CHAPTER ONE
Chapter One

I: Sylvia Plath: The Fifties Icon

"Two Girls there are: within the house
One sits; the other, without" ('Two Sisters of Persephone', CP 31).

"I have found that the whole clue to my happiness is to have four to five
hours perfectly free and uninterrupted to write first thing in the morning –
no phones, doorbells or baby.
Then I come home in a wonderful temper and dispatch the household jobs
in no time (LH 416).

For her entire life Sylvia Plath fought a viscous battle between the two opposing
agents of herself: the woman who - would - be writer and the woman presiding over her
era, the domestic angel. The two were incompatible and each strove hard to gain their
territory. Sylvia measured her success by the degree to which she managed to keep both
women allayed, that neither would come knocking at her door demanding more time and
attention. She burned with the desire to be recognised as the “genius” she attributed to her
“male counterpart”, her husband. Yet, she couldn’t dismiss the glossy, manicured,
perfectly content but utterly limited image of the female seeping from the covers of her
beloved women’s magazines. Her entire writing life she desired to be part of that world,
dismissing the true genius of her poetry for the creation of ‘safe’ short stories appealing
to the homemaker. She suffered from the expectations of that market, and what Ted
Hughes notes in his Foreword to her *Journals* as “her efforts to produce what the market seemed to require” (xiii). In taking on the literary burden of producing something expected, she forsook not only her authorial self but also her womanly self. The woman she strove so hard to achieve was an impossible paradigm, and the woman who tore into her poetry toward the end of her life recognised this. This woman, the woman of the *Ariel* poems and her mature self, eschewed the prescriptions of a domestic institution that denied the female access to her own inner life.

The cultural appropriation of female identity is at odds with the self-assembly that Plath attempts in her mature body of work, her *Ariel* poems. Indeed, to some extent the *Ariel* poems demonstrate what Donna Haraway has termed the experience of the "cyborg", "a kind of disassembled and reassembled being, a post-modern collective and personal self" (Haraway 203). Plath's affinity with the 'becoming subjectivities' of the post-modern sensibility, and the "affinal politics" of the transgression of the boundaries of self/other, is a central preoccupation of *Ariel* (Andermahr et al 51).

The writing that precedes *Ariel*, however, is the product of Plath's acculturated self, what her husband called her “instinct” for adapting “her writing potential to practical, profitable use” (xiii). Until *Ariel*, Plath was writing with the housewife's instinct for safe and appropriate budgeting, a form of writing that mirrored her social locus. Like a good housewife, Plath the writer dealt herself tight measures, the economy of a prescribed restraint that echoed the prescribed womanhood of her era. This prescribed writing was stillborn. Her poem of that name refers to those ‘dead babies’ she
produced under the influence of a cultural prescription. “These poems do not live: it’s a sad diagnosis”, she tells us. They are dead because their mother was “near dead with distraction” (C.P 142). And what was this "distraction”? For Plath, it was the death mask on the face of her cultural ideal, that “happy, housewife heroine” of Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique (1963). It took her away from the serious process of writing and it kept her from discovering her mature womanly self. Sylvia Plath housed within her the dream of a nation that depended upon the woman being divorced from personal ambition. As a woman of the 1950s she was severed from a deeper sense of self by an emblem of womanhood that was purely private and domestic. In the America of the 1950's Plath, like the majority of her female contemporaries, was the sister condemned to remain “within the house” searching for the courage to venture beyond the “sum” of her existence (Two Sisters', CP 31).

Plath’s use of metaphor betrays her understanding of the war within her. She is cognisant of the calculating “mathematical machine” that is the housewife’s daily routine, binding her to a larger mainframe that controls a whole generation of women. Plath creates a bifurcate female whose shadow self “sits” within the house. Unlike the acculturated fifties female, this self is socially defunct, having no purpose within the dominant male discourse of the social machine. Yet, her private discourse is that of the mechanically produced male - she “works problems on/ A mathematical machine” (CP 31). Relegated to the house, however, she lacks an audience for her genius, and in the language of the dominant discourse this Dickinson-like female fails to thrive. Her counterpart, the sister “without”, is fertile and “bears” a male heir. She is responsible for
the perpetuation of the status quo, despite the fact she is liberated from the traditional
domestic space of the female. Nonetheless, this classical emblem of womanhood is no
less limiting: she is ‘Persephone’, goddess of fertility and bearer of the male seed. This
bifurcate female, the woman ‘within’ and the woman ‘without’, the domestic and the
reproductive functions of traditional womanhood, this was the woman underpinning the
model of womanhood inherited by Plath and her contemporaries; a form of womanhood,
designed to serve the great acquisitive machine of production and consumption that were
the overriding energies of the fifties.

Underlying this precept was a psychology based on the persuasive theories of
psychoanalysts Marynia Farnham and her husband, Ferdinand Lundberg. Their treatise,
Modern Woman: The Lost Sex (1949), condemned the woman who “seeks a sense of
personal value by objective exploit” and threatens her with such lunatic omens as the loss
of her emotional capacity, “orgastic failure” and damage to her husband’s “sexual
capacity” (142; 271). Such myths prevailed and were fed by the mass market of women’
s magazines. Clearly defined roles for both men and women seemed to allay the fears of a
nation booming in the shadow of the atom bomb. While the imagination of millions of
Americans turned to the thought of an apocalyptic ending, it was easier to exist with a
solid sense of social decorum. The argument for gender difference suited the general
climate of fear and trepidation that characterised the fifties. What must be carefully
noted, however, are the cultural dictates imposed upon the fifties female that transmitted
absolute demarcations of gender roles. Gerda Lerner in her study of women’s social
history calls these demarcations "the cultural definition of behaviour defined as
appropriate to the sexes in a given society at a given time" (Lerner 238). This "cultural
definition of behaviour" is what must be examined in order to penetrate the persona of
Plath's Journals, Letters Home, stories, and poetry.

II: Expressionism not Confessional

In Ariel Plath moves toward a form of expressionism that liberates her from the
tight-lipped style of her previous writing. This new writing permits a degree of
automatism associated with the surrealist style, a dip into what Andre Breton in the his
‘Manifeste du Surrealisme’ called “pure psychic automatism” (qtd. Waldberg 11) and
what Plath describes in her diaries as the ‘breaking open’ of the “skies behind which the
prophesying angels hide” (Kukil 286). Central to the tenet of the surrealist style is the life
of the unconscious mind, a style that valorises the content of the dream life, hallucination,
illusions, and above all, the imagination. The exultation of the imagination over reason is
essential if “the prosecution of the real world” is to be achieved; that is, a complete
realisation of another state of being in which the “state of grace of childhood” is still
apparent, and the mind of the surrealist is no longer governed by the exercise of reason or
moral norms. This then, is the ultimate surrender to the imagination, and the self removed
from the diachronic reality of the everyday becomes, in the words of Rimbaud, “a seer”
(Waldberg 17). The ‘I’ of the Ariel poems, engaged in this “prosecution of the real
world”, is granted the freedom of “the disinterested play of thought” characterised by
associative thinking. This “pure psychic automatism” reaches a point of climax in the
final Ariel poems, ‘Daddy’, ‘Lady Lazars’, ‘Totem’, ‘Paralytic’ and ‘Mystic’, where the
self of the speaker appears to be totally submerged in the life of the psyche. The automatic style of these final poems belies a rigorous technical control that, if you like, allows for an assimilation of the surrealist style without a complete ‘surrender to the imagination’. This technical control, while appearing to be at odds with the fundamental nature of the surrealist style, permits what is the ultimate aim of these final poems—a generous degree of psychic play-acting.

The Gestural ‘I’

The ‘I’ of Plath’s mature poems engages in a technique associated with the gestural style of abstract expressionism that achieved popularity in the 1950s. Harold Rosenberg defined this style in his 1952 essay ‘The New American Action Painters’ as an attempt to create “an arena in which to act” (Rosenberg 22-23; 48-50). This act-painting clearly associates the function of the artist with that of a performer whose brush strokes act out the destiny of a uninhibited, synchronistic self, whose spontaneous gestures incorporate the existentialist philosophy of self-definition, as well as the surrealist doctrine of psychic automatism. Hence, artists such as Willem de Kooning celebrated the ability of the ‘I’ of the painter (the brush) to move freely up and down and across the canvas without recourse to any preconceived course of action. In Gardner’s account of de Kooning’s Woman series: “the attack is carried out with manic excitement, the figure slashed out with brush at arm’s length and at full speed. There is a curious effect, typically ambiguous, of simultaneous delineation and defacement, of construction and cancellation—a conflict between sketch and finished picture. The brazen and baleful
mask mixes the toothpaste smile with the grimace of the death’s head. The enormous sketch is carried through by the compulsive drive that marks the action painter” (Gardner 941). De Kooning’s “attack” of the subject recalls the phonetic aggression of ‘Daddy’s’ “ich ich ich ich ich”, the verbal tug-o-war between subject and object; between “delineation” of the speaker’s subject and his “defacement”. De Kooning’s rigorous slashes of colour and line, what Gardner calls his “construction” of the subject are also part of the process of erasure or “cancellation” of that same subject. Hence, the de Kooning subject - those monstrous femme fatales - while being “constructed” in line and colour are reduced, pictorially, to savages. In the same manner, Plath’s femme fatale, ‘Lady Lazarus’, who is also the speaker of ‘Daddy’, is subject to the savage irony of her creator. Her verbal acrobatics, whilst performatively, highly engaging, betray a self deeply at odds with itself.

The impromptu gestures of the action painter were clearly an attempt to be rid of the rigid social codification of the 1950s, whose dictates left no room for self-definition. As his associate, Jackson Pollock declared, “Painting is a state of being . . . painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is (Rodman 76-87). On a de Kooning canvas the ‘I’ acts out its own destiny, existing in the immediate, within the act of expression itself. Similarly, the ‘I’ of the Ariel poems exists synchronistically, as a series of gestural selves that celebrate the myriad, multifarious nature of the ‘I’ of the poet-self. These selves are often ironic and self-parodying; they do not pretend to be authentic. Like de Kooning, the speaker of Ariel celebrates the possibility of an expanded sense of self:
hybrid, unpredictable, indefinable; emanating from the limitless terrain of the imagination.

**Those Irritating Women: De Kooning and the Fifties Femme Fatale**

De Kooning’s ‘Woman’ series is a savage parody of the peculiar forms of fifties femininity. On the De Kooning canvas those femme-fatales of the movie screen—Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, Bette Davis—are reduced to “vociferous and ferocious” monsters on his canvas (de Kooning in Sylvester: 43-53). De Kooning’s gestural ‘I’ conjures up a cruel inversion of the fifties screen goddess and magazine models whose images are rooted in the prehistorical tradition of matriarchal cult-goddesses. These avenging gorgons of the primal imagination are close relatives of Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’ (CP 244-47). Erika Dross locates these “giant ladies” as those images “pasted on mail trucks and billboards” and describes them as “enormous public goddesses of droll sex and earnest sale pitches” whose ubiquitous expressions is the “American smile – that ubiquitous, vacant, friendly, distant, polite expression”. In one de Kooning sketch for ‘Woman’, the subject’s smile is cut out of “a T-zone ad for Camels in Life magazine (Dross 131). This is the “smiling woman” of ‘Lady Lazarus’ (CP 244), a symbol of cultural phenomena loaded with allusions - whose reference is the ubiquitous form of post-war femininity. Plath’s own artwork includes versions of the parodic goddess of de Kooning’s canvas. Her ‘Woman in Green at Table’ (ca. 1947-50), and ‘Woman with Folded Arms’ of the same period are both imitations of this monumental, primitive female, redolent of Picasso’s women - cubist forms with overt sexualisation of
the female form. Like Picasso’s women, her ‘Woman in Green’ is faceless: without identity or purpose.

De Kooning’s “irritation” against those forms of womanhood appears blatantly on his canvas, and hence his women are grotesque inversions of those idols of popular culture (Rodman 102). Pink Lady (1944) depicts a demimondaine in the tradition of Picasso’s Les Demoiselles D’Avignon or Manet’s Olympia (Waldman 82). Like all of de Kooning’s women, the semi nude of the female is reduced to incomplete forms in a savage debasement of the luxury of female sexuality. Unfinished triangles represent the female torso: reductive, abstract, geometric, executed in angry slashes of thick line. In the grotesque swivelling of the heard, the female is redolent of the nightmarish imagination of the surreal. Again, the feminine is denied in the almost total erasure of facial features; instead, what dominate are the protruding, missile-like forms of the breasts. Like the women of Pink Angels (1945), de Kooning’s Pink Lady is angry; a fallen goddess, an avenging angel. Two Women (Summer 1952) continue the raw, primal exposure of female sexuality. Again, the female sexual organs dominate the composition, but here, the breasts are delineated with a swath of blood red, an angry flash of scarlet colour that exaggerates the destructive sexual power of the female. This attention to detail is what Thomas Hess defines as de Kooning’s “intimate proportions”, an explicit cataloguing of body parts that cruelly deconstruct the female anatomy in a gesture redolent of Madonna’s explicit advertising of female sexuality (Hess 32). The speaker of ‘Lady Lazarus’ is closely aligned to De Kooning’s technique of deconstruction. In the case of ‘Lady Lazarus’, however, it is the self that is the subject:
Do I terrify?

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me (CP 244).

Rooted in the surreal, this deconstruction is barbaric and primal, a parodic deconstruction of the fifties sex symbol. A sardonic humour accompanies this process, a humour shared by the speaker of ‘Lady Lazarus’ and evoked in de Kooning’s 1949 Two Women on a Wharf. Here, one figure sticks out her tongue in a gesture that recalls the speaker’s jaunty first line: “I have done it again./ One year in every ten/ manage it-“ (CP 244). The audacity of the speaker is every bit as shocking as the visual impact of De Kooning’s women.

Like De Kooning’s whoreish vamps, the speaker of ‘Lady Lazarus’ presents herself in the costume of femme-fatale and whore, a monstrous inversion of the fifties screen siren. Hence, De Kooning’s Woman (1948) is a one-eyed monster (whose seering gaze evokes reference to Valéry’s command that the surrealist must write a see like a
Beneath a blazing sun this woman cradles her own bosom self-protectively; a body language evocative of the knowledge of her own imminent deconstruction. *Torsos of Two Women* is an explicit dismemberment of the female form. The blazing scarlet breasts of the second torso blaze from the canvas like erotic beacons, while the head of this dismembered female floats above her, beyond her reach. The composition presents a deliberate severing of mind and physique, a cruel comment on the mindlessness of contemporary forms of womanhood. The dismemberment continues with Woman IV, a parodic representation of the blonde form of Marilyn Monroe: peroxide yellow hair and flashes of golden colour across the erogenous zones of the breasts, belly, hands shoulders and hair. Red ovals further the heavy eroticism of the piece, surrounding the figure like a series of erotic gestures. The mock-eroticism of 'Lady Lazarus' is echoed in these gestures:

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Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone . . . (CP 245)
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This, the speaker's "big strip tease" is a flamboyant gesture of self-debasement and strongly communicates the ambivalence of the fifties female toward her own self-representation. The flat forms of the female form recall the words of the Third Voice of *Three Women*:
It is these men I mind:
They are so jealous of anything that is not flat!
They are jealous gods
That would have the whole world flat because they are (CP 179).

De Kooning’s flat forms betray the ‘jealous god’ in him, forms that reduce the female to
the language and forms of the male. Plath’s Third Voice imitates this language of the
male discourse: “‘Let us make a heaven’, they say./ Let us flatten and launder the
grossness from these souls’” (CP 179) – a statement that closely echoes the vision and
purpose of De Kooning’s Woman series. The male “heaven” is a place where the
visceral threat of the female form has been annihilated; in De Kooning’s Woman, this is
partly realised in the Frankenstein transformation of the female form.

De Kooning’s savage attack on the female was directed at those forms of
womanhood idolised by contemporary culture, a culture in which the staged vacuousness
of Marilyn Monroe was tolerated for the sake of sheer glamour. Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’
and De Kooning’s Woman series are the natural corollary of this form of womanhood;
the shadow of the sister whose existence is entirely “without” (‘Two Sisters’, CP 31).
It is easier to understand the repeated articulation of Plath’s desire to embody the fifties code of womanhood as we encounter her in the personae of her letters, journals, prose and her earlier poetry, when we look at the model of womanhood that was offered her. Magazines such as Seventeen and Mademoiselle that served as her earliest forums for publication were the same forums that aired advice to the young Sylvia on how to be a woman. Articles entitled “How to Be a Woman” warned a young woman that being a woman was a career, an imperative that couldn’t be avoided. Brett Harvey notes in The Fifties: a Woman’s Oral History that such journalism unloosed threats upon the developing female and quotes one such example of the type of browbeating a young girl would undergo:

there is no office, lab or stage that offers so many creative avenues or executive opportunities as that everyday place, the home[...]. What profession offers the daily joy of turning out a delicious dinner, of converting a few yards of fabric, a pot of paint, and imagination into a new room? Of seeing a tired and unsure man at the end of a working day become a rested lord of the manor (73)?

So becoming part of the “home” life became a legitimate, the only legitimate career for women. The constant advertising of its advantages bombarded the young woman until she backed down from any other course. Lundberg and Farnham’s definition
of femininity as “receptiveness and passiveness, a willingness to accept dependence without fear or resentment, with deep inwardness and readiness for the final goal of sexual life – impregnation” assaulted the fifties female, reducing her to its terms. She must accept the role of motherhood as part of her inauguration into a complete womanhood. Even the act of sex was subordinate to her role as mother, and pleasure, according to Modern Woman, would evade her unless she “in the depths of her mind, desire, deeply and utterly, to be a mother” (qtd. Harvey: 90).

