Plath’s use of the concept of ambivalence in her writings is a deliberate choice because through the use of this tool she negotiates her internal conflicts with the social role conflicts which she found incompatible. The social position of the female as daughter, wife and mother need to be addressed and Plath felt the necessity for change in the male attitude in order to bring about an integrated image of the female self. This acknowledgement of ambivalence in the self as well as in the structure of the 1950s America shows an effort to understand and accept personal identity. Plath’s poems deal with the contradictory feelings which she has towards her self as an educated intelligent woman and her ambivalent feelings towards father-figures and mother-figures.
In "Two Sisters of Persephone" (1956) (CP, 31-32), the first poem taken up for analysis, Plath uses the myth of Persephone, the dying and rising goddess of Greek mythology. In alluding to the Greek mythology, Plath is bringing to light a conscious awareness of the two possible destinies of womanhood, woman as an agent of procreation and woman who denies this destiny by choosing an intellectual life devoted to a career by using the myth of a Greek goddess who is a symbol of ambivalence.

This early poem is an expression of the conflict with respect to the norms of gender as the speaker oscillates between the two mutually incompatible choices, the choice of a career or marriage. This conflict may not seem an incompatible choice in the present day context and Plath herself even combined motherhood and writing in her life but this acceptance of the two mutually incompatible activities had drastic results. It is relevant to put the facts into perspective about gender role conflicts in the 1950s America and that in the present times. The conflict in the roles that women are required to play then and now have not changed much although superficially the women of the present days seem to have got everything under their control. The “double bind” situation is still being experienced, where career-oriented women face a no-win situation, unable to excel in either. That is why Plath says in her 1962 Journal entry:
…to unclutch the sticky loving fingers of babies & treat myself to myself and my husband alone for a bit. To purge myself of sour milk, ruinous nappies, bits of lint and the loving slovenliness of motherhood. (632)

There are too many responsibilities that a woman has to tackle and these responsibilities become obstacles in her path if she desires to fulfil her dream of becoming a complete and whole human being. The above quotation was written when she was thirty years old and had become a mother and at the same time trying hard to carve a niche in the literary world. The contradictory demands of motherhood and writing show her feeling ambivalent towards her status as woman..

In reading the poem, the socio-political context of 1950s America has to be taken into consideration. The gender norms specified by the postwar era was domesticity. The poem portrays the internal conflict of the poet with regard to the social roles and the social status of women. Plath’s 1951 Journal entry records the conflicting desires with respect to the two subjects of marriage and motherhood, and an intellectual life:

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? (55-56)

And then she asks herself “Am I strong enough to do both well? ...That is the crux of the matter” (55-56). In the poem “The Two Sisters of Persephone”, the poet expresses her conflict between femininity and intellectuality by creating two sisters of the Greek underworld goddess Persephone, wife of Hades, lord of the underworld, the realm of the dead, and daughter of Demeter, goddess of vegetation and fruitfulness. Persephone is a dying as well as a rising goddess; she divides her time between the land of the dead and the land of the living, the earth. In the poem the poet places one sister in the shade, the underworld or the place for the dead and, the other in the light, the earth or the land of Demeter. In doing so, she is comparing the two positions open for women in the 1950s, domesticity and career where domesticity is a fulfilment of a woman’s destiny, while choosing a career is a negation of this destiny. Speaking about the early poems “Spinster” and “Two Sisters of Persephone” Anne Stevenson observes in her biography Bitter Fame:

The poems present dichotomies of mutually exclusive types of women, yet Sylvia can be identified with both...The rosy fertility queen and the gray scholar of Two sisters of Persephone are again twin aspects of herself. (164)
The poem reflects the ideology that a woman’s destiny is motherhood and the consequence of diversion from this destiny is a virgin death, “Worm-husbanded, yet no woman” (CP 32). This early poem is at odds with Plath’s strong women of the later poems. When the poet creates the two sisters of Persephone, she places the first sister in the “shade”, a virgin and intellectual, working problems on “A mathematical machine” which is a “barren enterprise” (CP 31). As a result, she becomes squint eyed and “root-pale”, a condition caused by staying in the shade, the underworld, the land of the dead according to the pervasive ideology of the female who chooses to remain wedded to a career.

The second sister who stays outside in the “light” is “bronzed as earth”, becomes a bride and “bears a king”. This sister is associated with nature and fertility, a condition which the poet puts in an affirmative light inspite of her ambivalent feelings towards marriage. Here, even though the poet uses Persephone, a symbol of ambivalence, she is more in favour of the ideology of femininity. Born as a woman, it is a matter of pride for the woman to give birth to a child, to be an agent of procreation as she would have fulfilled her destiny. Plath moves with the tide even if she is unable to dismiss the possibility of an alternative destiny for women. This is why she portrays the picture of the wry intellectual virgin as a negative persona according to the prevailing culture of the time, negative to the feminine ideology. She places the two sisters of Persephone, shade and light, mother and virgin, side by side.
in the poem as a concretisation of her inner dilemma of making a choice between conformity to the feminine ideology and her desire for individuation.

The first stanza of the poem introduces the two girls which are the creations of the poet’s feelings towards womanhood; one sits within the house and the other outside. They represent shade and light, the primary binary opposites. When these two girls play a duet it signifies that they exist together, like the two sides of the same coin, but are different personalities like the two members of a duet:

Two girls there are: within the house
One sits; the other, without.
Daylong a duet of shade and light
Plays between these. (CP 31)

In the second and third stanzas the dark girl’s preoccupation with mental activities is described by the poet. When it was a time where girls are thought to be unscientific and lacking in analytical skills Sylvia makes this girl work “problems on/ A mathematical machine” (CP 31). Her labour is described as a waste of time as the poet calls it a “barren enterprise” (CP 31). This expresses the negative feelings generated in the public by this unfeminine exercise of the intellect by a female and also the poet’s acknowledgement of the prevailing ideology. The girl becomes squint-eyed and “root-pale” and her body is “meagre”, a sign of debility in health caused by her labour, an unhealthy condition for a woman, thus unadvisable for her.
Then, in the fourth stanza the second girl who favours the light and outdoors is presented in complimentary terms. She is compared to the earth, nature; the “dry ticks” used to describe the dark girl’s unproductive time are now precious like “blown gold/ Like pollen on bright air” (CP 32) and she lies on the grass, lulled by the drowsy fragrance of the poppies.

