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A Poet of the Personal

A Study of the Theme of Death in Sylvia Plath's Ariel

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

Death is one of the significant and recurrent themes in the poetry of Sylvia Plath but it is nowhere more present, powerful and intimate than in her late poems, written in the months prior to her suicide and published posthumously in the book *Ariel*. The poems are confessional in nature, exploring Plath's innermost emotions and private subject matters with a menacing focus on death. The imagery is explicit and intense and leaves a haunting impression but most intriguing is Plath's dualistic portrayal of death. In these poems, in a somewhat contradicting manner, death is represented both as a rebirth or renewal, sometimes transcending, and as the more traditional, ominous and melancholic end of all ends. The nature of the poems mark a notable change in Plath's writing-style which, in *Ariel*, she turns on its head moving away from the universal to the entirely intimate and private in her subjects. The confessional style of expression of topics such as death, suicide, sexuality and mental illness, which Plath explores in *Ariel* and were considered taboo in her time, is characteristic of the literature movement of confessional poetry that emerged in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s and owes its origin, partly, to Plath's work. The all-encompassing theme of death and its twofold nature denotes Plath's private struggle with mental illness and suicidal tendencies at the time of *Ariel's* conception. *Ariel* marks the transfiguration of Plath's poetry and establishes her as a poet of the personal and author of confessional poetry. The focus of this essay is to explore the theme of death in selected poems from *Ariel* by analyzing its representation with the objective of exposing its dual essence and to assert the relevance of *Ariel* as an instigating work tying Plath to the literature movement of confessional poetry.

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Introduction

Sylvia Plath is one of the most influential and distinguished poets of the 20th century, her posthumous collection of poems, published in *Ariel* in the middle of the century, marking the beginning of a new literary mode and a long-standing controversy over the extraordinarily explicit and haunting subject matter present in her late poetry. The publishing of *Ariel* effectively split the literary scene in two, some deeming it the epitome of self-pity and vileness with its harsh tone, explicit imagery and taboo topics of death, suicide and sexuality. Others maintained she was one of the most brilliant poets of the century, a master of her art, a poet whose skillful use of metaphor, imagery and language was almost unprecedented. Among them was M. L. Rosenthal, who argued she was one of the instigating forces of the new mode of confessional poetry along with its founder Robert Lowell, who was both a teacher and inspiration to Plath, and encouraged her to write about her experiences.

The 1960 collection of poems, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, is the only collection of poetry Sylvia Plath published in her lifetime. In October 1962, Plath began writing the collection of poems published in *Ariel*. In the span of several months, until February 1963, she wrote her most striking and brilliant poems, with astonishing rapidity, sometimes two a day, in a burst of heightened creativity. In 1965, two years after Plath's suicide, her husband, Ted Hughes, arranged and published these poems posthumously in *Ariel*, *Winter Trees* (1971) and *Crossing the Water* (1971) are also posthumous collections of transitional poems written in the same period, also edited and published by Ted Hughes. In 1982, Plath was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *The Collected Poems*, arranged and edited by Ted Hughes, a collection containing all of her published works.

Because Sylvia Plath's work is confessional in nature it has been read extraordinarily biographically, and rightly so. It is therefore necessary to read her poems in relation to her life by placing her work in an intellectual and cultural perspective. Various and random events from her life, large and small, are intertwined into her poetry and reflect her state of mind in the most prolific and burdensome period of her life. At the time of the conception of *Ariel* she had separated with her husband Ted Hughes, who had taken another lover and left Plath heartbroken and in a state of despair. In order to understand the explicit imagery, autobiographical

references and the significance of her private subject matter an insight into Plath's life and mindset is paramount to the interpretation of the poet's work as a whole.

This paper relates relevant details of Plath's life and career to her work and legacy as a confessional poet in a thematic analysis of a selection of poems from *Ariel*. The roots of confessional poetry are examined closely along with the essence and importance of *Ariel* as an instigating work tying Plath to the literature mode of confessional poetry. The thematic analysis of death is largely based on David Holbrook's study on the existential aspect of Plath's poetry in his *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* and Judith Kroll's classification of Plath's late poems in her *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. The focus of the essay is to explore in-depth the theme of death, its different representations and apply meaning to its relevance in relation to confessional poetry.¹

¹ In this thesis, the terms "confessional poetry" and "confessionalism" are used interchangeably to refer to the "poetry of the personal" as a literary mode.

1. A Look at Sylvia

American poet, novelist and short story writer Sylvia Plath was born in Massachusetts, on October 27th in 1932, to parents Aurelia Schober Plath and father Otto Emil Plath. Plath's father, born in Grabow, was of German and Polish ancestry. Otto's grandparents were farmers and had emigrated to the United States and when he was sixteen, they paid for his passage to come to America and also put him through college, where he did well. Otto later became a professor of biology at Boston University where he met Plath's mother, Aurelia Schober, the daughter of Austrian immigrants. In the fall of 1929, Otto and Aurelia were married and in 1932, Sylvia was born. Several years later Sylvia's brother, Warren, was born. In 1936, Otto fell ill but refused to be examined by a doctor. Four years later, however, he injured his leg and was forced to see a doctor. The doctor announced that Otto had advanced diabetes mellitus and gangrene had set in his leg. As a result, his leg was amputated and barely a month later he passed away of his illness. The doctor who treated him announced, sadly, that Otto's disease could have been easily treated and his life saved if he had only sought treatment earlier (Simpson 85-90). Sylvia was devastated by her father's sudden death and never fully recovered from the loss, as much of the biographical elements in her poetry attest to; the trauma she experienced as the result of her father's sudden death caused her to become depressed at a young age.

In 1942, the family relocated and Sylvia moved with her mother and brother to Wellesley, Massachusetts. Plath was a bright and diligent student and after she graduated from high school she attended what was then one of the best girls' colleges in America, Smith College. She excelled in her studies at Smith and took part in various extracurricular activities, such as editing the school paper, *The Smith Review*. In the summer of 1953, Plath won a coveted position as a visiting managing editor for *Mademoiselle* in New York along with 19 other college girls from all over America (Kroll xiii).

