

**The Representation of Feminine Fear in Sylvia Plath's Poetry**

**WONG Hiu-wing**

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Philosophy  
in  
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**Abstract of thesis entitled:**

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**Submitted by WONG Hiu-wing**

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This thesis is a study of the representation of feminine fear in Sylvia Plath's poetry. Though Plath's works have attracted wide scholarly research, not much has been done on the dominant theme of fear in her poetry. My approach in this thesis is to uncover the sensation of fear in Plath's poetry, with respect to three specific feminine roles: fear as a daughter, as a wife, and as a mother.

In the first chapter, the theme of fear as a daughter in Plath's poetry is addressed, referring specifically to her poems about the father. The father's early untimely death and his continual existence in her memory together lead to Plath's prevailing sense of daughterly fear. In the second chapter, different types of wifely fear in Plath's poetry are analyzed and discussed. Poems about love, marriage, and the husband-wife relationship will be used to demonstrate the theme of fear as a wife. In the final chapter, references are made to her poems about children and the maternal role to illustrate the theme of fear as a mother in her poetry.

This thesis is mainly a textual analysis of Sylvia Plath's poetry, with occasional biographical references. Plath's tendency to depict feminine experience in her writings is one key element that leads to a popular biographical reading of her poems. As most of her poems are autobiographical, the distinction between the poet and the speakers in her poems is often blurred.

## 論文概要

本論文主要探討西爾維亞·普拉斯(Sylvia Plath)詩集中所表現的一個重要主題－女性之恐懼(feminine fear)。由於有關普拉斯的學術研究較少涉及此一主題的論述，故本文的目的旨在深入了解普拉斯的詩中對女性恐懼的體現，並分別以三個女性角色－女兒、妻子、母親－所表達的恐懼為重點。

第一章詳述西爾維亞·普拉斯的詩表現作為女兒此角色之恐懼(daughterly fear)。普拉斯的父親在她八歲時去世，此事對她往後的生活產生了重大的影響和憂慮。第二章闡釋普拉斯的詩中作為妻子這角色的恐懼(wifely fear)，並以其對愛情、婚姻、夫妻關係著墨的詩為主要研究題材。第三章則通過描述其與子女有關的詩加以分析，從而討論在普拉斯筆下母親此角色所呈現的疑懼(maternal fear)。

本論文主要從文本分析(textual analysis)西爾維亞·普拉斯的詩，並間似其生平傳記作參考(biographical references)。由於西爾維亞·普拉斯的作品有較多關於女性經驗之描述及其本人亦為女性，文學評論者一般認為較難對其詩中女性角色與其本人作明確的區別。



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## Introduction

Sylvia Plath's *Collected Poems*, which incorporates most of her mature poetry from 1956 to the last days before her death, was awarded the 1981 Pulitzer Prize for poetry, an award rarely bestowed posthumously. This prestigious honor, one of the highest in the American literary community, marks an important milestone in Plath's poetic influence, bringing her the fame and attention that she longed for so desperately during her short life, and confirming her place in the genre of modern poetry. When I first came across Plath's poems, I instantly found that they showed a sheer attraction and intensity. Her compelling and passionate sensation underneath the carefully-controlled rhymes and tone, her use of concise, yet rich and intense imagery, her preoccupation to sketch feminine experience like pregnancy and childbirth, and her ability to handle the death issue with complacency – have all attracted me to study the poetry of this legendary poet whose death came so early and tragically. As I read through her poems, I discovered that her works, weaving together, formed a prevailing disheartening yet terribly beautiful picture of “fear.” In this thesis paper, I am going to explore the dominant theme of fear in Sylvia Plath's poetry, with respect to the three primary feminine roles Plath undertakes: daughter, wife, and mother. The study is mainly a textual analysis of Plath's poems, drawing occasional attention to biographical references, which I think is inevitable for a poet whose most powerful works are those with an intense autobiographical voice.

The private journals of Sylvia Plath show that her mind is always filled with anxieties, panic, worries, and fears, which are demonstrated by an incessant interrogation with herself, questionings about whether she has done right or wrong.

self-doubts concerning her ability, and fears about her choices. These journals unequivocally reflect Plath's depression-prone tendency; these kinds of nasty descriptions of her mental states are easily found: "My mind is, to use a disgustingly obvious simile, like a wastebasket full of wastepaper, bits of hair, and rotting apple cores" (Plath, *Journals* 19), or "Then I look at the hell I am wallowing in, nerves paralyzed, action nullified – fear, envy, hate: all the corrosive emotions of insecurity biting away at my sensitive guts" (Plath, *Journals* 60).

Besides the private journals, Plath's poetry is also filled with fear. It seems that everything around her can be menacing and frightening. From time to time, she reflects her psychological inward fear, either through the narrators or the characters, in her poems. The reflection of fear is more prominent in her later poetry in which the voices of the speakers are more intense and autobiographical. However, her earlier poems also show various sources of fear. For example, in "Harcastle Crag" (1957)<sup>1</sup>, the woman speaker is haunted by the silent environment and feels that her surroundings can be destructive:

[ . . . ] The whole landscape  
Loomed absolute as the antique world was  
Once, in its earliest sway of lymph and sap,  
Unaltered by eyes,  
  
Enough to snuff the quick  
Of her small heat out, but before the weight

1. Dates of Sylvia Plath's poetry are stated according to the *Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*.



Of stones and hills of stones could break

Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony light

She turned back. (37-45)

Besides, financial circumstances can also be worrying: “The money’s run out. / How nature, sensing this, compounds her bitters” (“Departure” [1956] 4-5). In the poem, there seems to be no remedy offered: “Retrospect shall not soften such penury” (9). While the sources of fear in most of the earlier poems are from the objective environment, the fear in Plath’s later poems is more from her subjective insecurity. The most prominent ones in Plath’s later poems are the sensation of fear stemming from her roles as a daughter, a wife, and a mother, which is the primary focus of this dissertation.

Plath’s biographers have offered many explanations of her fear. Linda W. Wagner-Martin, the writer of *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, suggests that “Sylvia’s relationships in the future clearly originated in her childhood fear of abandonment,” which comes to the surface because of her father’s sudden death when she was only eight (41). According to Wagner-Martin, probably due to this irremediable fear of abandonment, Plath needs emotional support and always seeks to be loved. Years later, according to Wagner-Martin, Plath begins to adopt a theory that “love was a consequence of her achievements and without those achievements she would not be loved” (*A Biography* 90).

At times, according to Wagner-Martin and others, fighting for success and thus be loved seems to be Plath’s primary objective in life and she therefore always has a fairly high expectation towards almost everything and tries to excel



in all areas<sup>2</sup>. She becomes more and more critical of herself and feels extremely depressed and shattered whenever she encounters a failure. Wagner-Martin describes two prominent personality traits of Plath as “her tendency to place great weight on something scheduled to happen in the future (and then to be disappointed when it failed to meet her expectations) and a corresponding harshness in her assessment of her own abilities” (120). Another important characteristic of Plath is “her need for control” – anything unpredictable unnerves her and usually results in catastrophic impacts to her: she either ends in an abnormal obsession with work, depression, or illness (Wagner-Martin, *A Biography* 49). Plath’s life is thus always plagued by her worries about her abilities and the uncertainties ahead. She even laments at her inability to end her life out of her own accord: “I couldn’t even succeed at killing myself. [. . .] I took too many pills and became violently ill, but didn’t die, after all” (Steiner 21). This is what Nancy Hunter Steiner, a roommate of Plath from 1954 to 1955 in Smith College, recalls of Plath’s own comment of her suicidal attempt in 1953.

Clearly, tracing the biographical details of Plath’s life would enhance the discussion of her poetic representation of fear, as there are indeed many substantial and plausible suggestions by critics and biographers about the linkage between Plath’s life and her poems<sup>3</sup>. Since Aurelia Schober Plath, Sylvia Plath’s

2. Nancy Hunter Steiner interprets Plath’s extremely high expectation in this way: “the remarkable intelligence and the enormous talent combined somehow to create a distorted perspective, causing Sylvia to set goals for herself that were impossibly high, perhaps deliberately so” (22).
3. One of the critics is Caroline King Barnard Hall who writes in *Sylvia Plath, Revised* that “Examining Plath’s life does, indeed, illuminate one’s understanding of her work, for much of the imagery, attitudes, and events in Plath’s poetry and fiction have their genesis in her life experience (1).

mother, mentions in an introduction to *Letters Home* that Plath starts to periodically fuse her experiences into the characters in her writing at an early age, Plath's tendency to incorporate personal experiences in her poems is not to be downplayed (Plath, *Letters Home* 22). Consequently, this thesis takes Plath's life experiences into account and notes the interaction between her life and the representation of fear in her poems.

Pashupati Jha's *Sylvia Plath: The Fear and Fury of Her Muse* (1991) is perhaps the only book so far that specifically deals with the theme of fear in Plath's poetry. In his preface, he suggests that "the pervasive presence of fear in her (Plath's) work, along with its invariable variants like vulnerability, anxiety, threat, awe, panic, and horror" is a crucial observation that most critics have overlooked. Jha suggests that Plath's poetry reflects "a consistent pattern of fear" which starts "from the earliest published juvenilia to her last poems and *The Bell Jar*" (111). Yet, his approach, while useful, differs from mine since his book emphasizes the ways Plath responds to this fear through her writings. He labels Plath's two poetic responses to the fear as "regression" – taking recourse to "myths, legend, and folklore" and reverting to childhood – and "aggression" – turning herself into a fearful figure instead of being just "the object of fear" (Jha 15). He finally shares his doubt of labeling Plath as "a mere Confessional" or "a feminist," which are probably the two most popular approaches that surround Plath-criticism. Since Jha's book, it seems that there are no other books that have dealt so specifically and comprehensively with the theme of fear in Plath's poetry.

My approach in this paper, instead of giving an overall comprehensive picture of this obsessed "fear" in Sylvia Plath's poetry, or emphasizing, as Jha



does, Plath's responses to her fear, focuses specifically on fear in the context of three different feminine roles of Plath, as a daughter, a wife, and a mother. These three feminine roles together constitute and establish a significant part of Plath's female identity. While her female identity is obviously inborn, her awareness of femininity is socially or culturally constructed. Plath's biographies and private journals uncover that the society and its cultural values construct significantly her sense of femininity. Ultimately, the three primary feminine roles as a daughter, a wife, and a mother become an extremely disturbing source of fear to her.

In the first chapter, I will amplify the theme of fear as a daughter in Sylvia Plath's poetry and confine my discussion of her role as a daughter to her relationship with her father, Otto Plath, who died when she was eight. In the poems of her father, she has an obsessive tendency to portray him as a dominating and intimidating man. He is always described as an awesome "statue" which requires enormous physical and mental energy to deal with. The three types of Sylvia Plath's fear concerning her role as a daughter, with reference exclusively to the poems about the father figure are, in my view, fear of the death of the father, fear of guilt in causing her father's death, and fear of her inability to free herself from her father's dominating and everlasting influences.

While the role of a daughter is evidently beyond her choice, Sylvia Plath is anxious to make her own decision of whether to occupy the roles of a wife and a mother. Her teenage journals always reflect her unsettling question of whether to satisfy the general cultural value in the 1950's American society of getting married, becoming a wife and a mother, or to achieve her ambitious dream of becoming a famous writer. Deeply influenced by the social belief yet always achievement-oriented, Plath seems to dismiss the two roles of wifedom and

motherhood as unsatisfactory and unfulfilling: she wonders if she would accept a life of “Living and feeding a man’s insatiable guts and begetting children” without “time to write” (Plath, *Journals* 33). Her fear of putting herself into these two roles is overtly amplified with a flurry of questions: “would marriage sap my creative energy and annihilate my desire for written and pictorial expression [. . .] or would I [if I married] achieve a fuller expression in art as well as in the creation of children” . . . Am I strong enough to do both well? . . . That is the crux of the matter, and I hope to steel myself for the test . . . as frightened as I am . . .” (Plath, *Journals* 24). Despite her initial ambivalent attitude towards marriage and childrearing, Plath did later get married and bore children. The experience of being a wife and a mother seems at times her inspirational source of a poetic muse as there is a significant group of poems depicting her feelings in wifehood and motherhood.

In the second chapter, the fear of a wife in Plath’s poetry will be addressed with reference to her poems about love, marriage, and wifehood. Some of her earlier poems have depicted the fear of love, which is generated from the fear of failure to consummate a good relationship with the lover. Plath’s view towards love and marriage is generally pessimistic and it can barely be replaced by her elation and satisfaction of marrying, in her mind, a perfect man, Ted Hughes, at the beginning of their marriage<sup>4</sup>. In this chapter, I will explicate three kinds of fear of a wife that Sylvia Plath shows in her poems: fear of separation from the

4. Shortly after Plath’s marriage, she describes Ted Hughes and their married life to her mother in a letter, dated July 14, 1956: “we are utterly happy . . . and I can’t imagine how I ever lived without him. I think he is the handsomest, most brilliant, creative, dear man in the world. My whole thought is for him, how to please him, to make a comfortable place for him; and I am free . . . from that dread narrowness which comes from growing self-centeredness. He is kind and thoughtful, with a wonderful sense of humor . . .” (*Letters Home*, 263).



husband, fear of the inferiority of being a wife, and fear of being betrayed. I will also address Plath's change of attitude towards the institution of marriage and her husband throughout her writing career.

The final chapter presents Sylvia Plath's view and fear of the role as a mother. After the birth of her two children, she writes a lot in her later poems about her children who have dominating places in the mother's mind. As she is a person generally not satisfied with herself, the existence of her lovely children cannot erase her preoccupation with fear. I will explore three main sources of Sylvia Plath's maternal fear in this section: inability to perform the mother role satisfactorily, fear for the future of her children, and fear concerning the sacrifice of innocent and beautiful children.

In this paper, Sylvia Plath's poetry will be seen as representing the feminine fears she experiences and endures. This study intends to enrich the textual analysis of Plath's poetry and explore in detail how Plath situates herself in the three different roles. Plath's poems will be read mainly from the biographical perspective as Plath is seen as having projected her subjective personal feelings into the speakers of most of her poems. Plath's poems, private journals, letters home, and works by the critics who are interested in Plath's poetry will be sought to illuminate the theme of fear in her works.



## Chapter 1: Fear as a Daughter

Me, I never knew the love of a father, the love of a steady blood-related man after the age of eight. . . . the only man who'd love me steady through life [. . .] He was an ogre. But I miss him. (December 12, 1958)

(Plath, *Journals* 264-5)

A clear blue day in Winthrop. Went to my father's grave, a very depressing sight. Three graveyards separated by streets, all made within the last fifty years or so, ugly crude block stones, headstones together, as if the dead were sleeping head to head in a poorhouse. In the third yard, on a flat grassy area looking across a sallow barren stretch to rows of wooden tenements, I found the flat stone, "Otto E. Plath: 1885-1940," right beside the path, where it would be walked over. Felt cheated. My temptation to dig him up. To prove he existed and really was dead. How far gone would he be? No trees, no peace, his headstone jammed up against the body on the other side. Left shortly. It is good to have the place in mind . . . (March 9, 1959)

(Plath, *Journals* 298)

As a well-known major influential event in Sylvia Plath's childhood, the death of her father, Otto Plath, creates an overwhelming and formidable impact on her life and also influences her poetic manipulations. Though not many of Plath's poems are about her father, it is undeniable that some of her most famous and criticism-provoking ones are about the father figure. Plath's father died of diabetes when she was eight, at the age of a critical moment in the development of a girl. The impact of the untimely death of her father is particularly traumatic to the eldest child, Sylvia Plath, in the family. Charles Newman suggests in the introductory chapter of *The Art of Sylvia Plath, a Symposium* that "the loss of

father” remains one of “her central occupations” in Plath’s later works (23).

From the records of Plath’s early childhood, it is obvious that as a little child, she strives very hard for her father’s attention and love instead of the mother’s: “Because Sylvia saw how much time Aurelia [her mother] spent with Warren [her brother], she campaigned diligently for her father’s attention” (Wagner-Martin, *A Biography* 24). The relationship between the father and daughter, in Wagner-Martin’s words, was “complex” as Otto Plath treated his daughter “as if she were a miniature wife” (*A Biography* 24). Therefore, the untimely and sudden death of Otto Plath imaginably creates a turmoil in her life and leaves her with haunting memories and influences which she feels incapable to cope with, even in her adulthood.

Plath is, I would say, tortured by the fact that her father is dead. Linda W. Wagner-Martin mentions an interesting pattern in Plath’s writings as she “consistently” describes “Otto’s death in terms of the *child’s* loss” and her sole attention is “on the child” (30). The effects of the father’s death is so crucial to her that she “constantly returns to her relationship with the dead father in an attempt to overcome and, if possible, accept the consequences of his death” (Melander 27-8). Since this death denies perpetually her attachment to him in a physical sense, thus instead, the father’s “physical absence translates into a powerful presence throughout Plath’s poetry” (Strangeways 165) as she tries to seek emotional attachment to the father through her writings. One central theme of Plath’s work is to reconstruct a father figure in a persistent way so as to deny the vacant space left by his death.

Though Plath has not admitted any autobiographical traces in her poems about the father throughout her writing career, she consistently illustrates a father



figure in her poetry which helps to establish a personal father symbol. In the poems depicting the father figure, Plath gives a dominating and intimidating portrayal of him. The father is an extremely huge and awesome figure that is always threatening and haunting her in memories. The somewhat exaggerated depiction of the father's physical hugeness and enormity understandably reflects Plath's inner emotional disturbance and turbulence towards her father.

The strong attachment and consistent memory of the father later becomes a sense of fear to Plath, suffocating her like falling into a trap with no way out. In this chapter, I will explicate the theme of fear as a daughter in Sylvia Plath's poetry in three areas: the astonishing death of the father, feeling of guilt of causing the father's death, and the inability to cope with the powerful, dominating, and everlasting influence of the father.

