Sylvia Plath’s Mirrors Reflecting Various Guises of Self

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William Freedman in his essay entitled “The Monster in Plath’s Mirror” evaluates Sylvia Plath’s frequent use of the mirror as a symbol of female passivity and subjugation, reflecting Plath’s own conflicted self-identity in its difficulty to reconcile the competing obligations of her artistic life in contrast to her domestic life (Freedman, 1993). In her poem “Mirror”, Plath regards life from the perspective of the mirror on the wall, personified in the use of first person pronoun “I” but only reflecting a view which is full of objectivity and indifference.

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions
Whatever I see, I swallow immediately .

“Mirror”

As the mirror appears to be a lake, the woman who regards her own vision in it sees her own drowning in it as a young girl and her own rising from it as an old woman. Thus, the reflection with its multiple guises carries within it the themes of death and rebirth. David John Wood, on the other hand, in his study of the “birth” imagery in Plath’s poetry, points to the uncanny connection between birth and writing (Wood, 1992). His research analyzes the nature of the relationship between maternal experience during childbirth, miscarriage and Plath’s quest for fulfillment, pointing to her poem “Face Lift”. David John Wood underlines the fact that motherhood comes to be associated with the desire for birth of a new poetic voice and identity (Wood, 1992). Whereas David Holbrook states that to give birth is to die, in other words, one is making a new life which causes another life to die (Holbrook, 1988). In her poem “Morning Song” even Plath’s image of her own self as a mother figure is blurred and effaced slowly from its shadowy vision in the mirror which reflects her various guises. Holbrook, in his psychoanalytical study entitled Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence, also points to the ambiguity in Plath’s mind between death

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and birth and, draws attention to Plath’s identification with Mother Earth, who is the metaphor of the female and fertility while, at the same time, the devourer of everything as a result of its being devoted to a love of Death. Holbrook mentions this powerful ambiguity in Sylvia Plath’s poem, “Death & Co.,” and states that there is a mixture of necrophilia and necrophobia in the poem (Holbrook, 1988). In other words, Sylvia Plath reflects both fear of death and sexual attraction towards death as if she were in love with it. In Plath’s vision we see a powerful undercurrent that evaluates sex as eating and annihilation. In this context, as mentioned in her Journals, Sylvia Plath’s biting Ted’s cheek during their first encounter at a party at Cambridge becomes quite meaningful because the act reflects both her sexual attraction towards Ted Hughes and her subconscious desire to devour him like Mother Earth. In her poem “Lady Lazarus” Sylvia Plath’s attraction towards death is most obvious, even “dying” is evaluated as “art”. In her poem “Elm” Sylvia Plath expresses her sense of despair and loneliness. Of course, to perceive one’s own self in a reflecting surface, either in a mirror or on water, or a lake, is to recognize one’s Jungian shadow as the dark underside of a shining surface. The significance of an alter-ego figure in Sylvia Plath’s late poems increases just as the desperate search for her own identity becomes hopeless.

Plath’s interest in the enigma of her self displays a terrible sense of emptiness. Her autobiographical poem “Tulips” which deals with the speaker’s inner psyche in a hospital room, reveals the tension between life and death. The whiteness of the hospital room, reminding one of the coldness of death, is juxtaposed with the brilliant redness of the tulips whose life energy injures the patient, who feels disturbed by the ‘gaze’ of the tulips. Her feeling of inertia, accompanied with the immobility of her body, leads the speaker to a sense of negation, to a feeling of loss of identity. The inner mirror of the psyche becomes all white, showing nil. As the nurses go up and down like “sea gulls” in their white caps, the patient feels herself like “a pebble” thrown up and down by the movement of waves. The body is described like a piece of stone, as if the persona in the poem were petrified. In The Divided Self, Ronald David Laing equates petrification or the act of turning someone into a stone or turning oneself into a stone with the psychic notion of depersonalization (Laing, 1965). In Plath’s poem “Tulips” the perspective is given
from the inside. By turning herself into a pebble, into an inanimate object, Plath feels petrified, that is, loses contact with the outside world and refuses to respond to any attempt of interaction or communication. In *The Divided Self*, R. D. Laing describes the case of James, one of his patients who said that he had ‘no self’. He had “no identity” of his own (Laing, 1965). James also expressed that he felt that he had no weight, no substance of his own. His words “I am only a cork floating on the ocean” reminds us of Plath’s similar condition in the hospital when she senses her being and body as “a pebble” on the shore thrown up and down by the sea as the nurses take care of her body and try to cure her.

