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**The Iowa Review**

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Volume 13  
Issue 2 *Spring*

Article 2

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1982

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## Recommended Citation

Dickie, Margaret. "Sylvia Plath's Narrative Strategies." *The Iowa Review* 13.2 (1982): 1-14. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2888>

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## Sylvia Plath's Narrative Strategies · Margaret Dickie

THE NARRATIVE QUALITY of Sylvia Plath's poetry has been identified with the family romance, the confessional mode, the myth of the white goddess, in short with structures that isolate the role of the individual. Such a view forces us to read in a peculiar way the number of poems, many written late in her life, which concern social situations, village life, bonds of kinship or friendship. Here the speaker must be seen as paranoid, sick, weakened, if she is to fit the lyric presence of Plath as abandoned daughter or wife, mad queen, or mythic spirit. But the fact that this poet devoted a major portion of her creative energies to writing realistic fiction opens up the possibility that the acknowledged narrative bent in her poetry may derive from her experience as a fiction writer, and, if so, that her poetry should be read in that context as social commentary rather than as the rantings of an isolated victim.

Plath herself has acknowledged the cross-fertilization of the two genres. Claiming to envy the novelist, she complains that in a poem, "There is so little room! So little time! The poet becomes an expert packer of suitcases."<sup>1</sup> The obvious distinction between the long novel and short poem would not bear citation if the poet did not want in some way to imitate the novelist. Ted Hughes quotes her as saying, "For me, poetry is an evasion from the real job of writing prose!"<sup>2</sup> And in the introduction to *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, Hughes has remarked on the use in her poetry of her exercises in social observation: "poems which seem often to be constructed of arbitrary surreal symbols are really impassioned reorganizations of relevant fact."<sup>3</sup> According to Hughes, Plath set herself tests of observation in Flaubertian style. After visiting neighbors in Devon, she would return home and enter in her journal details such as the furnishings of the house, the clothes of the people, which often found their way into her poems. Along with the details, I want to argue, came a commentary on the life of the village which she observed so carefully.

Plath's intermingling of narrative and lyric modes may owe something to Hughes' influence since his early poems comment on social types, explore communal life, narrate village incidents, but, whereas Hughes' poems conform to an English tradition of poetic realism and common sense, Plath's narrating lyrics are tightly packed structures in

which rapid shifts in point of view, highly selective characterizing gestures or external details, and compressed time sequences, obscure the realistic base. Social commentary in Plath is thus often read as neurotic self-revelation. It is only by attending to the narrative strategies of her poems that we can unravel their social knots and reveal the novel ways in which Plath has expanded the lyric poem. Like Robert Lowell's documentary autobiographical mode, Plath's social lyric may then be regarded as one more means by which the poet has recouped the ground lost to poetry when Poe insisted on the brevity and Mallarmé on the autonomy of the poem.

"Lesbos" illustrates some of the problems of Plath's way with narrative. What has struck readers of this and so many other poems by Plath is the intensity of its emotions. Plath's habitual opening of a poem with the designation of a state of mind has special force here: "Viciousness in the kitchen!" This scream, we imagine, details the speaker's own mood. In fact, the chief problem in understanding the poem is this way it starts with the announcement of an emotion unattached to a person. The reader is moved immediately to attribute it to someone. At first it seems to fit everyone: the woman whom the speaker visits who cannot stand the speaker's daughter or her kittens, the speaker herself who resents the woman's reactions, the interchange between them where distasteful confidences and advice are exchanged, the domestic life of the couple in the house. As the poem develops, however, viciousness begins to attach itself wholly to the woman visited where its roots are revealed as sexual. The speaker says, "You say your husband is just no good for you./His Jew-Mama guards his sweet sex like a pearl." But, as the speaker realizes, he is actually quite good for this woman since he serves to deflect her spite and malice: "An old pole for the lightning,/The acid baths, the skyfuls off of you." In slumping out for coffee, lumping it down the plastic cobbled hill, this man leaves the speaker exposed to his wife's venom. Then we realize that perhaps it is not the Jew-Mama but the wife herself who has rendered this man impotent, and, reading back, we see that the poem itself provides evidence of her disgust with life, vitality, sexuality.

