

# The Evolution of the Female Lyric 'I' in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

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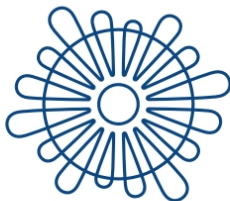
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Odjel za anglistiku

Diplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

**Tihana Micarakis**

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Plath's Poetry**

**Diplomski rad**

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The Evolution of the Female Lyric 'I' in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

**Diplomski rad**

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Zadar, 2020.



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## Introduction

Sylvia Plath was an American poet who reached today's level of popularity only after her premature death in 1963. During her lifetime, she published only one collection of poems, *The Colossus and Other Poems* in 1960 and a novel *The Bell Jar* in 1963 under alias Victoria Lucas. Her other collections of poetry, *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1972), as well as a collection of short stories *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (1977), were published posthumously by her husband and fellow poet, Ted Hughes, who handled all of her unpublished material. In 1982 Plath's *Collected Poems* won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Her most famous piece of work, *Ariel* garnered massive attention, especially by feminist critics, and helped to create a sort of a cult following reading her work mostly in the context of her biography, as well as her letters and journals.

In 1965 A. Alvarez, a well-known literary critic of the time, used the term 'extremist art' to describe the poetry of *Ariel* and positioned Plath in what came to be called 'Confessional Movement' along with Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, W. D. Snodgrass and John Berryman. Confessional Poetry was characterized by personal themes, especially recounts of a struggle with mental illness. For this reason, the term 'confessional' became controversial. After the publication of *Letters Home by Sylvia Plath, Correspondence 1950-1963* (1975) by Plath's mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, who selected and edited the materials with commentaries, a new wave of literary criticism followed, focusing on Plath as a feminist writer:

Rather than emphasizing the anger Plath expressed late in her life, the best of this feminist criticism attempts to piece together the reasons for her angers, her skillful manipulation of art forms that could be useful to her in her newly discovered voice, and the resulting impact her art evoked on modern-day readers (Wagner-Martin, *The Critical Heritage*, 16).

It is significant that women writers in Sylvia Plath's lifetime had to overcome different obstacles because of the way society perceived women, as Gilbert and Gubar point out:

Whether they defined themselves as feminist or not, women writers between 1940 and 1984 wrote out of a double consciousness: on the one hand, a newly intense awareness of their role as female artists who had inherited an increasingly great tradition, and, on the other hand, a newly protective sense of their vulnerability as women who inhabited a culture hostile to female ambitions and haunted by eroticized images of women. (qtd. in Myers, *Wojahn* 240-241)

On the one hand, much of feminist criticism on Sylvia Plath is to a certain extent based on the psychoanalytical approach, which focuses on her mental health, as well as certain issues from her childhood. On the other hand, some of these critics see Plath's poetry in the light of mysticism and mythology, explaining her poetry as part of the search for the understanding of the self by transforming autobiographical elements into mythicized reality, that is as "the logical outcome of a mythic vision in which art acts as a cathartic transformation of lived reality" (Mitchell 51). However, other studies tend to assume a miscellaneous approach, drawing on all of the above mentioned approaches to different extents.

Sylvia Plath's writing underwent drastic changes from her first volume of poetry to her last. The most notable changes are noticed in the structure and language, but also in the poetic voice. The majority of Plath's lyric speakers are female voices that were identified with Plath's persona and more often than not read in connection to her biography, as mentioned above. However, some critics such as Tracy Brain, point out to the fact that Plath uses a variety of both female and male voices to tackle issues she finds important. According to Brain, Plath plays with gender, refuses her poetic voices to be identified as either masculine or feminine, in this way "constantly shifting and surprising and above all challenging the reader" (3). The lyric 'I' in Plath's poetry has a central role which means that to examine the process of change in

the poetic voice of Plath's poetry is to examine the significance of her work and its impact on the modern-day readers.

This diploma paper will focus on the analysis of poems selected from four volumes of poetry: *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960), *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1972). The main goal of this paper is to examine the evolution of Plath's lyric 'I', its role and importance from her first published collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, to her last, *Ariel* and *Winter Trees*, published posthumously. This paper will also attempt to demonstrate how the lyric 'I' is in constant search of her own identity embodied in various roles she assumes: patient, daughter, wife, mother, and poet. Therefore, every section will be concerned with a different role the poetic persona occupies. Finally, it will discuss images of mirrors and mirroring, as well as doubling which play an important role in the lyric persona's quest for true self, that is self-definition.

### **1) "The Trees of the Mind Are Black": The Self in the Natural and the Psychological Landscape**

In this first section we will focus on the importance of the natural and the psychological landscape in Plath's poems and the way these two interact. It is important to observe how Plath uses objects from the natural landscape as building blocks of her poetic persona's landscape of the mind.

The setting of the poem "Man in Black" is the Deer Island prison, which was an actual correction facility located in Boston, Massachusetts. The hostility of the landscape is conveyed with both the imagery of manmade objects such as breakwater and barb-wire, as well as powerful forces of nature in the shape of tidal waves hitting the shores of the island. It seems



as though the lyric persona is merely an observer, looking from the mainland onto the island. The sight of the prison on the island and the waves hitting its shores shift to a sight of a man in black across the sea that the lyric speaker starts to address: “And you, across those white// Stones, strode out in your dead/ Black coat, black shoes, and your/ Black hair till there you stood...” (52-53). The image of the white stones is juxtaposed with the image of the person whose every feature is black: the shoes, the coat, even the hair. Interestingly, when depicting the natural landscape the present tense is used: “March ice/ Glazes the rock pools”, “sand cliffs rise” just as if the lyric persona observed it in real time. However, when the focus shifts to the figure in black, past tense is used: “strode” and “stood”. Furthermore, the motion in this poem, the waves hitting the breakwaters and the stride of the black figure, comes to a halt in the last stanza: “...till there you stood,// Fixed vortex on the far/ Tip, riveting stones, air,/ All of it, together.” (53).

All of the movement around the lyric speaker comes to a halt and concentrates in a single point, in the image of the man in black. The attention of the lyric persona is somehow drawn to the image of the man (riveting stones). The use of the past tense when portraying the image of the male figure as well as the use of the expression “dead black coat” could signify that the man is just a memory and that he is no longer present in the world of the lyric persona. The sight of the Deer Island prison brings back the memory of the man and all the emotions that come with that recollection. The lyric voice observes this landscape which reminds her of a male person who used to walk there. The expression ‘fixed vortex’, however, refers to the man representing a turbulent memory in the mind of the lyric ‘I’.

The boundaries between the physical and the psychological landscape seem to intermingle in “The Moon and the Yew Tree”. This can be seen from the first two lines, in which the lyric speaker warns the reader that natural elements are, in fact, the elements of the lyric persona’s mind: “This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary. / The trees of the mind

are black. The light is blue” (*Poems* 120). The reader enters a setting in which “the point where th[e] mindscape ends and the physical world begins can no longer be discerned” (Kendall 46). In this poem the lyric persona is not someone who is humble as she asserts her presence early on showing that the poem is about her: “The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God, / Prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility” (120). The poem reveals spiritual overtones with the presence of “fummy, spiritous mists”, behind a row of headstones, which can be seen from the lyric persona’s house. The line “I simply cannot see where there is to get to” can have multiple meanings. It could mean that the lyric persona cannot imagine its future or that she cannot perceive what there is after death.

The moon and the yew tree stand as the central motifs in the poem’s gothic setting:

The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,

White as a knuckle and terribly upset.

It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet

With the O-gape of complete despair. I live here. (120)

The sight of the moonlit night turns into a distorted vision of the lyric persona’s mind. “Upset” and “complete despair” tell us more about the lyric persona’s psychological state. Searching for an escape route from this state of mind she is unable to find the door. Instead of a door, she sees a face whose features are distorted as the features of her own psychological landscape reminding us of Edvard Munch’s famous painting “The Scream”. The lyric ‘I’ claims that the moon is her mother, and not the sweet Mary. Even though she has tried to find consolation in religion, she is unable to do so: “I have fallen a long way. Clouds are flowering/ Blue and mystical over the face of the stars.” (121). The view of the stars, of a source of light, seems to be closing off on the lyric persona. Finding no purpose in religion, she turns to the nature: “The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild./ And the message of the yew tree is blackness - blackness and silence” (121). There is no proper connection with the natural world. Neither

the moon nor the yew tree can offer any hope or purpose to the lyric persona's mind, only blackness and silence.

