

SYLVIA PLATH
IMAGES OF LIFE IN A POET OF DEATH

THESIS

Submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
of Rhodes University

by

MARY LYNN MATHER

January 1992

Contents

Abstract	p. iii
Note on abbreviations and spelling	p. v
Chronology	p. vi
Acknowledgements	p. vii
Introduction: Images of Life in a Poet of Death	p. 1
Part I: The White Goddess of Birth and Growth	
1. Life as Death's Antithesis: Spring and Love (1956)	p. 17
2. Life as Creativity: The New Moon and Art (1956 - 1958)	p. 29
3. Life as a Progression towards Death: Birth and Water (1958 - 1959)	p. 41
Part II: The Red Goddess of Procreation, Love and Battle	
4. Life as Death's Antithesis: Summer and Pregnancy (1959 - 1960)	p. 53
5. Life as Creativity: The Full Moon and Children (1960 - 1961)	p. 67
6. Life as a Progression towards Death: Battle and Illness (1961 - 1962)	p. 79
Part III: The Black Goddess of Death and Divination	
7. Life as Death's Antithesis: Winter and Resurrection (1962)	p. 95
8. Life as Creativity: The Waning Moon and Blood (1962 - 1963)	p. 120
9. Life as a Progression towards Death: The Journey's End (1962 - 1963)	p. 137
Conclusion: <u>Three Women</u> and Plath's Images of Life	p. 159
Bibliography	p. 172

Abstract

On a creative and a personal level, Sylvia Plath seems to have been fascinated by the relationship between life and death. Her work reflects an ongoing preoccupation with duality and a sense of tension between two opposing forces suffuses virtually every poem she wrote in the period from 1956 to early 1963. Because her attitude to both life and death is deeply ambivalent, Plath's poetry rests on a strong awareness of conflict and her art is characterized by a continual pull between extremes. This thesis is an examination of how she uses images of life in poems that ostensibly deal with death.

While Plath draws on the events of her own life for her poetic material, she also converts her personal experiences into a universal myth. She was familiar with Robert Graves's eclectic study of the pagan nature deity, The White Goddess, and she seems to have incorporated part of his symbolism into her own code of images. In particular, she adopts Graves's triple goddess of nature as one of the dominant figures in her created world, for the White Goddess is associated with life and death alike.

Plath's dichotomy of life and death works on different planes. Firstly, she frequently envisages the self as divided and the opposition between life and death takes on the dimensions of an internal psychological war. Secondly, she extends the battle between life and death to the creative sphere. Thirdly, she explores the idea of life as a journey from birth to death. The White Goddess is linked with the three natural realms of earth, sky and underworld. And Plath relies largely on seasonal, lunar and chthonic images in her poetry. Furthermore, the three colours of the goddess - white, red and black - are the dominant hues of her poetry.

Just as the White Goddess moves through her different natural phases, so Plath's images evolve and grow in significance and meaning. The thesis explores a number of key poems which are central to her growth as an artist and which best illustrate the corresponding development in her images of life. The study follows a roughly chronological order.

Note on abbreviations and spelling

The following abbreviations have been used to refer to Plath's own work:

CP: Collected Poems

JP: Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams and other prose writings

LH: Letters Home: Correspondence 1950 - 1963

BJ: The Bell Jar

J: The Journals of Sylvia Plath

American spelling has been retained when quoting from both Plath's poetry and her American critics.

Chronology

- 1932 Born 27 October in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, to Aurelia and Otto Plath.
- 1935 Brother Warren born.
- 1937 Plath family moves to Winthrop, Massachusetts.
- 1940 Otto Plath dies following a leg amputation resulting from a diabetic condition.
- 1942 Plath family moves to Wellesley, Massachusetts.
- 1950 Enters Freshman year at Smith College on scholarship.
- 1952 August: Publishes a prize-winning story, "Sunday at the Mintons'", in Mademoiselle.
- 1953 Summer: Guest managing editor at Mademoiselle, New York City.
August 24: Suicide attempt in Wellesley, Massachusetts, at home.
- 1954 Winter: Returns to Smith for second semester.
Summer: Attends Harvard Summer School.
- 1955 May: Graduates from Smith with prizes for poetry.
October: Begins Fulbright year at Newnham College, Cambridge University.
- 1956 February 25: Meets Ted Hughes.
April: Trip to Germany and Italy.
June 16: Marries Ted Hughes.
Summer: Long honeymoon in Benidorm, Spain.
- 1956-57: Second Fulbright year.
Living in Cambridge.
- 1957 June: Returns to America with Ted Hughes; holiday in Cape Cod, Massachusetts.
- 1957-58: Instructor in English, Smith College.
- 1958-59: Writing and hospital clerical job in Boston; seriously involved in therapy; attending Robert Lowell's poetry class.
- 1959 Summer: Sight-seeing trip across America.
Fall: Writing poetry at Yaddo, Saratoga Springs.
December: Leaves for England.
- 1960 April 1: Birth of daughter, Frieda Rebecca, at home in London.
October: The Colossus published in England.
- 1961 February: Miscarriage.
March: Appendectomy.
August: Moves to Devon.
- 1962 January 17: Birth of son, Nicholas Farrar.
May: The Colossus and other Poems, U.S. edition.
October: Separates from Ted Hughes.
- 1963 January: The Bell Jar published in England under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas.
February 11: Suicide in London in Yeats' house.

(Plath J: 360-361).

Acknowledgements

The financial assistance of the Institute for Research Development towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this work, or conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not to be attributed to the Institute for Research Development.

In addition to the Institute for Research Development, I would like to thank the Trustees of the Winifred Wilson Bursary Fund for their help in my second year of study. Rhodes University provided support - financial and moral - for which I am grateful.

Professor Malvern van Wyk Smith of the Rhodes English Department deserves a thank you for agreeing to supervise this study in the first place and for his helpful suggestions and his enthusiasm throughout.

By reading many of the rough drafts and by listening to wild ideas in the middle of the night, Barbara Dale-Jones kept me going during the interminable period of putting pen to paper and thoughts onto screen.

And, of course, thank you to the Mather and Morgan families for expressing an interest in what I was doing. In particular, my debt to Dinty knows no bounds. May the forthcoming "creel of eels" be my way of thanking you for everything.

Introduction: Images of Life in a Poet of Death

It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative - which ever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it.

(Plath J: 240).

Imagine a world where life is constantly vying with death and death with life. This is Sylvia Plath's personal battlefield. That the dichotomy spills over into her poetry is perhaps inevitable and, broadly speaking, as Annette Lavers points out, "the dialectic of life and death is the sole subject of the poems" (Newman: 107). In a sense, the realm Plath creates is a twilight zone between a set of polarities. Irving Howe suggests that she

exists in some mediate province between living and dying, and she appears to be balancing coolly the claims of the two, drawn almost equally to both yet oddly comfortable with the perils of where she is.

(Butscher: 233).

Even as she loves and honours life, Plath is acutely aware of the contradictions inherent in herself and in the larger realm. Life eventually yields to death.

In Three Women, the verse play she wrote in the early part of 1962, Plath's deeply ambivalent attitude towards life and death finds its most dramatic expression. Set in a maternity ward and "round about", the long poem was "inspired by a Bergman film" (Plath LH: 456). And the film, according to Pamela J. Annas, is Ingmar Bergman's Nära Livet (The Brink of Life or So Close to Life). Annas notes that, in examining the experiences of three women in the maternity ward of a hospital, Plath follows the basic structure of the film (Annas: 74). The title hints at the film's main concerns and, like Bergman, Plath looks at birth, life and death from different angles. The hospital - at once the centre of healing and recovery and a place of illness and suffering - provides the perfect backdrop for her ongoing battle between life and death.

Because the conflict between life and death assumes many forms, it may not always seem to be the overriding concern of Plath's work, as Suzanne Juhasz points out.

The struggle between life and death may not always be the ostensible or overt subject of a poem, but the perceptions and ideas of a consciousness that is struggling between life and death not only color but indeed control the vision of every poem produced.

(Juhasz: 104).

Plath's poetry suggests a preoccupation with ambiguity and duality and the images that dominate her work reflect a continual pull between contradictory forces. Light competes with darkness. Noise is set against silence. Warmth opposes coldness. Motion is balanced by stasis. Fertility contrasts with sterility. And every bright hue is matched by an absence of colour.

The sets of extremes mirror the war between life and death and Annette Lavers aptly describes Plath's code of images as "a kind of symbolical shorthand" (Newman: 102). She elaborates on how the system operates:

The life-principle is colour, pulsating rhythm, noise, heat, radiance, expansion, emotion and communication. Death is the other pole: darkness, stasis, silence, frost, well-defined edges and the hardness of rocks, jewels, and skulls, dryness, anything self-contained and separate or which derives its positive attributes from some other source, instead of generating them freely - for death is absence, nothingness.

(Newman: 107).

In the introduction to Collected Poems, Ted Hughes refers to Plath's "supercharged system of inner symbols and images" as "an enclosed cosmic circus" which is evident in even her very early poetry (Plath CP: 16).

With their clashing viewpoints and their diverging situations, the protagonists of Three Women extend the sense of contrast and opposition on which Plath's work rests. The verse play is subtitled "A Poem for Three Voices". The first belongs to a married

woman who gives birth to a son, the second is that of a secretary who endures one of several miscarriages and the third is the voice of a young student who bears an unwanted daughter. "I am slow as the world", begins the first voice and her patience is that of the unhurried globe. Watched attentively by the sun and stars, she turns calmly through the time leading up to the birth of her child. Her fertility, mentioned in the opening paragraph of the play, astonishes the moon. Because images taken from nature seep through the first voice's speech, her pregnancy is seen as a natural event which "will happen without attention" and she is not unlike the pheasant who arranges his brown feathers nearby. "Leaves and petals attend me", says the woman. And she adds: "I am ready".

Natural images are used to different effect in the second voice's introductory speech. She recalls the initial disbelief she felt when she saw "the small red seep" of blood that signalled danger. Where the first voice aligns herself with the harmonious turning of the globe, the second senses a relationship with negative forces. Images of coldness, emptiness and illness flood her monologue and the sense of loss and desolation which she feels is echoed in both the social and the natural world. Like the "flat" men who share her working environment, she lacks the rounded body of the pregnant woman. And the death she sees in the "bare trees" is "a deprivation" she understands too well. The colours that the secretary chooses are stark: white, black and silver, with the one reference to the "red seep" serving as a violent reminder of life. But it is a life which has been destroyed and instead of bearing a child within her womb, she admits that what she carries home is "a disease" and "a death".

If the first voice focuses on the positive aspect of the natural realm and pregnancy and if the second dwells on the negative side of nature and conception, the attitude of the third speaker falls somewhere between the two polarities. Just as the

secretary relives the discovery of her loss, so the girl begins her speech by remembering the moment when she learnt of her pregnancy. Although her unborn baby is alive, allusions to the "chilling" willows and the "white, cold wing" of a swan suggest that she has mixed feelings about the impending birth, for coldness is an image of death in Plath's symbolic code. As with the first and the second voices in Three Women, the attitude of the third speaker finds an echo in the natural world:

I wasn't ready. The white clouds rearing
 Aside were dragging me in four directions.
 I wasn't ready.

The repetition of the simple admission gives it added force, even as it heightens the contrast between the girl's words and the first voice's calm statement, "I am ready."

Both Eileen Aird and Jon Rosenblatt identify the transference of internal conflicts into external dramatic terms as one of Plath's recurring techniques (Aird: 52; Rosenblatt: 24). Acknowledging her as a poet who is concerned with the self, Anne Stevenson aptly refers to Plath as "a surrealist of internals" (Stevenson: 151). On a general level, Three Women can be viewed as an exploration of the subconscious mind, with the protagonists of the verse play serving as symbolic figures who represent different moods and aspects of the self. Carl Jung describes symbols as "natural attempts to reconcile and reunite opposites within the psyche" (Jung: 90). According to Jung, the symbol relies on two levels of meaning. On the one hand, it is familiar; on the other, it "possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning" and implies something vague, unknown or hidden below the surface (Jung: 3). Judith Kroll draws attention to the fact that Plath would have been "familiar with literary and psychoanalytic archetypes and symbols, both through the psychotherapy she had undergone and through her readings" (Kroll: 13).

Plath mentions Jung as one of the writers she studied while working on her honours thesis at Smith College in 1954. Fascinated by Fyodor Dostoevsky's "double" characters in The Brothers Karamazov and The Double, she explored the literary and psychological aspects of her topic alike (Plath LH: 145-146). In her biography on the poet, Stevenson writes of Plath's thesis:

"The Magic Mirror" - appropriately titled - is a detached, competent study of the crisis of identity in nineteenth-century romantic fiction, which in many ways anticipated the schizoid diagnoses of twentieth-century psychoanalysis. Unfortunately, Sylvia adopted for her thesis the wooden, academic style approved by her supervisor, and no one would guess from reading it that the author of this well-mannered, well-researched academic paper had invested the least bit of emotional capital in it.

(Stevenson: 54).

And Plath did have a personal interest in her subject matter as the man she married in 1956 points out.

Twice in his introduction to the journals kept by his former wife, Ted Hughes writes of Plath's "inner drama" (Plath J: xii). He adds that these private records "set down her day to day struggle with her warring selves" and he believes that she "fought her way through the unmaking and remaking of herself" in her daily journal entries (Plath J: xiii). For Plath, the image of the double seems to be closely linked to her own sense of division and she views existence as a constant battle between the "joyous positive and despairing negative" facets of the self (Plath J: 240). By constructing a poetic realm which mirrors her internal drama, she incorporates the conflict between life and death into her work and attempts to reconcile the two extremes. Aird notes that, in fusing "her recreation of the external world with her intense, inner perceptions", Plath was able to create "a mythological, visionary world which was both grotesque and beautiful" (Aird: 5-6). And the myth that she espouses is at once universal and personal.

Mythology, as defined by Joël Schmidt, is "the everlasting and constantly renewed translation of the major collective principles that govern humanity beyond the contingencies of time and space" (Schmidt: 2). Exploring the correlation between myth and the unconscious, Jungian analyst June Singer suggests that myth is a way "of expressing the inexpressible reality of the unconscious" (Singer: 236). Just as the myth is made up of images, so the unconscious is comprised of mental symbols or archetypes and Jung portrays the unconscious as a type of nature goddess.

Our actual knowledge of the unconscious shows that it is a natural phenomenon and that, like Nature herself, it is at least neutral. It contains all aspects of human nature - light and dark, beautiful and ugly, good and evil, profound and silly.

(Jung: 94).

A similar female figure - who governs the dual concerns of life and death - dominates many of Plath's poems.

In his detailed study, The White Goddess, Robert Graves describes the pagan nature goddess as "both lovely and cruel, ugly and kind" (Graves: 248). Concerned with birth, life and death, the impartial deity "destroys or creates with equal passion" (Graves: 388). As the feminine principle ruling the moon, the seasons and the underworld, she assumes diverse titles and forms. The nature goddess that Graves celebrates is "the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust - the female spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death" (Graves: 24). He adds that she need not be mentioned by name, for often the very elements "bespeak her unseen presence" (Graves: 25). That Plath had read The White Goddess and was familiar with the theory seems clear (Plath J: 168, 222). In addition, Kroll senses a parallel between the goddess and the poet. "Not only was the White Goddess her Muse, but the myth of the White Goddess seemed to be her myth", she says (Kroll: 40-41).

Whether The White Goddess is factually accurate or not is of little relevance to Plath's poetry. Instead, what is important is that she seems to have appropriated part of the myth and to have merged it with her own life story. Graves's study is, as K.K. Ruthven points out, "an eclectic synopticon" and Kroll stresses that Plath would have encountered many of his ideas elsewhere (Ruthven: 69). However, she feels that "the manner in which they are organized and analyzed by Graves invested them with unique relevance to her life as a woman and as a poet". Furthermore, she sees the circumstances under which Plath was first introduced to Graves's work as significant: Ted Hughes "initiated" her into "the realm of the White Goddess" shortly after they met (Kroll: 40). As Linda Wagner-Martin mentions in her biography, Plath and Hughes often studied mythology and anthropology together and The White Goddess was one of the books that "became a source of poetic symbols for both of them" (Wagner-Martin: 141).

The goddess of nature is associated with three realms: the underworld, the earth and the sky. Graves elaborates on her different aspects:

As Goddess of the Underworld she was concerned with Birth, Procreation and Death. As Goddess of the Earth she was concerned with the three seasons of Spring, Summer and Winter: she animated trees and plants and ruled all living creatures. As Goddess of the Sky she was the moon, in her three phases of New Moon, Full Moon, and Waning Moon. This explains why from a triad she was so often enlarged to an ennead.

(Graves: 386).

White is the principal colour of the goddess as moon-trinity, but it is not the only colour which is sacred to her. Graves notes that

the New Moon is the white goddess of birth and growth; the Full Moon, the red goddess of love and battle; the Old Moon, the black goddess of death and divination.

(Graves: 70).

Like the everchanging figure of the triple goddess, the three colours play a crucial role in Plath's code of images.

Rosenblatt dismisses the influence of The White Goddess on Plath's poetry because he believes that her views of death and rebirth lack "the simplicity and consistency of Graves's mythological system". Instead, he suggests, they reflect "the contradictions and self-division of lived experience" (Rosenblatt: xi). But the goddess myth is not incompatible with the notion of the split self, for the deity is herself divided. According to Graves, she is at once girl, woman and hag (Graves: 386). Susan Bassnett believes that

Sylvia Plath has incorporated the triple patterning of the White Goddess into her own writing, seeing in its intricacies a solution to the perennial problem felt by women, that of fragmentation.

Conflicting desires and moods, she adds, are "resolved through the idea of simultaneity that avoids resolution" (Bassnett: 49). And in a work like Three Women, Plath utilizes the image of the tripartite goddess of life and death to the full.

Throughout the verse play, the symbolical female figure appears and reappears in a startling variety of forms. The first voice assumes many of the positive aspects of the earth mother and Plath begins her drama with an image of the woman as a natural part of the cosmic process. In her most malignant form, the goddess of the earth haunts the secretary who is unable to bear a child. "The dark earth drinks them", says the woman of the small lives that she keeps losing and she sees the ancient mother goddess as "the vampire of us all". At times she "supports us" and "is kind". But she is also capable of cruelty and, in her sinister form, she is "Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb". Graves argues that the single, if infinitely variable, theme of poetry is that of life and death (Graves: 21). As an emblem of the conflict between the powers of life and the forces of death in Plath's work, the recurring goddess figure is associated with the divisions within the self and the universe alike.

In Three Women, images of the lunar goddess rely on a similar balance between positive and negative phases. To the first speaker, the moon is "luminous as a nurse" as she "passes and repasses" the mother-to-be. Far from being malevolent, the moon "is simply astonished at fertility". Because the third voice sees the childbearing process as a threat to her own life, the hospital takes on the dimensions of a torture chamber. "It is a place of shrieks", admits the girl. As the "night lights" of the hospital become "flat red moons" which "are dull with blood", Plath establishes a relationship between birth and the moon. If the lunar goddess presides over the first voice's pregnancy and the girl's ordeal, the moon also plays a role in thwarting the secretary's attempts to bear a child. This time, the second woman internalizes the negative facet of the goddess. "I feel it enter me, cold, alien, like an instrument", she says of the moon and she adds that she, like the lunar deity, creates corpses. Comparing the moon to "those dark mother-goddesses of primal times", Constance Scheerer notes "a fearsome combination of the destructive and the maternal" (Butscher: 176).

A true poem, as Graves defines it, "is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse" (Graves: 24). He sees poetry and myth as inseparable, for his thesis is that the language of poetic myth "was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess" (Graves: 9). He believes that "this remains the language of true poetry - 'true' in the nostalgic modern sense of 'the unimprovable original, not a synthetic substitute'" (Graves: 10). With their mutual emphasis on word pictures, poetry and mythology seem to form a natural alliance and Graves uses "the word 'myth' in its strict sense of 'verbal iconograph' without the derogatory sense of 'absurd fiction' that it has acquired" (Graves: 21). The goddess, then, is simultaneously a symbol of life and death and an emblematic muse who inspires poetry and is linked with making. Whether the moon-muse assumes positive or negative

roles, she is clearly equated with creativity for Plath.

With the opposition between fertility and sterility or childbirth and miscarriage, Plath extends her antithetical images of life and death to the creative plane. The symbolism works on two interconnected levels: in relation to children and in relation to poetry. She sums up her feelings about art and society in "Context":

For me, the real issues of our time are the issues of every time - the hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its forms - children, loaves of bread, paintings, buildings; and the conservation of life of all people in all places.

. . .

(Plath JP: 98).

Because making is important to Plath, both as a woman and as a poet, giving birth to either a child or a poem is a life-enhancing act. Living, for her, is akin to creating and she writes in her journal that her life "will not be lived until there are books and stories which relive it perpetually in time" (Plath J: 165).

Poetry, as Alicia Ostriker observes, is not "some kind of sterile swabbed tissue of language uninfected by the poet's life and incapable of infecting the reader's life" (Wagner: 98). Nor is poetry a neat translation of the artist's private world. In an interview with Peter Orr, Plath admits that she draws on the events of her own life for poetic material:

I think my poems immediately 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 she adds that personal experience should be relevant to larger issues (Orr: 169-170). To see Plath's poetry as little more than a stylized version of her own life is unfair and denies her the control she advocates when dealing with potentially disturbing experiences.

If Plath is passionately involved in her subject matter, she is also coolly distanced from it. And while she incorporates details from her personal life into her work, she moves beyond self-concern as she converts her story into a universal myth. Newman feels that the strength of many of her poems lies in her ability to adopt and master a number of voices which correspond to the divisions of the self (Newman: 30). Noting her efforts to establish an impersonal tone, he says that the self at the centre of her poetry is "a different self, one more powerful, less biographically identifiable; a voice at one remove from the crises it invokes" (Newman: 52-53). Each of the protagonists of Three Women undergoes an experience that Plath herself had endured, for she gave birth to both a daughter and a son and she suffered a miscarriage (Plath LH: 373, 408, 442). But, as Stevenson points out, the verse play rises above private iconography and she believes that it is "probably the first great poem of childbirth in the language" (Stevenson: 234).

Three Women was apparently "written for radio at the invitation of Douglas Cleverdon, who produced it with great effect on the BBC's Third Programme, on 19 August 1962" (Plath CP: 292). On the subject of child-bearing, Cleverdon remarks:

Considering the vast range of poems on death and mortality, it is surprising that such a fundamental experience as birth has so little literature of its own - until, of course, one remembers how few great poets have themselves been mothers.

(Newman: 228).

Annas emphasizes the fact that the "crisis situation" in Three Women is "uniquely female" (Annas: 73). Giving birth, then, is not only a metaphor for producing a poem. It is, in addition, an image of woman's creativity. "No writer has meant more to the current feminist movement" than Plath, Ellen Moers suggests. She adds that, while Plath was not a "movement" person, the wave of feminism began shortly after her death in 1963 (Moers: xiii).

In adopting the omnipotent figure of the nature goddess as both her inspiration and her prime image of life and death, Plath aligns herself with the feminist cause, for the pagan moon deity is a symbol of female power and control. Furthermore, Bassnett notes that the "White Goddess, the source of all poetry and of all life, the sublime muse, stands in direct contrast to the male fatherly God of Christianity and rationalism" (Bassnett: 48). Graves presumes that only a male poet could take the goddess as muse-mistress (Graves: 11). But she need not be a rival, as Erica Jong argues:

The muse may be many things to the woman poet: mother, lover, doppelgänger. Often, when the woman poet writes to her muse, she writes to that witchy aspect of her own soul - the goddess of death and destruction within herself.

(Jong: 32).

The goddess, as a facet of the self, becomes a symbol of the female poet in a predominantly masculine literary world.

Far from being fixed or static, Graves's White Goddess is associated with process and change. She moves through the different seasons, she alters her shape continually in her moon-guise and she rules the progression from birth to death (Graves: 386). Plath's poetry reveals - and actually relies on - a connection between life, myth and motion. Referring to one of his own articles on Theodore Roethke, Richard Allen Blessing describes myth as the perfect vehicle for a poet whose vision encompasses life and movement, even as it incorporates their antipodes. He quotes:

'A myth is itself pure action, the motion of a hero through time and space, usually toward more abundant life. What counts is . . . the urge, wrestle, and resurrection, the thrust toward the light, which drives the hero onward. The power of the myth is not a matter of plot, but of tropism, not a function of structure, but of energy and direction. The "structure" of the myth . . . is a kind of artificial construct, a graspable metaphor created to stand for the unstructured flowing that is life itself.'

(Lane: 69).

Life, for Plath, is linked to activity and death is viewed as a cessation of action. In the mythical world she creates, the conflict between life and death is often expressed as a pull between motion and stasis. Citing Freud's belief that the aim of all life is death, Richard Howard contends that "the effort of the mortal self is to reduce stimuli to an equilibrium, to cancel out tension, to return to the inanimate condition" and he detects a strong urge towards homeostasis and a yearning for stillness in Plath's work (Newman: 81-82). With the loss of her baby, the second voice of Three Women notices a "terrible cessation of everything", for death is equated with a lack of motion. Earlier in the verse play, she says:

I am dying as I sit. I lose a dimension.
Trains roar in my ears, departures, departures!
The silver track of time empties into the distance. . . .

Like the image of the departing trains, the allusion to the silver track of passing time suggests travel and Plath presents life as a journey from birth to death.

The motion through time is reflected in the changing face of the tripartite goddess, just as her three colours mirror her cyclical progression from birth to death. "As the New Moon or Spring she was girl; as the Full Moon or Summer she was woman; as the Old Moon or Winter she was hag", writes Graves (Graves: 386). The "white goddess of birth and growth" is the girl, the "red goddess of love and battle" is the woman and the "black goddess of death and divination" is the hag (Graves: 70). In Plath's system of images, shades of white, red and black function as symbols of her persona's moods and attitudes to life. White, the colour of birth and growth, is suggestive of life and death alike, for Graves stresses that the "whiteness of the goddess has always been an ambivalent concept" (Graves: 434). Red, the colour of love and battle, is unequivocally allied with life, war, passion, blood and activity. Black, the colour of death and divination, is associated with absence, stasis and destruction. Because the motion of the goddess

is cyclical and death leads into birth or rebirth, black hints at resurrection.

While Plath links her images of movement with the idea of life as a progression towards death, the symbolical journey also serves as an illustration of her development as a poet. In a sense, her artistic growth finds a parallel in the different phases of Graves's nature goddess, for she adopts the voices and the masks of the girl, the woman and the witch in succession. Hughes recommends that Plath's poetry be surveyed "as a whole, with attention to the order of composition" (Newman: 195). Because her images evolve from each other, reading the poems in even a roughly chronological sequence aids the understanding of her private system of symbols. Noting "how faithfully her separate poems build up into one long poem", Hughes adds that Plath

faced a task in herself, and her poetry is the record of her progress in the task. The poems are chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear. . . .

(Newman: 187).

Life - with its joy and its pain - is an important part of that plot.

Yet Plath's life includes her suicide attempts and it is her death which often attracts attention. She has become, as Bassnett points out, "a writer who wrote her own epitaph during her lifetime" and the emphasis tends to fall on "a reading of the poems which perceives them as prefigurations of her end" (Bassnett: 144). Ideally, suicide should not be an issue when exploring Plath's art. Certainly it should not be the means by which to explain it. However, critics of the poetry are drawn irresistibly towards an analysis that centres on death, and Plath's own end in particular. Her suicide, wrongly, becomes the frame that distracts from a true appreciation of her poetic picture. For A. Alvarez, Plath's death is "an attempt to get herself out of a desperate corner her own poetry had boxed her into" (Alvarez: xiii). Blurring her craft with her death, M.L.

Rosenthal claims that she was "literally committing her own predicaments in the interests of her art until the one was so involved in the other that no return was possible" (Newman: 71). And Howard believes that "it is the triumph of her final style to make expression and extinction indivisible" (Newman: 81).

Romanticizing suicide as the ultimate form of self-expression, many readers fail to distinguish between the life and death in the poetry and the life and death of the poet. Of the confrontation between experience and art, Plath says: "In a sense, these poems are deflections. I do not think they are an escape" (Plath JP: 98). Nor are they a cage. That she writes about death is indisputable, for, as Ingrid Melander notes

the body of poems where death can be considered either the major preoccupation or a component of a complex thematic whole, is considerably larger than the number of poems based on any other theme in Sylvia Plath's poetry.

(Melander: 80).

Thus, Plath can be referred to as a poet of death. But death is only part of the dichotomy and Plath's images of life need to be examined in an artistic context which includes the death theme, simply because it is closely allied to the life theme. As an absence of life, death would have no meaning in her poetry without the focus on life itself, for the death images are no more than cancelled life images.

It is, Bassnett argues, as absurd to read the poems as death wishes as it is to see the poetry as a case for Plath's mental instability. She believes that

the problems with which Sylvia Plath wrestled are problems that are by no means unique. What was unique was the way in which she gave voice to those contradictions and fragmented aspects of her personality at a time when other women were still keeping silent.

(Bassnett: 122).

Furthermore, by making the dual concerns of life and death an integral part of her poetic realm, Plath actually accepts the warring aspects of the self and reconciles them in her

personal myth. Together, the positive and the negative facets make up a natural whole and creating poems is as much a part of the process as the inability to produce a work of art. Plath seems to be acutely aware that life leads inevitably towards death. Yet it is not the destination that she celebrates in her poetry. It is the journey.

PART I: THE WHITE GODDESS OF BIRTH AND GROWTH

1. Life as Death's Antithesis: Spring and Love (1956)

Hot noon in the meadows. The buttercups
Swelter and melt, and the lovers
Pass by, pass by.

(Third Voice, Three Women).

Nature is often associated with the different aspects and the shifting moods of the self in Plath's poetry and the natural world provides her with a key to self-comprehension. Like Jung, she appears to draw a parallel between the hidden depths of the psyche and the subtle contradictions inherent in nature (Jung: 94). Constance Scheerer notes that Plath

demonstrates in her poetry how the mythic, in its immemorial pre-Christian (even pre-Graeco-Roman) dress of birth and death, seasonal and vegetative changes, moon and sea phases, and archaic concepts of beginnings and endings, is the only way to express the cosmos, is, in fact, the only way the cosmos can express itself.

(Butscher: 167).

In expressing the cosmos, Plath defines the self. And the "duet of shade and light" created in "Two Sisters of Persephone", a poem she wrote in 1956, relates to both the opposition within the natural world and an internal conflict.

Understanding the language of poetic myth, suggests Graves, leads to enhanced self-knowledge (Graves: 11). Nature elucidates the value and function of Plath's art - which is intrinsically related to her sense of self - and the polarities within the natural world form the basis of her symbolic code. The imaginative power of the poet, as she makes clear in "Soliloquy of the Solipsist", mirrors the whims of Graves's goddess of nature who "destroys or creates with equal passion" (Graves: 388). Like the goddess, the artist creates her own world, albeit with words rather than actions. When favourably disposed towards life, the poet can

Give grass its green
 Blazon sky blue, and endow the sun
 With gold

In such a mood, the vernal environment of the white goddess is foregrounded and celebrated in images of fruit and flower, warmth and love.

But Plath's poetic code depends on duality and the dichotomy of life and death is an important part of the nature. Spring and summer, in the poetic and the natural realm alike, are contested by winter with its destructive frost and icy force. Light, noise and colour meet their match in images of darkness, stony silence and bleakness. And the urge to participate in life and love to the full is counteracted by a reluctance to be involved in any sort of combat and an increasing sense of alienation from the physical world. If the poet is able to make a colourful paradise when "in good humor", she also holds

Absolute power
 To boycott color and forbid any flower
 To be.

In her "wintriest moods", the speaker bears a resemblance to Graves's black goddess of death and divination. While "Soliloquy of the Solipsist" explores the power of the poet as creator, the poem also relates to the self, as the title suggests.

The myth of the nature goddess lies behind "Two Sisters of Persephone", which depends strongly on an awareness of the dichotomy of life and death. The daughter of Demeter and Zeus, Persephone is gathering flowers when the earth gapes open and the ruler of the underworld claims her as his subterranean bride. Demeter, distraught by the abduction, takes her revenge by allowing no seed to grow on earth. Zeus succumbs to her threat and a compromise is reached whereby Persephone spends two thirds of the year on earth and the other third in the underworld (Frazer: 518). Sir James George Frazer says:

The descent of Persephone into the lower world would thus be a mythical expression for the sowing of the seed; her reappearance in spring would signify the sprouting of the young corn.

(Frazer: 555).

Myth can be seen as a way of explaining nature and natural phenomena and this may well have been its original purpose.

As the deity of birth and growth, Persephone is the white goddess in her spring garb. In Plath's poem, the bronzed outdoor sister lies near a bed of blood-red poppies. The poppy, according to J.C. Cooper, is one of the symbols of the Great Mother and an image of fertility (Cooper: 134). As she watches the scarlet flowers, the woman

. . . sees how their red silk flare
Of petaled blood
Burns open to sun's blade.

Mimicking the poppies as they bloom in the warmth, she becomes "sun's bride" and grows "quick with seed". She bears a king and becomes associated with Graves's red goddess of procreation, love and battle. In contrast, but still in keeping with the mythical story, the other side of Persephone is revealed in the sister who shuts herself into a darkened room. Her enterprise is "barren" and she is ultimately wedded to the underworld of death: "Worm-husbanded, yet no woman." In this guise, she takes on the characteristics of the black goddess of winter.

When Plath describes the seasons and the oppositions of nature in her work, she is conveying different states of mind. In her biography, Stevenson mentions that Plath "reported in her poems on the weather of her inner universe and delineated its two poles" (Stevenson: 262). "Winter Landscape, with Rocks", written in early 1956, is as much an analysis of a mood as it is a representation of a real scene. Plath's reference to the poem as a "psychic landscape" is apt, suggesting as it does a fusion of the inner, mythological

vision and the outer, objective world (Plath J: 105). The title implies an actual winter landscape with rooks as viewed by an artist. The vision, mediated by art, transforms into a single rook which inhabits the persona's wintry mind. What Plath presents is a metaphorical rook's-eye-view of a cold world. But while the poem describes a mental winter, it is the underlying memory of summer and happier times which serves to heighten the mood of bleakness and frustration.

