breastfeed Frida, she employed a nanny to take care of her. It is possible that Matilde may have been suffering from *post-partum depression* after Frida's birth. Her depressive condition was probably intensified when two months after Frida's birth; she became pregnant again and gave birth to her youngest daughter, Cristina (Drucker, 1991). The immediate replacement by a sibling who was a rival for her mother's attention and affection probably increased Frida's conviction of being unloved and abandoned by her mother. The sibling relationship between Cristina and Frida seems to have been a competitive one. As an adult, Cristina would act out her own feelings of rivalry towards Frida by commencing an affair with Diego Rivera, Frida's husband, an act that deeply hurt Frida (Zamora, 1990). Frida's relationship with her mother was not close. Her half-sister, Maria Luisa, described Maltilde as a "small-minded, vain, and selfish woman" (Herrera, 1983a, 450). Maltilde seems to have been cynical and disappointed with life. She once confided to Frida that the true love of her life had been a German youth she had known but

he had committed suicide. In short, Guillermo seems to have very much a second choice (Rummel, 2000, 21). Later, Matilde began to have attacks similar to her husband's epileptic fits, and that for much of their youth Frida and Cristina were raised by their older sisters (Rummel, 2000, 24). Frida developed a close relationship with her father. Guillermo was a "proud, fastidious man of regular habits and many intellectual pursuits" including painting, listening to classical music, and playing the piano. He treated Frida as a "surrogate son who would follow his steps into the creative arts" (Souter, 2007, 11).

Figure 2 Guillermo Kahlo (1915-1916), *Cristina, Adriana, Matilde, and Frida*.

Figure 3 Guillermo Kahlo (1924), *Frida at age 16*.

Figure 4 Guillermo Kahlo (1926), *Frida Kahlo in Male Attire*.

Figure 5 Photographer unknown (1898), *Wedding photograph of Guillermo Kahlo and Matilde Calderon*.

5. Painful Realities

Frida Kahlo's painful reality began at the age of six when she was diagnosed as having *poliomyelitis*.[3] "It all started with a terrible pain in my right leg from the thigh downward.

[3] *Poliomyelitis* is usually referred to as *polio* or *infantile paralysis*. It is an acute viral infectious disease as it can spread from person to person, primarily through the fecal-oral route. Different types of paralysis may occur, depending on the nerves involved. Spinal polio is the most common form, characterized by asymmetric paralysis that most often involves the legs.

They'd soak my little leg in a small tube of walnut water and hot cloths, and the poor little leg stayed very thin" (Tibol, 1993, 38). It has been conjectured that she also suffered from *spina bifida* (Budrys, 2006). Neighborhood children taunted her with shouts of *pata de palo* (peg leg). To conceal her affliction, she wore layers of stockings on her thin leg and a half-inch added to the heel of her shoe (Souter, 2007, 17). Research has shown that feelings of inferiority dominate the personality of all individuals (Broh, 1979, 177). The feeling of inferiority originates with the malfunction and/or underdevelopment of bodily organs. For example, a child such as the young Frida, a victim of polio, may develop a sense of inferiority about her height and posture. Adler (1956) argues the feeling of inferiority is the energizing mechanism of personality development. In short, it is the functional equivalent to Freud's *libido*. While Freud claims that the sex drive provides the energy for personality development, Adler claims that the feeling of inferiority provides this energy. Organs are not objectively inferior; they are only inferior within a social context. The individual perceives an anomaly whether or not the organ is medically inferior. Moreover, an individual overcomes a feeling of inferiority by compensating for his or her perceived weakness or inadequacy. For example, a person may compensate for weak vision by "blinking in bright light or squinting during close work" (Adler, 1956, 26); an individual adds to his or her personality by overcoming an organ deficiency. In addition, an individual may overcompensate for the organ inferiority by striving for a superior form of vision. Thus, it is arguable that Frida feelings of inferiority provided her with an energizing mechanism in terms of her artistic creativity. Her father "cared for and in fact doted on Frida during her illness and convalescence" and "her thinned leg became the outward symbol of her handicapped self" (Grimberg, 1993, 45). In 1922, Kahlo was accepted to the prestigious National Preparatory School in Mexico City. During this period, she witnessed violent armed struggles in the streets of Mexico City as the Mexican Revolution continued. Hutchinson (2007, 25) has underscored the importance of "live" competing ethnic traditions and political elites in the formation of nations. It was at this time that the roots of Frida's future cultural nationalism and ethno-symbolism were formed. Upon arriving at the vibrant intellectual center of her country, she discovered political elites and activists, artists, communists, and other individuals who dared to dream and challenge the status quo. She joined the *Cachuchas*, a group of pranksters led by Alejandro Gomez Arias. According to Rummel (2000, 47), Arias was "one of Mexico's leading intellectuals" and "believed that he

and other Cachuchas could help lead Mexico into a new more enlightened era" (See Figure 6).

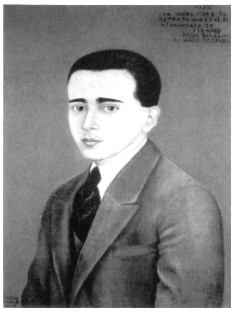

Figure 6 Frida Kahlo (1928), *Portrait of alejandro gomez arias*, Oil on wood, 61.5 × 41 cm, Private collection, Mexico.

By 1923, Frida and Arias had become lovers and shared many hours together at the Ibero American Library absorbing Gogol, Tolstoy, Spengler, Hegel, Kant and other great European intellects. Consequently, she gradually developed a deep-seated affinity for socialism and the uplifting of the masses. She remained a committed and vocal Communist for the rest of her life (Souter, 2007, 17). In 1925, Frida began her art studies as an apprentice to the commercial printer, Fernando Fernandez. In the same year, Arias indicated to her that he wanted to terminate their love affair. This was the first painful reality in her life and it caused her deep anguish. Their relationship is interesting because her courtship with Arias foreshadows her relationships with other men in her later life (Rummel, 2000, 48). Although they reverted to a chaste relationship, they continued their friendship. However, she still clung to the hope they would reconcile their differences and rekindle their special bond. In a letter to Arias, Frida wrote, "For nothing in this life can I stop talking to you. I will always talk to you even if you do not answer me because I love you more than ever, now that you are preparing to leave me" (Herrera, 1983a, 58-59). Yet, she indulged herself with two brief affairs: one with her mentor, Fernandez, and another with a female librarian at the Ministry of Education library (apparently her first lesbian encounter) where she had gone to apply for a job. It was during this time when her first serious relationship was ending that Frida suffered a grievous injury that irreversibly altered the course of her life. On September 17, 1925, in downtown Mexico City, Frida and Arias were travelling together on a bus which collided with a slow-moving electric trolley. Frida's injuries were so serious that she was not expected to live. A handrail had punctured her hip and had exited through her vagina. An onlooker removed the handrail from her agonized body. She

screamed so loudly that the siren of the approaching ambulance could not be heard. As Arias recalls:

> The collision had unfastened her clothes. Someone in the bus, probably a house painter, had been carrying a packet of powdered gold. This package broke, and the gold fell all over the bleeding body of Frida. When people saw her they cried, "*La balarina, la balarina*! (Herrera, 1983a, 48-49)

Frida recounts the accident as:

> It was a strange crash, not violent, but dull and slow, and it injured everyone, me much more seriously…the collision had thrown us forward and the handrail went through me like a sword through a bull. A man saw I was having a tremendous hemorrhage and carried me to nearby pool hall table until the Red Cross picked me up. (Souter, 2007, 25)

Frida's body was so fragmented that she had to use a steel corset for the rest of her life. Her spinal column and pelvis were fractured in three places, her collar-bone and two ribs were broken, her left shoulder was dislocated, her right leg was fractured in eleven places, and her right foot was crushed. A steel handrail had literally skewered her body in the abdomen and had exited out of her vagina. Of this wound, Frida would comment sardonically, "I lost my virginity" (Herrera, 1983a, 50). Hereafter, she never had a day without pain because these severe injuries never fully healed. During Frida's period of convalescence, Arias never returned her letters. Despite his rejection of her as a lover, Frida had learned an important lesson: being ill could work in her favor. She wrote in her diary, "We like being ill to protect ourselves." She realized that as long as she remained ill, "people collected around her and watched over her" (Grimberg, 1989, 40). It is at this time, that she demonstrates her indomitable spirit. By December, 1925, she had regained the use of her legs. It has been argued that Frida Kahlo may be an example of a "Borderline" personality where *fragmentation-proneness* arises from a deep sense of despair, emptiness and disconnectedness (Chessick, 1977). She struggled to prevent chronic feelings of *fragmentation* (Grimberg, 1993, 49) by resorting to *cohesive functions* (DiGiovanni & Lee, 1994, 3) in order to minimize the negative effects of her personal tragedy. Frida's imagery

depicts her fragmented self: cracked open, weeping beside an extracted heart, hemorrhaging during a miscarriage, anesthetized on a hospital trolley, sleeping with a skeleton, and even when beside her pets or husband, she looks fearfully alone (Herrera, 1991, 3). One year after the accident, she concretized her feelings of fragmentation in a drawing of the bus collision. It was done in the style of traditional Mexican ex-voto (*retablos*) paintings (See Figure 7). According to Drucker (1991, 68), "a retablo is a closing of a critical event, a continuation of life."[4] Frida also recreated the accident in a 1943 retablo (See Figure 8). As well as echoing her agonized poetic imagery, this retablo externalized her internal suffering and the tangible focus made her feel more *cohesive* (DiGiovanni & Lee, 1994, 3). Later in life, Frida would collect various retablos and display them in her home. Indeed, the symbolism of one of these retablos is especially pertinent to her ailing physical condition as it depicts a praying woman in bed (See Figure 9).