The artificiality of her enclosed kitchen, "all Hollywood, windowless," perfectly reflects this woman's attitudes. She not only hates children and kittens that "crap and puke," but she resists all life: the sun gives her ulcers, the wind gives her T.B.. For her, sex is an act, "acted for the thrill," and the men she knew when she was beautiful said,

“ ‘Through?/Gee baby, you are rare.’ ” It is a strange sexual comment, actually, although it is delivered here as a boast. For her the act is now over, but she recommends that the speaker take on an act, assume the siren’s pose: “I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair./I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair.” This kind of advice must appear totally irrelevant to the speaker’s situation which seems far removed from the sexually enticing. To someone “doped and thick from my last sleeping pill” and permeated with the “stink of fat and baby crap,” the woman’s comments might hit like “acid baths,” not words of support, but caustic criticism. And eventually the speaker identifies herself and this woman as “venomous opposites.”

But as the third stanza points out, the women are not just opposites; they are also linked in some way by their sexual frustration. It is this fact that irritates the speaker most thoroughly. The two women sit together on the sand, looking at the moon which “Dragged its blood bag, sick/Animal/Up over the harbor lights.” The moon, that double symbol for Plath of sickness and normality, death and life, witch and protector, encloses both women—the woman visited who is later associated with its “blood-bag” and its evil qualities as a “blood-loving bat,” and the speaker who is scared “to death” by this possibility, repelled by this woman and the stands she takes against procreation and life. At this point, however, the women are united, playing with the sand, “picking up handfuls,/loving it,” until their playfulness turns into a manifestation of their sexual frustrations, as they are “working it like dough, a mulatto body.”

Repelled by this realization, the speaker decides to leave, and packing up, she says of her hostess, “O vase of acid,/It is love you are full of. You know who you hate./He is hugging his ball and chain down by the gate.” Full of self-love or love without an object which has turned acid, this woman justifies her own marital situation as well as her advice to the speaker by flinging out at the end, “ ‘Every woman’s a whore./I can’t communicate.’ ” It is another strange sexual commentary. Whores communicate, but, for this woman, being a whore cuts off communication with women. And the speaker’s last view folds this woman back into her setting: “I see your cute décor/Close on you like the fist of a baby.” This visit is no idle gossip, but a painful exchange between women who have not only made different sexual choices (one procreation, the other performance), but who are exposed at some very basic level. “I am still raw,” the speaker concludes. The title of this poem is

ironic: these two women cannot communicate, there is no bond between them, they cannot console or counsel each other. The rage of the speaker stems from her helplessness, from her real need for companionship, and from her sense of betrayal by this woman-actor-whore, as well as from her contempt for her.

Here, as in a number of Plath's late poems, the narrative embedded in the poem offers an explanation for the intense emotions it engenders. The poems are often hard to plot, nonetheless, because it is not always clear who is speaking, from what perspective, in what tone of voice. Nor is it easy to attach references to terms such as the opening viciousness or later on the isolated phrases, "O jewel! O valuable!" where nothing in the situation seems to fit the attributes. Nor are the time span and cause-effect sequence always simple to discern. Here the time seems laid out carefully ("Meanwhile," "That night," "Now"), but even in this sequence it is difficult to jump from the scene on the sand to the shift in mood announced by "Now I am silent, hate/Up to my neck." The change is only clear if we look at the images in this stanza that are carried over from the opening. Here the speaker is packing "the hard potatoes like good clothes," "the babies," "the sick cats," and in this act she is accepting all the elements that the woman visited had rejected. The "hate/Up to my neck" is directed righteously against the woman visited who herself hates every aspect of domesticity. And, it is clear, the visitor is also submerged in the hatred inside that household. The narrative strategies of this poem are designed to explain this reaction and the rejection of this hated and hateful woman.

Here Plath seems to be defending or at the least deploring the lack of the traditional values of motherhood, full adulthood for women, even the community of woman. It is thus puzzling to read critical responses to the poem that claim it is a poem about lesbianism "as an escape from the grubby details of motherhood, but always in terms of sardonic satire."<sup>4</sup> Or again, it is difficult to accept such an acute critic as Joyce Carol Oates when she argues that "the intensity of 'Lesbos' grows out of an adult woman denying her adulthood, her motherhood, lashing out spitefully at all objects—babies or husbands or sick kittens—with a strident, self-mocking energy." Oates claims that "a woman who despises herself as a woman obviously cannot feel sympathy with any other woman; her passionate love/hate is for the aggressors, the absent husband or the dead fathers who have absorbed all evil."<sup>5</sup> Oates' diagnosis of the problem is not entirely incorrect, but, in attributing it to the speaker

of the poem, Oates has failed to follow the shifts in point of view. Plath is indeed describing someone who denies motherhood, but the rage of her speaker is directed *against* that woman, not in support of her.

