

Univerzita Karlova

Filozofická fakulta

Ústav anglofonních literatur a kultur

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

“I Am a Garden of Black and Red Agonies”: The Image of Maternity in Sylvia
Plath's Poetry

"Jsem zahrada černých a červených muk": Obraz mateřství v poezii Sylvie
Plathové

Vedoucí práce:

Pavla Veselá, PhD.

Praha, září 2023

Vypracovala:

Bc. Simona Zákutná

Anglofonní literatury a kultury

Declaration

I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

Prague, 1 August 2023

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

V Praze dne 1. srpna 2023

.....

Simona Zákutná

Acknowledgments

I take this opportunity to express sincere gratitude to my thesis supervisor Pavla Veselá, PhD. for the continuous encouragement, valuable guidance, and patience during the writing of this thesis. I am thankful and indebted to her for sharing her expertise.

Permission

I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

Keywords

Keywords: Sylvia Plath; poetry; motherhood; confessional poetry; domesticity

Klíčová slova: Sylvia Plath; poezie; mateřství; konfesionální poezie; domesticita

Abstract

This diploma thesis deals with the theme of motherhood in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. The main objective of the thesis is to explore how pregnancy, childlessness, and motherhood are understood by Plath in her poetry. I show how she transposed her thoughts and experiences of maternity into it and identify the main influencing outside factors. The poetry will be studied and read from a biographical, sociocultural, and feminist standpoint. Studies of motherhood and domesticity in the United States, predominantly by Betty Friedan and Glenna Matthews, will be analyzed in order to offer a general context within which Plath created her poetry and to demonstrate how she contested the idealized perception of motherhood at the time. To understand women's writing in a male-dominated literary canon and the ways in which Plath fought back against the language and archetypes imposed on her, demystifying motherhood in the process, feminist literary studies, predominantly *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar will be consulted.

The thesis will consist of four chapters: the first chapter will deal with biographical occurrences in Plath's life, covering known life events recorded in *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* and *Letters Home* relevant to the topic at hand. The second chapter will be focused on the theory regarding female writing in a male-dominated literary canon. The third chapter will provide a sociocultural analysis of domesticity and motherhood in the United States in the 1950s and the fourth chapter, followed by a comprehensive conclusion outlining the findings, will be concerned with the analysis of Plath's poetry about motherhood and children.

Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá tématem mateřství v poezii Sylvie Plathové. Hlavním cílem této práce je prozkoumat, jak Plathová ve své poezii chápe těhotenství, bezdětnost a mateřství, ukázat, jak do ní promítá své vlastní myšlenky a zkušenosti s mateřstvím, a identifikovat hlavní ovlivňující vnější faktory. Poezie bude analyzována a čtena z biografického, sociokulturního a feministického hlediska. Mimo jiné budou použity zejména studie Betty Friedanové a Glenny Matthewsové o mateřství a domesticitě ve Spojených státech a o měnící se politické a sociokulturní situaci v padesátých letech minulého století pro přiblížení obecného kontextu, v němž Plathová svou poezii tvořila, a porozumění tomu, jak vnímala a zpochybňovala tehdejší idealizované vnímání mateřství. Pro pochopení ženského psaní v literárním kánonu ovládaném muži a způsobů, jimiž Plathová bojovala proti jazyku a archetypům, které jí byly vnuceny, a demystifikovala tak mateřství, budou využity feministické literární studie, převážně kniha *The Madwoman in the Attic* od Sandry Gilbertové a Susan Gubarové. Součástí práce bude biografie Sylvie Plathové, zahrnující známé životní události zaznamenané v jejích denících a dopisech, které jsou relevantní pro toto téma.

Práce se skládá ze čtyř kapitol. První kapitola se bude zabývat biografickými událostmi v životě Plathové a zahrne známé životní události zaznamenané v jejích denících (*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*) a v dopisech domů (*Letters Home*). Druhá kapitola bude zaměřena na teorii týkající se ženského psaní v literárním kánonu, v němž dominují muži. Třetí kapitola poskytne sociokulturní analýzu domesticity a mateřství ve Spojených státech v 50. letech 20. století a čtvrtá kapitola, po níž bude následovat obsáhlý závěr s nastíněním zjištěných skutečností, se bude zabývat závěrečnou analýzou poezie Plathové o mateřství a dětech.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	8
Introduction	9
1 Sylvia Plath's Life	12
1.1 As a Daughter	14
1.2 As a Wife.....	21
1.3 As a Mother	26
2 Plath's Writing	30
2.1 The White Goddess	34
2.2 Anxiety of Authorship	36
2.3 Theorizing the Body	39
3 Domesticity and Motherhood in the 20 th Century United States	42
3.1 The All-American Housewife.....	47
3.2 (Un)natural Motherhood	50
4 Plath's Poetry of Motherhood.....	54
4.1 Pregnancy.....	56
4.2 Childlessness	61
4.3 Motherhood	64
Conclusion.....	76
Bibliography	80

Introduction

For more than fifty years after Sylvia Plath's untimely death, her life and work have been subject to numerous critical studies, inspiring many biographies to the point where she, according to Susan Bassnett, acquired "an almost mythical status."¹ The number of female writers that followed in her footsteps is a clear sign that the issues which Plath faced during her lifetime were in no way uncommon nor unique.² Still, she was extraordinary – in the way that her poetry defied conventional assumptions about numerous problems women suffered through alone and in silence, as her unapologetic confessional poetry reshaped them into a prolific platform where feminine fears could be discussed. Motherhood is undoubtedly one of them.

Plath's maternal poetry is filled with fragmented, anxious, and overall ambiguous images. It is precisely these images that I aim at examining. Jeannine Dobbs argues that the poet's "commitment to writing was total and unwavering and that her commitment to domesticity, especially motherhood, was ambivalent."³ Yet, it is Plath's poetry about domesticity and motherhood that can be placed among some of her strongest works, resounding with a powerful, autobiographical voice. Feminist critics highlighted the strength of her language, the rage that permeates her writing, and the aspects that allow for a culturally reflective approach, mirroring her inner battle of need for self-identification, yet a pressure to conform to the societal standards of the time.⁴ Susan R. Van Dyne, Linda Wagner-Martin, Susan Bassnett, and Jacqueline Rose are among the critics who saw in her poetry more than a steep staircase of mental distress leading to her suicide. They saw Plath as an "Everywoman,"⁵ a victim of the milieu within which she wrote.

Sylvia Plath was both a mother and a daughter, a dual persona in her poems. My concern is, therefore, two-fold. While some critics argue that her poetry as a whole is concerned with exorcising the father and mother persona, which haunted her, others, as beforementioned, posit that she was facing a crisis of identity as a writer, which she believed was incompatible with her identity as a mother.⁶ I believe there is truth in both. It is for this reason that in the first biographical chapter, I will include, other than a brief account of Plath's biography, a subchapter "As a Daughter," which is a more in-depth study of her relationship with her parents

¹ Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1.

² Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 119.

³ Jeannine Dobbs, "'Viciousness in the Kitchen': Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry," *Modern Language Studies* 7, no. 2 (1977): 11.

⁴ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 1.

⁵ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 1.

⁶ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 71.

and particularly her mother. I believe that it was her own daughter-mother relationship that first shaped Plath's perception of motherhood and continued to be a looming presence throughout her life and poetry.

Secondly, I will include a short overview of Plath's and Ted Hughes's relationship. The sub-chapter "As a Wife" will focus mostly on those aspects of their relationship which entail Plath's struggle for identity and self-realization as a poet, while being a wife of an already established poet. I will comment on her feelings of domestic entrapment, which inspired many negative domestic and maternal poetic images. The subchapter "As a Mother" will include commentary on Plath's own maternal experience based on known biographical facts. I will attempt to delve deeper into my analysis of some formative life events, which might have affected the way she treats motherhood in her poetry.

Plath's experience as a poet will be the topic of the second theoretical chapter, where I will outline briefly the three stages: early, transitional, and late poetry. It is here that I wish to theorize Plath's perception of the female/maternal body and language traditionally used to describe it in its many roles and archetypes, as well as discuss "Anxiety of Authorship," a term coined by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, referring to the fear and self-doubt experienced by female writers who work within a literary tradition dominated by men. I believe this anxiety was further fueled by Plath's preoccupation with Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, to which she was introduced by Hughes.

To better understand the socio-cultural background for much of her poetry, the third chapter will examine the studies of motherhood and domesticity in the United States of the era in which Plath lived: *'Just a Housewife': The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* by Glenna Matthews and most importantly, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, which was a landmark study examining the frustration and dissatisfaction of American housewives during the 1950s, together with snippets from popular women's magazines (reproduced in the beforementioned sociocultural studies) which she was known to read.

The third chapter, divided into three subchapters focused on domesticity in the 20th-century United States, housewifery, and motherhood, will serve as a theoretical background to demonstrate how Plath contested the idealized perception of motherhood at the time from a socio-cultural standpoint. The context in which she was finishing her studies and beginning her writing career was that of post-Second World War, when a campaign was launched against women in the workforce, presenting the glamorous images of motherhood and housekeeping as the pinnacle of female personal fulfillment. According to Susan Van Dyne, Plath was known

for “reading her culture, [...] from which she formed her expectations of what it meant to be a middle-class wife, mother, and aspiring writer in mid-twentieth-century America.”⁷ Van Dyne further argues that as much as Plath internalized much of the ideology, she would challenge or even reject it in her poetry. Struggling with the sheer impossibility of self-realization as both a successful poet and a loving and caring, “perfect” wife and mother, according to the standards of the era, I argue Plath transposed her feelings of entrapment in a domestic setting and maternal role into her poetry about pregnancy and motherhood. Therefore, analyzing the relation between Plath’s personal life and her artistic revision, and between her psychosexual identity and the cultural authority she contested, is my concern for this thesis.

The fourth and final, analytical chapter of this thesis will provide an analysis of maternal imagery found in Plath’s poetry. The chapter will be divided into three sub-chapters, each focusing on a different stage of the maternal feminine experience: pregnancy, childlessness, and motherhood. The recurring images (such as that of the moon) in these poems will also be taken into consideration and “translated” through her poetic language. The vocabulary of the poems will be closely examined, since as Annette Lavers argues, “we shall see that even in those poems which at first sight appear untouched by menace or obsession of death, the choice of details and adjectives betrays an underlying defensiveness, and implicit contrast.”⁸

Using the theoretical background outlined in the first three chapters, the poems will be studied and read from a socio-cultural and feminist standpoint based on known biographical occurrences. It is for the beforementioned reasons that my thesis statement posits that Sylvia Plath’s fragmented and ambiguous depictions of motherhood have their genesis in her life events and intense societal pressure, and can be explained through the analysis of perceptions of motherhood and domesticity in the 20th-century United States and her own experiences as a daughter, a wife, and a poet.

⁷ Susan R. Van Dyne, *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath’s Ariel Poems* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2.

⁸ Annette Lavers, “The World as Icon: On Sylvia Plath’s Themes,” in *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 123.

1 Sylvia Plath's Life

Perhaps the best way to begin a detailed study of maternal images in Plath's poetry is to provide a sense of who she was and what sort of domestic background she was coming from. The purpose of the first chapter is therefore to introduce Sylvia Plath and the many roles she played during her lifetime: as a daughter, a wife, a mother. As I mentioned before, I shall focus only on those aspects of her relationships that I find illuminating in regard to the research topic of this thesis.

What we know of Plath's private life, we know on account of her journal writing, which she took up when she was eleven years old and continued until her untimely death. Sadly, the portion of the journals leading up to her suicide was destroyed by Ted Hughes, claiming he meant to prevent their children from reading them and "in those days [he] regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival."⁹ Nonetheless, all the remaining original manuscripts of the journals are stored in Plath's alma mater, Smith College in Massachusetts. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* edited by Karen V. Kukil were published in 2000 and shall serve as a window to the poet's private life, her thoughts and sentiments that often reveal the true Sylvia (as opposed to the "Sivvy" persona of many letters written to her mother, "the carefully controlled voice of the earlier poetry and prose"¹⁰).

Marjorie Perloff claims that the split personas, the "poetic" or inner self of "Sivvy" in her letters home and Sylvia in her journals cannot be easily justified by mental illness.¹¹ She finds value in *Letters Home*, for when studied alongside her journals and poetry, they reveal the many roles Plath assumed as a result of societal pressure: "Dutiful Daughter, Bright and Bouncy Smith Girl, Cambridge Intellectual, Adoring Wife and Mother, Efficient Housekeeper."¹² Perloff further argues that Plath was not a schizophrenic, she was a product of her time, and "hers was a representative case of the American Dream gone sour."¹³ The anxieties expressed in the journals might help guide us through Plath's perceptions of the roles of a daughter, a wife, and a mother. According to Van Dyne, "Plath's private writing from 1957 to 1959, the first years of her marriage and of her life as a professional writer, [is] particularly revealing of the tensions that structured these identities."¹⁴

⁹ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 18.

¹⁰ Marjorie Perloff, "Sylvia Plath's 'Sivvy' poems: a portrait of the poet as daughter," in *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. Gary Lane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 156.

¹¹ Perloff, "Sylvia Plath's 'Sivvy' poems," 156.

¹² Perloff, "Sylvia Plath's 'Sivvy' poems," 156.

¹³ Perloff, "Sylvia Plath's 'Sivvy' poems," 157.

¹⁴ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 4.

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston on 27 October 1932, the first child of Otto and Aurelia Plath. Otto Plath was a German immigrant, who became a professor of biology at Boston University, specializing in ornithology and entomology. Two years after Sylvia was born, he published *Bumblebees and Their Ways*, compiling thirteen years of his study of the bumblebees of North America and fueling Plath's later preoccupation with bees in her poetry.¹⁵ Aurelia, Sylvia's mother, was born in Boston and met Otto studying for her Master's degree in German and English. She accounts that after their marriage Otto insisted she should give up teaching to be a full-time housewife and a mother,¹⁶ which she did and which I find tremendously significant regarding Plath's perceptions of womanhood and female self-realization growing up:

The age difference between us [...], Otto's superior education [and] our former teacher-student relationship, all made this sudden change to home and family difficult for him, and led to an attitude of 'rightful' dominance on his part [...]. At the end of my first year of marriage, I realized that if I wanted a peaceful home – and I did – I would simply have to become more submissive, although it was not my nature to be so.¹⁷

It was only after Otto's death from neglected and untreated diabetes mellitus when Sylvia was eight years old that Aurelia found a job again and moved from their seaside town in Massachusetts to an upper-middle-class suburb of Boston. While Otto's death caused Sylvia a life of suppressed anger for abandoning her and of "tireless effort to surpass the goals set for her by the authority figures she erected in his place,"¹⁸ her mother moving her away from the sea at such a young age likewise caused a lifetime of resentment.¹⁹ One can observe numerous instances of sea imagery connected to her search for identity and her mother, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

In 1950 Plath won a scholarship to Smith College and three years later attempted suicide for the first time by swallowing a whole bottle of sleeping pills. Nonetheless, she graduated *summa cum laude* and won a scholarship to Cambridge, where she in February 1956 met Ted Hughes after what Bassnett describes as "not belonging to the culture in which she found

¹⁵ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 5.

¹⁶ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 5.

¹⁷ Aurelia Plath, foreword to *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963* by Sylvia Plath (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 23.

¹⁸ Bruce Bawer, "Sylvia Plath and the Poetry of Confession," in *Sylvia Plath: Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2007), 9.

¹⁹ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 6.

herself, looking at England and the English with the eyes of an outsider.”²⁰ In her letters, Plath describes Hughes as “the only man I’ve met yet here who’d be strong enough to be equal with.”²¹ She married him only four months later and in 1957 they moved to the United States where Sylvia found a teaching job at Smith College and later attempted to survive on writing only. In 1959 she met Anne Sexton at a poetry workshop run by Robert Lowell at Boston University.

After moving back to England, Plath published her first collection *The Colossus*. She excitedly signed the letter to her mother describing this event “Your new authoress, Sivvy”²² – indeed, she went through her life striving to be good enough, after being raised in a family where “worth was measured by accomplishment.”²³ In 1960 her daughter Frieda was born. She started writing her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* but in 1961 she suffered a miscarriage, which inspired “the dead babies of *The Bell Jar*, a recurring motif throughout the novel, [which] mirror in fiction the child lost through miscarriage.”²⁴ In 1962 her second child, Nicholas, was born and they decided to move to Devon, where Plath took up beekeeping. Aurelia Plath said she found there to be “great tension” between her daughter and her husband when she visited, undoubtedly due to Hughes’s affair.²⁵ Sylvia’s distress and unhappiness can be found in her poetry dating back to this time: “Who has dismembered us?/The dark is melting. We touch like cripples.”²⁶

On February 11, 1963, Plath infamously committed suicide by gassing herself in the oven. She sealed the kitchen so her children would not get poisoned and left a note for the nanny she was expecting at nine in the morning with her doctor’s number on it.²⁷ The last poem she wrote before her death, “Edge,” opens with a line: “The woman is perfected./Her dead/Body wears the smile of accomplishment.”²⁸

1.1 As a Daughter

Robert Philips in *The Confessional Poets* suggests that Plath was a modern Electra, blaming her mother for the death of her father and that it was the death of her father that ultimately cast

²⁰ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 11.

²¹ Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 239.

²² Plath, *Letters Home*, 394.

²³ Calvin Bedient, “Sylvia Plath, Romantic...,” in *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. Gary Lane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 4.

²⁴ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 16.

²⁵ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 17.

²⁶ Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 195.

²⁷ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 18.

²⁸ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 272.

the darkest shadow over the rest of her personal and literary life.²⁹ He demonstrates Plath's preoccupation with the paternal figure in numerous instances of her incorporating bees into her everyday life, such as constantly playing "Bumble Boogie" on piano or taking up beekeeping in Devon. While I agree that Plath appreciated the connection with her father that bees symbolized, the organizational monarchic structure of the beehive was likewise potent in symbolism. Not to mention, "Plath enjoyed the neat parallel that the same woman, Winifred Davies, who taught her beekeeping served as midwife at the birth of Nicholas."³⁰ In this subchapter, I primarily focus on Plath's relationship with her mother, as I believe it was the major relationship that formed her perceptions of motherhood from an early age. However, there is much to be said of the bee poem cycle and father-focused poems in regards to Plath's psyche, and it is perhaps necessary to mention it, for it reveals an important understanding that Plath held of her father as the first male authoritative figure in her life, later substituted by her husband.

The "Beekeeper's Daughter," already very overt in its title, portrays the father-daughter relationship more as a master-slave relationship. The father is the "maestro of the bees,"³¹ a figure of authority and dominance. "Kneeling down/I set my eye to a hole-mouth and meet an eye/Round, green, disconsolate as a tear."³² One may observe the clever play on "eye" and "I," securing the speaker in her imagined role as a queen bee, living under her father's scrutiny. This role is, in itself, ambivalent: while the queen bee is the most important agent in the hive, she is thus subject to "perpetual confinement" and at the end of her life "biological exhaustion and inevitable replacement by young virgins."³³ The poem continues: "Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg/Under the coronal of sugar roses/The queen bee marries the winter of your year." Where the role of father and role of husband begins and ends becomes confusing here as she intertwines both into one, revealing her understanding of an authoritative male figure to be more general than specific – I, therefore, argue that in her perception, the same kind of authority and dominance she felt first from her father and later her husband, she connected on a broader scale to patriarchy as a whole.

This can be further supported if one considers her famous poem "Lady Lazarus." Van Dyne likewise argues that the poem does not have a "single adversary," instead Plath references "multiple forms of male authority." Even more names can be found in her drafts than in the

²⁹ Robert Philips, *The Confessional Poets* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 131.

³⁰ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 105.

³¹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 118.

³² Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 118.

³³ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 103.

published poem: “enemy, professor, executioner, priest, torturer, doctor, God, Lucifer.”³⁴ Van Dyne further posits that what Plath suffers from is “not male brutality but the gendered asymmetry of her relationship to power in which her role is always defined as dependent and defective.”³⁵ This I find an incredibly salient point in regards to Plath’s perception of female as an inferior sex and her subsequent resentment of her socially assigned roles.

