

## Sylvia Plath's Spell on *Ariel*: Conjuring the Perfect Book of Poems Through Mysticism and the Tarot

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It has been well-documented that poets Sylvia Plath and her husband Ted Hughes took part in a joint quest into the occult during their marriage.<sup>1</sup> Plath's journals are full of references to Tarot cards and of her wanting to learn how to use them, and both poets have written of their Ouija board sessions, crystal ball gazing and other supernatural explorations. What almost no one knows, however, is that the *oeuvre* of both Sylvia Plath's and Ted Hughes's poetry, fiction and essays is entirely structured upon Alchemy and a Tarot template—based on the ancient *Qabalah*.<sup>2</sup>

Tarot cards are a divination tool to which Plath gives a nod in her most famous poem, "Daddy:" "With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck / And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack" (Plath *Ariel*, 75).<sup>3</sup> The cards feature a series of human cultural archetypes, including letters and numbers taken from the *Qabalah*, a form of Hebrew mysticism practiced by Plath and Hughes as part of their adventures into mysticism.

For decades, Plath's toughest critics have lambasted her work for its controversial allusions to Jews and the Holocaust. From "Lady Lazarus": "My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen"); and from "Daddy": "I began to talk like a Jew / I think I may well be a Jew" (Plath *Ariel* 14; 75).

Suddenly, it all makes sense why this middle-class New England girl, a Fulbright scholar and *Mademoiselle* award-winner, could so closely identify with Judaism and Holocaust victims.

All signs point to her being a *Qabalist*.

Neither Sylvia Plath, nor her husband Ted Hughes, had published a collection of work before they became a couple. Because of this, every book by each of them, beginning with Hughes' *The Hawk in the Rain* and Plath's *The Colossus*, were written under this mystical

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful sampling of examples, see Plath *Letters Home* 145, 243-244, 280-281, 294 ; *Unabridged Journals* 327, 372, 380, 447, 517, 523, 525.

<sup>2</sup> Depending on its practitioners' faith, 'Qabalah' has many spellings, including Kabbalah and Kabala (Jewish); Caballah, Cabballa, and Cabala (Christian), and more. This article will use the most contemporary spelling, as ascribed by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

<sup>3</sup> "Taroc," or "Tarocchi" were 15<sup>th</sup> Century names for Tarot cards in Italy.



ordering and symbolism, and with enough success that the template would structure every bit of work each of them wrote throughout their respective lifetimes.

In 1965, Ted Hughes had taken the liberty of reorganizing *Ariel*, adding, subtracting and rearranging Plath's work as he saw fit. Almost forty years later, in 2004, *Ariel: The Restored Edition* was published by their daughter, Frieda Hughes, after her father's death. In this restored edition, the *Ariel* poems are returned to the original order that Sylvia Plath had intended. In this original order, it becomes clear that the first twenty-two poems of *Ariel* perfectly reflect, through combinations of actual words, images or card meanings, the twenty-two cards of the Tarot deck's Major Arcana (meaning "Greater Secrets"—these are the most famous picture cards, such as the Fool, Death, the Hanged Man, etc.). It is a real-life *Da Vinci Code*, of sorts. The next ten poems symbolize each of the ten ranks of the Tarot's Minor Arcana (meaning "Lesser Secrets"), the next four poems represent the four positions in the Court cards (Kings, Queens, Knights and Pages), and finally, the last four poems reference the four suits of the Tarot (Pentacles, Cups, Swords, and Wands).

In her poem, "Burning the Letters," Sylvia Plath says, "I am not subtle" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 240). However, in the case of the Tarot meanings embedded in her work, Plath was indeed quite subtle. It should be said that the poems in *Ariel* still stand up, first and foremost, as the poems loved over the last four decades. But just as Sylvia Plath purposefully wound multi-dimensional metaphors, double-entendres, enchanting sounds and other elements into her poetry, so too did she intentionally model the structure of these *Ariel* poems to mirror the Tarot.

How can it be that this had not been discovered? In 1988, Mary Kurtzman came close in *The Centennial Review*,<sup>4</sup> correctly identifying the direct correlation between the Major Arcana and the first twenty-two poems. Still, without a deep knowledge of *both* the Tarot *and* Plath, a close examination was never accomplished beyond the title poem.