In the poem "Mirror" the lyric 'I' is not a person but a reflecting object, as the title itself says. In the first part of the poem the mirror is introducing itself by emphasizing its objectivity and truthfulness, claiming that its views are "unmistaken by love or dislike" and that it has "no preconceptions" (*Poems* 122). However, in the second part of the poem the lyric 'I' transforms into a lake, whose surface also reflects: "Now I'm a lake. A woman bends over me, / Searching for my reaches for what she really is" (122). The focus of the poems shifts from the lyric 'I' to a female person that seeks her reflection in the mirror/lake. By looking at her reflection, she is trying to find her own identity. After the reflection of her own face offers her no answer to the question she tries to consult "the candles or the moon", both of which are a source of light.

As well as in "The Moon and the Yew Tree" the moon trope plays an important role. According to Judith Kroll, in Plath's poetry the moon functions as muse "which symbolizes the deepest source and inspiration of the poetic vision, the poet's vocation, [the] female biology, and [the] role and fate as protagonist in a tragic drama..." (21). If we project this idea onto the poem, we could argue that the woman in the poem is searching for her own identity by looking at the reflection of her face in the mirror and at the same time is trying to find her own identity by reexamining her role as a woman in her poetry. Freedman argues that the mirror or lake in this poem is "woman-and more particularly the woman writer or artist for whom the question of mimetic reflection or creative transformation is definitive" (208).

The end of the poem offers the mirror/lake's reflection on who the woman was in her past, a young girl, and also who the woman will eventually become, an old woman: "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish" (*Poems* 122). The future that lies ahead of the woman is somehow self-deprecating when it comes to appearance. According to Raza, the mirror is used to "explore

issues of female passivity and subjugation. The desire on the part of the woman to remain young amounts to succumbing to the male-defined ideal..." (75-76). Furthermore, Van Dyne claims that women "see their aging bodies refracted through masculine aversion as well as their own anxiety" (87). Besides the imposed image of the female body by male standards, Donna Richardson points out an interesting fact. The sheer fact that obsessing about one's own image and appearance in public makes us look for and, eventually find, something that would not be there if we were not so persistent in finding it: "By fishing for the truth in a superficial place [...] she made herself into a very live 'terrible fish' creating an image that literally would not be there if she stopped looking for it there" (195).

"Elm" begins as the lyric speaker's conversation with a female person about a mental breakdown. The speaker is trying to find the reasons for her madness: "Is it the sea you hear in me,/ Its dissatisfactions?/ Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?" (*Poems* 151). The image of the sea is connected to the lyric speaker's childhood and her dissatisfaction with it, but also the inability to communicate with the world. However, another reason might be a feeling of resentment after the break-up of a romantic relationship: "Love is a shadow./ How you lie and cry after it/ Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse". The image of a horse hooves galloping away from the lyric 'I' serves as a metaphor of lost feelings for one another. Furthermore, Blosser argues that "the hoof taps represent a sense of mourning" (149).

In the fourth stanza the lyric speaker takes on a shape of a horse that has an intention of galloping in a forceful and impulsive manner with the aim of turning the addressee's head into a stone. The identity of the addressee becomes vague. We are not sure whether the lyric speaker is still addressing the female person from the beginning of the poem, or her ex-lover or simply leading an inner monologue. The boundary between the physical and the psychological world ceases to exist. The physical objects are completely transformed into features of the lyric speaker's mind, as the focus of the poems shifts from trying to find a reason

for her mental state to trying to describe it closely: “I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets./ Scorched to the root/ My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires” (*Poems* 151). The suffering of the lyric speaker is displayed through the image of a conducting wire made incandescent by an electric current. As if this were not enough, the poetic persona disperses so violently that a bystander could not survive it. The whole image is finished off with a shriek. As in “The Moon and the Yew Tree” there is an image of the moon-mother, once more a disturbing image, this time also acting as a tormentor “merciless: she would drag me / Cruelly, being barren. / Her radiance scathes me” (152). Raza points out how the poem’s “dramatic tone, violence of the imagery, depth of feeling and suffering and personalizing of the external aspects of nature such as elm and the moon (121) serve to depict the lyric speaker’s state of mind.

Eventually, the poetic persona locates the source of misery and horror within her own body: “I am inhabited by a cry./ Nightly it flaps out/ Looking, with its hooks, for something to love” (152). It is an inner enemy, “a dark thing” that sleeps in her. Depression is portrayed as an evil and ugly monster that brings terror to the poetic persona. Her mental state, however, has its ups and downs: “Clouds pass and disperse.” The sky seems to be clearing from time to time.

Lonely and disappointed, but also feeling defeated by her inability to know more, the lyric ‘I’ turns back to herself and looks at her own face, but is unable to grasp her own identity: “What is this, this face/ So murderous in its strangle of branches?” (152). This image proves how the physical and the psychological world of the lyric persona are merged together. The reader is not able to discern which motif belongs to which of these two worlds. The elm tree is not a physical object of the outside world as the yew tree in the previous poem. Instead, the elm tree is a part of the lyric persona’s psychological landscape: “Elm presents the complexity of Plath’s mood of despair. The elm and the moon merge with Plath’s self, a self that remains

tortured and tormented” (Raza 120). The end of the poem offers no solution, only a pessimistic view of what is to come: a slow death that can be seen in one’s own face.

While the physical and the psychological world can still be discerned in “Man in Black”, this distinction begins to break in “The Moon and the Yew Tree”. The last poem of this chapter shows how Plath completely transforms the physical world in order to depict the lyric persona’s state of mind. The role of the lyric speaker changes accordingly. “Mirror” stands out among other poems in this section in the sense that the lyric speaker is indeed a physical object, a mirror, but also a natural occurrence, a lake, whose most prominent feature is to reflect objects. This concern with one’s own reflection in the mirror will prove to be a major preoccupation in other Plath’s poems, in which she deals with a divided self.

## 2) “I Shall Be Good as New”: The Self as Patient

In this section we will examine how Plath uses hospital setting as a means of addressing her persona’s quest for identity, but also demonstrating the fragility of the self. A common feature of these poems is the reexamining of the society’s definition of women conveyed through female persona’s struggle with a divided self. This divided self consists of the social self, presented in the public, and the personal self, present only in the mind of the lyric persona. Furthermore, the society’s deprecation of the aging female body is also addressed here.

The setting of the poem “The Stones” is a city “where men are mended” (*The Colossus* 82). The lyric voice is a patient in this city lying on an iron block that blacksmiths use as a surface for shaping hot metal. The poem is imbued with mechanical images of factories and hospitals: “Nurses and doctors, stonemason, workmen, children and mothers employ food tubes, electric currents, catgut stitches, swaddling clothes, hammers, pincers, sponges and

chisels as they seek to repair the figure who has fallen out of the light” (Bassnett 39). The lyric persona uses the metaphor of a reduction to a pebble. Aird argues that Plath uses stone as a representation of “a reduction to a core, stripped of all pretence and association, the low point from which a gradual ascent is eventually possible...” (in Wagner-Martin 194). In her comatose state, the lyric persona is at the mercy of people who try to mend her: “The jewelmaster drives his chisel to pry / Open one stone eye.// This is the after-hell: I see the light” (83). We can argue that prying open one’s eye or ‘I’ is an inappropriate and rude way of trying to pry into one’s own mind in order to fix it. The whole experience is a traumatic one. Nevertheless, the “elemental surviving self” (Aird in Wagner-Martin 194) that has gone through hell, manages to see the light, that is, to live.

