

Pour of Tor and Distances

Sylvia Plath & Post Lacanian Theory

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Introduction

What is particular to the discourse of the Plath archive, characteristically [is the] repeated figuration of a woman buried in her manuscripts- a structure of representation that perpetually crosses corpse and corpus, the body of the woman and the body of the writing.¹

Sylvia Plath's argente canon of work continues to provoke lively debate among critics. Although many commentators consider Plath to belong to an inner circle of significant female poets, her work seems destined to have to recurrently defend itself against attacks from those who insist Plath is univocally a 'confessional' poet, whose subject matter resolves into mere 'daddy issues'.² Recent theoretical developments in women's writing, however, prompt a new examination of this poet's at times macabre, at others ebullient, literature.

An approach founded on the theoretical hypotheses of Jaques Lacan, and later elaborated by French Feminist theorists including H el ene Cixous and Julia Kristeva, has gathered both support and evidence over the past decade. These theorists' augmentation of then-orthodox Freudian and Jungian doctrines created a moiety between different aspects of psychoanalytical literary theory as far as Plath's work was concerned. Critics such as Linda Wagner and Ann Stevenson hold steadfastly to conceptions of Plath's supposed Electra

¹ Anita Helle (ed), *The Unravelling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 4.

² See the following footnote.

complex as the all-encompassing 'key' to Plath's dislocating internal 'Ariel' landscape.³ This hermeneutic, together with the wide belief that Plath's work represents 'college-girl writings',⁴ has led several commentators to label Plath a poetic 'one-trick pony'. Her work has either been relegated on this ground or else cautiously lauded – as in Robert Penn Warren's troubled synopsis of 1966. *Ariel*, he wrote then, 'is scarcely a book at all/ more like something painfully scattered through a broken window'.⁵

However, despite the reticence, and the caution of reviewers and critics, *Ariel* began to acquire a mythological status. The manuscript for *Ariel* was left on Plath's desk after her suicide, and was subsequently rumoured to be 'poised/ between a volatile emotional state and the edge of a precipice'.⁶ Through *Ariel*, Sylvia Plath's daughter Frieda Hughes explains, Plath was resurrected, and her memory venerated as 'the clay from her poetic energy was taken up and versions of my mother made out of it'.⁷ The book's reputation grew as something unique, something that spoke directly in a primal language – a broken language.⁸ In time, Plath's collection established itself as the best-selling poetry volume of the 20th Century. *The Bell Jar*, which followed shortly afterwards, became a cult volume, for which demand vastly outstripped the supply of pre-publication bootlegged copies.⁹ Both books mock their detractors through sheer scale of their sales, and by their status as seemingly unshakeable classics. Plath has achieved what many female writers before her could not do:

³ The following biographies have been criticised for focusing too narrowly on Plath's alleged Electra Complex: Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London, Viking, 1989), and Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). See Tracey Brain, 'Unstable Manuscripts' in Anita Helle, *The Unravelling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 17- 39.

⁴ Yehuda Koren & Eilat Negev, *Lover of Unreason: Assia Wevill, Sylvia Plath's Rival and Ted Hughes's Doomed Love* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), p. 67

⁵ See Robert Penn Warren, dust jacket to *Ariel* (London: Harper & Row, 1966).

⁶ Frieda Hughes's foreword in Sylvia Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (London, Faber and Faber, 2004).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Paul Mitchell's essay *Reading the Late Poems of Sylvia Plath* in *The Modern Language Review* (January 2005), for critical analysis of how Plath's language is always 'on the point of collapse'.

⁹ Janet Badia, 'The Priestess & her Cult', in *The Unravelling Archive*, p.163.

namely, to write intensely personal poems and stories that attained canonical status in a publishing industry notorious for fraternal favouritism.¹⁰ Plath had emerged posthumously as a 'Priestess'.¹¹

Post-Lacanian critics argue that understanding the 'cults of Plath',¹² as well as her loyal readership, are key to untangling the myth of Plath and the endurance of her work¹³. The emphasis on negotiation between Plath and her reader is foundational, since Plath does not explore experience – which connects only to those who share that experience, or who can imagine it – but instead writes in the language of 'milk and blood'.¹⁴ Critics such as Christina Britzolakis argue that Plath describes, stanza by stanza, the fibres from which life is comprised, and from which it can decompose.¹⁵ She writes in a language 'closer to the body',¹⁶ closer to human experience, to birth, to death, and to cognitive function.

Why study Plath's work through the prism of psychoanalysis? We know that Plath was familiar with the contours of psychoanalysis as that discipline stood in the 1950s and 1960s. She purchased *The Basic Writings of Freud* for a planned dissertation on James Joyce,¹⁷ and thus it seems fitting now to analyse her work through contemporary interpretations of psychology. As in all spheres, psychology submits to fashions, bearing the imprint, for instance, of phrenology or Freudian phallogentrism, and through Lacan's radical

¹⁰ For the burning of 'male authored classics', see Kathleen Connor's essay 'Living Colour' in *Eye Rhymes*, Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (eds), *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 126.

¹¹ 'The Priestess and her Cult', Badia discusses the origins of Plath's tag as 'The Priestess', pp. 159-81.

¹² Ibid, p. 159.

¹³ Ibid, p.162.

¹⁴ Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Toward an Understanding of L'écriture Feminine' in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London, Virago, 1986), p. 366.

¹⁵ See Christina Britzolakis, 'Conversation amongst the Ruins: Plath and De Chirico, in *Eye Rhymes*, pp. 168-82.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Aurelia Plath, *Letters Home, Correspondence 1950-1963* (New York, Harper Row, 1975), p. 106.

influence we can trace a new maturity in feminist Psychoanalysis that seems sufficiently stable and credible to deploy as a tool in analysing Plath's *oeuvre*.

Freudian theory once appeared the obvious hermeneutic for poems that declared 'Daddy, I'm through'.¹⁸ The way of paternal rejection was taken to be madness.¹⁹ However, Kristeva, Cixous et al have rejected such reductivism by claiming that Freud exploited women, and fantasized them 'as sub-castrated men'. These figures replaced theories that were seemingly invulnerable to challenge with others less androgenic. Kristeva's psychological theories, for example, have been profoundly modified by Lacan's conclusions.²⁰ Theories of chora, writing the body, mirror phase and the social contract are explored in this dissertation, and applied to Plath's poetry and prose, in an endeavour to garner a more three-dimensional, palpable portrait of the poetess and her work. Poems by Plath that Britzolakis, Connors, Bayley and others claim as visceral and somatic should resonate under theories that propose to locate the body of the woman in the work – theories that have produced 'Ecriture Feminine'. As Ann Rosalind Jones suggests: 'If women are to discover what masculine history has repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality / to write from the body is to recreate the world.'²¹ This dictum chimes with the canon of Plath's work. Susan Gubar wrote that Plath was the 'mythmaker of modern womanhood',²² who dredged the corpus of female experience to explore the pleasure/ pain polarity of being the wife, mother and daughter. Plath was the 'poster girl' of the 1950s, the 'Priestess', 'Athene' and 'Cow woman, trundling her udders home'.²³ In other words, this

¹⁸ Sylvia Plath, 'Daddy', in *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (London, Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 73.

¹⁹ See Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Feminist Reader*, pp. 197-217.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ 'Writing the Body', p. 366.

²² Susan Gubar 'The Sister Arts of Sylvia Plath' in *Eye Rhymes*, p. 222.

²³ *Eye Rhymes*, p. 187.

poet was a woman engaged in the project of attempting to emerge as something 'else' in a world that Kristeva posits as inherently phallogentric.²⁴

Plath's 'daddy issues' have been much explored and justified.²⁵ It is accepted that poems such as 'Daddy' address, unequivocally, unresolved emotional scars caused by her father's premature death.²⁶ My dissertation, however, seeks to examine Plath's alternative inspirations in a bid to present her as a more nebulous artist, one whose work is less easily or schematically defined. By mapping Plath's work onto a range of post-Lacanian theories, I wish to foreground the importance of concepts of chora, body writing and the social contract to a fuller understanding of the contours of Plath's imaginative terrain. In so doing, I explore a new wave of psychoanalytical criticism that offers intriguing apperceptions of Plath's work.²⁷ It would be reductive, as Linda Wagner-Martin has argued, to view this figure simply as 'another doomed female genius'.²⁸ In this dissertation, I address Plath's violent femality. I also investigate her relationship with her mother using post-Lacanian models of study, and equally her relationships to her children and to her sexual partners. Through analysis of Plath's particular force of expression, her extensive legacy of written material, and developments in psychoanalytical critique, I wish to present a contemporary interpretation of the priestess and her personal Pentateuch.

²⁴ 'Women's Time', pp. 197-217.

²⁵ Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* and Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath* both pay close attention to the father/ daughter dyad in relation to Plath's writings.

²⁶ 'Daddy', in *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 73.

²⁷ *The Unravelling Archive*, p. 2.

²⁸ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Company, 1984), p. 68.

Off, off, eely tentacle! Plath & her mother

Between Sylvia and me – as between my own mother and me – existed a sort of psychic osmosis which; at times was very wonderful and comforting; and at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy.²⁹

The above quotation goes some way to identifying the subject matter under scrutiny in this section. The relationship between Sylvia Plath and her mother has taken something of a critical backseat compared to that between Plath and her father, usually regarded as more significant to the poet's work.³⁰ In recent years, however, this critical orthodoxy has been challenged by those who recognise the strength of Aurelia Plath's influence on her daughter Sylvia in terms of her development both as a writer and as a woman.³¹ The changing landscape of psychoanalysis from the mid-twentieth century onwards has presented a new channel of focus, one markedly less phallogentric, inviting us to read afresh the importance of the matriarch in Sylvia Plath's life and poetics.³² In particular, the seminal insights of Jacques Lacan between 1960 and 1970 have given rise to new perspectives on

²⁹ Aurelia Plath (ed), *Letters Home, Correspondence 1950-1963* (New York: Harper Row, 1975), p. 32.

³⁰ Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006) p. 59. In summation of a literary survey within this 'companion', Gill writes with some finality that 'Plath's patricidal mourning is inextricable from a melancholic violence towards herself'.

³¹ Nephie Christodoulides, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking: Motherhood in Sylvia Plath's Work* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005). This book is an excellent example of a new wave of Plath criticism that directs new attention to the influence of the poet's mother.

³² In particular, the works of Feminist Critics such as Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar and Elaine Showalter have facilitated investigations into the importance of maternal influence. See Elaine Showalter (ed), *The New Feminist Criticism* (London: Virago, 1985) for essays on the subject.

Plath's canon of work.³³ Feminist psychoanalysts such as Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous have utilised Lacan's theories of the mirror phase and the chora to assign the mother more importance within the child's development, and also to emphasize her unique value to adult psychic health.³⁴

The mother, according to Lacanian theory, occupies a privileged position.³⁵ As the maternal object, she has the most substantial influence over the infant's psychological development. Alongside the self-explanatory 'weaning complex', the mother also involuntarily invokes the death drive – a drive that is subconsciously caused by a desire to return to the breast or the womb. The mother is also the focus of Lacan's pre-war 'devouring' theories, in which the mother is fantasized as the devoured or devourer. Anxieties and trauma deriving from the mirror phase, arise from the child's realisation that the mother is not the same entity as itself, and the subsequent establishment of 'ego', or separation.

Of most significance to this section are the theories of the chora. Greek for Receptacle, the chora describes how mother and child hold each other in permanent stricture.³⁶ The most archaic form of the chora is represented by the point just before the child acquires language, and instead exploits 'archaic semiotic modality' to express itself, such as: 'da-da'. These infantile babblings are replaced by actual language, post-mirror phase (when the child realises it is separate from the world and must use language to obtain

³³ Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *The Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997), p. 355. Here Kowaleski-Wallace summarizes how critics such as Jacqueline Rose have deployed Lacanian theory to interpret Plath.

³⁴ Julia Kristeva 'A Question of Subjectivity', in *Modern Literary Theory*, Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds.) (London: Arnold, 1992), p. 134.

³⁵ Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', in Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory* (London: Arnold, 1992), pp. 126-131.

³⁶ *Letters Home*, p. 134

autonomy). Kristeva believes that this pre-mirror phase 'babbling' is not lost, but merely repressed deep in the psyche, and subsequently yearned for, finding expression in poetic language. Such repressions and recuperations, she claims, are especially the case for women, who precisely do not find *their* voice in paternally gendered language: '[women] experience language as something that is secondary, cold, foreign in their lives'.³⁷ The significance of this is that the underlying desire for the chora, as well for archaic semiotic modality, results in something that resembles the alliterative, rhythmic babblings of small babies: poetry. As Kristeva explains: '[poetry] can be considered as the source of all stylistic effort, the modifying of the banal, logical order by linguistic distortions such as metaphor, metonymy, musicality'.³⁸

As an example of this first recuperation, we might consider an early poem, 'Dear Mother', an apostrophe addressed to Aurelia: 'In the meantime/ an abstract kith [*sic*]/³⁹ for being my mother/ instead of the mother/ of somebody else or other'.⁴⁰ In evidence here is the forcibly alliterative, childish rhythmic patter that defines Kristeva's theory. Embrace of the chora results in creativity. Alternatively, its denial can give rise to depression, anger and melancholy, 'because the foundation has been destroyed, repressed'.⁴¹

Clearly, then, the arena of mother-daughter relations is of vital importance within the scope of the present study. Plath's relationship to her father and the resultant emotional fallout of his death has been covered extensively; it is the object of this chapter to demonstrate how Sylvia Plath's development as a writer also correlates in intriguing and resonant ways to her relationship with her mother. Aurelia and Sylvia, as the quotation at

³⁷'A Question of Subjectivity', p. 134.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Plath lisps the word 'kiss' in childish enunciation.

⁴⁰'Living Color', p. 90.

⁴¹'A Question of Subjectivity', p. 134.

the head of this section suggests, enjoyed a close friendship, but one the former herself admitted, that bordered on obsessive behaviour. In one psychotic episode, Aurelia reported that Plath shrieked: 'Oh mother, the world is so rotten! I want to die, let us die together!'.⁴² Their dyad, which Plath eventually came to resent, was marked by dependence, anger and jealousy.⁴³ In order to demonstrate the final outcome of Sylvia's psychological context in regards to her mother's influence, this section begins by looking at Sylvia's early childhood.

Sylvia's father, Otto Plath, died when the poet was just nine, of complications arising from undiagnosed diabetes.⁴⁴ Plath, together with her brother Warren, two and half years her junior, were raised solely by Aurelia. Both Plath's parents had been academics. Otto was an entomologist who taught Zoology at Boston University until his death.⁴⁵ Aurelia, equally ambitious, was an associate lecturer in practical arts at Boston University until her retirement in 1971.⁴⁶ Consequently, Sylvia was encouraged from an early age to pursue her intellectual and creative gifts to their fullest extent. Her developmental schedule was conducted, according to Kathleen Connors, at 'breakneck' speed.⁴⁷ The onus, after Otto's death, was placed on Aurelia to foster Plath's interests. By the age of twelve, her routine included advanced painting courses, making decorations for school events, working on the school yearbook, joining school committees, working on a junior column in the local paper, contributing to the high school paper, piano lessons, viola lessons, joining the high school orchestra, performing in class plays, publishing poems in magazines, playing for the basketball team, joining an extracurricular art club and art lessons from an elderly

⁴² *Letters Home*, p. 124.

⁴³ Sally Bayley, 'Sylvia Plath and the Costume of Femininity', in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (ed). *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 186.

⁴⁴ Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame* (London: Viking, 1989), p. 10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ 'Obituaries' in *The New York Times* (17 March 1994)

⁴⁷ Kathleen Connors, 'Living Color', in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (ed), *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 23.

neighbour.⁴⁸ Plath, whose fragile ego⁴⁹ rested upon her now-sole parent's approval, began a pattern of over-achievement that disfigured her adult life.⁵⁰ Not only was Aurelia extremely active in encouraging her daughter to rise to the top of the class,⁵¹ but also, as part of the perfect daughter exterior, cultivated an undivided love with Sylvia.

