

# To Be Playing to the Gallery of Oneself Alone: The Motif of Enclosure after WW II in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Some Selected Poems

Azadeh Feridounpour, Urmia, Iran

## Introduction

More than a decade after the end of WW II two important and transforming shocks were administered to American poetry: Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) and Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959). Their poems anticipated and explored strains in American social relations which were to issue in the open conflicts of the 1960s and 1980s, namely the public unrest about the uses of government and industrial power; the institutions of marriage and family; the rights of racial minorities and of women. Post-war poets soon began to claim their independence in poetic manifestos, and this was the point where many began to react to the very strict and rigid methods of their academic training, which were intensely based on an English curriculum, studying critical essays of contemporary poets and critics, thinking of a poem as something totally objective and composing it in intricate stanzas and rhymes as a sign of a civilized mind's power to explore and tame raw experience. Triggered, then, was the emergence of the more exploratory styles of the 1950s and 1960s, extending the subject matter of poetry to more explicit and extreme areas of autobiography. On the other hand, a new mainstream was emerging in American fiction as well. According to Tony Tanner in *The City of Words* (1971), the cultivation of an inner space by the writer and his/her hero in contemporary American fiction was a recurrent one. This is exactly what Sylvia Plath traces in her works.

This paper will focus on these cultural and political shifts and tensions, reflected in Plath's works, who was always hateful of being trapped in the routine of an ordinary life, especially that of a housewife in the 1950s and 1960s. I will shed light on the resulting sense of enclosure under all these pressures from the external world felt by a post-war woman poet who also suffered from manic depression.

## Discussion:

### I. A New Culture of Enclosure: America from 1930s to 1960s

America from 1930s to 1960s was a society moving more and more toward new experiences almost in every field, leaving "Absolutism" far behind and embracing "Pragmatism" increasingly (Steel Commager 408). Yet as Frederick R. Karl observes, "[e]verywhere we turn in the decade . . . we find paradox and irony. . . . Change was becoming so much rapid that it could no longer be readily assimilated" (24). The great material change in America since 1890s to mid-twentieth century, provided by technology and invention, "had changed an economy of scarcity to an economy of abundance, but it was the era of abundance that witnessed the greatest and most prolonged depression" (Steel Commager 406). While some new sophisticated issues such as "the emancipation of women, birth control and labor-saving devices . . . should have made for a happier and healthier family life, but one marriage out of every four ended in divorce and nervous breakdowns became so common as to be almost unfashionable" (407).

However, despite all these discrepancies and incongruities, gradually Americans began "to conform to a type" in a way that caused the people of the 1950s to seem more standardized than those of the 1850s (406). This "standardization, induced by the press, the moving pictures, the radio, schools, business, urban life, and a hundred other agencies and intangibles, permeated American life" (412). Gradually this conformity diminished "individualism" and "eccentricity," so "interdependence" was conspicuously preferred over "independence" (412, 421).

On the other hand, all the fears of the new Atomic Age which had filled Americans with the belief that their world would end in a bang, had caused them not to "regard the future as a romantic adventure" any more (412). This American tendency for the familiar (past) rather than original (future) reflected a culture of conformity as well.

More serious was the pressure for intellectual conformity and the growing intolerance with independence and dissent:

[In] the early fifties, the House Un-American Activities Committee was at its heyday, interrogating Americans about their Communist connections, holding them in contempt if they refused to answer, distributing millions of pamphlets to the American public: 'One Hundred Things You Should Know About Communism' ('Where can Communists be found? Everywhere'). (Zinn 435)

In the realm of private there was an advent of publicity too. One of these private realms was sex. Though it was still regarded as a Sin by a large segment of the population and some words such as virtue and purity carried sexual connotations, "[y]et both the old taboos and the old integrities were dissolving. Puritanism gave way to hedonism, inhibitions to experiments, and repression to

self-expression. Advertisers pandered shamelessly to the erotic instinct, the moving pictures appealed to it, and novelists exploited it, and all used a franker vocabulary than had been customary" (Steel Commager 429-30). But one should not forget that this new attitude toward sex was not accepted as a measurement of unwholesomeness.

However, like almost every other issue of the time, sexuality too, was serving other aims, namely political ones. As a matter of fact it was extremely political. American Puritanism viewed homosexuality and infidelity as "equated with untrustworthiness, possible betrayal of the country, and providing fodder for Soviet spies infiltrating American policy decisions," which in turn opened the way for "the FBI's (Hoover's) war on 'Sex Criminals' and then Joseph McCarthy's assault on 'sex perverts' who were open game for the communists" (Karl 47).

Meanwhile, minority groups— both sexual and ethnic ones— began to claim their so long neglected rights and to break their bitter silence. Hence two main notions of "assimilation" and "difference" became highlighted (Hendin 8). But it seems that one marginalized group was more active in claiming its so long neglected rights: feminists. With the emergence of some "groundbreaking" works, such as *The Feminist Mystique* by Betty Friedan in 1963, "feminist perspectives would be captured in inventive satires of old ideals of American womanhood" (8). As Campbell and Kean argue, a reawakening "female consciousness" accompanied by the "self-reliance" through exposure which had been educated out of women during a past history, was the thing which was sought as women's emancipation (191,192,194).

But in a post-war society, which had strained the notions of womanhood, motherhood and wifehood to their limits through all those aforesaid senses of "cultural conditioning," the changes were not so easy to be brought about (198). The war itself was far more than responsible for such a block. It had created insecurity, so there was a great need in the air to a return to something secure, and here is the very ground that socially defined gender loomed awkwardly. It "offered pre-set compartments into which male and female could be arranged so as to create a sense of 'normalcy' and order that were non-threatening and in keeping with precise, uncomplicated versions of an ideal America developed in these years of consensus" (197). As Nancy Woloch notes, there was a "new outburst of domestic ideology, a vigorous revival of traditional ideals of woman's place" with increasing demands for women in the working place too (493). And this is what she terms as the "split character" of the age, because there was a great discrepancy between the "notions of domesticity as the core of women's experience and fulfillment" and the pull to the

labor market (493, Campbell and Kean 198). As a matter of fact, World War II brought enormous numbers of women into job markets which, as Johanna Brenner and Maria Ramas argue, was a consequence of one side of capitalist development (127). They believe that "more married women were pulled into wage labor by increasing the demand for women workers, as production expanded faster than the labor supply (in, for example, clerical work after World War II), and by increasing the supply of women able to work" (136). These women usually attended "low-status," "low-paying" or "service-oriented" jobs as "typists, maids, teachers, nurses, cashiers, or sales-women," which were in deep contrast with all those high authority demanding jobs, mostly in managerial fields, so fashionable and popular in American masculine sphere (Gilbert and Gubar 1612).

