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Self-Transformation: Images of
Domesticity in the Poetry of Sylvia
Plath and Adrienne Rich

Allison Carey
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Since the advent of the second wave of feminism in the United States, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich have been canonized, not only in the mainstream literary canon but also in the feminist canon. Their poetry echoes concerns of the contemporary feminist movement, and it is often cited as an example of feminist poetics. Even though Plath did not live to see this second wave of feminism, she is often referred to as a feminist poet, and Rich herself is a voice in the feminist movement, which she often promotes and develops through her poetry.

Because of the changes that have been wrought in American life by this second wave of feminism, it is easy to forget that Rich and Plath began writing in the 1950's, when feminist literature was uncommon and certainly not recognized (and canonized) by mainstream critics as it is now. After World War II, women were encouraged to leave the workforce and to return to the home. The media presented glamorous images of women whose identities were confirmed by their concentration on marriage, family, and housekeeping. Rather than being encouraged to achieve their highest intellectual potential, women were urged to fulfill themselves through achievements in the traditional female roles of wife and mother. This is the environment in which Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich graduated from college and began their writing careers.

Rich's and Plath's early poetry demonstrates a deep suspicion of this feminine ideal. Both poets make liberal use of irony and sarcasm to criticize these constrictive, idealized, and often sentimentalized images of women and their worlds. Beyond such irony, however, Plath and Rich make concerted efforts to revise and

redeem the roles of women through their poetry. Plath and Rich undermine, through various poetic methods, the assumptions about womanhood that were accepted at the time that they began their careers. Both poets find within domesticity a language of images that expresses a range of emotions and ideas, from human desires and fears to metaphysical concerns. This use of domestic imagery to critique domesticity is, in a sense, a revolution from within the system.

Although it is important that they use domestic imagery, more significant is how they redeem and revise the idea of domesticity in their poetry. Instead of resorting to a complete rejection of marriage and domesticity, Plath and Rich seek to establish an essential continuity between domesticity, marriage, and their poetry. They attempt to make domestic work an essential expression of their complex intellectual and emotional lives. Both poets treat the domestic not as trivial or sentimental drivel, but as a complex, subtle language that, according to them, few people understand. Thus, they achieve their transformation by appropriating traditional feminine imagery and using it to express both particular and universal concerns.

As I stated above, part of the task of revisioning the domestic involves the destruction of old stereotypes, whether this is accomplished through Plath's wry irony or Rich's strident polemics. In this work, however, I will not emphasize this criticism of traditional domestic stereotypes; instead, I will concentrate on the poets' revision of domesticity. Plath achieves this revision through the use of domestic imagery in a dense, highly metaphoric verse, as

she represents the domestic world in a haunting range of Gothic terrors. Rich, on the other hand, uses a more concise, prosaic style to accomplish her poetic ends. Through this revisioning of domesticity in their poetry, Plath and Rich critique and transform several of the stereotypes prevalent in the 1950's about women and domesticity.

First, much of their domestic poetry undermines the myth of ideal womanhood that is mentioned above, to assert that women are more than domestic functionaries and furnishings. In addition, Plath and Rich show that women's concerns extend to the universal as well as to the particular and that the particular (i.e., domesticity) need not be trivialized or sentimentalized. They refute the stereotype of domesticity as superfluous, unimportant labor; their poetry addresses serious issues—often metaphysical concerns about life, death, and the nature of living—using domestic imagery.

Plath and Rich are notable, however, for having used these images to portray the mundane as well as the metaphysical, extending a complex analogy between "making in all its forms," (*London Magazine*) as Plath called it: the making of bread and the making of a poem are both offered as valid uses for a woman's creative energy. Adrienne Rich creates an extended metaphor of the nature of housework as a language, which she implies can only be understood by women. Through these and other poetic strategies, Plath and Rich transform the ideas about women and their worlds with which they grew up into forms that are more in accord with their own lives and which anticipate the feminist aesthetic which is to come.

Before examining Plath's and Rich's transformation of the traditional stereotypes of women and domesticity, we must first determine the nature of those stereotypes. Above, I mentioned the cult of the ideal woman, which was firmly in place in the United States from after World War II (when the women were asked to return to the home) until the beginning of second-wave feminism in the mid-to-late 60's. Betty Friedan, a wife, mother, and writer for women's magazines in the 1950's, documented this image of the ideal woman in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, which was published in 1963. Friedan says that this image of the ideal woman (called "the feminine mystique") was propagated by the media, by a glamorization of the housewife role. More importantly for a discussion of Plath and Rich, however, Friedan maintains that this ethic of the feminine mystique was encouraged and disseminated by American higher education in the 50's, just when Plath and Rich attended and graduated from college.

Friedan suggests that social scientists and educators of the time appropriated aspects of various intellectual trends such as Freudian psychology, Margaret Mead's studies of gender roles in primitive societies, and functionalist sociology to create this image of the ideal woman. Friedan says that education itself was used to promote this ideal to intellectual women, through what Friedan refers to as "sex-directed education":

Under the influence of the feminine mystique, some college presidents and professors charged with the education of women had become more concerned with their students' future capacity for sexual orgasm than with their future use of trained intelligence. . . . Thus

higher education added its weight to the process by which American women during this period were shaped increasingly to their biological function, decreasingly to the fulfillment of their individual abilities. Girls who went to college could hardly escape those bits and pieces of Freud and Margaret Mead, or avoid a course in “Marriage and Family Life” with its functional indoctrination on “how to play the role of woman.” (148)

Since Plath and Rich attended college in the 1950's, they too would have inevitably received the message of the feminine mystique. The reader can learn how pervasive this message would have been through an examination of interviews with female college students that Friedan includes in *The Feminine Mystique*.

Friedan interviewed many young women at Smith College in 1959 about their attitudes towards their courses, career plans, and school experiences. (Plath had graduated from Smith only a few years before, in the spring of 1955, four years after Rich had graduated from nearby Radcliffe.) According to Friedan (who had herself graduated from Smith in 1942), female students in her time were interested in their classes, while educators in the 1950's were resorting to offering classes in homemaking to interest female students. One senior at Smith College, in response to Friedan's question on which courses were popular with female students, replied: “Girls don't get excited about things like that anymore. We don't want careers. . . . But a girl who got serious about anything she studied—like, wanting to go on and do research—would be peculiar, unfeminine” (p. 145). Another student added: “The idea is to be casual, very sophisticated. Don't be too enthusiastic about your work or anything. People who take things too seriously are more or less

pitied or laughed at" (p. 146). Plath herself was a victim of this prescription against studying. Many biographers (and Plath herself in *The Bell Jar*) have pointed out that Plath received censure from other young women at Smith for working too hard.¹ Anne Stevenson, in *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*, says of Plath's first year in college:

Yet Sylvia did not easily make friends at Smith. After a lonely first term during which she suffered through a series of dismal blind dates or withdrew inwardly under the pointed sarcasm of girls who disapproved of her staying in to work on weekends, she began at last to make a reputation as a published writer. (25)

An examination of Plath's journal confirms that she received censure from some of the other young women at Smith because she studied so much. In one of her journal entries from her first year at Smith, Plath describes the attitude of the women in her dormitory towards her studying:

There comes a time when you walk downstairs to pick up a letter you forgot, and the low confidential voices of the little group of girls in the living room suddenly ravel into an incoherent mumble and their eyes slide slimily through you, around you, away from you in a snaky effort not to meet the tentative half-fear quivering in your own eyes. And you remember a lot of nasty little tag ends of conversation directed at you and around you, meant for you, to strangle you on the invisible noose of insinuation. . . . So you hear her say to you, "We'd rather flunk school and be sociable than stick in our rooms all the time," and very sweetly, "I never see you. You're always studying in your room!" (22)

Such an passage makes it apparent that Plath did received pressure from her peers to neglect academics in favor of socializing, and Rich would have inevitably received the same sort of pressure when she attended Radcliffe.

Despite this peer ethic against studying, both young women graduated from their respective colleges Phi Beta Kappa and with honors. Plath and Rich continued to pursue their writing, but they both married within two years of college graduation, so they had to combine their established roles as writers with their new places as wives and mothers. Their experiences of domesticity did not differ, in some ways, from that of many women—they had children, nice homes, and husbands who worked in the literary and academic fields. All of their experiences of domesticity were not, however, in harmony with the perfect marriage that the feminine mystique promised. This incongruity between the mystique and reality and the pervasiveness of domesticity in women's lives led Plath and Rich to address questions about the nature and role of domesticity in their writing. Neither of these poets' domestic experiences lived up to their perfect marriage that the media promoted as the ideal for (and the norm of) women in the 50's—in fact, both experienced deep dissatisfaction with their domestic situation within a few years of their marriage. They found that the stereotype of domesticity did not fit into their own experiences, so they transformed, in their lives as in their poetry, their definitions of domesticity. To understand the magnitude of these transformations, one must also understand the particularities of their personal experiences of domesticity and

marriage to recognize the importance of the personal images of domesticity that they will bring to their poetry.

After having graduated from Smith, Plath went to England to pursue an M.A. in English literature at Cambridge on a Fulbright scholarship. It was at Cambridge that she met and married (four months later) her husband, the future poet laureate of England Ted Hughes. After Plath received her degree, the new couple moved from England to the United States and back again, and they settled in Devon, where they attempted to make their living by writing. Plath had two children in as many years, and the Hugheses seemed happy, but the marriage soon started to deteriorate. The situation was exacerbated when Hughes had an affair with a family friend, and Plath and Hughes separated in the summer of 1962. Plath took the children and moved to London for the winter. It was here that she committed suicide in February of 1963, leaving her two children and the unpublished manuscripts that would later make her name.

Rich's life has been as dramatic as Plath's but quite different. She grew up, like Plath, in New England—the daughter of intellectual parents. After Rich graduated from Radcliffe, she travelled in Europe for two years on a Guggenheim Fellowship, then married Alfred Conrad, a Harvard economist, in 1953. Rich had three children, and the couple moved to New York City to teach at City College, where they both became active in the anti-war and civil rights movements, and where Rich became increasingly active in the feminist movement. The couple separated, and Conrad committed suicide in 1970, after which Rich began to increasingly identify herself with the radical feminist movement and publicly declared herself a lesbian.

She has continued to work in the feminist movement and to address feminist and lesbian issues in her work.

Thus, one can see that both poets strove to maintain a writing career while raising families, which was not an extremely common situation (and certainly was not the stereotypical ideal) in the 1950's, when the poets began their careers. The resolution of this incongruity is often played out in their poetry, in which they criticize unpleasant aspects of domesticity (such as uncaring husbands or the exhausting, unfulfilling nature of housework) and emphasize and transform other facets of domestic life. Plath and Rich appropriated domestic imagery for their poetry, whereby they came to terms with their own domestic experiences while they critiqued the aspects of domesticity that they found unfulfilling.

As has already been mentioned, Plath's and Rich's domestic experiences were not in harmony with the stereotype of domesticity that prevailed in the 1950's. So, too, did their poetry and use of domestic imagery differ from the mainstream poetry of the 1950's, which was dominated by an ethic of modernism that mandated a strict separation of art and life. T.S. Eliot, in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," offered an admonition to poets to keep one's life separate from one's poetry:

the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material. (590)

Eliot also maintains that "It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in

any way remarkable or interesting.” (592). Such an aesthetic would have obviously excluded the use of domestic imagery in poetry, just as Plath’s mention of her kitchen and its “stink of fat and baby crap” (“Lesbos,” 31) would certainly have gone beyond Eliot’s restrictions on the separation of life and poetry.

Unlike T.S. Eliot, many American modernists who were well-established writers by the time that Plath and Rich began their careers did not adhere to this separation of art and life. William Carlos Williams, for instance, used a considerable amount of domestic imagery in his poetry. His personal poetic ethic was “No ideas but in things,” and for Williams, many of those things were the objects of the everyday, including domestic objects. In his poem, “This Is Just to Say,” the speaker apologizes for having eaten some plums from the refrigerator:

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast (1-8).