Not only adults need to be mended, but also children: “Here they can doctor heads, or any limb. / On Fridays the little children come // To trade their hooks for hands” (83). This image reminds of the hooks in “Elm” that look for something to love. Kendall points out that hooks as a recurrent motif in Plath’s poetry “represent restriction, as the stringencies of the word hold the speaker back from the longed-for release” (202). It can also be argued that hooks in these two poems represent the inability to hold human beings or objects gently, to hold without hurting. Additionally, it could also stand for the inability to have an effective control over one’s own life.

The ending of the poem, nevertheless, shows the lyric speaker’s positive outlook:

The vase, reconstructed, houses

The elusive rose.

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.

My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.

I shall be good as new (84).

The lyric persona will be able to heal with love and care. The body might be reconstructed, but the bliss of the mind will remain difficult to achieve. The hook has been transformed into a hand, but it shapes a bowl for shadows, not sunshine. According to Saldivar, “‘The Stones’ witness to a fragile, fictional ‘I’ in construction. It will not last, for it will only be ‘good as new’, that is good while new” (110). The fear of the lyric ‘I’ lies in the realization that this health might be temporary.

“Face Lift” seems to continue where “The Stones” ends. The lyric persona receives good news from the clinic and declares: “I’m all right” (*Poems* 105). The good news brings back a memory of a visit to the hospital as a 9 year old. Now, the hospital setting seems to have changed, the lyric persona is “Traveling/ Nude as Cleopatra in my well-boiled hospital shift, fizzy with sedatives and unusually humorous” in preparation for a plastic surgery. Her whereabouts remain a secret for five days until her skin recuperates: “Skin doesn’t have roots, it peels away easy as paper/ When I grin, the stitches tauten. I grow backward. I’m twenty” (105).

After the face lift is done, the lyric speaker sees not only her appearance, but also her identity changed. The self-renewal was successful. As Wagner-Martin points out that, “the persona has been reborn”, but “the irony of the poet’s tone undermines her self-congratulation” (*A Literary Life*, 97). In the last stanza, the lyric speaker checks her face in the mirror to make sure she is not “the dewlapped lady” she was before. The grotesque image of the old self reminds us of “the terrible fish” the lyric speaker saw reflected in her imagination of the future self in “Mirror”:

The speaker voices the homicidal antipathy toward her aging flesh we saw reflected in “Mirror”, but she also boasts that the agency for the mysterious transformation of this bodily situation is her own. Her tone oscillates between two moods: a quiescent detachment from the body [...] and a parodic self-awareness of the resurrected body as



a grotesque. [...] The speaker of “Face Lift” dissociates herself from her body in order to control it. (Van Dyne 89)

The self has undergone the process of doubling with the old self being replaced by the new self. According to Birkle, the favored young self is the social self, presented to others, while the rejected old self represents the personal self, only available to the lyric speaker for viewing (103).

The final image offers the lyric persona as a baby: “Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze,/ Pink and smooth as a baby.” (106). Becoming a mother to oneself means that the lyric persona has taken control over her body, changing it in a way she wanted it to, thus giving birth to the new self. The “mirror’s sentence” is reversed, “but only by doing violence to an objectified, repulsive shadow self” (Van Dyne 89).

Plath continues with the theme of the double in the poem “In Plaster”. The lyric speaker wakes up in a hospital bed in a cast and sees her self being divided into the “absolutely white person and the old yellow one” (*Poems* 110). The idea of the self being doubled into the social and the personal self is conveyed in this poem as well. The white person is the social self, thus: “certainly the superior one” (110), a saint, while the old yellow self is the personal one: “ugly and hairy” (112). The lyric speaker fears her doppelgänger<sup>1</sup> at first, but then starts to embrace the advantages of this symbiotic relationship: “Without me, she wouldn’t exist, so of course she was grateful. / I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose / Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain” (110-111). The doppelgänger cannot exist without the original, therefore, she is dependent on the existence of the lyric ‘I’. The image of the lyric persona

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<sup>1</sup> “(German: “double goer”), in German folklore, a wraith or apparition of a living person, as distinguished from a ghost. The concept of the existence of a spirit double, an exact but usually invisible replica of every man, bird, or beast, is an ancient and widespread belief. The doppelgänger became a popular symbol of horror literature, and the theme took on considerable complexity. [...] In *The Double* (1846), by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, for example, a poor clerk, Golyadkin, driven to madness by poverty and unrequited love, beholds his own wraith, who succeeds in everything at which Golyadkin has failed. Finally the wraith succeeds in disposing of his original” (“Doppelgänger“, *Encyclopedia Britannica*).

blooming out of a vase as a rose reminds of the elusive rose in a reconstructed vase in “The Stones”. She has accepted the double as a life partner and their relationship takes on romantic overtones. However, the appreciation of the double’s superior qualities turns into a feeling of resentment and spitefulness on the lyric speaker’s side. The gap between the social and the personal self widens. What is presented in the public does not correspond to the reality of the self if we assume the lyric speaker is the original self. The social self’s dissatisfaction with the personal self results in the personal self’s disintegration presented through the image of skin flaking away in pieces. As Axelrod notices, the double also functions “as an instrument of self-criticism and change” (208).

There is a need for unity of the self which both sides attempt to achieve by getting rid of the other one. However, the image of the social self created and nurtured in public for a lifetime proves to be an obstacle in bringing the personal self to light: “Living with her was like living with my own coffin:/ Yet I still depended on her, though I did it regretfully” (112). It can be argued that the metaphors of coffin and plaster stand for restriction and confinement presented by the society, from which the true self cannot break free:

Much of the tension that informs Sylvia Plath’s poetry comes from this dilemma: while she does recognize that she is inextricably entangled in her social matrix and entangled in her society’s definition of her, she never finally accepts that definition, but continues to struggle against it in her poetry, though with a growing sense of frustration. (Annas 69-70)

The lyric speaker realizes that the divided self cannot be sustained. She will have to get rid of her double in order to achieve the unity of the self. But until the strength for the completeness of the self is gathered, the double continues to exist.

The setting of “Tulips” builds on “The Stones” with its hospital imagery. The lyric speaker is a patient lying in a hospital bed, whose attention is attracted by tulips: “The tulips

are too excitable, it is winter here.” (*Poems* 113). The flowers do not seem to belong to the hospital setting, in which whiteness, quietness and peacefulness dominate. The lyric speaker feels she has no identity: “I am nobody... I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses/ And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons” (113). At the mercy of the health workers, her helplessness is shown through the metaphor of pebbles being formed by water: “My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water/ Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently” (113). Plath uses similar imagery as in “The Stones”, the transformation of the lyric persona into a small stone, an unimportant and lifeless entity.

The life outside the hospital seems like a burden:

My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;  
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks

I have let things slip, a thirty year old cargo boat

Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address” (114).

The memory of the reality outside the peacefulness of the hospital room is difficult to face. Not even the sight of the loved ones can help. Considering the use of the hook motif in the previous poems, the smiles, equated with hooks, cannot hold or embrace the lyric persona; they simply hurt instead.

The second part of the poem focuses on tulips. They are too red, they breathe and observe. Their liveliness and motion are juxtaposed with the lyric speaker’s motionlessness and quietness. The choice of colors in this poem is crucial in understanding the tulips’ evasiveness into the world of the lyric persona, whose stasis is disturbed by the presence of the lively tulips: “In this world of whiteness and motionlessness, the tulips are an intrusion, symbols of the life and activity outside” (Bassnett 122). Not only do they completely steal the lyric speaker’s attention, but they also overtake the central role of the poem. They start to

function as a double and a mirror: “And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow/  
Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,/ And I have no face, I have wanted to  
efface myself./ The vivid tulips eat my oxygen” (115). The absence of identity in the first part  
of the poem begins to bother the lyric persona.

Finally, the whiteness and the sterility of the hospital room are completely overtaken  
by a desire for life. Even the walls “seem to be warming themselves”:

And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes

Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.