The dualism is echoed in the ambivalent symbols Plath employs in "Winter Landscape, with Rooks", for the sun, the water and the two birds suggest life and death alike. The water in the millrace, an image of life and motion, "plunges headlong into that black pond" which is a reflection of the persona's gloomy state of mind. The "sluice of stone" through which the water passes hints at imminent stasis and life is further threatened by the darkness and stillness of the pond. A white swan, image of life and the dawning day, floats on the black pool. But the sun, the source of life, has set and it scorns to look "on this landscape of chagrin". Floating "chaste as snow", the solitary white swan seems "absurd and out-of-season", a jarring reminder of another mood and another time. Opposed to the incongruous swan is the image of the black rook "feathered dark in thought" and "brooding as the winter night comes on". Associated with death and darkness, the stalking rook is allied with the speaker and her thoughts.

Plath's persona is acutely aware of what she has lost, frozen as the golden past is by her bleak mood:

Last summer's reeds are all engraved in ice
as is your image in my eye. . . .

What is lost with the summer is twofold: the image of the lover is as good as dead and the speaker has forfeited the innocence and purity suggested by the white swan.

Bassnett, quite correctly, detects a sense of bitterness at that loss (Bassnett: 42). Yet winter must eventually give way to spring, both literally and metaphorically, as Annas points out:

Often, Plath's poems have imaged winter as a time of rest preceeding rebirth . . . but only when the reference point is nature. The natural world is characterized in Sylvia Plath's poems by process, by the ebb and flow of months and seasons, by a continual dying and rebirth.

In this context, winter suggests hibernation (Annas: 113). Although the heart, symbol of life and love, seems a mere "waste", unlikely to "grow green again", it does.

Within a few days of writing "Winter Landscape, with Rooks", Ted Hughes had entered Plath's life and imagination. And the heart, in life and in poetry, had regained the ability to love. As Aurelia Schober Plath remarks, her daughter penned "a flow of ecstatic poems" on meeting Hughes (Plath LH: 181). Edward Butscher dismisses the works as "the clutter of coy bridal bouquets" (Butscher: 16). In one of these poems, "Song for a Summer's Day", the sun takes the speaker's heart as if it "were a green-tipped leaf". Plath and Hughes were married in London on 16 June 1956 (Plath LH: 247, 257). In addition to finding love, Plath was introduced to a world she never knew: "all nature" (Plath LH: 235). It is no coincidence that her newfound interest in nature occurred as her relationship with Hughes began. Both nature and the male figure dominate the poems of this period, for nature is associated with the man, as Margaret Dickie Uroff notes, in Plath's experience and in her work (Uroff: 77).

Yet even as the poet celebrates love in images taken from the natural realm, she subtly creates a tone of menace. Love, like nature, is simultaneously idyllic and threatening. There is more than one possible reaction to love and, in "Two Sisters of Persephone", Plath presents the options in the kinetic images of participation and

withdrawal or life and death. Dualism is her poetic trademark and Jerome Mazzaro senses an "almost psychoanalytic concept of the double" in "Two Sisters of Persephone". He explains:

The concept would be based on opposition rather than congruence. The opposition would add up either to a third figure containing both or to a cancellation of what each half-figure represents.

And he cites Plath's Smith College thesis on the double in two of Dostoevsky's novels as an influence on her thought (Lane: 226). Stevenson has observed that the study, entitled The Magic Mirror, "in many ways anticipated the schizoid diagnoses of twentieth-century psychoanalysis" (Stevenson: 54).

In connection with her topic, Plath writes that she is reading various works of fiction, as well as "Freud, Frazer, Jung, and others" and she finds

fascinating stuff about the ego as symbolized in reflections (mirror and water), shadows, twins - dividing off and becoming an enemy, or omen of death, or a warning conscience, or a means by which one denies the power of death (e.g., by creating the idea of the soul as the deathless double of the mortal body).

(Plath LH: 146).

Plath also refers to an "excellent chapter" in The Golden Bough on the soul as a shadow and a reflection (Plath LH: 145). In the chapter, Frazer states that "some peoples believe a man's soul . . . to be in his reflection in water or a mirror" and that looking at the reflected self is, for many, an omen of death (Frazer: 253). Annas sees Plath's early and conscious fascination with mirrors as a possible "way of imaging her own ambivalence and sense of division" (Annas: 5). The reflected self is the deathly aspect of the living self.

Using the mirror symbolism in "Strumpet Song", Plath treats chaste virginity and sensual indulgence as two facets of the same persona and the poem's tension is located in the internal battle between the positive and negative sides of the self. "Two

"Sisters of Persephone" is a more thorough examination of the duality within the individual. Uroff feels that both the "disdain for the intellectual woman" and "the elevation of the natural woman" concur with the personal choices Plath was making at the time (Uroff: 77). In a letter to her mother, written shortly before meeting Hughes, she confesses that she knows she is "not a career woman" and she yearns to find a man she "can honestly marry" (Plath LH: 213). But while the personae can be seen as caricatures of the need to choose between the dry academic world and the emotional realm of love, each set of oppositions is itself deeply ambivalent. In Plath's poetry, there is no neat analogy between withdrawal and writing; nor is there one between action and love.

Instead, love is seen as both desirable and dangerous. Love provides a sense of self-worth, yet the self may be engulfed by the other. Images of eating abound in Plath's poems of love - which often verge on being poems of hate - and while eating is necessary for life, it spells death for the prey. In "The Glutton" the persona feels that

. . . all merit's in being meat
Seasoned how he'd most approve. . . .

The sentiment is echoed in "Pursuit" where the persona is strongly aware of the dangers, even as she excites the panther-man to eat his fill. "One day I'll have my death of him", she says, treading a fine line between consumption and consummation. Uroff, quite convincingly, sees the panther as Hughes and she suggests that Plath's "first poetic treatment of him seems to borrow his own favourite predatory animal imagery" (Uroff: 70). Violent love is not exclusive to the male and the female speaker does her share of eating in "The Shrike", where the insomniac bird-wife sucks out the last drops of blood in her mate's "truant heart".

Love seems to incorporate both life and death in "Pursuit" and, according

to Plath, the central paradox of the poem is that "the more intensely one lives, the more one burns and consumes oneself". In "Pursuit", death "includes the concept of love" (Plath LH: 222). Love is viewed ambivalently because physical love is associated with the sun in Plath's poetic code and the solar sphere, as Barnett Guttenberg stresses, is at once "colorful and harmonious, brutish and destructive" (Lane: 142). The panther of "Pursuit" epitomizes the negative aspect as he "prowls more lordly than the sun". And in "Two Sisters of Persephone", the outdoor girl "Freely becomes sun's bride", just as the "petaled blood" of the red poppies "Burns open to sun's blade". For Guttenberg, the images of the solar realm include "all the physical products of earth, such as fruit and flower, over which the sun holds dominion" (Lane: 140). Associated with the sun, the poppies and the woman symbolize life and the link between flesh and flowers recurs in Plath's poetry.

Despite the promises of "fruit, flowers, children most fair in legion" to ward off menace in "Wreath for a Bridal", love is generally presented in images of anarchy rather than harmony. Love has the brute strength to rend the net of "all decorum which holds the whirlwind back" in "Conversation Among the Ruins". Love can cause black rooks to croak gleefully of havoc in "Pursuit". Love is responsible for broken windows and hearts alike (and they are alike) in "The Queen's Complaint". Love - with all its trappings of spring, birds and flowers - threatens, in "Spinster", to "unbalance the air" and turn a tamed paradise into "a rank wilderness of fern and flower". The contradictions inherent in life and love form the content of "Epitaph for Fire and Flower". The title suggests mortality and, indeed, while the lovers strive to immortalize their love in words and images of quartz, diamond, fossil and rock, it is essentially transient. Ironically, the very images chosen to make love permanent are no more than stony images of death.

As a symbol of love and fragility, the flower suggests life's evanescence and

is easily destroyed by the consuming fire. Because fire is linked with the sun and summer, it carries the binary opposition of the solar images. While fire signifies a renewal of life or a transformation, Cooper points out that its negative value is death and destruction (Cooper: 66, 70). The lovers of "Epitaph for Fire and Flower" fail to "outflame a phoenix" and instead love, in the form of fiery passion, devours itself. Similarly, in "Pursuit", the images of blood and fire, redness and life, are savagely undercut by the dominant presence of the "black marauder" whose raw lust is deathly. The world of the sun can seem mundane, particularly when contrasted with the lunar realm and Guttenberg believes that Plath's ambivalent dialectic "takes its shape around Yeats's central symbols, the sun and the moon" (Lane: 139). What is scorned in the physical world is "the cyclical, limiting invariability of whatever is begotten, born, and dies" (Lane: 141).

Green, as Lavers notes, is the prevailing colour in the initial phases of love, but "it rapidly turns into red passion which can prove too much to bear and, in addition, . . . brings guilt" (Newman: 129). The speaker of "Pursuit" shuts her door on "that dark guilt" which accompanies love as passion. And while the outdoor girl in "Two Sisters of Persephone" is wedded to the sun on "that green altar", it is the red poppies that she emulates as solar queen. Vernal green is the colour of youth, hope and change, just as white is the colour of birth, simplicity and purity. Neither colour is associated with the fallen woman, as the opening lines of "Strumpet Song" make clear.

With white frost gone
And all green dreams not worth much,

she abandons the realm of innocent love and takes to the streets. Her world is violently physical, but "that foul slut" is as much a part of the speaker as her "most chaste" self. As in "Winter Landscape, with Rooks", white innocence is yearned for although it seems inappropriate.

Paradise is symbolized by the colour green. In a sense, Plath examines the notion of paradise and finds it superficial. The voice of "Tale of a Tub" sees "the green of eden" as the "mask" of the past. And the view of an idyllic paradise swiftly changes to a vision of life after the fall. As Eden begins to look less than perfect, the greenness of spring yields to the harsh redness of summer love.

Born green we were
to this flawed garden,

announces the speaker of "Firesong" and green acquires the additional connotative value of folly, inexperience and naïvety. Paradise is guarded by a cruel warden, the garden is riddled with snares and traps and reality manifests itself in "spilt blood", "red sun" and "strict flame". Green love cannot last indefinitely because green is the colour of immaturity, as Plath shows in "Departure" where the speaker's poverty is mirrored in the images of unripeness as nature "compounds her bitters".

Several images in Plath's love poems of 1956 involve an attitude of contemptus mundi. In "Letter to a Purist", the solar realm is dismissed as "the muck-trap" of "skin and bone". The moon, however, is "impeccable". Similarly, in "Street Song", the speaker alone can hear the sun's "parched scream" and the "cracked world's incessant gabble and hiss" caused by the lover's absence. Participation in the natural world which is linked to love is not the only option open to Plath's personae. The woman who favours the indoor realm in "Two Sisters of Persephone" suggests an alternative reaction to both. Like the title speaker of "Spinster", who "withdrew neatly" from the impending disorder and warmth, the "wry virgin" barricades herself indoors and "works problems" on her "mathematical machine". Where her sister is one with the natural world, she is plagued by natural defects. Stunted by her avoidance of the sun, she squints, she is pale and her "meager" body lacks fullness. Living in the shadows, she applies order and logic to her

life while her alter-ego basks in the warm sensuality of the sun's rays. Her existence is deathly and unfulfilling. Bitter and "sallow as any lemon", she is finally "no woman".

As Mazzaro has pointed out, "Two Sisters of Persephone" relies on the concept of the double while suggesting the presence of the third sister - Persephone herself - who reconciles the opposition. Tensions are part of the self's complexity and the poem should not be read as evidence of schizophrenia for, as Helen Vendler stresses, "Plath's sense of being several people at once never here goes beyond what everyone must at some time feel" (Vendler 1980: 271). Annas believes that, for a woman, schizophrenia

has been a reality based on the doubly bound conditions of her everyday life: of being defined rather than defining herself, of being defined in contradictory ways.

(Annas: 44).

The image of the shattered self recurs in the poetry and the sense of division is echoed in Graves's portrayal of the nature goddess who is simultaneously involved in processes of creation and destruction, participation and withdrawal, and life and death.

What many of Plath's speakers seem to dread is a disintegration of the self or loss of self in another. The fear is expressed as an extreme vulnerability to dangers and Anne Cluysenaar mentions that this is common in one who has survived an experience of death, as Plath had (Schmidt and Lindop: 219). The image of breakdown works on two levels: it is both loss of control and fragmentation. "Street Song" starts: "By a mad miracle I go intact" and, as in "Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper", the protagonist uses ritual to ward off danger and assume a semblance of normality. Buying chrysanthemums, bread and wine, she keeps suspicion at bay in "Street Song". Similarly, Miss Drake ducks - the pun is intentional - to avoid the "bright shards" of "broken glass" that the hostile air seems

to hurl at her. The solitary female persona is generally denied true integration with her environment. In contrast, the male figure Plath creates seems perfectly at ease in the natural world and he changes smoothly and swiftly from panther to giant to faun or Pan. Uroff calls him the "god-beast-man" (Uroff: 71). As such, he is one more image of Plath's mixed feelings about nature and love, with which he is clearly equated.

If Plath uses the complexities of nature as a way of expressing the contradictions within the self, understanding nature and being a part of the natural world is equated with self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Love is explored as a means of healing internal divisions and the female persona is often defined in terms of the male other. She is "this adam's woman" in "Ode for Ted". She is "satan's wife" in "Vanity Fair". And she is "sun's bride" in "Two Sisters of Persephone". In a sense, she tries to achieve integration with the natural realm through the male figure who is so obviously a part of nature. Aurelia Plath describes Hughes as the "extraordinary male counterpart" with whom her daughter "could share all the emerging facets of herself" (Plath LH: 181). In the figure of the triple goddess - nature as woman - Plath finds a solution to her ambivalence. She is the girl who revels in the sun's light, just as she is the girl who withdraws into the shadows. As Persephone she embraces both life and death in their varying aspects.

2. Life as Creativity: The New Moon and Art (1956 - 1958)

I wasn't ready. The white clouds rearing
 Aside were dragging me in four directions.
 I wasn't ready.

(Third Voice, Three Women).

In a journal entry of 1956, Plath refers to the moon as "the neutral impersonal force that does not hear, but merely accepts my being" (Plath J: 100). And the impartial moon appears and reappears in her writing to such an extent that Kroll sees the presence of the lunar goddess as akin to that of the sun in a landscape painting: it is implicit even where the moon is not directly represented (Kroll: 79). Describing the moon as "a shorthand symbol or emblem of the whole vision", Kroll counts over one hundred direct references to the moon in the poetry (Kroll: 21). Plath incorporates the figure of Graves's moon goddess into the mythic world she creates and, in particular, she develops a correlation between the moon and making. The alliance is a comfortable one, for nature is associated with the self in her work and so is writing. Ted Hughes compares what was "going on" in the poet to a process of alchemy. "Her apprentice writings were like impurities thrown off from the various stages of the inner transformation, by-products of the internal work", he says (Plath J: xi).

But Plath's attitude to both the lunar muse and her own creative powers is ambivalent, as she spells out in "The Disquieting Muses". Written in 1957, the poem is about the strange forces behind her work. The title carries an intimation of unrest which is borne out by the description of the weird figures who have haunted the persona since her birth. Plath says of the work:

'It borrows its title from the painting by Giorgio de Chirico - The Disquieting Muses. All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures in this painting - three terrible faceless dressmaker's dummies in classical gowns, seated and standing in a weird, clear light that casts the long strong shadows characteristic of de Chirico's early work. The dummies suggest a twentieth-century version of other sinister trios of women - the Three Fates, the witches in Macbeth, de Quincey's sisters of madness.'

(Plath CP: 276).

But while Plath appropriates the strange figures and the eerie atmosphere of the Italian artist's painting, the final statement is her own.

The Three Fates Plath mentions are the Moirae or Parcae. Uniting as a triune deity, the sisters arbitrarily deal out birth, life and death (Schmidt: 182). Graves describes the fates as "a divided form of the Triple Goddess" who appeared in Greek legend as "the Three Grey Ones and the Three Muses" (Graves: 225). Associated with the figure of the moon goddess, the nodding "ladies" surrounding the bed are at once disturbing and necessary for they are aligned with creativity. Cooper sees all lunar deities as "controllers of destiny and weavers of fate" (Cooper: 107). And Graves notes that "the Three Fates, or Spinners" play a vital role in the German folk-story of Sleeping Beauty (Graves: 421). In introducing the idea of the guest who - "unwisely" - is not invited to the christening, Plath adds the fairytale to her artistic melting-pot. The muses stand at the foot, the head and the left side of the crib. According to Kroll, the third position "indicates the 'sinister' fate of the godchild" and she adds that, in Plath's tale, "no kindly godmother mitigates the spell" (Kroll: 29).

Although never directly referred to, the notion of the curse pervades "The Disquieting Muses". And the curse - a sort of mixed blessing - is the persona's destiny as woman poet. As Melander suggests, the persona's "ambiguous attitude to her own artistic gifts" is the central theme of the poem (Melander: 19). While the child seems

unperturbed by the weird muses, the mother (whose story-book witches were always "baked into gingerbread") refuses to acknowledge the unpleasant side of female nature. In slighting the "illbred aunt" or the "disfigured and unsightly" cousin, she invokes the curse. And the guest she fails to invite to the christening is no stranger. She is, for all her ugliness, a member of the family. Like the moon in her darker phase, the muses represent the sinister and the unknown. "Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head", the featureless figures suggest nature's otherness. Like the three fates and the moon goddess, the muses are impartial and they are associated with life and death alike. They say nothing. They see nothing. Furthermore, they are the creatures of nightmare, for they are at once familiar and recognizable and coldly alien.

Nature, as Annas points out, is generally seen as "impervious to the self" in Plath's poetry and "the human individual finds it incomprehensible and dangerous". It is nature's alienness, rather than active malevolence, which produces the sense of hostility and ultimately, Annas feels, "the self is in danger of dissolving into what surrounds her" (Annas: 18). In "Hardcastle Crag", the stillness of the stony landscape seems

Enough to snuff the quick
Of her small heat out. . . .

Not surprisingly, the moonlight walker decides to return to the comforting familiarity of the village. But the persona of "The Disquieting Muses" actually rejects what seems to be the known world in favour of the alien one. Increasingly, she becomes aware that there is an alternative to "cookies and Ovaltine", cheerful sing-song and "Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear".

Because the mother averts her gaze from anything unpleasant, her daughter wonders whether she could see the odd muses or attempt to dispel them. It seems

unlikely, for their eerie domain is diametrically opposed to the blurred monotony of the mother's existence. Annas marks an important feature of the duality. "It is characteristic of Plath's poetry that the dark, the horrifying, and the unexpected is seen through the ordinary, the mundane, the expected", she says (Annas: 40). Eventually, as Aird remarks, "the two worlds of comfortable normality and darker insight become irreconcilable in their demands" (Aird: 23). Recognizing the true realm of her poetry, the persona begins to take her cues from the "ladies" who "broke the panes" in the hurricane. She allows them to order her life simply because they offer an imaginative realism which is not included in her mother's diluted vision.

As the conflict escalates, the daughter assumes the characteristics of her strange "Godmothers". While the dancing schoolgirls blink their "flashlights like fireflies" and sing "the glowworm song", the protegee of the muses scorns the light. Instead, she stands "heavy-footed" in her "twinkle-dress" and, as the shadow cast by the three weird figures stretches further, she becomes quite deaf to her mother's desperate cries. With the allusion to the shadows, Plath implies that the muses have become an extension of the girl, for the image recalls her preoccupation with the shadow as a manifestation of the double character (Plath LH: 146). Learning from her personal tutors, the persona's touch at the piano is

Oddly wooden in spite of scales
And the hours of practicing, my ear
Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable.

In rejecting the humdrum and normal, she begins to create her own world with the help of her moon-faced muses, just as Plath uses De Chirico's painting as a springboard into her artistic realm.

De Chirico's technique, says Norbert Lynton, recalls "disquieting dreams and

the visions we are liable to have in the hypnagogic state between wakefulness and sleeping" (Lynton: 149). Plath pinpoints the moment when dream and reality are entangled in "The Ghost's Leavetaking", where the "kingdom of the fading apparition" is the twilight zone between living and dying, represented by the ghost. The moon presides over this

strange, magical world which is in many ways opposed to the earthly reality, and which is ultimately to resolve itself into the otherworld of death.
(Aird: 102).

Guttenberg notes the "dialectic of flesh and spirit, this world and the other" which manifests itself in the broken link between the two realms (Lane: 139). In her poetry, Plath fuses the opposition by merging reality and dream, life and death. Like the ghost who speaks "in sign language of a lost otherworld", she creates the "world we lose by merely waking up".

In "The Disquieting Muses", "The Ghost's Leavetaking" and "Snakecharmer", Ted Hughes senses a parallel between Plath's vision of "the deathly paradise" and the work of "the Primitive Painters" (Newman: 189). Paradise, as Scheerer points out, "is, by definition, not deathly" though with "the coming of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, paradise, our first home, takes on an eschatological meaning as well" (Butscher: 166). In "The Ghost's Leavetaking", Plath evokes

. . . the chilly no-man's land of about
Five o' clock in the morning, the no-color void. . . .

Deprived of colour and warmth, the otherworld of "sulfurous dreamscapes and obscure lunar conundrums" is a type of deathly "joint between two worlds" and two "Incompatible modes of time". The ghost rises towards the starting point of Eden and "the new moon's curve". Associated with the ambivalent lunar realm, even paradise serves as a reminder of death.

Many of Plath's early creativity poems are either based on works of art or have the imaginative world as their subject. Melander sees these poems as evidence of Plath's wish

to penetrate the very nature of artistic expression so as to make clear to herself the artist's function and possibilities and, at the same time, to put her own creative ability to the test.

(Melander: 19).

"Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor" sounds like the name of a painting but the speaker begins by dissociating herself from the artists:

I came before the water-
Colorists came. . . .

Rather than presenting a watered-down sketch of the scene, Plath's mussel hunter hopes to gain a deeper insight into "the wary otherworld", just as in "The Disquieting Muses" she discards the illusory in favour of the realistic. And she is well aware that the "samurai death mask" of the "crab-face, etched and set there" is

. . . less for
Art's sake than God's. . . .

Nonetheless, the otherworld resists her and the "sly world's hinges" swing shut as nature closes its door against her. Annas feels these lines suggest "that the world of the poems is becoming more enclosed" (Annas: 53). But the alien realm of the fiddler crabs and the mussels which evades the persona is the world of the sea and Plath uses water as an image of "my poems and the artist's subconscious" (Plath J: 223). In "Dream with Clam-Diggers", the persona's unconscious transforms the familiar into something alien; in "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor", the otherworld refuses to spill its contents. Both the sea and the creative fertility symbolized by water are connected with the figure of the lunar goddess. In "Hardcastle Crags", the sea is "moon-bound" and in "The Everlasting Monday", the doomed man in the moon has "seven chill seas chained to

his ankle", indicative of the seven days of the week. Monday, the day of the moon, is also, as Graves notes, "the day of Water" (Graves: 267).

In contrast to Plath's mussel hunter, the artist in "Snakecharmer" is afforded instant access to his artistic realm. Like the gods who created their world and like man who started another with his expulsion from paradise, the snakecharmer makes his serpentine domain: "He pipes. Pipes green. Pipes water". In "On the Decline of Oracles", Plath establishes the connection between the father figure and "that ambiguous sea" with its murmuring voices. "Moonrise", with its reference to the lunar goddess who drags the ancient sea-father at her heel, makes the link between creativity, maleness, water and moon explicit. As the artist in "Snakecharmer" views his liquid world with a "moony eye", water becomes a symbol of the unconscious inspiration rising fluidly to the creative surface. Plath has called the poem "a green and moony mood-piece" (Plath J: 211). And the greenness of the piped world reinforces the image of natural fertility and an artistic paradise.

Controlling the "snakedom" he manufactures is a simple task for the snakecharmer:

. . . let there be snakes!
And snakes there were, are, will be

until, yawning, he tires of his craft. Melander points out that, in choosing to echo the words of Genesis 1:3, Plath "implies the snakecharmer's kinship with the gods, or God" and the creation process (Melander: 21). That the snakecharmer is male is no accident. Henri Rousseau provides the inspiration for this poem and Plath's most deliberate deviation from Rousseau's painting is revealing. She changes the sex of the god-like snakecharmer, emphasizing the link between artistic creativity and masculinity. Sandra M. Gilbert

believes that Plath's work explores "the relationship between male authority and female identity, or, to be more specific, between male creation and female creativity" (Wagner: 206). In the poetry written between 1956 and 1958, Plath seems to see female creativity as a transgression in a predominantly masculine literary tradition.

Drawing attention to Plath's prose work as an illustration of her idea, Gilbert maintains that both "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" and "The Wishing Box" summarize the sense of "usurpation that seems to have haunted their author" (Wagner: 213). Similarly, Lavers is disturbed by Plath's "profound uncertainty about the possibility of reconciling womanhood and intellect" (Newman: 131). And Stevenson feels Plath implies "that the roles of 'writer' and 'woman' are in some way incompatible" (Jacobus: 160). With the notable exception of Virginia Woolf, who is not a poet, Plath's artistic influences are masculine. The woman poet, with no clear role model to emulate, turns to the powerful female figure of the pagan moon goddess as muse and mentor. And Graves's mythical White Goddess, as Bassnett stresses, "stands in direct contrast to the male fatherly God of Christianity and rationalism" (Bassnett: 48).

While the female creator of "The Disquieting Muses" is cursed, the male artist of "Snakecharmer" is blessed with the ability to charm his world into being with relative ease. As he twists the snakes "out of Eden's navel", they mesh with the dense green foliage and threaten to overwhelm both the vision and the creator:

. . . The snake-scales have become
 Leaf, become eyelid; snake-bodies, bough, breast
 Of tree and human.

The symbolism of the snake incorporates death and destruction, as well as resurrection and self-renewal. According to Graves, the "Serpent of Wisdom" was one of two lovers who vied for the attentions of the moon goddess. Like his rival, the snake twin was killed

and reborn every year (Graves: 387-388). Associated with the nature goddess, the serpent is linked with fertility and, as Graves notes, the snake is a sexual emblem (Graves: 125). In "Snakecharmer", the piped serpents serve as an image of creativity and the male artist successfully "Rules the writhings".

Plath's female persona, by way of contrast, is condemned to a vision which fluctuates between dry barrenness and overzealous fertility. Having mourned her inability to turn trees into "elegiac dryads" or Daphnes in both "November Graveyard" and "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad", she is plagued in "On the Plethora of Dryads" by "sluttish" tree-nymphs and there is "no chaste tree but suffers blotch". In his introduction to Collected Poems, Hughes describes Plath's attitude to her verse as "artisan-like" (Plath CP: 13). Characterized by an acute awareness of form and construction, her early nature poems are oddly unnatural and Uroff believes the fault lies in "attempting to impose the mind's order on nature" (Uroff: 79). Unlike the frustrated dryad-seeker, the male creator of "Snakecharmer" possesses a nonchalant self-assurance. Mirroring his skill, Plath achieves a snake-like fluidity of motion in the poem while carefully controlling her terza rima. And, like the snakecharmer who pipes his vision away "to nothing like a snake" when he tires of playing God, she allows the pattern to disappear in the final lines of her poem.

The "intricate wilderness of green" reappears in "Yadwigha, on a Red Couch, Among Lilies", subtitled "A Sestina for the Douanier" and inspired by Rousseau's "The Dream" (Plath CP: 287). Plath's poem, like Rousseau's painting, is a tribute to the very real power of colour as an image of life, but the sestina is also a celebration of the artist's right to create something purely because it affords him pleasure. In placing the "stubborn" red "baroque couch" in the unlikely "jungle green" setting, Rousseau defies convention and

"the literalists" simply to "feed his eye with red". With the image of the eye recurring in every stanza, Plath's poem insists on an awareness of perception and visual beauty. The intricate verse form of the sestina captures the sheer opulence of "red against green" and "Red against fifty variants of green". Because both colours are associated with fertility, "a tropical moon" watches over the lush creative world.

"What I fear most, I think, is the death of the imagination", Plath writes (Plath J: 109). And this is the subject of many poems of this period. Indeed, Newman notes that "the despair of not being equal to her craft remains a constant theme" (Newman: 30). The familiar world sometimes yields

. . . those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance

which she longs for in "Black Rook in Rainy Weather". When inspiration strikes and the bland objects of everyday life are transfigured by art, her doubts are temporarily quelled. Seeing a black rook in a new light provides

A brief respite from fear
Of total neutrality.

Because the moment of creative insight is short-lived, the persona resigns herself to another "long wait for the angel" and the heightened perception that goes with "that rare random descent". But Plath's angel is indifferent. While the goddess casts her influence on fertility, she also withholds inspiration.

"Moonrise", an unequivocal plea to the muse, opens with an image of reddening mulberries, a fruit sacred to the triple goddess because the berry turns from white to red to purple or black as she does (Graves: 70). Sitting "in white", like the mulberries and the moon, the persona despairs of the blank neutrality surrounding her. She digs her fingernails into her palms and is rewarded with signs of life as the "half-

moons" redden and the mulberries ripen. Aird sees the moon in this poem as "the source of whiteness and death, decay, aridity, cruelty and infertility" (Aird: 104). Lavers notes that the moon is the perfect symbol for death because "it shines in the night, its light is borrowed, its shape regular, well-defined and self-contained, and its bald light turns everything into stone" (Newman: 109). "The Disquieting Muses", clad in "gowns of stone", possess a petrifying power and, in "Moonrise", the muse "pares white flesh to the white bone" with her Medusan look.

In a similar way, the male creator of "Sculptor" ostensibly reduces his world to stone, as he transmutes life's flimsiness into something solid and enduring. He creates a "cumbrous world" of art which eclipses the "Inane" and transient "worlds of wind and cloud". The poem is about Leonard Baskin's ability to breathe life into "bronze, wood, stone". The artist captures life in a form which is deathlike in its order and perfection and gives it weight and solidity. With his chisel, the sculptor "bequeathes" his statues

. . . life livelier than ours,
A solider repose than death's.

Ultimately, as Plath suggests in "Context", a good work of art acquires a vitality and a permanence which outlasts the creator (Plath JP: 99). Creativity, like the moon-muse who inspires the process, is simultaneously equated with life and death, for while it is true that the moon is associated with sterility and death, in Plath's poetry white is also the colour of birth and new life.

"Moonrise" is not only about death and decay. The whiteness gradually gives way to redness and fertility because the moon governs the flow of menstrual blood, the sea and time. Graves points out that "the Moon, being a woman, has a woman's normal menstrual period ('menstruation' is connected with the word 'moon') of twenty-

eight days" (Graves: 166). Annas sees the moon as "a symbol for the monthly ebb and flow of the tides and of a woman's body" and she notes that fertility is associated with movement and process (Annas: 113). The moon passes through her different sky phases, lunar month after lunar month. And the mulberries undergo a final change as they "purple" and "bleed". If menstruation suggests fertility, Bassnett adds that bleeding is also a monthly reminder of the failure to conceive (Bassnett: 68-69). While the persona allies herself with the moon and the berries, the sign of ripeness she desires is pregnancy and she calls on Lucina, the "bony mother" in the sky. That the moon is "laboring" is apt. Lucina, says Schmidt, is the goddess who aids women in childbirth (Schmidt: 152). "The white stomach may ripen yet", the persona of "Moonrise" concludes.

In merging the curse of the fairytale with the influence of the three moonlike figures of "The Disquieting Muses", Plath suggests that her vocation as a female poet is a mixed blessing while subtly introducing the image of her poetry as menstruation. And she does refer to her menstrual period as the curse (Plath J: 107, 219). But whether her kind of creativity is a curse or not, Plath - like the protagonist in "The Disquieting Muses" - deliberately chooses the poetic realm of the moon goddess over her mother's illusory world of balloons and bluebirds. The muses inhabit a world where the "setting" sun "never brightens or goes down". That the speaker joins the three figures in this neutral zone between living and dying implies that she accepts her otherness. The muses do not desert the poet persona and she pledges her allegiance to the moon. Ready to begin her artistic journey, she faces her "traveling companions" with mingled defiance, trepidation and pride.

3. Life as a Progression towards Death: Birth and Water (1958 - 1959)

The face in the pool was beautiful, but not mine -
It had a consequential look, like everything else,
And all I could see was dangers

(Third Voice, Three Women).

Writing of the sea in her journal entry for 11 May 1958, Plath describes water as "a central metaphor for my childhood, my poems and the artist's subconscious" and she adds that the sea is connected with "the father image" (Plath J: 223). Written in 1958, "Full Fathom Five" explores the relationship between the father figure and the ocean. The title alludes to Ariel's song in Shakespeare's play, The Tempest:

Full fadom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell. . . .

(I.ii.399-405).

At once an image of the symbolic underworld in which the father figure dwells and an image of her poems and subconscious, the sea assumes the dimensions of another realm in Plath's poetry.

In "Full Fathom Five", the "Old man" who is washed in "with the tide's coming" is

A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves
Crest and trough.

With his "white hair" and his "white beard", he takes on the semblance of the sea itself. Plath allows the images of father and ocean to merge, suggesting that the two are closely related. Together, the father and the sea represent a world which has passed and she elaborates in "Ocean 1212-W":

And this is how it stiffens, my vision of that seaside childhood. My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle - beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth.

(Plath JP: 130).

Otto Plath actually died when his daughter was eight years old (Plath LH: 24). Stevenson refers to the poet's father as "an absence far more potent than any presence, apart from her mother's, in her personal mythology" (Stevenson: 12). Absence, for Plath, is akin to death.

What is central to Plath's personal myth, Kroll points out, is that her father's death seems to cause and represent a fundamental rift in her sense of self and time (Kroll: 9). Kroll interprets the split as a division between true and false selves:

the true self is the child she was before things went wrong; that part . . . lies buried with her father. The part which has continued to live after her father's death is, then, incomplete, a kind of false self; and the life lived by it is, to that extent, unreal.

(Kroll: 10).

In "Full Fathom Five", the persona yearns to be a part of the otherworld even as it seems closed to her. She remembers the sea's "shelled bed" but, cut off from the past, she walks "dry" on her father's "kingdom's border". Much of the poignancy of Plath's early poems, says Annas, "comes from this sense of being caught between two worlds, a part of both and therefore wholly of neither" (Annas: 31).

If the sea is coupled with the image of the dead father, water is also linked with the nature goddess. As goddess of the sky, the moon controls the ocean and the tides which Plath aligns with creativity. In "Moonrise", the goddess drags

. . . our ancient father at the heel,
White-bearded, weary.

