The ambivalence in Sylvia Plath’s poetry “creates depth, variety, and complexity”. It “reflects an imagination that offers no easy answers, and meanings for dealing with the uncertainties of life” (Bundtzen 193). Her poetry is an attempt to make sense out of life’s complexity, precariousness and intensity of the modern situation. The poems express the creative acknowledgement of the inherent ambivalence or “duality” of man, which, as Sylvia Plath says in the concluding part of her honours thesis, “… involves a constant courageous acceptance of the eternal paradoxes within the universe and within ourselves” (Quoted in Annas 5). Her writings are the struggle to accept the conflict that she felt in herself and her world. Plath’s journals, fiction, poems and novel have made an important contribution to the development of women’s writing. Carole Ferrier claims that Plath’s
“intellectual grasp of both crosscurrents and contradictions in the hegemonic ideology of this period [the 50s] and the new rising tide of women’s resistance is what makes her work particularly valuable for us, and her search particularly important” (215).

Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, in her study of the relationship between gender and women’s literature in relation to Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath, emphasised on the problem of “the conflicting roles of the woman writer”. She says that American feminist scholars use the term “double bind” to define the condition faced by the woman poet and that the very phrase, ‘woman poet’ indicates a contradiction and a tension which threatens to undo the female writer, in either or both these functions” (Lindberg-Seyersted 6). So, a woman aspiring to become a poet, especially in the 1950s America, faces a no-win situation in either role.

Gender plays a very important role in shaping Sylvia Plath’s poetics. The ambivalence in her writings is the result of being a “woman poet”. She lacked role models to encourage her in her choice of career. The educated, intellectual women that she knew at Smith College were single and failed to provide her a model. She was afraid that her veins would run with the “final wry sour lemon acid” that ran “in the veins of single clever lonely women” (UJ 224). She did not want to be all woman, unthinking and complacent like the pregnant women portrayed in the poem “Heavy Women”, or all poet,
sacrificing her womanhood, instead, she wanted to be a “woman poet”, famous among women poets. This refusal to stick to the stereotype of a woman, somebody’s wife and mother created difficulties both in her life and in her work giving rise to contradictions and tensions.

Her desire for individuality while conforming to the 50s American ideal of femininity gave expression to a poetics which is ambivalent and difficult to resolve; “…wanting both a baby and a career” she was afraid of “Growing old and dying without being Somebody?” (UJ 469-470). She again says: “What horrifies me most is the idea of being useless: well-educated, brilliantly promising, and fading out into an indifferent middle-age” (ibid 524). Without this striving for, and, success in her quest for individuality she would fade into a mere housewife. The tension created by Sylvia’s conformity in the family and social life and her dream of being “Somebody” are reflected in her writings. Her life and works are an illustration of the dilemma that a woman seeking a career faces.

The reason why feminists claim Sylvia Plath as their own is because she showed the reality that an ambitious woman faces behind the deceptive face of contentment in the conformity that American women of the period expressed. By the year 1959, she had already spelled out in her Journals “the problem with no name” of Betty Friedan. Her importance to women and
feminists rests on her attempt to diagnose and to understand this “problem” through an expression of her art:

Viewed as a cathartic response to her divided personae as an artist, mother, and wife, Plath’s works have been heralded by feminist critics for illuminating the personal and professional obstacles faced by women in the mid-twentieth century. These factors, combined with her tragic death, have made Plath an iconic figure whose popular fame has nearly equaled (sic) her literary acclaim.

(Bomarito and Hunter 293)

Sylvia Plath, even though held as a representative of feminism, did not consider herself a feminist. She is a representative of women everywhere regardless of time and place because she raises issues which are central to women’s lives, seeking individuality while remaining within the family. Her fame and popularity rests on her exploration of the conflicting experiences of women’s lives in her writings. She writes about the struggle that every woman has to face in order to lead independent lives or pursue careers within marriage. Carole Ferrier is of the opinion that what Plath was doing in her poems is common with what feminist critics were doing in their attempt to understand and raise consciousness about women’s lives and their experience:

Plath, in common with women grappling then with the problems of developing feminist theory, was fighting her way in those poems of the early sixties toward a
definition of what life within the middle-class nuclear family does to its members. Her distinctive mediation of the ideology of the family and love in the fifties and early sixties can tell us a great deal about patriarchal attitudes and how women in general, and women writers in particular, can find ways to resist and triumph over them.

(Ferrier 215)

About Plath’s contribution to the field of women’s writing and her definition of women’s lives, Pamela J. Annas observes:

Plath’s writing captured the anger, self-doubt, and the ambivalence that many intelligent and creative women were experiencing in the late 1960s and early 1970s as they became aware of the discrepancies between the potential they had begun to glimpse in themselves and the constraining definitions of women’s capacities that they encountered daily in the world and certainly in literature courses at most universities – which by and large ignored women poets. (6-7)

The anger and the ambivalence have not yet abated and Sylvia’s life and works still command interest because they express what most women experience in their lives. Many women find affinity with her experience; her poems sound deep chords in many women’s lives and raise their consciousness about the constraints on their capacities to strive for achievements and individuality. Expressions of these conflicting feelings are a way of finding ways to face them.
Ambivalence is the simultaneous and contradictory attitudes or feelings (as attraction and repulsion) toward an object, person or action (Merriam-Webster dictionary). It is usually considered to be a normal phenomenon of everyday life but the term was first coined by the Swiss psychologist, Eugen Bleuler in 1911 in connection with his study of schizophrenia (Raulin and Brenner 201).