Plath is unique in that her abundant body of written material in the form of letters, journals, stories, poems and notebooks provides an unusually comprehensive account of her relationship to her mother. Within this robust and extensive archive, however, there is a distinct scarcity of evidence pointing to Plath's direct rebellion against her mother. Of course, as Anne Stevenson points out, 'she was sitting down daily to exorcise her mother via *The Bell Jar*'.⁵² But this was adult Sylvia, the Sylvia that had been through long sessions of therapy, and a woman who elected not even to tell her mother about the existence of *The Bell Jar*, hoping to publish it undetected under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. If 'Victoria Lucas' was intimidated, the young girl 'Sivvy', found Aurelia Plath's influence to be formidable.

Plath's disposition for over-achievement resulted in frenetic outbursts of creative energy that aimed to express the inner tumult of emotion, but consecutively, the output was intended to garner praise. From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, Plath appeared to embrace what Lacan would theorize as the chora. This acceptance is demonstrable in Plath's sycophantic vying for her mother's attention in order to fulfil the role of the all-American

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Christine Britzolakis, *Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: OUP, 2005) see p. 25 for a Freudian dissection of Plath's 'fragile ego'.

⁵⁰ *Letters Home*, 1975. See the inside sleeve for commentary on the dependence of Plath on her mother's approval.

⁵¹ In a letter to her mother, Plath comments on 'your [Aurelia's] suggestion and my effort' on coming top of the class in English. 9 September 1947, (Plath Mss II/III Lilly Library, Indiana University) Correspondence, Box 1.

⁵² *Bitter Fame*, p.124.

'Sivvy' persona, and her statement that her 'umbilical cord has never been cut completely'.⁵³ Her attempts to take on an ever-lengthening list of extra-curricular activities appeared to result in the emotional nourishment that the young girl craved. However, simultaneously, Plath revealed her darkest thoughts to her diary and in her stories – a narrative of hatred towards her mother.⁵⁴

Plath was both disturbed and compelled by the maternal bonds of the chora. Resources indicate Plath's seeming refusal to move beyond the pre-mirror phase connection to the maternal object.⁵⁵ If the following extract can be taken at face value – and we should note that Plath was well-versed in psychology, and may well have been dramatically employing the vocabulary for effect – it appears to show that Plath's ego developed later than the average child's. In the following extract, she sees herself amalgamated with the world, with the maternal object and within the auto-erotic cotton wool of Lacan's *jouissance*,⁵⁶ until she was two and a half years old:

I hated babies. I, who had for two and a half years had been the centre of a tender universe felt the axis wrench & a polar chill immobilise my bones. I would be a bystander, a museum mammoth, babies! As from a star I saw, coldly and soberly, *the*

⁵³ This is an extract from an essay written by the teenage Plath, cited in 'Living Color', p. 34.

⁵⁴ Sylvia Plath, 'Tongues of Stone' in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 270. Here Plath describes a girl, who is modelled on herself, who would like to 'twist the life' out of her mother's throat.

⁵⁵ *Johnny Panic*, p. 120. This provides a salient example of Plath's maternal dependence.

⁵⁶ See chapter one 'On Jouissance' in Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love & Knowledge, 1972-1973* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999) for more information.

separateness of everything. I felt the walls of my skin. I am I. That stone is a stone.
*My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over. [My Italics]*⁵⁷

The passage concerns the birth of Warren Plath. Here, Plath seems to be either dramatising her progression through the mirror phase, or, alternatively, writing a genuine childhood memoir. The mirror phase, which signals the end of the ‘beautiful fusion with the things of this world’, usually occurs between the ages of six and eighteen months.⁵⁸ Plath’s journal entry offers us an insight into the intensity of her trauma at the idea of separation from her mother. Her desperation to remain ‘mummy’s girl’, coupled trenchantly with the loss of her father, provoked a severe reaction in which she outwardly embraced Aurelia’s punishing ‘pushy parenting’ in a bid to hold onto the chora, revealing only to her diaries the hatred that her mother inspired. Later, when Sylvia found her voice, she would bitterly avenge herself. For now, though, she was all-American Sivvy, with bouncy blonde bangs and a toothy smile.

Plath’s obsequiousness is evident in her letters to her mother (published and edited by her mother); they reveal unabashedly and disquietingly her need to please:

I only hope I can continue to lay more laurels at your feet. Warren and I both love you and admire you more than anybody else in the world for all you have done for

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ ‘The Mirror Stage of the Function of the I’, pp. 126-131.

us all our lives. For it is you, who has given us the heredity and incentive to be mentally ambitious. Thank you a million times.⁵⁹

Equally, Plath was beginning to comprehend the poisoned chalice of the stricture between herself and her mother. The image of obedience, purity, femininity and scholarly ambition that she insisted on maintaining had begun to take its toll. In the same year that she wrote the letter from which the above extract was taken, she also wrote a poem 'White Girl between Yellow Curtains'.⁶⁰ The final line of the first two stanzas consists of the repeated line: 'a white girl is making her white bed'. This is the final stanza:

Snow fall, and the snow will stay
while the pale diminuendo
from the black square of the window
the violet twilight shortens
til the white girl goes to her white bed,
and the cold white grave is tenanted.⁶¹

Plath's character experiences the fruits of her labour as the destruction of herself. The white bed her narrator had twice alluded to making, eventually becomes a grave to sleep in, flanked by the growing darkness. The emphasis on whiteness taps into an entire metaphorical range of purity and middle class breeding – one that the narrator embraces in

⁵⁹ *Letters Home*, p. 94.

⁶⁰ 'Living Color', p. 91. Also, see the appendix for a full transcript of the poem.

⁶¹ *Ibid*

the knowledge that it is the destruction of her Self that is at stake. The bed, that which provides a space of comfort, safety and of calm (with its metaphorical link to the womb), becomes the coffin. Was this an example of Plath's growing unease with the terms of her own maternal relationship, the expense to remain loved too high?

Christina Britzolakis believes so. Her essay 'Conversations Amongst the Ruins' explores Plath's 'loss of primal oneness with the maternal object'. The subsequent emotional fallout resulted in over 400 poems written and discarded (including the above lines) during her university years.⁶² These poems, Britzolakis claims, 'uncover a treacherously double legacy within the seemingly cozy paraphernalia of a suburban girlhood'.⁶³

Despite Plath's apparent resistance to Aurelia's conditioning, she lived in an almost permanent flux between self denial and mother-pleasing behaviour.⁶⁴ In a revealing interview with Peter Orr in 1962, just four months prior to her death, Plath can be heard speaking in the enforced enunciation of 'the all-American east coast girl'.⁶⁵ However, internally, since her teen years, Plath had been waging a war against the limits of her existence – one propped up by Aurelia Plath as the prototype of womanhood.⁶⁶ Plath, externally, seemed unable to leave the nest of her mother's making, and impeccably conserved the appearance of the archetypal 'gal' that would meet Aurelia's approval.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Christina Britzolakis, 'Conversations Amongst the Ruins: Plath & De Chirico in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (eds.) *Eye Rhymes* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 176.

⁶⁴ 'Letters Home', p. 498. Just eight days before her suicide, she wrote to Aurelia, and talked of mittens, her new au pair being 'boy ga-ga', her 'beautiful country house, the car' and how wonderful London was. She didn't voice the desperation that her friends described of her at the time.

⁶⁵ Kate Moses, 'Sylvia Plath Voice Annotated in Anita Helle (ed), *The Unravelling Archive* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2007), p. 94. Here, Moses describes Plath's voice in the interviews as cultivated, 'the fastidious way she pronounces "po-eh-trayh" and "Vat-ee-CAN" ...'.

⁶⁶ Sally Bayley, 'Sylvia Plath and the Costume of Femininity' in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (eds.) *Eye Rhymes* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 187.

It is well documented that Plath experienced during her teen years a growing awareness of the limits of female experience in her own culture.⁶⁷ Within Lacanian terms, some of Plath's written recordings could be read as an expression of a rejection of the social contract⁶⁸ – that for which she sacrificed her initial primacy with her mother to exist inside. As a teenager, Plath took down one of her mother's college books and underlined an entire section beginning:

Once both sexes use their reason equally, or have no unequal penalty awaiting the exercise of their emotions, then women cannot fail to dominate. Theirs is the stronger sex once nature and art cease their cruel combination against them.⁶⁹

Plath appears to be questioning the social contract, the symbolic order.⁷⁰ Aurelia, who in Plath's perception cultivated both ambition and yet also the traditional colophons of femininity, became a significant cite of tension in the context of the poet's struggle for autonomy and also approval.⁷¹

Appropriately, Plath's range of 'Sivvy' behaviour reads like a list of daily activities from the middle class white publication 'Ladies Home Journal' – Plath's teenage reading material.⁷² However, the baking, sewing, drawing and reading that comprised Plath's teenage exercises were infused with a rebel strain of what could best be described as proto-

⁶⁷'Sylvia Plath and the Costume of Femininity', Here, Bayley describes how Plath began working against the domesticated image of 'the cow people trundling their udders home'.

⁶⁸ See Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time' in Catherine Belsey & Jane Moore (eds.) *The Feminist Reader* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 197- 217. for a description of the social contract.

⁶⁹*Letters Home*, p. 32.

⁷⁰'Women's Time', pp. 197-217.

⁷¹*Letters Home*, p. 13. Here Plath discusses how she felt that the man should rightfully dominate the home.

⁷² Marsha Bryant, 'Ariel's Kitchen' in Anita Helle (ed), *The Unravelling Archive* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2007), p. 211.

feminism. In a painting by the sixteen-year-old, 'Nine Female Figures', Susan Gubar and Kathleen Connors agree that Plath expresses her belief in the claustrophobic redundancy of prescribed femininity.⁷³ 'Nine Female Figures' reveals a modernist approach to portraiture—the nine figures are drawn in minimal, simplistic lines, and are filled in with frames of colour and basic patterns, typical of African or Aboriginal art. Each figure overlaps the space of each other in a rigidly geometric way. Connors describes the figures as 'merged into static two-dimensional boxes that prevent them from breaking out/ vacant eyes and sexual function/ limbless/ propped in rows, their postures are defensive and vulnerable'.⁷⁴ Clearly, Connors is alluding to Plath's ulterior political motives within the gentility of her art class. Saliently, Connors goes on to say that:

This painting gives clear expression of the troubling midcentury cultural conditions Plath had been addressing in all forms of texts. The double standards for men and women's sexuality, the mid-numbing restrictions of the traditional 1950s housewife, and the frustrations of inhabiting a woman's body were some of Plath's most notable complaints of late adolescence.⁷⁵

In maturity, this aggression towards implied roles and towards what Plath considered the farcical notion of the social contract would find voice in poems such as 'The Applicant'.⁷⁶ 'The Applicant' employs the forceful, cheery vernacular and rhythm of a 1950s

⁷³ For a detailed argument on the subject see Susan Gubar, 'The Sister Arts of Sylvia Plath', and Kathleen Connors, 'Living Colour: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath', both in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (eds.), *Eye Rhymes* (Oxford: Oxford OUP, 2007).

⁷⁴ Kathleen Connors, 'Visual Art in the Life of Sylvia Plath' in Anita Helle (ed), *The Unravelling Archive* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2007), p. 72.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Sylvia Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 11

advertisement,⁷⁷ and yet addresses Plath's purchase of female commodity. Plath's sinister Stepford wife to be at the centre of the poem remains silent in response to a barrage of questions that investigate her wholesomeness. The relentless inconsistency between one line and the next, i.e. 'We make new stock from the salt. I notice you are stark naked'⁷⁸ helps to enforce the sense of ordained social encoding- a system that demands much, and confuses the subject. The narrator crystalises the dictation of multi-purpose functionality of the female body, but also laments the curbed experience with the damning line: 'It can sew, it can cook, It can talk, talk, talk'.⁷⁹ The poem 'performs' the rape of a female response to the world, showing that there is simply no room for a response in stanzas that relentlessly demand: 'Do you wear/ A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch/ A brace or a hook/ rubber breasts or a rubber crotch, stitches to show something's missing?'⁸⁰ Plath's dogged interrogation highlights the incompleteness of the 'The Applicant'. Marsha Bryant describes how Plath reinforces this by mapping the lexis onto the structure of the poem – 'by ending each of these opening stanzas with a sentence that enjambes the next stanza', for example:

It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Again see Marsha Bryant's novel *Ariel's Kitchen* (2007) for Plath's use of the domestic sales pitch in her poetry.

⁷⁸ *Ariel*, p. 11.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*

⁸⁰ *Ibid*

⁸¹ *Ibid*

The only stanza that is 'intact' is the final stanza, which ends with: 'Will you marry it, marry it, marry it'.⁸² The line suggests that completeness lies in the embrace of the symbolic order. Plath's machine woman grows more accustomed to her role with each passing year: 'in twenty five years she'll be silver/ In fifty, gold'.⁸³ The female subject gradually loses any vestiges of identity, and eventually becomes the sinister 'living doll'. For Plath, such numbness was not an option. She fought against inherent catechising of modes of living: 'whoah', Plath wrote to herself in her diary in 1957 – 'you will escape into domesticity by falling headfirst into a bowl of cookie batter.'⁸⁴

Even so, in adulthood, the supplanted influence of Aurelia – separated from her daughter by an ocean – and her encouragements for Plath to be the obedient, submissive 'Sivvy', inflicted its dominance on the way the poet conducted her life. Throughout *Letters Home*, Plath maintains a cheery, 'dutiful daughter' front, appearing chatty, and even juvenile. Jess Wynne synopsis the book as clarification of 'Plath's overwhelming desire to reach perfection for her mother's sake – and the resulting resentment when she failed.'⁸⁵ Into adulthood, this was to provoke an unusual split in Plath's written work- Plath and her mirror self.⁸⁶ In her diary, Plath pleaded 'What inner decision, what murder or prison break must I commit if I want to speak in my own true deep voice in writing ... and not feel a jam up of feeling behind a glass dam.'⁸⁷ The 'prison break', it has been acknowledged by successive critics, was the eventual release of the tide of anger and resentment that found voice in *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar*.

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Tracy Brain, 'Unstable Manuscripts: The Indeterminacy of the Plath Canon' in Anite Helle (ed), *The Unravelling Archive* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2007), p. 11.

⁸⁵ Jesse Wynne, 'The Agony and the Ecstasy- a Review of Letters home' at <http://www.hackwriters.com/SylviaPlathreview.htm> (2001). [Date of Access: 12 July 2009]

⁸⁶ *Bitter Fame*, p. 291.

⁸⁷ *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 297.

These 'two faces of Plath'⁸⁸ coexisted within the body of the woman, her darker self finding refuge and expression in poems such as the 400 discarded in shame through her college years.⁸⁹ Her duplicity manifested itself as an essential barrier against the caustic internalised feelings of disapproval she anticipated from her mother. The binding between her mother and herself became choking, so much so that her husband Ted Hughes even commented on it in his poem 'Ouija'.⁹⁰ He wrote 'Your association of ambition/ To please you and your mother,/ To fulfil your mother's ambition'. Later, in 'Blood and Innocence' he accused Plath of being 'Matricidal'.⁹¹

Plath's inner screaming slowly built towards a crescendo. However, until *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar*, this desperation expressed itself primarily as a disturbing closeness with the aggressor. In her book *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, Nephie Christodoulides dissects one of Plath's most disturbing lines: 'Mother, you are the one mouth/ that I would be tongue to/ Mother of otherness/ eat me'.⁹² Christodoulides points to Kristevan theory on 'all mouth' – a manifestation of unsatisfied infant hunger. This recalls Lacan's devouring theories, briefly discussed earlier in this section; in which the subject fears being devoured by the maternal object or devouring the maternal object. Kristeva posits that to avoid the fear of either of these extremes, the subject wishes for 'incorporation'.⁹³ Therefore, Plath here, according to Christodoulides, is attempting to sidestep the fear of maternal domination in an attempt to regress to being 'whole' with the mother, to be the tongue in the mouth, or the mouth at the breast – an inclusion in the maternal body. This line also

⁸⁸ 'Living Color', p. 37.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 91.

⁹⁰ Ted Hughes, 'Ouija', in *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), p. 53.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 168.

⁹² Sylvia Plath, 'Poem for a Birthday', in *The Colossus* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p. 80.