Her New England middle-class intellectual background coloured a major strain of Plath’s model of womanhood. Patricia Macpherson in The Puzzle of Sylvia Plath (1983) has identified the particular strain of influence upon the female of this culture as a “dominant ideology of self-fulfilment”. Macpherson points to Mary Ellmann’s identification of the “ethics of enterprise” in relation to this New England sub-culture (Ellmann 1979). Pivotal to this "self-fulfilment doctrine are 3 tendencies:

an awe of exertion, work, aggression against odds. . . Central to this point of view . . . are (1) the importance of self-determination, (2) the importance of effort and resistance, and, in preparation for this variety of experience, (3) the importance of analyzing one’s resources, distributing them according to their proper employments (Ellmann 212-3).
Macpherson interprets this tendency for striving to achieve as rooted in a sense of "moral good" that was part "of a life-long attempt to build a life of achievement over the void of unworthiness" inherited from the immigrant status of the Schrober family (the family of Aurelia Plath). In her introduction to Letters Home Aurelia Plath confesses that she found a "complete escape" in "the sugar-coated fiction of the day, wherein the poor and virtuous always triumph" and that Louisa M. Alcott's Little Women was a book she had learnt almost by heart. To escape the drudgery of her imposed domestic life the young Aurelia Plath lived within a "dream world" of knowledge. She writes on page 5 of having "a book tucked under every mattress of the beds it was my chore to make daily", a vicarious means of self-education imitating her own mother's "cheery" acceptance of educating herself through her daughter. This old order of womanhood based upon an excruciating martyrdom was Plath's inheritance.

The dread of female passivity and, more especially, the dread of redundancy, reek in early pre-marital entries of Plath's Journals. A 1952 entry written during Plath's summer vacation from Smith underlines Plath's obsession with managing her time profitably for the sake of self-amelioration. It is characteristic of the severe self-scrutiny she exercised during her college years and the form it takes of an unrelenting taskmaster matches the description of Ellmann's "ethics of enterprise":

The responsibility, the awful responsibility of managing (profitably) 12 hours a day for 10 weeks, is rather overwhelming when there is nothing, no one, to insert an exact routine
into the large unfenced areas of time – which is so easy to let drift by in soporific idling and luxurious relaxing. It is like lifting a bell jar off a securely clockworklike functioning community, and seeing all the little busy people stop, gasp, blow up, and float in the inrush (or rather outrush) of the rarefied scheduled atmosphere – poor little frightened people, flailing impotent arms in the aimless air. That’s what it feels like: getting shed of a routine. Even though one has rebelled terribly against it, even then, one feels uncomfortable when jounced out of the repetitive rut. And so with me. What to do? Where to turn? What ties, what roots? As I hang suspended in the strange thin air of back-home (J 50-51).

The need for a daily drill of self-fulfilling activities that will lead her closer to the ideal model of the New England intellectual female enslaves the young Plath in an airtight jar. This entry foreshadows the theme of *The Bell Jar* precisely as it also reveals to the reader the ghastly treadmill experience of a young woman of Plath’s promise, growing up in the “rarefied” environment of the New England middle-class intelligentsia. The flaw in this intense program of self-amelioration was that the demand for the high-achieving female in the world beyond their campus was virtually nil. Plath, and thousands of women like her were being prepared for a phoney existence of self-actualisation; in reality, the vast majority would end up “a mere mother and housewife” (J 327). A post-marital journal entry dating 1959 shows Plath considering herself as a defunct, the realisation of the horror of the “mere housewife and mother status”: What horrifies me most is the idea of being useless: well educated, brilliantly promising, and
fading out into an indifferent middle-age. Instead of working and writing, I freeze into
dreams, unable to take disillusioning rejections . . . (J 328-9).

At this juncture Plath considers only the idea of being “useless”. The self-
fulfilment prophecy of her educated New England upbringing is under threat of becoming
redundant. “The Lady and the Earthenware Head”, a poem of this early post-marital
phase, confirms Plath’s sense of personal redundancy. The head, “fired in sanguine clay”,
sits decapitated from its complete self, with “nowhere” to “fit”. “Best rid”, it is an image
of the dreaded sense of being found “useless” that haunts the young married poet. Its
Sisyphean state makes it easy prey to cruel tormentors: “Rough boys,/ Sprying a pate to
spare/ Glowering sullen and pompous from the ash-heap,/ Might well seize this prize”.
Of merely ornamental purpose, the head serves as a metaphor for the plight of the young
housewife who suffers the same fate as the head “shrined on her shelf” in the backwaters
of her suburban home. The head with its “grisly visage” is a nightmarish reminder of the
decomposing, barren state of the housewife.

IV: "An Abnormally Altruistic Person": The Mother-Daughter Legacy

and Female Socialisation

The Kelly Longitudinal Study of 1935-55, undertaken by scholar
E.L. Kelly as a series of interviews with husbands and wives in order to locate "scientific
determinants of marital compatibility", includes the case (Case 75) of prominent society
wife Carol Sears (May 249). In her interview, Sears responded: "[Marriage has given me]
my place in life. I feel I am doing exactly as I am fitted - with an occasional spurt of
independence growing less all the time. I am settling down to a way of things. I am happy
or content much more of the time than I am not” (qtd. May: 183). Carol Sears is a good
eexample of the prevalence of the ideology of Farnham and Lundberg as regards female
socialisation. Elaine Tyler May's study of the American policy of domestic containment,
*Homeward Bound* (1988) makes an important point as regards the assumptions of the
Kelly Study; that is, that "distinct domestic gender roles were universally endorsed" by
both Kelly and his interviewing subjects (May 250). These assumptions highlight a harsh
fact: women who did not choose the ‘gift’ of motherhood were left with meagre
alternatives. She could go out to work, but her options were limited to poorly paid jobs:
schoolteacher, secretary, nurse, waitress, and beautician. Hence, joining the world of
work would not remove her from her housewifely duties when she came home.

Aurelia Plath is typical of the many women who, for financial reasons,
were forced out into the world of work, not as a feminist bid for independence, but for as
a matter of survival. Without a male as head of the family to fulfill the traditional role of
breadwinner, the mother becomes the earning substitute. She must now grapple with both
the traditional male and female roles. This is a far cry from the image of the carefree
mother of the fifties sitcom, those Harriet Nelsos, Donna Reeds or June Cleavers who
enjoyed such a worry free existence. In those families where the father was not present,
the mother became the female martyr, forced into the quiet suffering of ‘the angel’ that
presided not only over the house, but also in the workplace. As a young child Sylvia Plath
learnt what it was for the woman to bear the responsibility of the entire family, and
whose silent burden became a source of great resentment. Writing to her brother, Warren, 1953, Sylvia refers to her mother’s capacity for this peculiar form of female martyrdom:

“You know as I do, and it is a frightening thing, that mother would actually kill herself for us if we calmly accepted all she wanted to do for us. She is an abnormally altruistic person, and I have realized lately that we have to fight against her selflessness, as we would fight against a deadly disease. My ambition is to earn enough so that she won’t have to work summers in the future and can rest, vacation, sun, relax, and be all prepared to go back to school in the fall. Hitherto, she’s always been rushed and tired, and her frailty worries me... After extracting her lifeblood and care for 20 years, we should start bringing in big dividends of joy for her (LH 113).

The model of womanhood that Sylvia inherits from her mother is one of altruism. According to this model, the female is denied any personal fulfillment except through the vicarious channel of her loved ones, which she strives to support in their desires. Aurelia Plath denies herself in supporting the desires of her daughter, and her self-effacement is fundamental to her daughter’s own self-reflexion. Sylvia, in urging her brother to “make [his] own breakfasts” so that her mother “won’t have to lift a finger” is responding to the memory of her mother’s sacrifice for her own sake. The daughter cannot bury the image of the martyred mother; it haunts her and although she fights to keep it at bay, this icon, coupled with the passivity of women encouraged by her culture, dominates her process of
acculturation. If the daughter wishes to find fulfilment for her ambitions, she must look to a different model of womanhood than the one offered by her mother. If she is to come out of the "shade" of and into the "sun" of her ambitions, she must turn away from the mother figure.

In *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap*, Margaret Mead defines the process of socialisation as a family's transfer from one generation to another of the core values and norms of a society. Walter Mischel in his essay "Sex-typing and Socialization" maintains that children imitate the same-sex parent (Maccoby 56-81). In an earlier essay, "A Social-Learning View of Sex Difference in Behavior" Mischel maintains that the most important principle of social-learning theory is that behaviour in a child is reinforced via rewards and punishments (Carmichael 3-72). In other words, parental approbation or disapprobation conditions a child's behaviour. In the case of Plath, the behaviour reinforced in her own mother is that of the self-abnegating female.

The process of socialisation of young girls of any decade begins with the primary caregiver: the mother. In Chapter 4 of *Maternal Influence: The Search for Social Universals*, Marion J Levy expounds the responsibility of mothers for early childhood socialisation: "the initial calculation of family patterns is always and everywhere ideally and/or actually carried out by mothers" (qtd. Green: 318). Mothers, Levy argues, teach the initial hierarchical structural differentiations based on age, generation and gender that underlie all future assignations. Levy concludes in chapter 10 that the patterns of integration the mother moulds for the daughter are predominantly a-rational,
particularistic, functionally diffuse, intimate, responsible and hierarchic. Furthermore, the mother-child solidarity is of greater intensity than other family solidarity. Steinberg, in her article for the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 16, supports the notion that the mother-daughter relationship is of greater intensity than that of the father-daughter. In other words, the mother becomes the primary model for the daughter’s socialisation and the dyadic of mother-daughter is most responsible for determining her later social status. The role of the mother as primary nurturer is a result of what Diane Wille terms in her 1995 article for *A Journal of Research* “social cultural mandates”. These cultural mandates, according to Wille, “influence the mother’s and father’s role expectations for themselves and their spouse” (803). This corroborates Mead’s definition of the process of socialisation.

In *Male and Female* (1949), Mead identifies three types of mother-child dynamics: what she calls the “complementary”, the “symmetrical” and the “reciprocal” relationships. These labels distinguish the mother’s attitude toward the child. In the “complementary” relationship the mother begins the process of reciprocation with her child, “treating the child as someone different from herself”, as a creature with needs (64-5). In the “symmetrical” relationship the mother behaves as if the child is essentially the same as herself and “she were responding to behavior of the same type as her own”. In the “reciprocal” relationship the mother and child focus on “the exchange of commodities” such as “love, trust and tears”. It is perhaps the reciprocal relationship that most characterises the one shared by Aurelia Plath and her daughter, with the “exchange of commodities” demonstrated in Sylvia Plath’s *Letters Home*. The rather excessive
greetings of “Dearest darling Mother” or “Dearest darling beautiful saintly Mother” or “To the Dearest Mother in the World”, point to Plath’s need to demonstrate strong emotional involvement with her mother. Whether these terms are genuine displays of affection, or the response of a duty-bound conscience is hard to determine, considering the ambiguous portrait of her feelings toward her mother in her writing. Whatever the case, the mother figure remains the chief sounding board for the circumstances of her life.

A 1950-51 painting by Plath, ‘Two Women at Window’ recalls the intensity of mother-daughter relations in which Plath, the daughter, stands helplessly over her grief-stricken mother (‘Eye Rhymes’ Exhibit, 2002). Plath’s composition has both women fold into one another, a composition that echoes the reciprocal relationship they share. Plath bends, almost, as if to receive her mother’s grief, a supplicant of her mother’s pain; her mother, meanwhile folds herself within the outstretched self form of her daughter, a passive recipient of her daughter’s sympathy. This cameo, a firm comment on the concentration of the mother-daughter dyadic, suggests a dependency that is potentially suffocating.

Plath’s 'Medusa' (CP 224), explores the emergent dysfunctional relationship of mother and daughter. Written as a defiant bid for independence at a time when her mental health was causing her mother great worry, the speaker rejects the presence of the mother figure and her “stooges” (the women her mother appoints in her absence). She rejects their “lens of mercies”, and in doing so rejects the nurturing model of womanhood of her formative years. 'Medusa' then, is a rejection statement of the order of women the mother
represents: the diligent, self-effacing female of her childhood years. “You are always there/ Tremulous breath at the end of the line”, Plath writes of her mother. The imagery of the womb, “fat and red”, the “barnacled umbilicus”, of the “Atlantic cable” - the telephone line that is her mother’s help line to her daughter - heightens in a gruesome and microscopic way, the daughter’s resentment of her mother’s leech-like care. At the climax of the poem Plath turns to the imagery of transubstantiation as cruel rhetoric against the mother figure:

Overexposed like an X-ray.
Who do you think you are?
A communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?
I shall take no bite of your body,
Bottle in which I live, (CP 225).

The final line renounces the mother from the sacred dyad of mother-daughter: “Off, off eely tentacle/ There is nothing between us”; and so the daughter disconnects herself from the model of the nurturing female.

‘Medusa’ is a piece of invective against the female order of the mother. The daughter ‘though helpless’ is determined to refuse her old idol: the mother figure. Instead, she asserts a bid for self-reliance in a desperate attempt at self-resurrection. The Catholic imagery that creeps into the poem’s final stanzas revolves around the maternal intercessory image of Mary, the “Mother of God”, whose compassion and purity provide,
in the catholic faith, ideal channels for human sin and weakness. The appearance of the mother as intercessor for her daughter’s despair is the ‘uncalled’ saviour. The speaker’s dependency on this saviour figure is revealed in a letter Plath wrote to her mother of the same period. She writes: that to be involved with her now “would be psychologically the worst thing”; she must “not go back to the womb” (LH 466-69). At the same time she is anxious that her mother knows she is having “an unlisted phone put in as soon as possible so [she] can call out”. The significant image here is the telephone line, the umbilical cord of ‘Medusa’ that threatens the speaker with psychic strangulation. Hence, while the mother figure is despised as the source of her dependency, she is also acknowledged as a source of life.

Criticism of the mother figure continues in ‘The Disquieting Muses’ (CP 74-76), where the speaker attacks the traditional and rather cliché notions of mothering that formed her childhood. The mature speaker regards these mothering techniques as limited and ineffective; what the child wants is a new breed of mother. Indirectly, Plath is criticizing the popular parenting techniques of Spock’s immensely popular The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care (1946). Spock’s ideology of sound parental instinct coupled with common sense, an open display of love and affection, and the mother’s enjoyment of the child, was dependent upon the ready availability of the mother at all times to apply these sensible measures (Spock 15). It was assumed by Spock, who spoke for the social consensus, that the woman could manage any dilemma involving her child because she had all the time in the world to devote to this cause. There was nothing to prevent her from being the 24-hour relief worker in the home.
Plath’s poem, 'Candles', (CP 148-9) frames the anticipation of motherhood as part of “false, Edwardian sentiments”. Like the candles, the mother-poet is one of the “last romantics” who holds onto the traditional role of the woman as nurturer, life-source, and, metaphorically, the bearer of light. If the woman boycotts the mothering role she may preserve her feminine charms, the “perfection” of 'The Munich Mannequins', but she will find her womanly power diminished, dead even. In 'Tulips' (CP 160), the mother of a miscarried child denies her desire to claim the dead child. She wanted “To lie with [her] hands turned up and be utterly empty”. To be “free” is the mother’s principal desire. The red tulips are the garish reminder of the life she has turned down; like the inert foetus they were “too red in the first place, they hurt [her]. She does not want her identity to be symbiotic with a child. The woman-poet demands the privilege of being able to “efface” herself, to relinquish the responsibility of her motherhood. As Uroff notes, Aurelia Plath’s journal of her children, “Wunderkind”, is a paen to the experience of motherhood. Each instance of her daughter’s growth and development is reason to make a record for posterity, a testament to her own devotion as mother (Mossberg 182-191). Hence, the child is the latest altar of female self-sacrifice, following on from her husband. The investment the mother makes in her child is enormous and all-inclusive, becoming the sum total of the mother’s journey as a woman.

“Mothers Don’t Write, They Are Written”

Such is the comment of Helen Deutsch, Freudian psychoanalyst in her 1945 study The Psychology of Women. As Susan Rubin Suleiman explains in her 1979 essay
"Writing and Motherhood", the role of the mother in terms of artistic creation is solely as a source material for the child. Motherhood is merely the journey of the child’s self-discovery; the mother, the silent and passive vehicle of this journey: “the mother is the essential but silent Other, the mirror in whom the child searches for his own reflection, the body he seeks to appropriate, the thing he loses or destroys again and again, and seeks to recreate” (Suleiman 117). The Freudian psychoanalysis, at the peak of its popularity during the 1950’s, asserted the notion that the “masochistic-feminine willingness to sacrifice” was entirely natural. Furthermore, the sexual aggression of women was helpfully redirected toward the maternal instinct (Deutsch 411-12). Motherhood and writing, then, are entirely discordant, as, according to the psychoanalytic discourse, the interests of the ‘ideal’ mother are identical with those of the child (Alice Balint, qtd. Chodorow: 77). Suleiman’s thesis is that more attention should be directed to the unknown discourse of the “mother-as-she-writes”, rather than the “mother-as-she-is-written” of the psychoanalytic discourse. Opening up the discourse of the mother-as-writer, the process by which she learns to (in the words of Jane Lazarre) “insistently be an artist in the midst of family”, the possibility of creativity and the “daily grinding fiction” that is motherhood, will become more real for more women (qtd. Tillie Olsen, 2001: 111).

This is Kristeva’s vision, for the mutually nurturing relationship of mother; as she writes in her essay “Stabat Mater”, for a woman, writing and the act of loving another are the same thing: “WORD FLESH” (Kristeva 100). Kristeva’s description of the moment of literary creation parallels Plath’s own. Kristeva writes: “What is love, for a woman, the
same thing as writing. Laugh, Impossible. Flash on the unnameable, woven of abstractions to be torn apart" (100). Inspired by Woolf's manifesto, Plath declares her allegiance to the moment of literary creation: "the moment of illumination, fusion, creation . . . the flux: making of the moment something of permanence. That is the lifework . . . No children until I have done it. (Plath’s underline, Kukil: 286). The “flux” of conception, this is the substance of Kristeva’s argument. She continues: “Let a body finally venture out of its shelter, expose itself in meaning beneath a veil of words . . . from one to the other, eternally fragmented visions, metaphors of the invisible”. The body that is the vehicle of writing is also the vehicle of love/life. The life force that directs this body is “maternal” and “involves our imaginary representations of femininity, non-language or the body” (Kristeva 100).

