The two preceding chapters have dealt with the life and the society of Sylvia Plath. In studying these two aspects of her life, it can be observed that Sylvia Plath’s ambivalence is shaped by her gender. The social and cultural practices and discourses of the period in which she lived also plays a prominent role in aggravating the contradictory feelings and conflicts she had as a woman. The ideology of domesticity that pervaded the postwar American society created conflict in intelligent and educated women and the concept of ambivalence is useful for the analysis of the social roles and role conflicts in Sylvia Plath. In making the analysis, the concept of ambivalence is used here with reference to the basic condition of the social nature of the human being.
Ambivalence is one of the phenomena of emotion and attitude that until recently did not receive adequate description and explanation in the psychology of emotions and in the human and social sciences in general, with the possible exception of psychoanalysis. There are also practically no experimental studies of it that fit the standards of contemporary experimental psychology. Even today it is not unusual for native speakers of English not to distinguish in a clear-cut way between ambivalence and ambiguity

Maxim Stamenov writes about ambivalence in the following way:

1. The coexistence of opposing attitudes or feelings, such as love and hate, toward a person, object, or idea.

2. Uncertainty or indecisiveness as to which course to follow.

One of the serious challenges on the way to proper understanding of the nature of ambivalence is related to the problem how to interpret the character of ‘opposing attitudes or feelings’ mentioned in the definition above. English language itself seems to add to the possibilities of confusion and misunderstandings, in this respect, because the native English expression for ambivalence is “mixed feelings”. The latter however may be based on the incongruence of two feelings or emotions, but not necessarily their mutual opposition (that may be further represented in language by the possibility to
express it in the lexical relation of antonymy between two words). For example, if a person experiences annoyed excitement (as far as this may be possible) it is a case of experiencing two mutually incongruent or incommensurably looking feelings, but the resulting mental state, if indeed possible, may not be considered ambivalent as far as incongruence is not necessarily identical to opposition. How to distinguish between them on a principled basis remains a problem for any theory of emotion. (Stamenov)

The thesis makes an attempt to study broadly the concept of ambivalence in relation to Sylvia Plath’s poems. 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 relevant to the study of the human condition because it is a central aspect of the human experience in the world. Pratt and Doucet stress “the fact that ambivalence is inherent in modern life, and is a central concept in many social sciences” (2), which show that investigations into ambivalence is of interest not just in psychoanalysis and literature but in present day societal as well as professional relationships like workplaces too. They study the relevance of investigating the nature of ambivalence in organizational relationships as well as intergenerational relations where they show that employees feel conflicting
emotions with their employers as well with their co-workers and customers and in the parent-child relations. This kind of study has surfaced because

...concepts [like ambivalence] emerge when they are needed to make sense of life’s situations...[and] the rapidity, complexity, precariousness, and intensity of today’s world are likely to generate increasing burdens of ambivalence... (Quoted in Pratt and Doucet 2)

Investigations concerning the concept of ambivalence are carried out in all areas of life concerned with human relationship. The modern age being an era of rapid change, the presence of contradictory pressures on the lives of the people has placed them in a dilemma. This is why social scientists like Weigert and Franks defined the twentieth-century as follows:

Rather, the rapid rate of change, the ever-increasing complexity, and the seeming incompleteness characteristic of social life in the 20th century suggest that this is an “age of ambivalence”. (Quoted in Pratt and Doucet 2)

The contradictory demands of the modern age on the human being has increased the feeling of ambivalence and resulted in difficulty of integration of the self. Man is a mixture of both good and bad, he is a complex and complicated being. The demands on life in the modern age have further aggravated the complexity in
modern man. Such complex emotions in man will necessarily be reflected in the literature of the times.

The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud had recognised the complexity of the human being when he formulated his theories of the fundamental motivating forces of man: “the constructive life urges and the destructive death urges” which he called “Eros” and “Thanatos”. Freud further divides the life urges into the ego drives and the sex drives (Page 179). Daniel Gunn points out that Freud claims himself to be a dualistic thinker in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”. He writes that “[Freud’s] commentators have often stressed on the apparent dualities in his work, between, for example, eros and thanatos, the ego and the id, or the life and death instincts” (Gunn 35). So, Freud’s dualism in his psychoanalytical theories shows that even he is not free from conflicting experiences. Thus, the pressures on the individual are both of an external as well as an internal nature. This creates in the individual a need to find a way to cope with the pressures of existence.

