

## Defamiliarization in the Domestic Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Lauren Zane

### **Beyond Biography: The Formal Innovations of Plath's Confessional Poetry**

*"What I fear most, I think, is the death of the imagination.... If I sit still and don't do anything, the world goes on beating like a slack drum, without meaning. We must be moving, working, making dreams to run toward; the poverty of life without dreams is too horrible to imagine."* (Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 272)

Sylvia Plath was a Pulitzer Prize winning American poet, novelist, short story, and children's writer who lived from October 27, 1932 to February 11, 1963 and produced some of the most powerful and influential poems and prose of the twentieth century.

Perhaps because of her status as a Confessional Poet, (along with Allan Ginsberg and the Beats), Plath has been the subject of five full-length biographies that focus on her life and suicide, mental illness, madness, therapy, marriage, the occult, and various aspects of her work.<sup>1</sup> However, this paper argues that biographic, psychoanalytic, historical, and/or ideological interpretations of Plath severely limit the readings of her work. Adam Kirsch points out that "thanks to a flood of biographies and memoirs, the psychic wounds of ...Plath...have been probed at great length; and because life is easier to talk about than art, there is a danger that [she] will become known mainly for [her] wounds" (xi). One of the central problems with these biographies is that they read Plath's work *through* her life instead of letting the work speak for itself. This approach undermines her work's formal and political challenges. As Susan Van Dyne writes in *The Problem of Biography*, "biographers often assume that Plath's "suicide authenticates the truth of her poems" (Van Dyne 5). Much of Plath's work is autobiographical, but that does not necessarily mean that she is the speaker of each poem, and that the feelings and events are true to her own life.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Edward Butscher's 1976 *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*, Linda Wagner-Martin's 1987 *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, Anne Stevenson's 1989 *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*, Paul Alexander's 1991 *Rough Magic*, and Ronald Hayman's 1991 *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*.

<sup>2</sup> In this sense, we can see Plath in the context of New Criticism, a shift that allows us to reconsider the biographical elements of her work in terms of their formal innovations and more abstract qualities. The main trend of New Criticism, which was inspired by T.S. Eliot's principles of poetry, was to "shift attention away from the figure of 'the poet'...and toward poems themselves" (Kirch xiii). The Confessionals would have "agreed with Eliot's definition of a poem as 'a verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling,'" because they all used language in a "deliberately



Separating the poet's life from the speaker of the poems opens the poems up for much more interpretation and allows the reader to identify with the speakers instead of envisioning Plath in domestic situations. It is difficult to pinpoint a specific audience that Plath may have had in mind while writing, because authorial intent is inaccessible. However, the implied reader might be anyone who shares these feelings of pressure and oppression by society's strict conventions and obligations to get married, have children, and live a bourgeois middle-class family life. These biographical readings limit the effectiveness of Plath's work, the reader's enjoyment, and fail to give Plath credit as an artist.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than read her work biographically, I am interested in acknowledging that much of what she wrote might have been inspired by her own domestic experience (as a writer's work is often drawn from his or her real-life experiences), yet she writes in such a way that alerts readers to the domestic limitations in a reader's life. I am not suggesting that she universalizes her experience, but that she tries to reach the reader through a shared set of references to domestic relationships with which they can identify. Plath represents these domestic issues not as simply confessions of her own problems in life, but as a means of defamiliarizing the reader and the reader's conventional assumptions about the domestic.

### Defamiliarization

*"Estrangement seems a good antidote to a risk we all face:  
that of taking the world, and ourselves, for granted."  
-Carlo Ginzberg*

Defamiliarization (or estrangement) is the poetic technique that forces readers to see familiar things in strange and unfamiliar ways, in order to influence them to change or enhance their perceptions of these things. Plath defamiliarizes her readers by making familiar things seem new, by unearthing oppressive elements of familiar situations and relationships, and by subverting traditional connotations with familiar things like domestic relationships.

Russian literary critic Victor Shklovsky (also spelled Viktor Shklovskij) first coined the term "defamiliarization" in 1917 in his influential essay "Art as Device" (alternate translation

---

artful and artificial way, in order to communicate to the reader not facts about the poet's life, but the inner truth of his or her experience" (xiv).

<sup>3</sup> In recent years, many critics have taken the same approach to studying Plath's work on a non-biographical basis. These critics include, but are not limited to: Jacqueline Rose, Susan Van Dyne, Tim Kendall, Marsha Bryant, Deborah Nelson, Tracy Brain, Robin Peel, and Lisa Narbeshuber.



"Art as Technique"). Critic Lawrence Crawford argues that Shklovsky's definition comes from a belief that "only the creation of new forms of art can restore to man sensation of the world, can resurrect things and kill pessimism" (Crawford 209). Shklovsky argues that defamiliarization "is found almost everywhere form is found," and "it creates a 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it" (Shklovsky 781). While Plath herself did not use the term defamiliarization, her comments on the imagination in the epigraph to this paper suggest that she agreed with Shklovsky's views on art. For Plath, a life without imagination is a life without meaning. She fears the death of the imagination in the same way that he fears the death of art by means of automatization or having dulled experiences in life. Plath similarly rejects the "poverty" of a life without "moving, working, [and] making dreams." For them, art should elicit a strong reaction with its audience and not be the kind of dulled, repeated, automatic response that comes with (what Plath and Shklovsky would call) ineffective or false artworks.

For these thinkers, art is a "tool to revitalize our dull perceptual habits" (Ginzberg 8). Art should serve to awaken our senses and keep us from having half-hearted experiences in life; going through the motions, "[going] on beating like a slack drum," and having a boring existence or a boring relationship with art. For Shklovsky, every experience in life and in art should be new, unfamiliar, and intense. In this sense, he is invoking Aristotle, who wrote, "Poetic language must appear strange and wonderful" (783). If the work does not provide an intense experience, then, by Shklovsky's definition, it is not art, and therefore is useless.

Shklovsky opens his essay with some of these theories on habitualization and automatization in our perception:

If we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic. So eventually all of our skills and experiences function unconsciously automatically. If someone were to compare the sensation of holding a pen in his hand or speaking a foreign tongue for the very first time with the sensation of performing this same operation for the ten-thousandth time, then he would no doubt agree with us. It is this process of automatization that explains the laws of our prose speech with its fragmentary phrases and half-articulated words. (5)

The example he uses of the sensation of holding a pen could easily be compared to our domestic relationships and settings which are likewise familiar to us. Much like not having to think about holding a pen to write with, a person does not have to think about having a relationship with her mother, because it is something that happens automatically.



Shklovsky believes that our lives are intrinsically habitual or automated because things get old to us very quickly. There is a sense that we are not even having an experience at all when we experience something very familiar because our reactions and motions are so automatic.<sup>4</sup> For instance, if a person takes the same route to work every day, her mind may wander on the drive and she will arrive to her destination without realizing it. Another example is moving into a new house; at first, everything is new because a person constantly observes her new surroundings to get used to them. But after a week or less, a person gets used to her new surroundings and walks into the house each day failing to notice anything. For Shklovsky, these are not real reactions to life, not real experiences, and people are not really living if they are not constantly having new and intense experiences. Crawford believes that "for Shklovskij the function of art is the creation of perception, by the overcoming of automatization" (Crawford 210). So in order to achieve a successful artwork, the artist must force the audience out of its state of automatization in order to create a new perception that leaves an impression. Crawford further states that "perception is the center of aesthetic experience, and perception can only be established by effecting a (textual) difference: to break down the indifferent recognition of automatization" (Crawford 210).