To say that Sylvia Plath has fears concerning her role as a daughter is not to erase the possibility of daughterly affection, or more precisely "emotional attachment," on her part. In some of her earlier poems, Plath explores the positive sides of the father by portraying him as an important protector and provider. In her collection *The Colossus*, the title poem (1959) directly relates to a person of great size and importance; the provider quality of the father is positively addressed. In this particular poem, the father is described as a huge statue and its greatness is overwhelming. The statue is so huge and enormous that the daughter (perhaps an identified self of the poet) associates herself to "an ant" crawling along it (him):

I crawl like an ant in mourning  
Over the weedy acres of your brow  
To mend the immense skull-plates and clear

The bald, white tumuli of your eyes. (12-15)

When compared to the greatness of the father statue, the daughter unflinchingly acknowledges her own smallness, even as a small insect. The allusion of herself to an ant is not only to highlight and emphasize the greatness of the father figure, but also subtly helps to illustrate her closeness and attachment to the father. As a small insect is capable of crawling along the huge statue, comparing the daughter to an ant implicitly reflects Plath's personal desire to attach to her father in a physical way, an everlasting elusive hope to her. At the end of the poem, Plath paints a leisurely, peaceful, and harmonious picture of imagining the daughter sitting in the "cornucopia" of her father's huge ear: "Nights, I squat in the cornucopia / Of your left ear, out of the wind, / Counting the red stars and those of plum-colour" (24-26). Here, the statue of the father provides an appropriate shelter for the girl who is thus protected out of the wind. He acts as "a viable shelter from the contingencies of worldly existence" (Bronfen 81) and "the daughter's dependence on the impressive father figure seems greater than ever before" (Melander 41). Besides, the deliberate chosen word "cornucopia" connotes a symbol of plenty and abundance, thus reiterating the provider quality of the father and highlighting his positive contribution to her (24). About twenty years after her father's death, Plath probably still senses her father's protection in a spiritual way. In addition, the association of the father to the sea in "Full Fathom Five" (1958) shows Plath's view and perception of him. The sea, representing the origin of human life, is huge, mysterious, and limitless. Her father, like the sea, is the origin of her life and in her child fantastic belief "would always protect her" (Wagner-Martin 22). The child Plath once lived on the ocean edge with her grandparents and loved the mysterious sea: "The Schober



house was a haven partly because of its location on the ocean edge. All the family loved the sea” (Wagner-Martin 22). Plath’s description of the dead father body under the sea significantly amplifies her belief that her father would always protect her, whether he is alive or dead.

The father image, besides being care-rendering and protective, is also illustrated as powerful and heroic. In “Electra on Azalea Path” (1959), Plath compares the daughter to Electra and her father to Agamemnon, a supreme commander of an army. In her Juvenilia poem “Lament,” the poet renders “a description of the father’s superlative qualities” (Melander 31). The father is surprisingly powerful and possesses an impressive ability to show disapproval and comment on everything, even the natural phenomenon and godly creatures: he scorns “the tick of the falling weather” (3), trounces “the sea like a raging bather” (7), rides “the flood in a pride of prongs” (8), and even boldly laughs “at the ambush of angels’ tongues” (14). Similarly in “On the Decline of Oracles” (1957), the father is compared to an oracle. Oracles, who prophesize about future events, are commonly-renowned and respected as powerful figures. To Plath, the father is as respectful and powerful to her as a prophet because he, like an oracle, creates influential impacts on her future. In the poem, the father is described as having “kept a vaulted conch / By two bronze bookends of ships in sail” (1-2), and the daughter uses this shell to listen to the “voices of that ambiguous sea / Old Bocklin missed, who held a shell / To hear the sea he could not hear” (4-6). Arnold Bocklin is a Swiss late-Romantic painter whose drawings show his special interests in depicting the sea and natural landscape. With her father’s shell, the daughter is able to hear the voices from the sea which even Bocklin, a sea painter, misses. Here, she suggests the kind of power her



father renders her, making her capable of grasping insights that even a sea painter, who contributes much time to explore and depict the sea, cannot achieve. It is like inheriting “a paternal gift” of “a visionary power for prophecy” from the dead father (Bronfen 77). The reference of Arnold Bocklin is put to pinpoint and highlight the power of the father, a coherent theme for the “father” poems like “Lament” and “The Colossus.” The death of the father follows with the disappearance of his possessions like books and the seashell, but the voices that her father sets on her still exhibit a powerful influence on her:

The books burned up, sea took the shell,  
But I, I keep the voices he  
Set in my ear, and in my eye  
The sight of those blue, unseen waves  
For which the ghost of Bocklin grieves. (11-15)

While the voice that is heard in Bocklin’s ear is private: “What the seashell spoke to his inner ear / He knew, but no peasants know” (8), the voices that are set in the daughter’s ear by her father are spreading as the once-ignorant “peasants” now “feast and multiply” (16), indicating the powerful influence of the dead father<sup>1</sup>.

Though Plath appreciates the father’s great and influential power in some sense, her poems actually amplify more of the negative aspects of this intimidating power and show her perpetual fear as a daughter. The first daughterly fear that Plath reflects in her poems concerns the fact that her powerful and heroic god-like father can die, which is extremely shocking and unreasonable to her. Plath deliberately presents the fragile and vulnerable side of the father in

1. Christina Britzolakis describes lines 11-15 as representation of the daughter/speaker’s relegation to herself “the task of tending and preserving the oracular authority of the father” (62).

“Electra on Azalea Path” and “Lament,” and shows that he is actually human and not immortal as she idealizes. The heroic Agamemnon, who connotes the father figure in the former poem, is astonishingly killed by his own wife, generally considered as a weaker counterpart. In “Lament,” though Plath paints a powerful picture of the father figure, the heroic tone of the poem is significantly downplayed by the repeated phrase: “the sting of bees took away my father” (1). The astonishing death of the father becomes more unbearable when the daughter laments for “the impossibility of replacing such a man” (Hayman 30):

O ransack the four winds and find another  
man who can mangle the grin of kings:  
the sting of bees took away my father  
who scorned the tick of the falling weather. (16-19)

Even with a thorough and complete search of “the four winds,” there is no possibility to find another man who has the power to “mangle the grin of kings.” While we are confronted with the father’s phenomenal physical power and strength, Plath deliberately provides a counter picture to us at the same time – the powerful father dies because of “the sting of bees,” bites from very small insects (1).

Perhaps the suddenness of the father’s death when she is so young and vulnerable is the most unsettling element of Plath’s view and feeling towards her father’s death. The shocking juxtaposition of the two contrasting portrayals of her father, both powerful and fragile, shows Plath’s disbelief and astonishment at



the sudden death of him<sup>2</sup>. The death of Otto Plath creates an extremely traumatic impact to Plath and leaves her with considerable depression and sadness. In many poems, the father is comparable to an all-controlling god who deserves the daughter's admiration and affection and thus his early untimely death is indeed unbelievable and unreasonable to her, and punches her with an unbearable force. In "Electra on Azalea Path," Plath illustrates the shock and astonishment the daughter has due to her father's untimely death: "Small as a doll in my dress of innocence / I lay dreaming your epic, image by image. / Nobody died or withered on that stage" (11-13). As a little girl, the daughter has always dreamt of her father as a god with phenomenal physical greatness, like an "epic" with great, brave, honorable and memorable qualities (12). Otto Plath dies when his daughter is still an innocent girl who has never thought of the possibility of dying, particularly in terms of the ones she knows and feels intimate with. As she has no idea of why this happens, the death of the father remains an enigmatic incident to her. In the poem, the traumatic effect of the sudden death of father to the daughter is illustrated:

The day you died I went into the dirt.  
Into the lightless hibernaculum  
Where bees, striped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard  
Like hieratic stones, and the ground is hard. (1-4)

The death of the father brings along unfathomable impacts to the girl: she feels like sleeping, similar to the bees, momentarily in a dirty dark environment. She goes to the place where the bees are hibernating like "hieratic stones" (4).

2. Sylvia Plath's immediate reaction to her father's death when her mother discloses the news to her the next morning is a dull response: "I'll never speak to God again" (Wagner-Martin, *A Biography* 28).

During this hibernating period, there are no lively motions and movements seen from the bees as they are inactive. Plath's suggestion of the daughter's joining to the bees indirectly shows her personal feeling after the death of her father is just like the hibernating bees: they seem to engage in an inanimate life without any actions and movements.

Plath further amplifies the catastrophic impact her father's death leaves her in "On the Decline of Oracles" by comparing the moment of death to the period of change from an old religion to a new one. As ancient people regard the coming of Jesus Christ as the end of prophesy age and a major division in history between the ancient Greek and Roman Empire and that of Christianity, Plath's deliberate entitling of the poem marks the supreme importance of her father's death. Though the poem is obviously not a religious one, the mention of the "three men entering the yard" is certainly an overt reference to the three wise men who appear at the birth of Jesus Christ (20). The title, "On the Decline of Oracles," as derived from the ancient historical reference, symbolizes a moment of great change and significant impact – a suggestive hint at the dominating and powerful influence of the father's death to Plath. "On the Decline of Oracles" does not portray a huge and horrible father figure like that awesome statue in "The Colossus," however, it gives us a picture of the mentally taxing life Plath has due to the death of the father.

As her father's untimely death is too unreasonable and unbearable, Sylvia Plath perhaps tries to search for an answer by worrying whether she is personally guilty of causing her father's death – the second daughterly fear in Plath's poetry. It is a fact that Otto Plath died due to an incurable illness, and thus obviously cannot be a fault on the part of Sylvia Plath. However, in some of her poems,



Plath explicates an ambiguous insinuation of the daughter's guilt at causing her father's death. Wagner-Martin observes that "Plath's writing often focuses on the guilt the daughter feels for her bereavement – she has somehow been responsible for his death, if not the direct agent of it" (*A Literary Life* 12)<sup>3</sup>. Though it is obviously insensible to blame the father's death on the daughter in Plath's case, I feel that her unreasonable self-reflection is again a fear stemming from the astonishing death of the god-like father. The father's death comes as a real unbelievable event to Plath and she cannot refrain from counting her own possible involvement in it. This unconscious guilty feeling of Plath is subtly seen in "Electra on Azalea Path":

I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy.

The truth is, one late October, at my birth-cry

A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing;

My mother dreamed you face down in the sea. (33-36)

Plath obviously recalls the moment of her birth here as she is indeed born in October; nonetheless, it does not mean that the description here is historically or literally true. The unpleasantness and horrible picture presented is, in my opinion, a sign of bad omen that Plath ingeniously insinuates. Plath probably feels that it is she who brings bad luck to her father and leads her mother to

3. Plath does not only reflect her sense of guilt in causing her father's death in the poem, but also in her journals and conversation with friends. One of her journal entries reads: "If I really think I killed and castrated my father may all my dreams of deformed and tortured people be my guilty visions of him or fears of punishment for me? And how to lay them? To stop them operating through the rest of my life?" (299). Nancy Hunter Steiner, a roommate of Plath in Smith College, recalls Plath talking about her father's death in this way: "He was an autocrat ... I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him" (21).



visualize a scene of his death at the sea. The daughter in the poem categorically turns down the mother's explanation of the father's death as a result of being eaten by a gangrene to his bone and interprets his death as "an act of punishing her for bringing her love to bear" (Bronfen 79). At the end of the poem, the daughter asserts that the cause of the father's death is the "love" she has towards her father: "It was my love that did us both to death," shouldering full responsibility (46). While the suggestion of "love" echoes the title of the poem in hinting the problem of the Electra Complex of the daughter, this line broadly contradicts the original Greek myth that Plath borrows. Instead of suggesting the mother as the murderer as in the original story, Plath attributes the father's death to the daughter and believes that the girl is personally guilty for this: "I had nothing to do with guilt or anything / When I wormed back under my mother's heart" (9-10)<sup>4</sup>. She only feels herself free of guilt when she escapes to seek protection from her mother. The daughter's self-condemnation is so great that she even calls herself a nasty "hound-bitch" which further intensifies her feeling of anguish and desperation after her father's death (45).

The fear of being guilty of causing her father's death is Plath's obsessed emotion which she also addresses in a later poem, "Little Fugue" (April 2, 1962), but here she demonstrates a different attitude from that in "Electra on Azalea

4. Plath has blamed her mother for depriving her of a father in one journal entry: "she (her mother) came in one morning with tears ... in her eyes and told me he was gone for good. I hate her for that. [ . . . ] He (her father) was old, but she married an old man to be my father. It was her fault" (266-7). In another entry, Plath reveals that she thinks her mother has blamed her for her father's death: "I have lost a father and his love early; feel angry at her (her mother) because of this and feel she feels I killed him (her dream about me being a chorus girl and his driving off and drowning himself)" (278).

Path.” Facing the father’s “barbarous” voice and nature (26), the daughter-speaker asserts that she is “guilty of nothing” (28). At a surface level, she refers to the catastrophic aftermath of the “Great War” and denies herself any involvement in this cruel unmerciful killing of people though she is part German heritage (31). However, this denial of being “guilty” can also be treated broadly as a reference to the feeling of guilt of causing her father’s death. Besides dismissing herself from any connection to the brutality of the German cruelty during the war, through this definite denial of guilt she also tries to free herself from the feeling of guilt aroused from the father’s death, as reflected in “Electra on Azalea Path.” As Jon Rosenblatt cleverly suggests in *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*, the daughter “abandons the image of the heroic Greek father and denies that the daughter should feel guilty” (122). Plath’s admission of the daughter’s fault at causing her father’s death in the earlier-written poem “Electra on Azalea Path” and denial in the later work “Little Fugue” is a probable demonstration of her own sick and suffocating feelings that are perpetually connected to her father’s death.

As a plausible way to get rid of the self-imposed guilty feelings and perpetual linkage to her father’s death, Plath enacts a desperate and anxious hope to revive the deceased father from death. Her desperate hope to reunite with her father is significantly expressed at the end of “Full Fathom Five” in which Plath describes the father’s body underneath the sea surface: “Father, this thick air is murderous. / I would breathe water” (44-45). The daughter abnormally dismisses her normal environment as “murderous” and prefers to breathe the suffocating “water” rather than the essential “air” for human beings, an obvious indication of her passionate wish to join the father under the sea. Moreover, the borrowing of the title “Full



Fathom Five” from Ariel’s song in Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” outlines a secondary revelation of Plath’s inner emotions (1.1.397-405)<sup>5</sup>. As Ferdinand’s father is ultimately discovered alive, Plath projects implicitly her obsessive wish to miraculously recover the dead father. Plath’s hope to revive the father from his death is most explicitly shown in her famous late poem, “Daddy” (October 12, 1962), with an overt revelation of the daughter’s hope: “I used to pray to recover you” (14). While it is obviously insensible to have such hope and impossible to recover the father from death, the daughter’s passionate wish ultimately turns into a sense of obsession – she even dares to risk her life for a reunion with her dead father. Probably due to a common belief of human beings that people who know each other can reunite after death, the girl enacts a desperate obsession to die and go back to her father: “At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you. / I thought even the bones would do” (58-60). In a way, Plath probably believes that at least their “bones” can reunite through her committing suicide – she did in fact try to commit suicide at age twenty – and being buried near her father<sup>6</sup>.

If the section in “Daddy” implies Sylvia Plath’s wish to join the father in death, most of the time it seems more likely that her father is not dead, but continues to exist and live in her memory. With the title deliberately derived from Ariel’s song talking about Ferdinand’s presumed dead father under the sea

5. When Sylvia Plath saw *The Tempest* in her seventh grade with her mother and brother, she was deeply impressed by the “father-daughter relationship, the reunion” and “the ocean” presented in the play (Wagner-Martin. *A Biography* 37).

6. Plath tried to commit suicide and experienced a mental breakdown in 1953.

because of a storm in Shakespearean play “The Tempest,” Plath apparently suggests the similarity between Ferdinand’s father and the father figure in the poem: both bodies are under the sea. Besides pointing at the similarity about the physical location of the dead father bodies under the sea, the reference of “Full Fathom Five” to Ariel’s song in “The Tempest” unveils another important message concerning the death of the father in the poem. In the play, Ariel begins with an appreciation of the beauty and preciousness of Ferdinand’s father by relating him to “coral” and “pearl”: “Full fathom five thy father lies; / Of his bones are coral made; / Those are pearls that were his eyes” (1.1.397-399). Ariel’s song seems harsh at first glance as it does not express any sympathy or create any smoothing effects to the bereaved Ferdinand. However, the message conveyed in this song is of an optimistic nature as it tells us that death is actually not so painful: “Nothing of him that doth fade / But doth suffer a sea change / Into something rich and strange” (1.1.400-402). Even though Ferdinand’s father is dead, his personal qualities are still retained and will never fade away. It is even probable that through some movement and flowing in the sea, the father is able to turn “into something rich and strange” (1.1.402). The death of the father mysteriously changes his own image in the son’s memory – the bones are made of “corals” (1.1.398) and the eyes “are pearls” (1.1.399) – he becomes more beautiful and precious. Thus, Ariel suggests that the death of the father is not as terrible as it appears to be because the dead person is still existing in the dear ones’ memories. Plath ingeniously conveys a similar message of Ariel’s song in her poem “Full Fathom Five.” Although the physical existence of the father is impossible to retrieve, in a way the father has not died:

For the archaic trenched lines



Of your grained face shed time in runnels:

Ages beat like rains

On the unbeaten channels

Of the ocean. (25-29)

Time does not create any effect on the memory of Plath and thus the impossible physical existence of the father in this way is not denying her anything<sup>7</sup>. In the poem, Plath suggests that while the father is physically rooted deep in ocean “among knuckles, shinbones, / Skulls” (35-36), the memory of the father is also planting a deep root in her mind, creating an everlasting memory that she cannot easily erase from her life.

