

## Red Earth, Motherly Blood: Articulating Sylvia Plath's Anxieties of Motherhood

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Sylvia Plath's poetic imagination derives a great deal of force from confronting issues of maternity, fertility and sterility, and this can be seen throughout her career. However, despite the inclusion, or intended inclusion (sees Frieda Hughes' introduction to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, xiii) of a large volume of these "fertility aesthetic" poems within *Ariel*, they have not elicited as much academic interest as the more canonical works of "Daddy," "Medusa" or "Lady Lazarus" (Peel 161).<sup>1</sup> This paper seeks to identify new views for feminist and psychoanalytical investigation within the maternally oriented poems such as "Barren Woman," "Morning Song" and "Thalidomide."

Helene Cixous, the French feminist writer, conceptualises women's language as cyclical, non-linear and emotionally funded. In order to break from a "discourse that regulates the phallogentric system," Cixous insists that a woman must "write [her] self. Your body must make itself heard/ To write [is] the act that will 'realise' the un-censored relationship of a woman to her sexuality" (qtd. in McNeill 278). Due to the form of such writings, *L'écriture Feminine* is often also referred to as "Writing the Body," and is frequently symbolised as "writing with milk and blood" ("Russian Roulette" 169). Such theories are particularly salient for an artist like Plath who is so closely identified with her own idiosyncratic "bloodjet" aesthetic – an aesthetic that has been described as a "language so full of blood and brain that it seems to burst and splatter the reader with the plasma of life" (qtd. in Helle 169).

Plath's fertility-centric poems, describing the functions of the female body, demonstrate most vividly the poet's penchant for writing from the body – wittingly or otherwise. My research explores Plath's views – and equally importantly, feelings – on motherhood, and how this issue influenced her work. By utilizing the ambit of *L'écriture Feminine*, it is my hope that the influence of the body and its functions on Plath's poetry will become clearer.

Documentary evidence suggests that Plath was far from reticent in her attitude towards marriage and babies; from her early womanhood, she appears to have taken a

<sup>1</sup> Peel notes that poems such as "Thalidomide," have still "not received a great deal of critical attention."



genuine interest in children and child-rearing.<sup>2</sup> Those around her noted an evident desire for children of her own. Her mother commented in her journal that while she and Plath had visited a friend with a newborn, Plath "opened the curled hand and stretched out the exquisitely finished little fingers ... There was such warmth, such yearning in Sivvy's face, my heart ached for her" (Plath, *Letters Home* 348). Plath seemed to look forward to motherhood, and certainly, Robin Peel believes, motherhood benefited rather than retarded (as Christine Jeff's 2004 BBC film "Sylvia" seemed to suggest) Plath's poetry (Peel 124). Peel suggests that her final month of pregnancy provided a burst of mental energy that provoked "New Year on Dartmoor," "Fever" and "Walking in Winter," among other poems (Peel 124). Kate Moses even claims that *Ariel* could be read in its entirety as ensorcelled by a daemon of "fertility and flowering and redemption" – the book functioning as a paean to reproduction and nature (Moses 100).

Parenthetically, *Ariel* opens with an aubade, "Morning Song." This narrative monologue comprises six stanzas, and follows a tradition of poetry narrating the relationship between mother and child, *a la* Joanna Baillie's "A Mother to a Waking Infant" (Baillie 54). "Morning Song" was composed when Frieda Hughes, Plath's first child, was eight months old and records the intimate moments between mother and child as the child wakes in the middle of the night. Superficially, the poem depicts parental awe in the presence of a newborn: "We stand around as blankly as walls" (*Restored* 5). However, critics such as Tasha Whitton and Marjorie Perloff sense the narrator's anxieties regarding her own mortality, and argue that the poem also addresses the unstoppable instruments of nature that create and destroy simultaneously (Whitton). In conclusion, Perloff writes, "one might note, in the first place, that the poem turns the aubade convention inside out: the speaker's dawn is not one of love or joy but one of dimly felt anxiety – motherhood both frightens and fascinates her" (qtd. in Whitton).

