CHAPTER - II

USE OF MYTH IN THE POEMS OF SYLVIA PLATH

This chapter deals with the poems of Sylvia Plath and the mythical elements woven into them. An attempt is made to recognise the myths that influenced her, shaped her thought process and channelised her creative energy. The thrust of the chapter is on understanding Sylvia's poems through the mythic pattern they follow and to link them with her biographical background wherever necessary to authenticate the conscious use of myth. The comments of Ted Hughes her husband and her letters to her mother are referred to whenever necessary for the above mentioned purpose.

A close study of her biographical background is required as her poems reflect autobiographical elements. Sylvia Plath was born on the 27 October 1932, the first child of two intellectuals, Dr.Otto Emil Plath, Professor of Biology at Boston University and Aurelia Schober who met Otto Plath, while studying for her masters degree in German. Otto Plath had immigrated to America from Grabow a town in the Polish Corridor when he was sixteen years old. The description of the Queen Bee in her father's treatise Bumble Bees and their ways (1934) is seen in her poems. His skill in bee keeping won the name BeinKonig (Bee-King) Aurelia Schober was first generation American of Austrian descent. Aurelia got married to Otto Plath, her teacher of German language, in 1932. Sylvia Plath was born in the same year. Sylvia Plath
refers to her mother as partly Jewish and herself as second generation Jew, justifying the Nazi imagery in her poems. Otto Plath died in 1940 when Sylvia Plath was just getting to know him and was thinking of him as God. The amputation of his leg and later his death left her devastated. These elements keep cropping up in her poems. In order to help in the keeping of the family, Aurelia’s parents came to live with them and Sylvia Plath formed a close bond with her grandmother, a figure of efficiency, stability and permanence. As their house was near the ocean, the memory of her grandmother was associated with the ocean. The ocean became part of her life, both physically and figuratively through their telephone number Ocean 1212w. Sylvia Plath joined Smith College and worked hard to please her mother and win scholarships, as her family could not afford her education. In her second year at Smith, she had depression and attempted suicide at Wellesley, in 1952, which is significant, according to her because she said she tried suicide once in every ten years. Sylvia Plath selected Doestoevsky’s Double as completion thesis for Smith. In 1955 she won a Fulbright Scholarship to England. In England, she met Ted Hughes and married him in 1956. The married life was idyllic, two poet minds influencing and encouraging each other. They kept shuttling from America to England and vice-versa. The birth of her daughter, Frieda Rebecca in 1960 opened new visions of creative talent in her poems. The Colossus her first volume of verses was published the same year i.e., 1960. This year of happiness was the last one of her idyllic life. The year 1961 was not a happy one, despite a few publications, she had a miscarriage and an appendectomy and her husband started an affair
with Assia Gutman, her friend of Russian origin. The birth of her son Nicholas Farrar and her final separation from Ted came together in 1962. The failure of her feminine aspirations due to Ted's infidelity shattered her already disturbed psyche. She moved to England after separating from Ted Hughes. The worst of cold that the country had seen, a depression come to stay, poverty, ill health and her suicide on 11 February 1963 at the age of 30 shocked the literary world.

The Colossus and Other Poems, the first volume of verses, was the only one published during her lifetime. It begins on a quiet note and builds up through confession of fear regarding her illness, both physical and mental. The poetry reveals the agony of suffering expressed in confessional forms. It is a recording of the response of a sensitive soul to a frenzied world, highlighting the vulnerability of the self. According to Ted Hughes; her husband, the collection evolved over the years. Sylvia Plath kept on changing the titles and despite her desire to leave out the old poems, she had to combine both the new poems with the old to “Bolster the Book” ¹ as she put it. These poems are important as they are well worked upon, each word thought out by a poet who wanted to write perfect poetry. In this volume, one finds Sylvia Plath's attempt at finding her real voice, which would direct her creative energy towards the goal of her life. Invariably, in order to externalize her inner compulsions she took recourse to folktales, myths, legend, paintings, sculptures anything of long standing value in art to counter the

onslaught of fear. The whole tone of the volume reflects fear born of confusion. The main theme linked to this study is of the incestual overtones for her father is seen in the title poem “The Colossus,” where she inflates the death father into a gigantic image. The mother obsession, desire for death and a fear of inadequacy in fulfilling the roles of being a daughter, wife, mother and poet are the main themes of the poems in this volume.

The second volume, to be published posthumously, was Ariel (1965). It was a slim volume and it was this volume along with her tragic suicide that paved the way for her fame and the Plath legend. Although, the poems in this volume were written last, they were published first after her suicide. Ariel, brought her the fame she had sought just as she had written to her mother, “I am a writer... I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name.”

In Ariel, the protagonists voice booms out clearly against all the confusions that had begun in The Colossus. The controlled use of emotion is loosened, and the mythical identification takes place, leading to images of transcendence in this volume. The voice of the protagonist is seen coming from an inaccessible depth, with a sense of threat. The protagonist is seen straining against all traditional restraints applicable to creativity. There is an exploratory invention, as A. Alvarez puts it

“violent, threatened personal involvement and a quizzical edge of detachment.” 3

This collection highlights the reality of existence of her earlier Gods. The main theme, which takes prominence, is suicide with a desire for revenge and rebirth. The purity of death is emphasized. An inevitable preface to doom is seen in “Lesbos,” “Death and Co,” “Elm,” “Applicant” and a few others. The fusion of death and creativity takes place. The conflict between ‘I (ego) and God’ is seen in the Ariel collection, where there is room for only one to wield the power. The clash leads inevitably towards destruction. The poems become a trajectory through which she hurls her thoughts of fear uncontrollably. As Irwing Feldman describes, “Getting There” and “Ariel” are memorable poems: “bold, powerful, grotesque, appalling, for they show her universe, infected with the self, as a devilish will.” 4 The concept of salvation, which necessitates murder and in turn murder requiring damnation as a pre-requisite, and once again the damned seeking salvation form the cyclic schema of these poems.

The sense of being haunted increases in intensity and the escape from dilemma seen in The Colossus, is resolved by flying off into nothingness. The desire of salvation ironically, is not the desire for peace or eternity but for the process which leads to salvation. The

disembodied motion is preferred to static perfection of death. The Ariel, poems were written in the last month of her life and often turned out at the rate of two to three a day. The despair and desolation of her condition sets the tone of the volume, the general effect being symphony of death and dissolution. The volume is full of violence, that of a disturbed mind. The Bee poems belong to this volume. Pain and exacerbation are the very life of these poems. The poems are filled with indignation leading to violence of the mind. This was not a new direction for the poet but only clarification of irresistible motives that were seeking the way to surface from the start. The influence of Robert Lowell is seen in the intense scrutiny of the self in this volume.

Crossing the Water, (1971) subtitled Transitional Poems, was published later but the poems were written between The Colossus and the Ariel. These are the fore runners of the Ariel poems and are also called the poems of the transitional period, giving us an insight into the workings of Sylvia Plath's mind before the final choice of her life was made. It was this collection, which made the readers look at Sylvia Plath, both as a poet and an individual in a new light. These poems represent a various mixture of the self-consciousness of The Colossus and Ariel. One finds control, formal and even superficiality in the tone of these poems. If in Ariel, she is a shriek of agony, here she is part of a landscape, a still point for nature in vortex, an observer who finds her day-to-day voice of the home-keeper. This volume emphasizes the unity of Sylvia Plath's works, forming a link between The Colossus and Ariel. "Crossing the water" the title poem deals with the sense of depression and lethargy, which follow the themes of illness, evolution of
psychological background, domestic oppression, public and private pain. The themes of pregnancy, motherhood along with miscarriage, which is described as 'bareness', 'deprivation' and 'infertility' are found in the volume. Surprisingly, one finds mockery of the masculine world with the flurries of domestic detail. The tone of non-chalance while dealing with themes like death, creating dramatic shock, was perhaps cultivated in this volume. An analysis of pain and desire to face it with equilibrium is characteristic of this volume. The influence of Roethke is seen in "Who," "Dark House," "Maenad" etc. There is a gentleness in these poems, which is missing in both The Colossus and the Ariel. The volume conveys to the readers, the terrible darkness of her mind. The last poem of the volume ironically is "Among the Narcissi" picturing an old man recuperating on a garden wall, a sign of hope and rejuvenation. Crossing the water, is an indispensable book in the understanding of Sylvia Plath the poet, as a whole.

Winter Trees, (1971) is another volume published posthumously. One could safely say that the volume deals with women as mothers, both as winners and losers. The volume concludes with the radio verse play the The Three Women. The titles are directly connected to the themes like "Childless Woman," "Child" and "For a Fatherless Son." "Thalidomide" too is about agonizing parental experience. Woman's personal experience in conception, carrying and giving birth to a child is emblematic of a world of natural growth and patterned progression in stark contrast to the technological world of destructiveness of 'bull­dozers,' 'guillotines' and 'white chambers of white.'
In the "Purdha" and "Gigolo" one sees the seed of anger towards the male sprouting. "Mystic," "Brasilia" and the title poem, "Winter Trees," reveal the dimensions of personal sufferings, which were only undercurrents heretofore. A reflective mood is also a new aspect of this volume.

The fear of a mother for the child whom she brings into a world of destruction leads to the theme of helplessness. An aloofness is deliberately created avoiding hysteria. An eerie fusion of helplessness and power is revealed. There is the dissolving of the ego, in contrast to the conflict found in Crossing the Water. There is a horror regarding the result of confrontations with the divine. "Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?" 5 The self devoid of all hope for the future, speculates on the fear of even God's failure in making her life meaningful.

As Joyce Carol remarks, "It is fascinating in its preoccupation with formlessness with dissolving; with a kind of premature posthumous disappearance of the poet's personality." 6

The Three Woman, is a synthesis of three states of motherhood. One has a child, one a miscarriage and one is suffering the death of a new born. The dialogues of these three women reveal violence, the violence implicit in female physiology, the violence of the phallic intervention, the violence of childbirth. A temporary resolution is found in the postnatal amnesia, confirming images of peace and growth.

Sylvia Plath The Collected Poems (1981); this collection won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry the same year of its publication. This volume, edited by Ted Hughes, came as a blessing to readers who desired a comprehensive view of Sylvia Plath as a person and a poet. The poems are collected and chronologically numbered as far as possible and belong to the four volumes published before and also contain some earlier poems under the title of *Juvenilia*. For a reader who wants to come out of the piece-meal analysis of her poetry, this volume is a must to form an independent view of her as an artist and trace the development of the poet. Ted Hughes Introduction to the volume provides fresh insights into Sylvia Plath as a wife and a poet.

Among the prose works, *The Bell Jar* was published during her lifetime under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. It is a semi-autobiographical work, recording experiences of a girl, Esther Greenwoods school life, scholarships, sexual experiences, attempts at suicide, hospitalization, insulin treatments, shock treatments etc. It begins with the high spirits of one of the undergraduate guest editors of Mademoiselle. The atmosphere of the book is one, where there is no hope, no promise and no growth, but only the stifling suffocation of the *Bell Jar*. It lays bare the sufferings of a tormented mind. The presence of the protagonist’s altruistic mother is seen as a stifling one. Sylvia Plath writes that, it is "an autobiographical apprentice work which I had to write in order to free myself from the past."  

The falsity of New York glamour, and the danger involved in the pursuit of the Horatio Alger myth is highlighted.

**Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams (1977)**

This is a Collection of short stories, which does not prove her as a good short story writer. Only ten of the seventy stories written were published in her lifetime. There is a flowing perception of terror in the title story; the world is exposed as a refraction of consciousness, consciousness as a version of the world:

> Well, from where I sit, I, figure the world is run by one thing and this one thing only. Panic with a dog-face, devil-face, hag-face, whore-face, panic in capital letters with no face at all — it's the same Johnny Panic, awake or asleep. 8

This search for the invisible, yet, dominating fear leading to intense scrutiny of the self forms the underlying tone of all her work. It was perhaps this fear, which made Sylvia Plath, adopt a myth to destroy herself before the fear destroyed her. If one is to take her complex background of having parents belonging to the predator and victim category, then one can easily relate this fear as an inherent one, of the clash between the Jewish and American values. The conflict was the conflict between the Jewish values of communal-welfare and the American values of individual progress, of the Horatio Alger myth of rags to riches. The fear of failing the American dream due to the Jewish

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element in her might have made Sylvia Plath, succumb to suicide. The seemingly bold Sylvia Plath, was not really bold as Elizabeth Sigmund one of her closest acquaintance at Cambridge tells: “Over those months as I got to know Sylvia the better I recognized a basic timidity and fearfulness which she often cloaked with defensive acerbity.” 9 Taking into consideration, her knowledge of Freud, this fear can also be attributed to the fear of retribution for harbouring incestual desires for a dead father. Even the ‘dreams’ in the short stories illustrates the influence of Freud’s theories. The dreams in the short stories are sometimes destructive. The stories relate to husband-wife relationship and their problems. A desire for love, faith and mutual respect between husband and wife is the underlying desire and indignance at its failure on certain occasions is recorded. These stories seem an apprenticeship to The Bell Jar.