In *The Divided Self*, R. D. Laing also mentions the case of another schizophrenic patient who has attempted three suicides and feels herself as if she were in a bottle (Laing, 1965). The patient describes of her psychic state as being imprisoned in a cave with stony sides and of her desperate desire to become part of the cave walls, to become an echo and a shadow. The sense of suffocation and of immobility which the patient experiences can also be seen in the self-image of Sylvia Plath. In “Tulips” the presence of these flowers in the hospital room, with their brilliant colour of red, disturbs the persona and they eat her oxygen. Plath’s psychic being feels suffocated by them. The “imagined gaze” of the tulips causes the patient to look down into the depths of her own psyche in which she sees that she is only a shadow, having no face at all. This process also causes a kind of gnawing of her conscience. Thus she desperately desires to efface her very being. Within the mirror of tulips is reflected her sense of negation as well as her desire for self-annihilation. She gives a vivid picture of that psychic state which R. D. Laing speaks of as “life without feeling alive” and describes the situation as one “of the schizoid feeling of the self which is partially divorced from the body” (Laing, 1965).

Pointing to the use of certain symbols in her poetry, David Holbrook claims that Plath obviously reflects characteristics of a schizoid personality and that she suffers also from typical problems of a schizoid condition, such as the feeling of being dislocated from one’s body and the sense of being petrified (Holbrook, 1988). Holbrook asserts:
The delusions and the surrealistic images used in her poems reflect what is beneath the surface, belonging to the inner psychic reality (Holbrook, 1988).

In her poem “Berck-Plage”, Plath’s description of the stiffening corpse of Percy Key, her cancer-ridden neighbour next door, comprises both surrealistic and terrifying pictures of death and also emblematic signs of her own struggle to confront it. Within the funereal gloomy atmosphere of death, there is an ironic parallel between the dying process she had to witness and the birth and growth into life of her second child, Nicholas, who came into the world almost at the same time as Percy Key died. The juxtaposition of the dying old man with that of the growing baby reveals Plath’s interest in death and birth as a recurrent cycle. She believed that death could be a pathway to rebirth. Judith Kroll evaluated Plath’s concern as follows:

To see the autobiographical details only as such is to regard Plath’s vision of suffering and death as morbid, but to appreciate the deeper significance of her poetry is to understand her fascination with death as connected with and transformed into a broader concern with the themes of rebirth and transcendence. (Kroll, 1976)

In her poem “Berck-Plage” Plath envisions grotesque and surrealistic transformations of what she had actually seen, as if she herself were De Chirico or Fellini. She describes the sea at Berck Plage as a reflection of her psychic state at that moment with certain surrealistic images:

The sea, that crystallized these,
Creeps away, many- snaked, with a long hiss of distress.

“Berck-Plage”

Her feeling of distress caused by the approaching death of her neighbour torments her inner psyche with past memories coming to the fore of her consciousness as if she were
in a tempest. In his psychoanalytical study, Holbrook claims that Plath had a “dividual” self (Holbrook, 1988). Throughout her artistic work, including her poems and her novel, *The Bell Jar*, there are images of selves which are petrified, cracked, patched up and divided against themselves. The image of multiple selves in concrete and symbolic forms can be surveyed in *The Bell Jar* in which Death becomes a symbol of Esther’s desire to return to the womb, so as to be reborn as someone freed from the external trappings of society. After her suicide attempt, Esther has to transform the dead baby in the bell jar into the living symbol of her personal and poetic freedom. As Esther goes through certain terrible experiences of life, such as the physical violence seen in Marco’s rape attack and the spiritual violence of the society in which she is living, she is led towards a certain repression which entails the death of humanity and trust in her soul. She becomes aware of her own evaporating individual worth and also of the feeling of emptiness in her inner psyche. As a result of the events she has gone through, Esther feels as though the society with its terrible force was splitting her self into an ever increasing number of smaller selves. In her novel, *The Bell Jar*, the disintegration of the self is depicted in two acts: first, in the breaking of the mirror into pieces in the hospital, and secondly, the splitting of myriad balls of reflective mercury after her knocking over of a tray of thermometers in the hospital. After all these actions, Esther attempts to take one of the balls of mercury and to keep it for herself in order to play with it, quite symbolical and meaningful.

