1-2023

Sylvia Plath as a Confessionalist Writer : The Queen Bee

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath is a renowned Confessionalist poet from the early-mid 20th century in America. She frequently compares to her predecessor, Robert Lowell, and her friend and colleague, Ann Sexton. Confessionalism was an emotionally authentic form of poetry that split off from prior poetry, such as Modernism. Modernist founder T.S Eliot wrote in his "Tradition and The Individual Talent," "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (1). Despite this mentality, Confessionalists addressed the elephant in the room: the fragmented and emotionally disturbed nation. With the use of biographical, cathartic poetry, Confessionalism gave birth to raw emotion and brought to the forefront all taboos: sex, gender roles, patriarchy, drugs, mental health, and suicide. A collection of renowned poets, including Plath, exposed their trauma to reflect the hurt of the times. Despite the commonalities, Sylvia Plath trod a different path of articulation and imagery throughout her works. Her poems use caricatures, frequent enjambments, and the terror of emotional disturbance to bring to light the role of a "victim of introspection" (Plath 25). This essay demonstrates the uniqueness of Plath's Confessionalist style and how her status stands amongst her colleagues and mentor, Lowell.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Confessionalism, mental health, feminism

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Sylvia Plath as a Confessionalist Writer: The Queen Bee

by

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A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

December 2022

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

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Montclair, NJ

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Acknowledgements

I want to thank all my professors at Montclair State for providing me with so much insight and love for English and American literature. I want to inspire other students like you do every day. Please know that you are heard and admired. Unfortunately, my time with the English department ends here.

I want to give gratitude to my husband and my two beautiful daughters. I was pregnant twice during my entire span as a graduate student. However, with a companion like my husband, I was able to achieve what others dream of doing.

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Introduction: The Confessionalist Era

In its simplest form, Confessionalist poetry is a type of composition that uses intimate details of the poet or addresses the "I." This type of poetry was popular from the 1950s to the 1960s when renowned poets such as Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell wrote cathartic poems on death, trauma, mental health problems, and other vulnerable issues in the human psyche. This form of poetry was an outstanding development from the Modernist era that built the foundations of Confessionalist poetry. Modernist poems were intense, emotionally authentic writings of varying tones, from melancholia to euphoria, concerning issues both personal and sociopolitical. Modernist poets believed they were neutral vessels that contributed no intimate context during the writing process. This form of writing is outlined in Eliot's essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." He describes the poet's role as a vessel of expression, not a reactive agent. In essence, he uses platinum's neutral, unaffected element in a chemical reaction as a symbol of the poet when writing emotionally charged pieces of poetry. He writes:

> When the two gases [sic] previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous [sic] acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the

> more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material. (Eliot 1)

Thus, his poems on psychosis, emotional disturbance, and sexuality had no affiliation with the personal. This dissociative fashion of writing held a stronghold in literature for the first forty years of the early 20th century. Modernist poetry became known as an "elitist" writing style for academic scholars and the bourgeoisie. However, emotional tensions were rising with the political climate and turmoil between the imminent war in Europe and the declining economy. There was a need for emotional authenticity that was in touch with the suffering of the time. The trauma of the era created a change in modernist ideology, which paved the way for Confessionalist ideals.

Poets such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell crafted cathartic poems that reflected the tones of the time: depression, solipsism, introspection, and anxiety. Using their life's challenges, they built relationships with their readers, showing their fragility in different lights and intensities. Specifically, Plath brought to light many taboo subjects like the patriarchy, female subjugation, and suicide. She amplified the message of her poems using emotional authenticity. Plath used war-related imagery and created grotesques to deflect from the intimate details of her life while making the exact emotional authenticity. All of Plath's distinct methodologies in her writing exposed the impermissible. The low morale during the mid-twentieth century needed a creative output to release the tension. Confessionalist poetry opened a dialogue for cultural awareness and gender inequality.