The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,

And comes from a country far away as health. (115)

For the first time in the poem, the color red represents a part of the lyric speaker’s body. Not  
only has the redness replaced the whiteness of the persona without a face, the stasis has also  
been replaced by motion. As Saldivar points out, “the poem ends with nostalgia for the body.  
The tears are signs of wanting a relation with the living source of love which is the complex  
dynamic of health, principally of emotional health” (129). Wagner-Martin argues that the sea  
trope serves as Plath’s touchstone, “her source of tranquility from the childhood” (*A Literary  
Life*, 67). The ending of “Tulips” differs from the ending of “The Stones”. There is no fear of  
losing health again. Instead, there is only a vision of it coming back.

### 3) “And This Is the Kingdom You Bore Me to”: The Self as Daughter

In the previous sections we have seen how the focus of the poem lies on the lyric  
persona’s self and identity. In this section, we will explore how Plath’s lyric personae  
reexamine their role as daughter in relation to both their mother and father in order to come  
clean with the past, but also to set a tone for the future of the self.

“The Disquieting Muses”, inspired by Giorgio De Chirico’s metaphysical painting of the same name, is one of the poems dealing with childhood and the mother-daughter relationship. The daughter reproaches her mother for either not knowing or simply ignoring the fact that her child’s world had been possessed by some nightmarish, disquieting figures, portrayed as “mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head” (*The Colossus* 58). Blosser points out how Plath uses the adjective bald recurrently in her poetry. She equates it to “white, the key word signifying absence, loss, sterility, coldness, indifference and distance” (98). We can compare the antithetical mother figures in this poem with the bald and wild moon mother in “The Moon and the Yew Tree”.

The child persona was sent to piano lessons although obviously she had no talent for music whatsoever. Nevertheless, there was something else the lyric persona found herself in, something for which she did possess a talent:

I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,  
From muses unhired by you, dear mother,

I woke one day to see you, mother,  
Floating above me in bluest air  
On a green balloon bright with a million  
Flowers and bluebirds that never were  
Never, never, found anywhere. (59-60)

The image of the mother floating represent the lyric persona’s power of imagination, as well as her artistic talent for writing. The fact that the flower and bluebirds will never be found elsewhere means they are unique, thus representing the originality of the persona’s artistic inspiration. Dreams and imagination blow up like a bubble as soon as she hears her mother’s voice calling her back to reality. An emotional distance between mother and daughter is created

with “the child’s realization of the mother’s failure and intentional misinterpretation of life” (Birkle 55).

The last stanza offers the image of De Chirico’s muses standing day and night by her side: “Faces blank as the day I was born,/ Their shadows long in the setting sun/ That never brightens or goes down./ And this is the kingdom you bore me to,/ Mother, mother” (60). The inner world of the lyric persona is a disturbing one, reminding of the “atrociousness of sunsets” in “Elm.” Aird points out how the muses are

an embodiment of the forces which Sylvia Plath saw behind her vision; they are ‘mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head’ and are opposed to the frivolous world of domestic comfort represented by the mother. The poet, finding the two irreconcilable, rejects the bright gaiety of the mother’s experience for the stony blankness offered by her muses. (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 138)

“The Colossus” on the other hand, deals with the memory of the deceased father, which proves to be a recurrent theme in Plath’s poetry. The poem begins with a statement: “I shall never get you put together entirely,/ pieced, glued and properly jointed” (*The Colossus* 20). The daughter persona is trying to complete the image of the father in her memory. He is portrayed as an ancient oracle and a god. She spent her life meticulously attempting to revive his voice in order to communicate with him. She admits with resignation that all this time her effort was futile.

The glorification of the father stands in contrast to the diminution of the daughter. On the one hand, the father persona is a colossal statue, characterized by an “immense skull”, “the bald, white tumuli of eyes”, and “historical as the Roman forum”. On the other, the daughter persona is “an ant in mourning”, squatting in his left ear. Wagner-Martin calls the colossal father “an unattainable sphinx-like statue, an entity more foreboding than real” (*A Literary Life*, 12). Furthermore, Bassnett points out how Plath’s earlier poems are characterized by “the great,

ponderous weightiness of the male colossus, the figure that, whether father or husband or image from classical times, dwarfs the woman who tends it and the imperfections of that crumbling effigy” (69).

Another interesting characteristic of this poem is the fragmented image of the father. All the physical objects which represent the father figure in poetic persona’s psychological landscape are scattered: “Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered” (21). Rippl suggests that this fragmentation is a part of the imperfection of memory:

The lyric ‘I’'s attempt to reconstruct the statue is triggered by the fragmentation which prompts the recipient to complete it in imagination. Plath provides an introduction which is fragmentary when it comes to nature. We are never presented with the past as a whole, but only as fragments, which we attempt to put together. Precisely this process, the arduous assembling of pieces and the attempts to complete fragments, is conveyed in “The Colossus”. (261-262)<sup>2</sup>

The poetic persona’s present is permeated with the presence of the dead father. He stands as this colossal statue in the middle of her psychological world. Raza points out the “irresistible desire to escape from the memory of her father”, who is “much too vehement a figure in her mind to escape from” (32). Another clue to this father fixation is the motif of Oresteia that somehow arches above the poetic persona and her father. This is an allusion to Electra complex: a daughter competing with her mother for the possession of the father.

The ending of the poem presents a new day for the poetic persona. However, something has changed in her life: “There is a suggestion of something being ended, of a future that will

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<sup>2</sup> The original quote is in German:

Diese Tätigkeit des Sprecher-Ichs, die Statue wiederherstellen zu wollen, wird durch den Charakter eines Fragments ausgelöst, das den Rezipienten durch seine Unvollständigkeit dazu anregt, es in seiner Imagination zu vervollständigen. Zweitens ist die von Plath beschriebene Einleitung von Natur aus fragmentarisch: Wir haben die Vergangenheit nie ganz, sondern immer nur in Teilen, die wir notdürftig zu einem Ganzen zusammensetzen versuchen. Genau diesen Vorgang, das mühevollen Montieren von Teilen und die Versuche der Vervollständigung von Fragmenten, werden in „The Colossus“ beschrieben (Rippl, 261-262).

not involve waiting in vain for someone to come (Bassnett 68). The poetic persona will not wait on her father anymore, instead she will try to live without him, however hard it will be since her hours will be married to shadow.

“The Beekeeper’s Daughter” introduces another recurrent motif in Plath’s father poems, bees. The setting of the poem is a garden, in which flowers spread their scents and make the air “too dense to breathe in” (*The Colossus* 73). A male figure appears here: “Hieratical in your frock coat, maestro of the bees,/ You move among the many-breasted hives,/ My heart under your foot, sister of a stone” (73). As we can conclude from the title of the poem, the daughter is observing her father, who is a beekeeper, at work. He is this priestly, powerful figure orchestrating his bees. As in “The Colossus”, he is portrayed as a mighty figure, not only because of his appearance but also because of his abilities. In contrast, the daughter sees herself minute as a stone under his foot. Identifying with a stone is a recurring motif, as we have seen in “The Stones”. It represents a feeling of self-depreciation.

The world of the garden’s flora and fauna is pulsating with life: “The air is rich. Here is a queenship no mother can contest-/ A fruit that’s death to taste: dark flesh, dark pairings” (73). The poem is imbued with sexual overtones, hinting at an incestuous father-daughter relationship, as Aird notices: “The complicated ambivalence of the relationship between father and daughter in the poem is established through the claustrophobic, wantonly erotic imagery” (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 194). An important detail is the “queenship no mother can contest”. The contest for father’s affection is not between the mother and the daughter, but between the daughter and the bees.

In the penultimate stanza, the lyric ‘I’ takes over the central role of the poem, kneeling down in the garden to observe solitary bees at work: “I set my eye to a hole-mouth and meet an eye/ Round, green, disconsolate as a tear” (74). We can draw a parallel between the hole-mouth and the face of the moon-mother in “The Moon and the Yew Tree” with “the O-gape of



complete despair”. Furthermore, the way Plath used the word “eye” in the previous poems can mean her lyric persona is yet again searching for an identity of her “self”, seeing her ‘I’ reflected as “round, green, disconsolate as tear”. Additionally, it could also mean her lyric persona is identifying herself with the solitary bees, standing in the shadow of her dead father, to who she feels subjected.