Sylvia Plath found relief in writing and creativity and she started to use in her poems most increasingly the figure of “the double” in order to evoke her sense of inner division in her soul, and to appease the conflict she experienced between her creative and uncreative feelings. In this way, the line dividing her inscribed texts from her psychic one became more uncertain and shadowy. Her artistic activity with its ups and downs displaced her libido from her object relations into words as self-objects. She was searching ways to give birth to a second self. In her poem “In Plaster”, the double self is depicted where the real body-self inside is evaluated as “the tenant”, without whom the outer-self would perish into emptiness. The tenant in her dividual self is seen in her poem:

I gave her a soul, I bloomed of her as a rose
This sense of inner emptiness or worthlessness comes most often to the fore as she searches quite desperately for substantiality within her own soul.

Sylvia Plath’s fascination with mirror imagery started quite early and consciously as a way of recognizing her sense of psychic division. Her father’s early death, of course, was one of the main reasons behind that sense of the schizoid self which most psychoanalysts have observed in her poetic art. Her troublesome relation with her mother and her difficulty in identification with her and the search for the feminine part of her soul were, of course, other reasons.

Another reason was her interest in the literary figure of “the double” which constituted her senior honors thesis at Smith College in 1954-1955, entitled “The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky’s Novels” (Axelrod, 1990). In her literary analysis of the figure of the Double, Sylvia Plath wrote:

The appearance of the Double is an aspect of man’s eternal desire to solve the enigma of his own identity. By seeking to read the riddle of his soul in its myriad manifestations, man is brought face to face with his own mysterious mirror image, an image which he confronts with mingled curiosity and fear. This simultaneous attraction and repulsion arises from the inherently ambivalent nature of the Double which may embody not only good, creative characteristics, but also evil, destructive ones ... The confrontation of the Double in these instances usually results in a duel which ends in insanity or death (Plath, 1955).

In Sylvia Plath’s poetry such themes as creativity versus inertia and also fertility versus sterility appear to be recurring motives. Within her own psyche, there could be seen the conflict between Dionysus and Apollo; in other words, the opposition between the sensual and the abstract, the transcendent and the rational. Sylvia Plath, torn between
the Dionysian and Apollonian tendencies in her life and art, tries to reconcile the dark forces of her own psyche with the brilliant creative forces of her intellect. Thus, her poetry expresses the various reflections of that conflict of the self as well as the enigmatic world within the self. As Pamela J. Annas describes in her study of Sylvia Plath’s poetry in *A Disturbance of Mirrors*, the fragmentation of the self in Plath’s work is most obvious:

> To see yourself trapped between sets of mutually exclusive alternatives neither of which fits, is to live in a circus hall of mirrors, where the self is distorted, disguised or shattered into slivers of reflection (Annas, 1988).