Figure 7 Frida Kahlo (1926), *The accident,*
Pencil on paper, 7.8 × 10.6 in, Collection of Juan Coronel, Cuernavaca, Mexico.

Figure 8 Frida Kahlo (1943), *Bus accident,*
Oil on metal, 19.1 × 24.1 cm, Private collection.

[4] Mexican *retablos* are small in size and painted on tin. Surrounded by flowers, ribbons, candles, and other adornments, retablos paintings brought a touch of the church into the domestic setting.

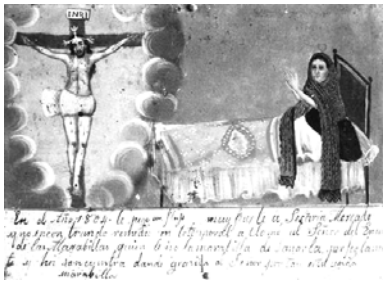

Figure 9 Unknown artist, *Sick woman praying in bed*, Oil on metal, 30 × 50 cm, Frida Kahlo collection.

During a six-month convalescing period, Frida began to paint using her father's paints and brushes. She completed her first painting: *Self-Portrait in a Velvet Dress* (See Figure 10). The style of this image shows that she was familiar with Renaissance style used by Mexican artists in the 19th century and the European art tradition. For example, the elongation of the hands and neck is reminiscent of the Mannerist style and the elongated figures of Modigliani. Moreover, there is a sense of elegiac sorrow in her eyes. In addition, the swirling waves in the background are comparable to the swirling gestures in the Post-Impressionist imagery of Vincent Van Gogh (See Figure 11). Like Van Gogh, her imagery would mirror her own personal agony. In 1928, Frida painted her younger sister, Cristina (See Figure 12). The pose is still in the Renaissance style used by Mexican portrait painters of the 19th century but already reveals both the stylistic and thematic influence of Diego Rivera. Hard and somewhat rigid contours now characterize the composition. A small, stylized tree in the background contrasts with a larger branch in the foreground to create the only suggestion of space and depth. In her previous portraits and self-portraits, Frida used the Renaissance style of painting with dark colors. This portrait, painted only one year after her Renaissance style period, is a sharp contrast.

Figure 10 Frida Kahlo (1926), *Self-portrait in a velvet dress*, Oil on canvas, 79 × 58 cm, Private collection.

Figure 11 Vincent Van Gogh (1889), *Self portrait,* Oil on canvas, 65 × 54 cm, Musee d'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 12 Frida Kahlo (1928), *Portrait of Cristina, my sister,* Oil on wood, 99 × 81.5 cm, Otto Atencio Troconis collection, Caracas.

Certainly, Frida's determination to overcome her debilitating condition indicates that she underwent some sort of personality transformation. Jung proposed that the dissociative capacity of the normal psyche promotes the expansion of the personality through greater differentiation of function. Jung (1960, 122) claims that dissociation allows certain parts of the psychic structure to be singled out so that, by concentration of the will, they can be trained and brought to their maximum development and this produces an unbalanced state similar to that caused by a dominant complex - a change of personality. Neumann (1955) develops this further in *The Great Mother*. Neumann traces the genealogy and symbolism of goddess figures in world culture: the *Primordial Goddess*, *the Great Round*, *The Lady of the Plants*, and *The Lady of the Beasts*. Neumann developed the theme of the parental *uroboros*, representing the first stage of consciousness which develops out of that chaotic layer of the unconscious, where psyche merges into the unknown psychoid matrix of life, and in which male and female, above and below, positive and negative, and all the other opposites, are mingled together in the primal darkness. Practically every cosmogonic myth starts with such a formless chaos, and they all recount how some god or hero, representing the first

glimmering of ego-consciousness arises, and who rebels at his impotence and struggles to separate *Father Heaven* from his eternal embrace with *Mother Earth*. Thus through the momentous deed of a heroic son, the one, the cosmic egg, is divided and the two are created. These two are the *maternal uroboros* and the *paternal uroboros*. The fragmentation of primordial undifferentiated archetypes, the *Great Mother*, leads to the emergence of individual archetypes such as the witch, the whore, the young goddess, or the wise woman. This parallels the discriminatory powers of ego consciousness to embrace such diverse archetypal images; in this case, of the *Feminine*, without being possessed and overwhelmed by them. Cultural change is hinted at here. It is brought about by creative, heroic individuals who dare to bring socially useful archetypal ideas or innovations into consciousness. This benevolent Jungian view can be wedded to a pathological view of dissociation, say arising from trauma, through acknowledging that early trauma can stimulate the creation of adult heroes, prophets, artists, and healers i.e., Frida, who was able to creatively transform her traumatic experience. Jung believed that his form of therapy could restore pathological forms of dissociation to health through some of the methods that creative individuals have discovered spontaneously. These always involve some form of conscious expression of the emergence of healing images and symbols from the unconscious, through dreams, art work, dance, or active imagination. This relates to Jung's concept of the *individuation* process, which implies the development of wholeness of the personality. Most creative individuals are not well-rounded but are one-sided and unbalanced in the direction of their area of genius. The area where they seem so often immature, if not pathological, is in the area of relationships. This was true of Frida Kahlo, however talented and creative. For some, narcissism might be all too apparent an explanation of Frida's life's work. *Narcissism* (Freud, 1914) is far too empty a term to describe Frida's desire to create her own reality with countless images of her self and visions of her context. In her keen self-awareness, she must have known that it was not physically possible for her to live into old age due to her ailments and operations. Thus, there had to be a certain degree of necessity to compulsively create self-portraits. As a matter of survival, it seems that Frida extended her life on canvas and was able to cope with her debilitating pain. And if she could not reproduce herself in human form, she could multiply in her own imagery. Whether they are an expression of narcissism, or represent an escape from debilitating physical pain and emotional suffering, Frida's transfixing self-portraits are alluring. One of her most remarkable self-portraits is

The Broken Column (See Figure 13) in which she creates a concrete depiction of her fragmentation.

Figure 13 Frida Kahlo (1944), *The broken column*, Oil on canvas, 40 × 30.5 cm, Collection Museo Dolores Olmedo Patino, Mexico City.

Evidently, Frida was probably influenced by pre-Columbian peoples in Mexico who anthropomorphized objects such as the Zapotec terracotta polychromed vase in the form of a vertebral column (See Figure 14). Frida's "shattered spinal column supplied only fragile support" and "could rely on these other columns for metaphorical support" (Udall, 2003, 11). In this image, Frida substitutes the pillar in the form of Greek fluted column for her shattered spine. "Psychological and physical pain is intertwined in a weeping self-portrait of rejection in love and a spinal spasm" (Herrera, 1983b, 60). The nails are evocative of the *Madonna of Sorrows*, and symbolically, the presence of a column that splits open the body suggests a phallus of steel. The bleak, forbidding landscape becomes "a potent metaphor for the inner desolation and fragmentation that occurs from the lack of a self object relationship" (Merewether, 1990, 15). The breasts are isolated and exposed. The cracks in the broken landscape echo her agony and fragmentation. Frida's Catholic upbringing may have influenced her identification with Renaissance imagery such as that of Botticelli.[5] Akin to Botticelli's *Saint Sebastian* (1447), she is depicted unclothed to the waist, covered by small nails that pierce the skin (See Figure 15). Akin to Christ and Saint Sebastian, she wears a loin cloth.

[5] In a letter to Alejandro Gomez Arias, Frida wrote "Your [Botticelli]...remembers you always." March 29, 1927. Quoted in Hayden Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1993, 45.

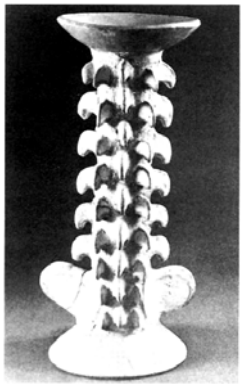

Figure 14 Unknown artist, (200 B.C. - 200 AD.), *Vase in the form of a Vertebral,* polychromed terracotta, Oaxaca.

Figure 15 Sandro Botticelli (1474), *Saint sebastian*, Tempera on panel, 195 × 75 cm, Staatliche Museum, Berlin.

6. The Second Accident

To fully comprehend the symbolism of Frida's "agonized poetry," we need to explore her complex relationship with her husband, Diego Rivera. Frida once said, "There have been two great accidents in my life. One was the trolley, and the other was Diego…Diego was by far the worst" (Herrera, 1983a, 68).[6] "His image was far from that of the starving artist. Everything about him was oversized from his unruly mop of black hair to the wide belt that held up his pants which sagged in the seat and bagged at the knees" (Souter, 2007, 22). Frida first encountered Diego when she was at the National Preparatory School. Diego Rivera was one of the three most famous muralists in Mexico and he had been commissioned to paint a mural in the school. Through her interest in painting, Frida met and flirted with Diego as he painted his *Creation* frescoes when she was a fifteen year-old schoolgirl (See Figure 16). Rivera had returned from Europe where he had been working for fourteen years and he was assisted by his wife, Lupe Martin, and a team of artisans. Frida and some of her friends often sneaked into the auditorium to watch Diego work. The students at the National Preparatory School nicknamed Diego *panzon* (fat belly). He was the butt of Frida's mischief

[6] A story Frida favoured in adolescence encapsulates residue of her mental life as a child and foretells the tragedy of her life and death at Diego's side. It is the story of the young *Selvaggia*, a wild girl who falls in love with Paolo Uccello, the 15th-century Florentine painter. Their love is doomed from the start. Eventually, she dies from starvation from her unrequited love. Selvaggia's story may have also mirrored Frida's own oedipal struggle. As she attempted to live out her fantasy, and perhaps like Selvaggia, she did not foresee her tragic end.

when she constantly attempted to make him fall down the school's staircase by soaking the steps with soap. Nevertheless, Diego seems to have possessed a certain elephantine agility in avoiding such a humiliating fate. She sought him out when he was painting frescoes on a scaffold at the Ministry of Education and shouted up at him: "Diego, please come down from there…I have something important to discuss with you" (Drucker, 1991, 38). She candidly told him, "I haven't come to flirt even though you are a notorious ladie's man. I just want to show you my pictures. If you find them interesting, tell me; if not, tell me anyway because then I'll find something else to do to support my family" (Souter, 2007, 49). She showed four paintings to Diego and asked for his opinion. Two of the paintings were probably *Self-Portrait* (See Figure 10) and a portrait of her sister Cristina (See Figure 12). Diego separated one painting from the other three and examined it for a longer time. "First of all, I like the self-portrait. That is original. The other three pictures seem to have been influenced by things you must have seen somewhere. Now, go home and paint another picture. Next Sunday, I'll come and tell you what I think." Diego visited Frida's home, saw more of her work, and agreed to tutor her. Soon, he began his courtship of Frida. According to Alejandro Gomez Arias, Diego opened doors for Frida that she would not have opened alone. It was Diego who developed the provocative attitude that helped Frida overcome her long-standing shyness, suggested that she use the retablos format that played such an essential role in her iconography, and encouraged her to wear the Mexican garments that concealed her short leg and complemented her compelling beauty (Grimberg, 1993).