The feeling of ambivalence is central to Sylvia Plath’s life. The young Sylvia traces her anxieties about her life and her “unaccountable” “sick and sad” feeling to her “distaste at having to choose between alternatives” (UJ 43-44). The main choices open to young women at that time was either marriage or career. As Sylvia did not like to renounce her sexuality by opting for only a career she decided early in her life to satisfy her sexual feelings by having a passionate relationship within the traditional customs accepted by the society (ibid 99). At the same time “writing is a way of life” to Sylvia (ibid 107) and she was afraid that marriage would make her lose her desire to write.

Plath had difficulty in accepting her femininity; she was ambivalent towards being a woman and her desire to become a writer. The most important impulse that guided Sylvia throughout her life was her ambition to succeed as a writer. This compulsion to become a writer and “the Poetess of America” (ibid 360) was the driving force in her life; she wanted to be a creator, “I will be a little god in my small way” because “…I am justifying my life, my keen
emotion, my feeling, by turning it into print?” (ibid 22) But, she was aware of the conflicting nature of the choice of her vocation as she was afraid that marriage might submerge her desire for self-definition.

Sylvia dwelt upon the question whether she could combine marriage and her writing successfully in her journal entries. Adrienne Rich, another poet, wife and mother, remembers Sylvia’s “curiosity about combining motherhood and writing” in their conversations. Rich said:

I answered something very sage, like ‘It can be done, but you’d better think about it real hard’. What I wanted to tell her was ‘Don’t try’, because I was in such despondency. I’d just had my third child, I was thirty, and I felt in many ways my life was over, that I would never write again. I couldn’t foresee a future different from the past two years of raising children and being almost continuously angry. (Quoted in Middlebrook 111)

Unfortunately for Sylvia, Rich did not spell out the reality to her and so, she had to find out for herself the experience of being always angry in her attempt to be successful in both. Lucy Collins observes: “The question of gender is certainly relevant to Plath’s work, both in her exploration of familial and sexual relationships and in her concern with the roles of daughter, wife, mother” (204). She is a woman who could claim that being born a woman in a man’s world is a “tragedy”. The reason she gives for her dislike of being a
woman is because a man can escape responsibility for his actions whether it’s their sexuality or promiscuity or lusts but women, in spite of their having similar desires just like a man’s, are required to remain chaste and faithful and “relegated to the position of custodian of emotions, watcher of the infants, feeder of soul, body and pride of man” (*UJ 77*). It is a great responsibility for women to bear and Sylvia resented this. But, by the time she was 19 years old, she resolved “If I am going to be a woman, fine. But I want to experience my feminity (sic) to the utmost” (*UJ 155*).

At the same time, social and cultural ideologies about being a woman in 1950s America also increased “the anger, self-doubt and the ambivalence”, that women felt because they were “…educated, emancipated…critical, particular, aristocratic in tastes” as Sylvia analysed herself (*UJ 100*). 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.

Sylvia, being intelligent as well as being a girl given to introspection, had asked herself about the effect which her home environment had on her psychic make-up in her *Journals* when she was 18 years old, “…how children are influenced and conditioned by their parents…” (*UJ 112*):
How much was the capacity to think that I got from my parents, the home urge to study and do well academically, the necessity to find an alternative for the social world of boys and girls to which I was forbidden acceptance? And does not my desire to write come from a tendency toward introversion begun when I was small, brought up as I was in the fairy-tale world of Mary Poppins and Winnie-the-Pooh? (34)

The Plath household was quiet, academic and devoid of social life. (LH 13) Both parents laid great stress on academic achievement when they were young. In the first year and a half after their marriage Sylvia Plath’s parents worked together to publish her father’s thesis. The Plath children, Sylvia and Warren, were early instilled the habit of reading and writing because, since their parents were both working, reading and writing for the thesis as well as a chapter for the book A Handbook of Social Psychology, they needed to keep quiet and steady so as not to disturb them. Whether at home or a visit at their grandparents or at their friends, both of them carried their favourite books with them. When Sylvia’s father became ill, her mother converted the largest bedroom in their house into the children’s playroom and told bedtime stories and ate supper there. She invented stories and read poems to them. “Both children made up their own rhymes and limericks”, patterned on those books read to them by their mother (LH 19). Before going to bed the two children would entertain their father, Sylvia played on the piano and “improvised
dances”; they would show him their drawings, poems and rhymes. This early habit of making up their own stories, rhymes helped Sylvia in shaping her future as a writer. According to Linda Wagner-Martin, the children were naturals in the “process of creating words” which “became a great source of comfort after the unexpected death of their father.” (Wagner-Martin 6)

Sylvia’s father, Otto Plath was a self-made man. He 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”, and in her prose “Charlie Pollard and the Beekeepers”, and “Among the Bumblebees”. His early death and the subsequent sacrifices that Aurelia, her mother, made for her brother and herself gave rise to a strong feeling of guilt in Sylvia, and created ambivalent emotions which are reflected in her writings.