Sylvia Plath: Letters Home, Correspondence, 1950-1963: was selected and edited with commentary by Aurelia Schober Plath (1975). The intensity of the rage exhibited by the protagonist, of the Ariel poems, and Aurelia Plath’s desire to rectify the ‘Medusan’ image in her daughter’s poems, which conveyed a wrong picture of her love and devotion for the success of the children demanded the publication of the letters. The letters, which were 696 in number were not permitted to publish, as not only Ted’s image was endangered but also because they

contained certain extremely private tribulation meant only for her mother's eyes.

The most significant fact that one notices in the letters is the tone of the letters, which is full of gaiety, love, warmth and filial gratitude. The picture of Sylvia Plath, or 'Sivvy' in the letters, emerges as a happy girl with love for life and sunshine, a successful American girl with straight A's and wonderful prospects for the future. Surprisingly, the loving daughter's role played in the letters is in stark contrast to the one in Ariel poems, The Journals, and The Bell Jar. The letters help the readers hypothetically re-date and re-analyse some poems.

The letters bring to light two highly contradictory characteristics of Sylvia Plath's personality. The first one is the intimacy that is depicted in her letters to her mother. The first letter home from Smith describes her awe at living "With 48 kids of my own age – adding that they are 600 in my class (don't faint)." 10 The Letters Home, one can safely say were written to please a mother who had provided her children everything that she could afford. They also serve as an umbilical cord between the mother and the daughter, through which the mother is seen to control her daughter. The second letter, taken here as an example shows her intimacy for her mother, describes her feelings for Ted Hughes. One finds it strange that, Sylvia Plath, shares her dreams for her lover, Ted Hughes, with her mother rather than girls of her own age. "... I know this with a sure strong knowing to the tips of my toes, and having been on the other side of life like Lazarus, I know

that my whole being shall be one song of affirmation and love my life long."  

This letter was written on 29 April 1956 just after a few days of having written to her brother, Warren, on 23 April 1956.

First, I have hacked through a hard vacation, shared really only the best parts with mother, not the racking ones (it is so easy to give merely the impression of rich joy here and not the roots of sorrow and hurt from which it comes) ... show the hidden agony of her student life.  

Sylvia Plath’s letters to her mother and brother show an incredible contrast in tone and content. The letter to her mother, seem contrived to keep her mother happy. The letter to her brother shows the torture of meticulous division of feelings exposed.

The letters continued to conceal her true feelings even after her marriage. The disturbance underlying the thin veneer of being a happy wife and mother shattered, when her mother visited her in London and found the marriage on rocks. The shock of having hurt her mother, and her failure to fulfill her mother’s dream, along with Ted Hughes’s infidelity, repression of her creative energy due to time demanded by childcare, proved too much for her. It wouldn’t be far fetched to say that her whole saga of life of an achiever, her marriage to Ted Hughes, was to make her mother happy, a dream to be realized to show her filial gratitude, a final sacrifice for the great altruistic mother.

11. Ibid. p. 243.
12 Ibid. p. 240.
The contradicting pictures of Sylvia and 'Siwy' can only be comprehended if it is accepted that she had a divided self, one working towards gratifying her mother's demands and the other her own search for the 'self'. During the last stages of her life, when, she found her real voice, it was difficult for her to continue the facile role of keeping her mother happy. Her marriage had broken and she had a chance to give up the submissive role, yet retain the maternal greatness of creativity - 'renouncing the subservient female role, yet holding to the triumphant note of maternal creativity in her scorn of “barrenness.”'13

This was the time when she was in Yeat's house having left the house in Devon and trying to stimulate herself in the fight for survival. The two selves were too difficult for her to maintain and perhaps to atone for the mother's sufferings at her father's hand, and her own at her husband's, she killed them figuratively in her writings and herself later in real life.

The narration of Aurelia Schober's life in the beginning of The Letters Home, gives the picture of a woman with a life full of denials and suppression. The commentary narrates Aurelia's life with her parents and then with her children both during Otto Emil's life-time and as his widow. Aurelia's marriage was one of subservience under an authoritarian man many years older than her, Prof. Otto Plath, who got whatever he wanted. Her life revolved around 'The Book' and 'The Chapter' of her husband, never around her or her dreams. A man who listened to none, made Aurelia adopt a submissive role to avoid marital

13. Ibid. p. 483.
conflict. Her resentment is clearly shown at his death, which left her a poor widow with two little children. Her life of hardship as seen by the children, especially Sylvia Plath, helped a natural bond to grow between them just as the bond between Aurelia Schober and her mother.

The Letters Home serve one main purpose that of authenticating the influence of other writers, paintings, White Goddess myth etc., on her writings. The letters indirectly expose the differences between Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. Sylvia Plath's techniques of exploration of themes and his attack on themes, give the picture of the predator and the victim.

The Journals of Sylvia Plath (1982): were published in the U.S.A, edited by Frances McCullough with Ted Hughes as consulting editor in 1982. These begin in the summer of 1950, just before she entered Smith College at the age of 17. Sylvia Plath's suicide and the Ariel poems suddenly found the readers searching for factors, which created a poet like her. The tragic ending of her life and hiding of the Journals by her husband, created a wave of indignance in the literary world.

It took twenty years for these Journals to be published as they, were concealed by Ted Hughes. It was strange that Ted Hughes gave the right of literary estate to his sister Olwyn Hughes whom Sylvia Plath did not like very much. These Journals are marked by an immense will to succeed and her relentless dedication to her craft. The reason for delay in the publication of these Journals, according to Nancy Milford is
perhaps the twin thrusts, which dominate them viz., "Sex and Vocation." 14

Sylvia Plath’s journals are linked to idealized domesticity and female dependence. Her meeting Ted Hughes on 26 February in the year 1956 is described by a passion totally in contrast to the sweet ‘Sivvy’ of the Letters Home. The Journals, describe Sylvia Plath’s encounter with Ted Hughes and their first kiss. She describes the drawing of blood in this encounter, in a tone, which matches only with that of the Ariel protagonist. The meeting was not of two people but of two passions. She had found the only man huge enough for her and as co-incidence would have it, named ‘Hughes’ and she yielded fighting. Sex was her need, but without marriage it seemed wrong. She had to get used to the idea of marriage and children, in order to fulfill her physical hunger. The fear that marriage would dry up her art was a fear that kept haunting her, along with a desire of being mother-earth giving birth to children. “Can I marry and have children and continue to write?” 15 she asks: Sylvia Plath’s wrath was not at being a woman, but for the reason that she had to pour her creative energies only under the direction and influence of her mate. The only freedom she had was in either choosing or refusing the mate. At the age of twenty, she had expressed her desire for a man who was something like a demi-god, and she found him, at the age of twenty-three. Her marriage made her

15. Ibid. p. 79.
happy. She was ecstatic about her “Black marauder” who she felt was her match. This she expressed both in her Journals and letters to her mother that he was “perfect, male counterpart to my own-self.” 16

The language used in describing Sylvia Plath’s relationship and dreams of her married life is full of sex and poetry. The idyllic life is described in terms, which one could see could never last for more than a short period. The hunger was so consuming that it had to spend itself very soon. The ideologies of the fifties are reflected in the Journals. The fear of barrenness, and desire for motherhood is described in poetic terms i.e., as ‘mother earth.’ The Journals, record the birth of her daughter Freida Rebecca and the publishing of her first volume of verses, The Colossus, in the year 1960. It also records the unfortunate incidents of her miscarriage and the operation of appendectomy in the year 1961. The year 1962, records the birth of her son Nicholas Farrar and her knowledge of Ted’s affair with Assia Guttman. The motive for death is seen gaining momentum in the Journals.

These Journals form an extremely important source of material to understand her life as a poet and woman. Tragically, the journal entries of last few months, which formed the crucial period of her lifetime, are missing. Consequently, the reasons for her sudden surge of creative energy might go unknown. The editing of the Journals has been done very cruelly, too many blanks and spaces are found in them. Ellipses mark them; especially where Sylvia is about to use her sharp tongue on

16. Ibid. p. 80.
her husband. Two Note-Books which covered the last three years of her life survived. The second of these books was destroyed by her husband, his justification for the act was:

Two more note books survived for a while, maroon-backed ledgers like the 57-59 volumes, and continued the record from late '59 to within three days of her death. The last of these contained entries for several months, and I destroyed it because I did not want her children to have to read it (in those days, I regarded forget-fulness as an essential part of survival). The other disappeared. 17

The novel Double Exposure too disappeared. Judith Kroll had seen the outlines of the book, which was about a married couple and a rival. The loss of such writing is tragic, although one finds it difficult to decide the extent to which one can delve into the private life of a person with its help. Although the mutilated and edited Journals are an injustice to the literary world, they emphasize the hypothecated facts of the husband-wife relationship. The importance of the Journals lie not in what they expose, but what have been deleted from them and Ted Hughes's 'decision of putting Olwyn Hughes, his sister whom Sylvia Plath disliked, in charge of the literary estate of Sylvia Plath. If, Ted Hughes was really as great a poet, if not a person, he would not have taken the above mentioned decision and given the responsibility of the literary estate to a person in whose words Sylvia was "a famous poetess

Grace Kelly Dream who descended on Yorkshire. Bloody cheek. A little American student with a couple of poems in magazines!”  

Although Olwyn earned her living from Sylvia Plath’s writings she denounced her dead sister-in-law/client as: “Selfish sick, neurotic, egotistical and manic depressive.” Words, which no one would use against a living, leave alone a dead person. The language shows the character of Olwyn who made Sylvia Plath’s life miserable. As fate would have it, another coincidence in Sylvia Plath’s life was her sister-in-law’s name Olwyn, which is also one of the names of White Goddess. ‘Owleen’ is a Welsh name of the White Goddess mentioned more than a dozen times by Robert Graves (the Hugheses were of Welsh descent)  

The general analysis of her published works concludes with the Journals. 

Sylvia Plath’s poetry exhibits, the influences of two important movements. In the mid 1950’s, at the time Sylvia Plath was writing her serious poems at Smith College and then in Cambridge, England, two major poetic movements were gaining prominence. Robert Conquests anthologies, New Lines I and New Lines II and Dr. Robert Lowell’s Life Studies. As rightly pointed out by Mary Lynn Broe, “At different points in Plath’s career, each group provided a milieu for, as well as some 

19. Ibid. 

19. Ibid. 
formative influence on, her poetry." 21 The Conquest’s provincialists had a few ‘dons’ for which they became famous. They used a language, “neither empty rant nor bloodless chinoiserie, neither howl nor cyper, but the language of men.” 22 Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Jennings, John Wain, Charles Tomlinson were few of these poets who refused to abandon the old orthodoxies and rational structure for the ‘Unbridled Id’ and broke away from the Pound and Eliot allegiance to paradox, symbol and myth to speak a more quiet and plane language closer to prose than poetry. Their poems were not influenced by subjective moods and their language permitted only what could be verified by logic. As, A. Alvarez, puts it their unflinching belief was that “life is always more or less orderly, people always more or less polite, their emotions and habits more or less decent and more or less controllable, that God, in short, is more or less good.” 23

On the other hand, Robert Lowell’s Life Studies of the confessional mode was in contrast with them. The confessional poets, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke and Anne Sexton, by advocating the confession of private pains, and hither-to-fore taboo aspects into poetry brought the suffering ego into public view. Unlike provincialists who refused to accept the new psychological discoveries

22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
as real, the confessional poets adopted the psychic realities as the focal point of their poetry. The poet's personality itself became the writing instrument, a process of becoming oneself, with the exposure of the vulnerable psyche. The main sensibility of these poets of post 1945 was influenced by the two wars, genocide, and concentration camps and mass technological alienation. Ruthlessness, dispassionate scrutiny of the self became the yardstick to measure the success of the poet. In simple words, self-exposure of the greatest kind came to be the subject of poetry. In Sylvia Plath's own words after attending Robert Lowell's Class in 1958:

I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's Life Studies. This intense breakthrough into very serious, very emotional experience, which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experience in a mental hospital, for example, interest me very much. These peculiar private and taboo subjects I feel have explored in recent American poetry - I think particularly of the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes about her experiences as a mother; as a mother who's had a nervous breakdown as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman. And her poems are wonderfully craftsman like poems, and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new and exciting. 24

Sylvia Plath's use of myth is conscious, although one cannot call her a representative poet of her age, one cannot undermine the sickness of her society. She answers to the definition of modern man's search for myth. Raymond William rightly says that,

...the utilitarian aspect of Myth...is exploring contemporary history - In the subsequent default of a particular phase of a dominant culture, there is then a reaching back to those meanings and values which were created in actual societies and actual situations in the past, which still seem to have significance, because they represent areas of human experience, aspiration and achievement which the dominant culture neglects, under values, opposes, represses or even cannot recognize. 25

As already discussed, the late 1950’s held no promise of hope or happiness for mankind. The two wars and the country’s inclination towards military power forced many of the sensitive poets to turn back to the primordial period for solace.