Williams used other domestic images, such as a young housewife doing her daily chores, in his poetry, as did other American modernist poets including Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop. Thus, while Plath and Rich may have violated T.S. Eliot’s mandate against the mixture of a writer’s life and emotion’s with his art, American modernists had been incorporating domestic imagery into

their poems for quite some time before Plath and Rich began their careers.

Plath and Rich, however, use domestic imagery in different ways than had the modernist poets. Those poets had often used domestic imagery to represent the comfort and stability of the everyday or to compare the material world (represented by domestic objects) with civilization's lack of spirituality. Plath and Rich, on the other hand, critique and transform domesticity in their poetry. Rather than using domestic images to portray the trivial and the everyday, Plath and Rich use it to represent everything from the life and death cycle to a sublimation of concern about marital problems into feelings towards a house and its furnishings. In some poems, Plath and Rich use domestic imagery to *celebrate* the domestic—the beauty of a child's innocence and the joy of sharing domestic concerns with a lover are a few of the subjects that they address in this manner. They stress, in fact, that one can validate domesticity as a poetic image in other ways besides using it as a serious metaphor—instead, they insist that domesticity itself is a valid subject of poetry.

The two poets are similar in several respects. First, both Plath and Rich do use domestic imagery in their poetry, to critique domesticity and to revise the stereotype into more suitable and realistic models. Also, they both use the domestic imagery to deal with simple and complex concerns, from celebrations of domesticity to musings about the nature of life. They do differ, however, in the poetic style with which they address domesticity, and, of course, the overall themes of their poems are often different.

Plath's poetic style is dense with complex words and extended metaphors, and the poems often assume a haunted air, as Plath represents the domestic world as a Gothic house of horrors. For example, in Plath's poem "The Jailer" she portrays the husband as the wife's evil jailer and torturer. In this poem, Plath extends the negative impressions of the husband to domestic furnishings when she comments: "My night sweats grease his breakfast plate." (1). Describing her tortures, the narrator says "I have been drugged and raped" (6) and, of her husband, "He has been burning me with cigarettes," (18). Later, the narrator maintains that she is subverting the power of her jailer through whatever means available to her, but that it has no effect:

All day, gluing my church of burnt matchsticks,
I dream of someone else entirely.
And he, for this subversion,
Hurts me, he
With his armour of fakery, (26-30).

At the end of the poem, the narrator states her final conclusion that her husband's victimization of her is his sustenance:

. . . What would the dark
Do without fevers to eat?
What would the light
Do without eyes to knife, what would he
Do, do, do without me? (41-45).

In "The Jailer," many of the most distinctive aspects of Plath's domestic poetry are particularly noticeable. First, Plath uses exaggeration to ridicule and subvert the husband's traditional dominant position in the marriage. She uses an extended metaphor of a husband as a jailer to enforce this point, and one can see here

that Plath was very conscious of the way her poetry sounded. Her repetition of "do" in the last stanza gives the poem an even more haunted sound. She uses these poetic methods to critique and subvert traditional assumptions about marriage.

Adrienne Rich does, in many of her poems, address some of the same concerns that Plath had addressed, but she does this in a vastly different poetic style. One good illustration of this difference is Rich poem "Novella," which particularly lends itself to a comparison with Plath's "The Jailer." In "Novella," which appeared in Rich's fourth volume of poetry *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, one can easily see how Rich's prosaic style contrasts with Plath's more poetic, highly metaphoric one. While Plath established the metaphor of jailer to critique the husband's position, Rich is more direct—in "Novella," she focuses on a marital argument to illustrate the problems in a marriage. Like Plath does in "The Jailer," Rich highlights a troubled marriage and shows that the couple's anger towards one another is displaced into feelings about their house or its furnishings. Unlike Plath, however, she accomplishes this using simpler language and without establishing a metaphor to communicate her message. The poem begins:

Two people in a room, speaking harshly.
 One gets up, goes out to walk.
 (That is the man.)
 The other goes into the next room
 and washes the dishes, cracking one.
 (That is the woman.) (1-6).

In these first lines, one can see that Rich uses a much simpler style when establishing much the same situation that Plath used in "The

Jailer," that of a troubled marriage. She shows that the husband and wife take out their aggressions towards one another on the house—the husband leaves the house and the wife breaks a dish. Although the parallel views of husband and wife given at the beginning of the poem seem to say that they are both at fault for the marriage's problems, Rich portrays the woman as much more of a victim when she says later in the poem: "She has no blood left in her heart."(9), as though the husband were a vampire who had victimized his wife. Even though the husband returns home in the last lines of the poem, Rich asserts that the husband and wife are ultimately separate, as she also will in many of her later poems:

The door closes behind him.
Outside, separate as minds
the stars too come alight. (16-18).

Even the simple comparison of these two poems shows that Plath and Rich often critique the same aspects of domesticity—bad marriages or unfulfilling housework—through similar methods, such as the displacement of feelings towards a spouse into feelings towards a house. These similarities in subject matter are significant in that Plath and Rich had such different experiences of marriage and family life. Despite these differences of experience, however, they seem to share many concerns and criticisms about traditional ideas of domesticity and marriage.

It is their stylistic and thematic differences, however, that actually make a comparison worthwhile. Their styles differ greatly, from semantics to their use of metaphor, and the very focus of their domestic imagery is often very different. Plath uses domestic

imagery as a form of ironic subversion, undermining assumptions about marriage and the husband's traditionally dominant role through her use of sarcasm and her exaggeration of domestic encounters and housecleaning problems. She also uses domestic imagery to celebrate the domestic joys, like the comfort of doing familiar household chores or of caring for one's child. Rich, on the other hand, uses domestic imagery to represent the destructive and unfulfilling nature of marriage from a woman's perspective. Rich's verse is much more prosaic and polemic than Plath's. In her later verse, Rich openly condemns marriage and, implicitly, men for this same destructiveness, and she constructs a complex allegory of housework as a sort of a language which men cannot comprehend.

In this paper, I will show that Plath's and Rich's manipulations of the images of domesticity differ, as Plath achieves her poetic ends through subversion of traditional domesticity and Rich uses a more violent polemic to insist on a change in the traditional domestic situation. I have explained that the literary and social ethic of the 1950's, when Plath and Rich came of age, mandated that domesticity should play a major role in a woman's life and that domesticity had little or no place in literature. These poets are important in the ways that they both revolted against and adhered to these rules—they critique domesticity through a use of domestic imagery in their poems, while they were themselves married with children. They both addressed three general areas of domestic life: a woman's life with her husband (or lover), her relationship with her children, and her housework. In the following pages, I will examine Plath's and Rich's treatment of these three areas, stressing their similarity in

subject matter as well as their many stylistic and thematic differences. Finally, I will show that in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich, domesticity is not sentimental, trivial, and dismissable. Instead, for them, domesticity is subversion, sarcasm, and a revisioning of the traditional stereotypes of women's concerns.

I. Husbands and Others

Images of husbands and lovers are extremely pervasive in Plath's and Rich's poetry, but the husbands in these poems bear the brunt of the blame for their criticisms of traditional domesticity. They often use images of husbands that are happy and satisfied, while wives are shown to be unhappy and trapped in the marriage—as in Plath's poem "The Jailer." The husband is shown as a manipulator and victimizer of women, who lives off the labors of his wife and the products of his marriage. Rich, also, often asserts that husbands are such unsuitable partners because they do not appreciate or understand the effort that women expend in domestic activity, particularly in housework. Rich goes so far as to establish an allegory of housework itself as a language, to which men are completely oblivious.

Both poets use the image of a husband as a manipulator, but, as was shown in the comparison of "The Jailer" and "Novella," they use it in vastly different ways. Plath most often portrays the husband as a monster: a vampire, a jailer, a torturer, or any other number of Gothic villains. Rich, on the other hand, criticizes as strongly as Plath, but in a more prosaically and without the metaphors of which Plath is so fond. In Rich's poems, husbands do use women, but this is represented as a crime within itself—Rich doesn't establish any metaphors of torture to couch her critique of domesticity. Rather than say that husbands are *like* torturers, Rich says that husbands *are* torturers in that they manipulate and use their wives, and she insists that this situation must change.

Plath and Rich leveled strong criticisms at the husband's traditional role, particularly at the lack of communication between man and wife and the way in which the husband lived off the inequitable domestic labors of his wife. In addition, however, Plath and Rich also wrote a series of poems examining alternatives to husbands. After Rich publicly declared herself a lesbian in the early 1970's, she began to represent lesbian domestic situations in her poetry. In this poetry, the partners are more gentle and understanding than husbands were shown to be, and the domestic situation itself is a comfort to the narrator and a reminder to her of the love that she shares with her partner.

Sylvia Plath also presented a set of alternatives to husbands in her poetry, but these alternatives appeared in the beginning of her career rather than the end. In the beginning of her literary career, in the few months before she married her husband, Plath wrote a series of poems about unmarried women. In her study *The Dialectics of Art and Life: A Portrait of Sylvia Plath as Woman and Poet*, Sylvia Lehrer suggests that Plath's use of this spinster image was a way for Plath to explore her alternatives to marriage (Sec. 4.2.2).

In the following section, I will examine Plath's spinster poems and show that they are illustrations of her dichotomous view of the nature of womanhood. I will then compare the ways in which Plath and Rich criticize husbands for using their wives and stifling their intellectual creativity and personal growth. Finally, I will examine Rich's proposed alternative to the husband: the lesbian lover, which she offers as being preferable to having a husband. Through these comparisons, the reader will begin to understand how Plath and Rich

criticize domesticity, what aspects of domesticity they find objectionable, and how they transform domesticity in a more liveable form.

One critic, Sylvia Lehrer, states in her book *The Dialectics of Art and Life. A Portrait of Sylvia Plath as Woman and Poet.* that Plath's spinster poems were a formal exercise, done to examine her alternatives to marriage. Several biographers have agreed that Sylvia Plath feared marriage (more than the average person fears marriage) because she was afraid that her domestic life would interfere with her writing.² However Plath did not fear men or marriage itself; instead, she feared the version of marriage that the feminine mystique offered, in which a woman would lose her identity in the jumble of children, husband, and home through which she would express herself. In her journal from her sophomore year at Smith, Plath expresses her fear that she would lose her identity into that of her husband, as she wonders what it would be like to be married:

For instance, I could hold my nose, close my eyes, and jump blindly into the waters of some man's insides, submerging myself until his purpose becomes my purpose, his life, my life, and so on. One fine day I would float to the surface, quite drowned, and supremely happy with my newfound selfless self (36).

Plath also received direct reinforcement of her fear of loss of self in marriage from her boyfriends. In her November 13, 1949 journal entry (unpublished, Lilly³) about a recent date with a boy of whom Plath was extremely fond, she recounts one of their conversations:

We talked about little things—he said he doesn't go for a career woman—a woman's career should be being a wife and mother. But when I protested, he said he'd let his wife have outside interests—she could paint if she wanted to, he conceded.

Despite this generous offer, Plath was not reassured. Her further journals are full of her fears of marriage, with marriage being associated (as above) with suffocation, drowning, and the absorption of her personality by her husband. Her spinster poems, with the possibility of an impending marriage, are a further way in which she examined this fear and attempted to convince herself that marriage was preferable to an unmarried life.

One of Plath's longest poems about a spinster is "Ella Mason and Her Eleven Cats." Ella Mason is described as "Rum and red-faced as a water-melon, her voice/Long gone to wheeze and seed" (7-8). The reader is informed, however, that "in olden days/Ella flounced about, minx-thin and haughty" (13-14), but, unwisely, she rejected all of her suitors. Again, Ella is described: "Now, run to fat, she's a spinster whose door shuts/On all but cats" (17-18). However, the narrator of the poem tells the reader that "we mark Miss Mason/Blinking green-eyed and solitary/At girls who marry—" (37-39). Likewise, at the end of the poem, the reader is left with the maxim that girls who marry, unlike Ella Mason, are "needing no lesson/That vain jades sulk single down bridal nights,/Accurst as wild-cats." (44-46).