⁹³ Nephie Christodoulides, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking: Motherhood in Sylvia Plath's Work* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005) p. 209.

carries with it the connotation of wanting to be the 'speaker' for that person, a point with which Wynne concurs. She has described how in the play version of *Birthday letters* (with 'Aurelia' on one side of the stage, America, and 'Sylvia' on the other, England), Sylvia writes her mother a letter about a dance she had attended.⁹⁴ Mother and daughter cross the stage to each other and join arms to dance around the stage, demonstrating Aurelia vicariously living through her daughter's experiences.

On some level, Plath had been long aware of the suffocation of so close a relationship, and of so much expectation being placed upon her shoulders. At seventeen, Plath confided in her journal that she had become too 'thoroughly conditioned',⁹⁵ and toyed with the idea of rejection of this conditioning, claiming that she 'deplore[d] constrictions and limitations.'⁹⁶ Just over a decade later, when Plath was twenty-eight, consumed with anger, partially towards the oppressive relationship with her mother, the poet's 'voice', had become 'chilled, sneering, relentless'; a voice had arrived from within.⁹⁷

Women, according to Stevens,⁹⁸ were the first victims of this new seam of vitriol exploited by Plath. Poems such as 'Medusa', 'Lesbos', 'The Tour' and 'Eavesdropper' all addressed the complex jealousies, rivalries, and intense relationships between women. Stevens points to Sylvia's successful visits to a psychologist's chair as the catalyst behind the emergence of this more acerbic and wrathful poet.⁹⁹ Stevens details the events of Wednesday 10 December 1959 – Plath on a visit to her therapist, had experienced a dramatic psychological shift upon the utterance of Dr Beuscher's words: 'I give you

⁹⁴ 'The Agony and the Ecstasy'.

⁹⁵ *Letters Home*, p. 40.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p.70. Plath writes, 'Dick has a queer idea that daughter's grow up to be like their mothers. I am an awkward hybrid'.

⁹⁷ 'Sylvia Plath's Voice Annotated', p. 107.

⁹⁸ *Bitter Fame*, p. 208.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 44.

permission to hate your mother'.¹⁰⁰ This, according to Stevens, 'went home like a shot of brandy/ It was like being a prisoner released from an invisible prison/ like being taught to breathe with two lungs instead of one, like being able to use a hitherto dark side of her brain'. Consequently, the year before her death, emancipated from the guilt of disliking being in a 'smarmy matriarchy of togetherness',¹⁰¹ Sylvia composed 'Medusa', a furious, fierce poem 'hurled across the Atlantic' towards Aurelia.¹⁰²

The title of the poem itself was an acute attack, conceived for absolute surety on the part of her mother, who knew exactly for whom the poem was meant. Medusa is an interchangeable name for a breed of Jellyfish also known as Aurela. The phonological similarity was too great for Aurelia to ignore.¹⁰³ Aurelia herself joked to Plath that Aurelia meant 'Golden' or 'Jellyfish'.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, the original title of the poem was 'Mum: Medusa'. Additionally, semiotic motifs of motherhood are abundant within the poem—sucking, placentas, umbilical cords, and so on help to reinforce the archaic subject matter at hand.

Stevens, espousing a Freudian Electra Complex view of Plath; eschews Post-Lacanian speculation on 'Medusa', claiming that this poem demonstrates that 'Electra's rival for daddy was her own mother'.¹⁰⁵ Plath's journal entry on the 19 February 1955 would seem to support this theory in that, 'there is no loyalty, even between mother and daughter. Both fight for the father...'.¹⁰⁶ However, this was written at least five years prior to Plath's composing 'Medusa'; can this really be counted as substantial evidence? In opposition,

¹⁰⁰ *Bitter Fame*, p. 144.

¹⁰¹ Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962* (New York, Anchor, 1982) p. 429.

¹⁰² *Bitter Fame*, p. 267.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p. 266.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 267.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 71.

Lacanian theorists, including Christodoulides and Kristeva, have read 'Medusa' as an attack on the maternal object, a poem that has little to do with the father figure. In opposition to the Freudian school, they regard the attack as stemming from Plath's inability to leave the sanctity of the chora, and the ensuing psychological suffocation. We can see through their reading a troubled Plath attempting to emancipate herself. The first stanza portrays Medusa's 'Ears cupping the sea's incoherences', which could be interpreted as a blocking action against the sound of the sea, or as the Medusa observing critically the faults in the rhythms of the sea. Both are relevant as Plath felt that the domain of the sea belonged to her,¹⁰⁷ and by presenting the monster as either ignoring it or criticising it, represents a severely imbalanced dyad between mother and daughter.

Christodoulides views this as a struggle to break away from the maternal object – a position that is supported by Kristeva, who regards the poem as 'a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back'.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, stanza by stanza, we observe the oscillation of the narrator's independence, as she alternately 'keels' over before coolly wondering from a distance whether she has escaped. Perpetually, the cables and tentacles threaten to drag her back. The struggle is perpetuated by the narrator's physical dependence on the creature. Once free she becomes:

Dead and moneyless,

Overexposed like an X Ray¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ For Plath's thoughts on her psychic connection to the sea, see 'Ocean 1212' in *Johnny Panic*, pp. 117-126.

¹⁰⁸ *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, p. 225.

¹⁰⁹ *Ariel*, p. 59.

Akin to the doomed person released from the fairy ring, Plath's narrator is stripped of everything in the absence of the 'Fat red placenta'¹¹⁰ that nourishes and protects the infantilised adult. Christodoulides adds 'Medusa has demolished the wall that separates her daughter from the rest of the world, and has rendered her separateness impossible and now attempts to absorb her.'¹¹¹ In defiance, the narrator spits out 'I shall take no bite of your body'¹¹² in a stanza loaded with heavy alliterative glottals for emphasis. In renouncing the body of the mother, the daughter hopes to claim independence from the chora. She hopes to escape the 'bottle in which I live',¹¹³ but yet is simultaneously 'attacking the baby who longs to remain in the hot salt of the womb.'¹¹⁴

It has been argued by Freudian analysts such as Stevens and Wagner Martin – as well as Lacanian analysts Kristeva and Christodoulides – that Plath's maternal relationship was significantly unhealthy, an unwanted inspiration for many of the poet's greatest works, including 'Medusa'. Whether she was angry at her mother for not being her father, or for separating her from her father has been extensively scrutinised. The object of this section has not been to explore this well trodden ground, but to demonstrate that the expanse of evidence to support Lacanian/ Kristevan analysis of Plath's canon can indeed be justified. The works described in this section are plangent with echoes of a detrimental and smothering chora and a rigid and uncompromising attachment to the maternal object. Plath's discontinuous vacillation between embracing and rejecting the social order can be

¹¹⁰ *Ariel*, p. 59.

¹¹¹ *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, p. 225.

¹¹² *Ariel*, p. 59.

¹¹³ *Ibid*

¹¹⁴ *Bitter Fame*, p. 267.

seen to be tied to the bonds of maternal influence – and to her deep need to be a good little girl adhering to the social norms.

On 21 March 2009, as part of its 'Digested Classics' section, *The Guardian* published an abbreviated version of *The Bell Jar*.¹¹⁵ The novel is reduced to one page, as John Crace condenses the text's key points and meshes them with salient 'truisms' about the life of Plath, producing a darkly humorous 'reading' of the cult classic. Near the end of the page, Crace writes:

The bell jar was still stifling me as I was shunted from Dr Pancreas to Dr Syphilis. I then found myself speaking to a kind and beautiful psychiatrist, Dr Nolan. "I hate my mother," I said, for the first and last time showing any insight or interest in my condition.

Aurelia Plath told the press she realised that she was perceived as an 'Ogre' by the literary world.¹¹⁶ It is demonstrable, within the scope of this section, that she did not intend to harm Plath's psychological health. Indeed, Plath's difficult relationship with her mother appears to have been symptomatic of much else: the mantle of single parenthood, perhaps over-zealously pursued, Plath's inherent ambition supported by an equally ambitious parent. Perhaps the pair were simply 'too close' for Plath to emerge fully as an adult. At any rate, Aurelia Plath's influence on her iconic daughter deserves to be analysed as closely as that of Ted Hughes, or indeed Otto Plath.

¹¹⁵ John Crace, 'The Bell Jar', in 'Digested Classics', *The Guardian*, 21 March 2009.

¹¹⁶ 'Obituaries', *The New York Times* (17 March 1994).

Red Earth, Motherly Blood: Plath's Children

This section inverts the focus of the previous study to look now at Sylvia Plath and motherhood. Plath's poetic imagination derives a great deal of force from confronting issues of maternity, fertility and sterility; but despite the inclusion (or intended inclusion¹¹⁷) of some of this group of poems in *Ariel*, they have not elicited as much academic interest as more canonical works such as 'Daddy' or 'Medusa'.¹¹⁸ The following sections seek to identify new scope for feminist and psychoanalytical investigation within maternally oriented poems such as 'Barren Woman', 'Morning Song' and 'Thalidomide'.

In the previous section, we examined the Kristevan reworkings of Lacanian concepts of the mirror phase and chora.¹¹⁹ Kristeva's work inspired a generation of deminist critics, and her feminocentric modification of Lacan's theories led to her central status among foundational theorists, placing her alongside Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig and Ann Rosalind-Jones, figures who identified and promoted '*L'Écriture Feminine*'.¹²⁰ This phrase translates literally as 'women's gendered writings',¹²¹ and propounds the idea of an alternative to paternally dominated systems of language. Conceptually, Cixous argues, women's language is cyclical, non-linear and emotionally funded. In order to break from a 'discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system', Cixous insists, a woman must 'write [her]self. Your body must make itself heard/ To write [is] the act that will 'realise' the un-

¹¹⁷ Sylvia Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007). See p. xii of Frieda Hughes's introduction for details of omitted poems.

¹¹⁸ Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (London: Associated University Presses, 2002), p. 167. Peel notes that poems such as 'Thalidomide', have still 'not received a great deal of critical attention'.

¹¹⁹ For more on this subject, see Julia Kristeva, 'A Question of Subjectivity', in *Modern Literary Theory*, ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Arnold, 1992).

¹²⁰ For a detailed essay on the formation of theories of 'Writing the Body', see Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body: Towards an Understanding of *L'Écriture Feminine*', in Elaine Showalter (ed), *The New Feminist Criticism* (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 361- 77.

¹²¹ The term was first used in Helene Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975).

censored relationship of a woman to her sexuality'.¹²² Due to the form of such writings, *L'écriture Feminine* is often also referred to as 'Writing the Body', and is frequently envisaged as 'writing with milk and blood'.¹²³ Such theories are particularly salient for an artist so closely identified with her own idiosyncratic bloodjet aesthetic – an aesthetic that has been described as a 'language so full of blood and brain that it seems to burst and splatter the reader with the plasma of life'.¹²⁴

We might expect that the birth/ maternity/ fertility-centric poems that describe the functions of the body will demonstrate most decisively Plath's penchant for writing from the body – wittingly or otherwise. This section sets out to explore Plath's views – and equally importantly, feelings – on motherhood, questions how this issue influenced her work. By utilising the ambit of *L'écriture Feminine*, it is my hope that the influence of body and its functions on Plath's poetry will become clearer.

Documentary evidence suggests that Plath was far from reticent in her attitude towards marriage and babies; from her early womanhood, she appears to have taken a genuine interest in children and child rearing.¹²⁵ Those around her noted an evident desire for children of her own. Her mother commented in her journal that while she and Sylvia had visited a friend with a newborn, Sylvia 'opened the curled hand and stretched out the exquisitely finished little fingers/ There was such a warmth, such yearning in Sivvy's face, my

¹²² Helene Cixous, 'Sorties: Out & Out: Attacks/ Ways Out/ Forays', in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (eds) *The Feminist Reader* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989), p. 117.

¹²³ 'Writing the Body', pp. 361-77.

¹²⁴ Anon, 'Russian Roulette', in *Newsweek*, June 20th, 1966, p. 110; cited in Anita Helle, *The Unravelling Archive* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 169.

¹²⁵ Aurelia Plath (ed), *Letters Home, Correspondence 1950-1963* (New York: Harper Row, 1975). Several of Plath's letters address Plath's desire for marriage and children, such as her correspondence of 20 June 1951 on page 71, where Plath writes about children of an acquaintance: 'Do I ignore their fights? Do I try to break them up? How do you inspire kids with awe and respect? By being decisive? By being ominously quiet?'

heart ached for her.¹²⁶ Sylvia seemed to look forward to motherhood, and certainly, Robin Peel believes, motherhood benefited rather than retarded Plath's poetry.¹²⁷ Peel suggests that her final month of pregnancy provided a burst of mental energy that provoked 'New Year on Dartmoor', 'Fever 108' and 'Walking in Winter', among other poems.¹²⁸ Kate Moses even claims that *Ariel* could be read in its entirety as ensorcelled by a daemon of 'fertility and flowering and redemption'¹²⁹ – the book functioning as a paean to reproduction and nature.

Parenthetically, *Ariel* opens with an aubade, 'Morning Song'.¹³⁰ This narrative monologue comprises six stanzas, and follows a tradition of poetry narrating the relationship between mother and child, a la Joanna Baillie's 'A Mother to a Waking Infant'.¹³¹ 'Morning Song' was composed when Frieda Hughes, Plath's first child, was eight months old and records the intimate moments between mother and child as the child wakes in the middle of the night.¹³² Superficially, the poem depicts parental awe in the presence of a newborn: 'We stand around as blankly as walls'. However, critics such as Tara Whitton and Marjorie Perloff sense the narrator's anxieties regarding her own mortality, and argue that the poem also addresses the unstoppable instruments of nature that create and destroy simultaneously.¹³³ In conclusion, Perloff writes, 'one might note, in the first place, that the

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 348.

¹²⁷ 'Writing Back', p. 124.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 124.

¹²⁹ Kate Moses, 'Sylvia Plath Voice Annotated in Anita Helle (ed), *The Unravelling Archive*, p. 100.

¹³⁰ *Ariel*, p. 5.

¹³¹ Joanna Baillie, 'A Mother to her Waking Infant', in W.R Owens and Hamish Johnson (eds.), *Romantic Writings: An Anthology* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2006), p. 54.

¹³² 'Living Color', p. 141.

¹³³ See Tasha Whitton, *Sylvia Plath: A Search for Self* (2007), available at: <http://www.womenwriters.net/editorials/whitton0500.htm> [last accessed on 24/11/2008]

poem turns the aubade convention inside out: the speaker's dawn is not one of love or joy but one of dimly felt anxiety – motherhood both frightens and fascinates her.¹³⁴

This 'dimly felt anxiety' is deducible in the apparent fading of the mother character juxtaposed with the increasingly vivid and noisy child. The mother's voice 'echoes',¹³⁵ she becomes 'blank',¹³⁶ a reflection of a cloud; she becomes a museum – a container of death and outmoded objects; and finally, she loses autonomy in favour of the child's demands: 'One cry, and I stumble from bed'.¹³⁷ The child 'shadows'¹³⁸ its smaller parents, the mouth, a budding rose 'opens clean as a cat's'¹³⁹ – a predatory animal. Consecutively, as the child opens its mouth to feed, the window, becoming assimilated with the child and developing a mouth of its own, 'swallows its dull stars',¹⁴⁰ bringing about an apocalyptic vision. In view of this, the last three lines acquire a sinister hue:

And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.¹⁴¹

The child, on swallowing the world, develops its own clear voice, a war cry, in contradistinction to its mother's echoing, dwindling voice. It represents a notification of its succession above its parents. Kate Moses' hypotheses concur, arguing that in the poem's

¹³⁴ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1984), p. 117.

¹³⁵ *Ariel*, p. 5.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*

¹³⁷ *Ibid*

¹³⁸ *Ibid*

¹³⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*

‘culminating lines ... Plath’s narrator becomes completely and willingly “effaced,” allowing her child full ownership’.¹⁴² This sentiment is reproduced in other poems such as ‘Brasilia’,¹⁴³ in which Plath’s narrator becomes ‘nearly extinct’¹⁴⁴ in opposition to her baby, which cuts its teeth against the world. In support, Whitton believes that ‘Morning Song’ addresses the imbalance and loss of identity in the wake of the child’s delivery.¹⁴⁵ She suggests that ‘Morning Song’ narrates the ‘re-establishment of self following the birth’ of the child,¹⁴⁶ and sees the child as a mechanism set in motion ‘like a fat gold watch’. The ‘fat’ and ‘gold’ signify the quality of an unbreakable and therefore unstoppable watch. By extension, Whitton posits, the mother’s body must also serve as an apparatus, one that industrially produces such mechanisms. Within this context, we can see that Plath’s poetic speaker is concerned not with the emotional processes of being a mother, but of the mechanical processes of the body and mind. The production and output akin to a factory line that ingests matter at one end, only to assemble the pieces into an independent working object at the other. The metaphor of the body as a machine serves to bisect emotion from the scene, and instead references the baby as an unfeeling parasite that exists to succeed the host body, once it has grown strong and sufficiently raptorial. Alongside representing an expression of how the woman might relate to the strange being that grew inside her body, and emerged from it, this reading also addresses the devouring theories introduced in section one. David Holbrook draws attention to the ‘ambiguity in Plath’s mind between birth and death’, and argues that through her maternal poems, such

¹⁴² ‘Sylvia Plath’s Voice Annotated’, p. 112.