Robert Lowell was one of the important voices of frustration for the nation during this period of instability. His style of poetry changed from formal rhyme and meter to free-verse poems. Not only did Lowell address the personal, but he voiced his opinions on politics. This

form of open expression with no boundaries gave rise to the birth of Confessionalism. His most well-known work, "Life Studies," offered a lens into his personal life and proved his mastery in poetry and prose while using casual diction. For example, Lowell's "For the Union Dead" addresses the greed and self-interest that fuels war. The poem responded to World War II's post-consumerism rise in the 1960s. Lowell's poem references Colonel Shaw and his all-black 54th Massachusetts Infantry that died in their fight for freedom in the Civil War. The poem contrasts the heroism of the soldier's sacrifices with the desensitized, modern-day Boston, Massachusetts. Lowell uses juxtapositions to describe various monumental buildings in Boston as old relics and the destruction of them for new constructions. In one stanza of the poem, he memorializes an amazing old aquarium as now a place for vandals. The poem depicts various examples of society changing, literally and metaphorically, forgetting the past. He reiterates in each stanza the insignificance of Boston's history due to today's self-indulgent society. Lowell writes, "Behind their cage,/ yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting/ as they cropped up tons of mush and grass/ to gouge their underworld garage" (Lowell 13-16). This stanza amplifies Lowell's perception of society's greed. Modern society has decided to destroy what was once important. Ironically, this new parking garage construction would be on top of Colonel Shaw's burial site, a site of sacrifice for the Union during the Civil War. This poem responds to society's desensitization and dismissiveness of the nation's sacrifices.

Lowell's poetic style meshes his artistry and sociocultural issues to promote a conversation on justice, empowerment, and empathy. This lyrical style became the foundation of his teachings at Boston University. By fate, Sylvia Plath was one of his pupils auditing the class in 1959 (Spivack 183). As a result, he passed on the power of writing as a platform for protest to address the nation's instability. Lowell taught many pupils who would grow to become renowned

poets of the time. Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton are primary examples of Lowell's influence in their writing. Both poets were vocal in their opposition to gender roles. In Plath's "Daddy," she discusses the frustration of female subjugation. Ghasemi confirms, "'Daddy' expresses Plath's anger and bitterness at the domineering male power in an exceptionally high pitch of intensity. Its shocking tone and style express the speaker's vehement denunciations of the male authority" (288). The "denunciation of the male authority" is a pinnacle attribute in both female poets' works. Plath and Sexton used the historical as a symbol for the male authoritarian. Both use Nazis as a representation of the male disciplinarian. In Plath's "Daddy," she writes, "I have always been scared of you,/ With your Luftwaffe,/ your gobbledygoo./ And your neat mustache/ And your Aryan eye, bright blue" (Plath 41-45). Sexton writes in "The Breakaway," "Your daisies have come/ on the day of my divorce:/ the courtroom a cement box,/ a gas chamber for the infectious Jew in me/ and a perhaps land, a possibly promised land/ for the Jew in me" (Sexton 1-6). Both poets present examples of female subjugation using Holocaust imagery and its historical context. Plath and Sexton stylized their poems with historical references to emphasize women's oppression.

Plath carries this anger against female oppression in many of her poems, using varying techniques to convey her message. "Daddy" is a poem that opens a dialogue on feminism depicted through the speaker's attitude toward her father. She writes, "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 80-85). This stanza depicts the menacing tone and the climactic killing of the patriarchal symbol: the speaker's father. Ghasemi writes, "The enraged speaker of 'Daddy' is distinguished by her constraint. She suffers from social confinement caused by male-dominance; thus, she is rebelling against the

silence and passivity imposed on women" (288). Ghasemi believes the speaker is breaking away from her father's totalitarian-like relationship. "Daddy" is Plath's way of conveying anti-patriarchal sentiment.