The ending of the poem offers a transformation of the daughter persona from a solitary bee orchestrated by the maestro beekeeper to the queen bee: “Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg/ Under the coronal of sugar roses/ The queen bee marries the winter of your year” (74). Firstly, the daughter persona equates her father with a bridegroom. Secondly, his imaginative death and her marriage happen at the same time. According to Saldivar, the marrying of the father, and at the same time “killing” his overwhelming presence, generates “the power to create an autonomous self” (170):

As a queen bee, defying gravity like a flying stone, she is self-generated by writing, full of desire to signify on her own terms, to ‘be’ original. She is now willful, dominant, and fecund, having taken from the father what she needs, his power... She is proud yet sorrowful, for the disconsolate ‘eye’ is the reflection of her own imperious and solitary spirit. (105)

However, we might as well consider an alternate possibility that the father and the bridegroom are not the same person. It is possible that the daughter persona has found a bridegroom who she thinks will aid her in getting rid of the dominating presence of the father. This idea can be translated to the next poem that will be analyzed in this section, one of Plath’s most famous and best known poems, “Daddy”.

“Daddy” is different from other father poems in its form, as well as imagery. Plath uses nursery rhyme, repetition and incomplete sentences, and, most notably, employs Holocaust images. The notion of the daughter’s subjection to her father from the previous poem, her heart

under his foot, is continued here with a similar imagery: “You do not do, you do not do/ Any more, black shoe/ In which I have lived like a foot/ For thirty years, poor and white/ Barely daring to breathe or Achoo” (*Poems* 191). But this time she rejects her subjected role, a life in his shadow. The black shoe represents the “entrapment by the father’s memory for a long time” (Raza 16). The poetic persona realizes that her love for her father was “something confining and limiting” (Birkle 62). The imaginative killing of the father is present here as well as the images of the godlike colossal statue and the seascape. Nevertheless, the ancient Colossus is transformed into a ghastly statue.

The inability to communicate with the father is repeated here as well. This time the language proves to be an obstacle: “I could never talk to you./ The tongue stuck in my jaw./ It stuck in a barb-wire snare./ Ich, ich, ich, ich,/ I could hardly speak” (192). The lyric voice repeats the first person pronoun but can neither say who she is nor express her feelings towards her father. The harsh sound of her father’s mother tongue, German, evokes Holocaust images: “I thought every German was you./ And the language obscene// An engine, an engine/ Chuffing me off like a Jew./ A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen./ I began to talk like a Jew./ I think I may well be a Jew” (192). She gradually identifies herself as a Jew. Brain points out how both the language and the nationality in “Daddy”, as well as Daddy himself can only be “an assemblage of disparate parts, of associations and substitutions that never quite add up to a whole” (61). This corresponds to the fragmentation we have observed in “The Colossus”.

In the next stanza, the father-daughter relationship is transformed to that of a Nazi oppressor and a Jewish victim. The poetic persona, who was unable to talk to her father is now able to reveal one particular feeling towards him: fear. The myth of the godlike father from previous poems is debunked and the image of a Nazi perpetrator, blue-eyed, neat, dressed in black, unraveled. The use of both the black color and “the boot in the face” encapsulate the

notion of masculine “power, violence, oppression and suffocation” (Blosser 123), which “found its ultimate expression in the Nazi death camps” (Ramazani in Bloom 54).

The emotionally charged scene calms down for the next stanza in which the daughter persona remembers the picture of her father standing at the blackboard. As if needing to remind herself of the hatred she feels for him she states: “A cleft in your chin instead of a foot/ But no less a devil for that, no not/ Any less the black man who// Bit my pretty red heart in two” (193). What is revealed behind the fear and hatred of the previous stanza is now a heartbroken cry of loss. In longing for the absent father, the poetic persona searched for him in other men and eventually married an image of him: “I made a model of you,/ A man in black with a Meinkampf look// And a love of the rack and the screw./ And I said I do, I do./ So daddy, I’m finally through./ The black telephone’s off at the root,/ The voices just can’t worm through” (193-4). The marriage turns out to be disastrous for the lyric ‘I’ who admits a defeat. The attempt to communicate with the father stops for there is no need for that anymore. The lyric persona has changed her agenda. She will exorcise both her father and her vampire-husband out of her life: “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two-/ The vampire who said he was you...Daddy, you can lie back now./ There’s a stake in your fat black heart” (194).

The act of exorcising of the male oppressors in form of the father and the husband seems to be a way of reversing the male threat against its very source. Van Dyne argues how “the aggressive back talk of the poem is aimed not merely at the patriarch of the title but at the cultural construction of masculinity that is first enacted by the father and later reproduced in the vampire husband who also tortures and abandons the daughter” (49). The two male figures who bit her heart in two, now have a stake in their own hearts. The powerless female figure restores the power over her own life and claims freedom from male influence. However, the cost of liberation seems too high for the poetic persona who is “through” (194), exhausted from the overwhelming presence of the two male figures in her life.

#### 4) “To Juggle with, My Love, When the Sky Falls”: The Self as Mother and Wife

In this section we will see how Plath’s lyric personae take over the role of mother and wife. The idea of motherhood is explored as a threat to the identity of the female persona and the notion of the child as a double, in which the reflection serves as a way of finding the self’s identity, is introduced. Furthermore, the poems in which the female persona takes over the role of a wife convey the idea of male ownership over women and their reduction to a sexual object.

“Morning Song”, the opening poem of the *Ariel* collection, demonstrates a mother waking up in the morning to feed her baby. The opening lines convey that the child was born out of love: “Love set you going like a fat gold watch./ The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry/ Took its place among the elements” (*Poems* 107). The mechanical image of the birth of the baby may denote a kind of a detachment the mother feels from her baby. However, “a fat gold watch” tells the reader the child is valuable and precious to the lyric speaker. As we have seen in the previous poems the adjective “bald” signifies indifference and distance for Plath’s lyric speakers. This idea can be translated here as well. The cry of the baby is this alien and strange sound that all of a sudden exists in the physical world of the lyric persona and asserts its place among the elements of her universe.

The baby is welcomed by its parents as a kind of sainthood: “Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue. In a drafty museum, your nakedness / Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls” (107). The baby is equated with a statue which reminds us of “The Colossus”. Furthermore, it is perceived as sort of an achievement or a prize, an accessory a person puts in their private collection. The nakedness of the baby is intimidating for the parents. They only begin to get to know this new creature than entered their lives as well as the other way around. The baby’s bald cry finds its equivalent in the blankness of the parents. Nevertheless, there is a strong feeling of protectiveness on the parents’ side.

The 'we' of the poem shifts to 'I' in the following stanza as the lyric persona reveals her thoughts about her role as a mother: "I'm no more your mother/ Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow/ Effacement at the wind's hand" (107). As in the previous poems, Plath uses the mirror imagery as a way of questioning her lyric speaker's identity. The mother persona sees her child as a potential double, in which her own existence can be reflected. However, she refuses her child as such. Furthermore, the image of effacement denotes the mother persona's fear of a loss of identity that can occur after accepting the mother role: "The speaker refuses to regard her child as the reflection of herself, which might seem negative upon initial consideration, but can also be regarded as an exceptionally mature way of looking on bearing and rearing" (Lehrer in Birkle 75).

The image of the child sleeping and breathing represents the mother's gradual acceptance of the child's existence in her own world: "I wake to listen:/ A far sea moves in my ear.// One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral/ In my Victorian nightgown./ Your mouth opens clean as a cat's" (107). The self-sarcasm present in the image of the motherly figure's appearance is overshadowed by a significant quality, the lyric persona's mother instinct, "her ability to hear" and "to sense her newborn's need" (Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life*, 96). The image of the far sea moving is reminiscent of the sea in "Tulips", that "comes from a country far away as health" (*Poems* 116).

The mother persona's acceptance of the child is symbolized in the metamorphosis of the "bald cry" from the beginning of the poem into a "handful of notes", "the clear vowels" that "rise like balloons" (107) at the end of the poem. The child's voice is no longer strange and alien but clear and rising, a source of joy and a celebration of life.