Yet, for a young woman of Plath’s generation, the act of mothering and the act of writing are irreconcilable acts of creation. The “maternal aversion” (Kristeva 113) that the mother experiences toward her child is the direct corollary of the mother’s loss of self or speaking “I”: “I am seized to the point where “I” no longer exist” (114). The mother must choose between her biological destiny, her physical body, or the body of words that is her speaking self; during pregnancy, however, this heterogeneity of body and body “explodes”, and the “dividing line between nature and culture” is pulled back (115). Hence, in her pregnant state, the mother achieves “access to the other”, to what Kristeva calls the “ethical” (or a higher sense of morality) (115). Plath’s ‘By Candlelight’ (CP 236-7) identifies this moment of heterogeneity between mother and child, self and other, in the image of the candle ‘blade’, “the yellow knife” that grows tall between them. In
Plath’s imagery, mother and child experience one another as both heterogeneous, and yet ‘other’. They “meet” in a moment of intense nighttime propinquity, the “fluid” of maternal protection drawing them together. Yet, the child is its own entity, “small and cross”, and the “yellow knife” of the candle/blade reminds the speaker of the life that is also entirely separate from her own (CP 237). As Kristeva writes:

for a mother . . . the other (the child) is inevitable . . . make a God of him if you like; he won’t be any less natural if you do, for this other still comes from me, which is in any case, not me but an endless flux of germinations, an eternal cosmos. The other proceeds from itself and myself that ultimately it doesn’t exist for itself (118).

Mother and child, then, exist and co-exist as separate and yet heterogeneous entities; whilst the child may endow the mother with material for her writing, in order to write, she must exist on one side of the “yellow knife” that separates self from other.

V: The Fifties Gender Gap

Within the family, the child is shaped for his encounter with the world. R.D. Lambert in, Sex-Role Imagery in Children: Social Origins of the Mind (1971), writes of the development of the child’s “ideas of what is right or proper for them as young men or women to do, to believe, to aspire to, and ways to relate to others.” These ideas are formed within the “human institution” of the family, states Lambert, as the child learns
“about the social order, which in time will appear to them to be a natural social order in
the sense that they will come to take it for granted as the framework within which they
think and act”. (1). Wini Breines in Young White and Miserable: Growing up Female in
the Fifties (1992) writes of the “vicarious pleasure” of the mothers of the fifties who saw
their daughters growing up within a society that might offer them more than had been
their lot. At the same time, these mothers experienced a “fear (born of their own
experience) that the bubble might once again burst, that their educated daughters might
find themselves discarded” (75-76). The tension between the inherited past and the
potential of the present that women of Plath’s generation faced, led to discrepancies in
behaviour and life choices that did not match their chosen, espoused ideology. Plath is
herself a primary example of the conflicting statement of interest expressed by young
women of her generation, and her journals and letters in particular are full of it. Despite
her ambition, her desires are tinged with the same feminine mystique of the majority of
women of her generation.

A study of patterns of child-rearing conducted in the mid 1950’s by Robert Sears,
Eleanor Maccoby and Harry Levin, and published in 1957 as Patterns of Child-Rearing
involved 379 interviews of mothers of children aged 5 and under. Breines cites sources of
this data as indicating the implementation of traditional sex-roles by parents whose own
history had been shaped by the era of the Great Depression and the Second World War
(62). These mothers showed awareness of the sex differentiation typical of their own up
bringing, but justified this differentiation as “natural reactions to innate differences
between boys and girls” (Sears 400). The attitudes demonstrated by the mothers of the
Sears report lie at the heart of the term "the feminine mystique", coined by the herald of the women's movement, Betty Friedan. Reports such as this demonstrate the mother-daughter legacy of the fifties that shaped the younger generation to the form of the 'mystique'. The Sears report clarifies that 80% of the women whose lives were shaped by this mystique were middle-class and remained at home to raise children and run the household (Sears 40). The husbands were involved in child-care and household duties only peripherally, leading to what Breines terms 'a strict division of labor" (62). John Seeley, R. Alexander Sim and E.W. Looselys' 1956 study of the patterns of suburban family life, Crestwood Heights illuminates the role of the husband in domestic duties only in the case of emergencies, when, for example, the wife was pregnant (190). What occurs then, is a pattern of domestic life in which the woman’s full-time responsibilities keep her from claiming any personal ambitions. The woman is the sum of her domestic allegiance. This, in a nutshell, is the form of Friedan's "mystique".

In his essay "The Social Structure of the Family" (1949), Talcott Parsons highlights the clearly differentiated sex-roles within a marriage. The marriage relationship, Parsons argues, was the strongest dynamic in contemporary society contributing to female segregation. According to Parsons, women of the 1950's were prepared for their roles as housewives and mothers despite receiving equal treatment by their parents. Once married, young women remain in their allocated roles as housewife and mother, thereby serving the dual purpose of shielding their spouses "from competition with each other in the occupational sphere" (265.) Parsons pinpoints the retreat of the married woman into the shadows of the housewife's role as fundamental to
the “functional importance of the solidarity of the marriage relationship to our kinship system”. In other words, the woman’s decision to marry and not pursue a career was a necessary factor in achieving the balance of power required for a successful marriage. Parsons reiterates this point in “Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States”, (1949), in which he states the importance of spouses avoiding competition in their careers. He also states that those middle-class women who did work were typically employed as secretaries, and thus did not pose a threat to their husbands’ status (95). Parson’s argument thus supports what became known as the "feminine mystique".

The Parsonian view of the American family with its differentiated sex roles was the dominant theory in post-war sociology. It was considered a natural assumption that the potential of the female for social status be more limited and therefore more predictable. Young girls were not likely to turn into ‘bad seeds’ for they were “more apt to be relatively docile” when compared to young boys. (“Age and Sex”: 90) There was considered to be no female equivalent of the male Beat rebel, a role savoured by writers Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac or Leroi Jones. As Hettie Jones (formerly Hettie Cohen) records in her autobiographical How I Became Hettie Jones (1990) the female, even among the alternative lifestyle of the Beat men, was relegated to traditional female roles: mother and housewife. The only difference in the lifestyle of the Beatnik wife was her additional duties as secretary or publicity agent for her burgeoning mate. As she continued in her silence, divorced from her creative voice by her subordination to her husband, her mate, meanwhile, soars to new levels of transformation and realisation. As wife, Hettie Jones becomes her husband’s “Advertising and Circulation Manager” (57);
her husband, meanwhile, Leroi Jones, becomes one of the most recognised voices of his generation. The irony of the Beatnik women was that while the lifestyle they shared with their male counterparts was a rebuttal of the conservatism of mainstream America, they found themselves equally, if not more subordinated as women than their middle class suburban contemporaries. As Hettie reminds us, once women like she, or even the resilient Diane di Prima who did manage to find a voice among her male rivals, were caught in the role of mothering the offspring of the Beatnik men, their lives as budding writers were drastically threatened. While their men had the freedom to tear off into the night for some wild orgy or political stampede, their children bound the women. And the children came and came, without always sharing the same father. In an atmosphere of 'loose-living', still the woman found herself more confined than ever. The agenda of the fifties rebel was not written for the woman.

The 'Unhappy Housewife' Syndrome

Images of domesticity and the undesirability of that state, saturate Plath's mature work. Two of her paintings from that period confirm this. 'Two Women Reading', a tempura piece dated 1950-51, resembles an advertisement for the blissful condition of the domestic life, and as such, can be read as a satire ('Eye Rhymes' Exhibit, 2002). The women are perched on the canvas like figurines: pert, inert, and serene. The landscape that encloses them is highly cultivated: an immaculate lawn and a villa redolent of a home and gardens magazine. A series of perpendicular lines criss-cross the canvas creating a series of flat, geometrical shapes, heightening the artificiality of the scene.
Domestic props surround the women: a picnic, and an elegant vase whose colours are echoed in the surrounding landscape are reminiscent of a Matisse interior. The domestic world encloses these women like a gentle but dull torpor; the experience of suburbia, more a state of the mind than a particular place, and these women, seemingly surrendered to its effects.

‘Nine Female Figures’ is an abstract piece of the same date as ‘Two Women Reading’ (‘Eye Rhymes’ Exhibit, 2002). The piece consists of a series of abstract, oblong shapes suspended across the canvas like a series of Matisse-like portraits. Within these portrait pieces, the eyes of nine women stare out at their onlooker. Their eyes are closed, however, and the scattered forms of their folded arms and hands echo their self-contained, almost foetal state. These women are folded in upon themselves, their blank faces indicative of the process of self-abnegation. Two-dimensional and decorative, these women ‘hang’ from the piece as objects of the male gaze. Inert, deconstructed, they have become non-beings, relegated to the hallway or dining room of a domestic interior.

The social myth that “a woman’s place is in the home” surrounds the heroine of The Bell Jar like a miasmic emission. It suffocates and distorts her reality, even deforming her sense of self. The metaphor of the fig tree with its black fruit that wrinkle and go black denote Esther’s spoiled potential. The fruit of her being has not been plucked in good time; in a society uninterested in a young girl’s talents, these talents, like the black figs will ‘plop’ to the ground (BJ 38; 52). The waste of such potential is reason for Esther to mourn the loss, become chronically depressed, and ultimately withdraw
from the society that will not validate her. What is validated is a patent for the young girl to join society’s subscribed course and usher her into the synod of housewife and mother. As Esther herself acknowledges to Buddy Willard, the “mutually exclusive” nature of the female role in society will only leave her “flying back and forth for the rest of [her] days” (BJ 90) if she does not make one firm vote for her social position. Either a woman conforms to social conventions or she will find herself propelled to another “mutually exclusive” social extreme – that of the mentally ill.

When Anne Sexton wrote in her income tax return in April 1960 “poet” rather than “housewife” as her occupation, she was finally validating to herself and the public her metamorphosis from suburban housewife to renowned writer (Middlebrook & Yalom 196). With such a declaration Sexton stepped out of the “mutually exclusive” cul-de-sac of the housewife-mother that had shaped her life to that point. It was through the experience of mental illness that Sexton discovered the way out of her cul-de-sac existence into the world of the practising artist. As a mother of two girls she would never be able to shed completely her former roles, and indeed, her life within the realm of the family became the fodder for her writing. Yet, it is undoubtedly the experience of mental illness that dominates Sexton’s work, and indeed galvanised what had been a tragic and hopeless cycle of illness into volcanic material for her writing. The decision to become a serious writer changed her relationship to the domestic life irreversibly. Sexton, as Diane Middlebrook notes in her article, “I Taped My Own Head: The Apprenticeship of Anne Sexton” discovered a new form of communication, what she terms “language” as a means of moving beyond the existence of the circumscribed housewife (Middlebrook & Yalom
This new "language" freed Sexton from the heavy weight of her domestic burden, what Plath transfigured into the image of the "Sow" "hedged by a litter of feat-footed ninnies/ Shrilling her hulk/ To halt for a swig at the pink teats" (CP 61). The prototype of womanhood inherited from her mother becomes 'The Double Image' in the mirror from To Bedlam and Part Way Back. It is the womanhood of her mother, passed down and received with fear and trepidation:

...this was the cave of the mirror,

that double woman who stares

at herself, as if she were petrified...

I, who was never quite sure

about being a girl, needed another

life, another image to remind me (Sexton 41-2)

The "other life" was Sexton's life as a poet. Her Bedlam poems deal with the subject of femaleness, as it is inherited from mother to daughter, as something noxious, a sickness. The process of her socialisation leads the female to the brink of despair and mental illness, as far away from the dreaded "mutual exclusivity" of the traditional female posture. Her life as a poet transfigured the "petrified" woman of a former generation and yielded "another image" of womanhood: woman as writer.
As Alice Ostriker notes "to be a creative woman in a gender-polarised culture is to be a divided self" (1987: 60). Educated, creative women were presented with few options, and the roles most impressed upon her were that of wife and mother. Women such as Plath, Sexton and Rich were swathed in the influence of their mothers' generation, caught in a struggle to redefine a new model of womanhood. The entanglement of the daughter with her mother, an issue that Nancy Chodorow explores in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, is a key issue in the reformation of the model of womanhood. Untying the generational knot requires the young woman to define herself as a separate entity, and not as a continuation of her mother or the world around her (Chodorow 177). In her poem 'Housewife', Sexton wryly draws the central point of identification of the female self to her mother, which in turn draws her into the role of housewife, or, in Sexton's imagery, into marriage to a house:

Some women marry houses.

It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,
a mouth, a liver and bowl movements.
The walls are permanent and pink.
See how she sits on her knees all day,
Faithfully washing herself down.
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
into their fleshy mothers.
A woman *is* her mother.
That's the main thing (Sexton 77).
'Housewife' internalises the predicament of the woman whose existence has become part of a symbiotic relationship to the house that she is bound to. This wry view of the conventional model of womanhood is cleverly set off by a shocking interpretation of that view of the woman confined to the narcissistic space of her own body. The walls of this space are "permanent and pink", but are significantly absent of a view to the world. The image of the woman in the house/body "faithfully washing... down" these walls holds a sexual connotation that shatters the propriety of the popularised fifties ideal of the female as an asexual, innocent Snow White homemaking creature. As a housewife, she is limited to a definition of the self as her home; as woman, she is defined by the contours of her "walls" of skin, her sexuality. Either way, she is kept to the boundaries of the traditionally determined role of the female. Sexton’s poem implies that the historical bond of mother-daughter relationships only serves the purpose of maintaining the model of traditional, constrictive womanhood. This version of womanhood is passed by the mother to the daughter and so, the young woman of the new generation finds herself, as her own mother did, sitting "on her knees all day/ faithfully washing herself down".

The unglamorous reality of the 'housedresses' mother is part of the self-denial intrinsic to the role of motherhood. The glory of her physical beauty and charm is snatched from her once she enters into the contract of reproduction and rearing children. As Simone de Beauvoir comments in The Second Sex, a "woman's fate is bound up with that of perishable things" (670). Furthermore, "the sole effect of time is a slow
deterioration: it wears out furniture and clothes as it ruins the face; the reproductive powers are gradually destroyed by the passing of years; thus woman puts her trust in this relentless force for destruction” (666). This ruination of her physical self leads to her inevitable demotion in the male universe on which her fate so heavily relies, and the woman thus withdraws from her physical self to escape the painful reality of this deterioration. She becomes, as De Beauvoir notes, immanent or “existent”; that is to say, transcendent of her former self. The woman’s body is not “for her a pure instrument for getting a grip on the world” (688). She cannot “dominate matter” “through the use of tools”. So she must “submit herself” to the “secret laws” of life which include the process of conception, pregnancy and rearing children. De Beauvoir suggests that she must teach herself “passivity and patience” in order to survive these ordeals, particularly upon her body, and in order to do this she is surrounded, conveniently, by the example of passivity in her domestic confinement – the kitchen where “one must obey the fire, the water! Wait for the sugar to melt, for the dough to rise, and also for the wash to dry, for the fruits to ripen on the shelf” (665).

Following the dissolution of her marriage Plath stepped (partly) out of the dowdy guise of the housewife and mother, and through the process of writing discovered a new guise. In the process of writing her Ariel poems, Plath discovered the role of public performer - flaunted in the exhibitionism of 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy'. Her writing at this stage, coupled with her daily four a.m. rising, reflected her commitment towards this new self. Integral to this new persona was a shattering of the traditional feminine posture, a being with social grace, impeccable manners, ornamental, and with a great
respect for her antecedents. Plath's *The Tour* (CP 237) undoes this Victorian precedent and presents a female voice that deliberately undermines the code of feminine conduct with viscous irony. Beneath the irony, there is a sense of wanting something better than the "mess" that typifies her domestic existence. There is anger in the lines:

Toddle on home to tea now in your flat hat.
It'll be lemon tea for me,
Lemon tea and earwig biscuits - creepy-creepy.
You'd not want that (CP 237).

The deliberate sabotage of Victorian social niceties is an attempt to present the ugly underbelly of motherhood and its antecedent – marriage. Once a woman has been dragged into the "burnt-out" and "wild-machine" (CP 237) of motherhood and marriage its ravaging chaos will destroy all possibilities of niceties surviving. Even the product of the mothering experience is alarmingly unpleasant: "bald" and with "no eyes" (CP 238). There is no room for the sweet innocence of the Victorian notion of children. The anachronistic reality of the aunt is harshly dispelled by the grimmer reality of the housebound mother and housewife.

Plath's 'Sow' (CP 60) opens with the line: "God knows how our neighbor managed to breed/ His great sow:/ Whatever his shrewd secret he kept it hid". The sow is the manifestation of the speaker's "secret" domestic existence. It is the "other life" that forces its bulk of duties upon her literary life. There is something shameful about this
underbelly existence, so it is “kept hid”, “impounded from public stare”. The public sees only the face of the poet but not of the woman in her vernacular state. The poet bears the “prize ribbon”; the wife and mother, the burden of her “lounged belly-bedded self”. As the sow from his sty, the speaker, from the vista of the kitchen and nursery, stares through into the world of the public self with “dream filmed” eyes. The poetry is landlocked into the same space as the impounded sow. There is room for writing only round the messy margins of the sty.

Self-denial is eventually converted to passivity in an environment that induces such a response. The lack of intellectual stimulus leads the domesticated mother to an inertness that shrouds her in the form of a stereotype. We see the culmination of that stereotype in a poem such as 'Heavy Women' in which motherhood and traditional femininity are gently lampooned (CP 158). Plath’s ironic humour is a process of deliberate inversion of “tradition of literary images of women” (Kolodny 82), whose by-product is a certain ambiguity. This ambiguity is, perhaps, a necessary but defensive device for the female speaker who finds herself caught within the “wild machine” of a relentless domesticity.

VII: Living Beneath the Bell Jar: The 1950's Dollhouse

The most important role for young women, the role of housewife and mother, was learnt by young girls watching their mothers about the house. As Parsons notes the mothers of the fifties’ generation of women “(were continually about the house)” and this
restricted domain facilitated the process of initiation into what were deemed by Parsons and his contemporaries as the "important aspects of the adult feminine role" ("Age and Sex": 94). Thus, the woman is ushered into a social matrix that establishes her as part of that social code. The heroine of Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood, is controlled by this codification of her behaviour through the image of her mother as the compliant doll. Esther, on the verge of a psychological breakdown, reaches an impasse in her creative attempts, and the novel that she is floundering to begin is obscured by the stubborn image of her mother inside a dollhouse. The dollhouse is symbolic of the woman's shrunken social domain where the woman as the doll, in this case, Esther's mother, sits as Esther herself does, staring "into space" (99). The creative energy of the female is reduced by the miniaturised world she inhabits. It is diminished as she herself is diminished, lost from sight in the context of the domestic world that engulfs her. The volcanic energy, as Ted Hughes describes the latent power of Plath's *Ariel* sequence in "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals" (Alexander 152-164) is here reduced to a disassociated and static image – the image of a doll sitting passive and purposeless, compliant with the social convention of the woman at home.