Figure 16 Diego Rivera (1922), *Creation*, Fresco in encaustic and gold leaf, National Preparatory School, Mexico City.

Their marriage was likened to an elephant and a dove (See Figure 17). "She had delicate features whilst he had bug eyes, full lips, and a lumpy face" (Drucker, 1991, 42).[7]

[7] It has been argued that their difference in age and size might be interpreted as an attempt to live out her childhood oedipal fantasy of actually marrying the paternal figure. See Comisarenco (1996, 15).

They had a tempestuous relationship which had “all the features of a complementary emotional bond where each needed the other as a means of feeling cohesive” (Lansky, 1992). When this bond was broken, it severely disrupted their lives, especially Frida’s. In a wedding portrait (See Figure 18) symbolically, their joined hands underline their union; marriage was pivotal in Frida’s life. Her adoption of Mexican indigenous costume began on the day of her marriage to Diego when she borrowed a skirt, blouse, and *rebozo* (a Mexican scarf) from a maid to wear to the ceremony in the city hall in Coyaocan (Herrera, 1983a, 99). Her mother was against the match. To her, Diego Rivera was akin to “a big toad standing in the doorway” Comisarenco (1996, 15). Frida’s father perceived their union somewhat differently. In his eyes, Diego Rivera was a famous painter who had money and had attained the respect of the government and the artistic community. At the wedding party in the La Casa Azul (Blue House), a drunken Lupe Marin, Diego’s former wife, lifted Frida’s wedding dress exposing her legs. Marin screamed “Do you see those two canes? That’s what Diego’s going to have to put up with and he used to have my legs!” Lifting her own skirt, she offered onlookers her own shapely legs as a comparison. Frida was infuriated and had to be restrained from attacking Lupe Marin but Diego found the event extremely amusing. Indeed, he liked the idea of two women fighting over him. Frida was so disappointed that Diego had not defended her in front of the wedding guests that she refused to sleep with him for several days after the wedding. Despite this incident, Lupe Marin taught Frida how to prepare Diego’s favorite dishes. Indeed, she modeled for Frida several times (See Figure 19).

Figure 17 Victor Reyes (1929), *Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera two days after their wedding*. Victor Reyes collection.

Figure 18 Frida Kahlo (1931), *Frida Kahlo and Diego River*, Oil on canvas, 99 × 78.7 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 19 Frida Kahlo (1929), *Portrait of Lupe Marin*, Oil on canvas, Dimensions unknown (Destroyed).

The overtly bisexual Frida, who often dressed in men's attire, (See Figure 4) had several affairs with both men and women. Diego knew of and tolerated her relationships with women, but her relationships with men made him insanely jealous. Ultimately, Frida would separate from Diego after discovering that he had an affair with her younger sister, Cristina. It seems that even when she hated him, Frida adored Diego and that the pivot of her existence was her desire to be a good wife to him. The couple eventually divorced but remarried in 1940. After recovering from her shock of Diego's and Cristina's betrayal, Frida did two things; as a form of protest, she cut her hair short and refused to wear Tehuana clothes (Rummel, 2000, 106). Freudian psychology suggests that hair is a potent sexual emblem and that cutting one's hair is akin to castration (Leach, 1958). In *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (See Figure 20), Frida is depicted wearing an outsized male suit which probably belonged to Diego. In her left hand, she holds a lock of her shorn hair as an emblem of her sacrifice and angst. In her right hand, she holds the scissors with which she has martyred her femininity. Strands of hair resonate through the composition as if they

have a vivacity of their own. Enclosed in a vast expanse of isolated space, her despair is palpable. The act of self-mutilation is underscored by an inserted song lyric: "*See, if I loved you, it was for your hair, now you're bald, I don't love you any more*." Symbolically, this image expresses Frida's aspiration for the freedom and independence from Diego, and men in general. *Self-Portrait with Braid* (See Figure 21) is the first self-portrait that Frida painted after her remarriage to Diego. It is another image where she demonstrates her black humour. Hair becomes the symbol through which she expresses her feelings. The strands of hair which littered the earlier picture (See Figure 20) seem to have been collected up and plaited into a new braid. It is a reaffirmation of her femininity which she rejected and symbolically renounced in 1940. Symbolically, the state of the remarriage is depicted as being insecure. The plants and chained necklace have a threatening presence and suggest entrapment. In reality, Frida and Diego had agreed that their remarriage would be one of mutual independence.

Figure 20　Frida Kahlo (1940), *Self-portrait with cropped hair*, Oil on canvas, 40 × 28 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

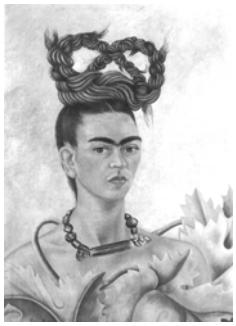

Figure 21　Frida Kahlo (1941), *Self-portrait with braid*, 51 × 38. 7 cm, Collection of Jacques and Natasha Gelman, Mexico City.

In *A Few Small Nips* (See Figure 22), Frida also expresses the agony of Diego's wounding infidelity with Cristina, her sister. She borrows the theme, and to some degree composition, from the Mexican artist Jose Guadalupe Posada. He had illustrated a story about the notorious Mexican rapist-murderer, Francisco Guerrero, (*El Chalequero*, the Mexican Jack the Ripper) with a lithograph of a man slitting a woman's throat (See Figure 23). However, unlike Posada, Frida fuses such gruesome depictions with a personal mythology to create an agonized poetic transcendent image. She also links her agonized betrayal to the Mexican national myth of *La Chingada* (the woman killed or wounded because of a perceived betrayal). It is evident that Diego had made Frida his *chingada.* Diego experienced no remorse over injuries directed to those closest to him, and especially to women. Once, during a lovers' quarrel, he stabbed Marevna Vorobiev, a Russian artist with whom he fathered a daughter. Diego's daughter, Guadalupe Rivera Marin, recalls how he beat her mother until she bled. Lucienne Bloch recalled that during a quarrel, Diego took a knife to stab one of his paintings. When Bloch attempted to stop him, Frida exclaimed, "Don't, he'll kill you" (Grimberg, 1990, 3). Paz (1985) offers interesting insights about cruelty and betrayal in the Mexican mindset about the male/female relationship.[8] The rationale for this act of psychic or physical violence is the act of betrayal. The need for a Mexican man to hurt a woman orginates at the time of the Spanish conquest. The first betrayal was by an Indian woman known as *La Malinche* (See Figure 24), "a figure of perplexed mythology, pain and betrayal" (Friis, 2004, 53).

Figure 22 Frida Kahlo (1935), *A few small nips*,
Oil on metal, 38 × 48.2 cm, Dolores Olmedo Foundation, Mexico City.

[8] At the crux of this relationship is the verb *chingar* (literally to *screw* but more precisely to *hurt* or *wound*, or in the most extreme cases to *kill*). The one who acts on this impulse is usually, but not always, is a man. The person on the receiving end, the *chingada*, is most often a woman. Paz (1985) claims that Mexicans use the phrase "*Viva Mexico, hijos de la Chingada!*" to express their anger, joy, or enthusiasm.

Figure 23 Jose Guadalupe Posada (1910), *Victim of Francisco Guerrero*, Lithograph, 35 × 28 cm, Published by Antonio Vanegas Arroyo.

Figure 24 Jose Clemente Orozco (1926), *Cortes and Malinche*, Fresco, San Ildefonso Museum, Mexico City.

Frida's agonized poeticism in expressing her duality and her painful relationship with Diego is evident in *The Two Fridas* (See Figure 25).[9] The painting attempts to communicate her pain when separated from Diego and her concerns about his possible rejection of her. The image "processes the emotions surrounding separation and marital crisis" (Kettenmann, 2003, 52). Symbolically, the Mexican Frida in the Tehuana dress represents the part of Frida which is respected and loved by Diego. She is depicted holding an amulet bearing a portrait of her husband as a child. Beside her sits her alter-ego, a European Frida in a white lacy dress. The hearts of the two women are exposed, connected by just one fragile artery. The two ends of the other artery are separate. With the loss of her beloved, however, the European Frida has lost part of herself. Blood drips from the freshly severed artery and it is only barely kept in check with a surgical clamp. The rejected Frida is in danger of bleeding to death. "Kahlo's two selves are conjoined yet separate, generically similar and crucially different. Not simply opposed to each other, the conflicts exist between and within them, and knitted into these disparities is a vital dependency" (Haynes, 2006, 6).

