CHAPTER III

STRUGGLING AGAINST ODDS:
CONFESSIONS OF INADEQUACY
Man as an individual is the centre of Sylvia Plath's universe. But his life is no bed of roses: he is pitted against the odds of life. The world being full of struggles, man, too, must face his share of conflicts. Thus the theme of conflict is the central motif of her work. The conflict is between man and the external world, man and life, man against unknown forces and even man against himself. Sylvia Plath begins by defining man's relationship with nature—the external world—and its inhabitants, moves on to man's attitude to his own self and then deals with his struggles against forces that are hostile. In this struggle against odds, Sylvia Plath's protagonist remains inadequate. As Esther in *The Bell Jar* confesses feeling "terribly inadequate", so too the persona of the poems voices this feeling time and again.

The *Colossus*, Sylvia Plath's first book, may appropriately be called a poet's impressions of nature. She describes in minute detail the hills and the rocks, the animals, bees and birds. In an interview for the BBC, Sylvia Plath once described the themes of her early poems as—"Nature, I think: birds,
bees, spring, fall, all those subjects which are absolute
gifts to the person who doesn’t have any interior experience
to write about."¹ In her later poems, when she did have
"interior experience" to write about, her poems stopped
speaking about nature in the manner of The Colossus poems:
no doubt, nature remained a part of her poetry but it
became a manifestation of her inner being. In her early
poems ( of The Colossus ), there is a conscious effort to
describe the sights and sound of nature. As an example we
may cite "Watercolours of Grantchester Meadows" from this
volume:

There, spring lambs jam the sheepfold, In Air
Stilled, silvered as water in a glass.
Nothing is big or far.
The small shrew chitters from its wilderness
Of grassheads and is heard.
Each thumb-size bird
Flits nimble-winged in thickets, and of good
colour.

Cloudrack and owl-hollowed willows slanting over
The bland Granta double their white and green
World under the sheer water
And ride that flux at anchor, upside down.
The punter sinks his pole.
In Byron's pool
Cat-tails part where the tame cygnets steer.

It is a country on a nursery plate.
Spotted cows revolve their jaws and crop
Red clover or gnaw beetroot
Bellied on a nimbus of sun-glazed buttercup.
Hedging meadows of benign
Arcadian green
The blood-berried hawthorn hides its spines with white.

Droll, vegetarian, the water rat
Saws down a reed and swims from his limber grove.
While the students stroll or sit,
Hands laced, in a moony indolence of love—
Black-gowned but unaware
How in such mild air
The owl shall stoop from his current, the rat cry out.

On the surface it appears as though Sylvia Plath were trying to paint an idyllic picture. This impression is the result of the images, words and phrases she uses. For example, in the first stanza we have spring lambs and small birds, in the second and third we are told that it is
an idyllic landscape—serenity is imparted by the reflection of willows in still water, making it "a country on a nursery plate" with spotted cows grazing in buttercup fields. This impression continues in the fourth stanza which speaks of the "moony indolence of love" and the "mild air". Truly, one feels that Sylvia Plath is one with nature, considering it a safe haven. However, the idea that the poet wishes to present is that idyllic appearance can be deceptive, beauty may be a facade that veils a threat. Even though the serene landscape is beautiful, there is more to it than meets the eye. Hence a superficial reading and an unquestioning acceptance of the description will not suffice. To determine the sense that lies deeper it would be regarding to re-examine the "country on a nursery plate".

The landscape which has spring lambs, thumb-size, birds and spotted cows has other inhabitants: a shrew, a rat and an owl—traditionally associated with death and decay. The willow trees, which impart scenic beauty are "owl-hollowed" and in the midst of the Arcadian green there are hawthorn bushes, symbolising lurking danger. Thus, along with scenic beauty, danger (associated with the rat, the shrew and the owl) is presented to prove that nature is not merely beautiful: it can contain a lurking menace, threatening the existence of man. In stanza four there are students strolling "in a moony indolence or love", unaware
of the dangers surrounding them. Ironically, though they are "black-gowned", they are sadly unaware of death that pervades the air. The students here represent man in general: man is placed in a world full of dangers but does not know what may befall him. And in such a hostile environment man, like the strolling students, remains alone against all hostility.

