



# Plath Profiles

VOLUME 9 • AUTUMN 2016

# Plath Profiles

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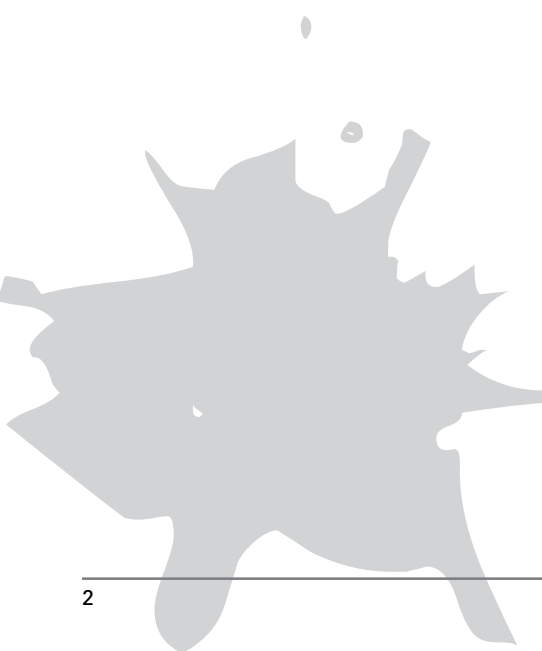
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## Editors' note

These fine and very original essays reflect the ongoing interest in the work of Sylvia Plath around the world. Yet just as interesting is how Plath has stimulated poetry as well as art for our issues – especially when you look at Kristina Zimbakova's fascinating piece, a detail of which graces our cover.

We apologise for the delay in producing this issue – we are a small team of volunteers and this work is a labour of love – and we also apologise to all of you who have experienced difficulty with our submission manager. It, like many things in life, is not perfect. Thank you for bearing with us on this journey.

Volume 10 will be our anniversary issue, and it will appear in late December 2018. We are planning something special to celebrate a decade of Plath studies. A call for submissions will be issued in due course.

We look forward to seeing you in Belfast this November!

JENNIFER MACBAIN-STEPHENS

## In the Slivered Hospital

the red lightbulbs in the hall spark a track suit fire / curly hair whispers / you don't want a piece of my  
moan / you want warm animal nothing

flesh tastes different eaten alive / the whisper laughs / then runs face map cues / fear the width of the  
voice / a hoarse stadium now silent clipboards / we all know the astronaut will save her in the end /  
turning earth to straw to weave a golden heart necklace

he thought he needed to save daylight and space bars / refuses to age / asks nothing about the brunette  
/ what's blood thinner other than splitting hairs? what's asking too much x plus y? memory is word  
/ no parasite

*only a mental monster attaches to a feeding tube*

he's clever / puts all energy into tricks / there is always a bad king in these stories / He's locked away in  
a tiny corner of my mind / facing an icy pool / so cold it ice cubes all limb memories away / disposes  
my secret body / vulture the bullets down my stomach

hit one fake button for fakery and parrot talk scripts / repeat chatter squirrel the same questions / how  
are we feeling today? flow like lava lamps jerky and hot / the audience knows the square deaths of you  
blocked off in my chest / my addiction complete

*shhhh ...the special rose colored glasses reveal the truth...climb on*

he drains my battery life beginning on Tuesdays / I have no idea how long I'll last / paralyzed to stop it  
/ stuck in this chair on a cliff / the walls gasp / butterfly wings smashed / if they are turquoise he  
wants me / if they are orange I breathe fire

his lips sweet hummingbird wing beats / but over there, maggots in the cherry bowl / I know this song  
/ this ritual / these letters and particles fill me up on Wednesday / when the air dances / when there  
is a message / shake the track suits / suit up the tuxedos

*break this porcelain bowl for me / this lock*

wear your portable man face / the wolf body comes later / the ingénue knows it's not about me / it's about  
her / the monster hides under the sheets / lips open neck muscles / straining / supplant all wants / my  
stomach grows full / you know how to feed but also how to starve

I never know which pill I'm going to get

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JENNIFER MACBAIN-STEPHENS is the author of three full length poetry collections: *Your Best Asset is a White Lace Dress* (Yellow Chair Press, 2016), *The Messenger is Already Dead* (Stalking Horse Press, March 2017), and *We're Going to Need a Higher Fence*, tied for first place in the 2017 Lit Fest Book Competition. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize. She is also the author of nine chapbooks. Her chapbook *She Came Out From Under the Bed (Poems Inspired by the Films of Guillermo del Toro)* recently came out from Dancing Girl Press. Recent work can be seen at *Prelude*, *Kestrel*, *The Chiron Review*, *Yalobusha Review*, *decomp*, and *Inter/rupture*. Visit: <http://jennifermacbainstephens.wordpress.com/>.



**SHEVAUN BRANNIGAN**

## Self-Portrait as Hydrangea

I would like a full brain.  
I would like to be gladiola.

As a child, I learned  
the sun wouldn't come to me,  
over hours as it set,  
I had to turn.

I am now grown. Petals' edges  
brown. The sun is busy.  
I try to find happiness.  
If I wait right here, the sun returns—

It will shine on me, with its approving moon face,  
like a mother leaning over her daughter's bed  
to say goodnight instead of goodbye.

It will keep me alive another week,  
make me sing, I will stretch toward it,  
it will hold me in its beams, I will feel it all around me like a body,

it will turn me pink, normal, it will know me,  
give me the energy to climb from bed to try,  
it will say there she is, that child I made.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SHEVAUN BRANNIGAN is a graduate of the Bennington Writing Seminars, as well as The Jimenez-Porter Writers' House at The University of Maryland. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in such journals as *Best New Poets 2012*, *Rhino*, *Court Green*, and *Crab Orchard Review*. She is the first place recipient of the 2015 Jan-ai Scholarship through the Winter Poetry and Prose Getaway. Her favorite poetry gig is the workshop she leads at her local Domestic Violence Shelter, and her work can be found at [shevaunbrannigan.wordpress.com](http://shevaunbrannigan.wordpress.com).

JANNA LAYTON

## The Beeswax Candle

I didn't know it would smell of honey.  
I don't know why.  
I suppose I forgot, we forget,  
what wax is.

It's the old beekeeper couple  
who tell me to smell the wax,  
to taste the honey,  
but I want to look at the bees.

They're in a box like Sylvia's,  
but with glass.  
This portable colony can be seen,  
and their kind gods will release them  
among blackberry blossoms,  
they tell me.

The man points out the queen.  
I am not her, but a maiden worker.

Later I light the candle  
and hear in its hiss  
the words of the great bee bards:  
Plath, Atwood, Oliver, Duffy.

The wax melts,  
and I can smell the day I found three hives  
in a field of wildflowers—  
the air around me was alive  
as the sisters flew between home and the world.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JANNA LAYTON lives in San Francisco. Her poetry and fiction have been published or are upcoming in various literary journals, including *Zone 3*, *Literary Bohemian*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, *New Mexico Review*, and *Freshwater*. She blogs at [readingwatchinglookingandstuff.blogspot.com](http://readingwatchinglookingandstuff.blogspot.com).

# Sumption: Sivvy's Food

*"You were slim and lithe and smooth as a fish" – Ted Hughes, "18 Rugby Street", Birthday Letters*

I)

**Sivvy:**

remember it took us three hours  
to shell the small shrimp  
deshelling a foreplay  
carapaced  
sex amidst the exoskeletons  
smell tidal  
rich in sucking scented probing fingers  
swell and smell  
caverns and crevices of the body  
sluice essence

(Sylvia's food  
the food of Sylvia  
belonging to eaten by  
contraction contradiction  
Sylvia is food  
convulsion  
apostrophe as noose raw)

those four fresh trout, succulent  
you brought then to me to cook  
in my flesh crucible  
I bit you on first meeting  
drawing blood  
but ever after  
you consumed me  
the red of my headband  
red red warp weft  
growing to rough cloak  
big enough to lay on  
crushing the soft mosses beneath us on your moors  
on the daffodils of our Devon home  
on the mussel hunter beach of my America  
where I first smelled the real me  
the sea/c of me  
that you nosed out

II)

**Ted:**

Ted dressed as Grandma  
transvestism, fetching on such a manly man  
he positively bursts from the nightgown  
greasy forelock escapes the nightcap  
He wants to eat you all up  
from the red of your lips  
faintly metallic  
acrid with the tidal tang of unconfidence  
off-brand American lipstick  
so red, to the pulsation of your labia  
turning you inside out  
a Humbertian desire  
gentle nibbles becoming more vicious  
gouts of blood as your flesh  
parts in his incisors  
he shadows as fox and panther (you like?)  
sets down as big bad wolf

Ted gapes:  
you are my fish  
freshly fucked freshly gutted  
I have caught you leaping the cold waters  
Electra complex unsexed and I will swallow you down  
hotted up, hallucinatory  
wet whet my appetite  
cunt a crucible for inspiration  
feed me transfixed through your gas fire  
feed me  
butter of my love

out of the frying pan  
nectar of Shrimp Newburg and four fresh fish over  
rice  
the fire of my lovesumption is all the rage  
only your flesh your juices  
will cure the sadist in me

sweet and savoury  
herrings in oatmeal  
don't tell me that you don't want to be eaten  
all abuse victims the same tired defence  
you are succulent



the intimate bonds of kinship and ultimate friendship  
eat feed me  
food for thought  
the trembling of your fingers  
arouses the fine line between  
pornography and erotica  
fetishism and cannibalism  
you lithe fish  
you sea kitten  
PETA's words lure me  
babysoft in your pink wool

head in the oven  
a final gesture  
to pleas/e me  
so nicely braised  
though your head is the least part of you

you could not make all of you fit  
head more symptomatic  
or symbolic?

III)  
**Sivvy:**

my head on the platter  
the open oven door  
sorry it's not genitals  
but you fishhooked and filleted those already  
chewed my ovaries  
distaff mountain oysters  
you a farmer  
with a working man's knowledge of viscera and sweetbreads  
and spat them on the slate

fresh white trout, out! out!  
even better had it been your beloved pike  
and freshly caught by you

eat me  
you are what you eat  
and I will be immortalized in you

even mow my right eye  
singed  
gaslight, a fright  
looks out through yours  
no pebbles on this dead wife's eyes  
I have become your third eye  
and my engorged mouth  
dick-ended on yours  
will suck and spew  
what you will not see  
you will feed me now  
I am i

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CRYSTAL HOPE HURDLE Author of *After Ted & Sylvia: Poems*, from which she read as a guest poet at the International Sylvia Plath Symposium at the University of Oxford in 2007, Crystal Hurdle teaches English and Creative Writing at Capilano University in North Vancouver, BC. She has a teen novel in verse, *Teacher's Pets*, from Tightrope Books.

**NATALIE CRICK**

## Blue Water

When my Mother dragged me out  
I wasn't cold.

My breath was blued  
By the light, seeping through

Trees, black as night  
With all that nothing in-between,

Mother already grieving  
For the other who drowned.

Tonight the storm broke,  
Clouding the colour of

Mother's necklace with the broken clasp.  
The wind whittles your apologies

To blue bone beads  
Small enough to swallow.

# Night

They came out to  
Watch the moon,  
A chalky paleness in the sky,  
Wet from an evening's  
Snow, gathering shadows  
In a field and hoarding them.  
Darkness waited  
Dimly in the trees,  
As a mother  
Slowly, slowly  
Withdrawing a child  
From her breast,  
Falling snow  
Pale as milk,  
The elusive shapes  
Of twilight merging#  
Haunting, full of  
Regret, a cry,  
And then silence.  
Night swallows all.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NATALIE CRICK, from Newcastle in the UK, has found delight in writing all of her life and first began writing when she was a very young girl. She graduated from Newcastle University with a degree in English Literature and plans to pursue an MA at Newcastle this year. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in a range of journals and magazines including *The Lake*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Interpreters House* and *Jet Fuel Review*. Her work also features or is forthcoming in a number of anthologies, including *Lehigh Valley Vanguard Collections 13*. This year her poem, 'Sunday School' was nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

HIROMI YOSHIDA

## Esther's Uncanny Doubles: The "big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman" and the "bleached-blond Negress" in *The Bell Jar*

"Am I a 'Plath addict'?" Sylvia Plath fans might continue to wonder about their own Plath proclivities in response to seemingly endless remakes of the "Sylvia Plath" commodity icon today nearly forty years since Sandra Gilbert enigmatically warned us that the "Plath Myth" had been "launched like a Queen Bee on its dangerous flight through everybody's psyche."<sup>1</sup> In fact, Plath fans might feel particularly inclined to resist the insidious seduction of the Plath Myth by questioning their own Plath addiction tendencies ever since Cynthia Sugars wrote in persuasive psychoanalytic terms to beware of this "dangerous" Myth, while describing Plath as "a symptom of our dis-ease."<sup>2</sup>

Such warnings regarding the dangers of Plath addiction predated the much-anticipated publication of *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* fifteen years ago. This greatly expanded and augmented edition of the Ted Hughes edited Plath Journals promised fan readers a complete Plath image makeover from the self-doubting, schizophrenically menstruating, morbidly body-obsessed, inevitably suicidal poet to the more grounded, multifaceted, life-affirmative girl-next-door, who loved food, clothes, sex, and babies, and complained about doing the housework, or the neighbors, or her marriage—just like any other typical American woman of today.

Therefore, fifteen years since the Plath Myth had been recycled for healthier consumption via *The Unabridged Journals*; fifty years since the publication of *Ariel*; and eighty years since the birth of Edward Said, it remains critically intriguing to examine the interrelation between the consumerist iconicity of Plath—the floating signifier of collective cultural desire—and the numerous instances of orientalism in her writings. On the one hand, the emergence of the orientalized autobiographical double in *The Bell Jar* signifies a gradual narrative (or self-enunciating) movement toward decay, disease, insanity, and self-dissolution. On the other, Plath's authorial self-orientation through the gradual process of poetic self-enunciation in the *Ariel* poem "Fever 103°" can be read in two ways: teleologically as lyric foreshadowing of her suicide; or as ongoing performative speech act invested with the oracular self-fashioning power of the poet priestess and seer.

Regardless of whether Plathian orientalism is approached with ironic negativity as symptomology, or with feminist positivity as subversive performance, Plath's orientalist engagements can revise her iconic status in fascinating ways. Thus I will discuss Plath's personal affiliation with Asian cultures before I examine the first nightlife incident of *The Bell Jar* in the psychoanalytic context of race and sexuality. More specifically, I will closely read Esther Greenwood's uncanny encounter with the orientalized double as ironic Freudian psychodrama, and her experience of Doreen as an instance of Kristevan "abjection" in response to the emergence of the hypersexualized alter ego. While in both narrative instances the emergence of the double foreshadows Esther's gradual movement toward mental dissolution, the racially coded colorations that these doubles assume translate race as pathological signs inscribed across the surface of the white female body.

While Renée Curry has examined the psychoanalytic metaphors of race in Plath's poetry, the psychoanalytic meanings of race in *The Bell Jar* and their sociocultural effects and implications have yet to be investigated.<sup>3</sup> It can be surmised, however, that a critical inquiry into Plathian orientalism can potentially destabilize Plath's remade iconic status, while pathologizing orientalism as the neurotic symptom that gradually evolved into her suicidal drive. Thus while acknowledging these specific risks involved in the critical investigation of Plathian orientalism, gaps in the extant scholarship on literary orientalism need to be filled, even while specifying Plath's own contribution to an orientalist discourse that is as tantalizingly and chimerically makeshift as her own iconicity and its endlessly signifying potential.

Acknowledgment of Plath's contribution to the discourse of literary orientalism can begin with a survey of her journal entries and correspondence. More specifically, it can be discerned from *The Unabridged Journals* and from *Letters Home* that her erratic, primarily academic, and media-filtered exposure to Asian cultures generated the subtext of orientalist ambivalence permeating *The Collected Poems*, the *Johnny*

1 "A Fine, White Flying Myth: Confessions of a Plath Addict," in *Modern Critical Views: Sylvia Plath*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 52.

2 "Sylvia Plath as Fantasy Space; or, The Return of the Living Dead" *Literature and Psychology* 45.3 (1999), 1, Research Library, accessed October 7, 2015.

3 Renée Curry, *White Women Writing White: H. D., Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and Whiteness* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2000).

Panic stories, and *The Bell Jar*.

To contextualize Plathian orientalism biographically, it might be interesting to recall that in 1959, Plath worked as a part-time assistant to Daniel H. H. Ingalls, who chaired the department of Sanskrit and Indian studies at Harvard University, and who served as president of the American Oriental Society.<sup>4</sup> Around the same time, Ted Hughes, to whom she was married by then, was allegedly planning to draft a libretto for a Chinese opera composer whom he and Plath had met at Yaddo according to a letter she wrote her mother dated March 26, 1960 (*Letters Home*, 371). Around the same time, also, she attended a Japanese gagaku dance performance that she describes in a nuanced concrete manner, but nevertheless, as "Weird, odd," and as having put her in a "trance" (*Unabridged Journals*, 499).

Plath's engagement with Japan, in particular, was more than aesthetically cultural, as discernable from her Smith College journals of the early 1950s. Specifically, she was sickened and moved to sympathy for the atomic bomb victims in Nagasaki—an extremely progressive response for her times toward the alien enemy of the United States of America during the Cold War period (*Unabridged Journals*, 46). Although she may be commended for seeing the atomic bomb victims as survivors deserving compassion, rather than as mere collateral damage to secure national defense, her lack of actual contact with Asian or Asiatic societies becomes the basis for her construction of the Orient as the locus of romance through images embedded in her November 22, 1955 love letter to Richard Sassoon: "persian moon," "Turkish tables," and "dark alladins." Such orientalist images, together with her singular term of endearment for Sassoon, "jaundiced adam," (*Unabridged Journals*, 192–93) potentially reinscribe the notion of the Orient as the locus of romance, sensuality, and disease—a collective Eurocentric mental space that opens up after anxiously envisioning humankind's fall from the white acme of Western civilization and into the jaundiced crevices of collective dis-ease.

It might also be interesting to recall that while Plath orientalized Sassoon by coloring him jaundice yellow in her love letter, Ted Hughes performs a similar lyric maneuver in relation to Plath, but in terms that are even more direct. Specifically, he orientalizes Plath in the *Birthday Letters* poem "Life after Death" when he describes her eyes as having a "Slavic Asiatic/Epicanthic fold" (lines 4–5). An equally noteworthy orientalist instance can be located in Gordon Lameyer's unpublished memoir, "Dear Sylvia," in which Lameyer and Plath agree that *Finnegans Wake* is comparable to "a great compilation of enigmas, a Chinese box, a labyrinthine puzzle."<sup>5</sup> This orientalist comparison most likely inspired the narrative instance in *The Bell Jar* when the letters of the Roman alphabet comprising the printed text of the *Wake* morph into indecipherable characters "like Arabic or Chinese" in Esther's extremely skewed consciousness (102). Thus the narrative instances of orientalization of the [white] subject, and the orientalist distortion of printed type in *The Bell Jar* have specific biographical referents.

While acknowledging the intertextually referential nature of *The Bell Jar* and other writings related to Plath, it might be noteworthy to recall that Plath's orientalist fascination coexisted with her interest in the psychoanalytic phenomenon of the double—an interest that Plath scholars have already investigated in relation to the Plath biographies that record her psychosocial conflicts and suicidal tendencies.<sup>6</sup> This interest in the double is most clearly documented in Plath's 1955 BA honors thesis, "The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels," that she completed only a year and four months since her return to Smith College in February 1954 after nearly six months of therapy following her suicide attempt on August 24, 1953. In other words, sixty years have passed since completion of her thesis—a textual event that invites reexamination of the phenomenon of the double in *The Bell Jar*. As Jeremy Hawthorne observes, there is evidence in Plath's study that she used this thesis writing exercise to examine her own suicidal breakdown before she wrote *The Bell Jar* five years later. Since the thesis bibliography includes Freud's paper on "The 'Uncanny,'" and Otto Rank's essays on the double, *The Bell Jar* can be read today as a literary text that was produced by the prevalent discourses of classic psychoanalysis in the 1950s. In her thesis Introduction, Plath summarizes information from Edward Lazell's article on schizophrenia that was included in the 1950 textbook *Modern Abnormal Psychology*. This summary compares the subject's self-directed psychic scrutiny with the moment when the subject ambivalently confronts the image of the self that is reflected on the mirror's surface.<sup>7</sup> This entire phenomenon of self-confrontation recalls Plath's narration of Esther's uncanny encounter with her distorted surface reflection

4 Eric Page, "Daniel H. H. Ingalls, 83, Sanskrit Scholar and Harvard Professor," *New York Times*, July 22, 1999, Arts section, accessed May 31, 2009.

5 Andrew Wilson, *Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* (New York: Scribner, 2013), 211. Wilson examined the original copy of the memoir at the Lilly Library.

6 Together with the Gilbert and Sugars essays, see Sandra Lim, "Double-Consciousness and the Protean Self in Sylvia Plath's 'Ariel'" (Stanford CA: Humanities Honors Program, 1997); and Jeremy Hawthorn, "The *Bell Jar* and the Larger Things: Sylvia Plath," in *Multiple Personality and the Disintegration of Literary Character: From Oliver Goldsmith to Sylvia Plath* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 117–34.

7 Although the front cover design for the fiftieth-year anniversary edition of *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013) has generated much critique for its threatening potential to trivialize the novel as "chick-lit," it actually enables visualization of the encounter with the double in the form of one's self in the reflected compact mirror image.

as the orientalized double in the second chapter of *The Bell Jar*. In this narrative instance specifically, Esther's initial self-misrecognition as a "big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman" (15) is readable as the ironic psychodrama that replicates Plath's description of the subject's self-directed gaze in the mirror, while also recalling Freud's uncanny misrecognition of his reflected self-image as his own doppelganger who seemed to be walking toward him according to his confused perception.<sup>8</sup> This specific narrative moment of ironic Freudian psychodrama is foreshadowed by Esther's description of herself in mildly deprecating, self-orientalizing terms while grooming herself for New York City nightlife. More specifically, she describes herself as having the "odd color" of a "Chinaman" and the thinness of a boy in a "queerly" cut black shantung sheath dress (6). At the same time, she matter-of-factly acknowledges her inability to measure up to the voluptuous Doreen whose skin had "a bronzy polish under the pale dusting of powder" (6).

Interestingly, Doreen's excessive sensuality acquires an aura of racialized extremeness in Esther's distorted consciousness. Esther remarks: "With her white hair and white dress she was so white she looked silver" (8). As the evening becomes racier, Esther sees Doreen as a "bleached-blond Negress" (9) who embodies at once the excessive whiteness and the excessive sexuality that are symptomatic of Esther's own projected anxieties concerning race and sex that gradually evolve at a time when her sense of identity is being radically restructured. It might be observed, therefore, that while Doreen is Esther's embodied alter ego in her aspect as "bleached-blond Negress," the orientalized self-reflection is Esther's reflexive attempt to negotiate the black/white binary that structures her perception of race as experiential category. In other words, she sees herself as an extremely subdued, somewhat uptight, far less glamorous, yet strangely androgynous shadowy replica of Doreen whose excessive sexual vitality is a threat that she absorbs into her own self in the chimeric reflection of the "big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman" after her attempt to recover from the sudden shock of an urban hedonism that generates the confession: "I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life" (8). Ironically, it is the bleached blonde, extremely tanned Doreen who recalls the photographic negative of a white woman with dark hair, the inverse image that corresponds to Esther herself.