Sylvia Plath’s father was born in 1885 in Grabow, a town on the Polish/German border (Gill 2) and had a mixed parentage of German and Polish. He spoke German, Polish and French. He earned the title of bee-king as a boy because of his knowledge of bees. Otto Plath was an excellent student and this made his grandparents, who had immigrated to the USA in the nineteenth century, offer to provide for his college studies in Northwestern College, Wisconsin, on condition that he prepared himself for the Lutheran ministry. He arrived in New York in 1901 when he was sixteen years old and
lived a year with an uncle who was a businessman. While he was staying with
this uncle he learnt to speak English by auditing classes in a grade school,
sitting at the back of each class and promoting himself to higher grades once
he had mastered each grade, thus completing all eight grades in a year. (LH 8)

Otto Plath majored in classical languages and his academic record
pleased his grandparents but his experience at the Lutheran seminary made
him decide to change his profession from becoming a Lutheran minister to
teaching; the main reason was that he found that Darwin’s writings were
forbidden in the syllabus which shocked his scientific mind and inclination.
The decision enraged his grandparents who announced that he would be
disowned by the family if he did not change his mind. But Otto Plath had a
strong and determined will so he did not relent; thereafter, he forged his own
path for the rest of his life. He won his MS and ScD from Harvard (Wagner-
Martin 3) and became a university professor and a bee specialist. In 1929 he
met Aurelia Schober who was a student at Boston University; she had
returned to the University to finish her M.A. in English and German. He
taught the course in Middle High German and at the end of the course he
invited her to spend the weekend at one of his Professor friends’ farm and
afterwards continued to correspond with her. The relationship deepened and
in January 1932 they married. She was twenty-one years his junior.
Aurelia Schober’s family was a German speaking Austrian family. Her father had lived in England before settling in the United States in the nineteenth century. She was a second generation Austrian who spoke German at home. She was a teacher of English and German at secondary level. Aurelia’s father had wanted her to be a “businesswoman” and to this end she had done a two-year course in the Boston University College of Practical Arts and Letters. Anne Stevenson describes Aurelia as “sensitive, efficient, and clever” (Stevenson 5).

After her marriage to Otto Plath Aurelia gave up her teaching career to become a housewife as her husband wanted. Her professional life came to an end and her domestic role began. Aurelia became her husband’s research assistant when his doctoral thesis was being expanded into a book. The book form of the thesis titled Bumblebees and Their Ways was published in 1934. In 1933, he and Aurelia worked together on a chapter on “Insect Societies” for an important book A Handbook of Social Psychology (1935). Otto Plath, being Aurelia’s teacher and because of the gap in their ages, played a dominating role and she was required to be more passive and submissive even though she was not submissive by nature according to her own admission (LH 5). From Aurelia’s account in the Commentary of Letters Home, it can be seen that Otto Plath, Sylvia’s father, was a patriarch in the house with her mother Aurelia sacrificing everything, her career, her time and even her children in the early days of their marriage when they were still quite small,
for her husband and his career. She was submissive to her husband and had to repress her own desires and dreams for the family. All importance was given to the head of the family. Such kind of tradition in the family must have certainly affected the young Sylvia’s mind. She would not want to be like her mother; rather she would want to be like her father. At the same time, being born a woman she has to face the consequences of the limitations of her sex. She says when she was eighteen: “Being born a woman is my awful tragedy…to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity” (*UJ* 77).

She regrets her physical limitations because it restricts her experience of life. A woman’s experience of life is limited unlike a man’s who enjoys more freedom in their movement and activities. In addition to this awareness of a woman’s limitations Sylvia had also imbibed the feminine ideology of womanly selflessness and considered her sense of pride and ambition as a human being as meanness and selfishness which need to be hidden or removed:

Pride is mixed with selflove and jealously (sic). All are rooted in the same inarticulate center of me, I think. I feed myself on the food of pride. I cultivate physical appearance – Pride. I long to excel (sic) – to specialize in one field, one section of a field, no matter how minute, as long as I can be an authority there. Pride, ambition – what mean, selfish words! (*UJ* 100)
Sylvia considered her “pride”, “selflove” and jealousy as “blots” in her character. She knew that she was proud, vain and jealous, at the same time she believed that these were feelings which were wrong to be felt by a woman. There is conflict in her feeling of pride, knowing that it is “mean” and “selfish” to be proud and ambitious in a woman. Society requires woman to be selfless but Sylvia is selfish according to her own admission. So, she must either hide the “blots” in her or find ways to get rid of them. These feelings clashes with her desire to find an “inviolate” field separate from her “future mate” (*UJ* 98). These feelings of having done something wrong are a result of the patriarchal indoctrination of the ideology of selflessness and sacrifice for women.

It is interesting to note that at an age when young people are absorbed in love relationships, Sylvia is in conflict about being a wife in the future. The selflessness that is demanded of a wife is something that she is ambivalent about because of her being “EGOCENTRIC”.

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932, at the Robinson Memorial Hospital, Boston. Her brother, Warren, was born two and a half years later on 27 April, 1935. Sylvia stayed with her maternal grandparents a week before her brother’s birth on the Massachusetts coast where she developed a strong love of the sea. During her childhood, Sylvia was her father’s favourite while Warren was sickly and taken care of by her mother. According to Aurelia, Otto Plath was a loving father who was proud of his two children even though he did not take an active part in tending to or playing with them since he was too busy with his career (*LH* 16).
Soon after Warren’s birth their father’s health began to decline. In 1936 his health started to fail him but he refused consultation with medical experts. He had diagnosed himself as suffering from lung cancer. It was in August 1940, after a minor accident, that confirmed that he was suffering from an advanced case of diabetes mellitus. In order to save his life Otto was required to amputate one of his legs; the operation was performed on October 12, 1940. On 5 November, Otto Plath died when Sylvia was only eight.

