"Through the Beautiful Red": The Use of the Color Red as the Triple-Goddess in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*
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The color red appears in nineteen of the *Ariel* poems. These nineteen "red poems" and their placement in the collection create a pattern of purification and rebirth from which a single character emerges.¹ The first four red poems deal with the female body. The next eight red poems connect the female body with the body of mother earth, specifically in night or pre-dawn settings. The next six of the nineteen red poems are poems that deal with forgetfulness, the death of the physical body, and purging of personal history in order to be reborn. The last red poem, "Stings," completes the cycle of female rebirth and purification in these *Ariel* poems. Red is Sylvia Plath's "Triple-Goddess."

To understand the Triple-Goddess, we must first look back to Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*. Despite the controversy surrounding Graves's research, there is no doubt about his influence on Sylvia Plath.² Susan Bassnett writes in *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry* that 'Graves' book appealed both because of its celebration of poetry and of the idea of the poet but also because of his investigations into the mythical sources of the creation of poetry" (58).

While connecting obscure myths, beginning with the legend of Jason, the Argonauts and the Golden Fleece, Graves aims to unite different religious cults through matriarchy. Graves states his thesis: "the language of poetic myth ancienly current in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess, or Muse, some of them dating from the Old Stone Age, and that this remains the language of true poetry—'true' in the nostalgic modern sense of 'the unimprovable original, not as a synthetic substitute' (Graves 9-10) and claims the "function of poetry [as] religious invocation of the Muse" (Graves 14). Graves mythologizes all women into the Triple-Goddess

² As quoted in *Graves and the Goddess: Essays on Robert Graves's The White Goddess* edited by Ian Firla and Grevel Lindop: "According to Keith Sagar, the single most important influence which Ted Hughes offered to the intellectual development of Sylvia Plath as their relationship began in 1956 was a 'fully worked-out belief in the poetic mythology of Robert Graves's The White Goddess'" (7).
He believes that the Triple Goddess is the source of poetic force.

Graves’s Triple Goddess is “a lovely, slender woman with a hooked nose, deathly pale face, lips red as rowan-berries, startling blue eyes and long fair hair; she will suddenly transform herself into sow, mare, bitch, vixen, she-ass, weasel, serpent, owl, she-wolf, tigress, mermaid, or loathsome hag” (Graves 24). He claims that the "moon-trinity…[means] the New Moon is the white goddess of birth and growth; the Full Moon, the red goddess of love and battle; the Old Moon, the black goddess of death and divination” (Graves 70). The Maiden is associated with the New Moon, new beginnings, birth and youth. In iconography she is connected to moths, butterflies, bees and frogs which become symbolic of her uterus and her potential for motherhood. She is not the pregnant mother, but the virgin. She is spring, the start of the new cycle of seasons. The Mother is birth and fertility. Ripeness, stability, power, parenthood and life. She is also the Full Moon, the pregnant body. She is summer. The Crone is wisdom, repose, death. The end of cycles. As Graves writes, "The Night Mare is one of the cruelest aspects of the White Goddess. Her nests, when one comes across them in dreams, lodged in rock-clefts or the branches of enormous hollow yews, are built of carefully chosen twigs, lined with white horse-hair and the plumage of prophetic birds and littered with the jaw-bones and entrails of poets… Her young ones also suck up blood” (Graves 26). Her iconography is usually birds of prey and snakes. She is the Old Moon. Susan Bassnett agrees with the appeal of the goddess for Plath that Graves establishes:

She is not constant and fixed but fluid and in perpetual movement, symbolized by the phases of the moon. The moon goddess is, simultaneously, goddess of three stages of female existence…Her element is the sea, she controls the tides and all liquids. She rules the Underworld and concerns of birth, procreation and death; she rules the Earth and concerns of the changing seasons; she rules the Sky and concerns of the changing moon. (Bassnett 58)

In Ariel, Plath links images of water (the sea), death, hooks, body parts, arrows, and the natural world (bees, trees, flowers) to Graves's concept of the Triple-Goddess in the red poems.