Plath's experience in New York was not what she had expected, it was in fact a life-altering ordeal that took a great toll on her. In her journal, she later described her experience as having been a mix of "pain, parties [and] work."² Much of the events that took place that summer she later used as an inspiration in her *roman à clef* titled *The Bell Jar* (1963) and published under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas." The

² *Pain, Parties, Work: Sylvia Plath in New York, Summer 1953*, is the title of Elizabeth Winder's chronicle of Sylvia Plath's experience as a guest editor at *Mademoiselle*'s yearly College Issue.

novel is largely autobiographical and Esther Greenwood's hardships reflect Plath's own struggles with life, self-realization and worsening depression following her stay in New York. Plath was treated for depression with electroconvulsive therapy but her condition worsened and she became increasingly more suicidal. In late August, 1953, Plath attempted suicide by ingesting a large amount of sleeping pills. Not wanting to be found, she hid underneath her house where, fortunately, two days later she was found by her mother and brother. Plath was admitted to psychiatric care and spent the next few months recovering and resumed her studies at Smith College in February of 1954. Although Plath got psychiatric treatment after her suicide attempt she never fully recovered and was plagued with mental illness most of her life (Kroll xiii).

Plath graduated from Smith College, summa cum laude, in '55 and won a Fulbright scholarship to attend Cambridge University. In February of 1956, Plath met Ted Hughes, whom she married in London several months later. During the next few years she published stories and poems in various papers and magazines, receiving mixed reviews. She returned to Boston with Hughes in 1957, writing and working part-time at Smith College. In 1959, they returned to England, settled in London and a year later Plath gave birth to their daughter, Frieda. Soon after they moved to Devon and in January of 1962 Plath gave birth to their second child, Nicholas. In June that same year Plath published her first and only book of poetry *The Colossus & Other Poems* (1962) and received positive reviews (Kroll xiv-xv). Several months later she learned of Hughes's affair with Assia Gutman, a family friend, and by the end of September they had separated and she remained with the children in Devon, Hughes moving to London (Kroll 48).

In the wake of their separation Plath began writing her late poems, with astonishing rapidity, writing at least 26 poems in the first month after separating from Hughes. In December, she moved with her children to an apartment in London and in January she published *The Bell Jar* (Kroll xv). Alone with her children in London, Plath became increasingly depressed and suicidal, having no spare time to write while taking care of her two children she wrote most of her poetry early in the morning (Rosenthal 88). She saw a psychiatrist who prescribed her an antidepressant and appointed her a nurse to look after her and the children because of her deteriorating mental state. On February 11th, 1963, at the age of thirty-one, Sylvia Plath took her own life (Kroll xv-xvi).

Sylvia Plath's life was tragically brief but her literary legacy is nonetheless one of the most influential in the 20th century. As much of her poetry attests to, if read biographically, one can see how profoundly her struggle with depression, anxiety, self-realization and difficulties with familial and romantic relationships influenced her as a poet. However tragic the end of her marriage and tumultuous months before her death was, it was the beginning of the extraordinary prolific period in which she wrote her most brilliant poetry that changed literary history.

2. “I,” a Poet of the Personal: The Ethics of Confessional Poetry

Confessional poetry refers to the genre of poetry that emerged in the United States in the middle of the twentieth century and initiated with Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*, published in 1959 (Hoffman 687). In his article, “The Making of a Confessional Poetic,” author Steven K. Hoffman argues that from a wide historical viewpoint, the essence of confessional poetry is the great Romantic lyrics and personal epic (688). He states that confessional poetry: “synthesizes the inclination to personalism and consciousness building of the nineteenth century with the elaborate masking techniques and objectifications of the twentieth,” a phenomenon unprecedented even among the Romantics, which, “makes notable inroads into myth and archetype, as well as social, political, and cultural historiography of high modernism” (Hoffman 688). Steven Gould Axelrod puts it in simple terms, citing three essential features of confessional poetry: “an undisguised exposure of personal event . . . a dialectic of private matter with public matter . . . and an intimate, unornamented style” (Collins 197).

In his article, Hoffman names three aspects common to Romantic poetry and confessionalism that effectively unify the two. Firstly, there is the prevalence of the “dramatic element” involving a character, at the center, in dramatic actions; second is the autobiographical element, which is the union of the poetic process with the externally detailed life of the poet, placing primary emphasis on philosophical and emotional crisis; and thirdly, the traditional aesthetic features that, to a great extent, determine overall structure and placement of certain dramatic occurrences arranged for the maximum emotional impact. As such, the poeticized experience serves as both the embodiment of a deeper cultural experience and an archetype for profitable personal adjustment to, and transcendence of, the state of the age (Hoffman 689). Although confessionalism is in many respects implausible without its Romantic background, Hoffman notes, there is a substantial breach between the two (689).

Hoffman is careful to clearly differentiate between the two modes, stating that despite the “radical personalism” of some of the Romantic canons, such as Wordsworth and Whitman, neither poet accesses the “minute autobiographical particularity of the confessionals” and what he calls the “almost numbing rehearsal of family conflict, severe emotional imbalance, and the difficulties of everyday living” present in the works of poets of the confessional mode (689-690).

Hoffman names a second contradistinction between the two modes as a shift in the point of view and its effect of the speaking voice or the literary persona. The confessional protagonist, he notes, usually functions on a level closer to the reader and his rhetoric is most often ironic and often ambiguous, while the Romantic is both a protagonist and a hero. "His speech becomes superb," Hoffman notes, because he addresses the reader from a height superior to and unattainable by the reader (690). The Romantic persona is mindful of the supremacy of its experience and competence and thus it speaks in inflated language, passionate and constantly above the reader. Although the reader's connection to the poem is of considerable interest in both modes, the logistics of that connection has decidedly transformed, where, in confessional poetry, the poet often rejects the bardic inclinations of their forerunners (Hoffman 690).

