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Alanna P. McAuliffe

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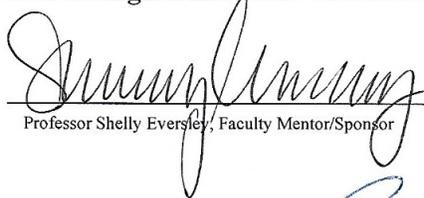
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**To Be Everything: Sylvia Plath and the Problem That Has No Name**

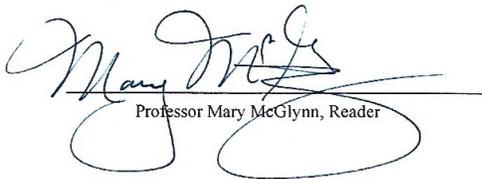
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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	3
Plath in Context: Postwar America .....	5
The Role of Women in Midcentury America .....	5
The Shortcomings of Postwar Women’s Movements .....	10
The Poetics of the Problem that Has No Name .....	15
The Poetry of Sylvia Plath .....	18
“Spinster” .....	20
“Two Sisters of Persephone” .....	25
“Elm” .....	30
“Ariel” .....	36
“Daddy” .....	41
“The Applicant” .....	50
Revolution as Salvation .....	55
Works Cited .....	58

## Abstract

This thesis will explore, in depth, how the poetry of Sylvia Plath operates as an expression of female discontent in the decade directly preceding the sexual revolution. This analysis will incorporate both sociohistorical context and theory introduced in Betty Friedan's 1963 work *The Feminine Mystique*. In particular, Plath's work will be put into conversation with Friedan's notion of the "problem that has no name," an all-consuming sense of malaise and dissatisfaction that plagued American women in the postwar era. This notion will be furthered by close-readings of poems throughout various stages of Plath's career, namely "Spinster," "Two Sisters of Persephone," "Elm," "Ariel," "Daddy," and "The Applicant," works which speak to binaries enforced by cultural convention, the dangers of the domestic model, and the inescapability of mid-century femininity. In advancing this argument, biographical readings of Plath's work will be rejected, bolstering the notion that her work stands alone as cultural criticism. Operating in an age of restriction and repression, Plath's work speaks to both female identity and subordinating norms of domesticity. Though this thesis will certainly incorporate contemporary and modern cultural criticism as well as historical context for the concept of feminine containment and restriction, it will be most focused on analyzing Plath's work as a poet, including assessing her praxis, aesthetic, and narrative choices. Finally, this argument will conclude by establishing how the six poems considered, as well as the rest of Plath's oeuvre, directly anticipate second-wave feminism and the women's rights movements of the sixties.

“WOMEN HAVE LUST TOO. WHY SHOULD THEY BE RELEGATED TO THE POSITION OF CUSTODIAN OF EMOTIONS, WATCHER OF INFANTS, FEEDER OF SOUL, BODY AND PRIDE OF MAN? BEING BORN A WOMAN IS AN AWFUL TRAGEDY.”

SYLVIA PLATH

## Plath in Context: Postwar America

Writers are largely a byproduct of the era that they inhabit. Even if it is entirely unintentional, sociohistorical commentary inevitably diffuses into their work. For an author like Sylvia Plath, however, reaching womanhood in mid-century America did not merely inflect her work: it inspired it. Life for American women in the middle of the twentieth century (particularly middle class white women) was largely centered around the domestic sphere. A symbol of hope, prosperity, and most significantly, stability, the home served as a model of successful democracy following a time of turmoil and conflict. Entering her adulthood in 1950, Plath was maturing in an era where the housebound role of women was an immovable status quo. Sylvia Plath's poetry is a direct result of a sparring with these rigidities, a desire for the comfort of gender normativity at odds with a desire for alternatives. Thusly, in order to understand the content and craft of her oeuvre, it is first necessary to review the historical context in which she was living and writing, roughly 1952 to 1963.

### **The Role of Women in Midcentury America**

Following the conclusion of the second World War in 1945, the United States became an icon of economic and political strength. While other global powers suffered immense losses of life and damage to infrastructure, American casualties were comparatively far less debilitating (Dunar 3). In the wake of violence and victory, American families felt optimistic about the future. When soldiers returned home to a triumphant welcome, peace felt permanent and the general perception was that life in America was unshakably stable. As a result, women were urged to have children, to raise them in an era of prosperity. In what is colloquially known as the "Baby Boom," more than seventy-six million children were born between the years of 1946 and 1964 (Dunar 174). With expanding families came the need for expanded houses, in neighborhoods built specifically for the

growing family. Subsequently, Americans began to move to the suburbs in droves, with low-cost mortgages giving former soldiers and their families an additional incentive to head for small communities on the outskirts of larger cities (Dunar 177).

The transition into a suburb-centric culture did little to benefit women. From the thirties into the forties, the number of women in the workforce grew exponentially in response to the economic pressures of the Great Depression (“Working Women in the 1930s”). When America entered World War II in 1941, men left jobs behind to go abroad and fight. Consequently, women filled positions formerly held by men out of necessity. The settling down into suburban life made many of these former freedoms inaccessible to women. Instead, young women were being encouraged to stay home, to keep house and to watch children while their husbands served as breadwinners of their family unit. By the end of the fifties, the average age at which women were married was roughly twenty years old (U.S. Bureau of the Census). A growing number of teenagers were foregoing higher education to marry, while thirty-seven percent had dropped out before graduation, mostly for marriage and a life of domesticity (“Women’s Roles in the 1950s”). Even if women did pursue higher education, they were often encouraged to take classes on home economics and interior design, their career choices often limited to clerical or service industry roles. Of the forty percent of adult women who did work outside of the home, only twelve percent practiced a profession (Zelomek). These women, often receiving their educations at women’s colleges throughout the United States, went on to pursue academic and white-collar positions but found that their ability and experience was overlooked due to their gender. Frustrated with the lack of career mobility, well-educated women sought solace in the home, hoping that it would “become not a place of drudgery but a liberating arena of fulfillment through professional homemaking, meaningful child rearing, and satisfying sexuality” (May 25).

Over time, however, it became evident that the decision to embrace domesticity was far from a choice; it was a reality steeped in normative cultural expectations. Though the second World War had reached its conclusion, the United States' deployment of the hydrogen bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ushered the world into a new state of alert. Though Americans attempted to cling to the myth of unshakable peace and prosperity, the atomic era was marked by anxiety and unease. In the wake of the introduction of nuclear weaponry, uncertainty and mistrust of communist-aligned nations and individuals grew. For example, when the Soviet Union gained confirmed nuclear capability in 1949, fifty-three percent of Americans polled stated that there was good chance of their community being bombed in a future skirmish (May 25). The angst surrounding a perceived but unknowable threat was soothed by the promise of containment. The first Cold War tactic of the United States, containment aimed to quell the spreading of communism and quash the advancement of the enemy. This policy was furthermore mirrored at home.

The domestic sphere became a “psychological fortress” for Americans, a “buffer against both internal and foreign threats”; ideologically speaking, women challenging the domestic model felt just as threatening to American well-being as the spread of communism (Meyerowitz 3). In the middle of the twentieth century, the personal was so politicized that it became increasingly difficult to discern public from private. The prototypical middle-class household – white picket fence, breadwinner husband, stay-at-home mother and homemaker – became a national symbol of prosperity and democracy. As a result, women, the symbol of domestic bliss, became indistinguishable from that which they represented – national identity hinged on women relenting and accepting their role in the home.

Containment also stifled women's sexuality. The notion of sexual containment was employed in conjunction with the rise of the domestic model. Just as an atom could be utilized in clean energy in lieu of a weapon, a “female bombshell could be harnessed for peace within the

home” so that feminine sexuality would not threaten the American way of life (May 108). While this is certainly not to say that unmarried men and women of the fifties did not engage in sexual activity, the implications of the ethos of containment were overreaching. Sex without the purpose of procreation was largely taboo, only discussed openly in reference to its threat on American morality. Sexual containment, like the containment of communism, was built primarily on fear. Communities feared the violation of gender roles (particularly the “preoccupation with female promiscuity”) would “cause sexual and familial chaos and weaken the country’s moral fiber” (May 112). While there was no evidence to their claims, the rate of premarital sex not budging since the 1920s, the fear and distrust of female sexuality generated the notion that it must be stifled and locked safely in the bounds of domestic monogamy. Yet paradoxically, women were still expected to be sexually desirable, magazines and conversations revolving around how to garner a man’s attention and win his affections.

In the fifties, women were variously infantilized, purified, and revered (the young, innocent ‘kitten’ or the model mother figure) or sexualized then commodified for male consumption (December 1953 saw the first issue of *Playboy* magazine). Fashion shifted from the fluid, boyish, practical looks of the twenties and thirties into something more akin to Victorian-era corseting and caging. A poll taken in 1947 verified that a majority of women did not like this style, one of crinoline, exaggerated brasseries, and carved out waists, but would wear it anyway, as it was socially mandated (May 108). For American women in the middle of the twentieth century, sexuality was something that was only discussed in terms of how it benefitted men. Whether through the “girlfriend” types of *Playboy* or the moralistic maidens of the marital bed, the parameters detailing acceptable expressions of female sexuality were defined by patriarchal standards. Female sexual autonomy and desire was a seldom discussed taboo shrouded in a culture of shame that left women feeling deviant for pursuing sexual interests.

Women like Sylvia Plath, just coming of age at the advent of the fifties, often found that this era of restriction made it incredibly difficult to reconcile individual identity with the responsibility of upholding a nationally endorsed model. In 1951, at the age of nineteen, Plath wrote:

I am at odds. I dislike being a girl, because as such I must come to realize that I cannot be a man. In other words, I must pour my energies through the direction and force of my mate. My only free act is choosing that mate. And yet, it is as I feared: I am becoming adjusted and accustomed to that idea...I, so proud and disdainful of custom, could consider marriage and honorable and vital estate. (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 54).

Even for Plath, a thoughtful artist with conflicting desires and interests, marriage and motherhood often seemed not only encouraged but inevitable. With the average median age at marriage falling and the rate of childrearing increasing, young women were pressured into making decisions about their future, familial and otherwise, quite rapidly. A dichotomy emerged amongst college-aged women where those who were single and directionless were envious of engaged peers for their stability and certainly while the betrothed grew resentful of those who were not tied down by such a commitment, feeling as if they had sacrificed their liberty in some way (Friedan 69). Young women were not encouraged to explore the full extent of their identities. They were instructed to “pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted a professional career, higher education, and political rights” (Lamb 29). Instead of following in the footsteps of these “undesirable” women, they were often led to sacrifice selfhood and describe themselves only in terms of another – someone’s wife, someone’s mother.