"Two Sisters of Persephone" is another of Plath's spinster poems, in which she weighs the value of complete freedom against the value of marriage. This poem, like her other spinster poems, was written immediately before Plath's marriage, during the period of

time in which critics have said that she must have been examining her alternatives to marriage. In this poem, the comparison is even clearer than in most, since Plath is not focusing just on the spinster herself—rather, she gives the reader a picture of two sisters, one of whom marries and one of whom remains a virgin until she dies.

The sister who remains a virgin is portrayed as being contained, almost trapped within the house, while the other sister is shown as being vibrant and always outdoors: “Two girls there are: within the house/One sits; the other without.” (1-2). Plath says of the sister who is in the house:

In her dark wainscotted room
The first works problems on
A mathematical machine. (5-7),

and later uses images of sterility and decay to describe the sister's activities: “At this barren enterprise/Rat-shrewd go her squint eyes,” (10-11).

The other sister, however, is described as a kind of earthmother figure—lush, vibrant, and, above all, fruitful:

Bronzed as earth, the second lies,
...
On that green altar
Freely becomes the sun's bride, the latter
Grows quick with seed.
Grass-couched with labor's pride,
She bears a king. . . .” (13, 20-24).

However, Plath has a more chilling fate in store for the mathematical (i.e., logical and unfeminine) spinster. She too, finds a husband, but only in death:

The other, wry virgin to the last,

Goes graveward with flesh laid waste,
Worm-husbanded, yet no woman. (26-28).

From this poem, one would learn that a woman who did not sacrifice herself and her autonomy on the altar of marriage would die embittered and alone. For this spinster, her only comfort in her virginal death would be to be "Worm-husbanded," although relations with the worms would not count as intercourse, so she still could not be considered a true woman.

In these spinster poems, Plath gives many pieces of advice, but she also gives the reader a good idea of the way Plath herself saw womanhood. Of course, Plath cautions women to get married if they have the opportunity and not to reject their suitors out of hand. Plath also establishes a link between marriage and fecundity, showing a husband-less life to be bleak and barren in more than the obvious sense. Spinsters are shown dying alone or with only cats to keep them company, and since she has never been married and had intercourse, Plath says, a spinster is not a true woman. Evidently, these exercises helped reassure Plath that the fecundity and vibrancy of marriage were preferably to a barren spinster's life, since she married Ted Hughes only a few months after these poems were written. Most of her strong criticism of husbands does not appear in her poetry until the fall of 1962 when she and her husband had separated, six years after she wrote those spinster poems.

Rich, however, used negative images of husbands throughout her career, beginning with her first volume, *A Change of World*, which was published in 1951, two years before she even got married

and continuing through her most recent volume, *Time's Power* (1988).

Before I address the ways in which Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich attacked the traditional husband's role in their poems, one must also realize despite this criticism, their poetry did contain a few affectionate portrayals of their own husbands. In "Wreath for a Bridal," written at the time of her own marriage to Ted Hughes (Stevenson, 96), Plath describes this marriage as "wedlock wrought within love's proper chapel" (12). In this case, the chapel is a sylvan setting with only woodland creatures and farm animals in attendance, and the narrator implies that this is a marriage endorsed by Nature herself: "cows utter/Low moos of approval" (3-4). The lovers themselves are described as "pure paragons of constance" (9), and marriage is described as being, for them, a "single state from that dual battle" (10).

While Rich's poems condemn the traditional role of a husband they maintain an affection toward the husbands themselves. "A Marriage in the Sixties," one of Rich's poems which seems highly autobiographical, gives a pleasant picture of a husband and wife at breakfast. In this poem, the narrator expresses affection for her husband, whom she calls: "Dear fellow particle, electric dust/I'm blown with . . ." The narrator speaks of the marriage itself as if it were a refuge, a bulwark of sanity in a chaotic world. Despite this sense of security, the marriage is also seen through soberer eyes when the narrator describes herself and her husband as "Two strangers, thrust for life upon a rock," (32)—this is hardly the "single state from that dual battle" that Plath extolls in "Wreath for a Bridal."

The affection expressed in the poem is tempered by Rich's fear that true communication between human beings is ultimately impossible: ". . . still—/two minds, two messages" (34-35). The narrator does express hope that in the future she and her husband "may have at last the perfect hour of talk/that language aches for;" (33-34). These images of stifled communication foreshadow Rich's later allegorical use of housework as a language, which she says that husbands cannot understand but that women (especially the lesbian lovers spotlighted in her later work) can understand perfectly.

Despite these obvious displays of affection directed towards specific men, both Plath and Rich are highly critical of the husband's traditional role of the husband in a marriage, which, they point out, leaves the wife in a very undesirable position. In most of Plath's and Rich's poems about husbands, the wives are victimized and stifled. Rich points out the discrepancies between partners in traditional marriages, but she is much more straightforward about placing the blame on the husband. This is not to say that Plath does not assign the husbands in her poetry with blame for problems—she definitely does. Plath assigns this blame, however, through elaborate metaphors and poetic conceits. Rich, with her outspoken, polemic style, simply states that the husband is to blame and devotes the rest of the poem to illustrating the problem or offering a possible solution.

In one of her early poems, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," Rich does not propose a solution to the problem of the woman's victimization, but she does not hesitate to say that the husband is the victimizer. This poem from *A Change of World* describes a woman who is doing

needlework, sewing images of tigers onto a tapestry. "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" could simply be seen as a poem about a woman sewing, if it were not for the second stanza, in which the narrator explains that "The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band/Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand" (7-8), making her sewing difficult to the point of impossibility. In the poem, embroidering is portrayed as Aunt Jennifer's main occupation and means of self-expression, and her work is restricted by her wedding ring and, thus, by her marriage. Later in the poem, the reader is told that "When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie/Still ringed with ordeals that she was mastered by" (9-10). Therefore, marriage is portrayed as a source of terror, carried on by a disembodied torturer never given a name other than "Uncle," but the reader is reassured that "The tigers in the panel that she made/Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid" (11-12) of "the men beneath the tree" (4). Thus, while Aunt Jennifer herself was mastered by Uncle and his ordeals, her domestic products survive her and are able to subvert Uncle's authority. The tigers are out of Uncle's reach, and Aunt Jennifer's only means of self-expression in life becomes her means of subverting Uncle's power after her death.

This poem is highly reminiscent of Plath's "The Jailer," in which the husband is also portrayed as confining his wife—a barrier to her happiness and creativity. In another of her poems, "The Applicant," Plath uses the situation of a carnival huckster trying to sell a bride to a prospective husband to critique the husband's and wife's positions in a marriage. In this poem, the huckster offers a number of examples to the young man of what marriage would be like. In all of

these example, the husband is the passive receptor of the wife's labor and the wife is the only one who works. The woman is promoted as a bride through the quality of her domestic skills:

. . . Here is a hand

To fill it and willing
 To bring teacups and roll away headaches
 And do whatever you tell it.
 Will you marry it? (10-14)

The huckster further advertises the fact that the woman will improve as a wife through the years, using the traditional 25 and 50-year-anniversary gifts to represent the woman herself:

Naked as paper to start

 But in twenty-years she'll be silver,
 In fifty, gold.
 A living doll, everywhere you look. (30-33).

And, again, the huckster advertises how well she can perform stereotypical women's functions: "It can sew, it can cook,/It can talk, talk, talk." (34-35).

In the end of "The Applicant," the huckster makes his final pitch, telling the young man: "You have a hole, it's a poultice./You have an eye, it's an image." (37-38). In this poem, Plath critiques many aspects of traditional domesticity, particularly the husband's expectations of the wife's role. Plath implies here that men are led to believe that their wife's sole responsibility is to care for them and that wives will perform domestic labors and also "do whatever you tell it." In this manner, Plath criticizes the husband's position in the

marriage as "one who is done for" and the wife's position as "one who does."

In many of her poems, Rich also criticizes the inequity that she sees in the amount of labor that men and women put into chores around the house. In these same poems, she also condemns husbands for their lack of understanding of the effort that their wives put into their housework. She insists that women are the victims in a marriage, as men use women's minds and labors to make themselves comfortable. In "The Loser," another of Rich's poems from *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, Rich portrays marriage as a chore, which eats away at a woman's beauty and her mind. The narrator of the poem describes a bride, first on the occasion of her wedding day and then, upon seeing her nine years later. (In the poem, "The Loser" refers to the narrator, who is either a jilted suitor or close female friend of the bride.)

In the poem's first section, the narrator mourns the loss of the bride's beauty that he/she anticipates:

Your wedding made my eyes ache; soon
 the world would be worse off for one
 more golden apple dropped to the ground
 without the least protesting sound, (Sec. 1, 7-10).

In this poem, the woman's marriage is seen as a time of sorrow and as a loss of beauty by the world—implying that her marriage will steal her beauty. In the second section of "The Loser," however, the narrator discovers that while the wife has not lost her beauty, her intelligence has been wasted on her domestic activities. Watching the housewife working, the narrator says:

Well, you are tougher than I thought.

...

I see you strip the the squeaking line,
your body weighed against the load, (Sec.2, 1, 4-5).

Then, the narrator comments:

Because you still are beautiful,
though squared and stiffened by the pull
of what nine windy years have done. (7-9).

Although the narrator sees that the woman is still beautiful, he/she is not reassured and says

I turn my head and wish him well
who chafed your beauty into use
and lives forever in a house
lit by the friction of your mind. (13-17).

Thus, in "The Loser," like many others by Rich and Plath, the husband's role in marriage is criticized: In many of their poems, husbands are portrayed as malicious monsters, who torture and abuse their wives, while the wives' every attempt at subversion is crushed. In more gentle descriptions, husbands are shown as living off the woman's labor and her intellect. Above all, the husbands are shown as not understanding everything from the woman's emotions to the magnitude of the effort that she has devoted to domestic labor. Thus, Plath and Rich strongly criticize the traditional husband's role, and, through her poetic polemics, Adrienne Rich insists that a change must take place.

Unlike some writers who offer criticisms of situations but do not offer their readers answers, Rich does offer an alternative to the husband's role that she has so strongly criticized. (While Plath does not offer an alternative to husbands later in her career, one could

speculate that she might have done so eventually if she had not died.) After she started working in the feminist movement, Rich increasingly identified herself as a radical feminist, meaning that she advocated a change of the system rather than working for change within the system. Keeping this in mind, one must also remember that Rich publicly declared herself a lesbian a few years later. After this declaration, her poetry reflected a change in Rich's portrayal of domestic partners. The domestic partners that appear in Rich's later poetry are lesbian lovers, but they are shown to be much more understanding and affectionate than husbands appeared to be in Rich's earlier work. The domestic chores performed in the poem are chosen duties rather than enforced ones, and these chores only help to remind the narrator of her loved one.

The most plentiful source of images of homosexual domestic partners in Rich's work is her series of *Twenty-One Love Poems*, published in Rich's volume *The Dream of a Common Language*, which trace the course of a lesbian relationship. Most notable about these poems, however, is the change in theme between these and Rich's earlier work about traditional marriages and domestic situations. In *Twenty-One Love Poems*, Rich portrays a domestic partner who is neither uncaring nor abusive. In fact, the images of domesticity here, as in many of her poems that focus on lesbian relationships, are comforting and pleasant, as they are performed out of love rather than duty, since this domestic relationship is based on communication and mutual affection.

In the second of Rich's *Twenty-One Love Poems*, the narrator describes a common domestic situation when she says "Much earlier,

the alarm broke us from each other,/you've been at your desk for hours" (2-3). Further in the poem, the lover is described as an affectionate force (rather than a threatening or overbearing one as in poems about husbands) when the narrator says that "You've kissed my hair/to wake me" (9-10). Finally, the poem indeed becomes a love poem from the narrator to her lover as she describes her "desire to show you to everyone I love" (13).

Further images of domesticity are used elsewhere in the *Twenty-One Love Poems* to represent familiarity and comfort between the partners, rather than the entrapment and waste of intellectual ability that characterizes domestic relationships in Rich's poems about heterosexual marriage. In the fourth of the poems, the narrator has just been with her lover, and she recounts performing a traditional domestic chore, bringing in the groceries, which only seems to make her savor the memories of her lover more.