Unfortunately, the miraculous effect of memory to make something more beautiful and positive ultimately declines, and the perpetual memory of the father becomes an intimidating entrapment to Plath. Plath concretizes her fear of the disturbing memory of her father by illustrating the father figure as a physically huge, enormous, powerful, and awesome person. The early death of Otto Plath undoubtedly denies her the possibility to sense his physical existence, but has also rendered her abundant space for imagination and projection of her personal view of the father. The depiction of the father as a huge and enormous figure, in my

7. In her journals, Plath reflects that her father is always with her but his absence also changes her life: “There is your dead father who is somewhere in you, interwoven in the cellular system of your long body which sprouted from one of his sperm cells uniting with an egg cell in your mother’s uterus. You remember that you were his favorite when you were little, and you used to make up dances to do for him as he lay on the living room couch after supper. You wonder if the absence of an older man in the house has anything to do with your intense craving for male company and the delight in the restful low sound of a group of boys, talking and laughing. You wish you had been made to know botany, zoology and science when you were young. But with your father dead, you leaned abnormally to the ‘humanities’ personality of your mother” (she is talking to herself in this journal entry) (Plath, *Journals* 26).

opinion, is a clear indication of the mental oppression she has from the disturbing memory of the father. The dominating influence of the father is actualized by Plath's uni-dimensional negative portrayal of his physical hugeness. In some of the poems about the father image, Plath describes him as an intimidating and giant statue, showing her intense mental oppression due to the memory of him. The reference to a giant statue first appears in her early poem, "Letter to a Purist" (1956), though in this poem the huge figure referred to is not specifically the father. The "grandiose colossus" is so invulnerable and unbreakable that even great forces from the sea do not damage him:

The envious assaults of sea

(Essaying, wave by wave,

Tide by tide,

To undo him, perpetually),

Has nothing on you (3-7).

Besides, his size is so huge that he is able to stride across large areas from "the muck-trap / Of skin and bone" (11-12) to the "preposterous provinces of madcap / Cloud-cuckoo" (14-15), covering from earth to sky. In "The Colossus," Plath refers the huge figure in "Letter to a Purist" specifically and explicitly to "father" (17). As I have noted, the huge father in this poem can provide protection to his daughter, yet he is also terrifying. The intimidating and huge appearance of the father statue is further stressed near the end of the poem: "The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue. / My hours are married to shadow" (27-28). Even the largest planet, the sun, rises underneath the father statue's tongue and the big figure thus casts a shadow on the daughter. In addition, marrying "to shadow" is an implication of the doomed and depressing life Plath has after her father's death.



as “shadow” gives the sense of melancholy and gloominess.

While “Lament” is her Juvenilia creation and “The Colossus” is among her earlier achievement, Plath’s perception of the father as a huge still statue is consistent through to one of her last poems, “Daddy.” Though the focus of this impressive poem is noticeably not the statue portrayal of her father, Plath continues to describe the hugeness and god-like nature of the father. The statue here is so large that the body spreads over the big ocean:

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,

Ghastly statue with one grey toe

Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic

Where it pours bean green over blue

In the waters off beautiful Nauset. (8-13)

The father statue’s hugeness and grossness is impressively magnified: just a “toe” of the “ghastly” statue is as “big as a Frisco seal” – the size of a large sea animal. The father statue is obviously huge and heavy in proportions when compared to the daughter and its hugeness is capable of extending across “the freakish Atlantic.”

In addition to referring the father to a huge statue, Sylvia Plath manifests his enormity by associating him to the limitless and fathomless sea. Just as the statue represents the protective but also the hard, unbreakable, and intimidating nature of the father, or the impacting influences of the memory of the father, the association to the sea is ambivalent. As shown, the sea is positively a protector and source of life in the child Sylvia Plath’s mind. Furthermore, the ocean is



illustrated as a charming beauty with various attractive reflected colors: “the freakish Atlantic / Where it pours bean green over blue / In the waters off beautiful Nauset” (11-13). However, the sea also possesses the power of destroying everything in the form of a formidable flood: the “Atlantic” ocean is mysteriously “freakish”<sup>8</sup>. With these ambivalent perceptions of the father figure, Plath also amplifies the ambivalent attitude she has towards him. While the father is awesome and intimidating as a “ghastly statue” or a huge sea that threatens and disturbs her in the memory, she still exhibits a passionate affection and attachment to him. After all, the father is the origin and source of her life; like the sea to all mankind, her lineage to him is impossible to break. Like a huge and heavy statue, the sea has a strange and terrifying beauty which Plath feels both attractive and scary.

Thus Plath is torn between a desire to revive or reunite with the father and a double fear that this task cannot be accomplished and will destroy her if she tries. In “The Colossus,” Plath describes the frustration and helplessness the daughter has from this futile effort of reviving the father. In the poem, the diligent daughter is like a laborer who tries day after day to clean and repair the father statue. Her futile effort to repair the statue is illustrated with an exhaustive and hopeless tone at the beginning of the poem: “I shall never get you put together entirely, / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed” (1-2). She hopes “to restore the grandeur of the ruined colossus” but admits “at the outset” that the “task” is

8. One memorable incident of the child Sylvia Plath concerns the September 21, 1938, hurricane. Plath “worried most about the Schober house, built directly beside the ocean” (Wagner-Martin, *A Biography* 27). It shows her understanding of the potential dangers of the sea.

“impossible” (Jha 51). The deliberate use of the three various words “pieced,” “glued,” and “jointed” reflects the daughter’s exhaustive input of energy and effort to repair the statue, a task that she regards as failure and disturbance. The suggestion of repairing and cleaning the huge father statue is actually, I believe, a reflection of Plath’s consistent wish to revive the dead father, or more specifically, to create a complete father picture in her memory. The huge task is not only physically demanding, but also taxing in terms of the use of time: “Thirty years now I have laboured / To dredge the silt from your throat” (8-9). The daughter helplessly laments over the ruins of the father and depressingly feels that “I am none the wiser” (10). Though it is obviously untrue that Plath has done this repair work for “thirty years” as by the time of writing this poem she is not thirty yet, the feeling of exhaustion and desperation is intense. In Plath’s mind, not only is the statue physically huge, but the task is also dominating, disturbing, and annoying to her. And most importantly, this task seems to be perpetually incomplete without an end. The fear of inability to revive the dead father seems to turn into a fear of inability to fulfill her duty as a daughter, as the task from her father can never be successfully finished. In “The Colossus,” Plath seems to highlight her responsibility as a daughter: it is her job to fix what is left behind by the father. The father statue leaves continual “silt” (9), “tumuli” (15) and pieces for the daughter to repair and clean literally, but I think in a broader sense, there is an emotional legacy that Plath inherits from her father that she needs to deal with – the intimidating memory of the father<sup>9</sup>.

9. Elisabeth Bronfen interprets Plath’s persona in “The Colossus” as follows: the persona dredges “the silt from the colossus’ throat so as to facilitate her understanding of the words he speaks from beyond the grave.” and mends “the skull-places and the white tumuli of his eyes so as to undo the scars of mourning” (80).



The direct association of the father to the huge sea further intensifies Plath's oppressive, menacing, and entrapped feeling she endures from the dominating and huge memory of her dead father, which is destroying her normal routine life. As we have seen, in "Full Fathom Five," Plath imagines the dead body of the father as being deep under the fathomless sea. Also, in the poem, as in Shakespeare's play, the father is an "old man" (1) wearing the appearance of a traditional old prophet: "white hair, white beard" (4), whose body flows along with the tide's coming and going. Plath's opening comment "you surface seldom" obviously shows that the father's body is very deep under the sea, making it difficult to get above the sea's surface (1). Besides, it probably also implies that the father actually does not always show up in the daughter's memory. However, the seldom propped-up memory of the father is still "a dragnet," trapping and creating great disturbance and control to her (5). The disturbing and uneasy feeling reasonably results from the terrifying and scary way the father shows up in the daughter's memory, like a body suddenly pops up from the fathomless sea. It seems clear that Plath is the "wrinkling skeins" (8) being "knotted, caught" (9) in her father's "radial sheaves" (7) of "spread hair" (8) – that is, the memory of her father is like a trap clogging her.

Another poem that demonstrates the father's controlling and dominating role in her life is "The Beekeeper's Daughter" (1959). In this seemingly-routine poem, a controlling and powerful image of the father is presented. Beekeeping is a task that Otto Plath lays hand on in his life and is also later practised by Sylvia Plath herself: "Plath's father and, subsequently, the poet herself engaged in it, and in her poems on this subject beekeeping is invested with a various and complex symbolic significance" (Ferrier 208). The poem depicts a specific moment in the



garden with hives of bees and flourishing flowers. The sexual connotation in the poem is explicit as Plath deliberately animates the scene with phrases like “A garden of mouthings” (1), “The great corollas dilate, peeling back their silks” (2), “Their musk encroaches, circle after circle” (3), “these little boudoirs” (10), and “The anthers nod their heads, potent as kings / To father dynasties” (11-12) – all are “descriptions of an engulfing female sexuality” (Uroff 146). The father, the beekeeper in the garden, naturally exhibits total control and manipulation of the bees and also the feminine-captured garden. It is yet important to note that he, the “maestro of the bees” (5), is not only setting control on the bees and the garden, but is also enforcing power on his daughter; “My heart under your foot, sister of a stone” (7) enigmatically deanimates her. While Plath shows the physical strength of the father in “Lament” and “The Colossus,” it is obvious that “The Beekeeper’s Daughter” illustrates his mental control and power over her. The impact and powerful influence from the father is apparent here: her “heart” is impinged with the force of the father’s body and is thus completely under his control (7). Besides, the father is portrayed as like a priest wearing a “frock coat” who exhibits commanding control on the bees, as well as his daughter (5). Although Plath acknowledges the importance of males in the production of offspring, she is still deeply disturbed by the all-controlling nature of the father. The father, representing male dominance, controls her and the bees which are also depicted with feminine characteristics with “breasted” “hives” (6). It is also worth notice that in “Electra on Azalea Path,” the daughter-speaker joins the bees after her father’s death, expressing her feeling of being controlled under the deceased father. The father figure, in control of the daughter and the bees, is thus a representative of extreme male power, suffocating Plath who feels disturbed by

the powerlessness of females.

In the end, negative intimidating images of the father seem to dominate Sylvia Plath's later, most intense poems. In "Daddy," Plath compares the father to the cruel German Nazi-officer and the terrible metaphysical creature like the devil. This impressive poem is acknowledged as the most powerful one dealing with the father-daughter relationship because of its overwhelming intensive emotions. The poem, probably because of its suggestive title, is usually considered as an explicit expression of Sylvia Plath's personal voice and as a direct expression of her inner feelings towards her father<sup>10</sup>. The father, in this poem, is no longer a huge inanimate statue, but becomes a human yet horrible and cruel Nazi-officer. The relationship between the father and daughter is illustrated with a much desperate sense of destruction and violence through deliberate transition to the Nazi-Jew relationship. Plath's ability to elevate private facts to public events is demonstrated with her deliberate reference to the Second World War as a historical reference in the poem<sup>11</sup>. Though acknowledged as "autobiographical," the literal and historical content of "Daddy" cannot be regarded as completely true in reality: Plath's father is not a Nazi and her background is German-Austrian, not Jewish. It is noticeable that Plath's father is genuinely of German heritage and Plath's concern for concentration camps is sincere and intense, as she could write

10. In a reading prepared for BBC radio, Plath describes "Daddy" in this way: "Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra Complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other – she has to cut out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 293).

11. George Steiner praises this poem as "the Guernica of modern poetry" because "it achieves the classic art of generalization, translating a private, obviously intolerable hurt into a code of plain statement, of instantaneously public images which concern us all" (qtd. in Wagner-Martin, *Critical Essays* 1-2).



a story inspired by this event years later and reveals that she remembers “sitting by the radio with Mother and Uncle Frank feeling a queer foreboding in the air” during the war times (Alexander 37). However, her use of historical facts is fairly personal and it is just her plan to develop her explication of father-daughter relationship alongside the public sphere – the Nazi-Jew complexity, a hostile relationship in the Second World War. The historical reference to a Great War, in a way, expresses and reveals Plath’s concern with world affairs, and more importantly, helps to concretize her fear towards the frightening German-father. It also helps to explore more of “the poet’s own predicament and her attempt to analyse its probable causes” (Melander 29).

The suggestion of the father as a cruel and brutal Nazi officer shows precisely the dominating and unpleasant influences of the deceased father towards Sylvia Plath who views him as the one who mentally abuses and threatens her throughout her life. With a categorically assertive comment: “I have always been scared of you,” Plath renders the daughter-speaker in “Daddy” with an overt expression of fear towards the father (41). In the poem, Plath deliberately explicates an emotional level of the father-daughter relationship as that of torturer and tortured – the daughter becomes the victimized and her father the victimizer. The daughter identifies herself as a Jew and the historical hostility of the Nazis to the Jews tells obviously the opposing relationship between the father and daughter. As Melander notes, “the powerful father figure has been given political-ideological attributes which further emphasize the daughter’s deep-rooted feeling of fear” (43). The Jewish daughter holds an emotional revolt against her father and distances herself from him: “I began to talk like a Jew. / I think I may well be a Jew” (34-35). The daughter-speaker rejects the Nazi-father



figure as being too cruel, violent, and savage to her as she “becomes a victim of Nazi gas chamber” (Jha 87): “A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen” (33). Addressing the father as “Panzer-man, panzer-man” (45), she associates him to an instrument of the war “and consequently a participant in the persecution of Jews” (Melander 43) to magnify the brutality and violence of the father.

The negative image of the father, besides the portrayal as a brutal Nazi-officer, is further extended, in the same poem, by relating him to terrible metaphysical creature like the devil. Through Plath’s imagination, the unpleasant, evil, and cruel nature of the father is highlighted with a description of his likely appearance to the devil who tears the daughter’s heart into two, creating unpredictable and inexpressible hurt:

In the picture I have of you,  
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot  
But no less a devil for that, no not  
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart into two. (52-56)

While the description of the father with “a cleft” in his chin is perhaps an exaggeration of his terrifying appearance like the evil “devil,” Plath describes the daughter’s genuine melancholy and sadness with the description of heart-splitting. Whereas heart-splitting is a traditional love-theme symbol, I would rather say she is talking about the extreme influential impacts and feelings of hurt and suffering she has due to the father’s early death.

Plath’s fear towards her father’s intimidating influences seems so formidable that she even feels the father’s use of language threatening. One problem of the

hostile relationship between the father and daughter is the father's horrifying use of German language, which signifies the sense of bullying and intimidation during the Second World War. The problem of language is reasonably addressed in "Daddy" with an imaginative portrayal of the father as a Nazi-officer, but is also briefly mentioned in "The Colossus" and "Little Fugue." In "Daddy," Plath describes the daughter as a victimized Jew being persecuted by the Germans. The girl's overwhelming fear is reflected through her inability to communicate with this cruel father whose presence and whereabouts are beyond her knowledge:

So I never could tell where you  
Put your foot, your foot,  
I never could talk to you.  
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in barb wire snare.  
Ich, ich, ich, ich,  
I could hardly speak.  
I thought every German was you.  
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine  
Chuffing me off like a Jew. (22-32)

Plath's fear of the cruel Nazi father in the poem is revealed through her inability to communicate with him because of the horrible German language. Plath here obviously refers to the cruel acts of Germans during the Second World War, as the German language itself understandably cannot be terrifying. The self-assertive



German word “ich” is incomprehensible to the daughter, making her suffer from a lack of mutual communication. This alien language is “obscene” and the repeated use of the self-conscious “ich” creates an intimidating suffocating force for her. The main reason for the communication difficulty between father and daughter has changed from Plath’s earlier poems: “While, in the earlier poems, the father’s premature death is the reason she cannot speak to him directly, the cause now is his obscene German language” (Bronfen 83)<sup>12</sup>. The problem of communication is reiterated later in the poem when the daughter describes the father’s speech and language as “gobbledygo” (42) and unconsciously shows her “inarticulateness” (Axelrod 57): “Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You ----” (45). Probably the father’s language is like those horrible sounds as “Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles / Proceed from your great lips. / It’s worse than a barnyard,” initiating a sense of fear and annoyance (“The Colossus” 3-5). The reference to the frightening German language also appears in another poem about the father, “Little Fugue” (April 2, 1962), which is written earlier than “Daddy.” “Little Fugue” talks about the daughter-speaker’s feeling of helplessness and her preoccupied memory of the past: “I am lame in the memory” (44). The father’s language is again illustrated with prominent unpleasantness:

I see your voice

Black and leafy, as in my childhood,

12. Plath records her difficulties in learning German in her journals: “At least I have begun my German. Painful, as if ‘part were cut out of my brain’” (319) / “Worked on German for two days, then let up when I wrote poems. Must keep on with it. It is hard. So are most things worth doing” (321).

A yew hedge of orders,

Gothic and barbarous, pure German.

Dead men cry from it. (23-27)

The German voice of the father is negatively described as brutal and uncivilized and causes the deaths of many people, echoing the historical truth during the war.

In an abstract sense, Sylvia Plath tends to associate the father figure to the color of black and darkness to demonstrate the negative haunting memory he leaves in her mind. Plath has an obsessed tendency to associate the father figure with the black color and darkness; the gloomy color significantly conveys the feeling of melancholy, depression, and unhappiness. The color of black, in Markey's understanding, also carries the "traditional meaning in Western culture" of "aggression and destructive in nature" (118)<sup>13</sup>. Thus the father's voice not only exemplifies his German accent, but is also "black," mysterious, haunting, brutal, and uncivilized. In "Little Fugue," the voice of the father is "Black and leafy," creating a sense of confusion and darkness (24). When recalling her childhood, the daughter only remembers her father's commanding and demanding "Black and leafy" voice (24) as "A yew hedge of orders" (25). The father figure illustrated here not only speaks a horrifying and threatening language, but also exhibits a powerful control over his daughter. The daughter does not have any sweet memories from the past, but only feels the sense of disturbance and "order." Besides, in "Daddy," the "white" daughter laments at her lack of freedom by being trapped in the father's "black shoe":

You do not do, you do not do

13. Jon Ronsenblatt suggests that "blackness" is "the fundamental color of death in the late poems" of Plath (126).



Any more, black shoe  
In which I have lived like a foot  
For thirty years, poor and white,  
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. (1-5)

The entrapment is so suffocating that the daughter “barely” has room to “breathe.” The daughter presented here suffers from “a condition which reduces the one oppressed to the barest minimum of human, but inarticulate, life” because “the father has for long oppressed” (Rose 224). The “black shoe” here thus signifies a dominating sense of oppression. The powerful god-like perception of the father is also destroyed at the end of “Daddy,” but is instead illustrated with the hateful sign of Nazi and total darkness: “O You -- / Not God but a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through” (45-47). It seems that “blackness is the key imagistic element indicating the presence of the father” (Rosenblatt 123). The father, after all, is “the black man” (55) with a “fat black heart” (76) wearing “black shoe” (2) and speaks to her through “the black telephone” (69), who mercilessly tears her heart and makes her suffer.