The term "confessionalism" was coined by American poet and 20th-century poet and critic M. L. Rosenthal in his article "Poetry as Confession" and refers to a certain phase in Robert Lowell's career that culminated in the publication of his poetry collection *Life Studies*. Through his discussion of Lowell's *Life Studies*, and in his later works, Rosenthal confines the defining features of confessionalism and, although he carefully restricts the possibilities of the mode, he gives priority to Sylvia Plath as an instigating author of confessional poetry (Uroff 104).

In his book, *The New Poets* (1967), Rosenthal discusses American and British poetry from 1946 up until 1966. His work is an exploration of the poetic scene that emerged immediately following World War II and the works of Robert Lowell and that of American poets such as Sylvia Plath, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton and British poets Ted Hughes and Peter Redgrove. Rosenthal's exploration involves studying the term "modernity" and what modernity in literature means. In his search of a distinctive character and directions of what he calls the new "modern tradition", he puts the last two decades following WWII in perspective. With poets of what he calls the "heroic" age such as Yeats, Pound and Eliot in the background Rosenthal analyzes the new poetic scene and its most significant works, with Robert Lowell as the most prominent figure to emerge in the period and to the genre of confessionalism that advanced under his influence (3-4). In *The New Poets*, Rosenthal emphasizes what must be the defining motivation behind true confessional poetry in his discussion of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* as a defining work of confessionalism.

In *The New Poets*, Rosenthal maintains that the shaping motivation behind Lowell's work is twofold but only one of those two agendas drives the work toward "self-transcendence." Despite the importance Lowell places in his intimate subject matter, the "objective artistry" is no less important, Rosenthal argues (67). The objective artistry, he claims, is the motivation that drives the work "toward an aesthetic realization that goes beyond the literal subject matter in its resolution" (67) although the two are inseparable aspects of the work. Rosenthal argues that the poet's pursuit of the truths of his nature is the "breakdown" of his family's past and adolescence and that the rebuilding of the adult self from that scrutiny is aesthetic in nature even with its autobiographical pertinence (67). This pursuit is a state of sensitive openness toward either one of two possibilities, "self-destruction as its worst possibility and reintegration on a deeper level as its promise" (Rosenthal 68).

Rosenthal claims that the subjective and artistic meanings come together when a poet is in search of such an openness. Despite this, he says, the poet manages to remain distant enough to subordinate the subjective to the artistic meaning. According to Rosenthal, Plath's *Ariel* is a "suicidal leap toward a perfection of death-realization" and on that note he references a letter he received from Lowell saying:

Maybe, it's an irrelevant accident that she actually carried out the death she predicted . . . but somehow her death is part of the imaginative risk. In the best poems one is torn by saying, "This is so true and lived that most other poetry seems like an exercise," and then one can back off and admire the dazzling technique and invention. Perfect control, like the control of a skier who avoids every death-trap until reaching the final drop. (68)

As such, Lowell is the expert who has withstood the "imaginative risk" both in his life and in his works because of his self-discipline and his persistence on recognizing the impersonal motivation of his works despite the threat of his intimate memories (Rosenthal 68).

In his book, Rosenthal notes that the word "confessional" seems a fitting description of Lowell's thematic invention in *Life Studies* because of the way he brings his personal humiliations, adversities and psychological struggles into the

poems (26). In his *Life Studies*, Lowell writes on themes such as alcoholism, insanity and sexual guilt and according to Rosenthal, these themes are without question developed in the first person in such a way as to refer to the poet himself (26). In a larger and more abstract context, Rosenthal further describes Lowell's work as being "one culmination of the Romantic and modern tendency to place the literal Self more and more at the center of the poem" (27).

Elaborating on his definition of the term, Rosenthal argues that a true confessional poem puts the poetic "I" in the center (Egeland 56). In *The New Poets*, he references a discussion carried out by numerous critics and poets, broadcasted in 1965 by Third Programme of the British Broadcasting Corporation, stating that some poems discussed were only peripherally confessional in nature, while Lowell's "Skunk Hour" from *Life Studies* and Plath's "Lady Lazarus" from *Ariel* were noted as true examples of confessional poetry. These poems, he claims, are genuinely confessional in the appropriate sense, "because they put the speaker himself at the center of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization" (Rosenthal 79).

Rosenthal further explains how these two are exemplary poems of confessional poetry as such: "At its lowest point of morale, Lowell's poem presents him as for the moment a *voyeur* suffering from a sickness of will and spirit that makes him, literally, lower than the skunks that take over the poem at the end" while "Sylvia Plath's poem presents the author in the midst of what proved to be her final, and finally successful, suicide attempt" (79). Here, Rosenthal draws attention to the defining aspects of confessional poetry, the "I" at the center of the poem, the author himself exposed. Then there is also the theme of taboo experience featured in these poems, an element of intimate exposure and vulnerability inherent to Sylvia Plath's late poems published in *Ariel*.

Sylvia Plath's range of technical abilities was more limited than those of Robert Lowell, and also her competence for creative objectivity. The course she took as a poet, according to Rosenthal, was the one option ahead in position to Lowell's along the treacherous way of confessionalism. The way of completely committing her own hardships in the interest of her art until both were so intertwined that no rebound was attainable (Rosenthal 83). "It was the old romantic fallacy," Rosenthal claims, "of confusing motive and art, or the real with the ideal" (83). Her death-drive and exceptionally prolific creativity coexisted as two parts of the same process. In her

destructive commitment, she eliminates other circumstances and in her late poems, intimate fixations and confusion become standardized, because of their artistic attributes. In this sense, these poems of *Ariel*, composed in 1962, were an exceptional shift from the cautious, but rarely inspiring work of published in *The Colossus* in 1960 (Rosenthal 83).

3. Sylvia and *Ariel*: Poetic Development

3.1. General Facts: On Theme and Subject

Plath's productivity soared in the months and weeks prior to her suicide in an extraordinary burst of creativity resulting in the immensely powerful, daring and skillfully written poems published in *Ariel*. Her late work marks a dramatic turn from the poems published only two years earlier in *The Colossus & Other Poems*. *Ariel* marks her shift in writing style and shows her immense advancement in both technique and use of imagery. It is a work of great significance where she moves from the more pretentious style, characteristic of the poems in *Colossus*, to a more authentic and personal approach representative of confessional poetry. A study of *Ariel* also reveals the hazards that are inseparable from the great qualities of her later poems.