I let myself into the kitchen, unload my bundles,
make coffee, open the window, put on Nina Simone
singing Here comes the sun I open the mail,
drinking delicious coffee, delicious music
my body still both light and heavy with you. . . .(8-12).

Later in the poem, when the narrator is upset because of something that she has received in the mail, her lover seems to her to be a potential source of comfort rather than the alienated source of problems that traditional husband-wife bonds often seem to be in Rich's work. ". . . I am crying helplessly,/ and they still control the world, and you are not in my arms." (20-21).

In other sections of *Twenty-One Love Poems*, Rich affirms the likeness and closeness of the lovers, rather than the lack of

communication that Rich seemed to fear in "Marriage in the Sixties." In the twelfth of the poems, the narrator describes herself and her lover as:

Sleeping, turning in turn like planets
rotating in their midnight meadow:
a touch is enough to let us know
we're not alone in the universe, even in sleep: (1-4).

Later, in poem eighteen, when the relationship seems to be deteriorating, Rich uses images of isolation to describe the relationship, as she has so often done in poems about traditional marriage:

I feel estrangement, yes. . . .
...
Close between grief and anger, a space opens
where I am Adrienne alone. And growing colder.
(11-14.)

However, the estrangement in this relationship is presented as more of a natural end to the relationship than the stagnation that Rich often blames for the end to traditional marriages. Again, the narrator addresses the relationship's ending in poem nineteen, when she tells her lover:

If I could let you know—
two women together is a work
nothing in civilization has made simple,
two people together is a work
heroic in its ordinariness,
the slow-picked, halting traverse of a pitch
where the fiercest attention becomes routine
—look at the faces of those who have chosen it. (11-18)

Here, Rich is kinder to marital relationships, implying that they take work similar to that of this lesbian relationship. She says that any relationship takes work to keep it alive and that the end of this relationship is not due to any unpleasantness on the part of either partner. Instead, she implies, this relationship has simply run its course.

In "The Images," from one of her later volumes *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, Rich focuses on another homosexual domestic relationship, which, again, is portrayed as more pleasant and affectionate than heterosexual relationships in Rich's poetry. In this poem, the domestic partner is described as a comfort and a shelter from the outside world—the narrator describes herself reaching to her lover for comfort in sleep: "My hand half-sleeping reaches, finds/some part of you, touch knows you before language" (3-4). Later in the poem, the lover is again described as a source of comfort for the narrator. However, the narrator expresses fears that are characteristic of homosexual domestic relationships: "Two women sleeping/together have more than their sleep to defend" (17-18). Despite these fears, the narrator of "The Images" also expresses fears common to domestic relationships in general: the pain of separation and the fear of harm coming to one's partner in the inhospitable "big city":

And what can reconcile me
that you, the woman whose hand
sensual and protective, brushes me in sleep,
go down each morning into such a city? (19-22).

Thus, while Rich shows in "The Images" as in her other poems that there are some concerns unique to lesbian relationships, she asserts that the day-to-day aspects of these relationships are sources of comfort and happiness to the participants.

Plath and Rich do not mince words when they criticize the husband's traditional role in marriage. In several poems, they show husbands as malicious monsters, and when they are being less harsh, the husbands are shown to be uncaring, uncomprehending victimizers of women. They have written, however, some affectionate poems about their own husbands, so the reader should not think that Rich and Plath hate men in general. Instead, through their poetry, they critique the traditional *role* of the husband, which they say is unhealthy for the woman, the man, and the marriage. Plath's only poetic alternatives to marriage were contained in the spinster poems that she wrote prior to her own marriage, but Rich's alternatives appeared later in her career, when she began to use images of homosexual domestic partnerships. In these poems, the nature of the images of domesticity changed because the nature of the domestic relationship itself had changed drastically. These relationships, in comparison to the traditional marriages that Rich highlights, are much more affectionate and comforting, and Rich asserts that this alternative is considerably preferable to the victimization of wives by husbands in traditional marriages. Thus, Plath and Rich do not only point out the flaws in the husband's role in marriage. In addition, they insist on its change, and Rich provides the reader with the alternative of lesbian domestic relationships,

which, in Rich's poems, provide their participants with stability, equality, and affection.

II. Housework

In many of the preceding critiques of husbands, Plath and Rich most stringently criticize the husband for his lack of appreciation of the wife's domestic labor. In both "The Loser" and "The Jailer," a woman does domestic work which is the sustenance of her husband. Rather than appreciate her for her effort, the husband remains ignorant of its magnitude and importance. In "The Applicant," Plath portrays the man as only being interested in having a wife because of the thought of all the work that she could do. Ultimately, however, Plath and Rich condemn the husband not for neglecting to help out around the house—instead, the husband receives criticism for his lack of appreciation for his wife's domestic labor.

In their poetry about housework, Plath and Rich develop further the idea that the husband does not understand the domestic efforts of his wife. In fact, in many of her later poems, Adrienne Rich creates a complex allegory of housework as a language, which, she says, men do not understand. Again, the negative aspects of domesticity are redeemed in the lesbian domestic relationship, as Rich's lesbian domestic partners do understand the language of domesticity, to which husbands had been oblivious.

By criticizing men for their lack of appreciation of housework, Plath and Rich are implying that housework is more important than it is given credit for. In the 1950's when Plath and Rich came of age, domesticity was represented as a woman's ideal achievement, but it was also portrayed as somewhat trivial and unimportant. Plath and Rich attack this denigration of domesticity in their poems that

contain images of housework. In some of her poems, Rich establishes the allegory of housework as a language. Besides this allegory, however, Plath and Rich also use housework as sources of melodramatic terror, as metaphors to represent personal qualities, and as a target of displaced emotions about troubled marriages. In the following section, I will examine the way that Plath and Rich use images of housework to assert its expressiveness and significance (both as a poetic image and as a form of communication) and to save it from triviality and banality. I will show that both poets felt that housework, like Aunt Jennifer's sewing, is a valid use of a woman's creative energy. Rich uses the images of housework in her poetry as a language of its own, and I will examine the way housework is transformed into a valid, complex set of poetic metaphors. Finally, Plath and Rich assert that while images of housework are a useful poetic medium, housework is an important activity in and of itself.

Sylvia Plath was interviewed near the end of her life, and she was asked about her poetic influences and inspirations, and she made the following observation:

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, building buildings; and the conservation of life of all people in all places, . . . (*London Magazine*, 46).

In these lines, Plath establishes a primary connection between "making in all its forms." She presents baking a loaf of bread and building a building as related activities, thus first asserting that while both these subjects are material for her poems, one is not more important than another. All of these activities—architecture,

painting, baking, and conceiving a child—are represented as valid uses for a person's creative energy. Therefore, Plath establishes her view that housework is an important activity, both in one's life and one's poetry. The importance that Plath affords housework can also be seen through a further examination of her and Rich's poetry, in which they destroy traditional stereotype about "trivial" domesticity and transform it into a complex, highly metaphoric language

With the methods she used in her poetry about husbands, Plath describes housework, particularly kitchen work, as a melodramatic minefield of danger. Kitchen appliances take on lives of their own and appear to regard the narrator of the poems suspiciously. In some cases, Plath uses exaggeration to make these kitchen dangers seem absurd, but she does often portray housework as a brooding, malicious monster.

In her poem "An Appearance," Plath personifies her kitchen appliances, which seem unintentionally but nonetheless harmful to the narrator. The poem begins: "The smile of iceboxes annihilates me./Such blue currents in the veins of my loved one!"(1-2). Although obviously sarcastic, the reference to the icebox as a loved one implies that it is not intentionally or maliciously hurting the narrator. Nonetheless, the reader does get the impression that the narrator is harmed by the icebox. This annihilation may be an expression of how, in the 1950's, women were supposed to define their identities in their domestic lives, which were not always so fulfilling. This lack of fulfillment would, indeed, be a form of annihilation for the wife, as it is for the narrator in "The Appearance."

In another Plath poem, "Lesbos," the narrator again refers to domestic objects as though they were violent, and she also seems to say that the overwhelming nature of the objects is caused by their being signifiers of the message of ideal womanhood. The poem begins:

Viciousness in the kitchen!
The potatoes hiss.
It is all Hollywood, windowless, (1-3).

Her kitchen, then, is overwhelming in that it resembles the feminine ideal of the time (spread by Hollywood in television and the movies) and attempts to impose this restriction on her. Later in the poem, the narrator describes her kitchen in less Gothic but more uncomplimentary terms:

Meanwhile there's a stink of fat and baby crap.
I'm doped and thick from my last sleeping pill.
The smog of cooking, the smog of hell (33-35).

These images of the kitchen in "Lesbos" do use Plath's usual poetic method of melodrama and exaggeration to criticize aspects of housework. In these two poems, Plath criticizes the extent to which any kitchen of her youth carried the requirements of the feminine ideal, which Plath also strongly criticized.

In one other poem, "Cut," Plath recounts a real incident in which she almost completely sliced off the end of her thumb, and she again uses melodrama to describe this event. In this poem, however, the melodrama is mixed with humorous metaphors and a considerable amount of self-deprecation. In the first lines of the poem, Plath recounts this occurrence: "What a thrill—/My thumb instead of an onion." (1-2). The rest of the poem is filled with often

silly metaphoric descriptions of the injured thumb. Not once does Plath seem to seriously want sympathy for her thumb; instead, she often seems to be poking fun at her usual poetic style, which is so heavy with metaphor. First, she describes the thumb itself as a "Little pilgrim, The Indian's axed your scalp." (9-10). Later, she describes the blood that is flowing from her wound: "Out of a gap/A million soldiers run,/Redcoats, every one." (18-20). Finally, she describes the bandaged thumb in an extended string of intentionally ridiculous metaphors:

Kamikaze man——

The stain on your
Gauze Ku Klux Klan
Babushka

Darkens and tarnishes . . . (24-28).

Thus, while Plath does use her melodramatic style to seriously criticize some aspects of housework, she can also use a melodramatic treatment of domesticity in a simply humorous manner, in a way intended to ridicule herself.

In a few of Plath's and Rich's poems, images of housework are made, through the use of metaphor, to take on the significance of the domestic relationship itself. Plath, of course, establishes this metaphor through a bit more exaggeration, but Rich, too, writes about situations in which feelings about the domestic situation or one's partner are sublimated into feelings about the house. Two poems have already been discussed in which this occurs—"The Jailer" by Plath and "Novella" by Rich—but there are other notable examples of this use of domestic imagery in their poems.

Plath's poem "Words heard, by accident, over the phone" was written around the time when Plath discovered that her husband, Ted Hughes, was having an affair, and the poem, according to one Plath biographer Anne Stevenson (251), recounts an actual incident in which Plath overheard a phone conversation between Hughes and his lover. In "Words heard, by accident, over the phone," the phone (a usual domestic feature, and one most commonly associated with women) is described as a vicious monster and the overheard words are represented as mud and as coffee. The anxiety caused by the affair and the breakdown of the marriage is displaced as domestic concern—worry over how she will clean up the mud. First, the narrator reacts to the words themselves as she addresses them "O mud, mud, how fluid!—/Thick as foreign coffee, and with a sluggy pulse." (1-2), and then she gets on to the business about worrying over how to clean up the mud (instead of how to repair the marriage):

What are these words, these words?
 They are plopping like mud.
 O god, how shall I ever clean the phone table? (6-8)

The narrator then describes the malicious persona that the telephone has assumed: "Now the room is ahiss. The instrument/Withdraws its tentacle." (12-13). Finally, Plath again reinforces the coffee metaphor, as she insists that these words have now invaded her and she will "stew" over them as though she were a coffee pot: "But the spawn percolate in my heart. They are fertile." (14-15). Thus, in this poem, Plath has personified a domestic object as a monster, has described herself as performing an activity like a

kitchen appliance, and has related a wife's anxiety over her failing marriage to her anxiety over the quality of her housecleaning.