The doll in her dollhouse is the ultimate realisation of the woman within the social matrix of the fifties. Plath's own interest in the image of the female doll is apparent from her collection of more than 350 handmade cutout dolls with outfits housed in the Lily Library, University of Indiana ('Eye Rhymes' Exhibit, 2002). This fixation with the image of the doll was relinquished once Plath separated from her husband in 1960 - a period of separation that also marks the period of fruition in her writing. As Hughes notes
in the aforementioned essay, her creative flux “burst all her restraints” and she was able to step outside the dollhouse.

Ushered into the uniform of the fifties female, Plath continued to wrestle with the image of “the living doll”. Her poem, 'The Applicant' delivers a satire on the fifties icon, the doll-like woman:

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
I have a ticket for that.
Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
Well, what do you think of that?
Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk... (CP 221-22).

This “doll” is the product of the domestic incubation and inculcation of the female, the Ladies Home Journal that Plath herself was raised on. As Linda Wagner notes, many issues of this magazine included illustrations for “Mother-Daughter” fashions, “look-alike” dresses, robes, and sportswear”, indicative of the mother’s behaviour replicated in
the daughter (Wagner 33). The “sweetie” in the closet is the daughter who attained
womanhood during the fifties, whose mother cajoles her to “come out” and embrace her
own version of womanhood as “a living doll”. A piece of undated Plath artwork, a black
and white drawing entitled ‘The Mermaid and the Moon’ figures the image of a mermaid
gazing upon a starry night (‘Eye Rhymes’, 2002). The mermaid, another version of the
fifties ‘doll’, lifts her right hand upward toward the star in what seems like a rather
pathetic request for rescue. This gesture underlines the feelings of entrapment
experienced by the “living doll” whose ontology is rooted in a fantasy of the male
psyche, and in turn, the male order. A product of the fantasy life of this order, the
mermaid-doll exists tenuously, mercurially.

The crisis of The Bell Jar is that of a young woman whose creative talent is under
threat by a social codification. This codification draws the woman away from the
realisation of her personal ambitions, in the case of Esther, away from a career as writer.
Denied access to this ambition, Esther withdraws from her social environ into a mental
state symbolised by the motif of the airless bell jar. What replaces personal ambition is
the ambition of her society, so that she becomes, as Esther perceives it, a preserved
mummy inside a carefully siphoned tomb. That tomb is marriage and domesticity.
Suffocated by the ambition of her society Esther loses hope of self-realisation and turns
inward toward depression and then psychosis. She turns to the examples of female
stereotypes in vain attempts to take on alternative identities that will distract her from the
reality of her lost ideal self. An early episode in the novel sees Esther mimicking the role
of her friends Doreen and Betsy who represent the cliché “good” and “bad” girl. Betsy is
the well-socialised "good" girl who fits the mould of the wholesome all-American girl, the 'real doll'. It is Betsy that Esther accompanies to the "Ladies’ Day" banquet where women engage in ‘proper’ activities for a young woman. It is Doreen that leads Esther to an orgy, an activity redolent of the Beatnik lifestyle. Esther is obviously torn between the two extremities of female role models found in her social milieu: the conservative, suburbanite and her counterpart, the unfettered bohemian. Each type rival Esther for her affection: Betsy endeavours to sway her away from what she perceives as the corrupting influences of Doreen toward her example of the innocent ingenue, while Doreen, in retaliation, swipes at Betsy’s example with her sneering regard of Betsy’s lack of worldliness. Thus, Esther is trapped between two forms of womanhood each bidding for her membership.

A Bifurcate Form of Womanhood

As Lynda K. Bundtzen notes in her essay, “Women in the Bell Jar” (1989), this is the bifurcate form of fifties womanhood in which Esther finds herself torn between emulating the sexy, sophisticated disinterest of Doreen, or the naive regulated behaviour of Betsy. Betsy wants marriage and a lot of children; Doreen, to disregard either. Betsy is the road toward conformity and social acceptance, Doreen, toward social disapprobation and contempt. If she joins Doreen she will have to suffer the lot of the outcast. If she follows Betsy’s suit she will find herself, as Betsy does when she becomes the woman for B.H. Wragge advertisements, the ‘model’ woman pinned to every billboard; the homemaker. Both models are flawed by imbalance and an unhealthy polarity of choice.
Belying the roles of both women are female archetypes: the choice between a Cinderella or her ugly stepsisters; the fairytale heroine or her antagonist. Doreen, in a social situation, will become the painted woman, attracting men like flies, the eternal femme fatale. Betsy, on the other hand, preserves the sweet innocence of Snow White or Sleeping Beauty. This is the model of womanhood disdained by the speaker of ‘The Disquieting Muses, the innocent Shirley Temple mould of the post-war starlet whose “twinkle-dress” symbolises her virtue. While Doreen vaunts the power of her sexuality in the company of men, Betsy remains uninitiated to her sexual power. Doreen’s energy is the pure and unadulterated sexual energy of the female, epitomized in the fifties icon of female sexuality - Marilyn Monroe. Betsy, meanwhile, is the Doris Day version of the wholesome homemaker and wife.

Esther finally summarises the cruelty of the bifurcate model of fifties womanhood when she goes to watch a film on that subject. She knows now that the moral of the story will end with the “nice girl [was] going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl [was] going to end up with nobody, because the man named Gil had only wanted a mistress and not a wife all along”(34). This is her final ‘goodbye’ to the suburban myth of bliss. The enlightened Esther turns to comfort in defiance of the norm. She will not accept the “main point” of her culture’s dictum that while men are permitted to roam the length and breadth of their sexual desires, the woman must remain in the chastity of her spotless kitchen. She rejects the message of the article her mother sends her; “In Defense of Charity” that advocates marriage as the lasting solution to the gulf in the experience of men and women. She decides not to be the woman with leading a “single pure life”,
married to a man with a “double life”. Consequently, she will “forget about staying pure” and “marry someone who wasn’t pure either” (66). She will take vengeance upon the man who lives the double standard by wreaking her own form of marital havoc. She too will play the role of sexual predator in the face of the spotless conscience of marriage.

Mrs. Greenwood is the soapbox for the type of womanhood advocated by her beloved Reader’s Digest. It is a model that Esther comes to reject, as Plath herself did, for its terms of confinement. Esther sees her mother’s excessive concern for her daughter’s “purity”, as well as her own, as having its origins in a social obsession. Esther views her society as being “divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn’t, and this seemed the only significant difference between one person and another” (77). Esther thus regards herself as part of a society where one’s sexual morals determine one’s identity. Her regard or lack of regard for the morals of her society defines her place within that society, and while the married woman is spared the judgement of her culture, the single woman is constantly on the defensive.

The anomie experienced by the young Esther Greenwood is the anomie of the female writer. In the role of writer she steps outside the protective and established barriers of her culture, the rigid pattern of female socialisation, and so becomes an illegitimate entity. When Esther meets Buddy Willard, the potential husband figure of the novel, her fears of personal annihilation begin to surface: “I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn’t want to write anymore. So I had begun to think maybe it was true
that when you married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state” (81). The potential husband is also the potential threat to the inspiring young woman writer and her creative energies. Esther notes that the creative endeavours of Mrs. Willard have already been, literally, trampled under foot: the braided rug she has spent weeks on is soiled and trampled upon within weeks after its completion (80). So the conjugal arrangement is something that Esther already knows to be a threat to her realisation as a writer. The traditional marriage thus becomes, in the young heroine’s mind, a source of subversion; the enemy. Esther extends this thought to its most disturbing conclusion. She envisions her future husband conniving to flatten her out “underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard’s kitchen mat” (80), and so the young wife becomes the victim of a grand male conspiracy to subjugate her. Esther’s fear of the married state leads her to such imaginings. Surrounded by the apostles of the married state her fear is exaggerated, as in the words of Buddy’s mother: “What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security”; “What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from” (67).

The mother figures that surround Esther are agents of social conformity. As models of womanhood both Mrs. Greenwood and Mrs. Willard reinforce tradition. Esther is left with no alternative paradigm. Her mother encourages her in the accepted but limited vocations of women, promoting shorthand lessons that were her own means of financial survival. Although Mrs. Greenwood is untypical in the sense that she is a single mother, she nonetheless chooses extremely typical occupations for both herself and her
daughter, almost as if to make up for her enforced widowhood. In doing so, she limits her daughter’s horizons to the size of her own. Esther’s drive toward self-realization as a writer scoffs at the traditional roles of the fifties woman that her mother bolsters. This drive is almost sexual in its urgency, shooting “in all directions...like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket”. The image of woman as arrow echoes that used by Mrs. Willard in her words of wisdom to Esther, and suggests that the female energy could be, in the line of her target, potentially lethal. It also infers that the female must equip herself with artillery of sorts in order to achieve her ambitions. Esther, in response to the prescription of her mother, Mrs. Willard, and all women of the establishment, that she sublimes her energy in marriage, demands that she be the hunter, rather than the hunter, the initiator, rather than the initiated. She will not resort to the traditional female sacrifice of “serving men in any way”. Instead, she will “dictate” her own thrilling vocation – as a writer. Constantin, the man that Mrs. Willard introduces Esther to, becomes the man that Esther hopes to seduce as an act of defiance against the cause he represents. Esther muses on the “pleasant irony” that would exist if she were to sleep with Constantin, an act that would implicate Mrs. Willard in the blame. She deliberately defies the conservatism of her mother and allows herself to be taken to Constantin’s room. As she acknowledges, “this could only mean one thing” (76). The heroine taunts the moral conventions of her day. This is all part of the role of the prodigal so many women of the 1950 found themselves playing.

Esther Greenwood is the counterpart to the “angry young man” of the sixties, a syndrome identified by John Osbourne in his play Look Back in Anger. Her anger is
directed against the culture that has her sealed hermetically in a “bell jar” of social and personal limitation. Unable to find an appropriate voice for this anger, Esther turns it inward - she experiences depression and a breakdown. Her inverted anger is also directed to the being closest to her, her mother, and symbol of the type of womanhood she rejects. As she sinks deeper into depression her mother becomes a caricature of Esther’s anger. Mrs. Greenwood is transformed into something non-living, non-feminine, and repugnant:

The room blued into view, and I wondered where the night had gone. My mother turned from a foggy log into a slumbering, middle-aged woman, her mouth slightly open and a snore ravelling from her throat. The piggish noise irritated me, and for a while it seemed to me that the only way to stop it would be to take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between my hands (101).

The mother, perceived here as a “log” by the daughter is stripped of her feminine identity. The “log” is equated with the condition of a “middle-aged woman”, a condition that reduces the woman to beast. As a middle-aged woman her mother no longer has the purpose of being feminine and attractive and thus becomes defunct. She is discarded by a male world that demands attractiveness as the principle purpose of the female. As an unattractive middle-aged woman, Mrs. Greenwood is without purpose. She is merely “skin and sinew”. She is superfluous. Esther’s anger toward a society that makes such undemocratic demands is directed here toward the object of those demands: the woman, and in particular, her mother. Her mother only serves to remind her of her own pending
middle age and exclusion from the chance of mobility. The model of the mother as marginalized social being, middle-aged and shorthand typist only serves to accelerate the young girls’ fears for herself. In desperation of meeting the same fate as her mother, Esther turns to the only acknowledged redemption for the fifties woman: the idea of marriage.

VIII: Marriage, The Safety Net: The Woolfian and Plathean Versions

Clearly Plath, and countless other women of her generation, faced a crisis of identity that was not claimed until the decade that had brought them to this point was over. For the time being, it was considered imperative that a woman should find her place within the safety net of marriage. Two of Plath’s earlier poems, 'Family Reunion' (CP 300) and 'Cinderella' (CP 303), reveal the anxiety of a young woman faced with the threat of self-annihilation and her consequent retreat into the traps of fantasies laid down by a society set on possessing her. The poet-speaker of 'Family Reunion' stands observing an arriving family group from a position of height. She is poised “Like a diver on a lofty spar of land/ Atop the flight of stairs” where she contemplates herself in relation to the rest who appear to “leer” at her like a “whirlpool”. The young girl considers the act of joining the family group as something dangerous, the risk of “the fatal plunge”. Her individualism is at stake: if she chooses to take the “plunge” she will face self-annihilation as part of a homogenised whole. This is the “absorbent” “sponge”, the social gathering below. If she remains on the stairs, removed from the “laughter and the screams of greeting”, she will have failed to perform her social duty. She will have rejected the
social norm, spurned her own socialisation. The young girl will face a different sort of risk: the risk of isolation. The safety of belonging will not be hers to claim.

'Cinderella' (CP 303), is a young girl’s flight of fantasy toward the eternally desired fairytale romance of the princess and her prince at the ball. Within a social context this is very much the fairytale ending promised young girls by the chief proponent of the fairytale romance, Walt Disney. As Susan Douglas comments in Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media (1994), Disney was the epitome of fifties America with its “generosity of spirit, its trusting innocence, its good-natured, harmless fun” (Douglas 27). Beneath the sugary sprinkle of the Disney screen lurked a stereotype of the female that belied its innocent appeal. The world of “Cinderella”, “Sleeping Beauty” and “Snow White” was pregnant with untruths regarding the woman (as early Plath artwork shows, Plath was also absorbed by the world of Disney heroines).

Plath juvenilia reveal an early preoccupation with the theme of enchantment and fairytale. ‘The Land of Enchantment’ (1944-7) a mural, and 2 poems, ‘Enchantment’ and ‘The Fairy Scarf’ testifies to this (‘Eye Rhymes’ Exhibit, 2002). However, a later diary entry (written when Plath was 18), reveals that Plath was aware of what she calls the adult ‘conditioning’ of this world of enchantment, and considers it to be a dupe, total incompatible with the adult world of “bread and butter, marriage, sex, compatibility, war, economics, death and self”. The “lovely never-never-land of magic, fairy queens and virginal maidens, of little princes and their rose bushes, of poignant bears and Eyore-ish donkeys, of life personalized, as the pagans loved it, of the magic wand, and the faultless
illustrations” is poor preparation for a world in which a recent World War, and the atomic bomb are overwhelming realities (Kukil 35).

Disney animations consistently presented the heroine as a paragon of girlish goodness. They are beautiful, of course - not as women, but as girls. A beautiful woman would perhaps demand a more complex reality, but a girl, still struggling with her particular identity, is the perfect candidate for the facile world of the fairytale. She does not question the paradox of being unconsciously beautiful, beautiful without any preening, beautiful without trying. A girl might believe in such a reality, but not a woman. A woman has learnt the hard and necessary lesson that her feminine charms are something she must work hard for, perfect. In a world where women’s journals bombarded the fifties housewife, the fairytale world of the virtuous, vanity-free female was a non sequitur. Only a very good, selfless girl, could find herself awake with her prince by her side, or fit her foot into that one, golden slipper. Only a girl who has done her Cinderella training and reached the peak of a female virtue can go to the ball. Thus Plath writes of the young girl “in scarlet heels/ Her green eyes slant, hair flaring in a fan of silver as the rondo slows” (CP 303) the young girl who, like the Disney heroine, has made it to that one moment of sheer fantasy by virtue of her apprenticeship to a particular form of the feminine, the female martyr. For one moment in time, her whole world becomes a “revolving tall glass palace” and she, the princess within.

Plath’s poem betrays the cynical edge of the adolescent girl on the verge of womanhood. The “caustic ticking of the clock” pricks the “whirling trance” (CP 304) of
the palatial world and reminds the young girl of her own biological 'clock' counting the minutes remaining in her childhood. The sound of the clock is the sound of the woman in her emerging. Soon, a woman will replace the young girl. The final lines of 'Cinderella' hook the young girl to the fashionable adult world of the "cocktail" hour with its adult "talk" - that early evening hour when the suburban man and wife bring together the divorced and "hectic music" of their separate lives. The cocktail hour was the fifties equivalent of the Victorian 'tea-time' or the nineties 'happy hour'. It was the moment in the day when couples converged in an attempt to share the disparate nature of their lives: he coming from the office and she from the kitchen or a walk with the pram around the leafy suburbs.

As Esther notes, it is the "mutually exclusive" nature of the decision facing women of Plath's generation and, in an earlier generation, Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries, that presented the most danger (BJ 90). If she takes the 'alternative' course from the one prescribed by her society, then she is denied the institutional benefits that the more traditional role offers her: predictability, security, and protection. When Virginia Woolf chose marriage to Leonard Woolf she knew that she had removed herself from the danger of the unmarried and non-traditional career woman, from the nightmare of remaining an undefended spinster her whole life. "If it were not for the divine goodness of L. how many times I should be thinking of death" she writes May 28th, 1931 (Diary. IV: 27). She had laid claim to herself as lying outside conventional sex roles and attitudes with the declaration of her androgynous thinking in A Room of One's Own. Woolf's decision concerning her destiny as a social being and woman was less "mutually
exclusive” than that of Plath. The extra padding afforded her by her inherited income, and the experimental precepts of the avant-garde circle that she moved within, allowed her to mould her life (with Leonard’s influence) to suit her temperament. As a writer with reoccurring mental instability, and as a woman who desired her independence and freedom, this enabled her to survive the experience of her womanhood until her premature death at the age of 58.

Her sister, Vanessa Bell, was in violent reaction to the Victorian family system that threatened to entrap her as surrogate mother and wife to her father, Leslie Stephen, following the death of Julia Stephen. In a letter to Virginia in 1907, shortly after the birth of her first child, Vanessa refers to “all the old abuses” and “vices of the family system” that came to the surface during this period of the Stephen family history (Lee 134). When Vanessa as the oldest daughter refused to take up what Virginia describes in A Sketch of the Past as the role of a “part-slave, part-angel of sympathy” (33), this lot fell upon their half-sister Stella. Virginia recalls the months between the death of her mother and Stella’s sudden and premature death when once again the house was stripped of its “Angel”. The Stephen sisters fought an inner battle against the conventions of the patriarchal family system both “as individuals” and also “in their public capacity.” Virginia and Vanessa “were living say in 1910”; her half-brothers and her father, the men of the house, “in 1860” (34). Virginia and her sister entered into a silent and private covenant that stood against the restrictions of the Victorian life. When Virginia came downstairs in her evening gown ready for “society”, her half-brother, George, sneered
with contempt at what he considered her failure to meet adequately the demands of appropriate “society attire”:

the sullen look came over him; a look in which one traced not merely aesthetic disapproval; but something that went deeper; morally, socially, he scented some kind of insurrection; of defiance of social standards . . . “Go and tear it up”, he said at last, in that curiously rasping and peevish voice which expressed his displeasure at this infringement of a code that meant more to him than he would admit” (36).