Kurtzman claimed that Plath used the Thoth Tarot, but this deck did not exist in the poet's lifetime (Greer), although Aleister Crowley's *Book of Thoth* was published in 1944, and Plath and Hughes were likely familiar with the book, which draws heavily from the *Qabalah*.<sup>5</sup> It is most likely, then, that Sylvia Plath used either the Rider-Waite or Tarot de Marseilles deck, based on what was available in America and Europe in the 1950s and 1960s. The Marseilles

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<sup>4</sup> Kurtzman, Mary. *The Centennial Review*, "Plath's 'Ariel' and Tarot." Summer 1988. pp 290-295

<sup>5</sup> *Qabalah* has a number of different, acceptable spellings, including, *Cabala*, *Kabalah*, *Kabbala* and more. Crowley and his group, The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn preferred Qabalah.

deck is considered the basis for the occultist's deck (Little) and was the model for the pictures drawn by Basil Ivan Rákóczi, the son of a gypsy fortuneteller who authored and illustrated *The Painted Caravan*,<sup>6</sup> the book from which Plath learned Tarot.

Ultimately, *The Centennial Review* published large assumptions and conjecture that skeptics laughed at and most Plath scholars ignored. And that is a shame, because Kurtzman was on the right track. Not taking into account the Qabalistic order of the entire book of *Ariel*, Kurtzman's guesswork was also wrong that the poem "Daddy" represented the Emperor card. A line-by-line, card-by-card analysis was needed, with the facts laid out and nothing left to speculation or intuition.

Given the cultural stigma and lack of serious respect often associated with matters of the occult, it is likely that both Plath and Hughes may have wanted to keep *Ariel*'s order and mystical references secret. In the original *Ariel* order, Plath is never obvious with her structure and *always* subtle, which is why, with names of poems sometimes even sounding like *other* Tarot cards, a less-diligent sleuth would soon be thrown off the trail. But the titles of these poems are not our markers, and Plath did not go about the same system of mirroring for each card.

In "The Others," it is patently obvious that Sylvia Plath is writing about the moon (and its corresponding Moon card). In "Barren Woman," she addresses the Empress card, only in its reverse (upside-down) meaning. "The Rabbit Catcher" is as much about the card's picture as it is about its meaning, as she plays with the images and symbols; and with the poem "Magi," (which from the title, *seems* to be matched to the Magician card), Plath works within the card's tone and spirit, letting loose all the wrath and fury of the Tower card as an angry mother.

The more exciting interpretive discoveries have been found in some of the less-popular poems, such as the practical Alchemy in "The Applicant," or "Death & Co.," which incorporates a Shaman prophesy. Beyond her own fascination with the Tarot and her great skill at building in layers of meaning within all her work, if one follows with Qabalist thinking, *this order and structure was also a spell*, of sorts, for her professional, if not personal, success.

Said Dr. Ann Skea in her writings about Ted Hughes: "Cabbala, like alchemy, works at three levels: the conscious, story-telling, level; the metaphorical level at which images and

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<sup>6</sup> Sylvia Plath's copy is held at the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Neilson Library, Smith College.



symbols work on the subconscious and the spiritual message is understood; and the practical level of applied processes and rituals" (ann.skea.com).

Altogether, the first twenty-two Major Arcana cards and their corresponding *Ariel* poems represent the circular journey of life and death, and back again. The poems for the ten ranks of the Minor Arcana delve deeper into individual life experiences, and the four poems for the suits (known as "the Bee Poems") portray the big issues of life: one's place in the world, emotion, thought, and work. The Major Arcana images represent all situations and obstacles of man. By setting her poems in the order of the Major and Minor Arcanas, court cards and suits, and having each poem contain images and references to the card in its position, Sylvia Plath may have believed that she was imposing the Tarot template on the reader's plane of thought, sending messages to the unconscious mind of others in the language of symbolism—the mystic's version of subliminal advertising. "Her psychic gifts, at almost any time," her husband Ted wrote, "were strong enough to make her frequently wish to be rid of them" (Alvarez 204).

In viewing Plath's *Ariel* poems through the Tarot/Qabalah perspective, new and exciting interpretations come to light: For example, the once-indecipherable line "of nine black Alps" in "The Couriers" now refers to the nine Major Arcana cards that include mountaintops in their picture, representing the Rosecrucian's Abiegnus, the sacred Mountain of Initiation. "Tulips" suddenly takes on a surprising erotic interpretation. The "Moroccan Hippopotamus" in the poem "A Secret"—aside from being an insult to her husband's exotic lover Assia Wevill, is a direct reference to a Qabala-based initiation ritual from the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, as are many images in the book title poem "Ariel."