In one of Rich's early poems, "Living in Sin," the male domestic partner is not portrayed as a villain; rather, the domestic world and everyday details make the relationship, too, seem average and mundane. The narrator says that the woman in the poem "had thought the studio would keep itself;/no dust on the furniture of love" (1-2). The woman sees the studio apartment and its furnishings as a symbol of her love and her relationship with her lover, and she wants their apartment to be as perfect as she wishes that their love were. The reader learns that "By evening she was back in love again,/though not so wholly but throughout the night" (23-24). One assumes that the night adds an air of romance to the apartment, and the night does not contain the daylight, which shows their apartment to be small and dusty rather than the perfect haven for love that she would like to imagine it to be. Earlier in the poem, the milkman is described as waking the woman and forcing her to see the daylight, and the poem ends with "the daylight coming/like a relentless milkman up the stairs" (25-26). The daylight, with its glaring dose of reality, reminds the woman that the lack of perfection in her relationship is mirrored in the lack of perfection in her apartment.

In one of her poems, Adrienne Rich even uses the way a woman executes household chores to represent aspects of her personality. In "The Mirror in Which Two are Seen as One" from *Diving into the Wreck*, Rich describes a character in the poem

according to how she performs certain domestic chores. First, to describe the woman's glamour, the narrator poses this example:

as when she scales a fish the knife
flashes in her long fingers
no motion wasted . . . (3-6).

While fish-cleaning is not a standard image of glamour, Rich does succeed in convincing the reader of this woman's glamour. Again, Rich describes the glamour of the woman, who is "rapidly talking of love," (6) as "she steel-wool burnishes/the battered kettle" (7-8).

Further on in "The Mirror in Which Two are Seen as One," images of food are used to symbolize both love and its lack. First, Rich describes love in a barrage of colorful food metaphors:

Love: the refrigerator
with open door
the ripe steaks bleeding
their hearts out in plastic film
the whipped butter, the apricots
the sour leftovers (13-18).

Later in the poem, images of a harvest in an apple orchard are used to represent burgeoning love. Most interesting among this litany of edibles, however, is the evocation of laxatives (i.e., fiber-rich grains) as a symbol for lost love:

Love-apples cramp you sideways
with sudden emptiness
the cereals glutting you, the grains
ripe clusters picked by hand (9-12).

Thus, in "The Mirror in Which Two are Seen as One," Rich uses images of household tasks and food to represent both personal qualities and the status of one's romantic life, thereby using domestic imagery to

address universal concerns and qualities, but from a perspective that is pointedly domestic in nature.

Rich does, of course, also critique some aspects of housework and domesticity, but she does this with her usual prosaic style, which contrasts obviously with the melodrama that Plath used in the preceding poems. It has already been established that Plath and both Rich criticize a husband's lack of understanding of his wife's domestic labor. Rich takes this criticism even farther, though, as she uses an extended allegory in her poetry to stage her critique of a woman's traditional (or idealized) relationship to housework.

In many of her poems, including ones from both some of her earliest and most recent volumes of poetry, Rich establishes this allegory, which stresses the husband's fundamental lack of understanding of this language of domesticity. These poems are pervaded by a sense of alienation and separation, similar to the fear of non-communication that Rich expressed in "A Marriage in the Sixties." In these poems, the husbands are not always malicious, but they are always unable to comprehend either the magnitude of the wife's domestic labor or its significance in their relationship. In Rich's poems about lesbian domestic relationships, however, the women always understand the importance of this language of domesticity, and the lovers seem much closer and are able to communicate better than the husband and wife ever could. I will examine Rich's use of this allegory, and show how she uses it to reaffirm both the ultimate separateness of man and wife and the ultimate understanding between female partners.

"A Primary Ground," from *Diving into the Wreck*, shows the husband again accused of living comfortably off the labor his wife. In this case, however, Rich shows that the man is also guilty of being unable to understand his wife. This poem, unlike most of Rich's others, shows the husband's experience of his marriage and domestic life, and the situation is presented as being unpleasant for all parties involved. The husband is shown as being sedentary, relying on his wife and children for emotional and physical sustenance—"And this is how you live: a woman, children/protect you from the abyss/you move near . . ." (1-3). Subtly, the man is presented as a user of his wife and other women, and of the products of his marriage—

. . . turning on the news
 eating Thanksgiving with its pumpkin teeth
 drinking the last wine
 from the cellar of your wedding (3-6),

and the reader then sees him eating dinner off of ". . . a cloth ironed by a woman/with aching legs" (11-12). The man in the poem is not presented as malicious or, even, necessarily happy with his life; instead, he seems to be as trapped by the status quo of his marriage as do the wives in many of Rich's other poems—

Sensuality desiccates in words—
 risks of the portage, risks of the glacier
 never taken
 Protection is the genius of your house (17-20).

The final stanza of this poem has a curious revelation about the man's situation—

But there is something else:
 your wife's twin sister, speechless
 is dying in the house (29-31).

The man does take his part in the caregiving—the reader is told that “You and your wife take turns/ carrying up the trays,” (32-33). However, this amount of assistance does not seem to redeem the man or his stagnation. In fact, the wife’s twin seems to symbolize the intelligent/creative side of the wife herself, being stifled and rendered speechless by her marriage, like many other Rich figures. Also, like so many other of Rich’s poems, “A Primary Ground” also ends with an affirmation of the lack of communication, as the husband and wife are taking turns “understanding her [the twin sister’s] case, trying to make her understand.” (34). This statement, combined with the image of the speechless sister and the complete lack of dialogue in the rest of the poem, does not seem hopeful about husbands’ and wives’ ability to communicate. This poem asserts that a husband is not able to understand either his wife’s domestic labor or her intellect, which is often manifested and represented poetically in her housework.

“One Life,” which appeared her latest volume, *Time’s Power*, focuses on a former working mother who has grown old and is being exposed to literature for the first time. She reads the books that her daughter brings home from college and thinks about the lives portrayed in those works, as she reflects on her own life as a working mother:

. . . I was a worker and a mother,
 that means a worker and a worker
 but for one you don't pay union dues
 or get a pension; for the other
 the men ran the union, we ran the home. (14-18).

These lines, better than any other in Rich's poetry, reflect the double bind that a woman found herself in, who was expected to give her energy to two equally demanding jobs at the same time. Later in the poem, this woman comments on her memories of her home life:

I had four lives at least, one out of marriage
when I kicked up all the dust I could
before I knew what I was doing.
One life with the girls on the line during the war,
yes, painting our legs and jitterbugging together
one life with a husband, not the worst,
one with your children, none of it just what you'd
thought. (20-26).

While the woman does not condemn the husband for expecting too much of her or for not helping out around the house enough, the best that she can say of her life with him is that it was "not the worst." Later, she says of her life (and that of other women) that "We took what we could." (28). Earlier in "One Life," she says that she had, in essence, held down two jobs, a feat which had gone unappreciated by men. She asserts her separateness from her husband, as she doesn't seem to have been extremely happy with him, and her comments show that he didn't understand the magnitude of the two jobs that she was doing. In essence, her husband did not understand her the significant role that domesticity played in her life or how demanding this role was..

In one poem in particular, Rich both firmly establishes the importance of domesticity and housework as a kind of language, and she asserts that it is only women who can understand that language. In "Coast to Coast," in the volume *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This*

Far, the narrator seems to see housework as a mixture of bane and blessing. Rich appears to be addressing the poem to a former lover, and she describes housework as a form of emotional outlet, familiar and comfortable, but unpleasant and too closely associated with unhappy times, all the same:

There are days when housework seems the only
outlet old funnel I've poured caldrons through
old servitude . . . (1-3).

Later, housework is described as "the accustomed tasks" (4), indicating that these chores may be something of a familiar comfort, a way to take one's mind off things, however unpleasant the tasks themselves might be. The reader cannot help but notice, however, the way the household chores are described—all of them being futile and quickly undone and, thus, frustrating and unfulfilling. Earlier in the poem, the narrator has described housework as ". . . old funnel I've poured caldrons through," an obvious image of futility. Later, though, Rich uses more concrete representations of housecleaning to provide these images:

. . . the vacuum cleaner plowing
realms of dust the mirror scoured grey webs
behind framed photographs brushed away (4-6).

These domestic activities are portrayed as pointless, since the house will only undo these activities by itself. However, the housework is also described as a comfort and as a physical and emotional outlet for the narrator.

This poem also firmly establishes the idea that women can understand this language of domesticity that men cannot. This poem is addressed to another woman, as though it were a letter, and Rich

implies in the poem that the woman to whom she is writing this letter will empathize with Rich's comfortableness with domesticity. The reader learns in the poem that the woman is a writer like Rich and that she has no problem with communication: "the passion of the speechless/driving your speech."(34-35). Finally, in the last stanza, Rich urges those who can understand this poem to share something with her. While she does not specifically exclude men, the poem itself was addressed to a woman, and Rich implies that only women could fully understand the poem and share it with someone else. Rich says:

If you can read and understand this poem
 send something back: a burning strand of hair
 a still-warm, still-liquid drop of blood
 a shell
 thickened from being battered year on year
 send something back. (37-42).

These objects themselves seem like "female objects," because of their personal nature, and it seems clear that Rich was addressing this poem to all women through her direction of it to one woman. In this poem, more than any other, Rich maintains that housework is both a comfort and a chore, but that only women can understand this dichotomy and that only women can understand the further significance that domesticity and the language of domesticity assume in women's lives.

In these poems, as in many of the others that I discussed above, Plath and Rich assign a great deal of importance to the images of housework and domesticity in their poetry. They often use these images to represent emotions about a relationship that are displaced

onto domestic objects, and they use images of housework to show how exhausting and unfulfilling work this can be. Rich uses an analogy of housework as a language to say that men do not understand the importance of domesticity and that women must ultimately find their understanding in other women. Finally, and possibly most importantly, Plath and Rich show that such poems as "Cut," which simply discussed a domestic incident, are as important and viable a topic for poetry as any of the more metaphysical subjects that they also address.

III. Children and Mothers

In her interview with *London Magazine*, Sylvia Plath included the making of children in her list of kinds of making, with making loaves of bread, buildings, and paintings. The inclusion of mothering in this list is as significant as her inclusion of bread baking. While motherhood has often been sentimentalized, it has rarely been placed in a category of importance with architecture. It is apparent that both Plath and Rich considered motherhood important, as they included many images of children and mothering in their poems. (Rich's poetry contains less imagery of children than Plath's. Most of Rich's treatment of the subject comes in *Of Woman Born*, her prose study of the history of motherhood.)

Rich's use of the imagery of children is limited to showing children as the innocent victims of bad marriages and to explore the pain of the infant's first awareness of the mother as "other." Plath, on the other hand, uses the imagery of children to mourn the raising of a child in a dangerous world, and to mourn *for* that world when it seems on the brink of disaster. Plath uses her poetry to celebrate the beauty and innocence of her children, who were toddlers and infants when she was writing all of her poems. Finally, Plath's poetic use of the image of the mother and child allows her to explore her own feelings about the subject. While she did love her mother and most certainly did love her children, Plath had found the role that her mother played in her life unsatisfying at times. She did not want to be a mother like her own, and her poetry was a way for her to examine her feelings about both her mother and her children.

In the following section, I will show that Plath uses some of her imagery of children to reconcile her own childhood experiences with the ideal of the mother and with her own wishes for her children's future. She addresses the children as products of her craftsmanship, and she thus further extends her own description that making a child is a "form of making." Later, she uses child imagery to discuss her fears about the world—the world is so dangerous that she fears for her children's safety. Whereas Adrienne Rich's poems about children show children who are victims of their parents' marital problems, Plath highlights children who have not yet been touched by that sort of pain, and Plath mourns that loss of innocence that she foresees but did not live to see.