Confessionalism: Death to Modern Poetry

It is imperative to address the characteristics of a Confessionalist poet to define Plath's role in this literary era. Confessionalist poetry is a breakthrough form of writing from the rigidity of Modernism. Modernists such as T.S Eliot and Ezra Pound were prideful of their "elitist" poetry that showed off philosophical ideations. In contrast, Confessionalists made common ground with readers by making their poetry emotionally driven and accessible with casual diction. Axelrod writes, "Between Modernism and Postmodernism: The Cold War Poetics of Bishop, Lowell, and Ginsberg," "In their crisis poems, [Confessionalists] wrote of bearing the unbearable, of contemplating the injuries at the core of their being. They made anguish a precondition for psyche itself, a door to all effects, a spur to the imagination, and a central feature of lyric poetry" (10). In essence, these poets exposed their lives to reveal the raw, horrid experiences of life which became the central message in their writings. Poets like Plath and Lowell, "invented new, perhaps unrepeatable vocabularies of subjectivity that remain apart from the modernist" (Axelrod 13). Confessionalist poets used traumatic autobiographical experiences and their lyrical craftsmanship to create emotional authenticity. This was a complete contrast from Modernists that suggested the writer's absence in their works and strayed from the personal. Molesworth writes:

> [Confessionalist] poets went against the grain of this social atomizing, and yet reflected its inevitable, distorted enlargement of individual psychology. As public and social goals

> crumbled or were emptied of meaning by too much chatter or inflated rhetoric, private satisfactions grew more desirable even if less clearly defined. (163)

Confessionalists like Plath open a dialogue on the unspoken tribulations of the human psyche. However, it is imperative to address that this form of poetry, despite its liberties, does have structure. Plath tends to gravitate towards free verse due to its nature of no rhyme and meter. One example is her poem, "Ariel," she writes:

> And now I
> Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
> The child's cry
>
> Melts in the wall.
> And I
> Am the arrow,
>
> The dew that flies
> Suicidal, at one with the drive
> Into the red
>
> Eye, the cauldron of morning. (22-31)

Plath's lack of rhyme and meter in these stanzas and line breaks creates an emotional experience. The use of enjambments in her poems tells readers to make purposeful pauses to build emotional tension in her works. Poems like "Ariel" are well-constructed thoughts and poetically orchestrated to heighten the theme of power and oppression. Her Confessionalist poems have

few stylistic, line-length, or stanza limitations, as free verse often affords such writers. Certain poems of Plath are as small as twelve lines, like "Contusion," and as lengthy as 126 lines from "Berk-Plage." Whether her poems are long or short, they offer equivocal emotional intensity. Plath challenges herself as a craftsman to create pieces in all ranges of emotion and length, from melancholy, short monologues like "Contusion" to lengthy, juxtaposed elements of death and birth in "Berk-Plage." All of Plath's stylistic elements create the necessary emotional authenticity in Confessionalist's poem.

Sylvia Plath as a Confessionalist

Sylvia Plath is a profound poet during the Confessionalist era. Works like "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" are familiar to many readers due to their raw and emotionally disturbing nature and subsequent inclusion in many secondary schools' curricula. However, Plath created a distinct form of poetry that did more than discuss subjects of death and psychotic episodes. Instead, she opened a dialogue for women during the 20th century to rethink their role as subordinates to the patriarchal household. Plath uses various literary techniques to "exhibit her violent reaction to the patriarchal dispossession of the female identity…through her use of shocking language and hurting imagery, [she] investigates the issues of suppressed womanhood" (Ghasemi 286). Looking at a wide lens of her collection from 1956-1962, readers will understand the unique style of Confessionalism through her use of imagery, hyperbole, and other literary devices.

Plath's authentic voice in Confessionalist writing ventured into territories of lyrical mastership. She provided a unique perspective on death by portraying it as bliss and conveying solid emotions of anxiety/emotional turmoil through her imagery and hyperbole. Plath does this in her poem "Lady Lazarus" which discusses her multiple suicide attempts. She writes, "And I a

smiling woman./ I am only thirty./ And like the cat I have nine times to die" (Plath 19-21). Plath's decision to write a poem on suicide with a twist of regret of not having died is sadistic, yet also vulnerable. M.D. Uroff writes, "Sylvia put the speaker herself at the center of her poems in such a way as to make her psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of her civilization" (104). However, Confessionalist poets such as Lowell exhibited the same kind of intense vulnerability. The difference is that Lowell's raw form and presence in his poems make it challenging to chastise him. On the other hand, Plath opens doors for criticism due to her dramatization of characters like Miss Drake in "Miss Drakes Proceeds to Dinner." Uroff writes:

> With Plath, it is otherwise. The person in her poem calls certain people father or mother, but her characters lack the particularity of Commander and Mrs. Lowell. They are generalized figures, not real-life people, types that Plath manipulates dramatically in order to reveal their limitations. Precisely, because they are such types, the information that Plath reveals about them is necessarily prejudicial and has consequently misled some readers who react with hostility to what she has to reveal. (104)

In "Miss Drake Proceeds to Dinner," Plath's craftsmanship in dramatization is evident in her description of paranoia. She writes, "With bid-quick eyed cocked askew/ She can see in the nick of time…Until, turning sideways,/ She lifts one webbed foot after the other" (14-24). Plath describes Miss Drake as a bird on alert for any potential danger as she crosses a dining room. In "Tulips," Plath writes about a patient in a clinic tended by nurses. She writes, "The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me./ Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe/ Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby" (36-38). She uses a plethora of literary devices, such as the symbolism of colors (red and white) and imagery (the hospital room), to evoke tones of melancholy and claustrophobia. "The Arrival of the Bee Box" is a

metaphor for the speaker's control of power. Plath writes, "I lay my ear to furious Latin./ I am not a Caesar./ I have simply ordered a box of maniacs./ They can be sent back./ They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner" (21-25). The poet's dramatization of this moment when the speaker receives her recent cargo of bees creates tension and paranoia. Lastly, "Lady Lazarus" is a poem regarding prior suicide attempts. In it, Plath's speaker explains, "Dying/ Is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well" (45-47). The poem addresses her continued emotional disturbance after her unwanted resurrection. This sinister outlook on life is a common theme in many of Plath's works.

Plath's poetry is dramatic, and as Lowell's pupil, their difference is significant despite both being Confessionalist poets. An example of their difference is Plath's usage of the Holocaust as an example of gender power dynamics. Despite Plath not being of Jewish descent, she discusses her resemblance to Jews during the Holocaust in "Daddy" as a symbol of subordination. Referring to the quote in the beginning of the essay, Plath writes, "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——" (Plath 41-45). The speaker compares her father to a Nazi and details of his scary attributes: his "neat mustache" and "Aryan eye." All details that form an image of the speaker's father as an authoritarian. Despite the emotionally charged effect of Plath's poem when discussing sensitive subjects like suicide, mental illness, and the Holocaust, it is imperative to mention that they are not as personal as one thinks. Uroff writes, "To associate the poet with the speaker directly, as many critics have done, does not account for the fact that Plath employs here as before the techniques of caricature, hyperbole, and parody that serve both to distance the speaker from the poet" (111). She uses elements of the Holocaust to recreate the same emotional intensity and horror while illustrating

female oppression. Her authenticity in using vulnerable subject matters such as this allows her to create multi-layered poems that are both literal and filled with subtextual significance. This form of craftsmanship and control of literary elements allows Plath to create poems of emotional complexity beyond her predecessors.

Plath uses a different method outside of the autobiographical to build emotional intensity. Plath creates personas through her poems to build a reconstruction of herself that is emotionally authentic. Ghasemi concurs, "There is a link between the development of Plath's women personas and her mastery over her craft as a poet...These poems are the medium through which the speaker articulates her self-conscious attempt at reconstructing a self which is liberated and autonomous" (Ghasemi 302). Plath's use of the speaker allows her to implement the personal indirectly. Unlike her colleagues, such as Lowell, who frequently use "I" to illustrate his personal experiences, Plath's methodology of uniting the poet and the speaker via persona makes her a unique Confessionalist poet. She does not mention real names or any direct details of her personal life in her poetry. Instead, her poems are indirect glimpses of her life without total exposure. She masters emotional authenticity without personal information, unlike her predecessor Lowell. She sets different goals and standards for her poetry by using distinct compositional techniques such as the indirect personal across her works to stand amongst other Confessionalist poets.