According to Cooper, deep waters symbolize "the realm of the dead, or are the abode of

supernatural beings". And all waters, he notes, being symbolic of the Great Mother, are also connected with birth (Cooper: 188). This tallies with Graves's myth, for the goddess of the underworld governs the mixed concerns of birth, procreation and death (Graves: 386). Dying is an inevitable part of the cyclical process and serves as a necessary prelude to rebirth and making. And dying, in both Plath's poetry and The White Goddess, is associated with a male figure.

Graves mentions that while "there were at first no male gods contemporary with the Goddess to challenge her prestige or power", she had two lovers (Graves: 387). The rivals are dual facets of the sun god who is the natural consort of the moon goddess. The god of the waxing year vies with the god of the waning year for the love of the capricious deity:

. . . one succeeds the other in the Moon-woman's favour, as summer succeeds winter, and winter succeeds summer; as death succeeds birth and birth succeeds death. The Sun grows weaker or stronger as the year takes its course . . . but the light of the Moon is invariable.

(Graves: 388).

Each rival undergoes an annual birth, life and death and subsequent resurrection. Plath says the father image in "Full Fathom Five" relates "to my own father, the buried male muse and god-creator risen to be my mate in Ted", as well as "to the sea-father Neptune" (Plath J: 223).

Several striking similarities, detailed in Kroll's study, exist between Plath's own life and that of Graves's mythical goddess. Early in November, the sacred god receives "his summons to death" (Graves: 187). And Otto Plath died on 5 November 1940 (Plath LH: 24). Kroll believes that Plath would have been aware of the echoes and that of these "the parallel between the goddess mourning her god, and the poet her father, was the most important" (Kroll: 41). This motif dominates the poems which were later

to appear as The Colossus. With the mourning of the god comes a strong desire to be reunited with him. Edward Lucie-Smith sees "the sea, and more especially the idea of death by water" as "the central image of the whole of this first collection" (Newman: 93). "Death by Water" is the title of the fourth part of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and Plath's father figure - "rising, falling" - resembles Eliot's dead man who "rose and fell". The current picks his bones and, as he moves through time, he passes "the stages of his age and youth" (Eliot: 75).

A definite inversion of life and death is found in "Full Fathom Five". Like Ferdinand's father, the old man is supposed dead, if the "muddy rumors" of his burial are to be believed. Yet his

. . . reappearance
Proves rumors shallow. . . .

While his "form suffers" from a "strange injury", he merely "seems to die". Because he transcends the years which have passed, shedding "time in runnels", death is presented not as an end but as a sea-change or transformation. In contrast, the daughter is trapped in another world whose "thick air is murderous." What she longs for is her own sea-change and a death that would be birth into his underwater realm. The reference to breathing is central to the notion that death is equated with life in this poem. Taunted by the rare vision of the surfacing father, the persona implores: "I would breathe water." Water, says Cooper, is associated with "the moisture and circulatory movement of blood and the sap of life as opposed to the dryness and static condition of death" and it is an image of regeneration (Cooper: 188).

In Plath's poetry, both the colour white - with which it is often coupled - and water seem to symbolize death to the old life and birth into the new. The life the

protagonist of "Full Fathom Five" is forced to endure is what Graves calls a mock-death or death-in-life (Graves: 421). The limiting confines of such an existence are more successfully overcome by the male persona in "Suicide off Egg Rock" as he strides purposefully into the sea. His blood continues to beat

. . . the old tattoo
I am, I am, I am. . . .

But the life image is far from positive. "His body beached with the sea's garbage" is a "machine to breathe and beat forever" and he longs for a "pit of shadow to crawl into". Instead, the sun strikes the sea "like a damnation" and the sordid materialism of hotdog stands, gas tanks and factories intrudes on the natural landscape. "The forgetful surf creaming on those ledges" is his only way out and water becomes an image of purity and release from a world of buzzing flies, glitter and decay.

Death by water, as a means of birth into another and better world, is sought in both "Full Fathom Five" and "Lorelei". Because death-in-life is the life lived by the false self, the death wish is a yearning for a rebirth or life-in-death which will liberate the true self (Kroll: 12). The speaker of "Full Fathom Five" professes to be fully aware that the old man who floats nearby is

. . .to be steered clear
Of, not fathomed.

Nevertheless, she tries to understand the "old myth of origins". "Lorelei" begins with a similar disclaimer:

It is no night to drown in;
A full moon, river lapsing
Black beneath bland mirror-sheen

Annas believes this is "a cry which protests too much" (Annas: 28). The combined images of moon, mirror and water suggest that few nights could be more appropriate. As dual symbols of life and death, all are associated with birth or rebirth in Plath's work.

The ever-changing face of the mirror makes it "a symbol for life which is preferred to fixity", says Lavers, but the cracked mirror is an image of death (Newman: 122). "In Midas' Country" presents "one gigantic tapestry" of gold, an illusion which is rudely shattered when the water-skiers "cleave the river's greening patinas". As the "mirror quivers to smithereens", the "Midas touch" evaporates and the landscape becomes "flintier". Aird points out that "the image of the broken mirror reflects the destruction of spiritual as well as physical calm" in this poem (Aird: 106). This is equally true of the shapes

. . . troubling the face
Of quiet . . .

which rise towards the speaker of "Lorelei" as she stares into the river. The reflection is a form of the self's deathly double for Plath and, while the motion of the river sisters is fluid rather than violent, the vision disturbs her persona.

Death-in-life, notes Kroll, "either seals off the self from the rest of the world or divides one part of the self from another" (Kroll: 56). Graves cites the century-long sleep of the princess in Sleeping Beauty and Snow White's apparent death as she lies in her glass coffin as mock-deaths (Graves: 421). Plath adapts these symbols of a deathlike existence and often merges them with the image of water in her poetry. In "The Sleepers", the title characters "lie as if under water" and in "Lorelei", the "massive castle turrets" are reflected in the river's "glass". Kroll sees glass as the perfect image of death-in-life, for it permits "the illusion of unity with the world while preventing that unity" (Kroll: 56). Trapped on the wrong side of the watery mirror, the speaker of "Lorelei" recognizes the sirens as sisters but is unable to enter their strange otherworld.

Pamela Smith suggests that the poem appears to be based on two German

legends, "St. Goar: Lorelei" and "Oberwesel: The Seven Maidens". She adds that both tales

are stories of fatherless siren-temptresses who frustrate and destroy the men they enrapture until the sirens themselves are punished by drowning.
(Butscher: 119).

Writing of "Lorelei", Plath refers to a song her Austrian mother used to sing to her as a child and says:

The subject appealed to me doubly (or triply): the German legend of the Rhine sirens, the sea-childhood symbol, and the death-wish involved in the song's beauty.

(Plath J: 246).

The German legend merges comfortably with the images of water and the death-wish, for Plath's father was German (Plath LH: 8). Although the father is not addressed in "Lorelei", the poem is a companion piece to "Full Fathom Five".

The process of dying is presented as a transition from one state to another in Plath's code of images. Because the persona of the early poems is generally passive, she is unable to make the move from birth to death or death to rebirth which is an integral part of the symbolic journey. However strong the urge to drown, it is not accompanied by action. The motion of the woman is severely curtailed in "Full Fathom Five". She walks beside the sea and it is the father figure who rises towards her, rather than she who goes down to meet him. Similarly, in "Lorelei", movement is restricted to the sisters and the river of which they are a part. The seductive song of the sirens bears

. . . a burden too weighty
For the whorled ear's listening. . . .

Barbara Hardy notes that this line "earns the sense of inevitability" in the speaker's final plea (Hardy: 130). "Stone, stone, ferry me down there", she implores, for she cannot move alone.

Plath's ambivalent attitude to water - and therefore to both birth and death - may account for the persona's inability to act. She writes that the sea

. . . had many faces, many delicate, terrible veils. It spoke of miracles and distances; if it could court, it could also kill.

(Plath JP: 123).

"The moon leans, a stone madonna, over the lead sea", says Plath in "The Net-Menders" and, like the lunar goddess who rules it, the sea is at once benevolently peaceful and callously ruthless. In "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor", the crabs lose themselves

Bit by bit to their friendly
Element. . .

but the human characters do not fare as well. In "Point Shirley", the grandmother's tireless broom is eventually no match for the predatory waves:

A labor of love, and that labor lost.
Steadily the sea
Eats at Point Shirley.

Nature, in the form of the "dog-faced sea", is at once destructive and indifferent to humanity and the animal image recurs in "The Bull of Bendylaw" with its "bull-snouted sea that wouldn't stay put". Even the "bland Granta" in "Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows" is witness to nature's savagery. These images of water differ markedly from those which are associated with the god or father figure. With his "dead" black coat, black shoes, and black hair, he strides towards the sea in "Man in Black". The careful placing of the words "dead" and "Black" gives them added emphasis. The man is a figure of death and Plath suggests that the reference could be "a transference" from her visit to her father's grave (Plath J: 302). Annas feels that the man orders and gives significance to experience, primarily by "being an imposition on the scene" (Annas: 34). He is the "Fixed vortex" who holds "All of it, together" as he draws the speaker towards him. Plath described "Man in Black" as a "love" poem (Plath J: 301).

Certainly, the visit to her father's grave lies behind "Electra on Azalea Path" (Plath CP: 289). Borrowing "the stilts of an old tragedy", Plath fuses the mythic tale of Electra and Agamemnon with the symbolism of The White Goddess and her own concerns. The poem opens with an allusion to death-in-life. "The day you died I went into the dirt", announces the persona. Robert Phillips suggests that "a pattern of guilt over imagined incest informs all of Plath's prose and poetry" (Butscher: 186). But the guilt the persona feels arises from the sense that she has precipitated the event. In a journal entry of 1958, Plath writes that she feels her mother holds her to blame for her father's death (Plath J: 279). "It was my love that did us both to death", says the Electra persona. She is "the ghost of an infamous suicide" and Cluysenaar notes that "a sense of being bound to the dead and of guilt at having survived them" often haunts those who have survived an experience of death (Schmidt and Lindop: 219).

As in "Full Fathom Five", the persona of "Electra on Azalea Path" is caught in a state of death-in-life and the images of life and death are inverted in the poem. The actors in the drama are not alive but "stony" and the grave is a "gate", suggesting a possible entrance into the otherworld if the father consents to pardon his daughter. The poem is characterized by pseudo-images of life. The "red sage" on the grave is "artificial", a "basket of plastic evergreens" rests nearby and the "bloody dye" drips "red". But this false blood does not disturb the speaker. Instead,

Another kind of redness bothers me:
The day your slack sail drank my sister's breath
The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth
My mother unrolled at your last homecoming.

Plath's rare use of italics draws attention to these lines and the dense alliteration and assonance heightens the emphasis.

On one level, the reference is to the sacrificial killing of Iphigenia which would provide Agamemnon with the wind needed for his fleet to sail (Schmidt: 146). In these lines, as Bassnett points out, the Electra-speaker seems to be expressing her understanding of the causality of things, for

the father's ritual murder of the sister is linked to the moment of his death at the hands of his wife and the reference here is to the wine-red carpet that Clytemnestra unrolls before inviting Agamemnon to enter the house where he is murdered.

The images of redness and the cloth carry connotations of menstruation (Bassnett: 86). Blood is synonymous with creativity in Plath's symbolic code and in "Electra on Azalea Path" the image is combined with that of the sea, the central metaphor for poetry and the artist's subconscious. The poem is, in part, about the creative process.

Hughes believes that, in the work of this period, Plath "accepts the invitation of her inner world" for the first time, for the poems "coincided with a decision to leave teaching and throw herself on writing for a few years" (Newman: 190). She notes that she feels

between two worlds, as Arnold writes - "one dead, the other powerless to be born": all seems thus futile - my teaching has lost its savor Then, on the other hand, I have nothing but a handful of poems - so unsatisfactory, so limiting

(Plath J: 227).

Uroff suggests that both "Full Fathom Five" and "Lorelei" should be read in this light and that "the passivity they express and the death wish they embody may derive from the career struggle that had exhausted her" (Uroff: 97). Frustrated in her attempts to write, the poet persona longs for birth by water or an immersion in the sea of creativity.

The old man of the sea surfaces "seldom" in "Full Fathom Five" and the sisters of "Lorelei" sing of a world that seems inaccessible. In "Electra on Azalea Path",

the inability to create becomes unbearable. The sea, turning a deathly purple, is not filled with ideas but "flat" and the wasted sacrificial blood is a reference to menstruation as the failure to conceive. This is the other "kind of redness" which bothers the speaker and it is a recognition of creative death or "wintering". What she desires is a release from "the lightless hibernaculum" of bees. In Plath's symbolic code, bees are equated with the muse, for the goddess of nature "is herself a queen bee" (Graves: 192). Like the goddess, the bee is associated with symbolic birth, death and resurrection and the life cycle of the bee is expressed in seasonal images. The moon muse rules creativity and Carole Ferrier sees beekeeping as "a natural analogy for the craft of verse" (Lane: 209). Uroff points out that female identity and experience is the subject of all the bee poems (Uroff: 146).

Identity, for Plath, is akin to art and making. In "Electra on Azalea Path", the rebirth which is linked to spring and creative autonomy is not mentioned and the persona is as passive as the dormant bees. "Like hieratic stones", they "sleep out the blizzard" and she is part of the somnolent hive. In the next poem, "The Beekeeper's Daughter", it is the father figure who moves "among the many-breasted hives". "Hieratical" in his "frock coat", the beekeeper, says Ferrier, resembles a priest of Cybele or Diana (Lane: 208). As a goddess of fertility and the moon, Diana was represented by a "many-breasted idol" (Frazer: 186). And Cybele is queen of the bees (Graves: 192). The "maestro of the bees" is at once the consort of the nature goddess and the poet's own father. Otto Plath was an authority on bumblebees and his academic colleagues referred to him as the "bee king" (Plath LH: 9). The beekeeper and the sea father are connected with creativity and fertility, for both figures are associated with the lunar muse. The images of water and bees become virtually interchangeable.

"The Beekeeper's Daughter" charts the persona's search for an independent, creative identity and the single line that follows each verse marks a change in her definition of the self. Examining the different roles open to her, she identifies with the goddess in her three phases. In the first stanza, she is the white goddess of birth and growth. Then she becomes the red goddess of procreation, love and battle. Ultimately, she tries on the mask of the fearful black goddess of death and divination. As she changes from subjugated daughter to queen-bee, the persona becomes more active. Initially, it is the father who walks about while she waits passively, her heart under his foot, "sister of a stone". But as the beekeeper's power wanes, hers grows stronger. Graves points out that the embrace of the queen bee is deathly (Graves: 24). The marriage, as Uroff notes, "will be death for the father, bridegroom, and new life for the queen bee in the spring" (Uroff: 147).

With the emergence of the queen bee in "The Beekeeper's Daughter", Plath hints that a transition from one phase to another is about to take place. Death-in-life is yielding to life-in-death. Where the old man seems to "defy other godhood" in "Full Fathom Five", he is now in the "winter" of his year and the cyclical motion from birth to death is echoed in the natural world. The goddess has two lovers who alternate with the changing of the seasons (Graves: 388). Uroff believes that Plath's marriage to Hughes plays a part in releasing her new identity (Uroff: 147). As her persona gains a stronger sense of her self and her creative potential, Plath allows her to move more freely and, as Annas notes, the symbolic journey she undertakes "is actually through an inner landscape" (Annas: 22). Instead of desiring her own birth, she is ready to give birth and assume the role of autonomous creator.

PART II: THE RED GODDESS OF PROCREATION, LOVE AND BATTLE

4. Life as Death's Antithesis: Summer and Pregnancy (1959 - 1960)

Dark tunnel, through which hurtle the visitations,
 The visitations, the manifestations, the startled faces.
 I am the center of an atrocity.
 What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering?
 (First Voice, Three Women).

With its complex layers of associations, its intertwined and seemingly contradictory images and its fluctuating voices, "Poem for a Birthday" marks a change in Plath's poetic development. Written in 1959 at Yaddo, the artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, the long work assesses the changing image of the self in relation to the double or other. As in the poems which emerged when Plath met Hughes in 1956, the internal divisions of the self are explored in terms of nature. When she wrote the sequence, Plath was pregnant with her first child (Plath J: 313). Pregnancy - like love - signals a wave of strange emotions and, as the body of the mother-to-be alters with the passing seasons, the persona undergoes a corresponding shift in her sense of self. As identity becomes inextricably bound up with the life evolving inside the womb, Plath's images of creativity take on a new poignancy. She anticipated that having children would release her "deep self" (Plath J: 165). And Stevenson notes a difference. "The writer was beginning to identify with the woman, the woman with the writer; there could be no true distinction between them", she says (Stevenson: 148).

According to Hughes, Plath "took childbearing in a deeply symbolic way" and he sees the autumn of 1959 as "an end and a new beginning" (Newman: 191). Characteristically, the poet expresses this change in images of life and death. Rosenblatt argues that she "used birth as her central image of the life force in its struggle with death"

and he sees rebirth as "the dominant personal objective of her later poems" (Rosenblatt: 12). The dual concerns of death and birth combine in "Poem for a Birthday" and allusions to birth-as-death and death-as-birth flood the sequence. A continuum of poems within poems and birthdays upon birthdays, the work is as "vivid and disjointed" as Plath envisaged it would be (Plath J: 324). Yet the seven separate sections also form a remarkably composite whole and what unites the series is the promise of imminent birth, hinted at in the title and further developed, on different planes, throughout "Poem for a Birthday".

In the opening section, "Who", the "month of flowering's finished" and the "fruit's in". Summer, the time of ripeness and fertility, has passed and the child has been conceived. As she moves through spring, summer and winter, Graves's goddess of the earth animates trees, plants and all living creatures (Graves: 386). Autumn is not her concern and the season is never mentioned by name in "Poem for a Birthday". Plath's focus is less on the arrival of autumn than on the departure of summer and the changes in the natural realm suggest a corresponding shift in her persona's mood and situation. Like the goddess, the pregnant woman progresses through nature's cycle. With the planting of the seed, one phase is over. "October's the month for storage" and the ensuing season is devoted to nourishing the unborn child within the persona's womb.

"This shed's fusty as a mummy's stomach", says the speaker and, while the immediate reference is to the greenhouse-cum-toolshed at Yaddo, the image works on several levels (Plath J: 325). The persona sitting in the shed has a "mummy's stomach" of her own. As she takes in food to see her growing baby through winter, she is "all mouth", just as pregnancy, in "Metaphors", is akin to eating "a bag of green apples". The mother-to-be becomes a storeroom of sorts and the fruit within is at once the child she

carries and the nourishment she absorbs. The speaker of "Who", says Uroff, "seems to be both the devourer and the fruit that is in storage" (Uroff: 117). Simone de Beauvoir notes that this is natural, for

in the mother-to-be the antithesis of subject and object ceases to exist; she and the child with which she is swollen make up together an equivocal pair overwhelmed by life.

(De Beauvoir: 512).

The persona assumes the dual voice of mother and child.

Punning on the word "mummy", Plath introduces the dichotomy running through "Poem for a Birthday". As a mother-to-be, the mummy is associated with birth; as the embalmed body awaiting burial, the mummy is a symbol of death and potential rebirth. Mummies, as Kroll points out, "were stored and preserved for eventual resurrection" (Kroll: 93). Mother and child, waiting for the promised birthday, undergo a form of mock-death. The foetus is not dead; nor has it been born. The situation of the child within the womb-tomb corresponds to that of the woman in the shed's "stomach". Flesh and flower are equated in Plath's symbolic code and the mother is "at home" among the dead and dying plants. A mummy in both senses of the word, the persona is expecting both a child and a birthday. And the birth she anticipates is as much her own symbolic birth or rebirth as the arrival of her child.

Throughout the sequence, the prospect of giving birth and being reborn is treated with mixed hope and despair. In "Who", the speaker's identification with the dying life in the greenhouse is reinforced. Her heart is not a symbol of pulsing life but "a stopped geranium" and the wind, forcing her lungs to breathe, irritates her. "Moldering heads console" her in her state of death-in-life, for they are "Inmates who don't hibernate" as she does. The allusion to the decaying plants as inmates signals a change in the

persona's thought processes. Plath writes in her journal that the garage room at Yaddo is "reminiscent of . . . a mental home" (Plath J: 317). The shed, "fusty as a mummy's stomach", becomes an institution filled with "women who think they are birds" and the dying plants remind the persona of the women in a mental ward. Both, David Holbrook contends, are vegetables (Holbrook: 38).

The experience in the mental home diminishes the persona. As she grows small enough to "sit in a flowerpot" and unobtrusive enough to escape the notice of the spiders, she becomes as vulnerable as the child she carries within her stomach and her imminent release from the institution mirrors the expected birth of the baby. The speaker's attitude to the events is ambivalent, for the asylum, like the womb, is at once a place of shelter and a prison. When the home becomes "a dull school" and she tires of being

. . . a root, a stone, an owl pellet,
Without dreams of any sort. . .

she calls on the goddess of nature to "eat" her. In a letter of late 1955, Plath writes:

so the hungry cosmic mother sees the world shrunk to embryo again and
her children gathered sleeping back into the dark, huddling in bulbs and
pods, pale and distant as the folded bean seed to her full milky love which
freezes across the sky in a crucifix of stars.

(Plath J: 91).

These images recur in "Poem for a Birthday".

Like an Alice in a surreal wonderland, the speaker in the mental home sees and experiences everything differently. "I said: I must remember this, being small", she notes. But the vision of the "enormous flowers" has passed. Plath described her breakdown in 1953 and the ensuing electroconvulsive shock treatments as

the deadly sleep of her madness . . . electrocution . . . and the inevitable
going down the subterranean hall, waking to a new world, with no name,
being born again, and not of woman.

(Plath J: 112).

"Now they light me up like an electric bulb", says the persona. Like the title character of "The Hanging Man", she endures "A world of bald white days in a shadeless socket". The image of the self as an illuminating bulb suggests a forced regeneration and return to health. A state of induced amnesia follows and for weeks she remembers "nothing at all".

As a dormant plant in the earth, awaiting spring and natural rebirth, the bulb is a more positive symbol of new life. The second poem of the sequence, "Dark House", is set in "the bowel of the root" and the darkness suggests the death that foreshadows birth. On one level, the persona's earlier plea to be swallowed by the nature goddess has been answered. Uroff feels that the appeal to the "Mother of otherness" is telluric, for the persona yearns "to be consumed by the earth, to return to the roots and grow again" (Uroff: 117). While the mouth symbolizes the "rending, devouring aspect of the Great Mother", Cooper maintains that it also suggests "the entrance to the underworld or the belly of the whale" (Cooper: 110). But the big, dark house is self-manufactured, made "Cell by cell from a quiet corner" and, on another level, the speaker is herself the earth mother.

In "Metaphors", the pregnant woman sees herself as "a ponderous house" and Plath elaborates on this image in "Poem for a Birthday". The body of the mother-to-be is filled with internal cellars, "marrowy tunnels" and "turnipy chambers". This is the dark house of the womb and, as Aird points out, "the movements of the strange, underground animal are linked with the pre-birth stirrings of the developing child" (Aird: 34). The persona of "Who", in her state of mock-death, feels as numb as an owl or a stone or a root. In "Dark House", the process of identification becomes more active, mirroring the increased motion of the baby in the stomach. Kroll suggests that the voice now "possesses a coherent form and consciousness" (Kroll: 94). The stream of images Plath

uses to describe the child in her womb converge in "You're" and "Blue Moles". Like the earlier "Metaphors", both poems are written in the nine-line verse Plath favours for her pregnancy riddles.

Rich in assonance, "You're" is a joyful celebration of pregnancy. The baby is a "creel of eels, all ripples" as it wriggles inside her, a trawler of the dark and therefore like an owl, "Mute as a turnip" from the day of conception to the time of birth and "Snug as a bud". Assuming the dual voice of mother and child in "Dark House", the persona talks of "eelish delvings", being "round as an owl" and living in the "turnipy chambers" of "the bowel of the root". The dead mole, in "Blue Moles", has been

. . . unearthed by some large creature
From his orbit under the elm root.

The moles "look neutral as the stones" and they "move through their mute rooms" underground, as persistently as the plants in "Mushrooms" inch their way towards the earth's surface. "Moley-handed", the persona of "Dark House" eats her way through the soil, edging towards her birth into the light.

In mythology, says Singer, "consciousness is generally projected onto the geographical surface of the earth. The depths of the earth appear as a symbol of the unconscious" (Singer: 155). And Aird believes that "Dark House" reflects "the attempt of the questing mind to build a security from the depths of self" (Aird: 34). For Plath, the worth of the self is measured in terms of creativity. Made of cells, the house suggests the womb; constructed of "gray paper", the house suggests art. De Beauvoir notes that while life usually appears as a mere condition of existence, "in gestation it appears as creative" (De Beauvoir: 513). Just as the child is developing within the pregnant persona, the poem is evolving in the mind of the poet. In "Poem for a Birthday", Plath begins to

equate the images of poems and children, seeing the self as the creator of both. "Again and again", says Bassnett, "she uses the metaphor of pregnancy to talk about producing a poem or a story" (Bassnett: 64). Like children, mushrooms and little creatures, poems grow.

Plath was reading Paul Radin's collection of African folktales and the poetry of Theodore Roethke at Yaddo and Hughes sees "Poem for a Birthday" as the result. He calls the work "a series of pieces, each a monologue spoken by some character in an underground, primitive drama" (Newman: 192). But, as De Beauvoir suggests, pregnancy is also a drama, "acted out within the woman herself" (De Beauvoir: 512). Important as the influence of Radin and Roethke may be, Plath's real source of inspiration is her unborn child. "Once I was ordinary", the speaker of "Maenad" begins and the sudden shift in tense marks a regression into childhood, prompted by her thoughts on littleness. She remembers a time when the "birds made milk" and she sat beside her "father's bean tree" and ate "the fingers of wisdom". In the Xhosa story, "The Bird That Made Milk", the children break their oath not to talk of their father's magic bird and are blamed for the poverty that follows (Radin: 147).

Like the children, the persona of "Maenad" feels she has somehow caused her own misfortune: "The mother of mouths didn't love me" and the "old man shrank to a doll". As in the earlier poems about the father, his death causes a division in time and self. She is no longer "ordinary". With the onset of motherhood, the images of childhood lose their force. "Birdmilk is feathers" and the "bean leaves are dumb as hands". The father, associated with the past, diminishes in stature. Where the daughter of "The Colossus" is small enough to "squat in the cornucopia" of his huge ear, the speaker of "Maenad", watching him shrink, realizes she is "too big to go backward". Pregnancy

brings a new sense of self and she is at once mother and daughter. As Bassnett notes, the dual role recurs throughout Plath's writing (Bassnett: 63). In these poems, the images of the double or divided self take on a deeper significance.

Ordering her own mother to keep out of her "barnyard", the persona warns that she is "becoming another". In one sense, she is becoming "another" mother, but she is also assuming the identity of "another" being. In June 1959, Plath writes in her journal:

A woman has 9 months of becoming something other than herself, of separating from this otherness, of feeding it and being a source of milk and honey to it. To be deprived of this is a death indeed.

(Plath J: 310).

While pregnancy brings joy and a heightened sense of self-worth, the mother-to-be is confused by her altered state. In "The Burnt-out Spa", the woman sees her reflection "beneath the toneless water". But, she adds: "It is not I, it is not I". Uroff feels she "draws back from this identity with the natural and significantly female life force that she has recognized" (Uroff: 112). Hardy, on the other hand, detects a "yearning for the purified human reflection" (Hardy: 131).

The expectant persona carries a life within her which is in sharp contrast to the signs of summer's decay and demise. Aird believes that Plath's pregnancy "increased her awareness of the cycle of birth and death which is endlessly repetitive" (Aird: 31). The ambiguity is captured in the opening lines of "The Manor Garden":

The fountains are dry and the roses over.
Incense of death. Your day approaches.

Hints of life appear even in the ruins of "The Burnt-out Spa":

And yet the ichor of the spring
Proceeds clear as it ever did
From the broken throat, the marshy lip.

The allusion to the spring is ambiguous. As the source of running water, the spring is an

image of the ongoing cycle of nature. As the season of birth, growth and new life, the spring offers a sharp contrast to the "rubbish of summers" and "the black-leaved falls" alike. Both springs are associated with purity and the imminent birth of the child.

"The dead ripen in the grapeleaves" in "Maenad" and the title implies that the speaker is an attendant of Dionysus or Bacchus, the god of wine and the vine. October was the season of the Bacchanal revels (Graves: 183). Wine is made from the fruit's decay and the image suggests new life emerging from the rot. Graves notes that the vine symbolizes resurrection and is sacred to the triple goddess (Graves: 183, 201). The persona of "Maenad" is tormented by the monotony of the ongoing life-cycle:

. . . Time
Unwinds from the great umbilicus of the sun
Its endless glitter. . .

and she "must swallow it all". While the image of the navel reinforces the notion of birth and light, what she longs for is darkness and oblivion. She urges the "Dog-head, devourer" to feed her "the berries of dark". References to dogs and devouring recur throughout the sequence and the "Dog-head" may be an allusion to Anubis, "the embalmer-god" of the Egyptians who guided souls from one world to the next (Graves: 413). The dog god was an attendant of the goddess (Graves: 53).

While wine is the "liquid of life" and truth, Cooper notes that it is also the sacrificial "blood of death" (Cooper: 192). The triple deity governs the dual concerns and the speaker of "Maenad" suddenly finds herself in "the moon's vat". In the transforming lunar light, "the blood is black", suggesting death rather than the redness of life. Turning to the moon goddess who affects female identity and creativity, she begs for self-definition: "Tell me my name". The persona's confusion transcends the different image clusters in "Poem for a Birthday". She is, after all, not only the intoxicated maenad whose

frenzy is a form of madness. Electric shock treatment produces a similar reaction: the patient wakes up "with no name" (Plath J: 112). And pregnancy evokes feelings of ambivalence and a feared loss of self in the other. In a sense, the sun she has swallowed is the child in the womb and the "endless" solar "glitter" is not a positive image of life. She is both weary and wary.

The male figure, because he is associated with the sun in Plath's symbolic code, often seems to control life. In "The Colossus", the daughter spends her time tending a broken idol. But, as Bassnett stresses, she is "a long, long way from being crushed" by her menial chore (Bassnett: 62). Plath takes the masculine imperfections and the growing rebellion of the woman, hinted at in "The Colossus", one step further in the central part of "Poem for a Birthday". "The Beast" follows the male figure's decline from sun god to dog. Once, life was simple: "Breathing was easy in his airy holding". Even the sun "sat in his armpit", just as it "rises" under his "tongue" in "The Colossus". While the images are similar, there are clear differences between the two poems, as the titles suggest. The persona no longer talks directly to the father. Furthermore, she relegates him to the past and the change in tense suggests a corresponding alteration in both her role and his. "Fido Littlesoul" is the gigantic statue's successor and the "Duchess" - albeit "of Nothing" - overshadows the devoted daughter.

Instead of clambering over an art-work with "pails of Lysol", the wife of "The Beast" housekeeps "in Time's gut-end". Bitterness is added to the humour. Married to "a cupboard of rubbish", she is "Hairtusk's bride". The images of domesticity clash with those of nature and what seems to irk the woman most is the pointlessness of her tasks. Graves stresses that the triple goddess is "anti-domestic" and that "the temptation to commit suicide in simple domesticity lurks in every maenad's and muse's heart"

(Graves: 449). Because "Poem for a Birthday" enacts the battle between life and death, present and past, mother and daughter, the urge towards birth or rebirth is matched by a stubborn refusal to be born into the world. In "The Beast", images of light, love and life give way to those of darkness, dust and death. Gary Lane hears the voice of the child in this poem (Lane: 123). But the sardonic tone seems more suited to the disillusioned wife.

As the joint voice of mother and child returns in "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond", the mood becomes more tranquil. In "our bower at the lily root", the seasons are changing. Overhead the old umbrellas of summer
Wither like pithless hands.

And the "coldness comes sifting down, layer after layer". Noting the "visual movement" from the underworld to the sky, Smith sees the poem as a statement "of faith in the life cycle" (Butscher: 117). Both the passing of summer and the approach of winter are viewed positively, for the images suggest the mock-death necessary for rebirth. "This is not death, it is something safer", says the persona. As

. . . frog-mouth and fish-mouth drink
The liquor of indolence. . .

a "soft caul of forgetfulness" encloses "all things". The image of the caul, or inner membrane of the womb, serves as a reminder of life and the birth to come. So does the allusion to the "fish-mouth". In "The Manor Garden", the evolving foetus moves "through the era of fishes".

"Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond" ends with the vision of "a god flimsy as a baby's finger" discarding the worthless body and rising into the sky. While the Christian belief in resurrection is one of the "wingy myths" that the speaker fancies she has escaped, the image anticipates the sixth poem of the sequence, "Witch Burning". Like the god, the persona yearns to "unhusk" herself and "steer into the air", shedding her own

meaningless exterior. In exorcising the false self, the "wax image" she inhabits, she hopes to release her true identity. Plath describes the process in a letter to her mother:

. . . I am making a self, in great pain, often, as for a birth, but it is right that it should be so, and I am being refined in the fires of pain and love.

(Plath LH: 223).

"Witch Burning" elaborates on the central theme of "Maenad": the woman is "becoming another". The idea of the father as a shrunken "doll" corresponds with her perception of the false self as "a doll's body". As symbols of the past, the dolls must be destroyed.

Where the "red tongue" of life is glancingly alluded to in "Maenad", the persona of "Witch Burning" is surrounded by "red leaves" and "red tongues" of flame. "Only the devil can eat the devil out" and, as she climbs to "a bed of fire", the doomed witch is also the keen witch-hunter. Whether fire is associated with creation or destruction, burning is an image of transformation in Plath's poetry. While exorcising the past is painful and "hurts at first", fire brings the purity necessary for rebirth. "The red tongues will teach the truth", says the persona. Identifying with the growing baby, she is "a little one", "tiny and inert as a rice grain". As the movement towards birth and rebirth accelerates, she swells and grows in the heat. Uroff feels that the speaker "enacts the fears of the birth throes" (Uroff: 121). But the "difficult burning", hinted at in "The Manor Garden", also refers to her own psychic regeneration. The return to health, Aird points out, "will be a painful process of growth and development from which there will be no easy escape" (Aird: 36).