But all this was not the whole double and contradictory representation of women back then. A persisting eroticization of the female body and nudity "as a receptacle for male desire" was in sharp clash with the ideal expectation of the angel at home (1606). The current male argot objectified women as "a cupcake . . . a tomato, a honey . . . a cherry, a sweetie pie," along with "sexy or repellent animals" such as "foxes, birds . . . kittens, pussies, bitches, dogs and pigs" (1606). As Gilbert and Gubar explain:

By World War II, it was possible, as it had not been during World War I, for armies of sex-starved men to decorate barracks, tanks, and planes with clippings of naked or scantily dressed movie stars or models. . . . At the same time, the pining-up of female nudity led to a fetishizing of body parts; breasts, buttocks, and legs were often appraised separately, as if the ideal woman could be put together like a jigsaw puzzle. (1606)

Yet these seductive "cherries" were not all that innocent:

Governments constantly urged fighting men to protect themselves against the danger of VD posed by whores and foreigners, a peril that, according to official propagandists, implicitly involved all women. Moreover, just as many World War I soldiers had blamed women for their suffering, combatants in World War II sometimes tended to associate the devastation of war with unleashed female energies. Even while the horror of the war was metaphorized as female, however, fighting men were continually reminded and constantly reminded themselves that they were struggling to preserve both the 'girl back home' and the values she represented. (1606)

But even the more ironic was that male representations of women were mainly concerned with describing them "as less than fully conscious human beings" (1607).

In this polarized relation of man and woman, the traditional concepts of family were vigorously challenged as well. Nuclear families in the suburbs became the standard type of established families: "[a]mbitious commuting husbands and dutifully domestic wives," were in fact the representation of the very bourgeois ideology of "home-ownership," "togetherness," "adjustment" and "maturity"(1599). It was as if "a version of medieval order prevailed: God in heaven (at least on Sunday), father at work, supporting it all gracefully, mother in the kitchen with all the time-saving appliances which kept her happy (or miserable), and the happy children playing or studying" (Karl 64). So, "the ideal mother was ever present never controlling," "and in order for this to occur, it necessitated a strong husband assuming domestic authority and economic and sexual control in the home so as not to confuse the child" (Rosenberg 151, Campbell and Kean 199). Adrienne Rich, as an essayist and poet of the 1950s, declares that "marriage and motherhood . . . were supposed to be truly womanly," but at the end a woman was left "feeling unfit, disempowered, adrift" (244).

As the threat of Communism increased "the subordination of women and the suppression of sexuality" increased as well (Meyerowitz 106). "Masculine strength and the patriarchal home as protective forces in a dangerous world" became more and more blatant (106). Blacks, "independent women, gay men, lesbians, 'domineering moms', and 'matriarchs'" seemed to be as intimidating as Communism was (106). This "strange marriage of foreign policy and domestic ideals" led the containment of Communism to have "domestic corollaries in the containment of women within the home and the containment of sex within heterosexual marriage" (106). The enclosure imposing sense could hardly have been worse when, as what was current in the 1920s, "some women groups and some women reformers faced accusations of left-wing or 'un-American' politics" (107). And notoriously the war against Fascism, which was supposedly fought by World War II and after that by the Cold War in America, "took no special steps to change the subordinate role of women," despite its use of them "in defense industries where they were desperately needed" (Zinn 416). Consequently, to be "beyond . . . the screen" of these projections meant to be dangerous, "an outsider and a threat to social order and normality" (Yorke 88). So, a new group of professionals, namely psychiatrists, psychologists, advice columnists, and guidance counselors, were already present to "explain the virtues of 'normalcy'" (Gilbert and Gubar 1599).

In a word, one can say that 1950s America had a distorted reputation and was mainly based on illusory and mythic notions than on the reality of experience.

## **II. A New American Poetry and Fiction**

### **i. A Panorama**

As a reflective ground of the enormous social changes of the 1930s to 1960s, literature was witnessing dramatic changes almost in every genre as well. These genres became a means of declaring an "underground protest" besides a challenge to the "literary status quo," or the traditional literary norms (Kalstone and Wallace 2: 2403). Ginsberg's 1956 long poem, *Howl*, and Kerouac's 1957 novel, *On the Road*, were significant as new experiments in the poetic and fictive world. While American poetry had achieved "a new confidence in native literary traditions, derived in part from the achievements of the early modernists" like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound in the late 1940s, during the 1950s poets were experimenting with a series of radical changes in their poetic creations to challenge the traditional norms, which were mainly writing "short lyrics," "avoiding the first person" narrator, relying on an outer motivator such as "a landscape" or "an observed encounter" to produce a poem as a result of "retrospection" in "intricate stanzas and skillfully rhymed" lines (2403, 2405).

Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, together with many others such as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, were among the "dissenting voices throughout the period," or as Stauffer calls them, the poets "outside the academy" (Gilbert and Gubar 1600, Stauffer 392). What they were after was a kind of self-exposing which became more important than "composing" (Kalstone and Wallace 2: 2407). This need of self-exploration was mainly felt in a society that emphasized the counterfeit while the alienated man tried to "validate himself" (Karl 33). The "difficulty of self-identification in a counterfeit or imitational context" was apparent in different novels and poems of the age (32).

Therefore, the theme of journey was characteristic of the writings in the 1950s: "the journey out, on the road, the journey inward, the journey to the interior of knowledge, into places no one dared venture" (45). The subject matter of poetry made a grand shift to the more secret aspects of a person's life, which were to be kept hidden in any circumstances. Insanity, sex, divorce and alcoholism along with some unique female experiences such as menstruation, pregnancy, menopause and abortion were only a few out of so many new addressed issues.