In Freudian psychoanalysis, ambivalence is the coexistence of conflicting motives and attitudes. J. D. Page describes the nature of ambivalence in the following way:

Love and hate, as viewed by psychoanalysts, are not necessarily mutually antagonistic. Often the two are
inseparably fused. In courtship there is often some quarrelling, and loved persons are often hurt. Conflicting coexisting motives and attitudes of this nature are frequently encountered in psychoanalysis and are included under the heading of ambivalence. (Page18)

The two emotions, love and hate, are not alternatives, according to psychoanalysis, but are a combination of feelings, “inseparably fused”. They cannot be chosen one over the other but exist together. The nature of ambivalence thus gives rise to a complicated, dual and conflicting feeling. This complicated feeling, then, can be mostly encountered in close or intimate relationships. Raulin and Brenner state that for Freud, ambivalence is a normal and expected constituent of any relationship. Freud’s use of the word in this way was a change from the concept of ambivalence described by Bleuler as a symptom of schizophrenia. Bleuler had also observed the presence of ambivalence in normal and healthy people as well as in those diagnosed with schizophrenia (Matthew H. Bowker), but “Freud now said that it was expected, even necessary, that everyone experience ambivalence” (Raulin and Brenner 204).

In The Cambridge Companion to Freud, Clark Glymour writes about Freud’s explanation of ambivalence:

Ambivalence is explained by supposing multiple agents with reasonably fixed but contrary preferences, and by
supposing that no one of the agents always dominates.

(Glymour 78)

He further adds that Freud’s concept of ambivalence in the ‘Rat Man’ case is possible when the “conscious love and conscious hatred” towards the same object are not intense, but, when they become intense then, the more painful emotion becomes unconscious. He explains this phenomenon as under:

One and the same agent cannot both love an object and hate that same object at the same time. But one agent can love aspects of an object and hate other aspects of an object. Freud’s explanation of ambivalence in the Rat Man case goes like this: Conscious love and conscious hatred of one and the same object are possible provided neither is intense. When both become sufficiently intense they are incompatible and one emotion must become unconscious, generally the more painful. Perhaps Freud can be understood as follows. One and the same agent cannot both love an object and hate that same object at the same time. But one agent can love aspects of an object and hate other aspects of an object. (Glymour 78)

This phenomenon can be seen in Plath’s poem “Daddy” where the speaker’s love for her father and her anger turned into hatred towards him because of his untimely death, is expressed ambivalently. In her Journals Plath says about her
father that “He was an ogre. But I miss him” (431); her father is cruel, frightening and powerful yet she misses him and his love. To compensate for the loss of her “ambivalently loved father” (Axelrod 26) the daughter in the poem makes a model of him in her husband, “A man with a Meinkampf look”, and as the poem progresses she kills both—“If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two”- and declares “I am through”.

Freud’s concept of ambivalence in the ‘Rat Man’ case about loving one aspect of an object while hating other aspects of the same object mentioned earlier can be observed in Plath’s “Daddy”, where the speaker announces in the second stanza “Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time”, then in the next stanza she confesses “I used to pray to recover you.” The lines express the speaker’s desire to “recover” her father from the separation that his death had brought upon their relationship. She feels the necessity to kill her father because he died before she had time to know him. The meaning is ambiguous, but it means that the daughter feels the need to justify her action of murdering her father again in order to prove that he existed. The anger expressed in the line “Daddy, I have had to kill you” shows the speaker’s intense love for her father, it’s an anger felt towards him for dying when she wanted him to be there for her. Her father is cruel, because he died when she wanted him to live, but at the same time he was adored, loved. In *Bitter Fame*, Anne Stevenson
agrees with Alvarez’s interpretation of the poem as a “love poem” (Stevenson 264).

The daughter tried to avenge her father “at twenty” by trying to die “and get back, back, back to you”. But she survived the ordeal; then, she made a model of her father in her husband and severed all communication with him. The daughter succeeded in her exorcism of her father when she finally killed both father and husband poetically.

Daniel Gunn states that Freud’s work with the ‘Rat Man’ confirmed his theory about the possibility of a combination of two different emotions:

An individual might be capable of intense love and intense hate, directed at a single person or object, without these two affects cancelling each other out…this complex of feeling which was termed ‘ambivalence’, is not the only or necessarily the most important duality in Freud’s work. (Gunn 3)

Gunn points out Freud’s claim of himself as a dualistic thinker-his work on Eros, the life forces, and Thanatos, the death forces, the ego and the id, and love and hate relation which he termed “ambivalence” (Gunn 35) is an example and proof of Freud’s claim that ambivalence is an expected and even necessary part of human experience (Raulin and Brenner 204).
Freud’s treatment of the ‘Rat Man’ in 1907 and published in 1909 as “Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis” led him to discover the presence of “positive and negative feelings of great intensity-developing into a ‘remarkable relation of love and hatred’”- coexisting, “even when directed at a single object, without cancelling each other out.” But Freud used the term ‘ambivalence’ only in 1912, in his paper “The Dynamics of Transference” in which he acknowledged his borrowing of the word from his contemporary Eugen Bleuler, the Swiss psychiatrist (Gunn 36). Bleuler had used the term in relation with schizophrenia.