The household that Virginia married into with her husband represented a move away from the Victorian notion of marriage toward a modern, more equal contract between man and wife. Indeed, she attributes her successful career to the lifestyle that she was able to lead, largely because of the financial means she had inherited from her father, ironically; and secondly, because of the domestic arrangements she and Leonard entered into that allowed her to profit from “the casual hours”. These hours were generally devoted to her diary, something she links to “some increase in [her] professional writing (Aleaska 299). It was the degree of leisure in her life that undoubtedly yielded her best writing, a rare indulgence for the majority of middle-class women, made possible by her inherited income and the efforts of her husband to secure this kind of life for her.

Leonard Woolf was instrumental in carving out and maintaining the serenity and balance of the life they shared together. If anything, Virginia was prone to burden herself
in a flurry of enthusiasm for activity with too many social and personal commitments. As Gerald Brenan, one of the Bloomsbury circle recalls in notes written for a discussion on the BBC, 1969, she would become over-animated in a social gathering and “talk too quickly from the surface of the mind, which had begun to work too quickly”. These “sudden flights of fantasy” and the galloping pace of her talk were certainly traits of the mania she was prone to, and coupled with her depressive bouts this led her husband into becoming, what Brenan describes, as “a manager to a famous actress”(Lee 564). Leonard acted as the moderating agent in her life, in some ways, as her keeper. It is not possible to ascertain how tight were the reins that he exercised over her activities, and it is probably safer not to try to gauge what was, an undisclosed matter. What was certain was that Virginia Woolf enjoyed those two precepts of her feminist tract, *A Room of One’s Own*: “money of one’s own & a room of [her] own”) and these enabled her success as a writer (Woolf: *Letters. V*: 195).

The decision to marry was, for Virginia, something utterly pragmatic. If we compare the reasoning, (or lack thereof) between her decision and that of Plath, the difference lies in one woman’s mature, and perhaps, ironically, more modern understanding of marriage as a partnership that supports the needs of each member. In such a way, the marriage of Virginia to Leonard Woolf was, as she describes it, hidden away in “common things”, the day-to-day rhythm of living under the same roof (*Letters. III*: 30). In a pre-nuptial letter to Leonard she frankly sets forth the obstructions and limits of her own personality as a form of warning to her future partner. She acknowledges her propensity to be “fearfully unstable”; to be at war with her two agents of herself: the
woman who “want’s everything”, “love, children, adventure, intimacy”, and the self who wants only “the extreme of wildness and aloofness” (Letters 1: 496). These are the words of a woman weighing up her realistic possibilities: should she commit herself to the security of marriage, or take heed of that nagging ‘woman in the attic’ who haunted her, promising to undo the chance of stability? Marriage, in Virginia’s mind was to provide both she and "L." with a “living thing, always alive, always hot, not dead and easy in parts as most marriages are”. Marriage was to provide them both with a vortex for change, a reference point that would allow she and Leonard to shift and turn with each development of life’s circumstances. It was not to be something constrictive, but rather, something enabling and convex.

Unlike Plath who viewed her marriage to Hughes as something that deserved great kudos (“And here I am: Mrs. Hughes. And wife of a published poet. Oh, I knew it would happen – but never so miraculously soon” (J 153)), Virginia Woolf was loathe to look upon marriage as something of a profession, or at least, something socially advantageous (Letters. 1: 496). If we compare a letter here quoted by Linda Wagner in a 1984 Journal of American Culture article entitled "Sylvia Plath’s 'Ladies Home Journal Syndrome'" (omitted in the published Letters Home), we see a vastly different perception of herself and Hughes as potential partners. Where Woolf offers pragmatism and bluntness, Plath surges into the blind delusions of an egocentric and universal union of two great beings:
And this woman I am stretching out to be is one whom no man can send
crying out of his life. Ted knows this, and I know this, and my next months next
summer, before he goes to Australia, will be spent making him learn with every
bit of his mind and heart that my like is not to be found the world over; nor his,
and in the sight of all the stars and planets and words and people in the world,
there are only two of us who are whole and strong enough to be a match, one for
the other. If he grows to this, the whole world will flare for joy; if not, I shall
write and love life all the same.

These are the words of an undiscovered Mrs. Beethoven. Their euphoric
expression of the Plath-Hughes match represents Plath’s view on her marriage as a union
of two geniuses that would “flare” the world into acknowledgement of the fact. The
startling egotism in Plath’s assessment of herself tears down the conventional fifties altar
of female subservience. Instead, what we see is a woman determined to canvas for her
own greatness; the greatness of her husband is acknowledged only as a consort to her
own. It is not a consistent appraisal of Plath’s view on marriage, for on many occasions
she promotes the sentiment of herself as the podium for her husband’s achievements,
happy to play the role of “angel in the house”. The dichotomy of her stance is perplexing,
but if we consider the multiplicity of selves that surface in the Journals and Letters Home,
it becomes more apparent that Plath was herself confused with the theology of her marital
crusade. Like Woolf, who echoes sentiments to the effect that marriage is “an enormous
pleasure, being wanted: a wife” (Letters. V: 115); that her husband is her “inviolable
centre” (Letters. V. 183), and the “core” of her life (Letters. III: 30), Plath took refuge in
marriage as a place where she could also be a traditional woman and receive traditional comforts. Being an independent, self-sustaining woman required too much aggression and too high a degree of vulnerability for her to sustain. She also desired what society had conspired for her: to be safely tucked away in marriage that would produce the kind of environment she boasts of to her mother:

Well, here I am, sitting at my little enamel table in the warm, cheerful kitchen, my Olivetti open before me, the timer [yours] ticking away, an apfelkuchen in the oven and the chicken stew gently simmering on the top of the stove . . . (LH 377).

This snug environment is what she has inherited from her marriage, what she herself has invested time in generating. It is a replica of the beloved world of her Ladies Home Journal, and she – one of its content, apple-pie baking women. Ultimately, this cosy world was to become just another journalistic deception - the ranting of her unabated writing self, what Woolf alludes to as the “wildness and aloofness” of her writing self.

While Woolf acknowledged marriage as allowing her to remain suspended between the oscillations of her mental state, (one that produced the panoply of characters that made up her complete self (Woolf, 1982: 220)), Plath comes to view her marital condition as a source of great restriction and ultimately, of humiliation. Woolf goes further in her acknowledgement of the benefits of her marriage in a letter to her composer friend and admirer, Ethel Smyth in which she places alongside her experience of
“madness”, her marriage (3 months into her marriage she experienced a major breakdown that led to a suicide attempt): “And then I married, and then my brains went up in a shower of fireworks”. These “fireworks” produced the “lava” beneath which lay “most of the things [she] writes about”. In other words, marriage was the trigger of her psychosis that was the beginning of her creative outpouring: “it shoots out of one everything shaped” (qtd. Aleaska: 359).

Sylvia Plath struggled with the question of her female identity, critical to Friedan’s definition of “The Feminine Mystique”: a conditioning process that produced a “frivolous, childlike; fluffy, feminine; passive” creature, “content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex and babies” (34). At the heart of this conditioning process, Friedan argued, were those mass-circulated women’s magazines of the fifties: Ladies Home Journal, McCall’s, RedBook, Mademoiselle, the magazines Sylvia Plath claimed as the target of her writing. Plath raises the question of the conditioning of female identity in a journal entry dated 1951. Central to Plath’s self-surmising is the matter of finding a suitable mate who will serve as the vehicle for the eradication of her “selfishness” (J 36-7). She expresses the regret of not being able to “gratify [herself] promiscuously” and offers marriage as the only feasible solution to her need for “the physical relationship of intercourse as an animal and releasing part of life”. Marriage, Plath acknowledges, is the only “customary” alternative open to her. It is part of her obligation to her family and to society to follow what she terms cynically, “certain absurd and traditional customs for her own security”. As a woman, she is envious of the freedom she sees enjoyed by her male counterparts; she has little choice but to choose marriage, what she calls the confinement
of "the major part of [her] life to one human being of the opposite sex." Marriage becomes a solution, the blotting pad for what she diagnoses as her excessive "self-love". Through marriage, she will lose herself, "hold [her] nose, [her] eyes, and jump blindly into the water's of some man's insides, submerging [herself] until his purpose becomes [her] purpose, his life, [her] life." Plath's solution voices precisely the condition Friedan identifies. The only alternative to the all-consuming marriage model is, what Plath identifies, as "a Cause" (J 37). This "Cause" is to serve as an alternative form of ego-eradication. This alternative to marriage perhaps explains why, she notes, "there are so many women's clubs and organizations" for the purpose of providing a place for the single woman to immerse herself.

Plath continues her self-address with the subject of spousal competition. She identifies her need to "excel in some field [her] mate cannot participate actively in" and thereby mollify the jealousy she would experience from watching her husband pursue a career. Writing is the potential defence against the complete self-abnegation of marriage. Writing is identified as the manifestation of her need for adulation, "a reaction against unpopularity". It is the means toward identity. It is the weapon in the face of pending marital and social responsibilities. Plath's apprenticeship to the post-war American ideals of womanhood, despite their conflict with her identity as a writer, were no more acutely manifested than in her marriage to Hughes. She had learned from her mother and her mother's generation to exalt in domestic chores; indeed, exaltation was something expected of her as proof of her capacity for wifely bliss. Her accounts of cooking, gardening, decorating and bookkeeping become, at times, odes of joy. She writes to her
mother of her “cowlike” state of being that induces an outpouring of domestic euphoria: Each day I bake something to hide away from Ted and Frieda when I’m recovering from the new baby. I have a box of sand tarts in shapes, trimmed with cherries and almonds, a box of Tollhouse cookies and a fruitcake. Tomorrow I’ll try an apple pie with the very last of our apples (LH 442).

All her active strength, at a time when she was expecting her son, is spent on improving the domestic life of her husband and daughter. Her entire focus is on serving the needs of those around her, while her poet self is entirely eclipsed. For sure, the period shortly before the birth of Nicholas found her, as one would expect, without the capacity for serious writing; yet, there is no hint of concern for the loss of this other self, merely exuberance for the small charms of her daily life.. Has the assertive modern woman of the writer persona been vanquished? In a letter to her mother dated April 29th, 1956, Plath wrote “... I have become a woman to make you proud” (LH 243). Who is this new woman? Does she pretend to be the ideal housewife, as well as that rare creature she describes herself as, the like of which “is not to be found the world over”? A 1950’s Ladies Home Journal article written when Plath was a freshman at Smith College, reflects the type of training Plath has received on “Making Marriage Work”:

1. Put his convenience first. Wives must, and so should you ...

4. Show that you enjoy yourself in his company ... Be enthusiastic about the diversions he suggests; show your interest in his ideals; be responsive to his friends.
Don’t try to make him over. To do so is futile in marriage, but fatal in courtship. Don’t criticize him, correct his grammar or his manners . . .

8. Be responsive but not aggressive . . . don’t ask when you will see him again. Such questions are his prerogative. Many girls have lost their chance of marriage by pursuing it – and a man – too aggressively (Wagner 34).

Clearly these are the proponents of a subordinate female class but deemed to be essential modes of behaviour if a woman was to hold onto her “man”. They read as a sacred text for the socialisation of the fifties female. Plath clearly ingested the fifties definition of ‘femininity’ that required the female to be: "dependent, submissive, passive, masochistic, unselﬁsh and accommodating oneself at all times to the needs of men and children”, a deﬁnition in keeping with the traditional precepts of femininity "associated with nurturing and the development of the emotions, rather than the intellect" (Connell 15).

The concerns voiced by Plath are representative of the concerns of the majority of young women of her generation. The overriding concern is for finding a suitable marriage partner before the age of 25. At the age of 19 Plath writes of the remaining three years she has “in which to meet eligible people”. The average marriage age for young American women dropped to 20 after the war. By 1951 one woman in three was married at the age of 19. Young women were placed on a testing ground in which the validity of their womanhood was at stake. The knowledge of their limited preservation date spurred
young women into the marriage market swiftly and with great earnest. There were
elements of both luck and daredevil required if a woman was to find herself married well.

An early poem speaks in metaphors of the adroit tricks the “young lady” learns as
part of her entry into the adult world. 'The Aerialist' (CP 331), is a young girl’s account of
the fear of performing badly while on public display. Her public performance as a
tightrope walker appears nightly in her dreams as a form of testing both her showmanship
and the strength of her nerve. The public arena is the setting of her test: “strict tryouts/ In
tightrope acrobatics”, where society gathers to watch a young girl’s probation on a
“perilous wire”. The poem can be read as a metaphor for the young female’s anxiety over
the fate of her adult self. Her walk across the tightrope thus becomes her voyage through
a society teeming with obstacles to her success, those “black weight [s], black ball [s],
black truck [s]”, envoys of the male world. The tightrope is symbolic of the thin line the
young girl walks toward the aspiration of her goal, and in the case of Plath and her
contemporaries, the end of the line meant marriage. The young girl of the 'Aerialist' will
not be safe from “this tough stint done” in the eyes of her public until she had guaranteed
herself the security of marriage. She must undergo an initiation into the social rites that
will secure her a safe passage, and for this purpose she must become a “nimble queen”, at
times “outrageous” in her attempts to move forward. The hazardous nature of her position
is reinforced in the final lines of the poem where the young girl senses how the whole
social fabric, like the “elaborate scaffold of sky overhead’ may suddenly fall in and drop
her into social oblivion.
The retreat of millions of women into the marriage contract is deeply connected to the fear of abandonment and anomie. Lying awake at night, unable to sleep, Esther envisages the future years of her life “in the form of telephone poles” “spaced along a road”. These future years are inevitable and already accounted for: she will marry a Buddy Willard for the sake of security and obediently subsume the anger of her dependency. Esther imagines herself doing what the rest of the world has already imagined for her. She will subordinate her fear to the male figure, her husband. The alternative was something too cruel to contemplate.

Wini Breines devotes a chapter of her *Young, White and Miserable: Growing up Female in the Fifties*, to the daughter of fifties sociologist Talcott Parsons – Anne Parsons. Using the autobiographical material left by Parsons as part of her application to the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute in 1959, Breines interprets Parsons as embodying the plight of the unmarried, career woman of the 1950’s whose social lot was one of social alienation. A brilliant scholar who died prematurely by her own hand at the age of 33, Parsons’ life has some similarities with that of Sylvia Plath. Like Plath, Parsons was a young woman in her twenties during the fifties and subject to the same social jurisdiction. As Breines puts it: “Her life is a case study that reflexively captures in her insights and dilemmas critical cultural dissonances for elite, white women of the 1950’s” (168). Like Plath, she was a professional woman struggling for recognition of her voice; like Plath, she chose a profession dominated by men, academia, and was not recognised by the
establishment until after her death. In her choice of profession she challenged social
gender polarisation of roles, but in the process of her courageous pioneering she lost the
privilege of private fulfilment. As a young girl she was caught between the need to
belong to the crowd and submit to the typical desires of the young woman for popularity
and social acceptance; so she wished to be cheerleader (169). Yet, her intellectual gifts
drew her out of the crowd and forced her on display. She battled with her own difference
and as she confessed to Betty Friedan in a letter written in 1963, she “came close to
marrying for security’s sake, but at the last minute the wedding was called off: the world
seemed so much bigger than split-level houses, and I thought I had better start off to see it
which I did” (170). The experience of Anne Parsons, female intellectual and lone wolf,
who wrestled with the coercive force of the feminine mystique, is a strong indication of
the potency of this force - even in the social margins.

Parsons’ short life is uncannily similar to that of Plath. She also shares similarities
with poet Anne Sexton. She grew up in the academic vicinity of Cambridge,
Massachusetts, and went on from a single sex private college to a Fulbright scholarship in
Paris. Plath herself won a Fulbright to Cambridge University, England in 1955. She was
attracted to the study of psychoanalysis and undertook research on several Boston-area
mental institutions. Plath, like Anne Sexton, was connected to Boston-area mental
institutions: Plath worked as a secretary at the Massachusetts General Hospital and
Sexton visited her psychiatrist there. All three women were institutionalised for periods
of their lives, and the dark side of the psyche permeated their work. A further comparison
can be found in their struggle to free themselves from the programming of the white
middle-class. Like Plath, Parsons had a prominent professor for a father and both men were employed at Harvard. In her 1963 letter to Friedan Parsons marks the age 25 as the year when her lease on the marriage market expired. She writes of the difficult access to women over 25 (hardly a mature age) in accessing the social opportunities that would launch them into marriage, quoted here by Breines:

Life for the unmarried person after 25 or so is simply not very easy because by this fact one is thrown out of all the better-worn social grooves so that even relatively simple things as what to do on Sunday become impossibly difficult. Probably the worst of the unpleasant results the situation creates is that it becomes difficult to remember that love is an intimate personal emotion that depends purely on chance, not a social obligation (as proof of one’s normalcy) or an abstract search for an “object” (172).

Parsons has clearly categorised herself as less marketable for marriage than her younger contemporaries, which, she implies, creates a sense of social abnormality. Writing at the age of 33, shortly before her suicide, she brands herself as a failure. In the eyes of her contemporary culture, she was a failure. She need only have to turned to the pages of such popular psychological works as Philip Wylie’s Generation of Vipers (1942), and Farnham and Lundbergs’ Modern Woman: the Lost Sex (1947), which became the prescribed intellectual text on the state of modern womanhood, to have this confirmed. The latter was a subversive mix of the current and popular Freudianism and Functionalist theories in sociology, and it declared the single woman to be an aberrant
creature. Spinsters were considered to be a harmful influence to young children and the authors suggested that they be barred from teaching positions "on the ground of theoretical (usually real) emotional incompetence . . . A great many children have been damaged psychologically by the spinster teacher who cannot be an adequate model of a complete woman" (370-71).