"Witch Burning", like most of "Poem for a Birthday", relies on dual images. The dying leaves and the cruel tongues of fire are red, suggesting life. "The cellar's belly" and "the mouth" of the dark are matched by "the candle's mouth" and "the robes of all this light". The month of October is a time of decay and death in the natural world; it is

also the month of birth, for Plath was born on 27 October 1932 (Plath LH: 12). She believed in astrology and her sign of the zodiac was Scorpio (Plath LH: 244, 280-281). Like the phoenix, the scorpion symbolizes "death and resurrection" (Cooper: 198). The focus in "Witch Burning", the penultimate work of the sequence, is positive. Rebirth is imminent and it is described in natural images. Far from being a triumphant climax to the series, "The Stones" brings a jolt and a regression. Gone are the positive symbols of birth and growth as the persona wakes up in "the city where men are mended".

The reference is to one of the folktales collected by Radin. "The City Where Men Are Mended" tells of two daughters who die: one is eaten by a hyena, the other is pounded in a mortar by her own mother. Their bones are taken to the city in an attempt to bring them back to life. The daughter who died naturally is mended well. But the daughter who was killed by her mother is mended badly (Radin: 251-252). Plath fuses this tale of symbolic death and rebirth with the events of her life. In the summer of 1953, when she attempted suicide, she crawled into a dark basement and her unconscious moaning led to her rescue (Plath LH: 125). Like the ill-fated daughter in Radin's story, the speaker of "The Stones" has been "diminished" by the "mother of pestles" and the implication is that she will be mended badly. She "became a still pebble" in the "stomach of indifference", a place of darkness, silence and peace. But the promise of death has passed, for the "mouth-hole", that "Importunate cricket", told the people where she was hidden.

To emphasize the contrast between the mock-death and the resurrection or birth, Plath switches tenses. Hughes sees "The Stones" as "the poem where the self, shattered in 1953, suddenly finds itself whole" (Newman: 192). Yet the persona's reaction to being saved is deeply ambivalent. "This is the after-hell: I see the light", she

says. Uroff detects irony and reluctance in these words, for the birth has been forced and "she has not been allowed to hibernate and grow again by becoming another" (Uroff: 120). The light of day "lays its sameness on the wall" and her own light does not come naturally. Instead,

A current agitates the wires
Volt upon volt.

Nourishment is found not in the earth but in the plastic "food tubes" which "embrace" the speaker. While "Love" supervises the healing and the "grafters are cheerful", the process is mechanized and the patient passive:

. . . There is nothing to do.
I shall be good as new.

As a sequence, "Poem for a Birthday" charts both the motion of the developing child and the mother's movement towards creative release. Gilbert suggests that "the poet, finally, can be delivered from her own confining self through the metaphor of birth" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 257). Pregnancy seems to inject Plath with a surge of creative energy and daring. Working on the series, she writes that the "absence of a tightly reasoned and rhythmical logic" frees her, even as it "bothers" her (Plath *J*: 326). And Hughes believes that "The Stones" is "the first eruption of the voice that produced *Ariel*" (Newman: 192). "Poem for a Birthday" is at once a tribute to the child within the womb and the ideas within the mind, for the vase of flowers, an image of fertility and vitality, suggests both. Furthermore, the symbol denotes "spiritual triumph and triumph over birth and death" (Cooper: 184). The body or exterior may be "reconstructed". What remains untouched is the inner life and artistic potential, the "elusive rose".

5. Life as Creativity: The Full Moon and Children (1960 - 1961)

I see them showering like stars on to the world -
 On India, Africa, America, these miraculous ones,
 These pure, small images. They smell of milk.
 Their footsoles are untouched. They are walkers of air.
 (First Voice, Three Women).

As the "bald cry" of her daughter takes "its place among the elements" in "Morning Song", a new set of images finds its way into Plath's symbolic code. Frieda Rebecca, her first child, was born on 1 April 1960 (Plath LH: 373). Because making is no longer confined to the realm of art, the poems about creativity assume an additional dimension. Where the speaker of "The Disquieting Muses" and "Moonrise" viewed her art as a curse and a source of otherness, the persona of the poems written after Frieda's birth accepts her role as a female creator. Gone are the doubts of reconciling writing with womanhood. Instead, as Aird points out, Plath insists

that what has been traditionally regarded as a woman's world of domesticity, childbearing, marriage, is also a world which can contain the tragic. She draws from this female world themes which are visionary and supernatural

Aird believes the work "is far from depressing because of the artistry with which she delineates her vision" (Aird: 14).

Motherhood heralds a heightened sense of self-worth and purpose. "It is as though the child were a proof of her identity, as though it liberated her into her real self", notes Alvarez (Newman: 58). But Plath's poems about her children, life-affirming as they are, rely on contrast and an awareness of duality. Lavers rightly senses "an undertone of frightened defiance" and an attempt to hold "death and failure at bay", for even Plath's positive themes are "presented against a negative background" (Newman: 123). Clearly, motherhood also brings feelings of anxiety and fears of loss or separation from the child.

Plath faced a miscarriage on 6 February 1961, less than a year after giving birth to Frieda (Plath LH: 408). Many of her poems of this period express, in varying degrees, the contradictory emotions of love for the living child and grief for the dead baby. In "Parliament Hill Fields", Plath presents a woman who is caught "'between the grief caused by the loss of a child (miscarriage) and the joy aroused by the knowledge of an older child safe at home'" (Plath CP: 290-291).

"Love set you going like a fat gold watch", says the speaker of "Morning Song" to her child. As a symbol of passing time, the watch suggests the movement from birth to death. Like a newly-wound timepiece, the baby starts the journey through life. Initially, a sense of detachment and alienation from the child seems to haunt the persona. The "strange, estranged beginning" disturbs Lane, as does the "schematic sense of cause and effect" (Lane: 134). But, however mechanical the motions of the ticking watch and the routine slap of the midwife may be, at least the process of life starts and the child's "arrival" is applauded. The transition from one state to another is not achieved in "Parliament Hill Fields". Instead, the persona loses sight of the foetus as it embarks on a "blind journey" and her own aimless wandering mirrors the pointless motion of the unborn child. Aird feels that the "imagery of bareness, deprivation, infertility subtly establishes the mood of withdrawal" (Aird: 44).

"On this bald hill the new year hones its edge", the woman says. As Cooper points out, the new year is a time of cosmic regeneration, growth and a renewal of life (Cooper: 112). But the allusion to sharpening suggests knives, sacrifice and death. Baldness is a dominant characteristic of Plath's impartial lunar-muse who influences fertility and sterility. "Faceless and pale as china", the moon is indifferent to the persona's suffering and "goes on minding its business". The goddess of the sky is "round",

suggesting wholeness and completion. In contrast to the full moon, the speaker feels empty and insubstantial as she walks through a mental landscape of illness and silence. Kroll sees the moon as both an agent and an emblem of the persona's state of mind: "the coldness and sterility of the Moon-muse may infect the heroine, causing and not merely representing her state of being" (Kroll: 126). Furthermore, the moon "brings on menstruation, which, in a sense, a miscarriage also is" (Kroll: 73).

If baldness implies bareness and barrenness, it also suggests exposure and a need for protection. In "Morning Song", the bawled or "bald cry" of the newborn baby entering the world is at once an assertion of her independent existence and a reminder of her weakness. The moon is not mentioned by name in the poem. Rather, the focus is on the ambivalent sun. The child is "like a fat gold watch" and gold, the sun's colour, symbolizes warmth, vitality and illumination. But, as Guttenberg stresses, the sun is associated with the monotony of existence. Although birth is "a momentary manifestation of the eternal", he says, "one is born only to be broken on the solar wheel of life" (Lane: 151). The persona detaches herself from the act of creation and the use of the past tense in the first stanza accentuates the sense of distance. Love, Uroff notes, is treated as "an impersonal force, applied from the outside" and, while this is also true of "The Stones", she sees "Morning Song" as the more positive poem (Uroff: 133).

With her bald light, Graves's lunar goddess turns the world to stone and the child, subjected to her gaze, resembles a "statue". On one hand, the baby is associated with deathly stillness and serves as a reminder of life's transience. On the other, the child is seen as a work of art and, in Plath's code, making is synonymous with life. The museum may be "drafty" in "Morning Song", but it serves a purpose. "Barren Woman", written two days later, begins:

Empty, I echo to the least footfall,
Museum without statues, grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas.

Instead of being a storeroom for art-works, the body of the woman is decorative, rather than functional. In her "courtyard a fountain leaps", only to sink "back into itself". Water is an image of life and birth, but the repetitive motion of the fountain is circular and self-contained. Like the menstrual cycle, the futile movement suggests possible life and fertility, even as this is denied.

Water symbolizes creative potential for Plath and, on another level, artistic birth is thwarted in "Barren Woman". As Annas points out:

Sterility, especially female biological inability to bear children, becomes a crucial metaphor in the post-Colossus poems for stasis, entrapment, the noncreative, an end to process.

(Annas: 55).

"Stillborn" is an undisguised admission of creative failure and frustration. "These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis", says the voice. In "Context", Plath writes that the poets she delights in "are possessed by their poems as by the rhythms of their own breathing" (Plath JP: 98). Like the ongoing beat of the heart, breathing is necessary for life. The problem, in "Stillborn", is that however much the mother-poet loves her work, "the lungs won't fill and the heart won't start". Being unable to make or complete a poem becomes a form of artistic miscarriage or stillbirth.

While child-bearing provides Plath with a way of expressing a "sense of creative disappointment", Uroff believes that the subject also allows her to explore "the correspondence between an inner vitality and its outer form through the relationship between mother and child" (Uroff: 132-133). According to Wagner-Martin,

Sylvia found writing in formal patterns easy. What was hard was discovering the true life of the poem inside its technical scaffolding.

(Wagner-Martin: 160).

Creating a successful poem is akin to giving birth to a healthy child. Uroff sees the "peculiar symbiotic relationship between mother and child" as Plath's "most positive expression of the double theme in her poetry", adding that the persona of "Morning Song" veers between confirming and denying the infant's identity as double (Uroff: 134). The child is proof of life and creative fertility. She is also an image - both as symbol and as replica - of the self.

The new role of motherhood brings a sense of stability and purpose, even as it heightens feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. "We stand round blankly as walls", says the woman. The baby depends on her mother for nourishment and protection and walls offer the security and shelter she needs. But the child is also an independent being and walls symbolize restricted movement and confinement. Aird notes that the persona is "aware of the loneliness of self which encloses each individual in a stony separateness" (Aird: 71). Knowing that she cannot hold on to her child indefinitely, she says:

I'm no more your mother
 Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
 Effacement at the wind's hand.

Butscher holds that the mother "refuses her role" (Butscher: 27). But while a sense of detachment still haunts the poem, it is balanced by the growing bond between mother and child.

Plath's choice of images to describe the relationship suggests that the distance is as much a part of nature as the closeness. In admitting that she cannot control her child's life any more than she can control her own, the mother is not rejecting her responsibilities. Rather, the voice is tinged with fear. Lane feels that the woman watches "in the mirror of her infant, the diminishment of her own vitality for the increase of its" (Lane: 134). As a mirror of the mother, the baby becomes an aspect of the double who

presages death. The child serves as a reminder of the mother's mortality, just as in "Mirror", the looking glass throws back an ever-aging woman. "In me she has drowned a young girl", the mirror says, and

. . . an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

Because the child of "Morning Song" reflects the mother's fate, she is herself subject to death.

While the cloud symbolizes the life-force or "visible breath", it is also an image of evanescence (Cooper: 38). The woman fears a cloud-like evaporation and dissolution, her

. . . own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.

Breath is necessary for life and Cooper believes it symbolizes the soul or spirit. The "moth-breath" of the baby "Flickers" and Cooper notes that the "intaking and outgoing of the breath" suggests "the alternating rhythm of life and death" (Cooper: 25). The mother's breath is as fragile as that of her child and life is threatened by the harsher breath of the wind. The wind, in "Parliament Hill Fields", has the power to toss the gulls like "blown paper" or "the hands of an invalid" and it "stops" the mother's "breath like a bandage". Paper and illness are associated with a loss of self and a threat to life in Plath's symbolic code. Like "Parliament Hill Fields", "Morning Song" was written within two weeks of Plath's miscarriage. With its images of roses, moths and clouds, the poem celebrates new life while acknowledging its transience and accepting the inevitability of death.

The threat becomes more real in "Magi", where the "abstracts hover like dull angels". Without noses or eyes to mar "the ethereal blanks of their face-ovals", the figures resemble the featureless "ladies" of "The Disquieting Muses" and, like the moon-

muses, the "Magi" watch over the child's crib. But where the sinister figures are seen only by the child in "The Disquieting Muses", the child of "Magi" ignores "the heavy notion of Evil". It is "less than a belly ache". And where the mother of "The Disquieting Muses" fails to recognize the dark forces, the mother of "Magi" regards "these papery godfolk" with suspicion. In both poems, the figures haunt the persona, rather than her mother or her child. Uroff feels that, in "Magi" and "Candles", the baby acts as an image of the "weak self surrounded by dark outer forces that would overpower it" and she sees the mother as "a helpless witness" who "does nothing to dispel the dark presence". Instead, says Uroff, "she evinces the same vulnerability to it that she attributes to the baby" (Uroff: 135-136).

In "Candles", the stark, penetrating glare of "the bald moon" is softened by the candlelight. With their inverted "hearts of light", the candles are "the last romantics". "Nun-souled, they burn heavenward", their "haloes" growing milky-clear, "like the bodies of saints". As symbols of love, religion and purity, the candles offer a flicker of hope in the darkness. But the "high-church hush" and the romantic dreams belong to a bygone era. The persona's "nostrils prickle" as she lights the candles and the "false, Edwardian sentiments" they evoke seem out of place in her world. Bassnett points out that the structure of the poem mirrors its subject matter. Spilling over from one stanza into the next, the lines create a sense of continuity and the mother acts as a mediator between the child and a past that represents "the antithesis of the bald moon that is the primeval White Goddess" (Bassnett: 73).

The candle, notes Lavers, "symbolizes the warmth and fragility of personal life" (Newman: 113). But while the candle signifies life even in darkness and "the mild light enfolds" the child, candles are easily snuffed out and the image reinforces the sense

of life's transience and uncertainty. As in "The Disquieting Muses", the eerie "shadows stoop over like guests at a christening". Far from being a match for the vigilant forces of darkness, the "little globes of light" actually create the shadows. The lines of the sixth stanza do not flow into the last verse and, as Bassnett points out, this breaks the continuity (Bassnett: 74). In doing so, Plath dissociates both her persona and the child from the past and focuses instead on the future. The baby, described as a "clean slate" in "You're", is a symbol of new birth, potential and a fresh start and Lavers sees the child as "a vagueness imbued with infinite possibilities" (Newman: 123). The image extends to the transformed woman of "Face Lift". Emerging from her "Mummy-cloths", she is "Pink and smooth as a baby".

In the concluding stanza of "Candles", the mother imagines that the innocent realm of the child is threatened by the darkness she senses around the crib. But the "infant still in a birth-drowse" is unbothered by the disturbing presences. Aird describes Plath's poems about her children as

expressions of tenderness and protectiveness for the child combined with personal feelings of despair and loneliness. The children represent a world of happiness and effortless peace which is far removed from the dark cruelty of the mother's universe.

(Aird: 67).

The darkness incorporates both the persona's own past and the influence of the lunar goddess. Plath associates childhood and the moon with creativity and Lane believes that the candle flames are "another symbol of the imagination" (Lane: 146). What is threatened in "Candles" is at once the life of the child and the spark of the poem, the woman's dual creations.

Like the candles, the sea suggests childhood and art. And the sea is controlled by the moon-muse who affects creative barrenness and fertility alike. In

"Morning Song", her influence is positive and, with the shift from the mechanized world to the natural realm, the voice becomes warmer. "A far sea moves in my ear", says the speaker. Responding to the child's call, she stumbles from her bed, "cow-heavy and floral" in her "Victorian nightgown". Heaviness is linked with child-bearing in Plath's poetry and in "Heavy Women", the expectant mothers "step among the archetypes", a calm moon-face floating over "each weighty stomach". Marjorie G. Perloff feels that "carrying a child gives the poet a sense of being, of having weight, of inhabiting her own body" (Butscher: 127). The feeling of substantiality lingers after the child's birth and the mother of "Morning Song" is not unlike the bulbous Venuses of "Heavy Women".

But the relationship between the moon and the women is not typical. Aird notes that "the moon's significance is usually as a force of infertility opposed to the human fertility of the woman who conceives and gives birth" (Aird: 108). The undertone of "Heavy Women" is one of menace. "The dark still nurses its secret", warns the persona and, far away,

. . . the axle of winter
Grinds round. . . .

Lane believes that "the mourning over delivery" to "the wise gray men" extends to both the newborn baby and "the poet's child, the poem" (Lane: 146). In "Barren Woman", the moon confirms her association with sterility. "Blank-faced and mum as a nurse", she "lays a hand" on the persona's forehead. Kroll stresses that this is not "an alliance with the Moon, but a victimization by it" (Kroll: 66). "Heavy Women" is filled with images of natural development and growth, but the tone is tainted by envy. The persona does not align herself with the women.

If making poems and children brings stability, fullness and wholeness, the opposite is true of failing to create a poem or losing a child. Perloff suggests that "the termination of pregnancy is seen as a frightening state in which one feels weightless, empty, disembodied" (Butscher: 127).

Your absence is inconspicuous;
Nobody can tell what I lack. . . .

says the speaker of "Parliament Hill Fields". Written five days after Plath's miscarriage, the poem presents a bleakly sterile mindscape. Like the mound of the stomach which has given birth to death, the hill is "bald" or barren and the "tumulus" guards "its black shadow". Kroll sees "a natural affinity between the moon and an ovum" (Kroll: 33). Not only does the moon look like an egg; the lunar goddess also affects fertility. Because making is closely allied to creative vision, there is an analogy between eggs and eyes. "Bald eyes or petrified eggs", alluded to in "Whitsun", are images of thwarted creativity. The eggs cannot develop and the eyes are blind.

In "A Life", the "egg-shaped bailiwick" Plath presents is her own artistic code and Kroll believes that the poetic "landscape finally seems to be a coherent whole" (Kroll: 30). The protagonist views herself with detachment:

A woman is dragging her shadow in a circle
About a bald, hospital saucer.
It resembles the moon, or a sheet of blank paper
And appears to have suffered a sort of private blitzkrieg.

Hospitals, paper and suffering join the cluster of symbols associated with the moon and sterility. Images of bondage and illness clash with those of movement and life in "Parliament Hill Fields". The air that "Swaddles roof and tree", also "stops" the breath and it is not pure, but "an ashen smudge" of pollution. "Ghost of a leaf, ghost of a bird", the woman feels as ethereal as the lost child, for the death erases her own vitality and motion.

Silence, darkness and stasis suggest death as an absence of life. The "shrill, gravelly" gossip of the small girls and the noise of the arguing gulls gives way to a deathly hush in "Parliament Hill Fields", as "silence after silence offers itself" to the woman. The light of the sun is as "wan" as the faint sound of the child, fading "like the cry of a gnat". But silence, darkness and stasis suggest another kind of death too: the inability to communicate or write poetry. In "Stillborn", the persona is "near dead with distraction" because her poems "stupidly stare, and do not speak of her". In "Zoo Keeper's Wife", the tormented insomniac is plagued by the "dead lake" of "the dark" with its grisly spectres. In "Candles", the light of the imagination is threatened by the forces of the night. And in "Barren Woman", the "attentions" of the dead ensure that "nothing can happen".

The connection between the moon and illness is ascertained in "Parliament Hill Fields". As the "day empties its images", the

. . . moon's crook whitens,
Thin as the skin seaming a scar.

Caught in the twilight hour between life and death, the woman turns her back on the "drafty half-light", the stiffening gulls and the dead foetus, to enter "the lit house" with its glowing picture and living child. Aird sees the division between the two realms as "a far from absolute one", but she feels that, in "finally admitting the transience of grief", the persona reasserts her desire for life (Aird: 44). Light plays on the nursery wall, revealing "blue night plants" and a "little pale blue hill". The "rabbit-eared" blue shrubs seem to give off "an indigo nimbus". According to Cooper, blue is the colour of truth, peace, contemplation and piety. It is also a lunar colour (Cooper: 40).

The natural illumination of the moon overwhelms the artificial light of the house and, with bitter resignation, the speaker faces the "old dregs, the old difficulties",

the old harsh realities. Because the positive images of life are all "behind the glass", she is cut off from the warm but illusory sanctum. The happy vision is merely a "birthday picture", a representation of an illusory world, rather than the truth. As in "The Disquieting Muses", where the balloons and the blue aura suggest an innocence and normality the persona cannot trust, the haloes of the shrubs are unreal, like "cellophane" balloons. "On Deck" makes the connection between "Moony balloons" and "light dreams". Like airy dreams, the balloons are beautiful but extremely fragile. And, like poems and children, the balloons are filled with the breath of life which is easily lost. The image suggests life, even as it hints at the inevitable popping of the illusion.

Written only a few days after "Parliament Hill Fields", "Morning Song" is no song of mourning. The poem captures the moment when night turns to day and the "window square" becomes white and "swallows its dull stars". Moonlight gives way to dawn and the new day is an image of hope. Movement is not restricted and the focus is on rising, rather than declining. As the sun begins to ascend, so does the tentative utterance of the child. Noise replaces silence and the "bald cry" of the opening stanza becomes a note of triumph in the final line of the poem. The baby's "clear vowels rise like balloons" of life, hope and aspiration. No longer unsure of her role, the mother starts to participate in the event and the title alludes as much to her song as it does to that of the baby. In fusing the cry of the child with the cry of the poet, Plath makes "Morning Song" a joint celebration of creative birth and success.

6. Life as a Progression towards Death: Battle and Illness (1961 - 1962)

A red lotus opens in its bowl of blood;
 They are stitching me up with silk, as if I were a material.
 (First Voice, Three Women).

If life is seen as an ongoing battle with death in Plath's poetry, the struggle escalates with illness and injury. Sickness and hospitalization provide a temporary reprieve from motion, akin to the stasis of death. In an early journal entry, Plath writes of

the difference between death-or-sickness-in-life as versus life. When sick (both physically, as symptoms showed, and mentally, as I was trying to escape from something) I wanted to withdraw from all the painful reminders of vitality - to hide away alone in a peaceful stagnant pool
 (Plath J: 50).

If the hospital is a place of health and healing, it is also a place of illness and inner pain. Annas points out that, in Plath's personal experience, the hospital was generally connected with "sickness, madness and death", as well as with depersonalization and a loss of control over the mind and the body (Annas: 77).

In particular, Plath seems to link the hospital with the events of the summer of 1953. Aurelia Plath describes the time in Letters Home. After a series of disappointments, Plath seemed to lose sight of all her goals and she expressed a wish to die. The family doctor recommended psychiatric counselling and "the long summer of seeking help began". One day in August, Plath disappeared and her mother discovered that a bottle of her sleeping pills was missing. When she was found, three days later, in a type of cellar under the house, she was rushed to the Newton-Wellesley hospital. In the following weeks, because "her desire to live had not reasserted itself", Plath was transferred to the psychiatric ward of the Massachusetts General Hospital. Here, says her mother, "association with other patients much more severely disturbed than she caused

her to regress". Plath's benefactor, Olive Higgins Prouty, ensured that she was moved to McLean Hospital where she recovered with the help of "Dr B." (Plath LH: 123 - 132).

In Plath's hospital poems, the conflict between life and death or movement and stillness is expressed predominantly in images of colour and its absence and the symbolic shades of Graves's goddess of nature begin to dominate the work. Graves emphasizes that the

whiteness of the Goddess has always been an ambivalent concept. In one sense it is the pleasant whiteness of pearl-barley, or a woman's body, or milk, or unsmutched snow; in another it is the horrifying whiteness of a corpse, or a spectre, or leprosy.

(Graves: 434).

The negative facet of the goddess aligns her with disease or illness and the figure of the moon as nurse is frequently evoked in Plath's late poems. Stevenson feels that red and white, in particular, are used "to disturbing effect", with "white suggesting the purity of annihilation" and "red signifying the blood and pain of continuing life" (Stevenson: 137). Whiteness provides a neutral backdrop against which the inner drama takes place.

"Look how white everything is", says the hospitalized speaker of "Tulips", a poem Plath wrote on 18 March 1961, during the week of her recuperation after an appendectomy (Plath CP: 291). As Kroll points out, the white background signifies "the landscape or the persona's frame of mind, or both" (Kroll: 16). It is "winter" in the white-walled ward and the patient feels "snowed-in". A calm and comforting silence envelopes her and she is "learning peacefulness". She has relinquished her identity and the trappings of the world:

I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

Even the efficient nurses enhance the sense of tranquillity. As they "pass and pass, they

are no trouble". Rather, they resemble a flock of "gulls" with their matching "white caps" and their fluttering hands, "one just the same as another". The uniform appearance of the nurses soothes the woman who has "lost" herself. Lavers sees the "whiteness, the anonymous life in hospital and needle-brought unconsciousness" as the persona's refuge from life's harsh demands (Newman: 110).

Water, like whiteness, is associated with both life and death and suggests purity. Lulled by the "numbness" of the needles and the care of the nurses, the body becomes as still and blank as "a pebble" smoothed "gently" by water. As the water washes over her head, the woman is absolved from the monotony of death-in-life. Her teaset, linen, books and family ties have slipped away. She has "never been so pure". Aird believes that "death is usually pure in Ariel because it brings escape from conflict; it symbolizes a rebirth" (Aird: 72). But, in the hospital poems, the state of death-like purity is not natural. Transcendence is drug-induced and images of religion mesh with images of medication. The "nun" of "Tulips" is needle-numb and the man who "floats an inch from the ceiling" in "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." is carried there by the "angels of morphia". Repose comes in the form of a "stone pill", just as in "Tulips", peacefulness is "what the dead close on", swallowing the calmness "like a Communion tablet".

Though "Insomniac" presents the other side of the picture, the poem relies on the same symbolism. Because the title character is "immune to pills", he is unable to enter the "life baptized in no-life for a while". Instead, the water drains "out the hole at the far end". Babies provide an image of purity and rebirth, akin to baptism, but waking "sweet" and "drugged" like "a forgetful baby" is denied him. "Sleepily as Lethe", the "simplicities" of daily life moan around the tent in "Two Campers in Cloud Country" and the final line of the poem, where the sleepers will "wake blank-brained as water in the

dawn", anticipates the conclusion of "Insomniac". The man is tormented by the sight of people "riding to work in rows, as if recently brainwashed". Plath's use of "brainwashed" is perfect, for while water signifies purity and cleansing, it also suggests forgetfulness and the deathly oblivion of the river Lethe.

The persona of "Tulips" is a "nun" in more than one sense. If the "bright needles" bring a purity which borders on the religious, they also promise amnesia and a loss of self. The faceless woman is simultaneously nun and none. To the doctor who sees only a body beneath a snowy sheet, she is no-one. "As usual there is no face", he remarks in "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.". Annas notes that Plath associates hospitals with depersonalization (Annas: 131). Soothed by the drugs, the patient enters a dull stupor in which ordinary life has no meaning. Her day-to-day existence evaporates and with it goes her definition of self. She has entered the state of mock-death which precedes rebirth. Lying quietly in the hospital bed, surrounded by neutral whiteness, she is "nobody". Plath writes in her journal: "I was so drugged I knew nothing and nothing bothered me" (Plath J: 337). But the escape into nothingness is only temporary, for the effect of the needles dissipates.

While white suggests stasis, winter and the purity of death, it also hints at the renewal of life, spring and the return to health. "Tulips" opens with a reference to the "too excitable" flowers. Because the woman strives to ignore them, they are scarcely mentioned in the first four stanzas. The pivotal verse reintroduces the subject of the poem. The persona says:

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.

But the persistent redness of the tulips wrenches the patient's attention away from the

bland whiteness of near-death. The poem's structure mirrors the dichotomy of the images. Examining the "unusual symmetry" of "Tulips", Uroff notes a correlation between the first and ninth stanzas, the second and eighth, the third and seventh, the fourth and sixth. Plath repeats and reverses the images. Uroff adds that "the poem moves into and out from a central stanza", just as the patient goes into the "state of anaesthetized numbness and out of it" (Uroff: 129).

In the starkly anonymous ward, the tulips seem out of place. Not only are they "explosions" in a world of doped tranquillity, they are also "too red" for comfort. The flowers possess the assertive vitality and independence the woman has wished to forget. Where she has become increasingly passive, the tulips become persistently active. Undeterred by the paper, they "breathe". Ignoring the fact that she is a convalescent, they "hurt" her. Refusing to leave her in peace, they talk to her wound with their "tongues". They are "subtle" deceivers, for while "they seem to float", they actually "weigh" her down. Instead of allowing the persona to drown in the water of oblivion, the tulips - "A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck" - threaten to dunk her in the sea of life. And life, with its mundane responsibilities and "little smiling hooks", is a heavy burden. "Tulips", says Annas, implies that "underneath an apparent set of opposites there is really no difference and no choice, that one will drown no matter which alternative one chooses" (Annas: 100).

The tulips keep a zealous eye on the patient and Uroff notes that their watching matches the tending of the nurses in the third stanza (Uroff: 129). But where the nurses encourage anonymity and a sinking into forgetfulness, the tulips do not. The woman is no longer allowed to lie

. . . between the pillow and the sheet-cuff
 Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.

Instead of being hemmed in by neutrality, she is caught between "the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips". Associated with life and the sun, the eye suggests either evil and destruction or enlightenment and illumination (Cooper: 62). As part of the solar realm, the red tulips symbolize vitality. Red, the colour of the sun, is linked with blood, fire, activity, energy and health. Sun and fire merge in "The Babysitters", where "The sun flamed straight down that noon", and in "Poppies in July", where the red flowers are "little hell flames". Because they assume the dichotomy of the sun, the interchangeable images can be positive or negative.

If illness is seen as the grey area between living and dying, the hospital presupposes a threat to life even as it allows for healing and regeneration. Kroll points out that, while red is the colour of life, blood is also associated with danger and violence (Kroll: 16). Blood, to "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.", is "a sunset" and the reference to the sun's decline implies that life is at risk. More characteristic is the sun's power to renew life. The life-fluid, "red and squeaking", is not easily quelled and, as "it seeps up" like a "hot spring", the blood is an image of the ongoing process of survival. "Gray faces, shuttered by drugs", follow the white-coated surgeon "like flowers". To the patients poised on the brink of life and death, he is "the sun". Plath describes the doctor as "somebody who deals directly with human experiences, is able to cure, to mend, to help" (Orr: 172). But the god-like figure controls life and death. And, as Bassnett notes: "The woman in the hands of the male surgeon experiences a double powerlessness, that of the sexual as well as the medical" (Bassnett: 125).

Watched by the flowers and the sun, the persona of "Tulips" feels "flat,

ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow". She has "no face". The image recurs in "Crossing the Water" where the protagonists are "two black, cut-paper people". Annas believes that the references to paper heighten the impression of unreality and depersonalization (Annas: 136). And Aird adds that, coupled with blackness and shadow, paper suggests the "substancelessness which pervades the later work" (Aird: 43). Silhouetted against the light, the figures are flat. Flatness, Lavers points out, expresses "a superficial contact with life, when shapes seem two-dimensional as they do in moonlight" (Newman: 110). Being flat symbolizes the inability to conceive or the loss of a child. In Plath's work, both conditions are caused by the lunar goddess who is linked with female identity and fertility. Flatness, whether as a result of sickness or miscarriage or sterility, is associated with pain and emptiness.

In "Elm", Plath makes the connection between the moon, illness and barrenness explicit. The tree speaks as a woman:

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
Cruelly, being barren.
Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.

On one level, the movement of the moon through the sky creates the illusion of the dragged tree and the lunar face seems lodged in her branches. On another level, the moon's monthly motions bring on menstruation and the speaker has "caught" her disease. Released from the tree's hold, the moon is "Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery". In "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.", the moon's rays seep into the hospital world of deathly suffering. "The red night lights are flat moons", says the surgeon and the lights "are dull with blood". As an image of life, blood is bright red and this is the colour of the flowers in "Tulips". Darkened to blackness, blood symbolizes wasted life or death. The surgeon, like the sun, is linked with blood as life. The moon controls the blood flow of death.

While sunlight is associated with life and warmth in Plath's symbolic code, the gaze of the moon reduces life to a chilly stoniness. Hughes notes that "The Rival" is "a poem left over from a series specifically about that woman in the moon, the disquieting muse" (Newman: 194). The persona sees the moon as "something beautiful, but annihilating", for she is one of the "great light borrowers". The moon resembles the rival whose "first gift is making stone out of everything". Graves describes the poet's rival as "his blood-brother, his other self, his weird" (Graves: 24). If, as Lavers suggests, "The Other" is seen as "a repertoire of all the attributes of death", so is "The Rival" (Newman: 122). Both poems explore the idea of the rival or the moon-like other as the deathly double of the self, making the battle between life and death an internal one. "Cold glass" is at once a reference to death and an allusion to the mirror image in "The Other". "Between myself and myself", says the persona, the glass is inserted.

"I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now", begins the speaker of "In Plaster". Throughout the poem, she veers between dependence on the "new absolutely white person" of the plaster cast and a recognition of her inner self, "the old yellow one". The strange relationship is symbiotic. Without the woman, the cast could not exist. Without the cast, the woman would be "quite limp". But even as the white self provides support, she drains the woman of her vitality. For Plath, the rose is a symbol of life and creativity and the soul of the persona, blooming "out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain", resembles a rose. Like a vase or "a mummy-case", two images introduced in "Poem for a Birthday", the white cast is the inanimate exterior. It contains life, but is itself dead. And, as in Plath's long sequence, the allusion to the mummy suggests deathly stasis while hinting at the prospect of release into another life. "I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her", the woman promises herself.

The call to life asserts itself in the form of the red flowers in "Tulips", only to be matched by an urge to sink into whiteness. Kroll interprets the conflict as a battle within the self. The recurring red flowers in Plath's poetry provide a

concrete visual embodiment of the contrast of the energy and vitality of the true self with the stasis, passivity, and numbness of the false self.

(Kroll: 18).

With their insistent eyes and their gaudy mouths, the tulips challenge the patient's decision "to efface" herself, just as the rose-soul of "In Plaster" rebels against the restrictions of the cast. The rigidly moulded perfection of the white self makes her "one of the real saints" and her "whiteness and beauty", her coldness and sterility, ally her with the moon. But the beams of the sun, playing on the cast, hint that the woman is regaining her identity. Even as she acknowledges the power of the other in "The Rival", the speaker admits that "in the daytime", the moon is "ridiculous".