For giving voice to all these newly born visions, these poets needed new forms and styles. Therefore, "meditative" modes and practices such as "gaiety of language," "the union of visionary power with energy of language," "less rhyme, sparer use of regular stanzas and metrics, even new ways of spacing a poem on the page" were introduced and imitated by many contemporary poets of the time (Kalstone and Wallace 2: 2404, 07). These new forms of expression were in fact "the mood of the times," which was now witnessing an assaulting counter-culture (Bradbury 197, 98).

On the other hand, comic nihilism as a dominant poetic mode was introduced by the so-called New York School, including Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and John Ashbery. They fostered this new mode in their "ironic and sometimes surrealistic verse," which was in turn influenced by black humorists and Jewish writers (Gilbert and Gubar 1604). This form of nihilism, as a reaction against the very utopianism of the age, "posited a meaningless cosmos from which human beings could only derive significance through acts of engagement willed in and for themselves" (1598). It was closely related to the school of Existentialism, so current in a disillusioned world of wars. Existentialism in turn was a new color to a newly revived realism when Modernism was out, and a new era under its most "elusive" title, "Postmodernism," was beginning (Bradbury 198). Existentialism in the works of many writers of the age, such as Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, John Barth, Walker Percy, John Berryman and Philip Roth, was a means "to avoid being or becoming consumers, to rebel not so much against death as against the culture of advertising and consumption that threatened to destroy the feeling of self" (Karl 49). Yet clearly the American sense of existentialism was totally different from what was transferrable through the French mind because for Europeans "existentialism was a way of defying death," while the American emphasis on space and spatiality precluded "the claustrophobia implicit in Europe's time-oriented societies" (49).

Therefore, American poets gradually began to get a new visibility in American life during the 1950s and 1960s. It seems that the "alienated artist" changed into "a poet-citizen," and came down from that ivory tower of traditional status (Kalstone and Wallace 2: 2405). Roy Harvey Pearce clarifies this dual position of the poet, first as a man who sees differently from the rest of the world and then as a man talking to men: "[t]he American poet, in his dedication to the idea of the dignity of man, has had as his abiding task the reconciliation of the impulse to freedom and the impulse to community, as the use of language in poetry may help bring it about" (in Curry 2).

To put this transformation of poetic language and form into a nutshell, one should draw on Richard Howard's words that what seems especially proper to the poets of the 1950s and 1960s is "the last development, the longing to *lose* the gift of order, despoiling the self of all that had been, merely, *propriety*" (in Kalstone and Wallace 2: 2506). According to the poet Hart Crane these changes were "prescribing and predicting new and more harmonious relationships between mind and body, culture and nature, as well as among nations, classes, races, and sexes" (in Gilbert and Gubar 1595). This is a time when marginalized Jewish, African-Americans and women began to write their own literature. Their heritage was that of American social realism in the 1930s and an "exposure of American writing to international influences, especially those of European modernism" (Bradbury 160). But the point is that the majority of the works by these marginalized were those produced by men, who talked from a totally masculine perspective in a society with pre-established patriarchal rules. It does not matter what the specification of their marginalization was. They were still men, able of keeping integrated in the face of all the hostilities and calamities while the major marginalized, women, were not as lucky. Gender-based notions were the main source for the subsequent injustices and hostilities that women had to fight against to regain something which was once theirs but then lost: their actual not defined identities.

## ii. Re-membering Selves

When the notion of womanhood began to be questioned as "a fictive and artificial" concept, a construction of "societal stereotypes," women writers all over the world began to "create an image of a transformed self" (Gilbert and Gubar 1616-17). The major impulse for this attempt of defining and redefining both themselves and their worlds was not only an effort to find a lost identity, but also an effort to criticize society. In other words, these women writers were after that "tacit project to renew a cultural history" to consciously organize cultural forms (Watts 89). This social criticism became highlighted when the world that circumscribes the self came under scrutiny, as if knowing the society was knowing the self. So, they began to use literature as "a site where both 'practical ideology'— accepted representations, images and modes of action— and new interpretative possibilities" could be negotiated, contested and imagined (89). To address the questions that only a few Medieval and Renaissance women had been able to formulate is central to the recent female voices in the literary world.



Though the very contradictory and deconstructive notions of selfhood are debatable, the challenge for shaking the clichéd myths of female life among women writers became very powerful in order to get back their lost selves. Henceforth, according to Anderson, it would be too wrong to assume that autobiographical narratives have "no ideological significance" (in Yorke 52). On the other hand, those autobiographical narratives were a new way of interrogating the old foundation of male academia. Reynolds argues that:

Academic conventionalities, indeed, were increasingly seen by feminists as synonymous with patriarchal narrowness, and the personal testimony gained the imprimatur of authentic experience. These forms of personalized, overtly subjective, narrativised argument had a particular force in the United States where, commentators have often claimed, a confessional culture privileged the individual's utterance of her own experience above other forms of authority. (169)

He emphasizes that for feminists the act of storytelling about oneself was indeed an act of fostering community. It forged a collectivism where before there had been isolated, silent individuals. This idea was invigorated by the assumption that storytelling had an explicitly politicised notion within, that it might be effective for a social change (169).

Although this may seem at odds with another emerging stream of the 1960s when American "male writers pursued forms of anti-realism, post-realism, the fabular and the fantastic," it was a revolutionary act for many women writers of the time because "the actualities of women's lives had been overlooked" (169, 170). While a Cold War was out there, the idealized notions of a warm home with the centrality of women pushed forward a yearning desire to expose the unknown narratives of such an apparently satisfied world. This newly cultivated and manifest realism was not against the literary radicalism and experimentalism of the age. Rather, the major writers of the era used the domestic ideology of the 1950s and early 1960s to place "the typecast motifs of that ideology (idealized marriage, suburban conformity, the 'junior executive' male) into dizzying, shifting fictions" (170). The works of these major writers move within and outside the perimeters of realism: Home, marriage and husband, the constituent elements of familiar terrain, are still present, but the narratives "play with these certitudes, through the 'mad' language" as in *The Bell Jar* or "the dream-visions of *Death Kit*" by Sontag (171).