Just as automatization impoverishes experience by eating away at our perception of experience, "...life fades to nothingness. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war" (Ginzberg 20, Shklovsky 5). Shklovsky suggests that it also impoverishes art and literature. Plath's writing seeks to keep perception at the forefront of our experiences with art because for her too, life is made dull by automatization. Plath's work has a strong application of Shklovsky's theories about art and defamiliarization. Defamiliarization is a useful approach for analyzing Plath's poetry because of the way she estranges the reader, or because of the fact that she defamiliarizes perception in order to estrange the reader.

For Shklovsky, art exists to intensify experience; therefore his goal is to promote literature that makes familiar things seem new when the reader reads about them:

And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead

---

<sup>4</sup> This process of automatization, denounced by Shklovsky, provides the historical background for his definition of estrangement as an allegedly timeless artistic phenomenon. Carlo Ginzberg *Making Things Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device*



us to a feeling of things, based on vision and not only on recognition. In order to achieve this goal art relies upon two devices: "estranging" things and complicating form, the latter making perception more difficult and laborious. The perceptual process in art is a purpose in itself and ought to be extended to the fullest. Art is a means of experiencing the process of becoming; the outcome of it is quite unimportant. (6)

By both "estranging things and complicating form," Plath succeeds in achieving Shklovsky's goal of art. These two devices are illustrated by Shklovsky in the work of Leo Tolstoy.

Shklovsky claims that Tolstoy "makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object" (779). He refers to many of Tolstoy's works in his essay, such as *War and Peace* and *Resurrection*, and asserts that Tolstoy uses this technique in "describing whole battles as if battles were something new" and "seeing things out of their normal context" (780-781). He also uses an example from "Kholstomer," which is narrated from the point of view of a horse who cannot understand the concept of personal property and how he can belong to a man. By drawing readers into the mind of a horse, he estranges them towards their own view of the institution of property because to a horse, a man owning land, air, water, and animals is incomprehensible (779).

In his essay entitled "Making Things Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device," Carlo Ginzberg defines two senses of defamiliarization in literature and aligns each with an author's work and how that author viewed Shklovsky. He associates the first with Leo Tolstoy and describes it as "the use of estrangement as a delegitimizing device, operating at every level – political, social, religious" (Ginzberg 18). This sense of defamiliarization in literature helps readers understand history, oppressive societies, stereotypes and other aspects of life that are often concealed or hidden. According to Ginzberg, Tolstoy went beyond using estrangement merely as a literary device:

For [Tolstoy], it was a way of 'going to the heart of actual facts and penetrating them so as to see the kind of things as they really are ... uncover their nakedness, see into their cheapness, strip off the profession on which they vaunt themselves' (18)

Ginzberg associates the second sense of defamiliarization with Marcel Proust and defines it as "an instrument to overcome appearances in order to achieve a deeper understanding of reality" (20). This sense of defamiliarization exists to intensify experience by complicating forms. As I will demonstrate in the following sections of this paper, we can see both of these forms of defamiliarization at work in Plath's poetry.



Both Tolstoy and Proust attempt to convey familiar things "as if they were seen for the first time" (20). Plath also aligns with this literary tradition by showing familiar, traditional domestic settings and relationships in new ways in order to allow readers to see them as if it were for the first time, awakened from automatization. As I will demonstrate, she does this through her treatment of theme, metaphor, diction, point of view, and symbol.

### Unconventional Poetic Conventions

In his essay entitled "Making Things Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device," Carlo Ginzberg said that Aurelius and Tolstoy both felt that "going to the heart of actual facts" meant overcoming false ideas and imaginations; ultimately, it meant accepting transience and death" (Ginzberg 18). This form of defamiliarization, which I will refer to as "delegitimizing estrangement," is exemplified by Plath's bitterly elegiac poem "Daddy." Plath's speaker in "Daddy" overcomes oppression and false ideas by expressing her anger about her dissatisfaction with her relationship with her father. By "uncovering the nakedness" of her repressed feelings about her father, Plath's speaker experiences catharsis and purges these pent up emotions and unresolved feelings. In stripping human relationships down to their core, Plath uses defamiliarization to help readers overcome false ideas drawn from the collective social connotations of domestic relationships, in which she finds many faults. She uses this technique to make the themes, relationships, and social structures in her poems seem new to readers through her use of symbol, metaphor, diction, and allusion. By making the familiar seem new in her artwork, Plath opens up the experience for readers to draw new conclusions and interpretations. These new interpretations move beyond readers' initial reactions to the poems, which are largely informed by social mores and norms.

In "Daddy," the speaker makes a famous and very controversial comparison of her father to a Nazi and herself to a Jew. Addressing her father in the poem, the speaker admits that she "[has] always been scared of *you*, /... your neat mustache / and your Aryan eye, bright blue" (Plath 223). This relationship, the speaker tells us, symbolically transformed her into a Jew: "I began to talk like a Jew. / I think I may well be a Jew" (223). The Holocaust references work to estrange the reader because one would hardly associate a father-daughter relationship with the poem's violent imagery and horrific connotations of the Holocaust. From the very first lines of



the poem, we can see that the speaker has been oppressed for thirty years by the "black shoe," which can be understood to be a synecdoche for her father:

You do not do, you do not do  
 Any more, black shoe  
 In which I have lived like a foot  
 For thirty years, poor and white,  
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. (222)

Here she reduces her father to a shoe, a piece of clothing, as a way of dehumanizing him, a reversal of how the Nazis dehumanized the Jews (and perhaps how he dehumanized her, since she is associating herself with a Jew). The boot or shoe could also be a symbol for the boots of Nazi soldiers marching, or the boot of the Nazi Party stepping metaphorically on the Jews. The boot could also refer to the authority exerted by a powerful, unforgiving governing figure (like Hitler or the speaker's father), or perhaps the shoes that the Nazis took from the Jews, leaving them nothing. The shoe could refer to a number of things, but the association of the black boot with the Nazi Party is interesting because boots have a duality in that they connote work, movement, possession, and also filth.

The following lines describe the speaker's feelings of entrapment and isolation in dehumanizing terms that place her as the foot and her father as the shoe that she has lived inside of for her entire life and could not escape, until when she took control: "black shoe/in which I have lived like a foot/for thirty years" (222). Shoes and feet are typically considered to be filthy but they can also be used to take action and move. The movement Plath refers to here is suggested in the lines: "I never could tell where you/ Put your foot, your root" (223). This movement reflects the political climate during the Holocaust and Nazi occupation in Eastern Europe.

Like Hitler, putting his "boot" down in many different countries to conquer them, the speaker's father moves through life putting his boot down wherever he wants to rule. The reader quickly learns, however, that the foot inside the boot has a weakness that it may be trying to conceal or work through. In the second stanza, Plath identifies a "Ghastly statue with one gray toe," where the "one gray toe" could be indicative of a handicap (222). Prior to WWI, Germany was considered a very affluent world power. After its collapse, they were looking for someone to blame, which ultimately led to "The Final Solution," or the Holocaust, to "purify" Germany.



Like the handicap of a gray toe, Germany was given an economic handicap after the war. They spent a lot of money only to fail and in turn owe the Allied powers for damages.<sup>5</sup>

However, on a foot there are four other toes. A solution to the issue of handicap could be to chop off the foot, or eliminate the "problem." A person could also accept the handicap, and could still be able to walk. In this instance, the speaker's father is likened allegorically to a Germany that cannot deal with its economic handicap after WWI and therefore decides to take out his bitterness on the Jews (in this case, the speaker's daughter), blaming them for its predicament. In the poem, the speaker's father does not choose to work with the handicap; he becomes resentful and places blame on her (222). Because he feels oppressed, he in turn oppresses the narrator. At the end of the poem, "the villagers," who never liked him, are "dancing and stamping on [him]" and he is the one getting the boot in the face (224). These lines illustrate "Tolstoyian defamiliarization" used as a delegitimizing device to unearth the oppression that the poem's speaker felt by her tyrannical father. By taking readers to a place where they would hardly think to go on their own, comparing the speaker's father to Hitler, Plath has removed expectation, removed instinctive response, and removed all traditional connotations of this all-important relationship. She has given readers the chance to explore it uninhibited by "false" ideas that could cloud their judgment.