During Otto Plath’s deteriorating health Aurelia kept her two children amused by inventing bedtime stories, read poems by Eugene Field, R.L. Stevenson, and A. A. Milne. Sylvia used these memories in a negative sense in her poem “The Disquieting Muses”. In the poem the poet blames her mother for feeding her fairy tales which did not help her when she faced the real world when she grew up. The world as her mother painted was unreal, imaginary, and illusionary. Sylvia writes in her journals that to be grown up is “…a pathetic blighting of the beauty and reality of childhood.” Plath says that children are “conditioned into the smooth strawberry-and-cream Mother-Goose-world, Alice-in-Wonderland fable, only to be broken on the wheel as [they] grow older and become aware of [themselves] as individuals with a dull responsibility in life” (UJ 35). The charge was that her mother did not prepare her brother and herself to face the world when they become adults, that she screened the reality from them and thus made them unable to lead healthy mature lives.
In addition to her husband’s illness Aurelia had to care for the sickly Warren. Sylvia was taken care of by her grandparents whenever Warren fell ill and thus she developed a strong attachment with her grandfather who played games with her, took her swimming. She used these happy childhood experiences in her writing. The children were aware of their father’s failing health and were kept on separate floors by Aurelia but she hoped against hope that he might recover with medicine and care and so was unprepared for any unfortunate experience. On Otto Plath’s death Aurelia, out of love for her children, tried to keep them from facing the separation from their father by death and did not let them take part in the funeral. When broken the news of her father’s death Sylvia had said “woodenly” that she would “never speak to God again”. She also made her mother sign on a piece of paper on which were written the words: “I PROMISE NEVER TO MARRY AGAIN. Signed:…….” (LH 25)

The children, especially Sylvia, did not see their mother mourn the death of their father. Sylvia would later charge her mother of indifference, of not loving and caring for her father, as if she had committed the crime of murder of her father.

In 1942 Aurelia sold the Winthrop house and moved to Wellesley. The reasons for the move were the low taxes there, good school system for the children and scholarship into Wellesley College for Sylvia in the future. By
this time Aurelia had taken up a teaching post at Boston University in order to support her family as Otto had not made any future financial provisions in case of any unfortunate event. This move from the seaside into the suburb after her father’s death affected Sylvia as she loved the sea which she considered as “…the foundation of my consciousness…” along with her Austrian and German roots (LH 346).

Sylvia was enrolled at the Marshall Livingston Perrin Grammar School moving back a grade as Aurelia found that all the other children were nearly two years older than her. In 1944 she entered Alice L. Phillips Junior High School and wrote for The Phillipian, the school’s literary magazine. Sylvia started writing in a diary when she was eleven years old. Aurelia writes about Sylvia’s 1944 and 1945 diaries in which she recorded her activities of school, with friends, about “summer, camping, swimming, and sailing.” Sylvia wrote rhymes accompanied with sketches. She made special occasion cards for her grandfather who was proud of them, he was also proud of her poems published in the school papers (LH 30-31). She was creative and original in making illustrated cards and paper dolls.

By 1945, Sylvia was aware of political happenings in the country. Robin Peel, in his essay “The Ideological Apprenticeship of Sylvia Plath”, writes about her reaction to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan by the United
States (Peel 59-72). Aurelia had told her children about their father’s pacifist views and when the first atomic bomb was dropped Sylvia recorded it in her diary with, as Peel says, “a certain sense of bewilderment”. He further adds that Sylvia’s 1945 diary “records her response to the end of the war in Europe, the end of the war in Japan, and the celebration throughout America now that World War II, was over.” Sylvia was too young to form any opinion about America’s action of destroying “60% of Hiroshima” except express shock and anxiety. (63) But, by 1948, she expressed her desire for peace in the poem “Youth’s Appeal for Peace” (63).

Sylvia joined the Gamaliel Bradford Senior High School in 1947; here she co-edited The Bradford. (Wagner-Martin viii) According to Jo Gill, Sylvia had poems published as early as in the early 1940s -- in the Boston Herald on 10 August, 1941 and in The Phillipian in 1945 and 1946 (Gill 4). During her high school, Sylvia was careful not to appear too “brainy” with her dates or too superior so as not to spoil the relationship. She was also very close to her mother and shared all her experiences with her. She graduated in the summer of 1950 and won a scholarship to Smith College. She also published a short story in August 1950, “And Summer Will Not Come Again” in the Seventeen magazine, and a poem, “Bitter Strawberries” in The Christian Science Monitor, before she entered Smith College. Again, in November Seventeen published another poem “Ode on a Bitten Plum”.
After her graduation from Bradford, Sylvia experimented with her sexuality and went out on dates. About dating she writes in her journal:

This is I, I thought, the America virgin, dressed to seduce. I know I am in for an evening of sexual pleasure. We go on dates, we play around, and if we’re nice girls, we demure at a certain point. And so it goes.

(13)

The consequence of all these dating experiences was the feeling of frustration of unfulfilled desire because of her biology. She is bound by the social customs which checked her from breaking them. The only thing that she could do was to “lean enviously against the boundary and hate, hate, hate the boys who can dispel sexual hunger freely, without misgiving, and be whole, while I drag out from date to date in soggy desire, always unfulfilled. The whole thing sickens” (20). The result of the double standard of society and custom is that Sylvia started to hate the boys as well as her female self. She hated the boys because she was jealous of their freedom of movement and action and of herself because of the limitations of her body. Anne Stevenson, a contemporary of Sylvia explains the sexual frustration of the times in her biography of Plath, Bitter Fame:

Middle-class teenage Americans in the 1950s subscribed to an amazing code of sexual frustration. Everything was permissible to girls in the way of intimacy except the one
thing such intimacies were intended to bring about.