### III. The Historical Sylvia Plath<sup>1</sup>

The temptation to read Plath's works in the light of autobiography is intense. Especially because of her suffering from manic depression, most of the critics are already there to reconstruct and interpret her works "as the case history of a woman with severe mental illness" (Malmshemer 526). This view owes its circulation to the theory "first presented and later affirmed further by A. Alvarez (who knew Plath), that the poetry and the suicide were inextricably intertwined, that one was essentially the cause of the other" (526). Furthermore, "Robert Lowell promulgated it in his foreword to the American edition of *Ariel*," and Hughes reinscribed it in *Birthday Letters* (Van Dyne 5). Unfortunately, almost every criticism on her works begins with a short account of her life, and only then the actual consideration of her works begins. This is especially the case with the very early criticisms written immediately after her death during the 1960s. The critics of this time have totally ignored the fact that "the commodity of Plath's life can restrict her poems to the marginal 'extreme' instead of the cultural mainstream" (Bryant 31). Of course, nobody denies the influence of Plath's personal life and all its events on her writing, yet according to Brain "these coincidences of Plath's own plots and emotions with the plots and emotions of her literary creations are not *all there is to be said*" about her works (15).

However, from the mid-1970s a larger number of critics have come to grasp the implications of her literary life apart from her personal life and all its events— Jacqueline Rose, Margaret Dickie Uroff, Claire Brennan, Stan Smith, Charlotte Croft, Linda Wagner-Martin, Ellin Sarot and Al Strangeways are some of such commentators. They have tried to dig up the roots of her mental illness not exclusively in a childhood trauma, namely the early death of her father when she was only nine, but also in vaster "historical and cultural pressures on Plath's self-construction" (Wagner-Martin 8).

Plath's acute observation of this effective environment around her had in fact changed her into a remarkably astute cultural critic. "Always I want to be an observer" was almost the motto of Sylvia Plath's life (in Schober Plath 40). Wagner-Martin too believes that she had an unusual "mature comprehension of the human condition" (10). Obviously, it should have been almost

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<sup>1</sup> According to Karen V. Kukil's explanation in her preface to *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, the text of this book is an exact transcription of the "twenty-three original manuscripts in the Sylvia Plath Collection at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts" (ix). So any probable mistakes regarding the grammar, punctuation, spelling and capitalization in the subsequent quotations from this book in this section and the following ones owe their existence to this fact. It is also the case with the chosen remarks of Sylvia Plath from her other book, *Letters Home*.

impossible for her not to be affected by the events of her environment when one pays attention to the coincidence of the most important historical events of the world in general and America in particular with those of her personal life. All those crucial historical events and their subsequent effects had evidently awakened a deep sense of responsibility in her as a writer to "move beyond autobiographical" in order to reflect the universal:

I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be *relevant*, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on (Malmsheimer 527, Orr 169- 70).

In other words, Plath believes that her microcosmic works should become a macrocosm in order to question, not merely to reflect. So, her confessions are "symbolic rather than circumstantial" (Schmidt 828). Schmidt believes that her technique is a "Brechtian *Verfremdung*" or defamiliarization (833). In his elaboration on the term, Robert Scholes states that "[t]rue realism defamiliarizes our world so that it emerges from the dust of habitual acceptance and becomes visible once again. This is quite the opposite of that comforting false realism that presents the world in terms of clichés we are all too ready to accept" (12).

In her interview with Peter Orr, Plath refers to many important points about her writing career, but the most important ones which she emphasizes are "historical criticism" or "knowing what period a line comes from" together with her American identity, though her background is particularly German and Austrian (Orr 169).

On the whole, her interest in both American and world history, most notoriously in concentration camps, explains that "[f]ar from becoming more self-absorbed in the last years and months of her life, Sylvia Plath seems to have been developing a political consciousness and in her poems and letters there are references to her fears of nuclear war and her growing interest in politics" (Bassnett 21). She always wanted "to become involved, to do something to help," she never wanted "to be deprived of however minute a participation in political affairs" (22). Weaving history into "all the paraphernalia that one finds in daily life" was the utmost concern of her writing career (in Orr 171). She believed that these life experiences could play a deep role in

enriching her writings: "writing is the first love of my life. I have to live well and rich and far to write, so that is all good. I could never be a narrow introvert writer, the way many are, for my writing depends so much on my life" (*Letters Home* 156). In almost all the letters to her family members, when she talks eagerly about the progress of her writing ability, she mentions again and again to the necessity of combining historical and social problems into her works— for example, in an early short story, "The Perfect Setup," which was published in *Seventeen* in October 1952, she had dealt with the problem of religious discrimination. Finally, in the search for finding another Sylvia Plath, beyond her usual psychological representations as a mad, manic-depressed and uncontrolled writer, one should note that:

Plath's writing is concerned with the relationship between human beings and this world that is around them, however painful that relationship, and powerful the temptation to deny it, may sometimes be. This is the other Sylvia Plath: one whose writing is much more than personal, who uses her poems and fiction to look at a world that extends far beyond her own skin, and invites us to look with her, beyond our own (Brain 38).

#### **IV. A Sense of the Historic: *The Bell Jar***

Eventually, all Plath's attempts to get to "the germ of reality" in her stories resulted in the creation of *The Bell Jar* (Plath, *Letters Home* 87). This novel is an exploration of "a 'split' self in a split age" (Campbell and Kean 202). It is a split self because according to Perloff, the defined guidelines of the society for women could neither be accepted nor rejected (508-12). Plath tried to make her personal experiences become a template for a "'generational' story" (Nelson 24). Here is the exact ground where the notions of relevancy and macrocosm become magnified about her works. This relevancy and macrocosmic nature of her experience has been well created by a hold on the artistic detachment she uses in the form of a "wry self-mockery" or gallows humor throughout the novel which has created a parody of a once-lived experience (Wagner, "Plath's *The Bell Jar* as Female 'Bildungsroman'" 65-7).