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3 From here on out I will use Triple Goddess instead of White Goddess despite the fact that the terms are synonymous. Triple Goddess is more useful to me in the distinctions that I find in Plath’s poetry. Graves preferred White Goddess.
She arranges these poems within the collection in a way that highlights this connection and emphasizes the continual process of rebirth and purification.

The first use of the color red, then, fittingly appears in "Lady Lazarus," the ultimate poem of death and rebirth. According to Susan Van Dyne, in this poem Plath "disassociates the speaker from her body" so that the speaker is able to reinvent her body and to be in control of its recreation (89). She mentions no less than 14 different body parts as she is made into a spectacle by the male figures (circus master, doctor, enemy). She prods the "peanut-crunching crowd" (26) to watch her suffer as she reconstructs herself. This speaker knows that "Dying / Is an art" that she does "exceptionally well" and she dies and is reborn at least three times in the poem (43-45). Judith Kroll writes in *Chapters in a Mythology* that "Plath associated the risk of death with the shedding of the past and the achievement of a state of transcendence" (171). So then, each death the speaker undergoes is the death of a false self that must be shed into order to create a true self that is "The pure gold baby" (69). The baby is an image of the Maiden, as the "grave cave" (17) and the action of "pick[ing] the worms off…like sticky pearls" (42) is the Crone. When the speaker claims "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (82-84) we know that she has reinvented herself yet again, and is ready to face the world with fierceness.6

The body is equally important in "Tulips," "The Jailor," and "Cut." In "Tulips" we are condemned to the white setting of a hospital room. The speaker is drugged and feels as if "the water went over my head," (27) implying a type of baptism by medication. She claims "I have never been so pure" (28), which links her back to the gold baby of "Lady Lazarus." But the tulips are "too red" (36) and "their redness talks to my wound" (39). The speaker claims they are "dangerous animals" (58), "opening like the mouths of some great African cat" (59). The speaker discovers the tulips to be vibrant and strong. Tulips are flowers that bloom from bulbs, from the dirt ground of Mother earth. As the speaker observes the flowers, they give her their strength. She describes her heart as a blossoming flower, "it opens and closes / Its bowl of red

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4 All quotes from the poems are from Plath's *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, printed in 2004. Each quoted phrase is from the poem discussed in the paragraph unless otherwise stated.

5 Kroll writes, "On the literal level the red hair of the woman is the blazing plumage of the phoenix. But Plath may also have recalled that red-hair victims were often preferred for sacrificial burning because they resembled the spirit of the ruddy grain, the god to whom they were offered, and so the red hair of Lady Lazarus allies her with a type of dying and reviving divinity" (154).

6 Robert Graves says of the Phoenix Age: "The legend was that from the ashes of the Phoenix a little worm was born which presently turned into a real Phoenix" (412-413).
blooms out of sheer love of me" (60-61). She connects herself to Mother earth and, in the penultimate line of the poem, allows water "like the sea" (62) to wash over her in a purifying rebirth ritual.

In "The Jailor" the speaker has also been drugged by a "sleeping capsule, my red and blue zeppelin" (12) given to her by her male captor. Our female speaker again "die[s] with variety— / Hung, starved, burned, hooked" (34-35). Each red and blue pill enters the speaker's body to keep her captive. The last stanza of the poem shows the questioning of the jailor's identity, as the speaker questions "what would he / Do, do, do without me" (44-45). While it could be argued that the speaker plays the victim in this poem, and that she needs this role in order to construct her identity, I disagree. This is a speaker who knows that she is at the end of another cycle of rebirth. The references to predators ("cat," "the beaks of birds," "a negress with pink paws") connect her to the idea of death and the image of the Crone. The jailor may think that he has won her body, but he does not succeed in gaining control of her mind. The speaker "imagine(s) / him / Impotent" (36-37). Her situation finds her confined, and yet she reconstructs herself multiple times in order to escape. This poem's conflict with identity clearly relates to the evolution of patriarchy according to Robert Graves. He claimed that the White Goddess was forced underground by the rise of patriarchy, first through the "revolutionary institution of fatherhood" (Graves 388) and then by "the institution of individual marriage" (388). Graves writes:

