Chapter 3
Sylvia Plath

To annihilate the world by annihilation of one's self is the deluded height of desperate egoism. The simple way out of all the little brick dead ends we scratch our nails against.... I want to kill myself, to escape from responsibility, to crawl back abjectly into the womb. (Sylvia Plath, Journals)

In the second chapter, I mainly focused on diverse religious and cultural background of our society which causes women’s neurosis and hysteria due to the stifling confinement. In this chapter, I am going to analyze Sylvia Plath's works in terms of women’s neuroses. Sylvia Plath and Sylvia Plath’s protagonists in her works are seen as neurotic. Little has been done to explore and define the source and nature of neuroses. It would be pertinent to examine such questions as; Is the madness inherent to their nature and or is it part of their quest for freedom to be new women in this patriarchal society? Phyllis Chesler in her book Women and Madness describes madness as “an intense experience of female biology, sexual, cultural castration, and a doomed search for potency” (Chesler, Phyllis. Women and Madness. New York: Doubleday and company Inc, 1972. p.28) Where does madness which obviously drives women to either self-destruction or rebirth come from? Why does women easily become victims? I will look into the reasons by analyzing her works.

On the morning of 11 February 1963, Sylvia Plath committed suicide in London. At the time of her death, she was known as the author of a moderately well received book of poems, The Colossus (1960). In addition, she had published a novel, The Bell Jar (1963), under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. She had published a number of prose stories and sketches in various magazines and journals. Plath also left behind a manuscript of newer work, titled Ariel, which consisted of poems.
written for the most part in the last five months of her life. The eventual publication of this book, somewhat altered in form from Plath's original intention, occurred in 1965. Plath's considerable fame as a writer dates from the publication of Ariel, which was quickly recognized as an outstanding poetic work. As the facts about her life, and particularly the manner of her death became widely known, she developed a cult status. Many critical commentators found themselves taking sides in a startlingly polarized debate about the merit of Plath's late work. Much of the critical controversy centered around poems such as Daddy and Lady Lazarus, in which Plath depicted the trauma of her personal history as a woman. From a feminist perspective, it is meaningful to clarify the identity of Sylvia Plath and her madness/genius. When Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950–1963 in 1975, and her Journals in America in 1982 were published, they added to the fires of controversy. The personal fallout from this almost unprecedented collision between a writer's work and her biography is incalculable. What can be asserted, however, is that Plath's notoriety has obscured to a great extent the true value of her work tending to foreground the more sensational of her poems at the expense of other, quieter, and perhaps more important aspects of her writing. Forty years after her death, and with the protagonists of Plath's work, it has become somewhat easier to view her work in a balanced critical way.

1) Defining Neurosis

The term was coined by the Scottish doctor William Cullen in 1769 to refer to "disorders of sense and motion" caused by a "general affection of the nervous system." For him, it described various nervous disorders and symptoms that could not be explained physiologically. It derives from two Greek words: neuron (nerve) and osis (diseased or abnormal condition). The term was however most influentially defined by Sigmund Freud over a century later. Freud said that "We have long
observed that every neurosis has the result, and therefore probably the purpose, of forcing the patients out of real life, of alienating them from actuality” (Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth, 1953 p.74.)

As an illness, neurosis represents a variety of psychiatric conditions in which emotional distress or unconscious conflict is expressed through various physical, physiological, and mental disturbances, which may include physical symptoms. Neurotic tendencies may manifest themselves as depression, acute or chronic anxiety, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, phobias, and even personality disorders. It has perhaps been most simply defined as a "poor ability to adapt to one's environment, an inability to change one's life patterns, and the inability to develop a richer, more complex, more satisfying personality. (Boeree, C. George. *A Bio-Social Theory of Neurosis*, 2002). A psychological problem develops when neurosis begins to interfere with and cause anxiety, frustration and depression in an individual. Frequently, the coping mechanisms enlisted to help ward off the anxiety only exacerbate the situation, causing more distress. It has even been defined in terms of this coping strategy, as a "symbolic behavior in defense against excessive psychobiologic pain which is self-perpetuating because symbolic satisfactions cannot fulfill real needs." (Karen, Honey. *The Collected Works*. (2 Vols.) Norton, 1937.)

According to psychoanalytic theory, neuroses may be rooted in ego defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms are a normal way of developing and maintaining a consistent sense of self while only those thought and behavior patterns that produce difficulties in living should be termed neuroses.
There are many different specific forms of neuroses: obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety neurosis, hysteria in which anxiety may be discharged through a physical symptom, and an endless variety of phobias. According to Dr. George Boeree, effects of neurosis can involve:

...anxiety, sadness or depression, anger, irritability, mental confusion, low sense of self-worth, etc., behavioral symptoms such as phobic avoidance, vigilance, impulsive and compulsive acts, lethargy, etc., cognitive problems such as unpleasant or disturbing thoughts, repetition of thoughts and obsession, habitual fantasizing, negativity and cynicism, etc. Interpersonally, neurosis involves dependency, aggressiveness, perfectionism, schizoid isolation, socio-culturally inappropriate behaviors, etc. (Boeree, Dr. C. George. A Bio-Social Theory of Neurosis, 2002.

In feminist perspectives, when women face hardship in their life but only to reach the labyrinth, they are easily fallen into the mire of neuroses such as can apparently be seen in the Sylvia Plath’s works. Jung said “I have frequently seen people become neurotic when they content themselves with inadequate or wrong answers to the questions of life” (Jung, C.G, Memories, Dreams, Reflections, New York, N.Y.: Vantage Books. 1989)

Sylvia Plath must be struggling to find out the answer which would never be found in her life, "If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days.” (The Bell Jar p.90)

2. Feminist Perspectives on Social Conflict

The woman is perfected.
Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity
Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare
Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.
Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little
Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded
Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden
Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.
The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.
She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag.


Sylvia Plath is one of the poets who lived the dramatic life. The chaotic and confused state of Plath criticism is best summed up in the words of Mary Kinzie;

Repetitive is the best way to characteristic the ensuing criticism of her work. Whether they are pedantic, musing, miffed, or so obviously confused that they can’t find cover, most reviews become

Sylvia Plath was more primitive and more cultivated, more self-destructive and more constructive, a lot madder and a lot saner, than the average person. The inclusion of the poem, Edge, by Sylvia Plath acts a suitable introduction to a study of society and its ability to make some women feel hopeless and further make women neurotic and render them take an extreme step within it. It’s suitable for two reasons. the first one: It was through that remarkable work of Plath, The Bell Jar, which first stirred my interest and challenged my perception of madness and suicide by women in our society; the second one: Sylvia Plath herself committed suicide in 1963, and this poem I have chosen was her last published work. Sylvia who published her personal anguish as a woman so fiercely and objectively is in no doubt a very reliable and poignant source on the subject of women’s suicide in our patriarchal society. As I have debated in the second chapter, our milieu for women whether it’s western or oriental is so harsh and claustrophobic. It is against women’s growth and is an accomplice for hindrance of women’s emancipation.

I will concentrate on the causes that lead to attempting suicide. I want to analyze the reasons and locate causes in our socio-cultural surroundings that are hostile to women. As I mentioned earlier in the first chapter, why do women feel
that there is no other way out? I will look at the role that society plays in molding this tragic response. But is there any way in which such an absurdity can be explained, since it can hardly ever be justified? Is our society really changing into desirable one for women? Is our society genuinely supportive of women who want to break from the shackles of patriarchy and become self-supportive and self-reliant. But Viviane Forrester doubts it:

We don't know what women's vision is. What do women's eyes see? How do they carve, invent, and decipher the world? I don't know. I know my own vision, the vision of one woman, but the world seen through the eyes of others? I only know what men's eyes see. (New French Feminism, Marks Elane & Courtivron Isabelle de eds. The Harvester Press. 1981. p.181)

A. Alvarez. had quoted in his book, The Savage God that “No one ever lacks a good reason for suicide.”


Yes, every person has a latent and dormant suicidal instinct in her own. But the most apparent thing we should focus on is what ignites the suicidal instinct, especially in women. The socialization process which a woman goes through culturally to be approved patterns of her behavior is the focus of my idea, since the general socialization process makes women vulnerable to self-destructive behavior. Our identity is first as a human being, second as a gender: a male or a female. But in our culture, whether it is western or oriental, it is reversed. Our core identity has become virtually synonymous with our gender identity before human beings. But, in our society, ultimately, “The humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being. The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter
seems wanting in significance by itself... Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man.” (The New French Feminism p. 44) Simone de Beauvoir further laments: “She is simply **what** man decrees, thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she **appears** essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex-Absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her. She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.” (New French Feminism p. 44) Women must struggle to overcome the cultural training they’ve received and the negative attitudes that patriarchal society has historically directed toward them. Annie Leclere also laments this situation as follows:

Men have principles, and they insist upon them.
And at least the heart of these principles, *engraved*, in the cold splendor of an eternal and almost super-human law, **the** value of woman and the value of man.
Woman is valuable in so far as she permits man to fulfill his belief as man.
But man is valuable in and of himself
For out of him cometh forth all value, **as** the sperm out of his penis.

(New French Feminism. P.79)

So to further diagnose this pathetic situation, it is imperative to look at several aspects of socialization that affect a woman’s development most and hence predispose her to neurosis and further suicidal tendencies.

i) **Sense of Competence**

The women who are lacking an adequate inner source for self-esteem, are unhappy and insecure. They must **depend** upon external sources. They are not able to stand firm as independent beings in this society for themselves. All the time they are defined by other’s view and judged by the gaze of males.
It is true to say that most women in our society struggle to achieve this sense of competence, but the socialization process systematically builds the opposite of this competence for women. Many of the abilities she does develop cause conflict, rather than strength within her because they may be seen as unfeminine. Therefore women should have their own allotted claustrophobic space in the patriarchal culture. Friedan depicts this phenomenon as follows:

Women never had it so good as you. In short, far from the vocation of marriage and motherhood leading you away from the great issues of our day, it brings back to their very center and the places upon you an infinitely deeper and more intimate responsibility than the borne by the majority of those who hit the headlines and make the news...

This assignment for you, as wives and mothers, you can do it in the living room with the baby in your lap or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hand. If you are clever, maybe you can even practice your saving arts on that unsuspecting man while he's watching television. I think there is much you can do about our crisis in the humble role of housewife. I could wish you no better vocation than that.


Both male and female while in infancy depend on their parents. But parents traditionally encourage a more submissive and feminine behavior in girl children. Instead of learning to do things for herself, she is taught to evoke appropriate response from other people who will then master and control her. Males are pushed to be competent and successful, which of course causes problems for them. The pressure on females is however a double bind. All children are expected to do well in school, but girls receive a second message about never being as capable as boys. The result is that females strive to do better than boys. But the reality she faces is the
backfire by male dominated society. From birth, for girls, the gender is an engraved tattoo and stigma throughout their lives. That’s why they try harder to overcome their inferiority. But the goals and dreams they are expected to pursue are not appreciated or respected as much as they are in the case of the boys. They are vulnerable to the social milieu and subjected to low self-esteem which is the starting point for neurosis and nervous breakdown of women.

Because of these hostile surroundings for girls, striving to achieve a personal sense of identity and autonomy is a major goal of their lives. But the process of socialization limits the degree to which a female can achieve this goal. How? It conceptualizes her basic roles as that of an object whose major function is to nurture, to service, to be a giver. She is brought up to believe that her main goal in life is to be chosen by a man, and to become his helpmate. It is not surprising then, that from infancy a girl’s looks and appearance is paramount, as well as the importance of her assisting others and putting others needs before her own. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote, in A Vindication of the Rights of Women: “Taught from infancy that beauty is woman’s scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.“ (Wollstonecraft, Mary. A Vindication of The Rights of Woman; With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects. Ashley Tauchert, ed. London, J.M.Dent; Everyman. 1995 p.89)

Hence a female’s sense of identity is shaped around her sense of attractiveness to another. C.B.Cox talks about this phenomenon in his critical journal about The Bell Jar. “Intellectual woman’s conflicting attitudes to her body, desiring to be attractive to men, and yet a little resented of the feminine role.” (Wagner, Linda W. ed. Sylvia Plath: The Routledge. 1988 p.100) Feminist sometimes refer to this as the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ syndrome. As in the fairy tale, women’s potentiality lies dormant, waiting to be activated by the man who will insure that she will live happily ever after. Females are thus brought up to believe
that their self-worth depends on catching a desirable man, yet they are criticized for being competitive and bitchy to one another. They are taught to believe that self-worth depends on physical and social attractiveness, yet they are criticized for being oversensitive to criticism, and for being vain and insecure about their looks.