The term “ambivalence” was first coined by Eugen Bleuler, the Swiss psychiatrist, as one of the fundamental symptoms of schizophrenia. Eugen Bleuler is credited with the introduction of two concepts fundamental to the analysis of schizophrenia: autism, which denotes the loss of contact with reality, “frequently through indulgence in bizarre fantasy; and ambivalence, denoting the coexistence of mutually exclusive contradictions within the psyche” (Encyclopedia Britannica). According to Raulin and Brenner, “Bleuler described ambivalence as fundamental (i.e., present in all schizophrenics), but, he also argued that ambivalence was secondary, that is, not directly a result of the disease process itself” (Raulin and Brenner 203). Bleuler illustrates ambivalence by giving the example of the rose, a flower which has thorns. His explanation is
that a normal person would form an integrated concept of a rose where he appreciates the beauty of the rose despite its thorns whereas a schizophrenic would love the flower for its beauty but hate it because of its thorns (Raulin and Brenner 203). So, ambivalence, according to Bleuler, is present in both normal as well as schizophrenic patients. Normal people may sometimes fail to integrate under some conditions, but they can achieve integration in situations that demand it. The schizophrenics may not be able to integrate the positive and negative valences of the object (Raulin and Brenner 203).

While giving ‘a brief history of the concept of ambivalence’, Matthew H. Bowker states that Bleuler used the term ambivalence in his theory of Schizophrenia published in 1910, but that it was in the book *Dementia Praecox or the Group of Schizophrenias* which was completed in 1908 but published in 1911, which made the first detailed investigation of ambivalence. Bowker emphasises Bleuler’s concept of ambivalence as both “universal and potentially pathological phenomenon” and that the difference between ambivalence in a normal individual and in a schizophrenic is in the way both respond to the feeling. Bowker says:

Whereas the ‘healthy’ individual came to accept his or her ambivalence as a mixed stance toward an object, the schizophrenic in Bleuler’s theory was forced either to
oscillate between all-good and all-bad impressions, or to split the object in two, one loved and one hated. (Bowker)

So, for Bleuler, ambivalence in a ‘sick’ person depends on the way the person expresses, defends, and responds to the feeling; at the same time, he stresses the fact that no individual is “exempt from ambivalence or the pressures that it generates” (Bowker). This opinion is the same as that expressed by Freud about the feeling, but Freud says that ambivalence is at the root of neurosis though not its efficient cause. For Freud neurosis is an attempt to cope with ambivalence “while effectively preserving it and restraining behaviour” (Quoted in Bowker). Thus, both psychoanalysts emphasise the existence of ambivalence in all human beings.

Melanie Klein, a Freudian psychoanalyst, is of the opinion that “ambivalence is at the heart of the psychological life of the child” and that, for her, love and hate is the central conflict in human experience. Klein regards splitting of the world, the parent, or even the self into two categories, absolutely good and absolutely bad, as a reaction to ambivalence, a defence mechanism. (Bowker)

Plath uses the phenomenon of splitting of the object or the self into good and bad, true and false in her poems. The most obvious examples are “In Plaster” (1961), and in the early poem “Two Sisters of Persephone (1956). In “In Plaster”,

the speaker splits into the “old yellow person” and the “new white person”, while in the early poem she creates two sisters of Persephone, the intellectual barren sister and the fertile one who becomes the “sun’s bride” and “bears a king”. Gordon Lameyer, who dated Sylvia during 1953 to 1955, describes her ambivalent relationship with him in terms which are similar to what Plath has written in the poem “Two Sisters of Persephone”:

More and more she had to apologize for having to hibernate for eight months of the year, promising at the end to emerge like Alice in Wonderland, stepping through her magic mirror and becoming a sun-worshipping summer queen. (Lameyer 39)

So, Plath uses certain concepts and terms of psychoanalysis as subjects and themes in her poetry and her fiction.

