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Heroine of the Peripheral: An Exploration of Feminism and Anti-feminism in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Devoney Looser

No study of Sylvia Plath would be complete without first expressing anger at the ways many early critics viewed her works. James F. Hoyle, in his "Sylvia Plath: A Poetry of Suicidal Mania," concentrated, like so many others, on Plath's celebrated suicide to such an extent that he saw little else in her poetry. Although death references in Plath's work should be noted, critics today focus on a variety of themes only peripherally connected to suicide or death. As Gary Lane says, "Everyone, it seems, has his own version of the Sylvia Plath myth."¹ Critic Susan Bassnett agrees and elaborates: "because of the diversity of these myths, criticism has also tended to try to prove its particular case to disclose the 'truth' about Sylvia Plath, to come up with the ultimate definitive reading and uncover the 'real' person who wrote the text."² Obviously, such "proofs" are merely conjecture. Plath criticism shouldn't be approached as a true-false question.

Recognizing that there are many legitimate ways to view Plath's work, this study doesn't claim a definitive reading or even a glimpse into the 'real' Sylvia Plath. Instead, the following exploration will focus on feminist and anti-feminist renderings of motherhood in Plath's *Crossing the Water*, *Ariel*, and *Winter Trees*. This study doesn't set out to prove or disprove these labels as they relate to Plath either. My intention is not to make value judgments about various aspects of the poetry but rather to highlight the contradictions and the co-existence of feminist and anti-feminist qualities in the text. This process will help sort out Plath's poetic complexities to allow the reader to see more clearly this "version" of the Sylvia Plath myth.

Feminism is a slippery term, and groups

socially and politically at odds may each consider its work feminist. For the sake of this paper, feminism will mean embracing the need for societal alternatives for women in all areas of life. Some feminists "question all male-defined structures and values" and say that "there is something better in femininity, a source of positive strength in women which is denied to men."³ Given this definition of feminism, anti-feminism becomes the embracing of norms, the acceptance of traditional gender roles and the subservience to male structures and values.

Sylvia Plath as Feminist?

Was Sylvia Plath a feminist? Ask any two critics and they will likely give two answers. David Holbrook argues (in response to a feminist "claiming" Plath) that according to a phenomenological study, Plath "could scarcely find within herself anything that was feminine at all. She is, perhaps, the most masculine poetess who ever wrote, yet, since masculinity requires the inclusion of the anima, she is not that either: she is sadly pseudo-male, like many of her cultists."⁴ Robert Bagg says that Plath's poetic vision is "the purest and most intense expression I know of the feminist mind."⁵ Those who see a latent feminist who only partially develops before her suicide are countered by the likes of Sylvia Lehrer who says she does not "join the feminists in abusing [Plath's] comparatively few poems about women's roles in society by using them as examples for their cause."⁶ I believe Plath's work shows us a proto-feminist, but she didn't personally reject the mainstream roles for women in her lifetime. On the contrary, critics have noted Plath's extreme desire to conform.⁷ It

is important, however, to recall the society out of which Sylvia Plath emerged. As Carole Ferrier says, "Plath was in many ways a victim of the fifties and its ideology of the family. Women struggling to lead independent lives...were under pressure to submerge themselves within monogamous marriage and create households straight out of the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Plath died just as the new wave of feminist theory began to surface...."⁸

I. Feminist Images and Personae

Motherhood and Childrearing

Feminists declare that "personal is political" and that reproduction is "controlled and socialized through such institutions as...compulsory heterosexuality and motherhood".⁹ An entirely new social system is seen as necessary. A feminist view of marriage and of motherhood, in the sense of the words as they are used today, would most likely be a negative one.

Because Plath also wrote poems which celebrate children, some critics overlook or ignore her negative references to motherhood. Bassnett incorrectly states, "The terrible sexual conflict of the father poems and the communication struggle of the mother poems is absent from these child-centred poems. Writing about herself as mother, Sylvia Plath seems at peace, able to find a centre of balance in herself." Plath, however, does portray child-rearing negatively in several poems.

Children are repeatedly referred to as "hooks" that pull at the narrator or the female persona. In "Berck Plage" (*Ariel*) such a reference is made. The female narrator says, "I am not a nurse, white and attendant,/I am not a smile./These children are after something, with hooks and cries,/And my heart too small to bandage their terrible faults."¹⁰ This poem, however, doesn't suggest that the speaker is the children's mother.