The enormous sense of history starts right away in the first chapter of the novel, the execution of the Rosenbergs:

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. . . . and that's all there was to read about in the papers- goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. . . . I kept hearing about

the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn't get them out of my mind. (1)

Closely connected with this electrocution which worries Esther Greenwood— a college student who is spending one month of the summer of 1953 in New York City as the guest editor of a fashion magazine— is the feeling of stillness and emptiness which starts right early in the novel too. But these feelings must have been distinctly those of the "tranquilized *fifties*," the "savage servility" sliding "by on grease," that Robert Lowell talks about in a number of his poems to reflect the conservatism of the era (in Gilbert and Gubar 1599). Wagner, too, believes that Plath's novel is "a testimony to the repressive cultural mold . . . . For those of us who lived through the 1950s, *The Bell Jar* moves far beyond being Sylvia Plath's autobiography" ("Plath's *The Bell Jar* as Female 'Bildungsroman'" 65-7). The "astonishing immediacy" of this novel, especially for women readers all over the world, was chiefly praised by Martha Duffy in *Time* (in Wagner, *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage* 6). The novel's "notable honesty— the intellectual woman's conflicting attitudes to her body, desiring to be attractive to men, and yet a little resentful of feminine role" is important according to C.B. Cox (99-100). So, it can be viewed as a successful amalgam of a historical, diachronic self with a synchronic, timeless one:

*The Bell Jar* is not a single case history, but rather a synchronic view of womanhood, for once seen from the woman's perspective. In it we do not find archetypes such as . . . the Virgin Mother of God, Eve the Temptress, and other man-made glorifications or condemnations of man's desire, to which women have so long adhered that they have accepted them as their own image (De Lauretis 124).

On the other hand, the notion of sickness that surrounds Esther everywhere in the novel is closely connected with that dim execution. Perloff observes that Plath's novel moves from the description of physical illness (ptomaine poisoning) to her mental illness and back again to physical illness (her final hemorrhage) (519-22). After all, health was a great issue in 1950s America, but ironically enough not for women but for men. According to Wagner-Martin, "during the 1950s, most women didn't pay much attention to being healthy. Being thin, model-like, with cinched waists and long legs, was the ideal, and to attain that thinness, women chose diet rather than exercise" (42). In fact, "the feminine self-sacrificing" was a part of culturally accepted ethos (42). While discussions about men's health began to circulate around, mainly because of their "stressful corporate jobs and unadmitted alcoholism," the only participation of

women in such a discourse was limited to "which kind of painful diet they were choosing to be on" (42). Maybe that is why almost all the men in this novel are represented as having husky bodies, white teeth, and pink cheeks while almost all the women are associated with sickness and poor health.

The breakdown that Esther/Plath underwent was a great issue for the 1950s American society. It was not something so easily forgettable. The great concern over such an issue is mouthed by the all-American boy, Buddy Willard, in his anxious question during his visit to the asylum: "I wonder who you'll marry now, Esther. Now you've been", and Buddy's gesture encompassed the hill, the pines and the severe, snow-gabled buildings breaking up the rolling landscape, 'here'" (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 197).

In real life, when Plath went back to college after her traumatic breakdown, her attempts for studying hard became harder, for now "continued success meant not only social normalcy, but sanity itself" (Shook 123).

Perloff believes that this arrangement of incidents around health and illness in the novel is purposeful, it is a proof that "disease, whether mental or physical, is an index to the human inability to cope with an unlivable situation" (519-22). It seems that she is echoing R.D. Laing's insistence on the fact that "the experience and behavior that gets labeled schizophrenic is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation" (517-19). In other words, "whatever the extent of Esther's congenital predisposition to madness, the mad world she inhabits surely intensifies her condition" (517-19). Yet it would be worthwhile to consider that in 1950s America, the notion of illness carried broader connotations because of its supposed interrelatedness with Communism as a cancerous malignancy. Surprisingly enough, as Esther's sentence during the process of electroshock treatment shows— "I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done" (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 118) — whenever there is a mention of sickness in the novel it is assumed as the result of or a punishment for some kind of sin or wrong-doing, as if emphasizing the stifling atmosphere of a punishing society which is a mad house, controlling and repressing the anarchistic energies of the self.

The very title *The Bell Jar* itself connotes this feeling of entrapment— a sense of "claustrophobia," whether "literal or metaphorical" (Reynolds 176). As Reynolds explains more specifically, the novel's world is one "beyond intimacy; the self is cut off from contact with others, sealed off" (176). This dismemberment, typical of not only the 50s and 60s novels but

also of a bildungsroman, happens in the search of identity in a militarist society with its "'perpetual subjection' of women" (Featherstone 98). According to Wagner, this sexual conquest was of great magnificence for a woman of the 50s, who was after an identity other than that of a sweetheart, girlfriend, wife and mother ("Plath's *The Bell Jar* as Female 'Bildungsroman'" 55-7).

In the *New Statesman*, Robert Taubman had called this novel "the first feminine novel in a Salinger mood" (in Ames 214). This analogy is highly important and relevant because "Plath establishes a hip, funny, slangy first-person voice, appropriating the heightened first-person voice of American fiction from *Huckleberry Finn* through to Holden Caulfield in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Esther is a sister to Holden: brilliant, witty, disintegrating" (Reynolds 173). In Edward Butscher's words, again reflecting a sense of J.D. Salinger's novel, *The Bell Jar* is "a minor masterpiece of sardonic satire and sincere protest," a protest against "the revelation of the 1950s domestic ideology as a 'false consciousness' that oppressed women psychologically even as it proffered a cornucopia of consumer goodies within the shrine of suburban homelife" (in Van Dyne 6, Reynolds 173).

Yet according to Nelson, one cannot ignore the dualistic ideology hidden in the advent of marriage or this suburban homelife. She believes that while it was supposed to create a sense of security in the face of a threatening outer world with all its insecurities, marriage itself was not so much a secure institution as the authorities advertised it. Nelson concludes that marriage became "an institution built on fear and inadequacy," where the couple retreated from "the insecurities of public life to heal the wounds to male ego and supply an outlet for female ambition" (31). In other words, this idealized institution had nothing to do with the protection of couples from nuclear conflict. This paradoxical claim on marriage reveals the so-much politicized nature of the marriages of the time: they were not marriages for their own sake, but marriages for the State's sake, as if one had "to respond blindly, unconsciously" to her/his environment to be accepted as a part of the community (Plath, *Journals* 23). More tragic was the fact that this advertised security was assumed to be needed only by women, as if they were little children, needing to be cared for by their virile husbands in the role of their fathers. Mrs. Willard, Buddy Willard's mother in the novel, seems to approve this when she says "[w]hat a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security" (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 58). But Esther declares in a rather rebellious manner "[t]he last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all

directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket" (68).