This happiness of the mother and child seems threatened by dark and ominous forces in the poem "By Candlelight": "This is winter, this is night, small love" (*Poems* 204). The mother persona holds her child in her arms and observes their reflection in the mirror: "The

mirror floats us at one candle power.// This is the fluid in which we meet each other” (204). The tendency of Plath’s lyric personae to observe their reflection in the mirror is continued here as well, but with the presence of the child. Van Dyne argues that this series of reflecting images are deployed in order to “represent the mother’s link to her child and the poet’s objectifying distance from it” (157). The question to the lyric persona’s identity is not solitary anymore, it is observed in the light of motherhood. “The mirror of mother-child identity [...] is repeatedly at risk; the candles that make the vision possible also serve to destabilize it. In their uncertain light, the union can be extinguished or projected as an alarming combat” (Van Dyne 161). The father figure is equated with Atlas and his role is to protect the child from the world. The image of the world is that of a claustrophobic blackness, closing in on the world of the mother and the child, threatening to destroy them. The image of the light being blocked or obscured is another recurring image in the inner world of Plath’s personae, which we have seen in “The Disquieting Muses”, “The Moon and the Yew Tree”, “Mirror” and “Elm”.

The closure offers no solution for the mother persona, who sees the future of her child as motherless. Without her presence the child will be left only with the father who is a “poor heirloom” and can only offer five brass cannonballs. According to Van Dyne, “an emotional and temporal repositioning of maternity” seems to be “characteristic of the closure of Plath’s poems to her children”, expanding “outwards beyond the locus of mother-child exclusivity and look[ing] forward in time” (162). The closing line, “To juggle with, my love, when the sky falls” (205) is especially poignant since it offers a juxtaposition of an innocent child’s play, juggling with balls, on the one side, and the apocalypse of the lyric persona’s world, the sky falling, on the other side, both images linked with the expression of mother’s love.

“Childless Woman” offers the reversed idea, as the title itself suggests. The poem begins with an impersonal view on menstrual cycle: “The womb/ Rattles its pod, the moon/ Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go.” (*Poems* 218). Here we have two familiar

images, the moon and the tree. The tree stands for the female persona and the moon stands for fertility. The thought of an unsuccessful conception triggers a series of images representing the woman persona's self-reflection:

My landscape is a hand with no lines,  
 The roads bunched to a knot,  
 The knot myself,

Myself the rose you achieve –  
 This body,  
 This ivory

Ungodly as a child's shriek.  
 Spiderlike, I spin mirrors,  
 Loyal to my image... (218)

We are presented with an image of the lyric persona's landscape of mind the which is vast and empty, featureless like a "hand with no lines". The inexistent lines are transformed into roads that lead nowhere. However, in the following line the lyric speaker equates herself with the knot signifying two different things. Firstly, she, herself, is the reason why her life path is irretrievably disrupted and complicated, therefore, a source of difficulty. Secondly, since all of the roads are tied together in a single point, they irrevocably lead back to herself. For emphasis of this idea the word "myself" is repeated, opening the image of the following stanza. The rose represents something fragile, but beautiful. We can draw a parallel with the image of "the elusive rose" in "The Stones" and the blooming out of the double as a rose in the poem "In Plaster". The fact that the rose is achieved hints at its meaning as a desired objective on the lyric persona's side. Nevertheless, the image shifts to a self-deprecating evaluation of the

woman's body as sterile, infertile, childless, ungodly. The inability to reproduce gives the woman persona a sense of worthlessness.

Furthermore, the obsession with self-reflection present in other poems is displayed as a spiderlike spinning of mirrors conveying the idea that every mirror image is manipulated by the lyric persona in accordance to her needs and desires. It is important to notice how the mirror's agency changes from "Mirror" to "Childless Woman". In the first one, the mirror has the power to affect the woman, whose perception is completely dependent on its reflection. In this poem, however, the woman persona takes over control of her own image(s) and the mirror is reduced to a simple reflecting tool.

The closure of the poem offers another dismal image of the lyric persona's future, similar to that of the previous poem: "Uttering not but blood -/ Taste it, dark red! And my forest// My funeral,/ And this hill and this/ Gleaming with mouths of corpses" (218). The lyric 'I' foreshadows her own death. What is important to notice is the "direct link between menstrual blood, unused in making of new children, and words, used in the making of poems" (Bassnett 75). The image of uttering blood instead of children can be translated to Plath's vision of her poetic productivity. For a poet persona, uttering blood represents the painstaking reproduction of poems, of expressing oneself. "Plath's intention is [...] to give her life a meaning in poetry, to create herself again, to give herself substance and subjectivity" (Birkle 71). Since this is not possible for the woman persona in this poem, she is sentenced to poetic death: "Plath's sense of selfhood depended on her feeling of imaginative fulfillment [...]. When her mirrors show an individual lacking in creativity, therefore, they expose a self already disintegrating" (Axelrod 210).

"Purdah", on the other hand, explores the theme of female oppression in general. The lyric 'I' is a wife who lives under a strict, repressive regime perpetuated by men. Wearing purdah



(“screen,” or “veil”) is a practice that was inaugurated by Muslims and later adopted by various Hindus, especially in India, and that involves the seclusion of women from public observation by means of concealing clothing (including the veil) and by the use of high-walled enclosures, screens, and curtains within the home (“Purdah”).

The poem opens with the lyric ‘I’'s introduction of herself as a jade stone and “The antagonized// Side of green Adam, I/ Smile, cross-legged,/ Enigmatical,/ Shifting my clarities./ So valuable!/ How the sun polishes this shoulder!” (“Purdah – Sylvia Plath”). There are a few things to consider in these lines. Firstly, the reader gets the sense that the woman sees herself as precious and valuable. However, it is only her appearance that is her most important feature. Secondly, the image of the creation of Eve from the Bible tells us how a woman’s position is that of the second sex, a less important one, “antagonized”. Finally, the line “shifting my clarities” reveals a change occurring in the female persona’s thinking.

In the following stanza she makes a connection to the moon, which she calls her indefatigable cousin. As we have seen in the previous poems, the moon is a recurrent trope signifying poetic vision and female biology. However, it is usually a tormenting figure. Here, she rises “with her cancerous pallors,/ Dragging trees”. Behind a purdah, the female speaker is hidden: “My visibilities hide./ I gleam like a mirror”, awaiting the bridegroom who is the “lord of the mirrors” (“Purdah – Sylvia Plath”). The notion of the bridegroom’s ownership over his wife is conveyed. Hidden and contained behind a veil, waiting quietly, all of the woman’s existence revolves around her husband. Bassnett points out how the form of the poem serves to create “an image of a woman who is contained, both within the walls of the building in which she has been placed by her bridegroom and within the boundaries of her own consciousness. The woman has been reduced to an object, a statuette [...]. Abbreviated language of the poem gives the reader a physical impression of restriction” (111).

However, the subjected wife persona is plotting a revolt against her oppressor. She starts to unloose her false identities one by one. Firstly, the identity of the sexualized female figure being exploited by men: “I shall unloose/ One feather, like the peacock”. Secondly, the identity of the quiet and submissive wife: “I shall unloose/One note// Shattering/ The chandelier”. Finally, she will reveal her real self by murdering her oppressor: “And at his next step/ I shall unloose// I shall unloose---/ From the small jeweled/Doll he guards like a heart---// The lioness,/ The shriek in the bath,/ The cloak of holes” (“Purdah – Sylvia Plath”). The final line is an allusion to the family tragedy of *Oresteia*, in which Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon by “repeatedly stabbing him through a cloak which she had thrown over him” (Kendall 167).

The ending of this poem intertwines several important characteristics of Sylvia Plath’s late poems: the image of a woman “emerging as a predator to counter balance the male ego” (Raza 96), as we have seen in “Daddy”; the identification of the female persona with lioness, the symbol of female strength, and finally, the dissolving of false selves in order to bring the true self to light through mirror imagery. These characteristics will be further explored in the following section.