¹⁴³ Sylvia Plath, ‘Brasilia’ in *Winter Trees* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 13.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid

¹⁴⁵ ‘A Search for Self’

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

as 'Morning Song', she identifies herself with Mother Earth, who both devours and is devoured.¹⁴⁷

With a view to Hollbrook's theory, in one of her Cambridge journals Plath discusses her desire to become impregnated by her first love, Richard Sassoon.¹⁴⁸ She notes her fear of being devoured by her psychological ill-health which she felt could manifest itself as a separate living entity growing within her womb:

And it is his child I could want. To bear, to having growing (sic). The only one whom I could stand to have a child with. *Yet. I have a fear, too, of bearing a deformed child, a cretin, growing dark and ugly in my belly, like that old corruption I always feared would break out from behind the bubble of my eyes.* I imagine Richard here, being with me, and my growing big with his child. I ask for less and less/ I will believe in you and make you invincible on this earth. Yes, I have that power. [My italics]¹⁴⁹

In the above quotation, Plath not only expresses her ingrained phobia of giving birth to a deformed child, but also, that this 'child' would become invested entirely with her depression and psychological disorder,¹⁵⁰ becoming a merciless instrument like the 'fat gold watch' that would taunt and devour her. Synchronically, Plath appears to confirm Hollbrook's theory, becoming almost omniscient in her power to make Richard Sassoon 'invincible on this earth' because she has 'that power' – the power being that she, just like

¹⁴⁷ David Hollbrook, *Plath, Poetry and Existence* (London: Athlone Press, 1988), p. 123.

¹⁴⁸ Plath, 'Cambridge Notes (February 1956)', in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 210.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Mother Nature, can reproduce and control nature, and specifically the birth and death cycles.

Clearly, there is a weight of psychoanalytical evidence to support theories of Plath's writing of the body, particularly with regard to the speaker's concerns about bodily production and destruction. Alongside this, we should note, persuasive arguments have emerged from more socio-cultural perspectives. Susan Connors, for example, writes that Plath feared not the psychological ingestion of her offspring, but simply that 'children might sap her creative energy'.¹⁵¹ 'I've felt lazier and lazier and more cowlike',¹⁵² Plath wrote to her mother in 1962 while heavily pregnant (and overdue) with Nicholas, her second child: 'before Frieda came, I was like this; quite cowlike and interested suddenly in sappy women's magazines and cooking and sewing.'¹⁵³

The horror of 'Thalidomide',¹⁵⁴ Susan Van Dyne suggests, derives from Plath's angst with regard to the sacrifice of writing in order to be mother: 'Your dark/ Amputations crawl and appal/ What leatheriness/ Has protected/ Me from that shadow/ The lopped/ Blood-caul of absences./All night I carpenter/ A space for the thing I am given'.¹⁵⁵ Within Plath's vague lexis, the amputee could also amputate and create absence (of creativity, within the scope of Van Dyne's theory). Plath, then, deliberately creates an ambiguity to leave the reader wondering what the narrator is attempting to 'carpenter'¹⁵⁶ by night. The metonymical links of cutting and sawing to carpentry, compliment Van Dyne's hypotheses that the reader is attempting to carve a space for herself away from the inescapable

¹⁵¹ Kathleen Connors, 'Visual Art in the Life of Sylvia Plath' in Anita Helle (ed), *The Unravelling Archive* (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 2007), p.72.

¹⁵² *Letters Home*, p. 441.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 439.

¹⁵⁴ *Winter Trees*, p. 31.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*

clutches of her terrible offspring. The situation becomes ‘the potential conflict that exists for the professional woman writer between the production of children and the production of language’.¹⁵⁷ Peel agrees, referring to the section of *The Bell Jar* wherein Esther Greenwood compares life to a fig tree: by choosing to pick certain fruits from the tree, you relinquish others to die and rot on the branches.¹⁵⁸

This argument is convincing, but it remains to be answered precisely why Plath should have chosen such a difficult subject to present her dilemma. Plath’s discourse of ‘blood and brains’ seems to have responded in a fervent manner to newspaper reports on the drug that caused deformities in unborn babies. Not usually known for writing ‘headline’ poetry, Plath’s fascination with the workings of the body was evidently piqued by the scandal.¹⁵⁹ This particular sphere of corporeal cruelty seems to have captivated Plath. Of the maternal/ fertility poems in *Ariel* (and those from *Winter Trees* originally intended for *Ariel*, but cut by Ted Hughes),¹⁶⁰ roughly half are concerned with malfunctions of the body, or more specifically of the reproductive organs.¹⁶¹ ‘Thalidomide’, ‘Barren Woman’, ‘Childless Woman’ and ‘Three Women’ return to motifs of physical dysfunction within the female body. Different kinds of evidence suggest that Plath was manifestly writing her own body in an attempt to vocalise her fears of infertility. Ann Stevenson writes that the summer of 1959 was marred by Plath’s realisation that her body had ceased to ovulate: ‘How can I keep Ted wedded to a barren woman?’ Plath wrote in her diary.¹⁶² Stevenson claims that for Plath

¹⁵⁷ *Writing Back*, p. 167.

¹⁵⁸ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 51.

¹⁵⁹ *Writing Back*, p. 168.

¹⁶⁰ *Ariel*; see introduction.

¹⁶¹ *Writing Back*, p. 169. Here Peel addresses Plath’s obsession with the body: ‘the daily reality of the body sometimes seemed to trouble Plath’. He supports this statement with an underlined passage from Plath’s copy of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*: ‘the putting on of clothes, the getting of children, the sordidity of the mouth and belly’.

¹⁶² Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame* (London: Viking, 1989), p. 158.

during this time, 'everything suddenly had "gone barren"'. Christine Britzolakis considers Plath's intrigue concerning the subject of infertility by way of the poet's meditation on Giorgio De Chirico's painting 'The Disquieting Muses',¹⁶³ as well as her gravitation towards one of the figures in the painting, whose 'arms frame a bulging stomach hollowed out by a shadowed void'.¹⁶⁴ Plath's poem of the same name lists voyeuristically the disembowelled figure's inhumane attributes: 'the mouthless/ eyeless/ stitched bald head'.¹⁶⁵ To Plath, the inability to carry children seemed to be the ultimate failing suffered by a woman, and she reduced the figure to a blind, dumb figure accordingly. Happily, Plath's own brush with 'barrenness' did not last very long. Shortly after the drama of the doctor's diagnosis, she fell pregnant with Frieda; however, the experience left emotional scars, as well as an impact on her work.¹⁶⁶ The subject of 'Childless Woman',¹⁶⁷ for example, seems desperate to affirm the author's fertility to the reader: she offers 'nothing but blood/ Taste it, dark red!'¹⁶⁸ This kind of unmistakable body writing¹⁶⁹ seeks to display female experience in all its rawness. The invocation of such a taboo serves to display the anguish that prompts her to offer her 'red earth/ Motherly blood'¹⁷⁰ to her reader in such an ostensibly undignified way.

Conversely, Plath's joy in producing children was evident, and the effect on her sense of wellbeing was considerable. After the birth of her first child she wrote: 'I think having babies is one of the happiest experiences of my life. I would like to go on and on!'

¹⁶³ Christina Britzolakis, 'Conversations Amongst the Ruins: Plath & De Chirico', in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (eds.), *Eye Rhymes* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 176.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

¹⁶⁵ Ibid

¹⁶⁶ *Bitter Fame*, p. 158.

¹⁶⁷ *Winter Trees*, p. 16.

¹⁶⁸ *Winter Trees*, p. 16.

¹⁶⁹ This topoi is echoed in 'Ariel', where Plath writes: 'Black sweet blood mouthfuls', p.33

¹⁷⁰ *Winter Trees*, p. 13.

Similarly: 'I have the queerest feeling of being reborn with Frieda'.¹⁷¹ In motherhood, Kate Moses claims, existed Plath's 'core' ambition and calling. She cites Ted Hughes's poem 'Remission' as confirmation. Hughes writes that Plath 'flourished only/ In becoming fruitful'.¹⁷² Moses comments:

He adopts imagery likening Plath's maturity, through motherhood, as a matter of artifices peeling away when he describes the maternal Plath as being the innermost, solid doll of a Matryoshka nesting doll set.¹⁷³

In her 'cow heavy' state – a state, Hughes writes, 'That was *the you*'¹⁷⁴ – Plath could not mask the exuberant joy she felt at being a mother.¹⁷⁵ 'Child' from *Winter Trees* expresses this emotion in untransposed terms.¹⁷⁶ The poem, in all probability written to Frieda,¹⁷⁷ consists of simple, transparent lines:

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.

I want to fill it with colour and ducks,

¹⁷¹ *Letters Home*, p. 450.

¹⁷² *Sylvia Plath's Voice Annotated*, p. 99.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 109. (Quotation includes my italics.)

¹⁷⁵ *Letters Home*, p. 337. Plath wrote an excited letter to her mother describing how wonderful she found motherhood to be, and of her plans to have more children. She wrote: 'I'm going to have all my babies at home, I love it!'

¹⁷⁶ *Winter Trees*, p. 12.

¹⁷⁷ 'Living Color', p. 83. posits that 'Child' is 'most likely a reference to her first child Frieda, who has blue eyes'.

The zoo of the new¹⁷⁸

The nursery cadence of internal rhymes such as ‘zoo of the new’,¹⁷⁹ and the deliberate unruliness of free verse, invests the piece with a sense of innocence, as does the absence of semantic depth in such apparently pedestrian lines as the first of the piece. This sits, at first glance, in stark contrast to the ‘hostility towards motherhood’ that Moses claims Plath voiced in ‘Morning Song’.¹⁸⁰ However, Connors registers the contrasting ‘unhappy darkness’ that leaks into the poem in the last stanza, claiming that the stanza illustrates the psychologically ‘encaged state [that] Sylvia Plath feared for herself and perhaps now feared for her daughter’.¹⁸¹

Not this troublous

Wringing of hands, this dark

Ceiling without a star.¹⁸²

The sharp turn in the poem, Connors suggests, accounts for Plath’s constant awareness of a ‘dark side of her brain’ that threatened to destroy the peaceful idyll of motherhood.¹⁸³ As a point of comparison, with regard to the degree of body writing that exists in Plath’s ‘maternal’ poems, many critics have alleged that Plath’s attempts to say goodbye to her children can be apprehended in these ‘maternal’ poems. They assert that death ghosts this group of poems, and this – in line with various critics’ theories – manifestly

¹⁷⁸ *Winter Trees*, p. 12.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁸⁰ ‘Sylvia Plath’s Voice Annotated’, p. 112.

¹⁸¹ ‘Living Color’, p. 83.

¹⁸² *Winter Trees*, p. 12.

¹⁸³ *Bitter Fame*, p. 144.

evinces Plath's self-knowledge that she was destined to kill herself.¹⁸⁴ Among such commentators are Ronald Hayman, who concludes that 'Balloons' from *Ariel* 'says a reluctant farewell to the children',¹⁸⁵ and Anne Stevenson, who concurs that in 'Edge', Plath was putting 'her own dead body there on stage' as a final statement to her children.¹⁸⁶ Such commentaries have been attacked as 'absurd' by Tracey Brain,¹⁸⁷ who argues that 'Balloons' addresses Plath's sensitivity towards her son's psychological development.¹⁸⁸ Similarly, Connors also disagrees with the 'crude approach' of the 'farewell' theorists, and states that 'Edge' represents a dedication to Katrina Trask, the founder of the Yaddo, an artist colony that Plath and Hughes stayed at whilst Plath was pregnant with Frieda.¹⁸⁹

All four of Katrina Trask's children died in infancy, and The Yaddo housed many paintings and sculptures of them, as well as a memorial in the gardens;¹⁹⁰ it would therefore have been virtually impossible for Plath to ignore the tragedy.¹⁹¹ On her own death, Trask was interred in a tomb at the Yaddo, surrounded by roses – a motif of 'Edge', which gives some foundation to the idea that the poem might relate to Plath's thoughts on Trask's inability to produce and maintain healthy babies.¹⁹²

We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,

¹⁸⁴ See the following footnote

¹⁸⁵ Ronald Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Birch Lane, 1991), p. 193.

¹⁸⁶ *Bitter Fame*, p. 298.

¹⁸⁷ Tracy Brain, 'Unstable Manuscripts: The Indeterminacy of the Plath Canon' in Anite Helle (ed), *The Unravelling Archive* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2007), p. 25.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 26.

¹⁸⁹ 'Living Color', pp. 82-8.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 83.

¹⁹¹ Sally Bayley and Kathleen Connors, *Eye Rhymes, Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Chapter 1 explores Plath's stay at the Yaddo, and reproduces some journal entries she made on the subject of the Trask tragedy.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, p. 135.

One at each little
Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded
Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden
Stiffens and odors bleed ...¹⁹³

Here we see Plath's internalised world again occupied by tropes of infertility – ceased lactation, dead coiled like embryos, children painted with the white pallor of the deceased. Plath, then, completes the journey of *Ariel* as a voyage of body and reproduction, the termination of life representing the final act. The body collapses in on itself in decomposition, 'folded/ them back into her body as petals/ Of a rose close'.¹⁹⁴ Saliently, the collapsing body parts are those representative in western culture of sexuality and fecundity, the breasts. Also, Flowers, routinely metaphorically connected to female genitalia, are almost explicitly referenced to as such within 'Edge'. However, 'the sweet, deep throats of the night flower' bleed nothing but 'odor'.¹⁹⁵ Semantically, Plath's 'night flowers'¹⁹⁶ are imbued with death, infertility and menopause. Finally, Ariel, the 'muse of poetry, the *moon goddess*' who inspires 'fertility and flowering',¹⁹⁷ looks on the scene in the final stanza:

The moon has nothing to be sad about,

¹⁹³ 'Living Color', pp. 134-135.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid

¹⁹⁵ Ibid

¹⁹⁶ Ibid

¹⁹⁷ Both quotations taken from, 'Sylvia Plath's Voice Annotated', p. 101.

Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this kind of thing.¹⁹⁸

Plath's muse, Ariel, nonchalantly accepts that death must come to all of her creations. Plath is intimately connected, even through the eyes of others, to her own personal deity. Hughes's describes the birth of Frieda in 'Isis' as: 'The great goddess in person/ Had put on your body, waxing full ...'.¹⁹⁹ Plath, in Connors view, is so attuned to the workings of Ariel's art of creation and destruction, that she can watch and describe with such a removed subjectivity the collapse of Katrina Trask's status as a maternal object.²⁰⁰ 'Edge', according to Connors, inflects Katrina Trask's tragic apologue.²⁰¹ Additionally, as shown earlier, Stevenson believes that Plath is also telling the story of the climactic chapter of her own body's story of fertility, production and sexuality, and it is here that Plath's *Ariel*, in its first published form, ends.

While this dissertation has also considered ulterior stimulants for Plath's poetry, such as Van Dyne's socio-historic 'repressed career woman' speculations, Plath's acumen for writing from the body clearly also deserves to be considered as a major shaping influence in her work. Critics such as Connors, Britzolakis and Peel have glossed Plath's compelling desire to write the body. Plath's trajectory of poetic output through the *Ariel* period traces a discourse for the female body, and as we have seen exploits the liminal spaces between birth and death. To conclude this section, Plath's work often seems emotively articulate, as opposed to descriptively objective. Kate Moses's words in her essay 'Sylvia Plath's Voice, Annotated' seem particularly resonant in this respect: 'if one reads "Wintering" as the

¹⁹⁸ 'Living Color', pp. 134-135.