(19)

Both partners in the dating game stopped just short of sexual intercourse if they were “pure” boys and “nice” girls. The activity of boys outside their own class or neighbourhood was ignored but a different standard existed for girls. Sylvia had ambivalent feelings towards the boys she dated because they never had to worry about getting pregnant. She uses these experiences in her novel *The Bell Jar* while writing about the character in the novel, Buddy Willard, the heroine’s boyfriend, who was thought to be “a fine, clean boy…coming from such a fine, clean family, and how everybody at church thought he was a model person,…he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for” while all this time Buddy was only pretending to be an innocent virgin. Esther, the heroine of the novel had asked him whether he had had an affair with anyone and he told her that he had one with a waitress during the summer. Esther says: “What I couldn’t stand was Buddy pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he’d been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face” (*The Bell Jar* 67).

In 1952, Sylvia won a $500 prize in the *Mademoiselle* national fiction competition and in 1953 she won a guest editorship at the *Mademoiselle* for her story “Sunday at the Mintons’.” In June she went to New York as one of
the twenty guest editors for a month-long internship. This experience was fictionalised in *The Bell Jar* in which its heroine Esther Greenwood goes through a rite of passage from innocence to experience. In an undated letter of late June Sylvia wrote to her brother Warren about her stay in New York:

I have learned an amazing lot here: the world has split open before my gaping eyes and split out its guts like a cracked watermelon…the shift to NYC has been so rapid that I can’t think logically about *who I am or where I am going* [italic mine]. I have been very ecstatic, horribly depressed, shocked, elated, enlightened, and enervated—all of which goes to make up living very hard and newly…Seriously, I am more than overjoyed to have been here a month; it is just that I realize how young and inexperienced I am in the ways of the world. 

(*LH* 117-120)

The disorientation caused by the New York experience to her life had a great effect on Sylvia and increased her sense of worthlessness inspite of her academic achievements. The real world overwhelmed her, it was frightening. She was confused about her identity and her sense of direction about her life. The month-long stayed in New York, instead of making her feel happy for broadening her horizon, brought discouragement and depression. It was a tired and unsmiling Sylvia that Aurelia met on her return from New York City. The exhaustion was not relieved by the news that awaited her at her arrival home; Sylvia had applied for a short-story course in Frank O’Connor’s writing class
and had counted on being accepted in it. But she was rejected. The rejection increased her sense of worthlessness after the exhaustive month in the city; she felt “…sterile, empty, unlived, unwise, and UNREAD” (LH 130).

Depression increased and one morning Aurelia noticed “some partially healed gashes on her legs” (LH 124) and on her questioning Sylvia replied that she wanted to see if she had the guts. Then, she cried: “Oh, Mother, the world is so rotten! I want to die! Let’s die together!” (LH 124) Psychiatric counselling was recommended by their doctor and she was prescribed sleeping pills but Sylvia became immune to the pills. A series of shock treatments were given which were traumatic experiences to her. By this time Sylvia was considering suicide as an alternative to a life in a mental hospital which would be “merciful and inexpensive to her family”. On August 24, 1953, Sylvia broke the lock of her mother’s safe and took the bottle of sleeping pills and went down to the basement; she swallowed a large number of pills and blacked out but on the second day she regained her consciousness and called for help. Warren heard her moans on the third day and found her. She was rushed to the Newton-Wellesley hospital and afterwards transferred to the psychiatric wing of the Massachusetts General Hospital (Stevenson 44-46).

By October, 1953 Sylvia was at McLean Hospital, Massachusetts, under the care of Dr Ruth Beuscher. Aurelia says that Sylvia was given insulin therapy and showed signs of improvement. Sylvia was “submitted to a series
of shock treatments toward the end of her stay at McLean, but her understanding psychiatrist promised to be with her throughout the treatment, and Sylvia’s faith in her doctor was without reservation” (LH 128). Mrs Olive Higgins Prouty, Sylvia’s benefactress of the scholarship she received when she was at Smith, had also suffered a breakdown and was sympathetic and helpful. Sylvia returned to Smith College in 1954 for the spring semester and lived an “active ‘date life’” according to her mother. For her honours thesis she took up the double in Dostoevsky’s novelette *The Double*, and Ivan Karamazov’s *The Brothers*.

Sylvia graduated in 1955 and went to England on a Fulbright scholarship. During that period she had a vibrant social and academic life; she became a member of the *Amateur Dramatic Club*. She also travelled to Paris and the south of France with Richard Sassoon with whom she had become involved in a relationship. Sassoon broke off the relationship. In February 1956, Sylvia met Ted Hughes at the launch party of a literary magazine, the *St. Botolph’s Review*. Four months later, in June, they married in London and went to Benidorm for their honeymoon. The poems “Fiesta Melons”, “The Goring” and story “That widow Mangada” are the results of the visit. The marriage between the two poets was one of the profound poetic effects in modern poetry. The couple returned to Cambridge and London to study and write. They also visited Hughes’ family in Yorkshire which inspired the
poems “Wuthering Heights” and “Hardcastle Crags”. Sylvia had been writing some good poems and in March 1957 she was offered a teaching post at Smith College. 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. About this teaching stint at Smith College Gill writes:

Plath’s *Journals* indicate a degree of ambivalence about this new role. On the one hand, it was an honour to be included among the faculty of such an esteemed institution, on the other, Plath had no female role models who could persuade her of the feasibility in these circumstances of reconciling all her other aspirations. The Smith faculty were largely single (and apparently less than enthusiastic about their star pupil’s hurried marriage) and dedicated to their academic lives. Plath wanted, as her *Journals* repeatedly make clear, to write, to teach and to be a fulfilled wife and mother. This route, she feared, might be closed to her in the path she had taken. (8)