Commenting on the psychoanalytic interpretation of works of art, Gleitman, Fridlund and Reisberg find similarity in Freud’s approach to works of art and literature and his attempt to understand the hidden meanings of dreams and myths:

Stated in the most general terms, Freud’s theory asserts that dreams tend to reflect the current emotional preoccupations of the dreamer, including those of which
he is unaware, and are often portrayed in a condensed and symbolic form. (Gleitman et al 733)

And the similarity of the approach, according to Freud’s theory, is that dreams as well as “The artistic production reflects the artist’s own inner conflicts”, and, the work of art “has impact on others because it strikes the same unconscious chords in them.” (Gleitman et al 728)

In order to illustrate a psychoanalytic interpretation of literature the authors look at Freud’s analysis of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* which was later elaborated by Ernest Jones. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a play where ambivalence is treated as the “central puzzle” to Hamlet’s indecision. Freud and Jones explain the indecisiveness of Hamlet and his inaction as the result of the Oedipus complex: “Hamlet is paralyzed because he must kill a man who did precisely what he himself unconsciously wanted to do, kill his father and marry his mother.” (728) But, Freud and Jones’ interpretation of *Hamlet* is not acceptable to all scholars. Just as the interpretation of dreams is difficult and inconclusive, trying to explain a work of art brings inconclusive results. There is no final meaning of art because of its ambiguous nature, it is an expression of the subjective feelings of the artist and at the same time, it will take into account the individual feelings and experiences and views of the reader. As the authors, Gleitman et al, assert:
The truth is that there is no one key, there is no one meaning of *Hamlet*, for works of art are necessarily ambiguous. As with myths and legends, this or the other interpretation may help explain them, but it does not explain them *away.* (728)

The authors conclude that “over enthusiastic application of psychoanalytic interpretation to literary works” does not give conclusive explanation, but they recognise “Freud’s impact on literature and literary criticism”; most literary critics and authors have been influenced by Freud and most critics have “at least a passing acquaintance with Freud’s basic works.” (728)

Sylvia Plath, as graduate student, was interested in psychoanalysis; while a student she wanted to take a psychology course and was aware of the connection between a knowledge of psychoanalysis and literature. This is proven by her choice of topic for her honours thesis in Smith College “The Magic Mirror-A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky’s Novels” which uses the psychoanalytic theories of schizophrenia.

In a letter to her mother on October 13, 1954, she wrote about her thesis:

In conjunction with this, I’ve been reading stories all about doubles, twins, mirror images, and shadow reflections. Your book gift, *The Golden Bough*, comes
in handy, as it has an excellent chapter on “the soul as shadow and reflection”. *(LH 145)*

In the same letter, Sylvia expresses her intrigue with her topic and her interest in it. With reference to Sylvia’s selection of her topic for her honours thesis, Gordon Lameyer acknowledges her obsession with Dostoevsky. She had been introduced to Russian Literature by George Gibian’s course in the spring of 1954. Lameyer writes:

Following Gibian’s course, Dostoevsky became Sylvia’s obsession. She carried his volumes on weekends to Yale or with her to the beach in the summer. I believe that Sylvia learned more about herself from reading *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot*, not to mention *The Double*, than from any sessions with her psychiatrist, Ruth Bruetscher (sic), whom Sylvia continued to see regularly at about bimonthly intervals through the following summer. *(Lameyer 35-36)*

Sylvia’s interest and intrigue with her thesis topic may be explained by Lameyer’s observation about her strong interest with Dostoevsky’s novels; what she has been reading for her thesis might have corresponded with what she felt about her own self and helped her attempts to understand her own conflicting nature.
Then, on October 15, she again wrote to her mother:

In connection with this [thesis] topic, I’m reading several stories by E. T. Hoffmann; *Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; Poe’s *William Wilson*; Freud, Frazer, Jung, and others—all fascinating stuff about the ego as symbolized in reflections (mirror and water), shadows, twins-dividing off and becoming an enemy, or omen of death, or a warning conscience, or a means by which one denies the power of death (e.g., by creating the idea of the soul as the deathless double of the mortal body) (*LH* 146).

The reading material of Plath’s thesis shows a mixture of literature on the double as well as the theories and essays of psychoanalysts. Judith Kroll observes Plath’s examination of the phenomenon of the double “from a number of perspectives, including the mythic, the psychopathological, and the literary” in the books that she was reading as preparation for the thesis (Kroll 71).

About Plath’s choice of the topic of her thesis, Strangeways observes that she felt the importance of a relation of psychoanalysis with literature and so placed a specific connection between literature and psychoanalysis (158). He further states that Plath’s generation was interested in theories of schizophrenia due to the influence of R.D. Laing’s *The Divided Self*. 
He also examines Plath’s attitude towards psychoanalytic theories and her study of the Double. In her preface to the “Magic Mirror” Plath had written:

our chief problem is not to diagnose mental maladies, imposing order from outside. Rather, we shall stress the intrinsic technique of the stories themselves, and seek to find in the concrete expression of the divided character the abstract conflicts which are the polarities of Dostoevsky’s universe (Quoted in Strangeways 159).