The rigid sociocultural standards of the era put a particular amount of stress on the generation of women just entering their late teens and early twenties in the late forties and early fifties. At a crossroads in their lives, these women were pushed towards making the widely-endorsed decision, a stable future where they could thrive within the home and find the comfort and structure

they longed for in the family unit. Even those who were “disdainful of custom” like Plath recognized that options were limited for women and that there was an implicit responsibility in femininity, that the option whether or not to embrace domesticity was a mere illusion of choice. In the postwar era, where domesticity was equated with democracy and a sense of national security, young women felt the pressure to conform more than ever. Still, the difficulty of grappling with one’s passions, desires, and individualities in an age of conformity and misogyny gave way to conversations between women, vital writings and responses in magazines and journals, and a culture that anticipated the as-yet inconceivable Sexual Revolution that began in the 1960s. It was operating within this space of pre-revolution that helped Plath hit her stride but ultimately did not provide enough impetus for change to assuage her feelings of emptiness and uncertainty.

### **The Shortcomings of Postwar Women’s Movements**

Though it appeared the progress women had been making in terms of employment, social status, and political recognition in the twenties through the forties had been completely halted by the antiquated domestic ideals of the postwar era, discussion surrounding the rights of women continued in the security of female spaces. While the overall percentage of women entering and finishing college dropped in the fifties, women’s colleges remained a breeding ground for burgeoning feminists. Between 1835 and 1900, seven women’s colleges (dubbed “the Seven Sisters”) were opened in the United States, overcoming political pushback (Barnes 72). The purpose of these institutions was to provide an education for American women that equaled, if not rivaled, the opportunities provided to men in a similar socioeconomic bracket. Fifty years after these colleges opened their doors, however, women began to forego pursuing higher education; though women made up 47.3% of all college students in 1920, this percentage had dropped down to a mere 31% by 1950 (Eisenmann 44). This drop-off in enrollment was due to an assumption that the type of

women these all-female colleges produced would be too brainy, too independent, too assertive, too unfeminine – and altogether unfit for marriage. Others ridiculed women’s education as a simple waste of time. These viewpoints clashed with how female academics viewed these institutions. For them, “women’s education was necessary for the growth and survival of the republic” (Barnes 72).

Certainly, women’s colleges served as a hotbed of growth for feminist theory and social movements. Motivated and unsatisfied American women viewed education not only as a means of individual mobility but as a way to “remedy social ills, learn leadership roles, and build coalitions to address inequities” (Barnes 74). This is not to suggest that such revolutionary attitudes were mainstream. These colleges were far from free from the pressure and rebuke of mid-century conservatism. Smith College, one of the Seven Sisters, was one of the most revered women’s colleges of the era – it was touted as a “serious” schools for girls, one that would follow a Harvard-esque model. Nevertheless, Smith was unquestionably influenced by the era. Gloria Steinem, notable feminist and founder of *Ms. Magazine*, who attended Smith from 1952 to 1956 (only two years behind Plath, who attended from 1950 to 1955), stated, “Administrators, professors, the president would say they were educating women so there would be educated children... People were trying to get women out of the labor force and into the suburbs” (Petroziello).

It was at Smith that Plath began to explore her desires, her anxieties, and her fears. Plath, whose peer Steinem described as “a very different person” who seemed unwilling to bend to conservative thought, found herself at odds with a dichotomy within women’s education (Petroziello). On one hand, these institutions were anticipating feminism, providing spaces for women that were free from sexual politics and pressures within the classroom dynamic, encouraging free discussion and debate amongst students. On the other hand, the consensus that women’s education was merely a springboard for finding a stable mate and having well-bred children dashed any attempts to undermine the status-quo. Plath voiced her frustration at Smith during her freshman

year, writing, “Maybe this is why I am a girl...so I can live more safely than the boys I have known and envied, so I can bear children, and instill in them the biting eating desire to learn and love life which I will never quite fulfill” (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 32). Though the restlessness and dissatisfaction that often serves as an impetus for rebellion was present, the prevailing attitudes of the era were so insidious that it made revolution impossible during the decade. It was not until the sixties, when the Civil Rights movement inspired and encouraged pushback against inequality, that modern feminism would develop fully.

Still, women managed to avoid being silenced in between the pages of books and magazines. The circulation of women’s magazines that began decades prior only increased in the postwar era. These magazines contained fashion and cosmetic tips, recipes, design advice, and, most tellingly, poetry and short stories. In the forties, the heroines of short stories were hopeful with a “definite aura around them that their individuality was something to be admired” (Friedan 30). They were often career-focused women with ambitions and goals. The desire for conformity and order that developed in the 1950s, however, nearly eradicated this depiction of women. By the end of 1949, only one-third of heroines in these stories held a career and even so, these protagonists often shook off their delusional search for independence and disavowed their career in exchange for a husband (Friedan 37). The women featured in these stories were extraordinarily young, childlike even. They cooked, they cleaned, they were sexually submissive, they reared children, and they never complained. Major women’s magazines like *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, *McCall’s*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Women’s Home Companion* seemed crafted specifically with the typical, domestic-driven woman in mind. That is not to say, however, that these stories of virtuous inexperience and feminine containment were crafted *by* women.

In the forties, many of the staff writers and contributors for women’s magazines were female. As Americans came back from the war, however, many of these female writers were forced

out of their field and into the home, replaced by men “who had been dreaming about home, and a cozy domestic life” (Friedan 49). This is not to say that women did not find outlets of resistance. Despite being outliers, young women were still publishing pieces that pushed back against the narrative they were being fed. While most mainstream women’s magazines bent to the whim of patriarchal standards and beauty columns in the fifties, a publication called *Mademoiselle* stuck to the values it was founded upon when it first hit the presses in 1935 (Aron). The magazine’s target audience was modern-minded white college-aged women – Plath’s demographic. *Mademoiselle*’s pages were filled with well-penned literature and, more importantly, a promise of hope for young women. With frequent fiction contests and a yearly shot at one of twenty internships to serve as a guest editor of a collegiate edition, *Mademoiselle* offered an alternative to the now male-dominated magazines of the era (Keller).

It was in the pages of *Mademoiselle* that Sylvia Plath found the freedom to write with the reassurance of an audience that was also frustrated with the state of society. Plath’s short story “Sunday at the Mintons” was published in a Spring 1952 issue as a winner of the magazine’s fiction contest. The story tells of Elizabeth Minton, an aging spinster who puts aside her freedom for practicality’s sake as she serves as her brother Henry’s housekeeper. Plath’s Elizabeth serves as a stand-in for women of the fifties, a cautionary tale of what might become of the once rebellious and resistant. Henry chides Elizabeth for not being a “practical girl,” for preferring reading and daydreaming to listening to the “sound of his voice as he marshaled her to duty,” for being unable to “fend for herself” (Plath, “Sunday at the Mintons” 309-302). Plath’s use of Elizabeth for a feminine figurehead speaks to the frustrations of the era: “She felt oddly that she was merging into someone else, her mother perhaps...Strange that she, after all these years of independence, strange that she should...be circumscribed...by domestic duties” (Plath, “Sunday at the Mintons” 311). The story takes a rather dark turn towards the end, as Elizabeth imagines Henry drowning in the sea outside

his home while the wind picks up her skirts and sends her aloft into the sky. Plath's story, like so many others of *Mademoiselle*, was markedly different than the housewife heroine of more mainstream media. There is such a bite at the end of *Mintons* when Elizabeth "gave a sigh of submission" and returns to her brother's side – it is Plath's navigation of the weighty feeling of inevitability, one that so many women faced when they felt relegated to a choice of domesticity or death (Plath, "Sunday at the Mintons" 319).

Regardless of those, like Plath and her peers, who defied the mainstream, the United States remained on the cusp of revolution until the movements of the sixties. Meanwhile, writers, philosophers, and activists worldwide were beginning to publish texts that challenged chauvinistic conservatism. In 1953, French author and intellectual Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was first published in the United States. The text analyzed sexism and social hierarchy through a critical lens, challenging the binary thinking that dominated postwar culture. De Beauvoir observes that, in this era, men were considered "the Subject, the Absolute," while women were reduced to "The Other," a singularity that kept them captive within the realms of femininity (de Beauvoir 6). The text became a bestseller in the United States nearly immediately, the translation's taboo cover (featuring the figure of a nude woman) making it a subversive choice for young women. That being said, its first publication in the United States did not have the revolutionary impact de Beauvoir hoped for in writing and publishing in her native tongue. Knopf, the American publishing company that obtained the manuscript, mistakenly categorized *The Second Sex* as a sex manual, "capable of making a very wide appeal among young ladies at places like Smith" (Glazer). Thus, the editors sought out a professor who wrote on biology and human reproduction – not philosophy or theory – to complete a translation of de Beauvoir's text. Thusly, it was not until a full decade later that a fully developed rhetoric of feminism was made mainstream. This reflective work, published in 1963, is largely credited with sparking the second wave of feminism. It was called *The Feminine Mystique*.

## The Poetics of the Problem that Has No Name

It was only in hindsight that the dissatisfaction felt by American women in the fifties was acknowledged as something beyond boredom or hysteria. In 1963, the same year Plath died by suicide, author and activist Betty Friedan (also a graduate of Smith College, over a decade before Plath and Steinem) published a pioneering look at the perpetuation of the myth of the happy housewife. After working as a freelancer for women's magazines where editors would routinely strip her subjects of substance, a frustrated Friedan began working on a novel-length exploration of female identity or rather, lack thereof, in mid-century America ("Betty Friedan"). This text, *The Feminine Mystique*, opens with a description of what Friedan dubbed "The Problem That has No Name". She writes:

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – "Is this all?" (Friedan 1)

Friedan's problem is one that plagued a large demographic (mainly white, middle-class) of American women, an internalized longing that mingled unpalatably with the fear of non-conformity. The glossy appeal of women's magazines combined with a cultural notion that men and women did not suffer from a difference in superiority, but a difference in identity. The general consensus of the postwar era was that women were so set apart from men, in desire, in intelligence, in biological function, that they could not possibly have any interest in that which men involved themselves in – whether it be poetry, physics, or politics.

The women Friedan interviewed for Friedan's research echo the sort of angst, melancholy, and feeling of dullness that mark much of Sylvia Plath's work. They remarked on "a tired feeling," "crying without any reason," feeling "as if I don't exist," "empty somehow," as if "I had no personality," like "I just don't feel alive (Friedan 8-10). These women felt compelled to suffer in silence as they perceived all other women, all other housewives and homemakers, to be satisfied, happy. The problem was personalized and a growing number of women felt their struggle was entirely self-inflicted. When their fatigue became unbearable and these women visited healthcare professionals, they were told it was all in their head, doctors advising them to take vitamins, go on a diet. At worst, these women were prescribed tranquilizers (Friedan 297).