Sylvia had negative feelings about single women, as can be seen in poems like “Two Sisters of Persephone”, “Spinster”, “Ella Mason and Her Eleven Cats”. And being married she was anxious whether she could write and be a mother. She was trying to find her role model in Adrienne Rich, who was a poet, a married woman and a mother. Rich said that the only detail she remembered about their conversations were Sylvia’s desire to know whether she could combine “motherhood and writing”.
In 1958 the couple moved to Boston to write; Sylvia took part-time jobs. She was a part-time secretary at Massachusetts General Hospital’s adult psychiatric clinic. It was this experience which inspired her to write the story “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams”. She also worked part-time in the department of Sanskrit and Indian studies at Harvard University, and also attended Robert Lowell’s poetry writing course at Boston University and in 1959 became friends with Anne Sexton and George Starbuck; Sylvia had also resumed therapy with Dr. Ruth Buescher. Dianne Middlebrook, as well as Plath herself, is of the opinion that Lowell’s writing seminar provided a “stimulus for her breakthrough in her poetry, partly because of the example of Life’s Studies and partly because of the example of Anne Sexton” (Middlebrook 105). Lowell and Sexton’s delving into the taboo depths of personal hell was something “new and exciting” to Sylvia. Both Plath and Sexton had suicidal tendencies and were receiving counselling from their psychiatrists. They talked to each other about their first suicides but the two were opposites, Plath was reserved while Sexton was flamboyant (Middlebrook 107). Plath was interested in Sexton, whom she found to be facing similar issues of being a poet, a daughter, a mother, issues which she was also trying to come to terms with (Middlebrook 106).

In early March, 1959, Sylvia visited her father’s grave at Winthrop. Her visit resulted in a poem “Electra on Azalea Path” in which she writes about her feelings on her father’s death:
The day you died I went into the dirt,
Into the lightless hibernaculum
Where bees, striped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard
Like hieratic stones, and the ground is hard.
It was good for twenty years, that wintering-- (CP 116)

Almost twenty years after her father’s death Sylvia writes about the way his death affected her. The world of the speaker of the poem became “lightless”, she was like the bees hibernating the winter; she became stone-like, leading a death-in-life existence for twenty years and waking up from her hibernation on her father’s graveyard. The poet says that the cause of the father’s death as well as the daughter’s own death for the past twenty years was her love for her the father. The daughter felt guilt and blames herself for her father’s death.

During this period Sylvia was anxious about not being able to conceive a baby. Her feelings about her inability to conceive are quite strong. She says in her Journals dated June 13, 1959:

It is not when I have a baby, but that I have one, and more, which is of supreme importance to me. I have been extremely fond of the definition of Death which says it is: Inaccessibility to Experience, a Jamesian view, but so good. And for a woman to be deprived of the Great Experience her body is formed to partake of, to nourish, is a great and wasting Death…A woman has 9 months of becoming something other than herself, of separating
from this otherness, of feeding it and being a source of milk and honey to it. To be deprived of this is a death indeed. And to consummate love by bearing the child of the loved one is far profounder than any orgasm or intellectual rapport. (495)

Sylvia wanted to experience motherhood. Being deprived of this most important female experience is, for her, just like death. Undergoing nine months of pregnancy, and then giving birth and nursing the baby is a profound experience for a woman. By this time, Sylvia considered the sharing of a baby with the loved one more profound than having any “intellectual rapport”. Another point to remember is that Sylvia considered creativity in writing to be the same as giving birth to a baby. Speaking about her first sonnet, the young Sylvia had written in her Journals: “Here follows my first sonnet, written during the hours of 9 to 1 a.m. on a Saturday night, when in pregnant delight I conceived my baby” (96).

Then on June 20 she wrote about her failure to conceive:

Everything has gone barren. I am part of the world’s ash, something from which nothing can grow, nothing can flower or come to fruit. In the lovely words of 20th century medicine, I can’t ovulate. Or don’t…I want a house of our children, little animals, flowers, vegetables, fruits. I want to be an Earth Mother in the deepest richest sense. I have turned from being an intellectual, a career woman: all that is ash to me. And what do I meet in
myself? Ash. Ash and more ash…Ted should be a patriarch. I a mother. (500)

The lines show Sylvia’s desire to fulfil the conventional role of a wife and mother. She wants to become the fertile woman, proud and fruitful. In desiring that Ted should be “a patriarch” she is resorting to the patriarchal ideology which had been ingrained in her since her childhood where she saw her father being the patriarch in the family and her mother being subservient to his wishes. At this point of time Sylvia no longer wants to be an intellectual, career woman but wishes to become the fertile “Earth Mother”.

Again she wrote: “How can I keep Ted wedded to a barren woman? Barren barren” (501). These words bring to mind her early poem “Two Sisters of Persephone” (CP 31-32) where the poet conflicts with intellectuality and motherhood. In “Barren Woman” (CP 157), the poet describes the emptiness of a barren woman’s existence while dreaming of becoming a mother “of a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos”. “Childless Woman” is filled with images of having nothing to look forward to except death. These poems show Sylvia’s feelings about a woman’s destiny. She considers motherhood as a fulfilment of a woman’s life, without this experience she says she “…would be dead. Dead to my woman’s body….my pleasure no pleasure, a mockery. My writing a hollow and failing substitute for real life, real feeling, instead of a pleasant extra, a bonus flowering and fruiting” (CP 157). This shows how
strongly Sylvia felt about fulfilling the biological destiny of woman which she equates with creativity in her writing.