Another method Plath uses to create this defamiliarized state in readers is her use of black imagery. This imagery negatively depicts the speaker's father in order to extend the use of the handicap or the boot. Black is a color that is frequently referred to in this poem -- the "black shoe" (222); "...a swastika/ so black no sky could squeak through" (223); "...no not/Any less the black man who/Bit my pretty heart in two" (223-224); "A man in black with a Meinkampf look" (224); "The black telephone's off at the root" (224); and "There's a stake in your fat black heart" (224). Several times the speaker describes her father as being a black man, dressed in black, or with a black heart. In this poem, the traditional connotations of the color black are at play in describing the speaker's father -- negativity, evil, darkness, death, pain, destruction, coldness, cruelty, and ruin. In describing him as black, the speaker provides dark and negative connotations to his personality as she is "poor and white" (222). This characterization

---

<sup>5</sup> Germany was devastated after WWII. Millions of laborers left their land. 14 million Germans came from the East and lived in refugee camps. Farm production fell and the Soviets cut off food supplies. The standard of living was at the lowest it had been in 100 years. Inflation was high, savings lost 99% of their value, and the black market distorted the economy. East Germany lost about 25% of their GNP for reparations to the Soviets.



exemplifies the first sense of defamiliarization (aligned with Tolstoy) in that it removes traditional connotations of father figures for readers by depicting the speaker's father as a black, Hitler-like Nazi. This depiction uncovers and unearths the speaker's true feelings of oppression and goes "to the heart of actual facts" about their relationship. The comparison is so shocking and controversial that it shakes away the readers' initial notions and opens up their minds to deeper interpretations.

Plath's speaker takes on the role of the Jewish Holocaust victim, emotionally and psychologically tortured and 'murdered' by her father. The speaker is isolated and entrapped by her father, who scares her (223). He made her feel inferior – so much so that she said she "barely dare[d] to breathe or Achoo" (222) around him and "...never could talk to [him]" (223). Much like the Jews in prison camps, the speaker feels enslaved and imprisoned by her father who had such control over her that she couldn't even speak to him and felt scared to even breathe or sneeze in his presence. The speaker, like the Jews during the Holocaust, feels as though she is cursed or fated to live under the tyranny of an oppressive dictator. Her constant fear of her father has been amplified by the Holocaust reference. The intensification of experience (here illustrated by using an "Achoo"—a sound that evokes the sense organs, hence perception) is a characteristic of literary defamiliarization. Therefore "Achoo" here is being used to enhance my reading of how the poem defamiliarizes commonly-held assumptions about the "tenderness" inherent in father-daughter relationships.

Plath's continued experimentation with diction and repetition of certain words to evoke visceral emotions conveys childlike feelings about this relationship, which defamiliarizes the reader since the speaker is identified as a grown adult. Plath's diction in this poem includes several German words, such as "ach du" (222), which means "oh you;" "ich, ich, ich, ich," (223) which means "I, I, I, I;" "Luftwaffe" (223) which was the German Air Force; and Meinkampf (224), the title of Hitler's book which means "My Struggle." Her style of expression in this poem establishes the tone and characterization of the speaker and her father. The German words the speaker utters show that she is trying to connect with her father by speaking the language with which he is so familiar, but all she can utter is a stammered beginning of a sentence that she will never complete because her "...tongue stuck in [her] jaw" (223). The references to the German Air Force and Hitler's book further characterize her father, not only as a Nazi, but also as someone who is like Hitler, with his "Meinkampf look" (224). The words "gobbledygoo" (223)



and "Achoo" (222) make reference to her childhood, since they are words from the verbal lexicon of a child. Plath's use of them in this poem suggests that the speaker still sees her father from the eyes of a childhood self, which is when he died. These lines also recall the famous nursery rhyme "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe. She had so many children she didn't know what to do" (Crowquill 3). This nursery rhyme further suggests that the speaker still views her relationship with her father in relation to her childhood. It also suggests that the speaker is, or one day will be, the old woman who has lived in a shoe for so long that it will become her identity.

The second sense of defamiliarization (hereafter referred to as Proustian defamiliarization) is exemplified in "Stillborn," as Plath uses estrangement to intensify the experience for readers. In "Stillborn," the speaker is a poet, who describes her poems as though they were fetuses in jars of pickling fluid sitting on a shelf looking at her, their mother:

O I cannot understand what happened to them!  
 They are proper in shape and number and every part.  
 They sit so nicely in the pickling fluid!  
 They smile and smile and smile and smile at me.  
 And still the lungs won't fill and the heart won't start (142)

The speaker is presumably the mother of these dead poems that are smiling at her from jars on a shelf. She uses personification to describe the poems as though they were once alive and growing but have died a tragic and early death, much like fetuses. Plath's technique intensifies the reader's response because the experience of seeing dead poems in jars is something so impossible to imagine that it shatters existing conventions and norms. It alters forms to give audiences a new and intense experience. The central point that Plath is making with this poem is that repetition of our life patterns (automatization and habitualization) leads to distraction, just as repetition of poetic form leads to death, or a dead artwork -- one that is unsuccessful. Rather than relying on formal defamiliarization here, Plath seems to be diagnosing a state of or approach to poetry that is "pickled" so "nicely" but is really dead and in need of medicine. The poet, here aligned with the mother (both creators), is in need of defamiliarization because she is "near dead with distraction" (142).

In "Stillborn," Plath suppresses the reader's traditional connotations of motherhood, such as warmth, nurture, and love – which are being defamiliarized. Instead, she is associating motherhood with new images. She not only invokes death and decay here, but the deceased



preserved in the exact state of death, smiling at her with an eerily permanent smile. Through depicting a poem as a dead, smiling fetus, Plath is not only defamiliarizing the poem, but also the fetus. The "mother" compares her "children" to pigs or fish, which are not animals that are typically associated with human children (142). The connotations with dead fetuses in jars are usually things for scientific study that is dehumanizing.

By comparing inhuman objects like poems to human subjects such as children, Plath removes reader's associations with the subjectivity of human fetuses and replaces them with new associations to inhuman objects. Invoking images this way disturbs readers when they realize after reading the poem what conclusions their own minds just made, which Plath has tricked them into doing. In doing so, she might be saying that our ideas about motherhood and poetry are in fact dead or useless because they are formed from and adhere primarily to the traditional, formal conventions of our society. By repeating life patterns, such as continuously having the same opinions, beliefs, and associations about things (like motherhood and poetic form), we are distracted and living automated lives, and therefore not truly living at all.

"Stillborn" can also be read as a commentary on the nature of poetic form. On the surface, it does not appear to use a formal technique of defamiliariation, but that is the underlying message: The poem is problematically "proper in shape and number and every part" (142). Through this poem, Plath comments on the formal conventions of poetry itself. Her even-lined meter, the stressed and de-emphasized syllables in each line, and the rhyme scheme, are "dead" and "pickled." She links this problem with motherhood by saying that conventional motherhood leaves one distracted and distraction causes one to create dead forms or poems that do not speak to or transform the reader, because they do not speak "of" the poet. The poem also suggests that poetic language was once alive—but when? Perhaps the speaker's poem was once alive while the poet was thinking of it or writing it down – when there was an action taking place keeping them in a state of movement. But once it was set down on paper, they effectively died. So, rather than engaging with defamiliarization in the formal sense, Plath alerts us to the fact that repeating the same pattern, whether poetic or a life-path (motherhood in a particular way) will lead to dull, pickled, dead people and their poems.