Thealoneness of the individual is emphasized by Sylvia Plath. The shrew that "chitters from its wilderness/ Of grassheads" could also be symbolic of the isolation of man in the wilderness of life. This image points a cue to "Wuthering Heights" (Crossing the Water) in which again we have the wild grass of the moors surrounding a lonely persona- this time not a shrew but a woman. Here, too, the landscape appears picturesque and inviting but soon the lure dissolves like "a series of promises" and the persona finds herself "ringed" by the hostile moors. Two more poems which depict the same theme are "The Snowman on the Moor" and "Hardcastle Crags" (The Colossus). In both the persona is alone in an unfriendly environment. "The Snowman on the Moor" depicts her amid the vast stretches of the snow-covered moorland: the hostility of nature is personified in this poem as "a grisly-thewed/Austere, corpse-white/Giant" who scares the wits out of the woman. Similarly, in "Hardcastle Crags" the granite hills threaten to "break /
Her down to mere quartz grit" and "snuff the quick / of her small heat out. "The lurking danger is symbolised by the use of the colour black– the "stone-built town" is black, the cottages are dark, the stones are "black stone set / On black stone"—whereas the indifference of nature towards man is depicted through the association of stone and metal with the landscape– the "steely street", the "humped indifferent iron" of the hills, the "granite ruffs"(!) of birds and the "stony light". In such stony and rocky surroundings the persona feels helpless to counter the threat she feels pervading the air.

This sense of underlying menace calls to mind an idea expressed by Thom Gunn in "On the Move":

"The blue jay scuffling in the bushes follows Some hidden purpose, and the gust of birds That spurts across the field, the wheeling swallows. Have nested in the trees and undergrowth. Seeking their instinct, or their poise, or both. One moves with an uncertain violence Under the dust thrown by a baffled sense Or the dull thunder of approximate words."

Here, Thom Gunn seems to be doing the same thing as Sylvia Plath: after drawing our attention to the graceful movements
of the blue jay and the swallows, he speaks of the violence that pervades the air. "One moves with an uncertain violence — there is danger, there is violence in every movement of ours: it has become a part of our lives and yet we are unaware of it.

In a hostile world man must fend for himself. Sylvia Plath's protagonist tries to blend with the world of nature by seeking an identification with small and fragile forms of life, creatures who are at home in the world of nature. Her animal poems bear the strong influence of Ted Hughes. But there is a difference. Hughes glorifies the hawk, the crow and the jaguar as symbols of power. He feels that they are superior to man because of their animal strength.

In "Hawk Roosting" (Lupercal) he identified himself with a hawk that sits high above the world with its claw hooked securely on the rough bark of a tree. "I hold creation in a foot." It says confidently. Similarly, in "Jaguar" (Hawk in the Rain the jaguar is a majestic animal. Even though it is in captivity, its ferocity enables it to achieve a degree of freedom as though it were in its natural habitat: "His stride is the wilderness of freedom: / The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel." This image is repeated by Sylvia Plath when she writes "Pursuit". Like Ted Hughes 'Jaguar'. Plath speaks
of a panther that is "more lordly than the sun. However whereas the jaguar is a symbol of life and power, the panther is symbolic of death. This is the intrinsic difference between the animal imagery of Plath and Hughes: whereas Hughes sees in his animals their struggle for survival. Plath, in the poems of *The Colossus*, seems defeated from the start as she sees in them not the instinct to survive but their vulnerability. For example when speaking of "Blue Moles" comparing the world of man with the subterranean world of the moles, she feels that the moles share the same fate as man—they face a life that is unpredictable and fleeting:

"... What happens between us
Happens in darkness, vanishes
Easy and often as each breath."

In "Frog Autumn" in the inclement weather of autumn the frogs are unable to survive: their "folks thin/lamentably". And in "Private Ground" we are told that fish suffer the same fate as men—they die.

However, in the animal imagery of the later poems we find a change of tone. Instead of animals that are vulnerable, Sylvia Plath turns towards those that are powerful. In the title poem of Ariel the horse is no
no mean creature: it is "God's lioness" that gallops understrained. The lioness as in image of power and fury occurs again in "Purdah" (Winter Trees) in which the doll-like bride rises in revolt against all oppression. And in the bee poems the bee is an awe-inspiring creature. In "Stings" (Ariel) she flies

"More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet...........
Over the engine that killed her-
The mausoleum, the wax house."