Sylvia Plath’s acquaintance with T.S. Eliot’s review on Joyce’s Ulysses, probably began in the year 1953, when she had intended to write her undergraduate thesis on ‘double images’ in Joyce’s Ulysses. Her list of unpublished works have poems which indicate a preoccupation with Greek history and myth “To Ariadane,” “Apology to Pass,” “A Morning in Agora” etc., are a few examples. This awareness of relevance of myth to literature is seen in a letter to her mother in the year 1956, “The important thing is the aesthetic form given to my chaotic experience, which is... my kind of religion, and as necessary for me... as the confession and absolution for a Catholic in Church.”26 In 1957, this awareness becomes a realization in her review on a volume of poetry by C.A. Trypanis, entitled The Stones of Troy and published in

Sylvia Plath observes Trypanis's method of borrowing from classical myth, and reworking classical paradigms into contemporary frames of reference. She refers to the places, characters and incidents borrowed from Greek history and myth. Sylvia Plath is seen, citing T.S. Eliot's review of Joyce's Ulysses:

In using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must preserve after him: It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama and futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. 27

She refers to the technique, where writer juxtaposes contemporary and antique words.

The influence of T.S. Eliot's review, led to an awareness of the dangers and limitations of transforming purely personal experiences into poetry. The keen perception of the concept of myth, as the unconscious past inherited through the ages and influencing the reactions of an individual's life is seen in her response to Peter Orr in the B.B.C interview:

I think personal experience, is very important, certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking narcissitic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on . . . I am not a historian, but I find myself being more

fascinated by history . . . and I think that as I age I am becoming more and more historical. 28

This awareness of the necessity involved in relating her personal experiences to larger things is what gives depth and universality to her poems. The proclamation of T.S. Eliot, about those who followed Joyce's method in *Ulysses* would not be "imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent further investigations." 29 helped Sylvia Plath transcend the genre of confessional writing by weaving myths into the autobiographical elements of her poetry.

In her letter to her mother, she writes about her poem, "Channel Crossing" and acknowledges the fact that her previous poems had been terribly limited in vision and her growing concepts of the universe were excluded from her poetry. Speaking of this awareness, she says, "Now, I am making a shift. The world and the problems of an individual in this particular civilization are going to be forged into my discipline." 30 Sylvia Plath's conscious use of myth to give order to her chaotic experiences is expressed to her mother when she says, "It is the articulation of experience which is so necessary to me; even if I never publish again, I shall still have to write, because it is the main way I give

28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
order to this flux which is life.” 31 The desire to create irrespective of recognition and material gains is also one of the major conflicts depicted in her life and works. A sense of frustration, in her inability of adopting the Horatio Alger myth, due to an irrepressible urge for creation, suppressed by the ideologies of her society pervades her work.

The poems in which she could successfully establish the personal experiences within the framework of myth came in late Fifties and early Sixties, “The Colossus” and “Electra on Azalea Path,” being a couple of them. In order to face the everyday boredom or humdrum of a meaningless existence, it forms a schema to make life meaningful. The myth making of Sylvia Plath cannot be exclusively considered as feminist tendency, although the feminists have claimed her as their sole property. In Sylvia Plath’s poems we find what Lauter calles, “a collective historic process of self definition by contemporary women not in an attempt to determine essential nature of Woman, but rather to honour and validate their experience of women, experience which has been denied, distorted by patriarchal heritage.” 32 The woman poets are found to begin their life history, with roles of daughters and Sylvia Plath is no exception to it. A poet with keen interest in history and

31. Ibid. p. 218.
contemporary happenings, it is hardly surprising that she reacted very sensitively to the happenings around her. Along with the horrors of nuclear war, threats, capital punishments, destruction of nature in the name of industrialization, she had to cope with the double standard morality of the late 1950's and early 1960's where a woman had to have a man father, or husband as a mentor. The sensitive nature of the poet surging with creative energy, had to find a release from this morality and the unsuitable environment created by it. The modern world with its shallow ideologies, which has displace age-old myths offering no solace she had to turn to old myths with archetypal imagery. Which in their universality and repetitive character made the modern rat-race life meaningful. For Sylvia Plath, a poet fully aware of her nation's political policies, along with the memory of the execution of the Jews, it was hardly a discovery that, the modern world was a product of rationality, which has relegated instinct and emotion to the back seat. Any woman with the sensitive nature could not have framed the heartless policy, which led to the monstrosities in the name of the war. She found it to be entirely in contrast with the feminine nature, which symbolize natural progress through birth and growth. The modern world, which subjugated the woman, could only belong to man and his intellect, which she felt was devoid of emotions natural to woman. This modern world of cold, calculative, legacy of patriarchal culture was not acceptable to many poets like her. This suppression of the feminine qualities was achieved through rules and regulations in the name of religious norms and social propriety.
In order to understand Sylvia Plath's poems, the reader ought to be aware of the mythical unity in her poems, to avoid the danger of considering the elements of suffering, violence, death and decay as self-indulgent morbid exhibitionism. As Judith Kroll puts it:

The myth has its basis in her biography, but it in turn exercises a selective function on her biography and determines within it an increasingly restricted context of relevance as her work becomes more symbolic and archetypal.\textsuperscript{33}

As the study deals with the mythological elements in her poems, it becomes essential to mention the sources of influence on her poems. The \textit{Golden Bough} by J.G. Frazer helps in locating the mythic pattern in Sylvia Plath's poetry. According to Frazer, all customs and rituals originate in the universal desire to ensure, the rebirth of crops every spring, and Judith Kroll, remarks that, Plath's relationship to her dead father obviously found confirmation in the 'sacred marriage' which is an indispensable element of many of the myths and rituals discussed by Frazer and Robert Gaves and which precedes the death (and often resurrection) of the "Dying God."\textsuperscript{34}

Sylvia Plath's early poems deal with the myth of death and resurrection of God seen in "The Colossus", where she was still in a mental state of conforming to the ideologies of her age. Whereas, in the later poems, "Lady Lazarus," "Purdah" the primary concern shifts from the God's resurrection to the liberation of the protagonist's self from the God (devil):that holds her in thrall, which shows her recovering from

\textsuperscript{34} Judith Kroll, \textit{Op. Cit.}, p. 82.
the disappointments of the patriarchal culture. The themes of the poems are related to Paul Radin’s African Folktales which Ted Hughes points out, she read with great interest and found the underworld of her worst nightmares throwing up intensely beautiful adventures, where the most unsuspected voices thrived under the pressures of a reality that made most accepted fiction seem artificial and spurious.  

The other work of art, which influenced her themes are the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico. The painting entitled, The Disquieting Muses, also comes as one of the titles of her poems and she acknowledges the borrowing of the titles in her B.B.C programme:

All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures in this painting – three terrible faceless dress makers dummies in classical gowns, seated and standing in weird, clear light that casts the long strong shadows characteristic of de Chirico’s early work. The dummies suggest a twentieth century version of other sinister trios of women – the Three Fates, the witches in Macbeth, de Quincey’s, Sister of madness.

Sylvia Plath’s use of myth is recognized even by Ted Hughes who calls her work, “Chapters in Mythology where the plot is seen as a whole and in retrospect is strong and clear.” Only to a reader of keen perception the plot of the myth unfolds as the mind grasps the motive of the mythic motifs used and thus re-reads the Ariel poems. Only by

dealing with the voices, landscape, emblem motifs and characteristics, which articulate a mythic drama, the unified vision slowly blossoms into focus from the initial poems, which seem belonging to the confessional genre to the final ones. The seemingly morbid personal sufferings get universalized with a concern for the themes of rebirth and transcendence. The central motifs are not difficult to identify, as they are closely parallel to motifs that occur universally in the history of myth, religion and literature and thus can be identified as archetypes. Considering her literary and poetic background and her psychotherapy treatment, it is natural that she was familiar with psychoanalytic archetypes and symbols. Sylvia Plath's reading of Jung, Frazer, Rank, Freud and Robert Graves helped her in weaving the mythic element into her poems.

This desire for mythic explanation is triggered off by some incident in the life protagonist of the poet, and a search begins from that point of time. As Fingarette puts it -

...in all inner disturbance the time factor is a cardinal point. There is always primarily a search for past time, for the obscure and forgotten crisis or the might have been; it is an attempt at recapturing it and working it out differently, usually more happily or for simply dwelling on it. 38

In Sylvia Plath's case the incident, which triggered off her search was the death of her father. The death of her father was too great an

emotional shock for her, although she was only eight and could have hardly felt it the way she puts it. Then one ought to be wary of the fact that the poet is selective about biographical elements and caters to the need of the myth used as a whole. Sylvia Plath's poetry represents the fundamental division of her self after her father's death. She considers herself in relation to her father as the 'real self' and the one after his death as the 'false self'. The conflict is between these two selves and the self-defined through her deep bondage to her father continued its demand for expression fatally. The self that continued in reality, in the absence of her father, turned out to be unreal and stagnant, yet too powerful to be ignored. This forms the basis of the sense of suspended time and stasis that pervades in The Bell Jar, and her later poems, which she repeatedly felt after the separation from her husband. There is a strong desire to recapture her lost past that of a golden period, when her father was alive, being fully aware of the futility of the enterprise. The longing is for something she feels is, "Sealed off ... like a ship in a bottle - beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete a fine flying myth." 39 This loss of her father is described as a psychic wound in the 'Eye Mote', which can never be healed and thus describes her condition as, "fixed me in this parenthesis." 40

Sylvia Plath considering the self with her father, as the real self, subconsciously felt the split in her self, as she grew up and started relating herself to others on this basis. She tried to analyse the relations of these two selves in her everyday life. The tension between these two selves and the strong urge to discard the false self, was more striking in reality, forced her to select myths where she could conveniently reject the existing relationships by grading them negatively. The only way out was by adapting Robert Graves ‘White Goddess Myth’ which emphasizes a rejection of the Apollonian / intellectual / patriarchal culture and a return to Dionysian / emotional / instinctive / matriarchal culture. The importance of the feminine force, the feminine consciousness without which, the universe cannot continue to exist.

Sylvia Plath is not the first to use myth in her poetry. Ben Jonson, John Donne, W.B. Yeats and Robert Graves are mythographers, whose cyclical systems are presided by Lunar Muses, provide metaphors for poetry. It becomes integral to the study of Sylvia Plath to have a brief account of the influences, which led to Robert Graves writing of the ‘White Goddess.’ The two most important people in Robert Graves’ life were his stepmother and father, Amalia Van Ranke Graves (Amy) and Alfred Percival Graves (A.P). Robert Graves’ stepmother was a strict disciplinarian and a rigorously religious and moral lady. He could not win her love, and tried to prove that he was lovable by marrying Nancy Nicholson. Yet, after fathering four children, he realized that she did not love him. Laura Riding, was his next choice leading to another disappointment. She sacrificed everything to be a poet, and became the
inspiration for his theory of the 'muse' remaining undomesticated. Beryl Hodge, became a loving wife, but did not satisfy his psychological longing for feminine love. He wrote The White Goddess, based on his relationship with women on three levels - Mother, Bride, Burier, which transcended the physical by personifying death as a woman/layer out. This led to his belief that only the 'White Goddess' who represented the archetypal female trinity as Mother, Siren and Witch and presides over birth, love and death can save the modern world from destruction. In such circumstances Jesus Christ, clearly the product of the male world of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, cannot save him.

In Sylvia Plath's The Three Women, the second voice explains how the 'Father and Son' are 'jealous gods' and would flatten the whole world to suit them, crushing and destroying it into a shapeless flatness with logic and intellect. Their Apollonian attitude is tolerated by mother-earth as Sylvia Plath says only for a short while:

She is the vampire of us all. So she supports us, Fatten us, is kind. Her mouth is red.

.......

Men have used her meanly. She will eat them. Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end.41

"The Myths are wearing thin..." wrote Robert Graves in the conclusion of The White Goddess in his historical grammer of poetic myth. Robert Graves continues to say that, "... Biblical myths no longer serve as a secured basis of poetic reference. Moreover the Latin and

Greek myths which have always been important to the poets (professionally at least) as the Christian, are losing their validity. 42

Thus the modern poet, once a privileged bard who preserved the religious secrets of the tribe, now dwells in wilderness, "where the temptation to mono-manic raving, paranoia and eccentric behaviour has been too much for many of the exiles." 43 The main theme was for Robert Graves the universal relationship between man and woman and the imbalance brought about by the suppression of the feminine principle. His theme has two aspects, the first is the struggle between the head and the heart, where the former has prevailed foolishly with barren argumentation and the second is the universal relationship of man and woman, poet and muse. Highly influenced by John Frazer's *Golden Bough*, he draws his elements from ancient stories and legends, but assembles them according to his own need of poetic creation. He elucidates the fact that every legend is in fact a version of the one legend, the legend of *Golden Bough*, the vegetation myth of Nemi'.

In Nemi, stood the sacred grove and sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis, or Diana of the Wood." ... "In this sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day, and probably far into the night, a grim figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom

43. Ibid.
he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead.44

The rule was that a candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to the office by slaying the priest and he continued until another candidate killed him.