Mirroring the ongoing tug-of-war between a return to health and a surrender to nothingness, the life-affirming light of the sun "slowly widens and slowly thins" in "Tulips". Like the moon, the woman feels "ridiculous" and "flat". Her reaction to the light is ambivalent, for the sun - rising and setting, day after day - symbolizes life's monotony. The sun brings nothing but pain and frustration in "Insomniac", where daylight is the man's

. . . white disease,
Creeping up with her hateful of trivial repetitions.

Furthermore, the sun is a source of destruction. While the voice of "Elm" asserts that she has been blasted by the moon's cruel "radiance", she has also "suffered the atrocity of sunsets" and been "Scorched to the root". The sunlight, "playing its blades" in "The Detective", is a "Bored hoodlum in a red room". Dissolving and "bleeding its lights" on the white wall of indifference, the sun forfeits both its regenerative and destructive roles in

"Apprehensions". Its power becomes negligible and the persona chooses the "utterly untouchable" sky and the stars as her "medium".

The sky symbolizes transcendence and infinity (Cooper: 154). But the "night sky is only a sort of carbon paper" to the "Insomniac". Pierced by the relentless light, the darkness is flimsy and insubstantial. To the speaker who feels ill or maimed or physically disabled, neither the light of the moon nor the light of the sun offers any real relief. Guttenberg notes a change in Plath's perception of the two spheres:

The solar realm proves increasingly destructive, the lunar realm increasingly inaccessible, and the plight of the poet narrator, caught between what cannot be reached and what cannot be borne, increasingly intolerable.
(Lane: 148).

As he enacts his tortuous dilemma, "Under the eyes of the stars and the moon's rictus", the "Insomniac" senses "A bonewhite light, like death, behind all things". This, as the persona of "The Moon and the Yew Tree" explains, "is the light of the mind, cold and planetary". The open-mouthed moon darkens the atmosphere with "the O-gape of complete despair". Emotionally and physically, Plath's speaker lives here.

With the "bald slots of his eyes stiffened wide-open", the "Insomniac" is forced to watch as the "old, granular movie" of his past keeps on rolling. Memories crowd in "like obsolete film stars" and his head becomes "a little interior of gray mirrors". The moon, as Blessing suggests, "acts as a kind of mirror" in Plath's work (Lane: 62). Reflecting a light and a life at one remove from the insomniac's own, the mirror becomes a symbol of the mind. Frazer writes of the belief that the soul is reflected in the mirror or water (Frazer: 253). In "The Courage of Shutting-Up", the mirrors of the mind

. . . can kill and talk, they are terrible rooms
In which a torture goes on one can only watch.

"Apprehensions" voices the question that lies behind many of Plath's poems of this period.

Boxed in by walls, the persona cries: "Is there no way out of the mind?" And the speaker of "The Moon and the Yew Tree" gives vent to a recurring fear. Cloaked in the misty "light of the mind", she "simply cannot see where there is to get to".

Plath's ambiguous attitude towards stasis, according to Annas, is an aspect of her "feeling of entrapment, that there is no place to get to" (Annas: 55). But, as Blessing stresses, the words imply that there is a place to get to, although the speaker is unable to "see" it. He feels that the line "raises the question of creative seeing, of imaginative vision" and that "Plath's imagination simply cannot take her there" (Lane: 61). As the title of the poem indicates, the yew contributes to the persona's mental anguish. "The trees of the mind are black" and Graves notes that the yew is the tree of death and destruction (Graves: 193, 468). In a church-yard, Graves writes, the yew reputedly "spread a root to the mouth of each corpse", providing a means of communication between the living and the souls of the underworld (Graves: 194). Just as the moon is the speaker's "mother", the yew becomes a symbol of the lost father and the past. "Dead men cry from it", says the persona of "Little Fugue", hoping for a word.

But, in "The Moon and the Yew Tree", the yew's "message" is "blackness and silence". It refuses to speak to the woman who can "see" no destination. Instead, it points at the deathly moon. "The yew's black fingers wag" in "Little Fugue", but the motion is akin to the futile efforts of "the deaf and dumb". The woman, like the clouds, is "blind". Following the pattern of the fugue, Plath allows the images to wander as they will, while continually returning to her original theme: the black yew and the white clouds. The yew's fingers mesh with the fingers of the "blind pianist" and his inability to see tallies with the "featurelessness of that cloud" which is "White as an eye all over". Graves describes the creative rite in which the poet makes a verse with his fingers and in his

mind, composing and repeating as he does so (Graves: 198). Both the pianist and the poet of "Little Fugue" rely on their fingers to make their music and the dominant colours of the poem are the colours of the piano keys.

While Plath's interwoven images recall the fugue of music, "Little Fugue" also plays on the secondary meaning of the word. In psychological terms, the fugue implies the "loss of awareness of one's identity" (Concise Oxford Dictionary: 397). The persona of "Little Fugue" is "lame in the memory" and confused by the signals of the yew. "I see your voice", she says, as the "yew" becomes the "you" of the addressed father. She imagines him "Lopping the sausages" and the image of the red meat recalls "cut necks". Like the red flowers of "Tulips", the violent assertion of life intrudes on the blankness of the mindscape. The German father, a military "yew hedge of orders", inflicts mental and physical suffering and the silence that follows is at once the stillness of his death and the quietness of those he seems to kill. "I survive the while", concludes the woman. But the fingers of the yew have become the fingers she uses to organize the morning she spends with her baby. "Little Fugue" was written a few months after the birth of Plath's son, Nicholas, born on 17 January 1962 (Plath LH: 442).

As in "Morning Song", the pale clouds suggest the transience of life and the evaporation of breath. The persona of "Last Words" imagines that the mirror of the soul

. . . is clouding over -

A few more breaths, and it will reflect nothing at all.

She refuses to "trust the spirit" which "escapes like steam". The cold clouds of "Little Fugue", no longer distant, hint at the woman's loss of self as they become "a marriage dress, of that pallor". Perloff feels that the clouds symbolize the woman's "impending marriage with death" (Butscher: 131). But what Plath also implies is that her relationship

with her husband is ailing and that marriage has become a form of death. The funeral service unites with the wedding ceremony in "Berck-Plage". Laid out for burial, the dead man possesses a "wedding-cake face in a paper frill". Beneath a sky of clouds, "the bride flowers expend a freshness" and "the soul is a bride" in a "still place", while "the groom is red and forgetful, he is featureless". Finally,

. . . like a beautiful woman,
A crest of breasts, eyelids and lips,

the corpse arrives.

Plath merges the description of her Devon neighbour's illness, death and funeral - called "Rose and Percy B" in Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams - with her personal concerns (Plath JP: 243-244). The sequence takes its name from a beach resort on the French coast which she visited with Hughes in June 1961. He notes that "a large hospital for mutilated war veterans and accident victims" overlooked the sea, adding that the disabled men "took their exercise along the sands" (Plath CP: 293). Hughes sees the poem as a combination of "that visit to the beach and the death and funeral of our neighbour" (Newman: 194). "Berck-Plage" begins with a reference to the sea as "this great abeyance" and a sense of waiting hangs over the long work. In the very first verse, the persona aligns herself with those who suffer, for "the sun's poultice draws" on her "inflammation". With its undertones of pain and mutilation, the poem moves towards the finality of death as a release from life and the sight of the coffin sinking into the red earth is "a wonderful thing".

The final sentiment expressed in "Berck-Plage" seeps through Plath's poems of mid-1962. Resigning herself to what seems inevitable, the woman says: "There is no hope, it is given up". The cold moon surveys the lovers dispassionately in "Event". Her

light is "that chalk cliff" in whose "rift" they "lie". And with the word "lie", Plath hints at betrayal. Eternal devotion is itself a "lie" and, noting "the iciness of apple blossom, symbol of love and weddings", Bassnett points out that the marriage "has turned to stone" (Bassnett: 108). The wedding band has become the "ring" the speaker walks in, "A groove of old faults, deep and bitter". The image of the ring as a trap acquires a grisly twist in "The Rabbit Catcher":

And we, too, had a relationship --
Tight wires between us,
Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring
Sliding shut on some quick thing,
The constriction killing me also.

The ring signifies marital union. But the bond has become unbearable for the persona.

As the dark melts in "Event", the lovers "touch like cripples". Sensing a longing for wholeness, Kroll believes that the "images of physical dismemberment reflect the cutting off which, emotionally, death-in-life is" (Kroll: 113). The false self is now associated not only with the past and the father but also with the present and the husband. Because the maimed, hunted or ill speaker finds it difficult to move, her choices are severely limited. Threatened by "The Rabbit Catcher", she runs blindly: "There was only one place to get to". Yet, even as she acts, she resembles the cornered animal. The "Elm" character cannot move at all. Nonetheless, as Annas notes, she is the centre of "a whirlwind of activity" which presses on her "from within and without" (Annas: 126). Walking through an "alley" of berries and "hooks", the persona of "Blackberrying" is drawn hypnotically towards the sea which is "Somewhere at the end of it, heaving".

What she sees is "nothing, nothing but a great space" of "white and pewter lights". What she hears is

. . . a din like silversmiths
 Beating and beating at an intractable metal.

While silver is associated with the moon and birth, lead or pewter is Saturn's metal and presides over death. And the two, according to Graves, are extracted from the same ore (Graves: 194). The metallic sea suggests both birth and death, and water is linked with the transition from one state to another. "Crossing the Water" explores the movement from life to death. As Bassnett notes, the poem is "full of images of ending" and loss (Bassnett: 70). But the motion is reversed in "Tulips" where the "thirty-year-old cargo boat" crosses from a deathly stasis to a new awareness of her own vitality. The water she sips "is warm and salt, like the sea" and recovery is imminent, however "far away" health may seem.

In "Berck-Plage", life is threatened and death wins the battle. The sun's power is questioned, for the body's walls are "caked" with old blood and the hearts have been "burnt" rather than healed. In "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.", life is threatened and the outcome of the conflict is uncertain. The heart is "a red-bell-bloom, in distress" and the soul of the dying patient recedes "like a ship's light". In "Tulips", life is threatened and saved. Gradually, the woman becomes "aware" of her heart which

. . . opens and closes
 Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.

Hardy notes that the "slow, reluctant acceptance of the tulips" signifies "a slow, reluctant acceptance of a return to life" (Hardy: 132). The heart is the symbol of love and emotion and the "bowl of red blooms" pumps the blood fluid through the body. Like the tulips, the heart is an image of vitality. Just as the redness of the flowers "talks" to the patient's wound, so the redness of the heart "corresponds" with the redness of the wound and the blooms.

The heart that opens and closes in "Apprehensions" is a "red fist" of defiance and the poem's title hints at the persona's uneasiness, even as it alludes to her understanding of what she confronts. The heart is a "red wall", trapping her in a life that is tedious. Furthermore, it "winces", suggesting that life is painful. And it does so "continually", for she is unable to control the ongoing throb of motion. With the "gray, papery bags" of the lungs, the heart forces the woman to stay alive. The organs function of their own accord and their persistent movements mock her yearning for an escape from life. Death, as Lavers points out, is "a terrifying conclusion", but it does have "a kind of saving nobility which favourably contrasts with a prosaic life" (Newman: 104). The persona of "Tulips" is tempted to surrender to death. The heart "opens and closes" and the air has been "Coming and going" and she has fluctuated between motion and stasis and floating and sinking. Yet, ultimately, the poem, the woman and the tulips turn towards the light.

PART III: THE BLACK GODDESS OF DEATH AND DIVINATION

7. Life as Death's Antithesis: Winter and Resurrection (1962)

Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.
 Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end.
 The sun is down. I die. I make a death.

(Second Voice, Three Women).

In charting an emotional swing between power and passivity, vengeance and victimization, defiance and docility, Plath's bee sequence documents an internal struggle. Written in less than a week at the start of October 1962, the five poems about bees and beekeeping explore the complex relationship between identity and creativity. Plath acquired a hive in June of the same year (Plath LH: 457). Throughout her work, she uses images of nature as a way of resolving tensions within the self and beekeeping provides her with a way of crossing from the actual and the real to the symbolical and the mythical in her poetry. In the bee sequence, Plath expands on the ideas she introduced in two poems of 1959. The speaker of "Electra on Azalea Path" states that the day her father died she

. . . went into the dirt,
 Into the lightless hibernaculum

of sleeping bees. For twenty years, she has endured her "wintering", the period of dormancy which precedes her rebirth in spring. The other early bee poem, "The Beekeeper's Daughter", examines the parallels between the life of Plath's speaker and the life cycle of the bees.

As the woman's affinity with the bees grows, identity begins to fuse with creativity. The persona of the bee sequence is intent on making a self. And Plath links the dual concerns of making and the self with nature. In her early and late poems alike, she uses the figure of the tripartite goddess to explain and reconcile the divisions she feels

within the self and she expresses the internal rift in terms of life and death. Whether the sense of fragmentation is triggered by love, pregnancy or motherhood, the overall effect is the same: the persona sees herself as a split entity who depends on the other or another for definition. But the poems of 1962 signal a clear change in self-perception, for Plath focuses strongly on the goddess as a symbol of autonomy and might who is equally able to create or destroy. At the time of writing the bee sequence, she and Hughes had separated and she was considering a divorce (Plath LH: 458-465; Wagner-Martin: 215). Images of the goddess and the queen bee merge easily, for the White Goddess, as Graves points out, "is herself a queen bee" (Graves: 192).

"The Bee Meeting", the first of the five poems comprising the sequence, begins with an allusion to the gathering at "the bridge", suggesting that a transition from one state to another is taking place. The people who meet the persona are at once familiar - "They are the villagers" - and strangely alien. "They are smiling and taking out veils tacked to ancient hats" and "they are all gloved and covered". Plath uses the veil as a symbol of inscrutability or that which is hidden. Confronted by a mysterious, veiled figure, the speaker of "A Birthday Present" speculates on what lies behind "these veils, shimmering like curtains". The veil, like the wrapping of a gift, conceals the inner contents. Unable to bear the suspense of uncertainty, she begs: "Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil". To let down the veil would be to expose the truth and, in a sense, the veil protects her from the danger of knowledge. Plath tentatively called the poem "The Truth" (Kroll: 130). The persona is prepared to accept the veiled figure's revelation, however frightening it may be.

In "The Bee Meeting", the veils ostensibly shield the beekeepers from stings. But, as one masked villager becomes indistinguishable from another, the veils contribute

to the growing sense of anonymity. Initially, the beekeepers are defined according to the roles they play in society. The rector, the midwife and the sexton are, as Uroff says, "public agents of marriage, birth, death" (Uroff: 147). As they don their veiled hats, the public faces slip away. "Their smiles and their voices are changing", notes the speaker. The midwife is recognized by "her blue coat" and the rector seems to be "that man in black". The description evokes the father figure of Plath's earlier work, himself a beekeeper. Everyone nods the same "square black head". As a mark of her difference, the persona wears neither suitable clothing nor the correct public mask. Like "The Applicant" who is "stark naked" when exposed to public scrutiny, she feels "nude as a chicken neck", vulnerable and silly. She has no protection against the stares of the community and the stings of the bees.

"The Bee Meeting" smacks of ritual and, in "Charlie Pollard and the Beekeepers", Plath describes the "anonymity" of wearing the hats as "very compelling, as if we were all party to a rite" (Plath JP: 248). A sense of imminent sacrifice seeps through the poem, yet it is continually denied. While the allusion to the self as an exposed "chicken neck" suggests slaughtering and echoes the father figure's butchery of "Little Fugue", the woman is rescued by "the secretary of bees" who dresses her in a "white shop smock". She interprets the gesture as an act of "love". Safety, as Holbrook suggests, is strongly associated with depersonalization in the poem (Holbrook: 216). The smock gapes open, but "the slit from my neck to my knees" disappears as the secretary buttons it up. The borrowed "fashionable white straw Italian hat" with its "black veil" adds the final touch to the transformation.- If the black veil gives the persona an air of secrecy and mystery, it also hints at mourning, death and submission. The beekeepers "are making me one of them", she says ambivalently.

Throughout "The Bee Meeting", Plath blends realism with an undercurrent of nightmare. Hardy feels that "the ordinariness and the factual detail work both to reassure us and to establish that most sinister of fears, the fear of the familiar world" (Hardy: 134). Images of life and death are entangled, making the landscape curiously alive yet ominous. "Strips of tinfoil" move in the beanfield, "winking like people". Inanimate feather dusters wave their "hands". The bean flowers stare "with black eyes" and their leaves are "like bored hearts". The speaker, disguised as "milkweed silk", hopes to merge with the natural environment and conceal her fear. But she senses the underlying menace and her continual questioning heightens the mood of expectation running through the poem. "Is it blood clots the tendrils are dragging up that string?" she asks. Graves notes that the spiral growth of the bean portends resurrection (Graves: 69). The life blood of the "scarlet flowers" does not flow freely. Rather, it has congealed, suggesting an attempt to end motion, and the floral clots are dragged by the clinging tendrils and the "bored heart".

Similarly, the woman does not move of her own accord. Instead, she is led to "the shorn grove, the circle of hives". The sickly scent of the hawthorn bothers her and its "body" is "barren". Graves notes that the hawthorn, "the tree of enforced chastity", is sacred to Cardea, the malevolent goddess who despised marriage and destroyed children (Graves: 68, 174-175). The figure of the destructive goddess of nature merges with the symbols of illness Plath uses to describe her ailing marriage. The hawthorn which "smells so sick" is "etherizing its children", just as an "operation" seems to be "taking place" in the grove. Images of war run parallel to those of sickness. The god-like "surgeon" who deals in life and death is an

. . . apparition in a green helmet,
Shining gloves and white suit.

With their "breastplates" - albeit "of cheesecloth" - and their "visors", the beekeepers are "knights" and the arrival of the helmeted leader signals the start of the combat.

The hawthorn, according to Graves, is one of the most important trees in "the Sacred Grove" (Graves: 464). Fusing "the Sacred Grove" with the "shorn grove", Plath's poem moves between the natural realm of the triple goddess and the social world of the beekeepers. Although the persona feels the urge to escape from the grove's confines, she is unable to move. "I cannot run, I am rooted", she says. Even nature conspires against her. In "The Rabbit Catcher", the gorse adds to the woman's "torture" and desperation and, in "The Bee Meeting", the gorse employs "its spiky armory" once more. Whether she moves or not, the speaker is trapped. "I could not run without having to run forever", she admits. As the smoke invades the hives, the bees fly wildly "on their hysterical elastics". The persona dissociates herself from the violation. Pretending to be "cow-parsley" or "a personage in a hedgerow", she again tries to blend with the landscape.

Her inability to move is matched by the queen bee's stubborn refusal to flee the hive. Like the woman, she seems to be "hiding" and the furious activity takes place around her. The images of persecution work on several interconnected levels in "The Bee Meeting". While the beekeepers "are hunting the queen", the virgin bees are anticipating their "duel" with her. They "dream" of the liberating "bride flight" and of the "upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her". The queen is attacked on both sides and, as Bassnett notes, "the I-speaker and the queen fuse together" (Bassnett: 140). Although the woman feels "exhausted" by the vicarious invasion, she assumes the stoic strength of the queen. She is "the magician's girl who does not flinch" in the face of oncoming knives or danger. But as the villagers remove "their disguises", she experiences a stab of

fear. The "long white box in the grove" seems as much hers as it is the hive of the queen and the outcome of the "operation" is horribly unclear to her. Although the "killing" has been postponed, she feels "cold".

The next poem of the sequence, "The Arrival of the Bee Box", confirms the link between the box and death. The persona has "ordered" a wooden box of bees which resembles

. . . the coffin of a midget
Or a square baby . . .

save for the "din in it". Babies - whether alive or dead - are associated with creative effort in Plath's work. While the "coffin" suggests death, it is filled with teeming life, making the bee box a symbol of the dichotomy running through Plath's poetry. Uroff sees the image of the box as one more example of her concern with "inner turmoil and outer form" (Uroff: 148). If the box signifies enclosure, it also suggests potential release and rebirth. Life is temporarily suspended in darkness and, as Cooper notes, the box represents the womb (Cooper: 24). In "Poem for a Birthday", the exploration of the "Dark House" is at once the movement in the belly and a tour through the unconscious. And the confining bee box is itself a sort of dark house.

Plath uses the image of the box or the womb or the underground cellar as a metaphor for the darker regions of the mind. Ferrier senses an underlying awareness of the "danger of breaking into, or out of, this enclosed space". She adds:

Sometimes the archetype represents the boundaries of the identity, threatened by what is outside; at other times it represents the mysterious and frightening aspects of the inner, unconscious mind, from which things intermittently rise up into consciousness.

(Lane: 210).

"The box is locked, it is dangerous", says the persona. Yet even as she acknowledges the

box as a source of possible destruction, she is drawn irresistibly towards it. She simply "can't keep away from it". Inside the box, the bees are "angrily clambering" to be let out and, like Pandora, she toys with the idea of releasing the havoc. The woman has to live with the bee box "overnight" and Ferrier feels that the line "indicates that she is dealing with her own unconscious" (Lane: 109).

The noise "appalls" the speaker, not because it is proof of life but because it is frustratingly "unintelligible". Susan R. van Dyne reads the bee sequence as "Plath's struggle to bring forth an articulate, intelligible self from the death-box of the hive" (Wagner: 165). Like "a Roman mob", the ideas of the mind threaten to become uncontrollable and the "furious Latin" is gibberish to the beekeeper's ears. "I am not a Caesar", she admits, for she is at once unable to control the rowdy crowd and powerless to interpret its angry message. Bassnett sees "the exploration of the meaning of power and freedom" as the unifying idea behind the sequence (Bassnett: 140). The woman wavers between asserting and denying both her own power and freedom and that of the bees. She is, on the one hand, the "owner" of the swarming masses. As such, she "need feed them nothing", neither encouraging them nor allowing them to develop. On the other hand, the "box of maniacs" is extremely volatile and seems to possess a fierce life and an insistent will of its own.

As beekeeper, the persona is clad in a "moon suit and funeral veil". The bee is associated with the moon and the lunar muse often assumes the form of the queen bee (Neumann: 267; Graves: 24). Like the goddess who destroys even as she creates, the bees affirm life but hint at destruction. In using the box of bees to symbolize creative activity, Plath voices her ambivalent attitude towards her own craft. The box has "no windows", suggesting that the bees or ideas are restricted and confined in their dark

"coffin". Van Dyne believes that

Plath is struck by the fundamental paradox of her creativity: owning her power to allow previously repressed material access to consciousness and to embodiment in words will destroy the temporary box of self-control.

(Wagner: 165-166).

Life - whether poetry or bees - is trapped in a deathlike cage, at odds with the disorderly nature of the restrained content.

In the early poem, "Soliloquy of the Solipsist", the poet considers her god-like status. She is able to create or destroy merely by opening or closing her eyes. In "The Arrival of the Bee Box", the poet as beekeeper delays playing "sweet God" until the morrow. As she puts her eye to the box and sees only darkness, her omnipotence comes into question. She is, after all, a novice beekeeper. Because Otto Plath was a beekeeper, Alvarez feels Plath's "bee-keeping becomes a way of symbolically allying herself to him, and reclaiming him from the dead" (Alvarez: 17). But while the female beekeeper identifies with the father, she also deprives him of his mystique by making his power her own. Ferrier notes that keeping bees enables the poet to gain a "symbolic control over her own life and actions" (Lane: 209). In "The Arrival of the Bee Box", the woman edges towards a tentative decision to release the bees and the last line of the poem deviates from the characteristic five-line verse of the sequence. "The box", she says, "is only temporary".

As the persona moves from being "The Beekeeper's Daughter" to the beekeeper, she gains confidence in her ability to control the bees. "Bare-handed", she and the "man in white", the bee-seller, remove the combs from the hive in "Stings". The need to appear as unobtrusive as a tree has vanished and the exposed "throats" of the wrists are "brave lilies". Fear of the bees has given way to a growing empathy between the

woman and the hive of life and activity. Because the queen refuses to show herself, the speaker wonders if the box contains "any queen at all". Plath drops clues to a correlation between her persona and the queen in "The Bee Meeting" and, in "Stings", the process of identification becomes explicit. Without seeing the queen, the woman senses that

. . . she is old,
Her wings torn shawls, her long body
Rubbed of its plush ---
Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful.

The woman and the queen, Bassnett believes, "share past imprisonment" and where one is old, "the other has suffered from servitude" (Bassnett: 140). Surrounded by "winged, unmiraculous women", the speaker acknowledges that she has endured her own kind of drudgery and wintering:

. . . for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.

But the world of the "Honey-drudgers" is one she hopes she has side-stepped. Uroff has noted that the bee sequence is an exploration of female identity and experience (Uroff: 146). The conflicting identities within the hive reflect the divisions within the persona. As housewife and mother, the woman aligns herself with the drudges. As poet and creator, she feels an affinity with the queen bee, however tattered and threadbare she may seem. Kroll asserts that the "coexistence of false and true selves" produces "the feeling of being at once helpless and trapped while truly powerful and free". The rift causes "the heroine's intolerable state of being" (Kroll: 11).

A violent rage races through the poems Plath wrote in October 1962 and the domestic realm becomes a minefield of fierce explosions. She described her work of this period as "Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me" (Plath LH: 466). "Lesbos" begins: "Viciousness in the kitchen!" and the hissing of the potatoes finds an echo in the

voice of the angry housewife. The light - "wincing on and off like a terrible migraine" - and the "windowless" room suggest that the poem is set in the confined space of the mind. Seeping through "Lesbos" is the "stink of fat and baby crap" and the "smog of cooking, the smog of hell". In the hive of "Stings", social interaction is achieved, for the drudges and the queen live together. In the kitchen of "Lesbos", the two women drift further and further apart and the irony, implicit in the title, serves only to heighten the distance and enmity. Lesbos, as Bassnett spells out, "was the centre of female intellectual activity in ancient Greece, presided over by the poet Sappho" (Bassnett: 110). Far from being confidants, the protagonists of the poem are "two venomous opposites" and all they have in common is their womanhood.

The figure of the "drudge" takes on a multiplicity of distorted forms. In "The Applicant", the wife is "A living doll", although vitality is exactly what she seems to lack. Plath calls her the salesman's "'marvelous product'" (Plath CP: 293). Referred to as "it", she is no more than "a hand" offered in marriage. People are perceived as separated parts of the body or random items of apparel. Two-dimensional and flimsy, the wife on sale is "Naked as paper to start". As the wedding anniversaries roll by, however, the commodity increases in value. After twenty-five years of death-in-life,

. . . she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.

The image of the woman as a valuable metal or precious jewel recurs in "Lady Lazarus", "Lesbos" and "Purdah". Stones and jewels, as images of death in Plath's symbolic code, serve to heighten the sense of alienation from life and society which haunts the various personae.

The "living doll" of "The Applicant" is ubiquitous. She appears "everywhere you look", says the prattling salesman. Certainly, she reappears in Plath's poetry, characterized not by her presence, but by the eerie absence of life she embodies. In "Amnesiac", the "little toy wife" is easily "Erased, sigh, sigh". And "Eavesdropper" offers

. . . a desert of cow people
Trundling their udders home
To the electric milker, the wifey, the big blue eye . . .

In a world of "drudges" and drones, the female poet is something of an oddity. Annas examines her dilemma: the woman feels caught between two sets of mutually exclusive alternatives and the poetic part of the self is perceived "as both strange and dangerous" (Annas: 159-160). Because the woman of "Stings" has played the role of "drudge" for years, she fears she has lost her uniqueness. She has seen her "strangeness evaporate" like "blue dew from dangerous skin". What she needs is an affirmation of her creative potential or a signal that rebirth and transformation is possible.

"It is almost over", says the persona, referring to the mock-death the "drudge" endures. She feels "in control" of her "honey-machine" which promises to open "in spring", yielding its contents in the season of new life and growth. Like "an industrious virgin", it will "scour the creaming crests", just as "the moon, for its ivory powders, scours the sea". Both the moon and the sea suggest creativity, reinforcing the image of the bees as fertile. But Van Dyne notes the ambivalence of choosing the queen as alter-ego. While her "special status is uncontested inside and outside the hive", she is distinguished by "her excessive generativity" and "her queenly estate is, in fact, perpetual confinement". She feels that Plath's "own recent history already resembles the queen's biological destiny". The "honey-machine" works "without thinking". Yet, as Van Dyne adds, "to own the queen, to think for the honey-machine means to control vicariously her life force" (Wagner: 160).

"Stings" relies on the inherent contrast between the destructive pain the bees are capable of inflicting and the creative sweetness of the honey they produce. "A third person is watching" the transaction between the persona and the "man in white". He is "a great scapegoat" who "has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me". The bees turn on him,

Molding onto his lips like lies,
Complicating his features.

As the figure escapes in "eight great bounds", he loses "the square of white linen" which he wears "instead of a hat". In a letter to her mother, Plath writes that the "furious" bees stung her husband:

Ted had only put a handkerchief over his head where the hat should go in the bee-mask, and the bees crawled into his hair, and he flew off with half-a-dozen stings. I didn't get stung at all

(Plath LH: 457).

An early draft of "Stings" has the persona telling the man that "it is no use running", for the bees are bent on destruction. They are "suicidal", but foolish: "Not heroes. Not heroes" (Plath CP: 293).

In the final version of the poem, the speaker is more concerned with regaining an identity than wreaking vengeance on the "scapegoat". Uroff sees the "curious choice between revenge on the man which means death and recovering a self which signifies life" as prophetic (Uroff: 148). Death, in "Stings", is not "worth it". Instead the woman asserts that she has "a self to recover, a queen". Both the self and the queen have been "dead" or "sleeping" in the "mausoleum, the wax house" and in the wax museum, says Kroll, "everything is lifelike but dead" (Kroll: 149). But while the bee-hive tomb is associated with wintering and death, in Graves's work it also promises rebirth (Graves: 103). As the queen emerges from her state of mock-death, the self is released from its own tomb. Annas describes the queen's flight as "an escape, a defiance, and an

act of creation all at once, since this is literally the beginning of a new cycle and a new hive" (Annas: 159). And the red "Scar" or "comet" flying in the sky is at once the triumphant queen and the liberated self.

"With her lion-red body", the queen bee is a form of the triple deity: "Cybele, the Lion-and-Bee goddess" (Graves: 62). She is the muse as "the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust . . . whose embrace is death" (Graves: 24). In flight, the queen bee has become "More terrible than she ever was". Erich Neumann elaborates on the destructive side of The Great Mother:

And among the bees . . . matriarchal womanhood assumes a character of the "terrible" in its relation to the males; for after mating, the drone mate and all other drones are slain like aliens by the female group inhabiting the hive.

(Neumann: 267).

The conclusion of "Stings", with its image of violent redness and rebirth into the world, is echoed in the final lines of other poems written in late 1962.

The persona of "Purdah" is hidden, and therefore alienated, from society. Made of "Jade" and the "agonized" side of "green Adam", she is seen as the "valuable" possession of the "Lord of the mirrors". Yet what the veil of submission and social anonymity actually conceals is a seething rebellion. Feigning docile servility, the woman quietly gathers all the powers of vengeance she can muster. "Priceless and quiet" on the surface, she shimmers and simmers with violence inside her silky body. "I shall unloose", she warns. Using repetition and short, fast lines, Plath builds up the poem's mounting suspense. Firstly, the persona releases a chandelier-shattering note. Ultimately, she liberates the darker side of her nature and the "jeweled" doll which the man "guards like a heart" becomes the murdering "lioness" who springs on her "bridegroom". In this aspect, the woman resembles the black goddess of death and divination, her lunar

"cousin". No longer content to play the role of submissive woman, Plath's speakers begin to fight back. "Electra becomes Clytemnestra", as Newman says (Newman: 45).

Like a white "Godiva", the persona of "Ariel" unpeels the "Dead hands" and "dead stringencies" which constrain her life. Hurling through the air, the horseback rider is transformed into an "arrow". She is

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

Guttenberg sees "the arrow shot into the unknown" as a symbol of rebirth (Lane: 150). But the arrow, as Cooper notes, also represents the masculine principle and signifies power and war (Cooper: 15). In Plath's novel, The Bell Jar, the image is clearly associated with masculinity and action. Esther Greenwood recalls Mrs Willard's disturbing words:

'What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security,'
and, 'What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the
place the arrows shoot off from,' . . . it made me tired.

(Plath BJ: 74).

Esther notes secretly that she would prefer to "shoot off in all directions" herself, "like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket" (Plath BJ: 87). The persona of "Ariel", freed of all that binds her, does so.

Allusions to redness, rising and rebirth take on a different twist in "Lady Lazarus", where the title character is a jaded artiste. "A sort of walking miracle", she possesses what her creator called "'the great and terrible gift of being reborn'" (Plath CP: 294). For "Lady Lazarus", suicide is vaudeville and, as an exhibitionist, she has no rival in Plath's poetry. "The big strip tease" - the highlight of her show - is the process of removing her bandages or embalming clothes and she begins her routine with a tired boast.

"I have done it again", she says of her ability to "annihilate each decade". Control is central to her act and Uroff describes Plath's persona as "above all a performer" who is "chiefly remarkable for her manipulation of herself as well as of the effects she wishes to have on those who surround her" (Uroff: 161). Art becomes a type of charade and Blessing believes that, throughout "Lady Lazarus", the reader has the uneasy feeling of being part of a joke. Extending the metaphor of the "big strip tease", he views the poet as the performer who takes off her clothes for society (Lane: 67).

That the situation in "Lady Lazarus" finds an echo in Plath's private life seems clear and, in a journal entry of 1956, she writes that she is fascinated by the biblical story of Lazarus rising from the dead. After her suicide attempt in the summer of 1953, she - like Lazarus - "rose up again" and she admits that she sometimes resorts to "the mere sensation value of being suicidal, of getting so close, of coming out of the grave" (Plath J: 99). The ritual, in "Lady Lazarus", takes place every ten years and the woman is "only thirty" when she embarks on death "Number Three". Alvarez points out that:

The deaths of Lady Lazarus correspond to her own crises: the first just after her father died, the second when she had her nervous breakdown, the third perhaps a presentiment of the death that was shortly to come
(Newman: 64).

Like a cat, Plath's persona has "nine times to die" and she resembles the speaker of "The Jailer" who dies

. . . with variety -
Hung, starved, burned, hooked.

"Dying", she quips, is "an art, like everything else".