The notion of motherhood, which is strongly reflected in the novel too, was closely connected with the notions of womanhood, suburban life and marriage in the age. The mothers in this novel, whether Esther's own mother or Buddy Willard's mother, are too domineering, especially that the latter becomes "the voice of society's wisdom about women" (Wagner-Martin 37). They were domineering because despite their being pushed more and more to the rims of domesticity, these women seemed to have achieved a type of freedom and power within the home which was otherwise impossible for them to achieve in the outside world. Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* strongly "rebuked women for exercising excessive power and thereby emasculating their sons" (in Nelson 30). This book changed into one of the decade's most cited "screeds against mothers" (30). The domination by mothers is well-reflected in the novel when Esther observes "Buddy was amazingly close to his mother. He was always quoting what she said . . ." (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 58). On the other hand, we continually face the lack of Esther's mother's understanding toward her problems in the novel. When Esther decides not to have any more shock treatments with Dr. Gordon after her first one in his private hospital, and announces this to her mother, after a pause her mother replies: "I knew my baby wasn't like that. . . I knew you'd decide to be all right again" (119). In fact, she is totally unable to understand the deep abyss which had become her daughter's life. When Esther finally begins her real therapy in another hospital under the instructions of Dr. Nolan, and learns that she has arranged for her not having any visitors any more, she considers it as "wonderful," because she actually hates all these seemingly sympathizing visitors, among them her mother (165). Even in her daughter's serious breakdown, she cannot stop measuring herself. This mother figure is always there in Esther's life as a strong icon of conformity in a repressed society to remind her about the best and worst things in life. She is a part of a pre-established system and tries continually to pull her growing and experience-loving daughter into the same pre-defined social molds while totally ignoring her true concerns with regard to life. In this realm Esther's so much wanted sexual intercourse can be considered from another angle, namely her deep desire to rebel against matriarchy. For obviously her mother was "the puritanical, morally upright woman who had known only one sex partner in her life, and who believed that monogamy was the only way to experience sexuality" (Wagner-Martin 31). Likewise, Esther's suicide attempt by hanging herself with "the silk cord of [her] mother's yellow bathrobe" and her act of stealing fifty sleeping pills



from her mother's supposedly locked cabinet are very symbolic, because in reality it is not that silk cord or those pills, but the mother figure in the background who causes her suicide attempt (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 129).

According to Pat Macpherson, this novel can be read "as a daughter's case of matrophobia . . . Esther's fear and hatred of her mother entrap her within a misogynist version of motherhood that is potentially lethal" (in Wagner-Martin 157). This hatred toward motherhood is not only present in her own relation with her mother, but includes other maternal targets as well. All the old ladies that Esther claims "wanted to teach me something," Dodo Conway and the mother of the little boy whom Esther tried to bribe on the beach with candy, are also included in this anti-mother plot (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 5).

One of the novel's most interesting, yet less considered aspects, is the existence of some characters who can be classified as racial minorities.<sup>2</sup> The brief but influential appearance of these marginalized, repressed and belittled races in a novel set back in mid-1950s America, where so many crucial political issues were going on in, is interesting and illuminating. The 1950s is a time when Black desegregation started in the military as well as in schools, mostly in the southern parts of America, though the real tension never truly erupted until the 1960s, when Black movements and organizations became more unified and organized. It is also a time that using Russian nationality was regularly avoided and condemned because of all the threats of Communism. Jewry's history in America of the time is more than complicated to be completely elaborated upon.

Plath was writing at the cusp of an era that would increasingly come to focus on Hitler's regime as a social and bureaucratic phenomenon. What's more, the Holocaust was a topic both in high school and college in Plath's academic life— Plath's teacher in Wellesely High School had blow-ups about different concentration camps shown in his class (Strangeways 371). The bulk of the Holocaust Literature which appeared in the 50s and 60s is a proof to its growing importance in a post-Auschwitz era. Later on, different films such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), *Exodus* (1960), *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) and *The Pawnbroker* (1965) brought the Holocaust issue to the forefront of America's popular imagination. The two-year, real-life trial of

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<sup>2</sup> The Russian Constantin, the Peruvian Marco, the Jewish man and the dark nun in the collection of short stories sent by the staff of *Ladies' Day* while Esther and other girls were in the hospital because of ptomaine poisoning, and finally the negro who served them food while Esther was recovering in the city hospital.

Adolf Eichmann from 1960 to 1962 played a crucial role in drawing attention to the atrocities of the Nazi party once again. Bearing this background in mind, we can see why Plath devoted a part of her oeuvre to such a phenomenon. With the Cold War threat at its peak in the late 1950s, the fears for a second genocide similar to that of the Holocaust was in the air. This time it faced all the people. The use of modern technology for the production of mass corpses and the deliberate annihilation not merely of lives but of identities too were among the most striking similarities between a nuclear threat and the Holocaust. Plath's repeated anxiety in her letters and journals show her no less concerned over the issue. Besides, Jews' denigration, spiritual death and victimhood in the Holocaust can be seen as a larger picture for the 1950s domestic incarceration in America. Not that people's suffering in concentration camps or black ghettos can be considered equal with that of married women's, but the oppressing wheels of a capitalist and consumer-oriented society, steered by authoritarian men, cannot be ignored. The best explanation for this analogy comes from Stan Smith:

It would be wrong to see Plath's use of the imagery of the concentration camp simply as unacceptable hyperbole, in which a merely private anguish is inflated to the proportions of global atrocity. Rather . . . Plath has seen the deeper correspondences between the personal and the collective tragedies, their common origins in a civilization founded on repression at the levels of both the body politic and of the carnal body (in Wagner-Martin 157).

