

Imagining the Mad Woman

Applying concepts of the narrative imagination,
psychoanalytic and feminist theory to *The Bell Jar*
and selected poems by Sylvia Plath



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Chapter 1

Sketching the bigger picture: the rationale behind the study

1.1 Introduction

Although Sylvia Plath's writing merits acclaim based solely on literary strengths, this position is often awarded to her life or, perhaps more accurately, her suicide. Accordingly, and due to her status as a confessional writer, numerous (if not most) analyses of Plath pay much attention to her struggle with depression and her death. It is therefore not surprising that psychoanalytic theory is a favoured approach to Plath (as in Rose, 1994:221-259). In applying psychoanalytic concepts (especially those found in the work of Sigmund Freud) in tracing the influence of her actual as well as symbolic/mythological father and mother, this study is therefore not original in its theoretical approach. However, by incorporating feminist theory in the application of psychoanalytic concepts, this dissertation creates a fresh perspective. Of course, feminism is often applied to examine the pressures which Western societal standards exacted on Plath as a woman, wife and mother (see for example Narbeshuber, 2004:185-203). Nonetheless, this study explores a lesser-known avenue by weaving together these two theoretical strands. Due to the nature of their work (which similarly integrates psychoanalytic and feminist theory, while also examining the influence of language on social gender roles and on women's writing), the so-called "French feminists" (Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva) will be of specific interest. This theoretical dualism can also be traced in several of the key Plath authorities who are referenced in the study, such as Christina Britzolakis, Lynda Bundtzen and Jacqueline Rose.

In addition to psychoanalytic and feminist theory, there is another conceptual framework that is of great importance to this study, namely American moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum's notion of the narrative imagination and its role in liberal education. Nussbaum's line of thought is arguably of more *practical* (as opposed to theoretical) significance to the study of Plath's work. Due to the limited length and therefore scope of this dissertation, a lengthy discussion of Nussbaum's hypothesis cannot be attempted. However, a brief outline is important, as it affords a larger backdrop against which an otherwise rather isolated intellectual pursuit could still prove to fulfil an important role in education. The use of the narrative imagination could also prove of use in overcoming obstacles which feminism and psychoanalysis cannot overcome on their own. Therefore, preceding an analysis of

The Bell Jar and selected poems by Plath, a brief explanation is provided to clarify the importance of such an approach to our education system.

1.2 Liberal education and world citizens

One of Martha Nussbaum's chief concerns in her 1997 publication entitled *Cultivating Humanity: A classical defence of reform in liberal education*, is the process of "cultivating humanity" in learners in order for them to develop into "world citizens". According to Nussbaum (1997:52), the idea of world citizenship or *kosmopolitēs* can be traced back to the classic Greek philosopher Diogenes. It was thereafter adopted and adapted by the Stoics who argued that we all live "in two communities – the local communities of our birth, and the community of human argument and aspiration that 'is truly great and truly common.'" Basically, the latter community is "the source of our moral and social obligations [...because] 'we should regard all human beings as our fellow citizens and local residents'" (Nussbaum, 1997:52). Nussbaum briefly sketches how this concept was carried over from the Stoics to various philosophers and that it is now at the core of (American) democracy. Nevertheless, she is equally adroit in pointing out that this is not an exclusively Western concept but that it can also be found in the works of Oriental and African philosophers (such as Rabindranath Tagore and Kwame Anthony Appiah). Thus, the idea(l) of world citizenship is as widespread in its conception as it is in its purpose.

Indeed, the ethical principles of most religious and moral systems can be allied with Nussbaum's (1997:59) summary of the essential duty of a world citizen: "One should always behave so as to treat with respect the dignity of reason and moral choice in every human being, no matter where that person was born, no matter what that person's rank or gender or status may be". Hence, if we observe this duty when considering Plath as both an individual and a writer, we would not condemn her as yet another "mad woman in the attic" who selfishly "took away" her children's mother. Nor would we, in respect for the dignity of her reason, treat her with a patronising sympathy. I mention the latter as we should not fall into the pat, objectifying kind of pity which Chinua Achebe accused Joseph Conrad of displaying towards Africans in

Heart of Darkness. Two-dimensional pity is not what Nussbaum had in mind. Instead, world citizenship involves an active questioning of one's own culture and standards (which admittedly Conrad succeeded in doing in the novella) in order to actively develop an understanding of what it means to be the other person (which would appear to be Conrad's failing). This process of "cultivating humanity" entails both recognising similarities and respecting differences between oneself and the other, which results from a critical examination of the worldviews of both parties.

Nussbaum grants that certain students may respond adversely or defensively to this process because they subconsciously perceive it as a threat to the legitimacy and stability of their identities. However, she is quick to point out that in order "[t]o be a citizen of the world, one does not [...] need to give up local affiliations, which can frequently be a source of great richness in life" (Nussbaum, 1997:60). Far from casting doubt on one's identity and detracting from its authenticity, engaging in the process of (Socratic) self-examination and adopting an attitude of receptive cosmopolitanism can in fact affirm and strengthen one's own identity. To better grasp this, a closer inspection of the necessary capacities of a world citizen is necessary.

1.3 Perceiving the bigger picture with narrative imagination

To give a short contextualisation: Nussbaum outlines a triad of basic capacities "essential to the cultivation of humanity". The first capacity comprises leading a Socratic, "examined life", which entails, *inter alia*, compelling "people to question their prejudices by making them consider how difficult it is to give good reasons for many of our deeply held beliefs" (Nussbaum, 1997:57). Often this involves a certain measure of unsettlement or even shock, as the ancient Athenians experienced in response to Diogenes (who *chose* to live in poverty and masturbated in public). The second capacity involves people seeing themselves "as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern" (Nussbaum, 1997:9-10). In other words, as intimated above, this would entail realising that there are certain traits, emotions, capacities, and so forth which are shared by *all* human beings. The

third capacity differs from the others in that it does not necessarily have a rational or factual basis but rather hinges on the human imagination.

Basically, narrative imagination “means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to *understand the emotions and wishes and desires* that someone so placed might have” (Nussbaum, 1997:10-11) [emphasis added]. Thus, the narrative imagination is explicitly founded on perceiving the other person’s *internal* world along with his/her external circumstances. It is at this point that the significance of narrative art¹ comes to the fore, because it “has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist’s interest – with involvement and sympathetic understanding, with anger at our society’s refusals of visibility” (Nussbaum, 1997:88). As such, applying narrative imagination to the arts could go some way towards evoking a sense of moral indignation in students at the social injustices suffered by figures otherwise “invisible” to them. Clearly, this acquired insight could be especially beneficial to South African educational institutions, where students come from various racial, cultural and economic backgrounds and do not necessarily have the skills or understanding necessary to function in a multicultural environment. Nussbaum (1997:90) contends that literature would be of particular import in the development of such insight, because it “both inspires intense concern with the fate of characters and defines those characters as containing a rich inner life, not all of which is open to view; in the process the reader learns to have respect for the hidden contents of that inner world, seeing its importance in defining a creature as fully human”. Furthermore, literature has the potential to lead to social change, because

[i]t is the political promise of literature that it can transport us, while remaining ourselves, into the life of another, revealing similarities but also profound differences between the life and the thought of that other and myself and making them comprehensible, or at least more nearly comprehensible. (Nussbaum, 1997:111)

Due to this particular potential of literature, Nussbaum argues that virtually any work of literature can stimulate personal change and, on a larger scale, social change. Indeed, this would explain why writers from various cultures and classes (such as

¹The term art here refers to all forms of art: literature, music, painting, sculpture, film, and so forth.

Charles Dickens, Athol Fugard and Ralph Ellison) have felt compelled to “tell their story” in the hope of social change.

While Nussbaum is evidently referring to fiction or drama here, the same awakening of compassion and understanding takes place when one considers (certain examples of) poetry. This would most probably be the case with lyrical and confessional poetry, where the explicit subject is the inner world of the individual. Nonetheless, other forms of poetry, through the poet as well as the reader’s narrative imagination, also penetrate and portray the circumstances and psyches of others; for example, William Blake’s “The Chimney Sweep” (from “Songs of Experience”) and Robert Burns’s “To a Mouse”.

The latter is actually a fine example of the “cultivation of humanity”, as the speaker ponders on the life of a mouse after he accidentally “turned up” her nest with his plough. He engages in Socratic self-examination in questioning his own values and actions, which makes him “truly sorry Man’s dominion/Has broken Nature’s social union”, a sentiment which would further indicate the spirit of connectedness inherent in world citizenship. Although the mouse is of a different species, the speaker also exhibits the second capacity in recognising mutual concerns that he shares with his “fellow-mortal” (such as the struggle for food and shelter in winter). More than this, he engages his narrative imagination in assigning to the mouse an internal life of emotions (such as panic, grief and pain) and aspirations to “promis’d joy”. In addition to recognising similarities, the speaker is careful not to lose sight of the differences between them; for example, the mouse is in harmony with nature while he is not, and the mouse lives in the present while the speaker must live in constant fear of the future. Simple though this poem may thus appear to be, it is an exercise in more fully comprehending what the existence of another may entail.

As rudimentary as such an exercise may sound, Nussbaum is quick to add that the narrative imagination comprises the same amount of critical thinking as she would have one apply to one’s own life, worldview and traditions. This prudence holds especially true for narrative art, because the reader/viewer’s imaginative response rests largely on what its creator intends to demonstrate. Our encounters with figures we are only “acquainted” with through our narrative imagination is also similar to our actual encounters with others, as either can produce both positive feelings (such as

understanding, sympathy, admiration, and so forth) and negative reactions (such as dislike, condemnation or even contempt). Still, Nussbaum cautions that one should first attempt to understand the position of the other before forming any judgement, “since we do not know what we are judging until we see the meaning of an action as the person intends it [or] the meaning of a speech as it expresses something of importance in the context of that person’s history and social world” (Nussbaum, 1997:11). It would seem that these words of caution are of special significance to Plath, whose life (specifically her suicide) and work have at times been criticised even before a comprehensive understanding of their cultural and historical contexts was reached.

Before moving away from world citizenship and the narrative imagination, Nussbaum’s (1997:94) response to criticism levelled against her theory is of interest here:

Literature does not transform society single-handed [sic...]. Certain ideas about others may be grasped for a time and yet not be acted upon, so powerful are the forces of habit and the entrenched structures of privilege and convention. Nonetheless, the artistic form makes its spectator perceive, for a time, the invisible people of their world – at least a beginning of social justice.

Thus, this dissertation does not advocate that the world will be transformed simply by teaching Plath in a manner that is mindful of developing the narrative imagination and world citizenship in students. Rather, teaching her work in this manner may *potentially* lead students (and hopefully even more seasoned academics) to a deeper understanding of her life and work, as well as developing insight into and concern for the lives of others who may be similar to her in some way. Due to the scope of this study, Nussbaum’s concepts are not actively applied to Plath’s work, except for the very last section where it is applied briefly and retroactively. However, it should be understood that the study as a whole is undertaken in the spirit of world citizenship and with these concepts in mind. Furthermore, it is hoped that the reader of this thesis will be able to employ his/her own narrative imagination and personal experiences in achieving a new understanding of Plath’s work.

1.4 The problems of applying psychoanalytic and feminist theory to Plath and her work

As alluded to in the introduction, a psychoanalytic or feminist study of Plath is hardly an academic oddity. This is partly because her life and background lend themselves to such an analysis. Yet, this could perhaps be said of any female artist who reached adulthood in that particular cultural period – 1950s America – and was prone to depression. To better understand this, one has to look at the background and influence of psychoanalysis:

A picture of the human mind as a unified whole that can achieve full awareness of itself has been central to western thought since the seventeenth century. The 'cogito' or thinking self defines our humanity and our civility, our difference from animals chained to blind nature and uncontrollable instincts. In the early part of the twentieth century, the assurance of that self-description was disturbed by Sigmund Freud's book, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), which described a discovery that would become the centrepiece of a new discipline called psychoanalysis. (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998:119)

This momentous discovery was that of the unconscious – refuge for all those instinctual drives which must be repressed in order for one to be accepted in society. Freud initially caused quite a furore amongst the bourgeoisie by uncovering and delving into the previously clandestine reaches of the human psyche, especially by exposing the often incestuous sexual desires which lurked there. However,

[b]y the time Plath came into contact with Freudian thought, psychoanalytic doctrine and therapy had been absorbed thoroughly into both popular and high American culture and might be understood, even when it was attacked, as a hegemonic ideology for defining both individual and family psychology. (Bundtzen, 2006:37)

What differentiates Plath then, along with other poets such as Anne Sexton, is her *awareness* of her mental condition. In fact, it was Plath's therapist at McLean's, Dr Ruth Beuscher, who encouraged her to "explain herself to herself in Freudian terms and to fashion herself as a patient, an intellectual and artist by applying Freudian and other psychoanalytic doctrines and therapies" (Bundtzen, 2006:37). Furthermore, Plath actively employs several Freudian concepts in her writing (even on an academic level as she investigates the uncanny and the *Döppelgänger* in her thesis on the double in Dostoevsky (Britzolakis, 2006:113)).

Together with this encouragement, her self-reflexivity and intelligence meant that Plath could now incorporate Freudian concepts into her social defence mechanism. Edward Butscher (2003:125) summarises her encounter with psychotherapy at McLean Hospital (after her suicide attempt in 1953) as follows: “[T]he entire Freudian apparatus became another feature of the mask, a sensible extension of the sensible college girl’s enlightened vision of the sensible world.” Thus, Plath found in her poetry a site where she could consciously explore certain psychoanalytic hypotheses, as opposed to her poetry baring the secrets of her unconscious against her will. Accordingly, Bundtzen (2006: 38) remarks: “Plath often anticipates the psychoanalytic critic’s strategies by making them her own, leaving the critic with little to do but expand upon ideas that are already *planted* in the text” [emphasis added]. In this way, she even obfuscates psychoanalytic efforts – in the words of Christina Britzolakis (2006:7) “[Plath’s] self-reflexivity continually complicates and interferes with the possibility of a psychoanalytic reading: Plath interrogates psychoanalysis at the very moment when it purports to interrogate her.” Therefore, we must be careful when analysing her work and even her letters and journals to keep in mind that they are at times self-consciously constructed. While Michel Foucault argues in his essay “What Is an Author?” that “the author” is basically a cultural and critical construct (Bundtzen, 2006:46), Plath could be said to take this construction one step further as “Sylvia Plath the writer” and “Sylvia Plath the woman and social being” could be said to be personae she wilfully constructed. This does not mean that we cannot form a fair interpretation of her oeuvre as a comprehensive body of work, but rather that we should be careful not to equate our interpretation with her life. Although I would not go as far as Jacqueline Rose (1994:221) in proclaiming that “Plath is a fantasy” for this reason, I would agree that we should understand that not all of her writing is purely autobiographical, but rather keep in mind that she created some (if not all) of her poems and fiction with the goal of creating or questioning specific images of “Sylvia Plath”. In addition, we should pay heed to Rose’s (1991:166-182) warning and demonstration that authors often project their theories onto Plath and present their projection as the “actual” Plath.

Furthermore, in terms of feminism, Plath was acutely aware of what her life as a *woman* implied and this was a source of immense frustration and discordance in her personal and emotional life. She was all too conscious of what was expected of her

as a woman (relatively well-read, but happy to be “pregnant and in the kitchen”, and subservient to her husband – cf. Plath, 2000:444 for example), and, while she often rejected these social values, she would also use them as further perimeters within which to construct the image she wanted to present to the world. As such, Plath is something of a reluctant feminist as she both rebelled against what “everybody and all my white-haired old mothers want[ed]” (Plath, 2000:433) her to do; yet she also struggled against her own Puritan sensitivity and longed to be a wife and mother. Similarly, we can also trace certain “masculine” responses to the female body (hence, also her own body) in Plath’s writing: a wish to beautify and preserve it, coupled with a great fear and horror of its abjection and functions. Here, Kristeva’s insights become invaluable and will be discussed at length. Plath also acts in a manner which is in patriarchal society associated with men by engaging in processes of rationalisation, abstraction and sexual assertion, and in constantly speaking out through her writing. In this regard, Cixous and Irigaray will be consulted, especially since Plath evolved from a writer who silenced or distorted her “inner voice” (she was often frustrated with the superficiality of her earlier writing) to a style of writing which was unique and even *écriture féminine*.

While these references to feminism are discussed in further detail in subsequent chapters, this brief reference provides an indication of an additional challenge for anyone attempting to form an equitable feminist interpretation of Plath’s work. Not only does her work evolve and change, the themes and desires expressed therein vacillate and at times form apparently paradoxical cycles (for example, the theme of the repressive father which is repeatedly addressed yet never fully resolved). Furthermore, her conflicting aspirations to and rejections of various aspects of womanhood provide a further complication for a feminist analysis. This challenge could be partly ascribed to a concept in psychoanalytic theory, namely the question of the “divided self”, which, although inherent to all human beings, is especially prominent in Plath’s work.

Rivkin & Ryan (1998:119) indicate that the second self is formed as individuals are taught from childhood to repress or sublimate their sexual and aggressive instincts, and to moderate their initial grandiose sense of self. As “the conversion of animal into civil behaviour” the process of repression is fundamental to the continuance of

civilisation. However, “such repression creates what might be called a second self, a stranger within, a place where all that cannot for one reason or another be expressed or realized in civil life takes up residence” (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998:119). According to Freud, this leads to “uncanny” feelings of doubleness – a sensation that “something strange coexists with what is most familiar inside ourselves” (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998:119). As the term implies, the notion of the “divided self” thus involves a kind of division in a person’s identity, and this could lead to the coexistence of conceptual and emotional paradoxes within one individual. Clearly, this personal dualism would be especially marked in the women of a society like that of 1950s America. While Freud might claim that the unconscious is the chief cause of this phenomenon, in Plath the divided self transpires in numerous forms. These various embodiments are dynamic and interrelated in her poetry and fiction, so that they do not remain either positive or negative, while also reciprocally influencing one another. There are three major dualistic “trends” (for lack of a better word) into which these numerous instances of the divided self can be divided; namely perfection and imperfection, uniqueness and universality, and passivity and activity/assertiveness. Most of the aspects of the divided self recur in several (and some in all) of these trends. To better illustrate this notion, a brief mention of the specific aspects of the divided self identified thus far in Plath’s work can be provided:

1. Depression and longing for death versus bliss and a love of life.
2. Mother versus daughter.
3. Passionate, feeling but intellectually inferior woman versus ascetic, intellectual virgin/spinster.
4. Horror at abject motherhood versus longing for and celebration of motherhood
5. Isolation from society and other human beings versus being a part of humanity and empathising with others.
6. The momentous/symbolic versus the everyday/mundane.
7. Perfectionist versus flawed human with a horror of perfection.
8. Victim or patient versus dissenter/avenger or healer/saviour.
9. Living in the past versus striving towards the future.

Although these aspects are juxtaposed as converse pairs, it is important to keep in mind that each aspect presents something closer to a continuum (for example, life can be celebrated in death; the past influences the present as well as the future; and a woman can be both a mother and daughter at the same time, or she may exist as neither at a specific moment). For this reason, it may be more useful to conceive of the aspects of the divided self as analogous to Irigaray's conception of the female sex as a multifarious union (cf. Irigaray, 1985b:28-29 for example). The aspects are also reminiscent of Cixous's conception of the "couples" on which the gender dichotomy is traditionally based (with the first aspect in each "couple" relating to masculinity and the second to femininity):

Activity/passivity
 Sun/moon
 Culture/Nature
 Day/Night
 Father/Mother
 Head/Heart
 Intelligible/Palpable
 Logos/Pathos
 Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress
 Matter, concave, ground – where steps are taken, holding- and dumping-ground
 (Cixous, 1975:579)

While Cixous used these "couples" to show how the feminine is always defined negatively and in opposition to the masculine, they could be interpreted in a more positive light in terms of the divided self. This is because the pairs also often function as doubles for one another with one aspect reflecting and inverting the other. In this manner, each half of a pair relies on the other for its fulfilment of meaning. Indeed, Plath's Master's thesis entitled "The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's novels" testifies to her avid interest in the duality of human nature. In it she states:

Dostoevsky implies that recognition of our various mirror images and reconciliation with them will save us from disintegration. This reconciliation [...entails] a creative acknowledgment of the fundamental duality of man; it involves a constant courageous acceptance of the eternal paradoxes within the universe and within ourselves. (in Butscher, 2003:159)

Likewise, the divided self does not imply that one of the selves is "better" than the other, but rather that each aspect is necessary and that all must be embraced in a Jungian manner as vital and interwoven parts of identity. For the time being, suffice

it to say that the apparent “divisions” which Plath consciously explores in her work makes the psychoanalyst’s task all the more trying.

As a possible solution to our interpretive dilemma, Rivkin & Ryan (1998:125-126) focus our attention on the father of psychoanalysis’ theory of literary interpretation:

Freud notices that literary texts are like dreams; they embody or express unconscious material in the form of complex displacements and condensations. The same rule that he prescribes for dream interpretation, however, also applies to literature: it is not a direct translation of the unconscious into symbols that “stand for” unconscious meanings. [...] nonetheless [this transmutation] permits it [the unconscious] to achieve release or expression. Literature, as fiction, might even be said to demonstrate these very processes of representation-through-indirection at work.

Thus, a possible solution to the various challenges would be to view Plath’s work as a representation of these *processes* of a human psyche, rather than as parts of *her* psyche which will form a complete picture when pieced together. Hence, instead of applying psychoanalysis in an attempt to reconstruct a whole and coherent hypothesis which attempts to capture the proverbial “mind, heart and soul” of the individual named Sylvia Plath, her work should be considered as analogous to “dreams” which could be interpreted in order to understand *some* of her psychological aspects.

For the same reasons, Britzolakis objects to the term “confessional” being applied to Plath’s work. Due to the recurrent appraisal of Plath’s work as “confessional”, Britzolakis (1999:7) contends that “for all their celebrity her texts remain underread.” This entails that her works are often read as simply “autobiographical” (like so many pages from a true-to-life journal), as opposed to critics appraising them as *constructed* works of art. Instead, “Britzolakis proposes a reading of Plath’s work on the level of the *allegorical*, which [...] situates Plath’s work nearer to fiction than testimony” (Anderson, 2007:80). Plath’s writing thus becomes allegorical of *certain* states: emotional, mental, familial and so forth; as opposed to exact replicas of *her* emotional, mental, familial and other states.

However, such an approach may lead to a vague and unsatisfactory theory. In order to form a more holistic picture, one would have to turn back to feminism to better comprehend the cultural pressures placed on Plath and how these contributed to specific aspects of the divided self. Furthermore, by engaging in critical Socratic self-examination; by recognising the common concerns which we share with Plath as

well as by respecting the differences between us; and finally by employing the narrative imagination, we would be able to arrive at a more balanced view of Plath and her work. Thus, while psychoanalytic theory would still play a role in studies about Plath, it should be utilised in conjunction with other theories and concepts to arrive at a more comprehensive analysis. Therefore, while this study aims to be coherent, it does not claim to be fully comprehensive in terms of Plath and her work.

Chapter 2

Being the beekeeper's daughter and the rabbit catcher's wife

2.1 “Electra on Azalea Path”: contextualising the Oedipus complex²

While the Oedipus complex as originally applied to boys is familiar enough, an abbreviated overview of the Oedipus complex as found in girl children may be necessary (in fact it was Jung, not Freud, who coined the term “Electra complex”). It is important to keep in mind that the “Oedipus complex is the *repressed* ideas that pertain to the family drama of any primary constellation of figures within which the child must find its place. It is not the *actual* family situation or the conscious desire it evokes” (Mitchell, 2000:63) [original emphasis]. Thus, the complex exists in the individual’s unconscious and hence he/she would not be (fully) aware of it. So, what does the Oedipus complex imply? To quote Freud (1931:4611) himself, The Oedipus complex entails:

[...] that phase of children's libidinal development which is characterised by the normal Oedipus complex [in which] we find that they are tenderly attached to the parent of the opposite sex, while their relation to the other parent is predominantly hostile. In the case of boys the explanation is simple. A boy's mother was his first love-object; she remains so, and, as his feelings for her become more passionate and he understands more of the relation between father and mother, the former inevitably appears as a rival. With little girls it is otherwise. For them, too, the mother was the first love-object; how then does a little girl find her way to her father? How, when and why does she detach herself from her mother?

Maude Ellman (1994:12) succinctly summarises Freud’s answer to these questions as follows:

The little boy relinquishes the mother because he fears castration at the father’s hands, having attributed the absence of the penis in the girl to such a punishment. The little girl, by contrast, blames her “castration “ on her mother’s stinginess or incapacity, appealing to her father for a baby as a penis-substitute. [...]he little girl’s trajectory is less straightforward [than the boy’s], for she must find a way of identifying with the mother she loved and spurned in order to resign herself to femininity, with all the disempowerment entailed.

For Freud then, the Electra complex is normative for all women and is based on the girl’s physical desire to possess her father and his penis as substitute for the one she

² In terms of the format of this study, an outline of theoretical concepts is provided at the beginning of each chapter before applying these concepts in the text analysis. Thus, a brief outline of those relevant notions in psychoanalysis and feminism is provided before discussing these in terms of *The Bell Jar* and selected poems by Plath. The division of these two parts of each section is hereafter denoted with an asterisk (*).

believes her mother deprived her of. While the girl does have a brief “narcissistic moment” in infancy when she believes that she will simply grow a penis later, her ultimate fate is one of literal and symbolic phallic inferiority. The most she can do as a girl child is hope that her father will “confer ‘honorary boy’ status on her and thus raise her out of the subordinate fate of women in a patriarchal society” (Swiontkowski, 2003:34). However, this presents problems in terms of being considered a “freak” in the eyes of society and even this wish still affirms the father’s ultimate power. As this aspiration is ultimately left unfulfilled, she then longs instead for a baby with her father and begins to identify with her mother again. According to Freud, there is nothing more a woman can do other than resigning herself to her permanent state of female disempowerment which can most effectively be countered (though never totally) by securing a husband and having a (preferably male) child with him. Therefore, the only viable option would be to consider one’s position as “the second sex”.

Plath (2000:54) herself lamented this sexual discrepancy in her diaries: “I dislike being a girl, because as such I must come to realize that I cannot be a man.” And what choice did she feel this left her with? She continues, “I must pour my energies through the direction and force of my mate.” Plath realised that, as a woman artist, her writing would in all probability not be met with the same esteem as that of a male author of comparable talent. As with all superstructures in patriarchal society, the symbolic father never admits the daughter-woman figure into his elevated ranks – it is only the son-man who is awarded this honour after allegorically defying his father during the Oedipal phase. In the words of philosopher Georg Simmel (in Horney, 2000:36):

The requirements of art, patriotism, morality in general and social ideas in particular, correctness in practical judgement and objectivity in theoretical knowledge, the energy and the profundity of life – all these categories which belong as it were in their form and their claims to humanity in general, but in their actual historical configuration they are masculine throughout. [...Basically,] in the history of our race the equation objective = masculine is a valid one.