Plath wrote a number of poems about women confronting each other, and the stories they tell involve affronts, disappointments, hurts, all stemming from the emotional inadequacies of the presumed stronger partner. A common confrontation in Plath's poems is between a controlled, life-denying, mechanistic woman, somewhat like the woman visited in "Lesbos," and a more tormented, messy, frequently lonely woman who disdains the comfort that she desperately needs but seldom receives from her organized opposite. Weak and vulnerable, she still triumphs in her misery, assured that hers is the preferable fate. This split in Plath's conception of women goes way back to her earliest "Two Sisters of Persephone" with its barren mathematical sister and the nature-loving sister who, opening herself to danger, bears a king; but, while the early poem had simply named the two types, implying their opposition, the later poems set up domestic dramas, fill out the social context somewhat, characterize and specify the women. However, this realistic setting and what looks like a simple narrative frame are rendered more complex by the peculiar details that crop up: hissing potatoes, for example, children called schizophrenics, exploding ice boxes. The speed with which dreary domestic realism slips into fantasy is disturbing, and readers, wanting to fix the poems, tend to attribute this shift to a presumably deranged speaker. And of course the speaker's tone of voice which is often frenzied, clipped, assertive, as well as her fine sense of rhyming and hypnotic rhythms, all these attributes combine to characterize her as having a suspicious, even hysterical, command of the situation. If she is as beleaguered as she claims to be, how can she be so witty, so nasty, so verbally controlled, we wonder.

These interpretative problems present themselves with particular force in "The Tour," a poem like "Lesbos" about a visit, but this time the speaker herself is visited. It is a simple domestic situation: the young housewife with a messy house and messy life of migraines and retching is invaded by her "maiden aunt" with her neat and mechanical life and her artificially decorated house. The aunt has "come to call," to "be shown about," to poke into the mess, not to help or console or comfort, rather to judge and condemn, we may assume. But, since she does not get a chance to talk herself and we see her only through the speaker's eyes or we hear her only through the speaker's voice, we have no real

way of knowing why the aunt has come. We must judge her by the details the speaker gives us, and they do characterize a particularly unattractive person. The speaker notes the aunt's jewelled "Gecko, the little flick!" a detail that seems to reflect the aunt's insinuating ways. We learn that the aunt's "place" is decorated with "Javanese/Geese and the monkey trees," another "cute décor" against which the speaker's real-life troubles seem more human. The aunt with her "specs" and her purse and her "flat hat" seems to be a caricature of a meddling old maid; but some of the sympathy that we might feel for the speaker subjected to this person is deflected by her cleverly rhymed monologue which seems too much in control, too severe a judgment on the simple aunt. The tone of the poem makes it difficult to remember that the narrative situation details a real invasion of privacy, an inspection of psychic turmoil which appears to be motivated only by idle curiosity. The aunt's only reaction is to consider the speaker "bitter," "averse."

"The Tour" is interesting because it shows how Plath's narrative interests clashed with her prosodic ingenuity, or perhaps it could be argued that certain stories she wanted to tell forced from her a rhythmic and rhyming intensity. She simply could not tell them calmly at a low pitch. The situation itself in which she is made to be polite, to let in the maiden aunt, to show her about, may create the stylization of language which the speaker uses. The insistent form, the incessantly repeated phrases, sounds, and rhymes, serve to distance the actual situation, to control verbally what seems like an invasion over which the speaker has no control.