Hitherto there had been only groups marriages of all female members of a particular totem society with all members of another; every child's maternity was certain, but its paternity debatable and irrelevant. Once this revolution had occurred, the social status of woman altered: man took over many of the sacred practices from which his sex had debarred him and finally declared himself head of household, though much property still passed from mother to daughter…It was not enough to introduce the concept of fatherhood into the ordinary myth…Then he became the Father-god, or Thunder-god, married his mother and begot divine sons and daughters on her. The daughters were really limited versions of herself—herself in various young-moon and full-moon aspects…He was eventually recognized as the Sun-god and acted in many countries as active regent for his senescent father, the Thunder-god. In some cases he even displaced him. The Greeks and the Romans had reached this religious stage by the time that Christianity began. (Graves 388-389)
Thus in this early stage of the evolution of patriarchy according to Graves, the female body is still an important part of the equation. There can be no birth without her body, so, there can be nothing without her. Yet, there is a clear stripping of the social status and an attempt to usurp her. "The Jailor" is a poem about the jailor, about how he is the one who needs the female speaker in order to exist. Without the speaker, there is no jailor.

"Cut" is full of images of the body broken and split, and also of references to historical death: "Indian's axed your scalp" (10), "Redcoats" (20), "Kamikaze man" (28), "Ku Klux Klan" (30), even "Babushka" (31), which is Russian for "grandmother/old lady." All of these images connect this poem to the Crone aspect of the Triple Goddess. The reference to red in "Cut" appears in the second stanza, "Then that red plush" (8) and it refers to the blood oozing out of the thumb cut. The blood belongs to the female speaker. Just as the speaker has reconstructed herself into power in "Lady Lazarus" and "The Jailor," by the end of "Cut," she also has regained power by subjecting the barrage of men to a blood stain that "darkens and tarnishes" and causes them discomfort, "How you jump—"(37). Her blood gives life. The speaker is not dead or defeated at the end of the poem. The last line, "Thumb stump" (40) brings attention to the scar, but the female body is still intact.

"Lady Lazarus," "Tulips," "The Jailor," and "Cut" are poems that associate the color red with the female body. Plath summons eyes, hearts, hair, skin, teeth, bones, knees, mouths, ribs and other body parts in these poems. The speaker deals with the construction of her identity through her physical body. She struggles against male oppressive forces yet relies on her body's ability to create life repeatedly as a means of transcending her entrapments. These poems and their images, despite calling on other aspects of the Triple Goddess, are representative of the Maiden because they link the female body to the goddess in what Graves would consider a "personification of primitive woman—woman the creatress and destructress" (Graves 386). In order for the cycle of life to begin, there must be the potential for motherhood, a female body. There must be spring. Without the Maiden, there can be no Mother or Crone. As Graves begins his mythological journey with the primitive goddess, Plath begins hers with the Maiden.

"Elm" is the poem that shifts the focus from a specific speaker's body, to the body of Mother earth. The speaker of this poem is the Elm tree and she speaks to another

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7 Another use of red appears in the word "Redcoats." I have chosen not to deal with this use of red because I do not consider it a pure use of the color, but it does build the military metaphor by directly summoning the British Army.
undistinguishable female body. Graves writes that the elm is "a female tree with leaves closely resembling the yew's, sacred in Greece to Artemis the Moon-goddess who presided over childbirth...ailm, in Old Irish, also stood for palm...Its poetic connexion with birth is that the sea is the Universal Mother and that the palm thrives close to the sea in sandy soil heavily charged with salt" (Graves 190). Plath's poem summons the sea, "Is it the sea you hear in me" (4) and proceeds to chastise the moon, another female fertility symbol\(^8\), for having "radiance [that] scathes me" (24). The poem is full of imagery of infertility, barrenness, and Crone-like imagery ("snaky acids hiss" and "red filaments [that] burn and stand, a hand of wires"). Trees, the moon, and the sea are all traditional female fertility symbols; yet, this poem is full of hidden anger "scorched to the root" (17).