The last three stanzas show the destinies of the two sisters. The second sister accepts the destiny of womanhood. Like the poppies opening to the sun she becomes a bride on the altar of nature and “bears a king”, a fulfilment of the destiny of womanhood, while her dark sister, bitter and sallow goes to the grave “worm-husbanded, yet no woman”:

Freely become sun’s bride, the latter
Grows quick with seed.
Grass-couched in her labor’s pride,
She bears a king. (CP 32)

Bundtzen observes the intellectual sister’s fate as a punishment for attempting to become man’s equal:

The intellectual sister of “Two Sisters of Persephone”, in fact, dies an early death for actively pursuing a male life of the mind instead of passively giving her body over to procreation. (Bundtzen 38)

The intellectual sister in the poem:

…Turned bitter
And sallow as any lemon,  
The other, wry virgin to the last,  
Goes graveward with flesh laid waste,  
Worm-husbanded, yet no woman.     \((CP\ 32)\)

The tragedy of this sister, for the poet, is that she dies a virgin. Al Strangeways observes that in this poem Plath:

\[
\text{…adversely compares the barren, intellectual activity of one woman with the sensual identification with nature of the other. Yet such a simple identification with nature, an almost Laurentian celebration of mindless fertility, is an exception in Plath’s poetry. More generally, she recognizes the problematics of such an identification between women and nature} \quad (\text{Strangeways}\ 64)
\]

In the poem, Plath is placing the dilemma in concrete forms by dividing Persephone into two girls because this is how society looks at or defines a woman; either a wife and mother or a woman involved in a job behaving like a man. But, woman, like man, is both nature and intellect. And this is what Plath is trying to impress upon the society at large and towards the males in particular.

On the other hand, it is understandable that Plath favours fecundity and abhors barrenness because fertility is synonymous with creativity and barrenness is associated with an ambitious writer’s inability to write. For her
writing is an act of giving birth, when she cannot write it means, to her, that
she is also infertile which is death, as a woman and as a writer. She is afraid
of infertility and barrenness in a woman. At the same time her ambition of
becoming “The poetess of America” clashes strongly with the desire for
femininity which entails domesticity and dependence. But, she wants to have
both in her life, as she says in her Journals, “I would like a life of conflict, of
balancing children, sonnets, love and dirty dishes;” an ambivalent choice
(225). Thus, the poem is an expression of the ambivalence between the social
role of women and the intrapersonal conflict towards the prescribed gender
role. In this poem Plath also exposes that “woman’s ambivalent nature is
culturally determined” (Bundtzen 206). This division of women into the
sensual and the mental gives rise to sociological ambivalence at the level of
social structure because the individual, that is, the woman in a particular
social relation experiences contradictory demands or norms that cannot be
simultaneously expressed in behaviour (Weingardt 298).

The poem is a criticism of the inability of intellectual woman to
assimilate feeling and intellect. It places the ambitious woman in an “either--
or” situation. But, Plath is a woman who dislikes alternatives. The poem
exposes the improbability of the patriarchal ideology of the 50s, of education
for domesticity for women which Governor Adlai Stevenson insisted on for
the Smith girls in his Commencement Address for the class of 1955 (Steiner
56,57).
Christopher Simons writes about the gender role anxieties in Plath:

Plath, like many intelligent women who completed their education before marriage, struggled with gender role anxieties during the 1950s. Plath’s journal entries from the late 1950s show the mind of an intellectually liberated woman struggling with, and often confined by, behavioural patterns imposed by “tradition”—but “tradition” that was really a recent 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 a “model young woman” in East Coast American society, and her instinctive antipathy to “traditional” 1950s female gender roles such as secretary, wife, and mother. In her journals, Plath frankly 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 (the year of her death), Plath’s protagonist Esther Greenwood struggles with conflicts related to gender roles and female independence from a patriarchal status quo. (25)

**The Disquieting Muses (1957) (CP 74-76)**

The next poem in analysis is the poem “The Disquieting Muses” which deals with a daughter’s feelings about her mother. Sylvia Plath commented about the poem while reading on a BBC programme:
It borrows its title from the painting by Giorgio de Chirico—*The Disquieting Muses*. All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures in this painting—three terrible faceless dressmaker’s dummies in classical gowns, seated and standing in a weird, clear light that casts the long shadows characteristic of de Chirico’s early work. The dummies suggest a twentieth-century version of other sinister trios of women—the Three Fates, the witches in *Macbeth*, de Quincy’s sisters of madness. (CP 276)

The poem “The Disquieting Muses” portrays the mother-daughter conflict as a strategy to deal with, and to understand and accept, however difficult, the ambivalent relation of the daughter-mother. The poet alludes to the fairy tale of *Sleeping Beauty* where the princess’ parents forgot to invite one of the fairies who, in anger caused by the slight, casts a spell on the baby princess.

In the poem, the daughter reproaches her mother for having brought about terrible things into her life. The daughter accuses the mother of bringing negative elements into her life from the moment of her birth. She places the mother against the muses in order to understand her ambivalent feelings towards her parent. Here, the mother is idealistic in that she wants both her children, the brother and sister, to become perfect persons, which is what every mother wants for her child. Her upbringing of her children reflects it but the speaker realizes that her mother’s dream-world of fairy tales is in stark
contrast to the reality. Her upbringing of them was not grounded on the hard cold facts of life where there should be room for the existence of failure, weaknesses and differences, and the need to make choices in all human beings. Plath also voices her opinion about parents who burdens their dreams on to their children.

Looking back at her childhood experience, Plath fictionalises her mother’s upbringing of her brother and herself in an attempt to find the source of her disquieting life. The poem suggests that the mother’s labours are lost on the daughter whose days and nights are watched over by these sinister figures whose “heads are like darning-eggs” and features are “Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head” (CP 75). The mother’s attempt to teach denial of unpleasant situations in her children’s lives has been ineffectual to the children when they grew up and faced the real world. The fairy-tales and the heroic stories where the good always wins and the bad are punished are just that, stories, lies. The daughter in the poem reproaches the mother for feeding her lies and denying the existence of unpleasant things like personal shortcomings and failures.