It is then with much relevance that I must allude to Freudian psychology, of which, according to Aurelia Plath and the journals,³⁶ Sylvia was a keen reader. Freud contends that the woman’s feelings of helplessness, inadequacy, and insecurity do not necessarily result in antifeminism, but drive her to identify with males and that a little girl sides with her father because she sees all women, including her mother, as helpless. Not only this, but the female subject can only find the connection to the dominant discourse or the patriarchal power through the act of submitting to it and performing the assigned roles of mother and wife:

The properly Oedipalized female subject can find relief from her crippling sense of inadequacy only through a heterosexual, procreative cathexis, and by aligning herself with the qualities of passivity, exhibitionism, and masochism which make her the perfect “match” for the properly Oedipalized male subject.³⁷

Faced with these claims, which Plath consumed not only as a reader of Freud, but also as a patient to a therapist Dr. Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse Beuscher, who was a follower of Freud, and considering the journal entries I will quote further down in this chapter, I believe her excitement over motherhood and domesticity at the start of her marriage were a byproduct of her feelings of inferiority fueled by the social climate of the era.

The fact that Plath felt rejected and abandoned by her father in his death is apparent in many of her poems. However, while he lived, she adored him and as Philips notes, “she was never happier than when she was about nine and running along the hot white beaches with [her] father the summer before he died.”³⁸ On the other hand, her mother “was an almost constant and often overwhelming presence,”³⁹ at once weak as all women in her understanding were, and yet the only parental figure she had left and felt an overwhelming need to please, “to whom

³⁴ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 55.

³⁵ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 55.

³⁶ Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 351, 508, 115, 122.

³⁷ Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford UP, 1983), 143.

³⁸ Philips, *The Confessional Poets*, 130.

³⁹ Helen Lynne Sugarman, “‘A Secret! a Secret!’: Confession and Autobiography in the Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes” (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2000), 136.

she was tied by a psychic umbilicus too nourishing to sever.”⁴⁰ Most feminist critics, according to Van Dyne, “place mother and daughter (rather than son) at the center of their scripts, and they emphasize the pre-symbolic communion mother and daughter share during and, most emphasize, beyond a pre-oedipal moment.”⁴¹

In January 1963, shortly before her death, she wrote a memoir of her early childhood: “Landscape of Childhood” published as “Ocean 1212-W.” As in much of her writing that concerned her mother, the sea was a prevalent motif. Murray M. Schwartz and Christopher Bollas recognize that “Plath’s primary relatedness with the world and her myth of herself as an artist both go back to a profound interfusion of herself and her sea-mother.”⁴² The connection she drew between the sea and the maternal body can be observed throughout the story. The “motherly pulse of the sea” reminded her of “a deep woman, it hid a good deal; it had many faces, many delicate, terrible veils. It spoke of miracles and distances; if it could court, it could also kill.”⁴³ The ambivalent feelings towards her mother I wish to analyze in this subchapter then begin to take form here.

In the memoir, Plath presents two majorly formative events: “The first is her traumatic severing from fusion with the maternal body; the second is the originating moment of self-consciousness as a poet, a state [...] in which her gender is insistently suppressed.”⁴⁴ She paints a picture of a beach, herself a curious infant crawling towards the waves and her mother, cautious, controlling, grabbing her heels and stopping her from entering the water. In Plath’s mythology, her father did not die of diabetes but drowned. This memoir is also worthy of attention for another reason. Van Dyne finds that it reads as a reworking of Plath’s earlier story “Among the Bumblebees,” “a story of origins in which her father is equated with the fury of the sea and the power of the pen.”⁴⁵ Was her mother, in her mind, preventing her from reaching him? Was she doing so in moving Sylvia away from their seaside town after his death? In any case, she longs for the mysteries hidden in the water: “I often wonder what would have happened if I had managed to pierce that looking-glass. Would my infant gills have taken over, the salt in my blood?”⁴⁶ This is not the only time she uses gills in connection to infants. In “You’re” her baby is “gilled like a fish.”⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Bawer, “Sylvia Plath and the Poetry of Confession,” 13.

⁴¹ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 140.

⁴² Murray M. Schwartz and Christopher Bollas, “The absence at the center: Sylvia Plath and suicide,” in *Sylvia Plath: Bloom’s Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2007), 197.

⁴³ Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 115.

⁴⁴ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 84.

⁴⁵ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 186.

⁴⁶ Plath, *Johnny Panic*, 115.

⁴⁷ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 141.

In 1953, right before her mental breakdown, she wrote to her brother:

You know, as I do, and it is a frightening thing, that mother would actually kill herself for us [...]. I have realized lately that we have to fight against her selflessness as we would fight against a deadly disease [...]. After extracting her life blood and care for 20 years, we should start bringing in big dividends of joy for her.⁴⁸

The ambivalence she displays towards her mother in this letter is astounding: she feels both indebted to her mother and is afraid of her extraordinary selflessness and altruism as if it were a “deadly disease.” One can perhaps trace back the origins of the “Sivvy” persona of Plath’s letters to this confession. The striking difference of her perception of her life events and even of Aurelia herself in her journals and the overly optimistic, strictly controlled, and bubbly letters paint a larger picture of the “big dividends of joy” Sylvia felt the need to pay back. In her private journals, she exposed her true feelings on the subject:

An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide: a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself: the “vampire” metaphor Freud uses, “draining the ego”: that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: Mother's clutch. I mask my self-abasement (a transferred hate of her) and weave it with my own dissatisfactions in myself.⁴⁹

Two more entries further establish these anxious feelings: “I am experiencing a grief reaction for something I have only recently begun to admit is not there: a mother’s love”⁵⁰ and “Nothing I do (marrying [nor] writing: ‘here is a book for you, it is yours, [...] you can praise and love me now’) can change a total absence of love.”⁵¹

Plath’s tragedy then, as understood by Wagner-Martin, lies not necessarily in her being her father’s daughter (as Philips claimed) but in being her mother’s daughter: “No one cared for Sylvia for herself, but rather as the product of all the success her mother had had in rearing her” and “Otto Plath was a static and comparatively known quantity. Because he was dead, the writer had no fear of either losing his love or hearing his reactions. But in the case of Aurelia,

⁴⁸ Plath, *Letters Home*, 112-13.

⁴⁹ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 508.

⁵⁰ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 507.

⁵¹ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 507.

Plath feared both.”⁵² It was not until Aurelia became witness to her daughter’s marriage falling apart in the summer of 1962 that the façade dropped. In October she sent a letter that is unlike any she sent before: “Don’t talk to me about the world needing cheerful stuff! [...] Let the *Ladies’ Home Journal* blither about those.”⁵³ This letter she signed “Sylvia.” It is safe to say that “Sivvy” has given way to her real self.

On October 16 1962 she told her mother: “I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name.”⁵⁴ This letter she wrote just days after the bee poem cycle and on the same day that she finished the poem “Medusa,” a companion poem⁵⁵ to “Daddy.” The letter's certainty and self-assurance stand in sharp contrast to the poem's perpetual rage and animosity. The poem is overflowing with metaphors for smothering. Perhaps the most overt reference to a real-life situation can be read in lines: “In any case, you are always there,/Tremulous breath at the end of my line,”⁵⁶ which directly references both the constant phone calls with her mother while she was in England (the sea dividing them) and the constant looming maternal presence in her subconscious, influencing every word she spoke.

According to Van Dyne’s reading of the poem, the speaker is trapped in her mother’s womb, imprisoned by her “old barnacled umbilicus,”⁵⁷ swallowed by her fat, red “placenta” and stewed in her amniotic fluid.⁵⁸ The “stooges” that chase her bring about a different dimension to the poet’s terror: they touch and suckle, evocative of an infant baby. Van Dyne further develops the argument of representation of motherhood as parasitic, when she quotes the drafts of the poem: “Wh<at>o do you think you are?/A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?/I am no pieta. /I refuse to be./Pulse by, pulse by!/I shall take no bite of your body.”⁵⁹ Here motherhood appears to be almost cannibalistic. Plath views her mother’s self-sacrifice as a debt she must pay back to her, which is evident from the beforementioned journal entries. From this draft, one can also observe her perception of herself (the child) as parasitic.

Her graphic imagery of blood, body parts, and female reproductive organs both reaffirm this claim, as well as situate it among her maternal poems. In Bracha Ettinger’s words: “Poetry is blood, one’s own and an other’s. Red flowers stand for bleeding (mother, maternal and

⁵² Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 25.

⁵³ Plath, *Letters Home*, 507.

⁵⁴ Plath, *Letters Home*, 502.

⁵⁵ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 93.

⁵⁶ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 225.

⁵⁷ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 225.

⁵⁸ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 96.

⁵⁹ “Medusa,” draft 1, page 2, composed October 16, 1962, reprinted in Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 97.

prematernal) wounds. Blood, dust, ashes, red, tulip, rose...”⁶⁰ and indeed, as Plath herself proclaims, “blood-jet is poetry/There is no stopping it./You hand me two children, two roses.”⁶¹ I will comment further on the connection Plath drew between writing poetry and producing children in the fourth chapter. In any case, the two appear to be somehow intertwined in the poet’s mind (it is necessary to note that the most striking instances of this are found in poems about miscarrying or stillborn children, where she uses the metaphor to symbolize her dissatisfaction with her work or the lack thereof). Much like she cannot stop the “blood-jet” of poetry, she fails to break away from the resented, suffocating maternal body – both are a part of her, despite her closing: “There is nothing between us.”⁶² Perhaps if there is nothing between them, eternally connected by the “old barnacled umbilicus,” there can be nothing at all.

Adrienne Rich explains Plath’s matrophobia as “a dread that if one relaxes one’s guard one will identify with [the mother] completely.”⁶³ Considering the beforementioned arguments, I believe this to be true in Plath’s case. She dreaded becoming Aurelia for the way she felt suffocated by her and because “the mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr.”⁶⁴ This is further connected to the issue of domestic entrapment which I will speak of in the next subchapter and in the third chapter, which Aurelia as a stay-at-home mother, who gave up her career for Otto, symbolized. Rich also posits that “to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery.”⁶⁵ The “radical surgery” Plath performed was undoubtedly evident in the “Medusa” poem.

Bassnett claims that after Plath wrote “Daddy” and “Medusa,” after exorcising the parental figures, her poetic interest shifted towards poems about children.⁶⁶ Another explanation perhaps lies in the fact that as much as she dreaded the thought, Plath became Aurelia: a mother of two children: an older daughter and a younger son, abandoned by her husband. In “Purdah,” written less than two weeks after “Medusa,” she seems to transform: “the will-to-power of an Electra turned Clytemnestra,”⁶⁷ taking on the identity of her mother. While I agree with Bassnett that finishing the two poems gave rise to a new persona preoccupied with poems about children, I disagree that “the terrible sexual conflict of the father poems and the

⁶⁰ Bracha Ettinger, “Demeter-Persephone Complex, Entangled Aerials of the Psyche, and Sylvia Plath,” *English Studies in Canada* 40, no. 1 (2014): 141.

⁶¹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 270.

⁶² Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 226.

⁶³ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Bantam, 1977), 235.

⁶⁴ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 236.

⁶⁵ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 236.

⁶⁶ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 93.

⁶⁷ Heather McClave, “Sylvia Plath: Troubled bones,” *New England Review* 2, no. 3 (1980): 456.

communication struggle of the mother poems is absent from these child-centered poems.”⁶⁸ I instead argue that Plath’s maternal poems stem directly from the familiar conflict of her formative years. As I will discuss in this thesis, the grotesque, anxious, and fragmented imagery connected with children in Plath’s poetry can prove a continuation of sorts, not a division. Together with the influence of her husband, centuries of overwhelmingly male literary tradition, and the social climate regarding domesticity and motherhood of the time, the picture of Plath’s anxious and oftentimes negative portrayal of children in her poetry becomes clearer.

1.2 As a Wife

Women in Plath’s era considered themselves more as assistants than as main performers,⁶⁹ which was typical of the mindset of the 1940s and 1950s, where men dominated both industry and prominent teaching positions. Plath observed this in her own family because her mother did not start teaching again until Otto had passed away. What is more, her grandmother was the homemaker while her grandfather worked outside of the home. What is more, she saw that her father dedicated *Bumblebees and Their Ways* to his “‘teacher and friend,’ William Morton Wheeler and had merely acknowledged the ‘service’ of his wife ‘in editing the 12 manuscripts and in proofreading’ [...]. He had generated language, whereas her mother only transcribed it.”⁷⁰ These instances undeniably left a deep impression and feelings of self-disdain. While attending college, she noted in her journal: “I am jealous of men [...]. It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening. I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life - his career, and his sexual and family life.”⁷¹ One can observe Plath’s understanding of these two roles – professional and domestic – as something that only a man can merge:

I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day [...], spare me from relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free [...]. I think I would like to call myself ‘The girl who wants to be God.’ Yet if I were not in this body, where would I be – perhaps I am destined to be classified. But, oh, I cry out against it! [...] Never, never, never will I reach the perfection I long for with all my soul [...] for I have been

⁶⁸ Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath* (Hong Kong: MacMillan, 1987), 92.

⁶⁹ Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 13.

⁷⁰ Steven Gould Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Wounds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 25.

⁷¹ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 122.

too thoroughly conditioned to the conventional surroundings of this community.⁷²

It is clear from the letters Plath wrote to her mother and her journal entries that she felt anxious about the necessity of identifying as a woman because it impacted her ambitions. While studying at Smith, she wrote: “Graduate school and travel abroad are not going to be stymied by any squalling, breastfed brats [...]. The consequences of love affairs would stop me from my independent freedom of creative activity.”⁷³ Here she overtly pits motherhood and creative activity against each other. *Expressio unius, exclusio alterius*: performance of one, in her understanding, excludes the other. However, when she enrolled in Cambridge, her attitude changed and she started to fear becoming one of “the weird old women,”⁷⁴ or “a spinster whose door shuts/On all but cats.”⁷⁵ Moreover, as Allison Carey argues, Plath did not fear marriage *per se*, only the sort of marriage offered by feminine mystique (I will speak more on what this sort of marriage entailed in the third chapter), in which she would lose her identity and means of self-expression.⁷⁶ This sort of marriage she feared immensely and associated it “with suffocation, drowning, and the absorption of her personality by her husband.”⁷⁷

It was at Cambridge that Plath met her future husband, Ted Hughes. The letters she sent between meeting and marrying him in the span of four months were described by Aurelia Plath as “radiant letters, when love and a complete sharing of hopes and dreams acknowledge no limits.”⁷⁸ In a letter to her brother, she excitedly calls herself the “wife of the internationally known poet and genius.”⁷⁹ Much like her mother was by Otto, she was struck by him, and indeed, in her own words, “my own father, the buried male muse and godcreator [has] risen to be my mate in Ted.”⁸⁰ The separate personas of her father and husband started to merge in her mind and at first, she was smitten by his academic achievements. Plath was deeply impressed by his knowledge of literature and other areas that as Linda Wagner-Martin posits, she thought were superior, only because they were different from her own areas of expertise.⁸¹ Edward Butscher argues that she overcame the fears of marriage because she thought he “was a person

⁷² Plath, *Letters Home*, 51

⁷³ Plath, *Letters Home*, 117.

⁷⁴ Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 232.

⁷⁵ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 54.

⁷⁶ Allison Carey, “Self-Transformation: Images of Domesticity in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich” (thesis, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1991), 19.

⁷⁷ Carey, “Self-Transformation,” 20.

⁷⁸ Plath, *Letters Home*, 266.

⁷⁹ Plath, *Letters Home*, 277.

⁸⁰ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 436.

⁸¹ Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 84.

with whom she could live as a wife and coexist as a fellow writer,”⁸² ultimately merging the two worlds she thought were incompatible. Her hopefulness at the start of their marriage shines through the letters: “I am a woman and glad of it [...]. Ted and I shall make a fine life together.”⁸³

One has to wonder, what happened to the “girl who wanted to be God.”⁸⁴ I believe she never left. Plath tried to conceal and stash her away, but ultimately, she was tormented by contingencies and alternatives. According to Van Dyne, her “fondest fiction about her relationship with Hughes was that it was a mutually beneficial collaboration.”⁸⁵ Plath believed they were each other’s best critics. However, what comes through in her letters is a teacher-student, less than equal relationship: “He literally knows Shakespeare by heart and is shocked that I have read only 13 plays [...]. He is educating me daily.”⁸⁶ Van Dyne further proposes that what plagued Plath was not only the cultural construction of American marriages in the 1950s and the familiar anxieties fueled by the ambivalent relationship with her parents, it was also the male-dominated literary tradition, to which she was exposed at Smith and Cambridge, and which was reinforced by the books she was gifted by Hughes.⁸⁷ Her feelings of inferiority were, therefore, fortified by Hughes’s view of her as only an apprentice poet and her metaphoric relation to the male literary canon she studied and taught.

I argue that Plath suffered greatly from what Gilbert and Gubar call “Anxiety of Authorship” (which I will focus on in the eponymous subchapter), both subconsciously fueled by the issues any woman writer faces entering the literary canon, but also vastly due to her husband’s influence. She could claim any sort of relation to the dominant literary discourse only by marriage: “I drank champagne with the appreciation of a housewife on an evening off from the smell of sour milk and diapers [...]. There Ted stood, flanked by T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice on the one hand and Stephen Spender on the other [...]. Ted looked very at home among the great.”⁸⁸ The cheerful, if somewhat covertly resentful letter stands in sharp contrast to a journal entry: “Must not nag [...]; he, of course, can nag me about light meals, straight-necks, writing exercises, from his superior seat. [...] He is ahead of me so far [...]. Smile, write in secret, showing no one. [...] A woman famous among women.”⁸⁹

She often referenced Adrienne Rich, Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, Emily Dickinson,

⁸² Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (New York: Seabury, 1976), 184.

⁸³ Plath, *Letters Home*, 276.

⁸⁴ Plath, *Letters Home*, 51.

⁸⁵ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 19.

⁸⁶ Plath, *Letters Home*, 287.

⁸⁷ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 19.

⁸⁸ Plath, *Letters Home*, 415.

⁸⁹ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 480.

or Louise Bogan, whether it be in simple recognition, admiration, or at other times with hints of competition, especially pertaining to Adrienne Rich, who was her contemporary. As Van Dyne argues and what the beforementioned journal entry confirms, is that in her feelings of jealousy and artistic insignificance, she stopped looking to Hughes for support (or critique) and instead felt the need to turn to famous women writers and study their work for ways to improve or reassurances,⁹⁰ aspiring to find her voice within the dominant literary discourse. As Van Dyne puts it, she “sought to recover examples of female greatness as reassurance that her gender was not an obstacle to literary creativity.”⁹¹

To speak further of Plath’s feelings of domestic entrapment is to turn to her journals, which “describe a state of creative paralysis and blockage, of being ‘verbally repressed.’”⁹² One can observe her fears of not becoming the great, famous artist she imagined herself to be, but a stay-at-home wife and mother, passive and listening. Seeing that her husband’s career was the prioritized one, she became a secretary of sorts, the fears she spoke of in her journals coming true: “Will I be a secretary – a self-rationalizing, uninspired housewife, secretly jealous of my husband's ability to grow intellectually & professionally while I am impeded [...], either mad or become neurotic?”⁹³ In one letter home she recounts a supposedly joyful event: “I am more happy than if it was my book published! I have worked so closely on these poems of Ted's and typed them so many countless times through revision and revision that I feel ecstatic about it all. [...] I can rejoice, then, much more, knowing Ted is ahead of me.”⁹⁴

After their first child Frieda was born in 1960, she attempted to find some time for herself to write while Ted took care of the baby in the mornings. However, in such a strict setting, she no doubt had great trouble producing any poetry, and so her frustrations and envy of Hughes grew.⁹⁵ During the first year after Frieda’s birth, she wrote only a few poems. Ted, however, “wrote plays for the BBC, books for children, enigmatic but vivid short stories, and many of the poems for his second book.”⁹⁶ This only fueled her resentment of him and own self-deprecation. In 1961 she miscarried and in January 1962 gave birth to their second child, Nicholas. Her ambivalent feelings about motherhood can be observed in a single letter: “I think having babies is really the happiest experience of my life,” and “I am enjoying my slender

⁹⁰ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 22.

⁹¹ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 136.

⁹² Christina Britzolakis, “Gothic Subjectivity,” in *Sylvia Plath: Bloom’s Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2007), 125.

⁹³ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 184.

⁹⁴ Plath, *Letters Home*, 320.