This female identity as an object also produces a rage towards the controller, our society. Sylvia Plath wrote in Her Journals “Is there no way out of the mind? (Journals p.98) That is, over dependence on others leads to rage towards the self for being in the dependent position, and towards other persons who have the power. However this rage is generally suppressed, as it is a major risk to express it openly to the one whom she is so dependent upon. Women who live in this situation may thus engage in suicidal behavior to express rage at their own ineffectualness, as well as toward the person who controls them. The more important point here is that whatever aggression women do have, they must inhibit its explicit expression. Women are meant to suppress their anger or expel their aggression indirectly. Though, when women do become directly aggressive they are seen as bitches or abnormal and unfeminine. This pressure to inhibit anger is so strong in women that it is often repressed and turned inward before reaching consciousness, thus leading to suicidal behavior. When Sylvia Plath herself was betrayed by her poet husband, Ted Hughes, she was emerging from an extended period of anger in which “the strangling noose of worry, of hysteria, paralysis prevented me from writing.” (Journals p.253) and she unconsciously priming herself to enter her major phase as an artist to repress her anger. She felt, “still tired, but curiously elated, as if absolved from suffication-projects bubble. Or is this a lull in a merry-go-round of panic blackouts?” (Journals p.258) But ultimatum of her choice was suicide.

Characteristics with stem from oppression such as low self-esteem and self-hatred, combined with the cultural rule against expression of aggression, may lead to self-destructive behavior and fear.
Sylvia is crying out as follows:

The only thing to love is Fear itself.
Love of Fear is the beginning of wisdom.
The only thing to love is Fear itself.

The low esteem is also related to masochism, which is the gaining of satisfaction from physical pain, psychological humiliation and women’s inferior anatomical structure. “The woman gains masochistic satisfaction from the discovery that she lacks a penis, from the pain of menstruation, from the pain of childbirth, from the violence and humiliation of intercourse, and in general from the acceptance of her passive role.” (Wolman B., Benjamin (ed.), Between Survival and Suicide, 1980, Gardner Press Inc., New York. p.141)

This, apart from being partially causally biological, involves seeing oneself as an object, subject to the will of others. Thus we may say that the socialization of the women render women to develop masochistic attitudes to reconcile their position as subordinates and second-class citizens. The difficulty for many women is that socialization does more than reconcile them to their role; it makes them feel guilty, ashamed and unnatural if they aren’t masochistic. Under sufficiently severe stress, the behavior of a masochistic woman may become low esteem and self-destructive. Although a suicide attempt or gesture may gain her short-lived attention, its primary effect is usually that she earns hostility and contempt, thus perpetuating her masochistic orientation. These negative responses from society just reinforce women’s feeling of worthlessness.

ii) Challenging Normality

“Loneliness is an unhappy compound of having lost one’s point of reference, of
suffering the fate of individual and collective discontinuity and of living through or
dying from a crisis of identity to the point of alienation of one's self.” (Dr Ludwig
Binswanger, Swiss psychiatrist. 1972.)

A number of psychologists have pointed out that it is healthier to have a
flexible sexrole identity, rather than a rigidly stereotyped one. But as Broverman
points out, the majority of mental health professionals described males and females
in culturally stereotyped ways. Their concept of a healthy mature female however,
differed significantly from those for men. “Healthy women were described as less
independent, less adventurous, less aggressive, less competitive, less objective, more
submissive, more easily influenced, more excitable in minor crises, more emotional,
and more conceited about their appearances. And that's a description of a healthy
mature adult, sex female — not women as they might become due to improper,
subordinating socialization, but women, as they should be in order to be described as
healthy and mature.” (Broverman, I.K. Sex Role Stereotypes and Clinical
38. p.17.)

Also what is normal sexual activity for an adolescent girl? Who is she
listening to and are any of the guiding voices intrinsically right? It's been reported
that guilt over sexual activity is an important factor in the suicidal behavior of
teenage girls. That guilt is more powerful among females is not remarkable, since
they have traditionally not been permitted the sexual freedom of males. In The Bell
Jar, Esther doesn't feel comfortable about the social norm, she laments:

“I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a
man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not.” (The Bell Jar p.79)

Initial sexual attitudes are learned early in life from one's parents. And even though
cultural attitudes seem to be moving in the direction of greater sexual freedom for
females, attitudes change slowly. At the present time the sexual activity of males
and females is judged differently. We still hear girls being called promiscuous, sluts, whores etc., for behavior that is considered at least acceptable in males. We still hear that girls ‘lose’ their virginity and boys ‘take’ virginity from girls.

“Men would try to persuade a girl to have sex and say they would marry her later, but as soon as she gave in, they would lose all respect for her and start saying that if she did that with them she would do that with other men and they would end up by making her life miserable.” (The Bell Jar p.78)

Recent sexual liberation may in fact increase rather than decrease sexual conflict in females. Females are now expected to be sexually liberated, which for a man is frequently defined as more available for his sexual pleasure. Thus, a girl may feel guilty if she has the old morality and guilty if she hasn’t the new morality. If she is sufficiently intimidated by modern standards, the girl who is not ready to become sexually active may feel there is something wrong with her, that she is frigid or unfeminine. They may lead to social withdrawal and isolation, which are major factors influencing suicidal behavior.

It is a fact that more married than single women are diagnosed with depression. Suicidal behavior in married women may be due to difficulties that stem directly from the traditional role of the housewife. Traditionally, it basically says that the best place for women is chained to the kitchen sink. She is supposed to be content, happy, fulfilled and self-actualized once she is married and has children – grateful to be taken care of by her husband. It follows that since women believed they should find this role satisfying, any dissatisfaction – depression, apathy, emptiness, neurosis – has to be attributed to her own inadequacies. Frequently women try to correct these symptoms by having more kids, compulsively redecorating their homes, by chronic pill taking, by closet alcoholism.

There is also the paradoxical aspect, that although housewives have more symptoms of psychological impairment than either single women, they tend to see
themselves as happy. They are too closely integrated into the societal normative rut. They are confusing adjustment with happiness. If feminine happiness means being a wife and a mother, they must be, by definition, happy. But life doesn’t go by these definitions and norms. Life is the battlefield for women to fight for their own happiness and battlefield to fight against any sanctions imposed by male dominated society. In Sylvia Plath’s poem, The Rabbit Catcher (1962), the mood of aggression of a woman appears. There is a clear hint at the end of the poem of the constricting bondage of personal relationship:

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

As human beings, women want their self-journey even though they go through hardships. But their self-journey has been blocked by patriarchal social norms. That’s why they easily succumb to suicidal neurosis and madness. But that is what they should pay to be reborn as new women.

3. Death as an outlet in Sylvia Plath’s ‘Death’ Poems

Dying
Is the art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well. (Lady Lazarus, in Ariel)

Death, incomprehensible and irresistible, forever entices and ensnares Sylvia Plath
with sensibility and sentimentality. Creative writers who suffer from melancholia and other mental illness deal with this universal theme, for they confront the same issue in their own lives, especially when they have to struggle with their mental or psychological problems caused by their surroundings. A study made by Runco, Mark A. attests that "there is a close link between creative writers and suicide attempts, taking the case of Sylvia Plath as an example that fits in with existing theories of creativity and suicide" Runco, Mark A. Suicide and Creativity: The Case of Sylvia Plath. A Death Studies 22(Oct-Nov 1998): p.637.

Indeed, if great and talented writers are born to be prodigies, most of them undergo personal problems beyond ordinary people's comprehension. Among the American writers who attempted suicide, Sylvia Plath is worthy exploring in feminist perspective. Praised as a "well-educated, disciplined writer who usually avoided the sentimentalities of some female writers" (Wagner-Martin, Linda. Sylvia Plath: A Biography. Simon and Schuster, 1987.) Also A. Alvalez, depicted her as "one of the poets who wrote civilization poems of the post-Auschwitz, post-Hiroshima era and showed instances of the extremist art along with Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton, too." (Hamberger, Michael. The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modern Poetry Since Baudelaire, Anvil Press Poetry.1968.p.97) Plath dedicated herself to poetry writing with determination. Her autobiographical novel, The Bell Jar, is a true delineation of her own life before she dies at the age of 31. Many of her poems that she wrote touch upon death itself, foreshadowing her upcoming suicide. As Plath is fascinated with the death theme, so are her readers obsessed with the real cause of her death. Death is an alluring topic as can be seen in many talented writers.

However, the more we read about scholars' and critics' views on Sylvia Plath's death, the more confused we are likely to become because death itself, paradoxically, is so simple and complicated. Simple in one sense, since the poet is as dead as a
doornail; complicated as it is, the real answer to her death has provoked such a controversy and forever remains a riddle. The only thing we can affirm is that the moment Plath kills herself at her own hands; she is dead, permanently separated from this earthy world. What is left is the fact of her death and the poems that she writes in her lifetime. But her death always remains an enigma because critics and scholars will attempt every possible way to solve the riddle, one that can never be determined except that she is dead. Anne Sexton wrote a poem about Sylvia’s death even though she took the same step of committing suicide herself:

O Sylvia, Sylvia,
With a dead box of stones and spoons,
With two children, two meteors
Wanderind loose in the tiny playroom,

With your mouth into the sheet,
Into the roofbeam, into the dumb prayer,

O Sylvia, Sylvia,
Where did you go
After you wrote me
From Devonshire
About raising potatoes
And keeping bees?

What did you stand by,
Just how did you lie down into?
Thief!
How did you crawl into,

Crawl down alone

Various approaches to the reading of Sylvia Plath have been provided, and definitely there will be more to come, and to explicate the reasons of her death, either feminist interpretation or a suicidal case study. The truth is that the dead are dead, and they can no longer speak for themselves. Since it is unlikely to ask Sylvia Plath the real cause of her death, the only thing we can do is to trace back her works and let her works speak for her.

By adopting Freud’s theory of death, I aim to examine and analyze Plath’s death poems as revealed in her writing. With application of Freud’s principles of pleasure, I intend to prove that Sylvia Plath attempts to transcend and transcribe herself through writing, but she fails to achieve her goal and plunges herself into the six feet under. Moreover, the poet’s concept of death revealed in her poems can give a glimpse of the agony and affliction of her life as a woman and reflect the ultimate choice that she has made to succumb herself to death itself. In her journal written in November 1952, she shows her frustration caused by external, drab surroundings given to the woman who really wanted to fly further ahead of reality:

I fell into bed again this morning, begging for sleep, withdrawing into dark, warm, fetid escape from action, from responsibility... I thought of myriad of physical duties I have to perform...The list mounted obstacle after fiendish obstacle; they leered, they felt apart in chaos, and the revulsion, the desire to end the pointless objects, of things, rose higher. (Sylvia Plath, Journals p.98)
She is again screaming towards the world;

Oh, mother, the world is rotten! I want to die! Let's die together. (*Journals* p.67)

In Freud's theory of death, he hypothesizes that the dichotomy of life instincts and death instincts. He categorizes the two contrasting and converging forces in ego, empowering and endangering the inner thoughts of one's mind. Freud's original concept is plain and practical, presuming that every living thing has the tendency to return to death itself. The concept of death instincts is further illustrated as follows: "In the works of my late years (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], and *The Ego and the Id* [1923], I have given free rein to the inclination, which I kept down for so long, to speculation, and I have also contemplated a new solution of the problem of the instincts. I have combined the instincts for self-preservation and for the preservation of the species under the concept of Eros and have contrasted it with it an instinct of death or destruction which works in silence. Instinct in general is regarded as a kind of elasticity of living things, an impulsion toward the restoration of a situation, which once existed by some external disturbance. This essentially conservative character of instincts is exemplified by the phenomena of the compulsion to repeat. The picture which life presents to us is the result of the concurrent and mutually opposing action of Eros and the death instinct" (Freud, Sigmund. *The Freud Reader*. Ed. by Peter Gay. NY: WW. Norton and Co. 1995. p.645).