Thus women like Anne Parsons were doomed to social ostracism and condemned as a failure in two senses, both of which are connected: as a woman and as a social being. She feels herself doomed to anomie, something that is exacerbated by her rise up the academic ladder. It is as if in choosing the extraordinary career for a woman of the academic, she further reduces her chances of achieving social integration. Her personal writing documents her struggle between her need to seek out an alternative lifestyle, her attraction to the Greenwich Village group, and the pull of the academic world whose ranks her father had already opened up. The example of her father made Parson’s retreat into the ivory tower of academia more probable, but this did not prevent her from putting up a fight with conformity. She was not unaware of the need, for her own sake, to assert her own sense of self, and not an inherited one. Whilst applying for her position in the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute, Parsons wrote of her sense of the importance "of working things out for oneself even if via deviant paths, of the value of real as opposed to couch experience even if the reality is conflicted or difficult, and the importance of personal and private reticence" (Breines 173). This statement reveals her hesitation in accepting the analytical methods of her profession, truly a significant ethical dilemma, but her decision to accept the fellowship at the Boston Institute perhaps indicates a
surrender of any hopes for an alternative life. This decision was latent with personal significance. It symbolised for her, the acceptance of her anomie and perhaps the final retreat from the social norm. This career opportunity would kill her chances of succeeding on the personal level. It was a cruel and for, her, fatal twist.

Sylvia Plath placed herself somewhere in the middle of the bifurcate choice of the 1950's woman. Toward the end of her life, with the emergence of a strong poetic voice and identity as a poet, she left her marriage and slipped into the anomie of Parsons’ experience. Her drive toward the fulfillment of her writing distracted her from the vulnerability of her situation as a single mother in London. 'Mystic', (CP 268) written January 1963 during the most severe winter London had seen for a century, is pregnant with sinister expectation and fear. There is a sense in which the poet listens for an approaching danger, with the paranoia of one who knows she is on the defensive: The air is a mill of hooks -/ Questions without answers. A dark force surrounds the young mother as she sits, defenceless, a woman and a writer, watching the stirring cruelty of the city where the chimneys “breathe” and the windows “sweat”. She identifies with the indigenous:

Christ in the face of the rodents,

The tame flower-nibblers, the ones

Whose hopes are so low they are comfortable –

The humpback in his small, washed cottage (CP 269)
and then appeals to for a universal benevolence: “Is there no great love, only tenderness’
(CP 269)?

The isolation of the single woman induces something of a catatonic state. The speaker of ‘Mystic’ presents the experience of one undergoing psychiatric observation. Despite her relative social and economic independence, the experience of 'aloneness' seized her writing, betraying her fear and paranoia. In 'Gigolo' (CP 267), written the same month as 'Mystic', the London is personified as the aggressor, filled with preying ‘enemies’ The speaker turns, defensively, to the “lizardy crevices” of the streets whose holes she will “hide” in. The enemy must be won over; the delusions of her paranoia gratified. She is able to take refuge in her own anonymity, away from the “family photographs”. The single woman does not want to be reminded of her former position in society as a married woman. She flaunts her state of singleness in the face of the women on the streets who “gulp at her bulk” as a testimony to her modernity, her liberality. She identifies with the women who wear “snazzy blacks”, vaunting their unprecedented independence. At the same time, the single woman speaker falls back upon the traditional concepts of womanhood - pregnancy and fertility - to boost her sense of power and identity. We sense a wavering confidence in her new role because of her diminished social state. She boasts of ‘milling’ a “litter of breast like eggs” and eats eggs, symbol of female fertility, to stave the “cellos of moans” of her singleness. These eggs (and fish) become her “aphrodisiac”, the metaphorical source of her strength to continue without a husband-protector. She turns in defiance to female sources of sustenance – the power of her fecundity.
The experience of singleness betrays vulnerability. The maternity of the single woman is at the same time a source of comfort and a threat to her. As a single woman with children, she is not truly single, but wed in another sense, to the responsibility of her children, a partnership she can never forget or withdraw from. She has embraced the power of maternity, yet society itself offers little to support her in this choice. She is forced to become more self-sufficient. Her vocation as a writer does not yield substantial income, for her position in the contemporary literary world is still novel. She is unable to fling herself into the corporate, economic powerhouse of the employed male even if she wanted to, because of the responsibility of motherhood.

X: Motherhood as Institution

The severance between reality and non-reality in Plath’s Ladies Home Journal genre of story cossets Plath, as it does all its female readers, in the two-dimensional world of its characters. As such, these stories perpetuate the fallacy of the “bright, happy” housewife living like a cosseted child between the walls of her “bright, happy” home. She is the product of a society who has convinced her that contentment is found in a facile reality. Like a family pet, she needs only the reassuring familiarity of her domestic habitat. Adrienne Rich attributes the normalisation of the “mother at home” as part of the process of her socialisation and consequent membership to the patriarchal and “political institution” of motherhood. In her essay “Motherhood in Bondage” (1979) (On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-78) she attributes the normalisation of the
mothering role for women as a result of tremendous social pressure for women who would otherwise be regarded as socially deviant. In her essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” from the same volume, Rich describes her own myopic plunge into the traditional role of wife and mother as something young women of her generation did unquestioningly, as a matter of course. Choice did not feature in the lives of Rich and her young contemporaries; it had never been suggested. For Rich, as a writer, motherhood was one way she could prove to herself that she had “a full” woman’s life and avoid the label of social “deviant”:

...I plunged in my early twenties into marriage and had three children before I was thirty. There was nothing overt in the environment to warn me: these were the fifties, and in reaction to the earlier wave of feminism, middle-class women were making careers of domestic perfection, working to send their husbands through professional schools, then retiring to raise large families...the family was in its glory. Life was extremely private; women were isolated from each other by the loyalties of marriage. I have a sense the women didn’t talk to each other much in the fifties – not about their secret emptiness, their frustrations (42).

What Rich describes as a lack of “overt” warnings to young women of her generation of the significance of their choice to “plunge” into motherhood constitutes part of her definition of patriarchy in her 1979 essay “The Anti-Feminist Female”. The “overt” lack of warning to young women on the question of motherhood is, in fact, a
covert part of the patriarchal world. Thus, young mothers find themselves designated to the role of unpaid housekeeper, nanny and mistress to a male authority figure – their husband. At the heart of patriarchy Rich places the “individual family with its division of roles” within which the female is trained to assume the subservient role (On Lies: 78-9). Restricted to the nucleus of the family the woman cannot build solidarity with other members of her sex or create a forum for sharing her experience of motherhood and the domestic life. Without female solidarity she does not question her situation; her lone voice is not sufficient to convince herself that something might be lacking in her worldview. The “loyalties of marriage” as Rich describes them keep her with her face to the wall of the family cell.

Motherhood as an institution is, as Adrienne Rich noted, something without physical entity; it cannot be visibly demarcated. She writes in her 1976 work Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution that unlike a government, religious or educational institution, motherhood does not have its own “symbolic architecture . . . no visible embodiment of authority, power or of potential or actual violence” (275). Rich goes on to note the penalties and laws of motherhood are not documented as for other institutions and, therefore, the insidious limitation of the individual’s power that comes with almost any institution to a greater or lesser extent, is not acknowledged. What does prevail is a mythical and much romanticized notion of motherhood as something captured in a “rosy” Renoir or an ecstatic Raphaelite Madonna (Rich 275). The grim underbelly of motherhood is not something we wish to remind ourselves of: the woman “trying to conceal her pregnancy so she can go on working as long as possible . . . or of the women
whose children have gone unnourished because they had to hire themselves out as wet nurses... We are not supposed to think of what infanticide feels like, or fantasies of infanticide, or day after winter day spent alone in the house with ailing children, or of months spent in sweatshop, prison, or someone else's kitchen, in anxiety for children left at home with an older child, or alone" (276). The "grim underbelly" of motherhood was concealed from the women of Plath's generation; indeed, for the young woman of the 1950's, motherhood was presented as something mythic, idyllic and ubiquitous.

Motherhood was the most petitioned for of any of the institutions of the 1950's and it was the ubiquitous membership of every woman. "Togetherness" was the catchphrase of the era, and that meant marriage with children. A woman like Plath, may have been non-traditionalist in the sense that she battled for personal recognition of her non-feminine talents, but at the same time the socio-economic status she chose was typical of the majority: marriage for the sake of security. Unlike many women, however, she did share the responsibility of bread winning through her writing and the award of grants and fellowships. At the beginning of her marriage it was her husband who took precedence in terms of public recognition of his work, and with it the larger percentage of economic value; but Plath was not too far behind, determined to contribute through her publishing and teaching. She deliberately targeted the most recognised commercial magazines, such as The New Yorker and Ladies Home Journal for what they would eventually yield her financially, in accepting her work. Marriage for Plath was less a matter of financial security, considering the unpredictable nature of her husband's career,
but a matter of social status and a barrage against the loneliness and vulnerability of the single woman.

Motherhood, however, brought with it loneliness, and a huge amount of it. Rich quotes the poet Alta with her prose poem, 'Momma: a Start on all the Untold Stories', 1974, that captures the bottled rage of the writer-mother left alone with her children all day. The adorable quality of the child’s beauty and innocence is eradicated by the sudden and vicious nature of the mother’s anger whose child is the only available outlet for her feeling:

child with untameable curly hair, I call her kia,

pine nut person, & her eyes so open as she watches me try
to capture her,
as I try to
name her. . .

what of yesterday when she chased the baby in my room
and i screamed
OUT OUT OUT GET OUT & she ran
right out but the baby stayed
unafraid. what is it like to have
a child afraid of you, your own
child, your first child, the one. . .
who must forgive you if either of you are to survive. . .

& how right is it to shut her out of the room

write about her?

how human, how loving, how can

i even try to

: name her

maybe they could manage w/out me

maybe I could steal

away a little time

in a different room

would they all still love me

when I came back (276)?

The voice of the mother-writer expresses the anguish of her curbed creativity. Her children are a direct threat to her creative production, her only tangible sense of productivity in the context of an immutable daily routine – the institution of motherhood “that cannot be touched or seen” (276). The mother cannot draw complete security from her vocation as a poet, for after all, she is a mother, and worries whether her demonstration of anger will cause “all” those who love her to withdraw from her. The love of a husband is implied in this “all”. What is most under threat here is the mother’s
mental capacity: will she be able to survive the challenge of her isolation and the threat to her creative energy? Will she be able to fulfil the roles of both mother and poet?

The irony in the poet’s expression of the frustration of being a mother is that her children serve as fodder for her writing: “how right it is to shut her out of the room so I can/ write about her?” The daughter has become the subject of her mother’s literary endeavours, moved out from the role of being merely her daughter. She has become part of the means of economic survival, of the writing process. Plath likewise, used her children as subjects for her poetry. The young child, after all, is an extension of the mother. It is natural that the child should become her muse in some way. Plath writes ‘Child’ (CP 265) in 1963 when living alone in her Primrose Hill flat in London. It is a poem devoted to the life of her young infant in his absolute and undefiled beauty. Plath recognises the purity of his innocence, his one “clear eye” as “the one absolutely beautiful thing” she would love to “fill (it) with color and ducks”. She contrasts the unsullied beauty of her son to the environment he has been born into, a place of “troubulous wringing of hands” that mark the pain of the adult self, the fearful mother. Amidst this dark backdrop, the child is like the one “star” the mother wishes she could see in the ceiling above his cot, but the reality of her life does not permit that symbol of hope. She is locked into the ritual of the “wringing of hands”. The child remains outside the darkness of his mother’s psyche. He remains in the imagined paradise of the “zoo of the new”, and she, on the “dark ceiling without a star”.
This emotional separatism of mother and child is, in part, the result of a lack of real education on the subject of mothering. Instead of preparing a young woman for the difficult transition to motherhood, textbooks of the era told her this was "her natural state in life", the corollary of marriage and domesticity (White 18). The result was that the young mother simply found herself emotionally unprepared for the demands of her child; in particular, for the radical threat to her personal and private self. The model of motherhood was made omnipresent in the lives of women of the fifties, and a coeval relationship forged between a woman's sexual pleasure and her responsibility to be a mother. The pronouncements of Farnham and Lundberg's Modern Woman were typical in their convoluted Freudian psychology: “we are saying that for the sexual act to be fully satisfactory to a woman she must, in the depths of her mind, desire deeply and utterly to be a mother . . . If she does not so desire it will be sensually unsatisfactory in many ways and will often fail to result in orgasm.” (266-7). Such horrifying misinformation served as mainstream advice to young women. In fact, they were threats designed to coerce the majority of women into the enclaves of marriage and motherhood where they were deemed to be “safe” and out of any trouble. They were also, of course, not likely to prove a threat to the male establishment in his 'specialised' role of breadwinner.

Adrienne Rich argues that the “physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens” (Rich, 1976: 52). A woman cannot slip into abject poverty because she is not a single unit but a “mother with child” and the emotional burden of the bond to her child will not allow this. A woman cannot neglect her own survival because in doing so she is neglecting her child. She is
compelled by the fact that she produced a life to ensure that at least the child, if not she, has a chance of surviving. This is the emotional ball and chain of motherhood that she will never be of. As a mother, she is Prometheus-Bound. The final lines of Plath’s ‘Mary’s Song’ suggest a holocaust of the heart: the child is part of the world that “will kill and eat” the heart of the mother (CP 257). The child, like the world around her, is a demanding, suckling heart who drinks the life-blood from his mother. In ‘Nick and the Candlestick’ the mother-speaker addresses us from the depths of the womb where she is destined to remain as a sort of purgatorial punishment, haunted by images of the subterranean:

Black bat airs

Wrap me, raggy shawls,
Cold homicides.
They weld to me like plums.

Old cave of calcium
Icicles, old echoer (CP 240-41).

The experience of this ‘womb-world’ is something penal and frightening, a place of utter isolation. There is no pre-natal paradise in Plath’s perception of the unborn state; the world before birth is as terrifying and lonely an experience as the world after. In ‘Morning Song’ (CP 156) the child’s breathing is “moth-breath”, weighty and
suffocating; in ‘You’re’ (CP 141), the child is a self-contained entity “wrapped up in [herself] like a spool”. The suggestion is that the mother must endure a non-reciprocal relationship as the child lives out its own separate existence.

The dominant school of thought on the process of child rearing during the 1940’s – 1950’s was Benjamin Spock whose basis for child psychology was the Freudian concept of innate aggression. The Spockian child is aggressive for a reason – to survive the intimidation of the world around him (and, in the case of a child born during the war years, to survive that experience). This aggressive nature suits a purpose – survival – but if exacerbated, the child’s aggression may cause him harm in his relationships with others (Graebner 614). Spock’s analysis looked to world events and the national security of the U.S as a metaphor for the security of the child. A child’s security, according to Spock, was like that of the nation-state – it determined his level of aggression:

We should help our children better to master their aggression by prohibiting meanness, forbidding them to watch brutality on television, declining to buy them war toys, pointing out to them at each occasion, at home and at school, their natural tendency to project their hostility onto others (Spock 135).

If secure in his environment, the child’s level of aggression would be kept at optimum level, and his position within the ‘submission-domination’ scale would be moderated (102). Spock, like his contemporaries and associates, anthropologist Margaret Mead and psychologist Erik Erikson, looked to more primitive societies as a model for
the family, believing that the U.S. was driven too much by competition and technological development to be able to offer security to its children. Integral to the idea of security was the idea of non-choice. A child preferred not to be faced with choice, but rather, (as Spock described his own pleasure at school from non-choice) to be part of “a cog in a machine”, with no experience of differentiation. In this view, Spock was only compatible with the Freudian school of thought of Issacs and David Levy, advocates of clear, controlled parental discipline, what Spock called being the “friendly boss”. ‘Consistency’ was the key to good discipline; consistency maintained the child’s sense of security, and the adult most responsible for this was the mother. The mother, in her role as nurturer, was the one “steady loving person” who whose presence was the “surest way” for the U.S. to produce “useful, well adjusted citizens” (Graebner 619-20). The mother then, was the guardian of her child’s morals and values, and considering her relegation to the domestic sphere, this was a surprisingly large responsibility (an echo, perhaps of the Victorian notion of woman as a morally pure being). Apparently for Spock and his associates, this was consistent with the role of mother as chief caretaker of her child. If a child were to ‘go off the rails’, then society was likely to point the accusing finger at the mother, rather than the father. The burden of responsibility then, lay heavy upon her shoulders.

Freudians such as Spock and, in Britain, D.W. Winnicott, championed a national ideology of domestication with the female firmly at the centre of this vision. In The Child and the Family (1957), Winnicott emphasised the role of the mother as nurturer, something completely 'natural' if we observe children playing 'Mothers and Fathers': "as
you know, father goes off in the morning to work, while mother does the housework and minds the children" (qtd. Sinfield: 205). The emphasis on the mother as the anchor of the nuclear family was perhaps a reaction to wartime insecurity, and in this sense the domestic program was as inevitable as the sixties backlash. In order to maintain the normative idea of family, having a mother at home was essential if the father was away at war (Sinfield 208). Producing children was just another measure in the effort to ward off the anxiety of war.

In an interview entitled ‘Context’ for The London Magazine, 1 February 1962, Plath acknowledges the importance of the issue “of every time” – the “making of children” (‘Context’ 46). This is a singularly female perspective, for it is unlikely that any male poet in interview would have strung together the creation of children and “loaves of bread” in the same sentence. Margaret D. Uroff in her essay, 'Sylvia Plath on Motherhood', states emphatically that Plath, like Anne Sexton, treated the subject of motherhood as part of a “peculiar and private taboo” that they, as writers, were determined to traverse beyond (71). Motherhood was, after all, one of the most significant of their life experiences as women. Yet, for Plath, the subject of motherhood does not appear to be surrounded by a conscious taboo. She does present conflicting and ambivalent feelings toward the role, and seem to be consistent with the emotional evidence of many mothers. Motherhood does not find them infused with the altruistic tenderness and devotion of a pieta piece, but rather with a pot-pourri of love, resentment, and sometimes, as in the post-natal phase, simply indifference. This ambivalence is as entirely natural, as is the love and affection she has for her child.
The severance between reality and non-reality in Plath’s *Ladies Home Journal* genre of story cossets Plath, as it does all its female readers, in the two-dimensional world of its characters. As such, these stories perpetuate the fallacy of the “bright, happy” housewife living like a cosseted child between the walls of her “bright, happy” home. She is the product of a society who has convinced her that contentment is found in a facile reality. Like a family pet, she needs only the reassuring familiarity of her domestic habitat. Adrienne Rich attributes the normalisation of the “mother at home” as part of the process of her socialisation and consequent membership to the patriarchal and “political institution” of motherhood. In her essay “Motherhood in Bondage” (*On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-78*, 1979) she attributes the normalisation of the mothering role for women as a result of tremendous social pressure for women who would otherwise be regarded as socially deviant. In her essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” from the same volume, Rich describes her own myopic plunge into the traditional role of wife and mother as something young women of her generation did unquestioningly, as a matter of course. Choice did not feature in the lives of Rich and her young contemporaries; it had never been suggested. For Rich as a writer motherhood was one way she could prove to herself that she had “a ‘full’ woman’s life” and avoid the label of social “deviant”:

...I plunged in my early twenties into marriage and had three children before I was thirty. There was nothing overt in the environment to warn me: these were the fifties, and in reaction to the earlier wave of feminism, middle-class women were
making careers of domestic perfection, working to send their husbands through professional schools, then retiring to raise large families...the family was in its glory. Life was extremely private; women were isolated from each other by the loyalties of marriage. I have a sense the women didn’t talk to each other much in the fifties – not about their secret emptiness, their frustrations (42)."