This reading of Doreen as Esther's photographic negative double can be corroborated by Plath's own psychoanalysis in her BA thesis, which very likely influenced the psychodramatic symbolism of race and sex in the first two chapters of *The Bell Jar*. She suggests in this thesis that the schizophrenic subject creates a double in order to enact transgressions vicariously. This vicarious enactment of transgressions would then be the subject's strategy for containing the feelings of guilt and anxiety that would otherwise evolve into a tormenting source of ambivalence for the subject (17). In other words, Plath encourages us to read Esther's doubles as the symptoms of the schizophrenic acts of denial and subsequent displacement of sexual guilt. Esther senses somehow that she has voyeuristically participated in an unclean act that casts her as the virgin, and Doreen as the whore in the virgin/whore dichotomy that furnishes the major source for the psychodramatic tension throughout *The Bell Jar*. Thus she seeks a self-exonerating ritual of purification when she decides to take a hot bath before retiring for the night (16).

Through the cleansing ritual of the bath, Esther attempts to deny her own voyeuristic participation in the night's orgiastic events. While she soaks in the bathtub, she attempts to assure herself through incantatory self-hypnotizing refrain that everything and everyone is "dissolving" around her—thus enabling her to regain her sense of virginal self-insularity and self-cohesion—the sense of herself as "something pure" (17). In other words, the sexually uninhibited Doreen is the Mephistophelean alter ego who seductively initiates Esther into the urban labyrinth of hedonism—an initiation experience that inscribes upon Esther's [white] body the culturally stereotypic visible markers of race that function as the pathological symptoms of a specifically white female psychosexual experience within the symbolic economy of *The Bell Jar*.

Clearly, Esther attempts to regain a violated sense of pure virginal American female whiteness that forms the nucleus of her personal identity. This pure virginal whiteness is antithetical to the impure questionable whiteness that Doreen voluptuously embodies—a whiteness that is paradoxically, also, an excessive whiteness that translates into the Africanist blackness, or the racialized color of misogynistic anxiety concerning the destabilizing threat of white women's sexual power. Esther's consciousness processes Doreen's bleached blonde hair and deep bronze tan, markers of racial and sexual excess, as signs of impurity and sickness. The brown projectile of vomit issuing from the hungover semi-conscious Doreen recalls the climax of orgiastic revelry at which "Doreen's breasts had popped out of her dress and were swinging out slightly like full brown melons as she circled belly-down on Lenny's shoulder, thrashing her legs in the air and screeching" (14). The overwhelming power of Doreen as spectacle of an overpowering female sexuality that is racially coded as black gradually diminishes so that by the end of the second chapter of *The Bell Jar*, Doreen becomes a mere memory trace in Esther's disassociating consciousness—a brown body presence leaving its memory mark uneasily as a "faint, irregular dark stain"

<sup>8</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).



(19) on the hotel corridor carpet directly outside Esther's room door.<sup>9</sup>

It is this same "dark stain" of sexual guilt that the orientalized Esther tries to wash off in the therapeutic bathtub. Orientalization in this narrative instance is a contamination of pure American whiteness—an "odd color" reflected in the world of the mirror whose silvery space is the liminal point of convergence for pure white virginity and impure brown sensuality. Racial colors (white, yellow, and brown) fuse in this mirror space whose silver color distorts through exaggeration a whiteness whose apotheosis is pathologically insidious like a mercury injection into the psychic bloodstream. In Esther's inebriated consciousness, Doreen was "so white she looked silver" (8). This mercurial glimmer of silver appears once again in the bureau mirror that "seemed slightly warped and much too silver" in Esther's skewed vision (16). It is this mirror world of ambiguity and distortion that reproduces the pathological symptom of the double: the excessively white Doreen who "looked silver" before evolving into the "bleached-blond Negress" of Esther's ambivalent perception; and the orientalized elevator reflection of the "big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman" of Esther's self-misrecognition. This crucial moment of uncanny Freudian psychodrama is, indeed, extremely ambiguous. Where exactly did Esther see this orientalized reflection of her worn-out self? On the surface of the closed elevator doors? In an elevator mirror? If so, where in the elevator could that mirror have been positioned? There is no descriptive or narrative evidence in the text enabling the provision of answers to these logistical questions, and so readers are asked to align their perspectives with Esther's and to fill in these textual gaps for themselves—an invitation to participate in a readerly act of textual construction that readers cannot help but resist uneasily as Esther gradually and steadily transitions into a state of mental breakdown. At the same time, the Africanist and orientalist codings of the double in the first two chapters of *The Bell Jar* are problematic because they threaten to reinscribe culturally familiar racial equations: the equation of excessive white female sexuality with blackness; and the equation of ambiguous, schizophrenically borderline states of mind with the "Oriental." Such racial codings originate in an over-idealization of whiteness that becomes a repressive symptom in its exercise on the body of the [white] female subject. To break out of this state of repression, the white female subject creates racialized doubles who act out her own transgressive desires that her racialized social code prohibits. When she begins to acquire the racial coloration of the double, she exonerates herself through a disassociation act that restores whiteness as both norm and ideal, initiating, once again, a vicious cycle that threatens to culminate in total mental breakdown.

Clearly, Plath herself as a German American woman in the postwar 1950s, experienced the conformist pressures of over-idealized whiteness and the urge to assimilate in a predominantly Anglo-American social environment in Massachusetts—one that barely concealed its hostility toward Americans of German descent. Plath's writings ("Fever 103°" in particular) betray an intense drive to resolve these conflicting social pressures through a gradual process of self-metamorphosis that dissolves her whiteness in order to supplant it with another color that transcends race. In "Fever 103°" this color is gold, while in *The Bell Jar*, the color silver functions in a similarly metaphorical manner, albeit somewhat more problematically. In other words, gold in Plath's lyric world is the color of transcendence—jaundice yellow undergoes the alchemical transformation into celestial gold in the furnace of her mind. At the same time, silver in *The Bell Jar* is the hybrid color of mercurial excess, as signified by the mirror that absorbs and reflects all colors on its slippery, shimmery, quixotic surface.

It might be concluded that racial transformations in Plath's writings—or the emergence of the racially coded doubles in *The Bell Jar* specifically—signify Plath's attempts to discover a racially transcendent color that would enable her to break out of the prison house of her own embodied whiteness.

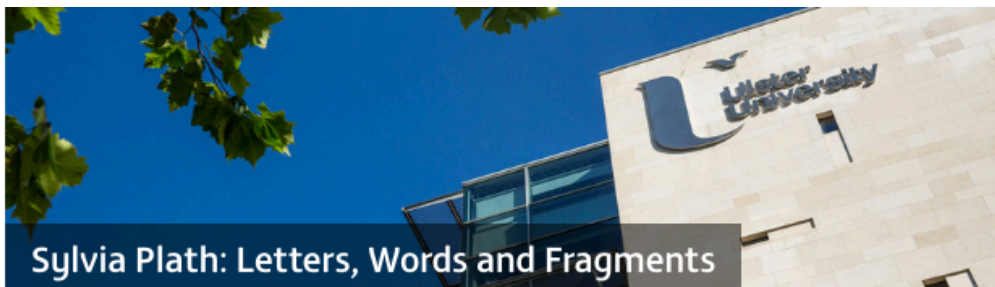
Possibly, the epitaph inscribed on her gravestone is readable as a testimony that she has indeed made the breakthrough into gold—"Even amidst fierce flames the golden lotus can be planted."<sup>10</sup> Thus the golden woman is more than "perfected" today.

9 This "dark stain" is readable as the residual sign of Kristevan "abjection" whereby "the abject" is a "jettisoned object" that is "radically excluded" [from standardized discourse and its modes of signification] and that lures the subject to "the place where meaning collapses." Thus the empty hotel corridor outside the liminal threshold of Esther's room door is the site of abjection that foreshadows her gradual transition into a mental space "where meaning collapses" quite radically. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Léon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

10 The epitaph derives from the sixteenth-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

HIROMI YOSHIDA holds a Master of Arts degree in English from Fordham University, and a Master of Library Science degree from Indiana University Bloomington. She has curated *The "Big Striptease" of Sylvia Plath*, an exhibition at the Lilly Library representing Sylvia Plath as iconized object of fantasy and abjection. Hiromi Yoshida is also the author of *Joyce & Jung: The "Four Stages of Eroticism" in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.



Date 10 November 2017 to 11 November 2017  
 Time 09:00 to 18:00  
 Location Belfast campus  
 Organiser Maeve O'Brien  
 Contact details [sylviaplath@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:sylviaplath@ulster.ac.uk) ✉

Register

To celebrate the upcoming publication of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume 1* in autumn 2017, the Faculty of Arts at Ulster University would like to extend an invitation to scholars, fans and members of the public to attend a conference on the work of Sylvia Plath.

The publication of Plath's *Letters* will no doubt produce new views on her life and work and with that in mind, this conference seeks to foster fresh commentaries on Plath by encouraging the fusion of her work with a range of interdisciplinary perspectives. For more information, please view the Call for Papers below.

#### ▼ Call For Papers

Autumn 2017 will see the much-anticipated publication of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Volume 1*. Following on from *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000) and *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (2004), this book is another landmark contribution in efforts by Plath scholars to piece together and recuperate Plath's words that have for so long been fragmented. With *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Volume 1*, Plath's words and experiences will be drawn together to give readers a fuller insight into her creative process and richly artistic literary life. The new information we receive from *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Volume 1* promises to offer new readings of Plath's poetry, prose and fiction writing as well as her literary influences, passions and pains.

In anticipation of the clarity that *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Volume 1* will surely produce, this conference seeks papers that will explore new and diverse discussions about Plath's writing, the contexts against which her work was written, how we read her in the past and how we read her today. Papers are encouraged but not limited to the following subjects:

- (Re)reading and recuperating Plath
- Published/unpublished Plath
- Plath and her archives
- Plath and her correspondences
- Plath and friendship
- Plath and biography
- Ecocriticism
- Representations of Plath in popular culture
- Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath
- Plath, her peers and literary influences
- Feminism and Plath
- Plath and Whiteness
- Queering Plath
- Plath and place
- Plath and voice

Papers from all disciplines are welcome - with full panels and artistic contributions especially encouraged. Please send proposals of no more than 350 words to [sylviaplath@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:sylviaplath@ulster.ac.uk) ✉ by Monday 31 July 2017.

This conference is sponsored by the [School of English and History at Ulster University](#). The event is free and is open to the public, but [registration](#) ✉ is necessary. [Registration](#) ✉ and accommodation information (including conference discounts) will be available shortly.

For more information and media enquiries, please follow on [Twitter](#) ✉ and [Facebook](#) ✉ or contact the conference organiser, [Dr. Maeve O'Brien](#) ✉.

## “Paula’s snowsuit was smeared wet and black with oil”: Sylvia Plath on Children’s Capacity for Love and War’s Influence of Hate

“An asset to any nation is the potential energy of its youth,” writes Sylvia Plath and her classmate Perry Norton in “Youth’s Plea for World Peace,” published in the *Christian Science Monitor* on March 16, 1950. Plath was seventeen. The two young authors, writing in opposition to continued work on the hydrogen bomb, continue: “Why not do more to support those of our young men and women who are essentially idealistic, believing firmly in the possibilities of world peace? These people can see beyond the present dilemma of nationalism to the basic brotherhood of all human beings” (19). The ardent, idealistic pacifism Plath expresses here is not unique to this article; it is a perspective Plath committed to and developed, imaginatively and intellectually, all her life. But Plath and her classmate’s words in this article advocate more than just idealistic pacifism: they point out the passion of youth, and their firm stake in the world and its conflicts; war and childhood do not, for Plath, exist in separate spheres.

The stake that young people, particularly children, have in the politics of the nations they inhabit is as prevalent in Plath’s writing as her commitment to pacifism. The words she and Norton write in “Youth’s Plea for World Peace” echo the report Plath the eighth grader wrote and illustrated on the First World War. One of her illustrations shows a young girl reading in a brightly lit room as a thought bubble floats above her head, filled with images of firing and bleeding soldiers; a tear falls down her cheek as she reads.<sup>1</sup> Plath the young high school student, writing to her German pen-pal Hans-Joachim Neupert, explains she does not believe children are inclined, by nature, to hate others or fear them; rather, she has hope that they can be taught to love others.<sup>2</sup> Wars, Plath argues in her letter, go against the way people should, and would if given the chance, relate to one another: in love and community. Seven years later, in a 1956 letter to her mother, Plath’s thoughts about “the Hungarian and Suez affairs” turn not only to soldiers, but to families: “All I think of are the mothers and children in Russia, in Egypt, and know they don’t want men killed” (*Letters Home* 284). And as a young mother, again writing to her mother in April of 1960, Plath considers a “Ban the Bomb” protest to be a perfect outing for her baby daughter: “I felt proud that the baby’s first real adventure should be as a protest against the unborn children doomed by fallout...” (*Letters Home* 378).<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the effects of war and political strife—whether as an amorphous moral threat or the very literal threat of deformity and violence—cannot be kept from children; paradoxically, the wars fought ostensibly to defend and preserve future generations inevitably endanger them.

This concept, that the wars fought to defend the home front and its children always threaten them, is most clearly and thoroughly expressed in Plath’s fiction, particularly in her short stories “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit” and “The Shadow.” In these stories, Plath imaginatively illustrates and expands upon the wartime ethic she expresses in the letters and artwork discussed above. In these stories, war and violence are decidedly not the civilization-preserving efforts that keep the home front a safe and peaceful place in which children’s innocence is protected and preserved. Rather, war and the violent reckonings of the state profoundly affect the lives of the children these stories portray by defining their lives based on violence. Therefore, in these stories Plath shows that not just men, or even men and women, but entire families—particularly children—must be included in the conversation about war and state politics, because not only their safety but the very patterns of their lives and their interactions with other human beings are irrevocably, and detrimentally, affected by that conversation and the violence that results from it.

<sup>1</sup> Though he does not consider the two stories upon which this essay focuses, limiting his discus

<sup>2</sup> This letter, dated August 24, 1949, can be found in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Peel also notes the connection between war’s effects on children, particularly infants, and Plath’s work; he does so most clearly in his discussion of Plath’s poem “Thalidomide,” which gets its name from a drug given to pregnant women that resulted in deformity. The poem, Peel notes, “is a response to the threat to children posed by the multinational companies, whether made of weapons or makers of drugs... Radiation and Thalidomide both do terrible things to unborn babies” (168). Though, Hammer, Peel does mention these two stories, they are not the focus of his discussion; he does note that they are places that show how Plath had “internalized” the “anxieties brought about by the 1940s” (93).

Scholars have interpreted Plath's use of war imagery, themes, and events in these stories in different ways. The two most in-depth considerations of these two stories are Luke Ferretter's and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's. Gilbert and Gubar, in their essay "In Yeats's House" in the third volume of *No Man's Land*, consider Plath's use of war imagery in these stories to be primarily metaphoric, used by Plath to refer to and help define wars beyond the political or military—particularly for their argument, the war between the sexes (297).<sup>4</sup> Their discussion focuses primarily on "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit." Ferretter, in contrast, discusses "Paula Brown" alongside "The Shadow" in light of both stories' portrayal of the uncertain place of German-Americans during the Second World War, arguing that in both stories, the injustice done to a child is parallel to the injustice done to the descendants of German immigrants in the United States (112).<sup>5</sup> In my view, the effects of war on the narrator in these two stories can be read in yet another way: this story shows how war, far from protecting those on the home front, not only threatens them, particularly the children, but also twists children's developing psyches to the point of teaching them violence.

"Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit" introduces readers to a child who, at first, sees more wonder than threat in the world around her; that world provides a backdrop to her childhood but does not yet threaten it. "The year the war began, I was in the fifth grade at the Annie F. Warren Grammar School in Winthrop," the young female narrator begins, "and that was the winter I won the prize for drawing the best Civil Defense signs" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 281). Plath wrote this story in 1955, a decade after that war—the Second World War—ended, but its echoes and influence remain in her fiction, just as they remain in the mind of the story's narrator: "Even now, thirteen years later, I can recall the changing colors of those days" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 281). Some of the "colors of those days" come from Logan Airport, right across the bay from where the girl lives; the airport's lights blaze across the water, the droning of its planes drowns out the sound of the waves on the shore, and its presence, to her, is like that of a holy city: "The airport was my Mecca, my Jerusalem. All night I dreamed of flying" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 281). At the story's opening, then, we meet a young narrator whose life is defined by the war; she's even won an award for a school project that depends upon the war's presence for its existence. However, the narrator's world is at the same time defined by the airport, a place that, if indirectly, connects her small part of the world to other parts of it. The story opens, then, with a child who sees little conflict between the proximity of the war and the proximity of the airport. The former connects different places in the world to each other through violence or the threat of it; the latter allows those connections to happen, too, but without violence. Instead, in the narrator's young mind, the airport represents the glory of flight, and Superman: "Superman started invading my dreams and teaching me how to fly. [...] In the magic whirring of his cape I could hear the wings of a hundred seagulls, the motors of a thousand planes" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 282). War, planes, and Superman—Civil Defense signs, magical airport lights, and comic books—all these frame the narrator's childhood world, and none are particularly threatening in her young mind.

She does not yet find them threatening particularly because, rather than signifying division and pain, they are all still connected to her home, her family, and her friends—to the safe community where she is growing up. She associates them only with two of the people closest to her, her Uncle Frank and her best friend David Sterling, who help bind together the narrator's experiences of war, flight, and Superman. Uncle Frank clearly combines both Plath's impressions of Superman and of war: "At this time my Uncle Frank was living with us while waiting to be drafted," she explains, "and I was sure he bore an extraordinary resemblance to Superman incognito" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 282). Soldiers who have not embarked for the war front are, in the narrator's mind, like Superman in his Clark Kent guise: part of the homefront landscape and the safe civilian community, yet always on the watch for a danger they will set out to defeat.

4 Gilbert and Gubar's recognition and analysis of the war and battle images in Plath's work is astute in some respects; however, in my view, they approach these stories from a perspective that does not take Plath's political thought very seriously. "Although Plath claimed in a late radio interview to be deeply concerned with war politics," they write, "she did not have an explicitly political imagination" (297). Plath's use of images and metaphors that reference battle and warfare become, for Gilbert and Gubar, mere tools that allow Plath to express how "the savage war between men and women [is] very like a war between sovereign states. Thus the female child's fall into the real world and the difference at the very least prefigures a fall into a sex role," they argue (297). Though this analysis has merit, to equate Plath's use of these images to the employment of poetic tools, rather than recognizing that they contribute to a conversation about war's effects on youth that Plath was very clearly engaged in from an early point in her life, is shortsighted.

5 Robin Peel makes a similar comment in *Writing Back*: "Plath's father's German background and her mother's Austrian roots had a particular significance as she grew up against the background of the Second World War, something that she draws on in her later short stories 'The Shadow' and 'Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit'" (93).



With her friend David, the narrator plays "Superman games," making up adventures in which they, like Superman, or like her Uncle Frank, get to be heroes. Though David doesn't see the resemblance between her Uncle Frank and Superman as clearly as the narrator does, he is willing to admit that Uncle Frank "was the strongest man he had ever known, and could do lots of tricks like making caramels disappear under napkins and walking on his hands" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 282-3).

Clearly, the violence of war—and its threat to Uncle Frank—are not dangers the narrator feels; instead she both feels and performs the idealized, saving strength of Superman, and her friend believes her uncle great because of his child-pleasing magic tricks.

However, the innocuous, family-friendly ways in which the narrator sees soldiery and Superman connect in her life, gradually begins to break. The break begins when the war's invasion into her home takes a form that threatens the safety of her Superman uncle rather than affirming his greatness. "That same winter, war was declared," the narrator writes, referring to the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. She continues:

I remember sitting by the radio with Mother and Uncle Frank and feeling a queer foreboding in the air. Their voices were low and serious, and their talk was of planes and German bombs. Uncle Frank had [sic] something about Germans in America being put in prison for the duration, and Mother kept saying over and over again about Daddy: "I'm only glad Otto didn't live to see this; I'm only glad Otto didn't live to see it come to this." (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 283)

The threat of war, suddenly spoken into stark reality by the voices on the radio and of her mother and uncle, directly impacts the narrator's family; their worry begins to alter the topography of her world, and the fact that she is a child does not protect her.

War also directly affects the narrator's school life, warping its comfortable rhythm. Some things, of course, remain the same: the narrator, as she mentioned earlier, is excited to best one of the boys on her block for the fifth-grade prize for best Civil Defense sign, and it's likely she'd show the same childish enthusiasm for winning any such contest, regardless of its connection to war. Other things, however, are more profoundly affected, and those effects more frightening:

Every now and then we would practice an air raid. The fire bell would ring and we would take up our coats and pencils, and file down the creaking stairs to the basement, where we sat in special corners according to our color tags, and put the pencils between our teeth so the bombs wouldn't make us bite our tongues by mistake. Some of the little children in the lower grades would cry because it was dark in the cellar, with only the bare ceiling lights on the cold black stone. (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 283)

In these air raid drills, familiar schoolchild's tools like pencils—quite useful, for example, for not only designing Civil Defense signs but also doing math problems or practicing penmanship—are tied to the threat of bombs, connecting familiar tasks with the possibility of death and destruction each time the child touches the pencil and feels the teeth marks in its wood. These drills, too, contrast starkly with the narrator's early euphoria at listening to Logan Airport's planes take off and watching the ethereal lights of its runways flicker in the light. Instead of being positively tied to war, signifying freedom, joy, and Superman, flight becomes instead part of war's threat.

The new, stark reality of the war affects the children's play as well. In their Superman games at recess, Sheldon Fein, a "mamma's boy" the narrator and David had recruited as their villain, assumes a darker, alter-ego that could have marched off a newspaper photo rather than the pages of a comic book: "Sheldon became a Nazi and borrowed a goose step from the movies," the narrator says (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 283). When Sheldon leaves school, he returns to a home where "his Uncle Macy was really over in Germany," and his mother had begun "to grow thin and pale because she heard that Macy was a prisoner and then nothing more" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 283). At home or at school, no child can escape; "the threat of war," the narrator writes, "was seeping in everywhere" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 283).

Against this foreboding backdrop there comes the promise of a normal childhood scene: Paula Brown, a girl nobody really likes "because she was bossy and stuck up," is having her annual birthday party, which the narrator always (reluctantly) attends "because it was for all the children on our block" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 283). At first, the party signifies the possibility that childhood, with its joys and petty jealousies and quickly healed conflicts, might survive the threat of war; however, the narrator is soon

proven right: the war will seep in everywhere, a threat to children rather than their savior and preserver.

Paula Brown's birthday party begins with comforting normalcy. Paula meets her guests at the door "in a white organdy dress, her red hair tied up in sausage curls with a satin bow" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 283). True to form, stuck-up Paula must show her guests her many presents before they are allowed to eat cake and ice cream. Her favorite present is a new snowsuit, which she models for her guests: "The snowsuit was powder blue and came in a silver box from Sweden, she said. The front of the jacket was all embroidered with pink and white roses and bluebirds, and the leggings had embroidered snaps. She even had a little white angora beret and angora mittens to go with it" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 284). The narrator is clearly not fond of Paula, and describes Paula in a way that does not endear her to readers: she is a spoiled, bossy, arrogant child, who readers dislike in part because they may remember the Paula Browns of their own childhoods. But Paula is irritating, not threatening; her character and her party are reminiscent of normal childhood, rather than the wartime childhood into which the narrator has been pulled. Despite the war "seeping in everywhere," Paula has her annual birthday party, and receives many presents. She even has a special snowsuit, shipped internationally from Sweden—an odd but significant detail that suggests international cooperation not tied to war efforts. Paula Brown's party, then, offers a sliver of hope that normal childhood might continue on despite the air raid drills and drafted family members.