The instinct of death may seem tucked away in the darkness, but it is lurking, waiting and working in silence as a kind of elasticity of living thing.

Freud further explicates the function of a death instinct in his hypothesis:

On the basis of theoretical considerations, supported by biology, we put
forward the hypothesis of a death instinct, the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state; on the other hand, we supposed that Eros, by bringing about a more and more far-reaching combination of the particles into which living substance is dispersed, aims at complicating life and at the same time, of course, at preserving it. Acting in this way, both the instincts would be conservative in the strictest sense of the work, since both would be endeavoring to re-establish a state of things that was disturbed by the emergence of life. The emergence of life would thus be the cause of the continuation of life and also at the same time of the striving towards death; and life itself would be a conflict and compromise between these two trends. The problem of the origin of life would remain a cosmological one; and the problem of the goal and purpose of life would be answered dualistically" (Ibid, p.645).

As Freud asserts that “life itself would be a conflict and compromise between these two trends,” the death instinct and the life instinct coexist within a living organism as two contrasting and contradictory forces against each other. Freud concludes his theory of these two forces by stating that it is an ongoing process:

On this view, a special physiological process (of anabolism or catabolism) would be associated with each of the two classes of instinct; both kinds of instinct would be active in every particle of living substance, though in unequal proportions, so that some one substance might be the principal representative of Eros. (Ibid. p.645).


Therefore, Freud speculates that “the instincts for self-preservation” is in opposition to “an instinct of death or destruction.” These two instincts, living and death instincts constantly oppose each other, aiming to be the final champion.
Similar to an ongoing fighting, the two instincts, existing in each individual, persistently compete with each other, trying to gain control over one another. When the power of living instinct dominates, the death instinct remains silent. Silent as it is, it is there, seeking time to fight back and win over the game. On the contrary, when the power of death instinct takes over, the living instinct will diminish and weaken its force. Though the fighting is inside each individual, it is only when one dies that the death instinct can claim its ultimate victory. However, before one succeeds in committing suicide, one has to undergo the painfulness and struggle that occurs incessantly in one’s mind, the combat between the death and living instincts. Sylvia Plath must have undergone similar experience before she killed herself. Sylvia Plath who didn’t overcome the burden of her life as a woman had to succumb to the death instinct, which I want to argue that the cause of her death can be attributed to the male-oriented society in which she lived. She confessed her anger and claustrophobic feeling in her Journals as follows: “Wrongness grows in the skin and makes it hard d to touch. Up, angry, in the darkness. No sleep, smothering. Sitting in the nightgown and sweater in the dining room staring into the full moon, talking to the full moon, with wrongness growing and filling the house like a man-eating plant.” (Journals p.146) Through analyzing and examining Sylvia Plath’s work, I intend to prove that Plath had tried to transcribe and transform herself through writing, but ultimately she failed to achieve to gain control over the death instincts because of her suffering and outer claustrophobic circumstances that she as an agonized woman had lived in. “The wrongness is creeping, choking the house, twining the tables and chairs and poisoning the knives and forks, clouding the drinking water with the lethal taint. Sun falls off-key on eyes asquint, and world has grown crooked and sour as a lemon overnight.” (Journals  p.147)

Among the ‘death poems’ that Sylvia Plath wrote, Lady Lazarus is the one that made her famous posthumously. The poem itself is highly confessional, dealing with
her three successive suicidal attempts at different points of her life. *Lady Lazarus* may provide insight into the frame of mind of a conflicted, talented woman attempting to make her mark during the period before woman’s liberation. When Sylvia Plath wrote *Lady Lazarus* in 1962, she was only three months away from ending her life. She had already made one well-publicized suicide attempt at the age of twenty. Why was this extra gifted and successful woman obsessed with dying?

Sylvia Plath’s poetry—painfully personal, raw, often bitterly angry—is just as intense as she was and also arouses intense emotions in its readers. Feminists applaud its portrait of a victimized but not broken-spirited woman like a phoenix in her poem.

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it—
A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot
A paperweight,
My face featureless, fine
Jew linen.
Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?—
The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.
Soon. soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me
And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.
This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.
What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see
Them unwrap me hand and foot--
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies
These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,
Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.
The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut
As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls. (Lady Lazarus, in Ariel);
At the age of 10, Sylvia Plath’s father died; she tried killing herself at the age of 20 and 30, the later one that she successfully committed suicide and joined her father. Each of the attempts occurs in a decade, a 10 years’ of time, as she openly declares in this poem. She lived an intense life, marked occasionally by great joy but more often by profound misery. With her characteristically strong feelings she despised herself for her shortcomings, grieved for her father’s premature death, hated her husband for his betrayal of her, and resented her mother, on whom she depended for approval. In the end, she was too exhausted by these emotions to go on living. She feels emotional cul-de sac in her present life. As I mentioned earlier, cause of women’s suicide is result from her social and cultural surroundings where she feels suffocating herself. Sylvia is succumbed to the surroundings given to her without anything to resort to. She feels dead-end and confinement straitjacketing herself. Thus, she wants to detour her journey by choosing extreme steps, suicide for aspiring rebirth in her next life.

According to Freud’s theory of death instinct, it works in silence but it will make its ambush at appropriate times. Therefore, the death wish lurking in Plath’s mind, though hardly unseen and noticeable, remains and makes its toll in the end. If her surroundings had been more amicable and perusable to her, she would never have taken extreme step. That was the really sorry to us.

By employing allusion to superstitiously traditional concept toward cats, Sylvia Plath stresses that she can “have nine times to die,” bringing on more imagery of rebirth and death. Comparing herself to a cat, Plath affirms herself that she possesses more than just one life and she can die as she wishes. Similarly, she adopts Holocaust terms in the poem and describes herself as "bright as a Nazi lampshade," and speaks of annihilating each decade of her life.

*Lady Lazarus* is also the poem in which she describes death as an art and it is through death that new life and resurrection can be attained. Plath describes dying as
a basically dehumanizing experience, dwelling on how real she can fake it each time she makes an attempt.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.
I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I’ve a call.
It’s easy enough to do it in a cell.
It’s easy enough to do it and stay put.
It’s the theatrical
Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:
‘A miracle!’
That knocks me out.
There is a charge.
For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart—
It really goes.
And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or touch
Or a bit of blood
Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so. Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.
I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby
That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.

Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—

You poke and stir.

Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—

A cake of soap,

A wedding ring,

A gold filling.

Herr God. Herr Lucifer

Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air. (Lady Lazarus in Ariel)

From its technical design of the overall poem, the first two stanzas read like a nursery rhyme, with a tone of playfulness. “Well” rhymes “hell” and the repetitive line “I do it so it feels…” emphasizes the importance of doing the job well—dying itself. Since Plath was an honors student in school, she excelled in everything she did, and she wanted to do it well. However, ironically, Plath is not talking about any kind of creative work, but the very serious and heavy topic of death. Plath took sleeping pills and locked herself in the basement. She was found and revived a few days later. Embedded with its black humor, these lines reveal Plath’s personal pain and experiences because she attempted suicide twice
before she died.

Comparing dying with a kind of art, or poetry writing, Plath aims to do it and she has to do it "exceptionally well". While Plath jokingly relates dying as a kind of art, she turns her suicidal attempts into words, as a means of releasing her agony. As George Steiner observes: "committing the whole of her poetic and formal authority to the metaphor, to the mask of language, Sylvia Plath became a woman being transported to Auschwitz on the death trains" (Steiner, George. "Dying Is An Art." The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium. Ed. Charles Newman. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1970.p.217).

It is in the writing about death that Plath mentioned the possibility of rebirth after death, as she ended the poem with "the myth of the phoenix, of the rebirth of suffering" (Bassnett, Susan. Sylvia Plath. London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1987. p.25). The persona in the poem Lady Lazarus will be burned into fire, experiencing the suffering and painfulness before being reborn out of the ashes. The well-known A. Alvarez interpreted Plath's death as "it was both a cry for help that misfired and a last desperate attempt to exorcise the death she had summoned up in her poems" (Ibid p.24). I think the second part of Alvarez statement confirms Plath's attempt to go beyond and release herself from the despair that she has been through. Though a fatal attempt it is, she dies with a wish to be reborn, as the phoenix in the Greek mythology. Using the phoenix myth, Plath dies with a destructive force to come back again. As Professor Van Dyne argues, "The heroine's last gesture underscores the wish driving the entire poem, the wish to appropriate the powers that threaten to destroy her" (Van Dyne, Susan R. "'More Terrible Than She Ever Was': The Manuscripts of Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems." Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath. Ed. Linda W. Wagner. Boston: G. K. Hall & Company, 1984. p.146).

Through the power of language, she attempted to "reverse the dominance she
identifies with these male figures" (Ibid. p.146). I agree with Professor Van Dyne's view of Plath's poetic power, but I want to add that Plath not only reverses but also subverts the powers that have taken control over her. The very power that Plath possesses is "the power of language, the power to name" (Ibid. p.147). The death instincts may be forceful over the living instincts, but the power of writing to overthrow the male monopoly can be even more violent, as she declares that "she eats men like air." "Beyond examining the ways women writers legitimate themselves in a male-dominated culture, then we need to study the ways they situated themselves within a female culture that is, in Carol Gilligan's term, a complex web of social connection and individual initiative, support and rivalry." (Axelroad, Steven Gould. *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.p.82)

The death theme which Plath refers to in her poems touches upon the death in personal and death in a larger scale. Her Poem entitled *Fever 103* relates the horrors of nuclear attack with her anguish at the betrayal of trust in marriage:

Pure? What does it mean?
The tongues of hell
Are dull, dull as the triple

......
Devilish leopard!
Radiation turned it white
And killed it in an hour
Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.

......
I am too pure for you or anyone.
Your body
Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern—( in Ariel )
.....

Plath linked the overwhelming forces of the nuclear bomb in World War II to the betrayal of her own husband, who had developed relationship with another woman at that time. The direct cause of Plath's third suicidal attempt traces back to her unhappy marriage. By raising the direct question and the meaning of the word “pure” in the opening sentence, Plath reveals her anguish and agony when she states that she is “too pure for you [her husband] or anyone else.” The betrayal of her husband is an unpardonable sin, just as the nuclear bombs that took people's life.

In the summer of 1962, she discovered that her husband was attracted to, and possibly already having an affair with, the wife of another poet. Overwhelmed with grief and anger, she turned to writing as an outlet for her pain. The resulting poems, Ariel, churned out at a furious pace, were the finest she had ever written. In one of the Ariel Poems, Stings she wrote, “I have a self to recover, a queen.” Although she mourned the end of her marriage, she was gaining a new sense of freedom and power through her writing.

With her suicidal attempt, she releases herself from the cruelty of the reality and revenges on her unfaithful husband. As fatal and futile her death is, she has transformed and transgressed herself from the unequal treatment in her life.

Other death poems in the last poetry of Plath in Ariel reflect her final gesture to record and defy her living situation. As scholar Peter Davison discerns:

“Every artist, and almost everyone else, at one time or another fetches up against the stark facts of life and death....The greatest writers have been able to record these terrible moments against the larger canvas of ordinary life, adjusting the threatened catastrophes of death and destruction among related and contrasting themes of life and hope and renewal....No matter to whom these [poems] may be addressed, they

The above statements best illustrate Plath’s work as the living proof for what she intends to leave in this world. Most of the death poems reflect partially her views of death, one that is the inevitable outlet to the other world.