Simmel goes on to say that this equation is not necessarily due to the biological and thus inherent differences between the genders, but suggests that it could be the product of male thought and domination (although he finally leaves the case “undetermined” in his essay). In addition to this, if we were to follow Jacques Lacan,

Irigaray and Cixous's line of thought, language is part of the "symbolic order" – that realm of order, abstraction and rationality which can only be attained once one has rejected the maternal in favour of the paternal parent (cf. Birch, 1992:50-52). Indeed, in their view, it is language itself which is responsible for constructing the concept or figure of "woman" as it is – another inversion of the essentialist biologism of Freud. The daughter – who must emulate the mother – is thus by inference incapable of mastering the symbolic order, which is both logocentric and phallogocentric, in the manner her male counterparts can, as she is both constructed by it and ultimately excluded from it. To quote Irigaray on the subject: "When a girl begins to talk, she is already unable to speak of / to herself. Being exiled in man's speech, she is already unable to auto-affect. Man's language separates her from her mother and from other women, and she speaks it without speaking in it" (in Ives, 2007:35).

Hence, women are effectively silenced (or made "invisible" in Nussbaum's words), especially when it comes to expressing their thoughts in the public realm. The best a woman artist could expect was the condescending proverbial pat on the head and/or to be consigned to an exclusively female audience (such as the readers of the *Mademoiselle*, *Woman's Day* and *Ladies' Home Journal* in which several of Plath's short stories and poems were published over the years). Catherine King (1992:17) seems to be following Cixous's line of thought in *Sorties* in her elucidation of this refutation by the patriarchal powers-that-be of female artistry (and indeed all things feminine):

Important also is the masculine control of the forms of knowledge and values which link notions of gender difference, and the supposed relative weakness of women, to a cluster of binary concepts used to "make sense of" the world. Such couples as: public versus private; nature versus culture; body versus mind; reason versus emotion, have formed dualities, in which women always take the characteristics of the subordinate, dependent "partner", which is made to appear opposite. This characterizing of women as body, emotion, nature and private has been used to place women's art-making in connection with the home, the family and our supposedly caring duties. This dualistic thinking has also extended into binaries used in the evaluation of art [...], which can be added to the basic dichotomies to create evaluations of women making things, regarded as emotional, sensuous, colourful, ornamental, derivative and decorative.

The only truly effective ways of evading this bias would be for the woman author to adopt a male pseudonym (such as Mary Ann Evans/"George Eliot" and Amandine

Aurore Lucile Dupin/"George Sand" did) or to be known by her initials only (such as Catherine Lucille/"C L" Moore and Susan Eloise/"S E" Hinton). Of course, even when she chose to write under a pseudonym ("Victoria Lucas"), Plath was always writing as a woman. Moreover, in writing poetry, Plath's chances of being admitted and recognised as a worthy writer in all the senses of the word were even slighter.

Dinah Birch (1992:46-47) explains why and how the genre of poetry, due to its especially "privileged and prestigious position within western literary tradition", was virtually inaccessible to female and black poets prior to the and even during the second half of the twentieth century. Despite the rise of modern poetry and its free form, the exigent art of poetry was still thought to demand the technical mastery of form, rhyme, meter, etc – talents of lingual abstraction still largely (albeit perhaps unconsciously) associated with males at the time when Plath began writing. Moreover, poetry was still seen as closely linked to an intimate knowledge of classical culture and poets, particularly Homer, Virgil, Horace and Theocritus – all *male* poets, Birch succinctly observes, with Sappho meriting little more than (if at all) a mention in most tertiary curricula. The title of Plath's first collection of poetry – *The Colossus* (1960) – is thus a "reference to the classical myth of a giant statue of Apollo, Greek god of poetry and music, that was said to have straddled the entrance to the ancient port of Rhodes" and thereby Plath "was careful to establish her right of entry to a cultural territory guarded by a divinity she saw as broken but still formidable" (Birch, 1992:47). Indeed, as will be detailed in the more in-depth discussion of her work following this section, the image of the broken statue-god-father would dominate her poetry and life in ways other than simply thematically. For the moment, it is necessary to turn back to the development of the girl as the "second sex".

Contemporary psychoanalysts have not discarded the "penis-envy" theory which lies at the route of this inferior position and the disempowerment which it ultimately entails for women, but they have reinterpreted the notions for their symbolic significance. The father's phallus is no longer seen only as a physical organ and symbol, but rather as a signifier of the cultural and economic advantage which men have in patriarchal society. Irigaray (1985b:51) refers to Karen Horney in defining penis envy as

a defensive symptom protecting the woman from the political, economic, social, and cultural condition that is hers at the same time that it prevents her from contributing effectively to the transformation of her allotted fate. "Penis envy" translates woman's resentment and jealousy at being deprived of the advantages, especially the sexual advantages, reserved for men alone: "autonomy," "freedom," "power," and so on; but it also expresses her resentment at having been largely excluded, as she has been for centuries, from political, social, and cultural responsibilities. [original emphasis]

As such, penis envy is thus doubly disempowering; firstly in what it represents and secondly as it (as acknowledgement of phallic superiority) serves as a token of woman's surrender to her inferior fate. The question now is: what alternatives are left to the Freudian woman? With what can she replace the phallus and all that it symbolises? The answer lies not only in acquiring a husband and (male) child, but what they represent – *'Love' has been her only recourse*, and for that reason she has elevated it to the rank of sole and absolute value" (Irigaray, 1985b:51; original emphasis). Clearly, this holds potentially dire implications for the woman who will sacrifice much, including her selfhood and agency for this love. However, as this sacrifice is more marked once she becomes romantically involved and/or a mother; this discussion will be suspended until the appropriate sections of the study. For now, suffice it to say that this need for and elevation of love can be exercised by the daughter in relation to her father.

To return briefly to the incarnations of penis envy, Swiontkowski (2003:33) asserts that in the case of female poets, the actual object of desire is the father's "creative potency" and "social powers". Plath particularly "seeks the father's power to advance her ambitions, to accept her as an equal" (Swiontkowski, 2003:33). Thus, from her disempowered position, Plath in the role of woman and daughter must turn to a father who is no longer there. She must re-create him in the form of a supernatural figure; or seek his approval in his symbolic counterparts – a husband, a son, or the superstructures/symbolic order of society. Evidently, the only way in which to attain the approval of the latter is to meet the requirements of the "ideal woman". As these requirements are normally modelled by the maternal and/or symbolic mother, these aspects will be examined further in the third chapter.

In light of the above, it would thus seem that (patriarchal) society's standards and hierarchy of power could be considered as one of the major causes for a persistent case of the Electra complex. In terms of Plath, society and its moral prescriptions

produced a further complication in terms of the divided self. To quote Freud (1914:151) again: “[L]ibidinal instinctual impulses undergo the vicissitude of pathogenic repression if they come into conflict with the subject’s cultural and ethical ideas.” The individual “recognizes [these ideas] as a standard for himself and submits to the claims they make on him” and from these one forms an “ideal ego” towards which one constantly strives. Freud also goes on to describe that our conscience performs the role of moderator in comparing the actual ego to the ideal ego, and especially in highlighting exactly where the actual ego falls short. The paranoia and feeling of being watched manifested in delusional patients is, according to Freud (1914:152), “this power in a regressive form, thus revealing its genesis and the reason why the patient is in revolt against it.” Freud (1914:152) traces the naissance of the ideal ego, “on whose behalf [the] conscience acts as watchman”, back to the “critical influence of [the individual’s] parents (conveyed to him [/her] by the medium of the voice).” As the individual develops and enters into social circles outside the family, the ideal ego is reinforced by “those who trained and taught him [/her] and the innumerable and indefinable host of all the other people in his [/her] environment – his [/her] fellow-men – and public opinion” (Freud, 1914:153). A child’s parents thus act as a kind of conduit for the prevailing ideology of that period. At the time when Plath was a child, the authoritarian figure within the nuclear family would have been the father and he would thus act as representative of society’s rules. Thus, while the post-Oedipal boy may still offer some resistance to the domineering “father” presented by society; the girl, in seeking this father’s approval, would be much more likely to be subservient to societal standards.

As alluded to above, the father can assume various forms of or within the symbolic order from which he can demand obedience. One of these would be the institution of the law, which denied women their rights to property and voting (another form of the female voice being silenced) for so many centuries. Another form of a patriarchal superstructure would be that of the military – embodiment of male, phallic prowess and conquest. A third form which we encounter more often in Plath’s writing is that of the medical profession. Richard Allen (1992:35) cites Foucault in stating: “Towards the eighteenth century the female body became a medical object *par excellence* [...] Representations of women which dress them only in their sexuality [...] say, ‘You are nothing but your sex, you are always the object of the

artist's [and doctor's] gaze, never the artist.'" Allen even goes so far as to assert that the gaze (a term which in itself has very negative undertones in postmodern theory) of the male subject objectifies and silences the woman by viewing her only for the idiosyncrasy of her sex. Allen (1992:35) elaborates on the latter: "The doctor or artist and the naked patient or model becomes [sic] the image of gender relations in western culture." Due to her recurrent visits to hospitals (especially during the haemorrhaging caused by her first sexual intercourse) and her treatment as a psychiatric patient, Plath offers valuable insights into this phenomenon. In one of her journals (Plath, 2000:209), she also goes so far as to link her new psychiatrist directly with the father figure: "[I w]anted to burst out in tears and say father, father, comfort me." Nevertheless, she also presents us with the other side of Foucault's picture of power relations; namely, that there "is no power without potential refusal or revolt" (Allen, 1992:35). Although one may thus be silenced by *force* (i.e., being tortured), *power* in the more abstract sense always leaves a gap, no matter how small or confined, for resistance and a voice to squeeze through. However, as revolution is the theme of the third section of this chapter, I will suspend this discussion for the time being.

Finally, there is a fourth manifestation of the male symbolic order that is of specific interest regarding Plath, namely, that of religion. Based once again on the logo-/pallocentric dichotomies of language, religion (akin to culture) seeks to protect us from forces associated with the feminine: animal impulses, the weakness of the flesh, irrational emotion/hysteria, etc. Gloria Anzaldua (1987:889) succinctly summarises the "protection" which patriarchal-centred religions purport to offer from the sinful, fearful feminine: "Because, according to Christianity and most other major religions, woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself. Woman is the stranger, the other. She is man's recognized nightmarish pieces, his Shadow-Beast." In terms of Christianity (which would clearly be most relevant to Plath), there are numerous entries in the Bible supporting this viewpoint. For example, women are deemed "unclean" during their menstrual cycles and after giving birth (cf. Leviticus 12 and 15); men must in fact avoid all contact with them and anything they have been in contact with in order to avoid contamination. While men are thus only labelled "unclean" when there is something wrong with them (such as a skin infection), women are labelled thus

simply for having a normal female body. There are numerous examples of notorious women in the Bible, which would include Jezebel (1 Kings), Delilah (Judges 16) and Salome (Matthew 14 and Mark 6). Then of course there is the first woman of all, Eve, who leads the first man (Adam) into temptation and causes their expulsion from Paradise (Genesis 2). Therefore, because she cannot trust her own nature, which is supposedly ungodly and sinful, woman must scorn her deepest needs and surrender to the will of the church (the “ideal self” at work again). The good daughter must now follow the word of God the father in order to save her from herself. Naturally, there are positive examples of women in the Bible too after whom books of the Bible are in fact named – Ruth, Esther and Judith (the latter being a deuterocanonical book). But, in each case, the woman’s heroism is due to her uniquely feminine characteristics: Ruth is celebrated for her loyalty to her mother-in-law, and Esther and Judith had to make use of their sexuality in order to become heroines. Even the most sacred of women in Christianity, Mary the mother of Jesus, is renowned for fulfilling the archetypal roles of femininity as virgin and mother (note that she remains “uncontaminated” by sex as a “virtuous woman” ideally should). Therefore, even the celebrated female figures posit an image of femininity served to underpin the limiting gender roles assigned to women.

In order to understand the relevance of these manifold concepts to Plath, I will now turn to the analysis of her work.

*

Plath’s father, Otto, was a Biology professor who specialised in the study of bees and his book, *Bumble Bees and their ways*, remains highly respected among entomologists (Butscher, 2003:5-9). It is thus hardly surprising that bee imagery recurs in several of Plath’s poems and that the bees are often connected to her father (or at least a father figure, if one takes the poems to present psychological processes). As suggested by Swiontkowski (see above), Plath’s Oedipus/Electra complex was not marked by Freud’s notion of physical, sexual desire but rather by a longing for the father’s approval and social power or influence. However, occasional

sexual references can be found in conjunction with references to her father. For example, the speaker of "Full Fathom Five" remembers her father's "shelled bed" (which could of course also refer to the beach and the father's deathbed), and the speaker in "Electra on Azalea Path" refers to herself as her father's "hound-bitch" (which also implies that she is inferior and subservient to him). Ambiguous and implicit though these references may be, "The Beekeeper's Daughter" contains imagery which is sexually much more explicit. The setting in this poem is a "garden of mouthings", where "[p]urple, scarlet-speckled, black [...] corollas dilate, peeling back their silks" (the corolla is the ring of petals surrounding the reproductive parts of a flower) and "[t]rumpet-throats open to the beaks of birds". The atmosphere is made all the more sensual by the "rich" air which is "almost too dense to breath in" due to the scent of musk, and the warm "orange and red" of the "little boudoirs" (flowers). Within this garden and its "many breasted-hives", the "maestro of the bees" moves like a sacred, "hieratical" figure. The latter adjective indicates the father's authority as a holy figure, embodiment of the religious superstructure, whom the daughter must obey and honour. Indeed, the speaker expresses her submissive state to this impressive figure; she "[kneels] down", her heart is under his foot, and she is no more than the "sister of the stone". The latter also suggests the passivity and voicelessness of the daughter; for, despite being in a garden full of "mouthings" and "hole-mouth[s]", she never speaks. She has a "mouth" of sorts – her vagina – but this is not used for speech; it serves as a gift for the father ("peeling back [its] silks" for him) and as a refuge for the "beaks of birds". She is thus trapped by her feminine mouth and cannot gain access to the symbolic order of language. This daughterly subservience and silence recur in poems like "The Colossus" and "Electra on Azalea Path", which I will discuss in a moment.

Due to the six-line stanza/one-line stanza pattern of the poem, the three lines which stand alone are emphasised: "My heart under your foot, sister of a stone"; "A fruit that's death to taste: dark flesh, dark parings" and "The queen bee marries the winter of your year." The three ideas in these lines are thus singled out as the core of the poem. The first of these we have already looked at, but what of the other two? After making several allusions to fertility and reproduction (which would also be indicative of the Electra complex) in the third stanza, Plath then directly refers to the repressed wish of the girl/woman in the throes of the Electra phase/complex: "Here is a

queenship no mother can contest/A fruit that's death to taste: dark flesh, dark parings." The daughter and speaker of this poem thus claims her "queenship" over her father, even while she realises that incest is the ultimate social taboo and that it would in fact result in a kind of "death". The dark "flesh" could thus refer to both the "sinful" nature of the act, as well as to the secrecy which such an act and desire would necessarily involve. The act of "paring" would thus refer to the slow and perhaps painful uncovering of these hidden aspirations. Moreover, the word is reminiscent of the word "pairing", which involves the same sexual ambiguity as the word "coupling". Thus, the third and fourth stanzas also demonstrate the divided self in terms of the desires of the unconscious and id which are in conflict with the ideal self. In the fifth stanza, the speaker kneels down to consider the "narrow" homes of the "solitary bees" with their "disconsolate" eyes. This image of the bees in their hexagonal cells could be interpreted in two ways: either the bees are "disconsolate" because they are solitary or because they are confined to their "narrow" homes. If the first interpretation is pursued, then this sad fate contrasts sharply with the speaker and her "Father, bridegroom" who are wed "in this Easter egg/Under the coronal of sugar roses". However, if the second interpretation is followed, we realise that the woman is doomed to a similar fate, restrained as she is with her father within the "Easter egg". Plath may have intended the ambiguity of this line as signifier of her own divided attitude to marriage. Furthermore, the metaphors of the egg and "sugar roses" again suggest the sumptuous, sensuous nature of the union (the pretty colours of an Easter egg and the artificial perfection and sweetness of the sugar roses), but also the surreality/unreality of the situation (clearly two people cannot fit into an egg and sugar roses are not real roses), as well as point to the claustrophobia of the Easter egg. In the final line, the queen bee is also married to the father figure's "winter", which suggests that the union will be fruitless after all. This could also be a reference to Plath's inability to move beyond her father's death (and into her own "spring" or "summer") and find a more suitable partner. In this way, the reference to Easter could also be interpreted in the light of the crucifixion and the woman's fate as a martyr, sacrificing her life for the union; yet it could also hint at something more positive – the resurrection and ascension of the woman (which will be further investigated in Chapter 4).

Returning to “Full Fathom Five” and “Electra on Azalea Path”, we find echoes of this accepting attitude of the female speaker with regard to her father’s, and by implication society’s, superiority. With their repeated references to “the classics” of highly regarded *male* authors – Shakespeare, Euripides and Sophocles – the poems also confirm Birch’s assertion of the exclusivity of poetry as a genre. Plath describes the former poem in her journal:

["Full Fathom Five"] has the background of *The Tempest*, the association of the sea, which is a central metaphor for my childhood, my poems and the artist's subconscious, to the father image – relating to my own father, the buried male muse and god-creator risen to be my mate in Ted, to the sea-father Neptune – and the pearls and coral highly-wrought to art: pearls seachanged from the ubiquitous grit of sorrow and dull routine. (in Louwe, 2007:30)

What is especially interesting about this quote is that Hughes is cast into the role of reincarnated father as well as “the buried male muse and god-creator”. I discuss this aspect in further detail in the next section, but for now it is also important to note that Plath is overtly (though not necessarily exclusively) assigning creative and divine powers to *male* figures.

The poem begins with a reference to both her father and the subconscious as the speaker claims that the “old man” “seldom surfaces”. In other words, she seems to claim that her father resides in her subconscious from which he rarely emerges into the conscious mind, and it is exactly this “obscurity” which makes him all the more dangerous (a belief which is in line with psychoanalytic thought). In fact, this ascendance occurs so rarely that his burial led the speaker to “half-believe” that he had in fact died. However, his “reappearance/Proves rumors sallow” and by doing so he “shed[s] time” (in other words, he nullifies all the time that she has survived without him). The father figure then “make[s] away with the ground”, arguably the symbol of the feminine and the daughter’s foundations of selfhood, and does away with the “ridgepole” or support of her sky – the opponent “phallus”. After this destruction, he “wind[s]/One labyrinthine tangle/To root deep among knuckles, shinbones,/Skulls”, thus indicating how deep his influence stretches – to her very bones. From this powerful position, he defies “questions” (perhaps the questions of the daughter who is not allowed to question?) and “other godhood”. While at the beginning of the poem he was merely an “old man” who rarely entered her world, he is beyond reason and other divinities at the end of the poem. Moreover, the speaker

now feels “[e]xiled to no good” on his “kingdom’s border”. Thus, “rather than represent a repressed world breaking back into the thoughts of the living, he is now seen as residing in a world from which Plath has herself been exiled” (Louwe, 2007:29). In the final stanza, she admits that she remembers *his* “shelled bed” – as if she was once part of his world. In the final two lines she addresses him as “Father” (which illustrates a religious as well as familial connection). Her longing for his presence has now become so intense that the “thick air is murderous” and she wishes that she “could breathe water”. The poem thus ends with the speaker conferring ultimate power on the father figure and wishing to join his realm, even if this could result in her (symbolic or psychological) “death”.

“Electra on Azalea Path” shows much the same kind of progression. From lines 5 to 14, the speaker describes how she “went into the dirt” on the day that her father died. With this metaphor, she does not mean (merely) that she was demeaned or dirtied (as some critics would have it), but rather that she went into a sort of hibernation, an innocent, dark state where “[n]obody died or withered”. The “bees” have also gone into hibernation “[l]ike hieratic stones”, which could indicate that the (once more divine) father likewise went into a state of “sleep”. In other words, she repressed or metaphorically buried the memory of his death (and thus a part of herself) for twenty years. The day she “woke” from this state was the day when she found his grave. Apparently, this poem was inspired by Plath’s visit to her father’s grave; the path running next to it was in fact called “Azalea Path” (Plath, 1981:289). This incident is also referenced in *The Bell Jar* [hereafter abbreviated as *TBJ*]. As Birch implied (see above), it is as if Plath and her female characters feel the need to pay respect to the male deity which is a fallen figure, but remains formidable nonetheless. After contemplating the pitiful state of the “poorhouse” churchyard, the speaker “borrows” from “an old tragedy”, the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus (which is also mentioned in the poem “The Colossus”), in associating with the mythical Electra. The references in lines 30 to 32 are to Iphigenia, Electra’s sister, who was sacrificed by their father Agamemnon; and to Clytemnestra, their mother, who killed their father with the same royal purple rug she welcomed him home with after his long journey abroad. Like Electra, this speaker cannot make peace with her father’s death either (lines 40-41). However, unlike Electra but in accordance with the speaker in “Full Fathom Five”, this speaker is contemplating suicide; she has in fact already

attempted committing suicide as she is “the ghost of an infamous suicide” (which could very well be linked with Plath’s own attempt in 1953). The major difference between the speaker of this poem and the one of “Full Fathom Five” is that she assumes responsibility for his death in the last three lines of the poem. Moreover, she claims that it is her “love that did [them] both to death” – love being the only recourse left to woman, according to Irigaray (see above). To clarify this guilt, Rietz (2007:417) asserts that:

[b]y all accounts, including her own, Otto Plath was a kind, loving father, if formal and somewhat remote, and there was little outward evidence that their relationship was troubled. But her feelings toward him, though powerful, were ambivalent. As she later recalled, “He was an autocrat. I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I killed him.”

This guilt is also considered part of the reason why Plath killed herself, but this aspect is discussed in further detail in Chapter 4. While not specifically part of the Electra complex, I would argue that this guilt is also due to the daughter’s perceived betrayal of her father. In wishing him dead, she was admitting that she wanted to be freed from his presence as well as that he was merely mortal after all. Her suicidal wish to be reunited with him would thus be a kind of over-compensation towards him (as if she could make it up to him in the afterlife) and an extreme form of punishment of herself.

This latter notion recurs along with some other aspects in *TBJ*, although there are not many references to “Mr Greenwood” in the novel. We are told that Esther Greenwood “was only purely happy until [she] was nine years old” when her father died. Furthermore, like the speaker in “Electra on Azalea path”, Esther also decides to visit her father’s grave (*TBJ*:157-161). In this part of the novel, her father is also connected to a divine/sacred figure, as Esther recalls how she would imagine throwing herself at a “priest’s feet”, begging: “O, Father, help me.” This once again shows a kind of subjugation to and sublimation of the father-god. It is also during this visit that Esther picks arms full of *azaleas* for her father’s grave: an act which could also be likened to a ritual of religious veneration. Here we find a further correlation to the Electra complex as Esther thinks to herself: “I had always been my father’s favourite, and it seemed fitting I should take on a mourning my mother had never bothered with” (*TBJ*:159). Again, there is resentment of the mother, although

this resentment is not caused by an inverted castration complex. Instead, Esther resents her mother for not loving her father enough and for not allowing Esther to grieve for her father. Esther also imagines that her father would have taught her “all about insects”, along with German, Greek and Latin. Therefore, had he lived, he would have been able to educate her as if she were his son, thus bestowing a kind of “honorary boy status” on her and allowing her entrance to the symbolic order. But of course he died and so her wish is ultimately left unfulfilled. Significantly, the section which describes Esther’s final suicide attempt in the novel follows directly after this visit. Thus, although there is no explicit connection between the graveyard visit and her suicide attempt, the order of events would seem to imply one.

The most pervasive presence of the symbolic father in the novel can be traced in Esther’s encounters with the medical world. Pat Macpherson (1991:56) succinctly summarises the role of medicine in *TBJ* as follows:

Esther’s gruesome tour of the hospital with Buddy the medical student, her poorly played imitation of a volunteer nurse on the maternity ward at the local hospital, and her painfully mishandled shock treatments at Doctor Gordon’s suburban clinic for depressed housewives, gradually move Esther toward the experience of involuntary institutionalization, the ultimate female subjection to male control of knowledge and technology.

One could add to this list Esther’s emergency admittance to hospital when she begins haemorrhaging after losing her virginity. This incident and the “gruesome tour” with Buddy will be discussed in the next chapter as this relates to the female body as a site of abjection. For the rest, Esther finds herself often confounded by her experiences with doctors, patients and hospitals. She is either considered as an object (in accordance with Allen’s claim) or disrespected as merely another hysterical woman. This is especially damaging to her character as Esther spends such a great deal of the novel’s timeline in medical institutions; just like the female speaker in the poem “A Life” who “[drags] her shadow in a circle/About a bald, hospital saucer.” One would imagine that even if the nurses fail to respond with empathy, that at least the fellow female patients would, owing to their shared traits. However, when she interacts with other women in medical situations, their response is often hostile, condescending or purely uncomprehending. Examples of these would include the women whose flowers she messes up during her stint as volunteer, Mrs Tomolillo (her neighbour at the psychiatric ward, who makes fun of

Esther and her mother) or the ladies at Dr Gordon's clinic (who initially treat Esther with great disdain). In fact, her interaction with Dr Nolan – her *female* psychiatrist – is her only truly positive interaction with either a medical professional or a woman in a medical institution. Perhaps Plath is suggesting that this is the sole way in which a woman patient can find truly empathetic and beneficial treatment within an otherwise male-dominated area – by consulting a female professional.

Of course, no discussion of the father-daughter relationship in Plath's work would be complete without a discussion of "Daddy", which follows later in this chapter. Plath's relationship with Ted Hughes and more specifically how this is portrayed in her poetry should first be considered in order to more fully comprehend this momentous poem. To facilitate this understanding, a brief outline of certain concepts from psychoanalytic and feminist theory is necessary.