The saga of the missing female body continues in "The Detective." This poem establishes a murder-mystery tone\(^9\) and begins by putting the reader into a landscape with "seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain" (2). But what is most interesting is that there is no dead body in this mystery. Plath states this fact several times: "No-one is dead" (15), "There is no body in the house at all" (16), "This is a case without a body. / The body does not come into it at all // It is a case of vaporization" (24-26). The female body then slowly disappears piece by piece. First the mouth, then the breasts are erased from the confines of the house. Clearly Plath is linking the idea of the body to the idea of the mother's body. If the house becomes a symbol of a pregnant body, then a house without a body would be a female body without a fetus. Just as "Elm" deals with infertility, so does "The Detective." As she makes this connection, she invokes the moon twice in the last two stanzas. "Their bones showed, and the moon smiled" (35) and the last two lines of the poem, "There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus. / There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes" (39-40). The missing female mother's body has been claimed by the Crone symbolized by the crow in the tree. Instead of infertility becoming a symbol for the dysfunction of the female body, by invoking the Crone, Plath connects her female body to the larger

\(^8\) Kroll writes, "Graves's view that all aspects of the White Goddess myth ultimately reveal a connection with poetry, and that poetry originally was and ideally ought to be a way of worshipping the Goddess in one or another of her forms, probably also held great significance for Plath. That the very act of creating poetry was closely associated with a Moon-goddess meant that the White Goddess myth claimed parallels with her life not only in terms of her family history but also asserted a connection with her vocation as a poet....Plath's mythology may be seen as a self-contained mythological story belonging to a large class of Moon-goddess mythologies" (54).

\(^9\) Victoria Anderson links this poem to the story "The Adventure of the Empty House" a Sherlock Holmes mystery by Arthur Conan Doyle. She claims that the poem "begs for a solution" (emphasis hers, 89). The most interesting connection with the Doyle story is that "Holmes returns from the dead to exact vengeance on those who would wish him dead" (emphasis hers, 92).
mythology of the Triple Goddess. The female need not be confined by the house, by her ability to procreate. All the female needs to do is evolve. What we have is actually a case of rebirth, a transition through the Triple Goddess.

The poem "Ariel" continues this link with the absence of the body. As Victoria Anderson writes in "Death is the Dress She Wears: Plath's Grand Narrative," "The enduring sense of 'Ariel' is precisely that of an absence of body; but not death so much as a transition to a state of pure energy" (92). As the female battle began in "The Detective," the female speaker completes her transformation in "Ariel," also the title poem for the whole collection of poetry, because of the voice that is found in the poem. Plath revises the legend of Godiva in order to reconstruct her speaker's character into a bundle of energy. Graves notes that Godiva is "a woman who when given a love-test by her royal lover, namely to come to him 'neither clothed nor unclothed, neither on foot nor on horseback, neither on water nor on dry land, neither with or without a gift' arrived dressed in a net, mounted on a goat, with one foot trailing in the ditch, and releasing a hare" (Graves 403). Graves claims that the hare is sacred symbolically because "it is swift, prolific and mates openly without embarrassment" (Graves 404). The hare is also, according to Graves, ritually hunted by the British on May-eve. He links the Triple Goddess to a folksong: "Then all those pretty-maidens would get guns, go a-hunting" (Graves 404). Graves then claims that the hunting is representative of a "love-chase" where "the soul of the sacred king, ringed about by orgiastic women, tries to escape in the likeness of hare, or fish, or bee; but they pursue him relentlessly and in the end he is caught, torn in pieces and devoured" (Graves 405). Plath's speaker, shedding "dead hands, dead stringencies" (21) and soaring over the sea, becomes an arrow "that flies...at one with the drive / Into the red // Eye, the cauldron of morning" (28-31). The arrow is an important connection to hunting, a sport that Graves links directly to the myth of Diana. But what we also have is a female body that is releasing herself of the traditional confines of womanness. Lady Godiva begins to sound like Lady Lazarus. In "Ariel" the Crone has been shed and the transformation into new energy is complete, thus ushering the speaker from yet another cycle of rebirth into the Maiden, signified by the last word of the poem "morning" (31).