Yet, however adept she may be at dying, her real knack is returning to life. "Lady Lazarus" is a shrewd survivor and Cluysenaar stresses that Plath is herself a survivor

in the psychiatric sense of the word. One of the traits marking such a person is the need to repeat "the process of dying in an imaginative form so that its outcome is a miraculous survival". For the failed suicide, she adds, "imagining death has a life-enhancing function" (Schmidt and Lindop: 219). While Plath has called her character "'just a good, plain, very resourceful woman'" who possesses a weird gift, she also regards her as the phoenix (Plath CP: 294). And the phoenix, in dying and being reborn, is associated with the sun (Graves: 412-413). Because Plath's attitude to the solar sphere is ambivalent, "Lady Lazarus" treads a very fine line between new life and destruction. Although the performer has perfected her "art", she wakes to "the same place, the same face" every time and the unvarying cycle of death and resurrection is itself a type of trap. The world she revisits in the poem is far from ideal.

With its diabolical setting, "Lady Lazarus" takes many of its images from the atrocities inflicted on the Jews by the Nazis. As Plath converts her personal story into a larger tale, she aligns herself with the persecuted. Her victimized persona draws attention to her skin - "Bright as a Nazi lampshade" - and her face of

. . . featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Dismissing "Lady Lazarus" as "sentimental violence", Howe is bothered by the fact that the poet magnifies "her act through illegitimate comparisons with the Holocaust" (Butscher: 230). But, as Aird suggests, Plath "used her personal and painful material as a way of entering into and illustrating much wider themes and subjects" (Aird: 83). She told Orr that her "concern with concentration camps and so on" was "uniquely intense" and she attributed this to her German and Austrian background (Orr: 169). Whether a doctor or the enemy or God or Lucifer, the man the speaker addresses is always referred to as "Herr" and the repeated use of the title evokes the figure of the German father.

But the animosity is not directed at the father alone and "Lady Lazarus" throws out a dire warning to "Herr God" and "Herr Lucifer" alike. All men are implicated in the poem's horror. As Annas remarks,

the structure within which Lady Lazarus is committing these repeated suicides and making these repeated comebacks to the same place is a patriarchal one. Heaven, hell, and the professions are seen as a male structure

(Annas: 138).

"Lady Lazarus", she says, attempts "to grow within conditions so inimical to growth that she feels she must continually start over again" (Annas: 102). Her apotheosis is marred by the fact that she cannot really escape from social discrimination and any triumph is tainted by the images of brutality and persecution which dominate the poem. Underlying the personal confrontation with "Herr Doktor" is the larger battle between "Herr Enemy" and other nations. Above all, "Lady Lazarus" is about the struggle for power. And, as Leonard Sanazaro notes, "the center of power becomes the individual's ability to create the self" (Wagner: 90).

"Lady Lazarus" is concerned with making or regaining an identity and Plath wrote the poem when she was still coming to terms with what she viewed as her husband's desertion (Plath LH: 464). She seems to have used her poetry as a way of rebuilding her shattered self and the work of late 1962 reflects a change in both her tone and her images. Annas interprets the suicides of "Lady Lazarus" as "an assertion of wholeness" and "an act of self-definition" (Annas: 137-138). As she makes plans for a future without Hughes, Plath - like her persona - feels her "wholeness . . . seeping back" (Plath LH: 462). Reduced to pieces of "Flesh, bone" and "nothing", the wronged figure of "Lady Lazarus" turns and burns and "melts to a shriek". But her destruction is necessary for her renewal and the indignant cry of the flaming woman fuses with the

menacing threat of the angry survivor. Her final words are ominous:

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

Graves contends that the White Goddess possessed the power to destroy in addition to her creative might and he holds that the deathly side of the triple goddess is represented by the witch or the hag (Graves: 386, 388). "Lady Lazarus" incorporates positive and negative forces and her dual nature is mirrored in the poem's polar images of life and death. She is simultaneously "pure gold baby" and foul-breathed corpse. Rosenthal sees Plath's persona as a witch whose rebirth "is couched as a threat" (Newman: 70). And the warning, according to Bassnett, extends to "all men and to the system of male values that sets even a male god above all". God and Lucifer, she adds, are addressed together "in a deliberate attempt to emphasise their common male-ness" (Bassnett: 115). As masculine forces of good and evil, both figures are set against the pagan goddess who symbolizes female strength and supremacy. "Lady Lazarus" consumes men, reversing the roles Plath established in her love poems of 1956. Rising out of the ash of potential destruction, the indomitable witch is an image of survival and revenge.

Just as "Lady Lazarus" forges a new identity in the flames, the persona of "Fever 103°" feels her "selves dissolving" like "old whore petticoats" and, as her temperature rises, she seems to be "going up" too. Transformed by the purging fire of her fever, she imagines she is rising "To Paradise". Plath suggests that the poem relies on the contrast between "'two kinds of fire - the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify'" (Plath CP: 293). The "low smokes roll" from the feverish woman "like Isadora's scarves" and Bassnett interprets the suffocating fumes as "signs

of the ever-presence of hell". The images of suffering range from Isadora Duncan's strangulation when her scarf caught in the wheel of a car to "the ultimate horrors of both the speaker's inner life and the world: unfaithfulness in marriage and the atomic bomb" (Bassnett: 127-128). Jumping from radiation to adultery, the persona's mind moves from the global to the personal in feverishly quick succession.

In "Fever 103°", the two kinds of fire find an echo in the two kinds of flowers.

The ghastly orchid
Hanging its hanging garden in the air . . .

is a vision of nuclear hell and death, while the "roses" attending the "Virgin" suggest perfection and purity. But the negative value of the atomic bloom threatens to overshadow the positive nature of the spiritual flower. Illuminated by her fever, the incandescent woman sees herself as

. . . a huge camellia
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.

With its sexual innuendo, the image echoes the dual symbol of radiation and adultery, the "ghastly orchid". Ultimately, as Annas notes, the speaker of the poem is trapped, for she

cannot become anything that is not already spoiled by the larger social context. There is no possibility of escaping, of becoming something pure, because she is too implicated in her own historical context.

(Annas: 136).

The private attack begins to take on the dimensions of a social war.

"The Swarm" begins with a reference to guns and violence - "Somebody is shooting at something in our town" - and couples it with an emotion. "Jealousy", notes the voice, like war,

. . . can open the blood,
It can make black roses.

Tainted by war and jealousy, life becomes black and deathly. "The disks of the brain revolve, like the muzzles of cannon" in "The Courage of Shutting-Up" and, while they are "Loaded" with "accounts of bastardies", the persona sees the futility of using her weapons. Similarly, the speaker of "The Swarm" detaches herself from the chaos she sees around her, serving as a commentator rather than an active participant in the battle. In the poem, a swarm of bees is being moved from one hive or "mausoleum" to another. According to Hughes, a loud noise like gunfire brings the bees

down to a much lower level where the beekeeper can reach them, and collect them into a box or skip. He then shakes the whole lot out on to a broad surface that slopes up into a fresh empty hive.

Plath watched the process "in a neighboring beekeeper's garden" (Plath CP: 293).

The incident sparks off a stream of associations and "The Swarm" crosses smoothly from the realistic level to the historical plane. In her interview with Peter Orr, Plath admits that she finds history "more and more" fascinating and that she is "very interested in Napoleon, at the present" (Orr: 169). According to Theo Aronson, Napoleon adopted the golden bees as his family emblem (Aronson: 89). Thus, the man with the "hump of Elba" on his back is easily linked with the swarm of bees. "It is you the knives are out for", the speaker tells him. Van Dyne, sensing that Plath is "seeking a historical analogue for her own case", sees the "fusion of the smug, manipulative bee-keeper with the figure of Napoleon" as "a surrogate for the absent Hughes" (Wagner: 167). And she draws attention to Plath's description of her unfaithful husband: "Ted lies to me, he lies all the time, he has become a little man" (Butscher: 104). Ferrier interprets the male figure as a blend of "father, beekeeper, and empire-building dictator" (Lane: 212). And Uroff feels that the images - the thundering bullets seem to be the "voice of God" condoning "the beak, the claw" and the man's bloody violence - point to Hughes (Uroff: 152).

The father merges with the husband in "The Swarm" and "Daddy", where the dominant figures are symbols of male power and military oppression. But the giant god of the earlier poetry is treated with a growing scepticism which seems to be prompted by the persona's recovery of her queen or self. Both "Daddy" and his "model", the "man in black with a Meinkampf look", have disappointed her. They no longer suit her needs.

You do not do, you do not do
Any more . . .

she says in "Daddy". The words also suggest inactivity and the god proves to be as lazy as he is forgetful in "Lyonnesse". Smiling, he watches the town and its people slide into oblivion. The reason for his neglect is simple: "He'd had so many wars!". Reduced by his battles, he turns "like an animal", trapped in his own "cage". Bassnett notes the loss of idealism which haunts the poem and she feels that the sadness is accentuated by the echoes of the early love poetry (Bassnett: 98-99). "The white gape of his mind was the real tabula rasa", says the woman of her fallen god. What he obliterates, as "Amnesiac" makes clear, is his home and his family.

The woman turns the tables in "Daddy", renouncing the bond between herself and the male figure. With its insistent rhythm and rhyme, "Daddy" is an audible chant and Plath's own comment on her late poems is important: "I say them to myself, I say them aloud" (Orr: 170). The tone of "Daddy" is strident; it is also playfully - and painfully - light. And the flippancy simultaneously masks and exacerbates the underlying anguish of the speaker. The rhythm, as A.R. Jones notes, "has its basis in nursery rhyme" and, like the nursery rhyme, "Daddy" presents "a world of carefully contained terror" which is controlled by the order of the rhythmical pattern (Newman: 234). Plath's speaker is "'a girl with an Electra complex'" whose "'father died while she thought he was God'" (Plath CP: 293). Running parallel with the voice of the little girl and the nursery

rhyme and the "gobbledygoo" is the harsher voice of the disenchanting woman who has endured her mock-death for "thirty years".

"Daddy" may sound like a nursery rhyme, but the vehemence of the adult persona's invective makes it more like a curse or a spell. The voice of the witch or the black goddess opposes the voice of the child and the tension in tone mirrors the conflict between pain and love. As Guinevara A. Nance and Judith P. Jones point out, "Daddy" is

a dramatization of the process of psychic purgation in the speaker. The persona's systematic recollection of all the mental projections of the father amounts to an attempt at dispossession through direct confrontation with a demon produced in her imagination.

(Wagner: 125).

In short, "Daddy" is about exorcism. And if making a "model" of the father refers to the resemblance between the two figures, the word, Nance and Jones suggest, also alludes to "sympathetic magic" and the voodoo doll (Wagner: 127). Kroll feels that the persona rejects her role of mourner for the dying god. Instead, she "escapes from the devil, just as Persephone escapes from Pluto by being 'reborn'" (Kroll: 117).

Driving the stake through the "fat black heart" of the effigy brings release from the horrors of the past. Violence is matched by violence and, throughout the poem, love is aligned with pain and brutality. The association is not a new one. "Pursuit", written in 1956, establishes the link between love and danger, passion and sacrifice, the "black marauder" and the persona's quickening blood. In "Daddy", the suffocating confinement in the "black shoe" merges with an image of force and repression: "The boot in the face". But even the boot is linked with the "heart" and love. "Every woman adores a fascist", says the woman wryly. He returns in "The Swarm", tramping over the "throats" in the mud. People are merely "chess people" - and the queen, however

powerful, is only a piece in a game - and throats are no more than "Stepping stones for French bootsoles". Sexuality becomes synonymous with sadism in "Daddy" and his replica has a "love of the rack and the screw".

Instead of defining life, as he did in the early work, the male figure denies life. "Daddy" bites his daughter's "pretty red heart in two" and the vampire-husband drains away the life fluid. The persona's anger is not restricted to the two men. The mother as "Medusa" is an "Old barnacled umbilicus" who paralyzes the lovers with her stark "Cobra light". Far from nourishing the speaker, the fatty red "placenta" squeezes the blood and breath from her child. Both parent figures are associated with water and stone. The tentacled jellyfish matches the sea father with his "head in the freakish Atlantic" and the "unnerving head" of the gorgon corresponds with the "Ghastly statue". In "Medusa" and "Daddy", Bassnett believes, the woman "explores the images of horror that face her and comes to the point of being able to take up a position of independence" (Bassnett: 91). "The Sylvia figure", as Stevenson calls the persona, "now takes central place in her poetic world, flanked by Otto and the Mother / Other" (Stevenson: 270).

Where the speaker tries to use the yew as a means of talking to the dead in "Little Fugue", she cuts off all ties in "Daddy":

The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

The endings of both "Daddy" and "Medusa" are ambiguous. The persona of "Daddy" is "through", suggesting that she has ceased to deal with the father, yet also implying that the telephone lines have been connected. Isolating the final words of "Medusa" from the five-line verse, Plath concludes: "There is nothing between us". Even as the phrase alludes to the end of the relationship, the obstacles between the two women fall away.

Nothing comes between them. Watching as the bees cross from one "mausoleum" to another, the speaker of "The Swarm" notes the impossibility of escape from either the past or the present. Like the unsuspecting bees, the people of France walk "the plank" between the old regime and the rising tyranny. Honourable and stalwart as the bees may be, their stings have little effect on Napoleon, the greedy "man of business".

As the persona's attention shifts from the pattern of history and society to the life cycle of the bees, the tone of rage and hurt subsides. The voice of "Wintering" is calmly introspective and the mood is one of patient resignation. Winter is "the time of hanging on" for the sluggish bees and the woman alike and, in the natural world, the images of coldness, blackness and stasis suggest not death but hibernation. Dark and windowless, the cellar resembles the bee box. But where the box was alive with noisy activity, the cellar is quiet and the bees are "slow". Both literally and metaphorically, the cellar is the room the persona has "never been in", the room she "could never breathe in". Uroff points out that the woman's

open confrontation with the blackness at the center of her own existence, and not associated with some outside threat, is the source of her tentative recognition that she will survive. For once, she is totally on her own - a painful recognition which reflects Plath's own situation.

(Uroff: 148).

No longer pretending to master the bees, the speaker admits: "It is they who own me". Annas feels that, in the bee sequence, the poet can gain control by giving up control and by "accepting that the creative process itself, though in her, is outside her conscious control", although it can be shaped by craft (Annas: 155). United, the bees

. . . ball in a mass,
Black
Mind against all that white.

The dark mind of the hive defies the deathly blankness of the white snow. "Winter is for

women", says the persona. And, in referring to both the women of the hive - "Maids and the long royal lady" - and the woman knitting beside the cradle, her identification with the bees reaches a peak. Like the bees, she has a bulb-shaped body and feels "too dumb to think". As in "Poem for a Birthday", the allusion to the "bulb" hints at rebirth, particularly as the image is associated with natural process and the hive.

In "Wintering", the discrepancy in line length - now a lone word, now a drawn-out phrase - seems to mirror the woman's uncertainty about her own future and that of the bees. According to Van Dyne, the worksheets reveal Plath's indecision as to their fate. She suggests that the poet "had trouble believing in the certainty of spring as the end of her wintering" and she believes that, throughout the bee series, she hoped "that saying it would make it so" (Wagner: 169). Ultimately, Plath allows her bees and her persona to fly and to "taste the spring". Ordering the Ariel poems, she chose "Wintering" as her concluding work in a book which began with the word "Love", in "Morning Song", and ended with the word "Spring". Her pattern was not followed (Plath CP: 14-15, 295). Ostriker calls "Wintering" a "celebration of womanhood and rebirth" (Wagner, p. 99). Optimistic and triumphant, the poem provides the perfect ending to the bee sequence.

8. Life as Creativity: The Waning Moon and Blood (1962 - 1963)

And that mad, hard face at the end of it, that O-mouth
 Open in its gape of perpetual grieving.
 It is she that drags the blood-black sea around
 Month after month, with its voices of failure.

(Second Voice, Three Women).

Two very different sets of image clusters run through the poems Plath wrote in the last months of her life and, as her attitude towards her craft becomes increasingly ambivalent, she elaborates on many of the ideas she explored in her earlier work about art. Dated 28 January 1963, "The Munich Mannequins" offers a vision of creativity which is unflawed but also unreal. "Perfection is terrible", begins the detached voice of the persona, for "it cannot have children". In the opening lines of the poem, Plath establishes a basic opposition between menstruation as a form of making and bearing children as an expression of creativity. Like the young girl of "The Disquieting Muses" who views her vocation as female poet as a curse and a source of otherness, the speaker of "The Munich Mannequins" draws a parallel between the "blood flood" and art. But she also regards the inability to "have children" as a reason for rejecting perfection and, like the mother of "Morning Song" who learns to accept her role as a female creator, the woman of the late poems seems to favour the child as an image of making.

While the figure of the moon goddess maintains her link with creativity throughout Plath's work, the poet adds to her impartiality a growing sense of threat. In the poems of late 1962 and early 1963, the realm of the moon evokes bleak despair and alienation, for the muse assumes the role of prophetess and witch-mother. As the Black Goddess, she is the harbinger of death and destruction. Jong has drawn a parallel between the death goddess and the "witchy aspect" of women, suggesting that when the

female poet writes to her muse, she calls on the goddess of death and destruction within herself. She believes that the woman writer identifies herself with "witch, crone, or principle of destruction" because she views her art as something which sets her apart from other women (Jong: 32). But, if the muse acts as an extension of the self, so does the child. In her sinister aspect, the goddess figure is diametrically opposed to the persona who brings forth life and nurtures her young children and this is the source of the conflict at the heart of Plath's very late work. As the moon becomes more remote, the child serves as the dominant image of hope, new life and the self-created.

"Perfection", the voice of "The Munich Mannequins" makes clear, is the moon's curse. "Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb", obstructing the flow of life and hindering the birth process. Inside the womb, "the yew trees blow like hydras" and the image of the yew negates the positive value of the next line of the poem, for "The tree of life and the tree of life" stand in opposition to the tree of death. Although the trees of the womb disperse potential life, the moon-shaped ova are of no value until they are fertilized. That the trees unloose "their moons, month after month, to no purpose" suggests that life is lost. "Childless Woman" relies on the same symbolism:

The womb
Rattles its pod, the moon
Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go.

Even as it refers to the futile release of the ovum from the womb, the recurring image of the moon disentangling herself from a tree recalls the suffering of the persona of "Elm" who fears she has "caught" the moon's contagious disease of infertility. "Winter Trees" offers a contrast to the plight of women. "Knowing neither abortions nor bitchery", the trees "seed so effortlessly!".

Like the scattered ova in "The Munich Mannequins", the spilt "blood flood" of menstruation symbolizes wasted life while reinforcing the notion of possible creativity. Hoping to fall pregnant in early 1959, Plath refers to her menstrual blood as a sign of "spilt fertility" (Plath J: 300). Bassnett feels that the journal entry "shows how far Sylvia Plath linked the imagery of the blood flow to her own creativity / productivity". The symbolism, she adds, is fundamentally ambiguous.

The blood flow and the creative flow are sometimes synonymous but elsewhere that flow of blood is a reminder of non-productivity, in the sense that it is a sign that conception has not taken place.

(Bassnett: 68-69).

For a woman, notes Uroff, "bleeding may be either a normal, healthy issue, evidence of a natural rhythm, or a sign of sterility and wounds" (Uroff: 157). "The Munich Mannequins" relies on the negative value attached to menstruation and, while the "blood flood" is the "absolute sacrifice", it is also the "flood of love".

In Plath's poetry, the inability to bear a child is treated with compassion when it is accompanied by the desire to give birth to life, as in "Childless Woman". An image of new life and hope, the baby signifies potential and a fresh start. Deprived of a child, the persona imagines that she has no future:

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

In vain, she strives to duplicate her image and however much she tries to create a child, she utters "nothing but blood". Because the liquid is "dark red", almost black, the blood functions as an image of thwarted life or death. With her "ivory" body, the woman takes on the attributes of the sterile moon. The colour of moonlight, ivory is also bone-like and hard, linking it with death. The light of the moon turns all to bone or stone and, in "The Other", the title character is the sick "moon-glow" whose womb is made "of marble".

Although the "blood flood" and the wasted moon-shaped ova signal the inability to produce children in "The Munich Mannequins", the speaker hardens her tone. The "flood of love" is essentially the flood of self-love and love for the other:

It means: no more idols but me,
Me and you.

Rather than loss, the blood flow suggests self-indulgence. And elected childlessness, as Lavers notes, is associated with guilt in Plath's work, for it "makes passion its own end" (Newman: 110). As in "The Munich Mannequins", the childless woman of "The Fearful" sees "only him and him" and the persona distances herself from the figure who hates the very "thought of a baby" and pretends to be a man. In contrast to the mother of "Child", who feels that her infant should be a "Pool" of "grand and classical" images, the rival of "The Fearful" forbids a baby to "swim" in the "silver limbo" of her eyes. She views a child not as a positive part of the self but as the "stealer" of her cells and her beauty. Silver, like ivory, suggests moonlight and, with her "silver" eyes, the rival is associated with the cold moon.

Plath establishes a link between death, perfection and the moon in "The Rival", where the remote lunar figure leaves an impression of "something beautiful, but annihilating". The connection recurs in "The Fearful". Of the beautiful woman, the speaker says:

She would rather be dead than fat,
Dead and perfect, like Nefertit

If perfection is synonymous with death or destruction in Plath's symbolic code, so is beauty, for beauty is a form of physical perfection. In "Lesbos", the once beautiful woman has become a sickly, sour "vase of acid", suggesting both self-destruction and a tendency to corrode the lives of others. With the "sulfur loveliness" of "The Munich Mannequins",

Plath takes the image of cold perfection one step further. The dummies in the shop window may be lovely, but the mannequins are quite lifeless. They are not even dead, since death implies an end to life. Like the "living doll" of "The Applicant", the figures are one-dimensional and unreal. Nevertheless, as Bassnett points out, the mannequins represent the "visual ideal of what society declares to be beautiful" (Bassnett: 68).

"Naked and bald in their furs", the mannequins assume the characteristics of the stark moon. Sulphur, perhaps because of its pale yellow colour, is associated with the strange lunar realm in both "The Ghost's Leavetaking" and "The Other". From the "sulfur loveliness" of the mannequins, the voice moves directly to their "smiles". And the smile of the moon, as "The Rival" makes clear, is lethal. In contrast to Plath's bulbous mother figures, the lolly-heads of the mannequins are perched on "silver sticks" and, while silver denotes lunar purity, the thin stick bodies suggest sterility and flatness. Perfection, the persona hints, is not natural. "Intolerable, without mind", the smiling mannequins are dummies in more than one sense of the word. In "The Munich Mannequins", says Annas,

man has finally transformed woman into . . . something that reflects both his disgust with and his fear of women. A mannequin cannot have children, but neither does it have that messy, terrifying, and incomprehensible blood flow each month.

(Annas: 114).

Mannequins, Annas adds, "do away with the problem of female creativity and self-determination entirely" (Annas: 115).

Structurally, "The Munich Mannequins" relies on several layers of images of cold sterility and the icy "snow breath" which freezes the life of the womb finds an echo in the falling snow of the city. As the "morgue between Paris and Rome", Munich is a place of death and stasis. "Nobody's about", save for the artificial people, the mannequins. Munich is deserted and it is dark. In the city, notes Annas, winter has

"sinister connotations", for the season "suggests death rather than hibernation" (Annas: 113). While the mannequins pose dumbly in the shop window, the "snow drops its pieces of darkness". The blank whiteness of the snow is perfectly balanced by the deep blackness of the night, for the falling snow hints at death's darkness. Snow, as Lavers explains, is "cold, white, made of regular units, and melts to nothing, thus revealing its kinship with absence, death" (Newman: 112).

Because "the moon and the yew tree are connected in an image of physical sterility" in the opening lines of the poem, Aird sees a link between "The Munich Mannequins" and "The Moon and the Yew Tree", which is "a poem about spiritual sterility and despair" (Aird: 109). But the sterility of "The Munich Mannequins" actually ranges from the physiological to the mental to the social and back again. The moonlight and the blackness seep through many of Plath's late poems. As in "The Moon and the Yew Tree", the persona of "Nick and the Candlestick" begins by evoking the blue light of the mind. She is "a miner" in a subterranean, "earthen womb" which oozes "tears" of wax and boredom. "Black bat airs" enshawl her and threaten to kill her, just as in "The Moon and the Yew Tree" the lunar mother unlooses "small bats and owls" from her "blue garments". The "cave" of the mind is filled with deathly echoes as the woman allows one thought to ripple into another.

In a realm of cold destruction and sinister darkness, the presence of the child, an image of life and creativity, is a surprise. "O love, how did you get here?", asks the persona. And with the discovery of the child comes a shift in mood, prompted by the flickering candle which "Gulps and recovers its small altitude". As the blue light dissipates, the rising "yellows hearten" the mother and her voice becomes softer. The poem breaks smoothly into two sections and Uroff feels that seven stanzas are devoted

to the candlestick and seven to Nick (Uroff: 149). In a sense, the first seven stanzas capture the mother's fears, triggered by the blue light of the mind, while the second half of the poem, with its focus on the child, reflects her attempt to allay the pain and worry. Yet the last part of "Nick and the Candlestick" grows directly out of the introductory verses and it is the underlying unease that gives the meditation on the child its poignancy.

Light and warmth are associated with the world of the child, darkness and coldness with the realm of the tormented mother. In Plath's night poems to her children, the light is always surrounded by a vast darkness which threatens to encroach on the world of love and safety. Annas believes that the mother and child live in "a closed-off world, a bubble outside the main stream of society". The smaller world "is limited both in space and duration", for "the outside world, which is real, will eventually break through and destroy it" (Annas: 116). In "Candles", the earlier poem written for Frieda, the delicate light is easily quelled by the looming shadows and, in "Magi", the blackness is associated with the dark forces of the lunar muse. The "haloey radiance" of the candle provides "the fluid in which we meet each other", the mother of "By Candlelight" tells her child. Floating in the mirror - at one remove from reality and "at one candle power" - mother and child seem strangely unreal.

The candle symbolizes the fragility of life and, in "By Candlelight", life is temporarily suspended:

At first the candle will not bloom at all -
It snuffs its bud
To almost nothing, to a dull blue dud.

As the candle flame hesitates, the mother holds her breath. But the "match scratch" brings the child to life and her cross "Balled hedgehog" appears with the "yellow knife" of light. With its nine-line stanzas, "By Candlelight" resembles the poems about

pregnancy, but the playful glee has given way to a deep sadness. The ominous "knife" of flame strives valiantly to keep "the sky at bay", but the suffocating "sack of black" is "everywhere, tight, tight!" and the kneeling "brass man" bearing the light is only a small image of Hercules (Plath CP: 294). "Five bright brass balls" are all the little man has to "juggle with", notes the persona, "when the sky falls". And it is her sure conviction that the sky will fall that makes the poem's ending pessimistic.

"Nick and the Candlestick" provides a contrast, for the mother's fear is coupled with optimism.

Let the stars
Plummet to their dark address,

she says defiantly. Instead of surrendering to the disturbing presences she senses around her, she hangs "soft rugs" and "roses" on the walls of the cave to camouflage the bleak despair. In "The Night Dances", the "pink light" of the moving child filters through "the black amnesias of heaven", providing a brief respite from absence and stasis. And in "Child", the mother expresses her deep desire "to fill" the baby's "clear eye" with "color and ducks" and the "zoo of the new", rather than with the image of her troubled self which the child, as her mirror, is forced to reflect. Aird believes that, in the poems about her children,

Sylvia Plath reveals the cruel opposites of her world in their starkest opposition, but they are not black poems because the darkness of the mother's world is subordinated to the light of the child's.

(Aird: 68).

Using images of darkness and lightness, Plath conveys the tension between the destructive and the creative realms. But the contrast between breaking and making is not as clear-cut as Aird suggests it is. Instead, the images of light and love fuse with those of darkness and despair, for the light exists within the darkness which threatens to

overwhelm it. Associated with the child, light is an image of life. Reflected by the moon, light becomes ambivalent. In "Thalidomide", the "half moon" functions as a dual image of lightness and darkness, whiteness and blackness, and life and death.

Half-brain, luminosity -
Negro, masked like a white,

she is both threatening and remote. She is neither one thing nor the other and her very impartiality - her "indifference" is seen as "White spit" - causes the persona's fear. Where the full moon signifies wholeness, the half moon hints at loss or some kind of lack.

"Spidery" and "unsafe", the moon looms over the speaker of "Thalidomide" and Graves notes that the female spider is a manifestation of the goddess in her most sinister aspect (Graves: 24). The muse who rules the realm of making is able to inspire terrifying creativity. Her

. . . dark
Amputations crawl and appall . . .

and, while the persona is spared from giving birth to what is deathly and distorted, she appreciates the dangers which surround all unborn children. Some "glove" or "leatheriness" has "protected" her from the moon's cruellest trick of fate. If the poem's title refers to the drug which deforms babies, "Thalidomide" also suggests the crippling light of the moon, encountered in "Event". The moon is associated with illness and birth alike and the two images fuse in the poem. Because Plath equates children with her art, the symbolic birth which has gone awry works on two levels. As Bassnett points out: "Making a poem, despite the care and the labour, the carpentering, can sometimes result in a monstrous birth" (Bassnett: 66).

"The dark fruits" of the womb "revolve and fall" and the child, as "image" of the self, "Flees and aborts like dropped mercury". With the allusion to the cracked

glass, the idea of the baby as the mirror or reflection of the parent acquires a negative twist. Unbothered by the threats of "Thalidomide", the mother in "Nick and the Candlestick" says:

Let the mercuric
Atoms that cripple drip
Into the terrible well

Far from being maimed, her child is the one "Solid the spaces lean on, envious". The image of the dripping "mercuric atoms" recalls the opening vision of the poem, where the "Waxy stalactites" of the cave or candle "Drip and thicken". But the sense of fear has been conquered by a new bravado as Nick becomes "the baby in the barn". In daring to call her baby Christ, Hardy maintains, the speaker "makes the utmost claim of her personal love". And she adds that each "sensuous and emotional step holds for the mother in the poem and for Mary" (Hardy: 123).

While the final allusion to Christ is bold, the image grows smoothly out of the pervasive religious symbolism of "Nick and the Candlestick". As in "Candles", the flickering light evokes a series of mental associations. In the first half of the poem, the dark, cave-like room suggests the underground "womb" of the earth mother, but the pagan world of the goddess gives way to the realm of Christianity. The melting blobs of candle wax resemble white "newts". Because whiteness sparks off thoughts of purity, the newts are "holy Joes" and the traditional Christian emblem, the fish, rapidly swells into a school of predatory eaters. Floating by like ice or knives, the fish become a grotesque symbol of the

. . . piranha
Religion . . .

and the blood of the Eucharist merges with the blood swallowed by the voracious fish.

"Christ!", the speaker interjects, for the fish are "drinking" their "first communion" from her "live toes" in a grisly ritual of fellowship.

As the flame of the candle leaps and changes colour, the persona's vision of destruction yields to her awareness of creativity. With the discovery of the sleeping child - an "embryo" in the "womb" of the room - her voice becomes gentle and warm. According to Plath, the speaker finds in her son "'a beauty which, while it may not ward off the world's ill, does redeem her share of it'" (Plath CP: 294). Nick, like "the baby in the barn", is associated with light, love and life. Yet even as the child provides his mother with a sense of solidity, the bond is fragile, for the relationship between mother and child exists within the violent context of society and religion. In hinting at the fate of the adult Christ, Nick's "crossed position" is ominous, for the image suggests one more threat to what has been carefully nurtured and created. The fear reaches a peak in "Mary's Song", with the mother's plaintive cry to the "golden child the world will kill and eat".

Citing "Mary's Song" and "The Moon and the Yew Tree" as illustrations of her argument, Lavers contends that religion "seems to offer a refuge against the bald and wild moon", but that "the poet belongs outside, with the latter" (Newman: 115). While the comment holds for "The Moon and the Yew Tree", religion is certainly not viewed as an escape in "Mary's Song". Rather, Christianity is explicitly linked with sorrow and sacrifice. Bassnett notes that

Mary's case should be different, since the death of her child is a symbol of human regeneration, but the emphasis in this poem is on the power of history and the horrors of the past to reach out and touch the present. Mary must accept the inevitability of suffering.

(Bassnett: 143).

A simple domestic incident - cooking the "Sunday lamb" - provides a series of parallels to Mary's anguish. And her "Song" is a lament of pain and fear.

The cry is echoed in "Brasilia", with its futuristic "steel" people

Awaiting masses
Of cloud to give them expression

The anticipated mass is at once a vast bank of clouds and the Eucharistic ritual which will imbue the mechanical folk with meaning. As in "Mary's Song", religious suffering transcends time and the speaker of "Brasilia" veers frantically between visions of a comfortless past, a tormented present and a terrifying tomorrow. The sacrificed Christ, the teething baby and the "super-people" invade her mind. She appeals to the hungry "You" to spare her child and to leave him safe from "the dove's annihilation". Uroff feels that the plea is addressed to the destructive male God of Christianity (Uroff: 150). The last lines of the poem - a garbled version of the concluding part of the Paternoster - point to God as the force which threatens the child. Yet the male figure is counterbalanced by the female goddess of nature, the "Red earth" with her "motherly blood". Both are implicated in "The old story".

Although the dove is a traditional Christian symbol of peace, love and the soul, Graves notes that the bird is also associated with the moon goddess (Graves: 337). And Cooper points out that doves are "sacred to all Great Mothers and Queens of Heaven and depict femininity and maternity" (Cooper: 54). In "Winter Trees", the spreading rings of memory ripple from a "series of weddings" to the "shadows of ringdoves" as the speaker explores motherhood and creativity from different angles. Because the trees possess an "otherworldliness" which she envies even as it eludes her, the woman allies herself with the Ledas and the Madonnas. Theirs is the realm of loss and pain, and the poem finishes with the image of the "chanting" doves, "easing nothing". Plath's late work relies on a startling blend of Christian and mythic symbolism, as she allows the goddess to merge with the mother of Christ. This is consistent with Graves's theory, for he

explains that the "cruel, capricious, incontinent White Goddess and the mild, steadfast, chaste virgin are not to be reconciled except in the Nativity context" (Graves: 425).

But, in Plath's own "Nativity context", neither Christianity nor the pagan myth of the goddess offers any real comfort to the agonized mother. Paradoxically, it is often the child who alleviates her fears, even as he inspires them. As a symbol of freshness, innocence and purity, the baby is a source of hope in a stale and dreary world. He is also extremely vulnerable.