Joan of Arc of Confessionalism: Sylvia Plath

"Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper" by Sylvia Plath was published in 1956. This poem is one of Plath's introductory poems as a Confessionalist writer. Control is a significant theme in Plath's work as the subject maneuvers through the dining room. However, this simple task goes wrong. Plath writes, "No novice/ In those elaborate rituals/ Which allow the malice/ of knotted

tables and crooked chairs" (Plath 1-4). Despite the subject being "no novice" to the situation, the environment becomes anxiety-inducting. Plath writes:

Between the cabbage-roses

Which are slowly opening their furred petals

To devour and drag her down

Into the carpet's design. (10-14)

The walk to the dining room becomes a terror trap as the speaker maneuvers across the ward. Uroff comments, "Plath shows how terror may grip and render it rigid. Through her speaker's projective fantasies, she projects her understanding of hysterical control" (106). "Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper" is a poem of heightened emotion using visual imagery to transform a dining room into a predatory environment. Plath writes, "Footing sallow as a mouse/ Between the cabbage-roses/ Which are slowly opening their furred petals/ To devour and drag her down/ Into the carpet's design" (9-13). Plath uses visual imagery (the carpet's design) to bring the room to life as Miss Drake walks across in caution and her anxiety heightens from the "furred petals" that are ready to "devour and drag her down" (10-11). The subject is contained in this very moment to walk on "eggshells" and with "wary breath" to dodge any danger from the "devouring carpet." Plath delivers an emotional intensity of paranoia and anxiety with personification and imagery. Despite Miss Drake's paranoia, Plath's final stanza of "Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper" ends the poem on a satirical note. Plath writes:

Until, turning sideways,

She lifts one webbed foot after the other

Into the still, sultry weather

Of the patients' dining room. (23-26)

Miss Drake, personified as a bird throughout the poem, is on heightened alert as she tries to reach her destination. Plath's characterization of Miss Drake as a bird compares her paranoia to animal instincts, consistently weary of predators and any danger lurking. Plath describes, "With bird-quick eye cocked askew/She can see in the nick of time" (41). She further illustrates Miss Drake's heightened alert with how her eyes look as they survey the room while she crosses the dining room. Plath uses a different method of creating emotional authenticity with her readers by using caricatures as a bridge between herself and the subject. Molesworth writes:

There is also a vast distance between Miss Drake and the poet, a distance that may be measured by the techniques of parody, caricature, hyperbole that Plath employs in characterizing her…She has been distanced from us by the poet who sees her as a grotesque reflection of herself, employing the manipulative strategies of the uninformed mind against an undefined terror. (106)

Miss Drake is one of the many caricatures Plath uses in her works to implement the personal indirectly. Not only is the dramatization of Miss Drake valuable to the anxiety-induced message of the poem, but punctuation plays a significant part as well. In addition, Plath uses enjambments to have a continuous flow of tension. It creates a faster pace in the reading; consequently, the reader can feel the same emotional intensity as Miss Drake while reading. This combination of dramatization with enjambments is Plath's signature in Confessionalist poetry.

Another poem that encompasses Plath's unique style of Confessionalism is her poem "Tulips." This poem is one of Plath's most significant works on employing imagery. Plath writes in the first stanza: "The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here./ Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in./ I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly/As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands" (1-4). The poem's speaker is in a hospital, and she is at peace with the room's bareness and lack of liveliness. Plath writes, "I am nobody; I have

nothing to do with explosions/ I have given my name and my day- clothes to the nurses" (5-6). The speaker is a blank slate with no emotion as she gives her possessions, including her identity, to the nurses tending her. The poem's tone changes once color enters the hospital room. The red tulips break the bareness and silence of the room. The tulips are far too bright for the room's bareness and too lively for the sedentary speaker. Plath writes:

> The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
> Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
> Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
> Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
> They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
> Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,
> A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck. (35-42)

