

**Bc. Simona Zákutná**  
**"I Am a Garden of Black and Red Agonies":**  
**The Image of Maternity in Sylvia Plath's Poetry"**  
**MA Thesis**  
**Supervisor's Report**

Approximately one third of Simona Zákutná's thesis (the chapter "Sylvia Plath's Life") surveys and analyses various events from the writer's life, particularly events related to her immediate family background, her relationship with Ted Hughes and her experience of mothering. Besides critical studies of Plath's life and work, the thesis here draws on the poet's journals, letters and, to a lesser extent, her poetry. The next section (the chapters "Plath's Writing" and "Domesticity and Motherhood in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century United States") then introduces Plath and her work in broader contexts of male mythology, the masculine literary canon, and the patriarchal society of the United States (and Britain) in the 1950s. Principal sources here include Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*; less centrally, the thesis draws on French feminism, Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and Ann Oakley's critique of gender politics of domesticity and obstetrics, among others.

It is in the last chapter titled "Plath's Poetry of Motherhood" that the thesis proceeds to a more detailed analysis of Plath's poetry, in order to illustrate the previously-mentioned argument that the author's "maternal poems stem directly from the familiar conflict of her formative years" (21) as well as from "the influence of her husband, centuries of overwhelmingly male literary tradition, and the social climate regarding domesticity and motherhood of the time" (21). The reading of Plath's poems here is therefore above all biographical; the conclusion being that same as in her fiction and non-fiction, Plath's attitude to pregnancy, childlessness and motherhood in her poetry remains conflicted and ambivalent. The poet, it is argued, "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)" (78).

On the whole, the thesis presents its arguments eloquently and with reference to a variety of convincing critical and historical sources. My only concern (as Simona Zákutná knows) is that interpreting Plath's poems to explicate and illustrate the psychological and social analysis of her life is somewhat limiting. Several critics have discussed how Plath mythologized or typified the speakers and characters of her poems, and emphasized that the poet herself, for example, stated that although personal experience is significant, "it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience." In other words, Plath consciously fictionalized and invented, and even poems like "Daddy" do not have to be closely linked to her experience. (She is known to have described this poem as being about "a girl with an Electra Complex" whose "father died while she thought he was God.")

Perhaps, given the insistence of the thesis on biographical reading of Plath's poetry, the defence could address these conscious efforts of the author to manipulate and control experience, and her own insistence on the poems' independent existence. Other than that, however, the thesis in my view represents a significant piece of scholarship. I recommend it for defense and suggest a preliminary grade "výborně" (1).



Pavla Veselá, PhD.  
Prague, 17 January 2024