What Rich describes as a lack of “overt” warnings to young women of her generation of the significance of their choice to “plunge” into motherhood constitutes part of her definition of patriarchy in her 1979 essay “The Anti-Feminist Female”. The “overt” lack of warning to young women on the question of motherhood is, in fact, a covert part of the patriarchal world. Thus, young mothers find themselves designated to the role of unpaid housekeeper, nanny and mistress to a male authority figure – their husband. At the heart of patriarchy Rich places the “individual family with its division of roles” within which the female is trained to assume the subservient role (On Lies: 78-9). Restricted to the nucleus of the family the woman cannot build solidarity with other members of her sex or create a forum for sharing her experience of motherhood and the domestic life. Without female solidarity she does not question her situation; her lone voice is not sufficient to convince herself that something might be lacking in her worldview. The “loyalties of marriage” as Rich describes them keep her with her face to the wall of the family cell.

The narrow itinerary of the fifties mother led Plath, to fear “the stereotype of the images of the mother whose love is unconditional; and by the visual and literary images
of motherhood as a single-minded identity” (Rich 121). The mother of ‘Parliament Hill Fields’ (CP 152), as Lynda Bundtzen has identified, is unconventionally pragmatic at the loss of her child by miscarriage; the mother on the hilltop seeks above all to identify with the nature surrounding her and thereby fulfill her need for reconciliation with her environment which includes the symbol of mother as Nature. The mother-poet here reminds herself that the “inconspicuous” absence of the child in no way warrants an outpouring of grief: as the “city melts like sugar” at dusk so the baby she carried has become “an ashen smudge”. The mother’s perception of the landscape is tinted with images of the baby; the roofs and trees are swaddled by the dusky sky, and the mother pulls herself sharply from the reverie of the lost child: “I suppose its pointless to think of you at all. / Already your doll grip lets go.” As “the blue night plants” itself and “the day empties its images”, so the mother buries the residue images of her loss. Pragmatism has been judged to be the best means of ‘exhaling’ the “old dregs, the old difficulties” that encompass her motherhood and marriage. It is suggested by the mother-poet that the loss of her child is merely a part of the frequent “difficulties” that “take [her] to wife” - merely an extension of the conditions of her marriage.

A pragmatic attitude is key to the woman’s survival of the marriage-motherhood formula. Finding herself locked within a flawed and limited existence, the woman must adopt an appropriate attitude that will enable her to survive. The mother and wife ‘selves’, as distinct from the poet persona, are, like the stiff gulls of ‘Parliament Hill Fields’, living with a “chill vigil” in a “drafty half-light”. The more robust self of the poet must force these other selves into the “lit house”. Living in tandem with the mother and wife, the
poet in the woman must spur her on if she is to survive her vernacular existence. There is nothing natural about the state of motherhood, but something she passively submits herself to. The expectant mother of Three Women lives in a dormant state of inertia and results in her succumbing to the magnanimous ways of her body: “I do not have to think, or even rehearse. / What happens in me will happen without attention” (CP 176). This passive acceptance of motherhood echoes in “Heavy Women” (CP 158) where a group of beatific mothers “As Venus” sit compelled by the weight of their bellies, their heads, like their smile, suspended “calm as a moon or cloud”. The weightlessness of their mental state suggests an utter vacancy of all mental faculties; the women are merely embodiments of the unprovoked state of motherhood. The centre of their being lies within the weight of their stomach, and like the pregnant mother of Three Women, the mysteries of the pregnant state take place within them as an inexplicable almost occult practice. The mother of Three Women is not privy to the crueller realities of birthing, and the delivery places her at “the center of an atrocity”. The passivity of the mother’s role is the antithesis of the Mother Earth of ‘Parliament Hill Fields’ who commands like a grand symphony the processes of day and night. The simplicity of the expectant mother’s argument against the intrusion of science upon the birthing process is indicative of the naiveté of her experience:

I do not believe in those terrible children
Who injure my sleep with their white eyes, their fingerless hands
They are not mine. They do not belong to me (CP 185).
Here, the mentality of the mother is the same as a child's: there is no reasonable explanation for the lack of belief in the reality of children born with the defects caused by thalidomide; the mother pushes away the image as a child would the image of the devil. There is no real understanding but only a terrible fear of its haunting legacy.

The expectant mother is perceived then as a resigned subject of the process of giving birth with the suggestion that this inert state will continue to a varying degree throughout her motherhood. What are the alternatives to this imposed state? The voice of the secretary persuades us that the childless state is no better than the imposed slumber of the mother. She suffers a sense of terrible sterility, and like the sun that “is down”, she also “die[s]” and goes to a “death” of her own making. Her fate lies in sharp contrast to the Earth Mother of 'Parliament Hill Fields' whose pivotal involvement in the tides of Nature at least provide her with a sense of vocation. The process of conception and creation within the womb horrifies the third voice of Three Women, the voice of the student. With a shocking degree of pragmatism, the young female student decries the entire foundation of belief in motherhood as something utterly natural: “I wasn’t ready for anything to happen./ I should have murdered this, that murders me” (CP 180).

The response of Plath’s female personae revokes the prevailing fifties attitude toward the mothering role. Motherhood was not something beatific: the women of 'Heavy Women' are not endowed with the omnipotence or omniscience of a Venus, but rather are mock-heroic versions of the same goddess, whittled down to a limited embodiment of the
goddess of love and sexuality. They represent the powerlessness of the pregnant mother – solidified, inanely petrified by the life they carry within them.

XI: Looking Back: Female Antecedents

For Plath, it was not until she had broken away from the 'safety net' of marriage that she began to write her best poetry. The breakdown of her marriage and consequent single-parent status ignited the fuel that set alight the *Ariel* poems. The "ontological insecurity" (R.D. Laing's term) of her social position is echoed in her desperate pondering to understand herself as writer. Thrown back to the example of Woolf and "other brilliant women" she addresses the question: “Why did Virginia Woolf commit suicide? Or Sara Teasdale or the other brilliant women? Neurotic? Was their writing sublimation (oh, horrible word) of deep, basic desires? If only I knew” (J 62) She is anxious to link her own literary career to Woolf’s:

And she (Woolf) works off her depression over rejections from *Harper's* (no less! – and I can hardly believe that the Big Ones get rejected, too!) by cleaning out the kitchen. And cooks haddock & sausage. Bless her. I feel my life linked to her somehow. I love her – from reading *Mrs Dalloway* for Mr. Crockett – and I can still hear Elizabeth Drew’s voice sending a shiver down my back in the huge Smith classroom, reading from *To the Lighthouse* (J 152).
Plath’s need to fix her female literary antecedents suggests a desire to be ranked among these women. She is anxious to know that Woolf too turned to the comfort of routine domestic chores as a means of assuaging the pain of public failure. Her retreat into the domestic life is something Plath feels able to justify because Woolf, before her, had behaved similarly. Plath parallels what she regards as her own compromising behaviour - the submission of precious writing hours to the mundane chores of the housewife - to that of Woolf, and thereby finds justification. Having read what she calls “the blessed diary of Virginia Woolf” she has ascertained that Woolf also experienced the erosion of precious hours or writing by the demands of domesticity – “Every time I get into my current of thought I am jerked out of it” (Diary. III: 254). This sense of a kindred spirit with her forerunner, who also found herself involved in a tug o’ war between the role of wife and writer, allows Plath to conclude that this is a natural part of the female writer’s struggle for self. So Plath is able to forgive herself for having betrayed the literary cause by spending time in the kitchen baking pies, and she turns to the example of Woolf as a means of explaining to herself why it is she deserts her writing for the sake of an apple pie or a clean stovetop.

Furthermore, Plath’s familial female antecedents, her mother and grandmother, modelled the pre-war complete domesticated version of womanhood. Plath’s early artwork confirms that the domesticated female was the only version known to her as a child and young woman. Two birthday cards - ‘Grandmother’s Day Card’ and a birthday card to her mother, (dated 1952 and 1942-7), show her grandmother in the pose of exhausted (yet pretty) domestic drudge surrounded by mop and bucket perched on a
flight of steps with the caption: “Are you always working every minute of the day”; while the second shows her mother and grandmother beneath the Plath family house engaged in the kind of domestic ‘bliss’ (presumably baking pies) that Plath was later to find herself engaged in (‘Eye Rhymes’ Exhibit, 2002). It is the solidarity of the two women that is most striking: Plath’s familial antecedents were modelled around an all-consuming commitment to domesticity that left no room for an alternative form of womanhood. Furthermore, these pieces of early Plath artwork testify to the generational collaboration and reinforcement of women in this form of womanhood – a form unavoidable and intractable.

Yet Woolf was not the happy little homemaker that Plath became. Although Plath was 9 when Woolf died, an entire era and culture separated their lives. Plath was an adult of post-war America. She did not enjoy the privilege of an upper middle-class English inheritance that allowed a fortunate few to live by independent means. The fifties notions of the domestic angel that moulded her interfered with her vision of herself as an accomplished writer. In many ways she came from a less progressive culture than did Woolf, whose avant-garde entourage enabled her to shed the Victorian precepts of her parents and recast herself in a form of womanhood that suited her unique temperament. If we agree with the sentiment of Plath’s ‘Candles’ that the ubiquitous bearing of children was yet another antiquated Victorian notion, then Virginia Woolf certainly did experience a more modern and liberating marriage. The idea of having her independence and freedom must have been her reassurance during those long years of suffering from a sense of childless inadequacy. But, unlike Plath, she led a life that fulfilled the demands
of her 'wild' and 'aloof' self. "All one's life is a struggle for freedom" she writes in her diary (Aleaska 318). Without the constraints of children, with means of her own and only a small share of responsibility in her domestic life, Woolf was able to achieve the freedom that for her was writing.

The trouble with Plath's inheritance was that rather than moving forward in the concept of womanhood her culture had slipped into reverse. The war became a source of reactionary regression away from the kinds of roles society had been obliged to hand over to its women during a time of national crisis. Conservative notions of womanhood were frightened by the war era, and consequently, those fears prevailed in what became a conservative backlash. The contradictions in Plath's early writing - aimed at a commercial audience - reflect her internal division as a woman. She embraced the fifties ideal of a docile pie-baking female, but while she tried to pour herself into this mould, her best writing was denied her. But then the fifties did not present her with many strong female role models; she had only the women of a former age, the "Big Ones" as she calls them: the Bronte sisters, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Barratt Browning, Christina Rossetti, Sara Teasdale, Marianne Moore, Edith Sitwell, Virginia Woolf. These were women coated with the torpid restraint of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, whose womanhood and literary styles were all bound by some degree to the dictates of a patriarchal world. As Plath comments, they are women "all dead" (J 212). She has to face the horrifying reality that these women may have written as a means of "sublimation" (J 62) in an era when public expression of the desire for emancipation was taboo. Plath must acknowledge that the style, the content of their writing was infused with strains of
deference to the male. Even the avant-garde Woolf shaped her style around a male
academic model inherited from her scholarly father, Leslie Stephen. Plath’s predecessors
were in flight from male dictums, yet bound to the tradition of a male canon of literature.
Plath’s journals reveal her anxious search for female literary models, many of which
disappoint her with their proprietary measures. Nonetheless, a sense of her own genius
leads her to compare herself with these women (and to ensure that she is among their
ranks) even to the declaration that the novels of Woolf make her own “possible” (J 168).

The paucity of strong female antecedents perhaps explains Plath’s greater
excitement with her male forerunners. When she discovers a former residence of
W.B. Yeats to let in London, she is ecstatic: “By an absolute fluke I walked by the street
and the house. . . where I’ve always wanted to live. . .And guess what, it is W.B. Yeats’
house – with a blue plaque over the door, saying that he lived there!” (LH 477-48). She
believes it fateful that she has been led to his door, a testament to her part in the great
literary tradition, all be it a male one. Sandra M. Gilbert in her article "In Yeats’ House:
The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath” explores the idea of “the relationship
between male authority and female identity . . . between male creation and female
creativity” (146). Gilbert’s thesis - that Plath was influenced by a period in literary
history in which the female writer looked to her male predecessor for “dialogue” rather
than her female predecessor - seems quite credible in the light of Plath’s infatuation with
Yeats. If not a “dialogue” then it was a continuum at least that Plath sought for in her
fanciful association with Yeats - a sense of her own identity as an emerging literary
figure within the context of history. Her deliberate contiguity to the male literary
tradition further explains her acceptance of a society built upon a male order in which the female was but an extrinsic object.

The literary climate that Plath inherited was one immersed in a renewed male tradition, the modernists: Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Lawrence, Hemingway, and Faulkner. Although Gilbert argues that the female modernists: Stein, Millay, H.D., Barnes, Moore, and Woolf held up their own side of the modernist dialectic, none except perhaps Stein as cultural ambassador and Woolf as proponent of the new impressionistic style, truly held a strong stake in the movement. Plath’s scorn for what she calls “the quailing and whining” of Teasdale’s poetry and other female “scribblings” (LH 277) are understandable in light of the leading male presence. She sought to differentiate herself from other female writers as “One of the few women poets in the world who is a rejoicing woman….a woman singer” (LH 248; 256), “a woman famous among women (J 260). Such divided loyalty slung her back into the “viciousness of the kitchen” (CP 227) where she was content, at least for a while, to play the female martyr.

XII: 'The Ladies Home Journal' Syndrome

Plath’s stories of the mid-to-late fifties written with the specific formula of women’s journalism, support an image of her as writer and woman with a dual purpose. Her unpublished story “Home is Where the Heart is”, depicts the plight of a Betty Arnold, one of the brightest stars at her college, married and wrestling with a course of insurmountable obstacles that prevent her from ordering her domestic life as she would
wish it. In the course of preparing supper for her husband’s boss she denies herself the chance of winning a contest that would send her to Paris, a self-denying action whose sentiment closes the story. In the end the faithful housewife convinces herself that she was “really meant for Michael” (Wagner 36). Such a sentiment would echo with pleasing tones upon the ears of the young housewife readers of women’s magazines. Plath knew this and was able to churn out the formula she believed necessary to gain a hold in the popular market. The excruciating inner drama of her mature poems is sacrificed for the sake of this market and a place in popular journalism. The compartmentalisation of Plath’s writing styles are evidence of her ability to interject the discipline of professional appropriation into her writing. That her short stories are clearly not on par with her poems, would be immaterial to Plath who believed for most of her writing career that “poetry is an evasion from the real job of writing prose” (JP 3). It is clear that Plath’s prose, as a result of the dictates of the popular women’s magazine market, reflects the attempt to mould herself to the form of contemporary womanhood.

Yet, in 1957 Plath was not the sublimely content housewife of her unpublished prose piece “Change-About in Mrs. Cherry’s Kitchen”. The image of the happy, ‘humming’ housewife is not found between the lines of Plath’s journals and poetry of that period. This pretty fabliau is a fallacy of a childlike imagination:

Mrs. Cherry hummed to herself, sitting at the sunny kitchen table and paring carrots for Mr. Cherry’s favorite supper of beef stew. She flashed a bright, happy look around her kitchen: at the washing
machine washing, and at the oven baking, and at the icebox rumbling
gently as it kept the vanilla ice cream cold for Mr. Cherry's dessert (qtd.
Wagner: 37)

This piece of naive deception shows Plath willing to perpetuate the myth of domestic
bliss at the cost of obliterating her own experience of its grimmer reality. In a sense, such
writing is a betrayal of the sincerity of the experience of the domestic woman. Plath,
perhaps unwittingly, (for it was only the obsession with publishing in well-established
women's magazines to secure a place in popular journalism that drove her to write in
such a manner) is joining a cultural conspiracy that deliberately obfuscates the more
grinding aspects of domestic life by gilding it with the touch of a fairytale. In a larger
sense, she is betraying her entire sex to a process of cultural deception. That, a woman
who documents with such vitriolic feeling the sordid experience of her domestic life, can
then dismiss that experience for the safety of a myth, is perplexing. The need to infuse
the reality with fantasy depreciates the sincerity of her struggle, but apparently,
displacement makes the everyday more bearable, and provides a myth by which to live
by.

Public affirmation of the career woman, let alone the woman writer, was extremely
rare in fifties journalism. Linda W. Wagner notes that the only articles that might appear
in women's magazines were those designed to remind women that their natural realm
was the home. Their message undoubtedly included such maxims as this one from a 1952
Ladies Home Journal article entitled “The Employed Woman and her Household”: “all
women are, or aspire to be wives and mothers. . . and our society is still organised on the assumption that the conduct of the home is every woman’s natural function”. The justification of the career wife and mother is lame and apologetic: “Married women who work outside their homes do so either because they have special interests and abilities to exercise, which is a necessity of their personalities, or because the family needs their earnings” (Wagner 35).

The criteria of the socialised fifties woman is treated with the sardonic humour of the actual, as opposed to the ideal woman. Plath is the actual woman, and the actualised experiences of her motherhood and marriage, the domestic life, unsettle the popular beatific ideal of the happy homemaker. Like the pheasant of Plath’s poem of the same name, the socialised woman is taught to believe that she is “not mystical (CP 191) but merely an embodiment of an ideal woman. She is the Beatrice of the domicile: cook, housekeeper, loving, loyal wife and mother to her children. Clarissa Roche recalls that Plath affectionately named her children her ‘bunnies” (Butscher 88), a term that evokes an image of her running some kind of underground, clandestine family warren; a world utterly separate from the vocation of poetry. In her role as ‘Mother Bunny’, Plath is the matron figure in a hectic family existence validated only by the birth of a child She writes to her mother in March 1961 that the birth of her daughter Frieda has caused her to be “reborn” and to realize that her “real, rich, happy life” had only just started (LH 450). Are these the authentic words of a blissful mother, or the formulaic response of the propagandised fifties female? The image of the ‘bunny’ is quite in keeping with the fifties notion of womanhood in which the female plays the role of a pleasant, attractive and
pragmatic accessory to her husband. As wife and lover she is called upon to display the
cravings of her femininity (which in itself requires a great deal of time and attention). Thus
she presents herself to her husband, the public male world, and to other women, as the
paragon of domestic bliss. The training she received from her contemporary culture, a
culture very much based on the patriarchal demands of what a woman ‘ought’ to be, led
her into a traditional role she struggled to survive. At the same time, she chose to defy
cultural norms; she did not take shorthand but instead turned to writing as her highest
calling and so, joined as an outsider, the ranks of a male profession. The need for social
acceptance coupled with a deeper need to be part of traditional femininity led Plath into a
fricative pact between her subordinate and insubordinate selves.