Betty Friedan, too, describes the late fifties and early sixties for American women as a comfortable concentration camp arguing that "the passivity observed in suburban teenage girls and housewives is induced by a destruction of identity comparable to conditions in Nazi concentration camps" (in Frost 123).

Most of the critics believe that instead of interpreting Plath as someone who is trivializing history and aggrandizing herself, we should be aware that there can be no real boundaries between history and subjectivity, external and internal reality, and in a word between the trials of the world and those of the mind. In other words, they believe that instead of accusing her for reducing history and its elements to mere metaphors for her own myth-making, we should first ask why and how Holocaust issues or related historical subjects appeared in Plath's works. We should consider the cultural and proper place of the Holocaust in the time which she was writing. As she herself observes ". . . life for me is certainly a gyre, spiraling up, comprehending and including the past, profiting by it, yet transcending it!" (*Journals* 177). Then "it is important to

evaluate how effectively or appropriately Plath treats the Holocaust, and whether, indeed, she actually confronts the problem of metaphorizing in her deployment of such material" or not (Strangeways 376). We should also note that Plath's works are not strictly about the Holocaust, in the way the poems of Holocaust survivors such as Primo Levi are. Only a part of her poems are about this issue or war in general and they are neither as "resolutely private as they often appear" to be (378).

## **V. A Sense of the Historic: Some Selected Poems**

Plath's interest in close delvings into life has resulted in "courageously honest" and "surrealistically associational" poems by "this unusual poet" which has caused the unfortunate judgment of almost all of her works merely as autobiography (Malmshemer 527, Hughes 15). Her transatlantic or midatlantic experiences, which changed her works into a "'polyglot stew' of American and English vocabularies" have been ignored by a large number of critics (Brain 45). Poems such as "Dream with Clam-Diggers," "Landowners," "Leaving Early," "Stars over the Dordogne," "The Bee Meeting," "Stings," "Daddy" and "Cut" deal with this important issue, and so the sense of geography and culture is at the center of these poems.

Another important cultural influence upon Plath's poetry has been the 1950s American advertisements and their representations of domesticity. Considering the rich meaning of homemaking and kitchens in the consumer culture of this era, this cannot be irrelevant. Almost all the ads of the 1950s and 1960s used women and their stereotypical associations with domesticity as their first target because women were the chief customers of American business in the post-war years, and had a crucial role in the economic boom of those years. The representations of domesticity in the ads meant too much for Plath because in her related poems, she aimed at the portrayal of "the contradictions of a male-dominated industry that depended on women consumers, and the complexities of texts that both reflected and shaped women's desires" (Bryant 31). By targeting mainly the women of this era, these ads disempowered and confined them to the domestic sphere, and so excluded them from a larger patriarchal world. On the other hand, Bryant believes that the era's ads' constructed "drama through inflated rhetoric and outrageous claims" is well present in Plath's poetry too (17). In fact, the directness, immediacy and surreality of this commercial language is there in the brusqueness, business-likeness and bitchiness of Plath's poetic language (18, Brain 74). Hence, before calling Plath's poetry as

extreme and hysterical, we should go back to the structural cultural grounds of such a claimed extremity or hystericity. Poems such as "Lesbos," "The Disquieting Muses," "The Colossus," "Wintering," "Fever 103°" and "Cut" are noteworthy in this category.

Environmentalism, by which Plath means the mutual relationship between human-beings and the world and the penetrability of the borders in nature, is another less paid attention issue in Plath's works. After Rachel Carson's model who had raised some very important environmentalist issues in her two books, *The Sea Around Us* (1951) and *Silent Spring* (1962), Plath is among the first literary writers who has followed this line. She was worried about the influences of all the penetrable chemicals that threatened to poison every living creature. She knew well that no man-made shelter would protect living creatures from those invisible and poisonous chemical particles which scatter everywhere in the air and soil, and threaten to endanger the life cycle and food chain of the world. Some of her poems, such as "Green Rock, Winthrop Bay," "Waking in Winter," "Elm," "The Detective" and "Fever 103<sup>0</sup>" deal with this important issue. Generally speaking, through these environmentalist poems Plath tries to suggest that "mechanization, industrialization and overproduction result in a nightmare" of capitalism which has changed plants into rubber things, and the sea into "Old Mother Morphia" (Brain 90, Plath, *The Collected Poems* 151). The unspecificity of the speaker's gender in most of her environmentalist poems counteracts in a word all the primary pre-suppositions of eco-feminism that "'women are closer to nature than men,' and that, by virtue of that alleged special friendship, women have some privileged insights into our environmental morass or at least sensibilities that are more respectful of nonhuman life" (Brain 129). By such a rejection, Plath calls all human-beings into an involvement in the issues of the world throughout the entire globe, and so in a way she exonerates herself of all the accusations that her writing is morbidly preoccupied with her own personal sufferings.

Another important issue in Plath's poems is war. The interconnectedness between private and political to externalize her inner life is well obvious in her war poems. In a way they act "some way towards countering the charge of solipsism" against her, but this too is greatly ignored (128). Many critics question her right to use such historical issues such as Holocaust for her so-called myth-making, but they cannot see that she is using such material to disturb the complacent and egotistic affluence of a post-war American society. She achieves this end through inducing "'a sense of complicity'" in past events by demarking any boundaries between

the suffered and us, then and now (Strangeways 384). Instead of a direct representation of those events, she combines them with an intimate tone and material to make her readers feel implicated. In such poems readers are meant to feel uncomfortable and concerned, and to get that "boot in the face" as the title of Al Strangeways' article goes.

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that Plath completes one of the major projects of feminism by restoring history to women and women to history. It should be also noted that she was not alone in bringing up such issues in her work. There were other contemporary writers who adopted such material in their works too, such as Robert Creeley and Anne Halley. Some examples of Plath's poems in this realm are "Bitter Strawberries," "The Thin People," "Little Fugue," "Mary's Song," "The Munich Mannequins" and "Daddy."

The last culturally important but at the same time complicated issue in Plath's poems is the notion of motherhood. This repeated obsession with motherhood, whether in her novel or in her poems, as referred to before, might have been because of the role of the domineering mothers of her age, including her own mother. But contrary to her novel, which contained only the outlook of an angry daughter toward her mother, the panorama becomes vaster in her poems: the speaker of these poems is more closely involved in the feelings conveyed; she is not the detached narrator of the novel any more.