¹⁹⁹ *Birthday Letters*, p. 111.

²⁰⁰ 'Living Color', pp. 133-136.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*

extension of a narrative arc begun with “Morning Song”, one sees that the image of fertility has become internalized, just as her expressiveness is not intellectualized, but felt’.²⁰²

²⁰²‘Sylvia Plath’s Voice Annotated’, p. 113.

The Eye's Double Exposure: Sylvia, Ted & Otto

This section expands the investigation into conditioning emotional rapports in Sylvia Plath's life with an examination of the relationship between the poet and the men in her life. Of central importance in this respect are her father, Otto Plath, and her husband, Ted Hughes. Both figures have been extensively written about in connection to Plath's work.²⁰³ Otto Plath has been largely positioned as the object of Plath's alleged 'Electra complex';²⁰⁴ while Hughes's affair with Assia Wevill has been cited as the focus of the grudge that bore the bile and anger of *Ariel* into being.²⁰⁵

Taking my cue from Kristeva, I depart from lengthily scrutinised theories of Plath's supposed Electra Complex, as well from those concerning Hughes's affair.²⁰⁶ Within the cline of Lacanian/ Kristevan theory, these subjects are of limited importance to the production of creative matter.²⁰⁷ The crucial role of the male within the scope of Kristevan and Lacanian theory is that he upholds the social contract.²⁰⁸ This contract, Kristeva claims, acts in opposition to the natural 'pre-linguistic states of childhood where the child babbles the sounds s/he hears, or where s/he articulates rhythms, alliterations, or stresses'.²⁰⁹ Initiation into the social contract comes post-mirror phase, when an individual 'takes on the signs of

²⁰³ For examples of this, see Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame* (London: Viking, 1989) & Linda Wagner-Martin, *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1984). Both of these books espouse Freudian perspectives on the Plath canon.

²⁰⁴ Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 40.

²⁰⁵ Lynda K Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* (London: The History Press, 2005), addresses the impact of Hughes's affair on the writing of *Ariel*.

²⁰⁶ See Jahan Ramahazi, *The Poetry of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

²⁰⁷ In opposition to the Electra Complex theories, Kristeva cites that in any case, the 'tremendous psychic, intellectual, and affective effort a woman must make in order to find the other sex as an erotic object'. Instead, she writes, one 'detects everywhere the same impossible mourning for the maternal object'. See Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 9-30.

²⁰⁸ For the psychological roles of the sexes, see Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body: Towards an Understanding of L'Écriture Feminine', in Elaine Showalter (ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 367.

²⁰⁹ Julia Kristeva 'A Question of Subjectivity' in *Modern Literary Theory*, Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds) (London: Arnold, 1992), p. 133.

language, of articulation as it has been prescribed'.²¹⁰ Endowed as the social contract is with 'a thousand years of western culture',²¹¹ it serves to perpetrate and continue female oppression. Cixous writes that 'as soon as they [female children] begin to speak, they can be taught that their territory is black';²¹² that is, that they are second-class citizens. This section will consider Plath's bearing to the social contract, and seeks to throw light on the poet's struggle against the phallogocentric parameters that might have contributed to the shape of her own psychic energy. The debate around the validity of classifying Plath as a feminist will also contribute towards this section, as biographers and critics such as Jacqueline Rose and Marsha Bryant have attempted to define Plath's purchase on patriarchy.²¹³ Jacqueline Rose, for example, sees Plath 'on the edge of two contrary analyses of women's relationships to patriarchy. Simultaneously desiring and rejecting it',²¹⁴ whereas Bryant argues that the Plath reader must acknowledge 'Plath's vision of domesticity' that shades her poetry.²¹⁵

Collette Guillaumin speculates that 'psychic characteristics praised by advocates of *feminite* have in fact been determined by familial and economic roles imposed on women by men'.²¹⁶ We can see these factors at work in Plath's early life through the memoirs of Aurelia Plath. She remembered colleagues of Otto's telling him that he was 'the man who gets what he wants when he wants it'.²¹⁷ She noted that this was entirely natural within the framework of the Plath-Schober marriage, as they were both from Germanic heritage which

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Elaine Showalter, *The New Feminist Criticism* (London, Virago, 1986), p. 33.

²¹² See Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976) p. 310.

²¹⁴ Rose, quoted in Langdon Hammer, 'Plath at War', in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (eds), *Eye Rhymes* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 153.

²¹⁵ Marsha Bryant, *Ariel's Kitchen*, in Anita Helle (ed), *The Unravelling Archive* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2007) p. 224.

²¹⁶ 'Writing the Body', p. 371.

²¹⁷ Aurelia Plath (ed), *Letters Home, Correspondence 1950-1963* (New York: Harper Row, 1975), p. 12.

purports that the man should be '*derr Herr des Hauses*'- the head of the house, and should make all the decisions.²¹⁸ His 'rightful' dominance saw him controlling the family's finances and Aurelia reflected that 'if I wanted a peaceful home – and I did – I would simply have to become more submissive'.²¹⁹ The blueprint for male to female relations was demonstrated to the young Sivvy, who in turn, Aurelia claimed, sought to submit to male ego from an early age. Additionally, according to her mother, she specifically sought out those that were superior.²²⁰ Alongside the immediacy of her familial environment, Sylvia was also influenced, Sally Bayley believes, by the 'Disney aesthetic' of romance, and the 1950s Americana that 'only a very good, selfless girl, could find herself awake with the prince by her side'.²²¹ However, as Langdon Hammer argues, underneath the selfless exterior, Sylvia was asking some provocative questions with regard to her place in the social contract. Evidencing this with art work by the fourteen-year-old Plath, 'Girl with a Red Sweater' – a portrait of a young girl reading a book about war – he writes:

Beneath the girl's chair is a rag rug, cheery and snug; above her is the thought-bubble, full of war. Each is self-contained and circular; they are like a schematic representation of the so-called separate spheres of men's and women's activity. Yet they are both composed of the same colors. / It is as if the battlefield and home/ were composed of the same material.²²²

²¹⁸ Ibid, p. 13.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid, p. 297. Aurelia writes: 'She did not pretend the male was superior; she sought out those that were, and her confidence in her husband's genius was unshakeable.'

²²¹ Sally Bayley and Kathleen Connors, *Eye Rhymes, Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 198.

²²² 'Plath at War', p. 148.

If we can accept the validity of Hammer's point, we can see that Plath was demonstrating an adolescent questioning and blurring, of the boundaries of gender divided activity – an act of no small importance in relation to her mature poetry. Hammer's hypothesis is supported by Sylvia's teenage journals that return frequently to the topic of male and female activities and restrictions.²²³ Plath's unpicking of the Disney myth was taking place, of course, in the absence of the dominant male in her life, her father, who died when she was nine years old. Despite questioning and testing the lines of the social contract,²²⁴ the death of Otto Plath had left a vacuum where an idolised paternal object had been, and Plath, as Rose posits, seemed to crave the embrace of patriarchy.²²⁵ In the semi-autobiographical²²⁶ 'Among the Bumblebees' (bees were Otto Plath's specialism), Plath compares the entomologist father character to 'wild horses', 'thunder', 'a giant', 'a powerful and superior man' and an 'awe inspiring king high on a throne' – a succession of powerful and commanding images layered upon each other to invoke a god-like presence. Additionally, he commands the sea into 'obeying the skilful mastery' of his strokes, disciplines a storm to rumble 'harmless as a tame lion', and reduces his students to 'rising mournfully, there would be the sound of weeping, of wailing and gnashing of teeth.' Eventually – art imitating life – he dies, and 'there would be no one to walk with her, like him, proud and arrogant among the bumblebees'. Plath demonstrates in this story, the

²²³ 'I dislike being a girl, because as such I must come to realise that I cannot be a man. In other words, I must pour my energies through the direction and force of my mate...'. This is one example of Plath's soliloquising on her role in her culture. See Sylvia Plath, *The Journals Of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Anchor Books, 1982), p. 3.

²²⁴ *Letters Home*, p. 32. See Aurelia's discussion on her daughter's growing awareness of the separate spheres of the two sexes.

²²⁵ 'The Priestess and her Cult', p. 159.

²²⁶ There is strong evidence that this was autobiographical. In her journal, Plath writes 'I want to put together the complex mosaic of my childhood/ experiences from the nebulous seething of memory and yank them out into black-and-white on the typewriter. Like in my attempt: "The Two Gods of Alice Denway"'. Alice Denway is the main character in 'Among the Bumblebees'. See, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 73.

character's admiration of such an alpha male, her protector against the savage environs of the outside world. The female character in opposition to such a figure of masculinity, shrinks and becomes helpless, an archetype of helpless femality. With the loss of the connection, she fears never having access to such a breaker against the tide of external world and the damage that it can inflict. With his death, she also loses her claim to superiority- the students will not wail and gnash their teeth in her presence, and the 'docile and generous' sea would drown her in his absence.

From this juncture, some biographers and critics have discerned in Plath an Electra Complex, and assert that she was not only looking for a strong mate who could love her unconditionally, but that she was looking specifically for another Otto.²²⁷ One of the loudest of these biographers, Anne Stevenson, claims that Sylvia herself realised 'how closely a Freudian explanation fitted the enigma of her strangeness'.²²⁸ She adds that Ted Hughes, filling that mould in a psychologically unsound scenario, became 'the precarious chief prop of [Plath's] happiness'.²²⁹ Britzolakis, who also propounds an argument for Plath's Electra Complex in her rigorously academic essay 'Conversations Amongst the Ruins', makes a case through literary analysis of poems such as 'Electra on Azalea Path', but admits that Plath might have been playing to the audience. She argues that the metaphor of the 'stage' is abundant within the poem, turning the discourse into a 'theatrical space'.²³⁰ Furthermore, she acknowledges that oedipalised readings depend upon 'a bricolage of psychoanalytical, literary, and biographical texts'.

²²⁷ *The Cambridge Companion*, p. 41 as an example

²²⁸ Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame* (London: Viking, 1989), p. 132.

²²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 206.

²³⁰ Christina Britzolakis, 'Conversations Amongst the Ruins: Plath & De Chirico' in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (eds) *Eye Rhymes*, p. 175.

Kristevan theory provides an alternative explanation to the ‘fetishised father’ of Freud.²³¹ Ann Rosalind Jones claims that ‘women writers valorise phallic domination, associated with the privileged father-daughter relationship’.²³² Kristeva conceives that the inherent confusion of the mirror phase facilitates the destruction of maternal desire, and replaces it with paternal domination. This process ‘stabilises the subject’,²³³ replacing the *Jouissance*²³⁴ of the mother-infant sanctuary with the safety net of patriarchy. The loss of the paternal object, would therefore have a devastating impact, owing to the sacrifice that has been made to the altar of the social contract, the loss of the primal, maternal bond. In this, Freudian theory partially coalesces with Kristevan/ Lacanian, in that Freud claimed that the ‘hysteric suffers from reminiscence’; and this Kristeva agrees, is true of much of women’s writings.²³⁵ In short, in place of an Electra Complex – with the focus on one man, Kristevan theory points towards childhood development, and the conditioning a child goes through to submit to patriarchy- and subsequently, feels lost without it.

So, Plath’s admitted identification of Ted with her father²³⁶ may have functioned as a return to the stability she had owned through phallic dominance, until her father’s death.²³⁷ As described earlier, Plath sought superiority in her companion, and the ultimate supremacy existed within the prototypical, all-powerful being that Plath signified within the father figure of ‘Among the Bumblebees’.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² ‘Writing the Body’, p. 366.

²³³ Julia Kristeva ‘A Question of Subjectivity’ in *Modern Literary Theory*, Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds.) (London: Arnold, 1992), p. 131.

²³⁴ See chapter one ‘On Jouissance’ in Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love & Knowledge, 1972-1973* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999) for more information.

²³⁵ ‘A Question of Subjectivity’, pp. 135- 136.

²³⁶ *Letters Home*, p. 131. Plath writes: ‘I identified ted with my father sometimes.’

²³⁷ *Bitter Fame*, p. 249. Stevenson connects Plath’s poem ‘Berck Plage’ to the pain of Otto’s death

The wealth of Plath's autobiographical material in the form of letters, journals and notes, allow us an insight into her perception of Ted Hughes, and what he represented to her. Much of her language traces the articulations Plath produced, Britzolakis agrees, regarding her father/ father character in 'Among The Bumblebees'.²³⁸ In letters to her mother, Plath describes Ted as, 'a huge goliath',²³⁹ as possessing 'a health and a hugeness' and 'a voice of god'.²⁴⁰ She claims that she does not 'merely idolize' but sees 'right into the core of him'. Loving such an awesome man provoked her, as though Ted himself was the mythological Thetis, to use 'every fibre of my being to love him'.²⁴¹

Plath's 'Ode for Ted',²⁴² inflects the God-like descriptions reserved for the executors of patriarchy, those large enough to dominate the poetess:

From under crunch of my man's boot
green oat-sprouts jut;
he names a lapwing, starts rabbits in a rout,
lagging it most nimble
to sprigged hedge of bramble,
stalks red fox, shrewd stoat./
For his least look, scent acres yield:
Each finger-furrowed field
Heaves forth stalk, leaf, fruit nubbed emerald/

²³⁸ Christina Britzolakis, *Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (London: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 28.

²³⁹ *Letters Home*, p. 244.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 234.

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 243.

²⁴² *Letters Home*, p. 238

Ringdoves roost well within his wood,
shirr songs to suit which mood
he saunters in; how but most glad
could be this adam's woman
when all earth his words do summon
leaps to laud such man's blood!²⁴³

In the first and last stanza above, Ted appears to commands nature, becoming the maker of the world around him. The doves only sing songs to suit him, the fields provide crops only to garner a glance from the god-man. Ted becomes the ultimate father, the last word in patriarchy- that of the Infinite Spirit. Those that do not flee the thunder of Hughes's might footfalls, exist only to complement his existence, and he retains control of the entire domain 'all earth his words do summon'. The fox, known in folklore for his slyness and stalking prowess, is stalked by Plath's husband who outwits him, as well as the stoat – an animal equally famous for its ability to hide. Plath becomes submissively entangled within the poem as the woman belonging to the first man- Adam. Britzolakis suggests that the 'adamic mythology closely echoes the father idolatry of "Among the Bumblebees', through this, she argues, 'Plath [is enabled] to rewrite her life in terms of one single, redemptive goal' – to be the faithful, loyal girl willingly dominated by patriarchy. Dominated by Hughes's landscape within the 'Ode', Plath can only rejoice in the response that her husband evokes from the world, and be grateful that she is part of that world.²⁴⁴ In the face of this 'excessive

²⁴³ *Letters Home*, p. 238.

²⁴⁴ *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 36. Plath discusses 'submerging myself until his purpose becomes my purpose'.

and indeed fictionality of the idealised or ‘colossal’ masculinity’,²⁴⁵ Plath aims to please, ‘Even as he sees into my poems and will tolerate no fallings off from my best right self’.²⁴⁶

And Ted did dominate Plath professionally as well as emotionally.²⁴⁷ In a marriage built on ‘textual violence’,²⁴⁸ as Lynda K. Bundtzen puts it trenchantly, Plath’s work found itself at the mercy of Ted the editor.²⁴⁹ Ironically, considering Plath’s poetic gifts, she saw Ted as a ‘teacher’, and respected his instructions in regards to her career plans.²⁵⁰ Sylvia saw herself absorbed in Ted and wrote that he became ‘a rather powerful canvas on which other people lived and moved’.²⁵¹ However, within the curtilage of Kristevan theory, this peaceful existence cultivated by Plath was erected on shaky foundations. Any endeavour to re-establish the environment of paternal domination coded within the social contract remains an attempt to submit. Kristeva claims that for women, ‘there are psychotic risks attached. I might lose myself, lose my identity’.²⁵² Lacan concurs with intriguing rhetoric, compendiously declaring that a man can never truly love a woman, within the limitations of the social contract, ‘as he is ignorant of their ignorance.’²⁵³ This is not to claim that Hughes undoubtedly loved Plath, but sought to demonstrate that the dynamic between the two, as Britzolakis, Bundtzen et al suggest, would result in dysfunction owing to Plath’s self-ignorance (as the term is used in Kristevan theory). This dysfunction, Middlebrook and

²⁴⁵ *Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, p. 28.