Besides Sylvia Plath was also influenced by her husband Ted Hughes, who too felt the conflict of the masculine and feminine Principle. In his 'London Magazine' interview, he makes it clear:

... our culture's collapse derives partly from the idea that it began as a culture which repressed certain natural forces, forces mythically defined as feminine in contrast to the mythically masculine forces of logic and rational skepticism. But the power of the Goddess cannot be repressed forever, and poetry's task is to describe her return to, become the record of just how the forces of the Universe try to redress some balance disturbed by human error...45

Analysing the poems of Robert Graves, Cohen too endorses this idea when he remarks, "The remedy lies in the revival of Goddess-worship, the reversion from patriarchal to matriarchal society, and the abandonment of cold intellectuality, which Graves associated with perversion."46

The influence of Robert Graves' advice of rejecting the cold intellect is seen in her poem "The Death of Myth-Making," where she says,

Two virtues ride, by stallion, by nag,
    To grind our knives and scissors:
Lantern-jawed Reason, squat Common Sense,
One courting doctors of all sorts,
    One, housewives and shopkeepers.
The trees are lopped, the poodles trim,
    The laborer's nails pared level
Since those two civil servants set
Their whetstone to the blunted edge
    And minced the muddling devil
Whose owl-eyes in the scraggly wood
    Scared mothers to miscarry,
Drove the dogs to cringe and whine,
    And turned the farmboy's temper wolfish,
The housewife's, desultory.47

In the above poem, we get a vivid picture of the progress of mankind through industrialization, a product of intellect, which has proved itself, a death blow to myths of the past and all its mysteries. This has led to a suppression of feminine consciousness of emotion and intuition transforming a powerful female psyche into a robot-like housewife. This situation, warns Robert Graves, will not last for long and the oppressed female nature will escape and rise to destroy the constrictions of a masculine and mechanical civilization.

The above-mentioned facts and the use of her imagery, illustrate the fact that, hers was not a glorification of private psychotic obsession,

but a strong call from the depth of the residue raring to find a release. With these facts in mind, one can read and understand her poems as chapters in mythology.

Sylvia Plath has used motifs both from The Golden Bough and the White Goddess Myth. Robert Graves focuses on ‘White Goddess’ as both ‘emblem’ and ‘real’ agent of a characteristic drama which he considers to be the true theme of poetry.

Poetry, he says began in the matriarchal age, and derives its magic from the moon and not the sun:

No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped Oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the sacrificial fires. Stamping out the measure of the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward with a monotonous chant of Kill! Kill! Kill! and Blood! blood! blood!48

Although, Frazer discusses the same type of myths and rituals, he concentrates on death and resurrection of the vegetation God. Robert Graves discusses the vegetation deities who have two aspects of self—a new resurrected form and an old dead one. He concentrated on the Gods of the Waxing and Waning year.

Understanding Sylvia Plath, through the mythic elements in her poetry is a Herculean task and in order to simplify one needs to make a framework of the mythic scheme. The initial stage begins, as already mentioned, with the relationship to her father, the second stage is rejection of the mother, the third entrance of the rival, the fourth

assimilation of father and husband images, and the destruction of both through exorcism, the fifth is release from male domination and dependency, and desire for rebirth through death. The motifs, imagery, allusions encompass mythical, biblical, historical character and landscape and also works of art enhancing her significance as a highly skilled poet.

The myths used by Sylvia Plath are the Oedipal myth, where she becomes Electra mourning for her dead father, and the myth of 'Medusa,' used to complement the first one to help her reject the mother figure. The 'White Goddess Myth', which links all the myths with the presiding Moon symbol as the Lunar Muse. The myth of the racial superiority of the Aryans needs mentioning for two reasons, basically, as it is used by Sylvia Plath to express the dichotomy in the relationship between her German father and partly Jewish mother, and secondly, for the reason that, her poems abound in Nazi imageries. The last myth to be mentioned and which contributed to the tension of her life and work is the Horatio Alger Myth. This myth in fact, was the motivating power of her mother Aurelia's dreams for her children, which put Sylvia Plath in a 'bell jar' of filial obligation from which she could find no release.

The first stage begins with her relation to her father. The myths used by her are not far-fetched imaginations, because there are enough sources to authenticate these influences. In the notes prepared for her B.B.C reading, about "Daddy" she says,

The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra Complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was a Nazi and her mother
partly Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other - she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it. 49

This echoes the influence of Freudian psychology in her poems. The first poem, which is more in the form of narration about her life history, is “Electra on Azalea Path”:

The day you died I went into dirt,  
Into the lightless hibernaculum  
Where bees, striped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard  
Like hieratic stones, and the ground is hard. 50

The shock of her father’s death, leads to her hibernation. Her deep affection for her father seals off her life with his death and her life without him becomes meaningless. In order to illuminate a personal problem she acknowledges the fact in the fourth stanza. The purely autobiographical facts are combined with Greek mythology. The lines in italics, in the fourth stanza refer to the Orestia, followed by the poet’s own acknowledgement of having borrowed an old tragedy to universalize her personal problem, as she says,

The day your slack sail drank my sister’s breath  
The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth  
My mother unrolled at your last homecoming.  
I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy. 51

51. Ibid. p. 117.
And then in the last stanza, she very clearly accepts the guilt for her father's death, attributing its cause to her incestual desires and pleads, "O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at / Your gate, father - your hound-bitch, daughter, friend. / It was my love that did us both to death." 52 This poem belongs to the year 1959 and here one can see that all her ideas of forming a whole mythic pattern was gaining shape. Random borrowings were falling into place like a giant zigzag puzzle. She refuses to come out of the state of childhood, which she calls 'hibernation' where she loved her father greatly. She continues to mourn for him in her adulthood, where she says, "I lay dreaming your epic, image by image." 53

The line echoes the mourning of Electra for Agmemnon. The Electra like attachment is made explicit in "The Colossus" where she identifies her father as a Greek God and is given the image of Colossal ruin:

I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of your brow
To mend the immense skull-plates and clear

The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.
Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered

52. Ibid.
53. Ibid. p. 116.
54. Ibid. p. 129.
In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.
It would take more than a lightning-stroke
To create such a ruin.\textsuperscript{54}

She continues the mourning for the dead father by saying, “My hours are married to a shadow.”\textsuperscript{55} One finds the transformation of the dead father from Agamemnon to a priestly king, reminiscent of Frazer’s the ‘king of the wood,’ in “The Bee-Keepers Daughter,” “Hieratical in your frock coat, maestro of the bees,/You move among the many-breasted hives,/My heart under your foot, sister of a stone.”\textsuperscript{56} The Electra picture becomes complete where she gains victory over the mother, in the following line, where she speaks in a triumphant voice, “Here is a queenship no mother can contest—”\textsuperscript{57} The relationship between the father and daughter is concretized in a ritualistic ceremony, when she says, “Father, bridegroom, in this Easter Egg / Under the coronal of sugar roses /The queen bee marries the winter of your year.”\textsuperscript{58} There is full awareness regarding the outcome of the relationships as she says, “A fruit that’s death to taste: dark flesh, dark parings.”\textsuperscript{59} The ‘White Goddess’ is characterized by “the ancient power

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid. p. 129.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. p. 118.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
of fright and lust – the female spider or the queen bee whose embrace is
death."\(^{60}\)

Taking into consideration the whole mythic picture one can say that she was writing with ‘White Goddess Myth’ in mind. She was familiar with it and she owned a copy of the same. Ted Hughes, whom she met in 1956, had a friend with whom he shared a ‘cult’ of ‘White Goddess,’ which Sylvia Plath took up as an initiate. For both Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath the ‘White Goddess’ was a common muse. It becomes quite essential here to remember that she was interested in the works of Robert Graves and was reading all his books with great interest. As Ted Hughes remarked about Sylvia Plath’s response to *The White Goddess*, she said it “gave a shape to what happened to her.”\(^{61}\)

The theme of the ‘White Goddess’:

... briefly is the antique story ... of the birth life, death and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year; the central chapters concern the God’s losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for the love of the capricious and all – powerful Threefold Goddess, their mother, bride, and layer-out. The poet identifies himself with the God of the Waxing Year and his Muse with Goddess ...\(^{62}\)

Sylvia Plath felt the myth both as a woman and a poet highly relevant when the incidents of her life history and that of the myth


began to coincide emerging as a pattern on its own. In *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves shows that:

...all myths have a single meaning and all Goddesses, whatever their names or lands be to be one. Whether she is Isis, Aphrodite or the Irish Grainne, whether mourning for the murder of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis or Diarmuid, at the hand of Set, or Apollo or Finn Mac Cool, always it is the same murder in October, the boar-hunting season, always it is the death of the sacred king who is to be reborn at the winter solstice...”

As Sylvia Plath born in the month of October, this explanation of ‘White Goddess,’ helped her to initiate the ‘White Goddess’ cult into her life by identifying with her.

Sylvia Plath’s marriage to Ted Hughes introduced her to astrology and Tarot Cards. In her *Letters Home*, she expresses her “Plans of being a Seeress.” In *Letters Home*, dated 5 November 1961, she wrote to her mother of having seen Robert Graves, “I went to the Guinness party and was, to my surprise, called on to read my poem with the regular Guinness winners, which included Robert Graves,...”

Observing the common interests of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, Anthony Libby has done an indepth study on the influence that Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath had on each other in the shaping of their poetic ideas. Anthony Libby feels that the influence of her husband was very powerful. “From the beginning they shared a vision of elemental

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conflict." 66 Judith Kroll discusses the sharing of a common muse by Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath when she describes the picture of the moon goddess, which they had as a wall decoration for their flat. They had a poster enlarged from an astrology book depicting the great Moon Goddess, “Isidis' - "Magnae Deorum Matris" - and a list of her various epithets, including ‘Hecate,’ ‘Prosperina,’ ‘Diana,’ and ‘Luna.’67

The ‘White Goddess’ myth served Sylvia Plath as a map on which she could chart out her life and locate her past and her present, both bound to men. The past bound her to the dead father and present to her husband. Although, Sylvia Plath began her mythical role as ‘Electra,’ she did not stop at it. She extended it by adopting the myth of ‘the king of the wood’ found in Frazer’s Golden Bough. She made her father the king and became the priestess sentenced to live the life as her father’s votary, bride and queen. The marriage to her father was given mythical significance, setting the stage for the initiation of the ‘White Goddess’ myth in her life. Sylvia Plath was influenced not only by the myth of the ‘White Goddess,’ but also the life history of Robert Graves. She was keenly interested in his relationship with his lady friends and the factors that led to his creation of ‘White Goddess’ myth.

Frazer speculates about the motives regarding the sacred marriages or ‘magical dramas,’ which occur at Whitsun, the beginning of spring:

... Our rude fore-fathers personified the power of vegetation as male and female and attempted, on the principle of homeopathic or imitative magic, to quicken the growth of trees and plants by representing the marriage of the Sylvan deities in the persons of a King and Queen of May, a Whitsun bridegroom and Bride. 68

Frazer explicates that,

...such a sacred marriage between the King and Queen of the Wood took place once a year in the grove of Diana. Being personification of vegetation spirits, they inevitably come under the shadow of death. Until the revival they passed certain portion of the year underground ; and naturally come to be regarded as gods of the lower world or of the dead. Both Dionysus and Osiris were so conceived.69

These divine lovers sometime marry and one dies living the survivor to mourn, searching for the underground partner until he is reborn. Sometimes the roles are reversed as in Persephone where the female dies. Thus, Sylvia Plath considers herself married to her dead father. The mythic marriage is consumated in “The Bee-Keeper’s Daughter,” which reminds one of Freudian drama, as she describes the garden ready for fertilization,

A garden of mouthings. Purple, scarlet - speckled, black
The great corollas dilate, peeling back their silks.
Their musk encroaches, circle after circle,
A well of scents almost too dense to breathe in.70

69 Ibid. p. 452.
In guise of a Queen bee she marries her underground father /

God:

.... Kneeling down
I set my eye to a hole-mouth and meet an eye
Round, green, disconsolate as a tear.
Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg
Under the coronal of sugar roses

The queen bee marries the winter of your year.71

In "The Colossus," she tends to her married dead god, as a priestess taking care of a God’s Statue, speaking to it, as she says,

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol
I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of your brow
To mend the immense skull - plates and clear
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.72

The father-daughter relationship, the guilt of incestuous marriage is blown to a gigantic proportion, making it impossible to come out of its influences. Sylvia Plath is thrillws at her father’s greatness and enamoured by it to such an extent that she does not desire freedom as she says in “The Beast”,

King of the dish, my lucky animal.
Breathing was easy in his airy holding.
The sun sat in his armpit.
Nothing went moldy. The little invisibles

71. Ibid.
72. Ibid. p. 129
Waited on him hand and foot.\textsuperscript{73}

In “Full Fathom Five,” again one finds the description of awe at the grandeur of the ‘God’ image of her father-husband and a strong desire to rejoin him. One notices the desire for suicide through drowning as she says,

\begin{quote}
You defy other godhood.
I walk dry on your kingdom’s border
Exiled to no good.

Your shelled bed I remember.
Father, this thick air is murderous.
I would breathe water.\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

In “All the Dead Dears,” too, the influence of the dead father on her present life is highlighted. The awe of the god like figure is now replaced by fear of being under the control of the dead:

\begin{quote}
How they grip us through thin and thick,
These barnacle dead!

.....

And an image looms under the fishpond surface
Where the daft father went down
With orange duck-feet winnowing his hair –

All the long gone darlings: they
Get back, though, soon.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid. p. 134.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid. p. 93
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid. p. 70.
\end{flushright}
In "Lament," a villanelle we have the mixed feelings of awe for the god like figure and also mourning -

The sting of bees took away my father
Who walked in a swarming shroud of wings
and scorned the tick of the falling weather.