⁹⁵ “Sylvia Plath's ‘Sivvy’ poems,” 162.

⁹⁶ Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 92.

foothold in my study in the morning again. It makes all the difference in my day.”⁹⁷

That same year Hughes’s affair with Assia Wevill began. On September 23 in an unpublished letter to her mother, she vents that he was “spending checks he never entered in the book [...], making life utter hell and destroying my work plus living off my novel grant” and that “he tells me now he never had the courage to say he did not want children.”⁹⁸ In a letter that followed shortly after, she confesses that she’s “furious. I threw everything of mine into our life without question, all my earnings, and now he is well off [...]. He is a vampire on my life.”⁹⁹ It seems Plath was infuriated not only over Hughes leaving her for another woman, but that she was the one who did most of the work in their relationship, both financially and as a homemaker.

Right after their marriage fell apart, she wrote “The Jailer” and “Detective.” The prisoner in “The Jailer” is tormented both psychologically and physically: “He has been burning me with cigarettes/.../I am myself. That is not enough.”¹⁰⁰ Yet she does not escape for she is sure the man fully depends on her: “I wish him dead or away./That, it seems is the impossibility,/That, being free./What would the dark/Do without fevers to eat?/What would the light/Do, without eyes to knife, what would he/Do, do do without me?”¹⁰¹ “The Detective” addresses her feeling of disintegrating into nothing in her marriage, losing her identity, and her personhood. Once she dies, “There is no body in the house at all.”¹⁰² She “vaporized.” The mouth first, for she was forbidden to voice her thoughts. The breasts next, all used up after nursing her children or as a symbol of her sexuality. “Then the dry wood, the gates,/The brown motherly furrows, the whole estate.”¹⁰³ “This is the smell of years burning, here in the kitchen.”¹⁰⁴ The overwhelmingly strong, suffocating domestic imagery of the poem, combined with the letters written in the final weeks of her life, reveal an image of Sylvia Plath as the former wife, who was finally poetically free, “as if domesticity had choked [her].”¹⁰⁵ Choosing to end her life by gassing herself in the oven then becomes a telling metaphor in itself.

Considering all the beforementioned arguments, the case for Plath as trapped by domesticity and suffering in her need and inability to write or feeling academically and

⁹⁷ Plath, *Letters Home*, 482.

⁹⁸ Sylvia Plath, unpublished excerpt from her Sept. 23, 1962, letter to Aurelia (The Lilly Library, Indiana University), quoted in Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 122.

⁹⁹ Sylvia Plath, unpublished excerpt from her Sept. 24, 1962, letter to Aurelia (The Lilly Library, Indiana University), quoted in Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 122.

¹⁰⁰ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 226.

¹⁰¹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 227.

¹⁰² Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 209.

¹⁰³ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 209.

¹⁰⁴ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 108.

¹⁰⁵ Plath, *Letters Home*, 499.

artistically insignificant next to her husband is strong and serves as an important piece of glass in a kaleidoscope of her ambivalent feelings towards motherhood.

1.3 As a Mother

As we have already established in the subchapters above, as a student Plath felt significantly conflicted between motherhood and her professional career, to the point they often seemed irreconcilable. While studying at Cambridge this changed, as she began to see motherhood not only as a prison, but supposedly also as a way of “extending [her] experience of life.”¹⁰⁶ Whether this happened under the influence of Hughes, the social or academic climate (in fact, even in academia they were “taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents”¹⁰⁷), her mother, or whether this could be remnants of influence of her trusted therapist at Smith who was a follower of Freud, cannot be said. I believe that the correct explanation is that there is no singular explanation, but a myriad of them, intertwined, overarching, influencing, and bolstering one another.

Van Dyne offers another angle, claiming that Plath was hoping to achieve self-realization and adulthood as a woman by producing a baby (indeed, the degree to which Plath adapted “the 1950s cultural convention that womanhood is proven by motherhood is evident in her conviction that ‘every woman does it’”¹⁰⁸) just as she would a book of poems, finally ridding herself of the status of the student, the apprentice or the daughter.¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, Sylvia’s views on motherhood shifted and, as mentioned above, four years after marrying Hughes her first child was born. She was enthusiastic to fulfill her goals of being both a great mother and a great poet, and to defy the sociocultural norms and values “that defined female self-expression as most perfectly realized in the domestic drama of child-rearing.”¹¹⁰

The happiness and optimism after giving birth to Frieda did not last long, as she was confronted with the reality of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. According to Dobbs, Plath tried for compromise and though she attempted to merge the two worlds to the best of her abilities, she was unsuccessful.¹¹¹ Dobbs likewise speaks of great ambivalence, as Plath loved the inspiration and stimulus for writing that children provided (as Wagner-Martin mentions, Hughes was of the opinion that it was only after the birth of Frieda that Plath found her true

¹⁰⁶ Plath, *Letters Home*, 218.

¹⁰⁷ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 11.

¹⁰⁸ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 130.

¹⁰⁹ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 129.

¹¹⁰ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 144.

¹¹¹ Dobbs, “Viciousness in the Kitchen,” 13.

poetic voice and the motif of transcendence and rebirth took hold during this time as well¹¹²), yet she could not help but build up “a resentment against them, against their demands on her time, their drain on her creativity.”¹¹³ She was realizing that her life was failing to fulfill her personal demands.

Both of her children were delivered at home, which is unsurprising, considering her distaste for a sterile hospital environment, as exemplified by her poem “Three Women” or “some really interesting hospital sights”¹¹⁴ of *The Bell Jar*, including “a room with four cadavers,” and “bottles full of babies that had died before they were born.”¹¹⁵ *The Bell Jar* also offers a description of a hospital birth scene: “It looked like some awful torture table, with these metal stirrups sticking up in mid-air at one end and all sorts of instruments and wires and tubes.”¹¹⁶ Esther’s (Plath’s autobiographical character) description of the pregnant body is likewise distinctly negative: “She seemed to have nothing but an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs propped in the high stirrups,” and “she never stopped making this unhuman whooping noise.”¹¹⁷ Upon being explained what epidural anesthesia was, she was unenthusiastic: “I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn’t groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget.”¹¹⁸ The scene was inspired by a real-life event recorded in the journals:

Then I think of my gross fears at having a baby which I suppose center around that crucial episode at the Boston Lying-In, so many years ago when that anonymous groaning woman, shaved and painted all colors, got cut, blood ran, water broke, and the baby came with bloody veins [...]. Every woman does it: so I cower and want, want and cower [...].¹¹⁹

These examples clearly show Plath’s disdain for hospital births (or, perhaps, births in general. The issue of over-medicalization of childbirth will be further dealt with in the subchapter “(Un)natural Motherhood”).

Plath delivered Nicholas, her second child, with no anesthesia and therefore recorded

¹¹² Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 70.

¹¹³ Dobbs, “Viciousness in the Kitchen,” 13.

¹¹⁴ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 65.

¹¹⁵ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 65.

¹¹⁶ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 68.

¹¹⁷ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 68.

¹¹⁸ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 68.

¹¹⁹ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 429.

the event in her private journals in great detail:

I had my eyes squeezed shut and felt this black force blotting out my brain and utterly possessing me. A horrible fear it would split me and burst through me, leaving me in bloody shreds [...], then in three great bursts, the black thing hurtled itself out of me, one, two, three, dragging three shrieks after it [...]. I lifted my head and saw my first son, Nicholas Farrar Hughes, blue and glistening [...]. The afterbirth flew out into a pyrex bowl, which crimsoned with blood [...]. We had a son. I felt no surge of love.¹²⁰

Reading this gruesome description of her childbirth experience, it would be difficult for me to build any sort of case for Plath experiencing “tranquility” in motherhood as Bassnett claims.¹²¹ This account is not unlike the macabre narration in *The Bell Jar*. What is more, as Wagner-Martin argues, only a few critics have paid any attention to what might well have been the existence of post-partum depression.¹²² Marilyn Yalom, being one of them, claims that motherhood often “serves as a catalyst for mental breakdown.”¹²³ In Plath’s case, Wagner-Martin posits, it was further strengthened by “her anger toward Aurelia [that] fed into her self-image,”¹²⁴ bringing about a strong parallel between her mother and herself, realizing she might adopt her mother’s characteristics, or that she may have become her mother.

Moreover, Plath sought Aurelia’s approval and dreaded disappointing her even in the act of being a mother herself. This argument is particularly strong, considering the letter she wrote right after she miscarried: “I do hope the sad news in my last letter didn't cast you down too much [...]. All I can say is that you'd better start saving for another trip another summer, and I'll make sure I can produce a new baby for you then!”¹²⁵ In the act of producing babies for her, she found herself battling ambivalent feelings. Her maternity was a proof of her sexuality, as Van Dyne posits, and this she felt was somehow disappointing to her mother: “Why guilt: as if sex, even legally indulged in, should be ‘paid for’ by pain. I would probably interpret pain as a judgment: birth-pain, even a deformed child. Magical fear mother will become a child, my child: an old hag child.”¹²⁶ The image of deformed or monstrous children, as she suggests, is in her mind connected to guilt. The fear of deformed babies will be further touched upon in the

¹²⁰ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 724-5.

¹²¹ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 94.

¹²² Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 63.

¹²³ Marilyn Yalom, *Maternity, Mortality and the Literature of Madness* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985), 5, quoted in Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 64.

¹²⁴ Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 64.

¹²⁵ Plath, *Letters Home*, 439.

¹²⁶ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 517.

third chapter, as it is an important recurring image throughout her maternal poetry.

In a different journal entry, there is again the blurring of lines between motherhood and writing: “The virginal page, white [...] and then the painful botched rape of the first page. Slowly with great hurt, like giving birth to some endless and primeval baby.”¹²⁷ Where does one begin deciphering such deep anxieties? In Van Dyne’s words, what is revealed in these entries is that “Plath conceives of both writing and maternity as fearful ordeals whose outcome is uncertain; the biological metaphor that links them promises only struggle, pain, endless labor, and chthonic fears of monstrous offspring.”¹²⁸ What is more, the journal entry mentions “the painful botched rape.” A parallel can be drawn between this entry and her poem “Three Women,” in which one of the women conceives a child through rape and deals with her overwhelming feelings of fear and trauma. Not only does this speak of the fear of becoming a mother, but also of the means by which one becomes a mother.

¹²⁷ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 328.

¹²⁸ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 132.

2 Plath's Writing

In this chapter I will offer a brief account of Plath's literary life, outlining the major distinctive marks of the three stages into which her poetic work generally falls: the early (spanning from 1956 up to the publication of her first collection of poems, *The Colossus*, in 1960), the transitional (consisting of *Crossing the Water* collection, which was published after her death, but which contains approximately a year's worth of poems, spanning from the end of 1960 up until early 1962) and the late poetry (comprising of the poems she wrote from early 1962 until her death in 1963, namely the collections *Ariel* and *Winter Trees*).

Focusing less on the biographical and more on the creative aspects of her life during these years, I only wish to present a short account of the evolution of Plath's poetic voice, which took its definite shape during the last years of her life. While I argue that Plath's descriptions of motherhood were ambivalent across all stages of her poetic life, I find the evolution of the female speaker gradually learning to encode feminine meanings and transpose her covert rage at social and literary norms into poetry more than fascinating. In the subchapters to follow I will speak more on Plath's influences and anxieties about writing as a woman in a male-dominated literary canon.

The early stages of Plath's poetry signify the beginnings of her search for an authentic, poetic voice and experimental images, while still falling back on already established poetic structures (or as Bassnett calls it, "self-consciously intellectual poems"¹²⁹). As we established in the "As a Wife" subchapter, in the beginning, Plath relied heavily on Hughes for artistic and academic guidance. She was completing various exercises he prepared for her and this student-teacher relationship is reinforced as one reads Hughes's foreword to *The Collected Poems*, where he describes how "from this time I worked closely with her and watched the poems being written."¹³⁰ This paints an image of the early poems being written under Hughes's constant surveillance and influence. In her 1956 journal entry, she expressed dissatisfaction: "Until I make something tight and riding over the limits of sweet sestinas and sonnets [...] they can ignore me and make up pretty jokes."¹³¹ Looking back now and observing the way Plath's poetic voice shifted away from the formal features she learned and tried to emulate to rawer, emotionally charged poems of *Ariel* after her separation from Hughes, it is not difficult to draw the connection between the two.

¹²⁹ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 47.

¹³⁰ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 16.

¹³¹ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 248.

To speak on Plath's framing of female struggle and psyche in her poetry of the early phase is to delve into many contradictions. In accordance with the journal entries voicing her anxieties regarding a woman's role in society, Plath's early poems present a female speaker who must always choose: the mother and homemaker, or the career woman, and poet. It is only in the later phases that Plath's speaker attempts to merge the two, for better or worse.

The dissimilitude between the form of her early and late poetry is the reason some critics view this stage of her poetic career "as a prelude to her later work."¹³² I agree with Bassnett in saying that to reduce her early poetry to simply a prelude would be ignorant, instead one can look at it as "consciously experimenting, as a stage in her development as a poet."¹³³ John F. Nims goes on to say: "Notice all the stanza forms, all the uses of rhythm and rhyme; notice how the images are chosen and related; how deliberately sound is used [...]. Without the drudgery of *The Colossus*, the triumph of *Ariel* is unthinkable."¹³⁴

Published posthumously, *Crossing the Water* (1971) constitutes Plath's transitional phase and encompasses the poetry written between *The Colossus* and *Ariel*. The poems were written during Plath and Hughes's stay in London and later Devon, concluding with their separation. During this time "Plath often felt choked by domesticity."¹³⁵ It is however important to note, as Perloff does, that not all poems in the book can truly be called transitional, owing to the "very careless editing on the part of Ted Hughes."¹³⁶ She explains that many of the poems are contemporaneous either to the period of *The Colossus* or *Ariel*.

Nonetheless, Perloff offers five thematic groups the poems in the collection can be divided into:

- 1) Moralized landscapes (e.g., "Parliament Hill Fields," "Sleep in the Mojave Desert")
- 2) Hospital poems (e.g., "In Plaster," "The Surgeon at 2 A.M.")
- 3) Poems about pregnancy and childbirth (e.g., "Metaphors," "Heavy Woman")
- 4) Surrealistic portrayals of personal relationships (e.g., "Widow," "Leaving Early")
- 5) Poems about death or transcendence (e.g., "I Am Vertical," "Blackberrying")¹³⁷

The poems that will be studied later are the ones fitting into the third thematic group. However, it is important to note that this phase is overall valuable when one seeks to understand Plath's

¹³² Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 47.

¹³³ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 47.

¹³⁴ John Frederick Nims, "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath," in *Ariel Ascending: Writings about Sylvia Plath*, ed. Paul Alexander (New York, Harper & Row, 1985), 46.

¹³⁵ Caroline King Barnard Hall, "Transitional Poetry," in *Sylvia Plath: Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2007), 99.

¹³⁶ Marjorie Perloff, "On the Road to 'Ariel': The 'Transitional' Poetry of Sylvia Plath," *The Iowa Review* 4, no. 2 (1973): 94.

¹³⁷ Perloff, "On the Road," 102-3.

development of her final poetic voice and style, as well as some images she develops during this time that she continues to use in her late phase (such as the image of a mirror, which in her mind connotes death, drowning or even allusion to candlelight¹³⁸). Caroline King Barnard Hall argues that “the mutation in Plath’s use of rhymes, rhythms, sounds, and stanza forms from the early to the late poems is a process instructive to follow in tracing her gradual achievement of economical expression.”¹³⁹ If we then agree with the general idea of perpetuity throughout Plath’s poetic life, this phase provides the link connecting the experimental, yet controlled early phase to the poems of *Ariel* and reinforcing the postulation of an existing continuum throughout her poetry.

Both *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* collections were published by Hughes after Plath’s death. These are the poems that are most resonant with both personal and general feminine fears, anxieties, and ambivalence about simply existing as a female in the social climate they were written in. The poems of *Ariel* read as deeply personal and include works such as “Daddy,” “Medusa,” or the bee poem cycle, as well as numerous poems that reveal her perception of motherhood. While I will analyze poems about motherhood from every stage of her poetic life, it is this one that offers the greatest insight. To briefly touch upon the biographical, Plath here was already a mother to Frieda, during this phase miscarried and gave birth to Nicholas, as well as ended her marriage. The feminine and maternal themes permeate the late poems, as she explores her place in the patriarchal world as a woman, a mother, and a poet.

In her late poems, she frequently discusses the various roles women must play. In “Kindness” the writing of poetry stands in opposition to motherhood and domestic life. The “blood jet of poetry” contradicts the domestic and maternal nature of “Dame Kindness.” “Stopped Dead” features “a goddamn baby screaming”¹⁴⁰ and in “Lesbos” there is always “a stink of fat and baby crap” and she is “doped and thick from [her] last sleeping pill.”¹⁴¹ In “An Appearance,” the woman appears as mechanical, she is a “swiss watch, jewelled in the hinges.”¹⁴² Christina Britzolakis argues that “she is an allegorical cypher of femininity, reducible to the domestic appliances she operates and the repetitive functions she performs, a peculiarly willed, deliberate, and written construction.”¹⁴³

Gothic images are likewise prevalent, but this is not a newfound quality of *Ariel*. Plath was already experimenting with subterranean nightmarish landscapes and images in *The*

¹³⁸ Hall, “Transitional Poetry,” 108.

¹³⁹ Hall, “Transitional Poetry,” 100.

¹⁴⁰ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 230.

¹⁴¹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 228.

¹⁴² Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 189.

¹⁴³ Britzolakis, “Gothic Subjectivity,” 130.

Colossus. However, I find that in her late poetry, she turned from chilling descriptions of the setting and earth's surfaces to oftentimes macabre descriptions of the female body. For instance, "Wintering" ventures into the depths of the female body, where only "black asininity" and "decay"¹⁴⁴ await. Britzolakis offers an angle that I find notable:

Gothic literature, it has been argued, typically combines a "fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space."¹⁴⁵ For Plath, the literary-historical sign "Gothic" forms a secret link between the polarized male and female legacies of writing which the daughter-in mourning inherits. Ghosts threaten the feminine realm of the home, the proper or the domestic. Plath's tendency to conflate metaphors of psychic and spatial enclosure taps into the conventions of Gothic romance, historically coded as feminine.¹⁴⁶

This argument will be especially salient once we venture to analyze Plath's understanding of the feminine pregnant body in her poetry, which often features such monstrous and gothic descriptions.

According to Wagner-Martin, the route to *Ariel* for Plath meant separation from all male figures in her life and even from the dominant male-centric literary discourse.¹⁴⁷ In *Ariel*, after fighting all her battles, the female speaker stands alone. Identifying herself with an animal, such as a horse in the title of the collection, she is able to transcend her tormented, mortal body. What is more, such an act "recalls Robert Graves's insistence in his *White Goddess* that the spirit of that fiery female goddess often appears as a mare, tigress, owl, sow, serpent, she-wolf, female spider, snake, or queen bee."¹⁴⁸

One must be reminded of Plath's famous proclamation from 1949: "I think I would like to call myself 'The girl who wanted to be God.' [...] I am I – I am powerful – but to what extent? I am I."¹⁴⁹ "I am I" began a long search for identity, both in her personal and literary life, starting with *The Colossus* and culminating in *Ariel*, where Plath's poetic voice was finally crystallized into a powerful tool, unapologetically voicing feminine anxieties and rage, offering us valuable insight into the workings of the poet's mind. Hughes being the only person to have

¹⁴⁴ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 218.

¹⁴⁵ Chris Baldick, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), xii., quoted in Britzolakis, "Gothic Subjectivity," 116.

¹⁴⁶ Britzolakis, "Gothic Subjectivity," 116.

¹⁴⁷ Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 114.

¹⁴⁸ Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 113.

¹⁴⁹ Plath, *Letters Home*, 51.

read and destroyed Plath's last journal entries, "the Plath's voice is heard – now – only in the work itself."¹⁵⁰ Attempting to decipher the dense web of imagery she spun in her last maternal poems through analysis of known biographical occurrences, influences, and a detailed study of the social climate is therefore the most effective way for putting together all the pieces in a kaleidoscope of her ambivalent feelings towards motherhood.

2.1 The White Goddess

In Keith Sagar's understanding, "to supply [Plath] with a fully worked out belief in the poetic mythology of Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*"¹⁵¹ was the most significant artistic influence Hughes had on her. Plath voiced her preoccupation with the book in her journals and poetry alike.