## 5) “How One We Grow”: The Self as Queen Bee and God’s Lioness

“Stings” is the third poem in the bee sequence, in which Plath uses bee motifs in her exploration of power relations and the realization of her selfhood. The poem opens with a meeting of two beekeepers, of which one is the lyric ‘I’, who is buying a beehive. The beekeeper persona speculates about the state of the queen, on who the quality of the beehive depends. Furthermore, she negates any identification with the drudger bees, an image which she relates to housewives, who she calls “unmiraculous women”. Even though she had played the role of the housewife for a long time, she will no longer do so. She starts to perceive herself

as strange and other, non-compliant to the society's gender expectations: "And seen my strangeness evaporate,/ Blue dew from dangerous skin./ Will they hate me,/ These women who only scurry..." (181). The shedding of the skin represents an on-going transformation of the lyric persona's identity. The preoccupation with other women's opinions of her behavior seems to be a short lived worry as she asserts: "It is almost over./ I am in control. Here is my honey-machine" (181). The lyric speaker is confident about the success of her beehive.

However, a third person appears at the scene. The objects from the domestic interior, "his slipper" and "white linen" give a clue as to who this male person might be. He is the wrongful, lying husband, whose lies have been discovered by the bees. Since the husband is no longer a useful male bee, the female bees have to get rid of him in order to sustain the beehive. As Kendall notices, "the speaker's sense of being 'in control' excludes the need for revenge against the lying and redundant male. Yet control is only a means to an end, the end being [...] the identification with the queen bee" (141): "...I/ Have a self to recover, a queen./ Is she dead, is she sleeping?/ Where has she been,/ With her lion-red body, her wings of glass? (182). For the lyric persona, the process of identification with the queen bee seems to be a rediscovery of the dormant self. Britzolakis points out how "this rebirth is not unambiguously celebrated because the emphasis on redness implies a wounded and stigmatic self, while the wings of glass sound fragile" (in Kendall 141). The power is still there to regain for the queen bee persona. She will succeed in doing so by assuming the power which was solely in the possession of the male figures:

Now she is flying  
 More terrible than she ever was, red  
 Scar in the sky, red comet  
 Over the engine that killed her -  
 The mausoleum, the wax house. (182).

The lyric persona sees her liberation from gender expectations as a flight over the family house, in which she led a domestic life, imprisoned by both her own expectations and the expectations of the society. If we recall the image of the family home in “Morning Song”, in which the newborn child was welcomed in a “drafty museum”, we can draw a comparison to the image of the family home here. The mausoleum and the wax house stand for a broken family idyll, in which in the end only idealized, unrealistic statues remain.

It is also interesting to see how the seizure of power for the female persona is correlative to the role of the two male figures of her life, her father and her husband. If we examine the double role of the lyric ‘I’ in this poem, that of a beekeeper and the queen bee, we can see an important change from the earlier poems, “The Man in Black” and “The Beekeeper’s Daughter”. The observed male figure in “The Man in Black” has the leading role of the poem possessing the ability to distort the landscape of the persona’s mind and capture the whole attention to himself. In “Stings”, however, he is a mere observer himself, whose importance is minimized in such way that he only gets a “cameo appearance” (Van Dyne 108). Furthermore, as a beekeeper, Plath’s persona overtakes the role of the maestro of the bees from her father. She is no longer an observer of him orchestrating the bees, she is now doing it herself. According to Van Dyne, “the bee poems represent not only a revisionary history of [Plath’s] role as daughter, wife and mother but a simultaneous search for an adequate shape in which to reconstitute herself as both a generative and an authoritative poet” (105).

In “Fever 103°” the theme of a rising, liberated spirit is continued. The lyric speaker lies for three days in a state of high fever which evokes different images in her mind. The feverish hallucinations resembling a descent into hell shift to lyric speaker’s questioning of her identity: I am too pure for you or anyone./ Your body/ Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am lantern-// My head a moon/ Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin/ Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive” (198-9). Comparing herself with God is a familiar image seen in “The

Moon and the Yew Tree” where grass prickles the lyric speaker’s feet as if she were God. In “Tulips” the lyric persona describes herself as a “flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow” (*Poems* 115), signifying the effacement of identity. In this poem, however, the moon-paper stands for purity.

In the second part of the poem the lyric speaker performs a kind of a show for her lover, showing off her self-sufficiency, as Van Dyne notices: “The speaker’s dazzling self-display demonstrates to the astounded observer her resilient, seductive power and yet her volatile unpredictability. Her pleasure is derived not only from the autoerotic, orgasmic pulse of her fever but from the trespass of her performance that insists that her lover watch what he is no longer necessary to produce” (118).

The closure of the poem shows an ascent of a liberated spirit: “I think I am going up,/ I think I may rise-/ The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I/ Am a pure acetylene/ Virgin/ Attended by roses...Not you, nor him// Not him, nor him/ (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)-/ To Paradise” (199). According to Wagner-Martin, “the entirely pure woman, alone, recognizes, that the way she whored her path through life has been to accept roles she did not ever want, only because society coerced her” (*A Literary Life*, 118). The idea of the doubling of the self we have seen in “Face-Lift” and “In Plaster” has been abandoned: “The heat dissolves the past identities; Plath’s view of identity as a constriction guarantees that her persona should only ascend to Paradise after she has cast off identity altogether” (Kendall 165).

The lyric persona’s theatrical performance reaches another level in “Lady Lazarus”, one of Plath’s most famous poems, in which her lyric voice takes over different roles. As in “Daddy” the Holocaust images are used as a way of creating a persona victimized by the Nazi perpetrators. The images are disturbing: “my skin/ Bright as a Nazi lampshade,/ My right foot// A paperweight, my face a featureless, fine/ Jew linen... (*Poems* 211). The image of skin is repeated from previous poems, “Face-Lift”, “In Plaster”, “Stings” and “Fever 103°”. The notion

of featurelessness represents anonymity, impersonality, absence of identity and perfectly encapsulates the horrors of concentration camps.

The lyric persona is both the female Lazarus, who rises from the dead in the Bible, but also the mythical phoenix rising from the ashes. The rebirth in this poem is not a means of getting rid of the old self and the acquisition of the new one for the lyric persona comes back from the dead as “the same, identical woman” (212). However, her ability to decide over her own life and death is the source of her power which enables her to confront her oppressors. It is important to notice how “The male authority-figures of these poems – father, God, Nazi, torturer, Lucifer, vampire, with their brutal sacrifices and insatiable hungers, remind the reader that religion in *Ariel* is unassailably masculinist and violent” (Kendall 123).

As in “Purdah” and “Daddy” the oppressed female figure reverses the roles and takes revenge on her male victimizers: “Herr God, Herr Lucifer/ Beware/ Beware.// Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air” (214). However, the difference lies in the fact that “what Lady Lazarus suffers is not male brutality but the gendered asymmetry of her relationship to power in which her role is always defined as dependent and defective” (Van Dyne 55). Therefore, the agenda of the female persona is not merely avenging her suffering, but assumption of power from the male oppressors. Rising from the ashes and eating men like air means that that power had been acquired and the ascent is possible. The power over one’s own life and death of Lady Lazarus represents an affirmation of Plath’s identity both as a woman and a poet: “The persistent double consciousness of “Lady Lazarus” is not the split self of alienation that marks Plath’s other poems [...] but a strategy for control” (Van Dyne 57).

There is a reason Plath’s second collection, published posthumously, was named *Ariel*. This poem of the same title encompasses several important ideas and preoccupations visible in other poems analyzed in this paper and serves as an outline of Plath’s view on the transformation of selfhood. Ariel is Hebrew for God’s lion, but also the name of a character in

Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, "a spritely embodiment of poetic imagination who is eventually set free by its master" (Bloom 58).

The poem opens with a sense of motionlessness which turns into motion: "Stasis in darkness./ Then the substanceless blue/ Pour of tor and distances" (*Poems* 206). On the surface level of the poem the lyric 'I' is a horse rider at dawn. The poem continues with images of exhilarating movement of both the animal and the person: "God's Lioness,/ How one we grow,/ Pivot of heels and knees!- The Furrow// Splits and passes, sister to/ The brown arc/ Of the neck I cannot catch,// Nigger-eye/ Berries cast dark/ Hooks-// Black sweet blood mouthfuls/ Shadows./ Something else// Hauls me through air... (206). God's Lioness and the lyric persona are being transformed into one in what seems "an almost ecstatic celebration of pure, unhindered and unstoppable motion" (Blosser 149). The images are compressed and shifting, perfectly encapsulating this sense of unhindered movement.