One of Rich's only poems that focuses on a child is "In the Wake of Home," from *Your Native Land, Your Life*, which shows the effects that an unhappy marriage or absent parents has on a child. The poem traces the experience of the child, from early childhood to adulthood, when the woman's parents die and she must come to grips with her parents' death and her memories of her unhappy childhood. Images of domesticity are used in a variety of ways in "In the Wake of Home"—first, aspects of domesticity are used to represent the way the child wishes that her childhood had been, but these pleasant memories of domesticity are simply the child's wishful fantasies, looking back on her childhood. Later in the poem, the narrator acknowledges that these memories of the childhood are not real: "The home houses/mirages memory fogs the kitchen panes" (Sec. 3, 1-2). Thus, this image of the insulated, fog-shrouded

fantasies of the perfect childhood are complete fabrications, and that these images of family have never come true for anyone:

What if I tell you, you are not different
 it's the family albums that lie
 —will any of this comfort you
 and how should this comfort you? (Sec. 10, 15-18).

Rich maintains later in the poem that the child will later learn to fill these absences by herself, by providing for herself the domestic comforts that she missed as a child:

The child's soul carries on
 in the wake of home
 building a complicated house
 a tree-house without a tree
 finding places for everything
 the song the stray cat the skeleton
 The child's soul musters strength
 where the holes were torn (1-8).

However, Rich finally mourns the fact that the child must suffer in these unhealthy households: “And how shall they comfort each other/who have come young to grief?” (Sec. 11, 11-12) Thus, in this poem, Rich turns the focus of the poem onto a child, who has had an unhappy childhood, because, the poem implies, of the unhappy marriage of her parents. Here, Rich shows the unpleasant repercussions of marriage from the final of three perspectives—that of the wife, who is worn down and unhappy; the husband, who uses his wife to provide him comfort and who lacks the happiness he would gain through good communication; and the child, who has not chosen this relationship but who suffers as much as the husband or

wife in an unhappy family, is represented through her relation to a run-down house.

Whereas Rich's child poems most often focus on fictional children, Plath's poems about children concentrate on her own children. In two of Plath's poems about her young children, "You're" and "Morning Song," Plath addresses her children as products of her skillful craftsmanship. In "You're," Plath addresses her unborn infant, who is, she reassures herself, well-formed: "Right, like a well-done sum./A clean slate, with your own face on." (17-18). She seems to assert the perfection of her child and his evolutionary superiority when she mentions that he is "A common-sense/Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode." (3-4).

Margaret D. Uroff, in her essay "Sylvia Plath on Motherhood," asserts that in Plath's poem "Morning Song," she was attempting to forge the connection between motherhood and kinds of making. Uroff says of the mother in the poem that "The joy of creativity is the joy of producing something with the quality of the essential, and that joy is most perfectly realized in the birth of a child. This mother's initial response to her newly born child is the craftsman's pride in creating new life, in setting the child going." (80).

The readers can see that Plath did, indeed, set the child going, in this poem, as, in "Morning Song," she describes to the child how:

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements. (1-3)

With the beginning of this image of the child as a piece of machinery, she begins ponder the child's autonomy and realizes, to her horror,

that he and she are separate beings in the world. She continues this idea when she calls him "New statue." (4), and when 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. (7-9)

Again, later in the poem, Plath uses humorous images and images of ironic self-deprecation to describe her son and herself in relation to him. She describes him sleeping in his room, and she says: "All night your moth-breath/Flickers among the flat pink roses. . . ." (10-11). Then, no longer trying to distance herself from the child at the thoughts of his autonomy, Plath tells of getting out of bed to go to her son's room and give him his morning feeding:

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. . . . (13-15).

This use of humor and unusual imagery is continued when she says: ". . . And now you try/Your handful of notes;/The clear vowels rise like balloons." (16-18). In this poem, Plath has used a usually nostalgic subject (newborn children and new motherhood) and again exaggerated it—but here, she has exaggerated the subject using clever analogies and self-reflexive irony, which serves to undermine the usual seriousness with which poets address newborns. Plath expresses her disbelief at the physical perfection of her child, but she also mourns his autonomy.

This image of the mother who fears for either her own or her child's autonomy or survival can also be seen in several of both Rich's and Plath's poems. In Rich's poem, "Night-Pieces for a Child," Rich celebrates the bond between a mother and child. In the course

of the poem, the mother is caring for the child, who looks up into the mother's face and comes to the realization that she is the "other," that they are not the same person. The narrator of "Night-Pieces for a Child" is upset that the child has come to this realization, and she seems most afraid that the child might someday regard her with the misogyny with which society has traditionally regarded women. First, the narrator speaks of bending over her child's crib to tuck it in: "Wider they [the child's eyes] fix me—/—death's head, sphinx, medusa?"(7-9). She cries because her child's growing awareness of her as a separate being might later cause him to think unpleasantly of her: "Mother I no more am, but woman, and nightmare." (11-12).

Later in "Night-Pieces: For a Child," the mother herself wakes with a start and goes to check on the child. Again, the child's well-being brings the mother a sense of relief: "You still breathe, yes—" (18), and the reassurance of the child dispels the nightmares that the mother has been having.

In the last two stanzas of the poem, the reader sees the mother affirm her bond with the child, but only in terms of very unpleasant analogies:

But you and I—
 swaddled in a dumb dark
 old as sickheartedness,
 modern as pure annihilation—(25-28).

Finally, the mother seems to mourn what she sees as the growing of her child to society's standards, and she wishes for the return of a more natural, simple mother-child bond:

If I could hear you now
 mutter some gentle animal sound!

If mild flowed from my breast again . . . (30-32).

Many of Plath's other poems about children (besides "Morning Song") deal with much this same idea—the fear of a mother because of her child's growing autonomy. In one poem, however, called "Candles" and written when her first child was still in infancy, Plath describes her own fear that she will seem out of date to her own child when she comes of age. In "Candles," Plath describes nursing her daughter by candlelight, as she reminisces about her grandmother, of whom she says: "And I remember my maternal grandmother from Vienna./As a schoolgirl she gave roses to Franz Josef." (17-18). Later in the poem, Plath worries that she too will seem as outdated to her child as the roses and Franz Josef seem to her:

The eyes of the child I nurse are scarcely open.
In twenty years I shall be retrograde
As these draughty ephemerids.

I watch their spilt tears cloud and dull to pearls.
How shall I tell anything at all
To this infant still in a birth-drowse? (28-33).

Thus, Plath extends the fear of the child's growing awareness of its mother to a fear of the child's eventual rejection of its mother as being out of touch and out of date.

Some of Plath's most eloquent verses about her children discuss her fear of raising children in a corrupt society or raising them to face the same problems that she has faced. In one of her poems from Yaddo (an artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York) in 1959, Plath speaks of the child that is growing within her, full of

anticipation of its impending birth. ". . . Your day approaches./The pears fatten like little buddhas." (2-3). Later in the poem, Plath traces the developmental stages through which her child is passing:

You move through the era of fishes,
The smug centuries of the pig—
Head, toe and finger
Come clear of the shadow. . . . (5-8).

The poem's tone is rather dark, however, as Plath describes birds which "converge/With their gifts to a difficult borning." (19-20). Plath also worries about what the child will inherit through its birth: "You inherit white heather, a bee's wing,/Two suicides, the family wolves,/Hours of blankness." (12-14).

Lois Rosen, in her essay "Sylvia Plath's Poetry About Children: A New Perspective," argues that Plath uses these images of foetal development, contrasted with descriptions of autumnal decay around the manor "to evoke a feeling of continuity in the birth/death cycle throughout the history of creation." (99-100). Many poets have used autumnal decay to represent one aspect of the birth/death cycle, including Robert Frost and W.B. Yeats, but neither of these poets is able to give a woman's perspective on the cycle and counter the images of decay with personal accounts of the child growing inside him. Thus, with her use of the imagery of children, Plath is able to transform a fairly common theme of poetry, the cycle of birth and death, into a distinctly feminine and a distinctly domestic image.

In one final poem about her fears for her child, entitled "Child," Plath expresses a wish similar to that of most parents—to make life as pleasant as possible for her child. In this poem, however, her fear

of the child growing up in a corrupt world is outweighed by her fear of the child being affected by the personal problems that Plath herself was experiencing at the time. ("Child" was written only two weeks before Plath's suicide.) The poem begins as the mother says to her child:

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
I want to fill it with color and ducks,
The zoo of the new (1-3).

Later in the poem, the mother describes her personal problems, to which she hopes her child will never be exposed, as: "this troublous/Wringing of hands, this dark/Ceiling without a star." (10-12). In these and the previously mentioned verses about children, the mothers try to protect their children from society's prejudices and their own personal problems, and they present a child's innocence as being one of the most beautiful things in the world.

One of the most pervasive and troubling of Plath's uses of the images of children and mothers in her poetry is her portrayal of mothers as being ineffectual and unable to truly provide any comfort or assistance to their children. In "By Candlelight," Plath again describes nursing her child by candlelight, and she is again worrying about the problems that her child will face as he grows older. She describes the infant with affection and humor as a "Balled hedgehog,/Small and cross. . . ." (20-21). Plath then describes a small brass statue of Atlas, which Plath maintains is her only legacy for her son:

He is yours, the little brassy Atlas—
Poor heirloom, all you have,
At his heels a pile of five brass cannonballs, (31-33).

Plath further describes the balls as: "Five balls! Five bright brass balls!/To juggle with, my love, when the sky falls." (35-36), and says, in the poem that these juggling balls are both for Atlas and for her son, and that this is the only help or solution that she is able to offer him.

In "The Disquieting Muses," another of Plath's poems about the ineffectuality of the mother's role, the mother is presented as being particularly unhelpful to her children. Plath gives the following example, in which her mother attempts to ignore obvious dangers and comforts her children with ineffectual solutions:

In the hurricane, when father's twelve
Study windows bellied in
Like bubbles about to break, you fed
My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine
And helped the two of us to choir:
'Thor is angry: boom boom boom!
Thor is angry: we don't care!'
But those ladies [the Disquieting Muses] broke the panes.
(17-24).

In later sections of the poem, Plath tells of how her mother would hide problems from her or lie to her about her own abilities. Plath condemns this facade that her mother constructs, calling it a "soap-bubble" and stressing that she (Plath) has overcome this illusion and is now able to face her problems head-on.

In her study of Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Elaine Martin discusses the ineffectuality of the mother's role in this book, and why it is so troubling for Plath: "The mother becomes the socializing agent for the patriarchal society. Thus, when the daughter rebels against the social strictures, she also rebels against her mother." (28). Martin

maintains that the mother's role in this novel and thus, in Plath's life, was unsatisfactory in Plath's eyes, and that her mother's enforcement of patriarchal standards helped to precipitate her madness.

Plath did, indeed, seem to find her mother's role unsatisfying and unappealing, and Plath reflects her concern about this through her treatment of ineffectual mother figures in her poetry. Because of this dissatisfaction, Plath would have, of course, tried to create a new role of mother for herself, so that she would not repeat her mother's mistakes. Plath dealt with some of these mistakes, in this case, ineffectuality, in such "The Disquieting Muses," in which she also asserts that she is doing things differently than her mother did.

Plath and Rich both express their dissatisfaction with the traditional role of mothers and its effects on children in their domestic poetry. Plath critiques a mother's traditional ineffectuality in the face of a patriarchal society and bemoans a mother's lack of ability to help her child in any meaningful way. Rich draws her critique of the traditional family unit through an examination of the life of a child that came from an unhealthy domestic relationship. Both Plath and Rich express their concern as they assume the role of mother—they are fearful that their children will later regard them, as women and mothers, in the same condescending or misogynistic way that society often does.

In much of their other domestic poetry, however, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich have expressed a celebration of their children rather than fears about their futures. While Plath and Rich do use images of children to represent metaphysical issues like the

birth/death cycle, they often use their poetry to simply praise the joys of having a child and being a mother. Plath and Rich show that motherhood, which has often inspired insipid, nostalgic poetry can be used as an image in serious poetry, to both critique motherhood and celebrate its joys. They redeem this topic, often excluded from serious verse, and they transform the traditional images of motherhood and domesticity into forms that are more in accord with the reality and are more liveable to the poets themselves.