[9] Frida recorded the origin of *The Two Fridas* in her diary. She describes the memory of an imaginary friend of her childhood. "Her joyfulness…she laughed a lot. Soundlessly…I followed her in every movement and while she danced I told her my secret problems." See Fuentes (1995) *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*. London: Bloomsbury, plates 82-85.

Figure 25 Frida Kahlo (1939), *The two fridas*,
Oil on canvas, 173.5 × 173 cm, Modern Art Museum, Mexico.

In *Memory* (See Figure 26), Frida refers not only to her painful recollection of the situation between Diego and Cristina but also to the time when, as an adolescent schoolgirl, she pursued Diego hoping to become his wife. Frida suggests this early love in some of the composition's telling elements: the two dresses that hang from the sky and on her right over the shore hangs what appears to be her schoolgirl dress. On her left, over the ocean, hangs the Mexican or Tehuana-style dress that she began to wear to please Diego. Frida has painted herself armless and helpless (Herrera, 1983a). Yet, she has attached a missing arm to each dress. The gesture of the arms reveals her predicament and final choice. The arm on the schoolgirl dress is outstretched beckoning a parting Frida; the arm on the Mexican dress is "arm in arm" with Frida's armless sleeve pulling her toward the ocean. The symbolism of this image suggests that Frida remained, at least internally, deeply religious, and perhaps in moments of unbearable agony, she turned to religion for spiritual solace. This may explain why, consciously or unconsciously, she used religious imagery as a leitmotif in her paintings. For example, this image clearly echoes the sexual symbolization of *Saint Teresa of Avila* being pierced by a phallic arrow (See Figure 27).

Figure 26 Frida Kahlo (1937),
Oil on metal, 38 × 48.2 cm, Dolores Olmedo Foundation, Mexico City.

Figure 27 Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1652), *Saint Teresa of Avila*, Chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.

Akin to Teresa, she portrays herself as the receiver of a synthesis of profane and religious love. Frida depicts her own heart being pierced by the arrow of love, eviscerated and abandoned in a puddle of blood. Her heart is not presented in an idealized form, pierced by an arrow, but is realistically depicted dripping blood with veins and arteries exposed. She seems to be in a state of paralysis, uncertain of what to do or where to turn. In the aperture of the chest, a phallic arrow serves as see-saw to the tiny cupids that sit at each end, alluding both to the see-saw effect of sexual intercourse, the periods of good and bad in her relationship with Diego, and to the phallic spear that pierces a vaginal opening. There are several reasons why Frida's theoretical construction of *Memory* may have identified with Teresa. Frida shared the name *Carmen* with her and Teresa's *transverberation* (the wounding of the heart) may have stimulated her childish imagination. She may have been impressed by members of Teresa's order who originally walked bare-foot like martyrs suffering pain from injuries inflicted to their feet. Teresa, like Frida, was half Jewish, both from their fathers' sides. Both fathers had previous marriages and when they lost their wives and were left with two young children, and both they married conservative Catholic women. Both Teresa and Frida remembered their mothers as being emotionally distant. Similarly, the 17th-century Italian painter, Alessandro Tiarini, painted Teresa driving an arrow into a vulva-like opening in her chest in *Four Saints and a Donor*. Because of its shape and its penetrating effect, the arrow is considered a phallic symbol, but because it strikes without warning, it also represents falling in love (See Figure 28).

Figure 28 Alessandro Tiarini (1629), *Four saints and a donor*, Oil on canvas, 183 × 295 cm, San Martino Maggiore, Bologna, Italy.

Frida's sense of betrayal is also evident in *The Wounded Table* (See Figure 29). She painted this work during her divorce from Diego and her psychological state is reflected throughout the image. The painting resembles a warped version of *The Last Supper* with Frida adopting the role of Christ at the center of the table. She is surrounded by a mixed assortment of characters: Cristina's two children, a large papier-mâché Judas, a skeleton, a pre-Columbian sculpture, and her pet fawn, Granizo. The oversized Judas on Frida's right, dressed in blue overalls, represents Diego the betrayer. The figure has his hands on the table as did Judas who betrayed Christ. This gesture may be symbolizing Saint Luke's words at The Last Supper: *"but behold the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table"* (Luke, chapter 22, verse 21). Despite the betrayal, Frida allows the Judas (Diego) to protectively place his arm around her. To her left, the skeleton is holding a strand of Frida's hair. Symbolically, this may suggest that she is flirting with death. The pre-Columbian sculpture is intertwined with Frida, sharing the same arm symbolizing her connection to her Mexican roots. The threatening characters seem to be between the painter and the innocent figures of the children and the fawn, making them unreachable. This painting contains a lot of references to Frida's deformed leg and foot. The idol has peg legs, the skeleton and the Judas both have bandaged and bloodied feet and the table has flayed human legs. Perhaps she feels that her deformity in some way contributed to her breakup with Diego. The idol has peg legs, the skeleton and the Judas both have bandaged and bloodied feet and the table has flayed human legs; all references to Frida's own deformed right leg and foot. The two innocent children are the children of Frida's younger sister Cristina: Antonio and Isolda. They seem to be unaware of the situation or their surroundings.

Figure 29 Frida Kahlo (1940), *The wounded table*, Oil on canvas, 122 × 244 cm, Location unknown.

In a painting entitled *Four Inhabitants of Mexico* (See Figure 30), a diminutive Indian girl, dressed in an archetypal Tehuana costume, appears with a cast of characters based on artifacts owned by the Riveras. The petite girl may be Frida but the child lacks Frida's famous unibrow. However, it is arguable that she may symbolize the Indian heritage within Frida. Characters depicted in this painting include a Judas-figure, a pre-Columbian idol, a clay skeleton, and a straw man riding a donkey. They are all enclosed in a large arena, a plaza near Frida's home in Coyoacan. In the far distance, the desolate buildings that surround the square include *La Rosita*, a bar where Frida and her art students painted murals in the 1940s and 1950s. The Judas symbolizes the stereotypical macho male. His enormous size and the blue overalls identify him with Diego, who at one point kept a nearly identical Judas-figure next to his easel. Next to the Judas is just the opposite, a submissive pregnant female idol. The skeleton is a recurrent figure in the unfolding drama of Frida's art. Death was her constant companion. Sitting on the ground, sucking her finger and clutching her skirt, the child looks lost and abandoned. None of the four inhabitants take any notice of her. She is connected to them only by their shadows. Interestingly, this is the only Frida Kahlo painting in which there are shadows.

Figure 30 Frida Kahlo (1938), *Four inhabitants of Mexico*, Oil on wood, 31.1 × 47.6 cm, Private collection.

7. Frida Kahlo: Ethno-symbolist

It is manifest that Frida's agonized poeticism is echoed in her identification with the sufferings of Mexico as a nation and the pain of the Mexican people. For example, she employed various Mexican artifacts in her self-construct as a cultural and national iconic figure. Representation as a cultural process establishes individual and collective identities and symbolic systems provide possible answers to the crucial question of identity (Woodward, 1997, 14). In order to gain a full cultural understanding of a cultural text or artifact, it is necessary to analyse the processes of *representation*, *identity*, *production*, *consumption* and *regulation* (Du Gay et al., 1997). The study of representation includes symbolic systems which produce meanings about the people who used such artifacts and identities associated with it. These identities and the artifact with which they are associated are *produced*, both technically and culturally, in order to target the consumers who invest in the product. It can be argued that Frida as an artist and her symbolization was a result of her being a "social product" (Wolff, 1983, 28). A cultural artifact has impact upon the regulation of life, through the ways in which it is represented, the identities associated with it, and the articulation of its production and consumption. Frida's iconography demonstrates a *primordial identity*; an identity which predates history and culture. For example, it is reflected in a symbolization which bridges the ancient Mexican mythological world and the modern world. As such, Frida Kahlo can be classified as an *ethno-symbolist*. Classical *ethno*-symbolism, as defined by (Smith, 2001, 119), is about "shared memories of golden ages, ancestors and great heroes and heroines, the communal values that they embody, the myths of ethnic origins, migration and divine election, the symbols of community, territory, history and destiny that distinguish them." The combination of myths and claims inform the group's *mythomoteur* which "endows the movement with shape and direction" (Smith, 1986, 58). In her use of the *rebozo* (a Mexican scarf), Tehuana dresses and other Mexican paraphernalia, Frida becomes a human mythomoteur when she depicts herself wearing such attire; her symbolization reinforces the shape and direction of her support of post-revolutionary ideology. Her adoption of Mexican indigenous costume began on the day of her marriage to Diego (See Figure 18) when she borrowed a skirt, blouse, and rebozo from a maid to wear to the ceremony in the city hall in Coyaocan (Herrera, 1983a, 99). "Frida was born with the Revolution and she both mirrors and transcends the central event of twentieth-century Mexico making her fantastically, unavoidably, dangerously symbolic

and even symptomatic of Mexico" (Fuentes, 1995, 10). Frida's actual birth date was July 6, 1907. She gave her birth date as 6 July 1910, because being older than her classmates, and thanks to the polio, she wanted to appear to be their age, but she also wanted to be born in the year of the occurrence of the Mexican Revolution (Herrera, 1983a, 11). Fuentes underpins Frida's Mexican symbolism by suggesting that the pain and resilience prevalent in her work underscores both her personal anguish and the political state of Mexico. In other words, she depicted herself as a type of national motherhood figure. In her diary, Frida records, "I remember that I was four (actually she was five) years old when the 'tragic ten days' took place…I witnessed with my own eyes Zapata's peasants' battle against the Carrancistas" (Herrera, 1983a, 11). Her identification with the Mexican revolution also helped give her life meaning and prevent *fragmentation* (Grimberg, 1993, 49). Her use of Mexican attire and paraphernalia is evident in Figure 31.