This "dimly felt anxiety" is deducible in the apparent fading of the mother character juxtaposed with the increasingly vivid and noisy child. The mother's voice "echoes," she becomes "blank" a reflection of a cloud; she becomes a museum – a container of death and outmoded objects; and finally, she loses autonomy in favour of the child's demands: "One cry, and I stumble from bed." The child "shadows" its smaller parents, the mouth, a budding

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<sup>2</sup> See Plath's correspondence with her mother from June 20, 1951, where Plath writes about the children she is nannying: "Do I ignore their fights? Do I try to break them up? How do you inspire kids with awe and respect? By being decisive? By being ominously quiet? (71)"



rose "opens clean as a cat's" – a predatory animal. As the child opens its mouth to feed, the window, becoming assimilated with the child and developing a mouth of its own, "swallows its dull stars," bringing about an apocalyptic vision. In view of this, the last three lines acquire a sinister tone:

And now you try  
Your handful of notes;  
The clear vowels rise like balloons. (*Restored 5*)

The child, on swallowing the world, develops its own clear voice, a war cry, in contradistinction to its mother's echoing, dwindling voice. It represents a notification of its succession above its parents. Kate Moses' hypotheses concurs, arguing that in the poem's "culminating lines ... Plath's narrator becomes completely and willingly 'effaced,' allowing her child full ownership" (Moses 112). This sentiment is reproduced in other poems such as "Brasilia," in which Plath's narrator becomes "nearly extinct" in opposition to her baby, which cuts its teeth against the world (*Winter Trees* 13). In support, Whitton believes that "Morning Song" addresses the imbalance and loss of identity in the wake of the child's delivery (Whitton). She suggests that "Morning Song" narrates the "reestablishment of self following the birth" (Whitton) of the child, and sees the child as a mechanism set in motion "like a fat gold watch" (*Restored 5*). The "fat" and "gold" signify the quality of an unbreakable and therefore unstoppable watch. By extension, Whitton posits, the mother's body must also serve as an apparatus, one that industrially produces such mechanisms. Within this context, we can see that Plath's poetic speaker is concerned not with the emotional processes of being a mother, but with the mechanical processes of the body and mind. The production and output is akin to a factory line that ingests matter at one end, only to assemble the pieces into an independent working object at the other. The metaphor of the body as a machine serves to remove emotion from the scene, and instead references the baby as an unfeeling parasite that exists to succeed the host body, once it has grown strong and sufficiently raptorial. Alongside representing an expression of how the woman might relate to the strange being that grew inside her body, and emerged from it, this reading also addresses Lacan's devouring theories. David Holbrook traces Lacan's hypothesis by drawing attention to the "ambiguity in Plath's mind between birth and death," and argues that through her maternal poems, such as "Morning Song," she identifies herself with Mother Earth, who both devours and is devoured (Holbrook 123).



With a view to Holbrook's theory, we could look to one of Plath's Cambridge journals in which the poet discusses her desire to become impregnated by her first love, Richard Sassoon (Plath, *Journals* 200). She notes her fear of being devoured by her psychological ill-health which she felt could manifest itself as a separate living entity growing within her womb:

*Yet. I have a fear, too, of bearing a deformed child, a cretin, growing dark and ugly in my belly, like that old corruption I always feared would break out from behind the bubbles of my eyes. I imagine ... my growing big with his child ... I will believe in you and make you invincible on this earth. Yes, I have that power. [my italics] (200)*

In the above quotation, Plath not only expresses her ingrained phobia of giving birth to a deformed child, but also, that this "child" would become invested entirely with her depression and psychological disorder, becoming a merciless instrument like the "fat gold watch" that would taunt and devour her (200). Synchronically, Plath appears to confirm Holbrook's theory, becoming almost omniscient in her power to make Richard Sassoon "invincible on this earth" because she has "that power" – the power being that she, just like Mother Nature, can reproduce and control nature, and specifically birth and death cycles.

