

Homesickness and the Mother's Breast

Editha Sterba. *The Psychiatric Quarterly*, XIV, No. 4, 1940.

Edith Buxbaum

The author shows, in an interesting analysis, the meaning of homesickness to a girl of five years. After being settled in a new home and country for several months the child suddenly began to long for the estate of her grandmother where at the age of four she had found consolation for the frustration attendant upon the birth of a little sister. The grandmother and a friendly dairymaid had helped her to get over the disappointment of having to share mother's love with the new baby. Her jealousy was particularly aroused by the mother's nursing the baby. A cow which 'had four nipples and belonged all to herself' was accepted as a satisfactory substitute. What appeared to be homesickness proved to be a longing for the mother's breast. In fantasies which the child dictates to her mother, 'fear of starvation, the anxiety that her mother will no longer be in a position to maintain and feed her child's appear as her most important problem. In these fantasies, jealousy and death wishes against her

500

siblings are also expressed: The mother-bird 'had eleven little ones that had all been eaten up by a cat, except the eleventh ... and so she thought, "It is a good thing the children are dead ... now perhaps I shall be able to feed the one that is left." ... The next day the child said to its mother ... "I haven't enough to eat... I must go away." This fantasy reveals the familiar relation between aggression and fear. The little girl who obviously has a strong oral fixation to the mother's breast wants to get rid of her siblings because she does not want to share her food with them; she wants to let them starve. She is afraid that she will starve. Fear that the mother may no longer be in a position to feed her is rather a fear that mother, whose babies she wants to destroy, will not want to feed her as a punishment for her wickedness. The author says these fantasies occurred at the peak of the child's nostalgia.

We know that children at times react with anxiety to any change of living quarters even when their parents feel perfectly secure and at ease about it. They are even more likely to be disturbed when the parents feel uncertain and fearful themselves.

Further experience will show whether general conclusions can be drawn from this case.

501

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