Figure 31 Nickolas Muray (1939), *Frida Kahlo on bench*, Nickolas Muray collection.

In *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana* (See Figure 32), she is depicted wearing at Tehuana dress and diadem which simultaneously create a firm association to pre-Hispanic Mexico. By dressing in such attire, she embodies the main goals of post-revolutionary Mexican leaders and she acclaims contemporary manifestations of Mexico's pre-Hispanic past. Her personal transition mirrors Mexico itself in a "phase of self-examination and self-definition after the revolution" (Block & Hoffman-Jeep, 1998, 10). Similar ethno-symbolism can be found in *Self-Portrait on the Border between Mexico and the United States* (See Figure 33). This image was painted during her stay in Detroit. She portrays herself in colonial-style dress and ascetically coiffed hair, adding a Coatlicue-like beaded necklace with bones. Zarobell (2008,

23) contrasts this image with Estrada's 19th century portrait entitled *Young Woman with Pearl Necklace and Pink Dress*. It is clearly evident that Frida was heavily influenced by this image (See Figure 34). She depicts herself on a pedestal between the industrial North and a Mexico characterized by Mesoamerican art and ruins and native flora. Her undecided position between these two cultures is reflected in her blank expression and the fact that the platform on which she stands is not labeled *Frida Kahlo* but *Carmen Rivera*. Her figure seems stiff and synthetic. Zarobell implies that Frida copied Estrada's portrait with certain alterations such as the addition of the gloves, the Mexican flag, and the inclusion of a cigarette. The pink dress and coral necklace are present; the angle of the head is comparable, as is the line of hair that surrounds the visages of the two figures. Zarobell also argues that there is sufficient evidence to show that Frida's skill at oil painting would have empowered her to depict herself more realistically. As earlier argued, it seems that she intended to depict herself as a living mythomoteur of Mexicanism.

Figure 32 Frida Kahlo (1943), *Self-portrait as a Tehuana*, Oil on masonite, Private collection.

Figure 33 Frida Kahlo (1932), *Self-portrait on the border line between Mexico and the United States*, Oil on metal, 31.7 × 35 cm, Private collection.

Figure 34 Jose Maria Estrada (1845), *Young woman with pearl necklace and pink dress*, Oil on zinc laminate, 35.5 × 25.5 cm, Soumaya Museum, Mexico.

8. Womanhood and Motherhood Symbolization

Frida's agonized poeticism is also apparent in her symbolization of *womanhood* and *motherhood*. There is a distinction between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution; thus, motherhood is socially organized and is subject to historical and cross-cultural variations. Nationalist myths of motherhood operate at the psychic level of the conscious and unconscious, and are subject to interventions by institutions like the state. They include constructs about proper maternal practices and the myths create tension between the *good* and the *bad* mother. Good mothers are pure whilst those who do not conform to social constructs are bad mothers. *Medea* was the personification of the 'bad mother' who killed her children. Among bad mothers of fantasy she was the worst; as such she speaks to our times when the bad mother is always present as an issue, as a threat, as an excuse, as a pleasurable self-justification and as a political argument. In nationalist symbolization, the mother must be good because the nation is *sacred*. These different versions of motherhood are significant, especially motherhood in terms of the versions adopted by Frida. Lacan (1977) suggests that a child's sense of identity arises out of the internalization of outer views of itself-a *mirror stage* and that identity formation takes place when an infant realizes it is separated from the mother. This split is illusory because identity depends for its unity on something outside itself-it develops from a lack. This lack is the desire to return to the unity with the mother which was part of early infancy but which can only be a fantasy. Once the separation has taken place, the subject still longs for the unitary-self and the *oneness* with the mother of the imaginary phase. It can be argued that Frida's relationship with her mother lacked such "oneness." Turner (1967) argues that a

Mudyi tree is polysemic symbol of womanhood: the tree can be equated with breast milk, a mother and a child, materlineage, or feminine wisdom. Frida's female iconography demonstrates such multivocality. Grosz (1990, 33) claims that the mirror stage coincides with "the auto-erotic pleasure, a part of the infant's body, standing in for maternal supplication. The mirror stage sets up relations between the interiority the child recognizes and an exterior world (reality), generating subjectivity. However, the subject, in order to be a subject, must necessarily internalise *otherness*." This split is illusory because identity depends for its unity on something outside itself-it develops from a lack. This lack is the desire to return to the unity with the mother which was part of early infancy but which can only be a fantasy. Once the separation has taken place, the subject still longs for the unitary-self and the *oneness* with the mother of the imaginary phase. The tragedy of the mirror stage for a young girl is that she shall never have a totalized self image; she will never be perceived as a cohesive whole because she does not possess the phallus. For the little girl, the psychical unity is in conflict with more than the lived uncoordinated aggregate of parts but also later the anatomical distinction between her own femaleness (castration/lack/not one) and the masculine (possession of penis/wholeness/one). The ultimate tragedy of the mirror stage is that the subject only ever attains unity with the infinite in death, when this mortal coil returns to the ground, to the elements. In returning to the soil, back into the elements, the human subject body then, and only then, is literally re-incorporated back into the (m)other. The quest for unattainable wholeness, manifested in the desire to return to the source, the infinite, is a dominant theme in Frida's painting. It is as if Frida suffered a double castration, both psychic and physical, being female and experiencing the piercing of her torso at such an early age. In the production of a work of art, Frida was able to momentarily experience her own metaphoric death and thus attain the desired yet tragic unity longed for. Frida's embellished corset imagery reflects the duality of the beautiful and the macabre, of self-love and self-loathing, where in Freudian terms Frida the narcissist avenges the loss of a love object (in her case loss of physical self-mastery through injury and disability) upon oneself. Indeed, the subject and titles of many of her self-portraits evoke notions of wounded femininity; a common motif in her work is that of womanhood as the "castrated other." For example, in *Remembrance of the Open Wound* (See Figure 35), the painting shows a wounded foot and thigh. They are symbolic of the anguish Frida was experiencing with Diego's infidelities. The foot wound is real as a result of

surgery the previous year, although in reality it is her right foot that is wounded, not her left. The thigh wound is invented. The text on the ribbon behind her reads: "*Recuerdo de la Herida Abierta. Frida Kahlo 1938*" (Remembrance of the Open Wound). When describing this painting to her friends, Frida stated that her right hand is hidden under her skirt because she is masturbating.[10]

Figure 35 Frida Kahlo (1938), *Remembrance of the open wound,* Dimensions unknown (Destroyed).

Due to the 1925 bus accident, Kahlo was unable to bear children and had lost three children. As substitutes for children, she collected dolls and kept many pets on which she bestowed her affection. In *Me and My Doll* (See Figure 36), Frida is depicted sitting on the bed with one of her dolls. However, this is not a typical loving mother/child portrait. It is a grotesque doll. Frida looks forlornly at the viewer and seems unaware that the doll even exists. She displays no attachment to the doll. This sense of detachment is reinforced by her smoking a cigarette; something she probably would not do if the doll was her own child. The image underpins that Frida is condemned to a life of childlessness. The stark empty room only further projects the feeling of emptiness that the childless Frida must feel. Her skin is depicted in a sinister red earth colour which is mirrored on the floor. It is a reddish earth colour akin to the reddish terrain of Mexico. In a sense then, this image may symbolize a childless *Mother Mexico*.

[10] The original painting was destroyed in a fire. The only photo of it belongs to Raquel Tibol, a well known Mexican art critic, art historian, and author of several books about Frida Kahlo. She was also a personal friend of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera and lived with them in the last days of Frida's life.

Figure 36 Frida Kahlo (1937), *Me and my doll,* Oil on metal, 40 × 32 cm, Private collection.

A painting entitled *Roots* is another image which echoes the notion of childlessness (See Figure 37). Symbolically, Frida's intense aspiration to be a mother is linked Mother Earth as her body fuses with a plant. Her dream of fertility is symbolized by her torso opening up like a window that gives birth to a vine. Her blood surges through the vine and into red vesicles that extend beyond the vine to feed the parched earth. With her elbow propped on a pillow, she sees herself as a Tree of Life. In this painting, Frida becomes Mother Mexico as she nourishes the Mexican earth. Due to her Catholic upbringing, she was possibly making an analogy between her blood flowing into the world and the wine that came from Noah's grapevine which predicted Christ's sacrifice. Thus, she becomes the quintessential sacrificial victim (Herrera, 1991, 91).[11]

[11] *The Guardian* newspaper reported on August 12, 2007 that Frida reveals one of her long-held secrets in a new collection of letters published for the centenary of her birth. The book tells the contents of a series of letters that Frida exchanged with her physician and confidant, Dr Leo Eloesser, after she suffered a miscarriage in 1932, describing the devastation she felt when she realised that she could never have Diego's child. Frida's confession entitled *My Beloved Doctor* is a bilingual compilation of the letters she exchanged with her doctor between 1932 and 1951. The letters remained hidden for 50 years after her death. Twelve days after her miscarriage, she wrote to Dr Eloesser: "I have wanted to write to you for a long time than you can imagine. I had so looked forward to having a little Dieguito that I cried a lot, but it's over, there is nothing else that can be done except to bear it."

Figure 37 Frida Kahlo (1943), *Roots*, Oil on metal, 30.5 × 49.9 cm, Private collection.