The first mention of the goddess comes from her 1957 journal entry, developing the fictional character of Judith Greenwood: "Make her enigmatic: who is that blond girl: she is a bitch: she is the white goddess. Make her a statement of the generation. Which is you."¹⁵² One may observe Plath's immediate identification with this character and subsequent identification with the white goddess as an answer to the dilemma of femininity, whom she considers both "a bitch" and "a statement of the generation," situating her firmly in the contemporary discourse. The second example of this fascination likewise comes from the journals, where Plath describes a process of choosing names for their baby: "Read [...] 'The White Goddess' and unearthed a whole series of subtle symbolic names for our children whose souls haunt me - that my hurt & my two legs could be the doorway for walking, talking human beings - it seems too strange and fearful."¹⁵³ What I find fascinating about this entry is the way *The White Goddess* infiltrated even such intimate moments of Plath's life as naming her children. However, even in this seemingly happy recollection, she feels strange and fearful about the concept of becoming a mother.

But why did *The White Goddess* have such a tremendous impact on Plath's life and work? Here I borrow Bassnett's explanation of the myth:

The White Goddess – the source of all poetry and of all life, [...] stands in direct contrast to the male, fatherly God of Christianity and rationalism. She is not constant and fixed

¹⁵⁰ Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 142.

¹⁵¹ Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 10.

¹⁵² Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 335.

¹⁵³ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 432.

but fluid and in perpetual movement, symbolised by the phases of the moon. The moon goddess is, simultaneously, goddess of three stages of female existence – she is the virgin huntress of the new moon, the pregnant mother of the full moon and the wild hag of the waning moon. Her colours are white, red and black – whiteness being associated with purity but also with barrenness; red being associated with blood; both life blood and menstrual blood; and black being associated with decay, death and mourning. Her element is the sea, she controls the tides.¹⁵⁴

Looking back to our musings on Plath's anxious understanding of a woman's role in the society, it becomes more than apparent why she felt so passionately about this myth. A glimpse at a nightmare passage from *The Bell Jar* might provide a better example: "I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story. [...] One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor."¹⁵⁵ The goddess, as she understood, existed as an enigma, an ambiguity, a singular woman but at once a virgin, a mother, and a hag. She provided an answer to the issue of fragmentation Sylvia Plath (and other white middle-class women in the 1950s) felt: a way to merge her desires to be both a successful careerwoman – a poet and an artist; and a mother to her children, which her culture promised would fulfill her as a woman.¹⁵⁶ She saw the goddess as a cure to her inner turmoil, which "could be resolved through the idea of simultaneity that avoids resolution."¹⁵⁷ Judith Kroll finds beyond 100 instances where the moon is mentioned in Plath's poems, portraying "her emblematic muse – her Moon-muse – which symbolizes the deepest source and inspiration of the poetic vision, the poet's vocation, her female biology."¹⁵⁸ What is more, the goddess herself and the white, red, and black colors she stands for, as well as her ternary occupation as a virgin, a mother, and a hag are also mentioned.

However, I argue that *The White Goddess* not only offered solutions to fragmentation in her poetry but also further fueled Plath's inner dilemma as a woman and poet and her anxiety of authorship, which will be the topic of the next subchapter. Rose suggests that "the archetype might be taken on at considerable cost."¹⁵⁹ The white goddess, however powerful, was still only a muse. In his idealization of the feminine roles in society, Graves finds one completely incompatible with his understanding of a woman: "Woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse

¹⁵⁴ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 56.

¹⁵⁵ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 80.

¹⁵⁶ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 59.

¹⁵⁷ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 59.

¹⁵⁸ Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York, Harper & Row, 1976), 21.

¹⁵⁹ Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 153.

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.”¹⁶⁰ He then goes on to say: “It is the imitation of male poetry that causes the false ring in the work of almost all women poets.”¹⁶¹

As Rose suggests, Graves’s “conception of femininity was being consciously or unconsciously negotiated”¹⁶² between Plath and Hughes throughout their marriage. Graves’s ideology then likewise operated on a subconscious level in Plath’s psyche and influenced not only her relationship to poetry but also motherhood. Through her poetic persona, she attempted to merge the two, using the trilateral quality of the white goddess. Be that as it may, in her personal life she never managed to connect the two.¹⁶³ Motherhood and her poetic life stood firmly as separate pieces of her fragmented identity, excluding one another in her mind. Moving on steadily toward defining what “Anxiety of Authorship” is – as proposed by Gilbert and Gubar – I find these subchapters contribute much to the later analysis of Plath’s maternal imagery.

2.2 Anxiety of Authorship

“Yes, my consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, barroom regulars — to be part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording — all is spoiled by the fact I am a girl [...]. Yes, God, I want to talk to everyone I can as deeply as I can.”¹⁶⁴ This illuminating journal entry allows us a glimpse into the inner workings of Plath’s mind and perhaps an explanation as to why she was not fully satisfied being a “woman famous among women.”¹⁶⁵ She desired to join conversations of men, of which she was often left out, not only metaphorically, but in her day-to-day life (as exemplified by her strikingly jealous description of Hughes entertaining famous poets in their house and having meaningful discussions, while she could only observe the scene “with the appreciation of a housewife on an evening off”¹⁶⁶). As Rose puts it, “what she wants is not a room of one’s own [...] but the road, field and tavern, the expansion of a world crucially located outside.”¹⁶⁷

Gilbert and Gubar in their analysis of women’s writing through a social and historical

¹⁶⁰ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 446-7.

¹⁶¹ Graves, *The White Goddess*, 447.

¹⁶² Rose, *The Haunting*, 155.

¹⁶³ Dobbs, “Viciousness in the Kitchen,” 13.

¹⁶⁴ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 94.

¹⁶⁵ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 480.

¹⁶⁶ Plath, *Letters Home*, 415.

¹⁶⁷ Rose, *The Haunting*, 118.

lens speak of the Bloomian notion called “Anxiety of Influence,” a psychological struggle an aspiring male writer experiences, or his “fear that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings.”¹⁶⁸ To overcome this and become a true poet, he must devote himself to a “literary Oedipal struggle,”¹⁶⁹ in which he must undermine his literary antecedents. This notion is indeed both intensely Freudian and patriarchal and as such, rules out writers who are female: the female writer “must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her.”¹⁷⁰ She therefore cannot participate in the discourse and this struggle in the same way a male writer would, bringing about a whole new, exclusively female, anxiety – that of authorship:

The loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention – all these phenomena of “inferiorization” mark the woman writer's struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart.¹⁷¹

What is more, Gilbert, Gubar, and Bassnett speak of another predicament female writers face (which is directly connected to my earlier musings on Graves’s conception of the woman being only a muse). In Bassnett’s words, “language itself mirrors the male-dominated structuring of the world. The Logos – reason, learning, the Word – has come to be equated with the Phallus, a symbol of maleness. Women are therefore completely trapped for [...] literary forms have been determined for them.”¹⁷² How then can the female poet transpose her female experience and struggle with self-realization into her poetry if the very language is male-centric? I agree with Bassnett in her claim that one must find a center and a voice that no male poet can relate to or possess.¹⁷³ To return to our analysis of Plath’s anxieties on writing and

¹⁶⁸ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 46.

¹⁶⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 47.

¹⁷⁰ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 48.

¹⁷¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 50.

¹⁷² Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 62.

¹⁷³ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 62.

identity alike, I find it noteworthy to mention Gilbert and Gubar's points about depictions of women as characters within this phallogentric language. They posit that

because a writer "fathers" his text, his literary creations [...] are his possession, his property. Having defined them in language and thus generated them, he owns them, controls them, and encloses them on the printed page [...]. Lacking the pen/penis which would enable them similarly to refute one fiction by another, women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to mere properties, to characters and images.¹⁷⁴

The most radical of them, standing in opposition to one another, are those of "angel" and "monster" in the house. The juxtaposed images of an angel and a monster imposed onto female characters call for at least a short definition. Gilbert and Gubar trace the origin of the angel archetype to the Middle Ages' reverence of the Virgin Mary as the virgin mother of God, which during the 19th century transformed into an idealized image of a domestic woman – an angel in the house.¹⁷⁵ This character, however, tends to have "no story except a sort of anti-story of selfless innocence based on the notion that 'Man must be pleased; but him to please/Is woman's pleasure.'"¹⁷⁶¹⁷⁷ However, there is another side to this character: "The fact that the angel woman manipulates her domestic/mystical sphere in order to ensure the well-being of those entrusted to her care reveals that she can manipulate; she can scheme; she can plot – stories as well as strategies."¹⁷⁸ On the other hand, the monster archetype, often reduced to "a bitch" or "a witch" is the opposite:

While male writers traditionally praise the simplicity of the dove, they invariably castigate the cunning of the serpent – at least when that cunning is exercised in her own behalf. Similarly, assertiveness, aggressiveness – all characteristics of a male life of "significant action" – are "monstrous" in women precisely because "unfeminine" and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of "contemplative purity."¹⁷⁹

This archetype represents male fears of female power, creativity, and self-realization and

¹⁷⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 12.

¹⁷⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 20.

¹⁷⁶ Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London: George Bell & Son, 1885), 73, quoted in Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 20.

¹⁷⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 20.

¹⁷⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 26.

¹⁷⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 28.

therefore such a monster-woman is inherently freakish and unnatural. Something must have gone wrong if she is not presenting herself as the perfect nurturing partner to the male. As Gilbert and Gubar note, Simone de Beauvoir's idea that "woman has been made to represent all of man's ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own physical existence, his own birth and death,"¹⁸⁰ rings true when one considers these monstrous representations of women throughout the ages.

Gilbert and Gubar use Sylvia Plath as an example of a female writer fully acknowledging her place within the patriarchal literary discourse¹⁸¹: In "Lady Lazarus" she says: "Herr Enemy [...] I am your opus, / I am your valuable."¹⁸² Here she sees herself as a creation, not a creator. However, by the poem's end, she "eat[s] men like air," accepting her literary persona that emerged from centuries of phallogentric literary canon, yet transcending her prescribed role and devouring her creators. The female writer then, to transcend these archetypes prescribed to her, must first reconcile herself to them. Gilbert and Gubar state that in order to free themselves from these literary shackles, "women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been 'killed' into art."¹⁸³ Their long struggle then stands a chance to turn into "a dance of triumph, a dance into speech, a dance of authority."¹⁸⁴

It is with these new findings that we can circle back to our previous argument that in *Ariel* Plath's poetic voice reached its final stages. Van Dyne agrees that Plath's final poems sought to separate herself from the male discourse as a whole, which included dismantling the most feminine – maternal – body. She posits that "to define herself as poet she must contest the gendered inscription of her body as feminine by shattering the plaster cast, by effacing the maternal body in 'Tulips,' or by demonizing it in 'Medusa'."¹⁸⁵ After separating from her husband, the poetic persona of her late poetry was able to stand alone, not only detached from men in her life but outside of the phallogentric literary discourse, generating her own language.

2.3 Theorizing the Body

Poststructuralist feminist theorist Helene Cixous in examining the poetic language of female writers argued that in connecting with her inner femininity and bringing it to light or onto pages by writing, the female writer would succeed in metaphorically becoming a mother to herself:

¹⁸⁰ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 34.

¹⁸¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 17.

¹⁸² Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 246.

¹⁸³ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 17.

¹⁸⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 44.

¹⁸⁵ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 100.

“flesh at work in a labor of love.”¹⁸⁶ In “Face Lift” Plath’s speaker is “Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze,/Pink and smooth as a baby.”¹⁸⁷ Women’s poetic language, according to Cixous, is non-linear and emotionally funded, a woman must “write [her] self. Your body must make itself heard.”¹⁸⁸ To write of the female body in such a fearless and raw manner, of its anxieties and desires is to revolt against the literary forms, language, and images, which were determined for women by men and which reduce them to archetypes and muses. It is the ultimate poetic reclamation of the body. Using such language, it becomes indistinct where the body ends and language begins, as “writing attaches itself to the frontiers of the body, where the limits between inside and outside are most precarious and can break down.”¹⁸⁹

And indeed, Plath’s maternal poetry resonates with this strong language, filled with body images such as those of blood and decay to depict her inner anxieties and pleasures connected to motherhood. Struggling to find her own voice and to assert her own vision in a literary landscape that was dominated by men, the link between writing poetry and ambivalent feelings towards motherhood Plath felt becomes evident. Already experiencing anxiety of authorship and academic insignificance, she was writing poetry and having babies “against a set of dominant cultural myths that represented woman and writer, motherhood and authorship, babies and books as mutually exclusive categories.”¹⁹⁰ Her artistic vocation then, in the social environment she wrote in, could be experienced and seen as unnatural and defeminizing while sacrificing her poetry in the interest of her children would be “obliteration of the autonomous selfhood.”¹⁹¹

As Gilbert and Gubar note, this predicament can be often observed in works of female writers and their obsessive preoccupation with imagery of confinement (or on the contrary, emptiness – such as hollows and caverns) symbolizing either alternative they were forced to box themselves in.¹⁹² Gilbert and Gubar also take an interest in the womb imagery in literature written by women, claiming that “disturbed by the real physiological prospect of enclosing an unknown part of herself that is somehow also not herself, the female artist may conflate anxieties about maternity with anxieties about literary creativity.”¹⁹³ Indeed, such Gothic

¹⁸⁶ Hélène Cixous, “Coming to Writing,” in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991), 52.

¹⁸⁷ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 156.

¹⁸⁸ Hélène Cixous, “Sorties: Out & Out: Attacks/ Ways Out/ Forays,” in *Continental Philosophy*, ed. William McNeill (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 278.

¹⁸⁹ Rose, *The Haunting*, 35.

¹⁹⁰ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 138.

¹⁹¹ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 139.

¹⁹² Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 64.

¹⁹³ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 88.

imagery of dark and claustrophobic spaces and nocturnal, subterranean atmosphere is prevalent in Plath's maternal poetry. Images of decay, incense of death and cold, closed-in spaces such as cavernous recesses and beehives pervade her depictions of a fertile and barren womb, portraying the realm of the mother, swaddled in ragged shawls, forever wintering. While the fertile womb can be "depersonalizing,"¹⁹⁴ reducing the woman only to an incubator, a barren womb may evoke fears of "inhabitations of nothingness and death, the transformation of womb into tomb."¹⁹⁵

For a woman to then become a true poet (as opposed to the Bloomian notion of annihilating the literary forefathers), the female writer may feel that she must poetically break ties with both her mother and her children, exorcising the mother figure in them both as a way to confront the stereotypes and break free from the preconceived notions (as Plath attempted in "Medusa"). As we argued earlier in these subchapters, the real culprit might not be the children themselves but the centuries-long male-dominated literary tradition and male-centric language, which generates stereotypes and archetypes of women (such as that she cannot combine motherhood and writing). The endeavor to artistically break free from these concepts and reclaim the female body is then to recognize and exorcize both the "angel in the house" and "monster in the house" as a way to free herself from the images men generated and in doing this, generate a new, deeply feminine, emotionally-charged and fearless language that male writers could not understand and become a mother to herself.

In Plath's late poems, she indeed generated a new language and attempted to rid herself of the social roles she despised, yet was still bound by them. As much as she cried out against it, she was still deeply influenced by her culture and gender. It is for this reason the next chapter will analyze the sociocultural climate regarding domesticity and femininity in the 20th-century United States. Although I focus on the United States, for that is where Plath was born and spent the majority of her life including her formative years, it is important to note that she also lived in Britain where the white middle-class housewife experience was largely similar.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 88.

¹⁹⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 88.

¹⁹⁶ Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 7-8.

3 Domesticity and Motherhood in the 20th Century United States

By 1890 the American understanding of the biological differences between the sexes (biological reductionism) took a strictly Darwinian turn.¹⁹⁷ This effectively meant the erasure of the individual personality of each person and subsequent explanation of their behavior only on the biological level. Glenna Matthews offers an example of a statement by a physician from the era: “It was as if the Almighty in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus and built up a woman around it.”¹⁹⁸

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, as both a wife, mother, and writer during this era was famously a keen observer and critic of the culture of domesticity. This took shape in her famous story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” in which she talks of a housewife’s mental breakdown, using “homely domestic details to evoke the horror of her own breakdown.”¹⁹⁹ Gilman sought treatment for her own feelings of domestic entrapment and post-partum depression, but during the consultations with her therapist Dr. Weir Mitchell, she only received this advice: “Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time [...]. Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours’ intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live.”²⁰⁰ Needless to say, this approach did not treat Gilman’s problem (only later separation from her husband, extremely rare at the time, did), but it serves as a great example of the sort of society-wide understanding of female distress and domesticity that was in place in the years approaching and influencing Plath’s milieu.

To contextualize the climate Plath’s mother lived in and the aftermaths of which Plath strongly felt growing up, a short description of the post-WWI era might be useful. The *Ladies Home Journal*, one of the most popular and longest-running American women’s magazines (with Sylvia Plath among its readers years later) was confusing in advice it offered women, whose husbands returned from deployment in World War I and there was no longer any need to replace them in the workforce. After over half a century of struggle, August 18, 1920 saw the ratification of the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote. Simultaneously, the *Ladies Home Journal*, as argued by Matthews, reminded them in the “credo for the new woman” of what their opinion on this new-found right should be:

¹⁹⁷ Glenna Matthews, “Just a Housewife”: *The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 125.

¹⁹⁸ M. L. Holbrook, *Parturition without Pain: A Code of Directions for Escaping from the Primal Curse* (New York, 1882), 14-15.

¹⁹⁹ Matthews, *Housewife*, 135.

²⁰⁰ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 187.

I believe in woman's rights; but I believe in woman's sacrifices also. I believe in woman's freedom; but I believe it should be within the restrictions of the Ten Commandments. I believe in woman's suffrage; but I believe many other things are vastly more important. I believe in woman's brains; but I believe still more in her emotions.²⁰¹

And so, in the post-suffrage era, the housewives were granted the right to vote but the media sold them the idea that it does not make any difference. A household shall still comprise its head – the man – and his submissive wife voting the same way. Matthews offers another illuminating example, an excerpt from the 1938 *Ladies Home Journal* issue, where the advice offered to a housewife seeking to understand and converse with her husband more effectively is as follows: “Be glad you're dumb about all these earth-shaking questions. They don't affect you nearly so much as a lot of other things much nearer home [...]. Be glad you're dumb while your husband is saving the world – be brave and you can save the home.”²⁰²

These were the years Aurelia Plath graduated from college and university, married Otto, and gave birth to Sylvia. During the WWII years from 1943 6 million women entered the workforce, but their needs as now working homemakers and mothers were not met. While they often worked long hours seven days a week, the juggling of work and domestic duties was made more difficult by nationwide shortages and rationing, and the government failed to provide much-needed child care.²⁰³ Matthews suggests that while this was a rather implicit “message of disdain for the American housewife,”²⁰⁴ there were more explicit cases: the publication of Philip Wylie’s bestselling *Generation of Vipers* in 1943. The book quickly became infamous for giving genesis to “Momism,” “the image of a deadly middle-class American female who is ultimately responsible for the collapse of the culture, for sapping the manhood of America from within.”²⁰⁵ Wylie argues that in the past “mom folded up and died of hard work somewhere in the middle of her life,” but now, fully dependent on a man, she lives on “to stamp and jibber [...] a noisy neuter by natural default or a scientific gelding.”²⁰⁶ He further criticizes the way (and the fact that) middle-class women vote, insulting their “beady brains.” Matthews posits that “anger so excessive fueled a book going into numerous printings suggests that *Generation*

²⁰¹ Matthews, *Housewife*, 191.

²⁰² Matthews, *Housewife*, 198.

²⁰³ William H. Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920—1970* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), 159-72.

²⁰⁴ Matthews, *Housewife*, 207.

²⁰⁵ Rose, *The Haunting*, 166.