Stasis in darkness.
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distance
God’s lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees! — The furrow
Splits and passes, sister to
The brown arc
Of the neck I cannot catch,
Nigger-eye
Berries cast dark
Hooks—
Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
Shadows.
Something else
Hauls me through air—
Thighs. hair;
Flakes from my heels.
White
Godiva. I unpeel—
Dead hands, dead stringencies.
And now I
The child's cry
Melts in the wall.
And I
Am the arrow,
The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red
Eye, the cauldron or morning.  (Ariel in Ariel)


Ariel is the name of the horse, but it is also the city of Jerusalem by Isaiah ( Isa. 29:7) meaning “God’s lion.” “Here, the deity is an immanent and coercive animal power, remorselessly pulling the rider out of her sense of personal identity and into a unity with itself” (Ibid.p.18). However, read its in psychological aspect, the poem “expresses a conventional death wish, a desire for extinction (Ibid.p.18). Suffering from mental instability, the rider or the poet Plath imagines herself as the horse, Ariel that intends to make a fatal suicidal attempt.

Another death-related poem depicted by Sylvia Plath is from *Death & Co.*
I do not stir
The frost makes a flower
The dew makes a star,
The dead bell,
The dead bell.
Somebody’s done for. ( in Ariel).

This poem describes the dead babies “in their hospital icebox”
Notice that the poem resounds with the death toll, as seen from its repetitive words “death bell.” The babies remain quiet and still because they are dead. All of Plath's early poems had insisted in different ways that she was able to overcome her pain; however, in this one, she was beyond anyone's reach. She was done for; the bell was tolling for her.

One more example that links to death-theme by Sylvia Plath is from Elm

It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there.
I am terrified by this dark thing.
That sleeps in me
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity. ( in Ariel)

The line “I have been there” indicates her unsuccessful suicidal attempts while “this dark thing” refers to the death wish, caused by her illness or mental breakdown that constantly tortures her. She is scared because the death desires perches on her, persistently lurking and stays with her.

In short, Sylvia Plath’s poems written before her death are full of numerous clues to her strong death wishes. With Freud’s theory of living and death instincts in mind, Plath’s poems reflect and reveal her struggling and battling before she kills herself. Though she attempts to transgress the death wishes that take possession of her, the overwhelming power of death instincts conquers her living desire. However, it is her writing that she employees that supports her to the end of her life journey
and it is with her remaining work that we can get a glimpse of her troubled soul. Early on the morning of Feb.11, 1963. Only thirty years old, She had been led to Phoenix. Plath may have decided at least a week earlier than she was ready to die. On Feb 5. 1963 in her poem Edge, she noted “We have come so far, it is over.”( in Ariel p.84)

Alvalez.A. expressed his opinion as follows:

The very source of her creative energy was, it turned out, her self-destructiveness. But it was, precisely, a source of living energy, of her imaginative, creative power. So though death itself may have been a side-issue, it was also unavoidable risk in writing her kind of poem. My own impression of the circumstances surrounding her eventual death is that she gambled, not much caring whether she won or lost. (Newman Charles ed. The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium. Bloomington & London: Indiana University. 1970 p.68)

By revealing so much of herself in her poetry, Sylvia Plath offered up not only her work but also her life and death, for close scrutiny. She really had jest for her life that couldn’t be completed in her given time.

I love people. Everybody. I love them, I think, as a stamp collector loves his collection. Every story, every incident, every bit of conversation is raw material for me. My Love’s not impersonal, yet not wholly subjective either. I would like to be everyone, a cripple, a dying man, a whore, and come back to write about my thoughts, my emotions as that person. (Karen V. Kukil ed, The journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962, London, Faber&faber,2000. Entry for July 1950, P.9 )

Within the last few days of her life she wrote Edge, which was specifically about the act that she was about to perform:

The woman is perfected.

Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity... *(Edge in Ariel)*

This poem is one of great peace and resignation, as if she had accepted the logic of the life she had been leading and had come to terms with its terrible necessities. Illness, loneliness, depression and the demands of two small children were too much for her. With her successful suicide, she marked her name in big block letters over the world of poetry.

Even though she hasn’t accomplished her relationship as a writer with the world, her story still fascinates women because it is about life and death, success and failure, joy and sorrow- a life of one woman who had lived intensely. But with her death, Plath’s legend was just beginning. Judith Kroll says: “The desire for death is then essentially a desire for death of that condition in a new beginning.” *(Kroll, Judith. *Chapters in a Mythology: Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, Harper& Row Publishers. 1976. p.130)*

Also Sylvia herself insinuates that in her poem:

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And eat men like air. *(Lady Lazarus in Ariel)*

In these lines, we can discern that Sylvia is essentially her female self and her immediate impulse is to rise like a flame from the ashes of a false life to consume the males who made her feel emotional cul-de-sac throughout her life and to revenge against society she bitterly had lived through.

4. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar: Struggling to be a New Women*
"I think I would like to call myself 'the girl who wanted to be God'. Yet if I were not in this body, where would I be--perhaps I am destined to be classified and qualified. But, oh, I cry out against it."
--(Sylvia Plath, Journals)

Wherever I sat-on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok _ I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air. ( in The Bell Jar )

Plath's novel The Bell Jar dramatizes the collision between the notion of new self, autonomous subject and traditional, cultural forces that have oppressed women in our society. In The Bell Jar, cure of Esther who had breakdown is viewed not as a form of internal healing, but instead as a test a woman must pass in order to rejoin the competitive society beyond the asylum walls. The novel depicts an encompassing lost paradise to which there seems no viable alternative, and at its core is a claustrophobic surroundings that is avoided only by denial of self. Protagonist, Esther’s suicide can in fact be seen as attempt of the will to avoid this stifling situation where women should confront unspoken harsh reality. Sylvia Plath reveals her intention to write this novel:

What I’ve done is to throw together events from my life, fictionalizing to add color—it’s a pot boiler really, but I think it will show isolated a person feels when she is suffering a breakdown...I’ve tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar...... (Wagner, Linda W. ed. Sylvia Plath: The Critical heritage, London and New York: Routledge, 1988. p.107.)

In this novel, especially the pervasive imagery of dismemberment conveys self-alienation leading to Esther Greenwood's breakdown and suicide attempt. This leaves Esther to define herself unwillingly in relation to culturally-ingrained, traditional stereotypes of women as I mentioned earlier in the first chapter quoting Betty Freidan's words.
Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* offers a brilliant evocation of the oppressive atmosphere of the time she lived and the soul-destroying effect and this atmosphere could have on ambitious, high-minded young women like Plath. The novel presents the transformation of Esther Greenwood from a young woman who hates the idea of serving men in any way to one who appears to seek for her exit from the asylum by committing herself precisely to that project.

A contemporary feminist theory has questioned the validity of this model of the self as a new woman, including the work of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan. Gilligan came to be known as the founder of "difference feminism". Many feminists insisted that there are no differences between males and females. But Gilligan asserted that women have different moral and psychological tendencies than men. Carol Gilligan challenged the Freudian notion that men have a well developed sense of justice- a sense of morality- where as women do not. She argued instead that "men and women have different conceptions of morality, each equally coherent and developed and equally valid." (Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982 p.2-23) Gilligan was preoccupied "the systematic bias of traditional philosophical and psychological literature on moral development. This bias has hindered recognition of women's conception of morality as a valid one and has instead found it- and women- to be deficient." (Ibid. p.2-23) According to Gilligan, "men think in terms of rules and justice and women are more inclined to think in terms of caring and relationships. She asks that Western society begin to value both equally." (In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982 p.2-23)

She outlines three stages of moral development progressing from selfish, to social or conventional morality, and finally to post conventional or principled
morality. Women must learn to tend to their own interests and to the interests of others. She thinks that women hesitate to judge because they see the complexities of relationships. Women were taught to care for other people and expect others to care for them. She helped to form a new psychology for women by listening to them and rethinking the meaning of self and selfishness.

As I argued in the second chapter, individualness and ego of women are the enemy of our society where male dominance demands women's egolessness and self-effacing, this situation is not much different from the oriental beliefs shown in Buddhist teaching and Confucius thoughts.

In the first part of Plath's novel, The Bell Jar, both the commitment to be a new woman and the effects of that commitment are woven into the text through the pervasive imagery of dismemberment. This imagery suggests Esther's alienation and fragmentation as well as a thwarted longing for relatedness with others and for escaping from the stifling surroundings and repression.

I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office until I couldn't get them out of my mind. It was like the first time I saw a cadaver. For weeks afterward, the cadaver's head--or what there was left of it--floated up behind my eggs and bacon at breakfast. . . . I felt as though I was carrying that cadaver's head around with me on a string, like some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar. (The Bell Jar p.5)

It is possible that the precursor of these and other apparently disembodied heads is the head of the baby born in the traumatic episode in which Buddy Willard, a medical student, takes Esther into the delivery room to witness a birth: "the stomach of the woman in labor sticks up so high that her face cannot be seen; the baby's head is the first thing to appear in the delivery, "a dark fuzzy thing" that emerges "through the split, shaven place between the woman's legs, lurid with
The images of dismemberment seem to be linked as well to the image of "a baby pickled in laboratory jar" which symbolizes the claustrophobic reality of herself who tried to get away to end up with cul-de-sac. Mason Harris mentioned this in West Coast Review:

The relations between regression and stifled development is particularly evident in the narrator's use of baby-images-central also to the poetry but developed with special clarity here. Pleasant baby images are associated with the joys of regression but the novel is also haunted by the nightmare images of fetus in a bottle- to which she was first introduced by her medical student boyfriend. This aspect of the baby becomes a graphic expression of that sense of strangled development which is the other side of her tendency to regression. (Wagner, Linda W. ed. Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage, London and New York: Routledge, 1988. p.109)

When after her recovery her mother says, "We'll act as if all this were a bad dream." Esther thinks "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream" (The Bell Jar p.207) This image is also compatible to that of baby in the incubator in Wanseo Park's novel, Dreaming Incubator.

Esther is haunted by images suggesting the self-mutilations of marriage and motherhood. She recalls the way in which Buddy Willard's mother weaves a beautiful rug only to destroy its beauty in a matter of days by using it as a kitchen mat. The message is clear to Esther:

I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat." (The Bell Jar p.82)

When the fig tree metaphor recurs to Esther, she sees her life branching out before her like the green fig tree story:
From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was a E.Gee, amazing editor, ....... I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, however, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest; and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs begin to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet."(The Bell Jar p.80)

The dilemma of her adolescence was that any choice was also a relinquishing. Anxiety about unknown future especially as an aspirant for writer is too stressed to digest for herself. That anxiety causes the neurosis to Esther as well as Plath herself. Betty Friedan also mentions as followes:

If an able American women does not use her human energy and ability in some meaningful pursuit(what necessary means competition, for there is competition in every serious pursuit of our society), she will fritter away her energy in neurotic symptoms, or unproductive exercise, or destructive love. (Friedan,Betty. Feminine mystique, New York:Dell.1974 p.109)

She continues:

Perhaps women live longer in America when women carry more of the burden of battle with the world instead being a burden themselves. I think their waste energy will continue to be destructive to their husband, to their children, and to themselves until it is used in their battle with the world.” (Ibid.p.79)

In a nutshell, to be a full human being is to think and act like a man.