IV. Conclusion

In the years to come, Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath may or may not retain their positions of importance in the American poetic canon. While some educators are calling for further examination of feminist writers like Plath and Rich, many others are calling for a return to a concentration on the traditional literary canon. If this reversal does indeed occur, Plath and Rich might be left by the literary wayside, as their poetry often challenged traditional assumptions about domesticity and the woman's role in the home, as well as challenging some of the poetic aesthetics of their time.

Even if Plath and Rich are someday abandoned as "minor poets" (which many critics call them even today), it is no matter—their effect on the literary world is, by now, indelible. Plath and Rich stress that one *can* use simple domestic imagery in poetry, either to critique domesticity, to celebrate its positive aspects, or to represent any of a number of other issues. Plath and Rich have in common the fact that they used domestic imagery in each of these ways, and while they do strongly criticize many aspects of domestic life, they also transform domesticity into a more tolerable form. These poets, along with some of their contemporaries like Robert Lowell, helped to pave the way for later writers, both female and male, who would find new ways to incorporate their personal experiences and concerns into their poetry.

Most importantly, however, is the fact that Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich transformed domesticity in their poetry, to leave images that are both criticisms and revisions of the ideal of true

womanhood with which they grew up. Plath and Rich illustrate the weaker aspects of this constrictive role, and they transform it, by emphasizing the familiarity of housecleaning, the affection of an understanding domestic partner, and the joys of having a child. Plath and Rich take images that they found either unpleasant or unrealistic in their own lives, examine and criticize them in their poems, and leave the reader with a set of revised and reformed images of domesticity. Thus, Plath and Rich do achieve a transformation, in their lives as well as in their poetry. They give the reader critiques and subversions of traditional domesticity, and, ultimately, they provide the reader with new, revised models and a few alternatives, which the reader must appreciate for their revisionary effects if not for their practical applicability.

Endnotes

1 Any further mention of "Plath's biographers" will be referring to Linda Wagner-Martin and Anne Stevenson, whose two biographies of Plath are probably the most complete of the many books on the subject. Wagner-Martin's book, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, is not as complete as Stevenson's *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*, because Wagner-Martin received stronger resistance from Plath's estate than did Stevenson. Therefore, all quotations in the text will be from Stevenson's more comprehensive study.

2 One can find quite a bit of evidence of this fear, in *The Bell Jar*, *Plath's Journals*, and in both of the biographies of Plath that I examine here. In one striking section of Plath's autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar* the narrator Ester Greenwood describes her future options as figs on a fig tree:

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant loosing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (62-63).

3 "Lilly" refers to the Lilly Library, the special collections and rare books library at Indiana University, in Bloomington, Indiana. Lilly Library has only a collection of Plath's childhood and college poems, diaries, and memorabilia. They obtained these from Plath's mother, and a few of the manuscripts and first drafts were purchased during Plath's lifetime, by a dealer in London. All of Plath's drafts and memorabilia from the time that she arrived in England in 1955 until her death in 1963 are at Smith College, which obtained them from Ted Hughes.

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Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. Harper and Row: New York, 1971. This partially autobiographical novel chronicles Plath's breakdown and recovery during her "Mademoiselle summer" of 1953. It gives the reader a good understanding of the extent of Plath's depression and is a clear elucidation of the pressures that Plath felt herself (or put herself) under while coming of age. The perspective of the novel, that of an older woman recounting the story of when she was a young girl, gives the reader the impression that the woman has completely recovered from her depression.

_____. *The Collected Poems*. Harper and Row: New York, 1981. This presumably complete version of Plath's poems contains all of her extant works that she wrote from about the time that she met Ted Hughes (1956) until her death in 1963. Edited by Ted Hughes, the poems are arranged chronologically and are dated whenever possible. Hughes's introduction is helpful, giving background to some of the poems, and the collection of Plath "Juvenilia" (fifty poems, the rest are at Lilly Library) is an interesting end to the book, coming right after the *Ariel* poems.

_____. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose, and Diary Excerpts*. Harper and Row: New York, 1977. This collection includes many previously published stories and seven unpublished stories from the Sylvia Plath Papers at Indiana University. The stories date from the early 1950's to 1962, and most are highly autobiographical in subject matter. They range in tone from an almost chatty style in the stories where Plath was trying to write publishable prose to a kind of *Ariel*-like haunted feeling in the stories in which Plath managed to bring her life into her work. The journal entries are heavily edited, but they do display a talent for description and eerie early records of Plath's feelings of inadequacy and self-loathing.

_____. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, eds. Random House: New York, 1982. This heavily edited version is missing those character assassinations and eroticism that are so characteristic of Plath. There were

two other of her notebooks that contained her diaries that survived her death and that had chronicled the period from 1959 until three days before her death on February 11, 1963. In the year after her death, Ted Hughes burned one of the notebooks and lost the other. The sections of the journals that are presented here do give a good indication of the extent of Plath's depression, but any sections that express anger at Hughes seem to have been edited out.

Rich, Adrienne. *Adrienne Rich's Poetry: The Text of Her Poems: The Poet on Her Work*. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, 1975. While this is the only anthologized version of Rich's work, and the usual Norton footnotes are very helpful, it is still very incomplete as it includes only her work through *Diving into the Wreck*. The critical essays are usually very complimentary, and most of them offer no real critique of her work—certainly no significant dialogue is presented.

_____. *A Change of World*. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1951. This is Adrienne Rich's first volume of poetry. The style and subject matter tends to be very traditional, although there are a few notable "prematurely" feminist poems like "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers." This book won the Yale Younger Poets Award, and it has a now famous introduction by W.H. Auden.

_____. *Diving into the Wreck*. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, 1973. This volume was heavily oriented towards women's issues and women's concerns—often highly polemic. It won the National Book Award, which Rich declined personally but accepted, with Alice Walker and Audre Lorde, in the name of all women.

_____. *The Dream of a Common Language*. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, 1978. It was in this volume that Rich first began to publish her poems that had an obviously lesbian focus. The *Twenty-One Love Poems* (including "The Floating Poem (Unnumbered)," an erotic lesbian poem) had been published separately a couple of years before this volume, but they were also included as the centerpiece here.

_____. *Necessities of Life*. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, 1965. Rich tends to retreat back into her more traditional

forms and subjects here, after the criticisms she received for her changes in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in Law*.

_____. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, 1976. In this book, Rich examines motherhood from two perspectives. She tries to determine the reality of the state of motherhood throughout history, but she contrasts this with whatever images of ideal motherhood and womanhood prevailed during the time period. She also focuses on the regulation of birth control and the male control of obstetrics for many years as methods of controlling women.

_____. *Snapshots of a Daughter-in Law*. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, 1963. Rich's breakthrough into women-centered poems and her first major experimentation with some non-traditional poetic forms comes in this work. Her poems are often more highly detailed and more obviously feminine, and she received a great deal of criticism for this move.

_____. *Time's Power*. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, 1988. In this, her most recent volume of poems, Rich seems to be much more nostalgic and somewhat retrospective. She often focuses on family problems and her fictional historical women, like the woman in "Harper's Ferry" who stays overnight with some of the people who are planning Harper's Ferry as she is running away from her abusive husband.

_____. *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, 1982. Again, Rich continues her use of lesbian and feminist themes, and she includes many poems on little known or fictional women, several of which have a decidedly international focus.

_____. *The Will to Change*. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, 1971. One of Rich's first publications after becoming heavily involved in the radical feminist movement and the first book of poetry after her husband's suicide, this book again contains many of the features of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in Law*, such as the stylistic changes. The themes are often highly politicized and reflect the personal conflicts that Rich had experienced in the past few years.

_____. *Your Native Land, Your Life*. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, 1986. Like *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, this book focuses on international women, some historical figures and some fictional, whose lives Rich addresses in her poems. She continues to focus on themes of lesbian relationships and the feminist movement.

Secondary Sources:

Aird, Eileen. *Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Work*. Harper and Row: New York, 1973. One of the first studies of Plath's entire *oeuvre* (which excluded, at this point, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*), this book examines the progression of Plath's poetry and its imagery, paying particular attention to the significance of the imagery in a biographical context. Aird emphasizes Plath's poetic skill and maintains that Plath's inner conflict overwhelmed her in the end in spite of and not because of her literary genius. Aird also says that one of Plath's major accomplishments "lies in her insistence that what has been traditionally regarded as a woman's world of domesticity, childbearing, marriage, is also a world which can contain the tragic." (p.14)

Altieri, Charles. *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 1984. The section on Rich, "Self-reflection as action: the recent work of Adrienne Rich," concentrates on her poetry and "its processes of defining and testing personal identity, its capacity to make private states serve as public testimony, and her elaborating a discursive style that absorbs scenic moments into a dynamic process of self-consciousness capable of linking the poet to her community." (p. 168) This section consciously avoids becoming a strict recital of the development of Rich's themes and style, since this has been done by so many other studies.

Annas, Pamela J. *A Disturbance in Mirrors*. Greenwood Press: New York, 1988. This book, written from a purposefully feminist perspective, concentrates on Plath's use of mirror imagery in her writing. Annas points out that the mirror is used to symbolize several different ideas, including the search for self identity and the struggle to discern between appearance and reality. Also, Annas maintains throughout most of this work that one of the major conflicts that Plath experienced, which is heavily reflected in her writing, is the conflict between her

societally-enforced role of wife and mother and her chosen profession of poet.

Ashford, Deborah. "Sylvia Plath's Poetry: A Complex of Irreconcilable Antagonisms." *Concerning Poetry* 7.1 (1974): 62-69.

Ashford says that the study of Plath is hindered by the fact that most criticisms focus only on *The Colossus* and *Ariel* and by the fact that Ted Hughes has not published Plath's poetry in chronological order (this work is pre-*Collected Poems*).

However, she says, careful study of Plath's work shows that Plath's poetry concentrates on the nature of her being, which is, according to Ashford, "a complex of irreconcilable antagonisms." Ashford says that most of these "irreconcilable antagonisms" center around her societally enforced role as a woman and her inability to reconcile herself to her "equipment" ruling her fate. Ashford also says that Plath's work is characterized by a search for self and that her inability to deal with her self-image and those "irreconcilable antagonisms" led to her self-destructiveness.

Bassnett, Susan. *Sylvia Plath*. Macmillan Education Ltd.: Hong Kong, 1987. Bassnett seems to assert the final culpability of Ted Hughes in the death of Sylvia Plath, helping along the martyrdom image, although she states early on in the book that Plath was experiencing conflicts of profession and motherhood like all other women at the time. Bassnett says that Plath should be read by keeping two points in mind: 1) One must reject attempts to discover the "true" Sylvia Plath, because her personality was characterized by seemingly contradictory mood swings. and 2) One must recognize that the texts of Plath's poems inherently contain contradictions (both inter and intratextually) because of the nature of Plath's personality.

Brauch, M. Ruth. "A Self to Recover: Sylvia Plath." *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin* 47.4 (1981): 20-25. Brauch says that Plath is rejecting "Woman's Fate" through her works like "The Applicant" and *The Bell Jar*. She maintains that Plath's trouble started at age four when her mother produced a son per her husband's instructions and, thus, made Sylvia feel as though her father felt she was inadequate. According to Brauch, these feelings of anger at her father (from age four) for wanting a male child also and at her mother for producing one led

directly to "Daddy" and the negative feelings towards her mother, like those expressed in *The Bell Jar*.

Broe, Mary Lynn. *Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. University of Missouri Press: Columbia, Missouri, 1980. In this examination of the progression of Plath's poetry, Broe manages to address most of the major analyses that have appeared about Plath since her death. Because of this criticism, Broe says, Plath has been mythologized, and Broe sets about to try to undo this. She attempts to show that Plath's poetry "incorporates a wider and more exciting range of emotions and responses as well as a greater degree of artistic control than recent critical history suggests." (p. xi) Broe tries to separate the art from the life in order to get a better perspective on both.