²⁴⁶ *Letters Home*, p. 248.

²⁴⁷ Lynda K. Bundtzen, Poetic Arson, in Anita Helle (ed), *The Unravelling Archive* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2007), p. 236.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ This dynamic continued after the death of Plath. Tracey Brain wrote that ‘the Ariel we know is only the latest draft/ Hughes’s ordering turns Ariel into descent into suicide, not collection of hope and redemption’ Tracy Brain, ‘Unstable Manuscripts: The Indeterminacy of the Plath Canon’, in Anita Helle (ed.), *The Unravelling Archive*, p. 20.

²⁵⁰ *Letters Home*, p. 239.

²⁵¹ *Letters Home*, p. 259.

²⁵² ‘A Question of Subjectivity’, p. 136.

²⁵³ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973* (New York, Norton, 1999), p. 89.

Bundtzen concur,²⁵⁴ began to percolate through the pages of Plath's writing, resulting in poems such as 'The Rabbit Catcher', which opens:

It was a place of force –
The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,
Tearing off my voice, and the sea
blinding me with its lights, the lives of the dead
unreeling in it, spreading like oil.²⁵⁵

This profoundly dense poem consists of six stanzas of free verse that superficially describes a day out with Ted, during which Plath found rabbit snares upon a clifftop, and promptly destroyed them. Diane Middlebrook suspects that the poem has less to do with rabbits, but more importantly 'forecasts the end of [Ted and Sylvia's] marriage'. In agreement, Bundtzen perceives that 'The Rabbit Catcher' demonstrates the ensnarement of female creativity within marriage, those 'zeroes, shutting on nothing'²⁵⁶ representing Plath's growing awareness of the binds of the social contract.²⁵⁷ Plath becomes as deaf and dumb as the stitched mannequins of 'The Disquieting Muses', throughout the poem. She is 'gagged', her voice is 'torn off', she is 'blinded' by the light. Plath, metaphorically becomes nothing more affective than a statue. Middlebrook also sees the lexis of 'Ode to Ted' collapsing in on Plath – the trope of the rabbit, leaping to life in the Ode, now makes a 'hole

²⁵⁴ See Diane Middlebrook, 'Creative Partnership: Sources for "The Rabbit Catcher"' and Lynda K. Bundtzen in Anita Helle (ed), *The Unravelling Archive* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2007).

²⁵⁵ *Ariel*, p. 7.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*

²⁵⁷ Lynda K Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* (Michigan, University of Massachusetts Press 2001), *The Other Ariel*, p. 49.

in the hot day' – death where life once was.²⁵⁸ Plath's joke to domesticity, while surrounded by death 'I felt a busyness, an intent. I felt hands round a tea mug',²⁵⁹ seeks to ridicule the minutiae of the paternal bonds of marriage.²⁶⁰ Interestingly, this was the only poem to which Hughes's admitted taking offence.²⁶¹ In his response, also entitled 'The Rabbit Catcher', he writes:

Those terrible, hypersensitive
fingers of your verse closed round it and
felt it alive. The poems, like smoking entrails,
came soft into your hands.²⁶²

The anger towards Plath for taking 'our bad moments' as part of her poetic discourse, resulted in him asking, extremely publicly, 'what had I done?'²⁶³ What he could have done, Middlebrook estimated, was to break the sanctity of their dynamic.²⁶⁴ Saliently, the poem was written following a weekend visit from David and Assia Wevill- the latter being one reason for Ted and Sylvia's divorce. Middlebrook writes that 'The Rabbit Catcher' is 'often considered as autobiographical evidence that Plath had discovered Hughes's sexual interest in Assia Wevill'.²⁶⁵

²⁵⁸ Lynda K. Bundtzen, 'Poetic Arson and Sylvia Plath's "Burning the Letters"' in Anita Helle (ed), *The Unravelling Archive* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2007), p. 263.

²⁵⁹ *Ariel*, p. 7.

²⁶⁰ See, *The Other Ariel*, p. 46.

²⁶¹ 'Burning the Letters', p. 248. quotes Hughes's letter to Anne Stevenson. He writes: 'The only thing that I found hard to understand was her sudden discovery of our bad moments ("The Rabbit Catcher") as subjects for poems.'

²⁶² *Birthday Letters*, p. 144.

²⁶³ *Ibid*

²⁶⁴ 'Creative Partnership', p. 261.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

To Plath, the emerging betrayal of her 'Goliath' was a source of pain.²⁶⁶ In her eyes, Hughes completed her family, filling the vacancy left by her father.²⁶⁷ The loss of patriarchal protection for a second time contributed to the fury the poet harnessed in, and directed into, 'Daddy' – perhaps her best-known poem.²⁶⁸ Yet again Plath's voice 'stuck in a barb wire snare' in a recycling of imagery from 'The Rabbit Catcher'. Critics such as Rob Jackaman deduce that the reoccurrence of similar phrases is non-coincidental, and that Plath deliberately created a heterogeneous poem that at once applied to Ted and to her father.²⁶⁹ Jackaman writes that in 'Daddy', Plath has Ted 'waiting in line as the son-in-law to inherit from the father direct power over the female'.²⁷⁰ The 'man in black'²⁷¹ of the poem, Jackaman claims, is 'the daddy behind the daddy': namely, Ted.²⁷² Stanza fifteen explicitly pulls together what the reader has suspected:

If I've killed one man, I've killed two-
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.²⁷³

Britzolakis ties her analysis to Kristevan theory, by alluding to the heavy alliteration that dominates the phonology of the poem, coupled with the consistency of the structure,

²⁶⁶ *Letters Home*, p. 244.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 26.1 Plath writes, 'what a lovely family we are now!' (That is, with Ted to complete it.)

²⁶⁸ 'The Cambridge Companion', proclaims it 'infamous', p. 117.

²⁶⁹ See the following footnote.

²⁷⁰ Rob Jackaman, *Broken English, Breaking English* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2003), p. 83.

²⁷¹ *Ariel*, p. 75.

²⁷² *Ibid*.

²⁷³ *Ariel*, p. 75.

that lends the poem a 'nursery rhyme' feel.²⁷⁴ This 'recourse to the semiotic', or, the return to infantile structures of communication, symbolises according to Kristeva, a need to return to the primordial state of the chora- to escape the patriarchal immurement of language.²⁷⁵

On this subject Kristeva writes:

On the one hand I am looking to release to hatred which has not been able to express itself, to manifest itself (depression is often the result of hatred which has not been exhausted). At the same time I am searching for the inscriptions in language of the archaic contact with the maternal body which has been forgotten. Where are these inscriptions to be found? / They are to be found in the tempo of the voice, in the rapidity of the delivery, or in its monotony, or in certain musicalities.²⁷⁶

In other words, the subconscious release from the bondage of the social contract expresses itself through modification of language – in truncation, alliteration, repetition, and so on, language that is reminiscent of 'baby talk' or semiotic modality.²⁷⁷ We discern such features clearly in 'Daddy'. In the poem's eighty lines, forty-two end in an 'oo' sound, creating a sonic landscape that contains an almost oppressive beat, a rhythmic march through the words. Connors agrees, drawing a curious parallel: 'the heavy rhyming,

²⁷⁴ 'Conversations Amongst the Ruins', p. 177.

²⁷⁵ Plath herself writes repeatedly in her journal of her symbolic desire to return to the womb: 'You want to go home, back to the womb'. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 67.

²⁷⁶ 'A Question of Subjectivity', p. 133-34.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

repetition and simple iambic pentameter [of 'Daddy'], reflects some of the books of Dr. Seuss, one of Plath's favourite childhood authors.'²⁷⁸

The ostensible catharsis discerned from the poem comes from the thematic journey from oppression to emancipation. The emancipation, if the poem is taken as a confessional, literal betrayal of Plath's relationship with her father and her husband, derives from her split from Ted and her exorcism of her mourning for Otto. However, through this Kristevan reading we can see that Plath is engaged in a process of purging her psyche of phallographic domination.²⁷⁹ Plath does not describe Ted or her father on a personal level, but instead describes the oppressors of the poem as Nazi's: 'With your Luftwaffe/ Panzer-man, panzer-man, o- You/ Not God but a swastika/ A man in black with a meinkampf look'.²⁸⁰ The lack of realism where references to Plath's aggressors are concerned in this 'confessional' poem lends weight to the theory that the poem seeks strenuously to renounce patriarchy, and not merely 'Ted' and 'Otto'. Plath's vampire/ Nazi man oscillates between both possibilities with fluid frequency. The boot, Middlebrook considers, connects to Plath's repertoire of motifs usually applicable to her husband. The black boot of the Nazi tyrant stamps a path throughout the poem, and stamps all over the narrator 'the boot in the face' to become one of 'the more formidable images found in modern poetry'.²⁸¹ It is 'not irrelevant', Middlebrook claims, 'that the rabbit in "Ode for Ted" occupies a line in which the rhyme sound is provided by a boot.'²⁸² The use of a boot also has specific connotations that link into a cognitive web of victimhood- you have to be pretty low down on the ground to have a boot on your face, or in-fact to notice the boot at all. Paradigmatically, a 'shoe' would have

²⁷⁸ Kathleen Connors, 'Living Colour' in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (ed), *Eye Rhymes*, p. 139.

²⁸⁰ Ariel, pp. 73-75.

²⁸¹ Kathleen Connors, 'Visual Art in the Life of Sylvia Plath', in Anita Helle (ed), *The Unravelling Archive*, p. 85.

²⁸² 'Creative Partnership', p. 257.

lacked the weight, both literally and orally, to oppress the narrator so severely. A boot is a heavy duty piece of footwear, one made for the uniform of police and soldiers, and the heavy glottals that book-end the word help to enforce the sound and the weight of its strong imprint on the poem. Plath's narrator in opposition is portrayed as highly submissive, cowering and abused. Interestingly, Hammer points out that despite initial impressions of the first half of the poem, Plath is both the 'victim and aggressor'.²⁸³ He dissects the following three lines, 'You do not do, you do not do/ Any more, black shoe/ In which I have lived like a foot/ For thirty years...'.²⁸⁴ He points out that through these lines, Plath's narrator becomes the foot in the boot of the oppressor- (he suggests also, becoming the foot of her father's that was amputated through gangrene- again displaying the oscillation between Ted/ Otto/ patriarchy). Therefore, we can deduce from this that Plath becomes her own oppressor, the 'foot and the face', forming a circle of self-abuse.²⁸⁵ Plath's emancipation, in this reading, must be from herself, the version of herself that existed as she wrote 'Daddy'- the one that had submitted to patriarchal domination, and subsequent patriarchal failure (via death and adultery). The system she had entered willingly into, and that had failed her.²⁸⁶

Plath's inability to admit to such defeat in her life burned vividly instead in print.²⁸⁷

Outwardly, at least, Plath appeared to display an acceptance of her abandonment for the second time:

²⁸³'Plath at War', p. 154.

²⁸⁴ *Ariel*, p. 73.

²⁸⁵ 'Plath at War', p. 154.

²⁸⁶ As a result, Plath read into Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*, 'An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide: a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself' - *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 280.

²⁸⁷ *Letters Home*, p. 458. Aurelia was troubled by Plath's denial. Plath wrote to her mother: 'I have everything in life I've ever wanted: a wonderful husband, two adorable children, a lovely home, and my writing.' On 4

living apart from ted is wonderful – I am no longer in his shadow, and it is heaven to be liked for myself alone, knowing what I want. I may even borrow a table for my flat from Ted’s girl- I could be gracious to her now and kindly. I may be poor in bank funds, but I am so much richer in every other way, and I envy them nothing.²⁸⁸

Her literature, however, told a different story. The all-adoring embrace of dominance that Plath’s characters and narrators spun through ‘Ode to Ted’ and ‘Among the Bumblebees’ was replaced in her *Ariel* phase with metaphorical jailors, abusers and oppressors. The men in her literary panorama became Nazi’s to her Jew. To be sure, a case can be made for the Freudian hypothesis with regard to Plath’s ‘Electra Complex’. She herself announced in a BBC interview in October 1962 that ‘Daddy’ was ‘spoken by a girl with an Electra Complex. Her father died while she thought he was God.’²⁸⁹ Whether Plath was playing to her audience again, as Britzolakis claimed, is an ambiguity no reader can resolve. There is no ‘key’ that will fully unlock these poems – Plath’s psychology was dense, fragmentary, recursive and self-complicating – even close inspection of her autobiographical/ biographical materials tell polar stories. However, a cline of disillusionment can be felt throughout the poet’s work, disillusionment in the things that she thought were solid and protective. Although the application of Kristevan/ Lacanian analysis to Plath and the men in her life is a project that has yet to be developed in a sustained fashion, there is

August 1962, the four of them waved her off at the station: ‘Nick was the only one smiling’. Aurelia adds: ‘It was the last time I saw Sylvia.’

²⁸⁸ *Letters Home*, p. 479.

²⁸⁹ *The Cambridge Companion*, p. 38.

sufficient research in the field to conclude that an argument can be made that rivals the Freudian orthodoxy. Plath's submersion into phallogentric notions of marriage, a Disney romance, and her sometimes troubled embrace of domesticity has led many critics, including Hammer and Britzolakis, to argue that Plath did indeed eventually wrestle with cultured prescriptions of womanhood. The implications of the failure of the touchstones of Plath's foundations as a daughter and wife indisputably had a devastating effect. Ironically, however, on 12 October 1962, battle weary but triumphant, Plath wrote to her mother: 'It is over. My life can begin'.²⁹⁰ This date also happened to be the one on which Plath vanquished her father and husband in the bile-filled, confessional cadences of 'Daddy'.²⁹¹ The scales, Plath claimed, had fallen from her eyes. Free from any form of masculine control for the first time since infancy, Plath was ebullient in her new-found environment: 'up about five, in my study with coffee, writing like mad. / Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me', she wrote.

²⁹⁰ *Letters Home*, p. 466.

²⁹¹ *Ibid*

God's Lioness – Sylvia Plath & Herself

The wrestle with domesticity and individuality characterises only one aspect of Plath's repertoire of psychic touchstones. Her work continues to hail wide audiences of readers, by no means confined to those who hold 'feminist' views – readers who in their own way viscerally understand Plath's self consciously broken, ambiguous language.²⁹² My concluding discussion seeks to bring into critical apposition principle elements explored in the previous three sections in an effort to 'get behind' one of Plath's best-known works, as well as to weigh from a psychoanalytical perspective why their appeal has been so enduring. As with previous sections, the theoretical focus remains on the work of Kristeva, Cixous et al. Having debated the validity of applying such theories to Plath's poems that relate to her mother, father, husband and children, we now look at the fruition of that exploration – those poems of Plath that relate directly to the poet herself.

Plath's internal world may well have been disfigured by difficult paternal/ maternal relations, and subsequently those problems might have complicated her relation with Hughes. Material in this dissertation has been chosen to explore the possibility of this. However, Kristeva insists that, irrelevant of childhood trauma such as the death of a parent, psychological confusion is universal to cultures that adopt the social contract, and to forms of social organization that sacrifice the chora to 'phallogocentric' order.²⁹³ In this section, I focus primarily on Plath's language to develop the argument outlined in section two centred on body writing and the extent to which it is connected with the culturally embedded notion of the social contract. By bringing these elements together in a vital interpenetration, this

²⁹² See Paul Mitchell, 'Reading the Poems of the Late Sylvia Plath', in *The Modern Language Review*, January, 2005.

²⁹³ For a detailed explanation of Phallogocentrism, see Toril Moi, 'Feminist, Female, Feminine' in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (ed.), *The Feminist Reader* (Macmillan: London, 1990, pp. 117- 32.

section considers whether a comprehensive account of Plath's work can be evidenced through interrelated staples of post-Lacanian theory.