Plath's eventual embracing of domesticity was viewed as one of the more intolerable cases, as the plight of the educated housewife was akin to "a two-headed schizophrenic" and that Plath was one of many who was "reduced to screams and tears...in the process of turning from poetess into shrew" (Friedan 11). Well-educated women were often encouraged to live vicariously through their children, the only benefit of having spent years of their life in higher education seemingly to raise superior offspring; frustratingly, for female thinkers and artists, procreation was valorized over creation. This resulted in what Friedan asserted was a form of "progressive dehumanization," where women, trapped in the home by external and internalized cultural mandates, became "dependent, passive" in an "endless, monotonous, unrewarding" life that resulted in a "slow death of mind and spirit" (Friedan 369). Both psychological and physical ailments began to prop up in housewives across the United States but these symptoms were widely undiagnosable. What was merely written off as boredom or hysteria in past moments, doctors realized this so-called "housewife's syndrome" was carrying a range of pathological effects, from "heart attacks, bleeding ulcers, hypertension" to full-on psychotic breakdowns (Friedan 351). While women died at a lower rate than men, it seemed their quality of life and sense of enjoyment surrounding the day-to-day dropped off suddenly with

the rise of the domestic model. In Bergen County, N.J., a densely populated model of American domesticity, a study by Dr. Richard Gordon noted that “young housewives (18 to 44) suffered not only childbirth depression” at a rate of one in three mothers but also that “all psychiatric and psychosomatic disorders” were exhibited amongst women in “increasing severity” (Friedan 352). As mild depression gave way to suicidal ideation and slight neurosis developed into psychotic breakdowns, American women were being forced to the point of extreme mental illness merely because of this “Problem That Has No Name,” an intangible sensation so deeply internalized and unspoken that it was difficult to pin down at all.

Despite this difficulty, Friedan, Plath, and other female contemporaries still attempted to vocalize this sensation and make it palpable. Without the benefit of modernity, however, neither Friedan nor Plath had access to the language or theory that explained this kind of insidious dichotomy. Plath was an individual who sought (and thrived on) a plural identity but was confined by singularities, by the expectation to be feminine, to be a mother, to be a wife, to be quiet. Plath wrote that she could “never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want” – a dilemma that left her pondering, “Perhaps you could trace my feeling back to my distaste at having to choose between alternatives...that’s why I want to be everyone, so no one can blame me for being I” (Plath, *Unabridged Journals* 43). Certainly, her aching desire for something else – something more – was far from uncommon for women in the fifties. In responding to such feelings of inadequacy and constriction, it was difficult to recognize, let alone articulate such a sensation. As American women were consistently spoonfed the myth that their own feelings of ennui were based in some sort of failure on their part, some lapse in proper womanhood, female writers were grappling with the notion that this problem was far from self-inflicted while trying to assess whether or not something so overarching was escapable.

Sylvia Plath's work as a poet is a direct response to this contention, a confrontation of Friedan's "problem". Her work is fraught with images of women attempting, often in vain, to preserve their own identities in the face of an opponent that strips them of the most human of qualities. Placed in its sociohistorical context, Plath's poetry reads as both a reaction and a rebellion to the postwar era's suppression of female identity. It is angry at times, frustrated, and in other instances, it seems forlorn, nearly cynical about the concept of progress. It is in assessing these tones and the use of "I" as a narrative poetic structure that often leads critics and readers to ascribe Plath's poetry personal meaning. As a result, her work is so often obscured through the lens of biography. In the next section, these critical perspectives will be disputed and instead, Plath's work will be dissected as more than intimate musings – her poetry serves as cultural criticism.

## The Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath's poetry is often filtered through a lens of biography, the first-person speaker rarely if ever viewed as a separate entity from the poet herself. While Plath certainly integrates the personal into her poems, this is an aesthetic and thematic choice, not an invitation to dissect her familial disputes and psychological traumas. Her work is not to be consumed as the mere musings of a tragically brilliant but ultimately doomed young woman, nor the embittered complaints of a scorned housewife. Critics and biographers will often go to great lengths to find the most sordid details of Plath's life -- her sexual experiences, her suicide attempts, her husband's abuse and infidelity -- in order to offer some sort of explanation for her poetry.

But to read Plath on biography alone, searching for the intimate hidden meaning in each stanza, is to do a disservice to the cultural criticism she provides. It is also an inherently sexist form of critique, as male authors and poets seldom face the same type of imposition. In literature, first-

person male speakers are over-accepted as general representations of mankind. But Plath is not afforded the same extension of a metaphorical voice. Though the speakers of her poems represent women in the postwar era as a whole, Plath's work is so often obscured by the public's fascination with her life -- as critics like Carl Rollyson assert, "Sylvia Plath is the Marilyn Monroe of modern literature" (Rollyson 1). Comments like these strip Plath to superficialities and undermine the depth of her poetics. It is as writer Kari Larsen argues in her review of Rollyson's largely gossip-fueled Plath biography *American Isis*: "Systematically delegitimizing Plath's poetry by relentlessly turning back to her life and the idea that her life and her being intriguing, beautiful, and tragic is de-facto more captivating than her poetry is irresponsible and misogynistic" (Larsen).

Sylvia Plath should be read simply as a poet, without the backdrop of celebrity worship and morbid fascinations. Though her personal journals and letters (which are used in this exploration solely for the purpose of placing Plath within the time period of "The Problem that Has No Name") are a rich resource, they are not guidelines for defining her poetry. Plath is a poet foremost, a poet who worked tirelessly to get her work published. As such, the posthumous publication of her most intimate musings and letters (including those between Plath and her mother as well as Plath and her therapist) seems nearly voyeuristic, violating authorial consent in some way. Therefore, criticisms that derive themselves solely from biography often verge on conjecture, speculative piecemeal work that discredits how Plath uses the confessional to her advantage. Her integration of personal experiences and observations serve to say something about domesticity and womanhood as whole, her language of "I" essentially a pluralized structure. Additionally, her turning inward operates as an exploration of a cultural "sickness" -- that is, the subjugation and containment of American women and the construction of gendered binaries. These are all conditions of Plath's praxis and indicators of narrative, scholarly, and creative choices. As such, they should be taken seriously, as not only poetics of the self but as the poetics of discontent.

In the critical assessment of the six poems that follow (“Spinster,” “Two Sisters of Persephone,” “Elm,” “Ariel,” “Daddy,” “The Applicant”), note that the full body of each work will appear, stanza by stanza, in the text of the analysis. These poems are presented as Plath had intended, with no attached biographical readings or assumptions. This argument incorporates the full text of each poem in order to avoid out-of-context line citations that often plague literary criticism. As Plath’s poetry is paramount, it is critical to fully incorporate them into the body of this discussion. The poems that appear in the next section are organized by time of composition and are analyzed poem-by-poem in lieu of thematically or by period in Plath’s life. This is because Plath’s first book of poetry was published in 1960 and she died in February of 1963; there is not a wide enough breadth of work to analyze any substantial progression. Secondly, this thesis argues that Plath’s work, no matter date or subject, has similar thematic elements and operates in service of some expression of discontent; thusly, as there is no sense in sorting the works topically, poems are discussed in conjunction throughout each individual analysis. As such, the organization of the poems serves to provide contextualization and keep the argument cohesive.

### **“Spinster”**

Though Plath had been writing and publishing in magazines and journals since adolescence, her first collection was not published until 1960. *The Colossus and Other Poems* was a “deft and surprising” edition, Plath attempting to put aside academic verbosity for “ease and naturalness of language” (Wagner-Martin 166-167). The work was varied and contained everything from muses on relationships between mothers and daughters (“The Disquieting Muses” and “Point Shirley”) to image-driven nature work (“Mushrooms”) to, most relevantly, commentary on the state of womanhood in the postwar era. Throughout Plath’s poetry, both single and married subjects are explored and held in tension with one another, as if to hold both sides of the binary up to the

looking glass. Unexpectedly, Plath's single women are not necessarily any freer from the bounds of patriarchy than those who have taken wedding vows – often, in fact, these women find themselves isolated by a culture that rejects them. One such work is “Spinster,” a poem which unravels the experience of a woman who finds a sense of liberation only in rejecting norms of marriage and domesticity, only to nevertheless find herself entombed. The work begins:

Now this particular girl  
 During a ceremonious April walk  
 With her latest suitor  
 Found herself, of a sudden, intolerably struck  
 By the bird's irregular babel  
 And the leaves' litter  
 (Plath, “Spinster” 1-6)

The first stanza introduces this “girl” as a woman set apart from others – she is “particular” and specific, not made generic or incorporated within a larger group; this is reinforced by the definite pronoun “this”. Plath sets her poem in spring – outdoors and during the month of April, expressly – which are typically employed into poetry to incorporate notions of fertility and new life. It is a vigorous time of year, where flowers are pollinated and growth is rapid. Plath writes that this walk is “ceremonious,” a word choice that feels dry and sardonic in lieu of genuine. The connotation of this word is generated by both the over-inflated language used to describe a simple springtime stroll and the events of the stanzas that follow. Clearly, the figure of the poem is meant to be grateful for this moment with her “latest suitor,” verbiage which implies she has had a string of men before him – she has garnered experience, she is not naïve. These lines combined assert that the woman in the poem is trying her best to conform to the feminine role; she attempts to find a lasting mate, goes on obedient, polite strolls, and does not underestimate the importance of romantic ventures. Yet, suddenly, something within the woman tugs at her, and she is “intolerably struck,” unable to continue this ruse. She finds normally pleasant sounds irritable as the bird calls become “irregular babel” and the soft leaves on the ground feels messy, out-of-place. The reference to

“leaves” also serves as a pun on leaving, departing from the expectations of domesticity. The language of leaving and, in contrast, of being rooted is one that Plath employs throughout her body of work – it can be seen again, later in this argument, in the analysis of “Elm”. Plath goes on:

By this tumult afflicted, she  
 Observed her lover’s gestures unbalance the air,  
 His gait stray uneven  
 Through a rank wilderness of fern and flower.  
 She judged petals in disarray,  
 The whole season, sloven.  
 (Plath, “Spinster” 7-12)

After shaking off the haze of societal pressures, of the stress of what she *should* be doing as a woman of the era, the woman is suddenly distressed by that which is around her. It is tumultuous, even her lover marked by “unbalance”. The woman finds a sort of vulgarity in the natural world, “fern and flower” feeling somehow “rank”. Plath links this abrupt repulsion at an organic display of blossoming foliage to the woman’s internalized disgust at her social status and that which is expected of her, that marriage is the natural progression of a woman’s life. It also feels incredibly invasive. As critic Jeannine Dobbs writes, “There is a violence in love that threatens the spinster, that victimizes her” (Dobbs 15).

How she longer for winter then! –  
 Scrupulously austere in its order  
 Of white and black  
 Ice and rock, each sentiment within border,  
 And heart’s frosty discipline  
 Exact as a snowflake.  
 (Plath, “Spinster” 13-18)

It is for far more than seasonal woes that the poem’s speaker longs for winter. Women of the postwar era were often dealt purely illusory choices, their autonomy routinely threatened and questioned. For the woman, winter offers some semblance of order and “discipline,” a regulation that is not imposed by masculinity but by the “scrupulously austere” winter. While springtime gaiety (and

the men she has associated with the season) brings nothing but instability, winter feels oddly comforting in its severity. April is open, fertile, expecting – but winter is closed off and forbidding.