Esther believed firmly that there was no way that a talented woman could successfully combine a professional career with homemaking. As Mrs. Willard kept insisting, "What a man want is a mate and what a woman want is infinite security and What a man is an arrow into the future and what a woman is the place the arrow
shouts off from." (The Bell Jar p. 70) Women dominated. Women manipulated. Women subjugated. Plath seems to see these conditions as inevitable. Sylvia herself was not able to escape from the notion of Simon De Beauvoir:

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being. (Beauvoir, Simon de, The Second Sex, p. 457)

For, it is the conventional notion of marriage which gives to women the ultimate respect and recognition. Unmarried woman or a widow is looked down with suspicious and pity. With the security of marriage, the all-powerful domination of the husband, a woman is supposed to lead a confined and obedient life even though she reduced to a doormat. Esther had a fear of mutilation by refusing the social norm and convention like marriage and motherhood. Her reaction against this form of mutilation is clear in her violent sensitivity on her return home to the presence of Dodo Conway, a neighbor who is now pregnant with her seventh child. The vision of Dodo, "not five feet tall, with a grotesque, protruding stomach. . . . Her head tilted happily back, like a sparrow egg perched on a duck egg," (The Bell Jar p. 54) elicits from Esther the following reaction: "Children made me sick. . . . I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to." (The Bell Jar p. 43)

With Esther's New York experiences and her quest for a female model, she regularly interjects comments about Buddy Willard, the Yale medical student who has proposed to Esther. Early references to him connect him with the haunting childbirth scene and the bottled fetuses and cadavers he has introduced Esther to. That these images are all connected with women's traditional choices in life—to become mothers—begins to frame the essential conflict between Buddy and Esther. She began to realize that he was absorbed in his own restive patriarchal beliefs and
desires. For Buddy who is a very stereotypical man with patriarchal idea, women are helpmates, submissive to husband's wishes; they have no identity in themselves. Esther's desire to become a poet is nonsense to him because poems are "dust" in his vocabulary; her true role is to be virginal and accepting of his direction. That makes her feel frustration and futility.

Another frustration she feels is whether she conforms the conventional marriage or not: 'that the famous woman poet at my college who lived with another woman. When I told the poet that I might well get married and have a pack of children someday, she stared at me in horror. "But what about your career?" she had cried." (The Bell Jar p.76)

This passage focuses our attention on the immersion of Esther in what Adrienne Rich has called the compulsory heterosexuality, the pervasive heterosexism, of our culture. In her book, Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence (1980) she describes “compulsory heterosexuality as the main mechanism underlying and perpetuating male dominance.” She said that “assumption of heterosexuality both reflects and reinforces ignorance about lesbians and lesbian perspectives.” Anne Koedt also demystified heterosexuality by proving that “only a clitoral orgasms is the source of female sexual climax, and that all orgasm are extensions of sensations from this area.” (Humm Maggie, The dictionary of the feminist theory. Harvester Whearsheaf; New York, London1989) But Esther can't go against the social norm of heterosexuality even though she really has willingness to go against it. She wanted to acquiesce the relationship between Dr, Noran and Joy, but her upbringing doesn't allow her to do it and just give her confusion and frustration. It also reinforces our awareness that despite her intelligence, imagination and professional ambition, Esther's sense of identity as a woman is predicated on finding the right man. She is really juggling between career and marriage. But she is
not able to get out of social norm which impose ideal marriage on women. We can read this in her Journals.

I must find a strong potential powerful mate who can counter my vibrant dynamic self: sexual and intellectual, and while comradely, I must admire him: respect and admiration must equate with the object of my love (that is where the remnants of paternal, godlike qualities come in. (Journals, p.73)

Marriage, ostensibly, means equal bonding between one man and one woman mentally and physically. But if we go deep inside, there must be an invisible hierarchy between them. There must be required factors to be given bride by bridegroom. He seeks for virtuous, faithful, pure, devoted and sacrificial wife. She is to be all this without expecting anything in return from him. From the beginning, she enters into the confined space. That's why Esther is hesitating and feel intimidated to get married.

Despite the ambiguities of the closing of The Bell Jar, critics have been surprisingly willing to accept that Esther is in some positive sense "reborn" even if her future is uncertain. Because She kept on thinking, "I wasn't getting married. There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice--patched, retread, and approved for the road, I was trying to think of an appropriate one. . . . (The Bell Jar p. 123)

In some sense, she wants to be a nonconformist woman defying the culture but to no avail. She wants to justify her pathetic situation to be a retreaded tire: but she is still in the mesh of patriarchal net strangling her up. That means her recovery of breakdown is uncertain and always open to be a neurotic again. The tire, like a kitchen mat, presents us with a utilitarian object, selflessness, easily repaired or
replaced, as a metaphor for a woman. It is worth observing that a patched, retreaded tire may be ready for the road, but somewhere down the highway the owner can expect a flat. Now "flatten out" is exactly what Esther suspects --women do-- in marriage. A woman should be silent, apart from being a mother, in order not to be superseded. To quote Simon de Beauvoir again, "for man she is an amusement, a pleasure, a company, an inessential boon: he is for her the meaning, the justification of her existence" (The second Sex)

The metaphor of the tire image obliquely forces us to associate Esther's new lease on life with role expectations that contributed to her breakdown in the first place: the domestic servitude that Esther painfully recognizes "as a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's." Although Esther's breakdown may have sources lying buried in the past along with her father, the novel makes it sufficiently clear that she is torn apart by the intolerable conflict between her wish to avoid domesticity, marriage and motherhood, on the one hand, and her inability to conceive of a viable future in which she avoids that fate, on the other.

Plath's inability to resolve that conflict in her own life is well known. In an essay entitled "Sylvia Plath's 'Sivvy' (Sivvy was the nickname called by her mother Aureilla) Poems: A Portrait of the Poet as a Daughter," Marjorie Perloff concludes:

The first shock of recognition produced by Sylvia Plath's 'independence' from her husband and her mother was the stimulus that gave rise to the Ariel poems. But given the 'psychic osmosis' between herself and Aurelia Plath . . . given the years of iron discipline during which Sylvia had been her mother's Sivvy, the touching assertion [in "Medusa"] that 'There is nothing between us' could only mean that now there would be nothing at all. (Perloff, Marjorie G. A Ritual for Being Born Twice: Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, from "Contemporary Literature", Vol. 13, No. 4, Autumn, 1972, pp. 507-22.)
This turning point comes in Chapter 16, when Esther dumps the bunch of roses:

That afternoon my mother had brought me the roses. Save them for my funeral, I said. My mother’s face puckered, and she looked ready to cry. But Esther, don’t you remember what day is it today? No. I thought it might be Saint Valentine’s day. It’s your birthday. And that was the silly thing or her to do, I said to Dr. Nolan. Doctor Nolan nodded. She seemed to know what I meant. I hate her, I said, and waited for the blow to fail. But Doctor Nolan only smiled at me as if something had pleased her very, very much and said, “I suppose you do?” (The Bell Jar p.191)

In her journals Sylvia Plath notes the complex range of feelings she has toward her mother:

What do I expect by love from her? What is it I don’t get that make me cry? I think I have always felt she uses me as an extension of herself: that when a commit suicide, or try to, it is a shame to her, an accusation: which it was, of course. (Journals p.446)

Whatever the biographical validity of Perloff’s argument, it may help us to define a pattern that has been discerned in The Bell Jar. Esther’s mother’s expectation towards her daughter is an archetype of every ordinary mother who conform their lot to society without any rebellion. But Esther’s movement toward her breakdown entails a series of rejections of or separations from traditional image of women who, though they may be associated with some stereotype of womanhood unacceptable to Esther, have nurtured some important aspect of her evolving identity.

Esther acknowledged invisible shackle that was enforced on women by the society. Opportunities for women who want to pursue a career and live their own lives are very slim and translucent. Although those opportunities are present,
women's identities are solely defined by their relationships with men. While attending college, Esther met many women who influenced her life in some way. Esther looked up to many women who eventually let her down and were full of rejections and separations. All of the women Esther met symbolized an aspect of some stereotype of womanhood. Although Esther ultimately rejected the stereotypes the women represented, they were all responsible for shaping Esther's life, making her the person she was. However, once the women fully gave in to the negative socially constructed role of womanhood, Esther became depressed and her mental breakdown began. Nobody suggests solution to her to get out of bondage entangled in male dominated society.

For example, at the beginning, Esther admired Doreen, young woman also working on the magazine staff. But Esther felt let down by Doreen after noticing Doreen's dependency on men. Once Doreen let a man disrespect her, Esther lost all respect for her. Esther was really disappointed in her and said to herself "I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her" (The Bell Jar p.19).

Except Billy Barnard, Esther went on to meet a number of men who let her down in one way or another. One man she met symbolized the worst kind of disrespect a woman could face. Esther was introduced to Marco who was described as a woman hater. While Esther was out with Marco he called her degrading and dehumanizing names such as slut. Perhaps the most horrible act that occurred was the attempt to rape Esther. Marco represented the patriarchal society in which Esther lived as a whole, forcing his ideas on Esther and degrading and objectifying her by thinking of her as his personal object or possession. "Marco set his teeth to the strap at my shoulder and tore my sheath to the waist. I saw the glimmer of bare skin, like
a pale veil separating two bloody-minded adversaries. Slut! The words hissed by my ear" (*The Bell Jar* p.104). Esther fought back and pushed Marco off her, punching him and injuring him. That act was symbolic because when Esther rejected him she was also rejecting society's roles and beliefs.

Men rape because they own have the law. Men rape because they are law. They rape because they make the law. They rape because they are the guardians of the peace, of law and order. They rape because they have the power, the language, the money, the knowledge, the strength, a penis, a phallus. (*New French Feminism* p.194)

Esther asserted her voice rather than having it diminished. That was one instance in which Esther took a stand against men and society in general.

Another example of Esther standing up for herself was brought on by a conversation between Esther and Buddy. Buddy Willard asked Esther to marry him, and she explained her unconventional beliefs to him. Esther wouldn't choose marriage over her dreams of a writing career. She was convinced that, “After I had children I would feel differently. I wouldn’t want to write poems any more.” (*The Bell Jar* p.82.) So she began to think “maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state.” (*The Bell Jar* p.82.) Esther knew what marriage would denote, "It would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my nightgown and curlers after he’d left for work to wash up dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he’d expect a big dinner, and I’d spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted. This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s..." (*The Bell Jar* p.81-82). Esther discussed her confusion about the
choices she would be forced to make if they were to wed, and she assertively told
him that she couldn’t, and more importantly wouldn’t choose. She refuses to be a
mere object, a mere event in the life of a man. “Like the persona of the poem Ariel,
she imagines herself a phallic man who would be penetrator of the space, not the
space itself.”(Feminism and Recent Fiction in English, Ed, Sushila Singh. Prestige
ha! I let out a scornful laugh. If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at
once and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth
between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days" (The Bell
Jar p.76).

Although Esther stood up for herself and her beliefs in those instances, the
feelings of alienation by society caused her to feel self-alienation further leading to
Esther’s mental breakdown and suicide attempts. Throughout the novel it was clear
that Esther was not mentally well, however it was inferred that society’s repressions
for females contributed to her collapse. The suicidal undertones throughout many
parts of the novel revealed Esther’s mental instability. "The thought that I might kill
myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower" (The Bell Jar p.79). After
Esther’s mental breakdown she went on to try to commit suicide numerous times.
First, Esther tried to take her life by drowning herself. She believed that if she swam
an extraordinary distance in the ocean, that she would not have enough energy to
swim back to shore, drowning herself. That attempt failed. Esther also tried to
commit suicide by hanging herself, which again did not work. After Esther’s
continual discussions about suicide and depression, and after suicide attempts, she
was introduced to psychiatrist, Dr. Gordon.

Esther hated Doctor Gordon, and resented him the minute she walked into his
office. She hated him because she believed he was perfect with photos set up in his
office of his wife and children on his desk. Esther thought, "How could this Doctor help me anyway, with a beautiful wife and beautiful children and a beautiful dog haloing him like the angels on a Christmas card?" (The Bell Jar p.106). Doctor Gordon also spoke to Esther as though nothing in her life was really wrong, only she thought something was wrong. He was so condescending and arrogant in speaking to her that it was no wonder Esther loathed the Doctor. Esther disliked the Doctor even more when he suggested using the crude procedure of Electro Shock therapy to cure her depression.