Symbolically, women can also be viewed as being sacred. For example, Reddy (1979) suggests that ideas are often spoken as though they are "things inside the head." The notion that ideas can be transmitted depends entirely on an image of the person as a *container* of a person's inner life is often thought to be sacred i.e., the Pauline concept of the body as a temple[12], and especially the womb as a site of procreation-woman as the giver of life. Hence, the image of womanhood as a container is sacred (Forker, 2007, 80). Likewise, Frida depicts herself as a sacred container being violated as a result of an abortion (See Figure 38). On July 4, 1932, Frida suffered a horrible and life threatening miscarriage. This unfinished painting (See Figure 39) depicting the imaginary Cesarean procedure is believed to have been started prior to the miscarriage and is an expression of both hope and fear. Rybarik (1997) demonstrates a large majority of women who suffer a miscarriage experience the loss as that of the loss of a baby and as such, mourn the loss as one would the loss of a child. There are exclusive factors related to reproductive loss that differentiate it from other mourning events and thus, the likelihood exists for greater susceptibility to the development of a psychological disorder. These factors include the swiftness and unforeseen nature of the loss, the lack of communal recognition of the impact of *perinatal* loss (the period immediately before and after birth), "violation of the very order of life" (Boyle et al., 1996, 1274), loss of identity as a parent, loss of future expectations, and, for women, distress related to an inability to fulfill one of the fundamental "tasks of a woman." Geller et al.,

[12] The *Pauline* concept of the body as a temple is based on St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. He writes: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price" (*Corinthians* 6:19-20).

(2004) underscores possible fundamental medical illness or genetic factors that may have contributed to the loss, concerns regarding personal responsibility for the loss, and fears about future procreative competence. In the painting Frida depicts the delivered baby next to her. With hopes shattered by the miscarriage, she left the painting unfinished. Five days after the miscarriage, she began work on her retablo style image *Henry Ford Hospital* which depicts the sheer horror of the miscarriage (See Figures 40 and 41).

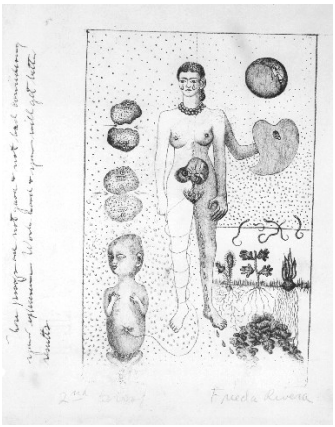

Figure 38: Frida Kahlo (1932), *The abortion*, Lithograph on paper, 32 × 23 cm, Collection of Dolores Olmedo Mexico City, Mexico.

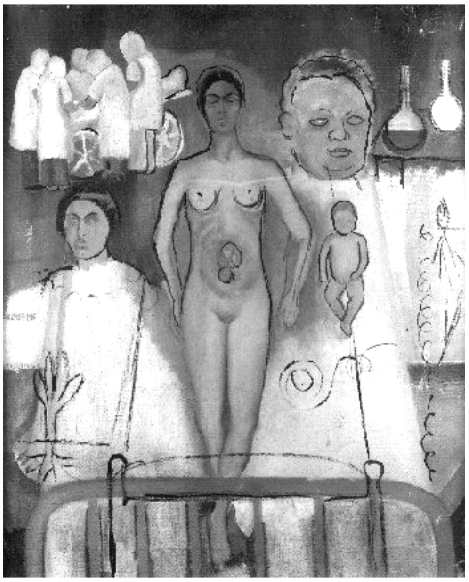

Figure 39 Frida Kahlo (1932), *Frida and the cesarean operation*, Oil on canvas, 73 × 62 cm, Collection of Dolores Olmedo Mexico City, Mexico.

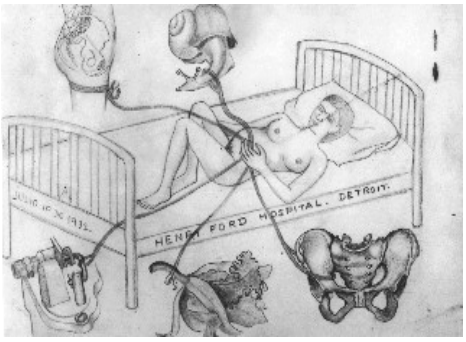

Figure 40 Frida Kahlo (1932), *Study for Henry Ford Hospital*, Pencil on paper, 14 × 21 cm, Collection of Juan Coronel, Cuernavaca, Mexico.

Figure 41 Frida Kahlo (1932), *Henry Ford Hospital*, Oil on metal, 32.5 × 40.2 cm, Collection Museo Dolores Olmedo Patino, Mexico City.

In *Henry Ford Hospital*, Frida is depicted as a fragmented mother who needs attention. Her need for attention is an antidote to her fragmentation. The image depicts Frida weeping upon a cell-like iron hospital bed that seems to be almost suspended in space. This separation from the earth echoes her feelings of isolation when in Detroit. “Like the cold metal bed, the background of the city is filled with hard, man-made objects. Frida is naked; lying in a pool of blood, and her face is expressionless except for one large tear” (Drucker, 1991, 69). She is “powerless and alone in the industrialized landscape. Her nightmarish fantasies elude any definite decoding because of their private nature and associations: a fetus, the ‘insides of a woman,’ pelvic bones, a snail, an escape valve from an autoclave, and an orchid” (Comisarenco, 1996, 16). Mexican folk symbolizations of nativity scenes frequently include ornate stylizations of snail forms. Moreover, a snail is a symbol of *parturition* (childbirth) in the Aztec culture and also a Christian symbol of a sinner. These

symbols were fused in Frida's depiction of her traumatic miscarriage. Comisarenco further argues that because Christianity insists that procreation is the only justification of the sexual act, it is possible that the guilt associated with the loss of the baby made Frida unconsciously identify with sinner/snail imagery. The autoclave, used for sterilizing surgical instruments, might be an unconscious reference to her earlier attempt at sterilization in terminating her pregnancy. Symbolically, the "half-born baby dropping into a puddle of blood" is the child that Frida had just miscarried, which made her wish that she too were dead (Herrera, 1991, 9). "Kahlo's painting seems to move through a process of stripping away layers, that of the actual skin over a wound, that of the mask of beauty over the reality of pain" (Mulvey, 1982, 15). Although this image contains the dreadfulness of her loss, it was also a source of strength. Through it, Frida learned to create, not as a mother, but as an artist. Although she compensated for her loss with paintings, she grieved all her life for a child, and the inability to have one provided a spur to her artistic work (Drucker, 1991). Grimberg argues that Frida's art did not exist until July 1932 when she spontaneously aborted the loss of a desperately wanted pregnancy, and in effect, gave birth to her own personal style. As Grimberg (1989, 14) points out, "she kept on her shelf a jar containing a fetus-her still-born child." Subconsciously, she may also have perceived herself as a Medean-figure, the archetypal killer of children. Furthermore, Frida would have been deeply aware of the Mexican legend of *La Llorona* (the weeping woman) who drowned her children, then killed herself, and was doomed to wander the earth in guilt as she weeped and searched for her children. She would also have been aware that *La Llorona* had been immortalized in song as a *Mother Mexico* type figure who lamented the sufferings of her afflicted children, and especially when it was sung by the legendary Mexican singer, Chavela Vargas, who had been one of Frida's lesbian lovers. Likewise, the song lyrics of the Irish nationalist song *Four Green Fields* inspired the painting of *Mother Ireland* as a mournful mother for her lost child (See Figure 42).[13]

[13] My four green fields ran red with their blood, said she
What have I now, said the fine old woman
What have I now, this proud old woman did say
I have four green fields, one of them is in bondage
In stranger's hands, that tried to take it from me
But my sons had sons, as brave as were their fathers
My fourth green field will bloom once again said she.

Figure 42 Martin Forker (1975), *Mother Ireland*, Oil on canvas, 103 × 103 cm, Private collection.

Several months after her miscarriage in Detroit, Frida painted how she imagined she was born. The emotional relationship that she had with her mother seems to have been a depressive and inadequate one. It seems that as an infant she lacked the maternal emotional support and mirroring she needed (Grimberg, 1998). Her mother's emotional indifference and her sense of feeling isolated while in her presence are depicted in *My Birth* (See Figure 43). This image depicts Frida's mother naked from the waist down with an apparently dead child emerging between her outspread legs. Frida illustrates the *maternal abject* through the painful birthing process. The image reflects her awareness of Aztec iconography as it mirrors a birth similar to the goddess *Tlazolteotl* in the act of parturition (See Figure 44) where a squatting woman with a sinister grimace gives birth to an adult man's head. Frida's fetal iconography relied heavily on Pre-Columbian sources in expressing her feelings about procreation. *Tlazolteotl*, the Aztec goddess of both childbirth and "filth" became an important object of analysis and inspiration for Frida and part of her personal iconography. According to Meso-American mythology, Tlazolteotl, who was often depicted giving birth, was the mother of *Centeotl*, the maize god, and of *Xochiquetzal*, goddess of fertility, flowers, and weaving. Tlazolteotl also embodied frightful aspects of sexuality, vice, and disease.

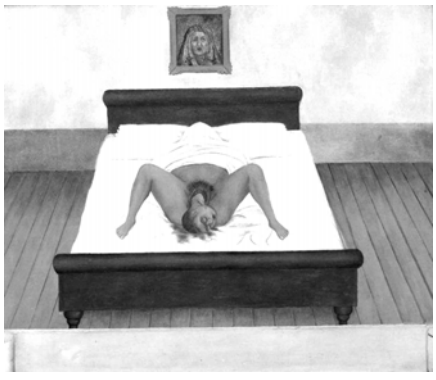

Figure 43 Frida Kahlo (1932), *My birth*, Oil on metal, 31 × 35 cm, Private collection.