XII: The Divided Self: The Writer and the Wife

The woman who holds ambitions for herself is labelled as a Bohemian and is
denied social affirmation; instead, she is classified as something socially erroneous or
heterodox. Plath’s poetry bears witness to a need for public and social, approbation. Her
decision to gamble with the two opposing agents of female self-fulfilment, motherhood
and marriage on the one hand, and writing and publication on the other, led her into an
irreconcilable and somewhat torqued existence. Phyllis Chestler in *Women & Madness*
(1974), explains Plath’s dilemma as part of her lack of membership to the more
privileged and selfish existence of the male writer: “Plath was lonely and isolated. Her
genius did not earn for her certain reprieves and comforts tendered by the male artist. . .
After separation from her husband, Plath continued to write and keep house for her
children” (Chesler 12). In other words, Plath was unable to thrust herself into the reclusive lifestyle afforded to most males and single women involved in writing. She wrote in the “glassy music” of the “blue” hours before dawn when her children were still sleeping, hauling herself out of bed with a cup of strong coffee, denying herself those precious hours of rest young mothers crave for the sake of her art.

In the words of Elizabeth Hardwick, Plath was a woman “whose stack of duties was laid over the ground of genius” and “ambition” (Hardwick 105), driven to achieve highly in all areas of her existence: in the kitchen, the study, in terms of her cultural and social finesse, in her relationships with her mother and husband, her children, and especially her writing. The “cry” in the night that is heard in “Elm” (CP 192) is the dislodged sound of her overburdened self lying at the “bottom” of the “great tap root”. It is the source of the “fear” of her limited self, flattened by the weight of her excessive drive to achieve and perfect. This inner voice ‘inhabits’ the woman and the poet, filling her with its sounds of “dissatisfactions”, recalling the “dark thing” that is her “madness”. It is a “madness” bought on by the betrayal of the female paradigm of her era: love, marriage, a house and then children – the woman siphoned off from the public gaze, obliged to find a meaning for her life in a domestic existence. Plath lived most of her adult life within the conventions of her time. Louis Simpson in A Revolution in Taste, (1978), explains this as part of the pragmatic Plath who, realising that she had to “live in that culture” (the conventional fifties culture), must then, “accept its norms” (121).
Plath's radio poem, *Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices* (CP 176-86) expresses the sense of inevitable failure experienced by women locked into the 'double bind' of her era. The voice of the secretary precisely captures the multifarious roles of the female caught in a myriad of unsatisfying and chameleon parts that she plays out at the expense of her own authenticity:

I have had my chances. I have tried and tried.

I have switched life into me like a rare organ,

And walked carefully, precariously, like something rare.

I have tried not to think too hard. I have tried to be natural.

I have tried to be blind in love, like other women,

Blind in my bed, with my dear blind sweet one,

Not looking, through the thick dark, for the face of another (CP 178).

It is the 'trying' that is so exhausting; in particular because these 'tries' are futile because they are based on the criteria of her society, and not her own. Thus, the woman of the fifties finds herself with no “chances” remaining; plugged into a social paradigm that is unnatural and at odds with the bona fide woman; existing as a precious object in a world that demands she act accordingly; in relationships in which she finds herself alienated, unknown to her lover, and forced to play “blind” to this fact. Ultimately, she is a woman of tremendous pragmatism – a pragmatism forced upon her by social conditioning, a skill necessary to survive the onslaught of her extrinsic existence.
The acculturation of the female toward the family unit was part of a definite cultural program to retain the female within the framework of the home. The security of the family unit provided the security and comfort deemed necessary for the more fragile constitution of the female. While the female was cosseted in a safe corner of the private domain the male carried out the higher responsibilities of the public world. Rich perceives this designation of the female to the home life as the patronising attitude of a society that has declared her to be more emotionally vulnerable than the male. Consequently, it is deemed ‘safer’ for her to remain within the realm of the home to provide her with the “tenderness” and “warmth” she requires (72). In the woman writer the conflict between self and culture creates a tug-of-war: should she, she asks herself, be more devoted to her traditional roles as wife, mother, homemaker, or to the role of writer? For the female, the question arises whether pursuing a writing career will deny her the fulfilment of her womanly self, something she is conditioned to believe is essential to a sense of fulfilled ‘femininity’. A synthesis of the roles of writer and woman is an ideal fraught with tension. To the culture of the 1950’s the idea of a woman-writer was incompatible: writing stole precious time from the hectic schedule of running the household, the prerogative of the ‘valid’ woman. A woman who chose to write was in risk of becoming what Rich terms “socially deviant”.

The marriage of domesticity and the writing life was not a happy one. Two years into the married life and Plath is facing the fated war between the self of the “brilliant” promise and the quiescent woman of the home life. The distraction caused by these irreconcilable selves and their torturous tug-‘o’-war in the conscious mind is repeatedly
documented in Plath’s journal of this period. A sense of terrible futility and thwarted potential wracks the young writer-wife – she notes her inability to produce anything of worth because of the war she houses within:

Tomorrow morning I will finish it (a piece of prose “on the bird”) and begin it over again, drawing structure out of it. I must be ghastly to live with. Incompetence sickens me to scorn, disgusts me, and I am a bungler, who has taken a bad turn in fortune – rejected by an adult world, part of nothing – of neither an external career of Ted’s – his internal career when written out, perhaps – not a career of my own, nor, vicariously, the life of friends, nor part motherhood – I long for an external view of myself and my room to confirm its reality. Vague aims – to write – fail, stillborn. I sense a talent, sense a limited fixity of view stifling me now (J 251).

The pathos of this passage lies in Plath’s absolute sense of having no true personal identity. She is anonymous, having been born into a world that expects her to carve out an enduring self. The adult world she feels has “rejected” her is that of her particular New England upbringing, and she is unable to salvage a compensatory sense of accomplishment from her husband’s career. The “limited fixity of view” is that of the unadulterated wife in her co-dependent existence with her husband. She is, as she wrote 8 months after her marriage, “Mrs. Hughes. And wife of a published poet” (J 153). That is the limit of her worldview, and 2 years has done nothing to expand the limit of that horizon. Being absorbed in domestic environs, she has been unable to develop that talent
she keenly senses. The kernel of that talent is the source of her potential as writer and individual.

The question of autonomy and self-definition lies at the heart of her existence. Alicia Ostriker in her chapter ‘Divided Selves: The Quest for Identity’ champions the view that female poets must lay claim to an identity of their own and thereby shrug off an identity imposed “which opposes female autonomy” (Ostriker 1987: 59). The marginal place assigned to female poets' lies in direct correlation to a woman's social marginalisation. Furthermore, the assignation of her writing to the margins of a hectic domestic schedule only serves to lower the profile of herself as writer in the eyes of her self, family and culture. When her writing is relegated to a few snatched hours or minutes between cooking and cleaning, shopping and feeding, the woman writer loses her sense of self-definition and autonomy. Her writing becomes something she practices 'underground'. It is not part of her overt, ordered, quotidian world, but something covert and 'stolen'. Plath rising at 4.30 a.m. in order to write for 2-3 hours before her children awoke is typical of a tradition of female writers who live with a constant and cruel division of loyalties. Inevitably it is the writer self, that is pushed to the margins, lost in the throes of more urgent survival issues. That self becomes lost to what Rich describes as “the discontinuity of female life with its attention to small chores, errands, work that others constantly undo, small children's constant needs” (1979: 43). Tillie Olsen describes the death of her writing life in “Silences: When Writers Don’t Write” cited here by Joanna Russ:
When the youngest of our four was in school . . . the world of my job . . . and the writing, which I was somehow able to carry around within me, through work, through home. Time on the bus, even when I had to stand . . . the stolen moments at work . . . the deep night after the household tasks were done . . . there came a time when this triple life was no longer possible. The fifteen hours of daily realities became too much distraction for the writing. I lost craziness of endurance . . . Always roused by the writing, always denied . . . My work died (Russ 8).

The erosion of “daily realities” upon the writing life keeps the female writer in abeyance; her “divided self” is her downfall. Critic Susan Juhasz attributes Plath’s divided self to her cultural conditioning: the exaggerated nature of her suffering resulted from [living in] the fifties, New England, the middle class” (88-9). The woman writer who declared herself a “genius” of a writer to her mother in 1962 (LH 468) was also acutely cognisant of the fact that she must master her feminine attributes in order to achieve full recognition as a woman. As Juhasz declares, a young woman of the fifties had to present herself “as “normal” as everyone else”. It was acceptable to be gifted, but only if her giftedness contributed to her overall femininity. In other words, the woman must become a paragon, functioning at the full peak of her feminine powers while she invests time in perfecting a gift that will allow her to take on the world. Adrienne Rich confirms the sense of a divided self experienced by the young woman. She writes of “the split [she] experienced between the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationship with men” (Rich 1979:
21-22). This "split" in the female psyche results in an experience of confused identity, falling out as she does of the clear parameters of traditional female socialisation into a role reserved for men.

Juhasz calls this split in identity of the woman-poet the "double bind" (1-5) and elaborates on the tension between a woman's role in society and her role as a female "poet":

... the word "woman" and "poet" denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles. "Women" are, according to society's rules, very different from "poets". A woman's identity is not identified by a profession such as a poet, but by her personal relationships as daughter, sister, wife, mother. Her "life" is family life. Her art... must necessarily conflict with her life. Usually she is pressured, or pressures herself... to make a choice: "woman" or "poet" (1-2).

The crux of the dissension between "woman" and "poet" lies in the fact that women traditionally gain their sense of identity or "self" vicariously – through their interaction with others. In order to be fully accepted as "poet", the woman must "exhibit certain aspects of herself that her society will label masculine" (2). In other words, the woman who wishes, also, to be "poet" will have to assimilate, to some degree, male roles and attributes.
Plath’s early attempts to be both “woman” and “poet”, following the lineage of established male poets, is demonstrated in many poems from The Colossus chiefly concerned with mastering modern poetic technique. Her husband describes his observation of Plath’s laborious assimilation of poetic technique in his “Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s Poems”: “She wrote her early poems very slowly. Thesaurus open on her knee, in her large, strange handwriting, like a mosaic, where every letter stands separate within the work, a hieroglyphic to itself” (Newman 188). Plath’s Colossus poems are heavily permeated with the images of animals so typical of Hughes’ poetry. The babies in the dissection room of “Two Views of a Cadaver Room” (CP 114) are “snail-nosed”. The sow of “Sow” (CP 60) is a “vast/ Brobdingnag bulk”, and like Hughes’ images of animals, the sow is unattractive, dark (“bedded on that black compost”), and insidious. Likewise, the moles of her poem “Blue Moles” (CP 126) are “out of the ragbag”, “dead in the pebbled rut”, reminding us of the disintegration of life and the omnipresence of death. These tinges of Hughes’ dark vision of the natural world, her obsession with technique, and the overriding concern with language rather than content, indicate a rite of passage through established male models of poetry before the flowering of an authentic voice that is Ariel.

In August 1957, Plath is still practising, as she writes to her mother, “quite elaborate and alliterative forms” and “short verse dialogue” written “in strict 7-line stanzas rhyming ababcb” (LH 324). The watershed period in her poetry did not come until the birth of her daughter and first child, Frieda. As A. Alvarez observes in his essay “Sylvia Plath”: “The real poems began in 1960, after the birth of her daughter, Frieda. It
is as though the child were a proof of her identity, as though it liberated her into her real self. I think this guess is borne out by the fact that her most creative period followed the birth of her son, two years later (Newman 58). It is as though, reaching ‘full’ womanhood with the experience of childbirth, it became permissible for Plath to become ‘full’ poet. The authenticity of the birthing experience was, in a sense, the license for authentic poetry, and the experience itself that induced the poetry. This is the “synthesis” of the roles of both woman and poet that Rich speaks of in “When We Dead Awaken” (42). Somehow, Plath was able to achieve this: to let in what Rich calls “the subversive function of the imagination”(43), and to fulfil the traditional role of mother to her children. Like Plath, Rich documents her ability to write “for the first time, directly about experiencing myself as a woman” (44). For Rich, this came to her “in the late fifties”; for Plath, it was the early sixties.

In his “Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s Poems” Hughes comments on Plath’s utter absorption in the reality of her poems, and her inability to live otherwise: "She had none of the usual guards and remote controls to protect herself from her own reality. She lived right in it, especially during the last two years of her life. Perhaps that is one of the privileges, or the prices, of being a woman, and at the same time an initiate into the poetic order of events” (qtd. Newman: 187). Hughes' comment suggests that by the time Plath was writing the Ariel poems she had indeed become that deviant social being, the writing woman. The roles of mother, wife, and housewife still figured as part of her day-to-day reality, but they did not define her. What defined her was her writing self.
In “Context” (JP 92), Plath asserts her “delight” in those poets “who are possessed by their poems”, and whose work is “born all-of-a-piece, not put together by hand”. Her statement is a rejection of the highly mechanised, technical poetry of the Modern and, predominantly, male movement she once aspired to. The nature of her work as a poet, as the nature of her life as a woman, now ‘possesses’ her. By 1962, Plath no longer lives and works in response to a culturally prescribed formula. She has freed herself from external influences and become an “initiate” into her own “poetic order of events”.

The process of achieving this "poetic order of events" is marked by a watershed experience in the relation of the poet-speaker to herself. The speaker achieves this through direct confrontation of her masked, poetic personas. Poet Carolyn Kizer’s poem 'Pro Femina' from her collection Mermaids in the Basement (1996), speaks of the unique female capacity for social masks that form part of her socialisation:

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Our masks, always in peril of smearing or cracking,
In need of continuous check in the mirror or silverware,
Keep us in thrall to ourselves, concerned with our surfaces (42).
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Plath’s poem, 'In Plaster' (CP 158), is a strong example of the masked selves splitting into two. The poem constitutes a female poet writing, not of external matter, but of the “peril” of her divided female selves. One self is conceived as an “absolutely white person”, the “superior one” who “doesn’t need food, she is one of the real saints”. The
self of the poet, however, is her antithesis: "the old yellow one . . . ugly and hairy". She is the ugly sister of the “absolutely white” self, who directs her venom at the “superior” one. As the poem progresses, these two personas are both at risk of cracking. A dependency, one upon the other, begins to emerge as the voice of the poet recognises the need of the other self for "a soul" which only she can give her:

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 (CP 159).

As each learns of the other’s need, their relationship moves from exploitation of their “fitting” personalities back to resentment of the other’s existence. The speaker realises that the other self has begun to believe “she was immortal”, and that she is no longer the “superior” one. The dependency of their relationship has lead to jealousy, and the speaker realises that it must be either one or the other of the selves that triumphs:

I used to think that we might make a go of it together –
After all, it was a kind of marriage, being so close.
Now I see it must be one or the other of us.
She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy (CP 159).
The speaker's realisation that she must choose between "one or the other" of her conflicting selves is a form of a showdown with herself. The speaker must, in order to continue ontologically, choose between one or the other. In terms of the Plathian oeuvre 'In Plaster' makes way for the devastating honesty of 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus' where the speaker, still masked, nonetheless, betrays a choice of "one or the other" bifurcate masks of womanhood. By opting for the "ugly and hairy one", Plath discards the impossibly of the unattainable perfection of the 'saintly' version of the female. This choice indicates a consummate rejection of the socially constructed model of femininity. The choice of the "ugly" self provides further scope for masquerading, as the speaker utilises the need to 'mask' the ugly self with an excuse to unload the devastating irony of the later poems. This masquerading requires a double-consciousness on the part of the speaker, what W.E. Dubois, quoted here by Barbara Gelpi, describes as the "sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity". The acknowledgement of this 'double-consciousness', as Arnold Rampersad has noted, is the beginning of the process of transcendence of the role of 'cultural victim'. For the woman writer, the process of transcendence continues with the necessary release of anger, and the ensuing creativity that this anger produces (Gelpi 270). For Plath, this comes once she has rejected the mask of saintly 'femininity' and donned, instead, the raw and more brutal mask of the avenging angel.
Double-consciousness: The Need for Deflection

The expressionistic mode of Plath's mature work proceeds from the double consciousness of the female writer, a double-consciousness that involves an awareness of the female self in relation to the world, and the position of the world or male 'Other' in relation to herself. Being female, this position is a subordinate one and endows her with a view of her own reflection in the eyes of the world or 'Other'. This view of her self, and her self in relation to the world, is what Luce Irigarary has defined as the 'speculum', the instrument by which the male order (the world) perceives the female. Irigarary's speculum infers that the female subject is forced into the position of viewing herself as a reflection of the male; that is to say, as "a negative of its own reflection" (Moi 132). For the female poet the experience of self-reflection in the eyes of the 'Other' precipitates the need for deflection, and hence the creation of a series of deflecting personae in her writing. These personae or 'speakers' become a means by which the female writer can release her emotion, namely anger, regarding her subordination to the 'Other'. In the case of Plath, these personae allow her to take revenge on the 'Other', those agents - her father, her husband - responsible for her subordination. Likewise, through the acting out of various personae the poet-speaker identifies the bifurcate nature of her culturally constructed self - the "absolutely white" self of prescribed femininity and the "ugly hairy" self that is her shadow. Both personae are deflections of the perceived reflection of society or the male order that has constructed her, by which she has become wife, housewife and mother. Aware, as Irigarary has argued, (Speculum de l'autre Femme (1974)) of the non-representation of the female in the social order, Plath, as a female
writer, dons masks as a means of acting out this socially constructed self as part of an ironic gesture to that self hidden "in between signs, between the realized meanings, between the lines" (Irigarary 20). Through the interplay of reflected and deflected selves, the female writer is able to find something beyond the social construction, something "in between" the engagement of her self with the reflection, the male gaze, and the deflection: her artillery of female personae.