. . . . . .
Trouncing the sea like a raging bather,
he rode the flood in a pride of prongs

. . . . . .
He counted the graces of god a bother,
laughed at the ambush of angels’ tongues,

. . . . . .
O ransack the four winds and find another
man who can mangle the grin of kings:
the sting of bees took away my father
who scorned the tick of the falling weather.76

The refrains of the lines “the sting of bees took away my father/
who scorned the tick of the falling weather” reflect the regret of the loss of a man who was like a god to her. The introduction of the bee imagery, acknowledges the regret for being responsible for the death of the father-god.

The five Bee poems of Ariel show her identification with the Queen bee. It was easy for her to imbibe the bee image as her father, Otto Plath, was a professor of Zoology and had written a treatise on the life of the bees, Bumble bees and Their Ways. It dwells on the beauty of the Queen Bees. The descriptions of the bees in Sylvia Plath’s poetry are echoes of the descriptions found in the book. Besides this familiarity

with the Bee life, through her father the myth selected by her too advocated the queen bee imagery referring to it as the ancient power of fright and lust leading to death. Sylvia Plath remembers her childhood, when her mother had read to her Matthew Arnold’s “The Forsaken Merman.” The impact of the poem on Sylvia Plath as she herself remarks was:

I saw the goose flesh on my skin, I did not know what made it. I was not cold. Had a ghost passed over? No, it was the poetry. A spark flew off Arnold and shook me, like a chill, I wanted to cry; I felt very odd. I had fallen into a new way of being happy. 77

This uncanny experience of her childhood found its proof in Houseman’s practical test of a poem describing the presence of the White Goddess Muse:

The reason why the hairs stand on end, the eyes water, the throat is constricted, the skin crawl and a shiver runs down the spine when one writes or reads a true poem is that a true poem is necessarily an invocation to the White Goddess or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust – the female spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death. 78

“Little Fugue,” and “Lesbos” also deal with the theme of the father. In “Little Fugue,” too the marriage ritual is dramatized along with the yew tree as a medium between the dead and living. The races of the second stage begins where she starts using the Queen bee image,

and identifying with it, ritually accepts the father as a husband and begins to reject her mother who is the competitor for her father’s love.

For a person like Sylvia Plath who was always interested in myth the appropriate image to describe her mother was the Greek ‘Medusa’.

The ‘Medusan’ imagery has been developed on three lines. The first line of thought developed is based on the name ‘medusa,’ that is a jelly-fish, with help of it the optical conceit is developed. The mother’s concern becomes a lens, magnifying and diminishing the events of the protagonist’s life. The second thought is developed with the physical aspect of ‘medusa,’ the tentacles, which are reminiscent of the ‘spider,’ which symbolizes the ‘great mother,’ whose embrace is death. The concept of death as the effect of the mother’s vision is developed as impaling, paralyzing, and asphyxiation during the process of an X-Ray. The third line of thought is complementary to the second one, where the ‘basilisk-evil eye’ theme is developed to its fullest extent. It could be charted as jellyfish – Gorgon – Lunar muse. Bernetta Quinn, writing about the ‘Medusa’ found in Sylvia Plath’s poems, draws attention to its various meanings, “Several scholars have called attention to another name for the common medusa, Aurelia aulita – moon jelly fish – the first element suggesting Sylvia Plath’s mother, Aurelia Schober Plath and the second lunar symbolism.” 79 She continues to remark that, “In accordance with ‘White Sticks’, the Aurelia is described in Science texts

as White, clear and even milky." This image associated with her mother continues to strengthen the resentment she felt for her mother's presence. In the title poem "Medusa," an optical conceit begins with the startling word 'God-ball', which the poem develops in terms of lens as the poem progresses.

The mother's kind nature becomes unbearable, when it deprives her of privacy to suffer in silence. A lens like Aurelia can both magnify and diminish objects. Sylvia Plath feels her problems are both blown up and reduced in severity by her mother Aurelia Plath. This feeling is born, because, the blowing-up and diminishing are seen by Sylvia Plath inevitably through her mother's eyes, whose altruistic nature is resented. The lens imagery, is symbolic of the resentment she feels in being forced to share all her experiences, with her mother due to filial gratitude. The burden of this gratitude descends on her like the bell-jar, suffocating her. 'Medusa form' also means bell-shaped which is the name of her novel. The picture of 'Medusa,' here is also an indication that, Sylvia Plath's life was dominated by this imagery. As Sylvia Plath says, "I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the lens of a bell jar." Her fascination for 'medusa' is seen in:

Just a note to say that I have at last burst into a spell of writing. I was rather stunned Thursday morning, my first real day off after a week of correcting 70 papers, averaging mid term grades and writing a report on another thesis, but I had about seven or eight paintings and etchings I wanted to write on as

80. Ibid.
poem subjects and bang! After the first one, "Virgin in a Tree," after an early etching by Paul Klee, I ripped into another, probably the biggest and best poem I've ever written, "Triumph of Wit over Suffering." A total of about 90 lines written in one day. 82

Sylvia Plath's, "The Lady and The Earthenware Head," develops the evil eye theme, where an amateur artist makes an unflattering head of the 'I' and lodges it in the crotch of a willow tree to prevent any injury to it, because, she superstitiously considers it as an effigy. It glares down at her, "An antique hag-head, too tough for knife to finish, / Refusing to diminish / By one jot its basilisk-look of love." 83 The word 'basilisk' makes the head into a medusan image, which she continues to use in "Medusa," where she develops the lens imagery and the resentment for her mother. In "Medusa," she says,

Off that landspit of stony mouth-plugs,
Eyes rolled by white sticks,
Ears cupping the sea's incoherences,
You house your unnerving head-God-ball,
Lens of mercies. 84

The presence of the mother reminds her of the sea, and impales her because it links her to the memory of her dead father. The death of her father has fixed her in a parenthesis. Thus, the mother's presence is resented. The more she tries to free from the influence of her mother, greater is the force with which she drawn into it. The medusa has no

84. Ibid.
organs like 'eyes,' 'ears,' 'head,' 'God-ball' etc., because, it is a jelly fish and all the necessary functions are performed by its tentacles. The appearance of a medusa is reminiscent of a 'spider,' which in turn is an image of the 'great mother' whose embrace is death. Sylvia Plath, feels suffocated in the presence of her mother, as the mercies of her mother are unwanted. The optical conceit is developed as the jelly fish is spherical and therefore, perfectly suited to mean an eye-ball or lens. "Lens of Mercies" refers to the mother's unwanted kindness. A sense of intrusion resented by Sylvia Plath who longs for privacy. Aurelia Plath's concern, are compared to tentacles by Sylvia Plath.

In "Parliament Hill Fields," Sylvia Plath reduces herself, unable to live up to her mother's dreams. She becomes a non-feeling object due to numbness created by the pain of her abandoned state. She finds herself diminished by the lens or the 'mother eye,' a fall in her mother's eyes. The evil eye theme developed in the "Lady and Earthenware Head" and "Medusa" is continued here, she feels impaled and lifeless due to numbness created by the intensity of pain. If one relates it to Horatio Alger Myth, then one can see the guilt of having failed her mother by not living up to the myth, which makes her feel diminished in the mother's vision. Although, Aurelia hardly expressed such feelings, Sylvia Plath feels like a dead object, "...I'm a stone, a stick." It also refers to the gorgonising effect of the camera lens developed in the following context. Bernetta Quinn hypothecates that "James Merrill's "Medusa," has influenced Sylvia Plath in the writing of her "Medusa,"

85. Ibid. p. 152.
as the same conceit of lens occurs in his "Medusa." 86 James Merrill
describes a stone Gorgon, as the genius of the garden, where two lovers
are sitting disconsolate that their summer romance is at an end. The
deadly eye is described as "that slight crystal - lens / Whose scope
allows perfection to be conceived" and equates the lens with "god head
in a world of sense." 87 The eye is connected to the brain with nerve
filaments, which allows man to externalize the Eden of his mind, and
return as perception. This highlights the connection between the eye
and the brain.

In the second stanza of "Medusa," Sylvia Plath continues to
express her anger at her mother's unsolicited help:

Your stooges
 Plying their wild cells in my keel's shadow,
 Pushing by like hearts.
 Red stigmata at the very center,
 Riding the rip tide to the nearest point of departure. 88

"Stooges," refer to small commensal animals called medusa fish,
which swim near the larger medusa and are heart shaped. Being a girl
of American upbringing by 'Stooges' she also might have meant 'one
who serves or co-operates with another in a subservient manner;
sometimes unpleasant work'. If one takes the main theme of the poem,

p. 99.
87. Ibid.
her mother’s unwanted concern, one can safely conjecture that ‘Stooges’ referred to the people whom Aurelia appealed to help her daughter from depression, especially Winfred Davies the midwife who later figures quite prominently in ‘The Bee’ poems. The ‘Red Stigmata’ further refers to martyrdom of an over devoted, over protective mother and altruistic mother. Even when Aurelia is not physically present, her presence is felt through the helpers she sends to Sylvia Plath, who try to substitute her mother’s love ‘like so many hearts’. The ‘Red Stigmata’, refers to her mother’s nature, which refuses to free her daughter from the bondage of motherly love. In a letter to her brother Warren she had written about this suffocating love of her mother:

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. . . .After extracting her life blood and care for 20 years, we should start bringing in big dividends of joy for her. . . .89

This remark of realization of parental sacrifice and filial gratitude is a reflection of Jung’s Essay The Development of Personality transcribed by her:

... parents set themselves the fanatical tasks of always “doing their best” for the children and “living only for them.” This claimant ideal effectively prevents the parents from doing anything about their own development & allows them to thrust

their "best" down their children's throats. This so-called "best" turns out to be the very things the parents have most badly neglected in themselves. In this way the children are goaded on to achieve their parents' most dismal failures, and are loaded with ambitions that are never fulfilled. 90

In the third stanza of "Medusa," Sylvia Plath exhibits an inclination to reject the Christian principles, which encourage her mother to be self-sacrificing. As Sylvia Plath says:

Dragging their Jesus hair.  
Did I escape, I wonder?  
My mind winds to you  
Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable,  
Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous repair. 91

The religious reference is in-keeping with the stream of thought in the letter to Warren, where, the mother killing herself, for her children is similar to Jesus dying for his children of the world. The 'Umblicus', shows that although severed, it still connects her to her mother. In Physics 'umblicus' means a strong life-line linking an astronaut working in space outside his vehicle is connected to that vehicle." 92 Taking into consideration Sylvia Plath's life history, the cables also refer to the letters and cablegrams, which kept the lifeline to her mother alive. Sylvia Plath was in a terrible dilemma of wanting to be free from her mother's protective presence and yet, at the same time needed her

badly. The feeling of guilt of having let down her mother gnawed at her, urging her to hide her broken marriage from her mother. Sylvia Plath’s fear for her mother’s pain at her broken life was greater than the pain she felt for herself. This guilt of having hurt her mother made it difficult for her to fit together the pieces of her life. The very day she wrote “Medusa,” 16 October 1962, she wrote two desperate letters to her mother. “I am getting an unlisted phone put in as soon as possible so I can call out; you shall have the number.”93 The result was an alarmed mother writing to her friend Winifred Davies to help out Sylvia Plath. The response was immediate for this unsolicited kindness. On 21 October 1962 she wrote again, “Will you please, for goodness sake, stop bothering poor Winifred Davies!... She is busier than either you or I and is helping me as much as she can and knows and sees my situation much better than you can...” 94 The interweaving of autobiographical elements with the myth of ‘medusa’ is completed.

The anger of desperation lasted only for two days after which she wrote a letter of apology, with a sense of futility that she could never be free of her mother’s influence, wanted or unwanted. Her mother expected nothing more than permission to help her daughter, never once contemplating it from her daughter’s point of view. Sylvia Plath’s mother was grateful to her daughter for sharing her life with her. As she says in the fourth stanza of “Medusa:”

94. Ibid. p. 473.
In any case, you are always there,
Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
Curve of water upleaping
To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,
Touching and sucking.95

Sylvia Plath knew that the only way she could ensure her mother’s happiness was by sharing her life experiences with her whether she liked it or not. The lines give an impression of a fawning mother, creating a sense of nausea. Sylvia Plath shows an awareness of fact that, she could never be free of her attentions. In the fifth stanza of “Medusa,” screams out helplessly,

I didn’t call you.
I didn’t call you at all.
Nevertheless, nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta 96

On 16 October, she makes a futile attempt to keep her mother away from her misfortunes in a gentle manner, literally beseeching for independence; by writing, “It would be psychologically the worst thing to see you now ... I must not go back to the womb.”97 Sylvia Plath wanted to suffer her grief in silence and privacy. She did not want to share the humiliation she felt at Ted Hughes’s abandonment with her mother. In fact, she wanted to become free even from her mother’s

96. Ibid.
influence, as she wanted to sort out things and her life all by herself. Perhaps, it was a desperate attempt to preserve at least one incident as her private intimate secret, which her mother was trying to take away from her.

The unsolicited ‘placenta,’ refers to her mother’s visit during the month of July, when Sylvia Plath was trying to overcome the reality of her husband’s infidelity. The situation in which Aurelia found her daughter was a shameful one to Sylvia Plath. Sylvia Plath describes the paralyzing effect of her mother’s visit. It makes her breathless and insecure. She compares the mother to a poisonous reptile as she says, “Cobra light / Squeezing the breath from the blood bells / Of the fuchsia. I could draw no breath / Dead and moneyless.” The inextricable link between material gains and emotional security is picturized. It also refers to the failure of the Horatio Alger myth in her life.