But here – a burgeoning  
 Unruly enough to pitch her five queenly wits  
 Into vulgar motley –  
 A treason not to be borne. Let idiots  
 Reel giddy in bedlam spring:  
 She withdrew neatly.  
 (Plath, “Spinster” 19-24)

The distrust and fear of men that Plath generates in this poem speaks a great deal to the relationships between men and women in the middle of the century. The negative diction that Plath employs in the poem does not display a disdain for men, per se, but instead an anxiety that settling down with a man means sacrificing your own sense of self. The woman of the poem fears her “queenly wits” are at stake should she succumb to the pressures of monogamy and domesticity. There is a slight sense that the woman is ashamed as she refers to those who succeed in the pursuit of passion as “idiots” – she feels as if there is a disconnect in her inability to simply do what is expected of her.

And round her house she set  
 Such a barricade of barb and check  
 Against mutinous weather  
 As no mere insurgent man could hope to break  
 With curse, fist, threat  
 Or love, either.  
 (Plath, “Spinster” 26 -30)

The “queenly” nature of Plath’s speaker, mentioned in the previous stanza, is reinforced here as men are “insurgent” and weather is “mutinous”. Plath’s “Spinster” is matriarchal, inverting the common narrative of royalty that men are kingly, to be respected as leaders and authority figures. The language of royalty, which is used again and again in Plath’s work, is also relevant in how it harkens back to the cultural expectations of women – to raise men of high education and social graces, echoes of past eras that insisted women bear sons fit to take the throne. In this stanza, Plath’s spinster finally falls into her titular role as she imprisons herself within her home, finding a false sense of

empowerment; though she may be safe from “mutinous weather” and “insurgent” men, she has essentially imprisoned herself. Here lies Plath’s commentary on womanhood in her time period. In her estimation, a woman’s options were to either conform and marry (and be shackled within the domestic sphere) or to pursue the single life (wherein you are shackled within yourself and neglected by a disapproving culture). Though “Spinster” is a work that speaks directly to this duality, critics lost in biography miss the point. One such critic, N.B. Masel, writes that the woman within the poem is “insecure, unstable...a victim of a deep-rooted personal inadequacy” and that this in some way “reveals the disturbed self of Sylvia Plath” (Masel 43-44). This fascination with Plath’s temperament and mental illness is so consuming that it clouds the intention of her work, which serves as a deft cultural criticism.

Contemporary reviews of *Colossus* seemed preoccupied with Plath’s refusal to choose a theme, style, or even a particular voice. The text houses varied works with no real cohesion, Plath still trying to balance her level of education with her desire to make each poem accessible. It was experimentation with different tones and voices – but reviews from critics, nearly entirely male, saw it as sophomoric, lacking in some way. These remarks are biased in tone and word choice and verge on condescending with qualifying remarks regarding Plath’s gender. One such review came from Al Alveraz in a December 1960 issue of *The Observer*: “She is not of course, unwaveringly good. At times her feeling weakens, the language goes off on its own and she lands in blaring rhetoric. At other times, she hovers close to the whimsy of fairy stories,” being sure to differentiate Plath as a “poet” rather than a “poetess” marked by “deliciousness, gentility, supersensitivity” (Alveraz). The careful attention Alveraz takes to remove Plath from her female peers, to masculinize her, is negated by his over-qualification. His assertion that Plath was not matured as a writer and that she “had not developed a consistent voice” neglects to acknowledge that this lack of cohesion was Plath’s intention (Wagner-Martin 180). As an individual who frequently combatted binaries and rigid singularities, Sylvia Plath

did not value a uniform style – her work in *Colossus* varies in tone and topic, from nature-reads on sows to incisive takes like “Spinster”. It was only in Plath’s poetry that she was finally free to escape that which confined her and allowed her to critique the culture she was immersed in.

### “Two Sisters of Persephone”

Another of Plath’s poems that acutely deconstructs the postwar era’s subjugation of women is “Two Sisters of Persephone”. Though not included in *Colossus*, “Persephone” was featured in an issue of *Poetry* and was later culled for a collection posthumously. Like “Spinster,” this work operates largely on the dichotomy between women who followed the route of matrimony and motherhood and those who attempted (futilely) to escape. It opens:

Two girls there are: within the house  
 One sits; the other, without.  
 Daylong a duet of shade and light  
 Plays between these.  
 (Plath, “Two Sisters of Persephone” 1-4)

Despite the title of the poem, this first stanza suggests that it is not two sisters but one singular woman that Plath writes of, struggling with two conflicting identities. As there are “two girls” within one “house,” the figure of the poem acts as a sort of split-psyche that flits between the options presented to American women. As she “plays between these” notions, an important thread is established between this work, “Spinster,” and throughout Plath’s canon – that is, the desire to be everything, to avoid all binaries, to escape the confines of femininity and exist in total liberation.

In her dark wainscoted room  
 The first works problems on  
 A mathematical machine.  
 Dry ticks mark time  
  
 As she calculates each sum.  
 At this barren enterprise  
 Rat-shrewd go her squint eyes,  
 Root-pale her meager frame.

(Plath, "Two Sisters of Persephone" 5-12)

The first identity Plath uncovers is a single woman who, unlike the embittered and frightening woman of "Spinster", finds herself unmarried and undomesticated due to her interests. The figure is calculating, focused on a "mathematical machine" in lieu of a partner or romantic prospect. She is the model of academia that those who challenged women's colleges scorned – she is undesirable and unfeminine. Plath's description of this woman as "rat-shrewd," "root-pale," and "meager" do not necessarily mean that she is literally physically unattractive. Rather, these ugly descriptors are ascribed, Plath's cultural commentary coming into play as she incorporates society's perception of such a resistor. The language of "dry"-ness and the woman's "barren-enterprise" underscore her failure as a woman, her choice to pursue scholarly work being a hindrance to both finding a mate and bearing children.

Bronzed as earth, the second lies,  
Hearing ticks blown gold  
Like pollen on bright air. Lulled  
Near a bed of poppies,

She sees how their red silk flare  
Of petaled blood  
Burns open to the sun's blade.  
On that green altar  
(Plath, "Two Sisters of Persephone" 13-20)

Whereas the mathematically-focused sister (or persona/interest, if we are to follow the singular subject proposition) is "pale," her environment cold, dead, empty, and childless, the second sister is "bronzed as earth". She is representative of the ideal postwar woman, a natural, fertile, beautiful creature ripe for masculine consumption. The woman is at once deified and sexualized: the "red silk flare" of the poppies extends an allusion to deflowering, the loss of virginity marked by "petaled blood," being pried open by the sun's phallic "blade". The "altar" of grass keeps the sexual imagery reined in and culturally condoned, an indication that this is marital consummation. At the

same time, this calls to mind the language of ritual sacrifices, as if the second sister is a offering for American convention.

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-husbanded, yet no woman;  
(Plath, "Two Sisters of Persephone" 21-28)

Like the flowers, the second sister is now torn up. This provides Plath's incisive critique of her era's insistence that motherhood was something pleasant, ideal, natural, and imperative; the second sister is not aglow in maternal bliss but suffering and exhausted. When she becomes pregnant and gives birth, the woman seems to lose her otherworldly etherealness and turn "bitter" and "sallow". Her bearing of a "king" and consequential discontent is akin to how many housewives of the fifties felt; they were expected to raise kings, children bound for academic and social greatness, while sacrificing these opportunities in their own lives. (Note the difference in "Persephone" as opposed to "Spinster": once married, Plath's poems assert, the freedom to be "queenly", in control, is sacrificed for the pursuit of a "king".) The first sister, meanwhile, remains entirely pure, a "wry virgin to the last". Here, Plath again highlights the paradoxical role of American women, to be simultaneously virtuous and an object of sexual desire. Nevertheless, without a man's touch, she "goes graveyard with flesh laid waste," her body now only penetrated by the beings that prey on her corpse. The verbiage of "worm-husbanded" in particular delivers a morbidly intimate blow, as if the woman's sexual form was squandered all her all life only to be entered and explored by scavengers.

Inscribed above her head, these lines:  
While flowering, ladies, scant love not

Lest all your fruit  
 Be but this black outcrop of stones.  
 (Plath, "Two Sisters of Persephone" 29-32)

With the concluding stanza of her poem, Plath delivers a final blow that underscores her criticism of postwar culture. These concluding lines offer a damning notice to women; as with the fate of the two sisters, no matter what a woman of the era does (whether she remains a virginal spinster focused on a trade or follows the norm and embraces domesticity), she is damned. The tomb inscription of the first sister reflects her regret; she did not fulfill what she felt was her feminine duty and let her "fruit" go to waste, avoiding impurity but also missing out on fulfilling her duty as a woman. Meanwhile, as explored in the previous two stanzas, the second sister has all of the fulfillment and joy drained out of her as she is harvested for marriage and child-rearing. Plath's assessment of postwar womanhood as being either a death-sentence or a series of regrets is apparent here, a contribution to her running commentary on the difficulty to find identity in rigid binaries.

In response, Plath's poetry resists binaries. The drive behind her work is a desire to pursue a plural identity, a disavowal of strict gender roles. While that which restrained women, including Plath herself, was both culturally imposed and self-perpetuated, she postures that these conventional notions of femininity and masculinity are incredibly damaging to women. The notion that women must choose between a life of sterile work and academia or a life of being bound to the house as a wife and mother ruled the fifties. Al Alveraz, the same critic who covered 1960's *The Colossus* in *The Observer*, remarked that upon meeting Plath, he viewed her as a wife and mother, her identity as a writer scrubbed away. Of the encounter, he states that upon learning of his lapse, he called her poems "lovely" because "What else do you say to a bright young housewife?" (Wagner-Martin 176). Chauvinistic comments like these were far from uncommon. Men of the fifties, particularly male writers, were afforded with privacy, space, and time to write. Their critics took them seriously. For Plath and other female poets of the fifties and sixties, it often felt like a battle between motherhood

and artistic freedom, female confinement and total liberation; this is exactly the type of binary that Plath's poetry resists and rejects. The microcosm of the arts community mirrored American life in this way and it is a critical tension that Plath explores in her work. The women of her poems oscillate between whether or not they will succumb to the model of marriage and motherhood deemed most acceptable. Much like American women coping with the realities of the "problem that has no name," these poems reflect internalized debates – would starting a family or settling down quell the feeling of stagnation and subordination or simply exacerbate it?