However, Plath makes clear that any hope that children can escape war's effects is foolish, as the threat of war seeps even into Paula Brown's birthday party. After their cake and ice cream, the partygoers are taken to see *Snow White*, a film in which good prevails over evil and all conflicts are resolved, just like in a Superman comic. Unfortunately, the children's parents have not realized that the main feature would be preceded by a war film. The film, about the torture of war prisoners in Japan, profoundly disturbs the narrator; the harsh tone of its stark reality intrudes, discordantly, into the normalcy of Paula's party:

Our war games and the radio programs were all made up, but this war real, this really happened. I blocked my ears to shut out the groans of the thirsty, starving men, but I could not tear my eyes from the screen.

Finally, the prisoners pulled down a heavy log from the low rafters and jammed it through the clay wall so they could reach the fountain in the court, but just as the first man got to the water, the Japanese began shooting the prisoners dead, and stamping on them, and laughing. I was sitting on the aisle, and I stood up then in a hurry and ran out to the girls' room, where I knelt over a toilet bowl and vomited up the cake and ice cream. (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 284)

The narrator dreams of the prisoners that night, and finds that her comic book hero cannot save her from the violent images that still echo in her mind: "No matter how hard I thought of Superman before I went to sleep, no crusading blue figures came roaring down in heavenly anger to smash the yellow men who invaded my dreams" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 284). The war movie supplants the party's fun, and even her childish dislike of snotty Paula Brown, in the narrator's mind, just as nausea and unease have replaced the sweet cake and ice cream in her body. In this pivotal scene, the birthday party suddenly becomes less a stock image of American childhood and more a cruel introduction to the reality of war. It celebrates not the anniversary of a child's birth, but a birthing into dark political realities.

The war film's intrusion on the party portrays part of what Plath uses this story to communicate: war, rather than defending the home front and the peaceful life it represents, instead threatens precisely what it aims to protect, and many of those under threat are children. Up until this point in the story, the evidence of the war came hand-in-hand with measures taken to protect children from that evidence. The air raid drills, however frightening, also show how children were made privy to some facts of the war for their own safety, and their fear during the drills is rooted as often in fear of a dark cellar than fear of bombs. Having young students make Civil Defense signs, and holding a contest for the best ones, seems to also be an effort to engage children in patriotic action while at the same time shielding them from the ugliness of war through a fun activity and competition. Similarly, the conversations about German-Americans and German bombs the narrator's mother and uncle have in her presence are in "low and serious" voices. Their quiet tones suggest that, while they seem not to want the narrator to be entirely ignorant of what is going on in the world, they still want to protect her from many of the details. Throughout the story, then, there is recurring evidence that the adults in the narrator's world believe their children's knowledge of the realities of war not only should, but can be controlled: war can be waged to protect these children, and these children can also remain protected from not only war's air raids but also its gory details and images. However, the war film shatters this belief, and readers learn that whatever their intentions, there is no



way children can be sheltered completely: "Mother had found out that the main feature was Snow White before she would let me go," the narrator says, "but she hadn't realized that there was a war picture playing with it" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 284).

This new, real presence of war in the narrator's life shatters the normalcy of her relationships with the neighborhood kids—a symbolic picture of the way that, despite attempts to shield and protect it, childhood will inevitably be overshadowed and disrupted by war. The day after they see the film, when the narrator joins a game of tag with the neighborhood kids, a new kind of malice has invaded the children's play. Paula Brown, in trying to escape Jimmy Lane's tag, slides into an oil slick; her snowsuit is "smeared wet and black with oil along the side," and her white angora mittens drip "like black cat's fur" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 285). There is a moment of silence, before Paula fixates on the narrator, blaming her. The rest of the children join in: "Sheldon and Paula and Jimmy and the rest of them faced me with a strange joy flickering in the back of their eyes. 'You did it, you pushed her,' they said" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 285). The narrator flees her taunting peers, pelted with snowballs, determined not to run. But she cannot flee the children's new cruelty: the neighborhood kids tell their parents this lie, that the narrator pushed Paula and ruined her snowsuit, and eventually the narrator's mother and uncle agree to replace the snowsuit, even though she has told them she is innocent: "I told you what happened, and I can't make it any different. Not even for you I can't make it any different" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 287). Exposure to the war's ugliness and violence during the war film has kindled a terrible, cruel, "strange joy" in the children, inspiring them to new cruelty. The story closes with the narrator's new awareness not just of war's presence, but of its darkness and violence, its impact on her own life, her family, and the normal patterns of her childhood:

I lay there alone in bed, feeling the black shadow creeping up the underside of the world like a flood tide. Nothing held, nothing was left. The silver airplanes and the blue capes all dissolved and vanished, wiped away like the crude drawings of a child in colored chalk from the colossal blackboard of the dark. That was the year the war began, and the real world, and the difference. (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 287)

As Plath the young high school student wrote to her German pen pal in 1949, children are not, Plath believed, born with the capability to do and delight in doing violence against each other, but they can be taught—and in this short story, they learn those lessons well. One part—a depressingly large one—of "the war...the real world, and the difference" is the narrator's realization that, in a world where wars happen and are accepted as a natural part of human behavior, children will inevitably be trained in violence and hatred, despite any natural inclination toward love.

This same pattern is repeated in "The Shadow," a story Plath wrote in 1959 that is so similar to "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit" that the two are almost always discussed together in criticism.<sup>6</sup> The latter story begins by juxtaposing war's beginning with evidence of new violence in the narrator's formally normal childhood: "The year the war began...was also the winter of Paula Brown's new snowsuit" (281). In "The Shadow," as well, the war's beginning is juxtaposed with a shift in the narrator's previously normal childhood: "The winter the war began I happened to fall in the bad graces of the neighborhood for biting Leroy Kelly on the leg" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 147). And just as the narrator in "Paula Brown" is introduced to a new kind of cruelty and violence at the hands of her peers shortly after they see a war movie, so, too, is the narrator of "The Shadow," Sadie. However, in "The Shadow," the war's effects on Sadie's family and on her childish innocence are more explicitly drawn, and have much more specific ramifications in her own life.

From the beginning of "The Shadow," the contrast between children's antics and adult interpretations of them, and between children's ability and adults' ability to forgive rather than demand retribution, is very clear. In the story's opening line, Sadie introduces readers to the incident that shapes the first part of the narrative: she is guilty of biting Leroy Kelly on the leg, and the neighborhood's adult population have all sided against her. The details of Sadie's attack on Leroy, however, are startling not because they are sinister, but because they are not. According to Sadie, her refusing to let Leroy's younger sister, Maureen, use scissors prompts a tickle attack from Maureen, who knows that tickling makes Sadie "have hysterics" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 149). When Sadie dodges out of reach and takes refuge on a nearby rug, Leroy, at his sister's urging, pulls the rug out from under Sadie's feet and sits on her stomach to pin her while Maureen tickles away with "craven pleasure written all over her face" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 149). Sadie, left with no other option, does the only thing she can: "I twisted my head and sank my teeth into the bare space of skin just above Leroy's left sock...and held on until he let go of me" (*Johnny*

<sup>6</sup> For example, both Ferretter (114) and Gilbert and Gubar (267) discuss these stories together in their work.

*Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 149). Leroy's actions, he confesses to her later, were inspired by a scene in a Green Hornet comic book, which he later loans her; Sadie thinks perhaps that she would have done the same thing if she'd had Leroy's chance to act out a scene from one of their comics (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 150). As Leroy's willingness to lend Sadie comic books suggests, the three children quickly "come to terms" after the incident (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 150).

These three children exhibit the kinds of qualities Plath writes about in "Youth's Plea for World Peace" and in her letters to Neupert: though perhaps not old enough to be able to call themselves "essentially idealistic" ("Youth's Plea" 19), they quickly resolve their conflicts and see no reason to see the other punished. And though, as Plath writes to Neupert in her August 24, 1949 letter, children may have self-preservation instincts that lead them to act violently, such actions—like Sadie's biting Leroy on the leg—hardly stem from a natural "killing instinct." Rather than beings full of hate and prone to violence, these children seem inclined to camaraderie and harmony instead, sharing comic books and forgiving each other without a second thought.

However, the adults in Sadie's world are not so forgiving. "That Christmas we did not get our annual fruit cake from Mrs. Abrams; the Kellys got theirs," she says. She continues: "Even after Leroy and Maureen and I had come to terms, Mrs. Kelly didn't start up the Saturday morning coffee hours with my mother which she had broken off the week of our quarrel" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 150). The "neighborhood cold front" extends even to Mr. Greenbloom, the proprietor of the shop where Sadie goes for candy and comic books. Mr. Greenbloom asks her, with startling cruelty, whether her candy preferences lean toward a "little something to sharpen the teeth" (150); she flees the store without buying anything, overwhelmed by a sudden compulsion to apologize to Mr. Greenbloom, though he has accused her of nothing outright: "Why I felt compelled to explain my each move so apologetically I didn't know" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 150-1). Part of Sadie's confusion is tied to her belief that "the issue of my quarrel with the Kellys [was] a pure one, uncomplicated by any flow of emotion from sources outside it" (151). Though she is aware of "how mean people can be," thanks to her love of comic books and her favorite radio program, "The Shadow," Sadie has imbibed from the same sources a belief that "justice, sooner or later, would right the balance," that her situation is just as uncomplicated and painted in "elementary colors" as comics and radio programs have led her to believe (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 151). Sadie's response to the adults' cruelty, her innocent belief that justice will win the day and that all will be set to rights, is clearly tied to the fact that she is a child, full of thoughts of comic book justice and empty, as Plath's words both within and without the text of this story maintain, of any instinct toward hate. The adults in her world, however, have lost this childhood innocence; further, their cruelty and the vengeance they take against Sadie and her family are rooted not just in their loss of childhood's innocence but also in the effects of war on their lives. These effects touch Sadie long before explicit news and images of war do.

Sadie's struggle with the neighborhood's prejudice is interrupted by a war film, a plot point "The Shadow" shares with "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit," and one that transforms Sadie's childlike sense of justice into a more adult, and much more cruel, understanding of the inexplicable nature of human hate. Just as in "Paula Brown," Sadie's mother also did not know about her seeing the war film; Sadie's mother has sought to protect her daughter from the war-torn world outside: "I knew Mother would put her foot down once and for all at my seeing a war movie ('It's not good to fill the child's mind with that trash, things are bad enough')" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 152). Sadie, like the narrator in "Paula Brown," sees a film about a Japanese prison camp as part of a friend's birthday party, and she, too, is sickened by it. It gives her nightmares, and deeply shakes her comic-book sense of justice: "my sure sense of eventual justice deserted me" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 152). After the day of the birthday party, other parts of Sadie's life show clearer evidence of the war's looming presence. In "Paula Brown," the narrator's life was already full of air raid drills and the Civil Defense sign drawing contest; after the war film, these pieces of her life takes a new, sinister form as she connects them to the violence she saw on the screen. For Sadie, however, the war film marks a starker turning point: "The peaceful rhythm of classes and play periods at Hunnewell School was broken often now by the raucous, arbitrary ringing of the air raid alarm," Sadie says (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 152). At home, too, Sadie notices a new solemnity and even bleakness in her parents' eyes and voices: "At home, my parents sat a great deal by the radio, listening, with serious faces, to the staccato briefs of the newscasters. And there were sudden, unexplained silences when I came within hearing, the habit of gloom, relieved only by a false cheer worse than the gloom itself" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 153). As her life had begun to be defined by the cruelty of her neighbors, so it is now coming to be defined by the looming presence of the war, in her school, in her home, in her parents' gloom and forced cheer.

Sadie soon realizes that the adults' prejudice and the war's looming presence are connected. Plath

wrote to Neupert that children are not born with the ability to hate, but come to possess it by soaking it up from their parents, their neighbors, and the mindset of "friend" versus "enemy" that is fostered and exacerbated by war. Sadie faces such hatred as she realizes her neighbors' racial prejudice. On their way to school a week after the fateful trip to the movie theater, Maureen Kelly reveals to Sadie what her mother told her about why Sadie bit Leroy: "'My mother says it's not your fault for biting Leroy,' she called out in clear, saccharine tones. 'My mother says it's because your father's German'" (153). Significantly, Maureen, initially easily able to reconcile with Sadie after their scuffle with Leroy, has now learned a new reason for Sadie's behavior from her mother—she has, Plath's story implies, learned hate. Significant, too, is the fact that the reason Sadie and her family are discriminated against is the simple fact of their ancestry, which ties them to a people Americans have learned to call "enemy" because of war's effects on the home front and the family life it is meant to shield and protect. Maureen's words, and the ways the other children begin to treat Sadie at school—huddling away from her in groups, asking her in hushed whispers how she knows her father isn't a spy—make her angry, but also "a little scared" (154). The war has taught Sadie hatred and fear, both emotions Plath believes are alien to children and from which they can—and should—be spared.

The presence of the war, and the prejudices it influences, affect not just Sally's relationships with her friends and her adult neighbors, but also the safety she feels within her own family. When Sadie returns home from her school day of whispered taunts and alienation, "determined to have it out with Mother" about her father's innocence, she finds her mother sitting in a chair in the dark, looking "small, almost shrunken" with "raw-rimmed [eyes], moist at the corners" (154). Sadie tells her mother what Maureen had said about her father, and her mother is not surprised. She is not shocked by Maureen's words and does not explain Maureen's behavior away because of her youth. Instead, she tells Sadie that her father is a German citizen, and though their family and neighbors know that he would fight for the Allies if he had to, wartime has altered how their community sees her father. "In wartime...people often become frightened and forget what they know," Sadie's mother says. She tells Sadie that her father may even have to leave because of their neighbors' fear: "There are places out West for German citizens to live during the war so people will feel safer about them. Your father has been asked to go to one of those" (155). All members of the adult world, even the ones Sadie most loves and trusts, seem to have conspired to make her father leave: her mother says that "it's a government order," and later tells her that "God will let it happen," delivering a final blow to Sadie's childhood capacity for indiscriminate love, faith, and ability to forgive (155).

Like "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit," then, "The Shadow" also expresses Plath's belief that war, and the wartime way of thinking about others, twists children's innate capacity for love and teaches them to hate and fear. In "The Shadow," too, more so than in "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit," Plath shows how war not only distorts children's innocence, but also fractures family life. Far from protecting children and families on the home front, allowing them to live in relative safety apart from war's violence, war instead infects the very homes it seeks to protect with violence, discord, lack of trust, and hatred of others. In both of these stories, then, Plath articulates in fiction the perspective she emphasizes over and over in letters, articles, and other work: that those on the home front, particularly children, cannot be left out of conversations about war and state politics, because the results and implications of those conversations directly affect them.

"Nobody very much thinks about how big a human life is," Plath writes in her journal on June 19, 1953, "with all the nerves and sinews and reactions and responses that it took centuries and centuries to evolve" (541). This meditation on the bigness and intricacy of each human life, a point Plath makes to refute the idea of war as protective, and to scold those who display a twisted pleasure at the prospect of another's death, is one Plath rearticulates in letters and in stories. The child narrators of "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit" and "The Shadow" both experience what happens when the precious bigness of their lives, and their families' lives, is overlooked in favor of hatred. Through their stories, Plath urges readers to listen to what she calls in her 1962 essay "Context" the "real issues of our time." They are, she writes, "the issues of every time—the hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its forms"; the first among those forms of making is children, and "the jeopardizing of [them] no abstract doubletalk of 'peace' or 'implacable foes' can excuse" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 65). In these two short stories, Plath shows what happens when children are so jeopardized, and forces readers to recognize that, if people assume a political position that does not question war or the violence done ostensibly to preserve civilian life, they have assumed a position that is finally destructive, not just to their enemies but also to the young ones in their midst.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Mud Plus Struck Equals Muck: Filth and Violence in the Works of Sylvia Plath

For Sylvia Plath, “muck” is a charged word. In her 1956 poem “Letter to a Purist,” written in second person, presumably regarding her father who permitted himself to die a painful death from diabetes by refusing, early on, life-saving surgery (Rosenblatt 69; Broe 3), her “love” (line 8)—simultaneously a “great idiot” (line 9)—finds himself “Caught (as it were) in the muck-trap / Of skin and bone” (lines 11-12). In *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, Plath comments that her father’s death, a form of passive suicide, left her feeling “lost and betrayed” (Plath 312; Axelrod 25). Yet, as Jacqueline Rose deftly argues (229-31), it is not only loss or abandonment by a father but, equally, the overbearing, supremely powerful presence of Plath’s own father that inspired both love and the identification that love brings, as well as the confused ambivalence at a loss of the paternal “...mucktrap/Of skin and bones.” The ambivalence is understandable. As a child Plath memorized the Latin names for various insects and her entomologist father, smitten with his daughter’s precocity, showed off her bright intelligence at every opportunity. For Plath, her acclaimed performances on demand created what may have been the central tension in her life: her desire to please her father accompanied by the dim awareness that she needed to repress any negative feelings for him so that she would not lose his love. Yet, just short of the age of eight, she lost her father’s love through his own intractability and what Edward Butscher calls his “arrogant self-confidence” (12), leaving no one for his daughter to please. Filthy “muck” indeed.

The revulsion the word “muck” embodies is also evident when Plath memorably invokes this same word in her 1962 poem of betrayal, “Words heard, by accident, over the phone.” Here, Plath renames the ordinary telephone by which Ted Hughes received the voice of his lover, Assia Wevill, a “muck funnel” (line 15). This caustic poem transforms an ordinary telephone into an apparatus to transmit filth, as words of betrayal ooze out of the receiver and taint the marital home (Bundtzen, “Mourning Eurydice” 456; Bundtzen, “Poetic Arson” 440-41; Ford 130). The taint is in fact so strong that the narrator laments: “Oh god, how shall I ever clean the phone table?” (line 8). What a far cry from Plath’s joyous, earthy proclamation in a July 20, 1957 journal entry, that “Ted is wonderful...We are clean now, daily bathing the muck of Eltisley...bathing that muck off from our bones in the great salt tides of the Atlantic, the hot sun”<sup>3</sup> (*Unabridged Journals*, 289).

While scholars have long recognized the importance of this key term in Plath’s poetry, particularly in conjunction with her stormy breakup with Hughes, less attention has been paid to its presence in Plath’s semi-autobiographical novel of 1963, *The Bell Jar*.<sup>4</sup> The appearance of the word “muck” in Plath’s novel, at moments of the protagonist’s most extreme vulnerability, demonstrates a continuation rather than disruption of Plath’s poetic voice in a work that is often denigrated as either radically inferior or merely “minor.” By recognizing Plath’s invocation of filth at similar moments of crisis and frustration in her poetic and novelistic creations, we begin to break down an artificial border that some commentators have placed between literary forms in her work. Although Plath’s use of “muck” in her writing is not solely limited to negative experiences, certainly negative associations predominate, and this is especially true for *The Bell Jar*; thus, for Plath, shitty things often happen in the muck.

The word “muck” first appears in *The Bell Jar* after Esther Greenwood, charmed Mademoiselle intern living the high life in New York City, has been sexually assaulted on a date with the unsavory “woman-hater” Marco (106). In this graphic scene of emotional and physical violence, Esther narrates—as if in slow motion—the sequence of events: “The ground soared and struck me with a soft shock. Mud squirmed through my fingers. Marco waited until I half rose. Then he put both hands on my shoulders and flung me back” (108). Two pages later, when Marco asks Esther to return a diamond pin that he had given to her earlier in the evening, she responds: “It’s in my imitation jet bead evening bag...[s]omewhere in the muck” (110). In the space of two pages, we see the slippery workings of language, as the reality of the situation dawns on the highly intelligent Esther. When she first describes the attack, Plath’s character uses the combination of words “struck” and “mud.” Two pages later, these have fused, and the squirming and later oozing mud transforms into the more suggestive “muck.”

What is startling upon reflection, and what aligns this passage with Plath’s poetic voice, is the way these two words seem to form a precursor to “muck”: Mud + struck = muck. Although this scene explicitly



engages themes of misogyny and sexual oppression, thus engaging the limitations of 1950s America for an educated, middle-class woman like Greenwood, the novel's Joycean word play captures the inner workings of a brilliantly creative mind. Although Greenwood's body is assaulted, her mind slips proleptically into the world of *Finnegan's Wake*, the novel she plans to spend the summer reading in preparation for writing her thesis at Smith College (122). At this moment, Esther Greenwood's experience is narrated through the idiolect of Plath as a mature poet capable of the violent rhetoric of "Words Heard..." The symbolic power of "muck" is essentially the same in both texts: a word that encapsulates both violence (struck) and filth (mud).

If this were the only reference to "muck" in *The Bell Jar* it would be interesting, but only as a passing curiosity. It is the presence of a pattern that makes Plath's use of this term in her novel significant. In an episode that vaguely recalls the beachy journal entry of July 1957, Esther recounts another date and yet another incident of violence. Describing the beginning of the day, Esther explains: "Cal and I lay side by side on an orange-and-green striped towel on a mucky beach across the swamps from Lynn"<sup>5</sup> (154). This scene appears to take up where the previous incident with Marco left off. Esther is on the ground again, and, significantly, that ground is a "mucky beach." Cal will repeat the violence of Marco, as well (albeit in a less sexualized form), when the pair go for a swim. "Cal took me by the elbow and jostled me into the water," Esther recounts, and "[w]hen we were waist high, he pushed me under" (158). While this act of veiled aggression is unsuccessful, and Esther does surface just as she survives the attack by Marco, this event carries a taint. The "mucky beach" and the stagnation it suggests stand as proxy for Esther's hopeless state of mind. We learn from Esther, immediately after this vignette: "That morning I had tried to hang myself" (158).

In a final invocation, Plath attaches the term directly to her character when Esther is residing at the mental asylum where she receives treatment after her suicide attempt. In this scene, Esther is initially seated at the lunch table next to a patient who is typically held behind a "door with bars on the square, inset windows" (180). When this patient shows herself to be unable to eat at the table with others, she is led back to her room yet keeps "turning round and making leering faces at us, and ugly, oinking noises" (181). Perhaps as a way to distinguish herself from this animalistic patient, Esther attempts at this point to assert her authority with the Negro server, who had begun "to collect the empty plates of people who hadn't dished out any beans yet" (181). He merely responds with an "insolent bow" and mutters "Miss Mucky-Muck" (181).

The server's insult, which echoes an Australian colloquialism for pretentiousness or pomposity—yet diminishes even this from "Lady Muck" to "Miss Mucky-Muck" (OED)<sup>1</sup>—is in fact a form of violence against Esther given the context. As a patient, she is helpless. As a patient, she lacks choices. Although in ordinary life the accomplished Esther Greenwood would normally be the Negro server's social superior, especially in 1950's Boston, in the context of the mental institution her status vis-à-vis the staff was equivocal. As Esther describes, the Negro server, daunted by his proximity to a table full of crazies "... gawped at us with big, rolling eyes." (180) He looks through Esther rather than communicating with her, just as he had erased from his mind the unfed patients whose plates he cleared. In this scene Esther is denied her full humanity because her mind had become sick.

As we move through the novel we see "muck" creep into nearly every setting, whether it is Esther as an independent young woman tentatively and unsuccessfully exploring her transition to adulthood in New York, Esther as depressed daughter living in Massachusetts, or finally Esther as mental health patient confined to residential care. Here, the full significance of the pattern emerges. The term "muck" is not just applied to the ground where Esther's proxy (an imitation jet-bead purse) lies, or the ground where she herself lies (the mucky beach), but to her own person. Like the woman making barnyard oinking noises, Esther has become one with filth, "a little shit" (to borrow Kate Baldwin's phrase) who is fully subjected to the violence of a system that will not even allow her the choice between vegetables (Baldwin 34). Although we have titled this comment "Mud Plus Struck Equals Muck," perhaps it would be just as evocative to say "mud plus stuck equals muck" because both Plath and Esther Greenwood seem to reach for the word "muck" when each finds herself psychologically squirming in the mud of life.