### **About the Tarot:**

The Tarot deck was designed as a book of pictures that expresses the spiritual principles and occult powers of our consciousness, dependent upon occult harmonies of numbers. The Tarot represents a summary of the "Hermetic Sciences"—the *Qabalah*, alchemy, astrology and magic, and the twenty-two cards of the Tarot's Major Arcana represent the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the twenty-two paths on the Qabalistic "Tree of Life." Together, these sciences represent one system of a very broad and deep psychological investigation into the nature of man.

The earliest remaining Tarot cards are dated from 15<sup>th</sup> Century Italy; historical evidence shows that Tarot cards were designed to supplement the regular playing deck as a set of trumps. The book from which Plath learned Tarot, “The Painted Caravan” by the gypsy-born Basil Rákóczi,<sup>7</sup> however, suggests that Tarot symbols reached back as far as Ancient Egypt. It goes on to explain that Medieval Europe was once a dangerous place for heretics. Tarot lore suggests that by recording secret philosophies and magical teachings visually, those who disagreed with prevailing Catholic Church doctrines may have found a way to safely pass on their knowledge without persecution. This was also a great way for occult practitioners from all over the world to communicate beyond written or spoken language. The Renaissance practice of using *ars memorativa*, or pictorial memory systems, was an integral part of the occult movement at the time.

The standard, modern Tarot deck consists of seventy-eight cards total. It is the twenty-two Major Arcana cards, with their archetypes, that recur throughout the ages in almost all known human cultures and societies, which have intrigued scholars, mystics, occultists and psychologists for generations.

The Tarot's four suits symbolize the four seasons; the four alchemical elements of Earth, Water, Fire and Air; and the four sectors of the Zodiac. Individually, Swords represent thought and action; Pentacles (also known as Discs or Coins) are earthly gains; Cups are emotion and love; and Wands (also known as Staves, Rods or Batons) are words and creation. Each Tarot card has two meanings; upright, which is generally the positive qualities of the card; and reversed (upside down), reflecting the card's darker side, foretelling of delay and obstacles to achieving the positive end, or in the case of a card that is negative either way, the reversal may show an end to the pain and suffering.

The *Ariel* poems and their corresponding Tarot cards are shown below, with parallel card-poem meanings. Additional information to support Plath's Tarot matches is found throughout *Qabalah* and Golden Dawn texts, as well as in *The Painted Caravan* and all of Ted Hughes' writings. A pack of Rider-Wait Tarot cards, to view the images Plath uses, and a copy of the restored edition of *Ariel* is all that is needed to make sense of this brief overview:

#### **Poem and Major Arcana card:**

#### **Meaning**

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<sup>7</sup> Rákóczi, Basil. *The Painted Caravan*. 1954. JC Boucher, The Hague (Holland), pp. 7-24



"Morning Song" – The Fool	New beginnings, birth, innocence.
"The Couriers" – The Magician (reversed)	A trickster or con-artist.
"The Rabbit Catcher" – The High Priestess	A powerful woman with no need of men; the card's picture is well-described in this poem's symbols and imagery.
"Thalidomide" – The Empress (reversed)	A lost, aborted or miscarried child.
"The Applicant" – The Emperor	A powerful man who is all-business; cold, unemotional.
"Barren Woman" – The Hierophant	This card's picture is well-described in the poem's symbols and imagery.
"Lady Lazarus" – The Lovers	Conflict of choice between two; temptation; duality.
"Tulips" – The Chariot	Excitement, rush, success after a struggle. This card's picture is well-described in the poem's symbols and imagery.
"A Secret" – Justice	Truth winning, legal repercussions.
"The Jailor" – The Hermit (reversed)	Solitary, meditative, wisdom through introspection.
"Cut" – The Wheel of Fortune	Luck, the card's picture of the Wheel as an onion, play on double-meaning of words such as "trepanned."
"Elm" – Strength (reversed)	The strength to face and defeat darkness and evil.
"The Night Dances" – The Hanging Man	Stuck, going nowhere, reflecting, the old life peeling away.
"The Detective" – Death	Death of old ways, new start.
"Ariel" – Temperance (reversed)	Balance of nature, surrender to passion, art, personal expression. This card's picture is well-described in the poem's symbols and imagery.