The idea of being gazed at and impaled by the ‘basilisk eye’ and the ‘God-ball’ is continued, where the mother’s visit is compared to the stinging of the medusa, and the gaze of the cobra.

The Jelly fish are armed with stinging capsules which when discharged narcotize the victim, to be later eaten and digested, the same way spiders devour their prey. According to Freud, a spider is symbolically interpreted as the “phallic mother of whom we are afraid.”

The comparison of the mother to 'medusa' and an oblique reference to the spider, becomes explicit in "Totem," where a spider is shown waving its arms, and is seen calling her, "I am mad, calls the spider, waving its many arms." 99 This reference to the spider is taken as a sign to accept a pagan god. The significant aspect of Sylvia Plath, was that she was born under the zodiac sign of Scorpion. Being a staunch believer in astrology, she may be referring to the stinging of a scorpion. The paralytic effect of the sting is further strengthened by the x-ray imagery, where a person is asked to hold the breath, when it is in progress. Sylvia Plath needs breathing time and therefore requests her mother in a letter, "I cannot face you until I have new life." 100

A few days before writing the "Medusa," she requests her mother to keep away from her and after a week, when the mother offers financial help Sylvia Plath refuses it. "Saviour," "I want no monthly dole, especially not from you."101 All her attempts at being considerate towards her mother fail. She bursts out angrily being at the end of the tether of patience, unable to handle the two problems at the same time, that of sorting out her life and being a dutiful daughter. With the address of "Saviour," begins the rejection of Christianity. In the seventh stanza of "Medusa," she says,

Overexposed, like an X-ray.
Who do you think you are?

101. Ibid. p. 473.
A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?
I shall take no bite of your body,
Bottle in which I live, 102

Nothing is hidden from her mother, and in anger she rejects her mother as the Mary of the Christian faith. This can be explained again in terms of her rejection of martyrdom from her mother. Sylvia Plath's poems show her using religious imagery of which she is exhausted and wants to be rid off. The setting is for rejection of Christian principles, which force her to abide by rules of gratitude, filial obligation etc., and search for a new pagan faith promising more independence. Just as in “Medusa,” in “Mystic,” too she refers to the “Pill of Communion Tablet,” in “Tulips,” she imagines the dead shutting their mouths on peace “like a communion tablet,” in “Totem,” the consumption of the sacrificed hare “let us eat it like Christ” and in “Nick and the Candle stick,” she “suffers a piranha / Religion Drinking / Its first Communion out of my life toes.” The tablet, which accepts one into the fold of Christianity, is rejected in these lines. She wants no part of a religion, which cannot give her solace. She rejects the super compassionate Virgin Mary in rejecting her mother. The influence of Frazer's “Eating the God” ritual, also found in Christianity in the acceptance of the communion tablet is unmistakable. Frazer in his “Eating the God” ritual observes:

The Mexicans even before the arrival of Christian missionaries, were fully acquainted with the doctrine of transubstantial on and acted upon it in the solemn rites of the

religion. They believed that by consecrating bread their priests could turn it into the very body of their God, so that all who there upon partook of the consecrated bread entered into a mystic communion with the deity by receiving a position of divine substance into themselves.  

The reference also to Mary, as sorrowful Mother or Mary Magadalene who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and dried them with her hair. The rejection of Christianity as a religion is complete in the last stanza of "Medusa:"

Ghastly Vatican.
I am sick to death of hot salt.
Green as eunuchs, your wishes
Hiss at my sins.
Off, off eely tentacle!  

The 'Medusa', thus becomes the image for her mother, a representative of Christian values, and in the rejection of the mother the authority of church over personal life, the Pope's control over people in the name of spirituality is rejected. She is tired of 'hot salty tears,' which religion has no power to wipe or stop. The 'Medusa' imagery can be analyzed in religious context where, in Matthew 19:10-13, Christ divides eunuchs into three categories, based on voluntary or involuntary impotence; they are 'green' or inexperienced in regard to sexual consummation. If Aurelia is 'Medusa', then her wishes are 'tentacles' trying to penetrate into her daughter's private pains, futilely. One can

consider the “Medusa” poem to be an exorcism of the Christian element. The rejection of the mother might also be due to the feeling that the matriarchal impulse in her was responsible for the failure of her relationship with two men, her father and her husband who were significant in her life. The rejection of Christian Mary leads to the acceptance of ‘Moon Muse’ in her life. Making her realize her role as a puppet in the hands of the ‘Collective unconscious’. The last line of “Medusa,” is full of significance.

“There is nothing between us” can be considered literally as a complete break off between the mother and daughter or even pregnant with insinuations that although both appear different there is absolutely nothing between them to separate them - they are one and the same, all female species are same, despite the apparent differences. Aurelia lost her husband at a very young age, and was left destitute for no fault of hers, and Sylvia Plath too lost her husband at a young age, Sylvia Plath depended on her mother for her support, just as Aurelia depended on her mother, strengthening the illusion of the power of matrilineal culture in an apparently patriarchal world. The poem “Medusa,” is a poetic narration of Sylvia Plath’s life, in which she is seen enmeshed between the call of the collective unconscious and the conscious effort of leading a normal life in patriarchal society. The poem finally ends on a note where the present is rejected for the past.

Berentta Quinn calls attention to the significance of the Gorgon, in the study of the poem “Medusa.” The story of Gorgon told by Hesiod and Ovid, affects all western literature through Homer and Dante. “This daughter of sea – God Phorcys symbolizes the worst horror the
human imagination can create." 105 Modern poets like Robert Lowell, Randall, Jarrell, Ezra Pound, Allen Tate, Ben Belitt, James Merrill, W.S. Merwin etc., see in 'Medusa' a way of incarnating their insights. 'Medusa' belonged as a stone mother not only to the mythic transformation traced by Erich Neumann in The Great Mother, but is also involved in Robert Graves The White Goddess, which was Sylvia Plath's main source of inspiration. She is interchangeable: Hecate, Artemis, Demeter, Selene, Medusa, Aphrodite and even Ishtar (Esther of Bell jar). Most of these are 'Lunar' names. As Neumann rightly notes:

In Greece, the Gorgon as Artemis Hecate is also the mistress of night road, of fate, and of the world of dead ... as Hecate she is the snake - entwined moon goddess of ghosts and dead, surrounded, like Artemis the wild goddess of the hunt, by a swarm of female demons.106

Judith Kroll, too, refers to the moon-muse of Sylvia Plath's late poems as resembling Hecate. 'Medusa' is also known as 'Circe' is the lady without mercy, who destroys where she would love. Fredrick Thomas Elworthy, labels her a Witch: "The story of the Medusa is but an incident in the evil eye and should be studied by all interested in the subjects." 107 This imagery is found in Sylvia Plath's "The Lady and The

Earthenware Head.” In Lorelei, “Medusa is a siren of the legend who haunts a rock on the Rhine and by her loveliness led sailors to destruction.” 108 Lorelei is also a genius of amphibian called a mud eel, suggesting the ‘eely-tentacles of Medusa’. In “Lesbos,” Sylvia Plath becomes a Lorelei “I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair” 109 Medusa, has also been a symbol of duality in man, depicting the contradiction within him. She is a fusion of opposites: “Lion and eagle, bird and serpent, mobility and immobility; beauty and horror.” 110 The other poems, which reflect the ‘Medusa’ myth as Gorgon are “Elm,” “The Munich Mannequins,” “The Disquieting Muses,” “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” “The Rival” and “Sculptor.” In “The Stones,” one finds the desire for temporary release, or solace through her sleeping pills, brandy and water. Medusa being the Stone Mother is connected to the common word ‘Stoned’ meaning drugged. This solace attained through drugs is considered a false heaven. In “The Stones”, she says, “Drunk as a foetus / I suck at the paps of darkness.” 111

‘Darkness’ symbolises Medusa, and her breasts, which give the blessing of death or here sleep, describe Sylvia Plath’s condition when she was under medication of sleeping pills.

108. Ibid.
If "Electra on Azalea Path," gives a narration of her life history and establishes her role as a modern Electra, the traces of the third stage begin where Sylvia Plath acknowledges her past and using the 'Medusa' confirms her helplessness at the hands of the call from the past of the Mother Goddess culture. The rejection here is of a 'mother image,' who is sweet like Mary, blubbering, eucharistic, who though kind is unable to help her. The other 'Mother' accepted by the 'Moon Muse', is found capable of explain the failures of her relationship with men. In "Electra on Azalea Path," her mother becomes her rival for her father's love, and if father and husband become one, then the one who takes away her husband becomes her rival whom she cannot defeat and thus assimilates with the 'Moon Muse', a cruel heartless lady.

The most striking image and symbol of Sylvia Plath's poetry, which pervades her poetry even where its image is not present, in Ted Hughes words, is the 'Moon':

... a strange muse, bald, white and wild, in her 'hood of bone' floating over a . . . burningly luminous vision paradise . . . which is at the same time eerily frightening . . . her poems . . those incredibly beautiful lines and hallucinatory evocations. 112

The above lines describe the landscape of her later poems. According to Judith Kroll, "there are more than one hundred direct references to the Moon in her poetry." 113 The moon for Sylvia Plath was not just a detachable symbol but it symbolized her deepest source and inspiration of poetic vision, her vocation, her female biology and

the role and fate as a protagonist in a tragic drama. All other motifs and images harmonise as well because in all other Moon mythologies similar motifs and images are interrelated. Robert Graves whose work Sylvia Plath read with great interest associated poetry with the moon (already discussed.)

"The Disquieting Muses" and "On the Decline of Oracles" written about the same time were inspired by the metaphysical paintings of Giorgio de Chirico. The muses, the atmosphere and visual imagery for her "The Disquieting Muses" are borrowed from the painting, The Disquieting Muses, which Sylvia Plath saw and influenced in 1958. At that time she was searching for her real voice and she borrowed from Radin's folk tales and Rousseu. The unifying vision was not yet developed. Chirico began populating his paintings with strange figures of mannequins or tailor's dummies in stone gowns. The heads resembled moons. This metaphysical landscape provided Sylvia Plath the stage onto which she could project her autobiographical and psychological concerns. In "The Disquieting Muses," she says,

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unasked to my christening, that she
Sent these ladies in her stead
With heads like darning-eggs to nod
And nod and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib? 114

The helplessness of her position is continued in the fifth stanza of the same poem as, “I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere, / From muses unhired by you.” 115 And in the last stanza, she describes the predicament of being imprisoned by the three muses, from whom she cannot escape. “Day now, night now, of head, side, feet, / They stand their vigil in gowns of stone.” 116 The acceptance of the Moon Muse is reinforced. The Moon Muse overshadows the mother’s well meaning muses who inhabit a world where evil has no place. The reference is to the idyllic picture of a life dreamt by her mother for her children. The failure of this, much cherished dreams leads to the rejection of Christian mother, seen in “The Moon and the Yew Tree.” The ‘Moon’ muse of Sylvia Plath’s later poems is a kind of witch, resembling the witch-goddess Hecate. Hecate too is the muse, prophetess, and hag, portending death or doom. “The life of a moon-goddess typically includes the death of a male-god, whose loss she either mourns or celebrates.” 117 The above, mentioned aspect of the goddess parallels that of Sylvia Plath and her mythic protagonist:

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.  
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.  
How I would like to believe in tenderness —  
The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,  
Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes.

115. Ibid.  
116. Ibid. p. 76.  
Inside the church, the saints will be all blue.
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
Their hands and faces stiff with holiness.

The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild.
And the message of the yew tree is blackness – blackness
and silence.\textsuperscript{118}

The speaker accepts pagan religion along with the outdoor
panorama of Yew tree, and sky, ruled by the Moon her true mother.
The moon muse is bald, wild and a tragic muse with no tenderness,
belonging to a unromanticized world. She sees no comforts in the
kindness preached by Christianity. The true religion for her is one of
Ecstasies, Oracles, Prophecies and Omens.