But in the transformation process, death is never very far away and a male figure of death makes an appearance in the poem "Death & Co" with an accomplice. As Graves traces the power of the Triple Goddess/White Goddess myth, he discovers that her power is eventually
overthrown by the patriarchy and she takes a position behind the male deities. Because the male deities have overthrown the Triple Goddess, all the male figures that appear in Plath's red poems are then the enemy. They serve as a reminder that the Triple Goddess is eventually forced underground. So in this poem, the speaker feels that she is "red meat" (10), but she is "not his yet" (11). They make small talk with the speaker. Death & Co do not come for the speaker; they are here for two babies in the hospital. At the end of the poem the "dead bell" rings twice: "The frost makes a flower, / The dew makes a star. / The dead bell, / The dead bell" (27-30). Frost normally kills plants, but here it creates a flower—symbolizing the start of the rebirth cycle—the image of dew strengthens this idea by connecting rebirth with the morning, despite the death bells ringing twice. The male figure of death might come to reclaim two babies, symbols of future generations of goddesses, but, for now, the Triple Goddess is stronger and will not allow the speaker to go until she is ready.

"Lesbos" shows a mother with a screaming child and a cheating husband. The male is again an enemy and he is described as a "flapping and sucking, blood-loving bat" (80). The hate that is intended for the male figure is directed at the barren mistress "who have blown your tubes like a bad radio / Clear of voices and history" (17-18). The women in the poem are unable to communicate with each other. It is almost as if the Triple Goddess is at war with herself in this poem. The Mother is invoked through the moon, and the sea, the Crone through the images of death and disease, and the Maiden through the young girl. The title of the poem then becomes ironic as Lesbos is a Greek Isle associated with Sappho and womanness. Graves writes:

> Woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse or she is nothing. This is not to say that a woman should refrain from writing poems; only, that she should write as a woman, not as if she were an honorary man...It is the imitation of male poetry that causes the false ring in the work of almost all women poets. A woman who concerns herself with poetry should, I believe, either be a silent Muse and inspire the poets by her womanly presence...or she should be the Muse in a complete sense...She should be the visible moon: impartial, loving serene, wise. Sappho undertook this responsibility. (Graves 446)

And here, Plath does the same by allowing the battle between matriarchy and patriarchy to rage in her poem, but refusing the husband to consume the final moments of the poem, which engage the sea imagery and the two women: "Even in your Zen heaven we shan't meet" (92).
"The Other" also deals with a cheating husband: "You come in late, wiping your lips" (1). While the poem seems to be a poem of anguish at the loss of love, this line is quite telling in the speaker's ability to overcome. The poem begins with an invocation to "White Nike" (3), goddess of victory, daughter of Zeus. Nike (Nicē) volunteered to be a charioteer for her father in the War of the Giants and was rewarded with a seat on Olympus (Graves 352). Nike is closely identified with Athena, goddess of war. As in "Ariel," the image of the arrow is conjured, "Shriek from my belly like arrows, and these I ride" (19) as a symbol of energy and strength. An arrow is a weapon that aims for a direct, specific target. By linking our speaker to two strong female goddesses, Plath demonstrates how the speaker will not allow the discord captured in this poem to affect her negatively any longer than it must. She will overcome; she will be victorious. The speaker's use of red appears in the line, "Navel cords, blue-red and lucent" (18) which directly symbolizes the woman's body ability to reproduce, and summons the Mother aspect of the Triple Goddess by calling to the moon, "Oh moon-glow" (20). It is through the body that the speaker will triumph. By the end of the poem her blood is "dark fruit" (29) and will nourish her through her rebirth and victory.

In "Stopped Dead" our mother speaker is in a car crash with her husband and their child. The baby cries and the husband is "out cold" (5), perhaps a suggestion that he is already dead as a result of the crash in the opening line of the poem. The speaker seems to hover over the scene of the accident looking down on the "Red and yellow, two passionate hot metals / Writhing and sighing" (8-9). Kroll writes that "[the poems where] Plath's protagonist confronts death, or contemplates dying or suicide, are essentially envisioned rituals whose ultimate motive is to kill the false self along with the spoiled history and to allow the true self to be reborn" (171). The last stanza suggests just such a state of transcendence of the speaker's soul: "I'll carry it off like a rich pretty girl, / Simply open the door and step out of the car / And live in Gibraltar on air, on air" (23-25).