When writing of Sylvia Plath's poetry, critic Karen Jackson Ford asserts that consciousness of Hughes' infidelity—and particularly the watershed event which inspired "Words heard" and the memorable image of the "muck funnel"—marked a turning point. Plath's poem invokes the imagery of rape to capture the marital catastrophe, and designates muck as its byproduct.

<sup>1</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Lady Muck" refers to "a self-important, pompous, or pretentious woman (or man); a woman (or man) pretending to have greater importance of status than is really the case."



All is not lost, however, for Ford asserts that because of this calamity “the great writer [Plath] rises from the ashes of the perfect woman” (132). If we look at the instances where Plath inserts the word “muck” into *The Bell Jar*, we will notice a like pattern. As in Plath’s late *Ariel* poems, which she drafted on the reverse side of a typed draft of her novel (Van Dyne 102), *The Bell Jar* tells the story of a woman whose experience of the world is at odds with her literary ambitions. Esther Greenwood’s story is the tale of an ambitious and talented American woman who would like to have it all, but who is shown repeatedly—and even violently—the impossibility of that dream. At moments of keen disillusionment, the ugly word “muck” appears in Esther’s story, just as it does in Plath’s late poetry, to signal the pain of giving up that dream.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Associate Professor, Saint Martin’s University, Lacey, WA.
2. Professor, Saint Martin’s University, Lacey, WA.
3. Eltisley, a small village, lies on the Cambridge Road, Cambridgeshire 13 km from the town of Cambridge and Cambridge University. Interestingly, King’s Lynn, UK lies about 55 km to the northeast near a shallow bay called The Wash where the events Plath described as bathing the muck off at the beach could have easily taken place. Both Plath and Ted Hughes attended Cambridge University (at different times) and they met at a party at Cambridge (Wagner-Martin 130). The beach at Lynn, MA will figure in another use of “muck” in Plath’s work in *The Bell Jar*. See main text.
4. While started earlier, the bulk of Plath’s novel was written during spring, 1961 and the months following (Wagner-Martin 185-87).
5. The reference is to the beach at Lynn, Massachusetts but – as above – in note 1, Kings Lynn is near the beach at The Wash, Cambridgeshire, UK.

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## SARA FETHEROLF

## Shrunkened Heads: Reading Plath Reading Eliot

In 2011, Frances Stark's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* was on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, part of a special exhibition of drawings dealing with personhood and individuality in an increasingly commercial world. Carbon-transferred onto bulky cardstock, the series of prints reproduced Eliot's five-page poem as it appeared in Stark's second-hand copy of the text, annotated by an earlier, unknown reader. The notes were made in the margins with a blue ballpoint, handwritten and idiosyncratic. I visited the exhibit on my twenty-sixth birthday, and I stood in front of this particular installation for a long time, struck by the intimacy of what I was viewing, even in its current form (the pages took up an entire wall of exhibition space). Readers declared and second-guessed. They underlined passages; they gave opinions and then counter-opinions. At least once they noted something completely unrelated, a personal memo jotted next to the text. It felt indecent almost, as if Stark had stumbled upon unidentified nude photos and reproduced them for public display. Here was an anonymous mind, spread out graphically (in more than one sense), exposed in all its weird twists and quirks. This was a portrait of thought in action. It was a mirror of the poem itself, in which Prufrock considers, argues, and changes his mind.

"Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did,'" writes Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." "Precisely, and they are that which we know." In this sense, I know T.S. Eliot, who is represented on my own bookshelves, annotated in the green pen I used in high school, in penciled underlines and in messy ballpoint scribbles. Frances Stark's prints were intimate because they were both foreign and familiar—a mind on paper, reacting to words that I, too, have reacted to. I have also been that anonymous reader who steps into Prufrock's thoughts for five pages. A great writer, according to Eliot, must undergo a kind of ego death and connect to "a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind." To create something original, the poet must maintain a "perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence." I would argue that careful reading requires something similar—a good reader is one who can let go of their own identity for a spell and merge with the page.

Not that Eliot's poetry exactly lends itself to this kind of reading. His poems are cyphers: opaque and prosaic, nonspecific and allusive. The voice (or voices) in them debates and undercuts itself. It eavesdrops, it ventriloquizes, and it engages with the literary tradition by blurting bits of that tradition as a kind of obsessive glossolalia. The reader is more likely to approach these texts as a puzzle rather than an invitation into another's mind. Perhaps this is why Eliot's poetry particularly solicits annotation. A careful reader must approach him through the armor of his "historical sense;" his poems ask to be interpreted rather than engaged head-on.

Aware, perhaps, of the difficulty of his allusions, Eliot went so far as to annotate "The Waste Land" himself, though he acknowledged later this may have made the poem's web of references even more abstract. "[M]y notes stimulated the wrong kind of interest among the seekers of sources," he wrote two decades later, conceding that this kind of annotation didn't contribute to the meaning of the poem, but rather "sent...enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail" ("Frontiers of Criticism" 534). Perhaps readers are particularly drawn to annotate Eliot because there's something paradoxical about his poetry—it is both aloof and intimate; it invites the reader to make their own meaning, but also gives the impression there's a truer "Holy Grail" meaning waiting to be teased out. Eliot's poems display the internal gears and switches of a particular sort of mind—one that plays hide-and-seek in poetic tradition, even as it seems to display itself openly.

Amanda Jeremin Harris has suggested Eliot's early poetics were influenced by the treatment he underwent for a nervous breakdown in 1921 (44). Eliot was treated by Roger Vittoz, a psychologist who advocated meditation, specifically asking patients to focus on symbols of eternity rather than on passing emotional states. Harris sees a correlation between this treatment and Eliot's theory that poetry should be stripped of all personal associations and made to fit into a large, cultural body of work. She particularly focuses on Vittoz's practice of intoning healing words or religious mantras that were meant to bring relief to a patient's scattered thoughts, and sees a connection to the end of "The Waste Land," where the words "Shantih, Shantih, Shantih" are intoned in the final line (45). But I think there could also be a connection to Eliot's argument in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." To reach a state of calmness in which healing could take place, these mantras were meant to be repeated until they lost meaning and became instead a meditation on infinity. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot essentially suggests

that poets become living embodiments of these healing words, devoid of personal significance but part of an ongoing act of creation. Perhaps this is why Eliot's poems often seem to lack landmarks, and why there are no concrete external events to ground the symbolic and the literary.

But if, as Eliot suggests, great poetry should be devoid of personal landmarks, then what is the job of the reader? Are they, too, receptacles for the divine body of literature? Or is the reader the body that literature moves through—are we a multitude of reading bodies that literature possesses and controls? Is Eliot asking the reader to vanish into the great body of tradition along with the writer, or is he inviting them to be the interpreters?

I had these questions in mind when I first visited the New York Public Library's Berg Collection of English and American Literature on a November afternoon. I learned that the collection holds a copy of Eliot's *Four Quartets* owned by Sylvia Plath, which she made notes in when she was a student at Smith College. I wondered what sort of annotations her reading had produced. Eliot was among the wide array of influences in her early work, and was a giant in literary culture when Plath came of age. When she began at Smith, *Four Quartets* would have not been regarded as Eliot's last great poetic work, but as his most recent.

Plath was given her copy of *Four Quartets* by Dick Norton, the man she was seeing during much of her first year at Smith. He inscribed on the inner leaf: "A small addition, Sylvie, to your collection of ideas, lives, stories, and shrunkened heads. Dick 1951." The handwriting is sweet and formal, reminiscent of a child's best cursive. It contrasts with the bold, authoritative scrawl of Ted Hughes across the bottom of the same page: "This is Sylvia Plath's own copy of *The Four Quartets*, and all the autograph annotations are hers." The book wears its history on its frontispiece—given to Plath by one man, given away for public study by another. Hughes' tone is detached yet reverential ("Sylvia Plath's own copy"). It is in keeping with the vague, mythic celebrity that has become attached to Plath since her death. Today the book is tucked alongside first editions and manuscript drafts of Eliot's poetry. Plath's copy is a plain, mass-market Harcourt and Brace edition, published in 1943. Because it is hers, it is locked away with some of the rarest documents in 20th-century literature.

I would like to explore how a book like this is a collection of shrunkened heads, a microcosmic representation of a life. Here we see two minds on paper—Plath's and Eliot's—distorted, perhaps, and perhaps not a faithful copy, but all the same an artifact, a curio, remaining evidence of the identity of the owner.

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"I don't think anyone's spent so much time looking at that book," the supervising librarian told me later. I'd been there all day, paging through the tidy notes in the margins of Eliot's poetry. The book felt like a double-exposed photograph, with Plath's interpretation of each poem overlaying the original. The marginalia even seemed to follow a loose poetic form. At the top of the first page, Plath noted the text was in "3 4 6 beat lines" (3), and her own marginal notes are in lines of roughly the same number of beats. She's responding to the shape of the printed text, of course—her lines have to squeeze in the space around Eliot's—but she also seems to be working with a kind of innate prosody. Her lines are broken across the page even in situations where she has more space to write. The poem and notes form a kind of call-and-response: "Chill/ Fingers of yew be curled/ Down on us?" writes Eliot, and Plath interprets and echoes, "is vegetable immortality all?" In the next line, the rhythm picks up as a kingfisher breaks into the poem: its "wing/ Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still/ At the still point of the turning world." Or, as Plath parses it:

bird flashes into silence,  
still pattern + light persists—  
(ambiguity:  
quiet + yet) (7)

Many of her notes are interpretive like this. Every page of the book is teeming with these careful, lineated analyses of Eliot's words. Some of her observations are characteristically insightful. In "Burnt Norton," next to the line, "Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind," she has written, "acted on, not acting." (6) She echoes the observation in "East Coker," when Eliot describes a bonfire scene. "Round and round the fire/ Leaping through the flames..." Eliot writes, and Plath notes beside these lines, "of men and bits of paper." (12) Plath is reading actively, drawing connections to the surface, even though Eliot left the images without any explicit link. Beside the opening stanza of "Burnt Norton," Plath has written, "Alice in Wonderland," noting perhaps the similarities between Alice following the White Rabbit into a dream-world, and the poem's speaker, who follows "the deception of the thrush" into "the first world" of the "rose-garden" (3). But Plath herself is the Alice of this particular copy of the book—she's a young girl trying to figure out how to navigate this mirror-world she has fallen into. She responds to the poem's apparent nonsense by trying to find the

logic and solve the riddle at the heart of it. In another copy of *Four Quartets*, the reader would have to do this alone. In this copy, we see the text grow curiously and curiously through Plath's lens.

Still, I can see why, as the librarian noted, scholars haven't paid much attention to this particular text. While her annotations are attentive, intelligent, and insightful, they are ultimately, the careful note-taking of a schoolgirl. Plath would have been 19 when she was given this book. Her handwriting is more similar to Dick Norton's careful inscription than to Ted Hughes' scrawl. It is small, neat, and regular. On the first page, she has translated the Greek epigraph: "Although the wind is common to all, most men live as if each had a private wisdom of his own..." Except "wisdom" is not the word that she originally wrote there. Rather, she corrected some other word to "wisdom," carefully going over it again and again until those six letters were pressed deep into the page. It is impossible to tell what word used first. There is only a trace of it behind the careful correction (1).

In their series *These Ghostly Archives*, Crowther and Steinberg have written a virtual encyclopedia of the Plath-related archival material that is available for public study. But while they examine several other books that Plath annotated, calling her marginalia "insightful, questioning, intelligent and often witty," and even quoting specific annotations that illustrate Plath's wry humor (28), in this case there is merely a passing mention of the "abundance of annotations" that show "how college-age Plath interacted with her book" (43). Nothing is specifically examined or quoted. And it's true that in this text, much of Plath's obsessive notation does not seem like a great poet preparing for her own acts of creation, as much as a good student painstakingly translating what she does not quite understand. She strikes me as an actress, learning her lines by figuring out what's going on behind them. Eliot's poems are vivisected in this volume; she opens them to look at the moving parts inside. She is rewriting and resolving; she is figuring out what she can use.

Many critics identify two stages in Plath's writing; the first "influence phase," as Gary Lane puts it, was "a scurry among many voices" in which "her gift for poetic mimicry" allowed her to try out many styles (Lane 116-117). Then, finally at the end, there were the *Ariel* poems, when critics generally agree she hit upon her authentic, original voice. It is true that Plath was a meticulous student when it came to poetry, and her seriousness is evident in many of the notes she made on *Four Quartets*. She spends a good deal of time tracking register and tone—in the first section of "The Dry Salvages," for instance, she notes the "scientific" word "algae" is set against "technical" jargon like "torn seine," and "common" words like "lobsterpot." All this maps how the tone moves from "placid serenity" to "mythical overtones" (21)—like the sea in the passage, the language is a "union of menace and caress" (22). Again, at a moment in "East Coker," she has noted the lines: "The dahlias sleep in the empty silence./ Wait for the early owl," and has written beside it "night and death" (11). Here, she's tracking image instead of tone, noting what abstract ideas the line corresponds to. It's as if she's studying how to get at something as big as night and death through poetry—how to break it into elemental pieces—the closed blossoms, the silence before the owl's call. Her notes suggest that she is trying to figure out what's behind Eliot's lines, the gears and switches that make them work.

The imitative nature of Plath's early writing creates a sense of "embarrassment" for "serious readers of poetry," writes Langdon Hammer. "Here is someone who has obviously studied poetry (to whom, in some sense, it didn't come naturally), writing it, and writing it like someone who studied it in school. Plath works too hard, or too dutifully, to legitimize her work" (64). Hammer sees a connection between Plath's dutiful quest for legitimacy and the post-war academic culture, where even at prestigious colleges like Smith, success looked different depending on gender. In this culture, "To choose to be a writer was to choose a special way of life, a career that was always more than a career because it was imagined as a process of becoming aimed at total self-realization" (67). A college woman, however, was naturally expected to choose between any career and marriage—"and," writes Hammer, "when choices must be made, [the assumption was] marriage will come first." For Plath, then, "gender determined the conditions of her access to high culture, which for her was through the position of the student" (64).

Eliot may not have been a major influence on Plath—Gary Lane writes that there is only "an occasional bit" (118) of him evident in the apprentice stage of her work—but in journal entries from the summer after her freshman year, she directly echoes language from the opening of "Burnt Norton" to reflect on her relationship with Dick Norton, the boy with careful handwriting who gifted her *Four Quartets*. "Dick is real only in that time was...and in that time will be," she writes. "Time present is Non-Dick." It's typical of her journals at this time to borrow from her reading material, and typical to cast her love life, particularly, in these sardonically poetic terms. Equally typical of her early journals, the same entry dissolves into worries about her writing: "Do I create? No, I reproduce. I have no imagination. I am submerged in circling ego" (*Unabridged Journals* 92). If, as Eliot claims, great poetry derives from "a continual extinction of personality" ("Tradition"), then Plath's concern is valid. But it seems to me that Plath did not have the option both to transcend ego and to remain a writer. For a young Plath, her search for an authentic self was



a necessary driving force. Without it, as she observes in her journal, she would probably be satisfied with a home and family, and “say ‘living and feeding a man’s insatiable guts and begetting children occupies my whole life. Don’t have time to write’” (*Unabridged Journals* 93).

Hammer argues Plath’s writing was “a serial process” and that in her poetry, “The multiple images of herself she created proceeded one after another” (71). Her work, in this sense, is a series of copies or likenesses, each one attempting to capture some illusive true self. Even her late work is driven by the impulse to “reproduce,” as she puts it. In her *Ariel* poems “she chooses submission to a technical program...as a way to pass to a higher plane that will, in the end, move her beyond mere technique” (Hammer 77-78). But it also seems significant that she uses the word “reproduce” to describe her process of study and imitation. Reproduction is an inherently female activity—if she doesn’t “reproduce” in poetry, she’ll do so by “begetting children,” and in the process will lose her selfhood, beholden to the whims of “a man’s insatiable gut.” In imitating the poets she admires, Plath is doing what Eliot suggests every student poet must do—she is “procur[ing] the consciousness of the past” that a poet should “continue to develop throughout his career.” If her poetry failed to fully become “an escape from personality” (“Tradition”), perhaps it is because of some unchangeable aspect of her identity, rather than her poetics. When a poet is not developing a historical sense throughout “his” career but throughout hers, how is that development hampered? In other words, does a female poet have the option of incorporating the body of poetic tradition into her own work, or will she always be in the margins, responding to tradition by copying and translating it into her own language?

In Plath’s case, her personality has consistently colored the way she is read. Even Plath’s *Four Quartets* is a literary relic more because of who it belonged to than what it contains. Indeed, I got the distinct impression this particular book generates more interest as a curio, something once owned by a literary celebrity, rather than because it has scholarly merit. In our email exchange before I visited the Berg Collection, one librarian questioned me thoroughly about my motives and intentions for examining the text, and in person later told me they use Plath’s *Four Quartets* mainly as an interesting artifact to show off when they’re giving tours of the collection to potential donors. This is natural, maybe—few poets have the level of fame that Sylvia Plath has taken on since her death. The book is precious mainly because it belonged to a goddess of twentieth century literature—her “own copy.”

“She became our...queen (poor queen, mad queen) of subjectivity,” writes Calvin Bedient, who admits he uses the epithet “both mockingly and respectfully.” Plath, he says, never “questioned the sufficiency or supremacy of her own intensity as a subject for art” (8). By setting Plath up as a “queen of subjectivity,” Bedient diminishes her poetry to an ego-driven act. Her writing depends on her autobiography—the reader cannot identify with Plath’s work without knowing the facts of Plath’s identity. “She could write only about herself, but she herself was the struggle of persons, she herself was drama” (9). Bedient goes on to break down the drama that was Sylvia Plath, categorizing her poems into “acts” that, taken together, tell the story of her tragic life and death. Susan Bassnett, reflecting on this tendency to interpret Plath’s poetry as dramatized autobiography, writes: “One wonders...whether the fact of her suicide has not become a framing text through which readers must pass before reaching the poems and stories themselves” (3). Plath has become a cult heroine, the “sexy tragic muse,” as Anne Thériault recently put it, who inspires poetry because she is poetry—Sylvia Plath the writer becomes indistinguishable from what she wrote. But critics who look at Plath’s poetry this way, Bassnett protests, fail to realize “the I that is Sylvia Plath writing dissolves into the I of each of us reading.... The poem, once written, is rewritten in every reading and the notion of a single definitive reading becomes the absurdity it is” (7).

Through most of her career, Plath seemed obsessed with finding a way to transcend influence. In her journals, she frequently worried her reading life was overly influential on her writing, hampering her originality as a poet. “Lines occur to me and stop dead: ‘The tiger lily’s spotted throat,’” she wrote in 1958, “And then it is an echo of Eliot’s ‘The tiger in the tiger pit,’ to the syllable & the consonance” (*The Unabridged Journals* 409). In “Subject Sylvia,” Meghan O’Rourke has argued the critical obsession with Plath’s biography harms the way her poetry is read; “Plath is not truly a confessional poet, but is labeled as such because of ‘a series of historical accidents’” (338). While Plath wrote alongside confessional poets such as Lowell and Sexton, says O’Rourke, she is not as self-revealing in her poetry as is widely assumed. Rather, Plath’s poetry seems more confessional than it is simply because readers are closely familiar with her biography—her mythos is so pervasive that it is difficult to separate from her writing. But O’Rourke contends that Plath actively worked to erase the personal in her poetry by coding her experiences through abstractions. She analyzes, as an example, an abandoned poem of Plath’s, which narrates the experience with a runaway horse later described in “*Ariel*.” The draft, O’Rourke notes, is full of the word “me,” whereas in the finished poem, “‘I’ takes center stage—an elemental, almost impersonal ‘I,’ not Plath, exactly, but a force, a feeling” (340). O’Rourke, like Bassnett, sees Plath’s selfhood dissolve in her poetry. “[T]he subject of the poem is...this

notion of being ‘at one’...as the shedding of the self” (341). In O’Rourke’s view, Plath has achieved the “self-sacrifice” and “extinction of personality” that Eliot postulates is at the core of great poetry.

Plath, then, is a strange contradiction. Her individual identity cannot be subsumed by literature as a whole; her life and poetry are indelibly fused in the minds of most readers. But like Eliot’s ideal poet, she alters and nullifies the personal voice in her later poetry, crafting poems that extend beyond the individual self. If Plath’s poetry cannot escape her biography, perhaps it is not because of any essential characteristic of the poetry, but because she is inescapably a woman—“arrogantly feminine” as one critic described her (Bassnett 2)—and therefore inherently alienated—marginalized, as it were—from the poetic tradition that Eliot describes. As O’Rourke suggests, the “I” (or “eye”) of “*Ariel*” is not Plath, but it also cannot be a wholly impersonal, universal speaker when Plath is writing in the context of a tradition that equates universal experience with male experience. Ultimately, her poetry cannot divorce itself from her biography because she is inherently outside Eliot’s tradition—her poetry is gendered even at its least personal. It is “confessional” not because it tells the details of her life, but because it is “arrogantly feminine,” fundamentally separate from the tradition that she sought to emulate.

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In her copy of *Four Quartets*, Plath heavily underlined the section in “Burnt Norton” where Eliot describes words as physical things:

...Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place... (7)

Plath’s own “Words,” written in the last month of her life, is an interesting contrast to this passage. Like Eliot’s words that “will not stay in place,” Plath’s words are volatile forces that “Will not stay still.” In her poem, the quickening pace and the list-like floods of images are similar to the passage that Plath admired in Eliot. But Eliot’s words are reactive; they either escape or wither and die. The words in “Burnt Norton” are like the “men and bits of paper”—“acted on, not acting”—whereas Plath’s words act on the world as “Axes” and create “echoes traveling/ Off from the center” (*Collected Poems* 270). Plath once worried that she did not “create” but only “reproduce[d],” but here her act of writing is the swing of an ax that destroys and creates; her words achieve immortality through making endless reproducing echoes. In Eliot’s poem, words are imprecise and mutable; they don’t hold concrete meaning or value. Try to put pressure on them, they slip away. Plath’s words, on the other hand, are interactive; they are tools and vehicles that transform reality. The echoes become horses; the poem doesn’t dwell on the image but moves on to sap, tears, water, and weedy greens. Eliot’s words move in the mind, transforming and shifting course, but Plath’s words are physical. While Eliot’s lines are full of frustration at the “imprecision” of language, in Plath’s poem, her words return, “indefatigable.”

Then again, Plath’s words, like Eliot’s, are subject to time. “Years later,” she writes, “I/ Encounter them on the road.” The words that once rung out like ax strokes come back “dry and riderless,”—empty but still alive. Her words can’t completely transcend the world they occupy, but belong to the same universe as the “fixed stars” that “Govern a life.” In “Burnt Norton,” words are wild things—the speaker wants to master them, but they won’t stay in his hand. In “Words,” the words seem wild at first, but they, like everything else, are subject to a governing fate.

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Around the same time she was annotating *Four Quartets*, Plath wrote in her journal about reading Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: “I will read him again, and he will talk to me, not being dead, or gone. Is that life after death—mind living on paper...?” (*The Unabridged Journals* 45). If a book is a kind of shrunken head, then can we resurrect Eliot or Plath by reading their words? Or does a reader impose himself or herself onto the page? Do we all bring our complicated baggage of identity—our own biography, as it were—to what we read? When Plath reads *Four Quartets*, is she reading Eliot or is she reading Plath?