Esther described her feelings on electrocution when she stated, "The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers...I thought it must be the worst thing in the world" (The Bell Jar p.1). Esther attempted suicide one final time by swallowing fifty sleeping pills, before being checked into the mental institution that helped cure her. While in the hospital, she met a friendly woman Doctor named Dr. Nolan, who inspired her. Dr. Nolan and Esther bonded and Esther was able to discuss problems of the past. After treatments, Esther was apparently cured, as she was able to leave the hospital at the end of the novel.

In The Bell Jar, the new woman is one that is presumed to be autonomous and whole and yet in which, on the other hand, she has her identity primarily through relationship to a man. It is the increasing tension of this double bind for Esther which results in her breakdown. Yet the other alternative, to reject the model of new woman and embrace a relational model, involves the restoration of the traditional plight of women: subservience to or submersion in others.

The way out of the dilemma is a relational conception of new woman in a world of non-oppressive, non-hierarchical relations. But we do not live in such a
world yet, and our culture offers few means of imaging non-oppressive, non-hierarchical relationality. It is difficult to write about new woman in our culture without making use of terms implying the very dualisms on which patriarchy is founded. When we become aware of the limits of our metaphors for new woman, *The Bell Jar* dramatizes the destructive effects of a commitment to the new woman.

Based on the obstacles that Esther Greenwood and Sylvia Plath had to overcome, *the Bell Jar* can be analyzed through the Feminist lens. The title, *The Bell Jar*, suggests that like a scientific object, women were looked at through 'a bell jar', or under a glass. “The distorted lens of madness gives an authentic vision of a period which exalted the most oppressive ideal of reason and stability.” (Mason Harris, *The Bell Jar*, West Coast Review October, 1973 In Linda W, Wagner ed, *Sylvia Plath: the Critical Heritage* p. 108) Women were viewed as objects that belonged to their men and the culture. This role that women were placed in was negative and dehumanizing.

Both Esther and Sylvia had to overcome culturally and socially constructed views of what were fundamentally female traits. Esther and Sylvia had a passion for securing for own space. Sylvia Plath urged women of the era to reject society’s constructed roles, and to become more independent. That is the reason she wrote the novel, *The Bell Jar*. Plath wanted to make it clear that if society continued to control women’s lives with the structure of patriarchy, many would eventually go insane from repressing their dreams and desires.

Sylvia Plath integrated her own personal values, and her own personal life accounts into the autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*. Her viewpoint was clearly depicted within the literary work through the feminist lens that tackled aspects of inequality, dehumanization based on gender, and stereotypes of women.
Pratt concludes, "The vitality and hopefulness characterizing the adolescent hero's attitude toward her future here meet and conflict with the expectations and dictates of the surrounding society. Every element of her desired world -- freedom to come and go, allegiance to nature, meaningful work, exercise of the intellect, and use of her own erotic capabilities -- inevitably clashes with patriarchal norms." (Platt, Linda Ray. The Spirit of Blackness in us, *Prairie* schooner, 47(spring 1973) p.87

*The Bell Jar* must certainly be read as the story of a testimony to the repressive cultural mold that trapped women in America, For those of American women who have lived through from 1950s to till now, *The Bell Jar* moves far beyond being Sylvia Plath's autobiography for looking for a slim hope.

“All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The Bell jar hung suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air." (*The Bell Jar* p.217)

But her emotional resolve is still entangled, because Sylvia Plath is not able to burst out herself fully and to make herself dream rosy picture of her future. She laments “I wasn’t sure. I was not sure at all. How did I know that someday-at college, in the Europe. somewhere, anywhere- the bell jar, with stifling distortions, wouldn’t descend again. (*The Bell Jar* p. 229 )

5. Viciousness of Domesticity in the Sylvia Plath’s poem

Here, I will examine allusions to marriage and motherhood in Plath's poetry, the hostile and often violent imagery in such pieces reflects Plath's strong resistance to the prospect of domestic entrapment as a wife and a mother.
i) Two Sides of Motherhood

During the early stages of the women's movement in the twentieth century, motherhood was a matter of public discourse that was to a great extent controlled by men. Some radical feminists argued that motherhood was a serious obstacle to women's liberation, a trap confining women to the home, keeping them tied to childbirth and child rearing. They considered these as the loci of women's oppression. They argued that to enjoy real freedom as women, the women needed to discard their role as mothers. Motherhood for them was a compulsory institution endowed by patriarchal society. However, another group of feminists oppose this conception of motherhood and think that motherhood is very crucial for women. It must be respected and acknowledged in order to give women a specific place in the society. In this polemical atmosphere, motherhood as a public discourse has become increasingly visible in the second half of the twentieth century. Some women writers depict motherhood as a boon and others as a curse. Here, my major focus is to analyze Sylvia Plath's conception of motherhood as is evident in her poetry. Her poetry shows much concern about the turmoil of emotions that women experience in their marriage and their anguish in being mothers. In general we think that the process of mothering is tedious, domestic, claustrophobic, and trivial. It isn't regarded as high art. As already mentioned, various feminist voices have been heard contesting the space for the discourse on motherhood from the sixties. These can be seen as belonging to one of the two groups: the anti-and the pro-maternal group.

In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone claimed that the subordination of women is rooted in the biological inequality of the sexes. She believed that women's liberation requires a biological revolution and that women should seize the control of the means of reproduction in order to eliminate the sexual discrimination. She demanded:
The freeing of women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by every means available, and the diffusion of the childbearing and childrearing role to society as a whole, men as well as women. (Schneir, Miriam. Feminism in Our Time; The Essentials Writings, World War II to the Present. New York; Vantage Books, 1994. p.247.)

Firestone wished to explode masculinity and femininity. According to her, no matter how much educational, legal, and political equality women achieved, and no matter how many women entered the public industry, nothing fundamental would change for women so long as biological reproduction remained the rule rather than the exception. To her the joy of giving birth and being a mother is a patriarchal myth and biological motherhood is the root of evil.

Another feminist who is against motherhood is Dorothy Dinnerstein. She has a conviction that the oppression of women originates in the female monopoly on mothering.

The deepest root of our acquiescence to the maiming and mutual imprisonment of men and women lies in the monolithic fact of human child; under the arrangement that now prevail, a woman is the parental who presides over the infant’s first encounters with the natural surroundings and who exists for the infant as the first representative of the flesh. (Chodorow. Nancy J. Feminism and Psychoanalysis Theory. London; Yale University Press, 1989. p.81.)

Dinnerstein speculates that we initially perceive mother “not as a person” (Ibid p.80.) but as “an awesome, all-enveloping object.” (Ibid p.81) She emphasizes the “absolute power of the mother’s life and death control over helpless infancy; an intimately carnal control whose wrath is all potent, whose internationality is so formidable-so terrifying and...so alluring.” (Ibid. p.81) This engages with the infant’s totally helpless need and dependence. As a result, according to Dinnerstein, the mother is inevitably the child’s adversary. Dinnerstein’s solution to the
victimizing of women was to institutionalize dual parenting. Only when men share equally with the women the task of nurturing the infants—only when the blame and anger that traditionally went exclusively to women is distributed equally to both genders, we can possibly realize that no one, male or female, is to blame for the human condition.

Adrienne Rich is one of the feminists who supports women’s role as mothers. Even though she agrees with Firestone that biological motherhood, as it has been institutionalized under patriarchy, is definitely something from which women must be liberated, she disagrees with Firestone in arguing that female biology is necessarily limiting and that the only way to liberate women from this limitation is through technology. She argues that a woman must not give up on her body before she has had a chance to use it as she thinks best. She emphasizes,

The repossessions by women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers... We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world, women truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose), but the visions and the thinking necessary to sustain, console and alter human existence—a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics and intelligence, position, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed. This is where we have to begin. (Ibid p.83)

For her, the solution to the impositions of child-rearing in a patriarchal society is not the renunciation of children; it is rather that each and every woman inculcates in her children feminist values.

ii) Sylvia Plath’s Fear of Pregnancy and Motherhood

For Sylvia Plath, domesticity is an ultimate concern. Plath frequently explores what it means to be a woman in terms of the traditional conflict between
family and career. "Others, such as A. Alvalez, have suggested that her role of artist was somehow incompatible with her role as motherhood."( Bassnet, Susan. *Sylvia Plath*: An Introduction to the poetry, Palgrave, 2005, p.71) Plath's life and her writing are filled with anxiety and despair over her refusal to choose and instead to try to have. It is apparent from her life and letters that her commitment to writing was total and unwavering and that her commitment to domesticity, especially motherhood, was ambivalent. Paradoxically, it is out of her domestic relationships and experiences that the majority of her most powerful, most successful work was created.

Many Plath poems are concerned at one level or another with suffering: with sickness, injury, torture, madness, death. Many Plath poems reveal this: *Cut*, for example, and *Fever 103°*, *Paralytic*, *Contusion*, *Amnesiac*, *Witch Burning*. This seems not surprising in that Plath's life and the lives of those close to her contained more than an average share of illness and loss. There were the amputation of her father's leg and his subsequent death when she was seven; her mother's chronic ulcer; her grandmother's death; her own breakdown, chronic sinus condition, broken leg, miscarriage, and appendectomy; In hospital where she viewed medical students dissecting cadavers, fetuses in bottles, and childbirth, provided a traumatic extension to her more immediate experiences. What is more interesting than the fact that her work reflects pain and suffering, however, is the fact that she sometimes portrays physical and mental pain as retribution for doing or being bad and that her poetry so frequently contains images that associate physical and mental suffering and also effacement—a kind of living death—, as well as death itself, with domestic relationships and roles.

In Plath's work in general, not only are other people the objects of vengeance—her parents, her suitors, her husband and in later poems his mistress—but she herself
is an object of her own vengeance. The idea of revenge of the self by the self is, of course, masochistic. But the linking of suffering and sin provides her with powerful, original images and diction when she deals with areas of life about which she had complex, ambivalent attitudes, such as marriage and especially motherhood.

Plath's letters to her mother and her novel both make it explicitly clear that Plath was confused and frustrated by the necessity of defining herself as a woman. In 1949, at age seventeen, she wrote: "I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day—spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free..." (Journals p. 102) She wrote, "Learning of the limitations of a woman's sphere is no fun at all." And at twenty, a student at Smith, she insisted: "Graduate school and travel abroad are not going to be stymied by any squealing, breastfed brats." (Journals p.46) By the time she reached the University at Cambridge, however, her attitude had changed. She began to see motherhood as a chance for extending her experience of life, and to fear that if she did not marry she would become one of the weird old women, "the bluestocking grotesques," she saw as alternatives. Writing to her mother from Smith, Plath agonized over "which to choose?"—meaning, work or pleasure? career or marriage? As I analyzed earlier, the central metaphor of the fig tree in The Bell Jar is Plath's literary portrayal of this dilemma. Each fig represents an option, a future: to be a famous poet, an editor or the like, or to be a wife and mother. Each is mutually exclusive and only one can be picked. As Esther hesitates, debating with herself, "the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at her feet." (The Bell Jar p.76) Rejection of any option was difficult because something in her wanted it all. "I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days," (Ibid.p.98) Esther says. In her own life, Plath tried for the compromise. There were times, her letters and the remembrances of her family and friends reveal,
that domestic life alone seemed to fulfill her. She was a perfectionist at housekeeping as she had always been at her college work and at writing. She felt that "children seem an impetus to her serious writing." But resentment against them, against their demands on her time, their drain on her creativity, is evident too. Plath's work suggests that the attempt to resolve these feelings failed. Her suicide may have been a final acting out of her belief in punishment, vengeance, of the self on the self for this failure.