Strangeways points out that Plath’s critics should bear in mind her advice of not using psychoanalysis “either to diagnose illness or to impose some sort of simplistic order on a work of art.” Plath’s idea about her study of the Double can be used as a point of reference for the present thesis. The study does not seek to start from Plath being a neurotic or schizophrenic, as some critics had done. Plath had a vision and she used the concept of ambivalence in her writings, whether in her poems or her novel, with a conscious awareness of what she was doing. Ambivalence was a tool from psychoanalysis which she used effectively in order to expose the prevailing contradictions and conflicts of her life and times.

T. S. Eliot had said in his essay “Tradition and Individual Talent”: “Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry” (Eliot 297). Eliot’s view is that the real test of a poet’s
achievement is that he/she has given a self-subsistent life to a poem, that it can be understood and valued without reference to the biography of the poet or the author. But, biography cannot be completely dismissed in the attempt to understand the work because the raw materials of the work of art are the poet’s emotions and feelings, his experiences, the books he has read, etc. The Impersonal Theory of Art that Eliot postulates cannot be exactly followed by the poet or the writer. The poem or the work of art that the poet has created may be different from the poet’s personal experiences but they are the elements that had gone into the creative process.

In Modern Man in Search of a Soul, Jung writes about the relation between psychology and literature:

It is obvious enough that psychology, being the study of psychic processes, can be brought to bear upon the study of literature, for the human psyche is the womb of all the sciences and arts. We may expect psychological research, on the one hand, to explain the formation of a work of art, and on the other hand, to reveal the factors that make a person artistically creative. The psychologist is thus faced with two separate and distinct tasks, and must approach them in radically different ways. (Jung 155)

Even though Jung accepts the close relation and even the interdependence between the two undertakings he recognises that “neither of them can yield the
explanations that are sought by the other”. He further adds this about the use of psychological analysis of the work as well as the artist:

It is of course possible to draw inferences about the artist from the work of art, and vice versa, but these inferences are never conclusive. At best they are probable surmises or lucky guesses (Jung 156).

So, use of psychology or psychoanalysis as a tool to analyse a work of art or the artist will not bring a conclusive explanation about the person or the work of art. Analysing Sylvia Plath’s attitude towards ambivalence will help in the attempt to read her poems but it will not be able to explain the work, on the other hand, the work cannot fully explain the artist.

Sylvia Plath recognises the inherent nature of ambivalence in the human being when she says in her poem “Love Is a Parallax” (CP 329-331):

‘...suspense
on the quicksands of ambivalence
is our life’s whole nemesis.’ (CP 329)

In the poem, the speaker says “ambivalence” is “quicksand” and the “nemesis” of a human being’s life is the “suspense” that one feels about the quicksand of ambivalence into which one sinks or tries to escape from, it is this fear of sinking that accompanies all human beings throughout their lives; this suspense of
keeping oneself from sinking is inescapable and the state of anxious uncertainty that one feels in one’s life cannot be defeated however one tries. For Sylvia, life is like “quicksand…hopeless from the start” “hopeless” (UJ 9) because it is irresolvable. The only thing worth having is “the simple sum of heart plus heart”. There is ample proof to show that Plath was afflicted by conflicting feelings in her life. Her Journals are the record of her oscillations and vacillations between one end of the pole of contradiction to the other. As early as 1951, when she was only 19 years old, Sylvia recognized the contradictions in her thoughts and feelings:

I desire the things which will destroy me in the end…I wonder if art divorced from normal and conventional living is as vital as art combined with living: in a word, would marriage sap my creative energy and annihilate my desire for written and pictorial expression which increases with this depth of unsatisfied emotion…or would I achieve a fuller expression in art as well as in the creation of children?...That is the crux of the matter, and I hope to steel myself for the test…as frightened as I am… (UJ 55-56)

Towards her femininity, she says: “I dislike being a girl, because as such I must come to realize that I cannot be a man” (UJ 54). She considers being born a woman “an awful tragedy” because her “whole circle of action, thought and feeling [is] rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity” (sic) (UJ 77).
Then, she resolves: “If I am going to be a woman, fine. But, I want to experience my feminity to the utmost” (UJ 155). Even though Plath has problems reconciling herself to her femininity, she accepts it grudgingly. Later on in the Journals, she prays “Save me from that [bitterness], that final wry sour lemon acid in the veins of single clever lonely woman” (UJ 224). So, inspite of her ambivalence towards femininity she has no inclination to remain single. She would accept the ambivalence, and live “a life of conflict, of balancing children, sonnets, love and dirty dishes” (UJ 225).