I couldn’t say. But I do know that by “Little Gidding,” Plath’s handwriting begins to break free of the margins and runs into the corners of the page. Plath noted this poem as the “opposite of East Corker where light is absorbed—here it radiates” (31). Her notes begin to radiate as well. They are just as careful and studious, but there is a slant and fervor in the shape of the letters, as if they were written quickly, in a kind of trance. Of course, I could be seeing more than is actually there. Maybe I only imagine this moment would please Plath—the dramatic culmination to *Four Quartets* where, as she puts it, “poetry” becomes the “pentecostal holy ghost” (36) that renews time through cleansing fire. In this moment, I imagine she’s looking for a way poetry can refine and burn away personal identity, a way the reader and text can briefly become one. Or I could be reading too much into it. See, I had an odd experience, sitting



in the quiet Berg Reading Room, flipping through the book that Eliot had written and Plath had marked up. Somewhere near the end of “The Dry Salvages,” I began to feel like I was shifting outside of time. Call it a transcendent moment. For a split second, I was everyone at once. I was a middle-aged man who had softened and gone mystic, reminiscing about places from my childhood but holding back the personal details, writing a poem that could be about anyone’s mystical place. I was a scholarship girl in her first year at Smith College, writing in the margins with my neat, decided print, deciphering, conversing with the text, peering through the eyes of the older poet. And I was me, a woman in the New York Public Library, November 22, 2013, reading Plath reading Eliot, hypnotized, depersonalized, ungoverned.

I left that visit shaken and abuzz, and it wasn’t until later I realized that for all the careful notes I’d taken, I forgot to write down page numbers for citing the text. I went online, and in minutes I’d found a copy of the same 1943 Harcourt and Brace edition from a used bookstore in Chicago, mine for \$13. It arrived, battered and missing a dust jacket, a few days later. Inside, it is exactly like Plath’s copy without her notes. But there are other notes instead. In the front cover, printed in tall, skinny letters, John T. Goldthwait of Evanston, Illinois, declares that this book belongs to him. He has underlined passages, but the annotations are sparse, mostly confined to a word here and there. “Rhyme” is the most common one. “Words” is another. Then, cryptically, on one page he has written “augurer,” “drawing lots for divination,” “star figure,” and “hypnotic.” Whatever was he reading?

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CHRISTINE WALDE

## ‘Unintelligible syllables’: Noise in the poetry of Sylvia Plath

Noise, by definition alone, is a noisy term. In information theory, too much information retrieved from a search query is called noise. Noise as it applies to electronic mediums is defined as a random fluctuation which varies in frequency, producing a variety of effects. Noise in communications is identified as a signal of error, a disturbance in useful information. Distinguished between interference and distortion, noise takes its shape in myriad forms. From thermal to flicker, noise ranges across an aural spectrum, and can be translated into colours, numbers, and different levels of visualization. What is common about noise, however, is that it is always characterized as something to listen for or against, not to listen to, though listening to noise, as John Cage suggested, yields a new kind of information.

In her essay “Noise That Stays Noise,” the poet Cole Swenson likens the first reading of a poem to noise — an experience of confusion or non-understanding — that works in concert with the information contained in the text. This state of suspension as the reader tries to decipher the information, attempting to find ground in the topography of its syntax, is a complex negotiation. In this way, as Swenson notes, poetry is a kind of communication, and if we know how to listen to the noise generated by its phonic systems, we can gain new information, not just about the poem or the poet, but in how to listen to and read all poetry (3).

What is different about poetry from other forms of writing or communication is that the use of noise can be used intentionally, and, when used at a certain level of organization – be it through alliteration, repetition, juxtaposition, spacing, number of syllables, word ending, line stops, can work together to create a more complex body of information; a transmission that is both profound and resonant.

In his essay “Noise,” philosopher Michel Serres looks at the etymology of the word noise noting that noise and nausea, noise and nautical, noise and navy have the same origins (50) and likens it to the sea, stressing that noise is something that transcends boundaries. It is metaphysical in its operations (51). Noise “never stops. It is limitless, continuous, perpetual, unchangeable” (50) and if one is to create a masterwork, “one must swim in language, dive in as if lost, for a weighty poem or argument to arise ... the masterwork shakes with noises... The masterwork unceasingly makes noise and sound” (53).

The poetry of Sylvia Plath, particularly the masterworks from *Ariel*, can be seen as possessing this kind of noise. Noise plays a central role in Plath’s poetry, lending her the power to overwhelm, disturb, conduct, jam and distort signals of information. Plath achieves this through a lasting and sustained series of syntactic effects that result in a profound transmission of meaning, what Alan Clinton has described as an “electracy,” where Plath’s voice operates as a kind of switchboard which privileges neither the historical nor the personal, but which shifts from one register to the other, acting as a mechanistic medium (61). Plath is the conduit and the conductor, both Electra and electronic, creating feedback with the semantic machinery of the *Ariel* poems, using their sound as a vehicle of sonic transportation and dislocation. Clinton asks us to consider the emergent media at the time of Plath’s composition, and to consider what extent electric, and even electronic speed informs Plath’s volume, reminding us that in order to understand “poetry’s ability to make unexpected connections” we must also understand its “conductive logic operating within media conditions” to “help us navigate the hidden structures” (64-65).

As early as 1955, Plath began reading and recording her poems aloud. Librarian Peter Steinberg also firmly believes that when Plath published her poems in print periodicals, she read her work in context with other writers in the issue, reinforcing her belief and vision in herself as a writer. Similarly, it may be that hearing her readings and recordings of her own poetry made her more concerned with the sounds of her words and their rhythms as she wrote, reinforcing the orality of her poems. This is further evidenced by accounts of her reading her poems to both Al Alvarez and Ruth Fainlight.

In Andrew Wilson’s latest bio on Plath, he describes how the young Sylvia “adored listening to Edith Sitwell reciting ‘Facade’ and how she particularly relished the physicality and sensuality of Sitwell’s vowel sounds and lines (239).” In her journals, Plath alludes to a morning on March 1, 1958, when she:

turned to chanting verses and got magnificent sense of power... learned the brief “call for the robin redbreast & the wren” “Thou art a box of wormseed” and began “Hark, now everything is still” – how to describe it? The surge of joy and mastery as if I had discovered a particularly effective, efficacious prayer: some demons and genii fuse, answering, when I

chant (341).

Plath concluded the journal entry by saying that she will learn not only words, but also a vocabulary "to staunch wounds, to bind up broken limbs and 'set the skull back about the head'"(341). Similarly, in her interview with the BBC's Peter Orr in 1962, Plath mentions that she was astounded by Dylan Thomas, who was well known for his recorded broadcasts. When asked by Orr if she consciously designed her poems to be both lucid and effective when read aloud, Plath replied:

PLATH: This is something I didn't do in my earlier poems. For example, my first book, *The Colossus*, I can't read any of the poems aloud now. I didn't write them to be read aloud. They, in fact, quite privately, bore me. These ones that I have just read, the ones that are very recent, I've got to say them, I speak them to myself, and I think that this in my own writing development is quite a new thing with me, and whatever lucidity they may have comes from the fact that I say them to myself, I say them aloud.

ORR: Do you think this is an essential ingredient of a good poem, that it should be able to be read aloud effectively?

PLATH: Well, I do feel that now and I feel that this development of recording poems, of speaking poems at readings, of having records of poets, I think this is a wonderful thing. I'm very excited by it. In a sense, there's a return, isn't there, to the old role of the poet, which was to speak to a group of people, to come across.

ORR: Or to sing to a group?

PLATH: To sing to a group of people, exactly. (*"A 1962 Sylvia Plath Interview with Peter Orr"*)

Listening to the BBC recordings, one is lulled by the sound of Plath's voice. Her mashed up New England-London-Cambridge-Devon accent, with its vatic Scarlett O'Hara lilt, is a voice that sings, using an arsenal of onomatopoeic sounds — either through devices such as alliteration, internal rhyming, repetition, and punctuation — to achieve an effect that is simultaneously assonant, dissonant, and resonant. Through language alone Plath creates a wall of noise that is as unstoppable as Serres' definition, ebbing and receding, washing over us, again and again in waves. For the purposes of this paper, I will be referring to poems from *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. Although much has been written about the symbolic arc of Plath's original order, I would also argue that it is as equally important for its sonic thrust. Beginning with a song — quite literally, a cry — and ending with the buzzing cycle of bee poems, the original order of *Ariel* is a discordant cacophony of sounds, populated with horses' hooves (*"Ariel"*), trains (*"Getting There"*), and hissing potatoes (*"Lesbos"*), just to name a few. Even the title itself suggests a tempest.

Much of this sonic effect is achieved, at a microcosmic level, through repetition and the use of double consonants, like two ll's, which are tripled through their repetition. Take this line from "Elm": "It petrifies the will. These are isolate, slow faults/That kill, that kill, that kill." (28); or "Lady Lazarus": "The second time I meant/To last it out and not come back at all. /I rocked shut/ As a seashell./They had to call and call/And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls./ Dying/Is an art, like everything else. /I do it exceptionally well./ I do it so it feels like hell./I do it so it feels real/I guess you could say I've a call./It's easy enough to do it in a cell"(15).

Plath, too, is particularly fond of the long 'oo' sound, used most predominantly in "Daddy" — there's the hammer of that double consonant again — which can be heard as an abject "ew," and is used repeatedly in words like "shoe," "achoo," "Ach, du," "Jew," "you," "true," gobbledygook, "through," "blue," "who," "two," "glue," and "screw" (73-75) in a kind of relentless loop, mixed and remixed to mimic the coo of a mother's tongue. Then there are the 's' sounds from *"Ariel"*: "Stasis in darkness/Then the substanceless blue/Pour of tor and distances./God's lioness/How one we grow/Pivot of heels and knees!" (33)

Plath's longstanding use of long 'e' sounds denotes a scream, a screech, a shriek, and recalls the buzz of bees, the industrious noise Plath employs in her sequence of bee poems, using words like "sleeping," "queen," "been," "sweet," "honey," "mahogany," "me," scurry, "feed," "need," "clean," "see," "free," "temporary," "hungry," and "immediately" (80- 88). Like the queen herself, Plath gluts herself on these words, this vocabulary, creating a series of alphabetic characters and representative sounds, that, like the bees in "The Arrival of the Bee Box," are words: "black on black, angrily clambering" composed of "unintelligible syllables"(82).

Using pre-digital digital humanities tools, John Butler's 1979 study "Poetry and the Computer: Some Quantitative Aspects of Sylvia Plath" used computation to contrast and compare a number various syntactical aspects of Plath's poetry, using the different volumes of Plath's poetry as benchmarks. In *The Colossus*, for example, there are 764 end stopped lines, but in *Ariel* there are 1098 (302). Not only does this suggest a new confidence in Plath's writing style, but contributes to a rapidity of rhythm that is more staccato than crescendo; generated by condensed fields of short, sharpened phrases. I find the number of exclamation

marks particularly fascinating: *The Colossus*: 17, *Ariel*: 54; question marks: *The Colossus*: 5; *Ariel*: 77; dashes: *The Colossus*: 30, *Ariel*: 77 (304); word length, from 1-3: *The Colossus*: 3473, *Ariel*: 4238 (306); sentence length, from 1-3: *The Colossus*: 90, *Ariel*: 141 (308). And so it goes: syntactic types of hyphenated words (noun + noun eg. bird-feet, flower-head) *The Colossus*: 80, *Ariel*: 30; noun + -ed word (eg. "blank-brained") *The Colossus*: 44, *Ariel*: 3.(310) In every line, in every stanza, at every turn, Plath created, in concert with a range of powerful and disturbing images from wars and death and suicide and disfigurement from the Holocaust to the Klu Klux Klan, a cacophony of noise against systems of religion, power, language and patriarchy. Taken together, these syntactical statistics and subject matter do not suggest a pastoral pitter patter, but a full-blown electrical storm of syllabic re-invention, complete with lightning strikes of fierce emotion, questioning, exclamation and intellect. By imparting this new noise, Plath brings new information to both the form and function of poetry and its future reading and reinterpretation.

In his Lacanian reading of the late *Ariel* poems, Paul Mitchell states that the phonemic repetition of these poems leads to stasis, not progression, but that this stasis is a necessary condition of their vocal subversion. He argues Plath's use of alliteration no longer assists to transmit the poem's meaning but that their very repetition is monotonous, depressed, leading to a silence of the speaker. Steven Gould Axelrod, in his book on Plath, meditates on Plath's relationship to language and how she used words, referring to the late poems Plath wrote as "registering not as language at all but as noise, a radio static"(21).

If we can understand, in the Cage-ian sense that silence is not silent, but in fact, another kind of sound, another noise, then Plath's silence is just another device in her noisy poetics, another instrument for her transmission. I would like to argue that Plath is not plunging off into silence; or the whiteness of the page, but that the words of her sonic performance are a triumph of harnessing the noise that surrounds and informs her poetic practice to transmit to us the information we need to know to understand the poem. In this way, as her listening subjects, we, too, are electrified through the amplification of sound in her works. By listening to the noise in Plath's poetry, we are literally and figuratively conducted through her poetic discourse; receivers of new information. They are not unintelligible at all: we need only listen.

Of course another source of noise that surrounds Plath is the enormous amount of information in the scholarship that surrounds Plath. As "the peanut-crunching crowd" (15), we continually shove in to see the "very large charge" (16) of what will be unearthed about her. Plath has one of the noisiest archives I have ever been to. Full of drafts and diaries and letters and essays and art and ephemera like dresses and typewriters and wastepaper baskets, chock-a-block with books and snippets of hair; it is, quite literally, a hive, a site of noise, in which Plath knew and realized from an early age, that her work was being acquired and collected — alchemically preserved— in a multiplicity of formats. Of course what makes Plath's archive even more noisy is that she herself is silent in death. Yet in her writing she continues to act as a signal to the noise, a noise that, like the ocean, is unceasing.

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MERCY D. SHERMAN

## “Every Woman’s a Whore”: Misogyny and Hypocrisy in Sylvia Plath’s Oeuvre

From scholars in Oxford to teenagers on Tumblr, vast numbers of readers of poetry and literature laud Sylvia Plath as an influential feminist. In fact, Ellen Moers, an American author who devoted 338 pages to discussing the literary history of female writers, described Plath by declaring, “No writer has meant more to the current feminist movement” (xv). That said, if we understand “feminism” by its dictionary definition, meaning active advocacy for women’s rights based on a belief in the equality of the sexes (Merriam-Webster.com)—or even if we take “feminism” colloquially, posing that the belief in the equality of the sexes is alone sufficient qualification—after poring through Plath’s oeuvre, personally, I struggle to see the evidence that Sylvia Plath was a pioneer of feminism. On the contrary, I think Plath carried an immense prejudice against women—especially when they displayed traits that she recognized and resented in herself.

Due to their outcries against various male oppressors, poems like “Lazy Lazarus,” “Daddy,” and “The Jailer” have long been used to support the theses of feminist scholars. But most of Plath’s poems that address or discuss patriarchal figures do so with a deep ambivalence, expressing anger alongside longing for attention, affection, or acceptance. Although Plath wrote fewer poems that were directed at fellow females, readers are hard-pressed to find a poem that addresses or discusses a woman with a primary emotion other than hatred.

It’s important to state that the contents of the previous paragraph could be true without necessarily precluding Plath from being a feminist. Feminists are absolutely entitled to have negative thoughts about specific women—and even a misogynist could be considered a feminist if she was a misandrist, to boot. But the wide breadth of emotions that Plath expressed toward men shows that she wasn’t a indiscriminate misandrist, predisposed to feeling disgust toward all males. In fact, that wide breadth of emotions serves to emphasize the sex-related double-standards to which Plath subscribed.

Critics have described Plath’s poetry about women as “acidly vindictive” (Stevenson), full of “aggression and rebellion” (Britzolakis, 127), and indicative of “white-hot hate” (Roche). Author David Trinidad, from whom we’ll hear plenty about the backstory of Plath’s poem “Lesbos” before this essay is over, goes as far as to call that piece a “condemnation of sisterhood.” Works such as “The Disquieting Muses” and “Medusa” strictly criticize the tactics of their speakers’ mothers; pieces like “Barren Woman” and “Heavy Women” together disparage the pregnant and prideful (Brain, 22); and the poems “The Tour,” “Eavesdropper,” “Lesbos” and “Kindness” rail against supposedly friendly women who fail at and/or because of their feminine roles.

Over the years, some scholars have complained that the malicious tone of these poems goes hand in hand with a certain superficiality of content and a lack of structural control. For example, in his book *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*, Edward Butscher described “Lesbos” as nothing more than “petty revenge, gossip, and whining decked out as art” (323). Although I understand how Plath’s enthusiastic indictments can be a turn-off, Butscher is mistaken when he argues that these poems are on average any less artful than other works of Plath.

“Lesbos” is a poem with many layers of backstory. To start, its title refers to a Greek isle where the famed poetess Sappho once lived. Sappho was renowned for being a female poet and for teaching female pupils how to write poetry. Furthermore, Sappho was known for her willingness to compose verse that discoursed on taboo subjects (Hallett, 447)—is this description starting to sound reminiscent of any other poetesses we might know? Here, however, is the main point of departure: Sappho’s favorite topic on which to write was her intense appreciation of other females (450). Sappho was rumored to be a homosexual (hence, we use the word “lesbian” to describe women who are sexually attracted to other women) [451]—but this speculation is irrelevant for the purpose of this essay; what matters is that Sappho wrote many poems describing fellow women in extremely affirmative ways. Additionally, Plath’s “Lesbos” is written in response to a poem by the same name, penned by one of Plath’s influences, Charles Baudelaire, which rejoices on the subject of the female friendship found on Sappho’s “Lesbos.” In her essay *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, scholar Christine Britzolakis argues “Lesbos” also replies to an earlier poem of Plath’s, titled ‘marcia,’ which addressed an old friend of Plath’s and did so utterly unironically, full to



the brim with kind words and "nostalgic idyll" (Britzolakis, 138). Although the existence of this poem might seem to contradict my previous statements that Plath tended to address women with hatred in her poetry, the fact that Plath never attempted to publish 'marcia'—and ultimately converted it into such a tour de force of female-to-female hatred—shows that its original tone wasn't representative of what Plath intended to express.

The next layer of the poem's backstory comes from David Trinidad, who precludes his tale by explaining that although Plath's poems should not always be read autobiographically, many of them do "invite us" to do so. Trinidad proceeds to justify this statement by quoting a late interview with Plath, wherein she explained that most of her poems "immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have"—to which I'd reply that 99% of poets could say the same thing, but that doesn't mean that 99% of poems are written autobiographically. Although Trinidad's first piece of evidence is weak, I do agree with his claim that many of Plath's poems beg to be read as autobiography. From her journals, we've learned that Plath wrote "Cut" shortly after she accidentally chopped off part of her thumb, "Fever 103°" shortly after she got over a 103° fever, "Ariel" shortly after returning from a foggy morning horseback ride, and "Lesbos" immediately after her October 1962 trip to visit Marvin and Kathy Kane.

To condense the story as much as possible, David Trinidad reports that Plath met Mr. Marvin Kane, an American actor, poetry performer, and playwright when the BBC hired him to assist Plath in recording some of her poems for its "Living Poet" series. Soon after, Marvin invited Plath to participate in his own BBC program, "What Made You Stay?" which interviewed Americans who lived in England; Plath invited Marvin to conduct the interview at her home in Devon, as she couldn't travel, just having given birth to her son. In a letter to her mother, Plath complained about the fact that Kane brought his wife, a friend, and that friend's two daughters along for the visit. Although it isn't obvious just how many of these guests were unexpected by Plath, clearly, at least some of them arrived without her anticipation. Additionally, at least two of the guests made an awful impression; Trinidad reports that Plath describes the children as "two of the most ghastly children I've ever seen" (*Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*). She goes on to critique the kids for having "no inner life, no notion of obedience," for their shrieky voices and their mucky boots. Regardless of the fact that Plath had two young children of her own, she callously wrote that "she could have kicked" them, immediately before making fun of their mother, a "tearful, ineffectual creature" who clearly did not impress the poetess.

Despite the non-idyllic visit, Plath invited Marvin and his wife Kathy to come live with her, Ted, Frieda, and Nicholas as the Kanes tried to find a new home (Trinidad). In yet another letter to her mother, Plath ragged on Kathy, describing her as a hypochondriac, incapacitated by ulcers, allergies, and migraines (*Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*). Plath complained about the Kanes for being manic, depressive, no help with the children, and the reason she'd gotten sick with the flu. In spite of Plath's massive list of objections about her guests, in a subsequent letter to a friend named Elizabeth Sigmund, Plath lamented the fact that the Kanes had moved out earlier than expected, saying that she now felt taken advantage of. Before much more time had passed, however, Plath wrote Kathy a fraught correspondence, frenziedly seeking sympathy; in this letter, Plath opened up about Hughes' infidelity and volatility, how he'd never wanted children and how he'd left her stuck in "cow country," in a life she'd accepted in an attempt at pleasing him. Throughout, Plath communicated a desperate need to see and be supported by Kathy—and when she packed up her bags, her kids, and her kittens for the drive to the Kanes' home just a few days later, Trinidad cites that Plath proudly described this choice as her "first independent act" (*Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*).

"Viciousness in the kitchen!" Plath's speaker exclaims at the start of "Lesbos," establishing the fact that the hostility of this poem is grounded in the domestic sphere (*The Collected Poems*, 227). Plath emphasizes this domestic aggression even further with her second line, "The potatoes hiss," which personifies the ingredients as one angry element in an overall angry scene. Next, the speaker criticizes the ingenuineness of the kitchen, with its "fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine," "coy paper strips for doors," and "Stage curtains"—a setting that she sums up as "all Hollywood." These censures act as the first example of Plath's hypocrisy in the poem. For one, Plath's speaker behaves hypocritically by criticizing ingenuineness when she herself is ingenuine, as is evidenced and emphasized by the line that follows: "And I, love, am a pathological liar." This line acknowledges that although the speaker thinks negative thoughts, she certainly does not express them—a point hit home by the insertion of the apostrophic and ironic word "love." Additionally, hypocrisy can be seen in the choice to criticize the kitchen's décor—a trend that continues through to the final stanza of the poem—if we're willing to conflate this speaker with the speaker of "Eavesdropper," another poem Plath wrote less than a week before. In "Eavesdropper," the speaker blasts a female neighbor for excessive judgmentalness, calling her out for her "Eyes like mice // Flicking over my property," and "Scrutinizing" her household (*The Collected Poems*, 260).

More hypocrisy can be identified in the speaker's denunciation of her hostess' treatment of the speaker's children. "You say you can't stand her, / The bastard's a girl," she admits, and then, "You say I should drown my girl," she continues (*The Collected Poems*, 227). The speaker takes care to point out that although her hostess hates her daughter, she favors her son—"You could eat him. He's a boy." Plath would not have included the last three words of this line, or multiple references to her daughter's gender, if she didn't want to emphasize the hostess' misogynistic tendencies, which could definitely be considered hypocritical, given the conceit of the poem as a whole. If we choose to follow David Trinidad's lead and read "Lesbos" as an autobiographical poem, another example of hypocrisy can be seen in the speaker's anger at her hostess' criticism of the speaker's children, considering all of the awful things that Plath had to say about the improper conduct of the kids of the friend of the Kanes' who had visited them during the previous year. Just as Plath had criticized the children's disobedience, the hostess in "Lesbos" is the implied critic behind the statement, "Look at her, face down on the floor," and just as Plath had stated that she could physically harm the visitor's children by kicking them, the hostess in "Lesbos" recommends that the speaker "drown my girl."

The speaker goes on to acknowledge the hostess' complaints about her husband. "You say your husband is just no good to you," she starts, her subject having made an overarching statement in condemnation of her own spouse (*The Collected Poems*, 227). The speaker then continues to speak for her hostess in justification of the previous statement, providing evidence that the husband figure is sexually "impotent" and otherwise overly passive, a follower. Again, assuming that at least a bit of autobiography exists in this poem, we can recognize hypocrisy in the speaker's absolute lack of empathy for her hostess' marital complaints. Although the hostess' marital complaints may pale in comparison to those that motivated Plath to visit the Kanes, a lack of empathy for spousal problems is the chief grievance that Plath had after leaving the pair in Cornwall, according to Trinidad. For this reason, it seems especially duplicitous that the speaker would trivialize the issues faced by her hostess.