In the summer of 1959 the couple travelled through the US. They visited California and while camping in the Yellowstone Park, a bear rummaged through their food supplies and this experience was used by Sylvia in her story “The Fifty-Ninth Bear”. They spent two months in the writers’ colony at Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, New York. The stay there was productive as Sylvia wrote some of the poems which appeared in The Colossus, “...almost one-third…” (LH 366). During this period Sylvia had become pregnant. After the stay at Yaddo they returned to England in December. They visited Ted’s family in West Yorkshire and returned to London in January, 1960. In February, Sylvia got a publisher for her first book of poems, The Colossus. They rented a flat at 3 Chalcot Square, London where their first child Frieda was born on 1st April. Sylvia took her little baby out to witness a “Ban the Bomb” march when it was only a few weeks old. This experience “indicates her increasing concerns about politics and the environment” (Gill 10). The letter to her mother about witnessing the anti-bomb march shows her concern about the fate of the world and the future of the human species as well as her desire to participate in “political affairs” (LH 378). Her essay “Context” (Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other prose writings 82-83) also voices her fears about “…the incalculable genetic effects of fallout”.
In January 1961, Sylvia was troubled by her appendix and was advised by her doctor to remove it by February as she had become pregnant again. This second baby was due in August but she suffered a miscarriage on 6 February. Sylvia wrote the poem “Parliament Hill Fields” on 11 February. The poem describes her feelings about her miscarriage. After this she was operated for appendicitis. This hospital stay produced the poems “Tulips” and “In Plaster”. Sylvia and Hughes bought Court Green, the manor house in Devon in July. The Hughes’ second child, Nicholas, was born on 17 January 1962. In the summer Hughes began a relationship with Assia Wevill. The couple, David and Assia Wevill had taken over their flat at Chalcot Square after they had moved to the country house and were mutual acquaintances of the Hughes. The relationship between Ted and Sylvia became seriously troubled. Aurelia, who visited them in the later part of June, sensed the tension between the couple. She left on 4 August with great forebodings.

By 27 August Sylvia wrote to her mother that she was trying to get a legal separation from her husband and told her that she wanted “a clean break” in order to rebuild her life after the separation (LH 460). The Hugheses went to Ireland in September but Ted left her there and went to Spain. Sylvia returned to her house with the children. Hughes came back briefly but left with his belongings for London (Gill 11). Sylvia was feeling very lonely. She wrote to her mother about her desire to have her brother and his wife with her in England. But she was determined to rebuild her life after the separation.
She did not want to return to America because she felt that if she did it would be just like running away from her life, at the same time she was not eager to face her mother who had witnessed the turmoil in her marriage.

She wrote her mother a letter on 12 October: “Every morning, when my sleeping pill wears off, I am up about five, in my study with coffee, writing like mad-have managed a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me” (LH 466). A few days later, suffering from fever, weak and helpless with her two small children, without a nanny, she desperately needed someone; she explained her situation with the words “I am fighting now against hard odds and alone” (LH 469).

Anne Stevenson writes about the aftermath of the Hughes’ separation on Sylvia:

Between the end of September and the first day of December, in the autumnal privacy of her three acres, with little more for distraction than her small children and the nannies who came and went, Sylvia Plath, in an astonishing blaze of creative power, produced forty of her Ariel poems, unique in literature. (Stevenson 261)

Here, Stevenson glosses over the reality of Sylvia’s plight, sick with fever, alone with two small children and trying to write, after going through the experience of finding her idealized husband in an affair with another
woman which is tantamount to a betrayal of her trust in him. She wanted her sister-in-law to help her out during these difficult times. This is a normal feeling when for a person who is alone and ill. Her mother, anxious in getting Sylvia’s letters during this time, sent a cable to her midwife, Mrs Winifred Davies, to find a helper for Sylvia (ibid 470). When she got better Sylvia was afraid that she had worried her mother with her desperate letters during her sickness from influenza. The poem “Fever 103°” written on 20 October was the result of the fever which she had been suffering although it has got other significations.

Sylvia returned to London in November instead of going to Ireland as she had intended. This change in the plan was caused by her decision “to facing the worst, not hiding from it” (LH 477); remaining in the country would imply that she was hiding from all her friends and acquaintances after Hughes had separated from her. In London she searched for a flat and found one in which W. B. Yeats had lived. She closed her country house in Devon and moved to the London flat in December with the children.

In London, Sylvia was busy with her writing, her BBC broadcasts poetry reading, and trying to fix up her flat. She wrote her mother about a commission for a program “on the influence of [her] childhood landscape--the sea”. The Oslo Radio also wanted to translate and “do [her] ‘Three Women’”, which she described as “A Poem for Three Voices”, set in a maternity ward.
She was also encouraged in her writing when A. Alvarez, the poetry critic, declared that her second book “should win the Pulitzer Prize” (LH 490). By early January, 1963, Sylvia was experiencing her first snow in England, seeing her doctor, Doctor Horder, as she was weak and tired after the flu, and wrote that the children were also suffering from high fevers. She felt gloom descending upon her as she viewed her future prospects, with the snow, the lack of a telephone, and the difficulty of getting a helper.

It is important to note what she says of herself during the last six months, after the separation from her husband and her move from Devon to London alone, and the responsibility of taking care of her two small children—“I just haven’t felt to have any identity under the steamroller of decisions and responsibilities of this last half year, with the babies a constant demand” (ibid 495). This sense of loss of identity when swamped by responsibilities aggravated her feeling of helplessness. She also worried about the financial problems she would be facing in the near future; she dreamed of supporting her family by her writing but felt lonely and needed some praise and encouragement in order to go on. The winter in January 1963 was severe; in addition to the heavy snowing there were “electric strikes…children freeze; dinners are stopped; there are mad rushes for candles” (ibid 496).