2.2 "Every woman adores a fascist": Plath's marriage to Hughes

Denied access to the creative realm and symbolic order, the woman in patriarchal society must turn to her mate to gain such access *inter alia* as it were. Yet, even here the woman cannot escape the looming presence of her father. While it is fairly normal that the opposite-sex parent plays a role in the child's ultimate choice of spouse, the father of a woman suffering from an unresolved Electra complex will have an even bigger impact on her choice of a partner. Swiontkowski (2003:33-34) quotes Susan Kavalier-Asdler in stating: "the internal father will persist as a demonic or bad object within the psyche of the developmentally arrested female. The antidote is then often sought in the form of an idealized male rescuer." For Plath of course, this "male rescuer" would come in the form of Ted Hughes. As alluded to in the quote from her journal concerning "Full Fathom Five", Hughes was to fulfil the important roles of the male muse and the creator-god in her life. In another of her journals, Plath states that he will be her "husband, lover, father and son, all at once" (in Middlebrook, 2003:45). Thus, in terms of Freud, she once more seems to fulfil the role of the passive female who appeals to the creative male and father figures in her life to lead and liberate her. Her husband thus "rescues" her from the oppressive influence of her father by subsuming the role of father-figure in her life. Indeed,

Hughes was to be an important creative influence in her life with his steady encouragement that she should delve ever deeper into her unconscious and grant it expression in her poetry.

Regardless of how positive the husband's influence may otherwise be, in becoming the second father figure, he is also paradoxically expected to become the new oppressor in the woman's life. Moreover, as Irigaray and numerous other feminists point out, the husband also becomes the new *possessor* of the woman. For, as long as there have been patriarchal, capitalist societies, there has been "traffic in women", to borrow Gayle Rubin's phrase. "If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it" (Rubin, 1975:542). The question is: how is the value of a woman determined? As a "gift", her value is firstly determined in the bonds that her exchange create/strengthen. The value of the *individual* woman could be determined in various ways: her beauty, her fertility, her potential as a worker or, on rare occasions, her wealth (rare because the wealth is normally not "hers" in the full sense of the word). According to Irigaray, however, the virgin signifies "pure exchange value" (Rendell, 1996: 172) in the patriarchal economic system as an entity which can be traded only prior to its use or consumption. This would explain the persistent methods of restricting a woman's movement – from less overt methods like chaperoning to explicit methods like chastity belts – in order to preserve her virginity, her exchange value. To quote Jane Rendell (1996: 175) again:

One characteristic of women's sexual bodies is that they are precisely not closed, they can be entered in the act of love and when one is born one leaves them and passes across the threshold. In capitalism, where space as commodity is confined and controlled as and in space, the threshold that she is and the threshold which contains her are feared.

Like the Parisian arcades of the nineteenth century (which Rendell discusses in her work), women had to be carefully guarded precisely because their appeal and value lay in their condition as thresholds to (sexual) pleasure. The idea that the woman-figure also presents a threshold which one passes during birth (or, metaphorically, during rebirth) correlates with another of Irigaray's concepts of the feminine in commerce, namely, the mother, which I will discuss in greater detail shortly.

Perhaps one of the greatest problems presented by the commodification of women is that they begin to internalise this ideology and lose their agency. This leads to the silencing of women, for “[t]o the extent that woman as an object of desire is reified, she is deprived of a voice” (Stoljar, 1999:101). Yet again denied active participation in the symbolic order, the woman begins to lose sight of her own subjectivity and in fact attempts to increase her own exchange value in order to secure a desirable mate. This in turn leads to women competing with one another and Electra’s jealousy and hostility to her mother is reincarnated. Women become fetish objects (a notion which will be further examined in Chapter 4) and one way to increase their value and appeal is in following fashion. Stoljar (1999: 111) cites Walter Benjamin on the matter as follows:

“In every instance of fashion there is something of a bitter satire on love, in every one of them all sexual perversions are mercilessly laid out, each one of them is filled with secret resistance to love” [...] The exploitation of sexuality in the mass consumption of the metropolis represents a new, perverse kind of commodity fetishism. Since the woman is dressed and made up the same way as many others she appears as a mass product, [and] marketability itself becomes attractive.

This mass production fetishism of the female body was especially marked in McCarthy’s America, which was so centred on the *image* of the American Dream, as Macpherson (1991:7-8) reminds us. Women were told from every corner of the media how to keep up with fashion (which was now accessible to everyone due to mass production) and improve themselves, and this “advice” was given under the auspices of the woman’s improving and empowering herself. However, “[t]he dark underside of this self-improvement road to female identity, reassuringly sign-posted though it is, is that the more thorough the instructions and illustrations, the more thorough the surveillance and regulation of the female body” (Macpherson, 1991:9). Moreover, after receiving this meticulous instruction, the woman takes the chore of regulation upon herself; the mirror and scale become the trappings (in all senses of the word) of this regime of beauty. Although she often rebelled against this, Plath was also prone to this condition. Her journal contains several celebratory references to her mastering the art of physical appearance (e.g. Plath, 2000:66 & 108); indeed the references to her clothes are so abundant that they warrant the entry “Plath, Sylvia – clothes of” (followed by the categories blouses, coats, dresses, etc.) in the index. However, Plath (2000:23) also recognises the underlying reason for this self-

beautification: "Tonight I am ugly. I have lost all faith in my ability to attract males. And in the female animal that is a rather pathetic malady." In other words, she realises that it is because she is a *woman* that she must be attractive to *men*. Not only is this necessary to attract a potential mate, it is also fundamental in order to meet the requirements of McCarthyist femininity.

To turn back to Freud now, he would claim that this self-fetishism and the subtle tortures it implies are symptomatic of female masochism. Indeed, Freud explains that the woman's need to find a replacement oppressor in the form of a husband is caused by the repressed masochism which is, to varying degrees, present in the unconscious of all human beings. For women and girls, the masochistic "phantasy [sic] is both the punishment for the forbidden gratification and, by repression, the satisfaction of it" (Mitchell, 2000: 113). As such, the punishment thus serves a dual purpose in both fulfilling the repressed incestuous desire of the girl while also assuaging the guilt caused by this desire. Furthermore, this "masochistic" tendency is all the more prominent in women who retain an Electra complex.

The whole phantasy expresses the pains, forbidden pleasures and difficulties of the positive Oedipus complex for girls, which, being unresolved along the path of "normal" femininity, thus bursts through: "People who harbour phantasies of this kind develop a special sensitiveness and irritability towards anyone whom they can include in the class of father." (Mitchell, 2000:114)

However, one should be careful not to label only women with an abnormal devotion to fashion and appearance (such as the wretched Hilda in *TBJ*) and a persisting Electra complex as being masochistic. Freud (Mitchell, 2000:114) goes as far as to claim that all women are basically masochistic:

"Masochism" – pleasure in pain – which is the turning against the self of the wish of the satisfaction of a drive, typifies the female predicament. It expresses the wish to submit to [symbolic/clitoral] castration, copulation or childbirth and to get erotic pleasure out of [these and other] painful experiences.

Thus, masochism is intrinsically female and could even be argued to play a vital role in making some of the most inevitably painful experiences of womanhood not only bearable but actually pleasurable. However, Freud (and Mitchell) is also quick to add that this form of "feminine masochism" occurs in both sexes.

Despite the fact that this kind of masochism and passivity can (and in fact will) be traced in Plath's work, the divided self manifests itself in this regard too. Plath was not the proverbial damsel in distress who waited for her knight to rescue her. Neither was she merely a passive recipient of Hughes's attention. For example, on the night that they first met, she had memorised the work of the local Cambridge poets she knew would be attending the party as part of her "seduction strategy" (Middlebrook, 2007:257). Throughout her work (as in her journals and letters), Plath demonstrates an almost demanding sense of what she wants in a husband. It was as if she had written out the part of the husband beforehand and then cast Hughes into the role when he happened to stumble into an audition. In fact, she would do more than this in actively moulding the kind of husband which she wanted him to be. As Plath wrote to her mother shortly before her marriage to Hughes: "To find such a man, to make him into the best man the world has seen: such a life work! [...] this is my reward for waiting" (in Middlebrook, 2003:27). The usual gender roles are thus subtly reversed as Hughes becomes *her* reward, *her* property which she can do with as she thinks best. In fact, it was she who proposed to him. Middlebrook (2003:49) points out that: "Some inquisitive person asked Hughes point-blank, why did you do it [marry Plath]? And got an answer: 'Because she asked me'". Yet, even Plath's assertiveness could be considered a product of the Electra complex as this is related to the "masculinity complex". In order to better illustrate and understand these dualities, it is necessary to direct ourselves to a discussion of her work once more.

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However, before attempting my analysis, I would like to point out that this discussion is not meant to present a comprehensive account of the relationship between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Instead, only those particular aspects which are applicable to Plath's writing, specifically in terms of the psychoanalytic and feminist ideas outlined above, will be considered.

Upon first seeing him at a party, Plath was impressed by his masculine "big, dark, hunky" appearance, his "colossal" voice (note the initial likeness to the sea-god-

father) and thought that he was “the only one there huge enough for [her]” (Plath, 2000:211). The meeting is now famous for what happened within the first few minutes of their acquaintance:

I was stamping and he was stamping on the floor, and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hairband off, my lovely red hairband scarf which has weathered the sun and much love, and whose like I shall never again find, and my favourite silver earrings: hah, I shall keep, he barked. And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek [...] blood was running down his face. His poem [“Law in the Country of the Cats”] “I did it, I.” Such violence, and I can see how women lie down for artists. The one man who was as big as his poems, huge, with hulk and dynamic chunk of words; his poems are strong and blasting like a high wind in steel girders. And I screamed in myself, thinking: oh, to give myself crashing, fighting, to you. The one man since I’ve lived who could blast Richard [Sassoon – her former lover]. (Plath, 2000:212)

Note all the forceful words used in the description: “stamping”, “bang smash”, “ripped”, “barked”, “bit him long and hard”, “blood was running”, “strong and blasting”, “screamed”, “crashing”, “fighting”. Thus, in terms of “feminine masochism”, one could argue that it was his impressive and even violent nature which attracted Plath. In fact, shortly after first meeting Hughes, Plath remarked that she was immediately attracted to him, observing that “just to look at him, it seemed to me he had a violent nature” (Butscher, 2003:185). It is interesting also to note that he first strips her of her feminine possessions before kissing her, and to see the measure of emotional investment she had in the hairband and earrings. He takes away the symbols of her beautification and it is only then that she can behave equally masculine and bite him. In fact, the entire interaction and its longed-for future are viewed in terms of a struggle, as if she must fight herself as well as him in *giving* herself to him. This (perhaps subconscious) choice of verb underpins the idea of the woman as a commodity, something to be awarded as a gift. Importantly, she becomes the giver as well as the gift, thus assuming the agency normally assigned to a man. Equally important to notice, however, is the fact that she was still *emotionally* in the possession of Richard Sassoon. She can only be freed from this state by the intervention of another man; there is no hint that she can free herself. This sentiment is echoed earlier in her journals when she “hope[s] there will be some man in Europe whom [she] will meet and love and who will free [her] from this strong idol” [Sassoon]” (Plath, 2000:201). Moreover, despite her immediate desire for him, Plath must contain herself or risk suffering the scorn of the Cambridge community. As she

reflects within one paragraph of the powerful description of their first meeting: “I could never sleep with him anyway, with all his friends here and his close relation to them, laughing, talking, I should be the world’s whore.” The consequences of fulfilling her desire are too great as society would be quick and harsh in admonishing her for it. Even though Plath was no longer a virgin at this time (cf. Butscher, 2003:149), maintaining the *image* of being one remained all-important. In addition to this, Plath’s cynicism and self-doubt soon kick in again – “I shall never see him, he will never look at me” (Plath, 2000:212). It seems that she believes herself unworthy of his sustained attention.

Written shortly after their eventual separation, “Daddy” similarly contains several references to both Hughes’s violence and the female speaker’s masochism and self-doubt. After living for “thirty years” in the “black shoe” of her father’s oppression, “[b]arely daring to breathe or Achoo”, she attempts to recreate her subjugation – firstly by “praying to recover” the evil father figure, and then by seeking a replacement for him. She claims that she “knew what to do”, after her second suicide attempt failed to reunite her with her father:

I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
[...]
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.

There are several parallels between the devilish “daddy” and the husband. Both are linked to Nazi Germany and the military (one of the facets of the fatherly symbolic order); both are apparently sadists; both are associated with the colour black (which could signify their sinister, unknowable and/or deadly/deathlike natures); and both are given a supernatural status as vampires. The speaker recognises these qualities and yet she still adores her father and married her husband. Moreover, the speaker not only eagerly marries (indicated by the repeated “I do”) this sadistic man; she actually *models* him on her father. She also openly admits that she was wholly subservient to the father figure (“Barely daring to breathe or Achoo”) and yet she still “tried to die/And get back, back, back to [him].” One would thus assume that the

same kind of attitude would apply to the vampirish husband, “who drank [her] blood” “for seven years.” The speaker even goes as far as to generalise in claiming: “Every woman adores a Fascist/The boot in the face, the brute/Brute heart of a brute like you.” She thus seems to concur with Freud that women are all (subconsciously at least) masochists. After her marriage to this second vampire, she tells her father: “So daddy, I’m finally through./The black telephone’s off at the root,/The voices just can’t worm through.” The voices which have been silenced in this manner could be either her own voices, or the voices of her father. His enduring influence in her life, however, would seem to support the former. The woman is thus irrevocably silenced when she decides to recreate her tormenter. Nevertheless, in describing her own masochism, the speaker consciously uses the past tense, because the poem describes how and why the speaker is actually “through” with this. The use of the present tense in the poem indicates the speaker’s resistance to this past state and the sadistic figures in her life. What is of special interest in “Daddy” is the fact that the speaker (religiously) adores and later creates her torturers. Her passivity thus negates and yet also actively perpetuates itself in continuing to search for someone she can be subservient to.

Likewise, the speaker of “Mad Girl’s Love Song” (one of Plath’s “juvenile” poems) thinks that she “made up” her lover “inside [her] head”. This lover would seem to be cast more as a rescuer than the one in “Daddy”, because “God topples from the sky, hell fires fade” and the “seraphim and Satan’s men” are all exiled due to his presence. The “mad girl” is thus freed from their stifling influence, but only after the man’s intervention. Again, there is a pseudo-masochistic sexual undertone as she “dreamed that [he] bewitched [her] into bed/And sung [her] moon-struck, kissed [her] quite insane.” However, the man abandons her and she laments that she “should have loved a thunderbird instead”; thus, she feels that it would have been better to love a completely mythical creature rather than a man (albeit a possibly imagined man). Therefore, her subservience is not as complete in this early poem. At least she is also able to “forget [his] name” and believe that *she* created him. Furthermore, she is able to escape his influence (albeit in a somewhat childish and temporary fashion) simply by closing her eyes. However, closing her eyes is an act of denial as it also makes her blind and vulnerable to the rest of the world, while at the same time making it possible for her to enter the dream where he seduces her again.

There are similar incidents of willing seductions in *TBJ*. Firstly, Esther decides that she would “let Constantin seduce [her]” (*TBJ*:74). Note that the sexual activity is left up to the man and that Esther’s only choices are to reject or passively accept his advances – she cannot initiate sexual contact (which is partly why “nothing happens” between herself and Constantin). The second wilful seduction in the novel is much more sinister, as it has undertones of the “rape fantasy”. When Marco, the “woman-hater”, attempts to rape Esther, she thinks to herself “It’s happening [...] It’s happening. If I just lie here and do nothing it will happen” (*TBJ*:104). It is only when Marco calls her a “slut” and thus brings her purity into question that she begins to fight him off. Nonetheless, she decides not to wash off the two streaks of blood that he drew on her face, because “[t]hey seemed touching, and rather spectacular, and [she] thought [she] would carry them around with [her], like the relic of a dead lover, till they wore off of their own accord” (*TBJ*:108). The marks of her near rape thus become a kind of “badge of honour” and Marco is likened to “a dead lover”. Moreover, in an attempt to keep the marks intact as long as possible, Esther tries to restrict her own facial movements (*TBJ*:110) – a wilful denial of her own subjectivity and voice. Despite this apparent act of mental masochism, Esther takes control of her sexual life later in the novel by acquiring a diaphragm. What is interesting to note from a feminist perspective, is that it is Dr Nolan (a *woman* psychiatrist – see above) who is the catalyst in this regard. Esther also shows herself to have feminist insights when she explains to Dr Nolan: “What I hate is the thought of being under a man’s thumb [...] A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line” (*TBJ*:212). With this remark Esther not only reveals one of the disadvantages of being a woman, but also the super-ego of society which restrains women’s liberty. Indeed, Esther describes the significance of acquiring the diaphragm as “climbing to freedom, climbing from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex” (*TBJ*:213). After this liberating incident, Esther thinks to herself: “The next step was to find the proper sort of man” (*TBJ*:213). This not only indicates Esther’s sexual assertiveness, but also her exacting kind of pragmatism – she thinks of “the proper *sort* of man”, as opposed to the romanticised ideal of “*the* right man”. This sort of man must be intelligent, so she could respect him; he must have some sexual experience; and it must be someone she “didn’t know and wouldn’t go on knowing – a kind of impersonal priestlike official” (*TBJ*:218). Apart from demonstrating Esther’s

exacting standards, this quote shows again Plath's tendency to assign a certain measure of sacredness to the figure of the male lover, thus implicitly assigning the power of the symbolic order to him. Of course, Esther (in parallel to Plath) succeeds in finding just such a man in the very next chapter when she meets Irwin and "decide[s] to seduce him" (*TBJ*:216). However, instead of the "miraculous change" she was expecting, she felt "a sharp, startlingly bad pain" (*TBJ*:218). Yet, the pain and the hymenal haemorrhaging are transformed into something pleasurable in proving that she is no longer a virgin and she "felt part of a great tradition" (*TBJ*:219). It is only much later that she contacts Irwin again (to insist on payment of the hospital bill). Esther again defies the stereotype of the romantic young female by feeling nothing for Irwin and considering herself "perfectly free" (*TBJ*:232) because he has no way of ever contacting her again. While Esther can thus be said to possess some of the characteristics of "feminine masculinity", she also overthrows the sexual passivity which is normally assigned to women. The implications of sexual confidence and the loss of virginity experienced by Esther and other female characters will be further discussed in the next chapter, as this ties in closely with the restrictions the mother places on the daughter's sexuality.

Yet, in spite of her own as well as her personae's sexual assertiveness, some of Plath's poems indicate that, while she was married to Ted, she would still (at least sporadically) assume the emotionally submissive role. One such poem is "The Snowman on the Moor", which describes how, after a marital tiff, the wife runs out of the house to the snowy moors. The husband stays behind, "guarding his grim battlement" – an indication that the house is his property as well as linking him to the superstructure of the military. The only things which are indicated as belonging to the wife are flowers, symbols of femininity. But these "winter-beheaded daisies" are "marrowless, gaunt" (indicating cowardice and weakness) and do not support her mutiny as they "[w]arned her to keep/Indoors with politic goodwill." She does not heed their warning and her "last taunt" to her husband is: "Come find me", which serves as a re-casting of the Freudian notion of the male rescuer, as well as a punishment of him for upsetting her. While on the moor, she calls on "hell to subdue an unruly man/And join her siege." Her calling to infernal powers for support would seem to prove the Christian fear of the woman as witch. But, instead of the "fire-blurting fork-tailed demon" she was expecting, "a grisly-thewed/Austere, corpse-

white/Giant” appears. He has “[n]o love in his eye”, suggesting that he is the opposite of femininity (which, as indicated above, is marked by an abundance of and need for love). From his “spike-studded belt [dangled]/Ladies’ shieved skulls”. These ladies were killed because their “wit made fools/Of kings, [and] unmanned kings’ sons” and because their “masteries/Amused court halls”. In other words, these *women* were beheaded for making use of their intelligence to humiliate *men*. Of course, these powerful men and the “snowman” also serve as symbols for societal structures and authority figures who punish a woman for daring to be intellectually superior to them. The wife narrowly escapes being beheaded and, reduced to no more than a “humbled, crying” girl, she runs home, “brimful of gentle talk/And mild obeying.” Thus, on a metaphorical level, the “moral of the story” seems to be that there is no help for an intelligent and defiant wife. Instead, it is as good as trying to defeat the structures of society itself, and for this transgression she will be severely punished. Plath (2000:583) described this as the “vast impersonal white world of Nature against [a] small violent spark of will.” Clearly, this reference is not to a feminine Nature but the ratio of an overwhelming system to a single individual remains in tact. The only option left for the woman and her “small violent spark of will” is to return to her original submissiveness. Together with this negation of her fury and her subjugation is also the intimation that the woman’s world has shrunk in some way. She will clearly not venture into the realm beyond her husband’s protection very soon and thereby her movements have become limited.

“The Rabbit Catcher” is another poem in which the female speaker is confronted by a malevolent environment and feels her movements are restricted by her husband. The first four lines describe the setting as “a place of force” which silences and disempowers the woman by “[t]earing off [her] voice”. There is a hint that the environment is punishing her with her own nature: “The wind gagging my mouth with *my own* blown hair” [emphasis added]. Symbolically, she is also silenced by a feature of her own beauty. In the second stanza, there is also an allusion to sado-masochism as the “black spikes” of the malignant gorse possess “an efficiency, a great beauty/And were extravagant, like torture.” As in the “Snowman on the Moor”, there is “only one place to get to”, but now this place is not a warm home. Instead, she runs to a hollow set with snares, which could be allegorical to the *vagina dentata*. This would be a far cry from a safe haven (even if it is one ruled by

patriarchy). Nonetheless, the woman seems to find the snares natural and feminine; they are “[s]et close, like birth pangs”, and conversely “[t]he absence of shrieks” is unnatural, leaving “a hole [...] a vacancy.” Like the vagina (which in a patriarchal value system is only valuable in as far as it provides sexual pleasure to a man or bears children), “the snares almost effaced themselves—/Zeros, shutting on nothing.” In other words, in not “shutting on” something, the snares (like vaginas) “efface themselves” and lose their value. Pain and restriction again seem to be part of the greater order of things. In the fifth stanza, the speaker now imagines or, rather, “felt” the converse side of this coin: the situation of the rabbit catcher as he waits in anticipation in his kitchen before going out to inspect his snares. His cruelty is pre-meditated (she “felt his “still busyness, an intent”), which would make it all the more cruel. His hands are “dull, blunt”, suggesting his callous nature, and they are “[r]inging” the neck of the “tea mug”. In lines 24-25 his sadism and tyranny are even more explicitly brought to the fore as she feels that “those little deaths” (which overtly indicate the sexual nature of these captures and underpin the allegory of the snares as vaginas) are awaiting him “like sweethearts”. Moreover, “[t]hey excited him”, indicating finally and decisively that the “rabbit catcher” is a sadist. In the last stanza, the speaker reveals that she “had a relationship” with him, which is characterised by the “[t]ight wires between [them]” and “[p]legs too deep to uproot”. This again illustrates the masochistic nature of the woman for having stayed in this relationship for so long that she can no longer liberate herself from its influence. However, this time the effects are more detrimental as she realises that the relationship is “killing” her. In order to better understand this poem, it is necessary to mention the biographical details behind it.

“The Rabbit Catcher” was written along with “Event” on the Monday after the Wevills left Court Green (Alexander, 1999:276-277). At this time, Plath (apparently) did not yet know for certain that anything underhand was going on between Hughes and Assia Wevill. However, it is highly probable that she picked up from the body language of either one or both that they were attracted to one another. Conversely, Bundtzen (in Middlebrook, 2007:262) claims that the poem is not so much about Plath’s recurring sexual jealousy, but rather it is “about the way marriage enthrals a woman’s creativity”. Hughes would later decide to exclude the poem from his revised edition of *Ariel* on the basis that it was one of “the more personally

aggressive poems” (Middlebrook, 2007:254), which would imply that the poem struck a nerve. Indeed, he would later admit that the only thing he held against Plath was that she turned their “bad moments” into subjects for her poems (Middlebrook, 2007:255). In fact, as Hughes would later indicate, Plath’s poem did refer to an actual event. While walking across the moors near Court Green one afternoon, they came across a number of rabbit snares. “Plath was enraged by the sight of the snares and ripped them out of the ground; [and, as would be revealed in his poem of the same title] he saw the gesture as acknowledgement of a deep difference between them, nothing to do with rabbits” (Middlebrook, 2007:264). The “quick thing” that is killed along with the speaker in the final lines of the poem could thus be the relationship between Hughes and Plath. This interpretation therefore also clarifies the meaning of “a mind like a ring/Sliding shut”, the “mind” being the creative partnership that they shared, and the “ring” being a clear symbol of their marriage. The ending of the relationship was thus killing Plath, an interpretation which has been favoured by several feminist authors. Yet, there is also a second interpretation which could be relevant here. To turn back to Bundtzen’s remark, this poem could also be read as being “about how Plath’s creativity has been enthralled by marriage to the man she identified with D.H. Lawrence” [Plath’s poem also being an intertextual response to Lawrence’s “Rabbit Snared in the Night”] (Middlebrook, 2007:262). The “[t]ight wires” and “[p]egs too deep to uproot” thus refer to Hughes’s massive influence on Plath’s creative processes. The “mind like a ring” is thus Hughes’s, which is “[s]liding shut on” Plath’s mental facets and killing her poetic self in the process. Hence, the authoritarian male figure is again inhibiting the woman’s creative ability and mental capacity (“quick” denoting quick-witted as well as alive), and in this case, even killing the woman. While I would argue that both interpretations are valid, it is important to note that the poem is written in the past tense. This would again (as in “Daddy”) indicate that the violence and the constricting union are at an end. The speaker says “we, too, *had* a relationship”. Thus, the relationship has ended and, with it, presumably the “rabbit catcher’s” *immediate* repressive and all-invasive power; even while the pegs remain deep-rooted. The question that remains, however, is whether the girl/woman was able to escape from under the sway of his influence. Accordingly, the final section of this chapter examines the oppressed female figure’s defiance of males.

2.3 “If I've killed one man, I've killed two”: A declaration of independence

As we have seen above, in Freud's notion of “normal female sexuality”, a woman must accept her fate as the inferior gender in order to begin to emulate the mother and become a woman. The question is: what if the woman retains her attachment to the father and the Electra complex persists? If a girl/woman fails to accept her lot as the inferior gender, Freud argues that she will become neurotic and suffer from a “masculinity complex” (Mitchell, 2000:98-99). As the term suggests, this complex basically implies that the woman experiences an intense desire to be and fantasises about being a male. This

fiction of maleness enabled the girl to escape from the female role now burdened with [incestuous] guilt and anxiety. [...However] this attempt to deviate from her own line to that of the male inevitably brings about a sense of inferiority, for the girl begins to measure herself by pretensions and values which are foreign to her specific biological nature and confronted with which she cannot but feel herself inadequate. (Horney, 2000:43)

Briefly then, the girl tries to find refuge from her guilt in the fantasy of being male, but finds instead a further sense of inadequacy. This, in turn, leads to an increasingly weakened and guilt-ridden conception of self, and utter frustration. Furthermore, according to Jung, “[i]f the sexual libido were to get stuck in this form the [...] Electra conflict would lead to murder and incest” (Swiontkowski, 2003:31). This perceived danger becomes especially relevant in the following analysis of “Daddy”.