In the second part of the poem the lyric speaker equates herself with white Godiva. Lady Godiva was an Anglo-Saxon gentlewoman who in legend rode naked through Coventry to save its citizens from an oppressive tax ("Lady Godiva"). Van Dyne argues that "in her transformation of Godiva, Plath exploits the erotic charge of her self-display and yet refocuses our attention on Godiva as subject rather than spectacle" (122), as it was the case in both *Lady Lazarus* and *Fever* 103°, in which the female persona's self-display was intended as a show for male gaze. She also argues that Godiva is "defiantly antisocial, her desire an unconstrained liberty of self-definition" (122):

And now I

Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.

The child's cry

Melts in the wall.

And I

Am the arrow,

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning. (207)

The transformation of the lyric persona is not only an ascent and liberation from constraints. It is also a unification of the self and an identification with the divine power, with the poetic, creative energy (“at one with the drive”). As in “Stings” and “Lady Lazarus” the red eye/‘I’ signifies the experience of pain as means of acquiring power to grow “one”. The speaker of “Ariel” achieves a feat that the personae of other poems have only dreamt of and that is a unified self. However, the unification of the self and the identification with God’s Lioness require casting off all relations of Plath’s personae to the world that we have seen in other poems: person to nature, patient to doctor, daughter to parents, mother to child, and wife to husband. As Saldivar notices, “The speaker in “Ariel” is joyous and fearless in self-conscious and lonely unity, knowing she risks death if she does not turn back toward the world of relation” (185). Finally, the physical body is destroyed so that the completeness of “the ‘I’ and its vision become all that there is” (184).



## Conclusion

In this paper we have seen how Plath's personae take over different roles. In the first section we have explored how Plath positions her lyric personae as human beings in relation to the natural world. The underlying thought of these poems is lyric persona's search for her place and purpose in the world. The result is the disconnection between the lyric persona and the natural world that proves to be unreadable and hostile. We also observed how the boundaries between the physical and the psychological world gradually cease to exist. In the first poem of the section the speaker is just an observer, whereas in the last poem of the section the distinction between the physical and the psychological world virtually disappears, and the poem consists entirely of the landscape of the persona's mind.

In the second section we have seen how Plath explores the hospital setting as means of depicting a fallen, weak self that requires mending. The poems are imbued with mechanical imagery, and the image of an eye signifies both the persona's clear vision of the world, as well as her personality. The reader is presented with the images of a struggle with mental health, but also a positive outlook on the future of the self after recovery. The images of mirrors and doubling play an important role in these poems, in which Plath explores the division of the self between personal and social self and the gap between those two personalities. There is a recurrent need for the unity of the self.

The poems of the third section explore the daughter persona's relationship to her parents. These poems represent the search for an independent self, a state which can be achieved only by removing the parents' influence and getting out of their shadow. The relationship with the mother lacks in honesty and understanding, with the daughter persona struggling with inner torments her mother does not fully comprehend. The daughter-father poems are characterized by the overwhelming presence of the dead father, who stands as a colossal figure in the mourning persona's life. The underlying idea of these poems is the

inability to communicate, but also a fragmented memory of the father which does not allow the daughter persona to get a complete image of him. In the last poem of this section this antithetical relationship shifts to that of an oppressor and a victim with allusions to Holocaust.

In the following section the lyric 'I' takes over the role of a mother and a wife. The poems about children are characterized by juxtaposition of the mother's landscape of the mind with the child's world. On the one hand, the mother's world is imbued with dark and ominous forces that threaten to destroy both her and the child. On the other hand, the child's world is full of hope and positivity. Struggling with her inner turmoil, the mother persona attempts to keep her child's world unspoiled. It is important to notice that in these poems the child is perceived as a mirror and a double. This plays a twofold role. Firstly, the notion of motherhood is perceived as a threat to the existence of the female persona's identity and independence. Secondly, motherhood serves as a metaphor for the poet persona's creativity. In the last poem of the section, Plath explores a general theme of oppression of women in a male-dominated society, in which the veiled wife takes revenge on her husband, thus letting her false identities drop one by one and giving a chance to her true identity to come to light.

This idea is continued in the last section, in which Plath's persona takes over the double role of a beekeeper and the queen bee, as well as God's lioness. What runs through these poems is criticism of gender inequality projected through the metaphor of the bee hive, which enables Plath to explore the power relations in society and give primacy to women. The main idea of these poems is the triumph of a subjected female persona who overthrows her male oppressor(s) by assuming their power, and transforms into a powerful and independent woman, liberated from male influence. "Ariel", the last poem of this section, differs from other poems. The transcendence of the lyric 'I' is projected as casting away of all of the persona's relations to the world we have seen in this paper. The result is the death of the physical body. Both the

unity of the self and the identification with the divine power are achieved. This poem shows that for Plath the divine power is the poet's creative spirit.

This analysis has shown how Plath's lyric 'I' evolved from her earliest work to her last poems. Whereas earlier poems were characterized by the problematic division of the self and the struggle with inner torments, later poems show how Plath's personae break the tradition of trying to find the solution for their true identity in their own or someone else's reflection of themselves, but turn to resolving the issue by actively participating in the process of self-realization and independency with the help of a very own artistic voice.

The reality of Sylvia Plath's iconic status in the popular culture is undermined by the fact that her legacy has been heavily overshadowed by her suicide. It is impossible to predict or imagine the critical reception had Plath lived any longer and produced more work. It is also impossible to predict her participation in the women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as her role in the public discourse. However, it is fair to say that Plath's ideas about gender equality were ahead of her time and proved to be an inspiration for generations of women. Well into the twenty-first century, her poetry is as fresh and relevant as it was at the time she wrote it.

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## **THE EVOLUTION OF THE FEMALE LYRIC 'I' IN SYLVIA PLATH'S**

### **POETRY: Summary and key words**

This MA paper sets out to explore the evolution of the female lyric 'I', its role and importance in the selected poems by Sylvia Plath. It attempts to show how Plath's lyric persona is in constant search of her own identity embodied in various roles she assumes: patient, daughter, wife, mother, and poet. The paper demonstrates how the images of mirror and mirroring, as well as doubling, play an important role in the lyric persona's quest for true self. In Plath's earlier poems we notice how lyric speakers deal with the problematic division of the self by seeking their true identity in their own or someone else's reflection of themselves. The paper shows how in her later poems the lyric 'I' seems to find her own self through her artistic voice. Plath's speaker develops into an unconstrained and autonomous female self that recognizes gender inequality in a male-dominated society.

Key words: Sylvia Plath, female lyric 'I', identity, evolution, mirror, double

## **RAZVOJ ŽENSKOG LIRSKOG „JA” U POEZIJI SYLVIJE PLATH: Sažetak i ključne riječi**

Ovaj rad bavi se analizom razvoja ženskog lirskog „ja“, njegovog značenja i uloge u odabranim pjesmama Sylvijs Plath. Cilj je ovog rada pokazati da je lirski subjekt u neprestanoj potrazi za svojim identitetom, utjelovljenoj u ulogama koje ona preuzima: pacijentica, kćer, majka, supruga i pjesnikinja. Pjesničke slike zrcala, zrcaljenja te dvojnika igraju važnu ulogu u potrazi za pravim „ja“. U ranijim pjesmama je vidljivo da se lirski subjekt bavi problematičnom podjelom ličnosti tražeći pravi identitet u vlastitom odrazu u zrcalu ili u drugima. U kasnijim pjesmama lirski subjekt pronalazi svoje vlastito „ja“ pomoću svog umjetničkog glasa. Lirski subjekt Sylvijs Plath pretvara se u nesputano i autonomno žensko „ja“ koje prepoznaje rodnu nejednakost u društvu u kojem dominiraju muškarci.

Ključne riječi: Sylvia Plath, žensko lirsko „ja“, identitet, razvoj, zrcalo, dvojnik