As Plath had commented about the poem on a BBC radio programme, she takes the title from de Chiroco’s painting of the same title. The most important impression the painting made on the poet’s mind was that the figures in the painting were “enigmatic”, “terrible”, “faceless…dummies” and
that they were sinister figures. The muses became harbingers of the inevitability of a person’s fate in spite of the machinations of human effort to shape their destiny. Here, the poet cannot escape her vigilant, uninvited muses who keep watch over her. Instead of being the inspiration to the poet they fill her with dread and anxiety. Al Strangeways observes that:

the speaker describes her female muses, not as supportive ‘grandmothers’, but in fairytale terms of powerful and ugly uninvited godmothers at a christening, in whose oppressive shadow the daughter develops. (Strangeways 32)

In the beginning of the poem the poet blames the mother, reproaches her for bringing bad things into her life. The poet is not sure whether her mother is even aware of the presence of these three ladies, the disquieting muses. The first two stanzas imply a lack of communication or an estranged relationship between the mother and the daughter. There is no close affirmative connection between them; it is a failed relationship. The mother’s idea of good parenting and the daughter’s idea are in conflict. In the mother’s stories the “heroic bear” always wins and the witches always got “baked into gingerbread”. The mother’s stories of bravery and punishment meted out to the bad had not been successful to drive away the fear that these three sinister figures aroused in her, they do not leave her company even far into the night. Story-telling and teaching them the denial of the existence of fear when the
poet and her brother were young, according to the poet, are no help when she is faced with the hard cold reality.

The third stanza describes a scene in which the speaker is reminded of an incident during her childhood in which the mother tried to keep the children calm during a hurricane by giving them “cookies and Ovaltine” and making them chant words to ward off the fear of the storm, but, for the daughter they were of no help because she says that “those ladies broke the panes”; these muses, unlike “Thor” who was ineffectual, were very powerful.

The poet goes back to the past when she was a child taking part in a school dance. Her inability to dance and being side-lined drove her mother into tears of disappointment. Mother’s attempts of making the daughter an all-round achiever like the other children were a failure. She remained in the shadow of her “Godmothers”, the disturbing muses.

The daughter remembers her shortcomings in dance and music of which her mother was blind to in the fifth stanza:

Mother, you sent me to piano lessons
And praised my arabesques and trills
Although each teacher found my touch
Oddly wooden in spite of scales
And the hours of practicing, my ear
Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable.  (CP 75)
The mother sent the daughter to ballet and piano lessons when she was a child and was proud of her but the teachers thought her wooden and tone-deaf. She was unteachable in dance and music but she says that she “learned elsewhere, / From muses unhired by you, dear mother” (CP 75). The mother’s lack of understanding of her daughter’s shortcomings, needs and wants drove them apart and made her look to other sources of inspiration.

The mother and daughter seem to live in different planets, the mother’s world was bright with colours; it was filled with flowers and birds which were “never, never found anywhere”, and was totally unapproachable and inaccessible to the daughter because it “bobbed away / Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!” (CP 76) The lines in the sixth stanza imply that the mother lives in an unreal, imaginary, illusionary world, optimistic and bright unlike her daughter’s world which is dark and dismal. Whatever she had taught her daughter was inapplicable in the real world and the poet resents this failing of her mother. The daughter came to realise the mother’s impracticality when she “woke one day” and understood her mother’s lack of experience or insight in her up-bringing of her children:

I woke one day to see you, mother,
Floating above me in bluest air
On a green balloon bright with a million
Flowers and bluebirds that never were
Never, never, found anywhere. (CP 75, 76)
Separated from her mother by an invisible, unbridgeable chasm, her “travelling companions” stand vigil over her day and night with blank faces, “shadows long in the setting sun” (*CP* 75, 76). The poet’s tragedy is that her sun “never brightens or goes down” (*CP* 75, 76) and she has to live this tragedy because this is what her mother had given her as her fate--“And this is the kingdom you bore me to, / Mother, mother.” But, since the poet wants to spare her mother from this unpleasant truth she resolves--“But no frown of mine / Will betray the company I keep.” (*CP* 76)

As Linda Wagner-Martin writes that Plath’s anger toward Aurelia, which were expressed in notes about her therapy with Dr. Beuscher, was focused on the faulty information her mother provided her. The daughter in Plath was disappointed in the mother as she was found to be of no help because of their “wide discrepancy in beliefs and expectations”. (Wagner-Martin, 27)

The poem is an illustration of maternal ambivalence which is generated by the conflicting impulses of the love and hate between parent and child because of the contradictory prescriptions of perfect motherhood. The daughter’s accusation is that her mother left her unprepared to face reality but she cannot express what she felt outright because of her love of her mother, so she uses her muse of poetry to do it.
The last line of the poem is pathetic and shows Plath’s feelings towards her psychiatrist Ruth Beuscher which contrasts with her feelings about her mother:

I believe in RB’s because she is a clever woman who knows her business & I admire her. She is for me ‘a permissive mother figure’. I can tell her anything, and she won’t turn a hair or scold or withhold her listening which is a pleasant substitute for love. (UJ 429)

She compares her psychiatrist with her mother. Sylvia feels that her mother is someone with whom she could never share her genuine feelings or is indifferent to her pleas for help and guidance when she is faced with problems.

The poem is an insightful analysis of the mother-daughter relationship, an example of the generation gap or, as social scientists call, intergenerational ambivalence. According to Kurt Luescher and Karl Pillemer “intergenerational ambivalence” is the term used:

to designate contradictions in relationships between parents and adult offspring that cannot be reconciled. The concept has two dimensions: (a) contradictions at the level of social structure, evidenced in institutional resources and requirements, such as statuses, roles, and norms and (b) contradictions at the subjective level, in terms of cognitions, emotions, and motivations…
critical component is the presence of both positive and negative perceptions by an individual. Thus, an individual who experiences the relationship with a parent as incorporating both affection and resentment would be identified as ambivalent. (416)

Plath’s poem “The Disquieting Muses” is the result of ambivalence felt at the subjective level as she feels both love and hatred towards her mother.