²⁰⁶ Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1955), 199.

of *Vipers* had tapped a fund of inchoate male rage in the larger society.”²⁰⁷ These issues do not overreach our argument, for it is known that Plath herself if not fully read, then was strongly aware of this book, as exemplified by her explicit mention of it in “The Babysitters”: “[...] You read/Aloud, crosslegged on the stern seat, from the *Generation of Vipers*.”²⁰⁸ What is more, this is the “only point in Plath’s poetry where she explicitly refers to a book from the ambient culture.”²⁰⁹

The early 1950s saw the crystallization of all the schizoid messages communicated to American women into what Betty Friedan calls the feminine mystique. This was the post-WWII era which once again came to sanctify the housewife inside a home, nurturing to the husband and children, possessing no personality and intelligence other than that of a home appliance. This new movement once again confined women to their prescribed domestic spaces and roles of mothers and wives, limiting and influencing their education in light of Freudian ideology and men’s need for a nurturing home after their return from the war. As Bonnie Bolling suggests, “a major goal of these civil defense strategies was to infuse the traditional role of women with new meaning and importance, which would help fortify the home as a place of security amid the cold war.”²¹⁰

Before Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, unhappy housewives were considered not normal and shouldered the blame for their psychological state.²¹¹ However, Friedan’s post-war study of American housewifery in mass media and in the home opened the eyes of the general public to the nationwide problem. Friedan was of the opinion that women were taught “in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication”²¹² that “the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity,” and so “the mistake, says the mystique, root of women’s troubles in the past is that women envied men [...] instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love.”²¹³

The women who went against the grain by desiring a career or artistic fulfillment were considered “neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy.”²¹⁴ This caused the median age for women to get married to drop to 20 by the end of the 1950s and continued to drop even lower and the number of babies they had continued to grow as women desperately sought the fulfillment in

²⁰⁷ Matthews, *Housewife*, 207.

²⁰⁸ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 175.

²⁰⁹ Rose, *The Haunting*, 166.

²¹⁰ Bonnie Bolling, “Little, Smiling Hooks,” *Plath Profiles* 6 (2013): 307.

²¹¹ Matthews, *Housewife*, 219.

²¹² Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: DELL Publishing Co., 1977), 11.

²¹³ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 37.

²¹⁴ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 11.

motherhood promised by the feminine mystique. Friedan describes the paradigm of a young bright student pursuing college only to find herself a husband, while “a century earlier, women had fought for higher education.”²¹⁵

As can be imagined, these marriages were oftentimes unhappy and the advice provided to women on keeping their marriage happy in the *Ladies Home Journal* read: “Cater to his tastes – in food, in household arrangements, even in your appearance. Indulging his wishes, even if they are whims, is a sure way of convincing him that you really want to please him.”²¹⁶ There was no space left for women’s individuality, she had to be a reflection of her husband’s and children’s wishes and desires and an extension of him when it came to public affairs such as voting.

Friedan described “a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States” as they performed their designated domestic and motherly duties during the day, awaiting their husband’s arrival. It all culminated in the question they were too afraid to ask: “Is this all?”²¹⁷ By 1960 the general unhappiness of the American housewife, while dismissed for reasons of her own fault, became generally recognized and boiled down to “this is what being a woman means.”²¹⁸ Friedan draws attention to an excerpt from the weekly magazine *Newsweek*:

“Anatomy is destiny.” Though no group of women has ever pushed these natural restrictions as far as the American wife, it seems that she still cannot accept them with good grace [...]. A good education, it seems, has given this paragon among women an understanding of the value of everything except her own worth [...]. American women’s unhappiness is merely the most recently won of women’s rights.²¹⁹

Another piece of advice by the media to solve the problem of unhappy women in unhappy marriages was for educational institutions to implement classes for young women on how to properly support their husbands and children. Influenced by the ideologies of Margaret Mead and Sigmund Freud, young women in colleges were successfully indoctrinated and so “higher education added its weight to the process by which American women during this period were shaped increasingly to their biological function, decreasingly to the fulfillment of their

²¹⁵ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 12.

²¹⁶ Clifford R. Adams “Making Marriage Work,” *Ladies Home Journal* (Sept. 1950), quoted in Matthews, *Housewife*, 210.

²¹⁷ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 11.

²¹⁸ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 19.

²¹⁹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 19.

individual abilities.”²²⁰ A new degree of education – The Good Wife Diploma – was even approved - Ph.T. (Putting Hubby Through).²²¹ This shift towards biological reductionism in higher education was in place when Plath attended and graduated from Smith.

Friedan, likewise a Smith alumna, spoke of her experience returning to the college and staying on campus years after she graduated (in 1959) to conduct interviews with the students and professors for her research, observing a great shift in mentality: “A beloved psychology professor, on the eve of his retirement, complained: ‘They’re bright enough. But [...] they seem to feel it will get in their way when they marry [...]. I couldn’t schedule the final seminar for my senior honor students. Too many kitchen showers interfered.’”²²² Another interviewee, a female sophomore student added: “Don’t be too enthusiastic about your work or anything. People who take things too seriously are more or less pitied or laughed at.”²²³ Plath graduated from the same school in 1955 and both in her journals and in *The Bell Jar* we can find confessions dealing with this dilemma. She was always academically inclined and aimed to do well in college and in this entry, we can see the pressure she felt from her classmates:

And you remember a lot of nasty little tag ends of conversation directed at you and around you, meant for you, to strangle you on the invisible noose of insinuation. You know it was meant for you; so do they who stab you [...]. So you hear her say to you [...], “I never see you. You’re always studying in your room!”²²⁴

What is more, Plath with her mother were present at Smith during Adlai Stevenson’s address to the graduates. Van Dyne notes that “ironically, Aurelia, widow, and working mother, attended Plath’s graduation on a stretcher, debilitated by a bleeding ulcer, one symptom of the stress of mothering Sylvia.”²²⁵ Stevenson “knew his advice ran counter to the expectations of his female audience: [...] ‘They had hoped to play their part in the crises of the age. But what they do is wash the diapers.’”²²⁶ His speech was considered so powerful it was even reprinted in the magazine *Woman’s Home Companion*:

²²⁰ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 148.

²²¹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 12.

²²² Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 144.

²²³ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 146.

²²⁴ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 48-49.

²²⁵ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 133.

²²⁶ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 133.

This assignment for you, as wives and mothers, you can do in the living room with a baby in your lap or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hand. If you're clever, maybe you can even practice your saving arts on that unsuspecting man while he's watching television. I think there is much you can do about our crisis in the humble role of housewife. I could wish you no better vocation than that.²²⁷

3.1 The All-American Housewife

The purpose of this subchapter is to examine, within the broader context of sanctified domesticity that we spoke of in the previous subchapter, the image of the white middle-class housewife and a mother that was presented during the 1950s as the only occupation to bring women happiness in life. This I consider notable, for domestic entrapment and madness, intimately tied with motherhood, were a recurring motif in Plath's poetry.

To demonstrate the sort of information mass media deemed important for their female readership, I borrow Friedan's example of articles from one of the most popular women's magazines from the era, *McCall's*:

- 1) The main feature on increasing baldness in women
- 2) A cautionary tale about "how a teenager who doesn't go to college gets a man away from a bright college girl"
- 3) A four-page spread on how to "reduce the way the models do"
- 4) Sewing patterns²²⁸

The rest of the editorial contents listed by Friedan were of similar nature. As she notes, the image painted by this magazine was the image of an American woman in the same year that "men were trained to travel into outer space; [...] physicists explored the concept of anti-matter; [...] biologists made a breakthrough in the fundamental chemistry of life."²²⁹ Yet none of these groundbreaking world news and politics found their way into popular women's magazines. The issue here is tremendous: the young woman is taught not to pay attention in college, her marriage might suffer for it. When she does pay attention, they teach her where her place in society ultimately is. And even submitting and performing her designated duties, the mass media directed at her withhold important information from her, keeping her docile and uninformed. The American housewives were taught there is no other, greater destiny than cooking, cleaning, and bearing children and "lived their lives in the image of those pretty

²²⁷ Adlai Stevenson, "Women, Husbands, and History," in *The Papers of Adlai Stevenson*, ed. Walter Johnson (New York: Little Brown, 1972), 498.

²²⁸ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 29.

²²⁹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 31.

pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands goodbye in front of the picture window.”²³⁰

As Friedan pointed out, the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* in France was met with strong dismissal by American critics, claiming that this was not an American problem by any means – the American women are happy, and if they are not happy, there is something wrong with them as individuals.²³¹ What de Beauvoir argued was that within the notion of a housewife can be found the reason for women’s suffering: “Woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home – that is to say, to immanence.”²³² Indeed, what she means here when she says female “immanence,” is the opposite to “transcendence,” which we can observe throughout her book as connected to the male sex. Immanence therefore constitutes “confinement or restriction to a narrow round of uncreative and repetitious duties,”²³³ a passive stagnation that contrasts the widening of one’s horizons, personal growth, and development of creative projects.

The same conclusion as de Beauvoir’s can be drawn from Ann Oakley’s 1975 large-scale study of housewifery: the housewife occupation in modern industrial society is to blame for stagnation in women’s rights movements. Oakley called for its abolition for “housework is work directly opposed to the possibility of human self-actualization.”²³⁴ This of course is connected to the issue of maternal overprotectiveness and unhealthy fixation on a child. Friedan argues that a woman, in her desperate need to both conform to the prescribed roles and find some sort of inner happiness turns to her children and lives through them. Instead of her own fulfillment, she seeks “the emotional satisfaction [...] she derives from keeping her children paddling about in a kind of psychological amniotic fluid rather than letting them swim away.”²³⁵ Reading this, we are reminded of the complicated relationship Plath had with her mother, feeling as if her mother could only survive if Sylvia was successful and happy. It then becomes increasingly clear why “young housewives suffering not only childbirth depression, but all psychiatric disorders, became during the fifties by far the predominant group of adult psychiatric patients”²³⁶ and why “one out of three young mothers suffered depression or psychotic breakdown over childbirth.”²³⁷

The mass media’s treatment of these alarming statistics was inadequate, to say the least.

²³⁰ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 14.

²³¹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 14.

²³² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 419.

²³³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 88.

²³⁴ Ann Oakley, *Housewife*, (London: Penguin, 1974), 222.

²³⁵ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 183.

²³⁶ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 282.

²³⁷ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 282.

Friedan offers an excerpt from *McCall's* article (April, 1957): "Is the housewife's chronic fatigue really boredom? [...] Yes [...]. The more your intelligence exceeds your job requirements, the greater your boredom [...]. Honest enjoyment in some part of the job such as cooking [...] and, above all, male praise are good antidotes."²³⁸ However, as can be expected, these treatments seldom, if ever, worked – "housework, no matter how it is expanded to fill the time available, can hardly use the abilities of a woman of average or normal human intelligence."²³⁹ The problem and solution of female domestic depression lay elsewhere.

What then could be an explanation? According to Friedan, many thinkers (such as Carl Jung or Heinz Hartmann) under different names of "will to power," "autonomy," or "self-assertion" "postulate positive growth tendency within the organism, which, from within, drives it to fuller development, to self-realization."²⁴⁰ This effectively means that for a human being to find their identity and fulfillment in the world, they are in constant need of positive development:

In this new psychological thinking, which [...] defines neurosis in terms of that which destroys man's capacity to fulfill his own being, the significant tense is the future. It is not enough for an individual to be loved and accepted by others, to be "adjusted" to his culture. He must take his existence seriously enough to make his own commitment to life, and to the future; he forfeits his existence by failing to fulfill his entire being.²⁴¹

Needless to say, while it is the male that these thinkers predominantly examined, the same patterns of need for self-realization and positive growth can be found in women – as can be deduced from de Beauvoir's, Oakley's, and Friedan's studies on housewives and their general unhappiness. I argue Friedan's reasoning for this strongly applies to Plath's case (see subchapters "As a Wife" and "As a Mother") and can sufficiently explain her feelings of domestic entrapment and creative stagnation, as well as provide another reason which brought about many negative domestic and maternal images in her poetry.

While one may find many negative references to motherhood and domesticity in Plath's writing, there are many instances which feel as if she completely accepts her role. This is why ambivalence is the term I have decided to use throughout this thesis. It is important to note, as Rose does, that one "may be critical of an ideology without necessarily being 'immune' to its

²³⁸ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 241.

²³⁹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 244.

²⁴⁰ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 299.

²⁴¹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 299.

effects. Criticism does not rule out identification.”²⁴² I borrow Van Dyne’s words to posit that Plath’s maternal and domestic poems are “at once symptomatic and strategic, symptomatic in that they suggest her culture’s powerful shaping influence on her imagination, yet strategic in that they represent her effort to rewrite her lived experience.”²⁴³

Matthews uses the example of Anne Sexton – Plath’s contemporary – as the most vocal female writer of the era who criticized domesticity²⁴⁴ when commenting on the literary reception of domesticity in the 1950s, bringing to attention her poem “Housewife”: “Some women marry houses./It’s another kind of skin [...] The walls are permanent and pink./See how she sits on her knees all day,/faithfully washing herself down./Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah/into their fleshy mothers./A woman is her mother./That’s the main thing.”²⁴⁵ Sexton’s discontent with everyday images here is apparent. These images, while obviously connected to domesticity, also bring us back to our earlier argument about Plath’s matrophobia and fear of becoming Aurelia in bearing and raising her children. The two are intimately intertwined – for in her mother she saw from earliest childhood the way of feminine mystique. I offer one more example of feminine fear of matrilineal inheritance and it is from Sexton’s poem “Self in 1958”: “I am a plaster doll. I pose,/I live in a doll’s house/[...]/But I would cry, rooted into the wall that/was once my mother.”²⁴⁶

3.2 (Un)natural Motherhood

Feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti in her essay “Mothers, Monsters and Machines” brings to attention the Aristotelian notion that “human norm in terms of bodily organization [is] based on a male model,”²⁴⁷ which renders the female body as an object of scientific study anomalous and passive.²⁴⁸ Not only this but in her body’s capability to transform extraordinarily during pregnancy, “woman as a sign of difference is monstrous.”²⁴⁹ Keeping in mind Braidotti’s arguments, we are reminded of de Beauvoir’s musings on immanence and transcendence, or her overreaching argument that women are seen as “flesh,”²⁵⁰ while men are associated with the mind.

²⁴² Rose, *The Haunting*, 176.

²⁴³ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 5.

²⁴⁴ Matthews, *Housewife*, 114.

²⁴⁵ Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 77.

²⁴⁶ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 155-6.

²⁴⁷ Rosi Braidotti, “Mothers, Monsters and Machines,” in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 63.

²⁴⁸ Braidotti, “Mothers,” 64.

²⁴⁹ Braidotti, “Mothers,” 65.

²⁵⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 162.

This brings us to the main claim of this subchapter: American women's individuality during Plath's era (and beyond) was put aside when it came to obstetrics, reduced in pregnancy, childbirth, and pediatrics to medical cases to be solved, and ultimately displaced by the high-tech medicalization of the maternal function, as argued by Braidotti, Ynestra King and Ann Oakley, whose article "Paradigms of Women as Maternity Cases" will be used as a main resource throughout this subchapter. The excessive medicalization of childbirth and loss of identity in the hospital environment was (as exemplified in "As a Mother" subchapter) a grave concern of Plath and a source of much of her trauma and anxiety connected to motherhood. It is for this reason I choose to include this subchapter as a valuable addition to the debate. Oakley argues that "childbirth stands uncomfortably at the junction of the two worlds of nature and culture"²⁵¹ and as such, its treatment in society calls for much examination. For it is this grave reminder of woman's predestined biology to which Oakley believes "we can trace the diagnosis and prognosis of female oppression."²⁵²

Obstetrics as a medical field concerned with the care for women during pregnancy and childbirth has in modern industrial society changed from a female-dominated sphere to "a system of male control."²⁵³ Among the instruments of medicalization of the maternal function, Oakley mentions: "providing institutional, not domiciliary, delivery care; routinizing the frequent use of technological, pharmacological, and clinical procedures; and aligning it with gynecology which treats the diseases of female biology."²⁵⁴ In such a heavily medicalized and controlled environment,

women appear to become machines [...]. One machine controls the uterine contractions that are recorded on another machine; regional anesthesia removes the woman's awareness of her contractions so that they must be read off the machine, and patient care comes to mean keeping all the machines going.²⁵⁵

It is of course important to note that the development in obstetrics does bring in positive factors as well, such as decreased mortality in childbirth and introduction of anesthesia epidural. However, female experience and feelings in such a setting become inconsequential, for only perinatal and maternal mortality rates are taken into consideration as a measure of successful

²⁵¹ Ann Oakley, "A Case of Maternity: Paradigms of Women as Maternity Cases," *Signs* 4, no. 4 (1979): 604.

²⁵² Oakley, "A Case of Maternity," 608.

²⁵³ Oakley, "A Case of Maternity," 610.

²⁵⁴ Oakley, "A Case of Maternity," 610.

²⁵⁵ Oakley, "A Case of Maternity," 611-12.

obstetrics care.²⁵⁶ Oakley published this study in 1979, but the importance of factors such as the mother's happiness and successful bonding with the infant has only recently been recognized. The pain-relieving drugs, while easing the physically painful experience overall, render the woman immobile and numb to the experience, which Plath criticized in *The Bell Jar*.

This so-called "mechanical model," which Oakley describes as one of the main two paradigms of women in modern obstetrics, stands in contrast to the other model of the "feminine woman," who "can never escape her ultimate biologic destiny, reproduction, and a number of psychologic problems encountered in the course of pregnancy are the result of conflicts concerning this biologic destiny."²⁵⁷ According to this model, such a "feminine woman" adapts to motherhood well and handles pregnancy and childbirth with ease. Women who experience issues and do not feel fulfilled by this model are then considered "failures."²⁵⁸

However, this model is strictly biological and deals only with a woman's predestined anatomy as the main reason why she should be fulfilled and satisfied with her experience. It fails to recognize women's "ideological, social, and economic location in a male-dominated culture"²⁵⁹ as an important factor featuring in their adjustment to motherhood or as a decisive instrument featuring in the development of postpartum depression. Oakley names for instance termination of cherished employment during pregnancy as a negative influence on women's motherhood experience, which deprives them of a sense of self and positive growth.²⁶⁰

De Beauvoir likewise argues against the so-called "feminine model," proclaiming that "no maternal 'instinct' exists: the word hardly applies, in any case, to the human species. The mother's attitude depends on her total situation and her reaction to it."²⁶¹ In *The Second Sex* she discussed how different motherhood is for each woman, how it is influenced by society, the woman's relationship with her mother, her husband, with herself, and how ambivalent it can be:

She feels it as at once an enrichment and an injury; the fetus is a part of her body, and it is a parasite that feeds on it; she possesses it, and she is possessed by it; it represents the future and, carrying it, she feels herself vast as the world; but this very opulence annihilates her, she feels that she herself is no longer anything.²⁶²

²⁵⁶ Oakley, "A Case of Maternity," 610.

²⁵⁷ Oakley, "A Case of Maternity," 613.

²⁵⁸ Oakley, "A Case of Maternity," 619.

²⁵⁹ Oakley, "A Case of Maternity," 615.

²⁶⁰ Oakley, "A Case of Maternity," 618.

²⁶¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 490.

²⁶² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 476-7.

I find these claims resonate strongly as a part of my overreaching argument of Plath's ambivalence towards motherhood transposed into her poetry and serve well as the final piece of my theoretical research into the personal and socio-cultural occurrences that operated consciously or subconsciously in her mind and influence her poetry of motherhood.

4 Plath's Poetry of Motherhood

The fourth chapter of this thesis will provide an analysis of Plath's poetry of motherhood, drawing on the biographical and sociocultural factors introduced in the first three chapters.

Children as characters and children as poetic devices became a recurring, frequent motif in Plath's late poetry. From the biographical perspective, during this stage, she has already experienced pregnancy, childbirth, miscarriage, and motherhood, and also her marriage falling apart. Schwartz and Bollas argue that "in the final months of her life Plath's work was infused with extreme and contrary emotions about motherhood."²⁶³ This is achieved through the use of many personas with many different voices, attempting to find a singular overarching feeling she could connect to motherhood and battle the contradictory voices in her head. However, as we discussed previously, motherhood is an ambivalent experience and such is her poetic portrayal of it. Leah Souffrant in her article on the poetry of motherhood notes that "the most interesting poetry by mothers about motherhood attempts to express the complexity of this multifaceted emotional and physical experience," and that "a mother's love can – indeed must – coexist with representations of violence, indifference, ambivalence."²⁶⁴ As Van Dyne puts it, "motherhood was not a stable, unified, or transparent category to Plath; rather, what it might mean had to be refigured repeatedly in the poems."²⁶⁵

The poetic language of her late maternal poems is arguably congruent with "writing the body" that Cixous proposed. It is filled with strong body imagery and emotionally-charged, likely attempting to escape the prescribed literary forms she learned and practiced writing *The Colossus*. The imagery of maternal fears, domestic madness, and feminine rage at the societal order present in *Ariel* was however not completely absent from *The Colossus*, proving that even when we consider Plath's artistic continuum throughout her work, the fears were already present at the very beginning. *The Colossus* poems about motherhood were "primarily dark, fearful."²⁶⁶

Plath's ambivalent feelings about motherhood were present all throughout her poetry, influenced from the beginning by the biographical factors described in subchapters "As a Daughter," "As a Wife," and "As a Mother." She feared identification with her own mother for in her she saw the way of the feminine mystique and female martyrdom in favor of children.