Sylvia Plath's early work were mostly imitation exercises where she copied the style of her favorite poets. Author George Steiner states that without *The Colossus* the achievement of *Ariel* would never have been impossible (Nims 136). Without the careful and banal preparatory techniques she exercised in *The Colossus*, the poems of *Ariel* would never have existed. Without the hard work, she could not exercise with genuine impulse what she learned to do with practice. In his introduction to *The Collected Poems*, Ted Hughes describes Plath's evolution as a poet going "rapidly through successive [moulds] of style, as she realized her true matter and voice" (16). *Ariel* is characterized by a much swifter and sarcastic tone than is present in her earlier work although the development from her earlier to her late poems is that of consolidation (Steiner 216). Author Alfred Alvarez expresses this change as a fundamental impression of "violent unease," restrained in *The Colossus* but progressively introduced in her later poems (Newman 9).

Death is an all-encompassing theme in *Ariel* curiously portrayed in a contradicting manner, as both a bodily death and a rebirth or renewal of the soul. One signifying the ominous end of all ends and the other a defeat of death, a resurrection. Death is often portrayed with hyperbolic emotions and actions, signifying either one of the two contradicting resolutions, a ritual of actual death or rebirth. In *Ariel*, Plath focuses on subjects such as death, suicide, incest, resentment, violence, murder and melancholia. The poetic persona, imbued with furor, permeating the text and its tone, is often merciless and full of resentment. Many of the poems are characterized by

resentment of men, appearing as a shadow on the poet's mind and progress. In some poems the Freudian Electra-complex is exposed through incest. Plath was a female poet, in a field of literature that actively shunned women, not taking them as seriously as men, simply based on their gender. A typical reflection of the 1960s society Plath lived in.

Many of the poems are characterized by a violent tone and violent actions. Murder is at the center of a couple of Plath's poems concerning her father, Otto Plath, and her husband, Ted Hughes which became a father surrogate to her. Plath's father is the reason for her existential anguish and Ted is echoed through her dad, Plath has to kill him in order to free herself from his shadow. This is the theme of one of Plath's most debated and haunting poems from *Ariel*, "Daddy," where the poetic persona triumphantly states: "If I've killed one man, I've killed two—" (71). This is what Kroll calls the liberation of the self "through its triumph over an expendable male" (49). The biographical basis for this identification Kroll states, is apparent in the collection of her *Letters Home* (248). Plath wrote to her mother shortly after marrying Ted: "He is better than any teacher, even fills somehow that huge, sad hole I felt in having no father" (Kroll 248).

Melancholia, grief and surrender are at the center of other poems in *Ariel*, portraying domestic surrealism and the banality of the role of the domestic homemaker drudging on in her role. In these poems, the poet incorporates the domestic and surreal and the poetic persona shifts between joyous revolt and despondent submission. Plath turned everything that came to hand into poetry, such as in her *Ariel* poem "Cut" where the simple act of cutting her thumb while slicing an onion becomes the dramatic center of her poem. The exhilaration of the persona as she observes her cut thumb is somewhat disquieting. The thumb takes on various images and she seems to be simply inspecting it as an object and not experiencing the act herself: "What a thrill – / My thumb instead of an onion. / The top quite gone / Except for a sort of a hinge" (1–4). The poem echoes the theme of detachment that is often present in her poetry, where the body is separated from the mind.

In some poems, the tone is milder, the poetic persona is not as violent in actions and the poems are characterized instead by gentle threats, melancholia, angst and even total submission. Many of the poems contain historical aspects, such as references to the holocaust, Nazis and Jews, and biblical and mythical elements exploring the notions of the divided self, the killing of the body and the rebirth of the

new self. She often focuses on images of nature, such as in her bee-sequence, where the theme is primarily on the intimate father-daughter relationship. Examination of the evolution of her imagery reveals an intimate relationship between the influential father figure and the poet's compulsive preoccupation with death (Melander 112)

According to Plath, her late poems were "poems written out loud," they were intended "for the ear, not the eye", and were characterized by rhythmical experimentation (Rosenthal 88). Rosenthal notes the incredible leap into pure "mastery of phrasing" that is characteristic of *Ariel*, emphasizing the importance of the flow of dramatic motion that must be treated as an important kind of assertion. Although, he states, the poems are not determined by dramatic motion and instead of calling for poetic explanations, they often seem to call for biographical explanations instead. At the center of all of Plath's central themes is "the confusion of terror at death with fascination by it." As such, Rosenthal claims, "a poem is the aesthetic projection of the psychological motives behind it." The deathly visions of the poetic persona are so intense that they become desperate desires toward that state (Rosenthal 88).

3.2. Critical Reception: A Brief Survey

In the 1970s and 1980s some critics renounced the mode of confessional poetry deeming it as hedonistic, characterized by solipsistic impulse and aesthetic antipathy. A more loveable and modest poet, Robert Bly argues, puts "his emphasis on the suffering of others rather than his own" (Bly 1). Furthermore, although Plath is widely acknowledged as a poet of the confessional mode there are a few critics worth mentioning who have a different perspective on her late poems. The aspects of her poetry that remain controversial and lie mainly in the interpretation of her poems as a whole and her artistic impetus.

Rosenthal's broadly acknowledged appraisal of *Ariel* was disputed first by Ted Hughes who claims that Plath uses the autobiographical features of her life in a much more emblematic way in her poetry than Lowell (Uroff 104). According to Uroff, what distinguishes Plath's poems from Lowell's is the nature of the person in the poem. While, according to Rosenthal, the persona in Lowell's poetry represents the literal self, Uroff contends that the characters in Plath's poems are "generalized people" that "lack particularity" and are drastically maneuvered to expose their limitations (105). On a similar note, critic Jon Rosenblatt argues that Plath's poems

are not in fact autobiographical in the confessional mode but metaphors for universal struggles or merely dramatizing transformations of her personal experience (107). Regarding her relationship to the persona in her poems, Plath said herself about the dramatized transformations in her poetry:

I think my poems come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, . . . and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind (Uroff 105).