The intimidating and formidable fear of the father finally leads to a feeling of anger and hatred, probably as the only way out for the tortured daughter – Plath. The spiritual attachment to a person who is already dead obviously requires much mental effort and energy to cope with, which usually results in depressing and agonizing sentiments. Because of this continual input of effort and energy to deal with the memory of the father, Plath ultimately senses the disturbing and oppressive feeling she has as having an intense memory of the father. The memory of the father becomes at the end like a “dragnet,” trapping her in a space with no way out (“Full Fathom Five” 5). The extreme negative and nasty

description of the father finally extends to a sole furious and disgusted tone of the daughter who is utterly tired and sick of the father's dominating presence in her memory:

There's a stake in your fat black heart

And the villagers never liked you.

They are dancing and stamping on you.

They always *knew* it was you.

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. ("Daddy" 76-80)

The voice presented here is obviously one of anguish and anger: she wishes to break the connection with the father so that "the voices just can't worm through" (70). Plath here does not only present the daughter's personal view of the father, but also invites the opinions of others attempting to give a more justified picture of him. While the description of the father's heart as "fat black" apparently echoes the tendency of associating the father to blackness and definitely paints an unpleasant picture for the father, the comment about the attitude of the villagers, in addition, creates a stronger impression of his dislikable personality (76). The power of the father is significantly reduced "as he lies in his grave reviled by the villagers" (Markey 16): "They are stamping and dancing on you" (78). At the end, the daughter, presumably the poet herself, "grows spiteful, attacks the father, and rejoices when the villagers join her in stamping on him" (Dickie 181). The phrase "I'm through" appears to signal the daughter's liberation from "the serious effects of her father's untimely death" (Melander 45)



as “she has successfully punctured him” (Ostriker 102)<sup>14</sup>. With a final shocking condemnation of the father as a “bastard,” Plath’s desperate hope to get rid of the father’s intimidating influence which poignantly suffocates her throughout her life seems fulfilled (80): “the years of fear and pain are at an end” (Bassnett 89). Plath at last understands that “the only way to renounce the negative power of the father is through open rebellion” and therefore deliberately closes the poem “with an act of absolute insubordination” (Markey 16). Maintaining such an angry tone to the father figure in her poems definitely demonstrates Plath’s anguish caused by his influence and the dominating space he held in her mind.

14. Paul Alexander reads this line of “Daddy” as showing “she is through” with “her father, her husband, perhaps even her life” (299). Guinevara A. Nance and Judith P. Jones provide another alternative reading of the line. They claim that this line implies “that the magic has worked its power of dispossession and also that the speaker is left with nothing. Dispossessed of the *imago* (image of the father) which has defined her own identity and with which she has been obsessed, she is psychically finished, depleted” (128). And Peter Dale describes this as an “ambiguous triumph” (67).

## Chapter 2: Fear as a Wife

Perry [a boyfriend of Plath] said today that his mother said, "Girls look for infinite security; boys look for a mate. Both look for a mate. Both look for different things." I am at odds. I dislike being a girl, because as such I must come to realize that I cannot be a man. In other words, I must pour my energies through the direction and force of my mate. My only free act is choosing or refusing that mate. And yet, it is as I feared: I am becoming adjusted and accustomed to that idea. . . . (1950-51)

(Plath, *Journals* 23)

I have hated men because I felt them physically necessary; hated them because they would degrade me, by their attitude: women shouldn't think, shouldn't be unfaithful (but their husbands may be), must stay home, cook, wash. Many men need a woman to be like this. (January 10, 1959)

(Plath, *Journals* 290)

While most people tend to lavish their imagination on how joyful and satisfied the wedded couples are after the universal happy ending of marriage in nearly all fairy tales, Sylvia Plath is obviously an exception. Starting from her Juvenilia creations, Plath constantly reflects a sense of uncertainty, instability, and fear about love and marriage, which persists throughout her writing career. Plath seems to possess an obsessive fear of failure in love even in her young, bright, and hopeful years. Her marriage to Ted Hughes in 1956 seems incapable of sustaining any stable or optimistic thoughts, as many poems written during that period convey the familiar sense of misery and deplorable feelings. The anguish and pessimistic view of love and marriage become more explicit in Plath's later works due to her catastrophic separation from Hughes. In the poems depicting



the theme of love and marriage, the voice that emerges gradually changes from one that is hopeless, worrisome, and fearful to a voice that is desperate, rebellious, and furious. Even in the supposedly fascinating and romantic world of love and marriage, Plath builds her self-enclosed world of fears and worries – a constant emotional state preoccupying her. The role of a wife is not an enjoyable and pleasant dream of Plath, but an inevitably distressful, fearful, and somehow painful task that she finds incapable to combat. Plath's juvenile belief of failure in love probably implants the root of her later continual fear of being a wife after she marries. In this chapter, I will amplify the theme of fear as a wife in Plath's poetry with respect to three main aspects: fear of separation from the husband, fear of the inferior role of the wife, and fear of being betrayed. I will also highlight the results of these uncertain worries and fears as reflected in her works: mistrust of the institution of marriage and a final outrage against the husband.

Sylvia Plath outlines a subtle connection between the two most important male figures in her life by illustrating her father and husband with striking similar qualities. In her journal, she questions herself when she considers marrying a boy: "Do I want to crawl into the gigantic paternal embrace of a mental colossus?" (qtd. in Wagner-Martin, *A Biography* 94). Even long before she marries, Plath seems to have an idea that one similarity of the father and husband would be the quality of hugeness and mental oppression. While in "Daddy," Plath mainly presents her ambivalent attitude towards the father, in the final section of the poem she switches to depict her miserable experience with her husband. She indirectly illustrates her emotional bond to her father by suggesting her deliberate choice of husband:

I made a model of you,

A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.

And I said I do, I do. (64-67)

As she is unable to reconcile with the deceased father in a physical sense, the only thing for her to do is to seek emotional resort – choosing a husband like her father. While it is impossible to determine whether Otto Plath and Ted Hughes have similar characteristics in any way, I believe Plath here rather expresses more of her personal hope of having a “live” father figure with her and projects her subjective expectation on the husband: “I identify him (Ted Hughes) with my father at certain times, and these times take on great importance” (Plath, *Journals* 278). Plath writes to her mother shortly after she marries Ted Hughes and suggests the importance of the husband in compensating for the loss of paternal love: “He (Hughes) is better than any teacher, even fills somehow that huge, sad hole I felt in having no father” (Plath, *Letters Home* 289).

Sylvia Plath’s early poetry reflects a positive admiration towards her husband who is presented, similar to her father, as a powerful figure who exhibits complete control over her. In an earlier stage of her poetic career, these two men’s powerful and all-controlling quality is illustrated positively by Plath, who shows her willingness to be protected and under their phenomenal power. This similar initial positive attitude towards both her father and husband demonstrates the foremost important and dominating space that these two men occupy in her mind. I have shown in the last chapter the explicit initial affection and worship Plath shows towards her father in “Lament” and “Electra on Azalea Path”; “Ode for Ted” (April 21, 1956) is a similar poem showing Plath’s appreciative perception



towards her “future” husband, Ted Hughes – as it is written just two months before their marriage. Reflected in her journals, Plath seems satisfied in occupying the role of a wife and expresses “attitudes internalized by her socialized self: a woman ought to marry, serve her man, embrace domesticity, subjugate herself to her family, and live happily ever after” (Hall 23). With a regular rhyming scheme, the tone and rhythm of “Ode for Ted” sounds like a happy song and conveys Plath’s rather unusual sense of happiness and satisfaction. In the poem, the husband exhibits magnificent magical power and control over his surroundings in a dominating way, with a surprisingly minimal effort. While Adam is given the power and ability of naming creatures in the Garden of Eden, the husband in the poem possesses an identical magical power with an additional capacity to manipulate animals:

he names a lapwing, starts rabbits in a rout  
legging it most nimble  
to sprigged hedge of bramble,  
stalks red fox, shrewd stoat (3-6)

He gives a commanding gesture and the birds obey him automatically to build their own nests: “at his hand’s staunch hest, birds build” (18). Her husband’s influence over the animals is so overwhelming that the birds sing songs according to his mood: “Ringdoves roost well within his wood, / shirr songs to suit which mood / he saunters in” (19-21). From these lines, it is also noticeable that the man does not only control and command the animals around him, but also renders them proper care and protection as the birds are well fed in his reign. In addition to possessing a dominating power over the animals, the husband is even portrayed as an effortless food-producer, who yet does not need an intense energy-input like



other ordinary farmers:

For his least look, scant acres yield:  
each finger-furrowed field  
heaves forth stalk, leaf, fruit-nubbed emerald;  
bright grain sprung so rarely  
he hauls to his will early (13-17).

He makes the fields grow by just casting a look and ploughs the land with a minimal effort by using a finger, and yet is capable of producing the rare “bright grain” (16). The production of food seems spontaneous without any human effort but is able to be achieved just because of the man’s physical presence: “From under crunch of my man’s boot / green oat-sprouts jut” (1-2). Here, Plath deliberately renders her husband with a precious ability to produce food – a symbol of life and energy. Plath thus implicitly expresses the importance of her husband in her life by describing him with a life-giving force.

Her admiration and intense affection towards her husband is more explicitly shown by her deliberate and willing submission and degradation of herself. In “Ode for Ted,” she chooses to immerse herself in her “man’s” world (1) and be called the rather negatively commented “adam’s woman” (22), showing the power imbalance between the couple<sup>1</sup>. Calling herself “adam’s woman” not only echoes the allusion of her husband to Adam at the beginning of the poem, but also

1. Two months after Plath first meets Hughes, she writes in a letter to her mother and refers Hughes to Adam: “The most shattering thing is that in the last two months I have fallen terribly in love, which can only lead to great hurt. I met the strongest man in the world, ex-Cambridge, brilliant poet whose work I loved before I met him, a large, hulking, healthy Adam, half French, half Irish [ . . . ], with a voice like the thunder of God [ . . . ]” (Plath, *Letters Home* 233).

demonstrates Plath's desperate and selfless subordination as "the woman who loves him is not even given a name" (Bassnett 100). At the end of the poem, Plath high-spiritedly expresses her delight and satisfaction to have such a strong and powerful husband by extending his positive appraisal from the environment:

[...] how but most glad  
could be this adam's woman  
when all earth his words do summon  
leaps to laud such man's blood (21-24).

Not only is Plath, as his wife, glad to see her man's phenomenal power, but his inanimate environment also "leaps" to praise him (24). With such a personal and subjective yet strong ending, Plath completes a positive picture of her husband as a model of her father – both are heroic figures with exceptional god-like power.

Despite the occasional affection and admiration that Plath has towards her husband, her works generally reflect an ineradicable fear of being a wife. As shown, "Ode for Ted" undeniably demonstrates Plath's personal affection and admiration towards her husband. Yet, it is important to note that this poem is exceptional because of its rareness. It is the only one that incorporates the name of her husband. Elsewhere, Plath's poems concerning the role of a wife reflect a general uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. Though it seems that these works are not the direct subjective voice of the poet-persona Plath as she adopts the masques of other wives, I would suggest that she ingeniously intends to reveal her uncertainties and worries as a wife, a role that she occupies day after day for almost seven years.

Sylvia Plath's first fear of being a wife concerns the fear of separation from



the husband, which can be caused by two plausible reasons: love's failure and death. Plath's wifely fear concerning separation due to failure in love may stem from her exceptional early pessimistic view about love matters. In her teens, Plath seems to be preoccupied with an obsessive fear that love will end in failure and separation. This obsession is so obvious that Pashupati Jha comments: "Love, in fact, is a highly disturbing emotion for Plath as it generates the fear of failure" (33). In "Winter Landscape, with Rooks," a poem written in 1956, the year of her marriage, Plath pessimistically imagines the disastrous impacts of failure in love. With the description of a desolate place and lonely environment, the setting of the poem subtly presents the gloomy and depressing state of the speaker:

Water in the millrace, through a sluice of stone,  
    plunges headlong into that black pone  
where, absurd and out-of-season, a single swan  
    floats chaste as snow, taunting the clouded mind  
which hungers to haul the white reflection down. (1-5)

The hurt that the speaker experiences and endures is so intense that it is as impossible to erase as to seek green plants in rocks; the lover's image is still lingering in her mind, bringing unbearable hurt to her:

Last summer's reeds are all engraved in ice  
    as is your image in my eye; dry frost  
glazes the window of my hurt; what solace  
    can be struck from rock to make heart's waste  
grow green again? Who'd walk in this bleak place? (11-15)

The speaker of the poem, being severely hurt by love's failure, seems to immerse

herself in a hopeless and desperate cheerless situation after this incident and understands that “love in such surrounding has no chance” (Jha 34).

In several earlier poems, Plath suggests different plausible factors that might cause failure in love, one of them being infidelity. In a Juvenilia work “To a Jilted Lover,” Plath depicts the misery and depression a girl has after being abandoned by her unfaithful lover. Through the subjective narrative of the abandoned girl, Plath illustrates the girl’s anguish and inescapable hopeless situation after this love failure as a gloomy world of “cold” (1), “sorrow” (2), and “black” (3). The possible reason for separation, as recounted by the speaker, is probably a lack of mutual faithfulness: “while from the moon, my lover’s eye / chills me to death / with radiance of his frozen faith” (7-9). The girl is much affected and hurt by the lover’s “frozen faith” as even his mere looks can make her suffer with a death-like feeling. However, it seems that the girl needs to shoulder part of the responsibility for this separation:

Once I wounded him with so  
    small a thorn  
I never thought his flesh would burn  
  
or that the heat within would grow  
    until he stood  
incandescent as a god (10-15).

Here, the poem seems to suggest that the girl has also hurt her lover before and the hurt continues to grow into probably a flame of revenge that makes him so intimidating and powerful like a “god,” who later paradoxically makes her feel like living in a “golden hell” (27). The flame suggested here does not appear



physically, but seems like a mental inescapable domination in the girl's mind: "now there is nowhere I can go / to hide from him: / moon and sun reflect his flame" (16-18).

A lack of communication between lovers is another vital factor that causes separation and love failures. In another early poem, "Conversation Among the Ruins" (1956), Plath uses specific images to illustrate the lack of communication between lovers and presents their relationship as an "appalling ruin" (6). Though the scene depicted in the poem is one of harmony and beauty with an "elegant house" (1) and "fabulous lutes and peacocks" (3), the speaker's lover is described as a hostile person who causes great disturbance to his surroundings:

Through portico of my elegant house you stalk  
With your wild furies, disturbing garlands of fruit  
And the fabulous lutes and peacocks, rending the net  
Of all decorum which holds the whirlwind back. (1-4)

The lovers are presented with absolutely different gestures in the poem, showing a lack of mutual communication and interaction, and the tragic nature of their relations: "While you stand heroic in coat and tie, I sit / Composed in Grecian tunic and psyche-knot, / Rooted to your black look, the play turned tragic" (10-12). In Christina Britzolakis's words, it seems that "the lovers, defined by their costume as at once actors in the play," are together participating in the tragedy (196). The mental landscape of the lovers is so ruinous and "bleak" (6) that nothing can mend their relationship: "With such blight wrought on our bankrupt estate, / What ceremony of words can patch the havoc?" (13-14). While the title of the poem initially suggests a verbal interaction between the lovers, by the end of the poem the title is ironic since it becomes clear that nothing can repair their

disordered and damaged relationship. The shadowy lovers in “The Other Two” (another early poem written in 1957) exemplify the same problem of lack of communication which causes a failure in their love relationship. There are two pairs of lovers in the poem, one is real and the other is shadowy, showing that “though the married pair is happy, they are dogged by their doom-doubles” (Hall 48). The illustration of the two lovers’ relationship is again tragic and depressing:

Heavy as statuary, shapes not ours  
Performed a dumbshow in the polished wood,  
That cabinet without windows or doors:  
He lifts an arm to bring her close, but she  
Shies from his touch: his is an iron mood.  
Seeing her freeze, he turns his face away.  
They poise and grieve as in some old tragedy. (15-21)

The shadowy lovers in the poem seem performing a “dumbshow” showing only gestures without verbal interaction. The lack of communication is further magnified with the woman’s explicit reluctance to have physical contact with the man who is infuriated with her indifference. Plath deliberately employs dramatic techniques to magnify and animate the lack of both physical and verbal interactions between the two lovers and emphasize the fatal cause of their ruined relationship. This poem also substantiates Plath’s doomed view of future: she sees failure even amid success.

Besides the fear concerning separation due to love’s failures, Sylvia Plath expresses her preoccupied worry about separation of the couple because of death. She vicariously depicts the catastrophic and disastrous feelings of a wife whose



husband is dead in a later poem, "Widow" (May 16, 1961). This poem is obviously not autobiographical<sup>2</sup>, yet by depicting "with poignancy the utter helplessness of a woman after the death of her husband" (Jha 71), Plath is also reflecting, in my view, her obsessive fear of losing her husband. The agonized widow in the poem nostalgically immerses herself in the past memory. She tries to gain warmth by a physical contact with the things her late husband gives her: "A paper image to lay against her heart / The way she laid his letters, till they grew warm / And seemed to give her warmth, like a live skin" (17-19). The mental melancholic landscape of the widow is described as one of "great, vacant estate" (21) that makes her feel like a "paper now, warmed by no one" (20). Plath deliberately manifests the lonely compassionate psychological states of the widow with the use of depressing images:

Widow, the compassionate trees bend in,  
The trees of loneliness, the trees of mourning.  
They stand like shadows about the green landscape –  
Or even like black holes cut out of it.  
A widow resembles them, a shadow-thing.