The pain
You wake to is not yours . . .

the persona of "Nick and the Candlestick" tells her child, for the hurt emanates from her soul not his. Because the baby is, as yet, untainted by society, his "blood blooms clean" where hers is sullied and drained by the "piranha" religion. The woman is draped in mental blackness in the first half of the poem, in contrast to her child who is coupled with redness and love. Nick is his mother's "ruby", a term of endearment which grows out of the bright blood image. Associated with life and the baby, the redness is neither violent nor destructive. Instead, Hardy stresses, red is "a beloved colour, because it is the child's" (Hardy: 124).

Red signifies creativity, vitality and energy in Plath's symbolic code, particularly when the image of redness opposes a stark landscape. But, as Lavers notes, "the poet's reaction to the violent affirmation of life against a neutral background of white varies according to her degree of vitality" (Newman: 108). Where the personae of "Tulips" and "Poppies in July" try to ignore the persistent calls to life, the speakers of "Poppies in October" and "Letter in November" revel in "the beautiful red". In "Poppies in October", written on Plath's birthday, the woman sees the red flowers as "A gift, a love

gift" in a world of "frost" and "carbon monoxides". And, in "Letter in November", the reddening apples challenge the "thick gray death-soup" of the morning air. As nature asserts its life-giving power in the midst of stasis and death, the world "Suddenly turns, turns color".

Walking through her garden, with its red leaves and "gold-ruddy" apples, its iron-scalloped holly and "the wall of old corpses", the woman honours nature's wholeness, for life and death co-exist in the autumnal setting. "Love" - addressed in the first and last stanzas of the poem - seems to be linked to the cyclical process of life and death which she senses around her. Affected by the changes in the natural landscape, she says:

I am flushed and warm.
 I think I may be enormous.
 I am so stupidly happy,
 My wellingtons
 Squelching and squelching through the beautiful red.

Redness, warmth, joy and weight combine as symbols of creative contentment and the solitary persona assimilates the fertility of her "property". The air "cushions" her "lovingly" and the golden fruits "bleed and deepen" as she passes by. She becomes a part of nature's regenerative process.

Blood serves as an image of defiant vitality in a realm of stark whiteness in "Cut", where the flowing blood of the persona's thumb is an affirmation of life beneath the dead skin. Slicing her "thumb instead of an onion" becomes a cause for "celebration". The skin of the wounded thumb - "Dead white" - flaps open to reveal "that red plush" of blood which inspires a flood of associative images. The bleeding finger acquires a series of lives of its own: now it is a "Little pilgrim" axed by an Indian, now a bottle of "pink fizz", now an army of moving soldiers. The individual, as Lavers suggests, seems to be "made up of smaller units endowed with a spontaneity not necessarily in agreement with

the conscious self" (Newman: 107). Checked by the running "Redcoats", the persona pauses mid-way through her string of metaphors. "Whose side are they on?", she wonders. While bleeding is a sign of life, an excessive loss of blood symbolizes death or sickness.

The pace of the second half of "Cut" is slowed by a stream of tripping rhymes. Suddenly, the woman feels "ill" and she has "taken a pill to kill" the feeling of insubstantiality. No longer a reason for mirth and merry-making, the pouring blood becomes frightening and the thumb takes on the characteristics of a maniac, bent on destruction.

Saboteur,
Kamikaze man . . .

the suicidal thumb threatens life. Howe sees "Cut" as "an example of weakness through excess" (Butscher: 231). But the wild jumps in emotion and the technique of free association arise from and accentuate the speaker's sense of shock and hysteria. Moreover, Plath never loses control of her images. Blood is a sign of creativity and, in following the train of the blood thoughts, she uses "Cut" to symbolize the process of making poetry. The life blood of the poem or poet eventually spends itself, darkening and slowing as the chaos gives way to the "Mill of silence" which suggests artistic order and completion.

"The blood jet is poetry", says the persona of "Kindness" and she believes that "There is no stopping it". Of the poem, Uroff says:

Poetry is the creative act by which the heart persists against silence and a kindness that would anaesthetize its fury. The image cuts both ways: the blood jet is evidence both of the heart's persistent life and of its exhaustion of that life in poetry. Kindness would stop such a sacrifice.

(Uroff: 155).

The final line of "Kindness" is ambiguous. Plath uses the images of the child and the rose to suggest life, creativity and natural beauty, particularly when she is referring to the soul or to the poem. Because both babies and blooms are delicate, the images hint at life's brevity and serve as a reminder of mortality. But while children and roses serve as images of making and fragility in Plath's work, blood assumes more than one meaning. If the "blood jet" is pure and life-enhancing, the "two children" and the "two roses" serve as an extension of the image of creativity. But if the reference is to the "blood jet" of menstruation, the children and the roses offer a contrast between the wasted and the realized potential for making.

Like the creator figure in "Kindness", the persona of "Childless Woman" utters "nothing but blood". With the allusion to "Uttering", Bassnett suspects that there is "a direct link between menstrual blood, unused in the making of new children, and words, used in the making of poems". In Plath's late work, Bassnett adds, "poetry has become her menstruation" (Bassnett: 69). Menstruation is, essentially, a negative image of creativity, akin to making death. In "Thalidomide",

The lopped

Blood-caul of absences . . .

is an emblem of artistic abortion or loss. And, in "Childless Woman", the "dark red" menstrual blood is easily coupled with the "funeral" of the "forest". As the trees of the womb waste their seeds, the persona becomes the hill, "Gleaming with the mouths of corpses". Landscape reflects bodyscape. Juhasz feels that Plath may have experienced a brief "respite from the long conflict between body and mind, woman and poet, that had plagued her for so many years" (Juhasz: 102). Yet, ultimately, making a child is not the same as producing a poem and "there remains a gap between woman and poet" (Juhasz: 103).

In "The Munich Mannequins", the "blood flood" of sacrifice is related to the perfection and order of what is created but artificial. With its three references to the deathly snow and blackness, the poem moves through different forms of sterility. The black message of the yew, introduced in "The Moon and the Yew Tree", merges with the cold womb. This is an image of physical barrenness. The snow, dropping its "pieces" of blackness, confirms the allusion to Munich as a "morgue". This is an image of social desolation. And the glittering "black phones on hooks", like the dark yew of communication in "Little Fugue", swallow only the "Voicelessness" of the blank snow. This is an image of creative death. The "bald" mannequins recall the disturbing "ladies" of "The Disquieting Muses", figures Plath said were modelled on De Chirico's faceless dressmaker's dummies (Plath CP: 276). The mannequins, the muses and the triple goddess as moon are one and the same, for all are linked with creativity as menstruation.

Casting an unearthly light on the city and the mind, the moon is utterly detached from what goes on below her. Newman views the central dichotomy of "The Munich Mannequins" as "the conflict between art and life" (Newman: 45). The cold world of society's perfectly manufactured mannequins is diametrically opposed to the warm, natural realm of the mother and her child. The city is associated with infertility and bleakness, not babies and motherhood, and the "domesticity" which lies behind the glass shop windows is only a commercial illusion. Both the "baby lace" and "the green-leaved confectionery" seem out of place in the stark, dark night. The persona of Plath's late work is torn between two very different forms of making: producing babies or issuing blood. Even as the presence of the lunar muse is necessary for poetry, the moon is an image of the unknown force which threatens the insular haven of mother and child. Where the two worlds overlap, the alliance is uneasy, and the defiant bravado barely conceals the underlying fear. Creativity, like life, has become a dual source of pain and joy.

9. Life as a Progression towards Death: The Journey's End (1962 - 1963)

I shall move north. I shall move into a long blackness.

I see myself as a shadow

See, the darkness is leaking from the cracks.

I cannot contain it. I cannot contain my life.

(Second Voice, Three Women).

Birth, life and death - the concerns of the chthonic goddess - form an integral part of Plath's final work, where the focus is on the transition from one state to another. Written in February 1963, "Edge" and "Contusion" take the conflict between movement and stasis, or life and death, to its logical conclusion. Whether she uses images of the sea and drowning to express the passage from death to rebirth, or images of violent redness and pale neutrality to illustrate the crossing from illness to health, the key motif in Plath's poems about motion is the transforming journey. "Edge", the last of the Collected Poems, begins with a reference to the end of the voyage through life. "The woman is perfected" and, in both "The Munich Mannequins" and "Edge", perfection suggests beauty, stasis and death. The two poems rely on a remote voice which accords with the pervasive sense of absence and detachment. But what is implicit in "The Munich Mannequins" is explicit in "Edge". In one work, the speaker surveys a perfection which is deathly. In the other, the woman embraces perfection, for she is dead.

Munich, with its impersonal hotels and shop-window "domesticity", is a place of transit, the traveller's stop-over point "between Paris and Rome". Although the city is viewed as a "morgue", the poem enacts the conflict between stasis and motion. However still the artificial mannequins may be, the trees blow, the snow falls and anonymous hands place shoes in the corridors. Movement, in "Edge", has ceased. The woman is already dead. The destination has been reached. Bassnett sees "Edge" and

"Contusion" as "perhaps the saddest" of all Plath's works, for they are "poems in which any semblance of struggle has been abandoned" (Bassnett: 144-145). Yet, as Howard stresses, the tone of the final work is devoid of pathos and he senses "a certain pride" in the voice, "the pride of an utter and ultimate surrender" (Newman: 87). In "Edge", the dead body "wears the smile of accomplishment", for the torture of motion has ended.

And motion is tortuous in Plath's very late poems, particularly when the landscape to be traversed is historical or social. For the persona of "Getting There", crossing the sea of life is akin to crawling through a battlefield of blood and mud. Caught up in "some war or other", she is "dragging" her body "through the straw of the boxcars" and, as the title suggests, "Getting There" is about the process of moving towards a destination. The poem, Hardy points out, "dwells painfully and slowly in the present tense" (Hardy: 137). Even the structure of "Getting There" mirrors the arduous journey. After two drawn-out stanzas of thirty three lines each, both starting with the same pained question, the work concludes with a quick couplet as the goal is realized. Relying on the journeying motif, Plath achieves what Blessing terms "the artistic effect of a world in violent motion". He adds that, by beginning in medias res and using indefinite pronouns, the poet conveys "the experience of being swept up in an action that has been gathering momentum for some time" (Lane: 60).

"Getting There", with its opening query, illustrates the force of the device.

The journey has long since begun and the speaker asks eagerly:

How far is it?
How far is it now?

As the woman travels across the weird terrain, images and impressions seem to fly past her, resulting in a strong sense of unreality, derangement and fragmentation. In referring

to the Krupp armament makers, Plath aligns war with "the dismemberment and destruction of the body" (Rosenblatt: 31).

The gigantic gorilla interior
Of the wheels . . .

and the black "muzzles" - a word which refers to the firearms and the animals alike - of Krupp's "terrible" creation acquire a frightening life of their own. The poem, Hardy notes, mixes "animals and machines in a mangling confusion" (Hardy: 137). While the machines take on animal or human characteristics, the men - or "what is left of the men" - are depersonalized. "Pumped" forward mechanically by the "pistons" and "the blood", the wounded soldiers form an army of disconnected limbs and the sound of the wheels "Punching out Absence! like cannon" merges with the "unending cries" of the military "dolls".

Even as the woman of "Getting There" is "dragging" her body across "Russia", the "train is dragging itself" across the war-torn landscape. Body and train fuse and the awful setting mirrors the persona's tormented state of mind. In a sense, the speaker becomes

An animal
Insane for the destination . . .

just as the persona of "Ariel" ultimately becomes indistinguishable from the horse she rides. Of "Ariel", Alvarez says:

The difficulty with this poem lies in separating one element from another.
Yet that is also its theme; the rider is one with the horse, the horse is one
with the furrowed earth, and the dew on the furrow is one with the rider.
The movement of the imagery, like that of the perceptions, is circular.

(Newman: 61).

In "Getting There", the traveller is one with the train, one with the army of maimed soldiers and one with the bloody mud. And the image pattern, like the journey, is not cyclical but linear.

Where "Ariel" is a joyful celebration of natural motion and fluid unity, "Getting There" is an agonized howl of social monotony and mechanical coercion. The triumphant arrow of "Ariel", flying into the solar eye, is replaced by the "Dynasty of broken arrows", an image of the destructive nature of war which also suggests that the battle-urge is passed on from generation to generation. If the arrow is a symbol of masculine power and action, the "broken" arrow signifies the inability to act. Cooper mentions that the arrow is associated with the ambiguous sun (Cooper: 15). Because Plath's attitude to the solar realm is ambivalent, the arrow is a dual emblem of creation and destruction. Uroff believes that, as an arrow, "the female mythological lioness" of "Ariel" is connected with battle and that "in her merger with the sun she absorbs its fertility". The "spirit with which the speaker identifies", she adds, "is whole, entire in itself", for "Ariel" is at once creative and destructive, masculine and feminine (Uroff: 166).

In "Getting There", the allusion to the battered men as "broken arrows" enhances the futility of violence while linking war with the negative aspect of the solar realm. Associated with the sun, blood suggests not only energy and vitality, but also danger and a threat to life. Uroff notes that the "life force and the thirst to kill are ironically related" in the poem, for "both pump forward with automatic purpose" (Uroff: 153). As if pushed by a large solar heart, the army throbs into battle. Daily, the sun rises only to set again and, in Plath's late work, the repetitive motion is echoed in the monotonous and predatory movement of the train. In "The Swarm",

. . . trains, faithful to their steel arcs,

Leave and arrive, and there is no end to the country.

The train of "Sheep in Fog" is a rust-coloured horse and its hooves are "dolorous bells". In "Totem", the train is "killing" the silver track which "stretches into the distance".

Turning and churning out destruction in "Getting There", the wheels of the train are "Fixed to their arcs like gods" and "All the gods know is destinations". According to Graves, the wheel is an emblem of the god of the solar year (Graves: 413). As an image of the revolving sun, the wheel suggests the cycle of life, death and rebirth. The gods who control life and death in "Getting There" may be mechanical, but they are far from inanimate. "Inexorable" and stubborn, the wheels possess a "will" of their own and, whether the train is "steaming" or "breathing", "dragging itself" or "screaming", the motion is unstoppable. Like the relentless engine which sees only

The bloodspot,
The face at the end of the flare . . .

the persona struggles through the slippery mud of blood and flesh. However distant and small the place she is "getting to" may seem, she surmounts the "obstacles" in her path.

Obsessed with the urge to reach her destination, the woman vows that she will bury both the wounded and the dead she passes on her "track". In referring to the injured beings as "pupas", Plath hints at a natural rebirth or metamorphosis and the allusion to "Incense" supports the growing sense of ritual. The "souls writhe in a dew", an image which recalls the conclusion of "Ariel" and anticipates that of "Death & Co.". Dew is a form of water and, like the cloud, the image suggests life's evanescence. Water, in Plath's poetry, is associated with birth, death and rebirth, and Cooper points out that dew is a symbol of spiritual refreshment and immortality. Dew is related to the moon and nightfall (Cooper: 50). Rosenblatt believes that, in "Ariel", the

transformation of the self into water (dew) that will eventually be burned up in the solar furnace identifies the poet with the basic creative and destructive elements of the universe, water and fire.

He sees the motion as "a cosmic journey to the source of life energy", the sun (Rosenblatt: 32).

From "Stasis in darkness", a stillness which is death-like, the protagonist of "Ariel" gallops rapidly towards the light, regeneration and rebirth. The scarlet "Eye" of the sun symbolizes either destruction or illumination and Plath combines the two meanings, for the rider of "Ariel" achieves illumination in destruction. Her flight into the consuming "cauldron" of the sun is "Suicidal", but it also brings unity as she becomes "one with the drive". The "I" who is the arrow and the dew fuses with the "Eye" of morning. Kroll notes that "Ariel" refers to the lion or lioness of God, or the altar or hearth of God, and that the word is associated with sacrifice and the holocaust (Kroll: 181). But Blessing stresses that what "counts here is acceleration, not allusion". Sensing a pun on "dew" and "do", he describes the persona of "Ariel" as "less pure spirit than pure act" (Lane: 65).

Activity, in Plath's poetry, is allied to making. And, on one level, the journey

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning . . .

is an artistic one. Graves refers to the cauldron of Cerridwen or the cauldron of inspiration, from which the triple muse was reputedly born (Graves: 27, 76). In The White Goddess, the cauldron is associated with "rebirth and re-illumination" (Graves: 88).

The speaker of "The Couriers" hears

. . . the immaculate
Cauldron, talking and crackling

All to itself on the top of each
Of nine black Alps.

According to Graves, "the word Muse is now generally derived from the root mont, meaning a mountain" and the nine muses - the goddess as ennead - who tended Cerridwen's cauldron lived on a mountain range (Graves: 385, 391). Where the cauldron of "Ariel" receives the dew, the cauldron of "The Couriers" is linked to the "Frost on a

leaf". Lavers detects a symbolic relationship between frost, snow and dew, and she feels that the image of frost on the leaf grows from the opening line of "The Couriers", for the trail of the snail resembles the dew or frost (Newman: 112).

"Ariel", as Blessing remarks, is a poem about riding a horse in which the word "horse" is never mentioned (Lane: 65). Trying to catch the "brown arc" of the neck which is connected to the passing furrow, the persona says:

Something else

Hauls me through air

The poem's movement includes the process of making poetry and "the drive" into the fertile morning is not unlike the impetus behind the "blood jet" of creativity in "Kindness". Air or breath, like blood, is associated with life, whether the life of the poem or the child or the creator. Talking to Orr, Plath said: "As a poet, one lives a bit on air" (Orr: 171). Cooper notes that air is symbolized by "the circle of the heavens, or an arc, and the colours blue, or gold of the sun" (Cooper: 60). In "Ariel", the "brown arc" is the horse's neck and the circle is the solar "Eye". Even the structure of the poem is circular, enhancing the sense of fusion and wholeness.

The link between the horse and creativity is explicit in "Words", a poem which Alvarez feels "is about the way language remains and echoes long after the turmoil of life has passed" (Alvarez: 30). Like

Axes

After whose stroke the wood rings . . .

and reverberates, words travel "Off from the center like horses". Mirroring her subject matter, Plath's images of the words evolve from each other and the sap, oozing from the axed tree, flows into the pool of water which is disturbed by a dropped rock. Noise and

water are associated with creativity and life. While an outside force - be it the axe or the rock - triggers the echoes of noise or the ripples of water, the words acquire a vitality and a permanence of their own, albeit a life at one remove from reality. "Years later", when the persona encounters the linguistic horses "on the road", she finds them "dry and riderless". The words are no longer related to the creator, nor are they dependent on her. Yet the "indefatigable hoof-taps" endure and the tireless motion of the horses contrasts with the "fixed stars" which "Govern a life".

Whether the animal serves as a symbol of making, as in "Words", or as an image of galloping time, as in "Years", the horse is associated with life and furious action. But Plath's attitude to life and death is deeply ambivalent and this is reflected in her mixed feelings about both movement and stasis. The speaker of "Years" celebrates life's process:

What I love is
 The piston in motion ---
 My soul dies before it.
 And the hooves of the horses,
 Their merciless churn.

She disdains the personified "great Stasis", whose "vacuous" blackness is plastered with stars, like "bright stupid confetti". The sentiments are reversed in "Getting There" where the pistons which drive the monotonous wheel of life are forcing the blood and the men into battle. What the traveller yearns for is a

. . . still place
 Turning and turning in the middle air

However different "Getting There" and "Years" may be in mood, both follow a journey through time and space. As the piston of "Getting There" pumps the blood

Into the next mile,
 The next hour . . .

the measurements of distance and time become entangled. At the end of the long journey, says the persona, there is a "minute, a dewdrop". With the "minute", Plath puns on the "small" place the woman is trying to reach. Associated with the "dewdrop", the "minute" becomes the moment of death. Melander sees the "nightmarish journey by train" as a description of dying (Melander: 106). And Ostriker notes that, while the various journeys by horse or train "seem, in violent motion, the antithesis of death's static perfection", they "inevitably turn out to be hurtling as fast as they can toward the point of extinction" (Wagner: 105). But, whether action is celebrated or despised, movement is always an image of life in Plath's symbolic code. What is dying in "Getting There", Kroll suggests, is "the self that identifies with enduring the sufferings of life", the false self (Kroll: 158).

Life, for Plath, is a progression towards death and time is the measure of the distance covered. In "Getting There", the motion through life provides the interminable horror ride. Death, with its promise of rebirth, is the endpoint. Scheerer believes that, in the poems which rely on the journeying motif, "the lusted-for goal" is always "death - death in the form of sweeping away of identity, melding into the primal / impersonal" (Butscher: 173). Linked to the image of the journey is the symbol of the wheel of life and Cooper interprets the wheel as a solar emblem of "Time, Fate, or Karma" (Cooper: 191). Like the wheel, the sun rotates and the cycle of time incorporates birth, life, death and rebirth. In The White Goddess, the wheel is associated with "the goddess of the turning year", be she Nemesis, Isis or Fortuna (Graves: 255). Travelling into the circle of the sun, the figure of "Ariel" is swallowed by time and fuses with the moment. Journeying towards the "minute", an image of split time, the woman of "Getting There" anticipates the rebirth of the self which comes when the wheel of life turns full-circle.

While "Ariel" starts with stasis or death and then gains momentum as the persona achieves unity in motion, "Getting There" begins with the journey and moves desperately towards rest and rebirth, for the speaker links movement with fragmentation. In a sense, the poems focus on different stages of the same journey and both protagonists aspire to wholeness. For the woman of "Getting There", the "face at the end of the flare" becomes a vision of the reborn self, from which the persona is separated by the "obstacles", the fire and the "detonations". Movement serves a dual purpose in the poem, as Hardy stresses, for the motion "creates a trope and a form for unbearable pain, and intolerable need for release" (Hardy: 138). Motion causes suffering, even as it leads to stasis and a relief from life's pain. As the train's "carriages rock" in "Getting There", they become "cradles" and the speaker emerges

. . . from the black car of Lethe,
Pure as a baby.

Like the figure of "Ariel" who becomes the "dew", she reaches the small "dewdrop" and is washed by the waters of oblivion.

But the process of regeneration or rebirth becomes tedious and the voice of the late poems is very weary. "One moves", says Annas, "but only in a circle and continuously back to the same starting point" (Annas: 95). Annas draws a distinction between the poems which rely on the image of the horse and those which employ the train as the means of motion. She feels that, as the poet

increasingly places herself within a social context, one that is historical and linear rather than natural and cyclical, she begins to see herself as trapped.
(Annas: 6).

Like "Lady Lazarus", who seems to yawn as she goes through the motions of returning to "the same place" and "the same face" and the same "Amused shout", the persona of "Getting There" is a tired performer. The poem's conclusion lacks the triumph of the

transformation in "Ariel" and, even as she sheds her "skin" of "old bandages, boredoms, old faces", the reborn self seems to be caught in ritual's rut. "Getting There" is something of an anti-climax to the terrible journey.

"Eternity bores me", says the voice of "Years", and "Eternity" is the province of God or the "great Stasis". The fleeting years

. . . enter as animals from the outer
Space of holly . . .

and Lavers suggests that, in both "Letter in November" and "Years", the holly leaves signify the "petrifying quality of passing time". With its sharp leaves and well-defined edges, Lavers adds, holly symbolizes death (Newman: 115). In particular, as Graves notes, holly "is equated with the birth or passion of Jesus" (Graves: 180). The persona fears that the roaring year may be associated with Christ and his awful "God-bit" which seems to be "Dying to fly and be done with it". But the horse, "as an incarnation of the Spirit of the Solar Year", is also an emblem of the new year (Graves: 385). The speaker of "Years" dismisses "Eternity", with its death and subsequent resurrection, in favour of the present moment and life. The years refuse to be frozen. Although the "blood berries" of the holly "are very still", the moving "hooves will not have it" and the poem concludes with the distant hissing of the pistons.

"Totem" opens with a similar image of eternity and motion. The bright stars of the wide sky become the glittering expanse of an endless "silver" railway line and the galloping horse is replaced by the murderous train. "The engine is killing the track", says the detached voice, adding that it "will be eaten" despite its vastness. According to Hughes, Plath "explained this poem in conversation as 'a pile of interconnected images, like a totem pole'" (Plath CP: 295). And the associative totem is built of eating images.

This is, Uroff notes, "the field that fed the pig that fed the butcher that fed man that feeds on Christ" (Uroff: 154). While food is necessary for life, being consumed is an image of death or mock-death in Plath's work. Motion, in "Totem", is not cyclical but linear, mirroring the pattern of the food chain and the progression of the engine along the "track" of time which "stretches into the distance".

Blood seeps through "Totem", but the blood hints at imminent destruction not life. The farmers have "Fat haunches and blood on their minds", the "world is blood-hot and personal" and the light of dawn is a "blood-flush". As the eater becomes the eaten, the poem edges towards the inescapable "Death with its many sticks". The protagonist says: "There is no mercy in the glitter of cleavers". Nor is there any mercy in the "mad" gesticulations of the spider. With the web's "nets of the infinite", eternity becomes an explicit trap. In "Totem", as Guttenberg points out, the wheel of reincarnation is viewed, "not as delivery round from birth to birth, but as treadmill" (Lane: 150). "There is", the voice suspects, "no terminus, only suitcases" and out of these "the same self unfolds like a suit". Cooper lists the serpent and various lunar animals, like the hare, as symbols of time and rebirth (Cooper: 79, 173). But there is no rebirth in "Totem". The snake is "counterfeit" and "the hare is aborted". Moreover, the spider is one aspect of the death-goddess (Graves: 24).

"Bald and shiny", the unpacked self of "Totem" resembles the moon. While the self has "pockets of wishes" and "Notions and tickets, short circuits and folding mirrors", the wishes and the notions are futile, the tickets are unnecessary, and the escape routes and the mirrors are illusory. What is real is death and

. . . in truth it is terrible,
Multiplied in the eyes of the flies.

The link between the flies, glitter and destruction is not new. The images dominate Plath's early poem, "Suicide off Egg Rock", where the sun strikes "the water like a damnation" and, in "Maenad", time's "endless glitter" unwinds "from the great umbilicus of the sun". In "Ariel", the dazzling light is viewed positively as the persona becomes "a glitter of seas" and creative energy. But in "Totem" glitter is coupled with blood, butchery and sacrifice and the final emblem of the "Totem" pole confirms the growing sense that annihilation, rather than renewal, is the end result of life's eating game. As the goddess waves her arachnid arms and her "nets of the infinite", the stick of the "Totem" proves to be no more than a sticky death.

Glitter, whether it emanates from the warm beams of the sun or the cold rays of the moon, is associated with death. The second business partner of "Death & Co." is a

Bastard
Masturbating a glitter.

Called "the other", he is, as Melander mentions, a male version of the beautiful lunar women who "smile or smoke" in "The Other" and "The Rival" (Melander: 98). Of "Death & Co.", Plath said:

'This poem is 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 other katabolists. I imagine these two aspects of death as two men, two business friends, who have come to call.'
(Plath CP: 294).

"Two, of course there are two", says the persona and the dual image relates to the central dichotomy of Plath's poetry. In "Death & Co.", the persona's ambivalence to both life and death reaches a peak.

Death, in his first guise, represents a stasis which is linked to artistic perfection. Exhibiting the "birthmarks that are his trademark", he tempts the speaker with his "scald scar of water". The image recalls the early poems about the father, where death by drowning is viewed as a form of creative birth. Alvarez feels that, like the father, the first figure of death is "elderly, unforgiving and very dead" (Alvarez: 26). The coldness of this death blends with a vision of nature's destructiveness. Death becomes a hungry "condor", hovering over his prey. "I am not his yet", says the living woman, but her defiance is smoothly eroded by the word "yet". Next, the death dealer plays on the persona's insecurities, telling her how "badly" she photographs. The snapshot is an image of frozen life or arrested movement and, as the title makes clear, this is the subject of "Paralytic". Photographs "visit" the paralyzed man, but they are "dead and flat". As a last bid, the dominant figure of "Death & Co." offers the woman a vision of her babies, chilled

. . . in their hospital
icebox

According to Kroll, the man insinuates that death could "make her that pure and that sweet" (Kroll: 142).

Where the first aspect of death is explored in detail, the "other" warrants only a perfunctory glance. Far from evoking a cold and classical death, the long-haired man "wants to be loved". In his efforts to seduce the woman, death becomes a "masturbating" exhibitionist. Seemingly silent, he tries to catch the persona's attention with his glittering performance. The second death dealer is less chillingly blunt than the first, yet his behaviour is misleading. Although he is associated with movement, sexuality and love, his actions suggest death rather than life. The show has nothing to do with reproduction or creativity, for the sex act is self-directed and essentially sterile. Death or

absence becomes the masturbated glitter. "I do not stir", says the woman, unroused by the "other". But her words are ambiguous and, in remaining still, she aligns herself with death as stasis.

Once Plath has presented the dual faces of death, she modulates the tone, the focus and the images of the poem:

The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star,
The dead bell,
The dead bell.

Because death is envisaged as a business deal, the persona views the proceedings with wry detachment. "Somebody's done for", she concludes. Frost and dew are emblems of death and coldness and, in the final lines of "Death & Co.", dying becomes a form of making. The flower, a symbol of creativity and transient life, is touched by death. Plath uses the image of the flower in diverse ways, even in the very late work. In "Mystic", the "sun blooms, it is a geranium", but the positive symbol of life is tainted by the speaker's memory of the "dead smell of sun on wood cabins". The "geranium" is part of the physical world of the sun, just as in "Leaving Early", written in 1960, the "red geraniums" are "friends" who "stink of armpits" and the "involved maladies of autumn".

"Mystic" is fraught with difficult questions and the recurring query - "what is the remedy?" - plagues the persona who sifts through various options. Seeing God is related to being drained by the solar realm, for the problem arises "Once one has seen God" and "Once one has been seized up" and used "utterly, in the sun's conflagrations". Swallowing the "pill of the Communion tablet" and "walking beside still water" are considered as possible remedies. Both are associated with oblivion and purity, whether medically-induced and religious or mythic and natural. "Memory" is another possible

remedy and the past is easily connected with water in Plath's symbolic code. The final remedy the persona contemplates is

. . . picking up the bright pieces
Of Christ in the faces of rodents

The "rodents" are the church mice "Whose hopes are so low they are comfortable", like the "humpback in his small, washed cottage". The remedies range from immersing the self in the past to finding religious solace in the everyday world, but the value of each "remedy" is questioned.

"The remedy", according to Bassnett, "is living, it is continuing to experience those parts of life that are beautiful, despite the encounter in the past with God" (Bassnett: 138). But living, in "Mystic", is part of the problem rather than the solution, and the poem opens with a description of life which is claustrophobic and negative.

The air is a mill of hooks -
Questions without answer,
Glittering and drunk as flies
Whose kiss stings unbearably
In the fetid wombs of black air under pines in summer.

Symbols of life, like the womb and the air and the summer, are coupled with blackness, flies, glitter and death. This is the realm of "the sun's conflagrations". Because, as Guttenberg notes, Plath "savagely renounces the physical" in the final phase of her poetic development, images of "the destructiveness of the physical world" dominate the late work (Lane: 142).

Deathly perfection, in "Edge", is associated with the realm of the moon, rather than the violent sphere of the sun, and the solar "geranium" is replaced by the lunar "night flower". As the "children leap in their cots" in "Mystic", the image of the blooming sun merges with the beating heart. The pattern is reversed in "Edge", where the dead

woman "has folded" her children "back into her body", like the "petals" of "a rose" which "close" when night sets in. In "Mystic", the sun's "dead smell" evokes a memory of the "stiffness of sails" and "the long salt winding sheets". The "stiffness" suggests death as an end to life's motion and the "winding sheets" hint at embalming or burial. In "Edge", the "odors" spill from "the sweet, deep throats of the night flower" and, with the "folding" movement, death becomes an inversion of birth. As the garden "Stiffens", death is both all-encompassing and unthreatening. Reflected in the night world of the plants, death is a part of nature's ongoing ritual.

The night smells of the garden "bleed" freely and, while blood is Plath's central image of life, spilt blood signifies either creativity or death. In "Edge", bleeding symbolizes creativity and death alike, for the focus is on the achievement of artistic perfection. "Contusion", ostensibly a poem about a bruise, examines the moment when life gives way to death and movement is subsumed by stasis. The bruise functions as an image of repressed life, for the blood is trapped beneath the skin. "Color floods to the spot" and the bruise is "dull purple". While purple is a colour and colour suggests life in Plath's work, the dark hue verges on being black and deathly. The skin surrounding the wound is the "color of pearl" and pearl, like silver and ivory, is associated with moonlight. In contrast to the bruise, the "rest of the body is all washed out". The washing movement of the blood resembles the motions of the sea, another symbol of creativity, and the "Contusion" becomes "a pit of rock" in which the "sea sucks obsessively".

Just as the bruise is the focus of attention, so the "hollow" is the point at which everything turns. The wound, like the "pit", forms the "pivot" of the blood or the water and the point of concentration is the "size of a fly". Like a small black fly which

threatens life,

The doom mark
Crawls down the wall.

Walls, in poems like "Apprehensions" and "Mirror", are associated with the heart which controls the flow of blood and serves as a symbol of love and life. Blood, as the life fluid, is linked with creativity and making. So is the sea. And the watery expanse of the ocean acts as a large mirror which reflects the self and life. In "Contusion", the images of the heart, the sea and the mirror are all related to the symbolic flow of blood which culminates in the bruise. As the "doom mark" creeps down the wall, the poem changes:

The heart shuts,
The sea slides back,
The mirrors are sheeted.

Movement has ceased. And, with the end to motion, the images of life become images of stasis or death.

In "The Couriers", the "ring of gold with the sun in it" is dismissed as a false sign. Truth is related to the mythic realm of the muse and the "disturbance in mirrors". The lunar goddess controls the sea and the tides and even the "gray" mirror of the sea is "shattering". Similarly, in "Words", the watery "mirror" of creativity is disturbed by the falling rock. Like the moon, the mirror acts as a reflector of either life or death and, as life becomes intolerable, the mirror symbolism becomes negative. Life, in "Totem", is comprised of "short circuits and folding mirrors", leading Aird to suggest that the mirror is "associated with the monotonous, inevitable, unchanging process of living" (Aird: 107). Frazer points out that "some peoples believe a man's soul to be . . . in his reflection in water or a mirror" (Frazer: 253). And he adds that "the widespread custom of covering up mirrors or turning them to the wall after a death has taken place in the house" is related to the supposed projection of the soul in the mirror (Frazer: 254).