"Eavesdropper" is a poem that seems to substantiate the claim that certain rather common situations elicited from Plath are extremely elaborate verbal responses. While "The Tour" had exploited Plath's genius for rhyming and rhythm, "Eavesdropper" tells its story through metaphors of startling particularity and power. It is a poem of intense feeling, this time of resentment, against a nosey neighbor who seems to live off the speaker's domestic miseries. The poem opens with the straightforward exclamation, "Your brother will trim my hedges!" And what might have been a kindly offer is quickly revealed for the self-serving gesture it is, "They darken your house." The person who finally gets attacked as "Toad-stone! Sister bitch! Sweet neighbor!" in the last line is called "Nosey grower" in the opening. At first it is just a reference to her gardening skills and her neighborly interference, but the term soon suggests another kind of growth, and the neighbor becomes "Mole

on my shoulder,/To be scratched absently,/To bleed, if it comes to that.”

The parasitic process is almost instantly reversed, and the loathsome growth on the speaker’s body now becomes the deadly addiction of her neighbor. The speaker says, “Your body one/Long nicotine-finger/On which I,/White cigarette,/Burn for your inhalation,/Driving the dull cells wild.” The speaker goes on to develop the weird metaphor of cancer-causing addiction in the third stanza:

Let me roost in you!  
My distractions, my pallors.  
Let them start the queer alchemy  
That melts the skin  
Grey tallow, from bone and bone.  
So I saw your much sicker  
Predecessor wrapped up,  
A six and a half foot wedding cake.  
And he was not even malicious.

In the context of the metaphor, we learn that the eavesdropper is a new neighbor, replacing the one who has died of cancer, and, as the poem develops we find out that the new neighbor is a native of the small isolated town, “a desert of cow people/Trundling their udders home/To the electric milkers, the wifey,” in which the poem’s speaker is a stranger. The neighbor is a gossip, “Tarting with the drafts that pass,/Little whore tongue,” a meddler, insinuating her way into every opening: “Levering letter flaps,/Scrutinizing the fly/Of the man’s pants/Dead on the chair back,/Opening the fat smiles, the eyes/Of two babies/Just to make sure.” We learn that the speaker herself is sleepless, harrassed by “distractions,” critical of her fellow townspeople, alone with two babies.

Wishing cancer on her neighbor may seem too severe a reaction to simple inquisitiveness, and the speaker may be accused of projecting some of the rage that her domestic situation generates onto her neighbor, that hapless “Chenille beckoner.” But the violence of the metaphors is in some way mitigated by the narrative situation. If the neighbor is an eavesdropper whose life revolves around the miseries she can uncover in the speaker’s life, then rage may be a justified response to such a heartless invasion of privacy, such a perversion of charity. Alone, aban-



done, a stranger, the speaker desperately needs a “sweet neighbor,” and thus she is doubly vulnerable to this woman’s prying habits. Her only protection against such an unwelcomed invasion is words, the exclamatory attack.

In addition to its name-calling defensiveness, “Eavesdropper” relinquishes itself to a kind of wild metaphorical energy, which seems typical of Plath’s poetry. Plath has commented on how this process worked. In her comparison of novels and poems, she writes,

I do not like to think of all the things, familiar, useful and worthy things, I have never put into a poem. I did, once, put a yew tree in. And that yew tree began, with astounding egotism, to manage and order the whole affair. It was not a yew tree by a church on a road past a house in a town where a certain woman lived . . . and so on, as it might have been in a novel. Oh, no. It stood squarely in the middle of the poem, manipulating its dark shades, the voices in the churchyard, the clouds, the birds, the tender melancholy with which I contemplated it—everything! I couldn’t subdue it. And, in the end, my poem was a poem about a yew tree. The yew tree was just too proud to be a passing black mark in a novel.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, it is possible to see how the actual woman next door, a gardener and a gossip, could develop by association from “Nosey grower,” to a mole to cancer, one metaphor calling up another in rapid succession. In this particular poem, however, the metaphorical development works in the context of certain social facts. First of all, it is not a yew tree but a human being who is being described, and this woman does retain some of the qualities of a character in a novel: she does live in a house next to the house of the speaker in the poem and she does certain things. The speaker’s metaphorical elaboration of her may take over the poem, but it never frees itself entirely from the real life situation. So, if reading the poem, we look mainly at the social context, we may find the speaker herself malicious. On the other hand, if we attend only to the metaphors, we see how the speaker has revealed the “queer alchemy” of gossiping. It is difficult to accommodate in any single reading both the narrative situation and the metaphorical development because they undercut each other in their mutual inappropriateness. Emphasizing one, we distort the other and make wrong-headed judgments of the poem. Yet, both