²⁶³ Schwartz and Bollas, "The Absence at the Center," 197.

²⁶⁴ Leah Souffrant, "Mother Delivers Experiment: Poetry of Motherhood: Plath, Derricotte, Zucker, and Holbrook," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3/4 (2009): 28.

²⁶⁵ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 144.

²⁶⁶ Dobbs, "Viciousness in the Kitchen," 13.

Her marriage with Hughes further fueled these feelings, being a constant reminder of her own (presumed) artistic inferiority, comparing herself to her husband, and being unable to work properly due to her domestic and motherly duties. When she did work, she felt defeminized and as if she failed in her mother/wife role due to societal pressure and the media she consumed. In motherhood she suffered from feelings of identity loss in favor of her children's identity and creative stagnation (albeit at certain times they inspired her), all in all, a strong ambivalence: "For Plath maternity was both depletion and enlargement, a threat to her identity and the unexpected confirmation of it."²⁶⁷ The literature Hughes gave her (such as *The White Goddess*) reminded her of her constant predicament: being a woman writer desperately wanting to join the male-dominated literary discourse and her anxiety of authorship.

After we established these outside factors operating in Plath's mind here and in the first three chapters of the thesis, our analysis of the selected poems can begin. These are the main concerns I wish to focus on in the following subchapters:

- 1) I wish to examine Plath's maternal poems for traces of these biographical occurrences and fears she expressed in her journals to understand how she dealt with them poetically.
- 2) I shall analyze the poems' use of strong feminine language and body imagery she created to try and combat her feelings and look for possible "angel/monster in the house" exorcism as a proof of her fighting back against the male-generated roles and archetypes.
- 3) How does imagery in maternal poems operate when motherhood is directly connected to domestic entrapment vs when the mother-child relationship stands on its own?
- 4) In some poems the child characters appear to be her own children and in some, children are only used as poetic devices. The critical study of Plath's maternal poems in regards to whom Plath speaks of/to is prone to biographical interpretation and context in which they were written. For the poet rarely explicitly refers to her children, for the purposes of this analysis I have concluded that the poems in which the speaker implicitly or explicitly considers the children her offspring or speaks to them in a "motherly" manner feature her real-life children. In these poems, the children are the main characters directly affecting the speaker's identity and surroundings and share the same characteristics of her real-life children – an older daughter and a younger brother. I will analyze both kinds of poems – the ones that appear to feature her real-life children and the ones featuring children only as poetic devices to voice her inner feelings and anxieties – for any recurring differences.
- 5) Does the analytical focus on male vs female child produce different results?

²⁶⁷ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 164.

In order to make the analysis more systematic, the poems selected with these criteria in mind will be divided into three categories: “Pregnancy,” “Childlessness,” and “Motherhood.”

4.1 Pregnancy

Reading Plath’s maternal poetry overtly or covertly concerned with pregnancy, the most fascinating point of interest for me were the strikingly gothic, vivid depictions of the womb. She is preoccupied with these images of dark cavernous recesses, underground burrows, and tightly enclosed, claustrophobic spaces. Van Dyne finds they can represent the journey into the underworld, as well as the depths of the female body, all in all, a “specifically female space.”²⁶⁸ This undoubtedly brings us back to the notion of “writing the body,” as we venture into the most intimate feminine space:

These interiors are often unknowable by rational means [...]. In their most benign forms, these caverns are capable of causing mysterious transmutations, including seasonal or personal rebirth. Because they embody the realm of natural processes, they may promise gestation as well as death. But these inner recesses are always ambivalently charged for a woman: they suggest her power to contain new life, and yet what she produces may in turn confine her, as biology overtakes identity and the mother-child dyad swallows the singular poet.²⁶⁹

The womb then is an ambivalent space, both threatening and endowing for the woman, serving both as a reminder of her prowess and biology, reminding her of how her gender is viewed in society and literary discourse, as well as producing anxiety over the loss of identity. Van Dyne further mentions “female symbolic equivalencies between the womb, a demonic underworld, and domestic interiors” utilized by Plath and the boundaries drawn between them: “The collapse or crossing of these borders always means an extinction of part of the writing or mothering.”²⁷⁰

“The Manor Garden” is the opening poem of *The Colossus*. The poem is strikingly gothic, comparing the pregnant body to a haunted house, which reinforces the body-house dichotomy that Plath frequently used in her poems about motherhood. The opening lines of the poem set the tone for the rest of it, as well as the rest of *The Colossus*: “The fountains are dry

²⁶⁸ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 150.

²⁶⁹ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 150.

²⁷⁰ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 150.

and the roses over./Incense of death. Your day approaches.”²⁷¹ The pregnancy before childbirth is portrayed as anxious, tense anticipation of a threat, “a difficult birning.” “Birning” is a curious word to use instead of “birth,” and Jo Gill in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* notes that “it connotes the little-used term ‘birning room’. This was a room, familiar in seventeenth-century architecture, built solely for giving birth and – crucially in the context of the persistent ambivalence of this poem – for caring for the dying.”²⁷² In Dobbs’ words, “here is death in the midst of birth; the external, natural world at odds with the internal, human one,”²⁷³ bringing about the notion of life and death interlaced in the poet’s mind.

Gothic imagery can be observed throughout the poem: mentions of crows, worms, spiders, wolves, and the nocturnal atmosphere with “a blue mist [that] is dragging the lake.”²⁷⁴ The childbirth then and all that awaits it, is akin to “a kind of sacrifice.”²⁷⁵ This being the first poem Plath wrote knowing she was pregnant,²⁷⁶ we can safely assume the ambivalent feelings about motherhood were present in her poetry from the very start. What this tells us is that although Plath wished for children (perhaps due to the fear of being ostracized by the culture she wrote in, if she were to choose the alternative), these anxieties operated in her mind even before her first child was born. The continuation of the familiar conflict can be read in the lines about the fetus’ inheritance: “You inherit white heather, a bee’s wing,/Two suicides, the family wolves,/Hours of blankness [...]”²⁷⁷ The generational curse this evokes is profound.

“Metaphors” in content and form functions as a poem of pregnancy, pregnant with itself: written in nine lines, each consisting of nine syllables. Souffrant posits that “if the body is the ground for writing, then pregnancy and child birth must be intensely transformative”²⁷⁸ and as the body goes through intense changes during pregnancy, so it influences the poetic outcome. Such a strong poetic reclamation of the body echoes Cixous’s notion that the body writes itself as the poet writes the body, becoming a mother to herself. However, even this poem cannot be read without some ambivalence: Wagner-Martin speaks of the 1950s preoccupation with an underweight body and notes that “[Plath’s] use of the adjective ‘cowlike’ in several of her poems about babies and mothering reflected the way she knew society would view her large,

²⁷¹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 125.

²⁷² Jo Gill ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 125.

²⁷³ Dobbs, “Viciousness in the Kitchen,” 13.

²⁷⁴ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 125.

²⁷⁵ Elisabete Lopes, “Bats Flying off My Womb: Monstrous Maternity in Sylvia Plath’s Poetry,” in *Retold Feminine Memoirs*, ed. Gabriela Mádlo (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013), 53.

²⁷⁶ Lopes, “Monstrous Maternity,” 53.

²⁷⁷ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 125.

²⁷⁸ Souffrant, “Mother Delivers Experiment,” 27.

nursing, body.”²⁷⁹ Indeed, in the poem, she is “an elephant, a ponderous house,/A melon [...] /loaf big with its yeasty rising./[...] /I’m a means, a stage, a cow in calf,”²⁸⁰ and in “Morning Song” she is “cow-heavy.”²⁸¹ She paints herself as only “a means,” whereby the notion of losing one’s identity comes into play once again. Her fetus is described as “ivory,” the most prized part of an elephant’s body. The image of a house fortifies this idea - it only shelters the valuable dwelling within.

In “Poem for a Birthday” the pregnant body is once again compared to a house: “This is a dark house, very big./I made it myself, /Cell by cell from a quiet corner,/ [...] / Oozing the glue drops, / [...] / It has so many cellars,/ [...] /I am round as an owl, [...] /Any day I may litter puppies/ [...] My belly moves./I must make more maps./These marrowy tunnels!”²⁸² The body is likened to a vast labyrinthine cave in which the poet might easily lose herself without a map. Images of decay permeate the poem, and indeed, as Elisabete Lopes argues in her essay “Monstrous Maternity in Sylvia Plath’s Poetry,” “the pregnant young woman appears to be dead. Actually, she claims to be ‘at home here among the dead heads.’ [...] Morbidly, at the end of the poem, the female seems to have become depleted of her human nature, since she sees herself being reduced to ‘a root, a stone, an owl pellet.’”²⁸³ “A loss of identity, a sense of insignificance and smallness”²⁸⁴ then stand for both the experience of giving birth and dying (in body or mind). In this poem the speaker seems to be withering away as the pregnancy feeds on her and as she completes her biological predestination. This mirrors our earlier points about biological reductionism, which Plath feared and because of which she detested being born a woman. The poem also features lines “Mother of otherness/Eat me,”²⁸⁵ depicting motherhood as cannibalistic (as she did in “Medusa”) and “the mother of mouths didn’t love me,”²⁸⁶ which parallels her journal entries about the lack of Aurelia’s maternal love. Lines “I’ve married a cupboard of rubbish./I bed in a fish puddle”²⁸⁷ speak of her disillusioned feelings of domestic containment and living a life as suffocating as a fish in a puddle.

“You’re” slightly balances out the gloomy atmosphere of “The Manor Garden.” Like in “Metaphors” the form of the poem mirrors pregnancy: two nine-line stanzas mirror the gestation time of nine months. In this poem, written for her unborn baby, the tone is more

²⁷⁹ Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 95-6.

²⁸⁰ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 102.

²⁸¹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 157.

²⁸² Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 132.

²⁸³ Lopes, “Monstrous Maternity,” 54.

²⁸⁴ Bolling, “Little, Smiling Hooks,” 313.

²⁸⁵ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 132.

²⁸⁶ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 133.

²⁸⁷ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 134.

comforting and loving, as she likens her growing fetus to her “little loaf.”²⁸⁸ The fetus throughout the poem is compared to various animals, making it still appear as something alien, non-human, and different than the expecting mother. Among these similes, one is of particular interest: “a sprat in a pickle jug.”²⁸⁹ A hospital image of babies preserved in glass bottles infiltrates even this, at first glance positive, poem. Her baby is “gilled like a fish,” in the same way she spoke of her own infant gills in her childhood memoirs, reinforcing the familial continuation, yet hopeful the sad inheritance established in “The Manor Garden” will not harm it. The baby will be “a clean slate, with [its] own face on,”²⁹⁰ which as we will come to find both delighted and terrified the poet.

“The Arrival of the Bee Box,” at first glance a poem about the reality of keeping bees, offers a myriad of metaphoric readings. The dark buzzing claustrophobic bee box could symbolize the speaker’s anxious mind, but it could also be a metaphorical representation of the womb, “a poetic pregnancy.”²⁹¹ The speaker informs us: “I would say it was the coffin of a midget/Or a square baby.”²⁹² Already in the first stanza an uneasy, morbid tone is established as the images of coffins and deformed babies open the poem. She goes on to voice her fear of what lurks inside the dark space, of “how hungry they are.”²⁹³ The metaphorical fetus is portrayed as parasitic and the speaker is afraid her body (or identity) might be devoured: “The beekeeper’s doubts about her ability to control what threatens to feed on her mimics a woman’s experience of pregnancy.”²⁹⁴ She hopes to be spared from this fate by offering “no source of honey,”²⁹⁵ no love. In detaching emotionally from the parasitic fetus, she believes she can keep herself safe and whole.

We are reminded of Plath’s own depictions of herself as parasitic to her mother Aurelia, at once indebted and terrified of her selflessness. Did she believe Aurelia could lead a happier life if it was not for Sylvia? It is clear she detested the idea of becoming Aurelia to her children and share her fate. What is more, in the poem she is wearing a “moon suit and funeral veil,”²⁹⁶ a reference to her father’s beekeeping suit and mourning of his death, as well as to the moon-muse, who is ultimately a shapeshifter – appearing in her poems as a symbol of both femininity, barrenness, and death, corresponding to the ternary occupation of the white goddess. All three

²⁸⁸ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 141.

²⁸⁹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 141.

²⁹⁰ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 141.

²⁹¹ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 106.

²⁹² Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 212.

²⁹³ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 213.

²⁹⁴ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 106.

²⁹⁵ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 213.

²⁹⁶ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 213.

colors of the goddess are present: “black on black,” “petticoats of the cherry,” “moon suit.” With this, we once again establish one of the most recurrent images: birth and death intertwined. The womb as a source of life for the fetus, yet a symbol of death for the poet. Pregnancy in this poem is only used as a metaphoric poetic device and, reminiscent of “The Manor Garden,” depicted as anxious waiting for something dangerous that softly buzzes within the dark enclosure.

Already on January 8, 1959, Plath recorded a nightmare of monstrous offspring in her journal: “The baby, formed just like a baby, only small as a hand, died in my stomach,”²⁹⁷ and on November 15, another one: “I lay [...] full of evil dreams of dying in childbirth in a strange hospital [...] or having a blue baby, or a deformed baby.”²⁹⁸ The shock after delivering her son and seeing him, “blue and glistening”²⁹⁹ left her with “no surge of love.”³⁰⁰ As I mentioned before, in one of her journal entries she believed a deformed child to be a punishment for disappointing her mother. These anxieties and fears about deformed babies infiltrated her maternal poetry as well, functioning more as poetic devices than representations of her own experience.

In “Thalidomide” she finds herself haunted by the idea of her child growing somehow monstrous in her womb: “Your dark/Amputations crawl and appall.”³⁰¹ Van Dyne notes that even if “You’re” contained animals as comparisons to a fetus, they “had an evolutionary certainty about them.”³⁰² On the other hand, the “Thalidomide” baby is disjointed and fragmented, unable to take a human (or any) form. Van Dyne finds this “an extreme case of a more encompassing maternal fear of finding one's issue unlovable.”³⁰³ And so, unlike in “The Arrival of the Bee Box” (where she hopes to escape the dark terror within her), here Plath attempts to “carpenter/A space for the thing I am given.”³⁰⁴ The idea of motherhood that comes naturally to every woman is then shattered: “It is only after her own biological motherhood is accomplished, that the poet [...] finds there may be nothing natural about it. Even more striking [...] is her reconstruction of the relation between mother and child as a conscious and often conflicted choice,”³⁰⁵ as opposed to the social conventions of the time.

Written less than a week after “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” “Wintering” presents a

²⁹⁷ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 519.

²⁹⁸ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 596.

²⁹⁹ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 724.

³⁰⁰ Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 725.

³⁰¹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 252.

³⁰² Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 153.

³⁰³ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 153.

³⁰⁴ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 252.

³⁰⁵ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 153.

similar image of a dark claustrophobic cellar with no windows, where the mother sits among preserved jars of jam and empty bottles. “This is the room I could never breathe in./The black bunched in there like a bat,/No light/But the torch and its faint/Chinese yellow on appalling objects/Black asininity. Decay./Possession./It is they who own me.”³⁰⁶ The speaker here is possessed, does not possess. She draws a connection between winter and motherhood: “Winter is for women.”³⁰⁷ The dark cellar stands in parallel to a hibernating beehive – the bees are all female and have chased out the males. It is important to note that Plath wrote this poem in hopes she will make it through the winter as now a single mother of two children. The motherhood in this poem then stands on its own and in the closing lines of the poem, there is a promise of transcendence as the bees survived the winter and fly towards the spring – successfully defeating the angel in the house, “still at her knitting,” hidden away in the cellar.

4.2 Childlessness

If pregnancy and childbirth are the ultimate female sacrifice, what does that make a woman who does not bear children, or bears dead children? The former for Plath was a confusing area. “She hates/The thought of a baby—/Stealer of cells, stealer of beauty—/She would rather be dead than fat./Dead and perfect, like Nefertit.”³⁰⁸ According to Dobbs, “Plath sees childlessness as a kind of perfection, but perfection of a terrible nature because it is also death.”³⁰⁹ As one can observe, both motherhood and barrenness in Plath’s mind produced imagery of death, which I argue was due to the sociocultural convictions of the time always operating in her mind. If she was to become a mother, she believed she would die as a poet and if she was to stay childless, she would (as the culture taught her) die as a woman.

“Munich Mannequins” opens with a line that cements this argument: “Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.”³¹⁰ The mannequins in the poem are described as “bald,” and “orange lollies on silver sticks,” pointing to their almost grotesque thinness, which strongly contrasts the round and big pregnant female body of “Metaphors.” The adjective “bald” used to describe mannequins is also prominent in that it is mostly connected to death, hospital setting (with “bald” nurses), and contrasted with her femininity. Bassnett argues that these mannequins represent the “visual ideal image of what society declares to be beautiful,”³¹¹ which is

³⁰⁶ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 217.

³⁰⁷ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 219.

³⁰⁸ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 256.

³⁰⁹ Dobbs, “Viciousness in the Kitchen,” 20.

³¹⁰ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 262.

³¹¹ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 77.

incompatible with the pregnant body (another cultural standard for a “feminine woman”) and therefore produce very confusing images to women who feel as if no matter what they do, they cannot win. From the “perfection” of the mannequins the speaker turns her attention to “the domesticity of these windows/The baby lace, the green-leaved confectionery,”³¹² hammering in the idea of both these contrasting ideals for women as restrictive and unsatisfactory.

Another important image in the poem is that of the moon as both directly present in the nighttime scenery of the poem and symbolizing menstruation: “Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose./The blood flood is the flood of love.”³¹³ As Bassnett notes, “the spilt menstrual blood in the opening lines of the poem is symbolic of waste and unfulfilled femininity,”³¹⁴ establishing the moon in Plath’s poetic language as (among others) a symbol for barrenness or childlessness. The blood flow in Plath’s poetry, Bassnett argues, is “fundamentally ambiguous,” for in some poems it represents stagnation and waste, but in others (such as “Kindness”), it is a flow of creativity. The same imagery of menstruation as waste can be found in her poem “Childless Woman.” In this poem, the childless woman describes her body as “ivory,” reminiscent of “ivory” mentioned in connection to the fetus inside the womb in “Metaphors” – the pregnant woman in this line of thinking then seems to sacrifice her own, previously perfect, body of ivory and now the true valuable is the child growing in her. This once again brings about the idea of the woman losing her bodily autonomy and identity to her fetus, feeling only as a “house” or “a means” to something greater.

This image of a woman somehow empty and useless when barren is further developed in “Barren Woman,” where her body is likened to a “museum without statues,”³¹⁵ “a place of deadness.”³¹⁶ She is “nun-hearted,” the moon touches her forehead, metaphorically cursing her with childlessness and it is “mum as a nurse,” the imagery of the moon and hospital nurses as connected to bareness is vivid in this poem. However, two lines reveal her true reason for detesting her condition: “I imagine myself with a great public,/Mother of a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos.”³¹⁷ It is the approval of society she seeks and fears being outcast if she does not fulfill her predestined function. She desires to be praised by her culture and for the public to be a spectator in her reproductive life. In the same way it could be argued that this is a metaphor for a lack of inspiration and creativity, she is barren of poems, not children.

Shortly before writing “Parliament Hill Fields” Plath miscarried. According to Wagner-

³¹² Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 263.

³¹³ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 263.

³¹⁴ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 77.

³¹⁵ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 157.

³¹⁶ Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 97.

³¹⁷ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 157.