Hand folding hand, and nothing in between. (26-31)

The intense sadness, loneliness, and mournful sentiments of the widow are so impacting that she lives like a shadow without a concrete self and form: "A

2. Linda W. Wagner-Martin writes in *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* that "Widow" is a poem about Plath's anger towards her mother, who always, in Plath's view, puts enormous pressure and expectation on the daughter (189).

bodiless soul could pass another soul / In this clear air and never notice it" (32-33).

At the end of the poem, Plath explicitly reflects her obsessive fear by projecting it to the widow's mind:

That is the fear she has – the fear

His soul may beat and be beating at her dull sense

Like blue Mary's angel, dovelike against a pane

Blinded to all but the gray, spiritless room

It looks in on, and must go on looking in on. (36-40)

She fears that her dead husband may always look at her and even tries to communicate to her, but that she cannot detect him because of "her dull sense."

In addition to fearing that she can never reunite with her dead husband, the widow explicates a further fear that she may never escape him. She always has an intimidating and everlasting fear of her husband's soul and his "dead white face" beating at her "dull," monotonous, and blank mind. The dead husband is "tormenting her to no end" (Jha 71) and probably continues to loom around "the gray, spiritless room," casting intense invigilation. The woman "lives in a shadowy existence, unable to free herself from the influence of her dead husband: 'Death is the dress she wears, her hat and collar'(13)" (Markey 14). Because of her husband's death, the widow's life is completely shattered and she is doomed in everlasting gloominess and depression in her future. The fear of losing the husband or having him haunt her is thus manifested with a desperate forecast of the widow's future.

Besides the fear of separation, which she did in fact undergo when Hughes left her in October 1962, Sylvia Plath portrays also the fear of performing the inferior and subordinate role of a wife in the family – another role she lived.



While she positively reveals her willingness to enact a subordinate and inferior wifely role in the exceptional “Ode for Ted,” Plath’s attitude concerning this issue changes in many of her later poems. In a way, I think that “Ode for Ted” is deceiving in showing Plath’s view of the role of a wife. In many entries of her journals since her teens<sup>3</sup>, she desperately dismisses the role of a wife as deteriorating her individual identity and depriving her of freedom, and most importantly, subordinating her into an inferior position. Only when she feels elated and satisfied at the early stage of her marriage to Ted Hughes does she show her acceptance of the subordinate role of a wife in her journals. Thus, when later she feels sick of the role and in particular after her marriage smashes, she demonstrates an explicit feminist stance towards the issue of power imbalance and inequality of status between husbands and wives in the family in her poetry. Though Plath apparently does not use an autobiographical voice in many of these later poems, she certainly injects some of her personal experience and ideas. For example in two poems written closely together – “Amnesiac” (October 21, 1962) and “The Applicant” (October 11, 1962) – Plath reveals a sense of dissatisfaction and helplessness by presenting figures who are not treated as individual human beings, but are entrapped as properties or playthings of the husbands. The husband in “Amnesiac” treats the “little toy wife” (4) as of the same importance

3. In one of the entries of *The Journals* dated September 1951, Plath explicitly protests against her gender identity and asserts her unsubmitiveness: “I am jealous of men – a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode. I imagine, any relationship. It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening. I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life – his career, and his sexual and family life. I can pretend to forget my envy; no matter, it is there, insidious, malignant, latent.” / “I am vain and proud. I will not submit to having my life lingered by my husband, enclosed in the larger circle of his activity, and nourished vicariously by tales of his actual exploits. I must have a legitimate field of my own, apart from his, which he must respect” (34-5).

and status as the abstract “name,” and his properties like “house” and “car keys” (3). Furthermore, the wife in “The Applicant” is described like a mechanical robot or an inanimate doll: “A living doll, everywhere you look. / It can sew, it can cook, / It can talk, talk, talk” (33-35). As Jha notes, “the prospective husband of this poem wants a ‘living doll,’ a robot and not a wife, who could be evaluated on the basis of her utilities and functions, not on any human emotion” (82). The wife is “totally dehumanized” (Hall 127) and treated as a tool used by the husband for utility and functional purposes:

[...] Here is a hand

To fill it [the husband’s hand] and willing

To bring teacups and roll away headaches

And do whatever you tell it. (10-13)

“It” (the wife) is extremely obedient and submissive as she would do whatever she has been told. Besides, once the man takes “it,” “it” is guaranteed to stay until death” (Bassnett 96): “To thumb shut your eyes at the end / And dissolve of sorrow” (16-17). Plath deliberately replaces the usual womanly pronoun “she” to describe the wife with the general pronoun “it,” signifying the lack of the wife’s individuality, thoughts, and subjectivity. The wife seems to be reduced to a consumer product “of a bureaucratized market place” (Annas 131) and “it” should confirm strictly to the functional standard of consumers items, and should even be ‘recyclable’” (Jha 82).

Sylvia Plath significantly manifests the “doll” role of a wife with a reference to the traditional Muslim practice of keeping women out of public view – purdah. In “Purdah” (October 29, 1962), the speaker (wife) “is imprisoned and



dehumanized by the veils of a curtain devised for the subjugation of women in Oriental societies” (Sanazaro 88). Plath significantly illustrates the speaker’s ambivalent attitude towards her role as a subject of this practice in the poem. At the beginning of the poem, the wife, waiting under the veil for her bridegroom, indulges herself in the fantasy of purdah as being a valuable and precious wife:

Jade –

Stone of the side,

The agonized

Side of green Adam, I

Smile, cross-legged,

Enigmatical,

Shifting my clarities.

So valuable! (1-8)

She maintains an elegant self-conscious and satisfied posture and imagines herself as a gracious valuable wife, not easily to be seen. The biblical figure Adam appears again and echoes Plath’s tendency to view and call the husband as “Adam” in her earlier poem “Ode for Ted.” The wife describes herself as a precious jade which is the “agonized / Side of green Adam,” showing her inferiority as being “mere extension of the man” (Sanazaro 89). With the practice of purdah, the wife momentarily enjoys her preciousness by imagining herself as a queen, having various servants to attend her:

O chatterers

Attendants of the eyelash!

I shall unloose

One feather, like the peacock.

Attendants of the lip!

I shall unloose

One note

Shattering

The chandelier

Of air that all day flies

Its crystals

A million ignorants.

Attendants!

Attendants! (36-49)

The wife attempts to preserve her value and elegance by losing herself to the husband in a fairly tempting and step-by-step way, probably because she is afraid that she would immediately become not valuable if she allows her husband to view her entire face at an instant. The attendants, who are present to serve the veiled wife, help to enhance her beauty and preciousness.

Despite the poem's initial tendency to show the wife's willing submission to her husband, as in "Ode for Ted," it implicitly shows the wife's awareness of the restraints of the practice of purdah. She subtly breaks the fantasy of this practice



by emphasizing the entrapment and her lack of individuality:

I am his.

Even in his

Absence, I

Revolve in my

Sheath of impossibles,

Priceless and quiet

Among these parakeets, macaws! (29-35)

While the Muslims claim that the practice of purdah positively preserves women's preciousness and value, the wife in the poem views purdah as a harsh trap. She seems like an inanimate "priceless" "quiet" doll who feels herself valueless among the chattering birds as even the birds are allowed to sing and make audible sounds (34). With a categorical assertion "I am his," the wife unflinchingly acknowledges her property-like quality, and lack of individual self and freedom (29). The husband is presented, similar to other husbands in Plath's poems, as a powerful and all-controlling lord over everything:

At this facet the bridegroom arrives

Lord of the mirrors!

It is himself he guides

In among these silk

Screens, these rustling appurtenances. (19-23)

The "Lord of the mirrors" is the only one who is allowed to enter the secret place

of purdah and unloose the veil that keeps the wife's face out of sight. Jha asserts that the "expression 'mirrors' is quite apt and significant, for all the women in harem are supposed to be inert objects like mirrors meant only for reflecting the wishes and whims of the harem-keepers" (82). Facing the powerful bridegroom, the wife loses her freedom and is treated like a doll without the capability of speech and subjective will.

In addition to the inanimate "doll" role of a wife, Plath also explicates her fear of the inferiority of a wife by relating the wife to a non-human creature such as an animal. In the highly imaginative and fragmented "Zoo Keeper's Wife" (February 14, 1961), Plath gives an "account of a zoo keeper's courtship of his wife, which characterizes marriage as victimization of the woman" (Wagner-Martin, *A Biography* 184)<sup>4</sup>. The wife in the poem describes herself as a fish with an alienated self from her human body:

I can stay awake all night, if need be –  
Cold as an eel, without eyelids.  
Like a dead lake the dark envelops me,  
Blueblack, a spectacular plum fruit.  
No airbubbles start from my heart, I am lungless  
And ugly, my belly a silk stocking  
Where the heads and tails of my sisters decompose. (1-7)

Probably because of the unhappiness she encounters concerning her relationship

4. There is a possible biographical trace and personal element in this poem as Ted Hughes has planned to study a degree of zoology in 1960 (Wagner-Martin, *A Biography* 178, 184) and probably he "had once worked in a zoo" (Alexander 153).



with her husband, the zoo keeper's wife leads a stressful life without any sleep or rest. The unpleasant and ugly physical appearance of the fish is therefore a direct projection of the wife's mental psychological dissatisfaction. As the husband is the zoo keeper, describing herself as an animal implicitly shows the speaker's entrapped feeling as a wife. The husband is rendered with an influential power which – in contrast with his magical power in "Ode for Ted" – is a negative intimidating force to the wife in this poem. Calling her husband "My fat pork, my marrowy sweetheart, face-to-the-wall" (15), the wife laments that "Some things of this world are indigestible" (16). The husband is pig-like, probably too hard to deal with and he is extremely insensitive to his wife: he rather chooses to face the inanimate wall than the human wife. When the wife recalls their courtship, the scene is not presented in the usual romantic and fascinating way, but is filled with unpleasant animals, showing a doomed feeling of her present life: "the wolf-headed fruit bats" (17), "The armadillo" (20), "the white mice" (21), "the bloodied chicks and the quartered rabbits" (24), "the bear-furred, bird-eating spider" (30), and "two-horned rhinoceros" (34). The horrific imagery in the poem shows the wife's "nightmarish existence in a claustrophobic and abusive relationship with her husband" (Markey 12) and the "associations of kissing with the sliminess of the snails effectively deconstructs any ideas of tenderness or passion" (Bassnett 107): "The snails blew kisses like black apples" (38). At the end of the poem, the wife categorically asserts the everlasting taxing feeling she has regarding the role of a wife: "Nightly now I flog apes owls bears sheep / Over their iron stile. And still don't sleep" (40). Here, she seems to shoulder the responsibility of her husband to take care of the animals but the task is so energy-demanding that it causes insomnia. Providing a helping

hand to establish the husband's career is a role Plath herself feels familiar with as she once is such a wife: "Sylvia felt that Ted's writing was more important than her own. She shopped, cooked, kept house, typed Ted's manuscripts" (Wagner-Martin, *A Biography* 140). The wife in "Zoo Keeper's Wife," besides feeling like a caged animal herself, seems to take the entrapped feeling to the extreme by illustrating the burdensome and painful responsibility and tasks she ought to perform.

Plath further amplifies the fear of a wife as being entrapped and as lacking an individuality in the family by symbolizing the wife as a trapped criminal. In "The Jailer" (October 17, 1962), the wife reveals an even more intense and passionate repulsive attitude towards the invisible entrapment imposed by the intimidating and rather cruel husband who is a "rapist, abuser, liar, and murderer – as well as captor" (Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life* 131). Though Plath does not explicitly suggest the husband-wife relationship in this poem, the first line of the poem subtly presents a domestic setting and thus shows the intimate relationship between two: "My night sweats grease his breakfast plate" (1). The husband is described as a jailer who is normally employed doing the mere task of looking after the criminals; yet the one in this poem seems to be more brutal and cruel and uses violence to control the criminal-wife:

I have been drugged and raped.  
Seven hours knocked out of my right mind  
Into a black sack  
Where I relax, foetus or cat,  
Lever of his wet dreams. (6-10)

The normal and supposedly harmonious relationship between the husband and



wife is described in an astonishingly brutal manner: “The wife is drugged, raped, starved, hooked, and burned in the ‘black sack’ of marriage” (Jha 82). The jailer-husband’s cruel treatment leads to a mentally fragmented state of the wife who sarcastically regards her suffering as the source of happiness and fantasy of her husband, as a “lever” of his “wet dreams (10).” The husband’s inhumane violent treatment of the slave-wife seems to be described in an obviously unacceptable manner: “He has been burning me with cigarettes” (18). The criminal-wife, in return, emphasizes the suffering she endures and views herself in a self-pitying perspective by intentionally highlighting the severe treatment she undergoes:

All day, gluing my church of burnt matchsticks,

I dream of someone else entirely.

And he, for this subversion,

Hurts me, he

With his armor of fakery,

His high cold masks of amnesia.

How did I get here?

Indeterminate criminal,

I die with variety –

Hung, starved, burned, hooked. (26-35)

The husband is accused of “his deceitfulness and his pretense of forgetfulness” (Hayman 182). He has “high cold masks of amnesia” (31) and “does not remember loving her or wanting to marry her” (Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life* 131). She tries to imagine the husband as “Impotent as distant thunder” (37), yet



his power is still influencing her even after her self-imagined pitiful death, making her unable to gain complete freedom, both physically and psychologically:

In whose shadow I have eaten my ghost ration.

I wish him dead or away.

That, it seems, is the impossibility.

That being free. (38-41)

While the poem is apparently representative in presenting an autobiographical subjective voice of Plath as it is written within weeks after Plath's separation from Hughes, not every detail is to be treated as literally true. Instead, Plath rather incorporates her psychological anguish and desperation in this poem to show her hopelessness and smashed feeling like being dropped from a terrible height:

My sleeping capsule, my red and blue zeppelin

Drops me from a terrible altitude.

Carapace smashed.

I spread to the beaks of birds. (12-15)

The brief reference to the "sleeping capsule" here significantly echoes the wife's insomnia in "Zoo Keeper's Wife" and helps to intensify the taxing feeling the wife experiences as she suffers under the husband.

Besides the fear of separation and inferiority of the role of a wife, Sylvia Plath's poetry demonstrates a third wifely fear, that of being betrayed by the husband. This fear can reasonably be traced from Plath's personal biographical life as she is, in a way, betrayed by Ted Hughes who engages in an extra-marital affair which finally leads to their separation in 1962. "The Rival," a poem written in July 1961, is described by Hall as "oddly prophetic, for Plath was soon

to have an actual rival for her husband's affection, a rivalry she finally lost when Hughes left her to live with Assia Wevill" (98)<sup>5</sup>. Instead of saying that this poem is prophetic, I would rather argue that "The Rival" is a mysterious revelation of Plath's possible self-doubt and uncertainty concerning her relationship with her husband. The rival in the poem is compared to the moon with "beautiful, but annihilating" nature, and a distinguished cool manner, with an ability of turning things into stones like the fearful gorgons:

If the moon smiled, she would resemble you.

You leave the same impression

Of something beautiful, but annihilating.

Both of you are great light borrowers.

Her O-mouth grieves at the world; yours is unaffected,

And your first gift is making stone out of everything. (1-6)

"The Rival," nonetheless, is not as autobiographical as other later poems of Sylvia Plath. In "Words heard, by accident, over the phone" (July 11, 1962), Plath illustrates the telephone, a domestic tool for communication with outsiders, as a problematic initiator of her depression and uncertainty. As Hall suggests, this poem is Plath's response to a phone call she accidentally overhears to Ted

5. Jon Rosenblatt presents a different view in *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation* and suggests that "the Rival appears as the omnipresent, hostile moon, an image that is always associated with the mother in Plath's work" and "she (the Rival-mother) has the ability to turn the world to stone: she haunts the poet by constantly observing her from a distance" (127).

from his lover Assia (98-99)<sup>6</sup>. Plath's depiction of the domestic setting, as reflected in this poem, is obviously negative, unpleasant, and disgusting. In particular, the telephone is fearful: Plath probably injects her fear of being betrayed in the poem by regarding the telephone as a "monstrous tentacled alien thing that pours mud, excrement and spawn into the speaker's life" (Bassnett 109). The phone is pouring "mud" (1) which is "thick as foreign coffee, and with a sluggish pulse" (2), making her incapable of cleaning it ever again: "O god, how shall I ever clean the phone table?" (8). With the question from the person on the other hand of the phone "Is he here" (10), the tension in the poem increases with a more desperate tone of the speaker:

Now the room is ahiss. The instrument

Withdraws its tentacle.

But the spawn percolate in my heart. They are fertile.

Muck funnel, muck funnel –

You are too big. They must take you back! (11-15)

The phone is like a tool planting a seed in her heart and making an offspring grow inside. This offspring probably refers to the flame of jealousy and uneasiness that is initiated from what she hears in the unwelcome phone call. As she feels that the person who calls her home and possibly has an affair with her husband has violated her privacy, the feeling of jealousy and uneasiness finally becomes too big that the speaker feels unable to deal with it and thus desperately hopes for an end.

6. Paul Alexander does not think that "Words Heard, by Accident, over the Phone" is autobiographical, though. He comments on this poem as this: "Previously, when Plath had used life experiences as source material for her work, she had chosen events that had occurred in the past. [ . . . ] Not so with 'Words Heard'" (285).



In a later poem "The Fearful" (November 16, 1962), the phone call is mentioned once again, showing Plath's inability to cope with this unpleasant feeling even after her separation from Hughes:

This man makes a pseudonym  
And crawls behind it like a worm.