Another psychoanalytic concept which is of some importance in this section is the “repetition compulsion”, which seemingly paradoxically compels a person to recreate a certain traumatic event of his/her past. In his 1920 work “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, Freud describes the actions of a young unnamed boy (presumed to be his grandson). Through a game of flinging his toys away from him, the child was re-enacting the times when his mother, for whatever reason, left him for stretches of time. Of course, young children are distressed by what they perceive to be their parents' desertion, and so Freud attempted to understand why the child would of his own free will perform this event for himself. Freud (1920:3721) comes to the following conclusion: “At the outset he was in a passive situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as

a game, he took on an active part.” Freud (1920:3721) also postulates a second motive, namely, that the actions “might satisfy an impulse of the child’s, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him.” The defiant meaning of this action would thus translate into something to the effect of: “Fine, go away, then! I don’t need you in any case. Look, I’m even sending you away myself.” A child could also project his/her feelings onto a playmate, thereby making the playmate the target of his/her revenge.

Freud then goes on to apply this principle of traumatic repetition to adults. While treating someone for a neurotic condition, the psychoanalyst must first try to gain as much insight as possible into the patient’s repressed memories and their associated emotions. Unfortunately, this implies a re-enactment of the initial trauma as if it were transpiring in the present, which will in turn lead to the patient experiencing the same unpleasant emotions. Freud (1920:3723) further states:

These reproductions, which emerge with such unwished-for exactitude, always have as their subject some portion of infantile sexual life – of the Oedipus complex, that is, and its derivatives; and [in the process of psychoanalytic treatment] they are invariably acted out in the sphere of transference, of the patient’s relation to the physician.

Like a child, the adult thus finds a substitute for the original party (usually one of his/her parents) on whom he/she can exact his/her revenge for his/her Oedipal/Electral trauma. However, Freud is also quick to point out that this compulsion to repeat is not only solely negative. This is because “the compulsion can only express itself after the work of the treatment has gone half-way to meet it and has loosened the [unconscious] repression [of the traumatic event]” (Freud, 1920:3724). Thus, the compulsion to repeat is in effect a sign that the treatment is working; since, if the memory of the trauma was still fully repressed by the “coherent ego I”, neither the psychoanalyst nor the patient would be able to access the memory at all, rendering the condition “untreatable”. Nevertheless, Freud also cautions that individuals, even those who are not neurotic, may become “stuck” in this cycle of repetition. This is due to the fact that repetitions which lead to the same result prove to the individual that his/her earlier assumptions (such as “I’m not worth anything; I can’t accomplish anything”) resulting from the initial trauma (caused by the parent’s perceived rejection) were correct after all. Thus, unpleasant though

these repetitions may be, they also paradoxically confirm the individual's sense of self, albeit that this sense of self is predominantly negative.

In addition, the repetition compulsion can also go hand-in-hand with the death-drive (discussed in Chapter 4) and the illusion of "mastery" of destiny (i.e. hoping that during *this* re-enactment one takes control of the situation and that *this* time the parent will not hurt one). In spite of the emotional "pay-offs" which these responses may provide, the final step in the road to recovery and "fulfilled selfhood" is to recognise what caused the repetition compulsion and to see the compulsion for what it is and what it accomplishes. The individual can then recognise any future cycles and hopefully, over time, manage to end them (Kearns, 1997:76-77). Breaking free from the cycle also leads to the individual having more control over those actions and emotions which were once the result of the repressed trauma. Again, to better understand the relevance to Plath, one must turn to her work, which I will do in a moment.

As we have seen above, within the masculine symbolic order, feminine creativity is largely treated with derision or at least disdain. Therefore, many women have in the past attempted to write as men, which could also imply that the style, subject, logic, and so forth of their writing follow the tradition of male writing. Consequently, Cixous asserts that "[m]ost women are like this; they do someone else's – man's – writing, and in their innocence sustain it and give it voice, and end up producing writing that's in effect masculine" (in Ives, 2007:32). And yet, at the same time, Ives (2007:36) cites Cixous in stating:

You must write, because otherwise you get written. If you don't write, someone else will "write" you. You'll be written over, written out, edited, selected, controlled, censored, cut up, packaged, suffocated. All feminists agree that, whatever one believes, and whatever one desires, whether emotionally, politically, or socially, writing and creating are absolutely essential.

Therefore, women can in effect defy the oppression of the male symbolic order by writing themselves (in other words, being both the writer and the subject of the writing). (With this notion, I prefer to follow Cixous and Irigaray's conception of female writing rather than Kristeva's, who argues that there ultimately is no escape from patriarchal language and feminine writing becomes a "literature of absence, of negative capability, revealing by what it does not reveal" (Ives, 2007:37).) Essential

to this kind of writing is writing about the body, and as this is thematically closer to section 3.2 of this essay, I will not discuss this notion in depth here. Suffice it to say for now that *all* aspects of the *jouissance* of the female body and what living in/with/for a female body entails are important in *écriture féminine*.

In addition, what is of specific interest in relation to Plath is Cixous's style of writing. To quote Ives (2007:69) once again: "The sense of flux is one of Cixous' [sic] most conspicuous elements. Cixous' texts do not keep still: her metaphors often concern fluidity, burning metamorphosis." Further, metaphors of art as a (often shamanic) journey and sex as movement, along with emphases on a rewriting, reworking of classical texts from a feminine point of view recur in Cixous's *oeuvre* (Ives, 2007:69-71). Flying and flight are also given specific importance: "Flying is woman's gesture – flying in language and making it fly [...] in flight, she does not cling to herself; she is dispersible, prodigious, stunning, desirous and capable of others, of the other woman that she will be, of the other woman she isn't, of him, of you" (in Ives, 2007:77). Moreover, Cixous's texts possess spontaneity and immediacy, and they "veer from the optimistic to the cataclysmic" (Ives, 2007:83). All of these characteristics can and will now be traced in Plath's writing; except for her re-writing of the classics, which is referenced throughout this dissertation.

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On the whole, the poems which address the recognition and breaking away from male domination and the repetition compulsion were written in either 1962 or 1963³. As Britzolakis (2006:7) puts it: "The temporality of the poems pivots around a moment of loss or trauma which is available only through the oblique and deferred action of a performance [hence the title of Britzolakis' book "Theatre of Mourning"], giving rise to figures of mourning which exceed their apparent pretexts." However, although there is naturally some fluctuation, a cyclical kind of development can be traced. Firstly, with regard to her father, Plath is able to recognise his human nature

³ All dates of poems are taken from the *Collected Poems*.

and her own guiltlessness in his death, as well as how the memory of her father has dominated her world. For example, in “Little Fugue” (written on 2 April 1962), the speaker imagines her father’s voice as a “hedge of orders/Gothic and barbarous, pure German” and yet he says nothing anymore (line 55). Death has silenced him, taken away his voice; yet it is only in death that he is silenced like women are in society. Furthermore, although he is still a “Christ” (albeit a tortured Christ), the other terms which she employs to describe him create a far more human than divine picture: he “had one leg”, “a Prussian mind”, “a blue eye” and “[a] briefcase of tangerines”. She then exclaims: “This was a man, then!” While her statement indicates his human nature, it also recognises that he is in fact dead (he *was* a man). The declaration could also imply that this was the image on which she based her definition of a “man”. In addition, she now sees that she is “guilty of nothing”, but also that she is “lame in the memory” of his death and that she “[envies] the big noises” (made by her father’s voice when he was alive as well as indicating Beethoven’s – a man’s – creations). However, she “survive[s] the while” and is able to “arrange” her “morning”. She asserts: “These are my fingers, this my baby.” There is thus both an identification of her father’s power over her, as well as an affirmation of her own life and its features. She owns her body and finds self-affirmation in being a mother (a facet of female subjectivity which will be discussed further in the following sections). Admittedly, it does come across more like an affirmation of *existence* as opposed to *living*, but at the very least the speaker is no longer the religious devotee of the father figure.

During the same year, a series of bee poems emerged: “The Bee Meeting”, “The Arrival of the Bee Box”, “Stings”, “The Swarm” and “Wintering” were in fact all written in one week (the first week of October 1962). As indicated above, given that Otto Plath is often associated with the symbols of bees and beekeeping, it would be reasonable to assume that these poems all relate to the father figure in one way or another. Moreover, the repetition of the bee symbol and its associated metaphors may in itself be a sign of the repetition compulsion. In addition, while the speaker in the first of these poems seems overwhelmed by the meeting (she is alternately described as being “naked”, “rooted” (paralysed), “hurt”, “exhausted” and “cold”), the other poems in the bee sequence paint the female speaker in increasingly assertive colours.

In “The Arrival of the Bee Box”, the bee box which the speaker ordered is initially an object of fearful fascination and something she “can’t keep away from”. Firstly, this could be because the bee box is a symbol of the woman’s voice – “there is such a din in it./The box is locked, it is dangerous.” She must keep her voice “locked” because it can be “dangerous” to the patriarchal system and by inference herself if she frees it. When she bends down (as the speaker in “The Beekeeper’s Daughter”) to look into the home of the bees she finds “[i]t is dark, dark,/With the swarmy feeling of African hands/Minute and shrunk for export,/Black on black, angrily clambering.” The darkness could suggest the unknown recesses of the woman’s bodily, mental and emotional “inside”. The reference to the Other – this time in the form of the African slave – and the Other’s commodification and diminishment link up with the fate of the woman. Like the African Other, the woman would feel anger and resentment at being locked up. As such, the box would be an emblem of the woman’s confinement by the father and the symbolic order.

Secondly, her irresistible urge to return to the dangerous box again and again can be likened to the repetition compulsion to reproduce the traumatic recollection of the father. Yet, in the last four stanzas, the speaker begins to gain some measure of control as she thinks that the box “can be sent back”; or that as “the owner”, she can simply let the bees die of starvation. She also imagines that they would “forget” and “ignore” her, as she is “no source of honey” and they have no reason to “turn” on her. In the end, she decides that she “will be sweet God, [and she] will set them free.” As such, she thus assumes a divine status herself, but, unlike the ominous father-god in the previous poems, she will be a merciful god. She thus doubly resists the masculine system: she reclaims authority as well as rejects the masculine *form* of power. Therefore, she not only takes over his previous position as deity, she also further establishes her identity by refusing to be like him. In this manner, the masculinity complex is thus enacted and also negated.

This self-assertion is taken even further in “Stings” as the female speaker proclaims: “I am in control.” Importantly, the first two stanzas describe the interaction between herself and the male bee-seller in positive terms, as they are both vulnerable (not wearing gloves) and they have “a thousand clean cells between [them]”. Even though “[a] third person is watching” (who could represent the father figure, the

husband or even the conscience observing on behalf of the ideal ego) the transaction takes place between her and the bee-seller, “[h]e [the third person] has nothing to do with [them]” and he is soon “gone”. Allegorically, the woman realises that positive interaction between a man and woman is possible as long as both allow themselves to be vulnerable (i.e. there is no power relation in play), the woman is allowed to take part as a “buyer” (she is no longer simply the object being sold), and the old symbolic father is driven away. While she admits that he (the third person/father) was “sweet” and that his efforts were very productive/fertile, it soon becomes apparent that he was deceptive. Here, the bees took the female speaker’s side again, as they “found him out” and even “thought death was worth it”. The bees could thus be argued to symbolise the old self here, who considered suicide a worthy option in order to “kill” the influence of the father. However, the new self, the speaker of the poem, asserts: “I/Have a self to recover, a queen.” With the recognition of the influence that this figure has had on her life, comes the insight that she must also “recover” her own identity. For a while, she wonders what might have become of this queen with her “lion-red body”. The last five lines of the poem provide the answer:

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

Therefore, she is not only more powerful than before, she is also on the warpath (red representing blood [perhaps even hymenal or menstrual blood], anger and vengeance as well as passion and vitality). Her self becomes something ominous, looming over the enemies “that killed her”. It is important to note as well that *she* is the one who is resurrected, not the father figure. Moreover, in the concluding lines, we also find an indication that her revenge will be exacted on society at large (“the engine”), death itself (“the mausoleum”) and even the home which once restricted her (“the wax house”, where she was meant to “work without thinking,/Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin”). This new queen of selfhood stands in vivid contrast to the hypothetical queen mentioned earlier in the poem who is “old/Her wings torn shawls, her long body/Rubbed of its plush/Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful.” The speaker thus finds within herself a queen which is much greater and more terrifying than the one she had imagined. Although writing over a

decade after Plath, Cixous's thoughts and metaphorical tendencies can be traced in the rejection of the male symbolic order for female expression, in the dangerous metamorphosis and in the flying queen.

"The Swarm", the fourth in the sequence, shares certain of these characteristics, but unlike the other "bee" poems of 1962, does not have a female speaker. Instead, the poem employs an omniscient third-person perspective to describe how a man disperses the swarm his bees have formed and then recaptures them. Taken on its own, this poem would thus not seem to fit thematically with the other poems, because the swarm of bees are ultimately masculine as they are likened to Napoleon Bonaparte's army. As Gordon (2003:49) points out: "In a play on the initial of his surname, Napoleon Bonaparte adopted the bee as his personal insignia." Gordon (2003:49) also alleges that the kind of "cocked straw hat" is probably the same as the "white straw Italian hat" in "The Bee Meeting". The significance here would be that these hats were by and large produced in Leghorn, which is situated very near to Elba, the island Napoleon was exiled to after his failed invasion of Russia. What Plath seems to be doing in this poem is to ridicule the avaricious political forces which consider themselves invincible while they are anything but that. In this way, she is once again disempowering the symbolic order and the father-figure. The pack thinks the bullets – emblem of the male power of the militia – "are the voice of God" and that they (the bullets) condone the "pack-dog,/Grinning over its bone of ivory [a clear phallic symbol]/Like the pack, the pack, like everybody." The symbolic father in the form of the bullets thus wants uniformity in the admiration of the phallus and war, and of the pack itself. In light of "Stings", the "dumb" swarm of bees could also be symbolic of the old self, which once also heard the "voice of God" in patriarchy. If this is the case, then the old self is defeated again, this time through its own arrogance. The lighter tone of this poem would also seem to suggest that she is no longer investing so much emotion in the issue, thus serving as a sign that she may well be on the way to defeating it.

As the title of the poem suggests, "Wintering" is less energetic but more pensive in tone than the other bee poems. The bees in this poem are now reclaimed as a symbol of womanhood, a textual indication of the woman reclaiming power from the father figure. The first line is very optimistic in describing the time after the honey

has been taken from the hives: "This is the easy time, there is nothing doing." However, from the sixth line, the atmosphere becomes decidedly bleaker as she considers the dark, windowless room "[a]t the heart of the house" where the honey will be stored. While based on an actual pantry-like room in Court Green which Plath avoided (Butcher, 2003:246), this dark space also signifies the dark recesses of the unconscious and female existence. The speaker recognises that it is this room's "[b]lack assisinity", "[d]ecay" and "[p]ossession" which "own" her. All of these terms can equally well denote death, especially since the speaker states: "This is the room I have never been in/This is the room I could never breathe in." In terms of my hypothesis, this would thus suggest that the female figure recognises the sway that her unconscious and her constant awareness of death (specifically her father's death, in the case of Plath herself) have had over her life. However, she also realises that the room and the things which own her are "[n]either cruel nor indifferent" but are in fact "[o]nly ignorant". This could indicate that the woman has in a sense pardoned patriarchy for its mere ignorance; a further step towards a recovery of the female self. With this recognition, she is thus once more disarming both the unconscious and death (and by association the symbolic father figure) of their malignant power.

Conversely, the bees must simply hang on, even though this means living on a substitute (syrup instead of flowers). As in "The Arrival of the Bee Box", the speaker is again a merciful figure, who provides this life-sustaining substance. To survive, the bees must also form a "[b]lack [m]ind" against the cold white snow, which is likened to Meissen porcelain, a somewhat more direct connotation to the established German father figure. Once again, he is defeated but this time by the bees' collective mind. It would seem then that Plath is appealing to the support and unity of all women in order to defeat the larger male hierarchy which defines the landscape around them. Significantly, they will do this with their intellectual abilities. Moreover, "[t]he bees are all women," the speaker tells us, and "[t]hey have got rid of the men/The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors." It is thus not the men who have abandoned the women, but the women who have, by whatever means, "got rid of the men". Winter is now designated as a season made solely for women. The speaker then describes a certain woman, probably an allusion to Plath, who is located in a domestic role and environment, "[h]er body a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think."

While this latter reference may not seem complimentary, denoting as it does the intellectually inferior woman in patriarchy, there is still hope for the woman in the collective black mind of the bees. Furthermore, a “bulb” would suggest both potential for growth as well as a source of heat and light. In the last stanza, the speaker wonders whether the “hive” will survive. The poem’s denouement provides the resounding answer: “The bees are flying. They taste the spring.” Thus, we can deduce that the speaker herself seems to taste her freedom and spring. Although the poem’s tone does not possess the triumphal vengeance of “Stings”, it still indicates women’s inner, self-contained ability to survive and recover, even in the face of the malevolent, father-dominated environment. This is especially significant in the light of the fact that Plath’s typescript compilation of *Arial* showed her conscious choice of “Wintering” and its image of rebirth as the final poem for the collection (cf. Middlebrook, 2003:217 – 218). In addition to this, the poem ends with Cixous’s favoured metaphor for female victory – flight.

Written only three days after “Wintering”, “Daddy” is the most clear poetic portrayal of the father and husband figures’ domination over the woman, the repetition compulsion which this led to, her recognition of the influence of both these figures on her psyche, and finally her denunciation of their power. As may be expected, the poem shows similarities and differences to earlier poems dealing with the father-husband-God-tyrant figure. In the first stanza, the speaker refers to the stifling influence which the father’s perfectionist and authoritarian nature continued to have on her life, so much so that she could barely dare “to breathe or Achoo”. The domineering “black shoe”, which symbolises her father, also appears in “Berck-Plage” (where the earlier sacred status of a priest is again ascribed): “This black boot has no mercy for anybody/Why should it, it is the hearse of a dad foot.” The fact that the singular forms of the nouns are used indicates that the father figure could indeed be Otto Plath, as first his left toe and then his left leg were amputated due to diabetic gangrene (Butscher, 2003:13). Several references to his German origins further confirm that the father is modelled on Otto Plath. Moreover, his influence is important to note because the perfection which he demanded from her (firstly directly, and then indirectly after his death through Aurelia Plath’s and Sylvia Plath’s own super-ego) has in effect stifled and “killed” her. She is the victim, but a victim who suffers from the “Stockholm syndrome” and therefore perfectly fits Freud’s

description of feminine masochism. The speaker even goes as far as to claim: "Every woman adores a fascist/The boot in the face, the brute/Brute heart of a brute like you", which serves to show that she recognises the masochism which Freud claimed was inherent in all women. She is also similar to the subservient women of the "sea" poems as she "used to pray to recover" her torturer and her God. Again we find that the female speaker even "tried to die" to "get back, back, back to" him. There is also another recurrence of the theme of voicelessness: she "could hardly speak", except when she begins to speak like a victim ("like a Jew"). Finally, the last resort of the sufferer of the Electra complex is to marry "a model" of her father in order to be reunited with him in some way.

Although these aspects are referenced in the first two sections of this chapter, an aspect which at this point is the most important is the fact that the speaker of "Daddy" *recognises* and moreover *revolts* against the dominion of the authoritarian male figures/society in her life. Significantly, the poem opens with a refusal of his influence: "You do not do, you do not do/Anymore". In the second stanza, she also recognises that she had to bring him back to life because he "died before [she] had time" and she "had to kill him". In a note prepared for a BBC reading, Plath articulates these aspects of "Daddy" as follows:

Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it. (Plath, 1981:293)

Plath thus recognises that the "girl" must give in to her repetition compulsion and re-enact the trauma so that she can be free from the paralysing influence that it has had on her life. Like the speaker of "Wintering", this girl also appeals to a greater group to eradicate her victimisation. Thus, when the speaker describes herself as a Jew with a "Polack friend" and a "gipsy ancestress", she takes upon herself the role of the victim in a much larger, collective context. This route offers the speaker some way to establish an identity for herself. In fact, as mentioned above, it is only when she "began to talk like a Jew" that she finds her voice and the poem itself testifies to this speech act. Conversely, her father is cast as the Nazi with all the archetypal characteristics, "With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygook/And your neat mustache/And your Aryan eye, bright blue". The Nazi-Jew dichotomy is recreated in "Lady

Lazarus", although here the "Herr Enemy"/"Herr god"/"Herr Lucifer" does not (overtly) refer to her father but to the "Herr Doktor" (the doctor being another symbol for the dominant male). While I have comprehension for detractors' assertions that this proclivity is unethical, I feel that it is highly effective as a poetic device. I thus think that Bundtzen's (2006:28) claim with regards to "Cut" can also be applied to "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus": "[These poems] also interweave the personal and the political in a way that refuses the dichotomy between them". Thus, the poem does exactly what Nussbaum claims literature should do: it makes human suffering, whether individual or collective, the ethical concern of all other human beings. It thereby proves that all texts can be considered as political if the narrative imagination is employed. The father and husband figures' repression of her also becomes emblematic of gender repression which masochistic women themselves often perpetuate ("Every woman loves a fascist"). Finally, both men have been killed (in accordance with Jung's predicted result of the Electra complex); the "vampire" has "a stake in [his] fat black heart" and is defeated by the combined effort of all the "villagers" or victims. According to popular folklore, if the original vampire is killed, all the successive vampires will die too. So, the final stanza not only indicates the death of the father, but also that of the "black man" who was modelled on him.

This would thus seem to signal a final triumph, like that of the avenging queen bee in "Stings"; the "god's lioness" in "Ariel", or the female phoenix of "Lady Lazarus" who eats "men like air" (after she was at first the Herr Doktor's "opus", "valuable" and "pure gold baby" – i.e. his commodity). However, the final line of the poem paints a very different picture, as the speaker says: "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through." The battle has thus annihilated the speaker as well as the father figure. Moreover, the recurring "Daddy, daddy" indicates that his presence is as strong-felt as ever and that the repetition compulsion is still present. Moreover, she is still submissive to him as she addresses him like a small child would her father. The expletive "you bastard" shows that her emotions for him are far from tempered, in contrast to the milder tone of "Swarm" and "Wintering".

This defeatist sentiment reappears in several of her last poems, for example in "Mystic" (written on 1 February 1963, ten days before her suicide). The poem is marked by questions, of which the central ones are:

Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?
Once one has been seized up
Without a part left over,
Not a toe, not a finger, and used,
Used utterly, in the sun's conflagrations, the stains
That lengthen from ancient cathedrals
What is the remedy?

These questions would seem more rhetorical in nature than anything else as the speaker does not seem to think that there is any remedy. "The meaning leaks from the molecules" and the only answers she is left with are:

The chimneys of the city breathe, the window sweats,
The children leap in their cots.
The sun blooms, it is a geranium.

The heart has not stopped.

As such, all that is left are the facts of her life and the destruction caused by the God-like father, in whose service she has lost everything. Yet, it is also important to note that there is at least an affirmation of continuing *existence*, if not *life* in the fullest sense of the word.

Also written on 1 February and shortly after a visit by Hughes, "Kindness" turns back to the images of both "The Rabbit Catcher" poems, as well as Hughes's radio play "Difficulties of a Bridegroom" (Middlebrook, 2003:171-172). In this play, "a man driving to a sexual liaison sees a rabbit in the road and accelerates in order to kill it; on arrival in the city he sells the dead animal for two shillings and buys two roses for his mistress" (Middlebrook, 2003:172). Thus, when the speaker of "Kindness" is handed "two children, two roses", these "gifts" are presumably bought at the expense of a life. Moreover, this life would apparently be the speaker's (and by association and in all probability Plath's), especially if she is taken to be the rabbit who has been run over. If this is the case, she intimates that her children's pain is more real to her than her own: "What is so real as the cry of a child?" she asks, "A rabbit's cry may be wilder/But it has no soul." She has sacrificed her own subjectivity for her children's and has thus lost her "soul" and, like her "Japanese silks", she is in danger of being "pinned any minute, anaesthetized". The speaker is thus back under the torture of the sadistic man (presumably the same figure as that of "The Jailer" – also written after the "bee" sequence) and she has ultimately lost herself. Moreover, even poetry, which was once a source of sustenance, is now "[t]he blood jet" which cannot

be stopped. In this way even her creative outlet, her voice, has become life-threatening.

Written on the same day, "Words" illustrates the same basic concept – the speaker concedes that her "life" is governed by "fixed stars" (which are symbols for the memory of the pain that others have caused her). The "hoof-taps" of the destructive words prove to be "indefatigable". Thus, even though the speaker of the words has long gone (the words are "dry and riderless"), his effect on her life remains as powerful and hurtful as ever and he thereby still "govern[s her] life".

In the end, it would thus seem that the struggle against the dominant male is ultimately lost, at least in Plath's poetry. Despite finally recognising his influence, bringing him back to life, stripping him of his godly status and then killing him; despite finding an identity in a greater collective, declaring her independence and her ability to survive; Plath (at least the psychic processes of Plath as presented in her poetry) admits defeat and is "killed" herself.

Chapter 3

The perfect American women and mothers

3.1 “And this is the kingdom you bore me to, mother, mother”

Following an analysis of the male influences on Plath's identity (as portrayed through her work, that is), the impact of female influences, both in terms of other female figures as well as society's prototype of femininity, needs to be investigated. Clearly, no such psychoanalytical discussion would be complete without referring to the impact of the mother; and as before, this implies both Plath's actual mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, as well as the symbolic mother.