Plath's use of images and diction depicting suffering in relationship to female roles and domestic experience expressed in her late poetry are foreshadowed in several poems in her first book of poetry, The Colossus (1960). "The Colossus is as significant as we now expect title poems to be; a sense of the huge and the continuing dominates Sylvia Plath's sensibility. But the grandeur of mature oppresses as well as impresses her; apprehensions of lurking menace, more likely to test our endurance than our joy."( Wagner, Linda. W, ed. Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage. Routledge, 1988. p.37) Suzanne Juhasz comments that "this is a glittery, brilliant, self-conscious poetry of surface, a cold poetry."( Juhasz, Suzanne, Nakes and Fiery Forms. Modern American Poetry by Women: A New Tradition. New York: Harper&Row, 1976. p.90) Many of the poems in this volume were written after her marriage; some were written during her first pregnancy. Poems in The Colossus that deal with male and female relationships or motherhood are primarily dark, fearful poems.

The Manor Garden, the initial poem in The Colossus, was written in the fall of 1959. It begins by creating an apprehensive, foreboding tone that dominates the poem:
The fountains are dry and the roses over. Incense of death. Your day approaches. The pears fatten like little buddhas. A blue mist is dragging the lake.

You move through the era of fishes, The smug centuries of the pig- Head, toe and finger Come clear of the shadow. History

Nourishes these broken flutings, These crowns of acanthus, And the crow settles her garments. You inherit white heather, a bee's wing,

Two suicides, the family wolves, Hours of blankness. Some hard stars Already yellow the heavens. The spider on its own string

Crosses the lake. The worms Quit their usual habitations. The small birds converge, converge With their gifts to a difficult homing. ( In The Colossus)

The canvas is the autumnal decay of a garden, signaling a dying year, contrasted pregnancy of the speaker. "As pregnancy makes her more sensitive to the cycle of birth and death, so in the monologue that follows, the mother forewarns her unborn baby against death and difficulty awaiting as precondition of existence in this world. The perceptive layer and warmth of the womb will not always be available. Thus, pregnancy is transformed into a central drama in a universal theater."( Butcher, Edward. Sylvia Plath, Method and Madness. New York: Seabury Press, 1976. p.84) Here are death in the midst of birth; the external, natural world at odds with the internal, human one. Only momentarily does a correspondence, a harmony, occur between the natural and the maternal: "The pears fatten like little
buddhas" as the fetus evolves and the womb fills. But negative images like wolves, hard stars, a spider and worms outweigh the positive ones like pears, fishes, a bee's wing, and heather. The poem's prophecy is for a difficult birth.

Not apprehension but real revulsion to motherhood is expressed in Sow.

God knows how our neighbor managed to breed
His great sow:
Whatever his shrewd secret, he kept it hid

In the same way
He kept the sow--impounded from public stare,
Prize ribbon and pig show.

But one dusk our questions commended us to a tour
Through his lantern-lit
Maze of barns to the lintel of the sunk sty door

To gape at it:
This was no rose-and-larkspurred china suckling
With a penny slot

For thrift children, nor dolt pig ripe for heckling,
About to be
Glorified for prime flesh and golden crackling

In a parsley halo;
Nor even one of the common barnyard sows,
Mire-smirched, blowzy,

Maunching thistle and knotweed on her snout-cruise--
Bloat tun of milk
On the move, hedged by a litter of feat-foot ninnies

Shrilling her hulk
To halt for a swig at the pink teats. No. This vast
Brobdingnag bulk

Of a sow lounged belly-bedded on that black compost,
Fat-rutted eyes
Dream-filmed. What a vision of ancient hoghood must

Thus wholly engross
The great grandam!--our marvel blazoned a knight,
Helmed, in cuirass,

Unhorsed and shredded in the grove of combat
By a grisly-bristled
Boar, fabulous enough to straddle that sow's heat.

But our farmer whistled,
Then, with a jocular fist thwacked the barrel nape,
And the green-copse-castled

Pig hove, letting legend like dried mud drop,
Slowly, grunt
On grunt, up in the flickering light to shape

A monument
Prodigious in gluttonies as that hog whose want
Made lean Lent

Of kitchen slops and, stomaching no constraint,
Proceeded to swill
The seven troughed seas and every earthquaking continent.

Written earlier than The Manor Garden, the poem Sow is a portrait of a Brobdingnagian hog not yet "hedged by a litter of feat-footed ninnies / Shrilling her hulk / To halt for a swig at the pink teats," but a monstrous maiden pig awaiting a "boar fabulous enough to straddle her heat." In action, this comic, this grotesque sow consumes the world. Exaggeration is one dimension of Plath's vision. The sow is
one of her colossal figures. Although the sow is ridiculous, she is frightening. For Plath, sow represents the destiny of the adult female--the Dodo Conways (in *The Bell Jar*) of the human world, a breed not about to become extinct on the contrary to show repulsive animalistic productivity.

Another *Colossus* poem, *Moonrise*, uses exceedingly ominous imagery and allusions to Christ's death in relation to pregnancy:

Grub-white mulberries redden among leaves.
I'll go out and sit in white like they do,
Doing nothing. July's juice rounds their nubs.

This park is fleshed with idiot petals.
White catalpa flowers tower, topple,
Cast a round white shadow in their dying.

A pigeon rudders down. It's fantail's white
Vocation enough: opening, shutting
White petals, white fantails, ten white fingers.

Enough for fingernails to make half-moons
Redden in white palms no labor reddens.
White bruises toward color, else collapses.

Berries redden. A body of whiteness
Rots, and smells of rot under its headstone
Though the body walk out in clean linen.

I smell that whiteness here, beneath the stones
Where small ants roll their eggs, where grubs fatten.
Death may whiten in sun or out of it.

Death whitens in the egg and out of it.
I can see no color for this whiteness.
White: it is a complexion of the mind.
I tire, imagining white Niagaras
Build up from a rock root, as fountains build
Against the weighty image of their fall.

Lucina, bony mother, laboring
Among the socketed white stars, your face
Of candor pares white flesh to the white bone,

Who drag our ancient father at the heel,
White-bearded, weary. The berries purple
And bleed. The white stomach may ripen yet.

The poem concludes with an address to Lucina, the goddess of childbirth, whom Plath transforms into a woman in the Moon. The moon, traditionally connected with the female cycle of menstruation, represents the negation of pregnancy. In her book, *Chapters in a Mythology; The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, Judith Kroll talks about the moon as a central symbol in Plath’s poetry. She points out that there are more than a hundred direct references to the moon in the poems and argues that the moon functions:

As her emblematic muse-her moon-muse-which symbolizes the deepest source and inspiration of the poetic vision, the poet’s vocation, her female biology, and her role and fate as protagonist in a tragic dram: and through the use of a lunar iconography, it gives concrete form to the particular spirit of the mythicized biography. (Kroll, Judith *Chapter in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, New York, Harper & Row, 1976. p.21.)

The woman of *Moonrise* contemplates the corpses underground and which release memories of her dead father. At the same time, there is eager expectancy involved in her future delivery of child. Thus, the cyclic of birth and generational destruction is posed against her own fertility. This tension is maintained through the poem. The allusion to Lucina offers an extra depth to the poem. Lucina is not only the goddess of child-birth, but also a destructive force, whose “face/ of candor pares
white flesh to the white bone.” Though the poem ends with the indication of childbirth: “The white stomach may ripen yet”, it leaves an unresolved tension whether the woman is waiting for fulfillment in child-birth, or annihilation in death. And the child of the labor Plath describes is an "ancient father," "white-bearded, weary," Thus, the birth or the anticipation of that experience includes its antithesis.

In *The Stones*, she is "a still pebble"; and she becomes one with the foetus:

This is the city where men are mended.
I lie on a great anvil.
The flat blue sky-circle

Flew off like the hat of a doll
When I fell out of the light. I entered
The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard.

The mother of pestles diminished me.
I became a still pebble.
The stones of the belly were peaceable,

The head-stone quiet, jostled by nothing.
Only the mouth-hole piped out,
Importunate cricket

In a quarry of silences.
The people of the city heard it.
They hunted the stones, taciturn and separate,

The mouth-hole crying their locations.
Drunk as a foetus
I suck at the paps of darkness.

The food tubes embrace me. Sponges kiss my lichens away.
The jewelmaster drives his chisel to pry
Open one stone eye.

This is the after-hell: I see the light.
A wind unstoppers the chamber
Of the ear, old worrier.

Water mollifies the flint lip,
And daylight lays its sameness on the wall.
The grafters are cheerful,

Heating the pincers, hoisting the delicate hammers.
A current agitates the wires
Volt upon volt. Catgut stitches my fissures.

A workman walks by carrying a pink torso.
The storerooms are full of hearts.
This is the city of spare parts.

My swaddled legs and arms smell sweet as rubber.
Here they can doctor heads, or any limb.
On Fridays the little children come

To trade their hooks for hands.
Dead men leave eyes for others.
Love is the uniform of my bald nurse.

Love is the bone and sinew of my curse.
The vase, reconstructed, houses
The elusive rose.

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.
My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.
I shall be good as new.

All in all, these early poems, written around the time of Plath's first pregnancy and personally selected for publication in her first collection, reveal degrees of mental stress over the maternal condition. Motherhood may be something monstrous, as the child may be. Signs attending birth are not propitious but only give a bad omen.

iii) Sylvia's Anxiety of Marriage in her Poetry
The Colossus also introduces one of Plath's single women. The Spinster, written in the year of her marriage, describes a woman who renounces the disorder that romance brings into her life. Romance is symbolized in this poem by the fertility which spring promises, "the rank wilderness of fern and flower." The "lover's gesture imbalances the air." The spinster rejects "this tumult" and adopts instead the "frosty discipline of winter":

Now this particular girl
During a ceremonious April walk

With her latest suitor
Found herself, of a sudden, intolerably struck
By the birds' irregular babel
And the leaves' litter.
By this tumult afflicted, she
Observed her lover's gestures unbalance the air,
His gait stray uneven
Through a rank wilderness of fern and flower.
She judged petals in disarray,
The whole season, sloven.
How she longed for winter then!—
Scrupulously austere in its order
Of white and black
Ice and rock, each sentiment within border,
And heart's frosty discipline
Exact as a snowflake.
But here—a burgeoning
Unruly enough to pitch her five queenly wits
Into vulgar motley—
A treason not to be borne. Let idiots
Reel giddily in bedlam spring:
She withdrew neatly.
And round her house she set
Such a barricade of barb and check
Against mutinous weather
As no mere insurgent man could hope to break
With curse, fist, threat
Or love, either.

What is problematic here for the woman is biological and creative roles pulling her in two opposite directions. The central conflict in Spinster is between aridity of intellectual pursuit on one side, and the tempting role of a fulfilled woman in conventional sense of term on the other. The "frost discipline" of intellectual career where "each sentiment is within border," is at loggerheads with the sensuous smell of the spring seasons. In addition to disorder, there is a violence in love that threatens the spinster, that victimizes her:

And round her house she set
Such a barricade of barb and check
Against mutinous weather
As no mere insurgent man could hope to break.

With curse, fist, threat
Or love, either

Some early but uncollected poems also explore the experience of the woman rejecting or attempting to reject the man. In The Snowman on the Moor (written near the end of 1956 and published in Poetry: July, 1957), Plath investigates more closely the spinster's choice. In The Snowman on the Moor, a man and a woman have had an argument and the woman flees. Escape, however, is not really what she wants. "Come find me," she cries. But "he did not come." Clearly it is pursuit that the woman wants: "police and hounds to bring her in." She wants the demonstration on the man's part of his desire for her, a sign of his submission. The second part of the poem shows how the woman is subjugated instead. She is subjugated not by a figure of passion but by "a grisly-thewed / Austere, corpse-white / Giant" who is
"sky high." "Snow / Floured his beard." This colossus represents the wintry world into which she has fled--the spinster's world of "frosty discipline."

she felt
No love in his eye,
Worse--saw dangling from that spike-studded belt
Ladies' shaved skulls:
Mournfully the dry tongues clacked their guilt:
"Our wit made fools
Of kings, unmanned kings' sons: our masteries
Amused court halls:
For that brag, we barnacle these iron thighs."