In these poems her imagery is close in spirit to that of Ted Hughes.

Whenever Sylvia Plath speaks of nature we note an internalisation of all externals. The feeling of loneliness and fear in the persona's heart is reflected in the outer world. For example, in "Wuthering Heights" and "The Snowman on the Moor" the bleak landscape is symbolic of the bleakness that exists in the persona's mind. In a later poem, "The Moon and the Yew Trees" (Ariel) the moonlight becomes "the light of the mind" that colours the perception of the beholder. It is the mood of the protagonist that is reflected in the external world. In "Suicide Off Egg Rock" (The Colossus) the man who is fed up of life feels that the world comprises mere "imperfections" and even sunshine, traditionally a source of happiness and bounty, is a "damnation". Whenever Plath speaks of nature she
gives us not description alone but its impact - the effect it has on the mind of a person. But, no matter how the protagonist perceives it, nature remains inmical to human life. The wind pours by "like destiny", bending everything in one direction ("Wuthering Heights") and the moon causes women sterility and suffering ("Three Women"). However, when the poet speaks of the sea, her attitude is different: she feels that the sea may offer her a refuge from the turmoils of life.

In its strongest form nature manifests itself as water - of rivers or of the sea - which is a recurrent motif in the work of Sylvia Plath. We may judge the importance that the sea had for the poet by referring to her autobiographical prose piece "Ocean 1212-W" which begins with the following lines:

"My childhood landscape was not land but the end of land
the cold, salt, running hills of the Atlantic.
I sometimes think my vision of the sea is the clearest thing I own." 4

In poems like "Lorelei", "The Bull of Bendylaw", "Point Shirley", "Full Fathom Five" and "Berck-Plage" (to cite just a few examples) Plath speaks of the sea in the various aspects she was familiar with. Like Byron, she is fascinated by its tempestuousness. The best portrayal of a stormy sea
is in "The Bull of Bendylaw" (The Colossus) in which the sea is likened to a raging bull. It is so powerful that the efforts of man to control it fail miserably. It sweeps up inexorably and swallows whatever comes in its way. The sea, representing nature, is also shown in opposition to man. In "Point Shirley" there is the "sluttish rutted sea", the brutal "dog-faced sea". In this poem the poet speaks of her grandmother trying to save her house from the damage the sea threatens to perpetrate on it. For example, after a storm she "wore her broom straws to the nub", clearing the mess in her yard. In this case the grandmother becomes symbolic of the entire human race, struggling against the whimsicality of nature.

When speaking of the sea, Sylvia Plath voices resentment against its brutality only superficially. Even though, like the other forces of nature, the sea does oppose man. Sylvia Plath gives us a personal viewpoint in "Full Fathom Five" and "Lorelei". In the first poem, speaking of an imaginary father who had drowned in the sea, she would like to join him:

"Father, this thick air is murderous,
I would breathe water."

And in "Lorelei" she invokes the "goddesses of peace" to ferry her down to the sea-bed, to a world more full and clear." Thus there is a curious ambivalence in Sylvia
Plath's attitude towards the sea, in fact toward nature itself. Though she is aware of its hostility, she finds it fascinating and would like to merge with it.

The conflict that Sylvia Plath presents in her poems is not merely between man and the outer world: it exists on a deeper level. Internalising the conflict, Sylvia Plath speaks of the forces at war within the psyche: man against himself. The confessional poets often speak of the temptation to put an end to this life. As in Hamlet, the question is "to be or not to be". This is, however, not a new theme. Death has always held fascination for man. One may refer to Freud's theory of the death instinct outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Sylvia Plath is fascinated by death and even longs for it. Her desire to return to a state of lifelessness, to sink into the oblivion of death is comparable to Keats' wish for an "easel death". She visualises herself as a "still pebble" entering "the stomach of indifference" (The Stones). In "Poppies in July" (*Ariel*) she imagines a quiet death with the help of opium:

"If I could bleed, or sleep—
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that

Or your dull liquors seep to me, in this
glasscapsule,
dulling and stilling."
The longing for death, for a state of fixity, "stasis in darkness," permeates the work of Sylvia Plath. Richard Howard points out this tendency in her work and notes the frequent use of words like "still" and "still" that cluster around the Latin "Stolidues" (to be rigid), which is beyond the pleasure principle.⑤