Janet Malcolm, in The Silent Woman, observes Plath’s ambivalence towards her writing, especially her fiction, and her ambivalent relation with Ted Hughes, her husband, with reference to the story “The Wishing Box”, written in 1956, in Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other prose writings (35-42). About Plath’s ambivalent feelings, Malcolm says:

In the case of Plath, it wasn’t that she was more divided than the rest of us but only that she left such a full record of her ambivalences—which is why the study of her life is both so alluring and so disturbing, and why the predicament of her survivors is so dire. (Malcolm 88)

So, Plath’s ambivalent attitude is an attitude shared by her contemporaries like Malcolm, who was one year junior to Anne Stevenson in the University of
Michigan, while Stevenson and Plath “were born within months of each other” (Quoted in Malcolm 72-73).

In “The Wishing Box”, the young couple, Harold and Agnes Higgins, compares dreams every morning at the breakfast table. Harold’s dreams are vivid, Technicolor, “meticulous works of art”, and he had a “quick”, and “colourful imagination” and his dreams became an integral part of his waking experience from which Agnes felt “left out”. Agnes’ dreams, on the other hand, were “so prosaic, so tedious, in comparison with the royal baroque splendour of Harold’s” that she became envious of Harold. The result of Agnes’ failure of the imagination is drink, insomnia, sleeping pills and finally, death. Agnes felt herself inferior to Harold as she finds herself competing with his “quick and colourful imagination” (Malcolm 36), and as Musolf states, “Jealousy becomes a human defect, a product of low self-esteem” (Musolf 229).

Plath had said about the importance of imagination in her life:

What I fear most, I think, is the death of the imagination…We must be moving, working, making dreams to run toward; the poverty of life without dreams is too horrible to imagine: it is the kind of madness which is worst: the kind of fancies and hallucinations would be a Bosch-ish relief. (UJ 210)
Al Strangeways had pointed out the limiting nature of psychoanalytic interpretations of Sylvia Plath’s poetry in the third chapter of his book *Sylvia Plath: the Shaping of Shadows*. He observes the use of Object-relations theories of Melanie Klein, D. W. Winnicott, Nancy Chodorow, R. D. Laing by critics like David Holbrook and Lynda K. Bundtzen (133) while Steven Gould Axelrod uses “a combination of object-relations and poststructuralist psychoanalytic theory” in order to “situate Plath’s poetry very firmly in the actual or conjectured psychic disturbances of her past” (134). These critics either use psychoanalysis to examine her poetry as the result of her “psychic disturbances of her past” or “at analyzing her poetry to identify and examine the ‘schizoid’ nature of Plath’s personality” (135).

On the other hand, the Lacanian approach “concentrates on the difficulties of symbolization-of entry into the ‘symbolic order’ of the Father, represented by language, from the pre-Oedipal ‘imaginary’ of the Mother-and the instability of the movement, exhibited in the ever-present slippage or playfulness of language”. Strangeways’ observation is that though both approaches have their uses they fall “into an extreme of either abstraction or biographicalizing” (Strangeways 136). But, whatever the limitations, psychology and psychoanalysis have become effective tools in the attempt to understand the
human condition and human experience in real life as well as in the psychic processes reflected in works of art.

In Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar*, the heroine Esther Greenwood reminds her friend, Buddy Willard, about a question he had asked her whether she wanted to live in the country or in the city, and she had replied that she “wanted to live in the country *and* (italics mine) in the city both”. Buddy had then told her that she “had the perfect set-up of a true neurotic.” Esther declared that he was right and that she was neurotic, as Buddy’s smile faded. Then, after a few lines she laughed scornfully and said:

> 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.

(Plath, *Bell Jar* 89-90)

The character of the novel, Esther, illustrates a very good example of what Daniel Gunn observes about Freud’s theory about dreams “that the unconscious bore no allegiance to the principle of selection-either/or-preferring the combination and…and.” Freud’s ‘Rat Man’ case confirmed that the principle of the combination “and…and” could have an influence on the “affective life”. The neuroticism that Esther speaks about here is the feeling of ambivalence towards
making a choice. She ignores the necessity of making choices; instead she will take both the choices.

Plath’s use of psychoanalytic terms in the novel as well as using the subject matter of the nervous breakdown and electro-convulsive therapy of her heroine, Esther Greenwood in the novel *The Bell Jar* combines the attempt to experiment with a subject she was interested in and her awareness of the “popularity of the subject in magazines like *Cosmopolitan*” (Moraski 84). In a *Journal* entry of June 13, 1959, Plath says:

> Read COSMOPOLITAN from cover to cover. Two mental-health articles. I must write one about a college girl suicide. THE DAY I DIED…There is an increasing market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don’t relive, recreate it. (UJ 495)

Moraski is of the opinion that Plath’s discovery of Theodore Roethke’s poetry about his experiences of his mental breakdown (Moraski 84) and an article she had read by Patricia Blake “I Was Afraid to Be a Woman”, June, 1959, in the *Cosmopolitan* suggested to her the germ of *The Bell Jar* (Moraski 86).