**Full Fathom Five (1958) (CP 92-93)**

The next poem for analysis “Full Fathom Five” takes its title from Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* where Ariel sings the song “Full fathom five thy father lies” about the drowned Alonso, Ferdinand’s father. In the play no one died, Ferdinand meets his father Alonso, who was thought to be dead. Judith Kroll writes about the poem:

“Full Fathom Five” refers to the retelling of the speaker’s life in obviously Shakespearean terms: her father, by dying, has undergone a ‘sea-change’, becoming a sort of underworld king whose daughter, exiled from his kingdom, is condemned to life. The allusion both states that her father is dead and intimates that, like Ferdinand’s father, he still lives. (54, 55)

Sylvia Plath wrote in her *Journals* about the poem “Full Fathom Five” (1958) (CP 92-93):
Another title for my book: Full Fathom Five...It relates more richly to my life and imagery than anything else I’ve dreamed up: has the background of The Tempest, the association of the sea, which is a central metaphor for my childhood, my poems and the artist’s subconscious, to the father image – relating to my own father, the buried male muse & god-creator risen to be my mate in Ted, to the sea-father Neptune – and the pearls and coral highly-wrought to art: pearls sea-changed from the ubiquitous grit of sorrow and dull routine. (UJ 381)

Anne Stevenson observes the following in relation to the poem: “Perceiving how a godlike image of Otto Plath (whom Ted had replaced) needed to rise from the sea, Sylvia composed Full Fathom Five, (Stevenson 128). Again, Ted Hughes says that it had been written “while reading Cousteau’s books about the submarine world, alternating reading and writing without moving her position.” (CP Notes: 1958, 287)

Sylvia considers her poem about her father as one of her “best and most curiously moving poems, about my father-sea god-muse…” (CP13). It is in stark contrast to the poem on her mother, “The Disquieting Muses”. As the poet says, the father is placed in the triple role of “father, sea god and muse” whereas in the poem about her mother she points an accusing finger at her mother. Her mother’s muses are disquieting though the mother is unaware of her daughter’s distress, but the father muse is desirable though unfathomable.
The mother poem is based on factual information while the poem about her father is mythical.

In the poem, the poet tries to understand the uncertainty surrounding the death of her father. This is no wonder because both the poet and her brother, Warren, were screened by their mother from the death of their father. They did not take part in the funeral and so, never had a chance to properly mourn his death.

In the first three stanzas of the poem, the father is portrayed as a sea-god who rises with the waves, formidable as the ice-mountains, unfathomable and “inscrutable”. The father is seen rarely, coming with the tide, like Poseidon, the Greek sea-god, riding the waves. The drowned father is a myth that the poet uses in most of her poems:

Old man, you surface seldom.
Then you come in with the tide's coming
When seas wash cold, foam-

Capped : white hair, white beard, far-flung,
A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves
Crest and trough. Miles long (CP 92)

As Plath has written in her journals about the sea metaphor the drowned father floats in the subconscious sea of her childhood. Her memory of him survives as a myth “to be steered clear /Of, not fathomed”, dangerous like the
“keeled ice-mountains” (CP 92) because to try to understand her feelings for her father is dangerous, at the same time, it was a splinter in her heart to which she returns again and again poking it with a needle to remove. But, if she delved too deep into herself his form vanishes like “vapors” in the dawn sea. As the poet says in the sixth and seventh stanzas:

…I
Cannot look much but your form suffers
Some strange injury (CP 92)
And seems to die: so vapors
Ravel to clearness on the dawn sea.
The muddy rumors (94)

The eighth stanza continues from the seventh:

Of your burial move me
To half-believe: your reappearance
Proves rumors shallow, (94)

This shows that the poet has difficulty in reconciling herself to the death of the father; she does not want to believe that her father is dead and is sceptical about the rumours of his death, and his appearing as a sea-god proves that he is undying and eternal, which is what she wants to believe.

In the remaining stanzas, the poet describes the mysterious nature of the father. The archaic, grained face of her father solidifies time, and “Ages beat like rains” (CP 93) when he surfaces. The father is powerful enough to move
heaven and earth. But, no one has seen him “below shoulders” and he defies questions because he is unreachable and unapproachable by the daughter. The daughter’s desire and attempt to connect with him poses difficulties because to do so would mean her joining him in his watery kingdom, which will be death for her. The daughter and the father are separated by her exile from the father’s kingdom of the sea:

I walk dry on your kingdom's border
Exiled to no good.  (CP 93)

The daughter is alive, her father is dead, but she considers her living as being exiled from her father. She prefers death—“I would breathe water” (CP 93)—so that she could join him. Her longing for her father is not just that of her biological father but of her “childhood, her poems and the artist’s subconscious” (UJ 381). The buried male muse is her dead father who has risen as “god-creator”, “sea-father neptune” in her husband.

The poem ends with the poet’s death-wish or the desire to join the father in death: “Father, this thick air is murderous. /I would breathe water” (CP 93). Her love of her father and her longing to join him will mean death for her. For the daughter, life has become “murderous”; she would prefer death and join him in his mythic kingdom. The father-figure in the poem is “both dead and absent and at the same time an oppressive ruler over his
daughter, who is both guilty of his death and ‘guilty of nothing’” (Bundtzen 193). A similar idea is expressed in the next poem to be analysed.

**Electra on Azalea Path 1959 (CP116-117)**

“Electra on Azalea Path” (CP116-117) was written on March 20, 1959. On March 8, 1959, Sylvia Plath paid a visit to her father’s grave at Winthrop. Sylvia recorded the visit in her *Journals*:

Went to my father’s grave, a very depressing sight. Three grave yards separated by streets, all made within the last fifty years or so, ugly crude block stones, headstones together, as if the dead were sleeping head to head in a poorhouse. In the third yard, on a flat grassy area looking across a sallow barren stretch to rows of wooden tenements I found the flat stone, *Otto Emil Plath: 1885-1940*, right beside the path, where it would be walked over. Felt cheated. *My temptation to dig him up. To prove he existed and really was dead.* (italics mine). (473)

The feelings expressed in the *Journals*, about her “temptation to dig him up. To prove he existed and really was dead”, shows Plath’s feelings about her father’s death. It is an admission of her ambivalent feelings about her father’s death. She had never really accepted or recognised the fact that her father had really died. The poem, as Bassnett says, is “Sylvia Plath’s working out of her relationship with her father” (86).
Plath had never accepted her father’s death in her subconscious mind. In the poem the poet tries to come to terms with the death of her father by using the Oresteia myth. The title suggests an Electra-like daughter trying to reconcile her feelings in connection with her father’s death. Another reference is to Freud’s theory about the Electra complex where every young girl is in love with her father and jealous of the mother.