The third stage becomes powerfully visible after her marriage to
Ted Hughes. Sylvia Plath married Ted Hughes as he fit into the boots
left behind by her father. He was a dominant personality, like her
father, whose work her mother forced to do, like a secretary sacrificing
her personal interests. Her mother lost her father to death, and
according to Sylvia Plath ‘Death’ becomes a rival to her mother in the
form of ‘Moon’ muse. Therefore, logically, the ‘Moon’ muse should be
her mother. Ted Hughes’ interest in myth encouraged her to
experiment in mythological themes, and she too worked for him,
sacrificing her own interests. Ted’s infidelity in fact gave her a
complete mythical vision of the ‘White Goddess’ myth, in which Robert
Graves mentions the ‘Rival’. Sylvia Plath found her ‘Rival’ in Assia
Gutman, her husband’s mistress. In the notes jotted down for an outline

of the novel which she was working at the end of her life, "she refers to principals as 'heroine,' 'rival,' 'husband' and 'rival's husband.'"119

At that time Sylvia Plath did not have a rival in flesh and blood. It existed in her mythic context. The 'moon,' as the mother was already woven as a rival in her poems and Assia Gutman provided the character by her willfully childless state, a sterile beauty, who became a natural ally to the barrenness of the 'Moon-muse' of Sylvia Plath's poetry. Sylvia Plath's technique of making use of the people in her life as mythic entities is authenticated by her letters to her mother. When Sylvia Plath wrote "Faun," she reported that the poem was about her husband in a letter to a mother. Thus, she incorporated her husband into the scope of her mythological frame-work. The Moon-muse being the connecting symbol for the whole drama including the actions of the three main characters- heroine, rival and dead and resurrected gods- her real life rival is mythologized. In the myth of 'White Goddess', Graves repeatedly uses the term 'rival'. The poet protagonist participates by proxy in the ancient story celebrated in poetry, the story also being in some sense that of the poet's relationship with the Muse:

The theme . . . is the antique story . . . of birth, life, death and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year; the central chapters concern God's losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for love of the . . . Threefold Goddess, their mother, bride and layer out. The poet identifies himself with the God of the Waxing Year and

his Muse with the Goddess; the rival is his blood-brother, his other self, his weird.'120

Judith Kroll speaks about "...the Sacred king as the Moon-goddess's divine victim; . . . every Muse - poet must, in a sense, die for the Goddess whom he adores, just as the King died."121 If the poet is a woman, a simple inversion might present itself. Instead of two male rivals contending for the favour of a muse-goddess, two female rivals might contend for the favour of a God. As Judith Kroll puts it, "the heroine in the first form of 'White Goddess' marries and mourns her God. In the second form by gender inversion the God is lost to a rival. The loss of the battle is not death but rebirth. Both the God and heroine can be reborn." 122 In the first case the father and husband become rivals, and the husband usurps the father's place, two men fighting for the Goddess and when two female rivals fight for one male god, the rivals are mother and daughter. The two patterns co-exist, the false self in the absence of the God wishes for the birth of the true self to be born whatever be the case. In this context, Sylvia Plath found two new incidents to complete the vision of the 'White Goddess' myth as parallels to her life story. The myths discussed by Robert Graves speak of the "death of the God or his representative at the end of a fixed term, often seven or eight years." 123 The Queen of Elfland in Thomas the

121. Ibid.
122. Ibid.
123. Ibid. p. 66.
Rhymer was the medieval successor of the pre-celtic White Goddess who carried off the sacred King at the end of his seven years reign ... Robert Graves also mentions a type of Hercules, a co-king, who reigns alternatively with his twin: often “The Twins’ joint reign is fixed at eight years.” 124 These time periods coincide with the death of Sylvia Plath’s father, when she was eight years old and her separation from Ted Hughes after seven years of married life. These time periods of the death of the god are made use of by Sylvia Plath in “Lady Lazarus,” she says, “I have done it again. / One year in every ten / I manage it—”125

Although, one finds the time period altered to suit the mythic scheme of the poem, the influence is too stark to be ignored. In “Daddy,” too she makes use of time period when she says, “I was ten when they buried you. / At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you.” 126

Ted’s involvement with Assia Gutman, provided her with the ‘Rival’ needed to complete the mythic pattern of the ‘White Goddess’ myth. Sylvia Plath’s last few poems written in feverish intensity were thus the result of agony at the separation from a man who she loved, and the ecstasy of having acquired the complete mythic vision for her writing. In the “Moon and Yew Tree,” the moon appears as a muse-

124. Ibid. p. 229.
126. Ibid.
rival, but as the mother’s ‘rival’ and her pagan mother: “The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right, / White as a knuckle and terribly upset.”

Anger or grief makes a person ball the fist tightly until the knuckles become white. The gesture is symbolic of frustration, which Sylvia Plath associates with the ‘rival.’ A sense of despair and frustration dominates the tone of the poem: as she continues to her tirade against Christianity, which has failed in ensuring the sanctity of her marriage:

Inside the church, the saints will be all blue,
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
Their hands and face stiff with holiness.
The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild.

The morality preached by the church regarding adultery does not stop the rival from taking away her husband or her husband from being unfaithful to her. In the ‘Rival’, she says,

If the moon smiled, she would resemble you.
You leave the same impression
Of something beautiful, but annihilating.

And your first gift is making stone out of everything.

Assia Gutman, Ted’s mistress aborted herself many times to preserve her beauty, going against the ideologies of the late 1950’s and

126. Ibid.
128. Ibid.
129. Ibid. p. 166.
early 1960's for which Sylvia Plath had sacrificed her freedom. Sylvia Plath felt haunted by the 'rival' in her life. She found it strange, that her husband loved her 'rival,' although she never bore his children. "... a barren wife infects her husband’s garden with her own sterility and prevents trees from bearing fruit; hence a childless woman is usually divorced." In “Barren Woman,” she describes the worthlessness of a childless woman. This poem was written even before meeting her rival in her real life, which proves the existence of the ‘Rival’ in her mythic context.

Empty, I echo to the least footfall,
Museum without statues, grained with pillars, porticoes, rotundas.

In my courtyard a fountain leaps and sinks back into itself,
Nun-hearted and blind to the world. Marble lilies
Exhale their pallor like scent.

Mother of a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos.

The ‘Rival’ is described as an artificial flower with no fragrance and a mausoleum instead of museum. The moon, is connected to barrenness or fertility. There is resemblance between an ovum and the moon. The ovum is white, blank and spherical and the moon’s monthly cycle rules the cycles of the ovulation and menstruation. Each turn of the moon ruled cycle insures barrenness. In “The Munich Mannequins,” she comments:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold or snow breath, it tamps the womb

Where the yew trees blow like hydras,
The tree of life and the tree of life
Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.\textsuperscript{132}

In the above poem the ova are seen as barren 'moons'. Since the Moon is a woman she too has her normal menstrual period of twenty-eight days. \textsuperscript{133} The rival is perfect but not fruitful.

The same strain of thought is continued in "Elm," as she says,

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
Cruelly, being barren.
Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.

I let her go. I let her go
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery. \textsuperscript{134}

This poem deals with the imagery of miscarriage, which flattens the round shape of a pregnant woman. "An Appearance," Three Women: A Poem for three Voices, "The Other," "The Fearful" and "Childless Woman" are other poems dealing with the rival woman and her satisfaction of enjoying male relationship for its own sake without proving the worth of femininity of continuing the race.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid. pp. 262-263.
\textsuperscript{133} Robert Graves, The White Goddess ; A historical grammar of poetic myth, (London; Faber & Faber, 1952), p. 165.
Like a true muse, the rival refuses to be wife and mother. In “The Fearful,” Sylvia Plath writes:

She would rather dead than fat,
Dead and perfect – like Nefertit,

The silver limbo of each eye

Where the child can never swim,
Where there is only her and him. 135

Sylvia Plath, gaves a mythic significance to Ted’s adulterous behaviour. She justifies this act by sighting Robert Graves, where the poet here her husband deserts her and follows the moon-muse, which is her rival. Robert Graves “has a dictum that the muse must never become ordinary and must resist the temptation to commit suicide in simple domesticity (which) lurks in every maenad’s and muse’s heart.”136

Sylvia Plath becomes responsible for her husband’s behaviour for she has taken the risk of being a wife and mother giving in to the temptation of being domesticated. Her husband’s betrayal was therefore considered as another coincidence of linking her life with the ‘White Goddess’ myth. Every incident of her life seemed miraculously entwined with the dictums of the ‘White Goddess’ myth. Olwyn, was Ted’s sister who made Sylvia Plath’s life miserable. ‘Olwen,’ is a Welsh name of the White Goddess, incidently the Hughes were of Welsh

135. Ibid. p. 256.
descent. It would be relevant to mention the name of the protagonist of her _Bell Jar_. Esther Greenwood. Robert Graves mention that the children born of "May Day orgies were 'merry begots,' after repudiated by their father." And he also lists the names commonly given to such children, and "Green wood" is one of them. In the "Two Sisters of Persephone," where she emphases the dilemma of choosing between being a wife, mother and remaining a virgin spinster. This poem describes the conflict between the dictums of the ideologies of the age and the myth selected by her:

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

Freely become sun's bride, the latter
Grows quick with seed.
Grass-couched in her labor's pride,
She bears a king. Turned bitter

And sallow as any lemon,
The other, wry virgin to the last,
Goes graveward with flesh laid waste,
Worm-husband, yet no woman.  

In the fourth stage, Sylvia Plath establishes her twin in "The Other," her dark self which move towards killing of the males in her life who had made her life miserable. The fusion of father and husband takes place in "Daddy." The fifth stage, is initiated after she exorcised her past. If the mother is exorcised in "Medusa," in "Daddy," she exorcises the father and husband, not only as men, in her life, but by accepting the matriarchal culture which had been haunting her for long. Freedom from male dominated roles does not come merely by divorcing her husband, their death becomes her rebirth. As the first step towards the killing of the males in her life, she mentally acknowledges her mistake of having lived in the shadow of her dead father. In "Witch Burning," she accepts the futility of having wasted her life mourning for her father and a strong desire for rebirth:

Mother of beetles, only unclench your hand:
I'll fly through the candle's mouth like a singeless moth.
Give me my back shape. I am ready to construe the days
I coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone.
My ankles brighten. Brightness ascends my thighs.
I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light.140

"Purdah," "Stings" and "Lady Lazarus" are poems, which speak of freedom from male domination. In these, the God is reidentified as devil and oppressor, whose death is celebrated in the 'White Goddess' myth. In "Daddy," she weaves the three polar motifs into a variation on the dying God and mourning goddess theme in which she rejects the

140. Ibid. p. 136.
'Electra' role putting an end to the continuity of her false life i.e., Death-in-life. There is a list of charges against the father. The ritual recital of the myth is meant to cancel the earlier Christian marriage to Ted, through whom she had married her dead father saying, 'I do', 'I do':

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or achoo,

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time –
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,

Ghastly statute with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

Her pent up anger against her dead father is brought out by calling him a 'Nazi', and making herself, a 'Jew', describing him as a person with an Aryan eye – with neat mustache, Panzer-man, a Fascist, a brute and also a man with a cleft in his chin instead of foot and there by transforming him into a devil. This last line is autobiographical and it refers to Otto Plath's amputation due to diabetes. In the next stanza, Sylvia Plath describes the way she had sought her dead father with an attempted suicide and when that failed she had sought him through her husband. She voices a strong desire of being free from both of them:

141. Ibid. p. 222.
You stand at the blackboard, daddy,  
In the picture I have of you,  
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot  
But no less a devil for that, no not  
Any less the black man who  
Bit my pretty red heart in two.  
I was ten when they buried you.  
At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back to you.  
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,  
And they stuck me together with glue.  
And then I knew what to do.  
I made a model of you,  
A man in black with a Meinkempf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.  
And I said I do, I do.  
So daddy, I'm finally through.  
The black telephone's off at the root,  
The voices just can't worm through.  

The 'Telephone Off at the Root' refers to the Yew tree, which is supposed to link this world with the under world. It has aerial roots which look like branches and according to Sylvia Plath connect the world with the underground world, which worked as a contact between her dead father and her. She wants to sever all connections with the dead father. In "Little Fugue," she addresses her father with his amputed leg directly. It is a poem, that identifies her dead father with Christ, which makes him, her god where by he rules her life, she says:

142. Ibid. pp. 223-224.
The yew my Christ, then.
Is it not as tortured?

.............
Great silence of another order.
I was seven, I knew nothing.
The world occurred.
You had one leg, and Prussian mind.

Now similar clouds
Are spreading their vacuous sheets.
Do you say nothing?
I am lame in the memory.

I remember a blue eye,
A briefcase of tangerines.
This was a man, then!
Death opened, like a black tree, blackly. 143

The father's death is responsible for the emotional crippling of her life. The death has created a psychic wound that would never heal. Her life was deranged after her father's death, and she had to re-learn to live:

I survive the while,
Arranging my morning.
These are my fingers, this my baby.
The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor. 144

'Fugue,' in its psychiatric sense is, as Judith Kroll puts it:

... a state of psychological amnesia during which a patient seems to behave in a conscious and rational way, although upon

143. Ibid. p. 188.
144. Ibid. p. 189.
return to normal consciousness he cannot remember the period of
time nor what he did during it; temporary flight from reality.  

Sylvia Plath's fugue results from her father's death, but unlike the
fugue victim she does not enjoy spells of complete recovery. The black
colour of the Yew tree is sacred to Hecate and suits her oracular father.
'His voice is black and leafy'. Her marriage dress which are compared
to clouds are indistinct in contrast to the definiteness and rootedness of
the black Yew tree which symbolizes her father's death. Sylvia Plath
considers herself to be blind in-keeping both with Oedipal image and
the blind pianist. Just as the pianist's fingers play from memory,
Beethoven's 'Gross Fuge' the yew's black fingers play on her life. In
The White Goddess, Robert Graves mentions an ancient finger-alphabet,
or "deaf-and-dumb finger-language" often used by Druidic poets,
who sometimes "induced a poetic trance by treating their finger-tips as
oracular agents."  