Unlike "Stillborn," "Poppies in October" seems to offer a critique of the people who are distracted by automatization, but, also offers a solution by giving us a poem that jars readers out of their own dulled perceptions. In this sense, it forces us to pay attention to itself (and by



extension, the surface of the world) in order to figure out what it is really saying through its experimentation with formal techniques. In "Poppies in October," Plath applies defamiliarization through her use of vibrant imagery and unusual syntax in the hermeneutic qualities of this surreal poem:

Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts.  
Nor the woman in the ambulance  
Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astonishingly ----- (240)

Plath estranges readers with our beliefs about what are considered normal behaviors and reactions to injured people and emergencies. Most people would stop what they were doing and rush over to see if they could help the injured person or the paramedics; however, this speaker is more concerned with how captivated she is by the aesthetic beauty of nature and the call she hears from the "late mouths" of the poppies. Therefore the poem is successful because it causes an intense reaction in readers. The speaker's behavior subverts normal conventions for the sake of realizing, noticing, and having an experience with aesthetic beauty.

At first glance, it is difficult to understand what is going on in this poem or which action the reader should follow – the scene at the ambulance or in nature. This confusion immediately puts readers in a defamiliarized state, forcing them to search for the subject of the poem since it is not clearly named. The reader might only be able to identify the subject in the title, and not in the poem itself, which recalls Shklovsky's comments about Tolstoy, who makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the subject or object being described.

The "blooming" heart draws readers' notice to a couple of things at work in this poem that further intensifies the experience. Once the reader identifies the subject of the poem, what is noticed next is the injured woman whose heart is "bloom[ing] through her coat so astonishingly" (3). This line signals to readers that there are two meanings to the word "blooming." She privileges the blooming of poppies because she is so detached from humanity that she is more interested in the beauty of poppies than in the woman in the ambulance. The aspects of the poem that point to this disregard for the injured woman's blooming heart are in the first few and last lines where the speaker realizes that she is ignoring the woman and focusing on nature. The lines "Even the sun-clouds..." and "Nor the woman..." indicate that nothing, not even the pastoral, beautiful day, or the crisis taking place right in front of her, could distract her from the beauty of the poppies (240). This poem exhibits defamiliarization because the speaker's



experience is one that is so unlikely to occur that readers are forced to set aside their normal inclinations and focus on something that would be completely secondary in life (like looking at flowers during an emergency). The speaker is so desensitized to the physical world that she sees something that would normally produce senses of panic, alarm, or the urge to help in some way, and she is so captivated by nature that she ignores the emergency. She seems to feel this way because she hears a call, an inhuman call from the poppies and is drawn to their call rather than a human call of distress from a woman in an ambulance.

The beauty that is revealed to the speaker is a kind of sublime horror that is astounding and cuts through readers' own value systems. The speaker finds herself addressed by the "late mouths" that "cry open" to her and she is the only one who is receptive to their call (240). The eyes "under bowlers" – a possible reference to English businessmen -- are dulled to the world and cannot see the beauty of the poppies (240). Her reaction to the poppies causes her to cry out in fear and horror "O my God, what am I" – which is an existential response to an utterly inhuman call from nature to the vividness of the natural world (240). At this exact moment, she has a sense of horror when she discovers her own subjectivity. The next question she asks herself is what kind of person has she become since these flowers can cry out to her and speak to her as nothing else can? These feelings of horror at the speaker's subjectivity evoke Proustian defamiliarization since they exist to intensify a reader's experience with the poem and awaken, perhaps, our own sense of horror at our lack of perception of the natural world. The expression, "stop and smell the roses" comes to mind, since paying this kind of close attention to the beauty of nature is the kind of thing that most people probably take for granted in their everyday lives.

This fixation on poppies demonstrates to readers that our everyday perception of the world might be dulled, much like the perception of the people in the poem wearing bowler hats. Two things also cry out to the speaker, but she cannot hear them – the woman in the ambulance and sun-clouds, which are both images of the color red. The clouds are red because the sun is shining through them and the injured woman's heart is bleeding red through her coat. Most poppies are also red in color. Red imagery connotes vividness and intensity, two main concepts in this poem. Red represents life and death – two of the most intense states of being.

The speaker makes a distinction between noticing the sky, in passing, and being struck by the vivid and intense experience she has with the "late mouths" that cry to her. Why are they "late"? Is it because these poppies are blooming later than their season to bloom and that is why



she is so struck by them? Perhaps they are "late" because she is signaling that they are dead or inhuman, therefore reinforcing the wordless, inhuman call that she hears from them. Since they are inhuman as plants, they do not have a voice that humans can understand; in fact, most plants do not utter any sound other than the rustle or whistle of leaves blowing in the wind. Since poppies cannot literally speak or call to her, their call is a voiceless, wordless, and even soundless inhuman call to her that only she can hear. With this scene, Plath could be trying to alert readers to their own dullness of the world and, in a sense, tell readers to "stop and smell the roses" more often in life and pay more attention to aesthetic beauty; to be receptive to the sublime call from beauty, nature, or art.

For thinkers like Shklovsky, shock reaction is a sign that an artwork is successful. He would favor instances like this one, of the sublime, something that is both beautiful and horrifying at the same time. This poem comments on habitualization in the reference to "[the] eyes/dulled to a halt under bowlers" (240). These eyes cannot see the poppies because habit has made the visible world invisible to them. They move through life dulled to the surface of the world, not noticing anything, perhaps unless it is shocking or new and grabs their attention. Here Plath is commenting on society as a whole, being too automated to notice art in the world, which is why she uses defamiliarization to make familiar things (like domestic relationships) new and intense for readers.

A large body of Plath's poetry deals with familiar topics within the domestic world – such as marriage, family, and parenthood. She applies strange, abstract, and conceptual descriptions to these domestic settings and relationships in order to force readers to think differently about them. In each of our lives, we live in domestic settings and have or at least have had domestic relationships with our parents, siblings, and spouses. The parent/child and husband/wife dynamics are nothing new to us because everyone has a mother and father and can identify with the feelings that accompany those relationships. Our domestic relationships are all unique, and Plath's domestic poetic framework is similarly unique to the various speakers and addressees of her poems. These relationships are also identifiable because they represent universal bonds between familial relations. However, Plath describes domestic relationships in her poetry in such a violent manner that it defamiliarizes the reader with traditional connotations of those relationships and re-presents them in an intensified, amplified way that sheds light on deeper issues. The reader has the option of either empathizing with the speaker because the poems



evoke something that is true and resonates with her, or sympathizing with the speaker as an outsider who does not share similar perceptions or feelings about her own domestic relationships.

In this next section, I will focus on how Plath presents 1950s American domesticity in a violent manner to change readers' perceptions and perhaps redirect their behavior. She speaks both to those impacted by and those who fought against rigid and oppressive social conventions. This section will emphasize how Plath uses defamiliarization and other techniques to achieve an intensity of reader-response and experience. I focus specifically on the poems about motherhood, marriage, and those that evoke the parent/child relationship from the perspective of the parent to the child and also from the perspective of a grown-up child in reference to his or her parent. I will be comparing and contrasting the ways in which each one approaches this topic.

### **Problems with Motherhood, Marriage, and Parent-Child Relationships**

Like Tolstoy, many of Plath's poems are strange, abstract, and conceptual, yet also very visual, given their sensory weight. An example of this kind of poem is "Mirror," which is true to perception and not to knowledge. The goal of such poems is for expectations to be shattered, for readers to be surprised, in order to make things new by making our experience fresh. "Mirror" is written from the perspective of a personified mirror that is reflecting the image of its female owner throughout her life and commenting on what it sees, from *its* point of view. Plath reminds us of the philosophical questions raised by mirrors and reflection. The symbolism in "Mirror" demonstrates the mimetic qualities of poetry to life, if one reads the mirror to be a symbol for poetry. Thinking critically about the long debate over whether art reflects life or life reflects art, this poem shows how both can be true since the mirror reflects life, and the poem can be also be seen as a mirror that reflects art. Literature is a faithful mirror of the world and of life since it reflects life.