In the first stanza, the poet describes the daughter’s reaction to the father’s death, her helplessness and her inability to accept her separation from her father. She says:

   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—
   As if you had never existed, as if I came
   God-fathered into the world from my mother's belly:
   Her wide bed wore the stain of divinity.
   I had nothing to do with guilt or anything
   When I wormed back under my mother's heart. (CP 116)

The poem shows that with the death of her father the daughter also lived in a death-like condition. The reference to the bees wintering shows that her state after her father’s death is like that of the bees which her father loved alluding to Plath’s own life. She continued in this state for twenty years,
denying her father’s existence. Her grief was so extreme that she wormed back into her mother’s womb, regressing into a guiltless state of childhood which implies that she felt guilty on her part about the death even though she says “I had nothing to do with guilt or anything” (CP 116). The poem is written in March 1959 when Sylvia was 27 years old, so it is a looking back at the past and analysing her feelings after more than twenty years after his death:

In the second stanza, the poet becomes “Small as a doll” (CP 116) and she is dressed in “innocence”. The poet has become a child again and tries to absolve from her guilt about her father’s death by putting on a “dress of innocence” and recreates an epic for her father where “Nobody died or withered on that stage” (CP 116). This is wishful thinking on the daughter’s part to cope with her loss. But the attempt to escape from the fact of her loss is useless as she woke up from her hibernation on her father’s grave. Seeing the sorry condition of her father’s grave her dream of her father’s epic was shattered. The graveyard was crowded and there were no real flowers except some artificial plants in the neighbouring grave; the rains dissolve the dye of the red flowers. The red colour of the dye brings to her mind another kind of redness. She is reminded of the Oresteia myth of Electra:

Another kind of redness bothers me:

*The day your slack sail drank my sister's breath
The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth*
My mother unrolled at your last homecoming.  
I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy.  (117)

The lines written in italics refer to Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia to Artemis for a favourable wind on his voyage to Troy and his eventual murder by his wife Clytemnestra, with the help of her lover Aegisthus, in revenge for the killing of her daughter. When Sylvia uses this legend she insinuates that her father was murdered by her mother just as Agamemnon was murdered at his wife’s instigation; she blames her mother for her father’s death and in trying to understand it she borrows the tragedy of Orestes and his sister Electra. But, in the next line she puts all the blame on herself saying that she was fated from the moment of her birth to lose her father just as it was her mother’s to lose her husband early. Bassnett observes:

The figure of Electra is an ambiguous one – she appears both as victim and as hag, as avenger and as moral coward in various retellings of the story and it is this multiplicity that seems to dominate Sylvia Plath’s poem…  (88)

In the last stanza, the daughter says “I brought my love to bear, and then you died” (CP 117) and rejects the factual cause of her father’s death that her father “died like any man” (CP 117). She believes that her love killed him and that it was her fault that her father committed suicide by drowning “My mother dreamed you face down in the sea” (CP 117), this is why she says “I am the ghost of an infamous suicide, / My own blue razor rusting in my
throat” (CP 117). So, for the daughter her father did not die from a natural cause like the “gangrene” but was either drowned or murdered or committed suicide in order to mythicize him and set him up as a grand colossal figure and sea god of myths and legends which she had done in the previous poem “Full Fathom Five”.

She seeks pardon from her father for murdering him by being born to him and says that both of them died as a result of her love-“It was my love that did us both to death” (CP 117) which implies that she has committed the crime of patricide indirectly for which she asks pardon from him. As Susan Bassnett says:

The Electra figure is an unhappy, marginalised outsider, doomed neither to share the confidence of her mother nor to enjoy the fruits of her loyalty to her father. (87-88)

This is the fate that Sylvia is doomed to bear because of her guilt complex as well as her anger and resentment against both parents. Sylvia, like Electra, is both a victim suffering from her father’s death and a victimizer of her father’s death, the cause of his death.

**The Colossus (1959) (CP 129-130)**

The poem “The Colossus” (1959) (CP 129-130) deals with the problematic relationship with the father as in the previous father-poem “Full
Fathom Five”. In “Full Fathom Five” “the father is the buried male muse and
god creator…” (UJ 381), but here, the father is a ruined colossal figure. The
poet presents the huge broken ruins of a colossus which the speaker in the
poem is trying to repair or to reconstruct or resurrect.

But it is only in the fourth stanza of the poem that the speaker addresses
the ruin as the father. In representing the broken colossus as the father, the
daughter’s relation to the father is not that of flesh and blood or of any normal
memory of a father but of a gigantic idol of which she is the caretaker or a
worshipper who wants to mend the ruined and broken idol to its former glory:

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum. (CP 129)

Both father-figures in the two poems are either buried or broken and
ruined muses. They are of no help to the daughter and her task is to either
make the buried muse-father rise as a sea-god Neptune or to reconstruct the
ruined statue to make him an oracle. But the irony is that it is the daughter
herself who is going to bestow these “god-like proportions or pretensions”
(Bundtzen 187) while knowing that he is dead and so, ineffectual to help her
as her muse; he has nothing more to say to her. Bundtzen observes:

The daughter in Plath’s poem is looking for an oracle, a
father who will be the ‘guarantor of all values’ and
absolute measure of meaning in her life. At the same
time, Plath is critically aware of the fact that her father is nothing but a dead man, a mere mortal…

The effect of this double perspective—devoted and critical—in “The Colossus” is confusing. The archaeologist-daughter displays contradictory emotions toward the huge statue she is restoring. (Bundtzen 187)

Representing the father as a colossus signifies the ambivalent feelings of the poet towards him. It also suggests that the memory of the father is not whole, which is not a healthy feeling, but broken into huge irreparable pieces which the poet is trying to fix; she is attempting to resurrect a whole, complete image of the father in her mind. But unfortunately for the poet she is not successful in her attempt. The psychological wound in the daughter made by the inability to communicate and to know the father is laid bare in the poem. The daughter’s desire for knowledge of the father through communication with him is a failure because of the hugeness and importance and god-like nature of the father in her imagination. This unfathomability and incommunicability of the father gives him the quality of a muse.

The first stanza expresses the impossibility of the daughter’s attempt to repair the broken pieces of the ruined colossus entirely. Animal sounds emit from the mouth of the statue which is worse than the noises proceeding from a barnyard. The speech of the colossus is incoherent and incomprehensible to the daughter:
I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It's worse than a barnyard. (*CP129*)

The incomprehensibility of the sounds emitted by the father is mocked at by the daughter; she contemptuously derides the father for considering himself “an oracle, / Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other” (*CP* 129). Maybe this is why she is unable to clean the colossus’ throat as she says “I am none the wiser” (*CP* 129) because she cannot understand what he is trying to convey to her.