Author Louis Simpson maintains that Plath's poems were not necessarily "confessional" in its nature, but rather a "mythology." He states that although her poems bring the reader back to her life, because she wrote about real people and incidents, she transforms the experience she bases her poetry on and thereby creates a "mythology." Furthermore, he emphasizes that in order to understand her poetry, and why she wrote it the way she did, it is necessary to understand her life, noting, how Plath "drew a darkness over herself" after her father's death (90).

Contrastingly, Steiner argues that Plath's poems are "too honest" and "have cost too much, to be yielded to myth" (212). Plath's poems took huge risks and because of that, Steiner argues, she could not return from them stating that these risks expanded her: "austere manner to the very limit. They are a bitter triumph, proof of the capacity of poetry to give to reality the greater permanence of the imagined" (Steiner 218). Author Jon Rosenblatt is in agreement but argues that on a greater level Plath's poems effectively amplify the conversion of her private situation into a metaphor for universal struggle. The importance of Plath's work, he argues, lies in her "alteration and heightening of autobiographical experience." He maintains that her failures and successes are distinguishable on the basis of her embodiment of *private* experiences through a series of images and figurative development (Rosenblatt 107).

Thus, some of her earlier poems, he argues, only display descriptions of occurrences from Plath's life because they have to be read particularly in terms of what happened in the poet's life on a particular day. Her late poems, from *Ariel*, he maintains, successfully actualize her connection to four aspects of reality: "the family, women, nature, and death." Conclusively, Rosenblatt states, each of these relationships rest on contradictory conceptions of death (107).

Ideas advocated by critics such as Rosenthal and concurring critics contributed greatly to the band that grew around Plath, portraying her as an example of the conscious poet who gave everything for her art and only yielded against mental tortures and oppressive circumstances. Alvarez, English poet and friend to Plath, is in agreement with Rosenthal on the basic characteristics of her poetry, on the great personal hazard involved, and its ultimate worth regardless of the cost (Egeland 56). Author George Steiner maintains that Plath's success derives from the fact that she had become master of the fundamental theme, situation that characterizes that she built her poetry on, the rebirth of the psyche and ailing body (Steiner 214). Steiner argues that Plath was unique in the sense that her great success and the thousands of poets that were influenced by her could certainly imitate her "elisions and monotonies of deepening rhyme" but not the desperate integrity that is the soul of her poetry (218).

4. Exploring the Duality and Different Representations of Death in Selected Poems from *Ariel*

4.1. Death of the Body and Rebirth of the Soul

Death is an all-encompassing theme in *Ariel*, filled with explicit and intense imagery, brilliant language and fierce tone that leaves the reader with a haunting impression. The subject matter is intimately personal and autobiographical, completely exposing the author and her innermost emotions and private matters with a menacing focus on death. What follows is an in-depth analysis of selected poems from *Ariel* exploring the duality and different representations of death, portrayed as both a ritual of rebirth and a ritual of actual death, or what can be called death of the body and rebirth of the soul.

In *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* Kroll seeks to discover the thematic meaning of Plath's late work by analyzing their rhetoric in order to reveal her artistic purposes and the meaning of her work as a whole. In her book, she explores the nature of Plath's poetry, its imagery, symbolism and biography. Kroll divides Plath's late poems into what she calls separate "resolutions of the myth," as rituals of death and rituals of rebirth and transcendence. The central concern present in Plath's late poetry is the dilemma of the two aspects of death and rebirth and almost everything in the poems contributes either to that subject or to the conceived resolutions of the dilemma. The poems relate the sense that the future is precluded and that no experience or circumstance can change that, so the only resolution is that of rebirth or transcendence of the self (Kroll 3).

Kroll maintains that Plath viewed the self, flawed or not, a false limitation and as a solution and means to a rebirth, she extends or transforms that self, at the center of the drama, to complete transcendence (170). In order to comprehend the deeper meaning of Plath's poems it is necessary to interpret her attraction to death as combined with and altered into a deeper interest with the themes of rebirth and transcendence (Kroll 5). Such is the distinction of death and rebirth that is fundamental to this thematic analysis of Plath's late poems.

This analysis focuses on Plath's late poems from *Ariel* with a few exceptions where reference is made to her earlier poems where it is necessary and relevant in the context of her work as a whole. To outline Plath's twofold portrayal of death I have chosen the following poems as representations of her poems on rebirth and her poems

on actual death, respectively. The poems “Daddy,” “Medusa” and “Lady Lazarus” are analyzed as rituals of rebirth orchestrated through exorcism and resurrection, while the poems “Death & Co.” and “Edge” will be analyzed as rituals of actual or bodily death and the latter specifically as a ritual of transcendence.

4.2. Death, Rebirth and Transcendence

4.2.1. Rituals of Exorcism

Poems decidedly about the poet’s father, read chronologically, display how the bias towards him progresses from nostalgic bereavement, grief and blame to bitter resentment and fierce determination to escape from the grip he has on her (Kroll 122). The act committed in “Daddy” serves to erase the grip that has smothered her:

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. (1–5)

In this figure of apathetic and exploited notion of domestic life, the persona essentially measures her former self to a woman who has “lived in a shoe” and who did not know what to do. Now however, she knows exactly what to do. In a preface to the exorcism, she depicts the evolution of her father’s figure, starting with his former stature as “Marble heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghastly statue with one grey toe / Big as a Frisco seal” (8–10). At the beginning, he is the figure of a marble statue, a divine and horrifying behemoth, with one big toe as big as a San Francisco seal. Then she presents the altered figures of: “Aryan eye,” “panzer-man,” “swastika,” “Fascist,” “brute,” “devil,” “a man in black with a Meinkampf look,” “vampire,” “bastard” (Kroll 123).