Martin, “given the traditional indirection of poetry in the early 1960s, for her to write about miscarriage, directing her meditation to the fetus she had just lost was a daring move.”³¹⁸ She continues to say that another notable aspect of the poem was the complete absence of the father/husband figure, as the speaker deeply feels the “physicality of her loss of the child, aware that it is only the mother’s body that feels the loss.”³¹⁹ The experience this poem speaks about is then completely outside of literary language generated by men. Perloff believes that, although an ambivalent experience, pregnancy “gives the poet a sense of having weight, of inhabiting her own body.”³²⁰ The emptiness she feels deep inside manifests itself in the loss of ability to express, as “nobody can tell what I lack,” and “silence after silence offers itself.”³²¹ The images of roundness in the poem (“bald hill,” “round sky,” “moon’s crook,” “cellophane balloon”) seem to magnify the speaker’s confession that she is “a stick.”

Van Dyne finds that “for Plath, making poems and making babies were persistent metaphors for each other.”³²² Bassnett agrees that “throughout her writing the link is made between barrenness, sterility and inability to write.”³²³ “Stillborn” was the poem Plath wrote breaking her six-month writing block. Here she compares her failed poems to dead babies sitting inside glass bottles preserved in formalin. She expresses her frustration over why they had to end up like this since they “grew their toes and fingers well enough.”³²⁴ Formally, they seem right and yet they cannot live on their own. The babies in glass jars are a recurrent image in Plath’s poetry of motherhood. “In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow”³²⁵ in “Two Views of a Cadaver Room,” and in “You’re” the baby is depicted as “a sprat in a pickle jug.”³²⁶ Sylwia Gryciuk finds that “it connotes stunted development, stasis and detachment [...] as well as ever-presence and inevitability of death.”³²⁷ What is more, as we exemplified above, the pickled babies are also connected to the prevalent image of the moon, white and childless. This image stems from the real-life experience described in *The Bell Jar*:

Buddy took me out into a hall where they had some big glass bottles full of babies that had died before they were born. The baby in the first bottle had a large white head bent

³¹⁸ Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 74.

³¹⁹ Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 74.

³²⁰ Perloff, “On the Road,” 96.

³²¹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 152.

³²² Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 145.

³²³ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 78.

³²⁴ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 142.

³²⁵ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 114.

³²⁶ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 141.

³²⁷ Sylwia Gryciuk, “Children in the Blood Jet of Poetry : Sylvia Plath’s Poetic Tale of Infanticide,” *Brno Studies in English* 46, no. 1 (2020): 157.

over a tiny curled-up body the size of a frog. The baby in the next bottle was bigger and the baby next to that one was bigger still and the baby in the last bottle was the size of a normal baby and he seemed to be looking at me and smiling a little piggy smile.³²⁸

During this hospital visit, she not only witnessed these dead babies but also a woman giving birth and an autopsy in a morgue.³²⁹ It is then no surprise that in her maternal poetry, we find a myriad of instances where death and life appear to be intertwined or ever interchangeable.

What is of particular interest for our research is that Van Dyne finds “these stillborn poems fail to acknowledge their creator:”³³⁰ While in “You’re” the speaker welcomes the autonomous identity of her child, in “Stillborn,” where the dead babies serve as poetic devices, she deeply fears the babies’ (or poems’) autonomy will ultimately mean her own erasure: “And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her.”³³¹ In Van Dyne’s words, “Plath’s worst fear about producing babies or words, at least as she represents these activities in her poetry, seems to have been that their inevitable separateness questions rather than confirms her identity as their maker.”³³²

4.3 Motherhood

According to Ostriker, the “most exciting and disturbing mother-child poems tend to group themselves around the periods of infancy and adolescence, when the simultaneous union and division between mother and child generates maximum ambivalence [...] both an enlargement and a loss of identity.”³³³ Indeed, in many of her poems of motherhood, the theme of a loss of self once again comes into play. As her infant child grows, she often feels her own identity disintegrate to make space for the new autonomous being.

“Morning Song” is the first poem in *Ariel* and offers a glimpse of a tremendously ambivalent experience of motherhood. The sheer ambiguity of this poem can be proven by the critics’ strikingly different readings of it: while Wagner-Martin posits that the poem “re-creates the joyous mothering occasioned by the infant who wakes during the night,”³³⁴ for Carmen Birkle it is an example of “a wish for social norm-fulfilment and fear of motherhood.”³³⁵

³²⁸ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 65.

³²⁹ Lopes, “Monstrous Maternity,” 56.

³³⁰ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 145.

³³¹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 142.

³³² Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 145.

³³³ Ostriker, *Stealing the Language*, 180.

³³⁴ Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 96.

³³⁵ Carmen Birkle, *Women’s Stories of the Looking Glass* (Munich: W. Fink, 1996), 74.

“Morning Song” begins with a vast distance between the mother and the child. The language used to describe the child’s creation seems to suggest the speaker was only a mere spectator and did not take any part in it: “Love set you going like a fat gold watch./The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry/Took its place among the elements.”³³⁶ The speaker goes on to compare the infant to a “new statue./In a drafty museum,”³³⁷ which is reminiscent of the statue simile from “Barren Woman.” The image now, translated through Plath’s poetic voice, while connoting something valuable (as “a fat gold watch” likewise suggests), paints a narcissistic image of a mother only seeing her child as a prized object to possess, something that will earn her society’s approval and admiration as well as bring about our earlier point about “ivory,” where the baby represents the valuable and the mother only the means.

The poem continues: “I’m no more your mother/Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow/Effacement at the wind’s hand.”³³⁸ The concern here is twofold. First, the speaker appears to deny her motherhood (also evident from the curiously detached beginning). Second, she compares herself to a cloud, which ultimately faces effacement and this sad ending will be mirrored by the child itself. I, therefore, agree with Van Dyne in her proposition that “rather than confirm her mother's generativity, the newborn serves to mirror her mortality.”³³⁹

However, by the end of the poem, the tone grows warmer. “And now you try/Your handful of notes;/The clear vowels rise like balloons.”³⁴⁰ The speaker hears clear vowels, anticipating human language, and with this the objects she mentioned before pale in comparison. Her daughter, while still opening her mouth “clean as a cat’s,”³⁴¹ which carries some sinister connotations, now has a voice to tell her own story and the speaker allows her to try. Based on our earlier distinction, this poem can be understood as talking about Plath’s real-life daughter. While it still contains ambivalent imagery, the climax of it can be argued to be peaceful and the content mostly positive.

In “Lesbos” the babies are directly connected to domestic confinement and appear more as background figures completing the maddening image than autonomous beings. The kitchen, where there is “viciousness” and “the potatoes hiss,” together with various domestic objects, seem to depict the housewife as unsafe and trapped among her threatening surroundings. “The baby smiles, fat snail,/ From the polished lozenges of orange linoleum,”³⁴² and as Carolyn

³³⁶ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 156.

³³⁷ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 157.

³³⁸ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 157.

³³⁹ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 158.

³⁴⁰ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 157.

³⁴¹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 157.

³⁴² Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 228.

Seifert finds, “the baby and the clean floor are not only images of respectively creative and useless work, the roles of mother and housewife, but also are symbols of torture and madness.”³⁴³

While in her “Sivvy” letters to Aurelia, there is no shortage of happy and proud mentions of Sylvia’s cooking and domestic skills, her poetry appears to portray them as a drudgerous Sisyphean task or as downright threatening. The disconnection between the happy housewife she wished to be in her mother’s and society’s eyes and her true self, which resented the role (and resented Aurelia for symbolizing it) is apparent: “Meanwhile there’s a stink of fat and baby crap./I’m doped and thick from my last sleeping pill./The smog of cooking, the smog of hell [...] Now I am silent, hate/Up to my neck [...] I do not speak./I am packing the hard potatoes like good clothes, I am packing the babies, [...]”³⁴⁴ In her domestic role she is silenced and hateful, babies once again complete the suffocating domestic image with their smell and sound. What is more, the familial reenactment and the sad inheritance foretold in her earlier poems about pregnancy are present too: “You say I should drown my girl./She’ll cut her throat at ten if she’s mad at two.”³⁴⁵

In “Magi” the speaker is pondering her infant girl’s future by her crib, comparing her to baby Jesus, whom the magi brings gifts. “For her, the heavy notion of Evil/Attending her cost less than a bellyache,/And Love the mother of milk, no theory.”³⁴⁶ The small baby is clueless about the unkind world ready to devour her the moment she snaps out of her sweet innocence. The Plathian speaker does not offer advice or a solution, therefore it appears she fully expects the familiar reenactment to take place and instead, “assumes her own mother’s destructive strategy of denial.”³⁴⁷ She cries out: “These papery godfolk./They want the crib of some lamp-headed Plato./[...] /What girl ever flourished in such company?”³⁴⁸ She projects her own feelings of academic and artistic inferiority fueled by anxiety of authorship onto her baby girl and onto the femininity she ascribes to her. She knows her daughter will suffer as she did if she dares to pursue the male-dominated intellectual sphere, however, she does not offer much else but laments. A very similar scene is painted in “Candles” written on the same day as “Magi,” where the speaker nurses her infant girl and once again fears for her future and the impending doom she inherited: “How shall I tell anything at all/To this infant still in a birth-

³⁴³ Carolyn J. Seifert, “Images of Domestic Madness in the Art and Poetry of American Women,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 1, no. 2 (Autumn, 1980 - Winter, 1981): 3.

³⁴⁴ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 228-9.

³⁴⁵ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 228.

³⁴⁶ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 148.

³⁴⁷ Gryciuk, “Children in the Blood Jet of Poetry,” 166.

³⁴⁸ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 148.

drowse?/Tonight, like a shawl, the mild light enfolds her./The shadows stoop over like guests at a christening.”³⁴⁹

Written in March 1962, “Three Women” is a dramatical poem/radio play, which Wagner-Martin calls “the most impressive long poem Plath had written, or would write.”³⁵⁰ It contains narratives by three different women with different experiences of motherhood. The dramatical switching between narrators allowed Plath to masterfully portray the ambivalence of feminine anxieties and desires connected to motherhood, as opposed to the narration of a single speaker, which is present in the rest of the maternal poems to be examined. Many critics argue this poem is highly confessional, including Philips, who posits that “all three women are, in many ways, aspects of Plath's personality,”³⁵¹ or Dobbs, who believes that “each voice captures an aspect of Plath's attitudes toward motherhood.”³⁵²

The First Voice rests in the hospital before her child is born, worried it is “the calm before something awful.”³⁵³ The moon overlooks the scene from the very start and she is “luminous as a nurse” and “astonished at fertility.”³⁵⁴ The First Voice speaks up, if covertly, about the issue of over-medicalization and the objectification of the female body in obstetrics we discussed in the subchapter “(Un)natural Motherhood.” Before she goes into labor, she comments on the strange language spoken by the doctors she does not understand: “It is so quiet here./The sheets, the faces, are white and stopped, like clocks./Voices stand back and flatten. Their visible hieroglyphs/Flatten to parchment screens to keep the wind off./They paint such secrets in Arabic, Chinese!” She feels left out of the discussions about her own body, for she does not understand the terms they speak to her or each other. Later the birthing scene is reminiscent of a torture chamber as she cries out: “I am the center of an atrocity./What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering?/Can such innocence kill and kill? It milks my life.”³⁵⁵ She envisions the infant as parasitic before she loses consciousness due to the medication administered to her.

When she comes to her senses, she sees her baby boy and the First Voice’s thought process reminds us of Plath’s experience recorded in her journal about giving birth to Nicholas: “Who is he, this blue, furious boy,/Shiny and strange, as if he had hurtled from a star?/[...]/The blue color pales. He is human after all.”³⁵⁶ She recognized his humanity and is overwhelmed

³⁴⁹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 149.

³⁵⁰ Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 103.

³⁵¹ Philips, *The Confessional Poets*, 144.

³⁵² Dobbs, “Viciousness in the Kitchen,” 21.

³⁵³ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 179.

³⁵⁴ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 176.

³⁵⁵ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 180.

³⁵⁶ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 181.

with love and protectiveness. What is troubling is the speaker's infatuation that could be, through Plath's poetic language, translated as both an innocent love but also a more sinister, incestuous desire: "I have papered his room with big roses,/I have painted little hearts on everything."³⁵⁷ According to Gryciuk, "owing to the absence of the boy's father, the First Voice bestows on the infant son a dangerous combination of maternal and romantic love."³⁵⁸

The Second Voice went through a miscarriage. Loss and emptiness (as in "Parliament Hill Fields"), together with strong ominous imagery of the moon permeate her narrative. She describes her body as a garden that is gloomy and decaying: "I am accused. I dream of massacres./I am a garden of black and red agonies."³⁵⁹ The Earth which is usually poetically viewed as the kind matriarch, is here the bloodthirsty and vengeful mother of all: "I lose life after life. The dark earth drinks them./She is the vampire of us all. So she supports us,/Fattens us, is kind. Her mouth is red./[...] I know her intimately—/Old winter-face, old barren one [...]./Men have used her meanly. She will [...]/Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end." The vivid blood and body imagery of the maternal harshly contrasts the flatness of men she feels she now shares: "I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat!"³⁶⁰ Much like the First Voice, she feels the impersonality and sterility of the ward deeply: "It is a world of snow now. I am not at home./How white these sheets are. The faces have no features."³⁶¹ The faces of doctors and nurses are not the only ones haunting the speaker:

And then there were other faces. The faces of nations,/Governments, parliaments, societies,/The faceless faces of important men./It is these men I mind:/They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are jealous gods/That would have the whole world flat because they are./I see the Father conversing with the Son./Such flatness cannot but be holy./"Let us make a heaven," they say./"Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls."³⁶²

These lines prove that the Aristotelian argument (as understood by Braidotti) that "woman as a sign of difference is monstrous,"³⁶³ which we discussed in "(Un)natural Motherhood," indeed operated in Plath's subconscious and influenced her writing. Here she references patriarchy as

³⁵⁷ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 186.

³⁵⁸ Gryciuk, "Children in the Blood Jet of Poetry," 160.

³⁵⁹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 180.

³⁶⁰ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 177.

³⁶¹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 178.

³⁶² Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 179.

³⁶³ Braidotti, "Mothers," 65.

a whole and the way they try to mold the woman to their image, for they cannot understand her body and the stages it goes through in terms of themselves.

In the maternity ward, surrounded by faceless doctors and nurses, her anguish is but a statistic: “It is usual, they say, for such a thing to happen./[...]I am one in five, something like that. I am not hopeless./I am beautiful as a statistic.”³⁶⁴ As she readies to go back home, they give her back her clothes and make up and with it, her identity. What is more, Dobbs adds another dimension to the Second Voice’s narrative: “By personifying this in terms of a woman who is characterized by her function outside the home, The Secretary, Plath may be suggesting that this fate, this loss, is a punishment. And she vows a kind of penance, a rededication to her domestic duties.”³⁶⁵ And indeed, by the end of her narrative, she calls herself “a wife,” perhaps in hopes that by reinstating her femininity, as understood by her culture, she will no longer be punished for her rebellion against the norm.

The Third Voice is a young girl, who was raped (as understood by her memory of the day of conception, compared to the story of Leda and Zeus in the form of a swan: “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 wasn't ready.”³⁶⁶). In her narrative her blame is directed towards men as a whole, she despises the doctors who tend to her: “They are to blame for what I am, and they know it./They hug their flatness as a kind of health.”³⁶⁷ The image of flatness as connected to men (and, therefore, barrenness) infiltrates this narrative as well, and the overarching images, bearing similar connotations, then bind the entire poem together. The Third Voice is not ready for childbirth or motherhood, as well as deeply traumatized by the rape she suffered and therefore puts her baby up for adoption before it is even born.

Her experience is gruesome: the birthing scene is “a place of shrieks,” and “the night lights are flat red moons. They are dull with blood.”³⁶⁸ She cries out: “I should have murdered this, that murders me,”³⁶⁹ which is reminiscent of the First Voice’s experience of birth. In both the infant is portrayed as parasitic and feeding on the mother’s life energy and body, echoing de Beauvoir’s understanding of the fetus (as discussed in the subchapter “(Un)natural Motherhood”). The Third Voice’s infant is described as a “red, terrible girl,” and “her cries are hooks that catch and grate like cats./[...] /Scratching at my sleep, and entering my side./My

³⁶⁴ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 183.

³⁶⁵ Dobbs, “Viciousness in the Kitchen,” 22.

³⁶⁶ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 178.

³⁶⁷ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 180.

³⁶⁸ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 180.

³⁶⁹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 180.

daughter has no teeth. Her mouth is wide./It utters such dark sounds it cannot be good.”³⁷⁰ Once again the imagery of the demanding baby’s mouth opening to disturb the mother and take from her is present, and as Schwartz and Bollas argue, “its murderous needs suck the very life she is supposed to supply.”³⁷¹ The baby and its cries for love continue to haunt the speaker even after she leaves the hospital, and so “even her daughter’s vulnerability is presented as a threat, her neediness as a violent intrusion.”³⁷² Walking out of the hospital, she feels like “a wound” and the memory of undoing her baby’s fingers which were grasping her as she left felt like tearing off “bandages.”³⁷³

Kroll finds that once again there can be felt a strong influence of *The White Goddess*, operating on some level in each narrative and representing each of the three women: the white color of the goddess attributed to the First Voice, standing for “birth and growth,” the red, representing “love and battle” for the Third Voice and the black, or “death and divination”³⁷⁴ associated with the Second Voice who suffered a miscarriage. The ambivalent imagery and differing experiences and attitudes of the three women throughout the poem serve to demystify motherhood, in accordance with de Beauvoir’s claims that “no maternal ‘instinct’ exists: the word hardly applies, in any case, to the human species. The mother’s attitude depends on her total situation and her reaction to it.”³⁷⁵ Bassnett finds that while she, daringly, does present powerful situations, which were considered taboo during her time, “there is no definitive ideological narrative voice that locates the women in any moral hierarchy.”³⁷⁶ This point goes to further prove that what Plath unapologetically presented here were her own feelings towards motherhood. Bearing this in mind, I take note of the starkly different treatment of the male (mostly positive) vs female (overwhelmingly negative) baby in this long poem as we move towards analysis of Plath’s later maternal poems which now, according to our distinction, feature her real male child.

“Event” mentions the baby boy for the first time. Here the speaker is stuck in a suffocating domestic scene with a man she knows is having an affair and a baby that is “demanding.”³⁷⁷ Philips claims that “she would like to conform to the world’s expectations of her as a thoroughly modern mother [...] to become part and parcel of the mechanized male-

³⁷⁰ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 182.

³⁷¹ Schwartz and Bollas, “The Absence at the Center,” 197.

³⁷² Gryciuk, “Children in the Blood Jet of Poetry,” 161.

³⁷³ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 184.

³⁷⁴ Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology*, 58.

³⁷⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 490.

³⁷⁶ Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction*, 125.

³⁷⁷ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 194.

oriented world and even to contribute to it. But she cannot.”³⁷⁸ The baby produces “intolerable vowels” and “his little face is carved in pained, red wood.”³⁷⁹ Gryciuk argues that the infant’s “suffering appears to be an extension of his mother’s pain.”³⁸⁰ The moon is out and overlooks the scene, taking on all its sinister connotation. The stars are “hard,” an adjective she used for stars in her first *The Colossus* poem, “The Manor Garden,” where motherhood was likened to a gothic haunted garden. In this poem, where motherhood is only a background part of this eerily unfolding domestic scene, it once again appears gothic and negative.

The infant as an innocent, clean slate is mentioned again in “For a Fatherless Son,” where the speaker finds comfort in her son’s unawareness of his father’s misdeeds and departure: “And I love your stupidity, /The blind mirror of it. I look in/And find no face but my own [...] /It is good for me.”³⁸¹ Van Dyne finds that Plath “could never look in the mirror of her child’s face without simultaneously wondering who she was in this reflection [...] If the child is a ‘clean slate’ or a ‘blind mirror,’ then the mother who is a writer would be tempted to believe that she could inscribe it with images of her own making.”³⁸² The loss of identity did not feel so immanent as long as the child remained only a reflection of its mother, with no autonomy and defining characteristics. While in “You’re,” a pregnancy poem, it can be argued she is excited for her baby to be “a clean slate, with your own face on,”³⁸³ to escape the same suffering she went through, in “Morning Song,” after giving birth, the speaker feared her own effacement, which would accompany the child developing its own face.