The subconscious desire behind this death wish is to return to the prenatal state. In The Bell Jar, Esther wishes to end her life: after many unsuccessful attempts she takes a drastic step and swallows a bottle of sleeping pills, hiding in the crawl space of the cellar in her house. This "crawl space" becomes symbolic of the womb to which she wishes to return. And when she is discovered, the first sound that she is conscious of is, significantly, "Mother". Similarly, when skiing with Buddy Willard, she suddenly and foolishly decides to venture downhill on her own, even if it means suicide. This is how Esther recounts the experience:

"I plummeted down past the zigzagger, the students, the experts, through year after year of doubleness and smiles and compromise, into my own past.

People and trees receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurled on to the still bright point at the end of it, the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby cradled
in its mother's belly."

The well of death is visualised as the womb, giving birth to a new life. Similarly, in "Last Words" (Crossing the Water) the speaker likens death to a womb-like retreat:

"They will roll me up in bandages
they will store my heart
Under my roof in a neat parcel."

Sylvia Plath often speaks of death by water, drowning in the sea "which is the primordial symbol of the womb. In "Suicide Off Egg Rocks" the protagonist first looks for a "pit of shadow to crawl into (we are reminded of Esther's crawl space) and then walks into the forgetful suri of the sea. The sea is definitely the benevolent mother that brings oblivion, her gender being determined by the fact that in it is found the phallic Egg Rock. In "Full Fathom Five" the sea is the mother symbol as it 'contains' so to speak- the drowned father of the speaker. Thus, in her wish for suicide. Sylvia Plath unconsciously desired to go back to the prental state.

When speaking of death by water one may draw a parallel between the work of Sylvia Plath and the vegetation myths discussed by Frazer. In the poems of Sylvia Plath death takes a person back to the womb- that
is, to another birth. The one who dies is resurrected just as the vegetation gods of Frazer die and are reborn. Frazer particularly mentions the Syrian Adonis, the Phrygian Attis and the Egyptian Osiris. His explanation of the dying and reviving gods derives from his detailed examination of the rites and customs of the worshippers of these gods. The gods are mourned and buried. Adonis, unlike the other two gods, was usually given a watery grave by being thrown into the sea and was thought to come to life the next day.\(^7\) This death and resurrection pattern is what we find in the poems of Sylvia Plath. Her drowned god is usually her father: he is drowned but his resurrection is eagerly awaited and often visualised. For examples in "A Life" she imagines him rising out of the sea: in "Lament"he, like Proteus, rides the flood"in a pride of prongs."Thus, death is not the end: it is followed by resurrection. And the longing to die is a veiled longing to be reborn.

However, death is not easy to attain. Even though the mind and heart wish to die, the body is unwilling and stubbornly refuses to yield. "The body is amazingly stubborn when it comes to sacrificing itself to the annihilating forces of the mind," says Sylvia Plath in one of her letters.\(^8\) In "Suicide Off Egg Rock"when the protagonist tries to drown himself, his blood keeps beating stubbornly"the old tattoo/I am, I am, I am."Life and death are at war with each other
and the tension between the life-giving forces and the
wish to die runs through the poems. Annette Lavers feels
that "the dialectic of life and death" forms the sole subject
of the poems. Even though this is just a partial view-
Sylvia Plath speaks of much more than just death—it is
ture that her overwhelming concern with death cannot be
ignored. Her attitude towards death undergoes changes in
the course of her work. Initially she is just aware of the
possibility of death: then she longs for death; and finally,
she accepts death imaginatively. Thus the outlook changes
from contemplation and courtship of death to symbolic
experience of death.