elements demand attention. Together, they articulate the disparity we saw in "The Tour" between verbal control and actual powerlessness. The speaker can fix her neighbor all right in a deadly epithet, but she is in turn squirming under the unrelenting attention of this "Sister bitch." They are locked in deadly combat: the speaker, imaginative and quick witted, and the neighbor, who derives her power from the sanctions of the community, "the ciphers" who need to be filled. The lyric voice in this novelistic situation is shrill, it must be admitted, but its shrillness is not without motivation. Combining modes here, Plath seeks to broaden the range of the lyric voice. The poetic patterns of rhyme and rhythm, of metaphors, may be insistent, but she attempts to pack into them as much narrative life as she can.

Indeed, in some poems, Plath seems to be experimenting with the way in which patterns erupt from narrative details, depend upon them even as they develop along what appears to be an autonomous course. Plath's speakers can turn every contingency into a discrete image, and that image into another one, until a pattern forms. It is not Plath's "lithic impulse," as Richard Howard has termed it, her desire "to reduce the demands of life to the unquestioning acceptance of a stone," that is at work here; it is rather her incredible imaginative energy, her ability to capture a whole situation or character in a single image, to open a door on a life, shut the door, and in the interval reveal the entire drama.<sup>7</sup> The poem which Plath entitled "Medusa" (although it might be better titled "Medea") is a good example of the way Plath's image-making works. Packing into the strict patterns of poetry some messy autobiographical incidents, Plath offers a revealing insight on motherly concern.

"Medusa" is curiously a poem about connections, those between a mother and her daughter and particularly between Mrs. Plath and Sylvia, we may assume from the biographical information of the letters. Thus, this poem is important to keep in mind when we are tempted to think of Plath as a visionary whose poetic self is isolated, unconnected with the social world, projected outward by objectifying emotions. The poem develops by a basic image pattern of bonds, ties, "barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable," "Tremulous breath at the end of my line," "eely tentacle." Although this imagery is more surrealistic than some in Plath's more realistic poems, in fact certain narrative details emerge in the poem. It is addressed to a mother who lives on the other side of the Atlantic, who came for a visit, intruded on some domestic fight, and whose solicitations and stifling concern cannot at this point help the

speaker. The number of peculiar religious references to this mother suggests that she wants to establish strange connections, to play God or to offer herself as a sacrifice or intercessor for her child. But such interference only intensifies the speaker's misery. "Green as eunuchs, your wishes/ Hiss at my sins," she says. Whatever the daughter's sin is, and the mention of "eunuchs" and "kicking lovers" suggest that the daughter's sin has been to grow up to full sexuality; the mother's desire to protect her, to maintain close bonds, is really a desire to keep her forever as a dependent, to stifle her life. "I could draw no breath," the daughter complains, and her only wish is to escape the clutches of her mother's tentacles. Whether she does in fact escape is rendered ambiguous by the last line. "There is nothing between us" could indicate the daughter's wrenching free from this maternal solicitation or it could also suggest that the mother has narrowed the distance between herself and her daughter and has indeed become identified with her.

A mother who comes even when not called, who is always there "upleaping/To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,/Touching and sucking," "Squeezing the breath from the blood bells," nurtures destructive connections. She is indeed the dangerous, engulfing mother who would go on providing her children with life supports long after they have developed such systems of their own. The auntie and the eavesdropper seem to be variations on such a mother, intrusive people who would sustain themselves on the tragedies of others. To frame them in rhyme or metaphor or image patterns is to contain their evil doing, to reduce them to images before they suck the life from their victims.

The four poems discussed here, all dealing with bonds between women, are not among Plath's best known work, but I think that their peculiar combination of narrative details within an intricate poetic pattern is typical of her poetry. She does tell stories, frequently complicated ones, and their point is usually to justify an intense emotion—viciousness, resentment, love—which stems from some social circumstance. There is always a central figure in her poems, but she is surrounded by a cast of characters, and the interchange between the characters is essential to the meaning of the poem. The lyric voice tells the stories by manipulating point of view—sometimes repeating what she has been told, sometimes commenting on other persons, sometimes articulating her own thoughts or emotions—and this manipulation gives the poems a narrative density which is often difficult to plot. Characters are devel-