“By Candlelight,” strikingly ambiguous in its imagery, can be perceived as portraying “a mixture of love and fear.”³⁸⁴ The language used towards the infant son is tender, yet their surroundings are reminiscent of her claustrophobic, gothic pregnant poems. According to Lopes, “mother and son are envisioned in an embryonic environment, suffused with amniotic fluid, a kind of a uterine cocoon.”³⁸⁵ She wishes to protect him from the harsh winter raging outside, or the unkind world he was born into. Gothic imagery of candles and shadows permeated the poem as the baby “creaks” to life, a curious word bringing to mind a creaking chair image, rather than a baby’s cry. The little brass Atlas figure is a “poor heirloom,”³⁸⁶ for the boy, all that he has left from his father. The candles illuminate the baby, who appears as

³⁷⁸ Philips, *The Confessional Poets*, 141.

³⁷⁹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 194.

³⁸⁰ Gryciuk, “Children in the Blood Jet of Poetry,” 167.

³⁸¹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 205.

³⁸² Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 154-6.

³⁸³ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 141.

³⁸⁴ Perloff, “On the Road,” 109.

³⁸⁵ Lopes, “Monstrous Maternity,” 55.

³⁸⁶ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 237.

only a figment of the mother's imagination unless directly in their light. The candles flicker and the speaker fears the symbiosis with her child will be broken the moment their light disappears. In Van Dyne's words, "the 'sack of black' that threatens to blot out this scene is more than the winter night; it encompasses the claustrophobia of Devon, the single mother besieged with money worries, who sees no exit from child care or her crumbling house."³⁸⁷

In "Nick and a Candlestick" the sack of black seems to have overtaken the scene. The gothic, gloomy environment takes us all the way back to Plath's early poems of pregnancy, fearful and claustrophobic. In "Nick and a Candlestick" the speaker descends to what seems to be the underworld, a deep cavern or the depths of the female body, a journey "always dangerous to women, potentially transformative."³⁸⁸ The depths of the female body resemble a damp, dark cave: "stalactites/Drip and thicken, tears/The earthen womb/Exudes from its dead boredom./Black bat airs/Wrap me, raggy shawls,/Cold homicides."³⁸⁹ The language Plath generates here echoes female biology, a strong example of "writing the body." The dripping stalactites represent the mother's sorrow. The fear of being overtaken or devoured by whatever lurks in the darkness is the same fear present in "The Arrival of the Bee Box" and "Wintering."

Suddenly, the tone of the poem changes – the speaker notices something as she journeys further: "O love, how did you get here?"³⁹⁰ The appearance of her baby boy influences the modulation of tone. As is often the case, Plath does not claim to be the mother of the baby, she only seems to witness him. The red color of fertility overtakes the black: "The blood blooms clean/In you, ruby [...] Love, love,/I have hung our cave with roses,/With soft rugs/The last of Victoriana."³⁹¹ As tender and comforting as this image is, it does have a more sinister, incestuous undertone, as argued by Gryciuk: "The space she creates is more romantic in nature than it is maternal,"³⁹² echoing the poem "Three Women" and the Fist Voice, who painted little hearts and roses to prepare for her baby boy's arrival. The poem closes with lines: "Let the stars/Plummet to their dark address,/Let the mercuric/Atoms that cripple drip/Into the terrible well,/You are the one/Solid the spaces lean on, envious./You are the baby in the barn."³⁹³ Motherhood emerges victorious in this poem, standing by itself with no connection to domesticity.

Much like she did in "Magi," here Plath compares her infant to baby Jesus. However,

³⁸⁷ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 162.

³⁸⁸ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 162.

³⁸⁹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 240-1.

³⁹⁰ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 241.

³⁹¹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 241.

³⁹² Gryciuk, "Children in the Blood Jet of Poetry," 170.

³⁹³ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 242-2.

in “Magi” she saw her daughter’s future greatness as a burden and cried out against it, while here she is ecstatic that her son will be unique. This perhaps speaks of the deep-rooted self-perceived inferiority due to her gender, which operated in Plath’s mind for all of her life (as I discussed in the first two chapters) and which she now projected onto her own daughter. What is more, Gryciuk argues that “the speaker chooses her infant son as the primary object of her love, finding pleasure in the boy’s future masculinity, and treating him as a substitute for his father,”³⁹⁴ or perhaps a stronger ally, though her daughter was the older of her children. It can be argued that the reenactment of the familial structures from Plath’s childhood took place here as Plath assumed Aurelia’s role and likewise favored her son. The mother-daughter relationship then did not break the cycle, as the two existed as wretched mirrors of each other, much like Sylvia and Aurelia: the mother serving as a forever reminder of all the daughter might become and the daughter as the reminder of all the mother could have become, both producing resentment.

As much as Plath wished to merge her fragmented identities of a wife, a mother, and a poet, her late poems prove that these identities, when transposed into her poetic language, stand in sharp opposition and “if not mutually exclusive, [they are] mutually eroding.”³⁹⁵ “Kindness” features an overly nurturing, maternal character “Dame Kindness.” While Van Dyne rightly theorizes it could symbolize “a reaction against the ‘Sivvy’ personality”³⁹⁶ she developed for Aurelia, it is also an overt personification of the “angel in the house” archetype, whose exorcism follows shortly after. The blood-jet of poetry that cannot be stopped stands in sharp contrast to the maternal, overtly sweet characterization of Dame Kindness. “You hand me two children, two roses”³⁹⁷ closes the poem and drawing on Van Dyne’s research,

in the dominant literary tradition, the equation of roses with budding female beauty assumes that the period of female creativity is brief and is limited to producing biological offspring. The male poets’ metaphor operates as a threat as much as a tribute, arguing as it does that a woman’s only hope for something like immortality is to breed. In claiming “the blood jet is poetry” Plath refuses the traditional analogy and links her issue instead to metaphor.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁴ Gryciuk, “Children in the Blood Jet of Poetry,” 170.

³⁹⁵ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 169.

³⁹⁶ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 169.

³⁹⁷ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 270.

³⁹⁸ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 170.

With this, she exorcises the “angel in the house” archetype as well as the traditional male-generated rose analogy and creates her own language, using the deeply feminine, body-conscious “blood-jet of poetry.”

In “Edge,” the last poem written before her untimely suicide, Plath presents a disquieting scene: the Plathian speaker killing both her children and herself. “The woman is perfected,” she claims, as her two dead children in the form of two serpents coil around her breasts, which are now empty of milk, sucked dry. She paints an image of a gothic garden, reminiscent of her first poem from *The Colossus* “The Manor Garden”: “[...]the garden/Stiffens and odors bleed/From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower./The moon has nothing to be sad about.”³⁹⁹ The moon, her muse, and one of her favorite images connected to the various conditions and cycles of the female body observes the scene closely. The description of this atrocity “brings to mind the suicide of Cleopatra,”⁴⁰⁰ as the speaker smiles, victorious in her death. Almost justifying her act with “a Greek necessity” proves that she believed it to be necessary, unavoidable, perhaps even a morbid act of love, for she saved her children from the fate that would await them in the grim world.

Ironically enough, Van Dyne finds that “‘Edge’ is drafted on the reverse of a typescript of ‘Wintering.’”⁴⁰¹ The survival of winter and transcendence she longed for in “Wintering” were squashed by “the drag of maternal depletion and poetic extinction.”⁴⁰² But then again, considering the forever ambiguous and intertwined imagery of life and death in her poetry, the transcendence, when considered with Plath’s poetic language in mind, could mean precisely this. The deaths of both her poetic and domestic selves “perfected” the woman. The transcendence she imagined in “Wintering” and the one she got in “Edge” may not be so different. It is immensely important to note that Plath did not kill her children in real life. As Birkle rightly suggests, “the image of the mother who folds her children back into her body like a rose does with its petals suggests death but also rebirth.”⁴⁰³ Van Dyne believes there is another explanation (other than the vastly negative one, that Plath simply despised her children): this final act does not have to be “a denial of maternal connection and care but their final expression.”⁴⁰⁴ Could the rebirth be connected to her children, who she wished would be able to develop their own identities and not share her fate? Was this because she ultimately believed the identity of the mother and the child will forever be intertwined (just as hers was with Aurelia

³⁹⁹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 273.

⁴⁰⁰ Gryciuk, “Children in the Blood Jet of Poetry,” 173.

⁴⁰¹ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 172.

⁴⁰² Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 172.

⁴⁰³ Birkle, *Women’s Stories of the Looking Glass*, 78.

⁴⁰⁴ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 174.

and Otto), and did she want to save her children from the same predicament?

Whatever the case, the claim from the beginnings of this thesis held up throughout and stands firm as our analysis comes to a close: the portrayal of motherhood in Sylvia Plath's poetry is highly ambivalent – and the ambivalence only deepened, once we introduced more questions: how did her imagery operate when connected to domesticity, her own children as opposed to children as poetic devices and when it concerned female/male child? A comprehensive summary of my findings from the analysis, as well as my findings of the outside factors influencing this ambivalence from the first three chapters will be provided in the conclusion of this thesis.

Conclusion

In Plath's poems of pregnancy, in the months awaiting the child's arrival, the woman's body is a cave, a cellar, a beehive or the underworld, anxious and anticipating a threat, something monstrous, deformed or something hungry for her flesh and mind, almost parasitic or vampiric. Some of her favorite images are those of a womb being both a source of life for the baby and death for the poet, voicing her fears of loss of her own identity, biological reductionism, and domestic confinement she felt was culturally imposed on her. In every pregnancy poem examined there was strong feminine language – "writing the body" – present. Oftentimes her pregnancy poems conflated the body of the poet and the body of the poem (as in "Metaphors" or "You're"). On the other hand, there are instances where the pregnancy is portrayed more tenderly (albeit still with some negative undertones), if anxiously for the fate of her children, who were to inherit her family's history and her own struggle.

Images of emptiness, idleness, and meaninglessness are developed in Plath's poems of child loss/childlessness. She portrays barrenness as perfection, but of a terrible kind, for it also symbolizes death. The confusing overlapping image of death both connected to childlessness and motherhood can be explained after examining the sociocultural convictions of the time, presented to women in mass media: the true "feminine" white middle-class woman must be thin but also must mother many children. The two were confusing and contradicting, for pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood fundamentally change the body. In this sense Plath attempts to convey the idea that the woman is trapped in a patriarchal world where there are contradicting expectations and condemnation, no matter which vocation she chooses. The morbid imagery in Plath's poems of child loss and childlessness, such as that of dead infants preserved in glass jars, has its genesis in her biographical events but is further developed within her poetic language as a metaphor for stagnation and lack of creativity. Once again we find children as poetic devices in her poetry used negatively to portray the poet's fears of her loss of bodily autonomy, identity, and approval of society (including her mother).

In the poems of motherhood dealing with infant children, the ambivalences further deepen: the children represent both stagnation and transcendence, domestic confinement and journey deep into the self, a valuable object who in turn renders the mother worthless, the generational curse and hopes of breaking free from it. Images of decaying nature, ominous moon, dark, damp cavernous recesses and dimly lit enclosures with harsh winter raging outside permeate the poems. The world outside (or the society) is portrayed as dangerous and threatening and so is the journey into the underworld (or the depths of the female body). The

grotesque and terrifying depictions of childbirth in the hospital can be traced back to her fear of over-medication of childbirth and loss of bodily autonomy in a sterile hospital environment.

A difference can be drawn between the portrayal of her own children in her poetry and depictions of children used solely as poetic devices: the latter is strikingly more negative, as it was these detached images that she could transpose her anxious feelings of motherhood and domesticity into with no guilt. Her real children she often described with much more tenderness. This ambivalence can be divided further: the treatment of the male child in her poetry is usually connected to overwhelming protectiveness and love (with imagery at times carrying even more sinister, incestuous connotation), rejoicing at his uniqueness and greatness. The female child is often pushed aside and her uniqueness is lamented as a great burden. I argue this is due to Plath's deep identification with her daughter, sensing a reenactment of her own past in her daughter's future and resentment of the similarity between them that is reflected in her daughter's face, reminding her of her female gender and the inferiority she suffered from because of it. This can be further argued when we consider the speaker of "Morning Song" appeared delighted at her female child developing her own face and identity, opposed to the speaker of "For a Fatherless Son," who wishes to only see her own reflection when looking at her baby boy's face.

Another important distinction needs to be drawn between her portrayal of motherhood as suffocating and negative when connected to domesticity (as in "Lesbos") and motherhood standing on its own (as in "Wintering" or arguably even "Edge"), where the speaker hints to a hopeful promise of transcendence. The feminine mystique was only starting to get critical coverage by the end of the 1960s and so Plath was one of the "women struggling to lead independent lives or pursue the ideal of being writers [which] were under pressure to submerge themselves within monogamous marriage and create households straight out of the *Ladies' Home Journal*."⁴⁰⁵ The social conventions at the time successfully made her believe she would fail as a mother if she devoted herself to her art and fail as a writer if she devoted herself to her children. This poetic insignificance was already fueled by her anxiety of authorship and the archetypes (such as of the "angel and monster in the house" or the one developed in *The White Goddess*: a woman as a muse or nothing at all) and binding phallogocentric language which did not speak of her deeply feminine experience. As much as she fought against the norm in her poetry, of which the ambivalence discussed is a proof, she was very much a victim of the milieu and the literary canon in which she wrote and as Rose argues, "to detach her from [these

⁴⁰⁵ Carole Ferrier, "The Beekeeper's Apprentice," in *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. Gary Lane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 215.

debates] is to remove a central component of her work.”⁴⁰⁶

Outlining the outside factors operating consciously or subconsciously in Plath’s mind (artistic insignificance and feeling bound by the predetermined male-generated language and archetypes, fear of domesticity and motherhood as portrayed by her culture and her mother, fear of losing her identity as a poet and an autonomous being to her children who required all of her time and attention, fear of childbirth and over-medicalization in hospitals as only one of the examples of the ways in which men control women), the ambivalence found in her poetry of motherhood can therefore be seen as a way to free herself from this psychological imprisonment and structures and create her own language, her own unique female experience. In Van Dyne’s words,

a woman writer suffers an alienation within herself that is culturally produced and that is textually reproduced in different but discernible forms. In these explanations rage is identified with a narrative need, a desire for a revisionary or oppositional story of female experience that counters the dominant cultural fictions.⁴⁰⁷

By writing the body and developing a myriad of ingenious metaphors and images for its functions and stages, adorning her poetry with strikingly gothic and feminine body words and building upon them metaphorically (womb and blood being only two of them), as well as rebelling against the domestic archetypes generated for women by men, she fought back against the language that did not speak of her or for her. She successfully demystified motherhood by transposing her subjective and ambivalent experience of it into her poetry, echoing de Beauvoir’s claims that motherhood does not come naturally to every woman (and indeed, there were instances in Plath’s poetry where she had to consciously “carpenter” her love for a child).

To conclude then, it is impossible to label the imagery in Plath’s poetry of motherhood as either negative or positive. It is deeply ambivalent and depends on many factors, such as if the characters in the poem are her real children or if the motherhood is portrayed only as a part of a wider, suffocating domestic scene and therefore male-dependent. Nonetheless, this analysis proved that the negative images present in Plath’s maternal imagery can be explained by a close study of the biographical occurrences, women’s writing in a male-dominated literary canon, the sociocultural climate, and the stereotypical understanding of motherhood and domesticity in the 1950s.

⁴⁰⁶ Rose, *The Haunting*, 167.

⁴⁰⁷ Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, 24.

There is not one singular answer to the question “Why?” Instead, it is a puzzle of answers that, when put together, paint the final picture. By constructing motherhood in her poetry in such an unapologetic fashion and speaking of issues women in that day and age were too afraid to bring up, she is establishing a new social construction of motherhood and in doing so, becomes a poetic mother to all the female poets that follow in her footsteps.

Bibliography

- Alexander, Paul. *Ariel Ascending: Writings about Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.
- Axelrod, Steven Gould. *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Wounds*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.
- Bassnett, Susan. *Sylvia Plath*. Hong Kong: MacMillan, 1987.
- Bassnett, Susan. *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H.M. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape, 1953.
- Birkle, Carmen. *Women's Stories of the Looking Glass: Autobiographical Reflections and Self-representations in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde*. Munich: W. Fink, 1996.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Sylvia Plath: Bloom's Modern Critical Views*. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2007.
- Bolling, Bonnie. "Little, Smiling Hooks." *Plath Profiles* 6 (2013): 307-318. <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/plath/article/view/4296>.
- Butscher, Edward. *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*. New York: Seabury, 1976.
- Carey, Allison. "Self-Transformation: Images of Domesticity in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich." Thesis, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1991. https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/66.
- Chafe, William H. *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920—1970*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Cixous, Hélène. "Coming to Writing." *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*. Ed. Susan Robin Suleiman. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- . "Sorties: Out & Out: Attacks/ Ways Out/ Forays." *Continental Philosophy: An Anthology*. Ed. William McNeill. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998.
- Conboy, Katie, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury, eds. *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.
- Dobbs, Jeannine. "'Viciousness in the Kitchen': Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry." *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1977): 11–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3194361>.
- Ettinger, Bracha. "Demeter-Persephone Complex, Entangled Aerials of the Psyche, and Sylvia Plath." *English Studies in Canada* 40, no. 1 (2014): 123–54. [doi:10.1353/esc.2014.0010](https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2014.0010).
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: DELL Publishing Co., 1977.

- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Gill, Jo, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Gilman, Charlotte. *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.
- Graves, Robert. *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
- Gryciuk, Sylwia. "Children in the Blood Jet of Poetry : Sylvia Plath's Poetic Tale of Infanticide." *Brno Studies in English* 46, no. 1 (2020): 153–74. <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2020-1-7>.
- Holbrook, M.L. *Parturition without Pain: A Code of Directions for Escaping from the Primal Curse*. New York, 1882.
- Johnson, Lesley, and Justine Lloyd. *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife*. Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2004.
- Kroll, Judith. *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. New York, Harper & Row, 1976.
- Lane, Gary, ed. *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.
- Lavers, Annette. "The World as Icon: On Sylvia Plath's Themes." In *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*. Edited by Charles Newman. 100-135. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971.
- Lopes, Elisabete. "Bats Flying off My Womb: Monstrous Maternity in Sylvia Plath's Poetry." In *Retold Feminine Memoirs: Our Collective Past and Present*. Edited by Gabriela Mádlo. 51–62. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013.
- Matthews, Glenna. "*Just a Housewife*": *The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- McClave, Heather. "Sylvia Plath: Troubled Bones." *New England Review* 2, no. 3 (1980): 447–465. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40355326>.
- Oakley, Ann. "A Case of Maternity: Paradigms of Women as Maternity Cases." *Signs* 4, no. 4 (1979): 607–31. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173362>.
- . *Housewife*. London: Penguin, 1974.
- Ostriker, Alicia Suskin. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Boston: Beacon, 1986.
- Perloff, Marjorie G. "On the Road to 'Ariel': The 'Transitional' Poetry of Sylvia Plath." *The Iowa Review* 4, no. 2 (1973): 94–110. <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1521>.

- Philips, Robert. *The Confessional Poets*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber and Faber, 1966.
- . *The Collected Poems*. New York: Harper & Row, 1981.
- . *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. London: Faber and Faber, 1979.
- . *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*. London: Faber & Faber, 1975.
- . *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Bantam, 1977.
- Rose, Jacqueline. *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Sagar, Keith. *The Art of Ted Hughes*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- Seifert, Carolyn J. "Images of Domestic Madness in the Art and Poetry of American Women." *Woman's Art Journal* 1, no. 2 (Autumn, 1980 - Winter, 1981): 1-6.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1358076>.
- Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- Silverman, Kaja. *The Subject of Semiotics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Stevenson, Adlai. "Women, Husbands, and History." In *The Papers of Adlai Stevenson*. Edited by Walter Johnson. 495-502. New York: Little Brown, 1972.
- Souffrant, Leah. "Mother Delivers Experiment: Poetry of Motherhood: Plath, Derricotte, Zucker, and Holbrook." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2009): 25-41.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.0.0198>.
- Van Dyne, Susan R. *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Wylie, Philip. *Generation of Vipers*. New York: Rinehart and Company, 1955.