Clearly, there is a weight of psychoanalytical evidence to support theories of Plath's writing about the body, particularly with regard to the speaker's concerns about bodily production and destruction. Alongside this, we should note that persuasive arguments have emerged from more socio-cultural perspectives. Kathleen Connors, for example, writes that Plath feared not the psychological ingestion of her offspring, but simply that "children might sap her creative energy" (Connors 72). "I've felt lazier and lazier and more cowlike," Plath wrote to her mother in 1962 while heavily pregnant (and overdue) with Nicholas, her second child: "before Frieda came, I was like this; quite cowlike and interested suddenly in soppy women's magazines and cooking and sewing" ((*Letters Home* 441, 439).

The horror of "Thalidomide," Susan Van Dyne suggests, derives from Plath's angst with regard to the sacrifice of writing in order to be a mother: "Your dark/ Amputations crawl and appal—/... What leatheriness/ Has protected/ Me from that shadow—/... All night I carpenter// A space for the thing I am given" (*Winter Trees* 31). Within Plath's vague lexis, the amputee could also amputate and create absence (of creativity, within the scope of Van Dyne's theory). Plath then, deliberately creates an ambiguity to leave the reader wondering what the narrator is attempting to "carpenter" by night. The metonymical links of cutting and sawing to carpentry, compliment Van Dyne's hypotheses that the reader is attempting to



carve a space for herself away from the inescapable clutches of her terrible offspring. The situation becomes "the potential conflict that exists for the professional woman writer between the production of children and the production of language" (Peel 167). Peel agrees, referring to the section of *The Bell Jar* wherein Esther Greenwood compares life to a fig tree: by choosing to pick certain fruits from the tree, you relinquish others to die and rot on the branches (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 51).

The faint sinister tone of Plath's metaphor for life choices circumnavigates another of her preoccupations - that of destructive forces. Plath's discourse of blood and brains seems to have responded in a fervent manner to newspaper reports on the drug that caused deformities in unborn babies. Not usually known for writing "headline" poetry, Plath's fascination with the workings of the body was evidently piqued by the scandal in which children were born bearing the consequences (facial and bodily malformations, intestinal deformity and heart disease amongst other symptoms) of their mothers taking the morning sickness drug Thalidomide while pregnant ("Story of Thalidomide"). This particular sphere of corporeal cruelty seems to have captivated Plath. Of the maternal/fertility poems in *Ariel*, and those from *Winter Trees* originally intended for *Ariel*, but cut by Ted Hughes, roughly half are concerned with malfunctions of the body, or more specifically of the reproductive organs (*Restored* xiii, Peel 165). "Thalidomide," "Barren Woman," "Childless Woman," and "Three Women" return to the motifs of physical dysfunction within the female body. Different kinds of evidence suggest that Plath was manifestly writing about her own body in an attempt to vocalize her fears about infertility. Anne Stevenson writes that the spring of 1959 was marred by Plath's realization that her body had ceased to ovulate: "How can I keep Ted wedded to a barren woman?" Plath wrote in her diary (501). Stevenson writes that for Plath during this time, "everything suddenly had 'gone barren'" (Stevenson 158). Christine Britzolakis considers Plath's intrigue concerning the subject of infertility by way of the poet's meditation on Giorgio De Chirico's painting "The Disquieting Muses," as well as her gravitation towards one of the figures in the painting, whose "arms frame a bulging stomach hollowed out by a shadowed void" (176). Plath's poem of the same name lists voyeuristically the disembowelled figure's inhumane attributes: "the mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head" (Plath, *The Colossus* 58).

To Plath, the inability to carry children seemed to be the ultimate failing suffered by a woman, and she reduced the De Chirico's hollow-wombed figure to a blind, dumb mannequin accordingly. Happily, Plath's own brush with "barrenness" did not last very long. Shortly



after the drama of the doctor's diagnosis of "temporary infertility," she fell pregnant with Frieda. However, the experience left emotional scars, as well as an impact on her work (Stevenson 158). The subject of "Childless Woman," for example, seems desperate to affirm the author's fertility to the reader: she offers "nothing but blood—/ Taste it, dark red!" (*Winter Trees* 16). This kind of unmistakeable "body writing" seeks to display female experience in all its rawness. The invocation of the taboo of consuming menstrual blood serves to display the anguish that prompts her to offer her "red earth/ Motherly blood" to her reader in such an ostensibly coarse and bold way.