Plath's psychological bearing to the social contract in the context of her relations with her father and husband was complex and at times contradictory. The ramifications of the contract extend beyond male-female relations: blind acceptance of the sacrifice,²⁹⁴ Kristeva argues, results in a troubled relationship to Self. A woman may, 'by counter-investing the violence she has endured, make of herself a "possessed" agent of this violence'.²⁹⁵ To simplify, a symptom of the repression could manifest itself as a form of passive aggression, with the aggression directed inwardly. The loss of the maternal object during the phase when an infant is entering the social contract has a specific effect on writers, Kristeva claims. 'A writer', she suggests, 'must have been in a situation of loss – in order to write'.²⁹⁶ In her article 'Women's Time', she writes:

Is it because, faced with social norms, literature reveals a certain knowledge and sometimes the truth itself about an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret, and unconscious universe?²⁹⁷

The pertinence of this insight to Plath's work has been frequently remarked in a bid to explain Plath's popularity.²⁹⁸ The assumption is that her cultural experiences informed and provoked her work, and in turn connected her to masses of women living under the

²⁹⁴ *The Feminist Reader*, p. 203.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 208.

²⁹⁶ Julia Kristeva 'A Question of Subjectivity' in *Modern Literary Theory*, ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Arnold, 1992), p. 137.

²⁹⁷ 'Women's Time', p. 212.

²⁹⁸ See Claire Brennan, *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (Columbia: University of Columbia Press, 1999) p. 29.

same indenture. Sally Bayley writes that Plath's sexual politics were piqued during the baptism of fire of the college campus. She refers to one incident where the presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson presented a speech at Smith College attended by Plath. The speech 'focussed on the "unanimous vocation" of Plath's contemporaries "to be wives and mothers" who would influence their husbands and children'.²⁹⁹ Bayley sketches out the cultural atmosphere in which this speech was given, noting that the failure of a woman to adhere to the widely accepted dogma would result in: 'Loss of her emotional capacity, "orgastic failure", and damage to her husband's 'sexual capacity'.³⁰⁰ Plath, responding sensitively to these politics, questioned: 'Why should they [women] be relegated to the position of custodians of emotions, watcher of the infants, feeder of soul, body and pride of man?'³⁰¹ However, as the evidence below shows, like many of her peers, Plath's positioning on the side of the political fence was far from clear. The social structure, embodying ideas that drew Plath's venom³⁰² though 'the mass market of women's magazines',³⁰³ also 'served as Plath's earliest forums for her own publications'.³⁰⁴ Marsha Bryant confirms this paradoxical situation in her work on Plath and domesticity. She conceives that Plath's contributions to publications such as the *Ladies' Home Journal* provide us with 'an alternative archive' by which to read Plath. Indeed she sees a split in Plath's work – one half that is critically acclaimed (work that challenges the social contract), and another that

²⁹⁹ Sally Bayley, 'Sylvia Plath and the Costume of Femininity', in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (eds.), *Eye Rhymes* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 184.

³⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 185.

³⁰¹ Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Anchor Books, 1982), p. 30.

³⁰² She wrote in her diary 'to realize that most American males worship women as a sex machine with rounded breasts and a convenient opening in the vagina, as a painted doll who shouldn't have a thought in her pretty head other than cooking a steak dinner and comforting him in bed after a hard 9-5 business job', *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, pp. 21-22.

³⁰³ 'Sylvia Plath and the Costume of Femininity', p. 185.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

'circulates outside'; that which panders to the world of cookery and sewing.³⁰⁵ She sees a grown-up 'Sivvy', whom Zoe Heller bluntly describes as 'a fake *Ladies' Home Journal* Sylvia.'³⁰⁶ Perhaps, at this point it would be illustrative to refer back to 'Sivvy', who, we saw in section one, wrote to her mother in tones of joyous, zealous girlhood, and to contrast it to the work of Sylvia Plath/ Victoria Lucas³⁰⁷ whose macabre, visceral body writing and rejection of the social contract has been explored in sections two and three of this dissertation. This split, Bayley observes, 'becomes the central narrative of several of Plath's *Ariel* poems'.³⁰⁸ This confusion of self, Susan Gubar writes, enables Plath to join 'the ranks of twentieth-century women artists who used visual and verbal forms to elaborate upon that curious web of intersecting interjunctions we have come to call femininity'.³⁰⁹

Plath's poem 'The Two Sister's of Persephone'³¹⁰ embodies the self-splitting identified by Gubar as it debates whether or not a woman should conform:

Two girls there are : within the house

One sits; the other, without.

Daylong a duet of shade and light

Plays between these.

In her dark wainscoted room

The first works problems on

A mathematical machine.

³⁰⁵ Marsha Bryant, 'Ariel's Kitchen: Plath, Ladies Home Journal and the Domestic Surreal', in Anita Helle (ed.), *The Unravelling Archive* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2007), p. 211.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 212.

³⁰⁷ Plath's pseudonym

³⁰⁸ 'Sylvia Plath and the Costume of Femininity', p. 184.

³⁰⁹ Susan Gubar, 'Afterword', in Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (eds.) *Eye Rhymes* (Oxford: OUP, 2007) p. 224.

³¹⁰ Sylvia Plath, 'The Two Sisters of Persephone' in *The Colossus* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p. 63.

Dry ticks mark time
As she calculates each sum.
At this barren enterprise
Rat-shrewd go her squint eyes,
Root-pale her meagre frame.
Bronzed as earth, the second lies,
Hearing ticks blown gold
Like pollen on bright air. Lulled
Near a bed of poppies,³¹¹

As diverse as *The Bell Jar's* 'stereotypes' of 'homemaker Betsy and Sexy Doreen',³¹² Plath examines the 'split model' of womanhood, literally splitting a person in half, fashioning two sisters out of the one mythological woman, Persephone.³¹³ In the Greek story, Persephone is kidnapped by Hades, God of the underworld. Demeter, Persephone's mother, strikes a bargain with Hades to win her daughter back for the first half of each year, giving her up to Hades for the second. Persephone spends half of her life in darkness, and half in light.

The first of the four stanzas (of seven), reproduced above, possesses an anomalous tone of *ennui*, as though the narrator is casually observing omnisciently the daily activities of the two sisters. This is suggested structurally, by the uncomplicated syntactic pattern and the nursery rhyme-esque couplet which opens the poem. The lack of knottiness allows for a deceptively undemanding first read. However, as the poem matures into the sixth and

³¹¹ Ibid

³¹² 'Sylvia Plath and the Costume of Femininity', pp. 198-99.

³¹³ Ibid, p. 184.

seventh stanza the reader sees the condemnation of either sister to discontentedness, a surprisingly sharp descent. The coolness of tone in the poem contributes to the reader's suspicion that this work is not to be taken at face value. It suggests that Plath did not set out simply to provide an anapaestic narrative to the Hellenic legend. Rather, Plath seems to be lipping sedition beneath the transparency of the simple tale. Bayley agrees and believes that 'The Two Sisters of Persephone' addresses the confines of the social contract, and represents 'a statement of the right of the female to exist, in private, without demands of glamour.'³¹⁴ In the second stanza, weighted down by the dark of the room, we see a woman inside the house, in defiance of the social order – refusing to beautify herself and act in a feminine manner. Employed in the logical and traditionally masculine task of mathematics, she seems to be working against the traits of femininity. However 'Dry ticks mark time'³¹⁵ – she is still watched and imposed on by 'manmade' order, a ticking clock. Escaping patriarchy becomes a fruitless task, a 'barren enterprise',³¹⁶ and due to her activity, she loses the feature that would give her commodity in the social contract – her beauty – 'Rat-Shrewd go her squint eyes'.³¹⁷ As though a negative of her more beautiful sister she is 'root-pale' in comparison to the 'bronzed as earth' hue of her sister's skin.³¹⁸ The beautiful sister embraces the demands of glamour, as well as being passive and receptive to being measured up by patriarchy – the sound of the ticking clock to her is 'blown gold'.³¹⁹ Most importantly, this sister is fertile, an allusion traced by the spring-like atmosphere that keeps her. Her skin is the colour of sun-kissed earth and she becomes assimilated with it by lying down and joining it, and the pollen, ready to seed, floats around her. Later, she is tempted

³¹⁴ Ibid, p. 199.

³¹⁵ *The Colossus*, p. 63.

³¹⁶ Ibid

³¹⁷ Ibid

³¹⁸ Ibid

³¹⁹ Ibid

by a 'bed' of poppies that are later described as 'petalled blood/ Burns open to sun's blade'³²⁰ – fertilised by an anthropomorphic phallic imagining of the sun. Bayley reads this poem as 'competing forms of femininity serving to upstage each other';³²¹ which is justifiable in a basic sense of two sisters being extremely different. However, the two women seem oblivious to each other's existence, and therefore, do not compete with each other at all. Most importantly, they are, as detailed earlier, two sides of one person. This is internal conflict- the two sides of one woman never made whole, never completed. Neither 'sister' ends the poem triumphantly. The beautiful produces a son, a King, but is still somehow failed by the world around her, she becomes 'bitter/ And sallow as any lemon'.³²² Her sister remains virginal and isolated, eventually becoming, 'worm-husbanded, yet no woman'.³²³ Under Hades (phallocratic) dominion, both sisters suffer, as half of their needs can never be met. Neither can reconcile as one undivided self, who is both beautiful and fertile, but independent and intelligent too. Subsequently, both paths are doomed to failure. Bayley writes that despite the beautiful sister reproducing, it is the barren sister that endures. The sister Bayley terms, 'the dark relative of the two selves'³²⁴, lives a martyr's existence against patriarchal control, and for her suffering, is compensated by the strong belief in her own form of virtue. She believes that the theme of being split and the dark side taking over is a theme that continues to emerge in Plath's work. This theme, she believes, culminated in Plath's 1962 creation of 'Lady Lazarus' – a vengeful and devastating sorceress/

³²⁰ Ibid

³²¹ 'Sylvia Plath and the Costume of Femininity', p. 204.

³²² *The Colossus*, p. 64.

³²³ Ibid

³²⁴ 'Sylvia Plath and the Costume of Femininity', p. 204.

Goddess, who warns both God and Lucifer, two components of the social contract, to 'beware', because she 'eats men like air'.³²⁵

In 'Lady Lazurus', Plath attacks these two polar agencies of control functioning within Christian cultures – God and the devil. This blasphemy has salience in regards to Kristevan theory, as Kristeva philosophised that 'Modernity is characterised [by] human beings attempting to live without religion' and that this is intrinsically linked to female questioning of order.³²⁶ Despite being raised as a Catholic, Plath herself felt the absence of faith, 'Shall read the Bible: symbolic meaning, even though the belief in a moral-God structured universe not there'.³²⁷ To lack belief in such a system, Kristeva conjectures, is key to creative writing- she sees disbelief as a catalyst for a searching process, one that 'leads to the active research/ to break the code, to shatter language, to find a specific discourse closer to the body'.³²⁸ Ann Rosalind Jones, in sympathy with Kristeva, sees the Western contract of 'systematic repression' as directly correlating to body writing. Plath's questioning was taking place underneath the facade of the 'fake Ladies' Home Journal Sylvia' that lived to cook and clean for her family.³²⁹ However, she confessed to her journal that she was 'afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day – spare me from the relentless cage.'³³⁰ She felt the parameters of her culture, and deduced that ' boys live so much harder than girls and they know so much more about life. Learning the limitations of the womans sphere is no fun at all.'³³¹ Sylvia's 'woman's world', as physically limiting as she perceived it to be,

³²⁵ *Ariel*, p. 14.

³²⁶ 'Women's Time', p. 213.

³²⁷ *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 292.

³²⁸ 'Women's Time', p. 204 .

³²⁹ Zoë Heller, 'Ariel's Appetite', in reviews of *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, in *The New Republic*, December 18, p. 200.

³³⁰ Aurelia Plath (ed), *Letters Home, Correspondence 1950-1963* (New York: Harper Row, 1975), p. 40.

³³¹ *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 72 .

was experienced instead through 'emotions and senses'.³³² These senses, as Jones and Kristeva posited, found their way onto the page- as Richter scale mappings of Sylvia's cognitive web. She detailed the differences she imagined in the male and female mind in her 1952 short story, 'Sunday at the Mintons'.³³³ The female brain, she saw as, 'a dark, warm room, with coloured lights swinging and wavering, like so many lanterns reflecting on the water, and pictures coming and going on the misty walls, soft and blurred like impressionist paintings'.³³⁴ In contrast, the male brain is 'flat and level, laid out with measured instruments in the broad even sunlight. There would be geometric concrete walks and square, substantial buildings with clocks on them./ The air would be thick with their accurate ticking.'³³⁵ The latter complements the analysis of the 'Two Sisters of Persephone', in that the ticking clock that punctuated the second and fourth stanzas represented, in Plath's mind, the ever-present guardianship of patriarchy. The female brain within 'Sunday at the Mintons', functions as an unstable, ambiguous canvas of fractured light, image and atmospheric condition. It is comfortable and womb-like, soothing and attractive. The male brain, in opposition is mathematically rigid- taut with accuracy and rule. It is a cold, hard space of judgement and measurement. This vessel of paternal domination is the seat of the social contract, and it is significant that Plath should have been looking to define the conditions of the organ – and its female counterpart – in such an early story. Kristeva writes that through literature, women aim to capture femality, what is more 'flexible and free',³³⁶ such as the kaleidoscopic workings of the mind, expressed in Plath's story. Through this kind

³³² Ibid, p. 32.

³³³ Sylvia Plath, 'Sunday at the Mintons', in *Johnny panic and the Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), pp. 148- 160.

³³⁴ Ibid, p. 155.

³³⁵ Ibid, p. 155.

³³⁶ 'Women's Time', p. 212.

of 'active research', we can begin to understand, 'the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex'.³³⁷

However, Plath came to poetry in what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar defined as a 'nineteenth-century gendered sense of authorship'.³³⁸ On moving to Britain in 1955, Sylvia became frustrated by the lack of success in publishing her work, a situation she blamed on English poetry being 'in a straight jacket'.³³⁹ She felt that the trochaic of revered British writers tended towards narcissism, instead of 'relevance'.³⁴⁰ Perhaps the lack of relevance for Plath eventuated in her own brand of body writing, the 'blood and brain',³⁴¹ that has become a central motif of her work. On body writing, Lacan wrote that 'there is always something in her that escapes discourse',³⁴² he cites Freud's *Urverdrängung*, or 'primal repression' as a causation.³⁴³ This resulted, he believed, in 'cunt-orsions',³⁴⁴ – a concept that coalesces with Jones, Kristeva and Cixous's theories of *Writing the Body*. By utilising these psycholinguistic paradigms of Kristeva, Lacan, et al. Paul Mitchell claims that Plath's use of language attempts to iterate this elusive discourse; he writes that she, 'exploits her textual space in order to suggest an experience beyond the symbolic'.³⁴⁵ He concludes that the centrifugal nature of Plath's unique discourse is 'on the point of collapse'.³⁴⁶ This interlinks

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Susan Connors, 'The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath', in *Eye Rhymes*, p. 75.

³³⁹ Audio of Sylvia Plath's BBC interview with Peter Orr (1962) available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faCsq4zF7wY> [date of access: 12-02-09]

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Anon, 'Russian Roulette', in *Newsweek*, (June 20th, 1966, 110), cited in Anita Helle, *The Unravelling Archive* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 169.

³⁴² Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973* (New York, Norton, 1999), p. 33.

³⁴³ Ibid, p. 61.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 75.

³⁴⁵ 'Reading the Late Poems', 2005.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

with Cixous's argument that broken language is an attempt to articulate, 'a desire for swollen belly, for language for blood.'³⁴⁷

One of Plath's most nauseatingly 'bloody' poems, 'Cut' has historically left audiences divided on the validity of its status as body writing. Whereas Marsha Bryant sees it as 'an over-the-top exercise in metaphor making',³⁴⁸ Langdon Hammer conversely sees the poem as existing in 'opposition between self and other within the larger unity of civilisation':³⁴⁹

The stain on your

Gauze Ku Klux Klan

Babushka

Darkens and tarnishes and when

The balled

Pulp of your heart

Confronts its small

Mill of silence

How you jump-

Trepanned veteran,

Dirty girl,

Thumb stump.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁷ Quoted in Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body: Towards an Understanding of L'écriture Feminine', in Elaine Showalter (ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 366.

³⁴⁸ 'Ariel's Kitchen', p. 231.

³⁴⁹ Langdon Hammer, 'Plath at War', in *Eye Rhymes*, p. 156.

³⁵⁰ *Ariel*, p. 25.