Plath's nuanced rhetoric and marked skill was something male reviews harped on – Bernard Bergonzi of the *Manchester Guardian* wrote that Plath differentiated herself from female contemporaries as she defied the "rule" that "the work of women poets is marked by intensity of feeling and fineness of perception rather than by outstanding technical accomplishment (Bergonzi). This review, sexist and reductive, discredits female poets, underestimates Plath as a writer, and completely ignores the intimate, attached intensity of feeling that is the undercurrent of every work. Despite Bergonzi and other critics attempting to detach Plath from her gender, womanhood is essential to her poetry, the misogyny she faced her fodder. Plath was keenly aware of the sharper lens of critique that would be applied to her work due to her gender, yet reviews like this no doubt reinforced the perceived dichotomy between artistry and womanhood. "Two Sister of Persephone" is an especially effective response to these sexist reactions to her simultaneous finely-honed skillset and her identity as a midcentury American woman; Plath's use of two female figures, the blurring and repetition of "she," the two identities simultaneously held in tension and made indistinguishable, allows the poem to generate a universal female subject. Certainly, the poem serves as an example of cultural criticism as it takes one woman and segments her into a model of idyllic womanhood and a model of pure individualism, putting these two halves in tension – the very same tension that Plath and thousands of other housewives faced, the internalized longing for an escape from such either-or

mentalities. The ultimate inability for either of Plath's female identities to find satisfaction or fulfillment is indicative of Friedan's "problem that has no name," the malaise and emptiness nearly palpable. It is evident then, in this reading of Plath's poetry, that her work serves as an incisive response to the world she inhabits.

### **"Elm"**

Not all of Plath's poems were straightforward with their intention; she often employed elements of nature to cultivate a rich exploration of female discontent. The speaker in her 1960 work "Elm" is a personified tree, the language largely incorporating celestial and natural imagery. Nevertheless, the undercurrent of feminine dissatisfaction and discontent is still quite evident. Contrary to Bernard Bergonzi's bigoted remarks, Plath plays with "intensity of feeling" in this poem while also employing a great deal of technical finesse, challenging the notion that women are subpar poets capable only of recording the day-to-day in lieu of angry, spirited creators compelled to write revolutionary works (Bergonzi). The poem begins:

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:  
It is what you fear.  
I do not fear it: I have been there.  
(Plath, "Elm" 1-3)

Plath begins with the titular elm tree as speaker. The elm has been gendered female ("she says") and she directly addresses the main narrative figure of the poem. Note that the tree does not address the surface-level aspects of her being – the trunk, branches, and leaves – that sprout above the ground. Rather, she assures the listener that there is a darkness, a "bottom", that resides below the superficial, beyond what is visible to passerby. In incorporating this conversation, Plath hints at a commentary that women are more than mere housewives, far more than fair foliage for a man to incorporate into his life. There is a darkness to women, a collective darkness that lurks beneath the

surface, the “feminine mystique” that lies shadowy and immovable. The nature of roots, of the tree physically being grounded permanently to a given spot, also speaks to the “fear” that the elm recognizes in the listener. These lines reflect both the emptiness and dissatisfaction mid-century women hid below idyllic roles as housewives and nurturers and the desire for freedom from being tied down or restrained by gender roles.

Is it the sea you hear in me,  
 Its dissatisfactions?  
 Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?  
 (Plath, “Elm” 4-6)

The tree goes on to mention the audible “sea” that the listener may hear inside of her. The mention of the sea being within oneself mirrors the poetic notion of women being tidal creatures, their fertility cycles linked to the ebb and flow of tides. This language not only reinforces the tree’s gender but introduces the topic of childrearing and sexuality. The sea is also representative of freedom, an untethered and boundless force, but in the case of the elm, the sea is locked inside, signaling a “dissatisfying” containment of a desire that is unattainable. This sensation is akin to the feeling women in the fifties had when they were forced to swallow their desires and passions and instead serve as some symbol of static stability. The “voice of nothing” and “madness” mentioned is a nod to “housewives’ syndrome” and the growing mental decay of American women; the tree rhetorically asks the listener if what she hears is the elm’s locked-away dissatisfactions or her own.

Love is a shadow.  
 How you lie and cry after it  
 Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,  
 Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,  
 Echoing, echoing.  
 (Plath, “Elm” 7-12)

It seems the elm tree is speaking to a young woman, still coming to terms with her identity in postwar culture while considering the longevity of youthful optimism. The elm, however, quickly

dashes any thoughts of romance or fulfilling heterosexuality. She asserts that, for love itself, there are only two socially acceptable methods for a woman to find such a connection: “cry,” to be the hyperemotional, weepy figure of femininity, or to “lie,” to be sexually submissive and allow a man to take her. Nevertheless, a part of her asserts that she will remain true to her desires and “gallop thus, impetuously”. There is a tension here that suggests a frustration with confinement and that when hidden, such as in the cover of “night,” there is a desperate desire for the rash and impulsive. The chase will be a fruitless one, however, and all women will nevertheless arrive at their deathbeds (“head is a stone, pillow is a little turf”) before they find satisfaction.

Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?  
 This is rain now, this big hush.  
 And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic.

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.  
 Scorched to the root  
 My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.  
 A wind of such violence  
 Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.  
 (Plath, “Elm” 13-21)

The fire line of the fifth stanza raises a question (“Shall I bring you the sound of poisons?”), which serves as some articulation of desire. This is key as desire is something that women of the postwar era as meant to be avoid— they are meant to be satisfied, content, to ask for nothing. This line is particularly bleak as it mentions something toxic as a desire, death perhaps the only form of relief from such rigid standards. As the poem progresses, the tone feels more wrenching and desperate; this tone is crafted by the sudden shift of the weather, nature turning violent. Now, the elm warns the listener of the dangers that may belie her in her femininity. As Plath manipulated springtime in “Spinster,” so she manipulates the rain, usually a symbol of life and purity, turned toxic. A “big hush,” the downpour brings not beautiful life but wretched “tin-white” offspring that are incredibly deadly. As with women facing postpartum depressive and psychotic episodes, the

earth laments her botanic children, which are described as corruptive and poisonous. The tree goes out to express what she has suffered – the “atrocious” of sunsets, something beautiful likened to a destructive fire, a wind of “violence” that shatters her limbs. Plath’s incorporation of violence and death dismantles norms of gentle womanhood and shatters the inadequate binary models of femininity (poet v. woman, mother v. artist, virgin v. whore) that the postwar era presented. Though the domestic model of the postwar era promised a bright future, “Elm” promises that rooting women to one spot will bring only poison, fire, and violent winds. Additionally, this is another skillful cultural critique by Plath as she comments that that which is often described as natural or proper (such as the domestic model) holds dangerous implications for those living within their confines. Suffering, the tree “must shriek,” the “must” indicating this is not an active choice but an act of self-preservation. The elm becomes brash and restless, demanding her voice be heard. The “bystanding” that will no longer be tolerated is evidence of a society that seemed largely unconcerned with the woes or wants of women. In response, the tree shrieks in despair, longing for her anguish to be acknowledged and refusing to be silenced.

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.  
How your bad dreams possess and endow me.  
(Plath, “Elm” 22-27)

The reference to the moon is also feminized (“she would drag”). Foremost, the moon reflects a gravitational force, natural and beyond external control. This reflects what Plath first incorporated with lines regarding the tides, reflecting the cyclical nature of menstruation and fertility. The notion that the moon is “dragging” the female figure of the poem suggests that the demands of twentieth-century womanhood are relentless and that the women are not consenting to the roles they are being forced into. In Plath’s writing, the female form often seems a prison and this is no

different – women are chained and dragged to notions of motherhood based solely on biological realities. Yet the language of the moon being “barren” is jarring. It echoes the linkage between womanhood and motherhood, the inability to conceive a feminine failure. It also generates a tension that personifies the moon as “merciless,” a scornfulness that is perhaps brought on by her envy of the fertile elm. The start of the ninth stanza adds a frantic cadence with the repetition of “I let her go. I let her go”. The language of “diminished and flat...radical surgery” is a masterful turn of phrase that holds two significant meanings. One, the tree finds herself “diminished and flat” in terms of temperament after seeking “radical surgery” (i.e.; a lobotomy) in order to quell her anxieties and desires. Secondly, the language used is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the female body, “radical surgery” referring to a mastectomy, the “diminished and flat” verbiage quite literal.

I am inhabited by a cry.  
 Nightly it flaps out  
 Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing  
 That sleeps in me;  
 All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.  
 (Plath, “Elm” 28-33)

It is within these few lines that Plath tackles feminine ennui directly. By the default of her womanhood, she is intertwined, “inhabited” by a cry, a wail that begs for something more, a desperation that she cannot come to terms with. (The language of “inhabited” is also a play on the notion of pregnancy, as though the tree is barren, she still carries tears of longing within her). The elm is looking to fill a void or vacancy, left by a lack of mobility and autonomy, with “something to love.” The darkness within her is dormant and heavy, a lingering, all-consuming despondency for which there is no known cure or resolution – the problem that has no name. In the face of stagnation and the absence of an alternative, the speaker has become accustomed to the malignant creature’s presence but is unable to assuage the agitations that come along with “its soft, feathery

turnings”. This softness, often equated with antiquated ideals of femininity, feels suffocating and violent for the speaker.

Clouds pass and disperse.  
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?  
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

I am incapable of more knowledge.  
What is this, this face  
So murderous in its strangle of branches?—

Its snaky acids hiss.  
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults  
That kill, that kill, that kill.  
(Plath, “Elm” 33-42)

The elm recognizes that there is something missing in her life but searches for what it possibly could be, finally deeming them “irretrievables”. This sensation mimics that of postwar women who were unable to discern what exactly they were longing for, especially when they had everything – a husband, a house, children – that was culturally mandated. The elm, women, and Plath herself were all “incapable of more knowledge” in that this feeling, the “problem that had no name,” was not something that had readily accessible language to describe and was not a topic that yielded research or understanding. As the poem concludes, the speaker comes to terms with that which “petrifies the will,” the poisonous American culture slowly rendering her completely unchangeable, stripping her of her autonomy. It is this concept of the will being petrified, of freedom of choice being stripped away, that Plath equates with death.

“Elm” is a work that feels contained, the titular tree a rooted symbol who cannot find escape or salvation due to the life she is condemned to. Anne Sexton, a workshop classmate and confessional contemporary of Plath’s time, commented that Plath’s work sometimes was “all in a cage (and not even her own cage at that). I felt she hadn’t found a voice of her own, wasn’t, in truth, free to be herself” (Sexton 177). Sexton’s comments differ from those of male reviewers as they acknowledge that some of the confinement or over-exertion exemplified in Plath’s work was not an

indication of shortcomings as a poet, but of internalized insecurities and patriarchal expectations. That being said, the caginess of Plath's work often feels intentional, as if part of her praxis involves a closed-off sense of inescapability. Her inability to "find a voice" too was purposeful, with each different style and subject exploring ideas and identities that were inaccessible to American women. Within her poetry, Plath was trying desperately to define and unearth "the problem that has no name". In "Elm," her subject represents American women as a whole, an immovable, rooted force that is discontented and disdainful of its surroundings. Despite some critics attempting to link "Elm" with Plath's own psychiatric diagnosis, every sense of longing, malaise, and frustration evident in this work was also apparent in postwar households.