The last letter that Sylvia wrote her mother was on the 4th of February, 1963. A week after, on 11 February, in the early morning before the children
woke, she committed suicide by gassing herself. She had left a note with the telephone number of her doctor with the request to call Dr. Horder (Bassnett 18). The nurse sent by the doctor reached the front door of the apartment at 9 a.m. but the outside door was locked. She called her agency to confirm the right address. She, then, got help from a builder and together they broke into Sylvia’s flat. There was the smell of gas and when the kitchen door was forced open they saw Sylvia sprawled on the floor with her head on a folded cloth in the oven. Dr. Horder came at about 10.30 a.m. and confirmed the death (Stevenson 296-297). Aurelia Plath comments in the Letters Home that on 12 February her sister received a cable from Ted Hughes that Sylvia died on the 11th (500).

Different biographical critics tried to explain Sylvia’s suicide. Susan Bassnett best explains her decision to kill herself:

Within barely three years she had left her native United States to live in a country that intrigued her but whose climate eroded her health and sense of well-being, she had given birth to two children and miscarried a third, her adored husband was involved with someone else and she was writing at an exhaustive pace, juggling the domestic parts of her life around the flow of creativity that she needed to fulfil. Small wonder that there were times when she felt unable to cope. The simple fact of organising her working and domestic life, always difficult but made doubly so by the need to become the breadwinner once
the marriage had failed, was an enormous burden to take on. (19)

Taking into account all these facts it would seem that suicide is the only way out but these are assumptions, the reality will remain a mystery to all.

Sylvia Plath published one collection of poems in her lifetime, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, in October 1960 in the UK and in 1962 in the USA and a novel, *The Bell Jar*, in 14 January 1963 under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. The response to the publication of the two works was positive in the early ‘60s. According to Linda W. Wagner, the literary critics acclaimed the appearance of a new voice, “speaking in tightly wrought patterns and conveying a definite sense of control” (Wagner 1). They liked the discipline and the avoidance of sentimentalities which was quite unlike that of a female writer. The Colossus was recognized as a “strong book” and E. Lucas Myers, in his review, emphasised “the impersonal nature of Plath’s poems, even though they appeared to be about personal subjects”; he also praised their technical skill (Wagner 3).

Susan Bassnett considers the early poems of the *Colossus* as Sylvia trying out her hands on experimentation, a stage leading to the development of her late poems (Bassnett 47). Comparing the early collection with the later ones shows a lack of understanding and injustice to any writer on the part of
the critics and readers, and Bassnett attempts to avoid the setting up the early poems against *Ariel* in order to rate them inferior to it as most critics had done.

Jo Gill observes the influence of different writers in some important poems in the collection. According to Gill, some of the poets who influenced her were, to name a few, Theodore Roethke, Ann Sexton, Amy Lowell, Robert Lowell, etc. (Gill 36, 38).

Since *The Bell Jar* was published under a pseudonym there was no connection made to Sylvia but it was “favorably reviewed”. Laurence Lerner, in his review of the novel, called it “a brilliant and moving book” (Lerner 215) According to Jeremy Hawthorn, the novel concerns itself not only with the heroine’s “split personality forced on to women by men in an abstract and ahistorical way” but it is given a precise historical and social context”. The novel is not just a depiction of a “universalized sex-war, but with the complexities of human relationships in a very specific context”; the electrocution of the Rosenbergs in the beginning of the novel parallels the heroine’s treatment by electroconvulsive therapy after her suicide attempt (Matuz 409). Linda Huf considers the novel a representative of the era of Betty Friedan’s “feminine mystique” and the “Eisenhower Fifties” (Matuz 410).

But when Sylvia committed suicide on 11 February 1963, the tenor of the criticism changed, both for the early and late poems as well as the novel.
Critics began linking her art with her biography and they tried to understand and explain her art through her biography and her life through her art.

*Crossing the Water*, the second collection of Sylvia’s late poems was published posthumously in 1971 by Ted Hughes and the next year *Winter Trees*, the third collection was published. Robin Skelton praises the poems in *Crossing the Water* as marked by “verbal brilliance”, and Sylvia for using “imagery that is more vital and surprising than any other poet of her generation”. He continues that the collection goes “some way towards beginning to justify the high reputation [Plath’s] work has already been given” (Wagner 13).

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to the life and works of Plath. A brief account of the development of Sylvia Plath’s life and career is necessary for a better understanding of her ambivalent feelings which are expressed in her writings. This is followed by the second chapter dealing with the social, intellectual and literary background and influences where the impact of social and cultural ideologies and the influence of major writers on Sylvia Plath. 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. 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.

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. The fifth chapter is devoted to the analysis Plath’s late poems. “A Birthday Present” written on September 30, 1962 gives a vista of the poet’s life as seen 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, transcendence of the self through hell to paradise, 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. “Ariel”, “Purdah”, “Lady Lazarus”, written in October 1962, “Childless Woman”, written on December 1, 1962, “The Munich Mannequins”, and lastly, “Child” are analysed, both written on January 28, 1963. The sixth
chapter which is the concluding chapter gives the summary of the whole thesis. Here an attempt is made to assess the achievements and failure of Sylvia as a poet and her contribution to women’s literature in the light of her ambivalence in her poetry.

The first chapter has given an introduction to the life and works of Sylvia Plath. The brief biography shows that the poet’s life and her poetry are interwoven and reflects the ambivalence that the poet feels about her life and her times. Her poems are a reflection of the anxiety and conflict which she experiences in the attempt to deal with the contradictory emotions in her life. The next chapter will discuss the social and literary influences on the poet.
WORKS CITED