"Death & Co." – The Devil	Animal nature, physical senses. This card's picture is well-described in the poem's symbols and imagery.
"Magi" – The Tower	Anger, babble (as in "the Tower of Babel").
"Lesbos" – The Star (reversed)	Delayed gratification, unfulfilled dreams, pessimism and insecurity.
"The Other" – The Moon	Nature and the female cycle, depression, dreams.
"Stopped Dead" – The Sun (reversed)	Vanity and arrogance, relationship difficulties, misbehaving children.
"Poppies In October" – Judgment	Resurrection, healing. This card's picture is well-described in the poem's symbols and imagery.
"The Courage of Shutting-Up" – The World (reversed)	The complete cycle, the uses of limitation, learning from experience.

### Minor Arcana Ranks

"Nick and the Candlestick" – Ones	Beginnings and firsts, initiative, a masculine number.
"Berck - Plage" – Twos (reversed)	Problems with pairings, opposites, balance, unions.
"Gulliver" – Threes	Mysticism; this card's picture is well-described in the poem's symbols and imagery.
"Getting There" – Fours	Stability and restriction, strong and constrictive, dull and limiting.
"Medusa" – Fives	A need to break away, fighting, battles and arguments, war games.



"Purdah" – Sixes

Success and harmony with underlying tension, sacrifice and effort, the temporary nature of romance and wealth, this card's picture is well-described in the poem's symbols and imagery.

"The Moon and the Yew Tree" – Sevens

A siege, a struggle, standing up for your rights.

"A Birthday Present" – Eights

Two extremes, growth and restriction, gain and sacrifice, work and bondage, *Karma*.

"Letter in November" – Nines (reversed)

Prosperity and obtaining what one needs, purification and reassessment, a feminine number.

"Amnesiac" – Tens

Transformation; things are shifting and changing, burdens of work and home.

### Court Cards

"The Rival" – Kings (reversed)

Selfish, not to be trusted, lying and manipulative, mean.

"Daddy" – Queens (reversed)

A vengeful, spiteful woman; depressive and jealous, unstable.

"You're" – Knights

An intelligent, gregarious young man, a go-getter, seeker.

"Fever 103°" – Pages

Upsurge of energy, feeling more creative, opening up. Reversed is disrupted communication, general instability (*Both upright and reversed meanings appear to be used*).

### Suits

"The Bee Meeting" – Pentacles

One's place in the world; positions of power, materials, physical sensation, the Earth (*Both upright and reversed meanings appear to be used*).



"The Arrival of the Bee Box" – Cups	Emotion (especially fear, when reversed), feeling, nurturing, dreams.
"Stings" – Swords	Thought, logic, reason and self-control, forceful. When reversed: attack.
"Wintering" – Wands	Intuition, inception, action, work, projects, vision.

It was noted in the Appendix of *Ariel: The Restored Edition* that Plath did not want to include her poem, "The Swarm" among the "Bee Poems." With our new understanding of her over-arching order, the reason for this deletion is no longer a mystery. "The Swarm" embodies a different tone in contrast to the rest of *Ariel*. This poem, while containing representations of each card, to serve as a final summing up (in the same way Ted Hughes does with his ending poem "Lupercalia" in *Lupercal*), is not perfect in its ordering, and it differs from the other poems in its third-person narrative point of view. Plath was too much of a perfectionist to allow that.

Plath and Hughes were certainly not the first poets to attempt to use Tarot and Qabalistic magical practices within their writing. In fact, it is found all through the work of their literary heroes, including W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, William Blake, D.H. Lawrence—even Dante and Shakespeare.

Plath's reputation as a major contemporary poet lies almost solely upon her mystical works of *Ariel*, and her novel, *The Bell Jar*. These books are major literary and emotional journeys into depression, marriage, motherhood, and a male-dominated society, as well as exploring ideas of death and rebirth. Both books, as well as her short stories, essays and other collections of poetry, are structured to mirror our entire life cycle, as illustrated in the Tarot cards.

As Hughes was also Plath's mystical teacher, and given his own conscious alchemical patterns, he undoubtedly knew of his wife's interweaving of mystic symbolism and meaning into her work. Ted Hughes' deliberate rearrangement of the first publication of *Ariel* has kept Plath's secret order deeply hidden for over forty years. Given the fact that his own books of poems, essays and reviews were all also entirely Qabalah-ordered, Hughes was certainly aware that he was obscuring, if not destroying, Plath's original, full vision when he made the changes in order



and content. Perhaps Ted Hughes may have feared that the discovery would cost him his position as England's Poet Laureate. We may never know the truth, but Plath's literary magic was great enough to survive.