"Poppies in October" is the last of the Mother earth poems and it showcases a very specific rebirth. The poppies are the subject of the poem and they are compared to a "woman in the ambulance / Whose red heart blooms through her coat" (2-3). The frost from "Death & Co" is revisited in the last line of "Poppies in October": "In a forest of frost, in a dawn of cornflowers" (12). The forest of frost is an obvious connection to death, but the word dawn implies rebirth. The last line of this poem is the completion of the cycle of rebirth from the
poppies blooming to the frost killing them, to their eventual rebirth. The female body (heart, eyes, mouths) is connected to the idea of rebirth throughout the imagery of the poem. This poem becomes a reclaiming of the self for the female body. Plath used flowers in "Tulips" to connect with the Maiden, and here she takes it a step further: the flowers become the Mother linking the heart and mouth to rebirth.

The poems "Elm," "The Detective," "Ariel," "Death & Co.," "Lesbos," "The Other," "Stopped Dead," and "Poppies in October" connect the speaker to the body of mother earth and the poems occur at dusk, night or pre-dawn. These poems and their images, while connecting to the Maiden and the Crone, are most representative of the Mother in the Triple Goddess. The speaker's rebirth repeatedly happens as she is merged into the landscape of trees and flowers or as she is connected with the idea of reproduction through the imagery of water and the moon. The earth mother becomes representative of all female bodies, fertility, and reproduction. The strength of the mother's body is represented through various images that connect her body to hunting and war. We also have several romantic and relationship poems in this section of red poems. The love here connects these red poems most closely with the Mother, Full Moon aspect, of the Triple Goddess.

"Berck-Plage" an elegy of "metaphorical leaps," describes the death of a priest, the laying out of his body, the rituals of a funeral and wake, and the final burial of his body (Gilbert 127). The longest poem in the collection (and all of Plath's body of work) is broken into seven sections and the imagery of the poem is connected with the sea and death. It is also the poem that marks the shift to her red poems that deal with death, forgetfulness, and the purging of personal history. The images of the vacation spot become creepier as the poem builds and the reader is transported from the beach to the death scene where "An old man is vanishing / There is no help in his weeping wife" (51-52). When the body is laid out the speaker observes: "This is what it is to be complete. It is horrible" (61). In the last two sections of the poem the priest is buried. In section 6 there is a description of the funeral. The corpse is placed in the ground and "the groom is red and forgetful" (108). This line connects the body with the earth and the drinking of the Lethe and rebirth. The hole into which the coffin is lowered into is the mouth of Mother earth.

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10 Judith Kroll writes, "Mere bodily extinction would not really resolve anything. It offers only a parody of completeness, as in "Berck-Plage": "This is what it is to be complete. It is horrible." The speaker here seems to flirt with the horror of the old man's death, viewing it as a switching off of life, which leaves the corpse as an item that must be made presentable along with the other furnishings of the death room" (170).
"a naked mouth, red and awkward" (124) that swallows the man's body. It is significant that the man who dies is a priest, a participant in the suppression of the Triple Goddess. The priest is also representative of the "third stage of cultural development—the purely patriarchal, in which there are no Goddess at all" (Graves 389).

"Getting There" is a poem of forgetfulness. The first half of the poem creates an awful setting of a train piled with men's body parts, "what is left of the men" (29) rushing through war and death. And the war between patriarchy and the Triple Goddess shows itself again in this poem:

The body of this woman
Charred skirts and deathmask
Mourned by religious figures, by garlanded children.
And now detonations—
Thunder and guns.
The fire's between us. (46-51)

Patriarchy is battling against the Triple Goddess, while men's bodies are stacked on a train and rushed to "The bloodspot" (58) where the Triple Goddess shall "bury the wounded like pupas" (60). Interestingly enough, pupas are the stage between larva and adult in insects that undergo a complete metamorphosis. When the Triple Goddess is done, she will step "from this skin / Of old bandages...// Step to you from the black car of Lethe, / Pure as a baby" (65-68). The Lethe is one of the rivers in Hades that erases the memory of the person who drinks from it. If the pure baby emerges from the Lethe, then the transformation is complete. The past is forgotten and the baby must begin the cycle again.