When, towards the end of his career, Freud began delving into the origins of female sexuality, specifically pertaining to the time preceding, during and after the Oedipal phase, he was puzzled by girl children's very early ambivalence towards the mother. Naturally, during the Oedipal phase, this hostility could be explained by the rivalry the daughter feels for her mother in competition for the father's affection. As Plath (2000:199) put it in her journal: “I am a woman, and there is no loyalty, even between mother and daughter. Both fight for the father, for the son, for the bed of mind and body. [...] And I cry so to be held by a man; some man, who is a father.” However, what troubled Freud was the girl child's ambivalence towards her mother *prior* to the Oedipus phase. Although the possessive love he had expected was there, a strong sense of hostility also presided in the girl infant. What made this perplexing was the fact that this hostility occurred prior to “any rivalry the little girl might feel with the mother in her demands for the father in the positive Oedipal stage” (Mitchell, 2000:57). The conclusion that Freud came to was that an infant's need for maternal love is basically insatiable, so a mother will never be able to truly satisfy the infant's desire; hence his/her resentment of the mother. The girl child's situation is then further complicated by her “castrated” position, for which she blames her mother. “The realization that she is like her mother, ‘castrated’, makes her often turn violently against her mother. But at ‘best’ her hostility can only repress the attachment, and what is repressed is always liable to return, or find itself merely disguised in the new attachment” (Mitchell, 2000:111). Finally, the girl is unable to really break away from her mother and is fated to forever oscillate between the two poles of love and hate.

In feminist terms the love and identification that the girl-child must experience with regard to her mother can be doubly damning. According to Nancy Chodorow, one of

the foremost feminist object relations theorists, “due to their stronger bond to the mother, girls experience a lesser degree of individuation than boys” (Weedon, 2003:120). This has two effects: firstly, the girl will be more likely to unquestioningly follow in the mother’s footsteps (thus recreating for and within herself her mother’s oppression); and secondly, she will “develop more flexible ego boundaries which create the psychological preconditions for the reproduction of women’s subordination to men” (Weedon, 2003:120). If the girl or woman realises that her subordination is partly due to her relationship with her mother – as was the case with Plath (discussed below) – further antagonism will arise between them. Mitchell (2000:57) also alludes to the following: “Probably at some time the girl blames her mother for the social restrictions placed on her sexual life – but this would become particularly true only at puberty when there is far greater control of a girl’s freedom than of a boy’s.” This would prove especially valid for the young Sylvia Plath, who not only had to bear the jealousy and resentment that accompany having a younger sibling but who also had to witness the discrepancies in their relative freedom. When she reached sexual maturity and thus became sexually curious, her mother’s restrictions would cause a further source of resentment. Describing her experience in their relationship in the third person, Plath (2000:432), writes: “She gave her daughter books by noble women called ‘The Case For Chastity’. She told her any man who was worth his salt cared for a woman to be a virgin if she were to be his wife, no matter how many crops of wild oats he’d sown on his own.” Plath hereby thus recognises not only society’s double standards, but also her mother’s role in perpetuating them. Earlier, the eighteen-year-old Plath (2000:20) lamented the sexual desire she had to keep repressed in accordance with the ideal ego:

I have too much conscience injected in me to break customs without disastrous effects; I can only lean enviously against the boundary and hate, hate, hate the boys who can dispel sexual hunger freely, without misgiving, and be whole, while I drag out from date to date in soggy desire, always unfulfilled. The whole thing sickens me.

This sickening situation was further exacerbated by the 1950s’ McCarthyist ideal of the American family.

In illustration of this, Macpherson (1991:3) explains how eminent sociologist Talcott Parsons took “Freudian ideas about how children acquire gender identity and, avoiding any claims to the subconscious, created a pragmatic model of the nuclear

family functioning by means of sex roles, females 'expressive' both by nature and nurture, males 'instrumental'." As such, the woman was thus expected to perform an "internal" familial role as she was meant to be the emotional centre of the household who strengthened the ties between the respective members. Moreover, according to "the Freudianism at the centre of femininity in the 1950s: maternity *is* female desire, all else is sublimation" (Macpherson, 1991:50) [original emphasis]. The "normal" woman should thus desire nothing other than maternity; all else should be repressed or sublimated. Although Parsons created two models of family behaviour – one characterised by gender differentiation, the other, more liberal model by total gender integration – the first, conservative model was accepted as that which was most commonly followed in America. Macpherson (1991:3) underpins the prevalence of this model by stating: "By the late 1940's [...] therapeutic culture had arrived at a definition of mental health as social adjustment to roles". Successfully fulfilling these roles was seen as only "natural", and failing to do so was condemned as "sick". As living recrimination of his theory, Parsons's daughter Anne (who shared an uncanny number of features with Plath, one being exceptional intellectual ability) would eventually suffer a breakdown similar to Plath's and Esther Greenwood's, and committed suicide in 1964 (one year before Plath) (cf. Macpherson, 1991:4-5 & Breines, 1986:805-843).

To turn back to Freud for the time-being, however influential all of these factors may be in the ambivalence of the mother-daughter relationship, Freud declares that it is in fact the very nature thereof which lies at the root of this situation:

More important, however, than all the innumerable reasons a girl might have, or might later conceive (as rationalizations), for her hostility to her mother, is the general tendency towards ambivalence: the very primacy and intensity of this relationship makes it liable to contain hate as well as love – the girl, unlike the boy, cannot make a separation of these emotions and transfer the hatred to a rivalrous father; because she must soon come to take this same father as her love-object. (Mitchell, 2000:57)

Again, this cluster of circumstances is further amplified in Plath's life as her father died before she could resolve the Electra complex, and she thus only had the one living parent left to bestow all her love on and, conversely, to make the target of all her hostility. Moreover, the father would normally play a vital role in the child's struggle for independence from her mother. In terms of Plath, "[t]he psychic cost of having the mother all to oneself is double [...]: the apotheosis of the father, his

elevation into the immutable and divine figure who will later exact punishment, and the survival into later years of a preoedipal dependency on the mother” (Bundtzen, 2006:44). Indeed, shortly after her father’s death, the young Sylvia would show her jealous possession of her mother by asking Aurelia to sign a contract in which she agrees never to marry again (Bundtzen, 2006:43). Likewise, in wanting to make up for the loss of their father, Aurelia would over-compensate by smothering her grown children with maternal love. This is proven by the regularity with which she wrote to her daughter. For example, Aurelia sent a letter virtually every day while Sylvia was attending Smith College, “a record of maternal devotion that is somehow uncomfortable to contemplate” (Butscher, 2003:45).

Sylvia’s letters in return were meant to portray “the golden, straight-A girl”, as a kind of compensation for Aurelia’s sacrifice of her own academic career (Aurelia was herself an outstanding student who had a master’s degree in Middle High German and she was a teacher before having children (Alexander, 1999:13-15)). “Her letters are such a heavy weight on me,” Plath apparently told her friend Elizabeth Compton (to whom *TBJ* is jointly dedicated) on more than one occasion (Butscher, 2003:305). Sylvia would later describe Aurelia “as sacrificing her own life for her daughter’s, but then exacting a debt of gratitude for her martyrdom” (Bundtzen, 2006:43). Moreover, because the female child must model herself on her mother (as indicated above), she must attempt to keep to the exacting standards of femininity that her mother sets for her; after all, “the girl’s acceptance of ‘castration indicates that she should become *like* her mother. Overcoming the Oedipus complex is a sign of finally identifying with the parent of the same sex – so that society can go on accordingly” (Mitchell, 2000:111). The mother in such a case is thus doubly the target for resentment: firstly as the person to whom the daughter will be eternally indebted; and secondly as enforcer of the stifling corset of femininity designed by society. With regards to this social restriction, the phenomenon of matrophobia must be examined.

[Matrophobia] is the fear not of one’s mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one’s mother*... Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to be purged once and for all of our mothers’ bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers’; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery. (well-known feminist poet Adrienne Rich, in Macpherson, 1991:53) [original emphasis]

The daughter must thus struggle to free herself from the bondage of her mother's love in order to establish her own identity. However, as we have learnt from Freud, the very nature of this relationship makes it nigh impossible for the daughter to do this, no matter how angry she may be at her mother or the symbolic mother. The external pressure to live up to the mother's example, and the simultaneous desire to do so and to reject her outright thus come into conflict with one another. In the words of Plath (2000:437):

Who is it I am angry at? [...] It is my mother and all the mothers I have known who have wanted me to be what I have not felt like really being from my heart and at the society which seems to want us to be what we do not want to be from our hearts: I am angry at these people and images. I do not seem to be able to live up to them. Because I don't want to. What do they seem to want? Concern with a steady job that earns money, cars, good schools, TV, iceboxes and dishwashers and security First. [original capitalisation]

Note the explicit linking of patriarchy, commercialism and the role of the mother in imprinting their values on their daughters. While Plath goes on to say that she and Hughes have made a conscious decision and effort to reject this list of "must-haves", she continues to feel the pressure it exudes and that "[s]ociety sticks its so-there tongue out at us" (2000:437). She also admitted that, unwillingly, she and Hughes resented one another for not living up to the stereotypical familial roles assigned by society. "Both of us must feel partly that the other isn't filling a conventional role: he isn't 'earning bread and butter' in any reliable way, I'm not 'sewing on buttons and darning socks' by the hearthside. He hasn't even got us a hearth; I haven't even sewed [sic] a button" (Plath, 2000:445). Clearly, this leads her to feel more resentment for society and implicitly for her mother, who perpetuated these standards of living and family roles.

In terms of Freud, this resentment in turn leads to the daughter feeling murderous impulses towards her mother as matricide seems to be the only path to liberation. In his 1917 essay entitled "Mourning and Melancholia", Freud suggests that the murderous impulse (which must ultimately become repressed and remain unsatisfied) may be transferred in the unconscious onto oneself as a more acceptable target. After having read "Mourning and Melancholia", Plath (2000:447) writes that she had transferred the murderous impulse "from my mother onto myself [and] the 'vampire' metaphor Freud uses, 'draining the ego': that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: Mother's clutch." Her mother's love

had thus become smothering, and, without a father (the very embodiment of creative powers) to fall back on, Sylvia found it difficult to break away from her mother. To quote from Plath's (2000:447) diaries once more

I mask my self-abasement (a transferred hate of her) and weave it with my own real dissatisfactions in myself until it becomes very difficult to distinguish what is really bogus criticism from what is really a changeable liability. How can I get rid of this depression: by refusing to believe she has any power over me, like the old witches for whom one sets out milk and honey. This is not easily done. How is it done? Talking and becoming aware of what is what and studying it is a help.

In fact it was only after her admission to McLean's that Sylvia could begin to articulate the darker emotions that she felt towards Aurelia. For example, she once confided to a visitor that "she believed her mother never wanted her to become a woman, but rather remain a neuter creature dependent upon her for love's nourishment" (Butscher, 2003:156). Sylvia thus recognised her mother's reliance on her and also the restrictive influence that her mother had on her. In giving Plath "permission to hate her mother", Dr Beuscher further validated for Plath her characterisation of Aurelia as an enemy. It makes sense that the young Sylvia, still torn between her Electral love for her father and jealous resentment of her mother, and unable to come to terms with her father's sudden death, would blame her mother for his death. Nonetheless, as is typical with these kinds of negative emotions, she was forced to repress them when they came into contact with the ideal ego presented by her consciousness. And yet, as is so often the case with anything that is repressed, these emotions would eventually emerge from the unconscious with the same sense of urgency they had at the time of repression.

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While a number of Plath's poems contain either direct or oblique references to her mother or the mother figure, the most coherent picture can be found in *TBJ*. The following discussion is therefore centred on the manner in which Mrs Greenwood is presented in the novel, and only brief discussions on some of the references to the mother in Plath's poetry are included.

For most of the novel, Mrs Greenwood is treated with a certain measure of contempt, which stands to corroborate Freud's theory. Nonetheless, there are traces of Esther's pre-Oedipal love for her mother. Moreover, she also feels empathy for her mother and at times demonstrates (narrative) understanding for her mother's situation. The first allusion to her mother in the novel is: "My mother spoke German during her childhood in America and was stoned for it during the First World War by the children at school" (*TBJ*:30). However, instead of creating a closer bond between mother and daughter, this fact isolates Esther because the quote serves to show that everyone *else* in the family could speak German fluently. Similarly, when Esther is reflecting on marriage she thinks of what her mother endured: "as soon as she and my father left Reno on their honeymoon [...] my father said to her, 'Whew, that's a relief, now we can stop pretending and be ourselves' – and from that day on my mother never had a minute's peace" (*TBJ*:80-81). Again, this serves to underline Esther's matrophobic determination *not* to be like her mother and the quote forms part of Esther's rationalisation for not getting married. Thus, we find another form of resistance from Esther against her mother alongside the empathy she may feel. This also applies to the two most positive remarks about Mrs Greenwood that I could find in the novel, namely: "My mother took care never to tell me to do anything. She would only reason with me sweetly, like one intelligent, mature person with another," (*TBJ*:116); and "If we were good at the dentist's, my mother always bought us a swanboat ride," (*TBJ*:132). While the former remark seems complimentary, this form of reasoning apparently irritates Esther because it is a *contrived* display of respect, rather than a sign of actual respect. The latter remark could also be interpreted as the mother rewarding the children for complying with a symbol of patriarchal society and she would thus be establishing the super-/ideal ego in them.

An individual's pre-Oedipal dependency on his/her mother is deeply repressed, and so it is hardly surprising that the novel contains only two oblique references to Esther's dependency on Mrs Greenwood. Firstly, after her serious suicide attempt, Esther is found by her mother who was doing laundry (*TBJ*:192). It is interesting to note that Mrs Greenwood was performing a domestic activity commonly associated with mothers when she "saved" Esther. Symbolically, it could thus be argued that Esther has not been able to successfully individuate from her mother and that her mother has kept her alive. The second and more significant reference to pre-

Oedipal love is found when Esther first regains (semi-)consciousness in the hospital after this attempt. The first utterance she makes when her eyelids are “cracked open” is “Mother!” (*TBJ*:164). Her deepest and most repressed instinct in this dark and terrifying moment is thus to call out to her mother. This instinct to return to the safety and innocence of the pre-Oedipal stage is reflected in “Electra on Azalea Path” when the speaker recalls: “I wormed back under my mother's heart/Small as a doll in my dress of innocence [...]/Nobody died or withered on that stage/Everything took place in a durable whiteness.”

However, the opposite side of the intensity of this mother-daughter relationship is also illustrated by this incident in *TBJ* as Esther immediately denies her pre-Oedipal dependency. She wilfully exacts emotional revenge on her mother for mentioning this moment of “weakness”.

My mother came smiling round the foot of the bed. She was wearing a dress with purple cartwheels on it and she looked awful. [...] “They said you wanted to see me.” My mother perched on the edge of the bed and laid a hand on my leg. She looked loving and reproachful, and I wanted her to go away. “I didn’t think I said anything.” “They said you called for me.” She seemed ready to cry. Her face puckered up and quivered like a pale jelly. “How are you?” my brother said. I looked my mother in the eye. “The same,” I said. (*TBJ*: 165-166) [all line breaks from the novel deleted, as they are hereafter]

The mother is thus punished not only for exposing her daughter’s pre-Oedipal exclamation, but also for being “loving and reproachful” and for intruding on her daughter’s personal space. In her journals, Plath (2000:433) also describes the disdain she feels for her mother who wants to become her daughter in order to control her life in a manner of which the “neighbours” will approve: “She wants to be me: she wants me to be her: she wants to crawl into my stomach and be my baby and ride along. But I must go her way.”

As alluded to above, another reason for the daughter’s resentment and rebellion against the mother is her role as the daughter’s model and the reinforcer of society’s standards. In the poem “Maenad”, the speaker accordingly cautions or even orders: “Mother, keep out of my barnyard, I am becoming another”, a clear declaration of independence from the mother. Esther must similarly break away from her mother as the model of society over and over again. Mrs Greenwood fulfils this role in three ways, which I will now examine one by one: she tries to mould Esther in terms of

career choice and domesticity; she wants to restrict Esther's sexual activity; and she tries to suppress and deny Esther's mental illness.

Firstly, Mrs Greenwood never shows any confidence in Esther's decision to study English as her major and constantly tries to persuade Esther to learn shorthand. Mrs Greenwood teaches shorthand at the local college, but she does so reluctantly and only because she is now the sole breadwinner of the household. One has the impression that she would rather be a housewife, and yet – in a martyr-like fashion – Mrs Greenwood bravely bears her burden, making her an overt model of acceptable female behaviour. However, Esther continuously rebels against this ideal and when her single attempt to learn shorthand (which she only initiated in the first place to content the lady at the Scholarships Office, not her mother) fails, she decides never to attempt it again. In the following quote, Esther blatantly repudiates her mother for being a deficient role model as well as a hypocrite.

I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee [the “strong” and “wise” editor of *Ladies' Day*]. Then I'd know what to do [after college]. My own mother wasn't much help. My mother had taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died and secretly she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money because he didn't trust life insurance salesmen. She was always on me to learn shorthand after college, so I'd have a practical skill as well as a college degree. (TBJ:36)

Esther goes even further when she recognises the superstructure of society at work behind her mother's persistence. She responds negatively to her mother's suggestion that a woman who has learnt shorthand will be “in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter.” Esther tells us: “The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters” (TBJ:72). She thus outright rejects not only her mother's suggestion but also what it represents. Nevertheless, Esther's antagonism could be regarded as her own inability to follow in her mother's footsteps. While Esther intimates that the reason she could not grasp shorthand was because “[t]here wasn't one job [she] felt like doing where you used shorthand” (TBJ:117), one can also discern another reason. This is that Esther (like Plath herself) suffers from a recurring sense of inadequacy which is (partly) why she is such an “over achiever”, and she was probably frustrated by the fact that she could not conquer shorthand. For example, in Chapter 7 she starts “adding up all the things [she] couldn't do” and she “began with cooking” (TBJ:71) – an unquestionable

emblem of domestic, female activity. Unlike her mother and grandmother, Esther cannot cook. And, while she does not state so directly, one can deduce that she is perturbed by this “shortcoming”. Part of her resentment towards her mother could thus also be that she *cannot* faithfully follow her mother’s example, even though she has tried. The dilemma of the daughter is thus clearly exemplified by both Esther’s repressed longing to follow in her mother’s footsteps, and in her antagonistic matrophobia.

A second source of antipathy between mother and daughter is the restrictions which the mother places on her daughter’s sexual life. In the novel, Esther’s first mention of this restriction is the following:

My mother and grandmother had started hinting around to me [sic] a lot lately about what a fine, clean boy Buddy Willard was, coming from such a fine clean family, and how everybody at church thought he was a model person, so kind to his parents and to older people, as well as so athletic and so handsome and so intelligent [...] and how he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for. (TBJ:64)

This quote expresses not only the mother and grandmother’s implicit order that Esther should remain a virgin (and thus retain the highest possible exchange value as a commodity), but also demonstrates other societal standards. As a young woman, Esther is expected to marry and, furthermore, is expected to marry a specific sort of man. She is also expected “to take the advice of people who were already experts, like a married woman” (TBJ:76-77). The influence of the church (akin to medical professions as re-enforcer of the ideal ego and symbolic order) can also be traced in prescribing what “a model person” entails; conveniently a person who is “kind to his parents and to older people” (especially conspicuous when one considers that Esther’s *mother* and *grandmother* tell her this). Of course, Esther soon discovers that Buddy is not so “fine” or “clean” after all; instead he is a “hypocrite”. Again, Esther defies maternal and by association societal authority in repeatedly stating or implying in the novel that she never wants to get married. Moreover, she flouts convention by wilfully becoming sexually active. In a somewhat lengthy passage, Esther tells us of an article her mother cut out of the *Reader’s Digest* (TBJ:76-77) (an adaptation of the literature Aurelia gave to Sylvia, as mentioned above):

This article was written by a married woman lawyer with children called “In Defence of Chastity”. It gave all the reasons a girl shouldn’t sleep with anybody but her husband and then only after they were married. The main point of the article was that a man’s world is different from a woman’s world and a man’s emotions are different from a woman’s emotions and only marriage can bring the two worlds together properly. My mother said this was something a girl didn’t know about until it was too late, so she had to take the advice of people who were already experts, like a married woman. This woman lawyer said the best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren’t, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex. Of course they would try to persuade the girl to have sex and say they would marry her later, but as soon as she gave in, they would lose all respect for her and start saying that if she did that with them she would do that with other men and they would end up making her life miserable. The woman finished her article by saying better be safe than sorry and besides, there was no sure way of not getting stuck with a baby and then you’d really be in a pickle. Now the one thing this article didn’t seem to me to consider was how the girl felt.

Considerable though this excerpt is in length, the insight which it provides into the lives of Esther, the young Plath and her counterparts is more considerable. Firstly, we find an implicit corroboration with Parsons’s theory of gendered social roles and that *marriage* provides the only “*proper*” fulfilment of the two. Secondly, the man’s world is beyond the understanding of the girl, who must instead rely on the guidance of a more experienced female figure – like her mother or a woman already similarly married – thus enforcing her reliance on the maternal role models and impeding the process of individuation. Thirdly, the double standards of the sex lives of the two genders come to the fore again. Furthermore, we also find the dichotomy of the virgin and whore. A girl is only valuable as a virgin and if she dares to cross the sexual boundary – even if only once with someone who has previously vowed to marry her and who is the one pressuring her to have sex in the first place – she is automatically labelled a whore. This is in line with Irigaray’s thoughts on the woman’s role in the patriarchal exchange system: she is either a virgin, a whore or a mother; she is never simply a woman. It is also interesting to note that the woman who wrote the article is a lawyer – a professional woman but nonetheless a servant of a patriarchal superstructure (the law). Esther is clear-headed enough to notice all these damaging principles, and that the article does not recognise that the girl may possess an agency of her own. Hence, Esther decides to discard these instructions and lose her virginity. This is also linked directly to her mother’s instructions in Chapter 7 when Esther thinks to herself: “My mother had always told me never under any circumstances to go with a man to a man’s rooms after an evening out, it could only mean one thing” (*TBJ*:76). But this “one thing” is exactly

what Esther wants to do and she therefore consents to go up with Constantin to his rooms. Her sexual liberation is thus more than an affirmation of self; it is also a rejection of the mother and what she represents.

In addition, Mrs Greenwood represents the larger mindset of society in a third respect: her incomprehension (which would also indicate a failure to engage her narrative imagination), dismissal and at times outright rejection of Esther's mental condition. The first instance of such incomprehension can be found in Chapter 11 when Esther tells her mother that she has not slept for seven nights. Mrs Greenwood responds with an outright refutation by telling Esther she "must have slept, it was impossible not to sleep in all that time" (*TBJ*:122). Later in the novel, she urges Esther to volunteer at the local hospital on the basis that "the cure for thinking too much about yourself was helping somebody who was worse off than you" (*TBJ*:155). This once more enforces the idea that a woman should not think "too much", especially about herself; she should rather fulfil her role as caretaker. Of course, Esther's stint as a volunteer has more catastrophic than beneficial effects, again invalidating Mrs Greenwood as a role model. She also seems to believe that Esther is not recovering, because she refuses to "co-operate" with the doctors and psychiatrists. A telling example is when Esther expresses umbrage at being moved to another hospital. Mrs Greenwood tells Esther with a tightened mouth: "You shouldn't have broken that mirror. Then maybe they'd let you stay" (*TBJ*:169). Esther astutely points out that "the mirror [ironically the symbol of (feminine) vanity as well as self-knowledge] had nothing to do with it"; the issue at hand is actually that Mrs Greenwood blames her daughter and what she perceives as Esther's asinine disobedience for her illness. Symbolically, it is thus Esther's own fault for daring to defy the "father" (symbolic order) and his representatives (the medical professionals). Ironically, in Chapter 14 Esther tries to use (and partially succeeds in using) her mother's fallacious outlook to her advantage.

I thought if only I could persuade my mother to get me out of the hospital I could work on her sympathies, like that boy with brain disease in the play, and convince her what was the best thing to do [to kill Esther]. To my surprise, my mother said, "All right, I'll try to get you out." [...] "If I try to get you out," she laid a hand on my knee, "promise you'll be good?" I spun round and glared straight at Doctor Syphilis, who stood at my elbow taking notes on a tiny, almost invisible pad. "I promise," I said in a loud, conspicuous voice. (*TBJ*:173)

As his name would indicate, Doctor Syphilis is in all likelihood a figment of Esther's overwrought imagination, but her reaction serves to exemplify Freud's theory of the operation of the ideal ego. In this instance, Esther again openly challenges the authority of the ideal ego, while also pretending to be obedient to it, like a "good" girl. This defiance accordingly leads to her "punishment" as the disobedient female and being admitted to the private psychiatric hospital. Earlier in the novel, when Esther angrily claims that she is "through with that Dr Gordon", Mrs Greenwood reveals that she in fact believed that it was Esther's *intention* to become mentally ill. She says: "I knew my baby wasn't like [...] those awful dead people at that hospital. [...] I knew you'd *decide* to be all right again" (TBJ:140) [emphasis added]. Through Esther's eyes, Mrs Greenwood also seems to be more alarmed about the financial implications of Esther's treatment than her recovery; see for example TBJ:126 & 178. Mrs Greenwood is thus *apparently* most concerned with the fiscal and social implications (i.e. "what will everyone think?") of what she *perceives* as Esther's disobedient, attention-seeking stunt. Finally, this condescending attitude is confirmed towards the end of the novel by Esther's following observation:

My mother's face floated to mind, a pale, reproachful moon, at her last and first visit to the asylum since my twentieth birthday. A daughter in an asylum! I had done that to her. Still, she had obviously decided to forgive me. "We'll take up where we left off, Esther," she had said, with her sweet, martyr's smile. "We'll act as if this were a bad dream." (TBJ:227)

For Esther, the whole experience is naturally anything but a dream and she resents her mother for treating it as one. Essentially, her mother is robbing her of her agency in devaluing Esther's experience and illness. Moreover, it also becomes clear in this quotation that Mrs Greenwood casts herself (or at least is cast by Esther) in the role of martyr. As such, she is clearly more concerned with her own sacrifice and suffering than with Esther's. (Indeed, in "Maenad", the speaker even goes as far as to state: "The mother of mouths didn't love me.").

In light of the above, it is hardly surprising that Esther's attitude towards her mother is at times antagonistic. Even before the symptoms of her condition become patent, Esther remarks: "I made a point of never living in the same house with my mother for more than a week" (TBJ:114). As the novel progresses, her hostility towards her mother becomes all the more overt. At first this hostility is carefully contained in Esther's imagination only:

My mother turned from a foggy log into a slumbering, middle-aged woman, her mouth slightly open and a snore ravelling from her throat. The piggish noise irritated me, and for a while it seemed to me that the only way to stop it would be to take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between my hands. (TBJ:118-119)

Bearing out Freud's theory, Esther's murderous impulse must be suppressed and is then transferred onto herself as her suicidal tendencies become all the more marked. In her journals, Plath (2000:433) makes this suppression and transference categorical with her usual brutal honesty and wry sense of humour:

In my deepest emotions, I think of her as an enemy: somebody who "killed" my father, my first male ally in the world. She is the murderess of maleness. I lay in my bed when I thought my mind was going blank forever and thought what a luxury it would be to kill her, to strangle her skinny veined throat which could never be big enough to protect me from the world. But I was too nice for murder. I tried to murder myself: to keep from being an embarrassment to the ones I loved and from living myself in a mindless hell. How thoughtful: Do unto yourself as you would do to others. I'd kill her, so I killed myself.

