SYLVIA PLATH WAS BORN ON 27 OCTOBER, 1932 IN JAMAICA PLAIN, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS TO AURELIA SCHOFER PLATH AND OTTO EMIL PLATH. OTTO PLATH WAS A PROFESSOR IN BOSTON UNIVERSITY AND A BEE SPECIALIST, A FACT WHICH SYLVIA USED IN HER POEMS LIKE—“THE BEEKEEPER’S DAUGHTER”, “THE BEE MEETING”, “STINGS”, “THE SWARM”, AND “WINTERING”. HE DIED IN 1940 SOON AFTER WARREN’S BIRTH FROM AN ADVANCED CASE OF DIABETES MELLITUS. AFTER HER HUSBAND’S DEATH, AURELIA PLATH TOOK UP HER TEACHING AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY IN ORDER TO SUPPORT HER FAMILY. HER MOTHER’S SACRIFICES FOR HER BROTHER AND HERSELF GAVE RISE TO A STRONG OF GUILT IN SYLVIA. THIS AND HER FATHER’S EARLY DEATH CREATED AMBIVALENT FEELINGS IN HER WHICH ARE REFLECTED IN HER POEMS.

A very important event that marked Sylvia’s childhood and which continued to affect her throughout her life was the death of her father when she was only eight years old. His death left a deep void in Plath’s life which greatly affected her outlook towards life and complicated her relationship with men. Her search for a father-figure made her relationships with men fragile and dissatisfactory. On the other hand, the subordinate position of her mother to her father also influenced her decisions about the direction her future should take. Sylvia’s feelings for her mother were ambivalent. The belief that she should please her and gain her love through her achievements, first, academically, and then with her creative writing made the relationship conditional which had a disastrous consequence on her relationship with her mother. The poems “The Disquieting Muses” and “Medusa” clearly expose her troubled feelings towards mother-figures.

The most important thing that guided Sylvia throughout her life was her ambition to succeed as a writer. The ambition to write as well as to fulfil the destiny of womanhood by conforming to the standards of femininity aggravated her ambivalent feelings. She felt that
she could do nothing but write. She would accept writing and femininity, would accept the ambivalence, and live a life filled with conflict, balancing children, writing, love and domesticity. This awareness of the conflict and contradictions in her life and in her choices are reflected in her poems, especially in poems dealing with close relationships—with self, with-father-figures, and mother-figures.

Sylvia Plath had a brilliant academic career and was a perfectionist. She dreamed of becoming a poet and wanted to make writing her profession. Another important incident that made a lasting impact on her was her suicide attempt on 24 August, 1953 caused by the depression after her month-long internship in New York City with nineteen other girls from all over the country and a rejection from a writing course for which she had expected acceptance. She underwent psychiatric treatment and, eventually, electric shock treatment which affected her view of life. After recovery from shock therapy she graduated and went to England on a Fulbright Scholarship. There she met Ted Hughes and married him in June, 1956, only four months after their meeting.

Plath was offered a teaching post at Smith College in March 1957 but by 1958 she decided to resign from the academic post as she found that the exhausting demands of teaching left her with little time for her writing. She gave birth to her first child in April, 1960, four years after her marriage. She suffered a miscarriage and had an operation for appendicitis. These hospital experiences inspired her poems “In Plaster” and “Tulips”. A son was born to the couple in January, 1962. Soon after, they separated. Her novel The Bell Jar was published on 14 January, 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. Living alone with her two small children after her separation from her husband, she wrote poems which would make her name even during the last days of her life. On 11 February, 1963, Plath committed suicide. She was only thirty years old.
The experiences that Sylvia had in her life and the contradictory period of America in the 1950s influenced her writings. She was trying to carve a niche in the literary world as a woman poet. She raised issues which are central to women’s lives, women’s experiences about self, marriage, motherhood and career in her writings.

The thesis is divided into six chapters:

Chapter I: Introduction

Chapter II: Social and Literary Milieu

Chapter III: Ambivalence in Sylvia Plath’s Poetry

Chapter IV: Analysis of Poems Written from 1956-1961

Chapter V: Analysis of Poems Written from 1962-1963

Chapter VI: Conclusion

Chapter I: Introduction

The first chapter is an introduction to the life and works of Sylvia Plath. It also discusses some of the concepts of ambivalence in order to highlight the important aspects of the thesis. Ambivalence is defined as the simultaneous presence of conflicting feelings and tendencies with respect to a person or an object by *Gale Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (2005). The concept of ambivalence is central to Sylvia Plath’s life. This feeling is generated by certain important events that happened in the poet’s life, like the early death of her father, and the unhealthy relationship that she had with her mother whom she strove to please with her achievements. Plath also had problems with her femininity; she was ambivalent towards being a woman and her desire to become a writer. At the same time, social and cultural ideologies about being a woman in 1950s America also increased her ambivalence. All these...
push and pull in the poet between her need for self-identification and the demands of society and culture to conform to the norm of femininity, as well as her desire to experience everything that life has to offer her further enhanced her feelings of conflict. The impact of these feelings and attitudes on the poet are reflected in the poems. The ambivalent feelings and attitudes of the poet as expressed in the poems are investigated in the thesis and discussed in the successive chapters.