Additional examples of hypocrisy extend throughout the poem. The speaker teases her hostess for being rendered "exhausted" by migraines and ulcers, and then she complains about her own sleeping pill-induced exhaustion (*The Collected Poems*, 227). She continues critiquing the hostess' ingenuineness while simultaneously behaving ingenuinely, as is evidenced by the penultimate lines: "I say I may be back. / You know what lies are for." She describes her hostess as a "vase of acid," an insult itself brimming with toxicity. And she goes on to characterize the husband as "An old pole for the lightning," implying that his spouse's outbursts are lightning-esque in their fury, within a monologue renowned for its intense, lightning-esque concentration of aggression.

Soon after composing "Lesbos," Plath wrote "Kindness"—a poem with a misleading title. Although "Kindness" isn't quite as acidic or lightning-esque as "Lesbos," it still skewers a female figure for her failure to treat the speaker in the ways she wants to be treated; as such, "Kindness" could be considered a (literally) sugar-coated sister poem to "Lesbos." Unfortunately, neither Trinidad nor any other scholar has researched the backstory to "Kindness" in quite as much depth as Trinidad did for "Lesbos," but Britzolakis does report that "Dame Kindness" was inspired by an older woman who stayed with Plath, Frieda, and Nicholas soon after Hughes left to help the poetess with housework and childcare (145).

"Dame Kindness, she is so nice!" the speaker remarks, describing the poem's title character (*The Collected Poems*, 269). After reading the majority of Plath's written works, I know better than to blindly trust a line as direct as this one. Plath tends to communicate through complex metaphors and associative logic; usually, when she makes simple statements with no apparent subtext, Plath is cuing the reader to interpret those statements ironically. Although the speaker doesn't seem to be implying that Dame Kindness is the opposite of nice, she does seem to be expressing that Kindness' brand of niceness is superficial, or even meaningless. This initial implication is supported through the description of the way Kindness wears and/or breeds "smiles" in the speaker's household, within a stanza that features two subsequent lines ending with the words "smoke" and "mirrors." Plath continues to emphasize the superficiality of Kindness' kindness through the opening line of the following stanza: "What is so real as the cry of a child?" This question implies its own answer—that nothing is "so real as the cry of a child," especially not the shallow smiles that immediately precede it.

This opposition between phony expressions of happiness and genuine expressions of pain is the core conceit of "Kindness." "Sugar can cure everything, so Kindness says," the speaker states, immediately undercutting Kindness' aphorism by implying its incorrectness (*The Collected Poems*, 269). According to the speaker, sugar is really just "a little poultice," an ineffectual Band-Aid that Kindness proudly places over the speaker and her children's gaping wounds. This theme reminds me of the premise behind another one of Plath's woman-hating works, "The Disquieting Muses," wherein the speaker accuses her mother of feeding her "cookies and Ovaltine" to calm fears that were really quite reasonable, and telling her tales

where "witches always, always / Got baked into gingerbread," despite the fact that the speaker didn't feel her own story would have a happy ending (75).

Through her supposed acts of kindness, Dame Kindness encourages the world of all things feminine, domestic, and maternal while simultaneously discouraging the world of all things chaotic, painful, and poetic. The speaker describes the way Kindness cleans house with the fraught statement: "My Japanese silks, desperate butterflies, / May be pinned at any minute, anesthetized" (*The Collected Poems*, 269). With this phrasing, Plath paints the picture of a messy household, "Japanese silks" lying around, creating a form of chaos. The speaker, however, views her silks as "desperate butterflies," full of beauty, life, and emotion, which Kindness' actions would sterilize—and thus ruin. This metaphor goes hand in hand with the one used to end the poem: "The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it. / You hand me two children, two roses." In this way, Plath establishes the "blood jet" of "poetry" as something in direct opposition with the feminine need to care for children. The phrase "blood jet" refers to the poem "Rabbit Snared in the Night," written by one of Plath's chief influences, D. H. Lawrence, a poem in which the speaker addresses a rabbit that his trap has captured. More specifically, he blames the rabbit for the "strange lust" he feels to strangle her, a lust he characterizes as implicating him but originating from her. Lawrence's speaker yearns to crush the "blood-jets" of the rabbit's throat, her life-givers; similarly, Plath feels alive thanks to poetry, "an unmediated expressivity pouring out of the poet's wounded psyche" (Britzolakis, 145). Plath characterizes Kindness as a counterpart to the hunter, a woman who intends to crush the speaker's "blood jets" by stymying her poetry.

Despite its shorter form, I would argue that "Kindness" features just as many examples of misogyny as does "Lesbos"—but I can't make as strong a case for its representation of hypocrisy. Frankly, the only instances of hypocrisy that I can identify rely on our ability to conflate the speaker with the speakers of other poems written by Plath or with the author herself. For example, although the speaker criticizes Dame Kindness for cleaning the house, brewing tea, and trying to relax her upset children, if we use evidence presented by poems like "Nick and the Candlestick" to assume that as a wife and mother, at some point in her life, the speaker has engaged in domestic behaviors, then we can go ahead and call her a hypocrite for disapproving of the domesticity that she has also embodied. If we take things a step further and conflate the speaker with the writer, it seems unfair to hear such censure of domesticity from a woman who kept a favorite recipe for tomato cake and painted hearts on various household objects. Lastly, an arguable hypocrisy exists in the very conceit of the piece; in "Kindness," Plath has written a poem inspired by a woman who supposedly suppressed her poetic creativity.

Plath scholar Christina Britzolakis interprets the hypocrisy in Plath's oeuvre as a cousin of Charles Baudelaire's concept *dédoublement*, or duplication of the self, about which Plath wrote an essay during her undergraduate studies (120). *Dédoublement* occurred when Baudelaire intentionally represented two versions of the same self—often, one version that exists "in a state of authenticity," and one version that exists "only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity" (121). To put it more simply, one of the selves is ingenuine, and the other self is aware of that ingenuineness. One of the most famous examples of this concept comes through Baudelaire's poem "To the Reader," which, in the version translated from French to English by Richard Howard, finishes by addressing the reader as "hypocrite reader, --my alias, --my twin!" Readers can discover *dédoublement* in a number of Plath poems, including "In Plaster," "Paralytic," and "Lesbos," in which the self is represented by two distinct characters, the speaker and her hostess.

Understanding "Lesbos" and "Kindness" through the lens of *dédoublement* allows us to give Plath the benefit of the doubt and regard her hypocrisy as intentional. Even without the help of Baudelaire and Britzolakis, I'd still argue that Plath's hypocrisy must have been purposeful; given her general intelligence, I can't imagine Plath failing to notice all of the evidence of duplicity in her own poetry. To focus in on "Lesbos," every other aspect of the poem, from its carefully hateful diction to its deliberately let-loose structure, indicate total authorial intentionality.

If many of Plath's poems directed at women are misogynistic, hypocritical, and fully intentional, then readers must ask themselves the question: what is Plath trying to communicate through her tactics? Does Plath aim to illustrate that we all may subscribe to double-standards without knowing it, that we all may feel prejudice against groups we don't mean to—and that sometimes, we may even belong to the groups against which we're prejudiced? Plath could be pointing out that people are unnecessarily judgmental against others; she could also be pointing out that people are unnecessarily judgmental against themselves, maladaptively "self-negating," eagerly leaning into self-hating thoughts (Britzolakis, 123). In "Medusa," yet another woman-hating poem, the speaker exclaims "there is nothing between us" to her own mother (*The Collected Poems*, 224). This insult, just like "sad hag" and "Every woman's a whore," the zingers that exist attributed to neither the speaker nor the hostess in "Lesbos," all serve to simultaneously identify with and

reject the other, and thus reject the self, as well (Britzolakis, 169).

Considering the fact that Plath pushes the theme of fault throughout her oeuvre, it's appropriate to ask who might be to blame for her speakers' tendency toward hatred and self-hatred. Many feminist scholars point fingers at male figures: the absent father in "Electra on Azalea Path," "The Colossus," and "Daddy;" the oppressive husband in "The Jailer" and "Purdah;" and patriarchy in general in "Lady Lazarus." But in "The Disquieting Muses," "Eavesdropper," and "Lesbos," men only appear briefly, and always with emphasis on their impotency. In "The Disquieting Muses," "father's... study windows" burst at the hands of the powerful, female muses (*The Collected Poems*, 74); in "Eavesdropper," the neighbor's husband was just a "much sicker counterpart" (260), and a "man's pants" lie "Dead on the chair back" (261); in "Lesbos," "the impotent husband slumps out for a coffee," a lightning pole, a follower of stray dogs (228). In "Medusa," "Barren Woman," "Heavy Women," "The Tour," and "Kindness," male characters are not mentioned at all.

Initially and superficially, Plath seems to blame her negative emotions on other women. This tendency can be identified in letters Plath wrote to Elizabeth Sigmund, her mother, and the Kanes, wherein she faulted the Kanes for giving her the flu, the Kanes for failing to support her during a time of need, and her mother for becoming a strain during a supposedly generous visit, respectively (Trinidad; *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*). In many of Plath's poems, speakers also assign blame to other women; in "Lesbos," the speaker faults her hostess for her apathy and insensitivity, and in "Kindness," the speaker accuses her houseguest of being the very enemy of poetry. Although I fully empathize with the speakers of these poems, I simultaneously recognize that if they respond to perceived persecution with misogyny or hypocrisy, then they continue the cycle of the behaviors that torment them.

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## A World Without Men: Matriarchal Landscapes in Sylvia Plath's "Stings," "Wintering," "Purdah," and "Letter in November"

In several of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* poems, female characters eliminate male characters, often through a violent stinging or stabbing. This deconstruction of a patriarchal society leaves the women to themselves, in a fresh post-men landscape. The narrative of male defeat in these poems is especially interesting because of the recurring male oppressor in many of Plath's poems. In "Daddy," the father figure is referred to as the "Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart" (48-50). In "The Colossus," the speaker "labor[s]" for thirty years under the influence of the dominant father figure, "to dredge the silt from [his] throat" (8-9). However, as one may see in poems such as "Stings" and "Wintering," male figures are stung and exiled by a female collective. The narrative of "Purdah," in which a vengeful Eve murders Adam, is continued in "Letter in November," in which a lone Eve wanders through a resplendent garden. This subtle storyline threaded through *Ariel* examines the creation and nature of female power in a Plathian matriarchy, as well as the importance of individuality as the crux of such power.

In "Stings," Plath creates a picture of the post-men matriarchy. The speaker in the poem describes how the bees sting one of the male figures, identifying him as "a great scapegoat" (41). She states, "The bees found him out, / Molding onto his lips like lies, / Complicating his features" (48-50). As Christina Brikzolakis states in *Sylvia Plath: the Theatre of Mourning*, the hive is a symbol of dynamic female togetherness, of "industrious collectivity" (*Modern American Poetry*). This imagery positions the poem to be a one of a revolutionary matriarchy, where the manipulative influence of male domination has been vanquished. However, upon closer examination, the poem seems to focus not on the remarkable or noble power of female solidarity, but on the power of the female individual. In fact, the women themselves are described with an almost disparaging tone by the speaker. The community of bees in this poem is described as "Winged, unmiraculous women, / Honey-drudgers"—hardly a heroic description (21-2). Brikzolakis suggests that this description is actually intimidating, that the poem's "threat emanates less from the emblematic male figure than from the female, domestic collectivity of the worker bees or 'winged, unmiraculous women' who would turn the speaker into a 'drudge.'" However, instead of focusing on the speaker's fear of these women, the majority of the poem involves the speaker's disdain for this environment and these diminutive figures, as well as her desire to spotlight and empower the female individual. Throughout the poem, the speaker describes their domesticity in a negative fashion. She describes the bees as "women who only scurry, / Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover" (29-30). Their only fluctuation in life is more domestic work, more pollination. The speaker sets herself apart from these "drudgers" who are trapped in a hive like a "a teacup, / White with pink flowers on it" (22, 8-9). She states: "I am no drudge / Though for years I have eaten dust / And dried plates with my dense hair" (23-5). Instead of viewing this female collective as potent or empowering, the speaker emphasizes the smallness and domesticity of their lives and their limited power. She sets herself apart from them, setting a larger vision for herself than the servile role of a Mary Magdalene to a revered Christ. Thus, Plath's conception of the post-patriarchy world is actually more complex than the simple framing of a superficial reading or a strict second-wave analysis—the matriarchy is unremarkable and domesticated. The keystone part of Plath's sense of female power in this poem radiates from the integrity of the individual and individual choice instead of solidarity.

Even as the speaker observes the women's resistance against patriarchal figures, there is also a layer of disagreement or disconnect in her tone. She merely states: "They thought the death was worth it" (51). The distance that the speaker puts between herself and these efforts, instead of a commentary on female empowerment, reveals the difference in their value systems. Instead of choosing such a reactionary movement, the speaker focuses on recovering the agency of the subdued individual. The full lines in that section read: "They thought the death was worth it, but I / Have a self to recover, a queen" (51-2). Previously, the queen had been described as "old, / Her wings torn shawls, her long body / Rubbed of its plush—Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful" (16-9). The very symbol of a queen bee inherently involves subjugation and domesticity, since the main purpose of a queen bee is to reproduce. Plath references this oppressive power structure with the "engine" that "killed" the queen bee, since the



workers often kill an old queen bee who is no longer able to reproduce properly (59-60, Reichert). The speaker seeks to “recover” this queen, this reductive self, and to set the queen free from confinement of “the mausoleum, the wax house” (52). In her article “A Fine, White Flying Myth,” Sandra Gilbert states: “Being enclosed—in plaster, in a bell jar, a cellar or a waxhouse—and then being liberated from an enclosure by a maddened or suicidal or ‘hairy and ugly’ avatar of the self is, I would contend, at the heart of the myth that we piece together from Plath’s poetry, fiction, and life” (592). Just as Jane and the madwoman in Jane Eyre gain agency through physical or metaphysical escape, the speaker’s rescue of the trapped self in “Stings” represents the independence from limitation that pervades Plath’s work (593). Instead of focusing on the power of the female collective in this matriarchal new world, the speaker of the poem focuses on the reconstruction of individual agency and potential. The speaker sees the queen’s potential to fly above confinement, “more terrible than she ever was” (58).

In “Wintering,” Plath’s picture of the post-men matriarchy focuses more on the female community as a unified whole. She describes the bees as “all women, / Maids and the long royal lady,” who have collectively “got rid of the men” (38-40). This poem echoes an aversion to enclosure and stasis, as well as the forward gaze towards female potential. At first it may seem as though this entire female collective is just as culpable of being unremarkable “honey-drudgers” as the workers in “Stings.” Upon a closer reading, however, the main focus of this poem appears to involve the bees’ tension with stagnation and their potential for hope. In “A Fine, White Flying Myth,” Gilbert suggests that the paradox of the “Plath Myth” is a woman’s dual longing for “the freedom of flight” and her “desire for stasis... her devotion to the house in which she has lived,” fearing “the risks of freedom” (601-2). Although the fear of “freedom” and transformation or reincarnation is apparent in some of Plath’s works (such as the ending of “Witch Burning” and the ambiguous ending of “The Stones,”) I believe that “Wintering” actually reveals a female frustration regarding stasis and consuming desire for freedom. Plath’s imagery and use of theme in “Wintering” reveal these details most clearly. For example, the speaker mentions “the last tenant’s rancid jam / And the bottles of empty glitters— / Sir So-and-so’s gin” (18-9). Stasis and the passage of time have produced atrophy and a sense of destitution. This theme is echoed in the imagery of “Chinese yellow on appalling objects— / Black asininity. Decay” (16-7). Furthermore, the effect of winter and static hibernation seem to have a crippling effect on the bees. Although they have erased male influence in their society, they seem to be unsuccessful in creating a thriving, empowered matriarchy. Winter is described as a time when every woman is “still at her knitting... Her body a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think” (43-5). Female agency and ambition is curtailed by winter’s static state. This domestic, bleak imagery parallels the bees using their “warm days” to carry their dead out to a “mile-long body” of porcelain (35-6). Thus, stasis is not portrayed in a positive light in “Wintering”—the only hope seems to be surviving “another year,” the bees “flying” and “tast[ing] the spring” (50).

Plath’s thematic intent seems to corroborate this need for mobility and transformation. In “The Two Ariels: The (Re)making Of The Sylvia Plath Canon,” Marjorie Perloff states that Plath ends her original manuscript of *Ariel* on a note of hope (11). She cites Ted Hughes’s introduction to *The Collected Poems*, where he points out that Plath intended to start the book with the word “Love” and end it with the word “spring” (10). Plath wanted to begin *Ariel* with a sense of beginning and end with a sense of rebirth (the word “spring.”) If the narrative arc of *Ariel* was meant to end with a sense of looking towards a new beginning and reincarnation, it is hard to make the argument that the speaker’s major paradox has to do with the attractiveness of stasis. Although the idea of transformation does contain overtones of risk and uncertainty in Plath’s poetry (again, with the endings of “Witch Burning” and “The Stones,”) one can certainly make a case for her speaker’s distaste for stasis and her understanding of the preferability for inevitable change. In *Gender and the Poetics of Excess: Moments of Brocade*, Karen Ford points out the subtle optimism at the end of “Wintering” that sheds a positive light on this change, particularly the “glad” embedded in gladiolas, the Christmas roses as a symbol of renewal, and the unique, anticipatory line breaks (161). Ford also points to Plath’s old journals as a basis for this analysis:

[Plath] concludes *Ariel* on this rather simple and understated note of hope; its subtlety is a measure of its sureness. ‘Wintering’ achieves a perspective Plath had advanced years before in her journals: there she promises to herself to write ‘without any moral other than growth is good. Faith too is good’ (169). Here, at last, she seems to have listened to herself—a development only made possible by first recovering that self. (161-162)

Thus, the vision of a post-men matriarchy in “Wintering” deals with the collective female potential for transformation and resurgence. The “bulb” of their power has yet to sprout.

Now that two versions of the post-patriarchy have been reviewed, one question that remains is what female agency looks like in this new landscape. Both “Stings” and “Wintering” end on the cusp of this question—the queen has newly emerged from the “mausoleum,” the bees have just begun to “taste the

spring." Both mainly deal with the sprouting female potential in a Plathian matriarchy, not the actual workings of such a system. Since so many of Plath's poems deal with male dominance—the oppressive father in "Daddy" and "The Colossus," the violent partner in "The Jailer," the entitled male in "The Applicant"—it seems fitting to examine how Plath envisions an unfettered matriarchy. Her poem "Letter in November," in conjunction with "Purdah," answers this question. The elimination of men in "Purdah" imagines a Creation where Eve has murdered Adam. The speaker calls herself "Jade— / Stone of the side, / The antagonized / Side of green Adam" (1-4). This oppressive Adam has trapped her in a "small jeweled / Doll," which he "guards like a heart" (53-4). It is implied that this vengeful Eve murders him—she unleashes her inner "lioness," and the poem ends with "the shriek in the bath, / The cloak of holes," reminiscent of Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon (55-7). Thus, the poem ends on a subtle symbolic cliff hanger. What does Creation look like after Adam is eliminated?

"Letter in November" picks up on this vision of a post-Adam world with its Garden of Eden imagery, and it defines the nature of female power in a Plathian matriarchy. The speaker in this poem speaks of her "seventy trees / Holding their gold-ruddy balls... Their million / Gold leaves metal and breathless" (26-30). The poem's imagery hints that this newfound autonomy is both exciting and dangerous. The speaker qualifies her joyful descriptions ("There is a green in the air, / Soft, delectable. / It cushions me lovingly") with lines such as, "I am so stupidly happy" (8-10). The idea of a lone Eve among hundreds of resplendent apples hints at the tenuous nature of the speaker's euphoria. The ominous imagery of the poem also hints at the fragility of her happiness. The "gold-ruddy balls" are found in the "thick grey death-soup" of fall, and other gold colors around the speaker "bleed and deepen" like the "mouths of Thermopylae" (27, 35). The speaker's description of her Wellingtons "squelching and squelching through the beautiful red" takes on a more sinister tone when put in the context of ancient bloodbaths (14-5). The vulnerable nature of the speaker's happiness reveals the hazardous nature of her fresh freedom. The speaker is very self-aware of her own uncertain circumstances and the tenuous nature of the beauty around her—she knows that the vivid colors of fall will eventually fade into the "wall of corpses" that she loves "like history" (21, 23). Gilbert discusses this conflict in "A Fine, White Flying Myth." She states:

A profound and inescapable irony of all the works and lives I've been mentioning is that in her flight from the coffin of herself the woman writer or the character who is her surrogate is often consumed by the Heraclitean fires of change that propel her forward. Charlotte Brontë's madwoman burns up Rochester's house and herself; Mary Shelley's monster plans a funeral pyre to extinguish himself entirely, soul and all; Emily Dickinson's bomb of the spirit will surely explode any minute; and Sylvia Plath, dissolving into the cauldron of morning, "is lost," as she says in the poem "Witch-Burning," "lost in the robes of all this brightness. (Gilbert 601)

Eve's volatile foray into this sea of lustrous fruit bears both the emotions of rapture and apprehension, the potential for both joy and tragedy.

Although the speaker's freedom comes with an element of danger, this tension does not mitigate the value of a Plathian matriarchy. The very nature of female power in a Plathian matriarchy necessitates both a sense of apprehension and adventure. As stated earlier, the ultimate fear in this sequence of poetry is not change or metamorphosis, but perpetual confinement. The speaker in "Wintering" can already see the product of stasis—"rancid jam," "black asininity," "decay." Freedom and risk are two elements that must exist in tandem and do not necessarily mean that the post-patriarchy experience is unworthy of pursuit. The ending of "Stings" exemplifies this sort of coexistence. The description of the queen bee as a "red comet" mimics Plath's other poem "Ariel," which describes an "arrow, / The dew that flies / Suicidal, at one with the drive / Into the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning" (27-31). The speaker's forceful independence seems to necessitate a sense of risk. This connection goes back to Gilbert's point about the "suicidal" self who creates liberation from enclosure in "Stings." In "Stings," the queen bee's dually dynamic and fragile description speaks to this coexistence as well. She has a "lion-red body," but also has "wings of glass" (55). In *The Theatre of Mourning*, Brikzolakis pinpoints the allusion to the "mouths of Thermopylae" as a nexus of pain and release. She states that in the masculine poetry of Yeats and Eliot, Thermopylae traditionally symbolizes "the defeat of Asiatic formlessness by European form, of the barbaric Eastern other by Western culture" (212). However, through the use of victimized and ravaged imagery in "Letter in November," Plath deconstructs this traditionally triumphant male narrative—"the woman becomes the conduit of an alternative version of 'official' history, as a story of victims rather than victors" (212). The ominous sense of vulnerability in "Letter in November" coexists with the release of truth. A final layer to this analysis is the possibility that this dual nature of freedom and fear could have had personal resonances in Plath's own life. In her article "Becoming More and More Historical," Ellin Sarot writes, "Among [Plath's] terrors that October was freedom: what it meant, how to find it, or, having had it thrust unwanted on her, how to use

it. October 1962 was a difficult time for Plath, marked not only by the ordinary milestone of turning thirty but also by extraordinary upheaval and enormous, unexpected literary productivity" (Modern American Poetry).