Then in the second stanza she derides him for his self-importance, of his considering himself an oracle, a spokesman of the gods or something who prophesizes but the words conveyed by him are unintelligible to her. For thirty years the speaker has been trying to remove the silt from the father’s throat meaning she has been trying to clean, repair and reconstruct the image of her father:

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
Thirty years now I have labored
To dredge the silt from your throat.
I am none the wiser. (*CP* 129)
In the third stanza, the poet emphasises the hugeness of the colossus and the speaker’s smallness by comparing herself to an ant. Her labour of mending the father’s image is conducted in mourning. Then, the poet mentions the “Oresteia” which signifies the trilogy of Aeschylus, the story of murder and revenge of the House of Atreus, a cursed house. She says:

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arch over us \( (CP\ 129) \)

This implies that they live overshadowed by a curse like that of the Oresteia. Bundtzen explains the use of the Oresteia in the following way:

We may well wonder why she does not release herself from a predicament that she thoroughly understands as self-destructive. Plath’s only clue to such behaviour is the reference to the Oresteia, implying that the daughter is compelled by blood-guilt and revenge to persist in her work. (188)

The poet spends her days and nights “married to shadow” of the father and no longer hopes for rescue from her unrewarding labour of love. She has to bear the curse of forever trying to mend the broken image of the father and failing.

In the poem the poet gives a conflicting sense of the importance of the father by using words like “oracle”, “mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other” and emphasising his size, while making the speaker unimportant by
diminution of her size. At the same time she tries to show him as worthy of ridicule because of his self-importance as well as his unresponsiveness to the daughter’s efforts to connect with him. This expresses the daughter’s frustration with her efforts but still she relentlessly pursues her work of resurrecting the father. Bundtzen states that “The Colossus” is a poem about a daughter’s unsuccessful struggle “to recover a dead father, to retrieve his voice and persuade him to speak to her” (Bundtzen 186). The daughter’s attempt to make a connection with the father is futile because, as seen in the first and second stanzas of the poem, his words or language are unintelligible to her. The poet’s attempt to know, understand or to build a relationship with the father is futile because he is unfathomable, unimaginable and unknowable.

**Barren Woman (21 February, 1961, CP 157)**

Two poems written within a week of each other are the poems “Barren Woman” (21 February, 1961, CP 157) and “Heavy Women” (26 February, 1961, CP 158) which deal with two possible conditions that women may encounter in their lives, barrenness and fertility. In the poem “Barren Woman”, written on February 21 1961, the barren woman is critical towards herself; she says that she is like an empty museum, grand but meaningless, beautiful but worthless. About the poet’s description of the barren woman as “a museum without statues”, Kroll observes that the poet is suggesting that a barren woman’s body is “merely decorative, functionless architecture. A
marble building empty of statues is not a museum but a mausoleum” (Kroll 67). The poet presents an imagery of emptiness, echoes and deadness, a stark and deserted scene. The mood is cold and hard. The image of the fountain leaping and sinking into itself reflects the narcissistic unproductivity of the woman, existing only for itself, “nun-hearted and blind to the world”:

Empty, I echo to the least footfall,
Museum without statues, grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas.
In my courtyard a fountain leaps and sinks back into itself,
Nun-hearted and blind to the world. Marble lilies
Exhale their pallor like scent. \((CP \ 157)\)

Kroll assumes that the poem might have been occasioned by Plath’s own miscarriage in February 1961 (Kroll 66). It shows how Plath thinks about a woman unable to fulfil her social role of femininity.

I imagine myself with a great public,
Mother of a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos.
Instead, the dead injure me with attentions, and nothing can happen.
The moon lays a hand on my forehead,
Blank-faced and mum as a nurse. \((CP \ 157)\)

The woman dreams of being admired by people for becoming a mother of a daughter and several sons, she sees herself in the centre of a crowd unlike the emptiness of her barren state. But instead of becoming a mother she catches the attention of only deadness and says “nothing can happen”. Her
consoler is the moon, a symbol of barrenness and fertility for Sylvia. The idea conveyed in the poem is the emptiness and sterility of a barren woman’s life.

**Heavy women (26 February, 1961, 158)**

The next poem taken up for consideration is about pregnant women “Heavy women” (26 February, 1961, 158). It is interesting to note how Plath looks at these women who have fulfilled the social role of motherhood. Unlike the self-critical tone of the barren, the tone in this poem is ironical. The poet in the poem “Heavy Women” describes the pregnant women as beautiful and smug:

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Irrefutable, beautifully smug nothing  
As Venus, pedestaled on a half-shell  
Shawled in blond hair and the salt       (CP 158)
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She puts up these women to the status of Venus, the goddess of love. The mood is calm and complacent and warm. But the lines “The dark still nurses its secret/On the green hill, under the thorn trees,” (CP 158) are ambiguous. They might mean the mystery of childbirth which is an event filled with pain for the woman. But, these smiling pregnant women wait for the birth of their babies.

These expecting mothers wait for the beating hearts of their new born babies. The poet brings in the colour “Mary-blue” to suggest the similarity of
these expectant mothers to the Virgin Mary thus raising them up above the barren woman in the previous poem. But the calm and composed scene of the heavy women is jarred when the poet says-

While far off, the axle of winter
Grinds round, bearing down with the straw
The star, the wise gray men. (CP 158)

Even in the midst of this beautiful picture of expecting motherhood the poet’s mind is not free of the winter that comes round to every human being’s life. These lines convey a pessimistic note and reminded the readers of the birth of baby Jesus and the grief that His mother had to bear for her joy at His birth, and his suffering which is a grief that all mothers will have to bear without fail.

Looking at the two poems “Barren Woman” and “Heavy Women”, Plath’s attitude towards the two types of women’s social roles, being a barren woman and a pregnant woman, is ambivalent. Barrenness is a curse, at the same time, complacent and passive pregnancy and motherhood is also frowned upon by her. It is an insult to the potentialities and capabilities of the quality of a human being in the woman. One thing that is noticed about Plath in these poems is that in her personal life she conforms to the cultural norms of femininity but in her writings she explores and exposes the division of woman into two mutually exclusive entities. On the other hand, as seen in her Journals barrenness is death for her, biologically and artistically. (UJ 495)
In Plaster 1961 (CP 158-160)

The poem taken up for the next analysis is “In Plaster” (CP 158-160) was written on 18 March 1961. The poem is inspired by Plath’s hospital experience.