Red symbolizes rage, claustrophobia, and even pain for the speaker. Color manifests as an overwhelming presence in the room, removing the speaker from her sedentary lifestyle. Plath writes, "Nobody watched me before, now I am watched" (43). The speaker is distressed, and what was once empty is now stuffy. Uroff writes, "[The speaker has] exaggerated her emptiness and the tulips' violence and vitality" (108). Plath purposely uses hyperboles to dramatize the tulip as a wake-up signal. The speaker wants to return to when the nurses tended to her as pebbles (Plath 160). However, the red tulips remove any possibility of a neutral, anesthetized lifestyle. Plath writes:

> The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
> They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,
> And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes

Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me. (58-61)

The idea of being alive disrupts the speaker's psyche as she grows more cautious of the Tulip's presence. The effects of the red tulips conjure aggression, danger, and alertness. The speaker does not want to interfere with her quiet life. Plath uses symbolism in "Tulips" to differentiate between stillness and life's complexities.

In 1962, Plath wrote a series of poems centered on bees as an omen to her late father's endeavors in entomology. Of the several works, "The Arrival of the Bee Box," is one of the most renowned poems with its quintains and final stand-alone line. The poem's speaker receives a box of bees, and paranoia grows as the owner becomes worried about the power and danger of the box's contents. Plath writes:

How can I let them out?

It is the noise that appalls me most of all,

The unintelligible syllables.

It is like a Roman mob,

Small, taken one by one, but my god, together! (16-20)

The indecision to imprison the bees or to free them becomes a choice as serious as life or death. The speaker grows paranoid about the bee's potential danger and becomes tempted to open the box. Plath writes, "The box is locked, it is dangerous./ I have to live with it overnight/ And I can't keep away from it./ There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there" (6-8). The buzzing of the bees becomes louder as the speaker puts their ear to the box. Plath purposely does this to add to the tension and the suspense of the speaker's nerves and paranoia. Despite the speaker's attempt to retain strength and power through the day with the box's contents, Mary Lynn Boe interprets the speaker's control as a façade. She writes in "Recovering the Complex Self: Sylvia

Plath's Beeline," "The speaker's actual power becomes less convincing as her bravado grows...She wildly scrambles the boundary between herself and nature in a total departure from the maestro's authority" (Boe 14). The speaker's authority becomes questionable the more she lingers on her decision. Plath writes, "They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner" (25). This line in the poem is an affirmation that coordinates perfectly with her questionable control over the bees. By the last stanza, the speaker decides on mercy, "I will be Sweet God, I will set them free." The poem would have concluded at this point, but Plath's poetry is never literal. Instead, she finishes the poem with a stand-alone line, "The box is only temporary" (36). The word "temporary," as the final word in the poem indicates the inconclusive decision of the speaker. Plath uses unreliable characters, such as the speaker, to keep the reader observant and questionable of the superficial in her Confessionalist poems.

Plath wrote "Lady Lazarus" in the final months before her death in 1962. The poem begins with the affirmation of multiple suicide attempts. Plath writes, "I have done it again./ One year in every ten/ I manage it—" (51-55). Plath's tone is almost proud of her trials and errors. Molesworth writes, "The nature of the speaker is peculiar and defies our ordinary notions of someone prone to attempt suicide. Suicide is not a joyous act, and yet there is something of triumph in the speaker's assertion that she has done it again. The person recovering from a suicide attempt, as this speaker says she is, cannot possibly be so confident at the very moment of her recovery" (111). Plath's consistent resurrections in the last three attempts were all against her will. She writes, "It's the theatrical/ Comeback in broad day/ To the same place, the same face, the same brute/Amused shout:/ 'A miracle!" (Plath 1). Her inability to die and to continue living leads the speaker to address the Holocaust. Plath writes:

So, so, Herr Doktor.

So, Herr Enemy

I am your opus,

I am your valuable,

The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.

I turn and burn.