### **"Ariel"**

Written in 1962, "Ariel" is one of Plath's best-known works. On the surface, the poem is quite literally about the feeling of riding a horse. As most biographical critics would note, Plath had a horse named Ariel while living on her family estate in the later years of her life (Wagner-Martin 220). The poem is far more than an equestrian recollection, however. The speaker of "Ariel" is the vision of a liberated woman, an idealistic fever dream of pure liberation.

Stasis in darkness.  
Then the substanceless blue  
Pour of tor and distances.

God's lioness,  
How one we grow,  
Pivot of heels and knees!--The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to  
The brown arc  
Of the neck I cannot catch  
(Plath, "Ariel" 1-9)

The poem opens with a stillness, a “stasis”, a disquieting lack of action that troubles the speaker of the poem. There is a sense of shallowness as well, a “substanceless blue” sky that feels dull and empty. The speaker sits atop her horse and suddenly kicks off, the surroundings a “pour of tor and distances” as everything begins to meld together with her increasing speed; the language generates a malleability, as if the land has become fluid. This fast-paced movement frees her in some way, the bestial motions of her horse inspiring her own escape. Referring to the horse as “God’s lioness,” Plath crafts a kinship between the female horse and the female speaker, as if the speaker envies the horse’s freedom from cultural convention. “God’s lioness” is also a reference to the translation of the Hebrew “Ariel,” – God’s lion – which is used as a symbolic name for Jerusalem and a moniker for sacrificial alters (Frymer). This religious reference is both obvious (towards the name of the horse) and more nuanced. Plath’s use of feminized religious language crafts an aura of divinity, that the speaker of the poem is beyond earthly censure or restrictions. The enjambment Plath employs in her stanzas crafts a cadence that mimics the rollicking gallop of a speeding horse, giving the poem an accelerated feel. The speaker states that though she is a “sister” to the creature, she “cannot catch” up to its pace. There is a sense of longing created in these words, signifying that the speaker wants the same kind of freedom and swiftness that her horse maintains.

Nigger-eye  
Berries cast dark  
Hooks----

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,  
Shadows.  
Something else

Hauls me through air----  
Thighs, hair;  
Flakes from my heels.  
(Plath, “Ariel” 10-18)

It is first necessary to address Plath’s use of a racial slur, which will henceforth not be reiterated in this text. Her use of “eye” is a play on words, at once describing the shape and structure

of blackberries and a reflexive personal pronoun “I”. Throughout her body of work, Plath often falls into patterns of racism, anti-Semitism (as will be explored in the later analysis of “Daddy”), and classism. In order to attempt to express her discontent and feelings of subjugation, Plath compares herself to historically oppressed groups. This approach is deeply flawed and shows the poet’s own biases and bigotry. Plath was so focused on gender and her own lived experience as a white middle-class woman that she felt free to use such derogatory language. This serves as a signpost of Plath’s time, however; even the feminist movements that Plath’s work anticipates were far from intersectional. In considering the personal as political and the combination of both as poetic, Plath’s blind-spot is offensive and inexcusable but the work still serves as her own analysis of the feminine mystique (even as it serves only the struggles of her own demographic).

Moving on, though the speaker initially describes the union of herself and her horse as “God’s lioness,” it is evident that her feeling of invincibility is only temporary. The “dark hooks” of blackberries snag the speaker, pulling her out of her reverie. Following several stanzas marked by a swift launch into fluidity, the rapid and unstoppable rhythm of a horse, the poem is cut swiftly by “hooks”. This can be connected to the “hooks” of social convention, of family life, of past traumas, holding a woman back from liberation. The “shadows” and “blood” that plague Plath’s ride feel like ghostly figures, images that stop her in her tracks similar to the “hooks”. Momentarily, the poem stops with definitive punctuation after “shadows,” as if to call to mind the woman’s sense of liberation again being halted. When she remembers that which awaits her once she dismounts her horse, the routines of drab daily domestic life, she doubles down and throws herself into her ride. Now, the horse begins to speed up. There is a sexual, sensual energy to Plath’s descriptors of “thighs, hair,” her speaker’s heels upturned. Symbolically, even the mere the act of riding a horse is something rhythmically sexual. The “flakes” that fall away may be the restraints of conformity crumbling and decaying, leaving only pure feminine power behind.

White  
 Godiva, I unpeel---  
 Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I  
 Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.  
 The child's cry

Melts in the wall.  
 (Plath, "Ariel" 19-25)

Plath's mention of "White Godiva," an allusion to Lady Godiva of Mercia, is an extremely incisive critical move. Godiva was the wife of the Earl of Mercia who became a legendary figure when, exasperated at her husband's ever-increasing taxes, protested by stripping nude and riding a horse through the marketplace ("Godiva (c. 1040–1080)"). She became a cultural symbol of sensuality, power, and resistance. It was also rumored that the men who dared look upon Godiva during her act of rebellion were either blinded or struck dead. Plath's use of such a symbol of defiant female sexuality underscores a feminist reading of her work. As she continues, the speaker "unpeels," an act of disrobing from affronts and "dead stringencies," casting all rules aside. Finally free, the woman in the poem no longer feels the responsibilities or burdensome pressures of her daily existence. Her "child's cry melts in the wall," unheard and unimportant. Without these sonic reminders of motherly chores, the woman is liberated.

And I  
 Am the arrow,  
  
 The dew that flies,  
 Suicidal, at one with the drive  
 Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.  
 (Plath, "Ariel" 26-31)

After abandoning her role as a mere housewife, the woman becomes "the arrow, the dew that flies". The arrow stands in sharp contrast to that which acts as a symbol of motherhood and femininity. It is a phallic symbol, masculine and full of power, speed, violence, and flight. This is not

the sole time Plath used the symbol of an arrow to discuss notions of masculinity and femininity. In her only full-length prose work, *The Bell Jar*, Plath discusses the notion that a “man is an arrow into the future, and...a woman is the place the arrow shoots off from” (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 72). Her protagonist Esther Greenwood, a model for the “problem that has no name,” responds to this consideration: “That’s one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket” (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 83). In Plath’s work, the arrow is consistently used as a stand-in for the power and assertive decisiveness of masculinity. In the tenth stanza of “Ariel,” the speaker embraces this, refusing to adhere to the roles that have been imposed on her, even if it is merely for a brief ride. Though biographical critics may assert that the verbiage of “suicidal” is ominous or telling considering the poem was penned only a year before Plath took her own life, this is an erroneous and limiting reading of the text. “Suicidal” modifies “dew that flies,” only moments before Plath talks of the rising of the “red” sun. As the speaker’s ride began just before dawn, this language implies that with the rising of the sun and the coming of the day’s daily chores, her moments of gleeful liberation will soon be cut short. Indeed, Plath ends her poem on a domestic note, the “cauldron of morning” bringing to mind the preparation of food.

Though the woman of “Ariel” appears entirely different from the “Spinster,” the “Sisters,” or the “Elm,” she is an indication of what possibilities lie just beyond the grasp of the domestic. In the natural world, without any other human to impose ideas, regulations, or restrictions on her, the woman thrives, free from that which restrains her. Critic Susan R. Van Dyne writes that the woman is a “daring exhibitionist,” elaborating:

Self-engendered and self-delighting, these heroines appropriate male potency as their own.

They frequently trespass on male prerogatives; they are violent in their self-assertion and

unrestricted in their liberty. By contrast, the male figures who appear in these poems are mute, shrunken, disfigured, immobilized or dead. (Van Dyne 101).

Certainly, if there is a male figure in “Ariel,” Plath deems him so unimportant that he is never heard from. In “Elm,” masculine forces are a danger to the natural world, entirely gendered female. In “Sisters,” men are something that bring angst and dissatisfaction to a woman’s life; the suitor of “Spinster” seems intent only on causing disarray and chaos. By contrast, Plath’s women are not only sympathetic but dynamic. They struggle and they suffer but as “Ariel” demonstrates, they also thrive and embrace roles of power. Though the dead-end life of domesticity still beckons the speaker back at the conclusion of the poem, for ten stanzas she is freed from the shackles of patriarchy. As Van Dyne suggests, she is acting not as a model of postwar femininity but of masculinity, seeking what she desires unabashedly and without censure. The absence of a male figure to put her in her place allows the speaker of the poem to feel whole, liberated. This choice by Plath is deliberate, a reminder of her intentions as a poet of discontent.

## **“Daddy”**

Van Dyne neglected to recognize that men in the work of Plath could also be incredibly cruel and policing. Such is the case in her prolific 1962 work “Daddy,” a poem essentially synonymous with Plath’s career. The work is hotly discussed amongst critics, most of whom assert that this work is either a reflection on growing up under the thumb of Otto Plath or an assessment of Plath’s tumultuous marriage to fellow poet Ted Hughes. In 1976, author Edward Butscher discussed this tension in his new release, the first full length biography of Sylvia Plath, published less than a decade after her death by suicide. His biography was poorly researched and largely based on conjecture and antiquated analyses. As a result, Butscher dismissed “Daddy” as a “Freudian exercise” (Butscher). His analysis of the work as an expression of Plath’s Electra complex is at once

reductive and misogynistic. This kind of critique does a disservice to Plath's work and acts as a masculine write-off of feminine discontent. Yet "Daddy" is not, as Butscher asserts, a work indicative of Plath's psychosexual father-daughter longings, but a piece that speaks most viscerally of the relationship between American men and women.

As with "Ariel," it is important to address the language and imagery that Plath incorporates in "Daddy". She employs references to concentration camps, the genocide of Jewish communities during the Holocaust, and Nazi symbolism such as swastikas. These allusions are horribly anti-Semitic and blatantly offensive. They are deeply problematic and nowhere in the body of this text will these claims or references be defended. Plath's attempts throughout "Daddy" to liken the subjugation of women to the systematic extermination of Jewish families during the second World War is both a historical signpost and a reminder of the poet's privilege. With the benefit of hindsight, it is abundantly clear that this kind of language is reprehensible. For Plath, however, a poet writing works that reflected only on her own plight – that is, the damaging implications of the 1950s American domestic model on (primarily white, suburban, middle-class) women – these choices were less malicious and moreso ignorant. In reading the following passages with the betterment of modernity, these objectionable choices will be read for their commentary on women without indulging that which is bigoted.