Ted Hughes wrote in his notes about this poem: - “In March of this year SP spent a week in hospital undergoing an appendectomy. The patient in complete plaster lay on a neighbouring bed. This and the next poem, ‘Tulips’ (No. 142), were written during this week.” (CP Notes: 1961, 291) With the knowledge about the background of the poem, it is interesting how Sylvia develops the theme of the split self or the double by using the model of a real life person in a plaster cast. Using the facts about a plaster cast the poet builds up the dilemma of the self that is split or a person with a dual personality. Another reference can be made about this poem to Appendix 12, Letter, 1 October, 1957. The letter is addressed to “a demon” (CP 618). In this letter Plath writes about the presence of a “murderous self” and a “good self”. She says, writing about the conflict in her self, “ My demon would murder this self [the good one] by demanding it be a paragon, and saying it should run away if it is being anything less” (UJ 619). It is interesting to read Plath writing a poem inspired by a variety of incidents and feelings.

The poem “In Plaster” is a very ambivalent poem; in the poem, the poet splits the self into two and she says from the very outset that she cannot
escape from this split. This splitting of the self is a curse from which the person cannot escape, the warring of the two selves is going to last forever or till death ends her life:

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:
This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one,
And the white person is certainly the superior one.
She doesn't need food, she is one of the real saints.
At the beginning I hated her, she had no personality—
She lay in bed with me like a dead body
And I was scared, because she was shaped just the way I was. (CP 158)

In psychology, 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), while from the perspective of sociological ambivalence it is “conflict between different parts of the client’s sense of self” (Weingardt 299). He explains this conflict in the following way:

Individuals often describe their phenomenological experience of ambivalence as the interaction between aspects of different selves, different minds, or more neutrally different interests. (Weingardt 299)

In order to illustrate the point, he gives the example of a client who says that a part of her loves her husband while another part of her has hostile feelings towards him. Weingardt again explains ambivalence from classical
psychoanalytic theory: “…id, ego, and superego interact within the individual to cause intrapsychic conflict that can be experienced as ambivalence” (Weingardt 299, 300).

In the beginning of the poem the poet uses the qualities of the plaster cast to describe the new self which has the personality of a conformist. The poet says the new white self is superior as it does not need food and she considers it “one of the real saints”. She says she hated it at the beginning because it had no personality. Self-effacement and saintliness are qualities that enhance a woman’s femininity, which are “superior” qualities for a woman but the poet hates this lack of personality and individuality. The white person lay in bed with the poet like a dead body, shaped just like her, and this similarity scared her. This white superior self is an aspect of her own personality. So, the speaker in the poem knows that she can never escape from this self who is so perfect that it is not fallible like her human self.

The poem brings to the mind the early poem “Two Sisters of Persephone” where the poet Persephone into two selves, one feminine and the other intellectual, who are aspects of differing tendencies in the same person. The poet stresses on the whiteness of the new self, it is also unbreakable unlike the “old yellow self” and does not complain.

The difference between the two selves was that the new self was “whiter and unbreakable” (CP 158) and uncomplaining but cold while the old
self complains all the time. She was at the receiving end of the yellow one’s dissatisfactions but she did not retaliate. The poet calls it “stupid behaviour”; she remained like a “true pacifist” unaffected by the poet’s violent behaviour. She realizes that all these insults were borne by the white self because the white person wanted to win the old one’s love.

The third and fourth stanzas describe the relationship between the two selves. The speaker is the old yellow, the one from whom the new self came into existence so it was patronizing:

Without me, she wouldn’t exist, so of course she was grateful.
I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose
Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain,
And it was I who attracted everybody’s attention,
Not her whiteness and beauty, as I had at first supposed.
I patronized her a little, and she lapped it up —
You could tell almost at once she had a slave mentality.

(CP 159)

The qualities of the white self are too good to be true--“superior”, “doesn’t need food”, “one of the real saints”, has “no personality”, “like a dead body”, “unbreakable”, uncomplaining, “cold”, “a true pacifist”, “grateful”, has “a slave mentality”, tidy, calm, patient—all these qualify what patriarchy wants all women to be. She was the best nurse for the old yellow but a change took over the relationship:
She stopped fitting me so closely and seemed offish.
I felt her criticizing me in spite of herself,
As if my habits offended her in some way.
She let in the drafts and became more and more absent-minded.
And my skin itched and flaked away in soft pieces
Simply because she looked after me so badly.
Then I saw what the trouble was: she thought she was immortal.
(CP 159)

The white self at first could not exist without the old one but in course of time she became “superior” and resentful, started criticizing and became an agent of death. She wanted to take over the old yellow self completely, thinking “she was immortal” forgetting that she could not exist without the yellow self. The narrator’s dependence on the white self has placed her at a disadvantage; she could not do without her and is quite helpless while thinking of vengeance. Steven Gould Axelrod says:

For Plath, the other who unites with the self as an indispensable sustainer threatens to become an intolerable weight. Hence the patient’s ambivalent dependency and revolt: she rebels so that the double will “miss” her.
(Axelrod 222)

The poem expresses the splitting of the self into two conflicting personalities. It shows a portrayal of the identity crisis faced by women because of the demands of the social roles. Society demands passivity,
sainthood qualities in a woman represented by the white self but the old yellow one rebels against the norms that society prescribes for women as these are qualities that cannot be simultaneously expressed in their behaviors. The consequence of these demands is the oscillation of behaviors. The warring selves are trying to defeat one another but the paradox is that one cease to exist without the other. This condition is a human predicament. The struggle for dominance in self between these polar opposites will continue because of cultural requirements and the personal needs to self assertion.

**Tulips 1961 (CP 160-162)**

In the poem “Tulips” (CP 160-162) written on 18 March 1961, the tulips are the antagonists to the speaker lying on the hospital bed having given up her identity, individuality, her past and present, learning peacefulness and effacement. The tulips symbolise life towards which the speaker has turned her back, their redness and vitality excite the woman who has given up all worldly attachments and has become a nun, pure, empty and free, desiring disembodiment which is a desire for a death-like state. To this irresponsible desire the tulips pump life, awareness and health. The speaker and the tulips are the opposite poles of deadness and life. The flowers are a projection of the speaker’s ambivalent feelings towards life and death.
Susan R. Van Dyne observes that the tone of “Tulips” is “a quiescent detachment from the body…, a passive life-in-death in which her body is relinquished to ‘Jovian surgeons’”. (Van Dyne 89).