Do not think I underestimate your great concern. (66-73)

Although not of Jewish descent, Plath interweaves this comparison to convey her emotions of living as those who lived during the Holocaust: no autonomy or control of their lives. The speaker does not favor living under oppression as she compares her miracle resurrection by a male doctor to a strip tease. Plath writes, "With a million filaments./ The peanut-crunching crowd./ Shoves in to see/ Them unwrap me hand and foot—/The big strip tease" (25-30). Even amid her attempt at annihilation, Plath is still under the male gaze. The doctor is synonymous with male authority. As Ghasemi writes in her article, "Violence, Rage, and Self-Hurt in Sylvia Plath's Poetry," "What Lady Lazarus suffers is not male brutality but the gendered asymmetry of her relationship to power in which her role is always defined as dependendent [sic] and defective" (Ghasemi 297). To die is to liberate herself from the patriarchal society that binds her. Plath writes:

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I've a call. (45-47)

Even in death, it is never sufficient for Plath to gain autonomy; if she wins, she is to "eat men like air" (Plath 84). Her speaker's idea of death as an escape from oppression and a form of bliss differs significantly from other Confessionalists. Her feminism overwhelms "Lady Lazarus" as she uses symbolism to create a dialogue on female empowerment and autonomy.

Conclusion: Sylvia Plath as the Queen Bee

Plath has been able to diverge from the conventional forms of Confessionalist poetry. She is considered distinct from her colleagues, Sexton and Lowell, because of her ability to create emotional authenticity without personal context. She deters from the conventional "I" in Confessionalist poetry and uses methods such as grotesques in her poems to relay indirect reflections of the personal. For example, Plath creates a dialogue on mental institutions and illustrates the trauma behind paranoia in "Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper." She also uses poems as opportunities for protest and sociopolitical dialogue against female subjugation. For example, her famous poem "Daddy" compares a father-daughter relationship to a Jewish individual in a Nazi concentration camp. Her use of World War II in her poems allows readers to understand the severity of female oppression in domestic relationships and society. Plath's decision to create this juxtaposition is far from insensitive; it is intentional. She deliberately wants to convey the suffering and the objectification of the female mind and body under the male gaze. Plath's craftsmanship of writing with emotional authenticity without intimate details is her unique technique of relaying the personal in Confessionalist poetry.

Another unique trait of Plath's writing is her perception of suicide and mental health. Both are profoundly important in her poem "Lady Lazarus." In the poem, the speaker discusses her recent attempts to die. Plath was active in her pursuit of death and her mission to understand it. She instills readers with chills as she discusses the bliss of dying and the regret of living. Her use of visual imagery (Nazi lampshade) and idioms (cat with nine lives), helps readers understand the good of dying and evil behind living. Her signature writing style is palpable in her poems, especially in "Tulips."

"Tulips" takes place in a clinic, and the speaker is at peace as a result of the bareness of the hospital room and the constant sedation she is receiving in "bright needles" (Plath 17). She is sedated and is in and out of reality. However, not having any motivation to feel or process outside stimuli is precisely how the speaker wants to stay. She has given all her clothes, even her name, to the nurses. However, once the tulips are in her hospital room, it overpowers the speaker's domain. The whiteness of the room becomes immediately overwhelmed by the redness of the tulips. The redness screams for attention and removes the speaker from her dormant condition. Plath's symbolic use of colors provides context for readers to understand the subtleties of depression: white represents the speaker's emptiness, and red represents liveliness. The speaker does not want to live; she would rather lay still in sickness than be lively and healthy. Plath uses multiple literary techniques such as grotesques, historical context, imagery, and symbolism to convey discussions of feminism, mental health, and suicide awareness.

Plath has shown through her multiple poems the moldability of her craftsmanship. Her ability to create a form of Confessionalism that is emotionally authentic without direct biographical context is a form of artistry that shifts from the conventional. Nevertheless, like her colleagues Lowell and Sexton, Plath can maintain emotional authenticity in her poems. Her

unique, female-centered writings, like "Lady Lazarus" and "Ariel," provide comfort for readers during this era who feel alienated post World War II. Plath creates a form of honest poetry that outstands her predecessor, Lowell. Plath deserves recognition for her diverging route from the typical Confessionalist poets: simply put, she is the hive's queen bee.

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