However, despite suppressing and internalising her matricidal urges, Esther becomes arrantly aggressive towards her mother. In Chapter 11, for instance, Esther threatens her mother with one of the most hurtful things that one can do to a mother: she warns that she will cut the metaphorical umbilical cord forever:

"Does he mean *live* there?" [Dr Gordon's private hospital in Walton] "No," my mother said, and her chin quivered. I thought she must be lying. "You tell me the truth," I said, "or I'll never speak to you again." "Don't I *always* tell you the truth?" my mother said, and burst into tears. (TBJ:130)

Indeed, according to Esther, the answer to this last question is a resounding "no". As discussed above, Mrs Greenwood has been the instrument for perpetuating several untruths of patriarchy in Esther's life. In addition, as alluded to in the second chapter of this study, Esther still resents her mother for not allowing the children to attend their father's funeral. Therefore, to a degree, Mrs Greenwood is partially accountable for Esther's persisting Electra complex (as Aurelia is by inference to some extent accountable for Sylvia's persisting Electra complex). Esther states that she "never cried for [her] father's death" and that:

the graveyard and even his death, had always seemed unreal to me. I had a great yearning, lately, to pay my father back for all the years of neglect, and start tending his grave. I had always been my father's favourite, and it seemed fitting I should take on a mourning my mother had never bothered with. (TBJ:159)

Here, the repressed Electra complex and matrophobia thus come to the fore as Esther resents her mother for not having loved her father enough to grieve properly for him. Instead, Mrs Greenwood “had just smiled and said what a merciful thing it was for him he had died, because if he had lived he would have been crippled and he couldn’t have stood that, he would rather have died than had that happen” (*TBJ*:159). Symbolically, this statement could be interpreted to indicate that Mrs Greenwood feels that her belated husband was not as strong as she is, because she bears her own misfortune with a “sweet martyr’s smile”; while he would rather have died than bear his. This would also substantiate Esther’s claim that her mother hated her father for dying.

The incentives for Esther’s animosity towards and resultant rejection of her mother as role model thus become ever clearer. As with the Electra complex, the first step towards Esther (and indeed Plath too) surmounting these feelings and their negative impact on her psyche and life, was to recognise them for what they were. This breakthrough comes in Chapter 16 of the novel:

My mother was the worst [in a long stream of visitors]. She never scolded me, but kept begging me, with a sorrowful face, to tell her what she had done wrong. She said she was sure the doctors thought she had done something wrong because they asked her a lot of questions about my toilet training, and I had been perfectly trained at a very early age and given her no trouble whatsoever. That afternoon my mother had brought me the roses. “Save them for my funeral,” I’d said. My mother’s face puckered, and she looked ready to cry. “But Esther, don’t you remember what day it is today? [...] It’s your birthday.” And that was when I had dumped the roses in the wastebasket. [...] “I hate her,” I said, and waited for the blow to fall. But Doctor Nolan only smiled at me as if something had pleased her very, very much, and said, “I suppose you do.” (*TBJ*:195)

The reason why Doctor Nolan is pleased, despite Esther having done the “unthinkable” in admitting that she hates her mother, is clearly because this marks the beginning of her road to recovery. Indeed, on the very next page, we are told that Esther is moved to Belsize House (the ward for patients nearly well enough to be discharged). And yet, we realise that Esther will in all probability return to her mother’s house (and to the maternal space of non-individuation) and clearly all of the causes of the latent enmity between them will continue to persist. What has changed, however, is that Esther is now more fully aware of her feelings and their causes and she will thus be able to better respond to them.

The intensity of this love-hate relationship between mother and daughter, the pushing and pulling of it, is perhaps most effectively portrayed in one of Plath's later poems: "Medusa" (written on 16 October 1962). The first eleven lines describe the mother in martyr imagery: her head is a "[l]ens of mercies"; her "stooges" "push by like hearts,/ Red stigmata at the center" and drag "their Jesus hair" in the "rip tide". In the twelfth line, the speaker wonders: "Did I escape?" We realise that it is the mother's martyred love that she is trying to escape from; yet her own "mind winds" back to the mother. This is due to the "[o]ld barnacled umbilicus" which runs across the Atlantic and "[k]eeps itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous repair." Thus, no matter how hard the daughter may try to separate from her mother, even crossing the ocean, the connection between them seems to constantly repair itself. By the fourth stanza, the speaker reluctantly admits this with the opening line: "In any case, you are always there". She goes on to describe how the mother figure was like a fish hooked on the end of her line; "dazzling and grateful" to be on the end of the line apparently. The figure is both "[t]ouching and sucking", echoing Esther's and Plath's ambivalent attitude of pity and disgust at the mother's vampirish love. The fifth stanza begins with a repeated denial: "I didn't call you./I didn't call you at all," but "[n]evertheless, nevertheless" the mother came like a "[f]at and red [...] placenta" to the speaker – the very embodiment of the abject maternal.

Biographically, this would seem to refer to Aurelia's rather unexpected visit to the Hughes' at Court Green in 1962. Unfortunately, she not only came at the time when Sylvia found out about Hughes's affair, she was also there when he subsequently left Sylvia (Butscher, 2003:304-305). Hence, the paralysis of "the kicking lovers" could refer to the fact that her presence suppressed both their urge to make love and to fight in the loud, violent manner with which they were accustomed to clear the air. She thus feels as if the mother figure is suffocating her, even down to her blood. As mentioned above, Sylvia had always attempted to present the image of the "golden girl" to her mother; hence the speaker is very disconcerted that her mother should witness her at her most vulnerable time when she is "[d]ead and moneyless/ Overexposed, like an X-ray." Yet, the speaker refuses her mother's Christ-like sacrifice ("I will take no bite of your body"), although she admits that she must live inside her mother. The speaker is "sick to death" of the "hot salt" (presumably a reference to the corrosion that takes place in seawater) and the mother's "wishes" for

her daughter that “hiss at [her] sins”. This again indicates the mother as a moral referee and the daughter’s consequent rebellion against this (“Off, off, eely tentacle!”). The poem ends with a harsh but definite proclamation: “There is nothing between us.” Yet, the speaker has already alleged that the umbilical cord connecting her with her mother continues to miraculously repair itself and that the mother is “always there.” One could thus deduce that the speaker is aware of the fact that even her most ferocious efforts will not separate the two of them and that it is simply beyond her control. The daughter must struggle continuously to attain individuation. As such, this poem thus validates Freud’s thoughts on the ambivalent and yet indelible relationship between a mother and daughter, as well as Chodorow’s on the hindrance of the daughter’s individuation process by her relationship with her mother.

3.2 Two sisters of Persephone: The “spinster” and the “sun’s bride”

Following my initial discussion on the manner in which the mother influences the daughter’s personality and emotions, this investigation should also extend to other issues which are regarded as representative of being “a woman” by psychoanalysis and Plath (as communicated by her work). Freud’s essay “Female Sexuality” (1932), as referenced above, features a lengthy discussion on the pre-Oedipal and (positive) Oedipal phases of a girl’s sexual development. Unfortunately, the essay fails to provide a comprehensive view of the *adult* woman’s sexuality. Indeed, Freud himself lamented his ultimate inability to fully grasp female sexuality. The most complete picture (outside of the pre-Oedipal and (positive) Oedipal phases) in the essay is provided by the following description:

[Women’s] sexual life is regularly divided into two phases, of which the first [the clitoral stage] has a masculine character, while only the second [the vaginal stage] is specifically feminine. [...] [A] complication arises from the fact that the clitoris, with its virile character, continues to function in later female sexual life in a manner which is very variable and which is certainly not yet satisfactorily understood. (Freud 1931:4592)

Note how the female sex is (negatively) defined in contradiction with the active, virile male sex – the first phase marked by a diminutive copy of the male organ; the

second phase marked by passivity and receptivity to the male or, more accurately, to masculinity which therefore makes it “specifically feminine”. In Irigaray’s (1985b:23) words, the vagina becomes “a hole-envelope that serves to sheathe and massage the penis in intercourse: a non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself, self-embracing.”

This generalisation forms a patent contradiction to Plath and her characters’ assertive sexuality (which would seem to correspond to the “complication” of the clitoris’ “variable” influence in the second phase of female sexuality); hence she may have been labelled by psychoanalysts as a woman who is affected by a masculinity complex and whose sexual life is marked with the dominant influence of the clitoris (as opposed to the passive vagina). Similarly, a woman who actively engages in the symbolic order by following an academic career, for example, would be (implicitly) deemed as masculine. This would entail that she is no longer capable of fulfilling feminine functions – mainly maternal functions – hence the archetype of the “spinster academic”. She is denied her sexuality and remains forever a virgin, but a virgin whose exchange value has been repudiated as she is no longer “feminine” in the archetypal, psychoanalytic sense of the word. However, in Freud’s defence, he did not equate femininity with women only, or masculinity with men only. Instead, femininity *and* masculinity are inherent to all human beings and our sexual identity constantly vacillates between the two poles (Mitchell, 2000:47-48).

Despite this and other scandalous assertions made by Freud (such as his claim that monogamous marriage is damaging to both husband and wife), he was often criticised as a “typically Victorian prude” (Mitchell, 2000:331-333). This was due to his analysis of the super-ego’s impact on sexuality. Yet, Freud was quick to point out that psychoanalysis is “set only on relieving sexuality from its repression by a higher, superimposed agency; sexual control should be the choice of the individual, not the dictate of an alienating social system” (Mitchell, 2000:424). As such, Freud would probably have applauded Plath’s sexual assertiveness. Indeed, he advocated that the sexual liberation of women from an early age would lead to a marked decrease in the number of female neurotics (Mitchell, 2000:422-423).

Alas, the difficulties facing the female personae in Plath’s work are not so easily resolved, as the influence of the ideal ego and other forces could never be fully

dispelled. These women (Esther Greenwood and the female speakers of the poems selected for the purposes of this study) are constantly torn between the kind of woman which society compels them to be (conveyed by the authority of the father, provided by the model of the mother and reinforced by the ideal ego and conscience), and the kind of woman which their repressed libidinal instincts and semiotic desires drive them to be. This brings us back to the concept of the divided self as presented by the split between the ideal ego and the actual ego. Christina Britzolakis (2006:113) asserts that this split produces a “doubled discourse” within a person’s psyche and resultantly in his/her work if he/she is an artist. With reference to Plath, Britzolakis (2006:113) states: “This doubled discourse [...] is the product of a certain psychic violence; it travesties modernism’s resistance to the domestic, maternal and sentimental. Plath frequently pits the poet against the figure of the domesticated woman: the 1950s ‘housewife’/mother” (2006:113). At first sight, this would seem to correspond with Freud’s thoughts on a woman’s potential as a creator. Mitchell (2000:433) states that:

Freud considered that a woman’s cultural fate of having to dedicate herself more exclusively to sexuality and propagation than did a man, meant that her psychic reactions were also more oriented to love and sensuality. It was thus harder for her to sublimate these drives in the interest of work or cultural pursuits; for this reason she lagged behind man in the achievements of civilization and power, she has had to toss away kingdoms [...] The implicit message [...] is that a woman who is sexually and maternally satisfied is a satisfied woman.

It would therefore seem that for a woman to desire to be a poet as well as a wife/mother presents a desire of two mutually exclusive and even conflicting beings; especially since fulfilment of traditional female roles, particularly the maternal role (see above), should ultimately bring her satisfaction (according to Freud and Parsons). And yet, as Esther so succinctly puts it: “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell” (*TBJ*:89-90). Plath herself adopted this attitude. She even went as far as to admonish the male students at Cambridge in a letter she wrote to the student magazine in May 1956 because they could see women only as either “pretty beagling frivolous things and devastating bohemian things” or as “esoteric opponents on an intellectual tennis court where the man, by law of kind, always wins” (Butscher, 2003:181). Instead, Plath claims that she views “a woman not merely as feeling, not merely as thinking, but as managing a complex, vital interweaving of both.”

Furthermore, in wanting to be a wife and mother, Plath did not have in mind the kind of domesticity exemplified by her mother. On the contrary, “the stifling family-centred and ethnocentric conformity of the 1950s small-town idyll, particularly the sanitized ‘normality’ of the suburban ideal home” is often Plath’s “satirical target” (Britzolakis, 2006:115). While yearning for a type of domesticity, Plath thus still showed a derisive, matrophobic aversion for the only kind of domesticity that she had known.

Likewise, Plath’s attitude towards the female body also fluctuates from proud admiration to self-effacing disgust or abjection. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva (1982:4) follows Freud’s thoughts (in *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilisation and its Discontents*) by asserting that “it is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” Kristeva perceives “three broad categories of objects, against which various social and individual taboos are erected: food, waste, and the signs of sexual difference (roughly corresponding to oral, anal, and genital erotogenic drives)” (Gross, 1990:89). The object is vile, disgusting, disturbing, etc. not merely for its own empirical incarnation, but rather for what it exposes: female genitalia remind men that they might be likewise “castrated”; wounds and corpses remind us that the body is vulnerable, destined to die; crimes remind us that the law and ethics are fallible, people flawed and unpredictable. The object also differs from symbols/signs. We can consider and “make sense” of what the sign represents (whether it be death, crime or anything likewise unwanted) because we can separate ourselves and look at the signified from a safe distance – we can “understand, react, or accept” (Kristeva, 1982:3). The object, on the other hand, does not allow us this safe rationality as it invades the border which is drawn between the “I” and the other, the disgusting. The object, in the form of “refuse and corpses *show[s] me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are [sic] what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There [in the physical presence of the object], I am at the border of my condition as a living being” (Kristeva, 1982:4) [original emphasis]. What makes the object precisely that is because it reminds us, often in a manner circumscribing and overwriting rationality and the symbolic order, that it is already present within us – we can never truly extricate ourselves from the object, which lodges within us presently or potentially.

This is because the abject essentially reminds us that for all our rational prowess, we are fundamentally living *and* dying bodies. As such, the abject is both fundamental and contrary to subjectivity. Elizabeth Gross (1990:88-89) succinctly describes this dual function as follows:

Like the broader category of the semiotic itself, the abject is both a necessary condition of the subject, and what must be expelled or repressed by the subject in order to attain identity and a place within the symbolic. Even at times of its strongest cohesion and integration, the subject teeters on the brink of this gaping abyss, which attracts (and also repulses) it. This abyss is the locus of the subject's generation and the place of its potential obliteration. In its various processes of destabilization and breakdown, it is the space inhabited by the death-drive [which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4] or its Hegelian equivalent, negativity.

In being both the origin and end of the subject, the abject is thus concurrently the site of fascination and horror. As such, the abject becomes inextricably bound to the maternal, specifically the maternal body. Referring to Kristeva's notion of the abject and the contradictions it leads to in Plath's poetry, Britzolakis (2006:116) elaborates on this ambivalence as follows:

The exploration of the "powers of horror" associated with the female (and especially the maternal) body in Plath's work forms part of a broader dialogue with modernism. She tends to figure femininity as abject at points when its social, cultural and literary inscriptions come under the heaviest strain, as in "Lesbos" and "Medusa". [...]Plath's poems about motherhood, many of which elegiacally celebrate the mother-infant relation, are no less caught up in these paradoxes. Her exploration of the relation between maternal subjectivity and writing is highly innovative, combining lyrical intimacy and tenderness with a critique of motherhood as a symbolic and institutional discourse.

The maternal body thus not only becomes an object of horror, something to be feared and disgusted by; it also becomes a symbol of the inscriptions of the superstructures of society (as well as a site of "lyrical intimacy and tenderness"). Moreover, Kristeva also explains that the maternal is subconsciously assigned as the source of the two chief "polluting objects" – excrement and menstrual blood (cf. Kristeva, 1982:71-72). For the girl-child, who must identify with the mother, there is only one option left once she has accepted her "second sex" status – she must view her own body as a site of abjection. Britzolakis (1999:16) refers to several passages in Plath's journals where she views her mirrored body with horror through

a medico-legal gaze which magnifies minor imperfections of the skin's surface, turning them into allegorical marks of the weakness of the flesh [...]

In these passages, the imagery of skin disease is linked to femininity itself; summoning up 1950s Freudian doctrines of anatomy as destiny, as well as a much older cultural tradition which links femininity itself with pathology.

The only manner in which this abject destiny can be kept “at bay” is by “the redeeming power of work; not only by the daily routines of hygiene, femininity, and housework, but also by the work of self-realization and growth; above all, by the work of writing” (Britzolakis, 1999:16). Again, the divided self comes to the fore as the maternal body is thus rejected in favour of intellectualism, while domesticity is also incorporated.

Yet, paradoxically, Plath does not employ the maternal body only as a negative embodiment of society. The maternal body can also become “a symbolic site of resistance to the Enlightenment narrative of technological mastery over nature” (Britzolakis, 2006:117). Britzolakis further asserts that this tendency is especially evident in the poems of *Ariel*, where “Plath draws on aspects of the symbolic and religious discourse of motherhood as critique of Cold War militarism, what she refers to in a letter to her mother as the ‘military-industrial complex’ (*LH*, p. 438)”. Matrophobia and abjection are thus turned on their proverbial heads as Plath reverts these disempowering notions into forms of resistance and agency against the patriarchal symbolic order. In order to better understand these aspects of the divided self in terms of womanhood, we must once again turn to Plath’s writing.

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In terms of the divided self, it may be wise to firstly begin by addressing the “thinking” woman, the “academic spinster” before moving on to the other aspects mentioned above. The ideal of the stoic, coldly intellectual woman can be found in Plath’s poem “Spinster”. “During a ceremonious April walk/With her latest suitor”, a girl is suddenly struck by the “tumult” of spring and the “vulgar motley” of infatuation from which she “withdrew neatly”. Instead she longs for winter:

Scrupulously austere in its order
Of white and black
Ice and rock; each sentiment within border,

And heart's frosty discipline
Exact as a snowflake.

This woman thus actively rejects the “internal” role and “last resort” of love associated with women. Instead, she takes on the masculine characteristics of “discipline” and exactness in keeping her “sentiment[s] within border”. Perfection and order – normally associated with the masculine – become the ideal she strives for. In terms of psychoanalysis, this woman would thus be deemed as suffering from a masculinity complex. With the aim of maintaining this ordered, frosty perfection, she decides to erect “a barricade of barb” to keep out the “mutinous weather” of emotion (as signified by “curse, fist, threat” and “love”). However, the reader realises that in doing this, she is effectively isolating herself from life. Yet, even this poem is not as “black and white” as one may think. There is something tongue-in-the-cheek about the tone of the poem, and it was composed in 1956, the same year that Plath would marry Ted Hughes (Butscher, 2003:189), indicating that Plath did not want to be a spinster herself.

Written the same year, the poem “Two Sisters of Persephone” also contains a “thinking” girl, but here she is presented in juxtaposition to her counterpart. While the former girl sits “within the house”, the other lies in the grass “without”. The first girl becomes “rat-shrewd” and “root-pale” while she works at the “barren enterprise” of calculating sums. On the other hand, the second girl hears and sees the beauty of nature, thus “freely” becoming the “sun’s bride” and “grass-couched in her labor’s pride/She bears a king.” As the first girl dies a “wry virgin” with “flesh laid to waste” and to be “worm-husbanded” in the grave, she is “no woman”. One would thus be tempted to deduce that Plath is making a clear case in favour of being a “feeling” woman, who takes pleasure in all the joys of physical femininity, both (hetero)sexual and maternal, as opposed to being a “thinking” woman, who withers away in ascetic intellectualism. As such, this poem would thus seemingly embody Freud’s thoughts about the “satisfied” woman; yet the “sun’s bride” must also experience the pain of having sexual intercourse for the first time and giving birth (signified by the “petaled blood” and burning “open to sun’s blade”). Furthermore, in keeping with the divided self, there are technical details in the poem which suggest that both sisters are equally necessary (just as it is necessary that Persephone should cause the seasons’ change with her absence or presence). In lines 2 and 24, both the sisters

are thus mentioned in a single line. They are also engaged in “a duet of shade and light”, which suggests a measure of reciprocity.

In order to better understand this contrast in terms of the divided self, it is necessary to turn to *TBJ*. This is because Esther so clearly embodies the conflicts within the individual as she is torn between being a poet, keeping to her mother and society’s strictures (remaining a virgin, marrying a “clean, fine model citizen”, etc), and following her libidinal desires and semiotic drives, all in the struggle to establish her identity. In Chapter 7, she provides a concise outline of the female divided self’s dilemma:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor [...] I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn’t make up my mind which fig to choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (*TBJ*:73)

The female persona is thus forced to make a decision *between* being an intellectual and being a wife and mother. Unlike a man, society has imprinted on her that she cannot choose both. This belief is not only the product of her mother and other married women’s instruction; the intellectual and professional women in Esther’s life also preach this tenet. The other girl students who share the college residence thus gossip about Esther staying in to study – an echo of Plath’s experience when the girls in Hopkins House gossiped about her “always studying in [her] room” (Plath, 2000:37). Thus, when presented with the chance to escape from their scorn, Esther grabs it with no moral regret. Thus, after learning that Buddy has tuberculosis, Esther does not feel “one bit sorry”; she “only [feels] a wonderful relief” and sees it as justice for the sexual double standards and hypocrisies he embodies.

I thought the TB might just be a punishment for living the kind of double life Buddy lived and feeling so superior to people [an attitude shared with patriarchy itself.] And I thought how convenient it would be now I didn’t have to announce to everybody at college I had broken off with Buddy and start the boring business of blind dates all over again. I simply told everyone that Buddy had TB and we were practically engaged, and when I stayed in to study on Saturday nights they were extremely kind to me because they thought I was so brave, working the way I did just to hide a broken heart. (*TBJ*:68-69)

Work and study are thus recast by the other girls not as productive activities for their own sake, but only as a means to “hide a broken heart”.

Unfortunately, the professional women in Esther’s life also underpin this dichotomy of intellectual pursuit versus traditional feminine pursuits; albeit from the other side of the equation. For example, “the famous woman poet at [Esther’s] college lived with another woman” (*TBJ*:210) (lesbianism also arguably being symptomatic of the masculinity complex, cf. Mitchell, 2000:69), so one would think that she would understand Esther’s need for romantic love and companionship. However, Esther informs us, “when I had told the poet I might well get married and have a pack of children some day, she stared at me in horror. ‘But what about your *career*?’ she had cried” (*TBJ*:210-211) [original emphasis]. Again, Esther is thus told that being married (at least to a man) and having children is mutually exclusive to being a poet and/or academic. On one level, Esther seems to agree with the poet. For example, when imagining what being Constantin’s wife would entail (cooking and cleaning until she “fell into bed, utterly exhausted” – falling into bed also hinting at the woman’s “marital duty” of sexually satisfying the man), she declares: “This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s, but I knew that’s what marriage was like” (*TBJ*:80). Accordingly, Esther asserts at several points in the novel that she will never be married (*TBJ*:24, 49 & 79). She also recalls “Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after [she] had children [she] would feel differently, [she] wouldn’t want to write poems any more” (*TBJ*:81). Therefore, Esther decides that it might be true that “when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state” (*TBJ*:81). This notion is echoed in the “living doll” of “The Applicant” (“It can sew, it can cook,/It can talk, talk, talk”). Again, the poet and the housewife/mother are juxtaposed in a mutually exclusive dichotomy.

However, Esther decides not to internalise this dichotomy as prescribed by “these weird old women” (which include the woman poet at her college and Jay Cee, the editor of *Ladies’ Day*). Instead, like Plath (see previous section of this study), she is able to see their hidden intentions as “they all wanted to adopt me in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them” (*TBJ*:210-211). Thus, these women were trying to fulfil the role of the mother and have Esther model

herself on them, which is ironic as none of them had children of their own and they were trying to discourage Esther from becoming a mother herself. As discussed in the previous section, this form of mothering leads to the girl rebelling against rather than following the lead of the mother figure. Ironically, in this case, the rebellion drives the girl back to traditional feminine roles. Importantly, however, accepting the role of wife could only occur under certain circumstances. As Plath (2000:54) wrote in her journal: "I am amazed that I, so proud and disdainful of custom, could consider marriage an honourable and vital estate. But under certain circumstances I do justly consider it that." As such, Plath (and her female characters) can thus still be seen as rebelling: against the unmarried women who tried to persuade her never to get married as well as against the conventional kind of male-dominated marriages.

Part and parcel of this rebellion is the young woman's sexual liberation. Along with "Two Sister's of Persephone", Plath derided the prudish virgins held forth as the ideal in society in several other poems. "Virgin in a Tree", for example, sets out with the explicit aim to "instruct [against]/And mock" "virginity for virginity's sake". The endorsement of chastity is portrayed as a "moral mousetrap" set by "ugly spinsters and barren sirs". The "virgin" is thus tortured "on her rack" while she becomes "dour-faced" and "woodenly askew". It is thus outright ironic that the young beauty is wasted in this manner because she has been "duped" by those whose beauty has likewise been wasted.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Esther Greenwood has reached the same conclusion as the poem. She states: "When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue. [...] I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't" (*TBJ*:77). However, unlike most girls her age, she decides not to stay "pure" for some hypothetical bridegroom:

Finally I decided that if it was so difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still pure by the time he was twenty-one I might as well forget about staying pure myself and marry somebody who wasn't pure either. Then when he started to make my life miserable I could make his miserable as well.
(*TBJ*:77)

Thus, her decision to give up her virginity is not made only out of mere curiosity, but becomes a protest act of sorts against the double standards of society. Of course, this conclusion was largely due to the incident which exposed Buddy's hypocrisy

(*TBJ*:64-66). Nonetheless, Esther had already decided by this time that she “would never marry him [Buddy Willard] if he were the last man on earth” (*TBJ*:49), which indicates that her resolution was not due to romantic disappointment but rather as a protestation against the moral prescriptions of the duplicitous superstructures of 1950s American morality and (Christian) religion.

Yet, notwithstanding her overt rejection of these morals, traces of the ideal ego remain. Despite openly expressing scorn for them, the thoughts of her earlier blind date Eric left an impression.