Conversely, Plath's joy in producing children was evident, and the effect on her sense of well-being was considerable. After the birth of her first child she wrote: "I think having babies is one of the happiest experiences of my life. I would like to go on and on!" Similarly: "I have the queerest feeling of being reborn with Frieda" (Aurelia Plath 450). In motherhood, Kate Moses claims, existed Plath's "core" ambition and calling. She cites Ted Hughes's poem "Remission" as confirmation. Hughes writes that Plath "flourished only/ In becoming fruitful" (qtd. in Moses 99). Moses comments:

He adopts imagery likening Plath's maturity, through motherhood, as a matter of artifices peeling away when he describes the maternal Plath as being the innermost, solid doll of a Matryoshka nesting doll set. (Moses 99)

In her "cow heavy" state – a state, Hughes writes, "That was *the you*" (Hughes 109), Plath could not mask the exuberant joy she felt at being a mother and on April 7, 1960, wrote a letter to her own mother exclaiming "I'm going to have *all* my babies at home; I've loved every minute of this experience!" (*Letters Home* 377). "Child" from *Winter Trees* expresses this emotion in clear terms. The poem, in all probability written to Frieda, consists of simple, transparent lines:

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.  
I want to fill it with colour and ducks,  
The zoo of the new. (*Winter Trees* 12)

The nursery cadence of internal rhymes such as "zoo of the new," and the deliberate unruliness of free verse, invests the piece with a sense of innocence, as does the absence of semantic depth in such apparently pedestrian lines as the first of the piece. This sits, at first glance, in stark contrast to the "hostility towards motherhood" that Moses claims Plath voiced in "Morning Song" (Moses 112). However, Connors registers the contrasting "unhappy darkness" that leaks into the poem in the last stanza, claiming that the stanza illustrates the



psychologically "encaged state [that] Sylvia Plath feared for herself and perhaps now feared for her daughter" (Connors 83). The final stanza sees the narrator wringing her hands at a "ceiling without a star" (*Winter Trees* 12). This sharp turn in the poem accounts for Plath's constant awareness of the "dark side of her brain" that threatened to destroy the peaceful idyll of motherhood (Stevenson 144). As a point of comparison, with regard to the degree of body-writing that exists in Plath's "maternal" poems, many critics have alleged that Plath's attempts to say goodbye to her children can be apprehended in these "maternal" poems. They assert that "death ghosts" this group of poems, and this – in line with various critics' theories – manifestly reflects Plath's self-knowledge that she was destined to kill herself. Among such controversial commentators are Ronald Hayman, who concludes that "Balloons" from *Ariel* "says a reluctant farewell to the children," and Anne Stevenson, who concurs that in "Edge," Plath was putting "her own dead body there on stage" as a final statement to her children (Hayman 193, Stevenson 298). Such commentaries have been attacked as "absurd" by Tracy Brain, who argues that "Balloons" addresses Plath's sensitivity towards her son's psychological development (Brain 25-26). Similarly, Connors also disagrees with the "crude approach" of the "farewell" theorists, and states that "Edge" represents a dedication to Katrina Trask, a "poet and mystic" as well as the founder of Yaddo, an artist colony that Plath and Hughes stayed at while Plath was pregnant with Frieda (Connors 135-37).

All four of Katrina Trask's children died in infancy and her artist colony, Yaddo, housed many paintings and sculptures of them, as well as a memorial in the gardens; it would therefore have been virtually impossible for Plath to ignore the tragedy.<sup>3</sup> These omnipresent reminders of child-death would have made a strong impression on Plath, pregnant with Frieda and recovering from the disturbing memory of her "infertility" (Stevenson 158). Connors strengthens her theory of the inspiration of "Edge" being a tribute to Trask by drawing attention to two salient lines Plath cut from the poem "Eleven weeks, and I know your estate so well" and "I am the daughter of your melancholy" (Connors 135).