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.
Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in.
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.
I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

(CP 160)

Shorn off her identity, the speaker has resigned herself to the sanitized hospital and its staff. Its winter whiteness and quiet surround everything, and the speaker lies as if snowed-in cocooned by the cold. She lays quiet as the light that falls on everything in the room, trying to attain peace yet not quite achieving it as the continuing stanza shows; the eyes are aware of everything. The speaker has become one with all the rest of the patients there, she has surrendered her name, clothes, history and body to the nurses and doctors, at the same time, she has also given up her commitment to life. Her effacement is almost complete.

Against the backdrop of the speaker’s winter, the quietness, stillness and deadness of feeling and lack of enthusiasm for life, the tulips burst into the scene with their vitality and vibrancy, bringing life and spring for the
speaker. She is preparing herself for a death-like state when the tulips’ “excitability” explodes the peace and quiet. That is why she resents the tulips for the disturbance as the first line expresses.

In the second stanza, the speaker is on the hospital bed. Lying on the bed with her head propped between the pillow and the sheet, she sees all the activity going on around her. Even though she is confined to her bed, the patient’s mind is free to journey inward to meditate on her situation. The mind is active while the body is still; the peacefulness that she yearns does not come naturally but it is induced by the injections of the nurses.

The speaker’s body turns into a “pebble”, a depersonalized, lifeless inanimate object in the hands of the nurses who bring numbness and sleep. With sleep coming over her she says that she has now lost everything; she has lost herself to the drugs that obliterate everything for her. Now, she wants to lose her associations with everything that pull her back from this drugged peacefulness; her belongings, husband, her child smiling from the family photo, they catch hold of her like “hooks” or chains that bind her to life and relationships. She wants escape from commitment to her relationships which hold her back. When a person has no commitments it gives her a feeling of freedom, she has to answer to no one, nothing holds her back. In such an enviable situation the tulips explode into the scene and catch her attention disrupting her desire to free herself from all her loving associations.
Constance Scheerer writes about the poem:

“Tulips” sets up a confrontation not only between life and death but between the faceless and the face-endowed as well, i.e., between the impersonal, nonindividuated, primal, and mythic, and the personal, individual, cared-for and caring, here-and-now. The speaker wishes to be effaced: the tulips will not let her. They not only force existence on the speaker but pain and self-awareness as well. (Scheerer 172)

In the fourth stanza, the patient calls herself a “thirty-year old cargo boat / Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address” (CP 161). What she has been doing for the last thirty was accumulating what she now considers “baggage”; lying on the hospital bed she experiences the feeling of what it is to live in a world where there are no commitments or responsibilities. The hospital stay has cleansed her of her attachments to her possessions, her family, and as she drowns in a drugged sleep brought by the bright needles, she becomes like a nun, her renunciation of everything that had held her to life has made her a nun.

In the fifth stanza, the speaker said that she did not want any flowers; this suggests her desire to remain cut off from any relationship; flowers mean visitors, well-wishers, and, they mean that she is wanted back into the everyday world. Instead of going back to life she wanted to lie with her hands turned up and lie on the bed emptied of everything. This emptiness gives her a
great sense of freedom, so great that it “dazes” her. And, the price of this freedom is almost nothing, it means giving up just effacement of the identity. Giving up her individuality and her attachments has brought this feeling of peace and freedom, and then she continues “It is what the dead close on, finally” (CP 161). This peacefulness is a prelude to the enormous peace and finality of death. This closing in of death is like the swallowing of the “Communion tablet” by the initiated, death will also swallow her as she drifts into the peacefulness. This desire for the final peace is intruded upon by the tulips which were mentioned in the first stanza of the poem. And when the patient said that she did not want flowers she expresses her rejection of life.

The sixth stanza brings back the tulips of the first line of the poem:

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds. (CP 161)

After expressing her annoyance of the tulips at the very beginning of the poem, the speaker gives the reason of her feeling of resentment towards them in the sixth stanza of the poem. It is the redness of the tulips that she resents; the flowers are so red they hurt her. In the wintry whiteness of the room the red flowers are a herald of the spring which signifies life and growth, which the patient has denied access into her life. The vitality of the tulips is so great
that she can hear their breathing even through the wrappings; they are her
direct opposite in that they are full of life whereas she has emptied herself of
it. They are like “an awful baby” (CP 161), the emphasis being on the word
“baby” while she is “a thirty-year-old cargo boat” (CP 161) filled with
sickness and very far away from health as well as a desire from it. For
someone like her a baby is awful because a baby is an affirmation of life
while she denies life, so the flowers arouse conflicting feelings in her.

The seventh stanza starts with the speaker becoming the object of
attention of the tulips, the flowers signifying life. Now, with the arrival of the
tulips she feels she is being watched in her room; in the beginning it was her
“Stupid pupil” who had to “take everything in.” Becoming the object of the
tulips and the sun’s observation she sees herself as “flat, ridiculous, a cut-
paper shadow”; “flatness” and “cardboard” are terms which the poet uses for
men in a later poem “Three Women” (CP 177). In this poem she says that
“ideas, destructions/Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks
proceed” (CP 177) from this flatness. Using these terms on her the speaker
emphasises her destructive desires and disembodies her own self to show her
immateriality in the face of the tulips and the sun which are full of life and
energy. The speaker’s desire for self-effacement is reflected on the tulips as
she accuses them of eating up her oxygen. With eyes turned on her she sees
herself as she learns to disappear into nothingness. Her condition, as she
realizes, is ridiculous even to her own eyes.
The excitability of the tulips, and the wintry whiteness and quiet, like being snowed in, of the hospital are presented together for the effect of contrast. The whiteness of the place and the redness of the tulips conflict the senses of the speaker. The conflict is between her desire for effacement, non-commitment, denial of life and an affirmation of life.

And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health. (CP 162)

In the end of the poem the tulips win the battle between denial of life and the affirmation of life even though the speaker resents the intrusion of the flowers into her peaceful, happy state of non-commitment. Inspite of her reluctance to return back to health she admits that she could feel her heart and taste the salt of the sea.

In the present chapter, poems written during the years 1956-1961 have been analysed. The next chapter will be devoted to the analysis of poems written in the years 1962 and 1963, Plath’s late poems.
WORKS CITED