In order to be completely expelled Daddy must be altered from a god to devil. The persona ascribes his divinity to his totalitarianism and private distance, characteristics that became enhanced as a consequence of his death, and subsequently became reassigned to “a model of you,” her husband. Admiring a man, actually or

symbolically, becomes a sort of affliction, imprisonment or torture, so at the end of the act of exorcism, Daddy is justifiably expelled. The “telephone” now “off at the root,” brings about the completeness of the resolute exorcism and “the voices just can’t worm through” (Kroll 123). Now she has successfully expelled the shadows of both men, “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two—” (71), and is no longer under their dictatorship. She has liberated herself from the oppressing father figure, finally killing him, “There’s a stake in your fat black heart” (76) and now completely assured of his guilt “They always *knew* it was you” (79) she’s done with him “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (80).

“Medusa” like “Daddy” is the acting out of an exorcism of a repressive parent, in this instance, the mother. Just like in “Daddy,” this is a poem where she finally exorcises her mother as if she were a figure endowed with the destructiveness of her corrupted history (Kroll 125). The persona constructs an image of her and treats this creation as the cause and preserver of her distorted self, who therefore is justifiably expelled. The maternal aspect of her past must be invoked in order to be able to exorcise it, to create a clean slate of her history. Her approach to this task is to free her fate by eliminating her historical parents and abolishing them from the depiction the desire which would just keep her bound to her past and by that undermine her determination to assert a rebirth (Kroll 126-127).

The mother in “Medusa” both embodies and preserves her daughter’s feeling of estrangement and “death-in-life” much like the mythological Medusa, turned to stone (Kroll 127). Her head resembles that of a jellyfish, whose poisonous tentacles can be deadly. Thus, the body of the jellyfish seems a “Ghastly Vatican,” which, with its connotation of “paralyzing” and overpowering control, aligns to the figure of her father as a “Ghastly statue”:

Who do you think you are?

A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?

I shall take no bite of your body,

Bottle in which I live,

Ghastly Vatican. (32–36)

The fact that the persona refuses to “take a bite of [her] body” signifies that she does not want to integrate what her mother means to her (Kroll 127). In “Medusa”, the daughter feels as if her mother’s perspective is a dismissal of her own experience of life. “Medusa” portrays the condition of “death-in-life” as a state of fragmentary birth. The mother’s grasp restrains the daughter so much she cannot be entirely reborn. The transatlantic “cable” is a “barnacled” umbilical cord and in the concluding act of the exorcism it evolves into the frightening form of an “eely tentacle.” When her mother sails over the sea to her assistance, the jellyfish turns into a noxious placenta that the daughter has to free herself from (Kroll 128). The persona presents the image of herself as a fuchsia, a red flower similar to the bell-shape of the jellyfish, and her mother’s constraining being is portrayed as “Fat and red, a placenta”:

Squeezing the breath from the blood bells

Of the fuchsia. I could draw no breath,

Dead and moneyless,

Overexposed as an X-ray. (28–31)

Because enlarged blood cells resemble coins, “moneyless” signifies “absence of blood.” If the fuchsia were without color, a sheer “X-ray” of its real self, it would parallel the jellyfish. So, in order to be permanently and entirely born as her real self she carries out the act of exorcism: “Off, off, eely tentacle! / There is nothing between us” (40–41). Her severing the “eely tentacle” and “barnacled umbilicus” extends equally to the telephone metaphor of the severed attachment in “Daddy.” Here, also, she is certainly “through” (Kroll 128-129). “Medusa” is a poem that represents the overprotective mother, characterized by gentle threats it is not as violent as “Daddy,” and the heroine doesn’t have to kill mom like dad and is reborn through the ritual of exorcism.

4.2.2. *Rituals of Resurrection*

“Lady Lazarus” epitomizes the mythical repetitive motif of dying and being reborn:

I have done it again.

One year in every ten

I manage it — (1-3)

Like the persona in “Daddy,” Lady Lazarus must break away from “Herr Doktor,” “Herr Enemy,” although both refer to her father, at the end, where she threatens “men,” she is also breaking away from her husband whose “wedding ring” she leaves behind. In “Lady Lazarus,” the persona frees herself from the immobilizing authority, reaching her true character as victorious revived goddess, the entirely redeemed, fierce true self that is the person, embodied or veiled, in much of her late poems (Kroll 118-119).

“Lady Lazarus” introduces the twofold nature of the masculine image as the god of the sun and the god of the underworld, as both “Herr God” and “Herr Lucifer,” the two images of one distinct deity. The persona has been married to both these deities, each of whom has somehow died to her, producing her death-in-life. However, her form of a grieving goddess has changed to that of a dying and reviving goddess (Kroll 119). Plath herself described Lady Lazarus as:

. . . a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman. (Rosenthal 73)

As such, the phoenix, that is the figure of the true reborn self, is endowed with enchanting independence and is self-generative (Kroll 119).

Alvarez once mentioned that Plath “sardonically felt herself fated to undergo [death] once every decade” as “an initiation rite qualifying her for a *life* of her own” and that in that way “death was a debt to be met once every decade” saying: “God knows what wound the death of her father had inflicted on her in her childhood . . . this had been transformed into the conviction that to be an adult meant to be a survivor.” As such, Plath’s engagement with endurance, in her life and in her art, is

inevitably an engagement with rebirth. In challenging death Lady Lazarus expels the “trash” of her past (Kroll 154).

From this rebirth arises the form of heroine or goddess who ceremoniously slays her associates. Lady Lazarus's red hair associates her with a kind of expiring and reviving deity. Her “red hair” refers to the traditional mythic elements of the blazing phoenix. Although Lady Lazarus’s claims that “dying is an art” her true talent lies in her “great and terrible gift of being reborn,” acknowledging that “It’s easy enough to [die] and stay put.” Her forte being the “Comeback in broad day” (Kroll 154).

Lady Lazarus is an artist of resurrection, the valuable possession of “Herr God, Herr Lucifer” and “Herr Enemy”:

I am your opus,

I am your valuable,

The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.