In "Tulips" (*Ariel*), a mother/wife persona has been hospitalized. She says, "My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;/Their smiles catch onto my

skin, little smiling hooks."¹¹ Later, the woman compares flowers to children:

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly through their white swaddlings, like an awful
baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
They are subtle: they seem to float, though they
weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their
colour,
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck...¹²

This child poem doesn't suggest a poet who is at peace or centered. On the contrary, the persona pleads for release from children if not from life itself. The woman speaker concludes saying:

The vivid tulips eat my oxygen
Before they came the air was calm enough,
Coming and going, breath by breath, without any
fuss.
Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise..
They concentrate my attention, that was happy
Playing and resting without committing itself.¹³

The parallels with motherhood are blatant. The tulips eat the woman's oxygen as her children ate her oxygen in the womb and sap her energy. Before children came, she wasn't worn out. Children bring noise to a household and concentrate the attention of the mother. "Tulips" can be read literally or as a story about a woman whose children drove her to hospitalization. It is also important to note that Plath miscarried a child before this poem was written. This fact provides another level of meaning.

"Metaphors" (*Crossing the Water*) is a motherhood poem in nine lines of nine syllables each. The poem creates comic images of pregnant women:

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
Money's new minted in this fat purse.
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.

I've eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there's no getting off.

Although the poem is clever, the effect is unpleasant. The woman is "fat," a "cow," and a "loaf." She eats the apples and now must face the consequences of boarding the imprisoning train. Her pregnancy is presented as a punishment as well as a riddle.

On one level "Ariel" (*Ariel*) describes a ride on Plath's horse, Ariel. At one point in the poem, the speaker says, "White/ Godiva, I unpeel/Dead hands, dead stringencies./ And now I/Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas./The child's cry/Melts in the wall."¹⁴ The horse helps her escape the child's cry. Of course, the poem also suggests another escape—suicide.

As in the poems on marriage, Plath offers few alternatives to the contemporary social order for mothers. One other poem that suggests an alternative to patriarchal motherhood is "Heavy Women" (*Crossing the Water*). The heavy women "Settle in their belling dresses./Over each weighty stomach a face/Floats calm as a moon or a cloud."¹⁵ The pregnancies cause rejoicing and peacefulness, and the women appear in a communal setting. The speaker describes women who "listen for the millennium,/The knock of the small, new heart."¹⁶ The final stanza presents the imagined social order:

Pink-buttocked infants attend them.
Looping wool, doing nothing in particular,
They step among the archetypes.
Dusk hoods them in Mary-blue
While far off, the axle of winter
Grinds round, bearing down with the straw,
The star, the wise grey men.

The men loom far off with the winter and the seasons, but this section introduces a variation of a Golden Age for women.

A number of poems do celebrate children and childrearing, as Bassnett points out. These poems make enigmatic the aforementioned views of mothers. When taken with some poems' insistence that women must have children to be full human beings, how can views of children as hooks and weights be reconciled? This question

will be addressed in the following sections.

II. Anti-feminist Images and Personae

Traditional Motherhood as the Ideal

The notion that woman's purpose is procreation is an issue in much of Plath's work. Many poems celebrate traditional motherhood and especially celebrate male children. Other poems express this idea by criticizing infertile women (this point will be discussed in the next section). All of these elements are anti-feminist because they don't allow for women's lifestyle choices and because they embrace patriarchal family structures.

One poem that holds up the traditional family as an ideal is "For a Fatherless Son" (*Winter Trees*). The female speaker says to her infant son, "You will be aware of an absence presently,/Growing beside you, like a tree,/A death tree...."¹⁷ The speaker says she loves the child's present ignorance of the father's absence. She concludes:

It is good for me
To have you grab my nose, a ladder rung,
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.¹⁸

The female speaker doesn't believe the male child will be happy without a father whose absence is described as a death. It is interesting to note that, if this poem was written out of Plath's own experience (i.e. about Hughes' separation from her, son Nicholas and daughter Freida), no mention is made of how a female child would feel the absence of a father.

"Nick and the Candlestick" (*Ariel*), another poem that may have come out of Plath's experience, talks about the mother's womb in unpleasant and religious images. The mother tries to protect the son with soft words and surroundings: "The pain/You wake to is not yours./Love, love,/ I have hung our cave with roses./With soft rugs--/The last of Victoriana."¹⁹ By the end

of the poem, Nick becomes a Christ figure: "You are the one/Solid the spaces lean on, envious./You are the baby in the barn."²⁰ It is unclear whom he will redeem—perhaps his mother.

Another celebratory poem about two children, "Balloons" (*Ariel*) displays a child playing with her brother. The speaker and the two children play with "Globes of thin air, red, green,/Delighting/The heart like wishes or free/Peacocks blessing/Old ground with a feather/Beaten in starry metals."²¹ The final stanzas say, "Your small/Brother is making/His balloon squeak like a cat./Seeming to see/A funny pink world he might eat on the other side of it,/He bites/Then sits/Back, fat jug/Contemplating a world clear as water,/A red/Shred in his little fist."²² The choice of a "funny pink world" doesn't seem coincidental. Pink implies the traditional feminine world which the boy "might eat." The male child triumphs. The mother/speaker seems to accept this as she relates it to his sibling.