One objection that might be raised to these examinations of Plath's matriarchy is that many of Plath's poems involve female conflict just as much as they celebrate female strength and self-actualization. One major example of this is the conflict between Plath's speaker and her oppressive mother. The mother in "Witch Burning" is a "black-sharded lady" who keeps her daughter in a "parrot cage" (9). She is referred to as a "mother of beetles" whose daughter begs, "Unclench your hand." In *Chapters in a Mythology*, Kroll states that "the mother of beetles" (and the "black-sharded lady," the black shard being a beetle's wing-cover,) is a reference to one of Radin's Zulu tales, "Untombine, the Tall Maiden" (240-1). Unomabunge is a monster who eats and then disgorges a king's daughter. This conflict pits female characters against each other instead of creating a picture of female solidarity. The oppressive, devouring maternal figure appears again in "Medusa." The mother appears to be a monstrous, carnivorous jellyfish that has trapped the daughter figure within herself. The daughter establishes a bank of maternal imagery with lines such as "Old barnacled umbilicus" and "You steamed to me over the sea, / Fat and red, a placenta / Paralyzing the kicking lovers" (14, 24-6). The daughter tries to resist the mother's hegemonic reach, stating: "Who do you think you are? / A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary? / I shall take no bite of your body, / Bottle in which I live" (32-5). She refuses to have any part with her mother, in language that is reminiscent of Christ telling his disciples to eat his body in order to be with him in eternity. One who would read the Plathian post-patriarchy in a strictly second-wave feminist sense might have trouble with this gendered conflict that permeates her other poems. What does this tension signify for the idea of a Plathian matriarchy? Is it possible that the concepts of female conflict or hierarchy (after all, the idea of a hive is inherently authoritarian) negate the celebration of female power or autonomy in Plath's poetry?

In order to answer this question, one might look to Plath's keystone of individuality again. If a core component of female agency in Plath's poems involves individuality and the integrity of the self, it could be argued that female conflict occurs in these poems because the self undergoes suppression, and thus the most important feature of female strength is diminished. The oppressive mother figure in Plath's poetry often uses her authority to suffocate the daughter's true identity, and thus contradicts the essence of female individuality. In "The Disquieting Muses," the speaker experiences a sense of extreme guilt as she "stood aside / In the shadow" apart from other light hearted girls, and was found "unteachable" during her piano lessons, and her mother "cried and "cried" (29-30). Throughout the poem, the mother tries to suppress the supernatural elements of her daughter's life, even though the speaker seems strangely attached to them. The speaker describes her mother as one "whose witches always, always / Got baked into gingerbread"—the paranormal and sinister are always defeated and are only considered the stuff of fairytales (11-2). Judith Kroll discusses the symbol of the oppressive mother in Plath's writing and takes it one step further. She references Ted Hughes's comments in "Poem for a Birthday"—specifically his observation that Plath's work has links to Carl Jung's work, and that she was reading *Symbols of Transformation* in 1959. Kroll notes that "in Jung's work individuation passes through the confrontation with the realm of the Terrible Mother" and that Jung saw the mother figure is "the mother of innumerable evils, not the least of which are neurotic disturbances" (161). The oppressive mother is a symbol of the trials of the self, from which the true, conscious self will emerge. Thus, this female rivalry in Plath's poetry does not necessitate a devaluation of the integrity of female strength. In fact, it sharpens what the mainstay of feminist philosophy is in Plathian matriarchies—individualism. Additionally, it confirms Plath's deviation from the expected and the consistent. Her definition of female choice doesn't fit into the typology of textbook feminist critique, or adhere to the nuances of that theoretical world. She makes her own choices regarding what the post-Adam world will look like, and invites the reader to risk seeing a woman's basic choice as fundamentally empowering.

Plath's post-patriarchy revolution defines its own rules. As shown through "Stings" and "Wintering," female potential is emphasized. "Stings" in particular focuses on female individuality as a core tenet of Plath's philosophy. "Purdah" and "Letter in November" hint at what this female potential might look like if it were actualized—self-possession and risk coinciding as the woman enters a post-Adam reality. Although the female conflict in Plath's other poems might cause one to question legitimacy of such a reading (whether female power in Plath's work is truly celebrated or not,) it actually sharpens the idea of what true female power looks like in Plath's narrative. In order for female power to truly exist, there must be an element of genuine selfhood—a concept that is echoed in "Stings."

One can also see the prioritization of selfhood in "The Swarm," a bee poem that was left out of Plath's original "*Ariel*" manuscript. This poem deals with women who have lost their power because they have lost their agency and their sense of self. In her article "Becoming More and More Historical," Sarot states

that the bees in this poem are both emblematic of Napoleonic victory and war-torn victims. On one hand, they represent a "badge of victory," but on the other hand, they are spliced into a description of Nazi death camps—"the hived station / Where trains, faithful to their steel arcs, / Leave and arrive, and there is no end to the country" (41, 34-6). The bees exist in a double bind under male oppression. They have no identity apart from male dominance, which they only either represent in its victory or devastation. Moreover, the very narrative of the poem lacks a female center, unlike the other bee poems that revolve around some female personality. Instead, the bees only exist as a reflection or effect of a male presence. Sarot points out that this lack of a "female center" might have been inspired by Plath's review of Josephine and her identification with the principle character (*Modern American Poetry*). Plath writes: "The portrait of Napoleon... the Emperor and godhead of France, comes completely alive in the mirror of Josephine's devotion." Sarot suggests that this lack of identity, while under the influence of male hegemony, might have been felt by Plath, who knew "this devotion, this womanly capacity to become a mirror and call it love." Sarot also points out that this lack of a "female center" might have been inspired by Tolstoy's commentary on the conquered city: "Moscow was empty... empty as a queenless, dying hive is empty." The lack of a "female center" and female identity are key to the lack of female agency in this poem. Thus, this arc of male domination causing a lack of female selfhood resonates with the commentary on the crucial component of female individuality throughout Plath's poetry. There is hope for female potential in this poem, however, much like the hint at peripeteia in "Stings" and "Wintering." The reader's omniscient knowledge of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo informs her understanding of how this narrative will end. Soon the "knives will be out" for Napoleon, the bees will vanquish the men, and Eve will awake in the post-Adam garden.

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TAYLOR MCGONIGLE

## Identity in *The Bell Jar* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*: A Comparison

*The Bell Jar* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* are both categorised as ‘Bildungsroman’, a literary term for the coming-of-age novel, which focuses on the growth and development of the teenage protagonist. The common tropes of a coming-of-age novel include some sort of emotional loss, which comes at the beginning of the novel, to spark the conflict between the main character and society, leading to a journey to maturity and an eventual acceptance of the protagonist into society. This structure reveals themes such as identity, maturity and mental health, which are important to the coming-of-age story and how young people tackle many obstacles in order to figure out their identities. All of these tropes can be seen in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *The Bell Jar* and help to shape the journey of the two protagonists.

Both novels contain an emotional loss, but they differ in terms of structure and chronology. One difference between *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *The Bell Jar* is the order in which the common coming-of-age tropes are presented. For example, the death of Joan is at the end of *The Bell Jar*, while the death of Michael comes at the beginning of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie’s story is presented in the chronological way the tropes are presented, whereas in *The Bell Jar*, because it’s being told retrospectively, the tropes appear backwards. The structuring of the novels represents the characters’ attitudes towards their identities: Esther tries on identities and struggles to find one that fits, which is why her doppelgänger Joan dies at the end, while Charlie knows his identity but doesn’t want to face it. The death of Joan was almost a symbolic death of ‘ill’ Esther and how she, from that moment onwards, slowly returned back to her ‘healthy’ self.

We can assume *The Bell Jar* is written from a place where Esther is hopefully at peace with herself and that she’s looking back onto events from a better place. On page three of the novel, we are told that she does go on to have a baby, however this subtle information drop of could be missed by the reader. She mentions the ‘freebies’ she collected while working in New York, explaining how she now uses ‘the lipsticks now and then’, which she never used before since she received them. This can suggest how she has moved on from her time in New York and is now comfortable with using things related to that time or that remind her of her breakdown. Esther mentions how she ‘cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with’, showing us she fulfilled something she was against in the past, and the recognition she has now is a much more significant identity – ‘mother’.

However, in *Perks*, Charlie ends the book by explaining to the reader that he will no longer be able to write his ‘letters’ because he will be ‘too busy trying to ‘participate’ in his sophomore year at high school. He even tells the reader that he wants us to ‘believe that things are good’ with him and ‘even when they’re not, they will be soon enough’. We can assume from Michael’s death and Charlie’s breakdown that he eventually recovers and makes attempts at healing. Charlie tells the reader he now knows how to deal with unpleasant situations; he has confidence in himself and the self-awareness to cope. Both Charlie and Esther have ‘doubles’, a person who represents an alternate self, either an ideal or what they do not want to be. Joan and Michael play doppelgängers to Esther and Charlie – they represent everything the protagonists do not wish to be or ever become. Even Charlie pleads to the reader after having suicidal thoughts: ‘I never wanted to. You have to believe me’. Both Esther and Charlie use their emotional losses to shape their identities and their lives. Esther even mentions that she doesn’t ‘like’ Joan, and that who Joan is and what she stands for makes Esther ‘puke’. It could be argued that their identities are found by forcing themselves to be something they do not want to be, which makes them realise exactly what they do want and who they do want to be.

The second trope that falls into place within these stories is a ‘journey to maturity’. This is the spark from the emotional loss, a realisation that change needs to occur. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie’s journey to maturity is high school. He realises after the death of his best and only friend that something needs to change to give him the best ‘high school experience’. It’s almost as if we see the ‘death’ of old Charlie and the birth of a new one: *The Guardian*’s review even mentions that ‘we all know there is no other time when finding out who you are and where you belong [that] is more immediate than when you are a teenager’. He knows these next few years are the most important ones he may go through in life and he wants to become a better person. However, it’s a different case for Esther. After visualising



her life as a 'fig tree', Esther realises she cannot have and achieve every aspiration she wants for herself. She realises this when she returns from New York expecting an acceptance to a writing course and finding a rejection instead. She says she feels 'the air punched out of my stomach'. This rejection stuns Esther. Her journey to this point had been one of high achievement and acceptance; to work hard and not achieve was inconceivable and terrifying. She had not yet learned how to take rejection.

The difference between *Perks* and *Bell Jar* is that Charlie changes himself for the better whereas Esther's identity falls apart. Using Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, we can see how Charlie and Esther break on their journeys to maturity via the *imago* or misrecognised ideal self. They both experience *jouissance*, the intense pain and the intense pleasure as they approach Lacan's 'The Real'. Charlie experiences *jouissance* during his sexual activity with Sam, someone he has longed for throughout the book. Charlie's *imago* is who he longs to be: Sam's boyfriend. Unfortunately, as Charlie and Sam become intimate and he moves closer to his goal, or The Real, he begins to feel the intense pleasure and intense pain, which causes his repressed memories of sexual abuse to surface. The intense pain makes him fall into a catatonic state, whereas Esther experiences *jouissance* after imagines her future in New York. Her experience in New York causes Esther to feel the intense pleasure of the things she could achieve but also the intense pain as she realises that 'The Real' is not actually achievable: New York did not live up to her impossible expectations. Charlie breaks on his journey to maturity, which then helps to shape him as a person and helps him heal. Esther breaks on her journey to maturity and continues to feel the intense pain while falling from almost touching her *imago*. These plot points are also reinforced in the structure of the books: it is only at the beginning of the novel when we hear the mention of a baby that Esther reassures the reader that everything about to be read will turn out okay in the future while at the end of *Perks* Charlie assures us that everything is okay.

The conflict between the hero and society is usually the climax of the story arc in the coming-of-age novel, which then leads to the final trope of acceptance within society. For Charlie, his conflict is down to being an outcast, a 'wallflower'. It is shown throughout the book that Charlie wants to live a 'normal' life and have the 'high school experience', including drinking, smoking and having sex. Because of his personality and behaviour, however, this is hard for him to achieve. His conflict with society is that he wants to do everything a 'normal' teenager does but he prevents himself from doing it without acknowledging why. It is because of the stigma surrounding mental health in males that prevents Charlie from actually confronting his problems. Charlie hides himself away and ignores his issues down to what is classed as 'masculine' in society, and mental health is regarded as 'weak' in men. Not only was Charlie abused but he was abused by a woman, twisting the common view that only men can be sexual predators.

Esther's conflict with society is about her gender. She is an intelligent, ambitious teenager who wants to achieve as many things as possible in her lifetime. However, society's patriarchal structures prevent this. In Chapter Nine, Esther must have her photo taken for the magazine to show where she wants to go after her time in New York is up. Other girls from the magazine wanted to be a 'farmer's wife', a 'hat designer' or a 'social worker in India'. Esther, as Jay Cee mentions, 'wants to be everything'. When told to 'show us how happy it makes you to write a poem', she bursts into tears. Even the things that she wants to do will not always make her happy and she realises that her aspirations are about to die out. Esther wants everything the world has to offer but cannot have it due to certain social expectations. Esther, a young woman, would have been expected to simply marry and bear children, serving as a housewife. It is also questionable whether she was mentally ill before she went to New York, or it all began to fall apart when she realised that her dreams were restricted. Both Charlie and Esther are blinded by the *jouissance*, neither of them recognise that 'The Real' is unachievable as they are blinded by the intense pain and pleasure.

The final trope within the coming-of-age category is the 'eventual acceptance' and it conforms to society. Not only can the characters now finally accept their own identity, but understand and accept the identity of others. Charlie finds eventual acceptance within his group of peers. Not only is he comfortable with accepting and participating with his friends, but he is finally accepted into a group of friends who accept him, regardless of what has happened to him, which means he no longer needs to try and 'kill' past Charlie. He can now truly be at peace with who he is and what has happened to him knowing there are other people who know and do not judge him for it, something he feared all along.

Esther finds eventual acceptance because she goes on to fill the expectations and standards that society imposed on females of that time. Although we never know if Esther truly gets better or how long it took her to get out of hospital, but due to how the story ends, we can assume that things got better for her. When finding out that Esther goes on to have a baby and presumably marries on page three, when she mentions the baby for the first and only time, we can assume that she is at peace with herself.

Looking back retrospectively on her journey can show she has taken time from the event and is finally at a place where she can sit down and write about it, in a better time of her life.

The four main tropes of a coming-of-age novel undeniably contribute to the theme of identity. An emotional loss, a journey to maturity, the conflict between the hero and society and an eventual acceptance all show how identity can be found within *The Bell Jar* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

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JESS ARDLEY

## Exploring identity in *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye*

Rebellion is a central theme in both *The Bell Jar* and *Catcher in the Rye*: it is both personal and cultural. As both novels are Bildungsroman, the novels' coming-of-age stories show how their respective protagonists' identities develop with regards to their cultures and class. However, both also are windows on the time, as they were both mid-century novels set in and around New York City featuring protagonists of the upper middle classes who grapple with their roles in society in regards to gender, family and class.

Both Esther and Holden are discontent with cultural homogeneity. Firstly, Esther is seen in *The Bell Jar* to reject the consumerism within American culture as she becomes discontent in New York. The culture surrounding Esther resulted in her feeling 'inadequate all along, she simply hadn't thought about it'. Esther's rebellion is caused by her ability to consciously recognise the unhealthy nature of 1950s culture. The pressure of expectations as a result of increasing mass media-portrayed idealised lifestyles and glamorous women meant many felt they had to 'keep up with the Joneses'. For Esther these aspirations cause a hyperreality, placing greater empathises on trivial issues, detaching society from meaningful concerns, making many feel relatively deprived. Esther illustrates how consumerism leads people to always want more. A by-product of the consumerist culture would be individualism: Esther condemns social expectations by discarding her clothes, stating she 'can't face these clothes when I come back'. The literal rejection of consumerism links into the idea that individuals have become self-interested in their own narcissistic values. Esther's rebellion is met with conflicting feelings: in chapters 9 and 10, she tries to mask her cynical opinions, yet as her thoughts battle with social conformity her rejection of consumerism results in Esther feeling distant from the other characters.

Meanwhile in *Catcher in the Rye* Holden rejects the superficiality of culture, commenting on how many of the characters are 'phonies'. He feels as though social interactions are false, hiding true emotions. Furthermore, Holden views 1940s culture as one shrouded in deceit, for example, calling his classmates, 'phonies' suggests Holden views their actions as trivial, lacking good intentions, used to better their appearance a clear example of superficiality. Holden's view of the culture causes him to reject it by wearing a red hunting hat: "I took my red hunting hat [...] and put it on—I didn't give a damn how I looked." Holden attempts to segregate himself from the superficiality by wearing his hat. It is a refusal to conform to the culture that does not encourage individuality. However, his desire to appear different is ironic: Holden takes his hat off in social situations, and when he knew he "wouldn't meet anybody that knew" him. While trying to reject his culture, he becomes concerned with his appearance: it makes him feel comfortable in a society that makes him uncomfortable. Holden's rejection is weak in comparison to Esther's recognition of the negatives of consumerism, and unlike Holden, she resists conformity to the point it can be seen as a factor for her deteriorating mental health. Her rejection causes her to feel isolated. This contrasts with Holden who although feeling that society is based on superficiality succumbs to caring about appearances. He conforms more than Esther does. Although, at first, Holden finds it difficult to accept society's culture, he later is found to conform, which is common in a coming-of-age novel.

Esther and Holden try to detach themselves from their class. While Esther feels restricted by her class, Holden rejects the common ascribed positions that an upper class upbringing produce. Esther rebels from her class; she feels like the middle class is a metaphorical prison. While at home she notes "The grey, padded roof closed over my head like the roof of a prison van, and the white, shining, identical clapboard houses with their interstices of well-groomed green proceeded past, one bar after another in a large but escape-proof cage". The middle class suburban landscape reminds Esther of her limited freedom if she too follows in her mother's path. The affluence makes Esther feel identical to those surrounding her: conforming to this lifestyle does not stimulate Esther's inspirations. Esther rejects the middle class lifestyle of going to work every day and earning enough to maintain their pleasant lifestyle; she wants more to life than being 'imprisoned' by finances. Esther's consciously breaks from this concept of life. She recognises there is more to life than working to uphold a lifestyle that does not permit her to experience valuable and meaningful practices. Holden's comfortable, upper class, lifestyle is also rejected.

Holden's escape to New York highlights how he is testing alternative lifestyles, rebelling against his

private education and the comfort of wealth in search of something more. When asked by Phoebe what job he wanted to pursue he states he would like to be “the catcher in the rye”, his rhetoric implies that he wants to protect children from playing near the edge of a cliff, trying to protect their innocence which rejects the common idea of those who have the wealth to do so will go into a job like a lawyer. Holden views the loss of innocence as something that can be protected, however the loss of innocence is inevitable if the growing-up process is to occur. Holden, like Esther, deems their class as restricting their true aspirations. However, Holden soon comes to realise that there are impractical issues in pursuing an alternate existence: his concerns about his lack of money while in New York have taught Holden that his comfortable life might have positives as he sees that his wealthy background doesn't cause barriers for Holden. Esther's rejection of class is maintained throughout *The Bell Jar*, contrasting with the structure of a Bildungsroman where growing up results in the gradual conformity; however, in the *Catcher in the Rye* Holden seems like naivety stems from his age. He matures throughout the novel, however, as Esther illustrates, the unsatisfying feeling towards life is not just a problem of the upper classes.

The preconceived notions of sexual behaviours regarding gender are reversed by Esther and Holden. Gender subversion is present, in *The Bell Jar*, as Esther embraces her sexuality. Esther has the power to make informed choices about her sexual partners, which opposes the orthodox idea that women's virginity was their virtue. Throughout the novel Esther subverts the conventional ideals of both genders. Double standards are highlighted as Esther chooses her sexual partners much like the men do. Esther loses her virginity to someone she ‘didn't know and wouldn't go on knowing’, just like Buddy, who slept with a waitress because he was ‘free, white and twenty one’. By embracing her sexuality, Esther rejects the idea that only men may have multiple sexual partners. Her ability to not get attached serves a purpose as it suggests women are capable of not becoming emotionally attached to a man after sex: Esther slept with someone she ‘wouldn't go on knowing’ instead of falling for the man she does not expect them to settle down or start dating, which subverts the idea that a women's weakness is emotion.

However in the *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden attaches emotion to his sexuality. His encounter with Sunny, a prostitute, suggests that Holden believes sexual experiences should have emotion. He wants to get to know Sunny instead of just having sex. This suggests that Holden views emotional connections as important in a sexual relationship therefore rebelling from the common gender ideals. Both novels subvert the preconceived ideas surrounding sex: Esther doesn't deem emotion as imperative for sexual relations although Holden does which subverts gender norms. However for women, the stigmas attached to sex outside of marriage meant the consequences were far greater. The lack of contraceptives in the 1950s meant women ran the risk of pregnancy and unlike men who could simply have nothing to do with the child, women would often be shamed. Esther's gender rebellion is more significant as it provides a greater impact: the double standards still permitted that men were liable to have sexual relations outside of wedlock.

Both Esther and Holden show resentment towards family. Esther's fears of family life cause her to reject the heteronormative family. Society expects her to settle down, marry and have children yet Esther feels a void between society's expectations and her own feelings. She states she ‘began to think it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed’. Her dissatisfaction towards settling down is a clear rejection of the conventions, for women, who were deemed to have strong maternal instinct. The rejection highlights how Esther does not view family as rewarding, instead feeling like ‘a slave to a totalitarian regime’. Family for Esther limits freedoms and more so for women who become wives. For Esther, life is like the fig tree: with various options and wanting ‘each and every one of them’, the other options became obsolete. Choosing a family would result in giving up her career, the pressure surrounding growing up and making life decisions for Esther causes anxiety as to who she is and what life she wants to lead, as demonstrated through the Fig Tree metaphor.

However for Holden, family is also rejected: he is detached from the adults in his family. Phoebe is the only person Holden with whom he shares his true feelings, the ten-year-olds advice is respected and superior to those of adults. Phoebe states, ‘You don't like any schools. You don't like a million things’, which causes Holden to state ‘I do! That's where you're wrong!’ instead of disregarding his sister's statement he takes offence as though knowing it is the truth. Holden does not call his sister a ‘phoney’. This illustrates how Holden has less respect for his parents' opinions which shows how Holden views adults as ‘phoney’ and reinforces the idea that Holden's problem with adults, in his eyes, is the lack of genuine emotions, resulting in him feeling unable to connect to his parents. However, unlike Esther, Holden's dislike towards the majority of his family is maybe a result of his age; at a time of immense change it is common for teenagers to feel that adults are restrictive at a time when teenagers can experience the most freedom in their lives. Esther, however, dislikes the limitations that family places on women yet at the start of the novel, the reader is aware that Esther has a family of her own,

meaning she would have conformed to the family role. However, this does not mean she is satisfied with the domestic role she takes on, or does explicitly say that the life Esther leads conforms to tradition. For Holden, his eventual conformity comes around when he states he was happy at the very end, gradually accepting values in society which is common in a Bildungsroman as a journey of maturity ends up with the conformity.

Overall, *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye* both explore the stories of individuals seeking to rebel against the things that cause them displeasure. However, for Holden, the journey ends with a resolution: he recognises the benefits of his class and that his issues with 'phoniness' stem from his new recognition that in order to be an adult the innocence disappears. Moreover, his resentment towards family may stem from adolescent anger. Although Esther's discontent with life may also be accountable to growing up, Esther seems to be more radical in displaying her dislike to the current ideals and gender roles and there is no explicit moment of resolution for Esther instead she may have conformed by having a child, but this does not mean she accepts the roles.

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## ELISE STANFORD

## The significance of metaphor in 'Daddy'

In the poem 'Daddy', Sylvia Plath uses metaphors to portray the 'daddy' in a negative light. Plath shows victimisation through exploring the emotions such as vengeance and anger. She investigates the evil of the central metaphorical father figure by presenting the negative impact of him on the speaker's life.