Conversely, anti-mimesis explains that the self-conscious aim of life is to be able to express oneself through art.<sup>6</sup> For thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, artists are imitators merely mirroring what they see in the world and poetry itself is an imitation of the surface of the natural world. Plato in fact defines art *as* imitation.<sup>7</sup> Plath has gone beyond mimesis and has personified this mirror. She has given it a voice in order to shatter our expectations of the

<sup>6</sup> Theory developed by Oscar Wilde in *The Decay of Lying*.

<sup>7</sup> From Plato's *The Republic*, Book X.



functions of this object and sees the deeper message of her poem. Like her use of abstract and conceptual imagery in "Mirror," Plath uses similarly unusual imagery in her domestic poems to defamiliarize the reader.

To provide some background for the kind of political and social climate that Sylvia Plath's domestic writing came from, one must consider the development of modern feminism that was taking place in the fifties and sixties. In *The Feminist Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan writes about the yearning that she and other women feel for something "more" than the roles of housewife and mother could fulfill. She defines women's unhappiness as "the problem that has no name" and then attacks the image of women or the "feminine mystique" during that time because it holds women back from discovering their true identities (Friedan 36). She places blame on an idealized image of femininity that encourages women to confine themselves to these two roles: sacrificing career aspirations and goals. She believes that women are victims of a false belief system that assigns identity to them based on their lives with their husbands and children.

In the American fifties, many believed that a woman's proper place was in the home, providing care for her husband and children. There were certain pressures and expectations on women to fulfill such a life for their spouses and families and some women rebelled from this structure, seeking a life of more freedom and career options. Friedan comments on the content of women's magazines and advertising at the time and says: "The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home" (36). She is pointing to the external and internal pressures on women to live up to this idealized image of the perfect woman. Plath likewise rejects this image of women and makes her point clear in her domestic poetry which gives a voice to this woman who is unsatisfied with her life and does not have a vehicle for expressing such thoughts.

Plath and other Confessional Poets, such as Anne Sexton, have been called feminist writers for their controversial subject matter and groundbreaking social commentary. Plath's writing falls between the first and second waves of modern feminism.<sup>8</sup> Several of her poems

---

<sup>8</sup> The Feminist movement is divided into three waves. The first wave, beginning in 1848, focused on suffrage and equal rights. The second wave, beginning in the 1960's, deals with the inequalities of laws and the role of women in society. Second wave feminists view patriarchy as the oppressor who dictates how human relationships in society are arranged. They seek to extinguish traditional gender roles. The third wave, beginning in the 1980's and early



evoke unconventional sentiments regarding domestic life (like in *The Feminine Mystique*), such as the pressures that male-dominated society put on women to get married, have children, and be homemakers. In poems such as "Childless Woman," "Three Women," and "Words for a Nursery," Plath uses defamiliarization—in particular, through the use of unusual and violent imagery — to break down social taboos and express resistance to the pressures of family life in the middle-class home. Her poems often depict seemingly normal family situations and relationships, such as a mother and her newborn baby, alongside imagery that contains suffering, pain, isolation, and violence.

Plath's only dramatic piece, "Three Women," set in the maternity ward of a hospital, encompasses larger themes of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. Plath uses three voices, or speakers, to demonstrate the complexities of the maternal struggle and to express simultaneously some of the competing thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that these women encounter. As Leah Souffrant writes in her essay, "Mother Delivers Experiment: Poetry of Motherhood: Plath, Derricotte, Zucker, and Holbrook:" The voices alternate... the first voice assert[s], "I am ready," and the third voice insist[s], "I wasn't ready," and, "I am not ready for anything to happen." Maternal ambivalence is embodied in triple-voiced verse (Souffrant 28).

The first voice, presumably a married woman who gives birth in the hospital, rejoices in the beauty of motherhood; she is "ready" (177), "patient" (176), and "astonished at fertility" (176). The second woman is a secretary who has been hardened by the world, a little more bitter and cynical toward motherhood since she has just had another miscarriage – "...This is a disease I carry home, this is a death" (177). She is more pessimistic and nihilistic about pregnancy since so many have resulted in death – "...Again, this is a death. /Is it the air, /The particles of destruction I suck up?" (177). The third speaker is a college student who is scared and not ready for motherhood. She gives birth to a baby from an unwanted pregnancy that results from her being raped and ends up giving her baby up for adoption.

These views are not just the views of three different voices that represent three different people; reading them as representative in this way would be to fall into the biographical reading of Plath's poetry; rather, they represent points of view that might be held by a particular mother

---

1990's, includes elements of queer theory, women-of-color, post-colonialism, critical theory, transnationalism, ecofeminism, and new feminist theory. Humm, Maggie, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1995, p. 251; Walker, Rebecca, 'Becoming the Third Wave' in *Ms.* (January/February, 1992) pp. 39-41



at different points in one of the days, weeks, or years of her life. They may be those of any woman who has encountered pregnancy or the magnetic pull towards motherhood. At times the woman feels happy and ready for it, and at other times she thinks of the worst that might happen, while at other times she is scared and her fear turns into serious doubt. These three voices intersect at times, which produces a unique blending effect for readers. This simultaneous three-voiced perspective on motherhood defamiliarizes readers with traditional connotations of the same and replaces them with new associations that open up the subject to all sorts of new perspectives and interpretations. Her even, seven-lined meter demonstrates uniformity and pattern that unites the voices together.

In fact, since names, dates, and times are never stated about the women and their visits to the maternity ward, it is altogether possible that these three women are either all checked in to the hospital at the same time, sitting in the same room conversing with each other, or that they are in fact all the same woman who is coming to the hospital at different times in her life. It is possible that the third voice is the woman as a young girl who has been raped and had a terrible experience giving up her baby for adoption and then later in life as a secretary (second voice), she decides to give motherhood another shot since she feels that her first experience was stolen away from her. Then, after multiple miscarriages, just as she is about to give up entirely with trying to become a mother, the woman (now the first voice) gets pregnant and makes it all the way though her term to deliver a beautiful, healthy baby when she is finally "ready."

In the following lines, Plath uses defamiliarization to point to the reductive and dehumanizing experience of motherhood, and in so doing, challenges the widespread assumption that the experience of new motherhood is one of bliss and joy. In the voice of the first woman who has just given birth, Plath writes:

Who is he, this blue, furious boy,  
 Shiny and strange, as if he had hurtled from a star?  
 He is looking so angrily!  
 He flew into the room, a shriek at his heel.  
 The blue color pales. He is human after all.  
 A red lotus opens in its bowl of blood;  
 They are stitching me up with silk, as if I were a material. (181)

Childbirth is a beautiful instance of new life, but these lines are jarring and unusual, disturbing the reader's sensibilities by their depiction of both child and mother in inhuman terms: the boy is born blue, but "the blue color pales." We then learn that the narrator feels relief that "He is



human after all," since earlier she thought that he came hurtling "from a star" like a meteor or extra terrestrial. She is thankful that her son is in fact alive, and human; however, she associates herself with something inhuman, such as fabric material. She feels as though her body is as delicate yet utilitarian as silk fabric that can be ripped apart and then sewn back together. However, when fabric is sewn, the stitches remain, leaving forever a sign of the initial damage. In this instance, the woman identifies with her own objectification by realizing that she will always have a scar from the damage that is caused by labor and she will never be the same again (which alters her sense identity).

This woman also describes herself by using disturbing visual imagery from both the natural and artificial worlds to enhance the message that giving birth is paradoxical: one gives life while also violating and endangering her own life. The poem's speaker depicts the vagina as a red lotus that "opens in its bowl of blood" (181). This red imagery evokes the very real connection between the blood of birth and the blood of death, reminding readers that a woman can easily bleed to death while giving birth.