As life wanes and motion stops, the mirror has nothing to reflect and, in "Contusion", the mirrors of the soul "are sheeted", suggesting death. Lane, noting that "the movement is toward entropy", describes the voice of "Contusion" as "no longer human. It is", he says, "that of Plath's moon" (Lane: 133). The comment is also true of "Edge" and Kroll believes that the speaker and the moon share the same "celestial perspective". She draws attention to the first line of an early version of the poem - "Down there the dead woman is perfected" - to illustrate her point (Kroll: 144). The voice of "Edge" and "Contusion" is remote and impersonal, enhancing the sense of distance and, strangely, removing the earlier feeling of threat. Where the waning moon proved a source of fear in the poems about creativity and children, the death-goddess of "Edge" is calmly accepted. The moon, as a reflector of light, acts as the final image of the mirror in Plath's work. "Staring from her hood of bone", she casts her stony gaze on the earth.

"The illusion of a Greek necessity" flows in the "scrolls" of the woman's "toga" and her robe recalls the

. . . Ionian
Death-gowns . . .

promised to the children in "Death & Co.". The image of stasis is related to the goddess, for Graves calls Io "the horned Moon-goddess" (Graves: 102). In "Edge", Aird feels, "the dead body has the dignity of a piece of classical Greek statuary" (Aird: 86). The moonlit bodies resemble statues, making death a form of creativity. As in "Sculptor", the work of art acquires a permanence which outlasts the life of the flesh. Uroff sees the image of the "scrolls" as a dual reference to the "scrolls" of the death robe and the "scrolls" of poetry. Both, she adds, function as the woman's "final adornment" (Uroff: 168). Children symbolize creativity in Plath's work and the process of artistic birth is inverted as the woman folds her emblems of making "back into her body". "Each dead child" is

"coiled", like "a white serpent", to the woman's breast, but each "Pitcher of milk" is "now empty", suggesting an end to productivity.

Snakes are connected with art in "Snakecharmer", where the serpent symbolizes the mysteries of life, death and the self-created. And the "Serpent of Wisdom" is one of the rivals who dies and is reborn as he vies for the love of the goddess (Graves: 387). The allusion to the children as serpents prompts Uroff and Kroll to sense a parallel between the dead woman of "Edge" and Shakespeare's dying Cleopatra (Uroff: 168; Kroll: 145-146). Bassnett, on the other hand, hears an echo of the myth of Medea (Bassnett: 26). According to Graves, Shakespeare's "magnificent and wanton" Cleopatra, "by love of whom Antony is destroyed", is an accurate portrayal of the capricious goddess (Graves: 426). Medea, "the Corinthian Goddess who killed her children", is linked with Cerridwen and the cauldron of inspiration (Graves: 88). In "The Couriers", the cauldron is "talking and crackling" to itself and "crackle" is one of the words Plath uses to describe the "blacks" of the moon in "Edge".

Dressed in her "blacks", the moon takes on the attributes of the goddess of death and divination. Kroll has noted that the lunar goddess functions as both agent and emblem in Plath's poetry, for she alternately causes and represents the protagonist's state of being (Kroll: 126). The persona veers between identifying herself with the destructive goddess of vengeance - be she queen bee or spider or other - and renouncing the impartial deity who threatens to intrude on her creative realm. Aird suggests that, in "Edge", Plath "moves towards a fusion of the worlds of love and tenderness symbolized by her children and that of the moon" (Aird: 111). "Balloons", written on the same day as "Edge", has as its title subject the brightly coloured "soul-animals" which inhabit the home. "Such queer moons we live with", says the woman of the balloons and, although the symbolism

is ambivalent, the moon has entered the serenity of the domestic realm. Even as the illusory bubble pops in the child's hands, the moon image is not sinister. Death, as Newman avers, "is pre-eminent but strangely unoppressive" in Plath's very last poems (Newman: 53).

"Edge" begins with the vision of the "perfected" woman and ends with the image of the watching moon. In a sense, the woman mimicks the goddess Plath described as "the hungry cosmic mother" in 1955. As the "cosmic mother sees the world shrunk to embryo again", she gathers "her sleeping children back into the dark" (Plath J: 91). Annas feels that the woman of "Edge" has assumed some of the power of the primal goddess who consumes her children and the world, "turning back time to embryo and chaos" (Annas: 123). And Kroll sees a parallel between the actions of the woman and the moon: "The Moon-muse has reclaimed her daughter just as the daughter has reclaimed and reabsorbed her own children" (Kroll: 145). The muse, Graves stresses, inspires creativity and destruction alike and "though she loves only to destroy, the Goddess destroys only to quicken" (Graves: 434). Looking at the dead woman of "Edge", the moon is not saddened by what she sees. "She is used to this sort of thing", says the remote voice. As the price of her love and inspiration, the goddess asks for the life of the poet (Graves: 447).

Analyzing the peculiar relationship between the female poet and the muse, Jong notes "how frequently . . . the poet identifies herself with witch, crone, or principle of destruction". She adds that, while the male poet views death as an outside force, the woman poet tends to see death within the self and that the force is "often identified with poetic creativity - a dangerous craft for women" (Jong: 32). That "Edge" should be the last of Plath's Collected Poems is simultaneously disturbing and apt. Even as the work

reinforces the critical interpretation which sees Plath's poetry and her death as inseparable, "Edge" provides the perfect conclusion to the mythic journey through the realm of creativity and life. Graves believes that if the woman who concerns herself with poetry is not content to be "a silent Muse" she should "be the Muse in a complete sense", writing with the "antique authority" of the goddess. "She should", he adds, "be the visible moon: impartial, loving, severe, wise" (Graves: 447).

Transfixed by the cold light of the watching moon, the dead woman of "Edge" is "perfected" and still, for the agonizing process of living and "Getting There" has come to an end. Static and perfect, she resembles the moon and Annas suggests that the woman takes on both the characteristics of the lunar deity and some of her power (Annas: 124). Life's ongoing movement has yielded to the finality of death as a cessation of action and the woman's bare

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

Howard sees Plath's "yearnings towards deadlock, towards stasis" as being

beyond the pleasure principle; they tend rather to that great kingdom of alienation, of otherness we call ecstasy (standing outside oneself) which is not a matter of moving around but of being encircled, of being the centre of an orbit, of being transfigured, standing still. . . .

(Newman: 82).

In crossing the "Edge", the boundary between life and death, Plath's persona achieves a still detachment. She has reached the end of her creative and her mythic journey.

Conclusion: "Three Women" and Plath's Images of Life

As the New Moon or Spring she was girl; as the Full Moon or Summer she was woman; as the Old Moon or Winter she was hag.

(Graves: 386).

. . . the New Moon is the white goddess of birth and growth; the Full Moon, the red goddess of love and battle; the Old Moon, the black goddess of death and divination. . . . The three standing stones thrown down from Moeltre Hill near Dwygyfylchi in Wales in the iconoclastic seventeenth century may well have represented the lo trinity. One was white, one red, one dark blue, and they were known as the three women.

(Graves: 70).

While the figure of Graves's tripartite goddess of nature appears throughout Plath's poetry, the influence of The White Goddess is particularly apparent in her verse play, Three Women. Assuming the changing forms of earth mother, lunar muse and queen of the underworld, the emblematic deity affects the protagonists and the drama relies on a mix of seasonal, lunar and chthonic images. White, red and black - the symbolic colours of the goddess - are the shades which dominate the work. Citing Graves's comment about the lo trinity and the standing stones, Kroll notes that "each of the women in Plath's radio play represents one of the same three phases". She adds:

White, the New Moon color of "birth and growth" . . . expresses the fate of the "Wife" who gives birth to a son. Red, the Full Moon color of "love and battle," expresses the fate of the unmarried "Girl" who gives up her newborn daughter. Black, the Old Moon color of "death and divination," expresses that of the "Secretary" who has miscarried.

(Kroll: 58).

Kroll's contention, however interesting, is misleading.

Plath uses the figure of the White Goddess and images of conflict within the natural realm as a way of expressing the divisions of the self. Rosenblatt and Aird have pointed out that she translates her inner struggle into external dramatic terms (Rosenblatt:

24; Aird: 52). Likening the voices of Three Women to those of "very nearly disembodied wombs", Stevenson suggests that the trio "speak for stages in Sylvia's initiation into motherhood, which for her was tantamount to being reborn herself" and she adds that "each voice is recognizably hers". The first voice, according to the biographer, returns to a house "very like Court Green in Devon", the setting for the second voice's experience is "obviously London", and the third voice is "Sylvia's neurotic student self" at Cambridge (Stevenson: 232-234). Each woman seems to be associated with a different period both in Plath's personal life and in her growth as a poet. Very broadly, she adopts the masks and voices of girl, woman and witch in succession.

From 1956 to early 1959, Plath's experience was largely confined to the academic and romantic planes. She read English at Cambridge University until June 1957 when she and her husband moved to the United States. In October of that year, she began teaching at Smith College and Hughes later took up a post at the University of Massachusetts. Together, they decided in 1958 to leave the teaching profession and concentrate on writing (Plath CP: 275-287). On an intellectual and an emotional level alike, the period seems to have been characterized by new discoveries and personal growth. In a sense, 1956 was the year of Plath's birth as a poet. Through Hughes, she discovered a world she "never knew: all nature" and she began to make the realm a part of her artistic terrain (Plath LH: 235). Poems like "Two Sisters of Persephone" and "Strumpet Song" rely on nature as a means of portraying the ambiguity the young persona feels within her self. Adopting the contradictory figure of Graves's goddess to express the clash between the life force and a deadly power, Plath uses the dichotomy of life and death to convey a series of opposing attitudes.

In Three Women, the voice of the third character is primarily ambivalent.

Like the White Goddess of birth and growth, or the New Moon as girl, the speaker is torn between sets of polarities. On learning that she is expecting a child, she admits that all she "could see was dangers: doves and words". As she stares at her reflection, the mother-to-be feels detached from the altered self she sees in the water. "The face in the pool was beautiful," she muses, "but not mine". While preparing for her Smith College honours thesis in late 1954, Plath read "about the ego as symbolized in reflections (mirror and water), shadows, twins" (Plath LH: 146). Fascinated by the notion of the double, she uses the image of the self reflected in water to suggest the deathly aspect of the living self. The student persona of Three Women views her pregnancy as the outcome of a series of events and she regards the birth of her child as a form of death. Her "red, terrible girl" acts as a negative aspect of herself and she rejects her.

For the third speaker, love is seen as dangerous and threatening. Using dual images of life and death to convey her mixed feelings, she detects "a snake in swans" and nature seems to tear her in opposing directions. Although she "wasn't ready" and she "had no reverence", the face of the baby changes - "shaping itself with love" as if she is prepared for the event. In "Two Sisters of Persephone", Plath sets an austere existence against a more sensuous one and the siblings assume the aspects of death and life. Controlled restraint is balanced by the unstoppable forces of nature in both the 1956 poem and the words of the third voice. While the girl is unable to revoke her action, she manages to reorder her life after the birth, opting for the role of student rather than that of mother. Not a baby but the books she carries "wedge" into her side. She elects to be "solitary as grass" and she is not out of place among the lovers, "black and flat as shadows". Yet she misses something. Like the persona of "Winter Landscape, with Rocks", she yearns for a lost purity and simplicity. "The swans are gone", but the memory of their whiteness remains.

White is an ambiguous colour and Graves stresses that if the "whiteness of the Goddess" evokes images of purity, it also suggests "the horrifying whiteness of a corpse, or a spectre, or leprosy" (Graves: 434). Plath tends to couple the moon with suffering and anguish, and white, as the colour of moonlight, is linked with illness and pain. What the third voice of Three Women dreads is "the white clean chamber with its instruments" and its "shrieks". Apprehensively, the girl asks: "And what if two lives leaked between my thighs?", for she regards childbirth as a negative act which threatens her very existence. Blood, like whiteness, is associated with the ambivalent figure of the moon goddess and blood serves as a dual image of life and death. Because the red fluid is necessary for life and energy, a loss of blood leads to death or an absence of vitality. The images of the moon and blood fuse in the girl's speech, where the lights of the hospital ward resemble "flat red moons" which "are dull with blood".

In her early poems about her craft, Plath develops a correlation between the moon, making and menstruation. Bleeding and bearing children are allusions to female forms of creativity. With its layers of images of pregnancy, birth, miscarriage and blood, Three Women is a dramatic exploration of art and of the woman poet's attitude to her talent. Throughout the verse play, the girl is an ambivalent figure and, like the persona of "The Disquieting Muses" who views her destiny as female poet as a source of otherness and a curse, she regards the act of giving birth as a negation of normality. Far from being a positive urge and a celebration of new life, creativity is akin to ritual death for the third speaker. "I should have murdered this, that murders me", she says, marring the moment of birth with the reference to killing and being killed. In the poems about art, flatness is opposed to the rounded body of the pregnant woman and bleeding contrasts sharply with producing a baby. By drawing attention to the "flat red moons" which bleed light into the ward, Plath twists the images of life and creativity to illustrate the girl's duality.

Once she has given birth to her child, the third voice struggles to escape from what she has created and the image of her unwanted daughter seems to haunt her.

I see her in my sleep, my red, terrible girl.
 She is crying through the glass that separates us.
 She is crying, and she is furious.

Using images of glass and sleep, Plath hints at a type of death-in-life or mock-death and the short staccato lines accentuate the sense of detachment and pain which characterizes the speech. Like the persona of 1958 who examines her relationship with her dead father, the third voice feels cut off from the other. While the roles are reversed in Three Women and the speaker is the parent, not the child, the image of the journey recurs. As her daughter becomes "a small island, asleep and peaceful", the girl envisages herself as "a white ship hooting: Goodbye, goodbye". Resisting the "hooks" and "arrows" of her baby's cries, she makes the transition from one phase to another. Where the persona of "Full Fathom Five" longs for death by water as a type of creative birth, the play's third speaker sees the act of giving birth as the end of a phase of her life.

As she dons "the clothes of a fat woman" she no longer knows, the girl begins to resume her former identity. She imagines herself as "a wound walking out of hospital" and she leaves her "health behind", suggesting that her baby is associated with life and well-being. Yet however vulnerable she feels after her chthonic experience - and images of pain and loss dominate her postnatal speeches - she wrenches herself away, undoing the fingers of the child "like bandages". Back at college, the girl takes up her student persona. While her "black gown" is an indicator of her seriousness, it is also "a little funeral" and she cannot shrug off the sense that she has lost something. "There is an emptiness", she says sadly. But "the colleges are drunk with spring", and spring, as the season of new life and growth, is an image of hope and cyclical regeneration in Plath's work. As the girl tries to convince herself that what happened was no more than "a

dream, and did not mean a thing", she starts to feel that her "old wound" is "healing" in spite of her sense of sorrow and loss.

In contrast to the third speaker, the first voice of Three Women accepts both the process of carrying a child and the act of giving birth as her natural lot. Hers is the speech that opens the verse play and Plath begins the work by drawing a parallel between the woman and the universe. Slowly and patiently, the wife moves through the period of pregnancy, just as the globe turns about its axis. Juhasz believes that the images used by the first voice capture "the condition of unity between one's own body and the body of the world that the woman entering into childbirth feels" (Juhasz: 102). Even as her calmness gives way to the agony of labour, the wife continues to define herself in natural terms. Unperturbed by the whiteness and silence around her, she says:

I am dumb and brown. I am a seed about to break.
The brownness is my dead self, and it is sullen:
It does not wish to be more, or different.

Like the mother figure of "Poem for a Birthday" who sees herself as a mummy in both senses of the word, the woman is assuming a new identity.

Writing in her journal on 20 June 1959, Plath claims to "want to be an Earth Mother in the deepest richest sense". She adds that she has "turned from being an intellectual, a career woman: all that is ash to me" (Plath J: 312). While working on "Poem for a Birthday" at Yaddo, she was pregnant with her first child and Hughes has suggested that she regarded the time as both an end and a beginning (Newman: 191). In Three Women, the first voice seems to experience a shattering of the false self as her labour progresses and giving birth is at once a creative and a destructive process. "I am breaking apart like the world", she says as she becomes "the center of an atrocity". Aird stresses that "because the process of flowering or birth necessarily involves the decay and

death of the old self an image of natural death is used" (Aird: 59). The change in self-perception that accompanies pregnancy and motherhood finds an echo in Plath's artistic development. As the roles of woman and poet begin to overlap, the dominant persona of the poems resembles Graves's nature goddess in her Full Moon phase. Associated with procreation, love and battle, the Red Goddess is fundamentally positive and life-affirming.

Almost three years before she gave birth to Frieda, Plath recorded her desire to find "images of life: like Woolf found" and she added: "I will write until I begin to speak my deep self, and then have children, and speak still deeper" (Plath J: 165). That the child serves as one of her prime images of life seems to indicate that Plath accepts her dual role as creator of babies and poems. Giving birth to either is a "cruel" miracle and the wife's description of the process applies to both types of labour:

I am dragged by the horses, the iron hooves.
I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work.

As the woman feels her power increasing, she takes on the might of the nature goddess and she folds her hands on the "mountain" of her stomach. She elaborates on the creative act:

The air is thick. It is thick with this working.
I am used. I am drummed into use.
My eyes are squeezed by this blackness.
I see nothing.

Gilbert points out that the passage about childbirth could be "about escaping or about writing poetry" and she sees all three as ways of transcending the self (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 256).

Children, for the first voice, are the "miraculous ones" and they "are walkers of air". As "pure, small images", babies are symbols of sheer vitality, as well as being little versions of the self. Motion, noise, colour and blood combine to make the child one

of Plath's most positive images of life:

He flew into the room, a shriek at his heel.
The blue color pales. He is human after all.
A red lotus opens in its bowl of blood

But the baby is also extremely delicate and the wife notes that her son's "lids are like the lilac-flower" and that his breath is "soft as a moth". Like the mother of "Morning Song", the woman is aware of life's transience and fragility, and her words reveal an undertone of anxiety. As the world becomes a place of "corrosive" rain and withering trees, she yearns to protect her child from "the workable horrors" that surround him. "I shall be a wall and a roof, protecting", she vows, and she longs to assume the life-affirming aspects of the Red Goddess who is "a sky and a hill of good". Like the persona of "Magi", she fears "the slighted godmothers" hovering around the baby.

But the woman knows that her ability to shield him from harsh natural elements is limited. She asks:

How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off?
How long can I be
Gentling the sun with the shade of my hand,
Intercepting the blue bolts of a cold moon?

As her protectiveness swells, the woman imagines herself as "a wall" and she sees her hands as "a bandage to his hurt". Self-assurance has given way to nervous questioning and Plath increases the sense of threat by using a series of images of pain and illness. From describing her own hands as bandages, the woman moves to "those terrible children" who "injure" her sleep with their "fingerless hands". The thalidomide babies seem a far cry from her "pink and perfect" child and she is easily "reassured" by "the clear bright colours of the nursery".

Three Women is set in a maternity ward "and round about". The hospital - at once a place of healing and life, and sickness and death - provides the ideal backdrop for the confrontation between the opposing forces. Life becomes a battlefield and the first speaker recognizes that she will have to fight to guard her son. In spite of what often seems to be complacency, the wife is very vulnerable and Plath relies on many of the images she used in poems like "Tulips" and "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." to suggest that life is in danger. She veers between the image of the "little hearts" that the woman paints "on everything" and the image of the throbbing, red organ of life. After giving birth, the woman admits that it is

. . . a terrible thing
 To be so open: it is as if my heart
 Put on a face and walked into the world.

Waiting for labour to begin, the woman is "set apart" and her feelings of alienation are heightened by the swabbing ritual which leaves her "lurid with disinfectants, sacrificial." The process of labour becomes a type of crossing from death to life and she imagines herself as a flimsy "shell", tossed on the waves of agony and "echoing on this white beach".

After the birth, the first speaker comments that she has been stitched up with silk as if she "were a material". Plath links hospitals with depersonalization and, while all three women undergo a shift in self-perception and identity, the case of the second voice is the most extreme. Featureless faces surround her in the ward and the clinical white sheets create "a world of snow" which hints at death. Her sense of self eroded by her inability to produce a child, the woman confesses that she has "tried to be natural". As a secretary who works in an office in the city, she is removed from the positive aspects of the natural realm and her working environment is as impersonal as that of the hospital. Typing letters with her "alphabetical fingers", she feels alienated from the

humdrum commercial world and this is exacerbated by her discovery of the "small red seep" of blood. The colour drains from her face and she believes that she is "dying" as she sits. Losing the baby is akin to losing "a dimension" of her self and she seems to forfeit her human identity as she takes on the attributes of the office machinery. "Parts, bits, cogs" and "the shining multiples" overwhelm her.

Plath tends to use the symbolical figure of Graves's nature goddess as a way of resolving inner conflict and uniting the divided facets of the self. Images of fragmentation are not uncommon in the poems of 1962 and the secretary - like the dismembered but socially acceptable doll of "The Applicant" - imagines that she is missing "an eye, a leg, a tongue" and she leaves the hospital on "wheels, instead of legs". Where the persona of the early work depends on the other for self-definition, the speaker of late 1962 is forced to create her own identity. Plath and Hughes separated in October of that year. Alone, she tried to make a new life for herself, her young daughter and her son, Nicholas, born in January 1962. Leaving the old home in Devon, the three moved to London and faced the coldest winter since 1947 (Plath CP: 292-295; LH: 458-465). Not surprisingly, the persona of the poems Plath wrote at this time is obsessed with recovering her self and she experiments with a number of masks. Now she is the mighty queen bee; now the unstoppable "Lady Lazarus". And her role model is the witch, Graves's Black Goddess of death and divination.

As the Old Moon or hag, the goddess is associated with winter and destruction. The second voice of Three Women knows her well and she holds the crone responsible for the death she spies "in the bare trees". She has caused the pain and the "deprivation":

I know her. I know her intimately -
 Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb.
 Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.
 Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end.
 The sun is down. I die. I make a death.

She seems to recognize the figure as the darker aspect of her self. "How winter fills my soul!", she says, watched by "the moon in the high window". As she internalizes the negative facet of the goddess, the secretary starts to resemble her. With her red mouth, the hungry earth mother swallows the small lives that the woman makes and loses. Preparing to return to her husband and her home, the second speaker uses her lipstick to "draw on the old mouth" which she had discarded with her identity. The mirror reveals a "beautiful" statistic who is ready to face the "incalculable malice of the everyday."

Beauty, associated in Plath's work with the moon as rival or deathly other, is often connected with sterility and physical perfection. In "The Munich Mannequins", the womb which releases its "moons, month after month, to no purpose" serves as an image of creativity as a form of death, rather than a life-enhancing activity. For both the secretary of Three Women and the poet persona of the late poems, making becomes synonymous with destruction. Jong has suggested that, where the male writer sees the lunar muse as external and a temptress, the female poet often regards death as within the self. She adds that

since women in patriarchal society have had so few positive images of self, so few positive images of femaleness, they have identified their creativity - the thing that sets them apart from other people, other women - with destructiveness.

(Jong: 32).

"I feel it enter me, cold, alien, like an instrument", says the secretary of the moon. As she internalizes the destructive side of the goddess, she is able to "make a death" and "create corpses".

Just as the moon "drags the blood-black sea around" every month, so the woman produces not babies but blood. "I am helpless as the sea at the end of her string", she laments. Losing the potential lives, she is "bled white as wax" and the second voice becomes as "flat and virginal" as the waning moon. Adrienne Rich points out that the moon is a virgin in the primal sense of being "the woman who belongs to herself" (Rich: 96). Solitary and self-contained, the lunar goddess has no need to reproduce her image. Infertility, notes Aird, is "imagistically associated with the human world in all its more terrible aspects" (Aird: 63). In particular, flatness or the inability to bear a child is seen as a masculine trait in Three Women. As she watches the men in the office, the secretary describes them as "jealous gods" who "would have the whole world flat because they are". She adds:

I see the Father conversing with the Son.
Such flatness cannot but be holy.
'Let us make a heaven,' they say.
'Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls.'

Flatness, the male God and society stand in direct contrast to pregnancy and childbirth, the White Goddess and the natural realm.

Death, in Plath's poetic code, is a form of absence or emptiness and the flat stomach is an image of loss and the failure to create new life. Engulfed by "so much emptiness", the secretary is aware of the "terrible cessation of everything" and she feels "a lack". Life, in "Getting There", is a horror ride on a hurtling train, and death, the endpoint of the journey, provides a welcome rest from the relentless motion. Plath couples death with perfection and stasis in poems like "Edge" and "The Munich Mannequins". And, in the dark, the second voice of Three Women senses

The face of the unborn one that loved its perfections,
The face of the dead one that could only be perfect
In its easy peace, could only keep holy so.

But while the lost baby is clearly associated with death as stasis, the secretary is compelled to keep travelling along life's "silver track of time" and she prepares to "move into a long blackness".

As the images of society merge with those of nature, Plath softens the tone of the second voice's speech. The goddess follows a cyclical progression from birth through life to death and the ongoing process eventually leads to rebirth. With time, the woman learns to accept her fate and bitterness is replaced by a quiet pain. Things, she knows, can be "erased, ripped up and scrapped, begun again". At home, "mending a silk slip" while her husband pages through a book, she becomes aware of a "tenderness" that seems to touch the statues. Winter has given way to the season of birth and growth, and the "spring air" hints at "something healing". Like the city, the woman "waits and aches". Time passes and she tries to keep herself occupied. "I think I have been healing", she says, tentatively. "The streets may turn to paper suddenly", suggesting a sense of unreality, but the secretary recovers from "the long fall" and rediscovers her identity. "I find myself again", she states. Bassnett detects "a conscious effort to foreground life, even when the poems speak of the greatest pain" and she believes that "this characteristic . . . marks Sylvia Plath as a survivor poet, a writer with a message of hope" (Bassnett: 135). While the last lines of Three Women rely on an awareness of life and death as interconnected, the final image is fundamentally positive and typical of Plath's own attitude:

. . . The little grasses
Crack through stone, and they are green with life.

BibliographyI. By Sylvia Plath:

Plath, Sylvia. 1965. Ariel. London: Faber and Faber.

Plath, Sylvia. 1981. Collected Poems. Edited and introduced by Ted Hughes.
London: Faber and Faber.

Plath, Sylvia. 1971. Crossing the Water. London: Faber and Faber.

Plath, Sylvia. 1977. Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams and other prose writings. London: Faber and Faber.

Plath, Sylvia. 1986. Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963. Selected and edited with commentary by Aurelia Schober Plath. London: Faber and Faber.

Plath, Sylvia. 1976. The Bell Jar. London: Faber and Faber.

Plath, Sylvia. 1967. The Colossus. London: Faber and Faber.

Plath, Sylvia. 1982. The Journals of Sylvia Plath. Edited by Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough. New York: The Dial Press.

Plath, Sylvia. 1971. Winter Trees. London: Faber and Faber.

II. About Sylvia Plath or related to her work:

Aird, Eileen. 1973. Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Work. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd.

Alvarez, A. "Sylvia Plath". The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium. 1970. Edited by Charles Newman. London: Faber and Faber.

Alvarez, A. 1971. The Savage God: A study of suicide. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Annas, Pamela J. 1988. A disturbance in mirrors: the poetry of Sylvia Plath. New York, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press.

Aronson, Theo. 1964. The Golden Bees: The Story of the Bonapartes. London: Oldbourne.

Bassnett, Susan. 1987. Sylvia Plath. London: Macmillan.

Blessing, Richard Allen. "The shape of the psyche: vision and technique in the late poems of Sylvia Plath". Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry. 1979. Edited by Gary Lane. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press.

Butscher, Edward. "In Search of Sylvia: An Introduction". Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work. 1977. Edited by Edward Butscher. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.

Campbell Joseph. 1956. The Hero With A Thousand Faces. New York: Meridian Books.

Chodorow, Nancy. 1978. The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

Cleverdon, Douglas. "On Three Women". The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium. 1970. Edited by Charles Newman. London: Faber and Faber.

Cluysenaar, Anne. "Post-culture: Pre-culture?" British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey. 1972. Edited by Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop. Oxford: Carcanet Press.

Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English. 1984. Edited by J.B. Sykes.
Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Cooper, J.C. 1978. An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols. London:
Thames and Hudson.

De Beauvoir, Simone. 1984. The Second Sex. (Translated by H.M. Parshley.)
England: Penguin Books.

Eliot, T.S. 1986. Collected Poems 1909 - 1962. London: Faber and Faber.

Erikson, P.D. 1972. "Some Thoughts on Sylvia Plath". Unisa English Studies Vol.
X, no. 2: pp. 45-52.

Ferrier, Carole. "The beekeeper's apprentice". Sylvia Plath: New Views on the
Poetry. 1979. Edited by Gary Lane. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University
Press.

Frazer, J.G. 1974. The Golden Bough. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Friedan, Betty. 1963. The Feminine Mystique. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd.

Gilbert, Sandra M. "In Yeats' House: The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath".
Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath. 1984. Edited by Linda W. Wagner. Boston,
Massachusetts: G.K. Hall & Company.

Gilbert, Sandra M. "A Fine, White Flying Myth: The Life / Work of Sylvia Plath".
Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets. 1979. Edited by Sandra M.
Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. 1988. No Man's Land. New Haven and
London: Yale University Press.

Graves, Robert. 1962. The White Goddess. London: Faber and Faber.

Griffin, Susan. 1982. Made from this Earth: Selections from her Writing, 1967 -
1982. London: The Women's Press.

Guttenberg, Barnett. "Plath's cosmology and the house of Yeats". Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry. 1979. Edited by Gary Lane. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press.

Hardy, Barbara. 1977. The Advantage of Lyric: Essays on Feeling in Poetry. University of London: The Athlone Press.

Holbrook, David. 1976. Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence. University of London: The Athlone Press.

Howard, Richard. "Sylvia Plath: 'And I Have No Face, I Have Wanted to Efface Myself. . .'" . The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium. 1970. Edited by Charles Newman. London: Faber and Faber.

Howe, Irving. "The Plath Celebration: A Partial Dissent". Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work. 1977. Edited by Edward Butscher. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.

Hughes, Ted. "Notes on the chronological order of Sylvia Plath's poems". The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium. 1970. Edited by Charles Newman. London: Faber and Faber.

Jones, A.R. "On 'Daddy' ". The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium. 1970. Edited by Charles Newman. London: Faber and Faber.

Jong, Erica. 1982. Witches. London, Toronto, Sydney, New York: Granada.

Juhasz, Suzanne. 1978. Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition. New York: Octagon Books.

Jung, Carl G. and M-L. von Franz. (Editors). 1978. Man and his Symbols. London: Pan Books.

Kroll, Judith. 1976. Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath. New York: Harper & Row.

Lameyer, Gordon. "The Double in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar". Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work. 1977. Edited by Edward Butscher. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.

Lane, Gary. "Influence and originality in Plath's poems". Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry. 1979. Edited by Gary Lane. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press.

Lavers, Annette. "The World as Icon: On Sylvia Plath's Themes". The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium. 1970. Edited by Charles Newman. London: Faber and Faber.

Legrand, Gérard. 1979. Giorgio de Chirico. New York: Filipacchi Books.

Lucie-Smith, Edward. "Sea-imagery in the work of Sylvia Plath". The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium. 1970. Edited by Charles Newman. London: Faber and Faber.

Lynton, Norbert. 1989. The Story of Modern Art. Oxford: Phaidon Press Ltd.

Mazzaro, Jerome. "Sylvia Plath and the cycles of history". Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry. 1979. Edited by Gary Lane. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press.

Melander, Ingrid. 1972. The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.

Moers, Ellen. 1978. Literary Women. London: The Women's Press Limited.

Nance, Guinevara A. and Judith P. Jones. "Doing Away with Daddy: Exorcism and Sympathetic Magic in Plath's Poetry". Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath. 1984. Edited by Linda W. Wagner. Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall & Company.

Neumann, Erich. 1955. The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype. (Translated by Ralph Manheim). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Newman, Charles. "Candor is the Only Wile: The Art of Sylvia Plath". The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium. 1970. Edited by Charles Newman. London: Faber and Faber.

Olsen, Tillie. 1981. Silences. London: Virago.

Orr, Peter. 1966. The Poet Speaks. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Ostriker, Alicia. "The Americanization of Sylvia". Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath. 1984. Edited by Linda W. Wagner. Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall & Company.

Perloff, Marjorie G. "Angst and Animism in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath". Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath. 1984. Edited by Linda W. Wagner. Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall & Company.

Perloff, Marjorie G. "On the Road to Ariel: The 'Transitional' Poetry of Sylvia Plath". Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work. 1977. Edited by Edward Butscher. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.

Phillips, Robert. "The Dark Funnel: A Reading of Sylvia Plath". Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work. 1977. Edited by Edward Butscher. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.

Radin, Paul. 1952. African Folktales. New York: Princeton University Press.

Rich, Adrienne. 1977. Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution. London: Bantam Books.

Rosenblatt, Jon. 1979. Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Ruthven, K.K. 1976. Myth. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.

Sanazaro, Leonard. "The Transfiguring Self: Sylvia Plath, a Reconsideration". Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath. 1984. Edited by Linda W. Wagner. Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall & Company.

Scheerer, Constance. "The Deathly Paradise of Sylvia Plath". Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work. 1977. Edited by Edward Butscher. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.

Schmidt, Joël. 1980. Larousse Greek and Roman Mythology. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

Shakespeare, William. 1987. The Tempest. Edited by Frank Kermode. London and New York: Methuen.

Singer, June. 1986. The Unholy Bible: Blake, Jung and the Collective Unconscious. Boston: Sigo Press.

Smith, Pamela. "Architectonics: Sylvia Plath's Colossus". Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work. 1977. Edited by Edward Butscher. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.

Spacks, Patricia Meyer. 1976. The Female Imagination. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

Steiner, Nancy Hunter. 1974. A Closer Look at Ariel: a memory of Sylvia Plath. London: Faber and Faber.

Stevenson, Anne. "Writing as a Woman". Women Writing and Writing about Women. 1979. Edited by Mary Jacobus. London: Croom Helm, in association with Oxford University Women's Studies Committee.

Stevenson, Anne. 1989. Bitter Fame: a Life of Sylvia Plath. London: Viking.

Uroff, Margaret Dickie. 1980. Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press.

Vallier, Dora. (no date). Henri Rousseau. London: Thames and Hudson.

Van Dyne, Susan R. " 'More Terrible Than She Ever Was': The Manuscripts of Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems". Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath. 1984. Edited by Linda W. Wagner. Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall & Company.

Vendler, Helen. 1980. Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press.

Vendler, Helen. 1988. The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics. USA: Harvard University Press.

Wagner, Linda W. (Editor). 1984. Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath. Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall & Company.

Wagner-Martin, Linda. 1988. Sylvia Plath: A Biography. London: Chatto & Windus.