I turn and burn. (67–71)

However, this opus rebels against her gods, she eradicates their formation and thereby her false self. The first two “deaths” she carried out were essentially an effort to heal her connection to her father, the “Herr God, Herr Lucifer,” while in the end, death becomes her way to break away from these “gods” and ultimately redeeming her true self. As much as it is a burden, for Lady Lazarus, dying and being reborn is an innate art (Kroll 155):

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. (43–48)

“Lady Lazarus” is, in a sense, Plath’s vision of the state of perfection. She is the embodiment of resurrection, a brilliant artist possessing the terrifying gift of being reborn, an almighty and fearless goddess that devours the figures of her male oppressors:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air. (79–84)

4.2.3. *Rituals of Death and Transcendence*

Two, of course there are two.

It seems perfectly natural now — (1–2)

“Death & Co.” is one of the greatest examples of the element of duality that characterizes the poems in *Ariel*. In the poem the two polarities, or “faces” of death, fear and overarching confidence, are united in the image of the dual nature of death. The title of the poem, referring to a corporation, is both mocking and ironic. The ambivalence towards death is that although it represents an ominous state it also represents a figure of comfort for the suffering who believe in life after death. The poem is a monologue in the first person where no distinction is made between the poet and persona. That is, there is no persona present in the poem, rather, it seems as though the poem is a sort of soliloquy to the poet herself.

The poem is a prime illustration of Plath’s ambivalence towards death, because the two contradictory forces, her fear of death and her fascination with it, are united in the poem (Melander 97). Plath described “Death & Co.” as a poem: “. . . about the double or schizophrenic nature of death—the marmoreal coldness of Blake’s death mask, say, hand in glove with the fearful softness of worms, water and

the other katabolists,” and that she envisioned “these two aspects of death as two men, two business friends, who have come to call” (Kroll 142).

In the poem, Plath satirizes the two traditional portrayals of bodily death, the conceptual form of terminality and the real form of degeneration. The former becomes a raw, corpselike, businessman who delivers a persuasive promotion, insisting “. . . how sweet / The babies look in their hospital / Icebox . . . ,” (13–15) implying that death might do no less for her, making her as pristine and as tender. His associate, who satirizes the notion of death, as a suitor or groom, he is sordid and revolting. He is a fake, artificial and sexually enigmatic character impertinently “smiling” and “smoking.” The last stanza of the poem resonates a menacing and fearful tone (Kroll 142-143):

I do not stir.

The frost makes a flower,

The dew makes a star,

The dead bell,

The dead bell.

Somebody’s done for. (25–30)

This last chant invokes a conception of completeness attained by way of renewal—essentially a rebirth. The conceptions present in the lines “The frost makes a flower, / The dew makes a star,” (26–27) mark the renewal of something from a temporary into a more perpetual condition, and the time’s wearing on, from night “frost,” to morning “dew.” When morning comes at last, “the dead bell” (28–29) is certainly tolling for her. Possibly, the speaker assumes a state of a more perpetual form, reaching the definiteness and completeness of a work of art. However, although these forms indicate transcendence in the mythical sense of death, eventually they do not comprise more than an infirm objection “I do not stir” against an imminent actual or bodily fate. In this sense, “Death & Co.” differs significantly distinct from “Edge,” where the

actual “tangible” forms of death are insignificant or if not insignificant, it is clearly transcended (Kroll 143).

The poem “Edge” displays Plath’s ultimate act of drama as the last illustration in a ceremoniously orchestrated tragedy. In itself, it does not comprise a ritual so much as it displays the conclusion of a ritual:

The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,

.....

Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:

We have come so far, it is over. (1–3, 6–8)

The heroine and her past are exempt from further revolution, accomplished and completed. Although there is death, the conception is not that of bodily destruction. The form of destruction is peculiarly counteracted by the evolution of the poem from a dead woman to the “visiting moon” elevating the significance of the event to a different position. To such an extent as “Edge” exemplifies the last act of drama, it insists transcendence through realization, rather than through an actual rebirth. Everything seems resolute and perpetual, examined from a considerable distance, as if under the prospect of infinity (Kroll 145).

The dead woman in “Edge,” capsizing the development of birth, has consumed her cosmos and children, a scene that affirms the fulfillment of her existence. Likewise, “the moon” has consumed the woman’s destiny back inside itself. By consuming her children, she makes peace to them and the life they serve, in a manner that goes beyond reasoning and condemnation (Kroll 147):

She has folded

Them back into her body as petals

Of a rose close. . .

Here she does not perceive the children as different from herself, not as sheer formations which have rebelled against her, but as an inherent part of herself (Kroll 147).

In this fixed and endless illustration, death is not impending but an ultimate state. There is nothing that gives the indication that, like Lady Lazarus, the woman will be revived. In this sense, “Edge” displays another type of transcendence (Kroll 147-148). Characterized by melancholia and submission and displays a distressing image of definiteness, it is somber image, enhanced by the knowledge that “Edge” is one of the last poems Sylvia Plath wrote before she committed suicide.

5. A Fatally Flawed Sense of Existence

In his book, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, author David Holbrook maintains that Sylvia Plath suffered from a “fatally flawed sequence in her logic” that distorted her sense of existence. In his discussion, Holbrook examines what he calls the “Schizoid Problem in Creative Writing” and argues through symbolism in her poetry that Plath, although not schizophrenic, had schizoid characteristics, and that her suicide was a schizoid suicide (1).

Holbrook maintains that the schizoid personality is plagued by problems of becoming a person, of feeling whole and human and capable of exerting his independence (109). The cause of this inability, says Holbrook, lies in a failure of integration or a failure in the process of developing a self that enables a person to perceive the real world as benevolent and is tightly bound to ego-strength (109-110). Holbrook states that: “the artist works between the need to feel whole, and the need to see the world in a meaningful way” (110), and in order to see the world in a meaningful way this has to be built into the person’s personality. It is in this respect that Plath is lacking, not necessarily in the idea of the reality and reliability of the outer world but rather a lack in conviction in terms of feeling. In consequence, her work is defined by two compensatory actions, the denial of bad experience and enjoyable remembering (Holbrook 110).