Figure 44 Unknown Aztec artist (early 16th century), *The Goddess Tlazolteotl in the Act of Childbirth,* Aplite speckled with garnets, 20cm high, Collection of Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

In *My Birth*, placed above the bed and pierced by daggers in her heart, is the *Virgin of Sorrows*. Frida recalled that she included the Virgin as "part of a memory image" (Herrera, 1991, 9) whose invocation symbolizes a tragic occurrence, as a way of replacing the traditional representation of the Virgin as the divine intercessor against calamity in retablos or religious painting. The mother, who, like the baby, is dead, represents both Frida having the miscarriage and her mother giving birth (Herrera, 1993, 127-128). Apparently, the bed was the actual bed in which she and her younger sister Cristina were born (Herrera, 1991, 9). Arguably, this painting underpins Frida's relationship with her mother. Because she had never emotionally separated from her mother, Frida thought her individuation would psychologically kill her mother and that her real sense of self would be born only after her mother had died. Her relationship with her mother was not warm and nurturing; symbolically, it was "dead" (Jenkins, 1991). "Although the inevitable battles with the woman she called *Mi Jefe* (my chief) became more intense as both grew older, when her mother died Frida could not stop crying" (Herrera, 1983a, 14). Like Jenkins (1991), Knafo (1996) proposes that much of Frida's symbolization resides at the separation phase with her mother. Knafo particularly highlights the absent mirroring experience, which Frida missed and longed for, from her mother. As noted earlier, *mirroring* is responsible for providing the infant with its sense of identity and body presence (Lacan, 1977). This *mirroring* is equivalent to Kristeva's (1982) interpretation of the *mapping* of the body which occurs at the same time as the separation from the mother. Klein's psychic analysis of the child's separation from the mother is based upon a field of objects to be fused or split, possessed or destroyed by means

of fantasies produced by bodily drives. According to Klein, the first object of aggression for example is not the mother or father, but a series of part-objects-breasts, milk, penis, children etc. to which the infant fantasizes the connection of other part-objects-mouth, teeth, urine, or excrement (Nixon, 1995). According to Klein (1945, 78-79):

> The first introjected object, the mother's breast, forms the basis of the super-ego... the earliest feelings of guilt in both sexes derive from the oral-sadistic desires to devour the mother, and primarily her breasts. It is therefore in infancy that feelings of guilt arise. Guilt does not emerge when the Oedipus complex comes to an end, but is rather one of the factors which from the beginning mould its course and affect its outcome.

Frida's fixation with mirrors and her numerous self-portraits seem to underscore the necessity for her to remind herself that she did really exist. From another perspective, the essentialist myth of the *Perfect Mother* underlines motherhood as all-loving, all-giving, nurturing, intimacy, and softness (Forna, 1999). Indubitably, Frida took great satisfaction in keeping a home for Diego and loved fussing over him, cooking for him, and even bathing him (Herrera, 1983a). In short, she adopted the dual role of a wife and *Perfect Mother* to a man who had never really reached emotional maturity. She perpetually defended his misgivings, his ill-tempered mood swings, and his cruelties to her. She perceived Diego as a baby-faced child in her maternal arms who needed to be cuddled (Souter, 2007, 107). In *The Love Embrace of the Universe, The Earth, Diego, and Me*, she cradles Diego like a baby while the couple is embraced by an image of the earth and the universe (See Figure 45). The subject of this painting contains many elements derived from ancient Mexican mythology. It may be argued that Frida's inability to bear children led her to adopt a maternal role towards Diego. In the center of the painting, like a Madonna, she holds her infantile husband in a love embrace that illustrates the unifying relationship of mother and child. Although, Frida is depicted as a nurturing mother, the baby (Diego) is depicted with the third eye of wisdom on his forehead. Symbolically, they are both dependent on each other. One of Frida's doctors believed that she experienced crises when Diego was absent. This pattern of using various strategies to feel cohesive must have had childhood origins when her father involved himself in helping to restore his favourite daughter to health (Herrera, 1991, 194). Guillermo, and sometimes Diego, provided Frida with an experience of cohesiveness that

would otherwise have been missing. When this form of cohesiveness was absent or insufficient, she resorted to drugs and alcohol. Embracing Frida and Diego is the Aztec Earth Mother, *Cituacoatl*. The outermost figure, the *Universal Mother*, embraces Cituacoatl. In the foreground, the Itzcuintli dog, *Senor Xolotl*, is more than simply one of Frida's favorite pets: it represents *Xolotl*, an entity in the form of a dog who guards the underworld. In this image, Frida presents life, death, night, day, moon, sun, man and woman in a recurring dichotomy which is intensely entwined and unified together by two dominant mythological entities.

Figure 45 Frida Kahlo (1949), *The love embrace of the Universe, the Earth, Diego, me, and Senor Xolotl*, Oil on canvas, 69.8 × 60.6 cm, Private collection.

In another painting symbolizing motherhood and child relationships, the symbolism of the *Other* is evident in *My Nurse and I* (See Figure 46). It clearly supports Turner's (1967) notion that *womanhood* can be equated with breast milk. Frida depicts herself as a baby with the head of her adult self nursing at the breast of her dark-skinned Indian nursemaid whose face is replaced by that of an Olmec stone sculpture. Frida reaffirms her Mexican identity as she drinks the milk of her hallowed Mesoamerican ancestors. From a nutritional source, her national identity is created. This interpretation is extended when one compares this image with a painting by the Mexican artist Cristobal de Villapando (See Figure 47). In this painting, Saint Dominic is depicted as seen receiving the ultimate reward for his spiritual life as milk from the breast of the mother of Christ streams into his mouth. Likewise, Frida portrays herself as the recipient of an equally miraculous event. Symbolically, she is the adult milk-sister of all Mesoamericans (Zarobell, 2008, 29).

Figure 46 Frida Kahlo (1937), *My Nurse and I*, Oil on metal, 30.5 × 34.9 cm, Collection Museo Dolores Olmedo Patino, Mexico City.

Figure 47 Cristobal de Villalpando (late 17th century), *The lactation of Saint Dominic*, Oil on canvas, 360 × 480 cm, Church of Saint Domingo, Mexico City.

Frida's paintings were affected by her frequent mood swings: from euphoria to deep depression, from hope to hopelessness, and her periods of paranoia (Zamora, 1990, 118). In *Without Hope* (See Figure 48), she creates another visceral image of violated motherhood. Frida is depicted spewing out her internal organs onto a ladder over a bed. "The miscarried child thus becomes her sacrifice placed upon the cross-easel between a pale moon and a blood red sun" (Herrera, 1978, 42). Since she was so thin, the doctors made her eat pureed food every two hours. On the back of the painting's frame Frida wrote a rhyme: "*A mí no me queda ya ni la menor esperanza...Todo se mueve al compás de lo que encierra la panza*" (Not the least hope remains to me...Everything moves in time with what the belly contains). The sheet covering Frida's naked body is speckled with encircling microscopic organisms that appear to be cells with nuclei, or perhaps eggs, waiting to be fertilized. Their form is echoed in the blood-red sun and pale moon that appear together in the sky. Accordingly, Frida's agonized poetry is evident in the symbolism of the conflicting worlds of the microscope and the solar system. It could also be that she set the funnel of horror in *Without Hope* between cells and celestial orbs in order not to exaggerate but rather to minimize, by

contrast with the great span of things, her own personal miseries. In addition, the simultaneous presence of the sun and the moon refers to the Aztec notion of an eternal war between light and dark, or to Christ's crucifixion, where the sun and moon together indicate the sorrow of all creation at the death of the saviour. Thus, "whether the funnel is a hemorrhage, a miscarried child, a scream, or a force-fed meal, the gore gushing from (or to) Frida's mouth and onto (or from) an easel that evokes a cross can be seen as a ritualistic offering, a personal and imaginary rite that redeems or renews through suffering" Herrera (1983a, 347-348). In *Tree of Hope, Keep Firm* (See Figure 49), the duality of Frida's being is evident. Whether literal or figurative, trees and roots imply the bonds between mothers and daughters (Friis, 2004, 57). Subconsciously, this symbolization may signify Frida's desire to return to the unitary-self and the *oneness* with the mother of the imaginary phase (Lacan, 1977). Both Fridas are pictured on the edge of an abyss. One Frida is dead or wounded. Frida had been advised to have her spine strengthened by a specialist in New York. Shortly after the operation, she wrote to her first lover, Alejandro Gomez Arias: "I have two huge scars on my back in this shape."[14] She depicts the shapes of two cavernous wounds on her back which are also echoed in the fractured landscape behind. Her desecrated body is pictured facing away on a gurney beside a healthy Frida is now liberated as she holds the restrictive corset she wore through much of her life. In one hand she holds a flag which states *Rbol de la Esperanza Mantente Firme* (Tree of Hope, Stay Firm). This message is an affirmation of her optimism and courage. Symbolically, life and death are linked though the dominant Frida that sits in a position of privilege in front of her violated alter-ego. Furthermore, the duality of her essence is reinforced in the dissection of the composition into two halves (day and night) as her mutilated body is sacrificed to an Aztec sun. In contrast, the dynamic and optimistic Frida is associated to the symbolism of the moon, a symbol of womanhood. This dualism is based on the Aztec concept of permanent war raging between the white god *Huitzilopochtli* (the Sun god) and his opponent *Tezcatlipoca* (the black god of the setting sun). As such, Frida may have seen herself as a victim in some Manichean struggle between good and evil. The eternal battle between these two opposing deities ensures the world remains in a harmonious equilibrium.

[14] From a letter to Alejandro Gomez Arias dated 30 June 1946. Gomez Arias Archive.

Figure 48 Frida Kahlo (1945), *Without hope*, Oil on canvas mounted on masonite, 28 × 36 cm, Dolores Olmedo Foundation, Mexico City.

Figure 49 Frida Kahlo (1946), *Tree of hope, keep firm*, Oil on masonite, 55.8 × 40.7 cm, Private collection.