In a poem like "Watercolors of Grantchester Meadows"
we note the poet's awareness of death—the rat and the owl
amid the Arcadian green. Similarly, in "Hardcastle Crags"
the greyness, blackness and darkness represent death which
is ever present around us. This awareness of death makes
the poet contemplate the idea of dying, there is a deliberate
courting of death, especially in the Ariel poems. The Best
example would be "Death and Co." which as, the poet says
(in an introduction to her poems prepared for the BBC), is
about

"the double or schizophrenic nature of death—
the marmoreal coldness of Blake's death mask, say,
hand in glove with the fearful softness of
worms, water and other kata Kolists. I
imagine these two aspects of death as two
men, two business friends who have come to call."
This poem is significant not only because it throws light on the dual nature of death, it also illuminates the poet's dual response to death. The first personification of death invites the poet to cast aside the bonds of life-he tries to exhibit the attractive side of death, telling her how sweet babies look in their death gowns. There is something compelling and inexorable about him. The speaker feels helpless in his condor-like grip. However, the other aspect of death arouses revulsion: the second personification has long hair and is a "Bastard/ Masturbating a glitter". The speaker, faced by these two aspects of death, is unable to move and anticipates her own end:

"I do not stir. The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star, The dead bell,
The dead bell. Somebody's done for."

The poet's attitude towards death is clearly brought out: after having closely contemplate-d death, she is unable to retreat to safely and allows death to overcome her. In the poems written in the last few days of her life Sylvia Plath visualises her own death as a state of perfection, as in "Edge": "The woman is perfected./ Her dead/ Body wears the smile of accomplishment..."There is a note of resignation here, a resigned acceptance of death which the poet has always been aware of. The idea that she presents is that
death is inevitable and should be accepted calmly. As it
is a state of perfection, there is a nobility about it
that can never be attained during one's lifetime.

God, for example, is unknown: man finds himself
pitted against an unknown, often cruel, God. "By the roots
of my hair some god got hold of me. / I sizzled in his
blue volts like a desert prophet," says Plath in "The
Hanging Man." One is reminded of Odin, the Scandinavian
deity that Frazer speaks of, also called Lord of the
Gallows or the God of the Hanged. Human victims dedicated
to Odin here put to death by hanging. In Sylvia Plath's
poems the victim is not a particular individual but the
whole of mankind which has to follow the dictates of a
cruel God. However, stubborn resentment is voiced against
this God in the last line of the poem ("The Hanging Man"): "If he were I, he would do what I did." The idea is that
God cannot understand man since the two happen to be on
different planes. Hence God knows nothing about the
compulsions behind the deeds of man. And so the speaker of
Plath's poems defies God: "O God, I am not like you / In
your vacuous black, / Stars stuck all over, bright stupid
confetti" ("Years"). The conflict between man and God
continues.

When speaking of struggling against outer forces,
Sylvia Plath generally makes woman her pivotal character.
It is the woman who struggles against odds: against the authority of man-God, too, is male- and against 'man'-made institutions like marriage. From the early uncollected poems to the powerful poetry of Ariel the central figure in the poems is woman— with a few exceptions. It is woman who suffers and creates the raw material for Plath's poems. Even though in a stray example like "Suicide Off Egg Rock" the protagonist is a man, most of the poems have a female protagonist who has to come to terms with the world. Rejecting the traditional image of a docile and submissive woman, Sylvia Plath gives us a woman who is full of energy and power. She seems intensely aware of the power of woman, especially woman enraged. As Linda Mizejewski says, her poems present the picture of "woman uncontained", comparable to Dido, Susannah of the Old Testament, Phaedra, Medea, Hedda Gabler and Emma Bovary. 11

Women are first of all shown in conflict with men. Josephine Donovan has made an interesting study of the "sexual politics" in some of the short stories of Sylvia Plath, concluding that the conflict lies between the male "apollonian" and the female "dionysian" realm. 12 This study could be extended to include her poems as well since almost all of them show woman pitted against a male God, husband or father who dominates her. In "Lady Lazarus" the speaker is a woman: for a long time she tolerates being treated like
an exhibition piece by the "peanut-crunching crowd" that edges in to satisfy its curiosity by examining her after her suicide attempt: "You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there." But finally she decides to throw off all submissiveness and rises like a fury to wreak vengeance on her oppressors:

"Herr God. Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air..."

The last line is important: "I eat men like air." The animosity between the two sexes is laid bare. The same theme occurs in "Purdah" (Winter Trees) where the speaker, a doll-like bride jealously guarded by the groom, rises with demonic energy to kill her keeper and liberate herself, in the violent conclusion of the poem she casts off all submissiveness and, like Cityemnesira, assassinates the one who has oppressed her for long:

"And at his next step
I shall unloose."
I shall unloose-
From the small jewelled
Doll he guards like a heart-
The lioness.
The shriek in the bath.
The cloak of holes."