oped by a skilled and economic use of external detail (the aunt's "Gecko" jewelry, the eavesdropper's whore tongue, the mother's "Bottle in which I live") in much the same way, although in a more condensed form, that character is defined in the short story. But these poems make few concessions to prose as do the poems of Robert Frost, for example, which attempt to play down the poetic line by accommodating it to colloquial phrasing and natural speech rhythms. Plath's poems toy with their musical qualities, heighten them, even flaunt them. "You do not do, you do not do" is one famous example. In this respect, her true progenitor is probably Edgar Allan Poe, although even he might have sacrificed a few narrative twists for some of those "Nevermores." Plath never does. Her point is to tell all the truth and to tell it not slant but straight out.

Plath's tendencies toward this narrating lyric emerged early in her work—"Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Sea" from her Smith College days, for example, or the equally early "Circus in Three Rings." The habits of her fiction writing, as Hughes has explained, spilled over into her poetry, and the archive of details, so like a novelist's notebook, which she was collecting not only at Devon but certainly as early as her Fulbright year in Cambridge, was a valuable source for her poetry as well as her prose. Specific accounts of Cambridge activities form the basis of "All the Dead Dears," "The Eye Mote," "Watercolour of Granchester Meadows," among others. But the narrative strategies intensified in her late work, especially in the harrowing last months of her life when everything that happened to her seemed to have a heightened quality as if it were already in a fictional frame, and even more than that where Plath's need to explain and justify and blame and exonerate was sharpened.

The narrative element in Plath's poetry is instructive, however. When we look closely at it in her late poetry, we discover that it expresses conservative social views that seem at odds with the vituperative tone and iconoclastic attitude of the speaker. For example, the speaker in "Lesbos" is violent in her attack on the "Stage curtain" housewife in her "cute décor" who denies life. Despite her own emotional difficulties, this speaker presents herself as a responsible mother, a life nurturer, identified strongly with the domesticity that the woman she visits scorns. Again in "The Tour," the speaker contrasts her own domesticity, however disruptive, with the aunt's ordered but sterile life. Here too, it is domesticity, even the survival of what appears to be a domestic holocaust, that is acclaimed. And by domesticity I mean the house and

hearth (even if it is a biting “frost box” or exploding furnace or even the bald nurse) rather than the pairing of husband and wife since in most of these poems the husband is absent. “Eavesdropper” and “Medusa” are similar narratives of the invasion of domestic privacy where the sanctity of the home is the point of contention.

Although the speaker in all four poems feels estranged from the people around her, she sees herself as part of a community or family and even more she presents herself as a housewife and mother. While she admits to being beleaguered and harried in these roles, she never abandons them, and they give her at the same time a kind of privilege. Thus, we see it as heartless for the neighbor to scrutinize “the fly/Of the man’s pants”; but it is downright perverse for her to go “Opening the fat smiles, the eyes/Of two babies/Just to make sure.” This mother whose problems may have led her to “mad soft/Mirror talk” or the “zoo yowl” has managed nonetheless to keep her children safe and happy in their “fat smiles,” managed presumably against the great odds of her own unhappiness, and yet she cannot protect them from this unspeakable invader. If it is hard to reconcile someone who calls her neighbor “Sister bitch” and her mother “God-ball” with the champion of domestic virtue, it must be remembered nonetheless that such a champion might have expected to find support for her social position in the small-town community and the family, and thus would be doubly hurt by gossip and inquisitiveness.

The speaker of these Plath poems shares her criticism with early twentieth-century chroniclers of small-town American life such as Sherwood Anderson, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Edith Wharton; but most important of all, her position here is close to views expressed by Hughes both in his poetry and fiction. Like Plath, these writers too harbored hopes for a community of values and meaning where they discovered only pettiness, destructive gossip, even viciousness. In Plath’s poetry, of course, this slightly old-fashioned point of view of the sanctity of domesticity is wedded to a tormented modern consciousness. Unlike the puzzled and confused narrator of an Anderson story or the eccentric but hidden character of a Robinson poem, the speaker in Plath’s poetry is forthright in her attacks on the community which she imagines as itself predatory. She does call names as old Eben Flood does not, but these names are prompted by the same despair and loneliness and estrangement that drove Flood to drink. There is this difference between a Plath speaker and a Tilbury town man, however: Flood’s misery can be

attributed to changing times, to worlds overpassed, but Plath's woman seems to have suffered some private disaster, some violent emotional upheaval totally unconnected with the sociology of the small town. It is this fact of course that attracts neighbors or family members as Ted Hughes said in "The Casualty": "Sympathies/Fasten to the blood like flies." In "a desert of cow people," her miseries would have the fascination of a side-show attraction, and understandably she resents this fact.