This woman on the telephone  
Says she is a man, not a woman. (1-4)

Here, "this man" and "this woman" together play a trick on her, pretending the telephone call is just a normal conversation. Plath's fear of being betrayed is clearly shown through her continual bringing-up of the same subject of her husband having an affair behind her back. Marjorie Perloff even argues that the "poet is twice betrayed, for the rival wants not only her man; she also wants to remove him from his children, from Plath's own children" (302): "The silver limbo of each eye / Where the child can never swim, / Where there is only him and him" (16-18). Because the husband wants another woman, he can no longer see his own children. The portrayal of fear is significantly highlighted and intensified by the overwhelming title of this poem: "The Fearful."

Sylvia Plath's wifely fears such as fear of separation, fear of the inferiority of a wife, and fear of being betrayed ultimately lead to two results: a mistrust of the institution of marriage and a dramatic change of attitude from admiration to rebellion and fury towards her husband. To say that Plath's mistrust of the institution of marriage in the later poems stems from her wifely fears is not to suggest that her view of marriage in her earlier writing stage is positive. Instead, in an earlier narrative story-like poem "Crystal Gazer," Plath illustrates her

pessimistic view of marriage by suggesting the destined doomed ending of every love affair and marriage:

What Gerd saw then engraved her mind  
Plague-pitted as the moon: each bud  
Shriveling to cinders at its source,  
Each love blazing blind to its gutted end –  
And, fixed in the crystal center, grinning fierce:  
Earth's ever-green death's head. (43-48)

Everything is to be ended right at the first stage of development, including the tangible plants and also intangible love and marriage, with regard to the reference to the newly-wedded couple at the beginning of the poem: “a green pair / Fresh leaved out in vows” (8). It is also pretty ironic that “the gypsy who promises good fortune to the newlyweds has herself been doomed in love” (Hall 48).

The general pessimistic view of marriage in the early stage turns into a hopeless view towards this social institution in Plath's later stage of writing. In “The Rabbit Catcher,” the central image of the poem is the husband who is a merciless “killer of defenseless animals” (Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life* 78)<sup>7</sup> and the landscape of the poem “becomes a metaphorical trap set for the speaker” (Britzolakis 105). The poem, written in May 1962 when she first senses the threats from Assia, shows the entrapped feeling Plath has in her married life (Wagner-Martin, *A Biography* 205) which is described as “the constricting noose of the hunter's snare” (Tytell 305). Probably because of the traceable biographical details, this poem has attracted much attention though the

7. Plath writes in one of the journal entries: “Ted's dreams about killing animals: bears, donkeys, kittens” (324) and reveals that she feels threatened.



husband-wife relationship is not explicit till the last stanza:

And we, too, had a relationship –

Tight wires between us,

Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring

Sliding shut on some quick thing,

The constriction killing me also. (26-30)

The narrator at last reveals that there exists a relationship between her, probably a prey, and the rabbit catcher, which is “so confining that it is killing her” (Alexander 277). The entrapped feeling of the wife is significantly magnified with a reference to two kinds of objects: “tight wires” and “pegs too deep to uproot.” As Jacqueline Rose observes, these two references hint at “the danger [of the relationship] residing in how far, how deep it has gone” and the latter image “implies that it would be impossible to uproot them [the danger] *even if* she (or he) had so desired” (141). The marriage presented here is sharply divergent from Plath’s ideal, showing her gradual loss of hope in this social institution.

The initial pessimism and the later hopelessness finally turn into a desperate denial and mistrust of the institution of marriage in Plath’s writing after her separation from Ted Hughes. Plath amplifies her protest against the institution of marriage in “The Applicant” by adopting the tone of a salesman to test the ability of the applicant who wants to marry and have a wife. This poem is an important and significant portrayal of Plath’s authentic mistrust of the institution of marriage as it is written on “the date that, essentially, marked the end of her marriage to Ted Hughes” (Alexander 299). Plath deliberately uses the poem to suggest that marriage is “a form of imprisonment in which the woman either revolts against



her entrapment by the man or suffers through it with a kind of ironic passivity” (Rosenblatt 10). We have already seen that the “applicant” in the poem seeks a doll-wife. We can now note that the applicant who is eligible to make a marriage proposal seems himself required to have a frightening physical appearance:

Do you wear  
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,  
A brace or a hook,  
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

Stitches to show something’s missing? (2-6)

With a repeated stress of the empty-headedness and empty-handedness of the applicant, Plath subtly shows her hatred of the husband figure who only wants a mechanical robot-like wife and makes marriage like a market bargain. By the end of the poem, the tone of the speaker becomes more sarcastic like a commercial bargain with an implication that marriage is the husband’s business treat for a doll and usable wife:

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.

You have a hole, it’s a poultice.

You have an eye, it’s an image.

My boy, it’s your last resort.

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it. (41-45)

It seems that there is no other choice for the man to have a wife other than a mechanical robot or objectified doll.

While “The Applicant” appears more like a protest against treating marriage as a market bargain for a doll wife, “The Couriers” (November 4, 1962)

shows a complete denial of the institution of marriage. In the poem, Plath categorically denies the marriage ceremony by calling it artificial; she makes deliberate comparisons to other incompatible and non-genuine materials:

The word of a snail on the plate of a leaf?

It is not mine. Do not accept it.

Acetic acid in a sealed tin?

Do not accept it. It is not genuine.

A ring of gold with the sun in it?

Lies. Lies and a grief.” (1-6)

The three images here represent three different qualities of marriage: “ ‘snail’ symbolizes the sluggishness of married life, ‘acetic acid in a sealed tin’ (vinegar) its sourness and enclosure, and golden ring its outward glitter” (Jha 84). The golden ring presented in the marriage ceremony, with the image of the sun to signify a bright future, nonetheless does not guarantee an everlasting and hopeful future for the couple but brings along “lies” and grievances. This assertive comment explicitly demonstrates Plath’s negative and distrustful view of marriage, the institution that finally shatters her hope.

Besides the mistrust of the institution of marriage, another result of Plath’s wifely fear is her change of attitude towards her husband from admiration to rebellion and fury. As shown, “Ode for Ted” is an explicit praising song to her husband who is seen as a positively powerful and all-controlling figure in the poem. However, it is clear that her attitude towards her husband has dramatically changed in her later poems. It is also noticeable that “Ode for Ted”



is the only poem that directly uses her husband's name and shows her autobiographical voice. In many of her later poems, the husband is not referred directly as Ted Hughes as Plath usually adopts the masks of other wives. "Daddy" is probably the most explicit outpouring of personal feelings among her later poems which talk about her father and husband and it is possible that "the anger at Ted was the fuel for this" poem (Wagner-Martin, *A Biography* 219). While the major part of the poem deals with her father, by the end of the poem Plath illustrates the horrible nature of her husband, showing a sharp contrast from the image of "Ode for Ted." The husband in "Daddy" is portrayed as a monstrous creature: "The vampire who said he was you / And drank my blood for a year, / Seven years, if you want to know" (72-74). This comment shows an apparent biographical reference as Plath is married to Hughes for almost seven years. The suggestion of her blood being sucked by the husband amplifies her exhaustion and extreme negative view of her husband who is, in her mind, a blood-sucker like a vampire. Throughout the years, most critics have focused on the portrayal of the German father in this poem, but this may undermine Plath's targeting of her husband. As Wagner-Martin points out, Sylvia Plath, when choosing for a title for the collection of poems later named *Ariel*, initially chooses between "The Rabbit Catcher" and "Daddy," showing that she intends to emphasize "Ted's control of her life and what she saw as his abandonment" (227).

Due to the anguish and sense of loneliness from her failed marriage, the tone of the wife-speakers in Plath's later poems becomes one of rebellion and anger,

with a striving hope for a release from the stereotyped doll role<sup>8</sup>. In “The Jailer,” the wife ultimately adopts a revengeful tone against the jailer-husband. She outlines “the inevitable bond between light and darkness, between the victim and the victimizer” (Jha 82) and implies that his satisfaction and happiness would end without the continuation of her suffering and pain to feed him into a stronger figure:

[. . .] 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)

As Rosenblatt remarks: “The central theme of the poem is, in fact, the male jailor’s need for his victim, whom he rapes, starves, burns, and humiliates” (111). Her desperate and rebellious tone is employed probably because she realizes that it is after all impossible for her to gain complete freedom – the only way for her to release herself is to fight back at least in a mental way. In “Purdah,” the veiled wife finally expresses an outrage against the modeled doll role imposed by the practice of purdah that puts abundant limitations on her, striving for a release and a “symbolic revenge” (Britzolakis 130):

And at his next step  
I shall unloose

8. Though she carefully avoids a direct reference to Ted Hughes in many of her late poems, the portrayal of various wife-speakers significantly helps Plath to convey her attitude change towards her husband in an indirect way. The reason that Plath does not explicitly put down her husband’s name in her later poetry is, I believe, her deliberate avoidance of digging up the unhappy and unbearable past.

I shall unloose –  
From the small jewelled  
Doll he guards like a heart –

The lioness,  
The shriek in the bath,  
The cloak of holes. (50-57)

At the husband's (bridegroom) approach, the wife unlooses the "lioness" within herself and shows that she is not the idealized doll the husband "guards like a heart." The man is attracted to the doll fantasy of a wife, yet the wife has had enough of this passive inanimate role and strives to empower herself. She finally reveals her true identity as "the lioness disguised as a bird of paradise" (O'Hara 85), who changes from a silent "doll" (54) to a shrieking "lioness" (55). The "shriek" is particularly important to express the feelings of a trapped wife: "The absence of shrieks / Made a hole in the hot day, a vacancy" ("The Rabbit Catcher" 17-18). Using the striking word "shriek," Plath highlights the outpour of explosive rage of the wife and "signals the reader that what she has to tell cannot be told in a normal pitch" (Wagner-Martin, *A Literary Life* 112). The last two lines of "Purdah," alluding to the mythical murder of Agamemnon in the bath by Clytemnestra, amplifies the wife's enactment of revenge and emergence as an independent individual by suggesting a "ritual murder of the bridegroom" (Sanazaro 89).

The unhappiness, disappointment, and dissatisfaction of the role as a wife that Sylvia Plath experiences personally finally changes her view towards men as a whole. Like her attitude towards her father that I have illustrated in the last



chapter, Plath's tone towards the husband becomes one of anguish, rebellion, and fury in her later stage of writing career. The rebellious lioness image again shows up in "Lady Lazarus" with a definite outrage and assertive action-taking which ends the poem "as a straight drama of revenge" (Jha 91): "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (82-84). The speaker tries to adopt an extreme shrewish appearance like a fearful animal and exhibits an intense hatred against men in general: "she rises herself by her sheer power and desire to wreak revenge, thus she denies the possibility of any controlling power outside her" (Jha 91). In a reading prepared for BBC radio, Sylvia Plath describes the woman in this poem as having "the great and terrible gift of being reborn. [. . .] She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 294). As A. Alvarez notes the autobiographical traces in the poem: "The deaths of Lady Lazarus correspond to her own crises: the first just after her father died, the second when she had her nervous breakdown, the third perhaps a presentiment of the death that was shortly to come." Plath probably presents the liberating spirit to signify her own release from men's influences (qtd. in Melander 103). It seems highly plausible that she celebrates her success at the end of "Lady Lazarus" as this poem, written in October 1962, marks "the ending of Plath's long and debilitating saga of pain" due to her separation from Hughes (Wagner-Martin, *A Biography* 221). With an assertive ending line "I eat men like air," Plath triumphantly announces her escape from male domination, "assuming an autonomous identity" (Axelrod 160), transforming herself "into an aggressor, destroying men instead of being destroyed upon him" (Strangeways 172). However, this phrase, in my opinion, paradoxically hints that her anger and fury against men is futile and unsatisfied, as eating air is feelingless and possibly

meaningless<sup>9</sup>. This is a trap, in my personal opinion, that Sylvia Plath cannot release herself from and thus leads her to devote so many pages of her book to illustrate the father and husband, the two dominating male figures in her life.

9. Pashupati Jha holds a different view concerning the ending of this poem and suggests that the speaker of the poem "is the incarnation of pure energy, of extraordinary will power, and can eat them as easily as breathing air is easy" (91).

### Chapter 3: Fear as a Mother

For Dr. B: It is not *when* I have a baby, but *that* I have one, and more, which is of supreme importance to me. I have always been extremely fond of the definition of Death which says it is: Inaccessability to Experience, a Jamesian view, but so good. And for a woman to be deprived of the Great Experience her body is formed to partake of, to nourish, is a great and wasting Death. [ . . . ] A mother has 9 months of becoming something other than herself, of separating from this otherness, of feeding it and being a source of milk and honey to it. To be deprived of this is a death indeed. And to consummate love by bearing the child of the loved one is far profounder than any orgasm or intellectual rapport. . . .(June 13, 1959)

(Plath, *Journals* 308)

Sylvia Plath's overwhelming preoccupation with fear extends to her maternal world which is paradoxically built up with contrasting sentiments of happiness and emotional instability. However, to say that Sylvia Plath has fears of being a mother is not to deny her feminine wish to be a mother herself. This ambivalent attitude towards motherhood probably emerges from the polarity between the influence of cultural and social values, and the worries of undertaking domestic roles, which she perceives as jeopardizing her career development and demanding too much of her energy. As an American girl in the fifties who tries to be perfect, Plath is deeply influenced by the media in the contemporary society as ideally growing up to "be a wife and probably a mother" (Wagner-Martin 50). Yet, at the moment when Plath suspects that she is pregnant, she worries intensely that the childrearing would cause "the loss of her writing opportunities" and take too much of her time (Wagner-Martin 145). In a positive sense, Plath actually gets



satisfaction and pleasure to fulfill the conventional mother role and views delivering babies as bringing production and creation to the world. Just as the wife in "Three Women" (March 1962) has satisfactorily announced "I accomplish a work" after the delivery of her baby, Plath indeed shares this concept of "accomplishment" in mind, particularly after she bears her own children, Frieda (born on Apr 1, 1960) and Nicolas (born on January 17, 1962). She acknowledges the role of a mother as great and regards her children as beautiful and sweet<sup>1</sup>. She appreciates the loveliness and innocence of children as they are pure and beautiful – the two pleasant adjectives often used by her to describe children. Yet, the similar satisfaction of being a mother does not alleviate Plath's obsession to project pessimistic feelings in the pleasant and wonderful world of children. Instead, she is always emotionalized by her recurrent fears concerning the upbringing of her children. She cannot refrain from having worries, fears, and uncertainties, thus making the mother role a burden. Her world, to a great extent a self-enclosed and obsessed one, is made up of complex and contradictory feelings, making her unable to enjoy the maternal role in a satisfactory and fruitful way. She has put on herself enormous expectations and responsibilities as a mother, trying to live as a model for her children, a task she dismisses depressingly as a failure. In general, Sylvia Plath's poems reflect three main

1. In many letters to her mother, Plath describes her children as superb, beautiful and lovely: "Well, Rebecca [her daughter, Frieda Rebecca] is four days old, almost, and more beautiful than ever" (374) / "And Rebecca, of course, looked lovely immediately, hasty lady that she was" (375) / "You [her mother] will be mad for Frieda; she's the prettiest little girl I've ever seen and sweet as can be" (407) / "After both Ted's and my first shock at having a boy, we think he is marvelous [. . .] he is calm and steady, with big dark eyes and a ruddy complexion. Very restful and dear" (444) / "He [her son] has great, very dark blue eyes, which focus and follow your face or the light. . . . He has a real little-boy look, and his fuzz of brown baby hair looks like a crewcut. His eyebrows are strange – a quite black curved line over each eye, very handsome" (447).

kinds of maternal fears: fear of her ability to perform the mother role satisfactorily, fear for the future of her children, and fear of the sacrifice of innocent and beautiful children.

Sylvia Plath seems often to have a traditional positive view of motherhood. The very long poem that Plath completed in March 1962, "Three Women," though is not obviously "autobiographical," is significant in its comprehensive illustration of different aspects of the mother role through the intermingling of three separate subjective monologues. In a subtle way, it is possible to trace Plath's personal and subjective involvement in the poem as she bases it "on the emotions she had known during her two childbirths, her miscarriage, and her recovery from surgery in the hospital" (Wagner-Martin 199). In the poem, three distinct voices speak: a wife self-importantly and excitingly awaits her imminent delivery, a woman self-reproachfully laments at the loss of her unborn child, and a girl angrily renounces her illegitimate pregnancy. All of these point to Plath's deep-rooted conventional view of motherhood: a woman should bear children, and more importantly on a legitimate ground. More important than Plath's conventionality is her great praise of conventional motherly actions. As Rosenblatt notes, "a much more positive view of the process of marrying and having children emerges" in the poem (112). The portrayal of a pregnant woman (First Voice), attracting "attention" from "suns and stars" and even "Leaves and petals," considering herself as "a great event," shows that the poet upholds the importance of productivity and fertility of a woman. In addition, the satisfaction of being a mother prompts this pregnant woman to question the meaning and value of her life before the birth of her baby: "What did my fingers do before they held him? / What did my heart do, with its love?" Sylvia Plath's belief that a woman is



likely to have a fruitful sensation after the birth of her own baby is obviously reflected through the portrayal of this new mother.

Yet, despite her acknowledgement and praise of motherhood, Sylvia Plath still has an ever-present fear concerning this role. She fears that she can never succeed in being a good mother and a fear expressed in "Three Women" is a fear of infertility. In "Three Women," Plath not only hints at the importance of fertility of women, but also reflects her fear of infertility, which she perceives as a deformity of a woman. When Plath herself is once tested as having difficulties in conceiving babies in 1959, she feels that she is "sentenced to remain barren for the rest of her life" and derides herself as "something from which nothing can grow" (Hayman 136)<sup>2</sup>. It is thus not a surprise to see that the miscarried woman in "Three Women" sees herself as "hopeless," "useless" and "restless," observing "a lack" and being put as "a heroine of the peripheral" when conjecturing forever infertility. She views herself as an abnormal person who is not allowed to live in the centre but is pushed to the "peripheral" position, which can only be overcome by crossing through "the blur of" her "deformity." Besides, the poem has underlined an implicit feminist contrast between the fertility of women and the "flatness" of men. Men are described as "flat," that is, "infertile, cold, noncompassionate" (Rosenblatt 114), and this "flatness" brings destruction and chaos: "That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions, / Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed, / Endlessly proceed – and the cold

2. Plath's journals show a desperate fear of infertility: "If I could not have children – and if I do not ovulate how can I? – how can they make me? – I would be dead. Dead to my woman's body" (310). She also reflects her worries concerning the effect of her infertility to her husband: "How can I keep Ted wedded to a barren woman? Barren barren" (311).



angels, the abstractions.” She (*Second Voice*) associates men’s flatness with death, violence, horror, and cruelty, demonstrating her feminist ideology. However, it seems also clear that the woman is deeply influenced by the conventionality of womanhood. She has associated the “flatness” of men with the “flatness” of infertile women, showing her miserable conception of suggesting an infertile woman as “flat and sterile” (Rosenblatt 114), and most importantly, as a death-producer. In “Childless Woman” (December 1, 1962), the childless woman describes her “landscape is a hand with no lines, / The roads bunched to a knot,” seeing no future but a block (“knot”) for herself (4-5). The perception of a childless woman being doomed without future is a clear indication of Plath’s desperate fear of being infertile, amplifying her conventional view of women.