The title of the poem is significant. 'Purdah' or veil is what hides the speaker's true self that later rises to liberate itself. As far as appearances are concerned, she is just another veiled lady, too shy to unveil herself. This is the false self that is apparent, the true self being suppressed by male domination.

In Sylvia Plath's poems male domination is personified as a huge colossus, a gigantic male presence that portends evil. This creature is generally projected against an expansive back-drop that, instead of dwarfing, merely emphasises his stature. Often he is depicted against a shoreline as he has amphibious qualities, being able to rule over land and sea. When depicted against the shoreline, this colossus serves to point out the relationship between land and sea, life and death. The speaker is filled with the awareness that life on the earth is an unreal one lived by the false self; the true self is degraded.
Plath, in her poems, brings out the idea that woman remains dependent on man. We may again cite the uncollected poem, "The Snowman on the Moor" which stresses the fact that in a world full of unknown dangers a woman is forced to depend on her spouse. In this poem there are two male figures that confront the female persona—the arrogant husband and the grisly corpse—the white giant. The monster is symbolic of the dangers that a woman has to face in life whereas the husband represents security and support, even though he is haughty and proud. Thus Sylvia Plath though with reluctance, admits the difficulty of living without the shadow of a male figure looming over her, even if it were in an authoritarian manner. Such is also the theme of "Complaint of the Crazed Queen", another uncollected poem. Here there is again a giant who frightens a woman—this time a queen. The queen though terrified of him and his destructive nature, becomes absolutely dependent on him to restore her to sanity.

More often than not, the man she struggles against is a monster, the devil incarnate. In "The Snowman on the Moor" and "Complaint of the Crazed Queen" his evil traits are given a physical form: the terrifying appearance is described in detail. However, in most of the poems the appearance is not so blatantly evil, the wicked nature being implicit through the association of the colour black with the colossus as in
"Man in Black". Similarly, in "Daddy" he appears as a man in black with a meinkampf look and a love of the "rack and the screw". In fact there is a masochistic streak in Sylvia Plath's portrayal of man as strong, destructive and cruel, and woman as the helpless victim. The giants of "The Snowman on the Moor" and "Complaint of the Crazed Queen" are sadistic, taking delight in the grief and pain they inflict on innocent victims. Man is the hunter and oppressor, and woman the prey. And, yet, woman loves man for his brutality. This idea is best expressed in "Daddy" where she says:

"Every woman adores a Fascist.
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you."

Admiration goes hand in hand with a secret delight in being victimised, used or oppressed. It really seems as though the speaker of Plath's poems wants the boot in the face: she would love brutality from the cruel master she is dominated by.

In fact, in her portrayal of the colossus, Sylvia Plath follows the tradition of the Fatal Man popularised by the Romantics—the deadly hero who would first profess to be the lover and then murder the woman he wooed. Mario Praz points out that the motto of the 'Fatal' heroes of Romantic literature become" I loved her, and destroy'd her": These Heroes "diffuse all round them the curse which weighs upon their
destiny, they blast like the simoon, those who have the misfortune to meet with them. ... they destroy. ... the unlucky women who come within their orbit. Their relations with their mistresses are those of incubus-devil with his victims. It is impossible to overlook the affinity of these fatal heroes with the colossus of Sylvia Plath. A kinship may also be established with the vampire heroes of the nineteenth century. Sylvia Plath's colossus, like Maturin's Melmoth the wanderer, spells death to those around him: his love is accursed, he drags to destruction the woman who becomes attached to him. Mrs. Shelley's Frankenstein is again a satanic homunculus that spells death and destruction wherever he goes. Castruccio, another character created by her, is also the usual type of satanic hero. According to Mario Praz, these fatal Byronic heroes are merely metamorphoses of Milton's Satan. Similarly, Plath's colossus has satanic aspects.

It could also be said that the man in black created by Sylvia Plath is not an external force but her anti-self, symbolic of the waraging within her. According to Jung, "The devil is a variant or the 'shadow' archetype, i.e. of the dangerous aspect of the unrecognizes dark half of the personality." Depicted along with the diabolica connotations of blackness, Sylvia Plath's colossus may be taken as the darker aspect of her being, the anti-self that
mockingly invites her to death and destruction. Thus the persona has to struggle against an evil that appears to be external but is actually an integral part of herself, something that she just cannot shake off. In a poem like "In Plaster" (Crossing the Water), she does seem aware of this problem when she says, "There are two of me now: / This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one..." But when she sees it as a man in black, she does not seem to realise that the apparition may be a figment of the darker recesses of her mind. To her mind, he takes the shape of a dead father, a husband or a god whom she can worship, even though it may be fatal to do so.