The Yew tree becomes both, her tree and Christ, in mythic sense,
and her father who controlled her destiny. In The White Goddess,
Robert Graves devotes an entire chapter to types of lame dying and
reviving gods. "Little Fugue," identifies the Christ considered by

147. Ibid. p. 197.
Robert Graves to be a "lamed" god, with the yew tree - which has one 'tap-root'; an icon for the protagonist’s one-legged father. 148

The use of sympathetic magic discussed by Frazer in his Golden Bough is used by Sylvia Plath to exorcises her husband through her father. In sympathetic magic, “Things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy.” 149

The notion of sympathetic magic is that, as the image suffers so does the man- working through proxy. In “Daddy,” she says,

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two -  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,  
Seven years, if you want to know.  
Daddy, you can lie back now. 150

The use of sympathetic magic is also evident in her poems like “The Other,” where doors and windows are opened for facilitation of childbirth. The father’s wound becomes lameness in memory. It is equivalent to transforming itself into a homeopathic wound, which is seen in “The Eye-mote”:

When the splinter flew in and stuck my eye,  
Needling it dark.

. . . . . . . . . .

Neither tears nor the easing flush  
Of eyebaths can unseat the speck:

It sticks, and it has stuck a week.
I wear the present itch for flesh,
Blind to what will be and what was.
I dream that I’m Oedipus. 151

Her father’s death is described as splinter, which blinds her like Oedipus and leaves her groping blindly in her life. The progress in the mythic pattern leads to her changing of the victim-predator roles. The pain of having been betrayed by her husband is inverted, as if she rejects her husband. It is not the heroine who was held captive by the male image, father or husband but her false self. The real self becomes free in “Purdah”:

Jade –
Stone of the side,
The agonized

Side of green Adam, I
Smile, cross-legged,
Enigmatical.

Shifting my clarities.
So valuable!
How the sun polishes this shoulder!

Even in his

Absence, I
Revolve in my
Sheath of impossibles,

151. Ibid.
In the above lines too, one sees Sylvia Plath using sympathetic magic, she makes use of the myth that Eve was carved from Adam's side, and uses it to destroy her male counterpart. She becomes more of an external soul and destroys him through herself. The love she realized that her husband had for her was selfish, as the love was only to protect him, because she was a part of him that he dared not lose and therefore, guarded like a heart. But he doesn't know that only her false-self is attached to him and her real self is the moon, who ritually murders men, which is unknown to him. She can easily destroy her false-self to destroy him. The reference is to Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon. Robert Graves considered Clytemnestra to be an incarnation of the 'White Goddess'. The powerful inclination for rebirth is seen after the killing of the men in her life, where the fifth stage gains momentum. Mere killing of the men does not free her from male domination, what she needs is the rebirth. After killing the men, who made her life miserable, she adopts the queen bee image. She becomes

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154. Ibid. pp. 242-44.
the Queen Bee and identifies with the 'Great Mother,' with the recovery of the 'self', which was subdued by the men in her life. The mythical identification defined by Thomas Mann is achieved (Chapter I). The imitation transforms into identification with neither restrains nor barriers. She no longer depends on the men for sustenance, she can make use of them and then destroy them. She can start life anew at her own sweet wish and will. The 'Bee' poems of Ariel highlight this aspect. In "Stings," about the Queen Bees, she says,

Of winged, unmiraculous women,
Honey-drudgers.
I am no drudge
Though for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.

And seen my strangeness evaporate,
Blue dew from dangerous skin.
Will they hate me,
These women who only scurry,
Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover? 153

The thought projected here is that it was the false-self acting like a drudge, a Queen in disguise. One also finds the reference to Mary Magdalene who washed Christ's feet with tears and wiped it with her hair. Sylvia Plath too had accepted the Christian authority, which failed to give her peace. The strong impulse of survival against the male authority represented by father, son of Christianity is rejected who wanted her to live a death-in-life. She gets rid of this death wish with great difficulty and rises like a comet free from her false-self, which was 153. Ibid. pp. 214-15.
dominated by men. Only a Queen bee entomologically is “a perfect female who can start a new hive where-ever she wants, unlike the worker bees who are domesticated and satisfied in their male dominated roles.” 154 This also is reference to a women who have compromised their muse like qualities in domestication.

In ‘Stings’, the following lines describe the recovery of herself:

It is almost over.
I am in control.
Here is my honey-machine,
It will work without thinking,
Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin 155

In the same poem, her recovery as a Queen bee leads to the flight of the male from her life, out of fear, strengthening the vision of ‘Great Mother,’ whose embrace is death:

In eight great bounds, a great scapegoat.
Here is his slipper, here is another,
And here the square of white linen
He wore instead of a hat.
He was sweet,

The sweat of his efforts a rain
Tugging the world to fruit.

The bees found him out,
Molding onto his lips like lies,
Complicating his features. 156

154. Ibid.
155. Ibid. p. 215.
156. Ibid.
The father image of the opening stanza becomes the husband, and she has nothing to do with him. The description of flight is seen in the disarray of his belongings left behind during his sudden flight. She now has to recover herself – a rebirth as she says,

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her —
The mausoleum, the wax house. 157

Unlike the other bees who die for the male, she refuses to continue a subservient role which will ultimately lead to her death. She wakes up the sleeping feminine force in her, the initiation of which had frightened the man who took flight. The evoking of the collective unconscious of the powerful muse is described, as the subdued self rises like ‘a red comet,’ ‘a red scar,’ more terrible than ever. The rebirth is complete, the false-self is killed as the new one rises in its terrible naked form.

If in “Daddy,” she exorcises the male figures as death-gods, here she shows her capacity of freeing herself from their paralyzing influences as a resurrecting goddess, the fully liberated Queen Bee of the earlier poems, used only as imagery is seen in very strong terms in her later poems. ‘Herr God’ and ‘Herr Lucifer’ are the two faces of divinity

157. Ibid.
of the male-god, both the Gods who have died for her, leaving her in death-in-life state. She has transformed herself into a reviving goddess. About ‘Lady Lazarus’, Sylvia Plath herself says,

\[\ldots\] a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman.\(^{158}\)

The phoenix is a bird, which is reborn out of its own ashes. It is self-generating. Like the Queen Bee which spells death to the male in mating, the phoenix eats men like air and is clearly sister to ‘The White Goddess or Muse, Mother of All Living the ancient power of fright and lust – the female spider (the phallic mother) or Queen Bee’. Robert Graves also mentions “a type of Moon-goddess who ritually renews her virginity, usually after murdering her old consort and before taking a new one. She bathes naked in a sacred fountain. Each time I rise, I rise a bloody virgin / Sweet whore.”\(^{159}\)

The death of the men in her life is imperative and her rebirth is seen in the above lines.

In “Lady Lazarus,” the opening lines, speak of her attempts at annihilating herself. The poem is a sort of complete story of her myth. If “Electra on Azalea Path,” narrates her story from her father’s death to the time of writing, “Lady Lazarus,” continues the narration to the ultimate resolution of the myth. The poem includes everything


necessary to substantiate the first chapter of this study, which deals with the connection of myth to religious, social, historical, political and mythical character. It is a whole story in itself. A summation of the whole saga of her life, altered little to suit the myth.

In “Edge,” we find another type of transcendence, perhaps, one about which her feverish mind was planning:

The woman is perfected
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare

Feet seen to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose . . .

...........
The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone. 160

The lunar drama is over, the lunar mother has absorbed the daughter into herself. The matriarchal culture where children belonged to the mother's family has been revived. The scene reminds one of Cleopatra who killed herself by putting a serpent (asp) to her breast. Robert Graves considers her to be the one of the incarnations of the 'White Goddess', because, she too destroyed men.

Death-in-life is not the only drama presented in her poems. The desire for rebirth, resurrection also holds fear, as she says in 'A Birth day Present', she needs to know the truth, dispel the veil of lies, deceits and self-delusions which make life bearable. Yet, the knowledge of truth may kill her, like a knife. The uncertainty is killing her, but certainty is something for which she will need tremendous courage:

If you only knew how the veils were killing my days.
To you they are only transparencies, clear air.

But my god, the clouds are like cotton.
Armies of them. They are carbon monoxide. 161

Even if it meant death, she wants the truth, because it would be cowardice to shirk it. As she says,

Only let down the veil, the veil, the viel.
If it were death.

I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.
I would know you were serious.

There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.

161. Ibid. p. 207.
And knife not carve, but enter

Pure and clean as cry of a baby,
And universe slide from a side. 162

The fear of knowing the truth is compared to a knife which pierces to kill and also of seeing God and absolute truth. This fear is seen in “Totem,” “Mystic,” and “Paralytic.” In “Mystic,” she asks,

Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?
Once one has been seized up

Without a part left over,
Not a toe, not a finger, and used,
Used utterly, in the sun’s conflagrations, the stains
That lengthen from ancient cathedrals
What is the remedy?

Is there no great love, only tenderness? 163

The desire for a great love is never fulfilled in her life. The intense love she felt for Ted failed to guarantee a happy married life. Being disillusioned in life she says, in “Paralytic”:

I smile, a buddha, all
Wants, desire
Falling from me like rings.
Hugging their lights. 164

162. Ibid. p. 208.
163. Ibid. pp. 268-269.
164. Ibid. p. 267.
The influence of Buddhism is seen in the above lines and the desire to be free from both love and hate is great, but never achieved, because she does not want to be a saint but just a woman. The fear of seeing God and becoming a Buddha devoid of all desires makes her wish for never ending process of rebirth and rejects the silent, peaceful eternity. The “Totem,” continues this sense of fear of rebirth. Once she dies, then, she will be reborn. The safest position therefore she feels in between death and salvation, in the process of rebirth. This poem, indicates the influence of Upanishad. Living in Yeat’s house, along with Jung’s influence of psychic unity had made Sylvia Plath read the Upanishad. The influence of which is seen in the following lines: “There is no terminus, only suitcases / Out of which the same self unfolds like suit.” 165 In ‘Getting There’, we find the tragic nature of man desiring destinations knowing the consequences. An influence of Zen Buddhism is seen here as Buddha speaks a life as a flux. The desire is also for a life which become meaningful by itself:

Is there no still place
Turning and turning in the middle air,
Untouched and untouchable.

The train is dragging itself, it is screaming——
An animal
Insane for the destination, 166

Even Eliot in his “Four Quartets,” uses the symbol of a train journey for rebirth. Here it is a dramatic ritual, but one of fear. The

165. Ibid. p. 264.
166. Ibid. p. 249.
The desire for a never-ending voyage is clear, the destination is never clear. Therefore, possibility of spiritual rebirth is doubtful compared to physical rebirth. The belief of the immortality of soul is seen in this poem.

In conclusion, one can say that an in-depth study of Sylvia Plath's poetry along with her entries in The Journals and Letters Home show her use of myth to be conscious. The messages narrated through images, metaphors, and allusions are selected meticulously to create the mythic atmosphere. Sylvia Plath's greatness lies in her acknowledgement of the great influences behind her poems, and also in fusing them explicitly with her personal experiences. Each and every symbol can be analyzed for its various meanings and each meaning only adds to the beauty of its function in the poem. The myths used by her are not just for the sake of poetry, she has a justification for each one of them. Sylvia Plath's keen awareness and sensitive comprehension of the happenings of her world make her myths realistic. The myths prove her to be a victim of her contemporary world, i.e., of the modern man who has lost himself in his greed for material progress. A demand for man as a noble entity and complementary to woman, and not as an opposition is her main preoccupation. When, one force suppresses the other, the latter is bound to rebound with great force like the suppressed feminine psyche, which has been stripped of its mysterious power in the name of science. The 'White Goddess' myth helped her to universalize her personal predicament by providing a frame-work to her experiences. The Oedipal myth and the Medusa myth helped her to organize her poetic thought into one great mythic drama and they led
her towards the ‘White Goddess’ myth with the lunar muse. It would be a difficult task either to link or de-link her real life from her mythical characters, as the incidents in her life have been perfectly synthesized into the mythic schema.

The myths used by her transcend her poetry from the confessional to the mythical. The myth of Nazism and Horatio Alger myth, keep cropping up, during the conflict of the physical with the spiritual. “A Letter to the Purist,” beautifully describes her vulnerable position caught between her loyalty to the Horatio Alger Myth of material success and her loyalty to her ‘self’, which needs to create irrespective of material gains. In the poem, she says,

O my great idiot, who  
With one foot  
Caught (as it were) in the muck-trap  
Of skin and bone,

Dithers with the other way out  
In preposterous provinces of the madcap  
Cloud-cuckoo,  
Agawp at the impeccable moon.  

The poem indicates that only a return to the pagan goddess or moon muse would be able to resolve her confused state of being. The effect of selecting the pagan muse, led to her sacrifice at the altar of creativity. The fact that disturbs the readers is the incapability of such a well-read person in conquering the death wish. Sylvia Plath lived in the symbols, forgetting that they are pointers. Her failure in transcending

167. Ibid. p. 37.
these symbols led to her suicide. It would be appropriate to quote Joseph Wiesenfarth here to describe the tragic life of Sylvia Plath and her poetry, "by making the accidental circumstances of your life the necessary conditions of all lives, you have transformed yourself from an accident-prone analyse and into an emblematic Oedipus." 168 This citation shows very clearly what A.D. Hope says in "An Epistle from Holofernes":

Yet myths will not fit in ready made
It is the meaning of the poets trade
To re-create the fables and revive
In man the energies by which they live. 169

The above lines show that understanding a poet does not necessarily mean that the myth has been used in its true form it is altered to suit the poet's need.