'Cut' was inspired by the common domestic incident of an accident while preparing food.³⁵¹ However, Plath responded with an excitable, dense poem that offers an abundance of interpretations. The three stanzas above demonstrates Plath's ability to layer image upon image to display a non-linear compression of emotive material. The lack of full stops helps to enhance this marrying of clause to clause, image to image. Hammer believes that the place of the injury – the kitchen – is salient as it is often regarded as a 'feminine space'³⁵² – an extension of the matriarch's body that provides food, nourishment and warmth. He adds that the kitchen also taps into Nicholas Roe's theories on kitchens as spaces that provide 'woman's work'.³⁵³ If so, it could resonate a valid point with regards to the argument against the social contract and the subsequent body writing that rebellion produces. Marsha Bryant agrees that the location is significant, and that Plath is mocking 'domestic delirium' with her 'bottle of pink fizz'³⁵⁴ – her thumb in the place of a kitchen cleaning product.³⁵⁵ The imagery supports the hypothesis – the 'trepanned veteran',³⁵⁶ Hammer believes, is an 'amputee', a second class citizen.³⁵⁷ Despite the noise and drama of the incident, the blood jet is futile, in meeting 'its Mill of silence',³⁵⁸ the protest lacks a consequence. The last three lines are extremely interesting, as the thumb shape-shifts from an amputee, to a menstruating girl, to finally settling on the literal thumb stump. Aside from the circularity of beginning and ending on the same image of the severed thumb, it also provides some relief from Plath's rising crescendo of ever-increasing unattractive metaphors, the scalped pilgrim, the Ku Klux

³⁵¹ 'Plath at War', p. 154.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Quoted in 'Plath at War', p. 154.

³⁵⁴ *Ariel*, p. 25.

³⁵⁵ 'Ariel's Kitchen', p. 230.

³⁵⁶ *Ariel*, p. 25.

³⁵⁷ 'Plath at War', p. 157.

³⁵⁸ *Ariel*, p. 25.

Clan member, the amputee, and so on. It is curious that Plath saves the 'dirty girl'³⁵⁹ for the climax, before the nightmare is shattered, and all that remains is a scored thumb, as though the worst possible image would be a menstruating female. Hammer sees a grotesque psychological violence in the line that justifies its proximity to the final line. He understands that the amputee is not simply a victim of war, but represents what, 'must surely be a castration, following Freud's view of female subjectivity, which Plath would have known'.³⁶⁰ The 'dirty girl'³⁶¹ taunt that refers to the menstrual girl, is layered over the top of the 'Trepanned victim'³⁶² – consequently representing the castrated phallus.

Hammer's theories of Plath's narrators as both aggressor and victim translates the narrator of 'Cut' as belonging to this category.³⁶³ In 'Daddy', for instance, we saw how Plath was both the foot in the boot, and the boot in the face.³⁶⁴ Hammer places 'Cut' as being written just twelve days after 'Daddy', and being 'closely related'.³⁶⁵ We might also consider how Plath's images alternate between victim and aggressor: the dead pilgrim against the Indian with an axe, for example, or the Ku Klux Klan member whose robes are soaked in the 'pink fizz'³⁶⁶ of the narrator's 'celebration'.³⁶⁷ Thematically, Plath indulges a contradiction of positive and negative throughout the poem, resulting in a confusion that even catches the narrator out, she asks of the soldiers 'whose side are they on?'³⁶⁸ This, Hammer concludes, is precisely the point. He reasons that to cut one hand with another is to make war with

³⁵⁹ Ibid

³⁶⁰ 'Plath at War', p. 157.

³⁶¹ *Ariel*, p. 25.

³⁶² Ibid

³⁶³ See section three of 'Plath at War'.

³⁶⁴ See section two 'Red Earth, Motherly Blood: Plath's Children'.

³⁶⁵ 'Plath at War', p. 154.

³⁶⁶ *Ariel*, p. 25.

³⁶⁷ Ibid

³⁶⁸ Ibid

yourself. The narrator makes the cut from which 'a million soldiers'³⁶⁹ flow and war is figuratively pouring out of the narrator's thumb, from herself and to herself. This connects to the theories of Kristeva, explored at the beginning of this section; in which the social contract can cause aggression to be inwardly directed. As Plath wrote 'Cut', Hammer estimated, she 'was already at war with herself'.³⁷⁰

Plath's inner war, as she recorded in her journals, had much to do with the contradiction between male and female values with regards to sexual practice:

I am obligated in a way to my family and to society (damn society anyway) to follow certain absurd and traditional customs- for my own security they tell me. I must therefore confine the major part of my life to one human being of the opposite sex. / I cannot gratify myself promiscuously and retain the respect of society (which is my pet devil)- and because I am a woman...³⁷¹

Plath's eroticism, Frances McCullough wrote in the foreword to her journals, was 'quite strong'.³⁷² Much of the material had to be edited out owing to the tone of her appetitive prurience. The sensuality of the female body had always fascinated Plath, she drew pictures of sexy women wearing bodices and high heels in the margins of her journal when she was just thirteen,³⁷³ and wrote that she would 'notice women's breasts and thighs

³⁶⁹ Ibid

³⁷⁰ 'Plath at War', p. 157.

³⁷¹ *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 36.

³⁷² Frances McCullough, 'Foreword' to Plath, 1982.

³⁷³ 'Living Color', p. 45.

with the calculation of a man choosing a mistress'.³⁷⁴ Connors discusses in her essay 'Living Color', Plath's inclination to write of her own body in terms of 'fecundity and fertility'.³⁷⁵

This propensity found voice in 'Ariel',³⁷⁶ a poem that took Plath 'to her roots as a poet'.³⁷⁷ The title piece of her collection, it was, Connors argues, invested with Plath's stylistic ambitions for her poetry; Plath wrote of her admiration for work that actualised an 'infusion of radiance: a shimmer of plasm that is life'.³⁷⁸ The poem, many critics believe, was inspired by the horse on which Plath was learning to ride – as the poet claimed that she wrote it, 'after a horse I am especially fond of'.³⁷⁹ However, her daughter Frieda Hughes quipped that this description is among 'the most understated commentaries available',³⁸⁰ and critics have pointed out that 'Ariel' is the 'spirit of poetry'.³⁸¹ 'Ariel' demonstrates alloyed imagery applied transversely over eleven lyrical stanzas that draw together some of the most sexual and somatic imagery of Plath's poetry. Connors writes that the arresting 'fearless rider of Ariel'- God's lioness- is amongst Plath's women that are 'capable of spilling blood'.³⁸² Vicariously, through the rider of 'Ariel' (alongside the flamed aired 'Lady Lazarus'), Connors speculates that Plath contributed to an important polemic:

Woolf's narrator suggests flaming the word 'feminist' out of existence, it seems as if Plath pulled it out of the ashes and resurrected it par excellence in her own

³⁷⁴ *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 23.

³⁷⁵ 'Living Color', p. 115.

³⁷⁶ *Ariel*, p. 33.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 121.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁷⁹ Frieda Hughes, 'Foreword' to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*

³⁸⁰ *Ibid*.

³⁸¹ Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: a Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Viking, 1989), p. 272.

³⁸² 'Living Color', p. 123.

‘statement of the generation’ voiced by the ‘blond bitch’ and directed to the entire system of patriarchal privilege.³⁸³

Again, throughout ‘Ariel’ we can see how the politics of paternal domination and body writing seem closely related. The poem opens ambiguously:

Stasis in Darkness

Then the substanceless blue

Pour of tor and distances.³⁸⁴

The ‘stasis’³⁸⁵ is suggestive immediately of a parity, a symmetry lurking in the dark; which connotes two human beings mirrored, conjoined sexually. It could also suggest the meeting of the sperm and the egg fusing in the dark confines of the womb, being charged into life by the ‘substanceless blue’³⁸⁶ bolt of energy. The ‘substanceless blue’ could also invoke received phrases of orgasmic energy as being ‘electric’; but this phrase could also allude to the Electro Convulsive Treatment to which Plath was subjected aged seventeen.³⁸⁷ The last two readings therefore compact the line with sentiments that involve capture, being violated and trapped. The ‘pour of tor and distances’³⁸⁸ creates a backdrop for the rider/ lover – a backdrop of immense freedom, of an archaic mountainous landscape and

³⁸³ ‘Living Color’, p. 123.

³⁸⁴ *Ariel*, p. 33.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid*

³⁸⁶ *Ibid*

³⁸⁷ *Bitter Fame*, p. 44.

³⁸⁸ *Ariel*, p. 33.

distance, setting her free from the prison of volts allowing her to be liberated and ‘ascend skyward’.³⁸⁹

God’s lioness,

How one we grow,

Pivot of heels and knees!– The furrow³⁹⁰

Here, with increasing strength, the rider takes control, ‘growing’ into her role, one that Susan Van Dyne sees as ‘a fiery transubstantiation of the female subject’,³⁹¹ which might suggest that an aggressive female sexual energy maps the poem. Plath is in her creative element, ‘expressed through figures that are emphatically corporeal and transgressively sexual’.³⁹² The narrator’s sexuality develops throughout the poem, from the teasing ‘Pivot of heels and knees’, until she performs a ‘rebellious striptease’,³⁹³ becoming Lady Godiva of the skies:

White

Godiva, I unpeel –

Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I

Foam to Wheat, a glitter of seas.

The child’s cry

Melts in the wall.

³⁸⁹ Susan R. Van Dyne, *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath’s Ariel Poems* (Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), p. 124.

³⁹⁰ *Ariel*, p. 33.

³⁹¹ *Revising Life*, p. 119.

³⁹² *Ibid.*

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

And I

Am the arrow³⁹⁴

The higher she climbs, the further away from earthly (patriarchal) rule she becomes, and correlatively, her own sense of bodily ownership increases, even to the degree of denial of maternity. Van Dyne writes 'Godiva is defiantly antisocial/ She is unashamed of her guilty pleasure in the exhilarating ride that eludes even the maternal obligations and ignores the child's cry that "melts in the wall".³⁹⁵ Oxymoronically, Plath's body foams 'to wheat'³⁹⁶ - a symbol of harvest and fertility- the maturity of her journey waxing full into the culmination of sexual purpose. Finally, climatically:

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.³⁹⁷

Van Dyne's analysis here complements the 'fertility' reading. She contends that the 'dew and sun union is sexual not suicidal'.³⁹⁸ Finally, the narrator is flung into the 'red/ Eye, the cauldron of morning'.³⁹⁹ Ted Hughes, Stevenson reports, was working 'intensively'⁴⁰⁰ on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* while Plath was preparing 'Ariel'. The Tibetan theory of death

³⁹⁴ *Ariel*, p. 33.

³⁹⁵ *Revising Life*, p. 122.

³⁹⁶ *Ariel*, p. 33.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid*

³⁹⁸ *Revising Life*, p. 119.

³⁹⁹ *Ariel*, p. 33.

⁴⁰⁰ Stevenson, 1989, p. 137.

holds that in order to be reborn, one must walk into a light; a red light should be avoided, however, as contact with it means being reborn to a 'loose' woman.⁴⁰¹ If this were to be accepted as a valid source of inspiration for the final line, then there are discernible traces of Plath's rebellion tied up in the symbolism. Certainly, ending the poem with rebirth, coming after conception/ birth, sex and death, would imbue the poem with an astonishingly concise and emotive portrayal of the life cycle in just eleven epigrammatic stanzas.

Sylvia Plath, Tracey Brain claims, regarded *Ariel* as a collection of hope and redemption, 'female regeneration and emergence'.⁴⁰² Unfortunately, with the posthumous reshuffling of the manuscript⁴⁰³ that was to become her legacy, she soon became, 'packaged as that of another doomed female genius'.⁴⁰⁴ Since her death in 1963, Plath has emerged from the criticism of her poetry being a 'local act'⁴⁰⁵ to being revered as an undisputable icon,⁴⁰⁶ a serious and concrete poet. Indubitably, some 'cults of Plath' base their fanaticism on her tragically premature death – reminiscent of the often ghoulish followings of other cultural icons such as Kurt Cobain, Marilyn Monroe and Ian Curtis.⁴⁰⁷ However, Plath in life spoke to a wide audience for the reasons explored in this dissertation (as well as for others beyond the reach of its rubric). Why have Plath's words endured against the tides of other strong writers, writers who have measured themselves against Plath? Despite the poet having been hailed as the mouthpiece of unruly adolescent girls, and denigrated for her

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Tracey Brain, 'Unstable Manuscripts: The Indeterminacy of the Plath Cannon', in *The Unravelling Archive*, p. 17.

⁴⁰³ *Ariel*, 'Foreword'.

⁴⁰⁴ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1984), p. 68.

⁴⁰⁵ Janet Badia, 'The "Priestess" and her "Cult": Plath's Confessional Poetics and the Mythology of Female Readers', in *The Unravelling Archive*, pp. 170-73.

⁴⁰⁶ Anita Helle, 'Reading Plath Photographs: In and Out of the Museum, in *The Unravelling Archive*, p. 182. Helle discusses our 'photographic obsession with Plath demonstrates celebrity gaze.'

⁴⁰⁷ 'Reading Plath Photographs', p. 182.

'college girl' writings,⁴⁰⁸ she achieved a success that few writers, male or female, have surpassed.⁴⁰⁹

Perhaps some of those unforgiving, less tempered criticisms rose from misunderstanding - indeed, it is possible that Plath reveals through her poetry facets of female experience that are visible only through the 'hysteria' of adolescence, and become subdued again through adulthood. Through the lens of Kristevan and Lacanian theory, however, this dissertation has explored Plath's ability to illustrate vividly her own experience of growing into an adult immersed in Western culture through the 1950s and 60s. Much of that experience, documented through the media of biography, story and poetry, charts a territory that seems supremely legible to recent psychoanalysis. How far the puzzle pieces of psychoanalytical theory discussed in this dissertation can be said to form part of Plath's actual psyche, the matrix of personality, is clearly debatable. Plath was acutely conscious of her audience,⁴¹⁰ however, and sharply aware of developments in psychological theory, as well as treatments for psychic disorder.⁴¹¹ While this fact supports psychological readings, it also creates a problem when we survey a writer for 'genuine' points of poetic reference.

Plath was not shy of expressing her politics, or emotions, and she was certainly not idle in committing salient aspects of herself in this respect to paper. We have a wealth of material that enables commentators such as Tracey Brain, Langdon Hammer, Christina

⁴⁰⁸'The Priestess and her Cult', pp. 159-81. Badia investigates how certain films such as '10 things I hate about you' and 'Natural Born Killers', use Plath's books as props that underscore their character's 'immaturity' and 'college girl mentality'.

⁴⁰⁹Ibid, p. 163 for sales figures for *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar*. Also see Yehuda Koren & Eilat Negev, *Lover of Unreason: Assia Wevill, Sylvia Plath's Rival and Ted Hughes's Doomed Love* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), p. 67.

⁴¹⁰Tracey Brain, 2007, p. 25. Brain claims that Plath was well aware that her work would be archived, and that she was aware of her impending fame. Ted Hughes supports this in the foreword to Plath's journals; he writes that Plath's work sometimes suffered under the preoccupation with her perceived audience; she, 'wrote for publication'. Hughes, Foreword', in Plath, 1982.

⁴¹¹*The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 280.

Britzolakis and a generation of post-Lacanian critics, palpably to feel the contours of the artist's life, and to offer sensitive and lucid hypotheses with regard to the poet's work. However, several critics considered in this dissertation have adopted psychoanalytical approaches in order to read into Plath's work the notes of polemic and aggression that seem to pulse through the pages. Poems such as 'Ariel' that have been censured for their furious confessional bent⁴¹² – often seen as instinctive and unintellectual – disclose deeper, more satisfying readings when psychoanalysis is deployed. Plath's rich, complex sense of physical existence can be better appreciated when we take into account theories of body writing. Similarly, we recognize her careful, articulate rebellion when we consider her complicated, recursive relation to the social contract. Theories of chora also play a part in revealing in certain of Plath's poems, such as 'Medusa', a subterranean strength that is perhaps obscured in socio-historical readings. Plath's words were not usually drawn in response to fashions or historical events,⁴¹³ but inspired by singular experience, experience of the skin, of what it has lost – and what it can gain.

⁴¹²'The Priestess and her Cult', p. 174. Badia describes the kind of criticism Plath's work receives, such as Irving Howe's opinion that Ariel demonstrated, 'self-exposure, self-assault, self-revelation'.

⁴¹³ Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (London: Associated University Presses, 2002), p. 168.

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