Since *The Bell Jar* offers ample evidence of Plath's scorn for domesticity and procreation, the question remains whether the narratives discussed here are some aberrant sub-plot in her life's larger story or if indeed the conservative social position these narratives relay is central to her best work. It is true that her poems generally lack the acerbic force of her attack in *The Bell Jar* on male-dominated marriage and cow-like pregnancy, but they can jab at the lust of the empty-headed man for a mechanical doll-wife ("The Applicant") or reduce the pregnant woman to a comic "melon strolling on two tendrils" ("Metaphors"). Still these particular poems reveal not so much a scorn for domesticity or pregnancy as an attack on the conventions or a playful regard for the grotesque quality of pregnancy. When she treats these subjects directly in her poems, Plath displays a kind of knowing humor.

It is when Plath sets domesticity and children in a social situation that her attitudes became more conservative. From "The Manor Garden" on, she fears for her children's safety, longs to protect them in a family whose heritage is "Hours of blackness" ("The Manor Garden") and in a world that "will kill and eat" ("Mary's Song"). Behind these fears may be her own longing for a father to protect her, as we can see from the narrative details in "Daddy" which recite a life-long effort to find such a father, a loving search for roots and for a language with which to address him. When she realizes that she will be forever frustrated in this search, she grows spiteful, attacks the father, and rejoices when the villagers join her in stamping on him. Beneath the malice and vindictiveness of the speaker's tone is a narrative that recounts conservative, not to say regressive, efforts to restore the lost father, to reconstitute the conventional family disrupted by his death. When she kills him at the end, she does so by aligning herself with a new family, the community which supports her rage. The Plath speaker here hates her father not for what he was (although she tries to castigate him as a Fascist) but for what he was not (the conventional, ever-present, protective father). He was too little the dominant figure in her life, not Fascistic enough, as it turns out.

It is true that Plath's late poetry is dominated by a rising figure who seeks to escape domesticity, children, contingency itself: the figure flying into the "cauldron of morning" ("Ariel"), rising with "red hair" to "eat men like air" ("Lady Lazarus"), dissolving into "a pure acetylene/Virgin" ("Fever 103"). She seems to be a figure of radical energy. But balancing her is a socially conservative figure. She is the survivor of "Little Fugue," "Arranging my morning./These are my fingers, this my baby"; "The woman, still at her knitting,/At the cradle of Spanish walnut,/Her body a bulb in the cold" of "Wintering"; the mother "cow-heavy and floral/In my Victorian nightgown" of "Morning Song"; the woman who "would like to believe in tenderness" in "The Moon and the Yew Tree." She is finally the woman in "Edge" who folds her children "back into her body as petals/Of a rose close." For her, the blood jet may be poetry, but the children are "two roses." It is this woman whose outbursts at the community stem not from her own derangement or psychic turmoil but from the inadequacies of the larger social circle in supporting the smaller domestic circle of mother and child. This woman embodies the virtues of survival, of nurturing, of protection, against a community that would destroy, intrude, and condemn. She may be witty and nasty but underneath is a tone of self-righteousness. She is right, and her narrative strategies are designed to explain and justify her rage against those who are wrong.

## NOTES

1 Sylvia Plath, "A Comparison," *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 62.

2 Ted Hughes, "Introduction," *Johnny Panic*, p. 3.

3 Hughes, *ibid.*, p. 2.

4 Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), p. 323.

5 Joyce Carol Oates, "The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poems of Sylvia Plath," *The Southern Review*, IX (July, 1973), p. 517.

6 Plath, "A Comparison," *Johnny Panic*, pp. 62-63.

7 Richard Howard, "Sylvia Plath: 'And I Have No Face, I Have Wanted to Efface Myself,'" in Charles Newman, ed., *The Art of Sylvia Plath* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 79.