Butscher, Edward. *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*. The Seabury Press: New York, 1976. This book, best described as a critical biography, serves fairly well as a biography, but it seems to have been done without much (if any) assistance from the Hughes family. Butscher asserts that Plath's main concern, in her art as in her life, was her obsession with her father, which he attributes to a unresolved Electra period.

Butscher, Edward, ed. *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work*. Dodd, Mead, and Company: New York, 1977. This book is a collection of essays, divided into two sections, obviously, "The Woman" and "The Work." The first section, "The Woman," is a biography using nonstandard methodology—essays and poems about Plath by people who knew her well, like Gordon Lameyer, her sometime boyfriend during college. In the second section, "The Work," Butscher includes a good variety of essays about Plath's works, including sections about *The Bell Jar* and a few essays that deal with all her collections, as well as a couple that just discuss *Ariel*. Notably, for it is hard to find such essays in a collection like this, Butscher has included two essays that portray Plath's poetry in a negative light, including Irwin Howe's "The Plath Celebration: A Partial Dissent."

Carruthers, Mary J. "The Re-Vision of the Muse: Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn, Olga Broumas." *The Hudson Review* 36.2 (1983): 293-322. This article deals with the Lesbian poetry published by these four poets in the previous four years

("Lesbian" meaning "with a female consciousness or focus). Carruthers maintains that a female poet's relationship with the muse (the muse is *female*) is different than a male poet's—in essence, that one relationship is lesbian while the other is heterosexual. Carruthers also points out that in the work of each of these poets there is some degree of mythmaking or use of epic themes.

Corrigan, Sylvia Robinson. "Sylvia Plath: A New Feminist Approach." *Aphra* 1 (1970): 16-23. This article takes a look at Plath's life and work from a feminist perspective, and Corrigan tries to classify Plath as feminist or not feminist writer. Corrigan maintains that Plath actually had great insight into the way society treats women but that that didn't help—she was only given shock treatments for her insight. She states the "the poetess, in my estimation, set herself up to be a beautiful kill for life." (p. 20) She also says that Plath's great search was for autonomy, and that if she had realized what she was searching for and how much of that she had already achieved, she would not have committed suicide. Oh, yes, and Corrigan's conclusion about Plath as feminist? "She is feminist in the sense that she perceives inequities and expresses them excruciatingly well; but there is no prescription for positive thinking or acting, as I take it." (p. 18)

Donovan, Josephine. "Sexual Politics in Sylvia Plath's Short Stories." *Minnesota Review* NRP 4 (1973): 150-157. Obviously, Donovan discusses the sexual politics of Sylvia Plath's short stories, but since this was published before the collection of Plath's short fiction, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, it is somewhat limited. Donovan says that in Plath's short stories, sexual politics are symbolized in social terms (in, for example, "The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle") and in mythic terms. Donovan says that in Plath's fiction "social roles which are given to men and women are those which express psychic dimensions of reality." (p.156)

Eliot, T.S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Literary Criticism and Theory: The Greeks to the Present*. Ed. Robert Con Davis and Laurie Finke. Longman: New York, 1989. This essay is a statement of Eliot's modernist aesthetic of the separation of art and life. It is often cited by critics when discussing Sylvia Plath because of its strict warning to keep personal emotion

and experience out of one's work. In this paper, it is also applicable to Adrienne Rich, since she too used her experiences of domesticity as material for her poetry.

- Ellman, Mary. "The Bell Jar: An American Girlhood." *The Art of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Charles Newman. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1970. 221-226. This essay deals with the style and themes of *The Bell Jar*. Shows that the themes of *The Bell Jar* are the same as those of Plath's poetry in that "[t]he extremes of the novel are those of the poems, suicide and childbirth, erasing a life or writing a new one." (p.226)
- Erkkila, Betsy. "Dickinson and Rich: Toward a Theory of Female Poetic Influence." *American Literature* 56.4 (1984): 541-559. This essay discusses the nature of literary relationships between female poets. The author recalls Harold Bloom's theory that strong male poets "overthrow" their predecessors. Erkkila suggests that female poets deal with one another differently—that they draw upon each other for a sense of empowerment and for creative energies and that they see the line of female poets as sisters rather than competition. Erkkila focuses on Adrienne Rich's relationship with the work of Emily Dickinson, who has been very influential for Rich.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. Dell Publishing Co.: New York, 1963. In this landmark study, Friedan examines what she sees as the post-World War II malaise of American women. She points out that the soldiers came back from the war ready to settle down with sweethearts and have a family, only to find those sweethearts working their old jobs—and liking it! Then began a media blitz, through advertisement and women's magazines, to glorify the role of wife and mother. This message, which Friedan calls the Feminine Mystique, is based on the idea that women are so different from men and so much closer to nature (i.e. earthmother) that men cannot understand them, and that women are so essential in their roles as a sure refuge from the cold world that they must gladly give up those jobs and accept those new jobs for the sake of the country. Friedan points out the negative messages that were received by any woman who tried to work outside the home, and she says that this message adversely affected all women who came in contact with it—from mothers to their female children. Particularly significant to the study of Plath and Rich is that

Friedan's study was done in 1957, only a few years after both graduated from college, and that when Friedan interviewed undergraduates, she did so at her and Plath's alma mater, Smith College.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. "‘I go where I love’: An Intertextual Study of H.D. and Adrienne Rich." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9.2 (1983): 228-245. Friedman discusses the similarities between H.D.'s and Rich's use of female imagery and Rich's literary debt to H.D. She also points out that Rich's lesbian separatism is different from H.D.'s lesbianism, in which her "regeneration of woman as symbol and self took place within a context that included men as mentors, lovers, and companions" (244).

Gilbert, Sandra M. "‘A Fine, White Flying Myth’: Confessions of a Plath Addict." *Massachusetts Review* 19.3 (1978): 585-603. Gilbert looks at her own reactions to Plath along with her life's similarities to Plath's. (They went to the same high school, were both Guest Editors with *Mademoiselle*, and were apprenticed to the same woman at the magazine, *The Bell Jar's* "Jay Cee.") Gilbert explores the social context Plath worked in and which, to some extent, Gilbert shared. Primarily, Gilbert focuses on the exploration of selves and others that Plath explores in her poetry, and Gilbert likens the eventual purgation of these selves through the poetry to similar patterns in *Jane Eyre*, *Frankenstein*, and the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

Kroll, Judith. *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. Harper and Row: New York, 1976. This study deals with Plath's later poetry, particularly the *Ariel* poems. Kroll illustrates her theory that the major themes of these later works are "the male as 'god' and as 'devil,' the false self and the true self, and death-in-life and life-in-death (or death and rebirth)." (p. 12).

Lehrer, Sylvia. *The Dialectics of Art and Life. A Portrait of Sylvia Plath as Woman and Poet*. Institut Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik: Salzburg, 1985. This thesis attempts to show, as its title suggests, the interrelationship between Sylvia Plath's life and her poetry. Therefore, this study takes a decidedly biographical perspective in trying to show what could have been the impetus for the themes of her poetry, although Lehrer

maintains that Plath was not a strict confessionalist poet . This study is also highly pluralistic, introducing most of the major criticism that has been written about Plath, however conflicting. Also, this work is more complete than many, since it was written late enough so that Lehrer had access to *The Collected Poems, Letters Home, and the Journals*.

Martin, Elaine. "Mothers, Madness, and the Middle Class in *The Bell Jar* and *Les mots pour le dire*." *The French-American Review* 5.1 (1981): 24-47. Martin compares the occurrences of madness in the young female protagonists of these two novels. The protagonists both of the bourgeoisie and share similar family circumstances (absent father, stifling mother). Through these comparisons, Martin examines the characters of these young women and how their relationships with their mothers and their narrow roles in a patriarchal society are factors in their madness.

Melander, Ingrid. *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes*. Almqvist and Wiksell: Stockholm, 1972. As the title suggests, this revised doctoral thesis discusses what Melander sees as some of the major themes of Plath's poetry. These themes include the father-daughter relationship; "man's feeling of estrangement from nature,"(p.7); the conflicting images of fear of death and fascination with death, and those of Plath's poems that were inspired by works of art. Melander also emphasizes how Plath's idea of "the separateness of everything" was a pervasive image in all of her works and how its seriousness deepened over time.

Mizejewski, Linda. "Sappho to Sexton: Woman Uncontained." *College English* 35.3 (1973): 340-345. Mizejewski says that some women in literature take an unconventional role, being the opposite of an earthmother. She says that these figures are characterized by separation from the ground, a drive for freedom, and a sense of sexuality. Mizejewski points out that the rider in Plath's *Ariel* is one such figure, with the rider seeming almost a supernatural figure rather than an earthmother.

Newman, Charles. "Candor is the only Wile—The art of Sylvia Plath." *The Art of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Charles Newman. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1970. 21-55. Newman traces

the progression of her poetry from her early to her late works, stressing throughout her similarities to Emily Dickinson. He points out the pervasive sense of otherness in her work and shows how her language changed from the thesaurus-bound *The Colossus* to *Ariel*. Newman says that Plath reached a breakthrough in modern poetry in breaking away from modern poetry and showing that "academic" poetry and "non-academic" poetry are not mutually exclusive and are, in fact, unified (in her last poems).

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*. Virago Press, London, 1987. 23-75. In this analysis of heterosexual sex and marriage, Rich maintains that the current system of heterosexuality and marriage is propagated by men for their convenience. She also says that women are forced to accept this system through economic and social necessity, although they maintain their primary emotional ties with other women.

Rosen, Lois. "Sylvia Plath's Poetry About Children: New Perspectives." *Modern Poetry Studies* 10.1 (1980): 98-115. Rosen examines the different ways Plath uses the imagery or themes of children in her poetry. Rosen particularly focuses on the way some of her child imagery reflects her own experiences with pregnancy and motherhood, and she examines the dichotomy of Plath's use of romantic child imagery versus her disturbing images of children shrieking.

Stevenson, Anne. *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*. Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1989. This is one of the most complete biographies about Sylvia Plath, as it was able to take into account her *Letters Home* and *Journals*. Also, Stevenson got assistance from Ted Hughes and his sister Olwyn, which, according to Stevenson herself, may have biased the book. The book uses interviews with many people who were unwilling to come forward before, including several who knew Plath during her last days in London. The book tries to dispel many of the myths about Plath, and it tries to address her mainly as a writer rather than Plath as an interesting subject for psychologists or feminists.

Uroff, M. D. "Sylvia Plath's Women." *Concerning Poetry* 7.1 (1974): 45-56. Uroff examines the different ways Plath portrays

women in her poetry. Uroff stresses that the women of Plath's poetry should be seen as created characters and not simply as the many faces of Plath. She points out that in Plath's poetry, the grand division is not between earthmothers and other women but between intellectually centered women and brutish, physical men. She also says that what all the women of Plath's poetry ultimately share is a desire to be freed from the physical nature of men.

Uroff, Margaret D. "Sylvia Plath on Motherhood." *Midwest Quarterly* 15.1 (1973): 70-90. Uroff illustrates the different views of motherhood that Plath illustrates in her poetry: from mothers as stifling in "The Disquieting Muses," addresses to her unborn children in "The Manor Garden" and "You're," and a mother's fear for her child in an unstable world in "Magi." Uroff says that Plath's work is important because motherhood is an important facet of life that should be addressed in poetry, but it is a subject that is too often drenched in pure sentimentality.

Wagner-Martin, Linda. *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*. Simon and Schuster: New York, 1987. This biography, hardly as extensive as Stevenson's *Bitter Fame*, fails to mention many of the incidents that Stevenson cites to illustrate Plath's temper and solipsism. Wagner-Martin seems to have more of a psychological bent, investigating the why's and why-not's of Plath's psyche as caused by her childhood. This book is much more pro-Plath and anti-Hughes than is *Bitter Fame*, so Plath again seems to be only an innocent victim of fate. The lack of quotations from Plath's work (denied to the author by Ted Hughes and his sister, Olwyn) detracts from the book, as does the only light use of personal interviews with her former friends and acquaintances. Wagner-Martin maintains that Plath's *Ariel* poems are unparalleled but that the muse was stanchied by a convergence of unfortunate circumstance.