Criticisms of Barren Women

Several poems celebrate fertility indirectly by demeaning barrenness. "Munich Mannequins" chastises fur-wearing women because they are beautiful, mindless and infertile:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb...
Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.
The blood flood is the flood of love.

Not only do these women suffer from a terrible (albeit perfect) barrenness, they menstruate and lose a flood of love. This flood of love should attach itself to the uterus—in this poem, a better condition—because such menstruation would be useful and not useless. The addition of "to no purpose" adds the idea the mannequins are without purpose because they have chosen to remain childless. Women must have children to be fulfilled people, Plath's speaker suggests.

In other poems, barrenness also appeared as a negative quality. In "Lesbos,"

(*Ariel*) the speaker says the second woman blows her tubes "like a bad radio." "Winter Trees" (*Winter Trees*) puts down abortions and women who don't seed effortlessly. Other poems with extended similar themes are "Elm," "Childless Woman," and "Two Sisters of Persephone."

"Elm" (*Ariel*) is narrated by a female tree. The "woman" speaks about her broken life and how she has suffered:

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
Cruelly, being barren.
Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.
I let her go. I let her go
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.

This woman's barrenness leaves her "Looking, with its hooks, for something to love." She longs for children: "Clouds pass and disperse./Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?/Is it for such I agitate my heart?" Although the love she seeks could be from a lover, the presence of the moon image suggests fertility and childbearing.

"Childless Woman" (*Winter Trees*) describes the condition of a childless woman in six terse three-line stanzas. The result is a lyrical poem that reads like a dirge. It begins with the image of the empty womb: "The womb/Rattles its pod, the moon/Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go."²³ The woman speaks of her lack of future and imminent death in equally disturbing terms: "My landscape is a hand with no lines,/The roads bunched to a knot,/The knot myself."²⁴ She utters "nothing but blood—/Taste it, dark red!"²⁵

Her life, like menstruation, becomes meaningless and blotted out as a result of barrenness. The poem concludes: "And my forest/My funeral,/And this hill and this/Gleaming with the mouths of corpses."²⁶ Because she hasn't had children, the poem implies, she will not live on in the world.

"Two Sisters of Persephone" (*Crossing the Water*) directly attacks the lifestyle of a spinster. The poem introduces, "Two girls there are: within the house/One sits; the other, without./Daylong a duet of shade and

light/Plays between these."²⁷ The inside sister does math problems and the narrator says, "At this barren enterprise/Rat-shrewd go her squint eyes,/Root pale her meager frame."²⁸ The second, however, lies tanned and fertile in the sun "Near a bed of poppies,/She sees how their red silk flare of petalled blood/Burns open to sun's blade./On that green altar/Freely become sun's bride...She bears a king." The other "wry virgin to the last/Goes graveward with flesh laid waste,/Worm-husbanded, yet no woman." The first woman fulfills her purpose and bears a king. The second woman, who chooses an enterprise of the mind over fertility, marries only the worms who invade her dead corpse. The narrator will not even deign her with the title of "woman." Preferably, she should bear a king or a son. Any other lifestyle involves "flesh laid waste." This poem argues effectively for women to become a part of the world, but in order to be a woman, one must be a mother.

Conclusion

Plath chose to invent female personae who latched strongly onto traditional or non-traditional gender roles. Conflicting elements are so evident in her poetry, it may be argued, because this is the road on which much of Plath's work traveled. She sought ways to resolve ambivalence about life as a woman. As Carole Ferrier appropriately sums up, "It is not that Plath presents blueprints or role models; indeed, often what she portrays is the false directions into which her search led her."²⁹

Feminism and anti-feminism in Plath's poetry (and certainly in the poems about motherhood) aren't usually said to co-exist. Most critics would prefer to embrace one or the other critical bent or to dismiss both. Both are wrong. Plath's poetry presents logical contradictions—a study in choices—not the ravings of a dichotomous maniac poet. Plath's poetry is feminist. It is also anti-feminist. To ignore one side or the other is as fatal as reading half of a poem or half of a poet.

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Notes

1. ix.
2. 2.
3. Tuttle 268.
4. Bassnett 2.
5. 33.
6. ii.
7. Buntzen 53.

Looser

Heroine of the Peripheral

8. Lane 215.
9. Tuttle 267.
10. 22.
11. 10.
12. 11.
13. 11.
14. 26-27.
15. 9.
16. 9.
17. 33.
18. 33.
19. 34.
20. 34.
21. 79.
22. 80.
23. 34.
24. 34.
25. 34.
26. 34.
27. 34.
28. 46.
29. Lane 215.