The maternal fear of Sylvia Plath is partly generated from her view of children who are needy and helpless in her eyes. In the poems depicting children, in particular those concerning her own offspring, she repeatedly contrasts her world with that of those little creatures, where they are capable of freeing themselves from the depressed world she lives in and enjoying their lovely and carefree life. As Janice Markey observes, Plath’s poems about the children always demonstrate her desire “to protect children against the dangers of an intrinsically violent and insane world” (34). Though Plath always lives in a self-obsessed depressing world, the existence of her own children has ignited her deep-rooted maternal instinct, initiating her hope to act as a responsible mother. Besides appreciating the beauty, purity, and innocence of children, Sylvia Plath also feels that they are needy, requiring care and attention. Just as the boy would “clutch” the “bars” to get mother’s attention (“By Candlelight” [October 24, 1962] 22), the girl’s “One cry” makes her “stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral / In

my Victorian nightgown" ("Morning Song" [February 19, 1961] 13-14). In "Three Women," Plath mysteriously suggests that babies, both boy and girl, are "furious," – a description hinting at the needy, disturbing, and unfulfilled nature of children. As a mother, Plath is well aware of her responsibility to render proper attention and extra care to her children, so that they can grow up in a protected world with tender motherly love. Her self-expectation as a care-providing mother extends also to those unborn babies in the womb. As an expectant mother, she reckons the unborn infant in her body as a creature, incorporated with the essential qualities of a human being. She understands that deliberate attention and abundant care are needed to keep the unborn baby safe in her body. In "Three Women," the miscarried woman recalls her effort to keep the baby during her pregnancy:

I have had my chances. I have tried and tried.

I have stitched life into me like a rare organ.

And walked carefully, precariously, like something rare.

I have tried not to think too hard. I have tried to be natural.

Plath's belief of a mother's care-rendering role subtly penetrates through the monologue of this woman. Care should be provided to the unborn baby: bearing another life in the body makes changes to the woman's life-style, even in a trivial thing as the way she walks.

Sylvia Plath's awareness of the necessity to render proper protection and care to the needy and powerless children ultimately leads to a "burden" she ought to shoulder, a responsibility which she keeps reminding both herself and the readers of. As she acknowledges the needy and demanding nature of children, especially infants who need to be fed, she tries to gather a lot of energy to satisfy these small



creatures. She illustrates this energy-demanding taxing task of being a mother in “Morning Song” (February 19, 1961), in which she portrays a domestic maternal routine of taking care of her daughter overnight and being “totally responsive to the child” (Uroff 133). This duty not only requires physical energy, but also an intense mental concentration:

All night your moth-breath

Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:

A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry, I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral

In my Victorian nightgown. (10-14)

Invigilation and providing energy-requiring care is one of the many responsibilities a mother ought to take.

However, the expectation to perform a “perfect” mother role has gradually turned into a sense of burden, though Plath may not always be aware of this. It is impossible not to appreciate Plath’s imaginative power when she compares women to trees to demonstrate the tense sense of burden she obliquely feels as a woman, particularly as a “productive” woman:

Knowing neither abortions nor bitchery,

Truer than women,

They seed so effortlessly!

Tasting the winds, that are footless,

Waist-deep in history – (“Winter Trees” [November 26, 1962] 6-10)

It is obvious that the narrator admires the “constancy of the trees together,” “their independence and self-sufficiency” (Bassnett 118) and feels that “women seemed

devoted to sterility ('abortions') and cruelty ('bitchery')" (Rosenblatt 103). In comparison with the trees' carefree and effortless way of reproduction, Plath finds that women lead a more demanding life because the mother role requires energy and tiring effort in bringing up children.

Plath's acknowledgement of the importance of the mother role and the necessity of taking intensive care of children ultimately results in her incessant fears of being unable to perform the maternal role satisfactorily. The fears and uncertainties she has concerning her ability to provide proper care for the child are made up of two aspects: physical and spiritual. As we have seen, this pressing dissatisfaction not only stems from her fear of an inability to render care and attention to those living children, but also extends to the unborn ones. In many poems written after her unfortunate miscarriage in early 1961, Sylvia Plath depicts her feeling about the loss of an unborn baby and uncontrollably relates this one miscarriage to the possibility of perpetual infertility, which always creates disturbing sensations and continual fears to her. With mysterious and implicit obsessions, she blames the mother, that is herself, for the loss of the baby and feels solely responsible for not taking proper care in protecting the developing infant in her womb. She incessantly reproaches and labels miscarried women, possibly including herself, as creators of deaths. The description of the agonized feeling of a childless woman in "Childless Woman" is impressive as "the infertile woman projects her own landscape in order to reflect the barrenness of her body" (Rosenblatt 104):

And my forest

My funeral,



And this hill and this

Gleaming with the mouths of corpses. (15-18)

Seeing her supposedly nurturing “forest” as a “funeral” with “mouths of corpses” echoes the way the miscarried woman feels in “Three Women” after the loss of her baby: “I die. I make a death” and “I, too, create corpses.” The sense of guilt drives the miscarried woman to hating herself for the death she creates: “I am accused. I dream of massacres. / I am a garden of black and red agonies. I drink them, / Hating myself, hating and fearing” (“Three Women”). The extreme extension, from the loss of one baby to a massacre normally making many deaths, is an obsessive belief in her mind; she feels like losing “life after life” and views herself as carrying a “disease.” As a responsible mother, the sense of loss and self-hatred she experiences and undergoes due to the death of the unborn is partly generated from agony, and partly from guilt and personal blame. She perceives that a miscarrying mother is one who cannot provide proper care to her unborn baby but only changes life to death, due to her own negligence. While “hating” herself for the failure to provide sufficient care to the unborn infant, the miscarrying mother experiences at the same time a fear of being doomed to perpetual infertility. Plath views pregnancy as of supreme importance and significance to her establishment of womanhood as she “would be dead” and “dead to” her “woman’s body” if doomed to perpetual infertility (Plath, *Journals* 310). Yet she suffers continual fears concerning this issue: she fears being unable to render enough attention to the unborn infant, she is afraid of being unable to conceive babies, and she fears having a miscarriage when carrying a baby.

For the healthy and living children, Sylvia Plath strongly desires to live up to

the standard that is set, probably by herself, for a proper and careful mother. She has implicitly reflected her desire to provide insurmountable protection in the personal monologue of the new mother in "Three Women." Still recovering from the pain and hurt endured during delivery of the baby, the new mother announces her new duty: "I shall be a wall and a roof, protecting. / I shall be a sky and a hill of good: O let me be!" The new mother's assertion of duty and desire to provide protection foreshadows the wish of the mother in "Brasilia" (December 1, 1962) to enclose her helpless child in a protected environment:

O You who eat

People like light rays, leave

This one

Mirror safe, unredeemed

By the dove's annihilation,

The glory

The power, the glory. (18-24)

The plea of the mother to some unknown awesome and powerful figures for the safety of her own child shows her will to protect the child. Similarly, the new mother in "Three Women" wants to be a powerful guide and protector of her powerless and needy son who relies heavily on her, at least in a physical sense:

He is turning to me like a little, blind, bright plant.

One cry. It is the hook I hang on.

And I am a river of milk.

I am a warm hill.



The relationship of the mother and the son is like that of the sun and a plant: she is the source of the baby's nutrition and the origin of warmth, which are indispensable to the boy's development.

Nonetheless, amid the reverie and satisfaction brought by the arrival of a new baby, the new mother in "Three Women" gradually becomes uncertain of her ability to provide a lifelong care for her child:

How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off?  
How long can I be  
Gentling the sun with the shade of my hand,  
Intercepting the blue blots of a cold moon?  
[.....]  
How long can I be a wall around my green property?  
How long can my hands  
Be a bandage to his hurt, and my words  
Bright birds in the sky, consoling, consoling?

The new mother worries that "sooner or later, [. . .], the darkness of life and the pain in the world will reach out and engulf him" (Bassnett 131). This doubt of her ability to fulfill the basic requirement of a mother as a protective shell stems from the mother's self-awareness of her own despairing disposition: "The voices of loneliness, the voices of sorrow / Lap at my back ineluctably, / How shall it soften them, this little lullaby?" The mother understands her own deficiencies and inadequacies, and sad to admit, even the child's presence cannot erase her ineluctable feeling of "loneliness" and "sorrow." Sylvia Plath probably projects her sensitive and depressing feelings through this sentimental mother's voice, showing her uncertainty in being able to act as a protective mother. The new

mother's expectation to keep off the "winds" and the "sun" from the child is an obvious indication of her nervousness and over-sensitive nature, as natural phenomena are supposed to bring brightness and warmth, yet the mother considers these as hurting the child. She has dilemmas and paradoxical ideas concerning the approach to bring up the child. On the one hand, as a loving mother, she wants to lavish abundant care and concern to the child. Yet, on the other hand, she is aware of the potential dangers that might be aroused due to too overt an affection she shows for her baby: "It is a terrible thing / To be so open: it is as if my heart / Put on a face and walked into the world." The uncertain feeling of showing too transparently her love and care for the child is a reflection of her vulnerability and weak emotional state, and also indicates that "she is doubtful of her protective barrier around her 'green property' (her son)" (Jha 77). This new mother, Sylvia Plath's possible identified self, is torn between two emotions: the hope to show meticulous care to the child and the effort to refrain from showing too obviously the affection.

In addition to the fear of being incapable to provide protection, Plath is afraid of being a bad model to her children. She is aware of a little child's unformed self: when she looks in the "blind mirror" of the child, she finds "no face but" her "own" ("For a Childless Son" [September 26, 1962] 8-9). The mother in "Child" (January 28, 1963) also understands the impressionable nature of children, whose development depends significantly on the mother's influence: "I want to fill it (the child's eye) with colour and ducks" (2). She wishes to fill the child's "clear eye" with these pictorial images, showing the importance of the mother's role in painting and outlining the start of a child's life (1). As she understands that a mother is responsible for constructing the unformed identity of a child, her



self-assessment generates her fear of becoming a negative model and influence to her children:

Little

Stalk without wrinkle,

Pool in which images

Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous

Wringing of hands, this dark

Ceiling without a star. (6-12)

“The mother’s wishes for her baby are so woefully frustrated” (Smith 180), as she sees her own reflection in the child’s eye as an image with troublous and anxious gestures and a dark sky without bright illuminating stars. She feels disappointed and dissatisfied with her own image as being far from the images she believes her child should see, “grand” and “classical,” gestures suggesting prominence and elegance (9). In this frame of mind, she does not only lament her failure to appear splendid and harmonious, but is also afraid of her child’s limited vision and perspective – only seeing things not artistic and grand. Through “Child,” Plath categorically denies herself as a good model and makes an explicit statement of self-skepticism, as a bad influence to her children.

Besides worrying about her ability to perform the mother role satisfactorily, Sylvia Plath’s maternal fear is aggravated by her concern for the children’s future. As Sylvia Plath is deprived of enjoying her father’s love since she was eight, she reckons that a warm and harmonious family can more easily be created with both

parents present and around. Her separation from her husband in October 1962 not only creates traumatic impacts to her life and spiritual security, but also initiates her fears for the loss that her children might experience without a father. Although she tries hard to behave as an ideal mother, she understands very well that the sense of loss and emptiness her children have to suffer is something that she cannot mend even with intensive maternal care and tender love. “For a Fatherless Son” (September 26, 1962), written when she plans for the separation, is a sentimental revelation of Sylvia Plath’s fears for the growing development of her son without his father. From the psychologist’s point of view, a son needs a father model to identify with; lacking one might create difficulties for the growing development of the boy. Sylvia Plath’s specific dedication of the poem to her son might stem from this generally agreed theory, carrying the idea that her son might suffer more than her daughter. In fact, Plath’s worries concerning her son’s future are all in one way or other related to the father. The gloomy prediction of her son’s feeling of loss in the poem exemplifies her everlasting fear and over-reactive care for her son who is deprived of fatherly care and attention:

You will be aware of an absence, presently,

Growing beside you, like a tree,

A death tree, colour gone, an Australian gum tree –

Balding, gelded by lightning – an illusion,

And a sky like a pig’s backside, an utter lack of attention. (1-5)

Sylvia Plath’s imagination of her son’s future is made up of ugly and unpleasant pictorial images, intensifying the sense of doomed development of the son who sadly experiences “an utter lack of attention” (5). She “uses the image of a dead tree in the Australian outback to describe the loss of the father that the child has



not yet understood” (Bassnett 109). The emptiness left by the father would grow through years into “A death tree” with “colour gone,” signifying the colourless, empty, fruitless and inanimate life the son would lead after his father has gone (3). As a mother, Sylvia Plath can possibly supply enough nourishment to satisfy the primary needs of children. Yet, the absence of father inevitably leads to the spiritual and emotional lack of the children, an emptiness Sylvia Plath acknowledges as something that she might not be able to overcome. Her fear for the impacts of paternal absence upon the child further reflects her recurrent doubt of her ability to perform the mother role properly. She understands her own limitations and the fact that she cannot be perfect. Her awareness of the dangers of a paternal absence also amplifies her conventionality, that she emphasizes the completeness of a family and the importance of presence of both parents.

While fearing that her separation from her husband would leave an irremediable hole and an inability for the son to identify with his father, Sylvia Plath gives a paradoxical prediction that her son may grow up to be like the father nonetheless. Due to a general belief that children would grow up with a resemblance to their parents<sup>3</sup>, Plath reflects her fear in “By Candlelight” (October 24, 1962) that her boy would develop into a person with similar traits of her husband. Using the candlestick as background, Plath describes her child behind the bed “bars” possessing a dangerous nature: “The yellow knife / Grows tall.

3. Shortly after the birth of her daughter, Plath writes a letter to her mother talking about the possibility of her daughter growing to be like the parents: “Whatever height Frieda Rebecca [her baby girl] is, I shall encourage her to be proud of it. My own height, 5’9”, which so depressed me once is now my delight; I have a handsome, tall, living documentary of a husband to prove a tall girl need be nothing but fortunate in that line” (*Letters Home* 377).

You clutch your bars. / My singing makes you roar” (21-23). Though Plath explicitly calls the baby boy as a “Balled hedgehog,” the way the child behaves reminds us of a fierce lion (20). It is appalling to associate a child’s soft cry with the horrific sound that a lion makes, particularly due to the fact that Plath usually appreciates her children’s lovely and innocent nature. In “Morning Song,” Plath describes her daughter’s crying as “handful of notes,” suggesting the musical and harmonious rhythm of the girl (17). Even after an anxious and tense night of taking care of the child, Plath is capable of rejoicing in the child’s beautiful world and regarding the girl’s cry in a positive manner. This description contrasts sharply to how she refers the son’s cry to some sound as dangerous, terrible, and menacing as a lion. The implicit association of the son to his father is made more overt in the poem’s conclusion. Here, the phrase “No child, no wife” applies to the powerful candlestick figure of Atlas and by implication, and most importantly to the husband, who has left his family. Since Hercules wears a lion’s pelt<sup>4</sup>, and the candlestick figure also wears one, the father and son are both related to lions, notorious for their fierce and dangerous nature<sup>5</sup>. It might be possible that the failed marriage leaves so much irreparable hurt to Plath that she forms a fairly bad impression of her husband and feels that the man is as intimidating and dangerous as a lion. While subtly associating both the father

4. Plath does not refer directly to Hercules in the poem. However, the candlestick of the poem which she calls “Atlas” is actually an image of Hercules, wearing a lion’s pelt (Notes by Ted Hughes in *Collected Poems* p.294).

5. Plath mentions in a letter to her mother that Ted Hughes was born under the astrologic sign of Leo, the lion: “Oddly enough, astrologically, Leo [a friend] (his middle name means *Lion* in Hebrew, too) is a Leo, as Ted is – a very powerful and successful sign” (*Letters Home* 383).



and son with lions, Plath exhibits her mysterious obsession of fear about the son's future that he would grow up to be like his father – intimidating, dangerous, and probably bringing hurt to her.