## Sample Chapter from *Fixed Stars Govern A Life*

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### Card #15      The Devil Card

### Corresponding Poem: "Death & Co."



The meanings of the Devil card are bondage, sensual and material goals, obsession, lust, selfishness and overwhelming physical desire.

On the surface, "Death & Co." is a poem written directly as a slam on her husband Ted Hughes' character after Plath learned of his affair with Assia Wevill. Yet it is so much deeper and smarter than that.

In the Golden Dawn, the Devil card is attributed to the Hebrew letter *Ayin*, meaning "the eye which allows one to see beneath the surface structure. It is also the eye which imprisons us to focus on the surface structure."<sup>8</sup> And Plath's lines from "Death & Co." are pictured here well, in illustration and meaning: "Two. Of course there are two"; "The one who never looks up, whose eyes are lidded"; "He does not smile" (Plath, *Ariel* 35).

Interestingly, another Hebrew word, *Binah*, has an identical spelling to *Ayin*. *Binah* means "Wellspring of Forms" and reflects a preoccupation with the superficial: "He tells me how badly I photograph. / He tells me how sweet / The babies look in their hospital" (Plath, *Ariel* 35).

The numerology student has a lot to reckon with here, when discovering that the Devil (NChSh in Hebrew) and the Messiah (MShYCh in Hebrew) both equal 358; with the Hebrew letter *Ayin* (when spelled out) and the Hebrew word for *Deliverance* also holding equal values of 130.<sup>9</sup>

In his *Letter to Revd Dr Trusler*, August 23, 1799, William Blake said, "As a man is So he Sees. As the Eye is formed such are its Powers" (702). This may have been what Plath was referring to when she writes: "And balled, like Blake's" in line four of "Death & Co." (35). The Devil is assigned to the Zodiac sign of Capricorn, the goat, and goats have a third eyelid that also lends meaning to these lines.

<sup>8</sup> Association for Tarot Studies. <http://newsletter.tarotstudies.org/2005/04/golden-dawn-attributions/>

<sup>9</sup> [www.hebrew4christians.com](http://www.hebrew4christians.com)



The naked couple on the Devil card is chained together and exposed ("the nude") an analogy for a bad marriage. In *The Painted Caravan*, the hands of the Devil are described as "Taloned" and this fits with the condor image in "Death & Co." (Rákóczi 55). "Verdigris" is considered to be "the true first matter" in Alchemy for processing the Philosopher's Stone (Krummenacher). Verdigris is what the V stands for in "Vitriol"—the alchemists' code name for the Latin *Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Inveniens Occultum Lapidem Veram Medicinam*, which is believed to mean: "See in the interior of the purified earth, and you will find the secret stone, the true medicine" (ibid).

The Condor is also an important symbol in both Shamanism and Alchemy. The Condor is believed to be a messenger of the deities, circling high above the Andes, carrying the souls of the deceased into the Realm of the Dead. The Condor Dance has been performed for many thousands of years by shaman of the Amazon and Andes, in Mayan, Aztec, Hopi cultures, by people of the Bering Strait and Asian Steppes. This dance symbolizes the mysteries of life and death, and to manifest a shaman's inner Alchemy, as well as melting the male and female sides together. It is to celebrate and fulfill the prophesy by natives of both Americas that when the Condor of South America (symbolizing the feminine Mother Earth) and the Eagle of North America (symbolizing the masculine Heaven) unite, it is the beginning of a new age, a unity of the mind and the heart.

With this in mind, "Death & Co." takes on a whole different meaning: *it is a poem of hope*. Who would never look up, except for one who is already there? The female Condor gazes down, representing the subservience of the female. She has "lidded" and "balled" eyes, the "birthmarks" of her vulture species, and "nude" legs and neck.

Condor and Eagle nests are up high, where it is cold, like an "Icebox," and nests, of course, are where "The babies" are found.

The Eagle, representing the male in the prophesy, has a "Frill at the neck," his legs taking on "flutings of their Ionian / Death-gowns, / Then two little feet."

An early draft of this poem followed "Death-gowns" with images of Christmas roses, a thin veil of the Rosicrucians' symbol of the Rosy Cross.

Eagles have stern expressions ("He does not smile or smoke") over the vulture-like grin of the Condor ("The other does that").

"His hair is long and plausible" may be a reference to the shaman tradition. An earlier draft compared him to a shaggy dog.