Plath further defamiliarizes form by depicting the experience of giving birth that only tangentially appears to be a description of giving birth. In other words, she describes an experience without using the terms one would normally think to associate with it. This technique forces readers to be aware of the feelings of motherly disjunction. The poem uses synecdoche by first describing the woman's vagina, or "red lotus" in a "bowl of blood," as being ripped apart as if it, or she herself, or her womanhood, "were a material" (181). This association calls attention to the way that the experience of giving birth reduces her womanhood and humanity to a cloth, a dead material, in need of repair. While the first few moments that a mother has with her newborn baby are ideally her happiest, most beautiful and treasured memories of her life, Plath instead depicts this scene in non-linear and disjointed terms, suggesting that the central experience for the new mother is one of loss: loss of unity of her "self" and loss of her sense of humanity (which one might think of as being defined by a unified sense of self).

The connection made between birth and death in the section above recurs in a section spoken by the second voice, who is a barren woman staying in the hospital after another failed pregnancy. In the following stanza, Plath combines formal and conceptual elements of defamiliarization in order to align the speaker with the doctor's tool, moving seamlessly between self-description of the speaker as an object being affected by this instrument and then as the



object itself:

I feel it enter me, cold, alien, like an instrument.  
 And that mad, hard face at the end of it, that O-mouth  
 Open in its gape of perpetual grieving.  
 It is she that drags the blood-black sea around  
 Month after month, with its voices of failure.  
 I am helpless as the sea at the end of her string.  
 I am restless. Restless and useless. I, too, create corpses. (182)

In these lines, the speaker literally experiences the feeling of the metal instrument inside of her (which, the reader can deduce is the experience of cleaning out the uterus after the miscarriage). This woman has to face the disappointment for failing to successfully carry a baby to full term, which is, in part, shaped by a world that determines her value insofar as she fulfills her role as a mother: she is "useless" because she "too create[s] corpses." By using the word "too" here, the poem aligns the woman with the doctor's inhuman metal tool, the tool that is used to empty the uterus.

The divide between subject and object is further complicated by the personification of the doctor's metal instrument, which is said to have a mouth "open in its gape of perpetual grieving" (182). This "perpetual grieving" could be a reference to the other women who have come to the hospital with miscarriages and have had similar procedures. By shifting the "perpetual grief" of all of the women onto the instrument, this second woman connects with a communal sense of loss, but one that is silent because miscarriage is the kind of thing that one does not speak of in polite society (even today). The "voices of failure" are not, in this case, the voices of women, but rather, voices of the instrument. By placing the grief in an inanimate object, not only can the speaker and other fictional women in the hospital feel free to identify with it, but also the readers of the poem can as well. This dehumanization of the mother recalls the first voice's experience of loss, helplessness, and dehumanization, and reminds the reader that dehumanization can characterize both fulfilled and miscarried forms of motherhood. In this sense, Plath is reminding us that these poems are not just about single women with single experiences, and this helps to support my argument that it doesn't make sense to read Plath's domestic poems in biographical terms.

All three of the voices in "Three Women" are connected and unified by the shared idea that the experiences of birth, miscarriage, and rape are moments on a death-birth continuum that characterizes the domestic. The third experience of motherhood represented by the poem



(motherhood that results from rape), is also one of alienation from the "self" and the woman's identity. The third woman sees a reflection of her face in a pool but then tells us that it was "not mine" (177). Her experience with being raped has caused her to lose her identity, her intersubjectivity, and her ability to recognize herself as the owner of her body since her authority over her own body has been stolen and violated by another.

Again, Plath approaches this difficult topic through silence, evoking, using metonymy, but not outright stating or explaining—another characteristic of her use of defamiliarization. The girl's account of her experience suggests and insinuates rape, but only through symbols and coded words that mask the experience so that it is safe to remember and talk about: "doves and words / Stars and showers of gold—conceptions, conceptions!" (178). These lines use defamiliarization powerfully because they are literally unreadable, just as rape is unspeakable. It seems difficult to determine what these lines suggest, or to translate them into rational thought. They defy rationality in the same way that rape silences the victim.

However, the following section suggests that the girl had an encounter with a man whom she thought she could trust:

And all I could see was dangers: doves and words,  
Stars and showers of gold – conceptions, conceptions!  
I remember a white, cold wing

And the great swan, with its terrible look,  
Coming at me, like a castle, from the top of the river.  
There is a snake in swans.  
He glided by; his eye had a black meaning.  
I saw the world in it – small, mean and black,  
Every little word hooked to every little word, and act to act.  
A hot blue day had bubbled into something. (177-178)

The man was like a "great swan" to her, but she quickly found out that "there is a snake in swans" – meaning that not everything that is great and beautiful is honest and good, that evil lurks inside even the most beautiful creatures. The act of rape is also suggested by an oblique reference to Zeus, who raped Leda in the form of a swan.<sup>9</sup> By describing the swan's eye, which "had a black meaning," the speaker joins the concept of rape with that of language and helps us

---

<sup>9</sup> This could also be a reference to William Butler Yeats' poem "Leda and the Swan" (1924), which is also based on the Greek myth of Zeus and Leda.



to make sense of the unreadable lines above ("doves and words..."). The line, "Stars and showers of gold" could be a reference to the Greek mythological story of Zeus and Danae, the daughter of Acrisius, who was held captive in a tower where Zeus (who was in love with her) came and visited her in the form of showers of gold (Plath 178; Ramakrishnan 175). A painting by Jan Gossaert's depicts Danae being impregnated by Zeus by this same image of a shower of gold stars (181). This imagery could be seen as "a sexual or procreative image of phallus casting seed," which would explain the connotations with being raped or unwillingly impregnated (181).

The alignment of words and actions is characteristic of Proustian defamiliarization in this poem because readers might not generally associate with the kind of physical pain the speaker is experiencing from hearing her baby cry and squirm with the kind of physical pain that is caused by hooks. The speaker either cannot remember or does not want to explicitly state the details of her rape in readable or interpretable language because language that conveys understandable meaning is the language of the familiar domestic experiences that Plath is defamiliarizing with her poetry. The speaker rejects the use of familiar language (words to describe the rape that readers could logically understand) and instead uses images that we would not typically associate with rape ("Stars and showers of gold..."). She is refusing to name the experience of rape itself and thus again combines a conceptual defamiliarization of domestic issues within the formal techniques of poetic defamiliarization.

Familiar domestic meaning is further rejected by the poem with the alignment of words and actions by each woman in reference to her baby's cry: "every little word hooked to every little word, and act to act" (Third Voice) (178); "her cries are hooks that catch and grate like cats/ It is by these hooks that she climbs to my notice" (Second Voice) (182); and "One cry. It is the hook I hang on" (First Voice) (183). Each instance of hooks attaching words to actions, demonstrates Proustian defamiliarization because it provides a vivid image for readers. The use of the word "hook" allows readers to picture a woman holding onto a hook or a hook digging into her arm. It instantly creates an image which is a powerful metaphor for feeling. The kinds of forms and conventions that Plath is playing with in the above poems are also present in her poems about marriage and husband and wife relationships, such as "Pursuit," "Ode for Ted," "The Other," "Zoo Keeper's Wife," "Words for a Nursery," and "Event."

Just as she aligns pregnancy in the third woman's voice with unwanted sexual pursuit, in this next poem she defamiliarizes romantic courtship by calling attention to the unpleasant



aspects of its "passion." "Pursuit," the speaker is a woman who is being pursued by a panther-like man in a dark, enchanted forest. The poem describes the passionate chase that is emblematic of romantic courtship. The man is represented as a panther, which is an animal that connotes ravenous lust, power, and mystery. The woman retreats from the man in fear of being hurt; however, he is too strong and she eventually succumbs to him because she has no choice. She runs from him and he quickly catches up to her: "On fluent haunches, [he] keeps my speed....And I run flaring in my skin; /What lull, what cool can lap me in/When burns and brands that yellow gaze?" (22-23).