If any human is formed from the union of a mother and father, then to complete the development of self, one must sever the connection between each parent. The speaker of "Medusa" renews herself by purging her connection to her mother. What the reader experiences is the battle between two female powers for the ultimate control and sense of identity. The poem pairs religious imagery with jellyfish/sea imagery. The speaker is connected to the other, stronger female through an "Old barnacled umbilicus" (14) and she feels paralyzed and "Overexposed, like an X ray" (31). The final line of the poem is a renewal of self as the speaker complete severs her tie: "There is nothing between us" (41).

"Letter in November" finds a female speaker walking alone through her orchard in Wellingtons. She squelches "through the beautiful red" (15). Words like "morning," "rat's tail,"
"black," "odd corpses," "death-soup" and "celibate" connects us to all three aspects of the Triple Goddess. While the speaker's presence in the orchard is a powerful one, she is also interrupted by male violence at the end of the poem in "the mouths of Thermopylae" (35). Thermopylae is a famous battle site in the war between the Spartans and the Persians. The location near the sea and a narrow pass of mountains made it a "mouth" into Greece from the north. The Spartans defended this pass, but were outnumbered, so battled fiercely, but futilely to their deaths. The Greeks lost the battle but would eventually win the war. Also of note, Herodotus claimed Thermopylae to be three kilometers away from the river Phoinix, where Hercules jumped into to wash off the Hydra poison imbibed in the cloak he could not take off. Additionally, between Thermopylae and Phoinix is the village Anthela, which houses a temple for Demeter, the goddess of seasons, associated with fertility. In summoning this particular battle, Plath has managed to invoke the imagery of the mother through the sea and mouth, connect the location to the goddess most symbolic of rebirth and transformation, and show the violence of men. Also, Plath references "pods of laburnum" (4) in the first stanza of the poem. Laburnum is a small species of pea-flower tree in which all parts of the plant are poisonous. By invoking the poisonous plant and the battle of Thermopylae, Plath has skillfully shifted the beautiful moment of the woman walking through nature into a scene of life and death. The female speaker then becomes the Triple Goddess herself at war with patriarchy.

The poem "Amnesiac" is a poem about a man who has become of "No use, no use" (1) and so he is ritually purified in the Lethe because "there is nothing to do with such a beautiful blank but smooth it" (2). "Nurses the size of worms" (7), which invoke the Crone, peel his skin and bring him drinks. When he consumes these drinks he calls out to all aspects of the Triple Goddess and completes his purification: "O sister, mother, wife, / Sweet Lethe is my life" (25-26). Despite the historical fact that patriarchy will eventually replace matriarchy (mostly through Christianity, or so Graves claims), this poem demonstrates what would happen if this history were erased.

The companion poem to "Medusa," "Daddy" uses rhythm to create a "furious energy" that compels the reader through the poem (Bassnett 91). It is an aggressive and violent poem which aims to purge male domination. The female speaker battles against the father and husband who become fused in the poem and she drives a stake through their "fat black heart" (76) in the last stanza. She has to fight against this black man figure who "bit [her] pretty red heart in two"
(56) in order to be reborn at the end of the poem. The speaker is again a woman who has been ravaged by the elements in the poem, and who will rise above it and declare, "I'm through" (80) at the end of the poem.

All of these last red poems connected with the Crone are violent and aggressive ones. It is appropriate that Plath begins this portion of them with the death of a man in "Berck-Plage" and eliminates several other oppressive enemy figures throughout her remaining red poems. The references to death and disease and the end of life cycles are what make these poems most representative of the Crone.