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.  
 (Plath, "Daddy" 1-5)

The work begins with a play between themes of patriarchy and petulance, the latter of which Plath often equated with femininity, internalized misogyny linking childish demands and desires to something inherently feminine and inherently undesirable. The first stanza opens with a series of commands ("You do not do, you do not do") which sound like a repetitive chiding from an unseen

patriarchal figure. This cultivates a sing-song kind of cadence that feels mockingly regressive. Plath is clearly attempting to thumb her nose at the culture she resides in, one that constantly insists she behave, fall in line. The “black shoe” Plath mentions is a looming phallic figure, one that she is forced to reside in in less-than-ideal conditions. This speaks to the reality of postwar women living in the fifties, living under the foot of man, being cautious not to make a scene. The fear Plath’s speaker articulates, in which she barely dares to “breathe or Achoo” is informed by a fear of maligning social convention, Plath echoing the sentiments of a woman who, to borrow a chauvinistic turn of phrase, knows her place.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.  
 You died before I had time--  
 Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,  
 Ghastly statue with one gray toe  
 Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic  
 Where it pours bean green over blue  
 In the waters off beautiful Nauset.  
 I used to pray to recover you.  
 Ach, du.  
 (Plath, “Daddy” 6-15)

While the next line, “Daddy, I have had to kill you. You died before I had time,” may appear entirely biographical (Plath’s terse, stern father died when she was an adolescent), there is another layer to this expression that feels universal. The voice in Plath’s poem knows that undercutting (or “killing”) a male head of power will grant her some sort of peace, liberty, or comfort; but even that agency is taken from her, as the man dies without her influence. Plath writes that the masculine symbol in this poem is “marble-heavy, a bag full of God,” insinuating that men are cold, distant, and altogether too powerful, wielding their gender as if it made them deities. The talk of a “Ghastly statue” whose head resides in the “freakish Atlantic” also calls to mind a poem in Plath’s earlier collection – “The Colossus”. Plath constantly uses the symbols of stones and rocks throughout her work. These references cultivate a sense of stoicism and rigidity, cold symbols reflecting what felt

like an unchangeable era. Additionally, this harkening back to her original work, which was about admiring and tending to a crumbling statue of a man, shows progression in Plath's critical poetry; that is, the tone shifts from a tender woman, broken and resolved to continue her day-in-day out caretaking, to that of a vengeful, frustrated figure who carries disdain for the statue and all he represents.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town  
 Scraped flat by the roller  
 Of wars, wars, wars.  
 But the name of the town is common.  
 My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.  
 So I never could tell where you  
 Put your foot, your root.  
 I never could talk to you.  
 The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.  
 Ich, ich, ich, ich.  
 I could hardly speak.  
 I thought every German was you.  
 And the language obscene,

An engine, an engine  
 Chuffing me off like a Jew,  
 A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.  
 I began to talk like a Jew.  
 I think I may well be a Jew.  
 (Plath, "Daddy" 16-35)

From here, the poem takes a more abstracted turn, comparing the reign of patriarchy to the rise of fascism and the brutality of war. Plath's visceral imagery of a tongue "stuck in a barb wire snare" (a clear, and brutally offensive, reference to a concentration camp) is the sort of shocking, raw-nerve comparison Plath used to break boundaries and demand her reader's attention. As stated previously in this analysis, Plath's language here is a historical signpost that underscores her own biases and privileges; she was a white woman writing in reaction to the suffering of white women, so focused on gender that issues of religion, race, and historical sensitivities fell to the wayside. While it

is difficult, disturbing, and, with the benefit of modernity, enormously derogatory, this rhetoric is important. By representing the titular masculine figure of the poem as a Nazi – a cold, cruel, bigoted, heartless, calculating fascist – Plath is able to convey the level of power and violence that a male-dominated culture yields.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna,  
 Are not very pure or true.  
 With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck  
 And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack  
 I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of you.  
 With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.  
 And your neat mustache  
 And your Aryan eye, bright blue.  
 Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You--

Not God but a swastika  
 So black no sky could squeak through.  
 Every woman adores a Fascist,  
 The boot in the face, the brute  
 Brute heart of a brute like you.  
 (Plath, “Daddy” 36-50)

The speaker’s assertion that she is a “bit of a Jew” with “gipsy ancestress” resonates as if she is attempting to find a tangible reason why man is to be feared; likening mid-century America to the holocaust feels rational to her in this respect. There is a tangible anxiety in these lines, the fear of the male figure coming across in each line – the woman feels hunted and threatened by men. Just as Plath spoke of man as something “marble-heavy” in previous stanzas, he is now described as “Panzer-man,” a figure that is at once unable to connect and completely indestructible. This is also an additional to Plath’s thematic structure: “Panzer” is the German word for “armor,” a name later given to the armored tanks used by Nazis in World War II (“Panzer”). Thus, though the speaker previously spoke of his demise, it is clear that the “Daddy” of this poem represents more than a singular man; he is representative of the patriarchal social system as a whole, something that can be quelled but never completely destroyed. This overwhelming, overarching influence falls like a

“swastika so black no sky could squeak through,” any feeling of hope or thought of liberation seemingly dashed. Nevertheless, the speaker maintains her acerbic wit and, in the end of the tenth stanza, cements her message that masculine-dominated social structures are a universal detriment with a final blow. “Every woman adores a Fascist” is a line fueled by sarcastic rage. The notion of men as domestic “fascists” that women are meant to fawn over, “adore” was one that dominated postwar cultural conversation. Women were meant to be quaint, subservient, controlled – men were meant to make the rules and enforce them. Here, in her mocking singsong, Plath rejects that notion, using violence (“boot in the face”) to reinforce the culturally enforced submission of women. The repetition of the “B” sounds in “boot” and “brute” sound like furious stomping or contemptuous spitting. It is evident that Plath’s speaker, a stand-in for women of the postwar era, is frustrated and ready for resistance by any means necessary; thusly, these lines are a clear indicator of the budding sexual revolution.

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, 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 Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.  
 And I said I do, I do.  
 (Plath, “Daddy” 51-67)

Plath continues to flesh out the image of this overarching masculine figure by continuously describing him in shades of darkness: he stands at the “blackboard,” he is “the black man,” “a man in black,” something void and sinister. She underscores this by describing him as a devil-like figure who preyed on the innocent, attractive “pretty red heart” of the speaker. This has a dual meaning, as it can point towards the loss of zeal and enthusiasm for life that many women in the postwar era succumbed to or a sexual conquest, perhaps the loss of virginity or innocence. The speaker initially “tried to die” in retaliation of the wrongs that the man has done, but in realizing “what to do,” she elects to live on in spite and to be his most vocal opponent. The poem hints at the violence and inequity apparent in the American domestic sphere as well. At the opening of the fourteenth stanza, Plath’s speaker agrees to marry a dominant, restrictive husband with a “love of the rack and the screw”. This reference reinforces the language of torture and domination, the “rack and screw” an antiquated punishment device that pulled a victim’s limbs in opposite directions until they were left immobile. Plath’s choice of the rack and screw in particular is telling, as it speaks to the stubbornness of the era and how it rendered women unable to resist their bounds. As with Plath’s other poems, this leads to a fairly pessimistic conclusion about the nature of escape from culture’s constrictions. The cycle seems to be self-perpetuating and inescapable, the subjugation of women tainting every aspect of American life.

So daddy, I'm finally through.  
The black telephone's off at the root,  
The voices just can't worm through.

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.

There's a 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.  
 (Plath, "Daddy" 68-80)

In the concluding stanzas of the poem, however, Plath differentiates "Daddy" from her other works by doubling the stakes. While the speaker of the poem has indeed married yet another embodiment of misogyny, she is not afraid to "kill" him as she did her father. Furious, unhinged, and ready to entirely let go of patriarchal overtures, the speaker likens the male figure to a "vampire". This speaks largely to the overwhelming sensation of ennui and malaise that postwar housewives felt, as if their will to live was being slowly drained. Frustrated and undone, the speaker writes that there is a "stake in your fat black heart," a violent penetrative act uncharacteristically performed by a woman, a very literal, sexually-charged image of revenge. Additionally, according to lore there is only one way to kill a vampire (the aforementioned stake through the heart); this reinforces Plath's language of desperation and futility, as there are limited options for escape and resistance. Following this line, Plath gives a clear indication that this work is certainly not merely autobiography and is instead a protest piece that viciously tears at the cultural climate. In lieu of the speaker working alone, she has a team of "villagers" on her side who celebrate on the father's grave. These individuals represent other women joining the speaker, their shared victimhood and oppression bringing them together to cheer the demise of their cruelest foe.

"Daddy" can be a rather difficult poem to avoid biographizing, as Plath's father's Germanic roots and cold tendencies could easily be found within the text. However, Plath is not the only woman to incorporate the language of fascism and the holocaust into her writings on gender, culture, and sexuality. Betty Friedan too spoke to this in her analysis of progressive dehumanization. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan actually referred to the domestic sphere as "the comfortable concentration camp," elaborating that:

I am convinced there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous... In fact, there is an uncanny, uncomfortable insight into why a woman can so easily lose her sense of self as a housewife in certain psychological observations made of the behavior of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps... American housewives are not on their way to the gas chamber. But they are in a trap and to escape they must... refuse to be nameless, depersonalized, manipulated (Friedan 367, 371-372).

The use of such an analogy may be antiquated and discomfiting but for the women of Plath and Friedan's time, it rang truthfully enough to incite resistance. While the benefit of modernity has provided more nuanced conversations on sex and gender (without risking over-inflated comparisons tinged with charged language), what these comparisons show is just how evident the all-consuming feeling of confinement for American women was. Plath draws on this parallel in "Daddy" as it allows her to make a dramatic, gut-wrenching impact in an attempt to assure her readers will get the message. Both the male figure of Plath's poem and Friedan's analysis of the era serve as figureheads for a culture that routinely deprived women of success, vigor, and sexuality. Certainly, the closed-in quarters of a cul-de-sac did little to improve the feeling of being confined. Thusly, Plath reached for the ultimate historical frame of reference for internment and bigotry to convey the severity of the situation. In "Daddy," she resists the American domestic model as it served a patriarchal culture, urging for an escape from the replication of a father-daughter dynamic in the relationships of husband and wife (hence the poem's title and childlike singsong elements). It is evident this poem is not a manifesto about a poet's deceased father: it is a plea for resistance from a woman who felt too restricted to fulfill that rebellious desire herself.

## “The Applicant”

The final poem that this thesis will analyze is Plath’s “The Applicant,” which was written in 1962 and published posthumously in 1965, two years after Plath’s death. The poem is one of the most straightforward works of cultural criticism that Plath produced. A bitingly sarcastic commentary on the standards for American housewives in the fifties, “The Applicant” skewers expectations of women while acknowledging the absurdity of the domestic model. It begins:

First, are you our sort of a person?  
Do you wear  
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,  
A brace or a hook,  
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,  
(Plath, “The Applicant” 1-5)

From the very first line of the poem, Plath introduces the notion of social acceptability. The language used is one of exclusivity, giving the reader the allusion that familiar cultural mandates, like a pinched waist or a picket fence, will follow. Rather, Plath subverts this, listing a ragtag motley crew of attributes that would make one rather unfit. The speaker looks for imperfections or artificialities, like a “glass eye, false teeth, or a crutch”. Interestingly, even sexual organs are reduced to something manufactured (“rubber breasts or a rubber crotch”). This opening is outlandish, poking fun at the physical requirements of desirability in the postwar era by turning them on their head.

Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then  
How can we give you a thing?  
Stop crying.  
Open your hand.  
Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

To fill it and willing  
To bring teacups and roll away headaches  
And do whatever you tell it.  
Will you marry it?  
(Plath, “The Applicant” 6-14)

The speaker's interest in "stitches to show something's missing" has two meanings in Plath's work. One, this could perhaps allude to the biblical taking of Adam's rib to create Eve. Secondly, such verbiage may point towards the absence of a penis, "stitches" an innuendo for something inherently female. (The latter understanding of this line reads as Plath's sarcastic reaction to the theory of "penis envy," the Freudian notion that women desire male genitalia.) The poem's speaker then insists that without something missing, there is nothing they can provide, before quickly admonishing the applicant. The stern "stop crying" is Plath's commentary on both the erroneous synonymy between womanhood and the hyperemotional and a comment on toxic masculinity, which asserts that men must be tough, aggressive. In an attempt to placate the party addressed in a very maternal manner, the speaker offers something: "Here is a hand". Detached from its body, the "hand" is a simple stand-in, something incomplete and empty. More forwardly, the "hand" here represents a romantic suitor, a prospect for marriage who will provide what the applicant desires, a pretty wife to "bring teacups and roll away headaches and do whatever you tell it". The wife in question is reduced to an "it," an object with no autonomy, something to be bought and sold and kept. The language of the wife's submissiveness ("Do whatever you tell it") is at once ominous and matter-of-fact. Ultimately, it is the male applicant who will be entirely authoritative over the day-to-day life of the bride-to-be.

It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end  
 And dissolve of sorrow.  
 We make new stock from the salt.  
 I notice you are stark naked.  
 How about this suit -

Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.  
 Will you marry it?  
 It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof  
 Against fire and bombs through the roof.  
 Believe me, they'll bury you in it.  
 (Plath, "The Applicant" 15-25)

The poem now grows increasingly dark. The speaker explains that “It is guaranteed to thumb shut your eyes at the end and dissolve of sorrow”. In other terms, once the husband dies, the woman in question no longer serves a purpose. She exists for the mere company and service of her husband and in his death, she becomes a consumed widow who merely ceases (“dissolve”) to be. Plath’s reference to the dissolved material as “salt” could serve a biblical allusion to Lot’s wife and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah – despite being told not to look back at the city’s demolition, Lot’s wife glances behind her as they flee and is turned into a pillar of salt (Avi-Yonah). The motivations of Lot’s wife vary from pure curiosity to motherly concern (some readings tell of Lot’s wife looking behind to see if her daughters are safely following), but her actions are nevertheless disobedient. Plath uses this biblical reference to harken back to a historical reference of female dissonance while warning of the possibility of destruction, disintegration; as in “Persephone,” Plath asserts that women of the era are damned no matter their intentions nor matter of resistance. (This reference to a historical dissonant is similar to Plath’s reference to the resistant Lady Godiva in “Ariel”.) From the widow’s remnants, the speaker makes a new series of brides, insinuating that these women are all empty, interchangeable. As the sale goes forward, the speaker insists that the applicant (who is “stark naked”) put on a suit that is “waterproof, shatterproof, proof against fire and bombs through the roof”. This certainly speaks to Cold War Era themes, the rhetoric underscoring the anxieties of the atomic era. Beyond that, however, Plath is making a point about how the applicant donning a suit and going forward with marriage will ensure his own security and social stability. This stanza exemplifies the attitudes of domestic confinement, as the model wife is a symbol of safety and security.

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

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,  
 In fifty, gold.  
 A living doll, everywhere you look.  
 It can sew, it can cook,  
 It can talk, talk, talk.  
 (Plath, "The Applicant" 26-35)

The speaker then sardonically demeans the man, commenting that his "head...is empty". Plath's choice here is piercing, as it critiques men for upholding the masculine model. In lieu of thinking for himself, the applicant has caved to social norms, for himself (as a typical, hardline husband) and for his future bride (as a submissive housewife). Nevertheless, with a void, empty head, he is the perfect individual to impose postwar-era models of domesticity on. The speaker beckons the applicant's new acquisition from her hiding place, asking the man what he thinks of "that...naked as paper to start". That" refers to a woman, who is completely vulnerable, a sexual object ready to be demeaned. Plath then cleverly uses traditional anniversary gifts as a way to explain the value of a good wife: though she is flimsy paper now, she will learn her place and soon she will harden, she will be silver, she will be gold, all in time. The woman in question is a commodity, a beauty that will enhance his own social currency. A human doll, she will complete all the housewife's duties; "It can sew, it can cook" and it can "talk, talk, talk" though the applicant certainly will never have to listen.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.  
 You have a hole, it's a poultice.  
 You have an eye, it's an image.  
 My boy, it's your last resort.  
 Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.  
 (Plath, "The Applicant" 36-40)

The first line of the last stanza denotes many marriages of the fifties. Though happiness or satisfaction wasn't always felt, as long as "it works" well enough and fit the domestic mold, it was satisfactory. The speaker goes on to state that the bride is all the man needs to be truly happy and satisfied: if he had a "hole" (wound), she'd serve as "poultice" (a medical covering), if he had an

“eye,” she’d serve as a pleasant “image”. These are not equal meetings; in both instances, the woman exists to serve, please, or assuage the man. For the applicant, the wife gives him something beautiful to look at, something to conceal or cover an emotional gap, a hole to fill (literally and figuratively, both a vulgar reference to a vagina and to the woman’s own vacuous nature). Though the concluding line of the poem begins as an inquiry (“Will you...”), the definitive period at the end of the line marks that this union is far from a choice. Even still, each line of this stanza ends with a full-stop, forcing the cadence of the poem to slow while creating a conclusive end to each line, with no room for questioning or disobedience. This reflects Plath’s reaction to the domestic model, synonymous with American democracy, which was an imperative for adults coming of age in the fifties.

“The Applicant” is a demonstration of Plath’s satirical skill, a work that calls attention to the absurdity of the postwar era. The role of women was regressing despite previous decades’ movements and advances in terms of occupational and civil liberties. The home was somehow being used as an iron-clad failsafe against communism. The white-picket-fence and happy housewife myth was perpetuated despite atomic anxieties and female discontent being more apparent than ever. In Plath’s work, these cultural obsessions and phenomenons are held in tension with a female voice of reason. When Nicholas King wrote of Plath in a 1962 piece featured in the *New York Herald-Tribune Book Review*, he assessed that Plath wrote “with an objective language that is pure, drama-less, and often arresting,” her “objectivity...more of an attitude than a conviction” (King). But King, and other reviewers who put Plath in the same category as purely observational poets of the fifties, are incorrect in their assessment of Plath’s poetics as “objective”. As a woman writing about gender and sexuality, Plath’s work is informed by her own observations and opinions. Works like “The Applicant” force the reader to assume this point of view and feel the weight of the decade. These

works are not expressions of an “attitude” and they are not “drama-less”. They are filled with tensions and complexities that Plath employs in an attempt to cultivate a cultural conversation.

## Revolution as Salvation

It is evident that Plath’s work is both a byproduct of and a rebellion against the rigid structure of the postwar era’s domestic model. The era’s subjugation of women produced a feeling of discontent that simmered just below the surface for the entirety of the decade. This is why Friedan dubbed the malaise of the fifties “the problem that *has no name*,” as the language and expression of such troubling ennui was inaccessible or undesirable to most American women. Though it may be clouded under guise of metaphor or satiric bite, this angst, confusion, and anxiety pervades Plath’s poetry. As assessed, in poems like “Spinster,” “The Two Sisters of Persephone,” “Elm,” “Ariel,” “Daddy,” and “The Applicant,” Plath undercovers Friedan’s “problem,” stressing the language of the feminine. She subtly undercuts and derides masculine structures while producing speakers who are confined, trapped in their situations or unable to find freedom even in isolation.

This is because for Plath and the women of the postwar era, a conversation on female liberation would not come to a head until the revolutionary era of the sixties. In the 1960s, second-wave feminism developed from the seeds of resistance into a full-blown movement. In 1966, twenty-eight women (including Betty Friedan) formed the National Organization for Women, which aimed to bring “women into full participation in the mainstream of American society” asserting that “We do not accept the traditional assumption that a woman has to choose between marriage and motherhood on the one hand and serious participation in industry or the professions on the other” (Greene 114). Alongside this demand for the deconstruction of gender roles and the domestic model, second-wave feminism also called for mainstream circulation of contraception, abortion rights, job training for impoverished women, a removal of all sex-based educational boundaries, and

the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. This groundbreaking movement shattered the feminine mystique and gave women the ability to put a politicized name to the feelings that they had internalized and blamed themselves for. This rejection of social norms and cultural convention is the revolutionary step that the speakers of Plath's poetry most desired – and feared was most unattainable.

Sylvia Plath did not live to see the revolutionary women's movements that her work anticipated. Consumed by mental illness no doubt exacerbated by her feelings of being limited, restricted, passionless, and inadequate, Plath took her own life in February of 1963. While it is indeterminable what effect the liberation of the sexual revolution may have had on Plath's work or life, it is evident that her work stands as a direct pre-cursor to this cultural moment. Her praxis, at once informed by personal experiences and kept reliably generalized, generated work that was unflinching yet pleading, a poet desperately wanting to lead a rebellion but trapped by her own social conventions. In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, essayist Thomas McClanahan wrote:

At her most articulate, meditating on the nature of poetic inspiration, [Plath] is a controlled voice for cynicism, plainly delineating the boundaries of hope and reality. At her brutal best—and Plath is a brutal poet—she taps a source of power that transforms her poetic voice into a raving avenger of womanhood and innocence (“Poetry Foundation: Sylvia Plath”).

With the benefit of modernity, it is indisputable now that Plath's poems are works of cultural criticism, the poetics of discontent. Plath's “brutal” poetry was unafraid of exploring the depths of the “problem that has no name,” even if women (Plath included) were unable to express these feelings individually. They are crafted in response to the specific tensions of the postwar era and Plath's resounding desire to break free from the bounds of rigid singularities comes across in each stanza.

In her seminal classic *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf, one of Plath's literary heroes and greatest inspirations, wrote, "Who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?" (Woolf). Plath, a poet who felt constantly trapped and confined by the limitations of her gender on her art, her career, her sexuality, and, ultimately, on her life, was consumed by this heat and violence. Her visceral work is reactionary and resistant, refusing to be stifled or fall flat. It rejects biographical criticisms or assumptions, instead speaking entirely for itself. For Plath, and for her audience in the postwar era, these poems offered a critical look at the inescapability of rigid femininity with a keen sharpness that cut through the fugue of the feminine mystique.

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