Lynda K. Bundtzen declares that Plath’s ambivalence in her poetry is “a peculiarly feminine attribute, part of what Nancy Chodorow calls a woman’s
relational capacities and psychological adaption to the world” (Bundtzen 205)

Here, both Bundtzen and Chodorow is saying that ambivalence is a female quality and that this is how women relate and adapt to the world, even though its presence in men cannot be ignored.

In studying Plath’s ambivalence, sociological ambivalence is a useful concept for analysing the social roles and the role conflicts which are experienced by women, since both Bundtzen and Chodorow above acknowledge that ambivalence is how women adapt and adjust to the world, that is, the society at large. Kurt Luscher observes this about sociological ambivalence and gender with relation to his study of “intergenerational ambivalence”:

Of importance from a societal perspective is the analysis of the ambivalent structure of the category of gender in contemporary feminist writings. Similar to the differences between the young and the old, [i. e. intergenerational ambivalence] ambivalence is used here with reference to a basic condition of human sociability. (Luscher 7)

Intergenerational ambivalence is the ambivalence that arises between parents and their children due to intimacy, closeness and attachments. Kurt Luscher sees the need to analyse intergenerational relations since he is of the opinion that these relations “imply and generate ambivalences” (3). There is a
fundamental difference between one generation and the other, and as Luscher points out:

No matter how much parents and children are bound to each other throughout their lives and experiences, the latter can never become completely identical to the former. Thus, not only are family relations formally indissoluble, they are also characterised by this fundamental difference. (Luscher 6)

Plath’s poems “The Disquieting Muses” and “Medusa” are illustrative of “intergenerational ambivalence”. Both poems express the ambivalent feelings Plath has towards her mother.

Raulin and Brenner say “ambivalence is usually considered to be a natural phenomenon of everyday life” (201). In everyday language, it “designates dilemmas and inner conflicts, especially with regard to emotions. Many texts in the social sciences use the term specifically in this broad, common-sense meaning” (Luscher 6, 7). Kurt Luscher defines ambivalence from the social science perspective in this way:

We speak of ambivalence in a social science perspective when dilemmas and polarizations of feelings, thoughts, actions and, furthermore, contradictions in social relations and social structures, which are relevant for personal and
Kenneth R. Weingardt describes sociological ambivalence as “arising at the level of social structure when an individual in a particular social relation experiences contradictory demands or norms that cannot be simultaneously expressed in behaviour” (298). He explains ambivalence as the coexistence of positive and negative feelings toward the same person, object, or behaviour. He says that it is the experience of being “‘of two minds, of bipolarity, of vacillation, of the dialectic push and pull of internal conflict’”. Even though Bleuler described it as a fundamental symptom of schizophrenia, the experience is as old as human history and is the subject of both Eastern and Western philosophies and theories. The Yin and Yang of Taoism, the principle of samsara of Zen Buddhism, Jesus’ indecision to run away or face death in the garden of Gethsemane, according to Weingardt, and even Freud’s theories of Eros and Thanatos, are paradigms of the experience of ambivalence.

According to psychological and psychoanalytic theories ambivalence arises from the “level of individual intrapsychic processes”. It is caused by approach-avoidance conflict, cognitive dissonance, or psychological reactance as postulated by Miller and Rollnick. Other theorists like Elster and Skog describe ambivalence as “the interaction between aspects of different selves, different
minds, or more neutrally different interests” in individuals, in short, as arising from a divided sense of self (Weingardt 299). But human beings have to live in a society and build relationships with other members of the society. The intrapersonal ambivalence that a man has will influence the relationship with other individuals living in the family as well as in the society. Weingardt illustrates the effect that intrapersonal ambivalence has on relationships within the social structure with respect to Lewin’s proposition:

Human experience and behaviour do not occur in a vacuum but rather in a ‘field of forces’ that includes the influence of other individuals and society at large. It stands to reason then that ambivalence might be caused not only by process occurring within the individual but might also arise at the level of social structure. (Weingardt 300)

The theory of sociological ambivalence outlined by Merton and Barber in 1963 proposes that:

…ambivalence might arise not only from conflict internal to the individual, but also from conflict between various social roles and social statuses…In its most extended sense, sociological ambivalence refers to incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour assigned to a status (i. e., a social position) or to a set of statuses in society. (Weingardt ibid)
Another aspect of sociological ambivalence is made by Smelser when he says that “dependence (i.e., situations in which choice is restricted because of political, ideological, or emotional costs) breeds ambivalence” (ibid). He further points out that:

…an element of entrapment, be it found in romantic relationships, ‘total institutions’ (e.g., military camps, boarding schools), or groups or organizations that demand commitment, adherence, and faithfulness from their members (e.g., churches, unions, minority groups) can engender feelings of ambivalence. (ibid)

Another element that creates ambivalence is authority in those individuals who are subject to it. Authority is something which arouses “respect, love and admiration” with a mixture of “fear, hatred, and sometimes contempt” (Weingardt 301).