Holbrook calls this denial of bad experience “compulsive fantasizing” that is present in Plath’s more aggressive poems such as “Lady Lazarus” or “Daddy” and where she declares her apathy of the enmity that terrorizes her (110). There is still “enjoyable remembering” present in one of her earlier poems, “The Beekeeper’s Daughter,” but also hopelessness because the queen bee does not present herself.” Thus, says Holbrook, she collects fragments of memories of her father in “Daddy”: They stuck me together with glue. / And then I knew what to do. / I made a model of you,” (62-64), and marries “a cupboard of rubbish” like a house divided against itself (Holbrook 110-111).

Since she does not trust in herself she cannot see the world as benevolent and therefore it is meaningless and from that sense rises the need for rebirth. When her search for rebirth through death seems futile it takes cataclysmic course, such as in “Lady Lazarus” where the poetic persona blatantly calls for the repeated enactment of death. Contrastingly, in what is thought to be her last poem, “Edge,” there is a sinister

and indifferent tone and resentful expression of complete hopelessness that even her death can produce an imaginative reaction: “The moon has nothing to be sad about, / Staring from her hood of bone” (17–18). Here, the theme of rebirth and transcendence are lost. Holbrook calls this lack of creative achievement a reduction to nihilism and futile retribution that “promotes desperate dehumanization” (Holbrook 111).

The basis of all of Plath’s personal relationships was the identification with another person. So her ability to form meaningful relationships was dependent upon her identification with other people and as such, she could barely exist herself in the condition of being separate. This is evident in her feeling of desertion where the world imitates the prodigiousness of her own needs and threatens to suffocate her (Holbrook 117). In “Berck-Plage,” a highly autobiographical poem from *Ariel*, she feels isolated from the world and looks on as an ambivalent spectator: “Behind the class of this car / The world purrs, shut-off and gentle. / And I am dark-suited and still, a member of the party, / Gliding up in low gear behind the cart” (109–112).

Although the schizoid person suffers from close relationships, Holbrook states that Plath did commit herself to relationships, enduring the agony, in the hopes of satisfaction. Her late poems, Holbrook maintains, “are virtually cries of anguish” and a testament to the danger and damaging effects imposed by such relationships. Identifying with the external world is a difficulty that affects the schizoid person on a monumental level, it leads to mental detachment as a way to avoid the danger of over-dependence on objects because of the fear of being absorbed into them (Holbrook 117-118)

The schizoid’s withdrawal from the threat of an unfulfilling external world is augmented by this defense mechanism of detachment. Holbrook describes the cataclysmic effects of close relationships for a schizoid person as such: “the schizoid individual lives in a private hell, between fear of extinction through loss of relationship, and the menace of annihilation by dangerous relationship” and that out of it “emerges the desperation of the suicidal impulse to escape both dangers” (118).

So, the false sequence in Plath’s logic was that she believed that death could be a path to rebirth. There are both positive and negative aspects to Plath’s feelings about experience. In *Tulips*, from *Ariel*, Plath expresses the major ambiguity that is at the core of her work – whether to suffer the pain of existence in the world or to make the frantic attempt to be reborn. At the end, she seems to want to be reborn despite her suffering – the salty tears belonging to health (Holbrook 113): “The water I taste is

warm and salt, like the sea, / And comes from a country far away as health” (62–63). Often it is easy to sympathize with her strong sense of alienation but more often is her banal tone both alarming and distant as in her descriptions of the “I” (Holbrook 13). This is also evident, as Holbrook notes, in her semi-autobiography *The Bell Jar*, where she speaks of not recognizing her body as “her” and of having to “ambush” it to have the “whole say” and be “dead in a flash” (113).

As a teenager, Plath once wrote in her journal: “I want to live and feel all the shades, tones, and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life. And I am horribly limited” (Plath 46). In her late poems, Plath portrays how she lived all those variations of mental and physical experiences she desired so deeply to get to know, but perhaps not in the way she had anticipated and ultimately experienced them. Plath also once wrote on the meaning of an afterlife: “Is that life after death — mind living on paper and flesh living in offspring?” (Plath 49). However “flawed” Plath’s sense of existence might have been her assumption on existence in the afterlife hits close to home as her legacy surely is existent today if life after death is indeed “mind living on paper.”

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* (1965) has, for the most part, been judged in terms of its autobiographical content rather than for its poetic achievement. However, it is impossible to separate the life of Sylvia Plath from her poetry; the two are too intertwined to be disentangled. *Ariel* is a work of great significance that shows how the poet matures, through a remarkably sudden change in style that marks her move into confessional poetry. In the most superficial sense of confessional poetry, many view Plath's poetry simply as a long suicide note, a far too simplistic interpretation, as *Ariel* is worthy on its own merits and not just as a symbol of her final work or a morbid obsession with death. Importantly, she also expanded the biographical aspects of her work so that it can be read in an emblematic way on a universal level.

Sylvia Plath's inherent melancholia and rejection stems, for the most part, from her estrangement with her father, after his death, and the rejection and infidelity of her husband Ted Hughes. In *Ariel* she effectively expels and conquers these oppressing figures that once governed her life. Through the rituals carried out in her poems, she is resurrected and she even transcends death. The separation of the body and soul is a central theme in Plath's work and conveys her distorted and detached sense of self and difficulty with self-realization. From that exact sense stems her unique, twofold nature of death, as a resurrection through the defiant conquest of death and her visions of actual or imminent death. Her ambivalent attitude towards death is characterized by both fear and fascination by it, a dread of the decaying image of the flesh and an intriguing and bold desire of the resurrection of the self. Most intriguing though, is the underlying hope present in some of her more melancholic poems where death seems to be permanent. However, if examined closely, these poems seem to convey a paradoxical sense of transcendence, death is not the end of all ends but instead an ulterior existence beyond the physical level. As such death is a transformation of the self and means to rebirth.

Plath's poems would constitute the same thing even if she had not committed suicide, however, that is not to say they are not truly, and on the deepest level, confessional in nature. It is arguably so that her late poems came into existence because of the sheer fact she was seriously depressed and that she invested so much in them they became inseparable from herself. As such, they are a true representation of her private "self" and invariably so, a testament of confessional poetry.

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