As a whole Plath "is not sentimental about motherhood; it is not an unambiguously blessed state in her work" (Warren 65). Thus, it is very hard to trace her true feelings toward motherhood because they are so shaky, so fleeting and so unstable. First, there is a group of poems in which the speaker is mothering her own children with a positive outlook. "You're," "Parliament Hill Fields," "Morning Song" and "Balloons" are in this category.

But then after this small group of four happy poems, we face those poems in which she is still a child's mother or will mother one, but with totally hopeless and ominous feelings: "Sow," "Moonrise," "I Want, I Want," "The Manor Garden," "Dark House" (a poem in "Poem for a Birthday" series), "Heavy Women," "Tulips," "Three Women," "By Candlelight," "Nick and the Candlestick," "The Night Dances," "The Fearful," "Mary's Song" and "Child" are some examples in this category. It seems that in all the poems of this group, pregnancy and children are two monstrous, frightening and nasty things for her.

In a group of other poems, Plath's speaker is an angry and hateful persona who rages at the suffocating role of her mother or motherhood in general, and the observing role of this

detached mother. "The Disquieting Muses," "Who" (a poem in "Poem for a Birthday" series), "Finisterre," "The Moon and the Yew Tree" and "Medusa" are some examples.

Elsewhere, Plath tries to yoke the notion of motherhood with artistic creativity. Diane Middlebrook considers such a theory in her book, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath— A Marriage*. She believes that it was Plath's motherhood and maternity that released her from being Hughes' apprentice (in Van Dyne 14). She even sees Plath's *Ariel* poems as "bursting from her motherhood" (14). She is not alone with such an idea. Bassnett, too, points out Plath's deep desire for creating a kind of balance throughout her life between three seemingly fragmented spheres she considered contradictory in the early years of her life: motherhood, wifehood and writing. She believes that Plath's marriage at this point played a key role in such a fulfillment because it was the way for her to achieve maternity and wifehood. The very fact that after Plath's marriage her writing too became better and better is a matter of no debate. But ironically enough, the pivot that was to achieve the desired completeness collapsed in early 1962, and many poems dating from this time are already speaking of Plath's unpleasant ending. Bassnett even considers the rush of poems in the last months of her life as an evidence of that imbalance so tragically marking any dreams of totality (76). What's more, Plath herself had talked about such a link between her writing and motherhood in one of her letters to her mother: ". . . I am very excited that children seem to be an impetus to my writing . . ." (*Letters Home* 408). "Stillborn" is the most important poem in this category.

Plath's poetry is open to endless and unlimited interpretations and readings. A certain reading of a given poem is never approved or disapproved at the end, and no promise of an absolute meaning is guaranteed. Through her "elliptic, highly compressed syntax," Plath lets the reader revel in numerous decodings of her highly symbolic images (Yorke 51). She tries "to find a language that 'repudiates the common code'" of communication (56). Yet this language of hers should never be a prohibiting block for apprehending what she intends for the reader. Walking in her world, with all its unexpected caves, flowers and beings, is, in fact, a nice experience to have.

So, though the majority of critics categorize her among confessional poets, we should be careful about the usage of the term. The "I" that she explores in her poetry is not that stable, static one. It is one always flowing and always changing, assuming a polyvalent identity at once. It always moves towards "that which is opposed to [it], which crushes her, makes her suffer" (50). In other words, it always deconstructs itself. Plath knew that there are not any notions like a

unitary subject, that it is a mere "historical and ideological construct, an effect of discourse" (Anderson 61). In order to emphasize this versatility of the self she wrote "a highly figurative poetry having its own associative imagistic logic" (Yorke 51). It implicates its own proliferation of interpretations, and so results in her knowing herself or more truly oneself.

## VI. Conclusion

After Emily Dickinson, Plath was one of those rare female poets who wrote from a truly feminine perspective. She felt and successfully tried to explore the juxtapositions her generation had to face as one caught between the shadows of the Second World War and the menace of a nuclear age. Hers was the generation that "found itself on the edge, between austerity and affluence, between elitist cultural ideals and working class, racially integrated ideals" (Bassnett 24). As Plath herself observes "I do not know who I am, where I am going," yet she had to find a way out of all those loose ends to grasp life more fully (*Journals* 149-50). That is why she commissioned herself the colossal job of translating almost everything in life into a literary language to "give order to this flux which is life" (*Letters Home* 218). She always observed that "[w]riting sharpens life; life enriches writing" (208). Registering this mutual relation between life and writing was in fact "a way of life" to her (*Journals* 107).

What's more, she was still a woman, that "awful tragedy" which was to shape everything in her life (77). Maybe it was one of the reasons that caused her to sharpen her senses and insights to observe everything more deeply. For her, conservatism, was "the tragedy of man" (145). Its consequent muteness was sickness for her, and the inarticulateness felt like an awful "growing horror" inside her (*Letters Home* 207). This lack of conservatism as one of the main criteria of transgression in her poetry has invoked the most hostile criticisms of her writing over the years. But as she herself observes in her poem "Kindness" (1 Feb., 1963), "The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it" (*The Collected Poems* 270).

Those who accuse Plath's poetry of being a result of uncontrolled emotional rage and despair should reconsider her existing handwritten or typed drafts of *Ariel* or her other poems more closely. By considering the bulk of Plath's revised material in the Rare Book Room of Smith College, which fill "seven box files, each three inches thick and filled to the brim," one may conclude that not only is "the impression of dauntless hard work and scrupulously considered composition" impossible to escape, but also that the material provides evidence for

Plath's achieved craftsmanship as an artist (Brain 22). Bassnett declares that "the fluency of expression and the force of emotion behind the words on the printed page" in Plath's works, which were to become more politically informed since the 1960s onwards till her death, should be the first concern of the reader of her works (20). On the other hand, it is important to ponder the sanity of Plath's writings, that they are "sane in argument and subject matter," and that they are sane so far as they are "controlled, methodical, and carefully wrought— a circumstance to which Plath's manuscripts in the archives testify" (Brain 37).



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