I said maybe if you loved the woman it [having sex] wouldn't seem so boring [as his first sexual experience in a brothel], but Eric said it would be spoiled by thinking this woman too was just an animal like the rest, so if he loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business. (*TBJ*:75)

This lasting impression of sex as a “dirty business” is evident in Esther’s changing attitude to the sexually candid Doreen. As early as Chapter 1, Esther describes the close relationship between the two of them, even going so far as to claim: “Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my bones” (*TBJ*:7). Note that their affinity is described in terms of the abject, hidden, all-pervasive aspects of the body (bones being hidden but always contained within the body, and signifying death). In Chapter 2, Esther decides not to attend a party hosted by *Ladies’ Day* so that she can spend the evening with Doreen and the self-assured Lenny. Yet, despite Doreen asking her to “stick around”, Esther makes good her escape from Lenny’s mansion and returns to the Amazon Hotel. When Doreen is drunkenly brought to Esther’s door by the laundry lady, Esther at first does not want to open the door and then she leaves Doreen in the hall, lying in a pool of her own vomit. The latter is a clear instance of abjection as Esther is both revolted by and drawn to the sight, especially because she had been so close to Doreen. Hereafter, Esther makes a “decision” about Doreen and the abject self she represents: “I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart” (*TBJ*:21). As such, Esther would thus appear to be allying herself with societal morals again. However, it soon becomes clear that it was not Doreen which revolted Esther but rather what they had in common. The next morning she gingerly opens her room door, because she

“expected to see Doreen’s body lying there in the pool of vomit like an ugly, concrete testimony to [her] own dirty nature” (*TBJ*:21). Esther’s disgust is thus a form of projection and moral self-abjection; she is disgusted with her own actions in associating with Doreen in the first place and for then abandoning Doreen twice.

During the *Ladies’ Day* banquet later in the novel, Esther misses Doreen because she would have mocked the frivolous, vain Hilda (*TBJ*:26). Esther thus misses her “partner in crime” who is also able to see through the “ideal” and superficial femininity which Hilda signifies. Due to her longing for Doreen, Esther becomes aware of her own divided nature (as both a “golden girl” and rebel), but she interprets this as a sign of weakness: “I wondered why I couldn’t go the whole way doing what I should anymore. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn’t go the whole way doing what I shouldn’t, the way Doreen did, and this made me even sadder and more tired” (*TBJ*:26-27). Caught between obeying and rejecting the ideal ego, Esther is morally paralysed. Ironically, it is at the same banquet that all the girls contract food poisoning – another instance of abjection in the novel which exposes the “poison” in supposed perfection. Esther thinks of the “celestially white kitchens” – the very ideal of the prototypical “housewife” – and the decadent dishes made there as “[p]oison” (*TBJ*:45). Symbolically, the girls are thus “poisoned” by the very ideal which they are supposed to pursue; just as the “virgin in a tree” is tortured and wasted by the morality which was supposed to save her. Another irony is that this episode provides Doreen the opportunity to likewise become something of a “double figure” as she breaks out of the stereotypical “bad girl” role. It is Doreen, not Betsy or any other female character, who comes to Esther’s room with chicken soup and then goes on to take care of all the other girls. Symbolically, it is precisely because Doreen rejected the traditional feminine ideal that she was not poisoned. Esther thinks to herself: “She might have been Betsy or my mother or a fern-scented nurse” (*TBJ*:44). Doreen is an unconventional woman and yet it is she, along with the equally unconventional Doctor Nolan, who becomes a positive role model and nurturing figure for Esther. Thus, when the figure performing the mothering is not acting as an instrument of conservative values, Esther sheds her matrophobia and responds positively to the other woman.

Nevertheless, as Britzolakis observes, the feminine can become abject and terrible in Plath's hands. For example, in the poem "Lesbos" the domestic environment symbolised by the kitchen is dangerous and suffocating: "there's a stink of fat and baby crap", and the "smog of cooking" becomes "the smog of hell". Similarly, the female patient and speaker in "Lady Lazarus" becomes an abject sight of both horror and fascination for the "peanut-crunching crowd/[which]Shoves in to see/Them unwrap me hand and foot/The big strip tease." With this, Plath makes clear the objectification of the woman as both a sexual and medical object, and an abject body made of "hands", "knees", "skin and bone". Moreover, the body of the mother itself can also become a site of the abject in Plath's work. Esther's description of Mrs Tomolillo (who incidentally (or significantly?) has the same surname as the woman who later imitates Mrs Greenwood outside the psychiatric ward) giving birth provides a vivid example of this abjection. The table onto which the woman, who is about to go into labour, is lifted looks like "some awful torture table". Her identity is symbolically annulled by her pregnancy as

her stomach stuck up so high [Esther] couldn't see her face or the upper part of her body at all. She seemed to have nothing but an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs, and all the time the baby was being born she never stopped making this unhuman whooping noise. (TBJ:61)

The element of horror is thus increased by the woman's animalistic characterisation. Yet, Buddy explains to Esther that the "unhuman whooping noise" is the effect of the drugs she is on; the woman is in "a kind of twilight" sleep where she does not feel the pain or remember anything of the event afterwards. Esther is shocked and disgusted by this explanation:

I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again. (TBJ:62)

Therefore, pain itself becomes abject; something which haunts the woman in the dark regions of her unconscious memory. But it also becomes allegorical of the patriarchal oppression of women. This specific woman is clearly not deriving any kind of masochistic pleasure from giving birth as Freud suggested some women do. The woman's labia have to be cut in order for the baby to be delivered and

afterwards “she does not answer or raise her head” (*TBJ*:63). Thus, the woman assumes a death-like state after the birth, as if she, along with her gender (symbolic of her mouth and voice, if we follow Irigaray’s line of thought), has been obliterated by the experience. This forms another contrast to one of Freud’s hypotheses, because she did not find fulfilment in birthing a son; instead it destroys her (at least symbolically or momentarily). There is also a hint of this abjection when Esther is haemorrhaging on Joan’s sofa. She remembers “a worrisome course in the Victorian novel where woman after woman died, palely and nobly, in torrents of blood, after a difficult childbirth” and she wonders if she might be dying. Especially notable are the adverbs used to describe the woman’s death – “palely” and “nobly” – as if dying in such a way is the noble epitome of femininity (“palely” bringing to mind the ideal of the “fair lady”). The woman’s nobility is determined by how she fulfils her biological *role*, versus the manner in which man’s nobility is determined by his valiant, chivalric *actions*.

Despite recognising this, Esther still seems to be frustrated by her lack of maternal aptitude or instinct as it seems to represent yet another facet which she finds deficient in herself. Accordingly, while at the gynaecologist to be “fitted” with a diaphragm, she muses: “How easy having babies seemed to the women around me! Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn’t I dream of devoting myself to baby after baby all day like Dodo Conway? If I had to wait on a baby all day, I would go mad.” (*TBJ*:211-212). Yet, the reader is conscious of the fact that the present, narrating Esther, as opposed to the Esther of the past whose story is narrated, is the mother of a young infant (*TBJ*:3) for whom she cuts off the starfish from her sunglasses case. What this serves to show is not only that the divided self is apparent in Esther’s attitude to motherhood, but also that motherhood itself becomes symbolically multivalent.

Accordingly, as mentioned above, the maternal body can become a site of resistance to modern patriarchal society and what it represents. In “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy” the speaker makes several references to the holocaust and casts herself as a Jew; and “the other”, who is male, as the Nazi. However (as discussed in the third section of the second chapter of this dissertation), Plath inverts the normal victim-perpetrator relationship, as one of the speakers becomes a triumphant

phoenix who “eat[s] men like air” and the other a vampire slayer who kills her father and husband. Patriarchal society with its atrocities of war is thus defeated when the woman speakers annihilate the men who are symbols of it.

Plath also presents the opposite by rendering childless women as horrible perfections; perfection also being a symbol of the suffocating father figure. The opening lines of “The Munich Mannequins” accordingly state: “Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children/Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb”. This is thus not only a reference to the Nazi wish for Aryan perfection, but also indicates that having children may be an act of imperfection but that it is, after all, an act of life, an act of affirmation in opposition to the “[v]oicelessness” of the perfect snow. This would confirm Kristeva’s claim that abjection (this time in the form of the maternal body) is necessary to life. Conversely, the woman in “The Fearful” who “hates/The thought of a baby/Stealer of cells, stealer of beauty”, loses her identity because of her self-serving vanity. Her “voice [...] hollows/More and more like a dead one”, so that her chosen barren state is slowly killing her. Parallel images of sterility and death can be found in “Childless Woman” and “Barren Woman”. The converse also holds true as “the cry of a child” is the most “real” thing in “Kindness”, and as the child’s “clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing” in “Child”. These poems thus celebrate the act of self-affirmation and moreover the ontological significance of motherhood. According to Plath, being a mother thus involves more than an abject body or conforming to societal ideals; it also becomes an act of self-affirmation, self-expression and resistance against the horrors of war in patriarchal society. Moreover, the mother becomes the origin of the quintessence of reality and beauty. The divided self in this regard at least has thus apparently come full circle in first exposing and rejecting the 1950s stereotype of the mother; and then reassigning a politically and ontologically important role to the mother. In re-writing the female body and its functions, Plath is thus validating “Cixous’ politicization and poeticization of the body [as] a bid to reclaim not only the body itself but its representation and operation in culture” (Ives, 2007:75). In this manner, “[b]ody and text become synonymous. Censoring the body becomes like censoring speech and art. In making art, then, one writes one’s body, one’s existence” (Ives, 2007:75). In “writing her body” and the positive, self-affirming aspects of the female body Plath finds not only an individual definition of femininity but also a way to empower herself.

And yet, even then, there are poems like “Tulips” (where the female speaker longs for the perfection of “winter” and her husband and child become “little smiling hooks” from which she wants to be free) wherein this whole schema is inverted and negated once again. Although the limited space of this study prohibits a further investigation of these aspects, I will conclude this chapter by stating that these apparently contradictory poems would actually stand to prove the original hypothesis of the *divided* self in terms of Plath’s approach to womanhood.

Chapter 4

Dying is an art

4.1 "The woman is perfected": Understanding the death-drive and suicide as the final act of self-affirmation

Any psychoanalytic discussion of Plath's work (even one as rudimentary as this study) would be incomplete without a reference to the depression and suicidal tendencies which recur in several of her poems as well as in *TBJ*. Once again, we turn our attention to Freud, in particular his essay entitled "Mourning and Melancholia", a work which Plath herself repeatedly referenced.

Freud begins his discussion by outlining the characteristics which the two conditions (mourning and melancholia) have in common: "painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love [and] inhibition of all activity" (Freud, 1917:3042). As in mourning, the symptoms of melancholia (a term which has since been replaced with "depression" in popular and psychoanalytic culture) are brought on by some or other terrible loss. However, in melancholia,

[t]he object has perhaps not actually died, but has been lost as an object of love [...]. In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him. (Freud, 1917:3043) [original emphasis]

Thus, the basic difference is that for the melancholic the loss could remain "obscure" (in that its origin or extent cannot be fully grasped) and could extend beyond (although not excluding) death to "all those situations of being slighted, neglected or disappointed, which can import opposed feelings of love and hate into the relationship or reinforce an already existing ambivalence" (Freud, 1917:3048). It follows that, if the loss is caused by the disruption of a relationship, the person who has caused this emotional disturbance is usually someone close to the melancholic person. However, because the melancholic cannot exact his/her revenge on the beloved "object" (a term used in psychoanalysis to include persons too) which has caused the negative emotions, he/she must project the vengeful feelings onto him/herself. The wronged person's "erotic cathexis [emotional and libidinal investment] in regard to his[/her] object" undergoes a "double vicissitude: part of it has

regressed to identification, but the other part, under the influence of the conflict due to ambivalence, has been carried back to the stage of sadism which is nearer to that conflict" (Freud, 1917:3048). As such, the melancholic person thus transfers and projects the love (which he/she cannot give up even though the object must be given up), as well the hate which he/she feels for the object, onto his/her own ego. In order to punish and blame the original object, the melancholic thus now punishes and blames him/herself; and consequently the murderous impulse which the melancholic harbours towards the original beloved object must be turned back upon the melancholic.

While both mourning and melancholia are thus primarily characterised by a traumatic loss, the effects of this loss differ widely. Freud (1917:3043) further summarises the major differences between mourning and melancholia as follows:

In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. The [melancholic] patient represents his[/her] ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he[/she] reproaches himself[/herself], vilifies himself[/herself] and expects to be cast out and punished. He[/she] abases himself[/herself] before everyone and commiserates with his[/her] own relatives for being connected with anyone so unworthy. He[/she] is not of the opinion that a change has taken place in him[/her], but extends his[/her] self-criticism back over the past; he[/she] declares that he[/she] was never any better. This picture of a delusion of (mainly moral) inferiority is completed by sleeplessness and refusal to take nourishment, and - what is psychologically very remarkable - by an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life.

In light of the preceding discussions on Plath's work, the symptoms of depression may thus already sound familiar. A further resemblance can be found in Freud's observation that melancholic patients often "still succeed, by the circuitous path of self-punishment, in taking revenge on the original object and in tormenting their loved one through their illness, having resorted to it in order to avoid the need to express their hostility to him[/her] openly" (Freud, 1917:3048). This holds especially true if the person who the melancholic holds responsible for the original sense of loss is a close family member. In such a case, the melancholic's ultimate form of revenge would thus be to commit suicide; thus killing both the projection of the guilty party and depriving the actual guilty party of his/her loved one. Naturally, this leads one to think of the daughter (particularly in the forms of Sylvia Plath and Esther Greenwood) who must repress her murderous impulses towards her mother, hence

internalising them. I will delve further into this notion in a moment. For the time being, there is a more fundamental resemblance which must be contemplated, namely, that between the figures of the woman and the melancholic.

Sue Vice (1998:165) summarises this correspondence as follows: "Like the melancholic, a woman prefers affection to passion; has little interest in the outside world; and has suffered a primordial disappointment – castration, in the woman's case." Consequently, Vice argues, "female sexuality is necessarily pathological, as melancholia is in men." However, a pathological quality is not all that the two states share. Irigaray (1985a:66) argues that there is "no recourse other than melancholia" for the daughter once she has discovered her castration "and that of her mother – her 'object,' the narcissistic representative of all her instincts." The trauma of realising her own irredeemably "mutilated" condition and of realising that the same fate has befallen the woman she loves and must model herself upon is a trauma from which the daughter can never recover. To further illustrate the parallels, Irigaray (1985a:66-67) cites Freud throughout in identifying the characteristics which the daughter shares with the melancholic:

- profoundly painful dejection, which can be diagnosed by the absence of any libidinal activity and by the loss of interest in masturbation [...]

- abrogation of interest in the outside world, which, in the case of the little girl, takes the form of a faltering effort to master the external world. The latter is perpetuated in women's "weaker social interests" [...] and their "few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization". [...]

- loss of the capacity for love, which leads the little girl to "turn away from her mother" and indeed from all women, herself included. [...]

- inhibition of all activity: "Passivity now has the upper hand" [and women are traditionally meant to be passive by nature...]

- fall in self-esteem, which, for the little girl, signals the end of the "phallic phase" and the entry into the Oedipus complex. [...] She is a "mutilated creature" who, after she "becomes aware of the wound to her narcissism ... develops, like a scar, a sense of inferiority." "She acknowledges the fact of her castration and with it, too, the superiority of the male and her own inferiority."

Whereas some of these characteristics or symptoms have already been discussed at length with regard to women in general, and Plath and her characters in particular, a more exhaustive comparison will be attempted shortly. For the moment, other

theoretical aspects in terms of the melancholic and feminine conditions must be considered.

Ruth Parkin-Gounelas (2001:215-222) adds a further dimension to this debate by arguing that a suicidal person may also be hoping to turn him/herself into a fetish object. As such, a woman may attempt to become more aesthetically/sexually attractive in becoming more inorganic. The female body is thus seen “as *objet d’art*, a manufactured amalgam of dead parts which parades its own disjunction from any concept of a whole or living body” (Parkin-Gounelas, 2001:218). The melancholic woman can thus exact a further revenge upon her loved one in that she becomes all the more desirable in the process of becoming a fetish object; yet she becomes less accessible as she approaches an inorganic state. In this regard, suicide thus becomes a way to attain the status of a fetish object and hence a kind of inorganic perfection.

There is another factor which must be taken into consideration in order to gain a better understanding of the suicidal tendencies portrayed in Plath’s work, namely the death-drive. One of Freud’s hypotheses included in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” is that every organism must follow its “conservative nature”, which implies “an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads” (Freud, 1920:3740). As such, each organic creature is compelled to return to its initial inorganic state, even outside of the wish to become a fetish object. According to Freud (1920:3740), if we accept that “everything living dies for *internal* reasons – becomes inorganic once again” (which he attests through a series of biological investigations), “then we shall be compelled to say that ‘*the aim of life is death*’” [original emphasis]. Clearly, this would seem to contradict the instincts of self-preservation that have been observed innumerable in living creatures. Yet, Freud (1920:3741) argues that these are only:

component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself, [...each] organism wishes to die only in its own fashion.

Freud is thus not arguing that each living creature is essentially suicidal, but rather that any “unnatural” death is avoided as far as possible and “natural” death (such as

old age) is not resisted because it forms an integral part of each organism – everything *must* die after all. As such, Freud groups these “death-drives” under the “ego instincts” as opposed to “sexual instincts”: “the former exercises pressure towards death and the latter towards a prolongation of life” (1920:3745). According to Freud, this is because the ego, with its inherent, dualistic narcissism, longs to be reunited with the undifferentiated, semiotic state whence it once derived. It is thus out of love and hate for itself that the impoverished ego of the melancholic wishes to obliterate itself. As such, the death-drive can be likened to abjection as it both repels and attracts one to the obliteration of subjectivity. Kristeva elaborates on this similarity in maintaining that just as the height of abjection can be found in the maternal body, so the object of the death-drive can be found in the maternal. Burgin (1990:117-188) encapsulates Kristeva’s argument as follows:

[It is] not woman *as such* who is abjected, but rather woman as privileged signifier of that which man both fears and desires: the extinction of identity itself [...] The transient matter of the woman’s body however is doubly abjected, in that it is chronologically organized to remind us of our common condition as brief events in the life of the species. By this same token, however, the woman also signifies precisely that desired “state where everything is the same”: the pre-oedipal bliss of the fusion of bodies in which infant and mother are “inextricably mixed”, that absence of the pain of differing, condition of identity and meaning, whose extinction is deferred until death. (Burgin, 1990:117-118) [original emphasis]

Thus, the melancholic’s suicidal tendencies also form part of a wish to be reunited with the maternal body, which will be examined in Plath’s writing in a moment.

There is one final factor which must be considered in terms of melancholia and femininity, namely the conflict between the ego and the super- or ideal ego. Freud (1917:3045) points out that in the melancholic “one part of the ego sets itself over and against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object [...] [T]he critical agency which is here split from the ego [...] is the agency commonly called ‘conscious’.” As such, the melancholic person’s *internal* ideal ego in the form of his/her conscience is thus the agency denouncing the ego’s worth from within. For women then, it would be their internalised version of the symbolic order of patriarchy that is affirming their essential inferiority, which began with the castration complex. As such, Plath’s “death seems to act out Freud’s contention that suicide represents the final victory of the superego over the ego” (Britzolakis, 1992:214).

While the scope of this dissertation does not allow for a further investigation into these various hypotheses and their validity, these notions can be applied fruitfully to Plath's work.

*

That Sylvia Plath suffered from depression can be regarded as an accepted fact. Although originally misdiagnosed by Winthrop's local psychiatrist – dubbed “Doctor Gordon” in *TBJ* – as “a neurotic female rather than as a severe depressive”, her condition was finally correctly diagnosed at McLean's Hospital after her first serious suicide attempt in August 1953 (cf. Butscher, 2003:112,120-121). However, as several entries from her diaries will attest, she had suffered from depression for years before her suicide attempt. One example would be the entry for 3 November 1951, in which virtually all the established symptoms of melancholia (not mourning, because no one close to her had recently died) can be traced: painful dejection, absence of libidinal activity (loss of appetite for food and sex, insomnia), loss of interest in outside world, loss of capacity to love self and others, inhibition of all activity, fall in self-esteem and the judgement of the ideal ego extending its criticism of the ego's lack of (mainly moral) worth into the past.

God, if ever I have come close to wanting to commit suicide, it is now, with the groggy sleepless blood dragging through my veins [...] I fell into bed again this morning, begging for sleep, withdrawing into the dark, warm fetid escape from action, from responsibility. [...] I thought of the myriad of physical duties I had to perform [...] The list mounted, obstacle after fiendish obstacle, they jarred, they leered, they fell apart in chaos, and the revulsion, the desire to end the pointless round of objects, of things, of actions, rose higher. To annihilate the world by annihilation of oneself is the deluded height of desperate egoism. [...] I am afraid. I am not solid, but hollow. I feel behind my eyes a numb, paralyzed cavern, a pit of hell, a mimicking nothingness. I never thought, I never wrote, I never suffered. I want to kill myself, to escape from responsibility, to crawl back abjectly into the womb [...] I see the finger writing my hollow futility on the wall, damning me [...] I am] afraid that the disease which eats away the pith of my body with merciless impersonality will break forth in obvious sores and warts, screaming “Traitor, sinner, imposter [sic].” (Plath, 2000:149-50)

Moreover, Plath alludes to the parallels between the death-drive and the abject; she realises that her wish to die is (partially) a wish to return to a state of undifferentiation with the maternal body. Although one could continue to analyse this and other autobiographical writings by or personal conversations with Plath, I will now heed Nussbaum's admonition to respect the other's privacy in the pursuits of the narrative imagination. As such, the rest of this discussion will once more focus mainly on Plath's poetry and fictional writings as certain psychical processes of Plath (as opposed to pieces of her psyche we can reassemble), with only occasional relevant references to her life.

There are numerous poems which allude to the symptoms of depression and suicidal urges. One of these would be "Apprehensions", where the speaker seems utterly and painfully isolated from the outer world. She feels herself surrounded by four great walls: one white, one grey, one red and one black wall. In the first stanza, the sky is "[i]nfinite, green, utterly untouchable" above the white wall, and the angels and the stars that "swim in it" are indifferent. The symbolic superego is thus utterly indifferent to her pain and cause. Yet, these untouchable and indifferent entities are her "medium" to the outside world, which shows the extreme measure of her isolation. The white wall is presumably the spiritual quality of life, as the stars and angels would be sacred symbols. In the second stanza, we learn that the grey wall is her "mind" from which there seems to be "no way out". This world is presented as barren and sullied, because it has "no trees or birds" but "only a sourness." The red wall of the third stanza would appear to be symbolic of the body, which "winces continually". The speaker states: "This is what I am made of, this and a terror/Of being wheeled off under crosses and a rain of pietas." Not only does this serve to demonstrate that the speaker has lost the other facets outside her body which make her human, it also indicates the speaker's terror of funerals and dying. In addition to the indifferent angels of the first stanza, this terror of "crosses and pietas" would also indicate the speaker's relationship with the symbolic order in the form of religion. In terms of feminism then, patriarchy offers the woman no understanding or comfort – instead it worsens her ordeal. We realise that there is no escape from this ordeal as the final stanza is centred on the black wall. On this wall are "unidentifiable birds" (which could signify the subconscious or the obscure lost object), and "[t]here is no talk of immortality among these", which would indicate that this wall and its birds

represent death, perhaps by suicide. The poem ends with: "Cold blanks approach us/They move in a hurry." The "cold blanks" could be indicative of depression (as in the "hours of blankness" in "Manor Garden") while the speed of their approach may signal the speaker's sense of impending doom (like the "doom mark" that "[c]rawls down the wall" in "Contusion"). Several of Freud's characterisations of melancholia (such as a painful dejection and cessation of interest in and isolation from the outside world) can thus be found in this poem.

Several of the poems discussed above with regard to the father figure also contain references to the symptoms of melancholia/depression. For example, the speaker of "The Colossus" expresses extreme dejection and has lost all interest in the world outside from the island. The poem begins with a statement of self-doubt: "I shall never get you put back together entirely." After telling us of her efforts of "thirty years" (thus extending her condition to the past), the speaker proclaims that she is "none the wiser" – thus proving her efforts futile. She "crawl[s] like an ant in mourning", indicating both her diminished ego and the obscure loss that she has suffered. She has withdrawn from the outside world to such an extent that "[her] hours are married to shadow" even as the sun is rising. This statement indicates not only the persistence of her depression, but also that she is unavailable and not interested in other men (or the libidinal instincts which they might have satisfied). Therefore, the poem ends with the declaration: "No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel/On the blank stones of the landing." The speaker has thus wholly retreated from the outside world and has instead resigned herself to her bleak, isolated state. If the speaker is also taken to be representative of the impoverished ego, and the Colossus of the superego, it becomes clear that the omnipotent superego – even despite its fallen state – has conquered the ego.

Similarly, the speaker of "Full Fathom Five" is diminutive in comparison to the father-deity, who is ultimately the conqueror. She must now "walk dry on [his] kingdom's border/Exiled to no good." Along with a feeling of dejection and exile (retraction from the outside world), we thus find an indication of the ego's moral unworthiness. Moreover, the speaker longs for death as she wants to "breathe water" to join her father in the afterlife. These poems would thus corroborate Irigaray's theory of the woman as melancholic. The female speakers clearly feel themselves inferior to the

sea-father-god and this inferiority stems (at least partly) from the psychological effects of the castration complex. As such, these speakers become representative of women who are subjugated by the patriarchal symbolic order. In their utter surrender to the abolition of their ego to effective suicide and the superego, they stand to show that the woman who continues in her subservience must eventually suffer self-obliteration. Moreover, as verified in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, the female speakers both suffer from a persisting Electra complex. This becomes especially important when one considers Plath's particular situation.

Bundtzen (2006:40) accordingly offers a further explanation for the number of father-poems that contain references to depression and suicide. In order to do so, she quotes from Plath's journals (2000:476): "If I really think I killed and castrated my father may all my dreams of deformed and tortured people be my guilty visions of him or fears of punishment for me? And how to lay them?" Bundtzen then refers to Plath's remarks after reading "Mourning and Melancholia" (discussed above), but interprets these murderous impulses as directed against her father (as opposed to her mother). Therefore, "one explanation Plath seems to be formulating for her first suicide attempt is internalized guilt for wishing her father dead and having that wish fulfilled" (Bundtzen, 2006:40). In terms of Freud, part of the root of Plath's depression may well be the pain that her father's loss has caused her. However, as she was only eight years old when he died, a state of mourning which persists until adulthood cannot be validated. Instead, he becomes an "obscure" lost object and she cannot detach her emotional cathexis from him. Moreover, because her love for him endures, she cannot "punish" him for making her suffer thus and so she is forced to internalise the guilt of the betrayal and punish herself. This would also offer another explanation for the suicidal tendencies which are often portrayed in Plath's work, especially in her only novel.

