



## FACULTY OF ARTS Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

### Opponent's Report

**“I Am a Garden of Black and Red Agonies”:** The Image of Maternity in Sylvia Plath's Poetry  
MA thesis by Bc. Simona Zákutná

The thesis focuses on the issue of motherhood in the works of the American poet Sylvia Plath. It discusses a selection of poems from across her oeuvre in the context of her life (in this respect I appreciate the close focus on Plath's journals and letters, not a mere dependence on biographies) and her social position as a female author in the 1950s United States (and UK), moreover, one married to a major male poet.

I do very much appreciate the quality of the research behind the thesis, which uses highly relevant sources and maintains a good balance between its own argumentation and the use of existing scholarship. Another highly commendable quality is the writing style: the clear and readable academic prose, which makes the thesis a pleasure to read. The combination of erudition and elegance that can be found in the style of the thesis is a real achievement. I find the biographical part (Chapter I) particularly successful, especially thanks to the brilliant idea of structuring it according to the different female roles Plath adopted (daughter, wife, mother). That said, the subchapter “As a Mother” seems slightly less well-developed than the previous two ones (on her attitude to the role of daughter and wife), which I find a bit disappointing, especially if maternity is the main topic of the thesis. A lot of the attention is focused on the issue of childbirth, but the question of motherhood as such is much more complex, both generally and in Plath's case. The parallel between motherhood and authorship (giving birth and writing a poem) at the end of the subchapter could be developed further – and perhaps interestingly related to the previous two subchapters and also to the following chapter on writing and authorship (did Plath see herself as her mother's creation – even as a work of art? Did she see her children as “works”? How does the parallel between writing and giving birth relate to the male superiority represented by Hughes?)

While, overall, the thesis is clearly and logically structured, I find a certain disproportion in it – a lot of space is given to different “contexts” and there is not enough space left for the reading of the poems itself. As a result, the thesis does not quite do justice to its title as most of the text is not about Plath's poetry as such – only some twenty pages in an eighty-page long thesis deal with the texts of the poems themselves, and the individual readings are rather short and tend to focus on individual motifs and images, relating them to the contexts presented in the first three parts of the thesis. It seems a shame that the readings remain largely on the surface rather than offering more complex insights which could be interestingly developed.



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As for the method of the thesis, of course, psychological and biographical criticism is certainly valid in the case of Sylvia Plath – however, I lack a more explicit reflection on the critical method used, including the explanation of its pertinence in this particular case, but also the acknowledgement of its necessary limitations. Similarly, a brief overview of the major critical works that adopted this approach in the past (the biographical, psychological/psychoanalytical, and feminist approaches have been all significant in the Plath scholarship, as the sources referenced in the thesis clearly show) and an explanation of the position of this thesis in relation to these works would be welcome. These additions would bring the thesis to a higher scholarly level, and having a very clearly outlined conceptual framework might have been helpful in preventing the contextual parts dominate over the parts focusing on Plath's poems.

With regard to what has been said, I suggest two questions for discussion at the defence:

1. Could you develop more on the issue of the parallel between poetry writing and motherhood, writing and giving birth, poem and child (as hinted at, for example, on p. 29 of your thesis), and relate it to the concept of father-like authorship proposed by Gilbert and Gubar.
2. Could you comment on the advantages and limitations of the biographical approach in reading Plath's poetry?

I recommend the thesis for the defence and (depending on the candidate's performance at the defence and her ability to address some of the issues mentioned above), I propose a preliminary grade of "výborně".

Prague, January 21, 2024

doc. PhDr. Mariana Machová, Ph.D.