In her paper, which was presented at the International Psycho-Analytical Congress in Paris, in 1973, Shelley Orgel analyzes the life of Plath in parallel with her poetry from the perspective of her term “fusion with the victim”, in other words, a regressive vicissitude of identification with the aggressor (Orgel, 1973). Orgel first turns back to Plath’s childhood. As Sylvia and her brother grew up in the seashore town of Winthrop, Massachusetts, her childhood was filled with sea memories – gathering of seashells, making toys from objects picked up on the beach, collecting starfish in jars and watching them grow back lost arms, dreaming of Spain on the other coast of the Atlantic, believing in mermaids, observing the ferocity of a hurricane and the violence of the sea (Orgel, 1973). Orgel states that Plath seems to have identified the sea as a reflecting surface with the image of the father. In her subconscious, the sea is associated as a sadistic oedipal father. Her longing for her father appears in certain images in her poetry and *The Bell Jar* as figures who wish to drown themselves. In her poem “Suicide Off Egg Rock” the man is about to drown himself and in *The Bell Jar*, Esther imagines drowning herself in the bath which is a sign of her desire to be united with the absent father. Orgel states that Plath, in order to thwart the longed-for union in the ocean with the father as primal parent, as well as the oedipal consummation with the later father, turned in her poetry to the preoedipal mother for aid in repressing these instinctual longings. But her mother, whom Plath reproaches for her negligence of her father, becomes a symbol of whiteness, coldness and petrification like the gaze of Medusa and the light of the Moon. Sylvia in
her idealizing of the father figure, in college, was writing her first poetic drafts using her father’s red leathered thesaurus. At this time her identification with her idealized father was in conflict with her feminine sexual feelings. Later in her life, the women she selected as idealized surrogates for mother had the desired attributes or the intellectual capacity of males. Even her choice of the Double in her thesis suggests further elaborations of her conflict between dual identities – poet and female, aggressor and victim and of her tenuous differentiation between self and object, ego and superego. In her poem, “Daddy” there exists the desire to bring the father temporarily back to life, not as the merman, the man of the sea, but as the primal aggressor who can be hated like the Nazis, as the devil who can be warded off and killed permanently for the sake of her own survival. In order to resist the longing for fusion with the dead father she needs to find a way to turn her aggressive wishes outward. One way is by imaginatively creating a “hating” sadomasochistic relationship with the father and with her husband, who is also portayed as an identical Fascist brute in “Daddy”. Many of her poems seem to be like a journey to the borders of death which is always there both as a threat and as an attraction. In her last poems, the struggle against the forces of death weakens. In her poem, “The Colossus” she attempts to glue herself together, to create poetry out of her fragmented self and the multiple voices in her head, to reconstruct a poetic voice from the fragments of ruins so that they will return life through her art and to be reborn as having found her true self. Orgel states that the suicidal act simultaneously kills the aggressive self whose energies are directed against the bodily self and she adds that due to Plath’s sensitivity and vulnerability in early childhood, Plath appears to be an example of such a creative artist in whom the unneutralized aggressive energies could be supplied either to the energy for creative activity or to the energy for self-destruction. The creation of a poem for Plath represents in a displaced form the killing of a hated part of the self in a partially externalized representation. The act of suicide appears to be in opposition to the act of writing poetry. The more the work can be cathcted as a stable object for the creator, the more its creation can serve to discharge aggression outward. When the poems failed to allow a relatively constant investment of narcissistic libido, or aggression, their loss appeared like a series of deaths. The purpose of her creative impulse was to rescue her self, and to be re-breathing her own breath. Orgel concludes her analysis by stating that
the poems may be regarded as attempts to create transitional objects evoking the illusion of unity of the self with such representatives of the absent unempathic mother figure and the lost father figure (Orgel, 1973). With the destruction of the creativity process in writing poetry, the rage returns to the self, threatening to make their creator their victim. At the end of Sylvia Plath’s life, Orgel adds in her study, the only resolution appears to have been a suicide that regressively re-established the “perfect” self through “fusion” with images of the idealized victim (Orgel, 1973). In her hypothesis, Orgel linked Plath’s suicidal behaviour with ‘Christ-like’ empathy for victims and refined sensibility for poets.

In conclusion, in Sylvia Plath’s poetry, surfaces which are capable of reflecting images from within such as the mirror, the sea, the lake, the window, the eye, the moon, the bell jar, the crystal ball and the polished stones, indeed, stand for her desperate search for her own identity and the reality of her inner psyche, which are full of past memories of the dead father, appearing like a Colossus or a Nazi or a bee or a black boot from time to time, while the feelings of love-hate between herself and her mother appear like Medusa or the cold Moon. Last of all, in-between the paternal and maternal torturing images, there emerges a new voice which is that of the creative artist, her true self. The mirror imagery she uses in her poetry appears to be a dangerously shifting area of uncertainty and intensive tension. The reflecting surfaces which are used in her poetry become transparent and reveal a threatening world behind them, which can pull her in or drown her or annihilate the vision of the self. Reflecting surfaces demonstrate both the search for self in its multiple disguises and the disintegration of the self into pieces, and finally the rebirth of her true self.
Works Cited