The poem captures the paradoxical situation of a woman being trapped unpleasantly by her own desire and her disregard for what happens to other women when they give in to such desire: "In the wake of this fierce cat, /Kindled like torches for his joy, /Charred and ravened women lie, /Become his starving body's bait" (22). However, the woman is entranced by "the black marauder" (22) whose "ardor snares [her]" (23), and whose "voice waylays [her]" as she becomes a victim of him and her own sexuality (23). She speaks of a bloodthirsty and unquenchable hunger he has for her in these lines: "Doom consummates that appetite... hungry, hungry, those taut thighs" (22). In order to try to stop him she "hurl[s] [her] heart" at him and "to quench his thirst [she] squander[s] blood," but it is not enough, "he eats, and still his need seeks food/Compels a total sacrifice" – she must give herself completely to him in order to satisfy him (23). The woman quickly realizes that he has put her under a "trance," and she has become animalistically lustful too – "appalled by secret want" (23). She is shocked by this newfound lust within her and "shut[s] [her] doors on that dark guilt" (23). In order to escape, she bolts all the doors even though the panther (and her own lust) is treading close behind, climbing the stairs to get her.

Describing the male as a panther in pursuit of a woman is a successful metaphor using defamiliarization to show readers the toxicity and vulnerability of romantic relationships, from the woman's perspective. In this cat-and-mouse game, the man is pursuing the woman for purely animalistic and lustful reasons – he wants to completely consume her body and soul. Plath has portrayed the female as the victim of a wild animal who is hungry for blood as a vampirous panther "crying: blood, let blood be split" yet "hauled by love" (22).

Enchantment is usually an enticing, luring, and mysterious aspect of romantic pursuit, which draws in many victims. In "Pursuit," Plath rejects enchantment because of the role it plays



in bewitching and falsely misleading people into romantic pursuits. The actions of the enchanted forest seem to dictate the actions of these two people, and seem to be on his side, helping him along, or under his control. In the beginning, "his greed has set the woods aflame" (3), and she starts to run but is "flayed by thorns," and has to "trek the rocks" (22). Then the "hills hatch menace, spawning shade; / [and] midnight cloaks the sultry grove" (22), making it harder for her to see, putting up "snarled thickets" over her eyes (23). Once he "waylays" her and "spells a trance," "the gutted forest falls to ash" (23). These actions of the forest demonstrate that he is so powerful that he is in control of the forces of nature and is using them to capture her.

The formal elements of the poem help to defamiliarize the reader by staging the romance in opposition to the sweetly lyrical and melodic qualities characteristic of conventional romance. The half-rhymes allow no rest for the reader – they feel the immediacy of the chase, and the hard gutterals of "From gaunt hemlock, rooks croak havoc," which cannot be spoken quickly (22). These words have a rough, commanding tone, much like the many end-stopped lines. Each stanza has twelve lines except the last which only has two lines that each repeats the word "stairs." These last two lines suggest that the hunt is over because they break the pattern of the rest of the poem and repeat the same word. The final word being repeated signals futility for the woman.

Describing the woman and man as animals in a forest uses defamiliarization to help readers see the truths and realities of the situation. This dehumanization of the couple reminds the reader that this experience characterizes any relationship that is lustful and animalistic at its core and therefore is just as volatile as a panther pursuing its prey in the forest. In this sense, Plath reminds us that these poems are not just about this one couple, but about universal relationships that share these elements. Women often fall into traps by being mesmerized and entranced by powerful and ultimately abusive men. They often feel helpless in finding a way out of a bad relationship (like the speaker of the poem). Plath suppresses traditional ideas of courtship which are happy and joyous and inserts her own view of what really exists at the core of intense romantic relationships: lust, greed, power, and victimization.

Much like the commentary in "Pursuit" about the toxicity of romantic courtship, Plath has written several poems that evoke dysfunctional parent-child relationships, from both sides of the relationship. To begin with, the poems written from the perspective of a parent to their child (like "Three Women") are of some of the strongest in intensity because they express fear,



ambivalence, and negative feelings about parenthood. Some of the most vivid of Plath's poems about a mother and her child are "Edge," "Morning Song," and "Nick and the Candlestick." The latter two poems are written from the perspective of a new mother bringing home her newborn baby. In the following lines from "Nick and the Candlestick," Plath uses defamiliarization a number of ways:

I am a miner. The light burns blue.  
Waxy stalactites  
Drip and thicken, tears

The earthen womb  
Exudes from its dead boredom.  
Black bat airs

Wrap me, raggy shawls,  
Cold homicides.  
They weld to me like plums. (240-241)

First, the imagery and descriptions are of a mother entering her newborn baby's room in the middle of the night to nurse him presumably for the first time. Plath begins with an image of a womb, an "earthen womb." This image gives readers a vision of the woman's body as earth – which is a more traditional connotation about the female body, yet the womb is said to be tearing from "its dead boredom." This line tells readers that the mother figure is bored and ambivalent toward motherhood. She describes the room as though it was an "old cave of calcium" (241) and she was "a miner" entering it to go to work (240). By describing the speaker as a miner, Plath suggests that there is an element of danger to what she's about to do. Also, the fact that she is going into a stifling and dark space is a metaphor for how she will feel while nursing. The room is filled with "icicles" (241), "bats," "newts" (241), and "stalactites," which are not traditional items found in or associated with a baby's nursery. Also, the presence of "stalactites" plays with temporality since they take many years to form, whereas, a fetus only takes nine months to develop. This imagery suggests that the nursery is not a warm, happy place filled with love and nurturing, but is, in fact, a barren, cold, and dark (and possibly evil) place. Perhaps the presence of stalactites makes the woman feel old because she has lived through their formation and the formation and birth of her child. The image of stalactites represents old life and the image of the newborn represents new life, while the woman hangs in the balance. This reversal of traditional



connotations shows readers in a strange and unusual way that reveals the mother's true feelings upon entering her baby's room.

Secondly, Plath defamiliarizes readers with traditional connotations of a mother's relationship with her baby, which are similarly warm, loving, and nurturing. In the following lines, the mother describes nursing her baby in a violent, strange, and religious way:

A vice of knives,  
A piranha  
Religion, drinking  
Its first communion out of my live toes.

The candle  
Gulps and recovers its small altitude. (241)

Describing the baby as a piranha "drinking" and "gulping" its "first communion" from its mother gives readers a sense that the mother feels like she's being attacked by a vicious, sadistic fish with sharp teeth instead of her newborn baby nursing. Saying that the "communion" is coming out of her "live toes," suggests that she feels like he's taking everything out of her and she can feel it all the way down in her toes (241). These images are striking and haunting to readers and effectively jar them out of their normal way of thinking about the experience of nursing a newborn baby.

The poem's references to religion suggest ritual, ceremony, and reverence that are unusual references to make about a newborn baby and the act of breastfeeding, therefore defamiliarizing the reader further with this scene. In the final line of the poem, the speaker refers to her child as "the baby in the barn," which is clearly an association with the baby Jesus who was born in a barn in Jerusalem (242). She revels in awe of him saying, "O love, how did you get here? / O embryo" (241). This question provides another suggestion that he is the baby Jesus who was born out of wedlock to the Virgin Mary.

These references to Christ suggest that this baby is God-like; however, the child seems like more of an interruption to life than the giver of life or the savior of life. The speaker's descriptions of the room upon entering it with trepidation tell readers that she is entering a place that she really does not want to go. The formal aspects of the poem, such as the brief line number in each stanza (possibly suggesting tip-toeing), and the dark imagery suggest that the baby is interrupting her life that could otherwise be spent outside of the cave of a nursery.