In *TBJ*, Esther exhibits several signs of depression, such as a loss of appetite, severe insomnia and a general inhibition of all activity (such as reading and writing). In the novel, she considers suicide several times (*TBJ*:131, 142, 147, 150, 152, 153 and 161). However, she also clearly thinks of herself as worthless, which shows the internalisation of guilt and sadism. For example, in Chapter 12, she summons up her "little chorus of voices" – a testament of the super-/ideal ego at work – which

details everything that is wrong with or lacking in her (*TBJ*:141). Thus, her ego endures unrelenting criticism from her internal superego. Similarly, Esther imagines that “Joan was the beaming double of [her] old best self, specially designed to follow and torment [her]” (*TBJ*:197). As with the archetypal melancholic, Esther thus feels herself deserving of punishment. Notwithstanding this substitution, we could also deduce from this that Esther does not extend her current self-effacement to her old self if Joan is a copy of the “old best self”, and this would be inconsistent with melancholia’s symptoms. Nevertheless, even this self is not perfect as Joan eventually deteriorates and kills herself (*TBJ*:215). Symbolically speaking, the ego’s need for self-punishment is thus projected onto a second self who is then annihilated. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous chapter of this study, her mother seems to be the person whom Esther blames for her misfortunes, especially the loss of her father. The punishment Esther exacts varies in form and degree, but she attempts the ultimate form of punishment open to the melancholic in trying to rob her mother of a loved one (Esther). Thus, instead of acting on her murderous impulses, Esther transfers them onto herself and this would thus be a further affirmation of Freud’s theory of the melancholic. Furthermore, the place in which she chooses to commit suicide – a hole in the earth accessible only through their basement – is consistent with Kristeva’s notion that the death-drive is a desire to return to the abject, undifferentiated maternal (the dark, moist soil being the womb of Mother Earth). As mentioned above, Esther’s first semi-conscious utterance is “Mother!” (*TBJ*:164), which would also be in line with Kristeva’s thoughts.

To return to the theme of revenge: poems such as “Burning the Letters” also indicate the speaker’s powerlessness to exact revenge on the loved one who brought about the original trauma. Based on an incident where Plath decided to burn the papers and letters which Hughes had left at Court Green when he moved out, this specific poem describes an instance of actual revenge (Butscher, 2003:320). Unable to exact her revenge on the husband who has left her, the speaker (in her “housedress”, symbol of the domestic woman) burns all the papers he left at home. Symbolically, the poem itself is also an act of *creation*, which describes the *destruction* of what might have included some of Hughes’s poems; hence, Plath’s poem itself becomes an act of revenge. More importantly, the act of burning the letters signifies the death of the relationship (“here is an end to the writing,/The spry

hooks that bend and cringe, and the smiles, the smiles”), so that something is killed, even though it is neither the melancholic person nor the object of her love and vengeance. In the final stanza, the speaker warns her lover that the cry of her pain (the “red burst and a cry”) lives on forever, “[d]yeing the air” around him (“dyeing” indicating both the unnatural, smothering quality of the air as well as being reminiscent of the word “dying”). Thus, he will never be free from the pain that he has caused her (even if she is dead); hence she exacts one more act of revenge. Moreover, in effect, he will now become the melancholic who is haunted by the loss he cannot precisely identify as it infiltrates the very atmosphere around him.

“Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” contain further instances of revenge. As mentioned above, the speaker of “Daddy” “kills” both the father figure and her husband. Thus, the speaker of this poem has apparently not transferred her murderous impulses onto herself. Yet, she does attempt to commit suicide (albeit to “get back, back, back to [her father]”) and by the end of the poem she is annihilated herself (“I’m through”). A successful separation from the object of loss and revenge, and the ego has thus not taken place. This separation seems to be more successful in “Lady Lazarus”, as she is a phoenix who, like Lazarus from the Bible, is resurrected. She also vows revenge as she will “eat men like air”. However, this resurrection is also problematic. As Plath wrote in preparation of a BBC reading: “The only trouble is, she has to die first” (Plath, 1981:294). Like the speaker in “Daddy”, this speaker must also be obliterated; unlike the former however, she does possess “the great and terrible gift of being reborn” (Plath, 1981:294).

These two poems are also interesting in that they exemplify both the abject, as well as the fetishism identified by Parkin-Gounelas which is connected with the death-drive. In “Daddy” the speaker, as well as the father figure, is presented as a series of objects and body parts: a “black shoe”, “a foot”, “a bag full of God”, “one gray toe”, “a head in the freakish Atlantic”, “the tongue stuck in my jaw” and so forth. The speaker likewise had to be reassembled, “stuck” “together with glue”. In “Lady Lazarus”, it is only the speaker who is presented to us in this fetishlike manner. Here, the objects and body parts refer explicitly to the Jews in Nazi concentration camps: “a Nazi lampshade”, a “paperweight”, “fine/Jew linen”, a “napkin”, a “cake of soap/A wedding ring/A gold filling.” This creates an even more disturbing process of linking

death with the female body as a fetish object. In addition, the association with the woman as a victim of a fascist system is made uncomfortably clear. The connotation is made all the more explicit “[i]n an appalling conflation of the processes of strip-tease and flaying” (Parkin-Gounelas, 2001:219) in stanzas 9 to 11:

The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.

Herein, we also find a reinforcement of the woman as the medical and sexual object of the subjective male gaze. This connotation is made explicit by the titles she employs when referring to the always male (“Herr” translating as “Sir” or “Mr”) addressee: “Herr Doktor”; “Herr Enemy”; “Herr God”; and “Herr Lucifer”. The woman thus recognises that the once exulted roles appointed to males (such as being a doctor and God) are dangerous and evil where she is concerned. Moreover, she imagines herself becoming the “opus”, “valuable” and “pure gold baby” of these men, thus declaring her exchange value as a fetish object (ironically reflecting the initial etymology of the term). Becoming a fetish object also implies reaching a state of *inorganic* perfection; even the “baby” would be lifeless if it were “pure gold”. Indeed, with reference to her own suicide attempts, the speaker proclaims:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

Not only do these lines thus show the drive for perfection, they also illustrate the death-drive. In turning herself into a fetish object (or, rather, into several fetish objects), the speaker is simultaneously expressing a latent urge to return to an inorganic state. Furthermore, the woman speaker corroborates Irigaray’s theory of the inevitable melancholy of women when she implies that suffering and death by suicide are part and parcel of her identity. For her, depression and attempting

suicide “[feel] like hell” but also “[feel] real”, so much so, that suicide becomes “an art” which she does “exceptionally well” and which is her “call”. The latter statement would also indicate that she believes that committing suicide is her fate; thus dying by suicide would be the fulfilment of the aim of her individual death-drive. However, the final stanza of the poem indicates that she will be reborn, thus continuing the cycle of life instead of simply returning to the inorganic state.

A poem which illustrates certain of these aspects of the death-drive as well as the symptoms of melancholia/depression is “Tulips”. The speaker describes the “white”, “snowed-in” “winter” of the hospital room where she lies. She enjoys “learning peacefulness” and being “nobody” after giving up her “name”, “day-clothes”, “history” and “body” to the medical personnel. She feels like “a pebble” (note the reverse personification and fetishism at play as she becomes an inorganic object) under the hands of the nurses which “smooth” her “gently”. Along with these gradual losses of identity, she wants to give up all the “baggage” of her life, which includes her “husband and child”. She expresses “how free” it feels to “be utterly empty” and exist in this “peacefulness”. All of this points towards the death-drive’s pressure to obliterate the ego and identity by joining the formless. In the fifth stanza, she also envisages that this halcyon state “is what the dead close on, finally” in a kind of blessing “like a Communion tablet”, so that the state of death alone – and not the religious redemption which is supposed to await her after death – is her redemption. Therefore, in the last four stanzas, she laments the presence of the red tulips, which “hurt” her precisely because they are alive and they remind her that she is likewise alive. The tulips thus take on the role of the ideal ego and conscience as they “watch” her and compel her to see herself as “flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow/Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips”. In addition to showing the inferiority that she feels, these lines also demonstrate that her existence is, as it were, returned to her because she is being watched. For this ability, “[t]he tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals” and it is thus regretfully that the speaker is made aware of her own vitality and heart once more. The poem also highlights specific gender issues, which can be linked to melancholia, the death-drive and abjection. The poem contains several references to the speaker’s isolation from the outside world; for example, “it is winter here”; everything is “quiet” and “snowed-in”; she is simply “lying by [herself] quietly” (in other words not moving or

communicating) and she has “nothing to do with explosions” (this serving to illustrate Irigaray’s assertion that women are melancholic due to Freud’s definition of them – that they do not make active contributions to the discoveries of civilisation). As patriarchy would expect, she has surrendered both her “body” and identity (“name”, “day-clothes” and “history”) to one of its representatives – the medical world. Similarly, the (presumably female) nurses have sacrificed their identity due to their subservience to this representative of the symbolic order. They “pass and pass, they are no trouble” and “[d]oing things with their hands [i.e. not with their minds], one just the same as another,/So it is impossible to tell how many there are.” Moreover, from their lack of identity, they do nothing to affirm the speaker’s lack of identity as they “tend [her body] as water/Tends to the pebbles it must run over” (i.e. without choice or thought) and “[t]hey bring [her] numbness in their bright needles [also symbols of domestic work], they bring [her] sleep” while they have also “swabbed [her] clear of [her] loving associations” (a loss of capacity for love being another symptom of melancholia, especially for women whose one recourse in life is supposed to be love). As such, these women who conform to the symbolic order lose their own identity and also deprive other women of their identity. However, as indicated above, it is precisely this identity-less state which the melancholic and therefore the woman must strive after; for, as the speaker puts it, “I have wanted to efface myself”. Similarly, she can offer no resistance as “[t]hey have propped [her] head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff/Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut./ Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.” The image of the two “lids that will not shut” and thus have “to take everything in” is also a patent representation of the vagina and the woman herself, who (in the patriarchal system) can offer no resistance to the penetration and conquest of the male. Like the melancholic, the woman’s ego is rendered powerless by the superego and the ego strives to obliterate itself in the inorganic, formless state of undifferentiation. Despite all of this, the tulips seem to bring the woman back to life as the poem ends with the lines:

And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
 Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
 The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
 And comes from a country far away as health.

She is thus made aware of her “heart” and by inference her emotions and selfhood, and we can safely assume that the warm, salty water she tastes consists of her own

tears. As such, she is thus reconnected with her self and ego. Granted, these are yet like “a country far away as health”, but at least she now demonstrates an awareness of (perhaps even a yearning for?) this other “country”. Hence, we can thus assume that the speaker of *this* poem will not commit suicide after all.

Other poems which also exhibit an inherent urge to return to origins and/or an inorganic state (thereby demonstrating the death-drive) would include “A Birthday Present”, “Getting There”, “Years”, “Contusion”, “For a Fatherless Son”, “Lorelei”, and “Ariel”. However, unlike the speaker of “Tulips”, the subjects in these poems do seem to be leaning towards committing suicide. Of these poems, the last two most clearly illustrate another aspect of the death-drive, namely that every organism simply wants to die in its own fashion. In “Lorelei”, the speaker yearns for the peace (of death) that the sirens promise and she implores “Stone, stone, ferry me down there.” Correspondingly, in “Ariel” the speaker thus finally announces: “And I/Am the arrow,/The dew that flies/Suicidal, at one with the drive/Into the red/Eye, the cauldron of morning.” Both poems thus plainly illustrate one of the aspects of the death-drive – to die in a manner which is inherent and natural to the organism. If this desire is thus linked to the suicidal tendencies illustrated in these and so many of Plath’s poems as well as those of Esther Greenwood in *TBJ*, dying by one’s own hand becomes an act of self-affirmation. Although suicide would clearly not be organically/biologically inherent to each organism (as Freud indicated), I would argue that it is psychically inherent to the melancholic. In other words, for the melancholic to commit suicide means that he/she dies in precisely the manner which he/she wanted to die, and the self-affirmative value is double precisely because this death is achieved by the person’s *own* hands. As such, suicide becomes something of a self-affirmative act as well as a way to achieve perfection.

The last poem Plath apparently wrote, “Edge”, substantiates these notions. It was written on 5 February 1963, six days before her suicide on the 11th. The first line of the poem tells us that “[t]he woman is perfected” in death, clearly associating the death-drive with the drive for perfection in the inorganic state. In fact, her dead body “wears a smile of accomplishment”. Death is not only a way of perfecting herself, it also becomes a “necessity” and a declaration as her “[f]eet seem to be saying/We have come so far, it is over.” Like the speaker of “Tulips”, this woman is “now

empty”, but this time empty of milk. This would indicate not only an overt sense of blissful emptiness, but also a maternal lack or inadequacy. The speaker thus decided to take her children with her into death and “[s]he has folded/Them back into her body as petals”. Again, there is a notion of returning to origins and the undifferentiated maternal. Furthermore, death is presented as the most natural state. Therefore, the moon “is used to this sort of thing” and has “nothing to be sad about”. “Her blacks crackle and drag” so that we assume that she continues to exist as she has done before. As such, this woman’s death is thus an “accomplishment”, an act of perfection, a return to origins, and also something so natural that it cannot or must not be grieved. Suicide and death thus become the ultimate and inextricable fulfilment of life, the epitome of the death-drive and the melancholic’s final act of self-affirmation and achievement. This holds especially true if the person who has died at his/her own hands has attempted to commit suicide before, as death then becomes an act of triumph – the apex of the art which the speaker of “Lady Lazarus” has practised so often. Accordingly, Britzolakis (1999:2) asserts:

It is almost as if the poems are writing Plath’s suicidal destiny *for* her; she does not merely express herself but *becomes* herself. The poems attain an existential authenticity raised to the second power, as it were, by the thrilling proximity of a self-willed end which they somehow both foreshadow and precipitate.

One could thus argue that, in committing suicide and thereby satisfying the death-drive and bearing out her poetry, Plath has in fact succeeded in confirming once and for all her selfhood. In true keeping with the paradoxes of the divided self, she establishes and reclaims her identity precisely by obliterating her identity.

4.2 Reflection and conclusion

In the concluding remarks of this dissertation, a return to the narrative imagination seems appropriate. Several aspects and processes of the female and melancholic psyche have been discussed in terms of Plath’s life and work. While these discussions have by no means been comprehensive or complete, the aim was for the reader to actively apply his/her narrative imagination in order to more fully grasp the internal world and external circumstances of the female figures in Plath’s work

and thereby grasp *some* of Plath's psychical processes. As such, the study has hopefully stimulated a measure of Socratic self-examination and encouraged recognition of those common human features, especially those features common to women in a western patriarchal society, which Plath portrays in her writing. Furthermore, the differences which make Plath and her women personae unique have been respected and projection onto them was constantly avoided (in accordance with Jacqueline Rose's warning). It is also anticipated that the discussions have encouraged a suspension of judgement until a more comprehensive picture of the intentions and psychic processes of the various poetic and fictional characters has been achieved. Whether or not these aims have been achieved I will leave to the reader to determine.

In terms of psychoanalysis, the various influences that can potentially impact (often negatively) the human psyche have been considered. The focus was mostly on the female psyche, and therefore the analysis has concentrated specifically on the following: the influence of the Electra/Oedipus complex on the girl/woman's relationship with the father figure (both her actual father and the symbolic order which functions as a father in patriarchal society) and subsequently with her sexual/romantic partners; the girl/woman's intense and ambivalent relationship with the mother figure (as the primal love-object and as the model of ideal femininity); and the reciprocal dynamic which exists between these relationships and the girl/woman's psyche and life. The influence and incarnation of various other psychoanalytic notions have also been considered; such as, the ideal ego, the divided self and the masochistic ego. The characteristics and possible effects of melancholia and the death-drive have also been examined, particularly in terms of suicide as an act of self-affirmation. In so far as it was possible and plausible, these psychoanalytic notions have been related to Plath's work and, by inference, to certain aspects of her life.

With regards to feminist theory, theorists who also employ a psychoanalytic stance with regards to the specific position of the female figure in patriarchal society were examined. As such, the thoughts of several well-known and lesser known feminist theorists have been discussed and applied. Of particular importance was patriarchal society's definition of womanhood and the conflicts which women experience

because of this, specifically within the unique cultural setting of 1950s America. Therefore, the influence of the symbolic order in numerous of its figurations has been examined as well as how these can silence women, specifically the female writer. Other central concepts in reaching a deeper understanding of Plath's work and some of the psychical aspects she probes therewith have included: the woman's role as commodity and fetish object, the mother figure's role in perpetuating patriarchal pressure on her daughter, the female and especially the maternal body as embodiment of the abject, and conversely the way in which writing her body can offer the woman a subjective affirmation in the form of *écriture féminine*.

However, the study may be criticised for its short-comings, as there are several important figures and notions in psychoanalytic and feminist theory which were not included or could have been discussed more exhaustively. Examples of these are: Susan Gilbert and Susan Gubar's influential work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1980); Jacques Lacan's theories of the symbolic order and language, the mirror stage and the necessity and role of desire; Carl Jung's notions of archetypes, the anima/animus and the creative psyche; and Melanie Klein's writings on object relations theory and the death-drive. Even in terms of psychoanalysts whose ideas were discussed at length, the study is not all-inclusive. For example, Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny could be more extensively applied to Plath's work, while his thoughts on female homosexuality were barely alluded to at all. A more extensive investigation of Kristeva's theories such as that of the double-bind in terms of the abject mother and imaginary father could also be enlightening in terms of Plath and her writing. Similarly, a more comprehensive approach to Cixous, Irigaray and Chodorow would have led to a more extensive and stimulating discussion. A studied incorporation of other theoretical schools such as deconstructionism (which is often followed implicitly (but never explicitly) and in practice in some of the discussions), postmodernism and cultural studies would also have been fruitful. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind the limited scope of this study, which after all set out to analyse *only* those psychoanalytic and feminist concepts which were of the *utmost* significance to Plath and her work. Furthermore, Freudian thought was singled out precisely because Plath showed an interest in Freud's theories and set out to demonstrate and investigate them in her writing. Equally, certain feminist theories were selected precisely because of their affinity to psychoanalysis and/or relevance

to Plath's writing. Accordingly, those aspects of feminism which relate specifically to the symbolic father (in the form of patriarchal society) and to the abject mother as well as to the other social pressures of 1950s America were examined, so that the more negative aspects identified and criticised by feminist theorists were highlighted. Unfortunately, this meant that the more positive aspects and alternatives of feminist theory (such as the way in which motherhood can offer women agency and a celebration of their femininity) were neglected in favour of those aspects which were deemed to be most relevant to the study.

Due to the nature of the study, it was also inevitable, albeit regrettable, that the discussions of Plath's work could not be of a more formalistic/technical nature. After all, fiction and poetry are forms of art imbued with specific structural and aesthetic characteristics which differentiate them from other forms. This is particularly true in terms of Plath who, unlike numerous other modern poets, wrote a significant portion of her poetry in specific stanza and meter patterns. For example, despite being one of the most well-known and discussed of Plath's poems, not much has been written on the five-line stanza structure or the rhyme scheme of "Daddy" (with its repeated "oo"-sound end-rhyme). Plath was technically an exceptionally skilled poet; yet this is often overlooked in favour of a more thematic approach to her work, as it is regrettably overlooked in this study. Another short-coming of this dissertation would be that none of Plath's short stories were discussed. For instance, "Sunday at the Mintons" would be interesting to consider in terms of gender roles, while "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" could have significantly expanded the discussion on the patient-institute relationship, especially in terms of the mentally ill patient. In this regard, the limited focus and scope of this study must again be identified as the reasons for this deficiency.

Despite all of these apparent short-comings, I would contend that the study has succeeded in its initial goal to provide a fresh and insightful (albeit limited) analysis of Plath's writing (and, by inference, certain aspects of her life) in terms of the chosen psychoanalytic and feministic notions.

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Summary

In this dissertation, several aspects and processes of the female and melancholic psyche are discussed in terms of Sylvia Plath's life and work. The two pivotal theoretical schools which are thus of interest are psychoanalysis and feminism. In addition, there is another conceptual framework that is of importance to this study, namely American moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum's notion of the narrative imagination and its role in liberal education. However, this theory is not discussed in detail but rather provides the broader framework for the dissertation; setting the tone for the discussions as it were. While this particular analysis is thus by no means comprehensive or complete, the aim is for the reader to actively apply his/her narrative imagination in order to more fully grasp the internal world and external circumstances of the female figures in Plath's work and thereby grasp *some* of Plath's psychical processes (as opposed to attempting a holistic grasp on Plath's psyche).

In terms of psychoanalysis, the various influences that can potentially impact (often negatively) the human psyche are considered. The focus is mostly on the female psyche, and therefore the analysis concentrates specifically on the following: the influence of the Electra/Oedipus complex on the girl/woman's relationship with the father figure (both her actual father and the symbolic order which functions as a father in patriarchal society) and subsequently with her sexual/romantic partners; the girl/woman's intense and ambivalent relationship with the mother figure (as the primal love-object and as the model of ideal femininity); and the reciprocal dynamic which exists between these relationships and the girl/woman's psyche and life. The influence and incarnation of various other psychoanalytic notions are also considered; such as the ideal ego, the divided self and the masochistic ego. Furthermore, the characteristics and possible effects of melancholia and the death-drive are examined, particularly in terms of suicide as an act of self-affirmation. In so far as it is possible and plausible, these psychoanalytic notions are related to Plath's work and, by inference, to certain aspects of her life.

With regards to feminist theory, theorists who also employ a psychoanalytic stance (such as the so-called "French feminists" Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia

Kristeva) with regards to the specific position of the female figure in patriarchal society were examined. As such, the thoughts of several well-known and lesser known feminist theorists (for example, Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell) are discussed and applied. Of particular importance is patriarchal society's definition of womanhood and the conflicts which women experience because of this, specifically within the unique cultural setting of 1950s America. Therefore, the influences of the symbolic order in numerous of its figurations are examined and how they can silence women, specifically the female writer. Other central concepts in reaching a deeper understanding of Plath's work and some of the psychical aspects she probes therewith include: the women's role as commodity and fetish object, the mother figure's role in perpetuating patriarchal pressure on her daughter, the female and especially the maternal body as embodiment of the abject, and conversely the way in which writing her body can offer the woman a subjective affirmation in the form of *écriture féminine*.

Opsomming

Verskeie aspekte en prosesse van die vroulike en melankoliese psige word in hierdie dissertasie bespreek in terme van Sylvia Plath se lewe en werk. As sodanig, is psigoanalise en feminisme die twee teoretiese rigtings wat van kern belang is. Nog 'n konsepsuele raamwerk wat in hierdie studie van belang is, is Amerikaanse morele filosoof, Martha Nussbaum, se konsep van die narratiewe verbeelding en die rol wat dit speel in liberale opvoeding. Hierdie teorie word egter nie breedvoerig bespreek nie, maar dien eerder as die groter raamwerk waarin die besprekings geskied. Terwyl hierdie spesifieke analise (van Nussbaum se idees) dus geensins omvattend of volledig is nie, is die doel dat die leser aktief sy/haar narratiewe verbeelding sal inspan om die interne wêreld en eksterne omstandighede van die vroulike figure in Plath se werk beter te begryp, en op hierdie wyse ook begrip van *sommige* van Plath se psigiese prosesse te ontlok (in plaas daarvan om te poog om 'n holistiese begrip van Plath se psige te verkry).

In terme van psigoanalise, word verskeie van die potensiele faktore wat die menslike psige (meestal negatief) beïnvloed, oorweeg. Die klem val meestal op die vroulike psige, en dus fokus die dissertasie spesifiek op die volgende: die invloed van die Electra/Oedipus-kompleks op die meisie/vrou se verhouding met die vaderfiguur (beide haar werklike pa en die simboliese orde wat funksioneer as 'n vader in patriargale samelewing), en daarna in haar seksuele/romantiese verhoudings; die meisie/vrou se intense en ambivalente verhouding met die moeder figuur (soos die aanvanklike liefde-voorwerp en as die model van ideale vroulikheid), en die wedersydse dinamika wat bestaan tussen hierdie verhoudings en die meisie/vrou se psige en lewe. Die impak en die inkarnasie van verskeie ander psigoanalitiese begrippe word ook in ag geneem; soos die ideale ego, die verdeelde self en die masochistiese ego. Verder word die kenmerke en moontlike gevolge van melankolie en die doodsdwang ondersoek, veral in terme van selfmoord as 'n daad van self-bevestiging. In so ver as dit moontlik en geloofwaardig is, word hierdie psigoanalitiese begrippe in verwant gebring met Plath se werk en, deur afleiding, met sekere aspekte van haar lewe.

Met betrekking tot feministiese teorie, word teoretici geraadpleeg wat ook gebruik maak van 'n psigoanalitiese benadering (soos die sogenaamde "Franse feministe" Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray en Julia Kristeva) om die spesifieke posisie van die vroulike figuur in patriargale samelewing te ondersoek. As sodanig, word die gedagtes van 'n aantal bekende en minder bekende feministiese teoretici (byvoorbeeld, Jacqueline Rose en Juliet Mitchell) bespreek en toegepas. Van besondere belang is patriargale samelewing se definisie van vrouwees en die konflikte wat vroue ervaar as gevolg hiervan, spesifiek binne die unieke kulturele instelling van 1950s-Amerika. Daarom word die invloede van die simboliese orde in talle van sy figurasies ondersoek en hoe dit vroue kan stilmaak, veral vroulike skrywers. Ander kern konsepte wat deel vorm van die soeke na 'n dieper begrip van Plath se werk en sommige van die psigiese aspekte wat sy daarmee ondersoek, sluit in: die vrou se rol as kommoditeit en fetisj-voorwerp, die moederfiguur se rol in die voortbestaan van patriargale druk op haar dogter, die vrou en veral die moeder se liggaam as verpersoonliking van die abjekte, en omgekeerd, die manier waarop *écriture féminine* die vrou toegang kan bied tot subjektiewe uitdrukking wanneer sy haar liggaam "skryf".

Key terms

confessional poetry

feminism

female melancholia

Hélène Cixous

Luce Irigaray

Julia Kristeva

Martha Nussbaum

modern American poetry

narrative imagination

psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud

Sylvia Plath