The women already conquered by the cold giant. They exist as heads: women without bodies, without hair. They threatened men--it unmanned them. In turn, the women themselves were punished--they lost their femininity, their sexuality. This vision is of the frigid, truncated world of the woman alone, the world without love. Although the giant does not succeed in adding the speaker's head to his collection and, in fact, disintegrated--"crumbled to smoke"--when she "shied sideways," he does win. The fleeing girl is subdued by her vision of the alternative to the embattled state in which she and the man live:

Humbled then, and crying
The girl bent homeward, brimful of gentle talk
And mild obeying.
The giant is male because males rule the woman's world, her choices. He tries to downtrod on her with fierce force. The man to whom the woman humbly returns rules her real world. He is the master of frail woman. The giant who personifies the executioner—the punisher of women who rebel—rules her imaginary world of women unsubjugated and, therefore, unloved by men. The vision—in which no alternative is tenable becomes more and more Plath's way of seeing the world which is harsh against her identity as a woman. But Sylvia is ready for blast as Cixious said as follows:

When the repressed of their culture ad their society returns, it's an explosive, utterly destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions. For when the Phallic period come to the end, women will have been either annihilated or borne up to the highest and most violent incandescece. Muffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts. (New French Feminisms, Helene Cixous: The Laugh of Medusa p.265)

_Pursuit_ is a similar, early, uncollected poem (Atlantic: January, 1957), the first poem Plath wrote after meeting Ted Hughes.

There is a panther stalks me down:
One day I'll have my death of him;
His greed has set the woods aflame,
He prowls more lordly than the sun.
Most soft, most suavely glides that step,
Advancing always at my back;
From gaunt hemlock, rooks croak havoc:
The hunt is on, and sprung the trap.
Flayed by thorns I trek the rocks,
Haggard through the hot white noon.
Along red network of his veins
What fires run, what craving wakes?

Insatiate, he ransacks the land
Condemned by our ancestral fault,
Crying: blood, let blood be spilt;
Meat must glut his mouth's raw wound.
Keen the rending teeth and sweet
The singeing fury of his fur;
His kisses parch, each paw's a briar,
Doom consummates that appetite.
In the wake of this fierce cat,
Kindled like torches for his joy,
Charred and ravened women lie,
Become his starving body's bait.

Now hills hatch menace, spawning shade;
Midnight cloaks the sultry grove;
The black marauder, hauled by love
On fluent haunches, keeps my speed.
Behind snarled thickets of my eyes
Lurks the lithe one; in dreams' ambush
Bright those claws that mar the flesh
And hungry, hungry, those taut thighs.
His ardor snares me, lights the trees,
And I run flaring in my skin;
What lull, what cool can lap me in
When burns and brands that yellow gaze?

I hurl my heart to halt his pace,
To quench his thirst I squander blook;
He eats, and still his need seeks food,
Compels a total sacrifice.
His voice waylays me, spells a trance,
The gutted forest falls to ash;
Appalled by secret want, I rush
From such assault of radiance.
Entering the tower of my fears,
I shut my doors on that dark guilt,
I bolt the door, each door I bolt.
Blood quickens, gonging in my ears:

The panther's tread is on the stairs,
Coming up and up the stairs.
Its speaker is a woman who cannot transcend her own physical nature and who has intense and ambivalent feelings about her desire to do so. Like the woman in *The Snowman on the Moor*, she flees from a man because he is capable of hurting her. However, because of his strength and her weakness, she knows she will succumb. The woman is the victim not only of the male but of her own sexuality as well. She is pursued by a panther, a creature which embodies in the poem both the idea of the ravaging male and the woman's own desire.

Keen the rending teeth and sweet  
The singeing fury of his fur;  
His kisses parch, each paw's a briar,  
Doom consummates that appetite.

Here the beast represents the man, whose lovemaking both wounds and pleases. The assurance between "teeth" and "sweet" helps emphasize the paradox. The woman is aware what her fate will be if she succumbs, because like the giant snowman, the panther has previously victimized other women:

In the wake of this fierce cat,  
Kindled like torches for his joy,  
Charred and ravened women lie.

Soon, however, the woman admits her own desires: "His ardor snares me, lights the trees, / And I run flaring in my skin." Finally she is overcome by her awareness of the beast in herself. She recognizes her own lust as well as the cruel brilliance of his: "Appalled by secret want, I rush / From such assault of radiance." Such intensity and such awareness frighten the woman, and she wants to repress them. She bolts the doors. Nevertheless as the poem concludes, the woman knows: "The panther's tread is on the stairs / Coming up and up the stairs." She is frightened and feels cul-de-sac. She needs help to find exit, but to no avail. What a horrible and claustrophobic
situation she falls in. The woman falls a prey to the patriarchal milieu where there is no solution or journey leading to her freedom.

Women subjugated. Plath continued to turn the subject this way. She seems to see these conditions as inevitable. She writes in The Bell Jar: "I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat." (p.82)

But men train their wives to serve. Women are forcibly tamed. In a poem describing an ocean voyage entitled On Deck (in Crossing the Water), she observes this slavery relationship between man and wife.:

And the white-haired jeweler from Denmark is carving

A perfectly faceted wife to wait

On him hand and foot, quiet as a diamond.

Women fall in a catch 22 situation. Women fear men, they run from them; but they want to be caught. Women seem to need to be dominated, domineered; perhaps they love it:

Every woman adores a Fascist,

The boot in the face, the brute

Brute heart of a brute like you.

—Daddy (Ariel)

But inside her deep psyche, still the resentment, the rebellion bubble up. To be married is to be in purdah, in plaster, in jail as a confiner.
Plath sees a bride as a woman on whom a certain kind of seclusion is forced, a woman in *Purdah*.

Jade---
Stone of the side,
The antagonized

Side of green Adam, I
Smile, cross-legged,
Enigmatical,

Shifting my clarities.
So valuable!
How the sun polishes this shoulder!

And should
The moon, my
Indefatigable cousin

Rise, with her cancerous pallors,
Dragging trees ---
Little bushy polyps,

Little nets,
My visibilities hide.
I gleam like a mirror.

At this facet the bridegroom arrives
Lord of the mirrors!
It is himself he guides

In among these silk
Screens, these rustling appurtenances.
I breathe, and the mouth

Veil stirs its curtain
My eye
Veil is
A concatenation of rainbows.
I am his.
Even in his

Absence, I
Revolve in my
Sheath of impossibles,

Priceless and quiet
Among these parrakeets, macaws!
O chatters

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!
And at his next step
I shall unloose

I shall unloose ---
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart ---

The lioness,
The shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes. (in Winter Trees).
The bride sees herself become a private possession to be enjoyed by her owner at will. "I am his. / Even in his / Absence," the woman says. Her resentment, her rebellion grows stronger:

I shall unloose
One feather . . .

. . .
I shall unloose
One note
Shattering
The chandelier
And finally they burst:
I shall unloose--
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart--
The lioness,
The shriek in the bath,
The cloth of holes.

Revenge--this is the commitment sworn in the final stanza. The woman in purdah recalls Plath's more well-known *Lady Lazarus*, whose climatic boast in the face of all her male enemies is: "I eat men like air!"

Plath continued to explore the subject of woman with child as well as that of woman with man. These poems constitute some of her weakest work. It seems
significant that she could not deal with maternity and pregnancy in a positive or hopeful manner and at the same time raises the quality of her writing out of the level of mere verse and into the realm of true poetry. Even though, she occasionally tried to treat these subjects positively and hopefully, the outcome is her hysteria against these subjects that reduces her to an anguished woman. Plath's fear of procreativity was, in large part, a fear of a resultant loss of creativity. Esther Greenwood voices Plath's fear in The Bell Jar: "I . . . remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state." (The Bell Jar p.82)

What then about childlessness? For Plath, childbirth is a kind of martyrdom. A woman dies as a particular kind of woman when she bears a child, and she continues to die as the child feeds literally and metaphorically on her. What, then, about the woman who refuses to make this sacrifice?

This woman . . .

Says she is a man, not a woman.

. . .

She hates

The thought of a baby--

Stealer of cells, stealer of beauty--

She would rather be dead than fat,

Dead and perfect like Nefertit.
Plath sees childlessness as a kind of perfection, but perfection of a terrible nature because it is also death. The woman no longer sacrifices herself for the sake of life. The sacrifice is complete because all life is denied: "Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children" (The Munich Mannequins in Ariel). In Edge (in Ariel), the mother proudly takes back the gift of herself: "The woman is perfected" because she has reversed her maternal functions:

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little
Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded
Them back into her body. . . .

In Tulips (in Ariel), one of Plath's most popular poems, she uses a personal experience as a setting to express the complexities that the idea of childlessness has for her.

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.

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.
The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,
And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.
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.
Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river
Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.
They concentrate my attention, that was happy
Playing and resting without committing itself.

Ted Hughes says she wrote Tulips after being hospitalized for an appendectomy in March of 1961. She had miscarried just a short time before this operation; probably the second hospital confinement triggered associations with death and birth. These tulips are "like an awful baby." There is something wild and dangerous about them. She wants to reject them because she says "they eat my oxygen." This reminds me of Australian poet, Gwen Harwood (1920-1995)’s crying out “They have eaten me alive.” in her poem In the Park. She wants to reject the tulips as she wants to reject the trappings of her life and the family she has. Her freedom is both wonderful and terrible because the price is so high. The woman must give up her man and her child that hook onto her, as well as her things, her possessions to be free. And the ultimate price--and reward--is death.

Roles are exclusively maintained in “bee” society. In Plath’s series of Bee poems, she uses their society and her experience with beekeeping as a way to express her frustration over her own roles. In Stings (Ariel), she identifies with both the drones and the queen, and reveals the conflict between her domestic and her poetic world:

If there is, she is old,
Her wings torn shawls, her long body
Rubbed of its plush--
Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful.
I stand in a column

Of winged, unmiraculous women,
Honey-drudgers.
I am no drudge
Though for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.

And seen my strangeness evaporate,
Blue dew from dangerous skin.
Will they hate me,
These women who only scurry,
Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover?

But even had she wished it, the real children could not be folded back into her womb.
They were there to contend with along with the daily, routine, household chores.
Added to this was the frustration of being married to a poet, whose own poetry was getting written while she dusted, diapered, and served as his secretary.

Plath's poems with domestic settings are climaxed in her most ominous poem. She feels that there is "viciousness in the kitchen" as she wrote in the first line of *Lesbos* (in *Ariel*)

Viciousness in the kitchen!
The potatoes hiss.
It is all Hollywood, windowless,
The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine,
Coy paper strips for doors
Stage curtains, a widow's frizz.
And I, love, am a pathological liar,
And my child look at her, face down on the floor,
Little unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear
Why she is schizophrenic,
Her face is red and white, a panic,
You have stuck her kittens outside your window
In a sort of cement well
Where they crap and puke and cry and she can’t hear.
You say you can’t stand her, (in Winter trees)

This poem examines the hostile relationship between two women largely in terms of their domestic situations with “windowless”. There is no body because the woman has long since ceased to exist as a person.

Death came as the result of a deadly atmosphere, the withdrawal of love, and the drain of motherhood. Mothers are devoured by their children, effaced; women are subjugated by men, imprisoned, mutilated, made into puppets or toys, hollow or blank with no identities and no wills. Plath’s Phobia toward men, marriage, and motherhood in her last poems, abandoned by her husband, added other dimensions as well. and the guilt she surely felt. They are not exaggerations of pain but accumulations of it. It’s too heavy to resist anymore. They reflect not only her perception of outer reality, but they project her inner reality as well, as an ailing woman facing the limitation of her growth in a male dominated society.

It can never be known whether or not Plath chose consciously or unconsciously the path that would lead her deeper and deeper into a domestic labyrinth because she needed those subjects and those experiences and the emotions in order to create her best work. Her letters reveal, however, that in the final weeks of her life, separated from her husband, writing the final stunning poems, she felt poetically released as if domesticity had choked her. Perhaps it is not easy to say that choosing to die by sticking her head in a gas oven is a perfect symbolization of her experience. She should have lived longer to testify her arguments more intensely and beautifully for the emancipation of the new woman.