Sylvia Plath's maternal fear concerning her son's future is further intensified with the worries that the child may hurt her unconsciously when he grows up. Aside from the fear that the son would grow up as dangerous and terrible as his father, Plath addresses her fear of the hurt that might be brought by the son to remind her of the unhappy past. As seen from "By Candlelight," we realize that Plath has a mysterious obsession to associate the little boy with the adult father and believes that there is an unbreakable bond between them. It is thus understandable that just the physical presence of the son can remind her of her husband. In "For a Fatherless Son," Plath addresses more specifically the hurt that her son can bring to her in the future. The poem is written in the autumn of 1962 at the time when her son, Nicolas, is just more than half a year old and has not yet learnt how to talk. Though unable to communicate with her son in actual words, Plath enjoys this period of silent interaction: "But right now you are dumb./ And I love your stupidity, / The blind mirror of it" (7-9). She loves the way that the boy does not understand anything, like a blank white sheet of paper without any spots and colors. This peculiar enjoyment and pleasure is explained by her later: "It is good for me / To have you grab my nose, a ladder rung (10-11). As Ronald Hayman notes, Plath takes "comfort from having her nose grabbed by the little boy and from his amused reaction" when she stares "into the features that seemed to mirror her own" (179). In an exact literal sense, the reference to the son grabbing her nose can be considered as an intimate contact between the mother and the little son. However, Plath hints a symbolic reference here to

describe the journey of the development of the child as climbing up “a ladder rung.” The mother worries that one day the boy would climb to a certain point and touch a place that’s “wrong” – a place that would hurt her: “One day you may touch what’s wrong / The small skulls, the smashed blue hills, the godawful hush. / Till then your smiles are found money” (12-14). At the moment when the child does not know how to speak, he cannot ask her any questions. However, as the child develops, he would be “aware of an absence” that his father has left and it is natural that the boy would then ask (1). Plath imagines that what her son will ask concerning his absent father would have “wrung” (“rung”) her heart and reminded her of the unhappy marriage she once had. It explains pretty obviously why Plath enjoys the muteness and dumbness of the child: once the boy learns to talk, the questions he asks would dig up her past and hurt her immensely. She believes that she can enjoy this short moment of peace as “Till then your smiles are found money.” the mute son is a gift to her so far as he does not make inquiry (14).

While Plath’s fear concerning her little boy is specifically related to her estranged husband, those fears concerning the future of her daughter stem from the general oppression women experience. Though Sylvia Plath is not a “feminist” in my opinion, it is undeniable that she is critical of men in certain aspects. I have suggested earlier in this chapter that Plath describes men as initiators of death, chaos, and destruction in “Three Women”; she also criticizes men’s abstract thinking in “Magi” (October 17, 1960). In this highly feminist poem, Plath reveals her fear concerning the daughter’s future if she is brought up with men’s thinking and being “threatened from the outside” (Uroff 136). As Wagner-Martin notes, Plath is “impatient with abstractions” and rather



concentrates “on the living, the real, the day-to-day beauty of children and their innocence” (238). In “Magi,” Plath builds up a sharp contrast between “abstract(s)” (1) and “real” (6) throughout the poem: she comments that men’s theoretical way is “abstract” whereas women’s domain is more practical and “real.” The antagonism of “abstract” and “real” is illustrated precisely at the beginning of the poem:

The abstracts hover like dull angels:  
Nothing so vulgar as a nose or an eye  
Bossing the ethereal blanks of their face-ovals.

Their whiteness bears no relation to laundry,  
Snow, chalk or suchlike. They’re  
The real thing, all right: the Good, the True—

Salutary and pure as boiled water,  
Loveless as the multiplication table. (1-8)

The abstract arts without any specific lines or colors are contrasted with the specific “real” female experience such as laundry. Here, Plath hints an implicit criticism of the kind of abstract arts men paint that has nothing specific to do with real life. She further suggests in the poem about her infant daughter’s preference to have the “real” supply of mother’s milk rather than the theoretical notions of Good and Evil: “For her, the heavy notion of Evil / Attending her cot is less than a belly ache, / And Love the mother of milk, no theory” (12-14). The need for mother’s milk is a physical instinct and the sensation of “love” is certainly a real thing, not a theory. Only six months old, the baby girl prefers “real” things

rather than those abstractions. The desire of the three wise men to influence the child into becoming another “Plato” is a powerful indication of Plath’s disapproval of men’s abstract philosophy (16). Plato is a great philosopher with abundant influential theories about the nature of life. With a hope that the three wise men would leave her daughter alone and choose some boys instead, Plath again dismisses the male’s way of thinking: “They mistake their star, these papery godfolk. / They want the crib of some lamp-headed Plato. / Let them astound his heart with their merit” (15-17). With the ending interrogative question of “What girl ever flourished in such company,” Sylvia Plath reasserts her hope of preventing her baby girl from growing up in men’s abstract world and “stresses women’s abhorrence of such arid abstractions” (Markey 61). She unflinchingly reflects in the poem her worries of the oppressive male influence that could be brought to her daughter<sup>6</sup>, as abstract theoretical thoughts are considered generated from wise men and great philosophers, who are respected as possessing superior status.

Besides the fear concerning the inability to perform the mother role satisfactorily and fear for the future of her children, the third kind of Sylvia Plath’s maternal fear relates to the idea of the sacrifice of her innocent and beautiful children. This rather peculiar fear originates from her religious knowledge about the sufferings of great Jesus Christ, a savior who is depicted in the Scripture as pure, beautiful, and with exceptional greatness. In many of the poems concerning children, she identifies herself or other mothers with “Virgin Mary,” as

6. Eileen M. Aird provides another interpretation of “Magi”: “In ‘Magi’ she [Plath] reflects much more hopefully on her daughter’s destiny, for the dull abstracts hovering around the cradle are powerless against the protected innocence of the child” (138).



an agonized mother witnessing the sacrifice and sufferings of her own child. As Plath continually retreats to her self-enclosed world, it is not surprising that she makes desperate associations of common people to the great figures in the Bible, and consistently brings herself into that context. The fear of the sacrifice of her children, besides the religious connotation, is coupled with Plath's worries about the contemporary chaotic world. In a letter to her mother, Plath "consciously connects her fears for her child with her political concerns" (Strangeways 95) and poignantly questions whether there is "any point in trying to bring up children for destruction in such a mad, self-destructive world" (Plath, *Letters Home* 438).

Sylvia Plath vicariously reflects her fear of the sacrificial tendency of great and exceptional figures in "Three Women," through the voice of the new mother. The new mother, while waiting for the delivery moment to come, identifies herself with Mary: "Dusk hoods me in blue now, like a Mary." The allusion of the mother to "Mary" reflects the generalization of Virgin Mary to represent the quality of a specific kind of mother, who is doomed to bear sacrificial children. This particular allusion to "Mary" foreshadows the new mother's later fears concerning her son's future. After revealing the fear of inadequate protection for the young baby, the new mother enjoys a short period of reassurance and meditates for a while about her little boy's future. She is happy and grateful for her son's "normality" as she has a constant spiritual fear of the child being deformed: "I do not believe in those terrible children / Who injure my sleep with their white eyes, their fingerless hands. / They are not mine. They do not belong to me." While immersing in the happy moment for having a "pink and perfect" baby, the mother still fears for terrible things to happen in the future. Haunted by the terrible sufferings of the perfect Christ, she determines that it would be better

for her boy to be just common and normal:

I do not will him to be exceptional.

It is the exception that interests the devil.

It is the exception that climbs the sorrowful hill

Or sits in the desert and hurts his mother's heart.

I will him to be common,

To love me as I love him,

And to marry what he wants and where he will.

The reference to Christianity is obvious and remarkable here with an open allusion to Christ: the devil, the temptations, and his ultimate death that hurts Virgin Mary's heart. Due to the obsessive fear that exceptional persons would be sacrificed, the new mother rather wishes her son to be common and have the freedom to choose his life with his own will. This new mother, unlike some extremely ambitious ones, does not wish her child to become a great exceptional figure in the future, but rather hopes that he would just grow up normally.

Plath's obsessive fear of having her children sacrificed is more explicitly and deliberately elaborated in "Mary's Song" (November 19, 1962), a poem depicting a mother's fear of death of the "golden" child. Plath mixes public and private spheres in the poem: while on the one hand, a personal suffering of Mary concerning her own child's death is revealed; on the other hand, references to World War II are used to reflect the catastrophic impacts of her own child's death to the mother. In the poem, Plath "directly relates her own psychic anguish, her sense of being haunted by violence, anger, and a death wish, quite explicitly to the traces of violence left over from the Second World War in the European homeland of her parents" (Bronfen 93). Plath illustrates the paradoxical nature of "fire" in



the poem: while the fire purifies the “Sunday lamb” to turn into a precious color (1), “the same fire / Melting the tallow heretics, / Ousting the Jews” (6-8). The fire colors the food and makes it appear precious, yet the flame can be destructive as heretics are cruelly burnt by it to death for punishment. As it is understood that the golden lamb would be ultimately eaten, Plath’s preoccupied fear concerning the inevitable sacrifice of precious beings is signified and it foregrounds the forthcoming prediction of Mary concerning her own precious child’s death. In the poem, Mary portrays a grim image in her heart: “Grey birds obsess my heart, / Mouth-ash, ash of eye” (13-14). While the “grey birds” literally refers to the ashes of human bodies, the color of “grey” further reinforces and intensifies a melancholic and desolate state of the mother’s mind, which is full of death images. At the end, the mother Mary contemplates her own child who is going to be sacrificed for the salvation of mankind: “It is a heart, / This holocaust I walk in, / O golden child the world will kill and eat” (19-21). The golden color of the child echoes unequivocally the color of the sacrificial lamb mentioned at the beginning of the poem, suggesting the preciousness of the child. Virgin Mary is a representative symbol of suffering mothers and it is thus reasonable for her to narrate this lamented “song.” To Mary, the foreseeable death of her own child is like a “holocaust” which is repeatedly happening in the world history, and both of them are not to be prevented. With a poignant prediction about the golden baby’s unavoidable death, the mother concludes with a fear concerning the sacrifice of precious children, as she sadly acknowledges “the power of history” and can “accept the inevitability of suffering” (Bassnett 143).

Plath’s fear of sacrifice of precious and beautiful children is further

demonstrated in “Brasilia.” The religious reference to the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ in “Brasilia” is noticeable: “And my baby a nail / Driven, driven in,” signifies the inevitable sacrifice of the child (7-8). In the poem, Plath orchestrates a fearful start with some unknown expressionless “super-people” (6) with huge “torsos of steel / Winged elbows and eyeholes” (2-3). It seems that the fear of the mother stems from the presence of some unemotional and cold “super-people.” Personally, I think that these awesome figures may not really appear in a physical sense, but rather occupy an emotional space in the mother’s mind as something powerful, not easy to combat, and intimidating. The mother’s conjecture of some powerful formidable figures is finally substantiated with her ultimate plea for the safety of her child. Generated from her intimidating fear of the sacrifice of beautiful and precious children, the mother feels that even “the dove’s annihilation” cannot redeem the child’s danger (24). Even the destruction and sacrifice of the dove – a symbol of peace – cannot prevent the child from the predestined fate of suffering and death.

In addition, the reference to “pietas” in “Winter Trees” (November 26, 1962) subtly and rather implicitly demonstrates Plath’s obsessive fear of the sacrificial idea. While envious of the tree’s effortless and carefree way of reproduction, Plath reveals a sense of the burden and bind women have. The sudden and mysterious question – “Who are these pietas?” – raised at the end of the poem is probably another of Plath’s powerful sources of burden (14). As a pieta is a statue of Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Jesus Christ after his crucifixion, its use in the poem amplifies the fear Plath has concerning her maternal role – fear of an inevitable suffering and death of her own children. With an ending assertion of “The shadows of ringdoves chanting, but easing nothing” in “Winter



Trees,” Plath sets the poem in a gloomy tone, with the fact of impossible redemption of the sacrificial children (15). The “ringdoves” is ingeniously put to echo the “dove” in “Brasilia,” intensifying a sense of unavoidable destiny.

Though “Mary’s Song,” “Brasilia,” and “Winter Trees” are obviously not autobiographical poems, it seems that Sylvia Plath has the same kind of fear as Virgin Mary. Just as Plath identifies with the new mother in “Three Women” and compares the new mother to Mary, she indeed engages in an obsessive tendency to identify every mother to Mary and every precious beautiful little creature to Christ. With a formidable self-consciousness as a mother, it is not surprising to see that Plath relates her own children, in particular her son, to Christ. It is hard to overlook the religious connotation when Plath refers her son to “the baby in the barn” (“Nick and the Candlestick” 42) (October 29, 1962). Though Christ is born in a stable but not a barn, it is apparent that both are poor places and this association is further tightened with obvious references to Christ and religious myths in the earlier part of the poem. The fact that beautiful and precious things should die creates great impacts to Plath as she always regards her own children as lovely and wonderful.

Through a detailed analysis of Sylvia Plath’s maternal fear, her well-known pessimistic outlook of life is further magnified. Though she describes her children as beautiful and lovely, her perception of the future development of her children is quite gloomy. She presents an ambiguous interpretation of children in “Morning Song” when she refers her new born daughter to a “New statue” (4). It is rather beyond imagination to associate a new born lovely baby to a hard, huge, intimidating “statue” – an image of the awesome father in “The Colossus.” The use of the word “statue” also signifies a non-human and inanimate portrayal of her

child, which is further demonstrated when she relates the girl to an animal: “Your mouth opens clean as a cat’s” (15). The suggestion of a new baby as a “new statue” hints at Plath’s belief of impossible everlasting lovely nature of human beings, a further evidence of her pessimistic view. Plath’s ambiguous feelings of being a mother might be aptly concluded with a line from “Kindness” (February 1, 1963), in which she refers her children to roses, beautiful but hurt-prone, suggesting a mixed contradictory sense of pleasure and hurt: “You hand me two children, two roses” (20).

When compared to her role as a daughter and a wife, Plath regards the role of a mother with better acceptance and surer importance. Unlike the angry Plath in the later poems about the father and the husband, the mother Plath remains caring and protective throughout to the end of her poetic career<sup>7</sup>. Susan Bassnett observes that “writing about herself as a mother, Sylvia Plath seems at peace, able to find a centre of balance in herself” (92). It is significant that in many of her last poems written within a short period before her suicide, she depicts mostly the mother-children theme. The last poem in the *Collected Poems*, “Edge” (February 5, 1963), written six days before her death, celebrates the perfection of the death of a woman who has a haunting wish to take the children with her to death:

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,

One at each little

7. In her last letter to her mother, dated February 4, 1963 (a week before her death), Plath shows her tenderly mother love to her children and paints a hopeful future picture: “The children need me most right now, and so I shall try to go on for the next few years writing mornings, being with them afternoons and seeing friends or studying and reading evenings” (*Letters Home* 498).



Pitcher of milk, now empty.

She has folded

Them back into her body as petals

Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odours bleed

From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower. (9-16)

The dying woman desperately hopes to protect her children even after she dies: the dead children “have been folded back into the mother’s body protectively, as the ultimate loving gesture, similar to the natural folding of the rose around itself in the face of oncoming night in the garden” (Aird 86)<sup>8</sup>. The consistent emphasis of the unwavering effort of the mother thus gives us another perspective of Plath. M.D. Uroff notes that Plath literally writes “more poems on motherhood than on any other subject” and this serves “to revise her reputation as a death-ridden poet” and shows her uniqueness “among serious poets” (qtd. in Markey 31). While afflicted with continual fears concerning the mother role, Plath expresses a truly sensational voice to show us that she regards, after all, the mother role as the most

8. “Edge” probably reflects authentically Plath’s thought during the last period of her life. Trevor Thomas, the professor who lived a floor down in Plath’s house, recalls one incident when Plath cried before him: “‘I am going to die,’ she (Plath) said through her sobs, ‘and who will take care of my children?’” (Alexander 323).

important – the children are the only ones she cares most when she ponders death<sup>9</sup>.

9. Both Linda W. Wagner-Martin and Paul Alexander mark in their biographies that Sylvia Plath remembers to prepare cups of milk besides her children's beds and seal the doors so that the children can escape from the poisonous gas when she commits suicide. Her care and protection to the children last to that last moment of her life (Wagner-Martin 243; Alexander 330). The biographical trace, however, does not agree with her message in "Edge" – to take the children with her to death.



## Conclusion

This is the pattern of Sylvia Plath's reaction to the feminine fears she has: to the father and husband who have mercilessly and relentlessly disappointed her, she dramatically fights for a transformational release and empowerment; for her lovely children, she maintains her protection and remains a tender mother throughout. In a way, Plath has indeed tried to seek different resolutions to eradicate the fears she encounters and she seems successful at times. Her determination to signify a rebirth in her literary works is obvious as many of her late poems reflect an intense emotional need for a release and a new self. When her only novel, *The Bell Jar* (released under a pseudonym of "Victoria Lucas") received fairly favorable comments, Plath still felt depressed and frustrated as the reviewers failed to acknowledge "the affirmation of Esther's (the protagonist who is being identified with Plath) rebirth" at the end of the book (Wagner-Martin, *A Biography* 237).

Today, as almost all critics discover Plath's desire for a renewal and a self-recreation in her works as well as the lioness's shrieks in Plath's later poetry, it is not surprising that Plath is often categorized as "a feminist" and attracts feminist studies of her works. A typical such-like comment is made by Wagner-Martin: "Plath was a feminist, in a broad sense of the term: she never undervalued herself or her work. She insisted that she be recognized as the talented writer she was even while her children were infants and she was spending more time as a mother and a wife than as a writer" (*A Biography*, Preface).

My study of the representation of feminine fears in Plath's poetry, however, overturns my original assumption of Plath as a feminist. As my paper illustrates,

Plath tends to depict her feminine experiences with an overwhelming and prevailing sense of fear. Plath's fears and uncompromising attitude concerning these feminine roles most probably stem from her self-imposed expectation to perform these tasks well. Her anger and hostility towards her father and husband at the end of her life is clearly a result of her emotional dependence upon them and the disappointment she poignantly endures when they fail to meet her fantasized expectations. Plath fights against these figures as destructive agents of her life and future, instead of fighting for women's rights or highlighting the plight and victimization of females as feminists do. The fact that Plath treasures the opportunity of being a mother and eagerly hopes to perform her best illustrates more clearly Plath's position – she does not completely overturn patriarchal beliefs in women's roles. Though it is undeniably true that Plath's female voice becomes more aggressive and rebellious towards the end of her writing career, labeling Plath as a feminist seems to be over-simplistic.

Caroline King Barnard Hall, Pashupati Jha, and Jon Rosenblatt all conjecture the possibility of Plath turning into a real self-reliant feminist if she had not ended her life (Hall 129; Jha 114; Rosenblatt 9). While I am not attempting to give any ungrounded speculation, I believe that, whether or not Plath is a feminist, the consistent bitter presence of feminine fears in Plath's poetry will sustain her enduring tragic female image and continue to make her name reverberating in the world: "I am a writer . . . I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name" (Plath, *Letters Home* 468).



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