The concept of fatal heroes is obliquely related to the concept of the superman, an ideal superior being conceived by Nietzsche. Nietzsche speaks of the 'overman' Übermensch—the human being (Mensch includes woman as well) who is able to rise above normal human beings. The Romantics glorified the superman: Poe revived the legend of Tamerlane the conqueror; Byron sang of the deeds of Napoleon; Melville, in Capt. Ahab, created a gigantic exponent of egomania and the spirit of rebellion that was found in the Romantics. In fact, the superman and the fatal hero received attention and importance simultaneously, the former being the good counter-part of the latter. In Plath's colossus we find traits of both. In a prose piece she mentions the importance the superman had for her as a child:
"Those were the days of my technicolor dreams. Mother believed that I should have an enormous amount of sleep, and so I was never really tired when I went to bed. This was best time of the day, when I could lie in the vague twilight, drifting off to sleep, making up dreams inside my head the way they should go . . . .

These nightly adventures in space began when Superman started invading my dreams and teaching me how to fly. He used to come roaring by him in his shining blue suit with his cape whistling in the wind, looking remarkably like my Uncle Frank. In the magic whirring of his cape I could hear the wings of a hundred seagulls, the motors of a thousand planes.17

This image of the superman is integrated into Sylvia Plath's colossus.

However, the evil that Sylvia Plath's persona has to contend with is not always given the physical appearance of a giant. At times it appears symbolically. In "Pursuit" the apparition is presented through an allegory: a panther is a majestic creature," more lordly than the sun", pursuing
his victims quietly but surely. In this case, too, the
victims are women: "Charred and ravened women lie. /
Becoming his starving body's bait"—lines that remind us
of the "sheaved skulls" of women dangling from the belt
of the monster in "The snowman on the Moor". Here, too,
the pursued woman is helpless and realises the futility of
trying to escape from the inexorable approach of the
panther:

"I shut my doors........
I bolt the door, each door I bolt.
...........
The panther's tread is on the stairs.
Coming up and up the stairs."

The persona knows that escape is impossible: in fact, she
has known if from the very beginning. The first two lines
of the poem say

"There is a panther stalks me down:
One day I'll have my death of him."

All the same, she does try to appease him somehow:

"I hurl my heart to halt his pace,
To quench his thirst I squander blood:
He eats, and still his need seeks food,
Compels a total sacrifice."
The apparition that stalks the persona is not to be fooled with mere tidbits, he wants a "total sacrifice". She must sacrifice body and soul to appease him.

Considering the demands of the colossus, it would be interesting to study the response of the woman who is pursued. In "The Colossus" she is willing to devote an entire lifetime to the preservation of the god that sustains her. Here the object of worship is the fallen statue of a colossus and the persona takes up the task of "put-(ting) together entirely" this fallen statue. The speaker is a mere "ant in mourning" when compared with the huge bulk of the fallen colossus and she accepts her inferior role, working—even slaving—for her fallen God, facing whatever sorrow it may bring her. The broken statue that she tends is reminiscent of the broken God of Chiricito that speaks" a mysterious language". 18 She does not understand the working of this god—yet she voluntarily remains devoted to him. In fact, as she recalls later in "Daddy" she lives most of her life in his ominous shadow, "barely daring to breathe or achoo": her entire life has been spent in the unquestioning acceptance of the authority of the God that holds her in thrall. However, gradually the realisation dawns on Sylvia Plath"s speaker that she has been submissive too long and she rises to put an end to it, as in "Lady Lazarus" and "Purdah". The liberated heroine of Plath is
is symbolised by the lioness and the queen bee. In order to defend herself against a fatal man, woman too must be aweinspiring. When Sylvia Plath describes a woman in fury she gives us a 'Femme fatale' who has metamorphosed from the unfortunate persecuted maiden of her earlier poems.