9. Flight Symbolization

Frida's agonized poeticism is also evident in her flight symbolization. In her 1953 diary, she created an image of her severed feet and captioned it, "Feet what do I need them for if I have wings to fly" (See Figure 50). As a child, she had been captivated by the notion of flight. Not long after she developed the polio that would debilitate her, she had asked her parents to buy her a model airplane. Instead, they had given her a pair of straw wings and dressed her in an angelic white robe. It can be argued that the artificial wings must have underpinned the disappointment of a child whose mobility was already hindered. The memory of that childhood frustration, together with her numerous foot surgeries in the 1930s, is a likely source of Frida's painting (now lost) *They Ask for Planes and Are Given Straw Wings* (See Figure 51). The image depicts a female child akin to a miniature Frida

clothed in a Tehuana dress holding the imagined model airplane she never received. Connected to the earth, hovering by straw wings from above, the child aspires to fly, but cannot (Udall, 2003, 11). Yet again in another image symbolizing potential flight, Frida depicts herself as a winged angel. The caption reads "*Te vas? No. Alas Rotas*" (Are you leaving? No. Broken Wings). She stands, wings expanded behind her shoulders while her body, surrounded by a mass of foliage, is consumed by flames below. Symbolically, the broken wings suggest her lament for her own physical and emotional immobility (See Figure 52). In *Self-Portrait* (See Figure 53), the transfiguration of a caterpillar into a soaring butterfly had obvious connotations of freedom for Frida. Her imagined "butterfly-Icarus-artist wings could lift her above the pain of the physical world into a realm where differences of time and reality collapsed" (Udall, 2003, 13). It is not hard to imagine that someone who had spent most of her life encased in surgical corset would identify with cocoon symbolism or the stage of chrysalis in the development of butterflies. Fragile yet resilient, the butterfly mirrors Frida's life. She is depicted in mysterious Eden whilst butterflies nestle in her hair, and winged blossoms, the sexual organs of plants, float above. Symbolically, they represent the power of reproduction (Fuentes, 1995, 10).

Figure 50 Frida Kahlo (1953), ***Feet what do I need them for if I have wings to fly,*** **Frida Kahlo Diary, Frida Kahlo Museum, Coyoacan, Mexico.**

Figure 51 Frida Kahlo (1938), ***They ask for planes and are given straw wings,*** **Dimensions and location unknown.**

Figure 52 Frida Kahlo, *Alas Rotas*, Frida Kahlo Diary, Frida Kahlo Museum, Coyoacan, Mexico.

Figure 53 Frida Kahlo (1940), *Self-portrait,* Oil on canvas, 62 × 47.7 cm, University of Texas.

10. The Final Flight of Frida Kahlo

In the early 1930s, Frida had developed an atrophic ulcer on her right foot from which several gangrenous toes were amputated in 1934. In 1953, her right leg was also amputated as a result of gangrene. Consequently, she became increasingly addicted to pain killers, tobacco, and alcohol to ease her painful existence. It seems that following the amputation of her right leg, Frida became a recluse and deeply depressed, and finally lost her will to live. On July 12, 1954, she gave Diego a silver ring two weeks prior to their 25th wedding anniversary. When he questioned the timing of her gift, she replied, “Because I sense that I’ll be leaving you very soon” (Rummel, 2000, 243). On the morning of July 13, 1954, Frida was found dead in her Coyaocan bedroom. Wolfe (1963, 402-404) points out that that it was in Coyaocan, Frida’s birthplace and death place, that the last Aztec ruler, *Cuauhtmeoc*, was tortured by the Spanish. Wolfe suggests that Frida would have considered this an

appropriate place to die. The evidence suggested a possible suicide. In her last diary entry, she had written “I hope the leaving is joyful and I hope never to return” (Rummel, 2000, 163). Rivera (1960) states that the day Frida died was the most tragic day of his life, adding that, too late, he had realized that the most wonderful part of his life had been his love for her. In 1955, after a diagnosis of cancer, Diego Rivera married his art dealer, Emma Hurtado. His health deteriorated rapidly and on November 24, 1957 he died quietly of heart failure. He had given explicit instructions that upon his death his ashes be mixed with those of Frida. Instead the Mexican government chose to inter his remains in Mexico City’s famous *Rotunda of Illustrious Men*. Frida Kahlo’s exit from this world was dramatic. On July 14, 1954, her body lay in state in the splendid foyer of the *Belles Artes* in Mexico City. Much to the chagrin of Mexican officials, her coffin was draped with a large flag bearing the Soviet hammer and sickle superimposed upon a star. As her corpse was rolled toward the open crematory furnace, mourners surged forward to pull the rings from her fingers to save as mementos. At the moment when her corpse entered the furnace, an intense heat made her body sit up and she appeared to give a fleeting smile as her blazing hair stood out from her face in an aureole (Herrera, 1983a). “Her serene face encircled in a wreath of flaming hair, the broken, pinned, stitched, cleft and withered husk that once contained Frida Kahlo surrendered to the crematory’s flames” (Souter, 2007, 7). With her love of the unconventional and her penchant for black humour, Frida Kahlo would have enjoyed such a spectacle. Her flight symbolization is also evident in a painting entitled *The Dream* (See Figure 54). Ostensibly, this is a depiction of her imagined death. Frida wrote in her diary, “Anguish and pain, pleasure and death are no more than a process” (Fuentes, 1995). Her lifeless body rests upon a floating bed whilst her head rests upon a soft pillow. Symbolically, the bed is a prison where she had to convalesce from her painful realities: polio, the bus accident, miscarriages and abortions, lost loves, betrayals, and amputations. The leaf motif on the bed linen takes on a life of its own and is, perhaps, symbolic of a new life. Above Frida is a Judas doll. Formerly, she had habitually referred to her agonized body as “this Judas of a body.” The Judas doll is mirror image of Frida. It too lies garlanded with leaves and its bald head rests upon a soft pillow of two cushions. Frida often referred to death as *la pelona* (the bald or stupid woman) as a coping mechanism. “I tease and laugh at death so it won’t get the better of me” (Drucker, 1991, 29). The Judas doll’s legs are wrapped in a network of fireworks which are evocative of the steel orthopedic corsets that Frida had to

wear for most of her life. Seemingly, akin to the flight of a new born butterfly, she at last escapes from her chrysalis-like Judas body cocooned in painted plaster, steel corsets (See Figure 55) and chin harnesses (See Figure 56) and her soul ascends to a serene and pain free cerulean firmament.

Figure 54 Frida Kahlo (1940), *The dream*, Oil on canvas, 74 × 98.5 cm, Private collection.

Figure 55 Nickolas Muray (1941), *Frida in painted plaster corset*, Nickolas Muray collection.

Figure 56 Nickolas Muray (1939), *Frida in chin harness*, Nickolas Muray collection.

When viewing *Frida in Chin Harness* (Figure 56), a line from a poem entitled *Blood and the Iliad: The Paintings of Frida Kahlo* by Patricia Dienstfrey (1979) comes to mind. Perhaps, it is fitting to conclude a study on the "agonized poetry" of Frida Kahlo by citing some sections of Dienstfrey's poem.

Blood and the Iliad: The Paintings of Frida Kahlo

In a surgical landscape
Chin set on a broken Ionic column
Nails like the nails from Christ's cross
In her breasts and scowling face…
In Henry Ford Hospital after a miscarriage
She hemorrhaged
She lay like a new born
In a nest of blood…
And when it was finished
When black lovely night rolled down
No cry rose to assault the lamp of day
But ghosts come back as they do
To blood-stained ground and drank from her hands
Her white fingers
Where she had scraped away the paint

Conclusion

This study on the symbolism of Frida Kahlo should prove useful to art education as it stresses the importance of art students' visual literacy and their ability to comprehend symbolism. The study provides art students with prior knowledge of Frida Kahlo's artworks to help them form a stronger knowledge-base and to develop their interpretive skills of artworks. This study has examined the *polysemic* or *multivocal* symbolization of Frida Kahlo's "agonized poetry." The dominant symbol which Frida Kahlo uses is her broken body. Her rich symbolization explores the turmoil of her personal life. Her symbolization of womanhood underscores her femininity, her desire to be loved, and as a woman betrayed by

those whom she most loved. It is evident that Kahlo's paintings were therapeutic in the sense that they expressed her constant feelings of *fragmentation* (Grimberg, 1993) and that painting was for her, a *cohesive function* (DiGiovanni & Lee, 1994) to lessen the harmful effects of her personal tragedy and heartbreak. Kahlo's symbolization stressed the notion of *difference* (Woodward, 1997) and this sense of difference identifies her as a *liminal* figure (Van Gennep, 1960) in her duality and hybridity (Haynes, 2006). Despite her Communist ideology, Kahlo was heavily influenced by religious images such as retablos and Renaissance iconography. In addition, such iconography may have been a source of spiritual comfort when she was extremely ill. Her *motherhood* symbolization also reveals her fragmented self and as a cohesive function in expressing her agonized experiences of miscarriages, abortions, and in her fears of infertility. In her motherhood symbolization, she adopts the role of the *Perfect Mother* in her maternal relationship with her immature husband. Painting during a time of cultural and political upheaval, her work is also infused with a potent political insight. In her ethno-symbolization, she assumes the role of a national motherhood figure and adopts the role of a human *mythomoteur* (Smith, 1986) to underpin Mexico's pre-Hispanic past and her Mexican post-revolutionary ideology. Kahlo's fixation with multiple mirrored self-portraits may reflect her separation phase with her mother (Lacan, 1977) and also underlines her self-affirmation to her existence. Her preoccupation with representations of flight underscores her desire to be released from the agonized reality of her Judas-body. As Diego Rivera claimed, Frida Kahlo produced a series of masterpieces which had exalted the feminine quality of truth, reality, cruelty, and suffering. Never before had a woman put such agonized poetry on canvas.

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