But back to the Eagle: Plath's first draft had lines about him wearing yellow gloves, and she labeled him as homosexual. These lines are telling, for they show both the yellow feet and legs of the American Eagle, and the preference for men, to be interpreted as male domination.

The prophecy states that in a 500-year period that began in the 1400s, the Eagle of North America would become so powerful that it would virtually destroy the Condor of South America, as male would dominate female. This has long been considered a metaphor for America's power and wealth ("Masturbating a glitter") as birds can't resist objects that shine. The line also fits well with the Devil card's meaning of being selfish and giving in to the senses, as well as a blatant negative sexual reference.

The final stanzas are what give the poem hope: "I do not stir" is alchemical direction, and, as alchemy is psychological as well as physical chemistry, both meanings of "stir" can be implied. This is the waiting time for a change toward peace. Alchemists and mystics use the cold winter as metaphor for the physical death. In an alchemical text published in 1671, Benedictine Basilus Valentinus wrote:

"In the winter the multitude suppose everything to be dead, because the earth is bound in the chains of frost, so that nothing is allowed to sprout forth. But as soon as the spring comes, and the cold is vanquished by the power of the Sun, everything is restored to life, the trees and herbs put forth buds, leaves, and blossoms, the hibernating animals creep forth from their hiding places, the plants give out a sweet fragrance, and are adorned with a great variety of many coloured flowers; and the summer carries on the work of the spring, by changing its flowers into fruit." ([www.scribd.com](http://www.scribd.com))

On the Qabalah's Tree of Life, the Devil card's path falls between Splendor and Beauty. However, this path is not beautiful, but cold, under the influence of Capricorn, the Earth sign of Saturn ("The frost makes a flower").

Dew is symbolic of divine incarnation or manifestation from Heaven. Alchemists believed natural dew contained the divine Salt (thoughts of the One Mind) that could transform the Sulfur and Mercury of the First Matter. In many ways, dew represented the Elixir, or contents



of the cup of God, the Holy Grail. "The dew makes a star" refers to the goddess Eos, the Roman Goddess of the Dawn. The alchemical text *Dawn, De Aurora Libellus Apollonii* reveals that she is the daughter of Hyperion, the One Above, Who Travels High Above the Earth—fitting for these two birds. Eos carried pitchers with which she pours the dew on the Earth, causing our great star, the Sun, to rise.

"The dead bell, / the dead bell" has many associations, and Plath undoubtedly wanted them all to apply: The Rosicrucians tell a tale of Frater Gualdi, who was found lifeless after ringing the Death Bell (Rituals). But this is also an allusion to America's Liberty Bell. In this case, Plath is showing the demise of the male American Eagle, and the rise of the female Condor. In Alchemy, the eagle is always a symbol of *Volatilization*. For instance, an eagle devouring a lion indicates the volatilization of a fixed component by a volatile component. Alchemists believe the Devil card corresponds with the seventh and last operation in alchemical transformation, *Coagulation*.

Traditionally, in mythology, bells have been seen as a connection between heaven and earth, between the high and the low, announcing the presence of the holy while scattering the powers of the base and profane. Often, the tolling of bells was viewed as the voice of God Himself. In older times, bells were relied upon to measure the hours and to divide the day into its parts. Bells toll only for us three times: at baptism, marriage, and death. The motions of bells describe the cosmic dance of the elements, and in Hebrew lore, bells are called the Quintessence - the 5th element in Alchemy: the *magnum opus* or Philosopher's Stone.

Early drafts of this poem<sup>10</sup> show that many more lines were cut entirely. These lines were loaded with imagery and meaning from the Devil card, as well as of the Eagle and birds. There are references to horns, slaves being sold on the market, and all the Devil card traits of indulgence, shallowness and superficiality, as well as unease. A reference to America works the prophecy back into the poem, too.

Plath's own Tarot book, *The Painted Caravan*, defined the Devil card as:

"a disruption of character, the crumbling of power achieved through cruelty, domination by animal passions and mental perversity. It is the card of the sadist and all who have

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<sup>10</sup> Early drafts are found in the Plath Collection at the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.

sold their immortal souls for temporary gain while on earth," and, "The dark forces of nature are to be understood for what they are and respected as such." (Rákóczi 56)

If this does not sound like the history of post-WWII United States of America, what does?

Sylvia Plath herself described this poem as "concerning the double or schizophrenic nature of death," symbolizing the two sides of death by picturing them as contrasting men and ultimately, "Somebody's done for" (Alexander 308). Perhaps she was only talking about the physical: some *body*.



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