The title names the child "Nick" which could be a reference to "Old Nick" -- a term for the devil. These contrasting identities of the child signal to readers that the mother does not see him as a normal baby, but as either a God-like or devil-like creature. She seems to be conflicted about her feelings toward motherhood and her child, unable to decide if her baby is a god or a devil because one minute she is recoiling from her baby in fear and the next she is in awe of him. Perhaps her reverence is a guilt-reaction to the feelings of distaste that she has for him. Either way, the readers are defamiliarized because our instinctive ideas about motherhood are that the mother should be unconditionally happy about having a child, not feeling disgusted, tethered down, or consumed by him.

All of these references to divinity and mythology defamiliarize readers with this relationship because the speaker has a very different image of her father than most. The speaker is impressed by him, but more importantly she feels "married to shadow" and tied to this obligation she feels to preserve and resurrect him. She says, "thirty years now I have labored...I am none the wiser," indicating that she should know better than to spend her life devoted to this lost cause (129). But at the end of the poem she says, "No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel/On the black stones of the landing," indicating that she has given up her idealistic dream that he will somehow, someday come back to life and stand back up (130). She ends the poem with a somber, reflective tone of someone who has come to terms with their loss. By grieving, the speaker is transformed from the worker ant into a human with "ears" that hear a change in the wind (130). The change in the wind suggests a change within her.

All of the poems I have examined convey various senses of defamiliarization at work in Plath's domestic poetry. She uses various literary techniques, poetic strategies, and elements to create an unusual, unfamiliar, extreme, or unthinkable setting for domestic relationships in order to estrange the reader with our automated responses to such relationships. In doing so, Plath effectively forces the reader to jump out of his or her everyday reactions to artwork and see things in a vibrant, new, and intense way. She suppresses external connotations and associations with familiar things in order to change reader's perceptions of the same because she, like Shklovsky, believes that "worn-out and devalued combinations of motifs and devices have to be broken up and recombined in order to generate new perception when they themselves are 'familiar'" (Crawford, 211).



Along those lines, it is my sincere hope that the criticism on Plath steers clear of the same "worn-out and devalued" interpretations of Plath's work. To read her work in a strictly biographical sense, where the poet *is* the speaker of the poem, offers nothing more than limitations on the artwork. The poems can and very well stand on their own as individual works of art that do not need to have the poet's life read into them in order to gain meaning. Perhaps Plath's main underlying message to readers is to urge them to reconsider their own conventional assumptions about the domestic along these lines. The reader might go about doing this, given the model I have provided of Plath's poetry, by subverting his or her initial reactions and thoughts about the themes and issues being discussed and open his or her mind to allow for new possibilities, interpretations, and meanings to be taken out of the text. And also, the reader should not limit the poetry by reading it *through* the poet's life but rather should let the work stand alone, free from bias or misled interpretations.



## Works Cited

- Crawford, Lawrence. "Viktor Shklovskij: Différance in Defamiliarization." *Comparative Literature* 36.3 (1984): 209-19. Print.
- Crowquill, Alfred, and Thomas Nelson & Sons. *Nursery Rhymes*. London; Edinburgh ; New York: T. Nelson & Sons, 1880. Print.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963. Print.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. "Making Things Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device." *Representations* 56. (1996): 8-28. Print.
- Gill, Jo. *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print.
- Kirsch, Adam. *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets : Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, and Sylvia Plath*. 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005. Print.
- Maryon, Herbert. "The Colossus of Rhodes." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 76 (1956): 68-86. Print.
- Ramakrishnan, E. V. *Crisis and Confession: Studies in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath*. Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1988. Print.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971. Print.
- . *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, Ed. Frieda Hughes. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004. Print.
- . *Crossing the Water: Transitional Poems*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971. Print.
- . *The Colossus & Other Poems*. New York: Knopf, 1962. Print.
- . *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes. London: Faber & Faber. New York: Harper & Row, 1981. Print.
- . *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose, and Diary Excerpts*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. Print.
- . *Winter Trees*. London: Faber and Faber, 1971. New York: Harper & Row, 1972. Print.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Rosalind and Helen, a modern eclogue, with other poems*. London: C. and J. Ollier. 1819. Print.
- Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique." *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. Ed. David H. Richter. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989. Print.



Shklovskii, Viktor. *Theory of Prose*. Elmwood Park, IL, Dalkey Archive Press, 1990. Print.

Souffrant, Leah. "Mother Delivers Experiment: Poetry Of Motherhood: Plath, Derricotte, Zucker, And Holbrook." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 37.3/4 (2009): 25-41. *Academic Search Premier*. EBSCO. Web. 14 June 2010. Print/

Van Dyne, Susan R., and Inc NetLibrary. *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993. Print.

#### Works Consulted

Bawer, Bruce. "Sylvia Plath and the Poetry of Confession." *The New Criterion* 9 (1991): 18-27. Print.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New York: Knopf, 1953. Print.

Beer, John B. *Post-Romantic Consciousness: Dickens to Plath*. Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.

Blake, David Haven. "Public Dreams: Berryman, Celebrity, and the Culture of Confession." *American Literary History* 13.4 (2001): 716-36. Print.

Christodoulides, Nephie. *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking: Motherhood in Sylvia Plath's Work*. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2005. Print.

Dobbs, Jeannine. "Viciousness in the Kitchen: Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry" *Modern Language Studies* 7.2 (1977): 11-25. Print.

Humm, Maggie. 1995. *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, p. 251. Print.

Kalstone, David. *Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. Print.

Katz, Lisa. "The Space of Motherhood: Sylvia Plath's 'Morning Song' and 'Three Women'." *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 4.2 (2002): 113. Print.

Middlebrook, Diane Wood, et al. *Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985. Print.

Perloff, Marjorie G. "A Ritual for being Born Twice: Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar" *Contemporary Literature* 13.4 (1972): 507-22. Print.

Phillips, Robert S. *The Confessional Poets*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973. Print.



- Plunkett, Felicity. "Barren Women: Figurative Babies and the Spectre of Motherhood." *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* 71 (2007): 21. Print.
- Ramazani, Jahan. "Daddy, I have had to Kill You: Plath, Rage, and the Modern Elegy." *PMLA* 108.5 (1993): 1142-56. Print.
- Rosenthal, M. L. *Our Life in Poetry: Selected Essays and Reviews*. New York, N.Y.: Persea Books, 1991. Print.
- Scigaj, L. M. "Voice and Vision: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath." *American Literature a Journal of Literary History, Criticism and Bibliography* 73.4 (2001): 881. Print.
- Simpson, Louis Aston Marantz. *A Revolution in Taste: Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Lowell*. New York: MacMillan, 1978. Print.
- Smith, Pamela A., and Sylvia Plath. "The Unitive Urge in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath." *The New England Quarterly* 45.3 (1972): 323-39. Print.
- Strangeways, Al, and Sylvia Plath. "the Boot in the Face: The Problem of the Holocaust in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath" *Contemporary Literature* 37.3 (1996): 370-90. Print.
- Swiontkowski, Gale. *Imagining Incest: Sexton, Plath, Rich, and Olds on Life with Daddy*. Selinsgrove Pa.; London; Cranbury, NJ: Susquehanna University Press; Associated University Presses, 2003. Print.
- Walker, Rebecca, "Becoming the Third Wave" in *Ms.* (January/February, 1992) pp. 39-41. Print.
- Wisker, Gina. "Viciousness in the Kitchen: Sylvia Plath's Gothic." *Gothic Studies* 6.1 (2004): 103-117. Print.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Decay of Lying*. Haldeman-Julius Co., 1922. Print.
- Wurst, Gayle. *Voice and Vision: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. Geneva, Switzerland: Slatkine. 1999. Print.