According to Praz, "There have always existed Fatal women both in mythology and in literature,"women like . Scylla and Clytemnestra. The Diabolical beauty of fatal women attracted the attention of the romantics. Keats in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" speaks of a woman who has the power to hold men in captivity. Coleridge in "Christabel" created a similar demonic women in the witch-like Geraldine. Shelley, when describing Medusa, says,"Its horror and its beauty are divine." The fatal woman is terrible not only in her beauty but in her terrible rage. And she is deadly—not madonna but belladonna, the "lady of situations" that Eliot, too, speaks of. Walter Pater and Swinburne depict their fatal women as vampires-Monahsa and Phaedra. In Phaedra, Swinburne creates a superwoman:

"Man, what have I to do with shame or thee? I am not of one counsel with the gods. I am their kin, I have strange blood in me, I am not of their likeness nor of thine: My veins are mixed, and therefore am I mad, Yea therefore chafe and turn on mine own flesh, Half of a woman made with half a god."
This is the kind of liberated woman Sylvia Plath visualises (we may again refer to Nietzsche's übermensch), a woman who knows no restraints:

"Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs. A wind of such violence Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek."

( "Elm" )

And since she assumes a terrible form, she has the right to warn all men, whether they are "Herr God" or "Herr Lucifer", superman or _homme fatale_ to "Beware/ Beware" her vengeance.

The anger against men is best expressed in "Daddy" in which the vampire that haunts the persona is ritually killed:

"If I've killed one man, I've killed two-

remains stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through."

A jolting love-hate poem like this one lays bare the ambivalent feelings of the persona towards the Daddy-vampire-husband. The "dancing and stamping on his dead body brings to
mind another woman poet raging against a male oppressor, namely. Diane Wakoski in the title poem of her volume Dancing on the Grave of a Son of a Bitch, a poem worth quoting in this context. It begins:

"God damn it,
at last I am going to dance on your grace,
old man.

you've stepped on my shadow once too often, you've
been unfaithful to me with other women, women so cheap
and insipid it psychs me out to think I might ever
be put................
in the same category with them:

*I'm going to dance on your grave
because you are
dead
dead
dead
under the earth with the rest of the shit....."

Sylvia Plath's woman protagonist is not only against the dominating male world, she is also opposed to the institutions established by men: for example, the institution of marriage. Sylvia Plath feels that marriage and domestication makes a woman unreal: it suppresses her true self. In "The Couriers" (Ariel) she speaks of the disillusionment of marriage:
"A ring of gold with the sun in it.
Lies, Lies and a grief."

The title of the poem is significant: we expect couriers (messengers) probably of love and hope, but the poem is not about such pleasantries: It is about disappointment. In "The Applicant" (Ariel) the fate of a woman who is married is clearly delineated:

"In twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can see, it can cook.
It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image."

The institution of marriage binds a woman to a man and she is forced to slave, cook and sew for him, becoming a doll-like bride as in "Purdah."

In The Bell Jar Esther feels that getting married is like "being brainwashed, and afterward you went about in some private, totalitarian state." This state of being
brainwashed is the result of following the humdrum routine of domestic life day in and day out, "Measuring the flour: cutting off the surplus./ Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules" ("A Birthday Present", Ariel). In a relationship like this, all love disappears: it is just something "you lie and cry after" ("Elm"). "Event" speaks of a marriage that has failed because all love has died: There is no communication between the husband and wife who lie back to back in bed. Their relationship is a "groove of old faults, deep and bitter. / / Love cannot come here. "Thus, marriage, woman's union with man, fails to be a satisfying relationship. It is just another institution that woman has to struggle against. For a human being life is, no doubt, tough: for a woman it is even more so and she must fend for herself against all odds.

Thus, struggle in life is a part of man's lot. Sylvia Plath tries to project the idea that in the midst of these struggles, though man is doomed to failure, he does, for a time, put up a heroic front. This theme of conflict is presented through a poetic style that is appropriate. Plath uses words, images, rhyme, rhythm and figures of speech so as to present her themes forcefully, showing man not merely as beaten before the start, but heroic in his confrontation of the problems of life.
NOTES & REFERENCES


18. The epigraph that Plath gives to "One the Decline of the Oracles" (*Poetry* XCIV, Sep. 1959) is from Chiricide's essay, "The Feeling of Prehistory": "Inside a ruined temple the broken statue of a God spoke a mysterious language."