On her own death, Trask was interred in a tomb at Yaddo, surrounded by roses – a motif of "Edge," which gives some foundation to the idea that the poem might relate to Plath's thoughts on Trask's inability to produce and maintain healthy babies (Connors 135):

She has folded  
Them back into her body as petals  
Of a rose close when the garden

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<sup>3</sup> Connors reports that the four Trask children died of Diphtheria (Connors 136)



Stiffens and odors bleed ... (Plath, *Ariel* 85)

Throughout this poem, we are privy to Plath's internalised world, occupied by tropes of infertility, ceased lactation, dead coiled embryos and children painted with the white pallor of the deceased. Plath, then, completes the journey of *Ariel* as a voyage of body and reproduction, the termination of life representing the final act. The body collapses in on itself in decomposition, "folded// Them back into her body as petals/ Of a rose close..." (85). Saliently, collapsing body parts are those representative in Western culture of sexuality and fecundity, the breasts. Also, flowers, routinely metaphorically connected to female genitalia, are almost explicitly referenced to as such within "Edge." However, Plath's "night flowers" bleed nothing but "odor." Semantically, Plath's blooms are imbued with death, infertility and menopause. Finally, we could think of Plath's *Ariel*, as the classical "muse of poetry, the moon goddess" who inspires "fertility and flowering" (Moses 101).

The moon has nothing to be sad about,  
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this kind of thing. (*Ariel* 85)

Plath's muse, Ariel, nonchalantly accepts that death must come to all of her creations. Plath is intimately connected, even through the eyes of others, to her own personal deity. Hughes's describes the birth of Frieda in "Isis" as: "The great goddess in person/ Had put on your body, waxing full ..." (Hughes 111). Plath, in Connors view, is so attuned to the workings of Ariel's art of creation and destruction that she can watch and describe with such a removed subjectivity the collapse of Katrina Trask's status as a maternal object (Connors 133-136). "Edge," according to Connors, inflects Katrina Trask's tragic apologue (133-136). Additionally, as shown earlier, Stevenson believes that Plath is also telling the story of the climactic chapter of her own body's story of fertility, production and sexuality, and it is here that Plath's *Ariel*, in its first published form, ends.<sup>4</sup>

While this research has also considered ulterior stimulants for Plath's poetry, such as Van Dyne's socio-historic repressed career woman speculations, Plath's acumen for writing from the body clearly also deserves to be considered as a major shaping influence in her

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<sup>4</sup> Stevenson consistently maps her readings of Plath's poems onto the poets relationship to her own reproductive successes and failures. On "Morning Song" and "Barren Woman" Stevenson writes that the "Rage, hysteria, and sorrow [of miscarriage] ... set her writing again" (Stevenson 207).





work.<sup>5</sup> Critics such as Connors, Britzolakis and Peel have glossed Plath's compelling desire to write the body. We have seen Connor's strong argument for "Edge" functioning as a meditation on maternal "failure," Britzolakis' investigation into Plath's intrigue with regards to the "infertility" of one of De Chirico's figures, and we have looked at Peel's empirical data that links Plath's poetic 'outbursts' with her pregnancies. Plath's trajectory of poetic output through the *Ariel* period traces a discourse for the female body, and as we have seen exploits the liminal spaces between birth and death.

To conclude this paper, Plath's work often seems emotively articulate, as opposed to descriptively objective. Kate Moses' essay "Sylvia Plath's Voice, Annotated" seems particularly resonant in this respect: "if one reads "Wintering" as the extension of a narrative arc begun with "Morning Song," one sees that the image of fertility has become internalized, just as her expressiveness is not intellectualized, but felt" (Moses 113). It is clear that the poetess aligns her art with the cycles of the body and the cycles of life. The threat of the disturbance of maternal success (either through infertility, miscarriage or losing a child postpartum) created clear cites of artistic interest for Plath, as did the subjects of menstruation and pregnancy. The psychological responses to the mechanisms of nature, of reproduction, are overt and sophisticated and find voice through the poetess' unique "bloodjet" aesthetic.

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<sup>5</sup> See Peel 167.



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