Therefore it is with Plath's emphasis on triumph that we must read "Stings." It is the last poem in Ariel that makes reference to the color red. This is the poem where the transformation is most complete. Not only is there a physical rebirth (as witnessed in "Lady Lazarus") but there is also a completion of the transcendence of the Self. Our Triple Goddess has purged history and invokes all of her aspects to rise above males who try to harm to the hive. The poem is about a speaker who prepares a bee hive and who transforms into the queen who escapes her enclosure. Robert Graves wrote in The White Goddess that "The Goddess is herself a queen bee about whom male drones swarm in midsummer" (Graves 192). The queen bee is the ruler of the hive; she controls all the male drone bees. During the spring time, a hive will usually swarm; swarming is a natural means of hive reproduction. A new hive will form when the queen flies out with a large portion of drone worker bees. Sometimes the old queen flies off and finds a new place to nest, giving the old place to a new virgin queen. Other times there is no new virgin queen and the old queen returns. Swarming is a delicate period of time to a hive. If something happens to the queen bee or the new virgin queen bee, then the whole hive will die. Either way, we see that there is a direct connection to the Triple Goddess – there is a rebirth in progress in this poem, despite Plath's ambiguity of whether the old queen will return to the hive or die. The queen bee's "lion-red body" (55) is a direct comparison to the Triple Goddess. Robert Graves connects the lion to Blodeuwedd, Ishtar and Delilah:

Samson was a Palestinian Sun-god who, becoming inappropriately included in the corpus of Jewish religious myth, was finally written down as an Israelite hero…That he belonged to an exogamic and therefore matrilineal society is proved by Delilah's remaining with her own tribe after marriage…Samson, like Hercules, killed a lion with his bare hands, and his riddle about the bees swarming in the carcase of the lion which he had killed, if returned to iconographic form, shows
Aristaeus the Pelasgian Hercules…killing a mountain lion on Mount Pelion, from the wound in whose flesh the first swarm of bees emerged. (Graves 315-316)

Delilah is typically thought of as the woman who is responsible for the downfall of Samson. And ignoring any Judeo-Christian interpretation of this famous story, what we have is Plath linking us to a strong female whose fate is unknown (no one knows what happened to Delilah). Plath’s ambiguity is interesting, because whether the new queen takes control of the hive or the old queen resumes her throne, there is still a queen in the end. And this queen flies "more terrible than she ever was, red / scar in the sky, red comet" (57-58). The scar imagery connects to the arrow, which is a weapon of war and has also come to stand for the transformation of energy. Our queen bee is avenging, flying "Over the engine that killed her—" (59). Our queen is victorious.

In fact, Plath has ordered her "Red Poems" in a way that begins and ends with triumph. First we see the pattern of shedding false selves and rebirth in "Lady Lazarus" and we end with the triumph of the queen bee soaring into the world in "Stings." The color red has become the symbol of rebirth and purification in all these Ariel poems. Plath has carefully constructed the Triple Goddess out of the color red by linking her to the female body and to Mother earth, who is continually involved in the process of recovering/identifying/recreating herself. Plath continually sheds what she considers the false selves of her speaker because Plath is searching for truth. As Robert Graves summarizes:

The poet's inner communion with the White Goddess, [is] regarded as the source of truth. Truth has been represented by poets as a naked woman: a woman divested of all garments or ornaments that will commit her to any particular position in time and space…She was death in disguise…she is the Flower-goddess Olwen or Blodeuwedd; but she is also Blodeuwedd the Owl, lamp-eyed, hooting dismally, with her foul nest in the hollow of a dead tree, or Circe the pitiless falcon, or Lamia with her flickering tongue, or the snarling-chopped Sow-goddess, or the mare-headed Rhiannon who feeds on raw flesh. (Graves 448)

11 In fact, Plath has referenced three specific goddesses in her poems: Nike, Demeter, and Medusa. Nike is the representation of the daughter/virgin, Demeter is the mother/fertility, and Medusa is the Crone.
Plath, greatly influenced by Graves¹², takes his mythology and creates her own narrative of the Triple Goddess in *Ariel*. Graves concludes that, "The White Goddess is anti-domestic; she is the perpetual 'other woman,' and her part is difficult indeed for a woman of sensibility to play for more than a few years, because the temptation to commit suicide in simple domesticity lurks in every maenad's and muse's heart" (Graves 449). However, Plath's Triple Goddess is always victorious. The Triple Goddess sheds that which is unnecessary until she is free and can burn like a pure red flame, a red scar in the sky.

¹² Bassnett writes "Kroll [in *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*] discusses the enormous impact that reading Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* had on Sylvia Plath's poetry. It was Ted Hughes who introduced her to the book, which had become the subject of a cult following" (58).
Works Cited