Chapter II: Social and Literary Milieu

The second chapter of the thesis is a study of the social and literary background and influences where the impact of social and cultural ideologies and the influence of major writers on Sylvia Plath are analysed. Studying Plath’s poems with reference to the historical context shows that she shared most of the ideology that was prevalent at the time among American women. Sylvia’s poems are not only autobiographical, subjective, and self-centred but also show an awareness of the social and political climate of the time. Her life showed that she tried to conform to the norm of the invented American woman, wife, mother and nurturer of the home, while being very much conscious that she was an educated, intelligent and ambitious woman. Sylvia’s ambivalence lay in her attempt to combine the two.

The chapter also shows that Plath was influenced by the experimentations, and radical self-analysis of the early twentieth century. She studied T.S. Eliot and other important writers of the modernist movement, including Ezra Pound, Joyce and Woolf in her school and college. She also read Auden, Lawrence, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Dylan Thomas and Williams, and also, Yeats. According to her own admission, she was influenced by Dylan Thomas, Yeats, Auden, William Blake and Shakespeare. But, women writers were also important to Plath as competitors. Plath greatly admired Woolf and Lawrence. Plath was also influenced by the writings of the confessional poets. Robert Lowell’s Life Studies published
in 1959, had a great impact on Plath. The exploration of the personal, painful and taboo areas of experience by Lowell, Sexton and Theodore Roethke influenced her writings. The following chapter will discuss the concept of ambivalence as defined by psychoanalysts and sociologists as well as ambivalence as noticed in Plath’s poems.

Chapter III: Ambivalence in Sylvia Plath’s Poetry

The third chapter is devoted to a broad investigation of the theory of ambivalence with reference to Sylvia’s poetry. An analysis of the ambivalence in the poems with relation to father-figure, mother-figure, self and in being a woman and a writer is taken up in chronological order. Sylvia Plath’s expression of ambivalence in her poems exposes the ambivalent position of women in a patriarchal and modern Western society and her manner of trying to come to terms with the conflict in her. It is a feeling shared by her contemporaries who lived during the fifties, like Anne Stevenson and Janet Malcolm. The poems also disclose the undercurrent of hatred, rage, desire of escape through death and a rebirth, to be free from the shackles of social and cultural bonds. These negative feelings are inseparably fused with the feelings of complicity with the prevalent cultural ideology of being a wife and mother, nurturer of home and children. Her late poems show a rejection of convention and superficiality of the prevailing ideologies of the middle part of the twentieth century.

Chapter IV: Analysis of Poems Written from 1956-1961

(1959), express Plath’s conflicting feelings and attitudes to her father’s death and to father-figures which again are dealt with in the later poems.

She wrote poems on the subject of barrenness and pregnancy in “Barren Woman” and “Heavy Women” just within five days of each other in February 1961. The hospital poems “In Plaster” and “Tulips” (1961) deal with the conflict in the self between self-effacement and selfhood, the feeling of opposition between conformity and non-compliance to the conventional norms of femininity. An analysis of these poems shows Plath’s conflicting feelings towards femininity, to her father’s death, and, to her relationship with her mother.

Chapter V: Analysis of Poems Written from 1962-1963

The fifth chapter is devoted to the analysis of Plath’s late poems. “A Birthday Present” written on September 30, 1962 gives a vista of the poet’s life as seen by the poet when she turned thirty. On her approaching birthday, she is looking back on her life experiences and putting a poetic perspective to it. The 1962 group of poems related in theme are “Stings”, “The Applicant”, “Ariel”, and “Purdah”. They deal with transformation of the woman, a criticism of the patriarchal culture for its treatment of woman as objects or machines without feelings or wants or ambitions, and the enigmatical nature of woman hidden by the veil. The two poems “Daddy” and “Medusa” written on October 12 and 16, 1962, respectively show development from the early poems written to the father and mother-figures. The late poems taken up for analysis are “Lady Lazarus”, “Childless Woman”, “The Munich Mannequins”, and “Child”.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

The last chapter is the concluding chapter and gives the summary of the whole thesis and shows the significant aspect of Plath’s achievement. It contains remarks, observations
and the findings of the research work. The chapter shows that the analysis of the poems supports the argument about Plath’s ambivalence. Her ambivalent feelings as reflected in her poems show that she was aware of the conflicting nature of the social and cultural ideologies of the period during which she lived. The poems are a critique of the society and culture and also an expression of her desire to bring about a change in the lives of women, especially creative women so that their capabilities do not remain subverted in the activities of the home and family.

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