The first metaphor used by Plath is the motif of the nursery rhyme, which illustrate victimisation. Plath uses the phrases 'black shoe', 'achoo', 'stuck in barbed wire snare' and 'Aryan eye' as metaphors to illustrate the suffering of the speaker's childhood. 'Black shoe' is an allusion to 'there was an old woman who lived in a shoe', which could be her way of implying the mental neglect and abuse inflicted on her. Her childhood was torture and this poem her long-overdue retaliation towards her father; she wants witnesses to know that he's done wrong. She reveals feelings such as anger and hatred that she never felt she could voice when he was still alive and therefore uses this poem as a coping mechanism, common to poems of the Confessionalist style of poetry.

Plath's narrator explains to the reader how she lived her childhood feeling restricted: She needs to break free, and this is her chance. Metaphors such as 'black shoe' and she was 'barely daring to breathe or achoo'; linking to how she is 'white' reinforcing how she hasn't been exposed to light- pale and sickly, supporting this point. She refers to herself as the bottom of the heap in this patriarch, the irrelevant proletariat and her father, the bourgeoisie. Symbolically, being the shoe, she supports the body, keeps it standing, but is unrecognised and unappreciated for the effort she puts in. However, shoes are worn to keep the feet warm and safe, but this isn't the portrayal the reader receives; Plath ironically takes something safe and makes it sinister to make the reader feel uneasy. Alternatively this metaphor could describe the negative relationship between her and father: she keeps him going, and is both the emotional and physical power and strength behind him – without his beloved daughter, he would not even survive. Within autobiographical aspects, this could explain Plath's father Otto losing his leg in reality – his daughter was his only healthy foot – but he shows no support or neither support nor love in return. Seeing him from a child's perspective, her view will always be irrational; she will never be provided with safety and security.

A reoccurring association is made with Holocaust tropes, which develop the theme of victimisation. The speaker refers to herself as a 'Jew', making her father take the role of 'Nazi'. She is 'stuck in a barbed wire snare'; any movement or attempt to escape could potentially cause her harm. She has no route to freedom, emotionally imprisoned; we see a similar theme of confinement with the shoe. This is representative of concentration camps: Jews had no power over their imprisonment. The speaker uses this metaphor to portray her experience of innocent suffering with no purpose, living under a delusional dictator. Her father is mentioned as having an 'Aryan eye', Hitler's ideal candidate: he believed the best and heroic race were those with blue eyes and her father fulfils this expectation, reinforcing the point that she and her father live on different levels in the social construct of this poem. 'Daddy' is prestigious and powerful; she is lower class and an unappreciated being. We can tell the power between the two characters is unbalanced from the references made towards 'daddy' and how he is a 'ghastly statue', heavy in comparison to the speaker who categorises herself as 'a Jew to Auschwitz', weak and unhelpful. This is significant because the reader can see the seriousness of the speaker's everyday life and how threatening each action she takes is.

The second use of symbolic metaphors is Plath's representation of emotions, or in fact how the father is emotionless, with his eye much rather focused on power. Metaphors Plath use include 'Mein Kampf look': the speaker uses this image to express her feelings about her father's behaviour. It becomes a survival technique for her not to keep it bottled up and lose her sanity. The father's 'Mein Kampf look', understood as a struggled gaze and allusion to Hitler's autobiography, an historical dictator described as lacking a heart, – this also coincides coinciding with evil. This conceit is juxtaposed to manipulate and usurp WW2 imagery; it layers levels of meaning and buries true feelings. This 'look' is associated with Freud's repression theory and how previous experiences can become submerged, leaving an empty void in place of emotions; possibly the father's heart. Plath stated: "It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative—whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it." Plath's quote motivates the reader to consider Freud's idea of the super-ego, ego and id: Plath's ego was unbalanced, this could have led to her depression; this relates to her own life as well as that of the speaker in 'Daddy'.

The constant mention of the 'black man' Freud's theory of the 'Uncanny' – and adjective metaphors portray 'Daddy' as a massive presence in his daughter's life. Without him, a large chunk is missing but potentially for the better. However, after his death, the speaker's repressed feelings are exposed as her defence mechanisms are down. I agree that Plath uses these metaphors for "tackling the problem of female selfhood" as Lisa Nabeshuber wrote in the *Canadian Review of American Studies*, : focusing on the father's and then husband's control by dominance and how the female is always the vulnerable, weak character -- the conventional gender role. Some critics would argue this dominance is unacceptable and therefore the poem fights for a feminist overthrow of patriarchy; women are oppressed and the speaker's prospects are restricted, suggesting women can only achieve success with the help of a man, and without this support, they become worthless, summing up how the speaker feels.

The structure and form of the poem triggers a metaphorical view on the relationship between the father and daughter. Starting off with a passive nursery rhyme rhythm, the reader suspects the story conveyed will be nostalgic and heartfelt; however, just a few lines in, the tone changes and the suffering starts to emerge. This form of metaphor is ironic in archetypal family households: the parents read nursery rhymes to their children, and consequently in this scenario the girl is depicting one of her Daddy. This transition from nursery rhyme to swearing could also be interpreted as the speaker transforming from childhood and into adulthood, by the end she is fuming, expressing her feelings by exclaiming 'daddy' as a 'bastard'.

The use of German words merged into the English-language poem is also a form of metaphor. It suggests the speaker is hidden and trying to disguise her feelings, an example is 'ach, du', : the reader chooses how to interpret the 'oh'; is the female shock, upset, angry or is it even a sarcastic response to father's behaviour? Her prayers couldn't repent his sins or save him from his nasty-spirited persona. This is significant to the reader, as when reading the poem, they can see the speaker mature and define where the hateful, negative feelings have come from; the reader puts themselves in her position and also somewhat relates to Plath's life, relating things such as how her father died young.

Britain was still suffering in the 1960s after the WW2 disruptions affecting their everyday life links to the victimisation metaphors, survival of a traumatic experience, and eventually finishing stronger. This mirrors the speaker's ongoing war with her father and the traumatic experience of his death; subsequently, she survived too- forming a metaphor between the two situations.

On top of this, the 'daddy' is referred to as a 'swastika' associated with the enemy:- more WW2 imagery. The Nazi is just like how Plath's father was German, the reader then questions if this a representation of Plath's actual life, as with this scenario, it's not physically possible for the speaker to be a 'Jew'. Readers can link some parts of the poem to Plath's own traumatic experiences. I believe that Plath uses this metaphorical imagery to recreate and symbolise the harshness of both the speaker's life and her life, the suffering with the father figure and his betrayal, such as when he's referred to as having 'a cleft' in his chin, linked to the hoof of the devil. Her line 'I've made a model of you' just shows how strong her unconscious devotion towards him is: she hates him but needs him in her life.

Plath uses poetry as a means of working out her issues of abandonment from her dead father, using a cathartic technique in the form of poetry; she was a little girl when her father died and therefore she can only relate to him in a child-like way- using a nursery rhyme structure and tone. The poem is a transformation from child to woman similar to how the structure is set up; although only some evidence emerges for the reader to believe this is portraying Plath's life. This poem is not perceived as a biographical reading, it informs the reader of Plath's factual life however does not authenticate it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ELISE STANFORD studied English Literature, Psychology and Sociology at Stationer's Crown Woods Academy, London. She plans to study Psychology at the University of Portsmouth.

KRISTINA ZIMBAKOVA

## Poems, Suitcases

The art installation entitled 'Poems, Suitcases' consists of a sculptural painting (suitcase) and nineteen miniatures. They are all mixed media on canvas and paper (acrylic, pastel, graphite, natural resin, USA and Macedonian postal stamps and seals, hemp fibre, shredded paper, metal, leather, lichens *Pseudevernia* sp., *Evernia prunastri*, *Usnea* sp., *Cladonia* sp., *Xanthoria parietina*, *Lobaria pulmonaria*). The dimensions of the miniatures are 18x10 cm (the first two) and 21x10 cm while of the sculpture - 30x40x8.5 cm. The work was created during 2012/2013.

The installation is informed by Plath's essay "A Comparison":

"And there is really so little room! So little time! The poet becomes an expert packer of suitcases: " ...  
"There it is: the beginning and the end in one breath." (Plath 1977, 26).

" - a door opens, a door shuts. In between you have had a glimpse" (Plath 1977, 26).

"The door of the novel, like the door of the poem, also shuts. But not so fast, nor with such manic, unanswerable finality" (Plath 1977, 26).

The artwork title is a variation of Plath's poem "Poems, Potatoes." The sculpture is loaded with shredded paper, which stands for the intimate artistic process and creative chaos, from which the poet engenders a supreme order and a gem. The hand-written poem on the suitcase is "Mushrooms", courtesy of Plath scholar Peter K. Steinberg. The 19 miniatures epitomise the unloaded elusive mail from the poetry suitcase. Each piece contains inscriptions of titles of signature Plath poems or central notions in her poetry. The order arrangement of the pieces creates a story. In keeping with the poem "Mushrooms", the wording is made of lichens, which are a symbiotic association between two fungal species and an alga or cyanobacterium. The closing lines of this poem, "We shall by morning / Inherit the earth./ Our foot's in the door." (Plath 1981, 139) have an underlying purport I also aim to convey with the current object: the fascinating power of poetry via fungi as symbols of poems.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KRISTINA ZIMBAKOVA is a mixed-media painter, Sylvia Plath scholar and literary translator. She has published articles on Plath's poetry focusing on translation and visual representation. She has edited and translated into Macedonian the books *Sylvia Plath: Selected Poems* (2005), including 39 poems, and *Anne Sexton: Selected Poems* (2011), comprising 38 poems, both published by Academic Press.



















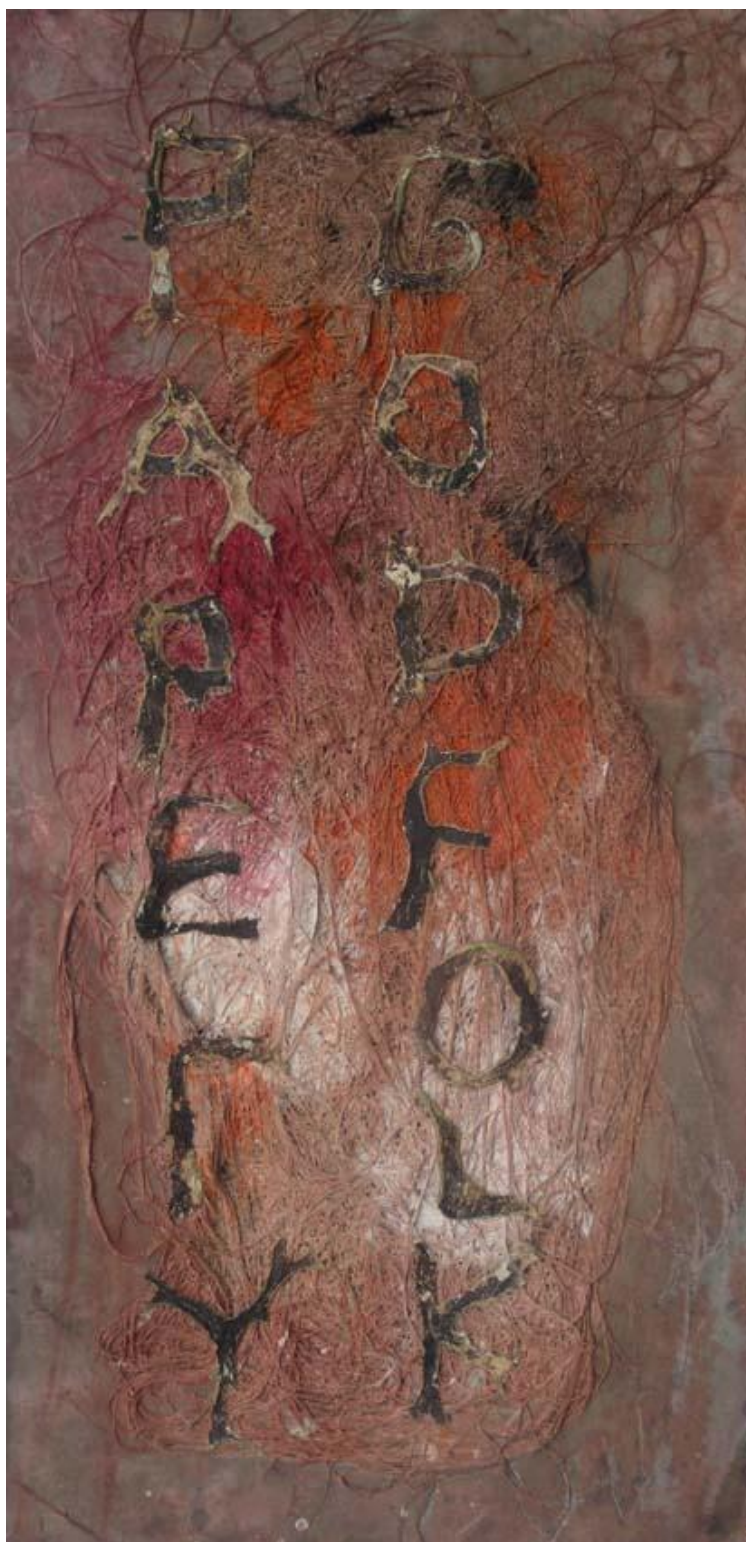














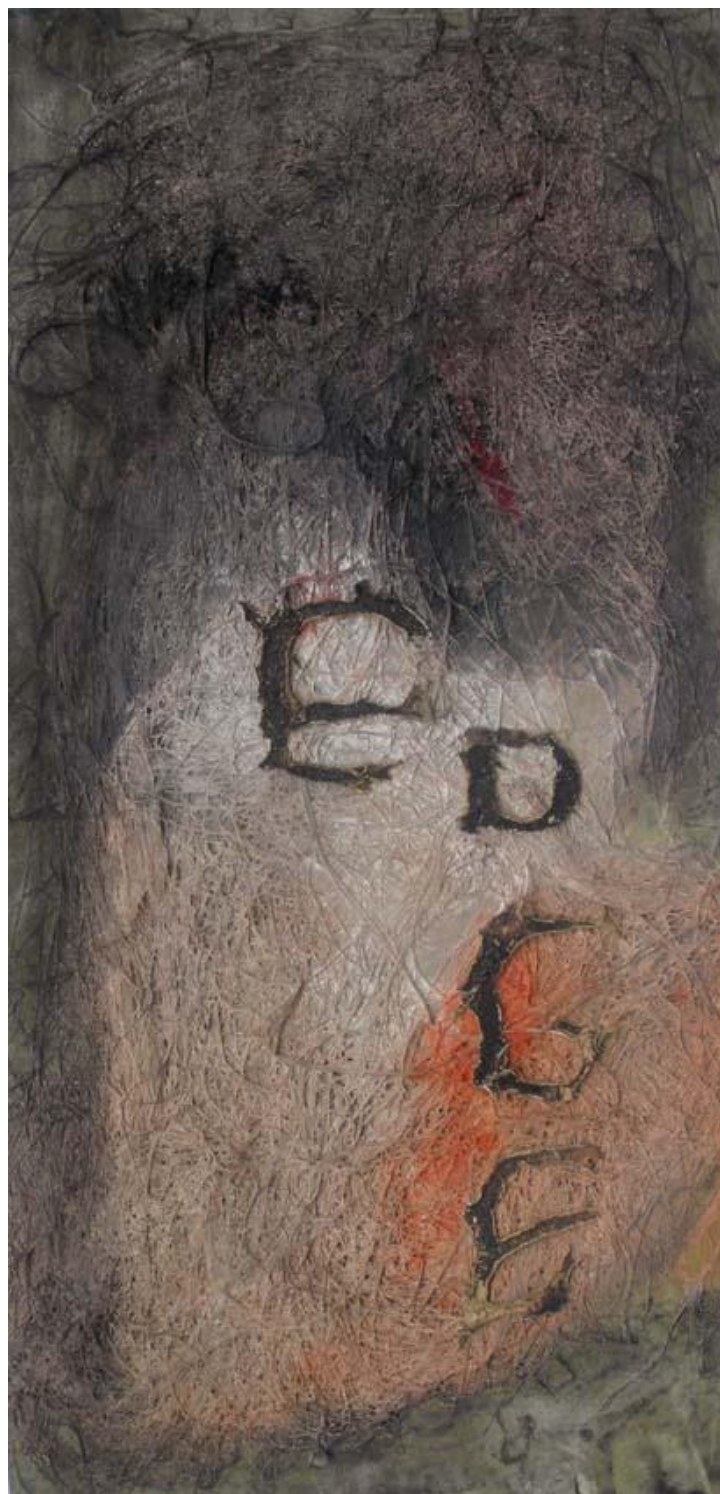




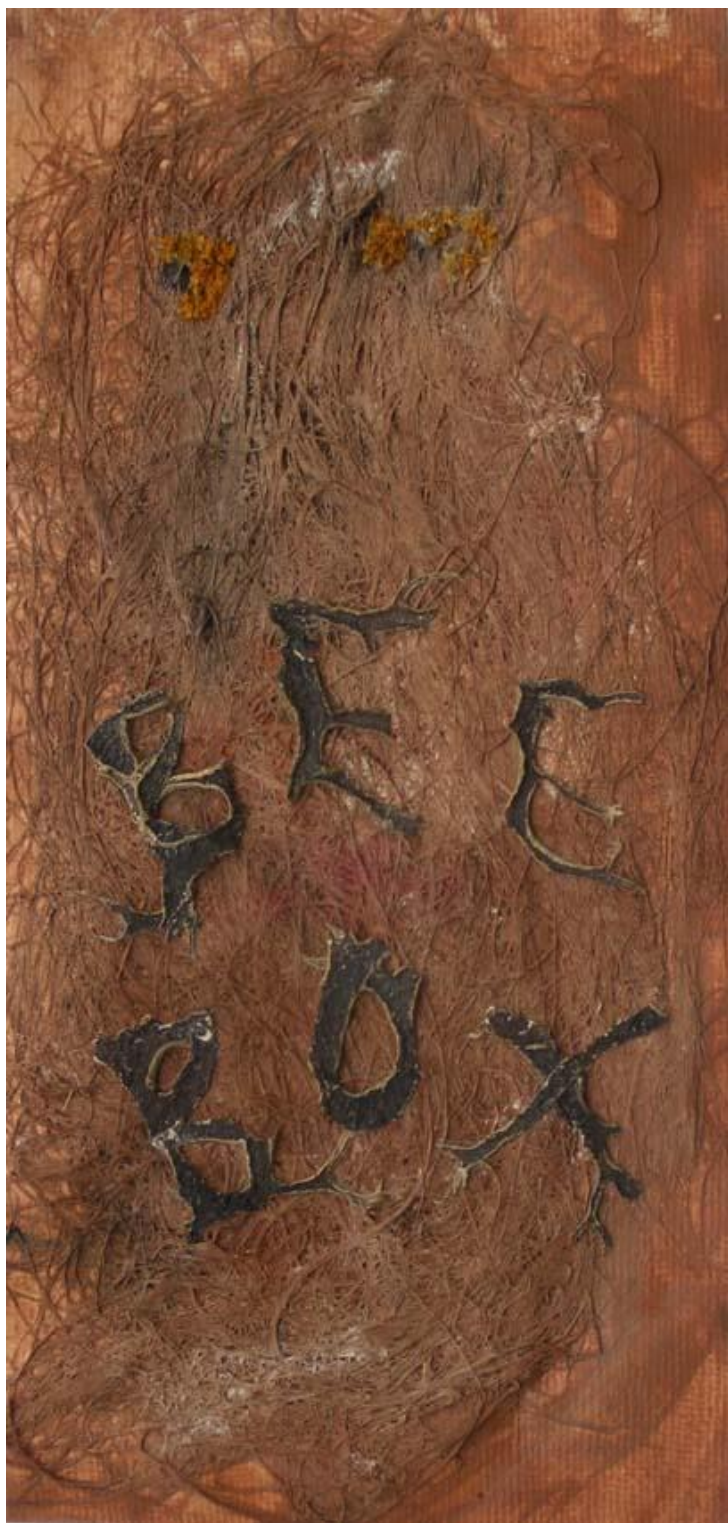










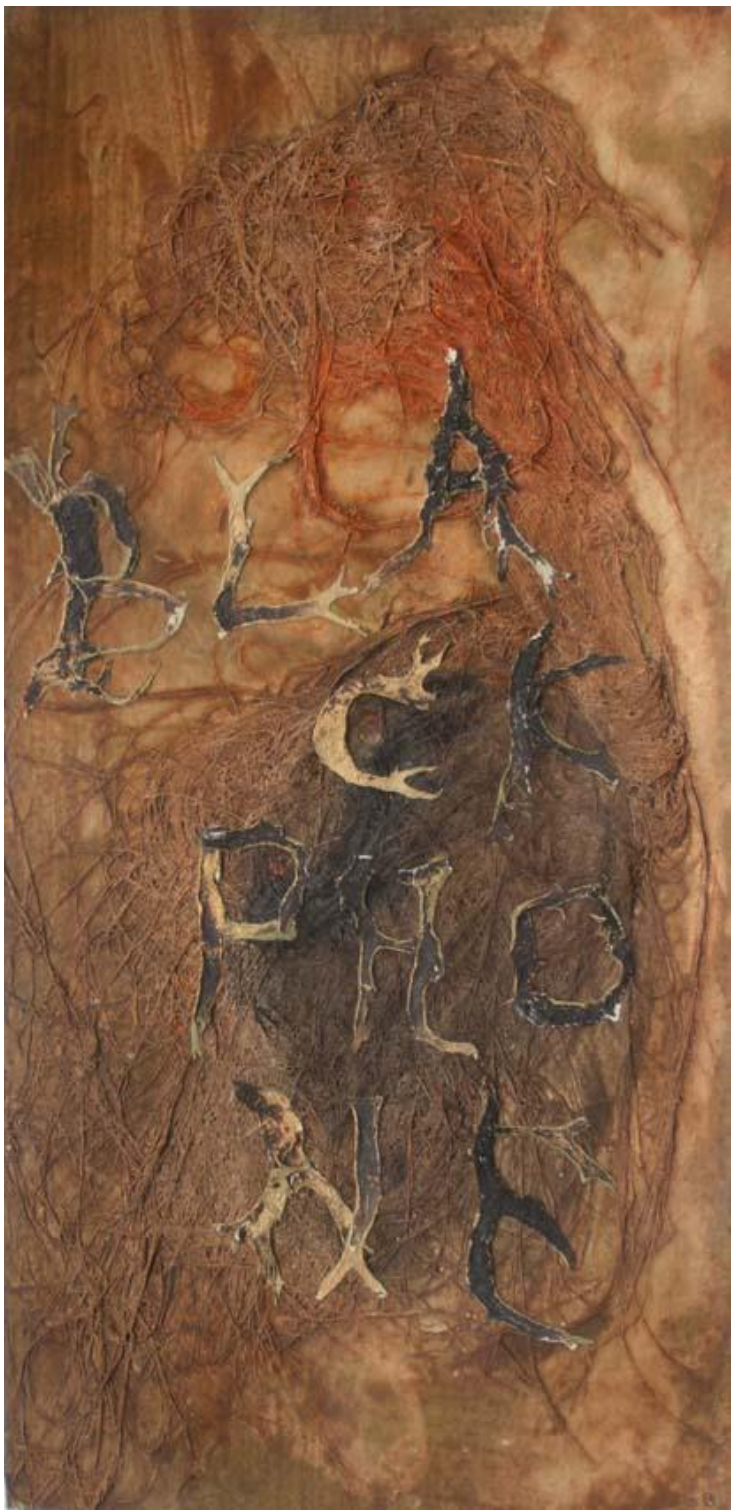
















## ABOUT THE EDITORS

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# Plath Profiles