From a study of the above theories of ambivalence it is observed that the ambivalence in Plath can be explained by using an amalgamation of these various theories, whether it is from psychology, psychoanalysis or sociology.

The present thesis will study the concept of ambivalence in Sylvia Plath from this common-sense, everyday perspective. Plath is a woman who tried hard to conform to the ideology of woman of the 1950s, at the same time, she wanted
to be more than being just a wife and mother. She wanted to marry, have children and also be a writer. She did not want to remain a passive member of society which was what postwar America wanted women to be. In her writings she criticises the male attitude of categorising women into intelligent “bluestocking Cambridge women” and “mindless girls” and proposes the need for change in the prevailing ideology in order that there is no split between the female status and female intelligence. So, studying Plath’s ambivalence from the societal perspective is relevant in understanding the ambivalence in her poetry.

Sylvia Plath’s expression of ambivalence in her poems exposes the ambivalent position of women in a patriarchal and modern Western society. 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.

Plath struggled against, and worked through, many of the inequalities and assumptions about gender in America of the 1950s. Like many intelligent
women who completed their education before marriage, she struggled with gender role anxieties during the short time that she lived. Her Journal entries records the mind of an intellectually liberated woman struggling with, and often confined by, behavioural patterns imposed by a tradition created by postwar reaction against advances in equality of employment opportunities for women, caused by the war itself. Plath’s writing plays out her internal conflict between being an “educated, emancipated woman” and her instinctive antipathy to the traditional 1950s female gender roles such as secretary, wife, and mother. In her Journals, Plath expresses her anxieties about gender roles. She writes about how she resents the gender roles of American society; yet she also writes about her desires to become a wife and mother in addition to becoming a successful writer.

In her novel The Bell Jar, first published in 1963, Plath’s protagonist Esther Greenwood struggles with conflicts related to gender roles and female independence from the patriarchal ideology. Plath’s poetry, especially her late poems, “reveals her internal conflicts about gender roles on a symbolic level, through images that are strongly connected to the more fundamental cultural forces of myth” (Simons 25, 26).

Plath is ambivalent towards her biology and her gender. She resents the restrictions brought about by her biology, the lack of freedom of experience as compared to that of men, the fear of pregnancy while desiring sexual fulfilment.
She has conflicting feelings with respect to gender roles prescribed by her culture. At the same time, her ambivalence is also shaped by social practices and discourses; the postwar culture further added to these contradictory feelings as it wanted women to be feminine and to adhere to the feminine role of domesticity which entails passivity. Plath’s feelings of ambivalence are expressed while dealing with the position of intelligent women in society.

Her desire to critique the patriarchal ideology is one of the consequences of her ambivalence, at the same time, this very ideology is the source of her ambivalence because she conforms to the same ideology that she resents. Her poetry is her attempt to deal with and go beyond/transcend her feelings of ambivalence.

One of her poems “The Snowman on the Moor” (CP 58-59) is an interesting example of a wife’s attempt to challenge her husband’s power and authority. It gives a sense of alienation and oppression caused by societal norms with respect to gender roles. The poem presents a scene of battle between a husband and a wife while suggesting that a woman is no match for a man; she is bound to be defeated in the battle between the sexes. After a fierce fight, the wife in the poem, goes out of the house in anger unmindful of the snow outside and walks through the moors resolving “she must yet win/Him to his knees—“. She rages and calls on “hell to subdue an unruly man”. Instead, a “corpse-white/Giant
heaved into the distance”. It was a primitive, “stone-hatcheted, /Sky-high, and snow/Floured his whirling beard”. On its belt she saw “Ladies sheaved skulls”. The giant attacked her with his axe but she narrowly escaped and as suddenly the giant crumbled into smoke. The wife was “Humbled then, and crying,/The girl bent homeward, brimful of gentle talk/And mild obeying”.

The poem is an expression of Plath’s anxiety as a woman. In the husband and wife power politics, the husband is helped and supported by the age-old patriarchal ideology as symbolised by the towering giant who “sheaves” the skulls of witty, intelligent ladies. The wife’s attempt to challenge the husband is defeated by the invincible tradition of male dominance.

The following chapter will be the analysis of selected poems with special reference to the concept of ambivalence. While analysing the poems the concept of ambivalence from the perspective of the psychological connotation of the term as simultaneous feelings of love and hate toward the same individual or object, and, ambivalence as viewed from the societal perspective will be treated.
WORKS CITED


